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Linguisticalize the Therapon: Meta-Magic in Therapeutic Transformation

Patrick Jemmer

One of the fundamental “mantras” of Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP) as applied to the “therapon” of seemingly “magical” therapeutic interventions, is that “the map is not the territory,” or alternatively “the menu is not the meal.” This article investigates the relevance of these statements in relation to the NLP “Meta model” and illustrates how these understandings can be used effectively by the practising therapist.

As human beings, we inhabit a rich and complex world. In fact our sensory systems are bombarded with so much information that we would be unable to function if we did not possess systems to “filter” the incoming signals, and deal first with those we perceive as being crucial to survival. Moreover, each person has a unique genetic makeup, leading to unique neuronal connections in the brain, and unique chemistry in the body, both of which have profound effects on that person’s perceptions of “reality.” We also are each subject to individual and distinctive experiences as we grow and develop, and these get woven into the tapestry of who we are and how we respond and function. Differences of gender, culture and language add to this complex *mélange*.

In order to make sense of the world, strategies are used by the brain to optimise its working potential. Often these strategies involve generalization, where information from one specific experience is extrapolated and used as a basis for judging other, different events. Similarly, contradistinction can be used, where the differences between items of information are taken as the identifying feature. We delete things when we are selective about what we leave in and what gets thrown out; we also distort our internal record of our experiences (quite literally we change our experiences). Thus we create stores of information in our memories, and have the ability to look forward to plan possible futures, and both of these features are brought to bear on how we live in the present. In other words our senses lead to internal representations and these are expressed as language. In this sense each person can be thought of as constructing an internal “map” using their own internal “toolkit” and

based on their own unique filtered data. It might be agreed that there is an “objective reality” to the physical world in which we live: however, if it were possible to “look inside the mind” of another person, the representation or map would be unique. And, although the basis of that individual’s working model of the world, and therefore crucial to their functioning, it is clear that “the map itself is not the territory.”

As O’Connor and McDermott put it: “The world does not come with labels attached. We attach them and then forget we did so. We can mistake the words we attach to our experience for the experience itself and allow them to direct our actions.” In terms of interpersonal skills, understanding the map of another individual, and being able to relate your map to theirs, is a fundamental route to effective communication. How, then, can a communicator, whether a therapist, teacher or salesperson, use this knowledge to bring about desired change and effect results? The answer to this question lies in the realization that the map is constructed from internal and external experiences, and can be modified over time as new information is added to the individual’s sum of knowledge, needs and wants. The problem is that the map is so useful in navigating our way through the world that it can become easy to mistake the internal map for the sum of reality. We use our maps constantly and unconsciously. Also, since no one person has access to another’s map, each of which is in any case unique, we can only approximate what another person is truly thinking or feeling inside. Since language itself acts as a filter in communicating, these factors provide a recipe for poor communication.

The Meta model of NLP recognizes this, and gives us tools to reverse the deletions, distortions and generalizations that limit our experience of the world, using, for example, the techniques of “chunking.” For example, if faced with the statement “Everyone in my new job dislikes me,” we can gain resources for the client by chunking down and asking “Do you really mean everybody? Is there not one single person in the office who likes you at all?” Alternatively it’s possible to chunk up, so to counter the statement “I’m terrible with money. I’ve only managed to save £ 3000 in the bank in 4 years!” you could respond “But that shows you definitely *do* have the ability to manage money.” Sideways chunking gets us from the statement “I’m a hopeless student. I’ll never pass anything,” to the more resourceful “But you passed your driving test the first time round. Only 10% of drivers can say that!”

Thus, in summary, everyone operates internally on a “map” of the world, and extrapolates the internal operations outwards to activities in the “real” world. The map is made with tools that differ between individuals (different people tend to use different representational systems) and the information distilled in the map comes from unique personal experience and the reaction to that experience. Since the map is not the territory (nor is the menu the real meal!), it can be changed, and once the map is changed, new and exciting possibilities manifest themselves in the outer world. Effective ways to bring about such change involve rapport building, accessing the other person’s map by matching representations, altering submodalities to “tweak” limiting memories, beliefs and behaviours or indeed create brand new ones and using the Meta model to recover the deletions, distortions and generalizations involved in “linguisticalizing” experience.

Below is presented a brief case study to illustrate a therapist’s use of NLP Meta model interventions with a client. Jane Doe is a middle-aged client (C) who comes to see a therapist (T) to discuss her vague “problems with life.” This is the first time they have met, and Jane appears somewhat sceptical about the whole situation, and is therefore ill-at-ease. She has three children who have all left home and she works very hard as a teacher of mentally handicapped children. Her husband, John Doe, is a businessman who is often away from home. Brief comments on T’s use of the Meta model are given in brackets before his speech.

T: Well, Jane, perhaps you could help me out by giving me some background why you’ve come for a chat today, so that we can take things from there.

C: Umm... well, I just feel totally dissatisfied with my life. I work very hard but it seems to bring no rewards, and now that my children have grown up and left home and are doing their own thing they just don’t love me any more. I’m very lonely.

[T challenges distortion: nominalization]

T: OK, Jane. In what particular ways would you like to reward yourself in what you are doing at work?

C: Well, it's not rewards exactly. I feel I am the hardest worker, but the fact that I am so busy no one ever invites me to coffee or discusses things with me; this must mean that they think I'm shirking.

[T challenges distortion: mindreading]

T: I feel what you're putting across. But you've said you're a hard worker: how exactly do you know that your colleagues feel the way you've described about you?

C: Umm... well, there are specific things. I specifically asked what time the last staff-meeting was and when I turned up at that time I found out it had been changed without anyone telling me. It made me angry, and that made me worse, although I am learning not to be taken for such a fool so much.

[T challenges distortion: cause-effect]

T: Well it's always good to learn and change! Can you tell me how and in what ways the actions of your colleagues caused you to feel worse?

C: Well it's obvious really! Just being taken advantage of and then ignored. It's just the same at home. My children don't phone and my husband doesn't seem to care either. Their fact that they take me for granted means they must have stopped loving me.

[T challenges distortion: complex equivalence]

T: I can hear what you're saying. And in what ways does being taken for granted equate with them not loving you any more?

C: Well, if they knew how hard I work and how lonely I get they would surely just take the time to have a chat or whatever...

[T challenges distortion: presupposition]

T: What makes you think that they don't know how hard you work?

C: Well, my husband says that since he spends all his time working just to take care of me, I needn't work and could stay at home with the house to myself now that the children have gone, and that it's my own fault if I don't enjoy my work anymore. He just doesn't listen.

[T challenges generalization: modal operator. C's use of 'I needn't work' implies that she feel that she does need to work]

T: What would actually happen then if you took your husband's advice to heart and had some time to yourself at home?

C: But that's exactly the point. I don't want to be on my own at home or anywhere else. I always feel on my own anyway.

[T challenges generalization: universal quantifier]

T: You *always* feel alone?

C: Yes... well, when John's there. No, I never seem to learn. I'm such an old fool. In fact, he seldom speaks to me now, and therefore doesn't care very much about me. So I'm lonely when he's not around and more so when he is!

[T challenges generalization: lost performative]

T: Who exactly says you're so foolish, then?

C: It's me, it's my own fault. John's the cause of all my problems and he knows it, but life goes on.

[T challenges generalization: universal quantifier]

T: So John causes *all* of your problems. Can you think of anything happening in your life that's not John's fault?

C: What I mean is that it's *us*. The pair of us. We've been growing apart as the children got older, and as they left we seem to have drifted to opposite poles.... I'm very sad and lonely.

[T challenges simple deletion]

T: What exactly are you sad about?

C: It was a huge wrench to let the children go away to University within such a short time of each other. That's left a huge gap in my life and they just don't care any more.

[T challenges deletion: lack of referential index]

T: Who exactly doesn't care?

C: John. He's much more distant now and wrapped up in his work than before.

[T challenges comparative deletion]

T: So John is putting more into his work now than when, exactly?

C: Well, we used to be so close after we first got married: until we had the children. Then he changed.

[T challenges deletion: unspecified verb]

T: In what ways exactly did John become different?

C: Well, that's when he accepted the new job and started travelling a lot more. He was always away from home and when he came back he seemed more distant each time.

[T challenges generalization: universal quantifier]

T: So John *never* made the effort to spend time at home with you and the children?

C: Well it seemed that way. He was so strange and cold and seemed resentful!

[T challenges distortion: nominalization]

T: What exactly do you feel he was resenting?

C: I don't know. The children always needed clothes, school uniforms, Christmas presents. And we wanted them to go to good schools and universities. I knew I had to put all my effort into helping them grow up in the right way and he had to work.

[T challenges generalization: modal operators]

T: I can feel where you're coming from. But did you both really have to act in the ways you've just described?

C: Hmmm... well you always look after your children. That's what any good parent would do. You can't just go off leading your own life and leave them to it, it's a great responsibility. And now they're independent and have good lives for themselves. But John is just the same.

[T challenges simple deletion]

T: Yes, it seems like you have made a great success with your children. But in what ways is John the same?

C: He's still working at the level he was when the children were still with us. And that doesn't leave enough time.

[T challenges deletion: lack of referential index]

T: Enough time for what, exactly?

C: I just want to spend *time* with him to talk, to do things *together*. We never get an opportunity and that would make a huge difference.

[T challenges generalization: universal quantifier]

T: So you never have a chance to spend time together right now?

C: Well, when he's finished working, and at weekends, but he just seems tired and disinterested.

T: OK, but in what ways is he disinterested?

C: Umm... well, just sitting down in front of the television, reading the newspaper. I can never get across to him.

[T challenges generalization: universal quantifier]

T: I can understand that John wants some peace and quiet. But has there never been a time when you've had a good heart-to-heart chat like you used to?

C: Well, when our oldest daughter and her partner had their first child, that brought back all kinds of memories for us, becoming grandparents for the first time! We went and stayed shortly after the baby arrived and that was wonderful. John was totally over the moon to be a granddad. We almost stayed too long that time but it would be lovely to see how they're all getting on.

T: So, listening to what you've just said, do you think that there are avenues for communication?

C: Well, maybe. I have a break at Easter, and I know that John's work is flexible. I really don't know about this but it's worth the thought. We could arrange a short visit

and stay in a hotel maybe. Not to overstay our welcome. And it would be good for us to get away from the house up here.

T: Well, it feels like you have some more options for communication now. We can explore all of these in future if that's what you'd like.