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An Introduction to NLP for Alexander Teachers

Part 1 – Language Patterns

By David Owen

“The Tao that can be told, is not the eternal Tao”
Lao Tsu. *Tao Te Ching*

The same is true for both the Alexander Technique and Neuro-Linguistic Programming. They both have to be experienced to be properly learned, understood and utilised.

After my previous article *Using NLP and Positive Reinforcement to Teach the Alexander Technique* published in the Spring 2025 edition of the ExChange Magazine, I was invited to write more about NLP, so that teachers may have a better idea of how to use it, both in their teaching and their own lives.

Often dismissed as pseudo science, NLP has been defined by Dr. Richard Bandler, its originator and co-creator as “The study of *subjective* experience.” As such, along with all psychological disciplines, it cannot be objective or truly scientific. It is a *model* of peoples’ thinking and behaviour. A model can predict behaviour, but it is not the real thing. It is not *true*, but it is useful.

NLP models how people *think*, both in what they do well and how they get stuck in problems. Because it is modelled on what people were already doing, it means that you may recognise patterns and techniques that you already use yourself. NLP brings these out into the open and categorises them, so that you can choose and use them deliberately and consciously. You can also avoid patterns you do not want, and protect yourself from undue influence from others.

There are too many aspects of NLP to be covered reasonably in one article. So for now, I will discuss how it all got started as well as the main language aspects of the discipline.

Beginnings and Basics

NLP™ (Neuro-Linguistic Programming™) started around 1970, when a twenty year old martial artist, accomplished musician and maths and physics graduate, Richard Bandler was working with the newly installed computers at the dawn of the computer age, at Santa Cruz University, south of San Francisco. He ended up house sitting for a psychiatrist who was using these new computers for statistics. As an avid reader, Bandler read all the psychiatrist’s books and from this he was concerned that there were so many theories about how people were “broken” but few people who could help them. These people were said to be “just gifted” and “so intuitive” implying that their skills were not learnable, meaning no one tried to emulate them. As a logician, Bandler was convinced that there must be patterns and so he decided to study them.

He was later joined by Professor John Grinder, a linguist. They, a group of students who worked with them, and later collaborators, went on to model both how people had problems, how effective therapists successfully resolved them, and in time how very successful people ran their minds. The field has enabled many people to greatly improve their lives and fine tune their skills.

How we Think

Bandler started by studying Virginia Satir, a very successful family therapist. She intuitively spoke to people using their own preferred words, including those referring to the senses, known as *Sensory Predicates*. She would ask:

“What do you *see* that you need?” or

“What do you *feel* is missing for you?” or

“What do you *tell* yourself the problem is?”

From this he proposed that we think according to our five senses, plus language. He called these thinking channels *Representation Systems* as we are

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re-presenting the outside world to ourselves in our minds through them.

As in my previous article, a good example of a thinking strategy, using all these channels, would be deciding what to eat from a menu:

As you read the menu, you see “Chickpea salad.”
You might *say* “Chickpea salad” to yourself inside your mind,
or go straight to *seeing* what that would *look* like in your *imagination*.
You know within your mind, what it would *smell* like first,
and then what it would *taste* like,
what its *texture* would be,
and then how it would make you *feel* to eat it.
Then you might *say* “Hmmm” to yourself,
with either a positive, neutral or negative internal *tonality*, and that tonality gives you a *feeling* of whether you want it or not.
You then either order it, or move on to other items.

Representation Systems

So Bandler deduced that we think according to our five senses, plus language. In NLP we abbreviate these as:

V = Visual

A = Auditory

K = Kinaesthetic or sensations

O = Olfactory = Smell or aroma

G = Gustatory = Taste

AD = Auditory Digital = Language or verbal.

The last is called Auditory Digital, as when we think in language, it is as if we speak and listen to ourselves, hence *Auditory*. However, as words are symbols and can be represented by characters, we refer to this aspect as *Digital*.

Normal auditory is sometimes called Auditory *tonal* (AT) to distinguish it from Auditory digital.

Sensory Preferences and Predicates

Some people speak predominantly using words from a preferred sense. If so, they may have characteristic tendencies, though as Alexander Technique teachers, we usually have enough sensory acuity to adapt our teaching to these people, without categorising them. However, it is also worth using their preferred terms, both for better comprehension by them, and for deeper rapport. Examples of sensory predicates that people might use are:

Visual

I have a *vision* of how things could be. Things are *looking up*, getting *brighter* and it's *crystal clear* to me that if we *look* on the *bright* side, we can be on the *sunny* side of the street. Things are a bit *dull* here. He has a *gloomy* outlook.

Auditory

This *sounds* good. It really strikes a *chord*. It's *music* to my *ears*, because we are on the same *wavelength*, living in *harmony* with a *song* in our hearts. This whole thing seems *out of tune*. He does not *ring* true.

Kinaesthetic - Sensation

I thought, *hold* on a minute, I am ready to *tackle* this *head on*. He wants something *concrete* that he can *grasp*, so he can *get a grip* on himself, *pull* himself together to *clear* the way to *make* things better. Things are getting *rough*. It is *painful* thinking about it.

Olfactory - Aroma

He really has a *nose* for an opportunity, he has the *sweet smell* of success. In fact he *reeks* of positivity and every time he lands in the *sh*t*, he comes up *smelling* of roses. I *smell* a rat. There is something *fishy* here. Something is *off*.

Gustatory - Taste

I have a *voracious appetite* for *gorgeous, tasty, delicious, meaty* challenges. I like to really get a *mouthful* of them, get my *teeth* into them and

chew them over. It really makes my *mouth water*. It left a *bad taste* in my mouth. It was all very *distasteful*. He was very *sour*.

Auditory Digital - Language or verbal

I *hear* what you are *saying* and I like your *story*. In fact I am lost for *words*, completely struck *dumb* that someone is *speaking* the same *language* as me. I *said* to myself “I could *listen* to this person all day!” He was *bad mouthing* everyone. He *speaks* with a forked *tongue*.

Non Specific

Many people do not have strong preferences, so you can use different predicates more freely as appropriate.

There are also *non specific* predicates, where no representation system is indicated. I tend to use these a lot, so that my pupils can think in their preferred ways. Examples are:

Arrange, attend, decide, know, notice, perceive, recognise, remember, sense, think, understand.

If I tell my pupils to *think* of their neck being *soft*, *calm* and *relaxed*, they might *imagine* what that may mean, or *say* it to themselves with a particular *calm tone*. However, as they probably have some experience of what *soft*, *calm* and *relaxed* has *felt* like in the past, and as these words are kinaesthetic, they are most likely to think of how their neck might *feel* when it is *soft*, *calm* and *relaxed*. (I have to tell my pupils to refrain from trying to make it feel that way, and refrain from checking if it feels that way, but to just think.)

Eye Access Cues

One way of detecting how someone is thinking is by watching their eyes. Around 1972, Bandler had read a paper by neuropsychologist Doreen Kimura about the vibrations of the eyeballs which cause the receptors to constantly have changing information in order to function. She fixed images to her subjects' eyeballs, so that these would vibrate with the eyeball. Due to the lack

of changing information, the subjects were soon unable to see the images. However, when questioned, the subjects said they could remember the image, but most of them moved their eyes up and to the left to do so.

Bandler and Grinder then asked their students to remember things visually, and observed the same movements. By further experiment, they found that most of them had fairly consistent patterns for:

Imagining created images – up to the right,
Remembering and imagining sounds – horizontal to the left and right,
For talking to themselves – down to their left,
And for accessing feelings – down to their right.

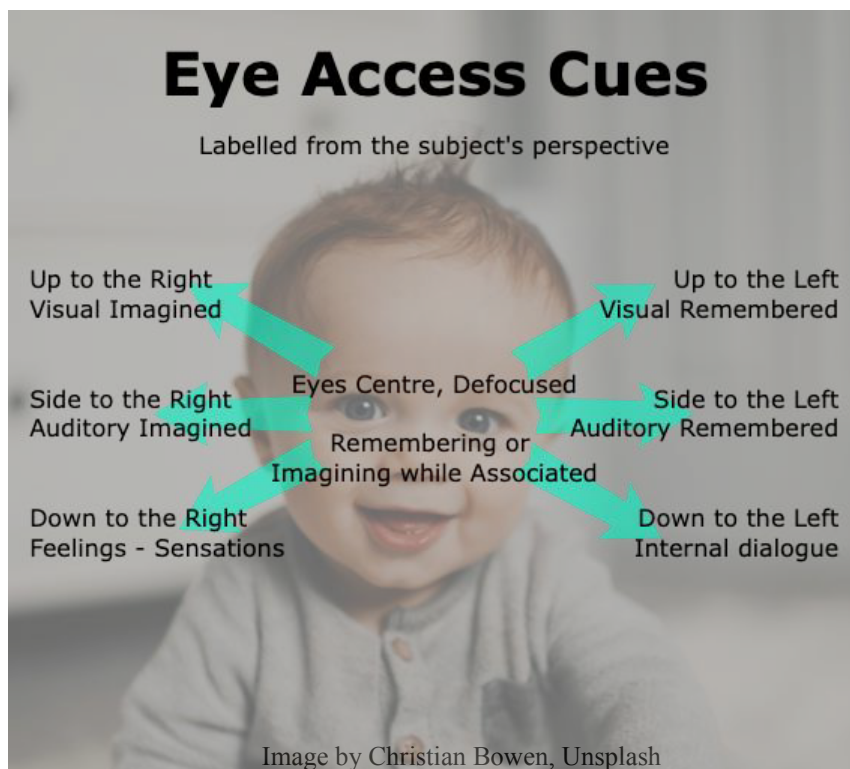
– Except for left handed people, whose directions were generally reversed! The diagram below is for most right handed people. For most left-handers, it is reversed.

Some of these directions are echoed in our language:

The future is *Right* ahead.

The past is *Left* behind.

I *feel* ‘*Down Right*’ certain about it.



Some people thought these could be used to tell if someone was lying. One police authority purportedly got into trouble for trying to use this. Most left handed people will look to their *right* to remember something, making it seem as if they are making something up.

My own experience is that many right handed people will look up to their right first, possibly at an imagined calendar to locate when something happened. Then, often only briefly up to their left, to actually remember it.

Use in Teaching the Alexander Technique

Eye access cues are useful for modelling a person's thinking sequences, either for coaching or therapy. I generally do not use them during teaching. However, if my pupil's eyes are *down*, I usually know that they are trying to *feel* something out or feel if it is right, or that they are *talking to themselves*. Seeing as I primarily want them to have external awareness, I tell them to only have a quarter of a thought for their directions, and to direct their attention outwards and be aware of the world around them.

Language

Linguistics and our Model of the World

The name Neuro-Linguistic Programming™ purportedly came about when Bandler was stopped by a traffic cop. Asked for his occupation and not having a job description, Bandler glanced around the car and saw three books: one was on neurology, another was a book on linguistics by Grinder and another was a book on computer programming. So he said

"I'm a Neuro-Linguistic Programmer!"

Although coined on the spot, this title clearly had merit. Our neurology is programmed both by what we experience, and also by what we hear and read, and say to ourselves in language. It turns out that language is very powerful in programming us. Precise language is also very useful for teaching the Alexander Technique, hence I am prioritising it in this article.

With John Grinder being a linguist, he and Richard Bandler took from work by Noam Chomsky on linguistics, Gregory Bateson on epistemology, and especially Alfred Korzybski, who coined the phrase "The map is not the territory." They took language models and applied them to the work of Virginia Satir and other successful therapists' methods.

As with Korzybski's map, it was clear that we do not perceive the world as it actually is (this is provable in physics.) Rather, we build a *Model of the World* within our minds.

This model is based on how we process information, in which it is presupposed that:

Our sensory experience cannot be fully taken in, or is not always considered important, so information is lost or deleted – **Deletion**.

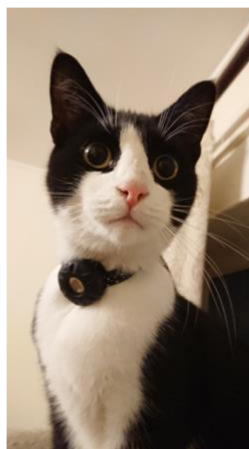
The remaining information tends to be sorted into familiar categories – **Generalisation**.

And this is further transformed into sometimes useful, though often inaccurate and misleading concepts, metaphors or symbols – **Distortion**.

Through perception, deletion, generalisation and distortion, we construct our model of how we think the world is. To us, this IS the world! It is *all* that we know of the world. It IS our *reality*.

Unfortunately our own *model of the world* is a highly distorted abstraction of what *actually* IS, i.e. *Actuality*. So:

Actuality → Perception →
Deletion, Generalisation, Distortion
= Our Model = Our Reality



Cat

Words themselves are distortions, as they are mere symbols for the concept they represent. The word "Cat" neither looks nor sounds like a cat and excludes the other senses. Language itself leaves out a lot of detail, usually for brevity. It tends to lump things in categories, and also has deeply inbuilt distortions.

Why Does this Matter?

Despite being a distorted abstraction, our model of the world has allowed our species to survive for millions of years and we now perform intricate and precision tasks with it.

However, when it comes to interpreting our fellow humans, we rely heavily on language to assess them. This is despite everyone's speech having come through **three** levels each, of deletion, generalisation and distortion:

First in perception,
Then in mental interpretation,
And finally in sentence formation.

This makes us reliant on an incredible amount of guesswork in getting an idea of what a person is like, what their values are and what they are likely to do. Hence something like the Meta Model is extremely useful in fine tuning our *own* model of the world, including our models of the people within it. It also helps us to get a sense of these *other* peoples' models and therefore helps us to be able to interact with them and *their models* constructively.

The Meta Model

From their understanding of the Model of the World, Bandler and Grinder developed what they called the *Meta Model*TM as it is a model of how people make their models of the world, how they represent them in language, and how language in turn, shapes their model, beliefs and understanding of the world. So it is a 'Model' of how we 'Model'!

So we get the hierarchy:-

Meta Model = model of how we use language to form, represent and communicate our model of the world.

↑

Language = tool for forming and communicating our model of the world, which involves deletion, generalisation and distortion.

↑

Our 'Model of the World'

↑

Deletion, generalisation and distortion in mental processing

↑

Deletion, generalisation and distortion in perception

↑

The World

There is a similar stratification within language itself.

Surface structure = What we actually say:
Simplified and distorted

↑

Deletion, generalisation, distortion

↑

Deep structure = The complete, full, word description of what we want to say

↑

Deletion, generalisation, distortion

↑

Reference structure = All the things we have observed and thought that lead to forming what we say.

By recognising and using the meta model categories, we recover information from the deeper structural levels of experience and thinking, bringing them into consciousness. We can use the meta model, its patterns and interventions to clarify, correct and enrich our own model of the world, to help others improve theirs, and to protect ourselves from other people trying to unduly influence or mislead us.

Each distinction has questions or interventions that can be used to:

Recover missing information,
Differentiate generalised statements, and
Correct distortions.

In doing so, a person can sometimes recover information from **inside** their model of the world, or it sometimes gets them to search **outside** of their current model and therefore expand it. This expansion often opens up new possibilities for the person, hence its application in coaching and therapy.

Categories and Patterns

There are thirteen main language patterns recognised in the meta model, sorted into categories of deletion, generalisation and distortion.

Deletions

- Simple Deletion (Missing information)
- Lack of (specific) Referential Index (He, she, it etc)
- Generalised or Non-Referring Noun (A man etc)
- Unspecified Verb (e.g. Hurt)
- Comparative Deletion (Deleted or obscured comparison)

Generalisations

- Modal Operator of (lack of) Possibility (Limitations)
- Modal Operator of Necessity (Rules, restrictions)
- Universal Quantifier (All, Every, None etc)

Distortions

- Complex Equivalence (This *means* That)
- Nominalisation (Something *happening* named as a Thing)
- Cause and Effect Ill-Formedness (This *causes* That)
- Mind Reading (Thinking you know)
- Lost Performative (Handed down ideas)
- Presupposition (Treated as true)

Patterns Explained and Interventions

Working from the most simple or trivial, to the most profound, the patterns are:

Simple Deletion (Missing information) (Deletion)

Information is simply missing. The communicator usually knows what they mean, but sometimes may not.

Examples:

“No.” or “Stop!” is usually understood in context by the speaker and listener, though not always. Someone might say “It’s finished!” out of the blue, in which case we would not know what they were talking about.

Interventions:

Who, what, where, when, how? Please explain further, etc.

This is usually simply a matter of being clear about what is meant by the speaker.

Lack of Referential Index (He, she, it etc) (Deletion)

“Bill saw a man. *He* didn’t understand the situation.” *He* could be Bill or the man. The speaker knows who, the listener does not. I could have written “he read all his books...” instead of “Bandler read all the psychiatrist’s books...” where there were two people being referred to. Sometimes when someone changes subject, it is not always clear that they have done so. So *he, she, it, they, them*, may refer to the original subject or the new one. People are often imprecise, but only rarely do they use this to deliberately confuse.

Interventions:

You can ask: “Which?” “Who specifically?” “Who read who’s books?”

Generalised or Non-Referring Noun (A man etc) (Deletion)

If someone says “A man robbed a bank.” We, and especially the police, would want to know who the man was – we want to know *who* the noun “man” refers to. We would also want to know which bank it was and if we were affected.

In the Alexander Technique, “The neck” or “My back” are imprecise terms. There are usually various muscles originating or inserting outside the conventionally recognised structure. When F.M. Alexander says he lengthened and widened his back, we not only do not know his process, but do not know whether he was able to permanently widen his ribcage, which would also be visible from

the front, or perhaps his shoulders and shoulder blades. I have not found consistent agreement among teachers as to quite what he was referring to.

Interventions:

“Which man and which bank?” “What specifically do you mean by the neck/back?”
“My back hurts...” “Where *precisely* does it hurt?”
(And *how* precisely? – Unspecified verb.)

Unspecified Verb (e.g. Hurt) (Deletion)

When told what someone is or was doing, but not told *how*:

“She *hurt* me!”

We don’t know whether this is physically, or that she did or said something that the speaker found upsetting. Either way, we do not know the *process* of hurting.

“*Free* your neck.” and “*Direct*.”

Alexander presumably knew how to do these, but does not tell us specifically how.

The communicator usually knows what they mean, but does not know if the receiver knows it. The receiver may *think* they know what the communicator means, but could be wrong. Finally, even the communicator may be unaware of their own process.

Interventions:

“What did she actually do that resulted in you being or feeling hurt?”

“*How* should I free my neck?” How? How precisely? What should I do in order to free my neck?”

“What do you mean by directing – how do I do it?”

Comparative Deletion (Deleted or obscured comparison) (Deletion)

Words such as more, less, better, worse, faster, slower, higher, lower, louder, softer, etc- all imply a comparison. Words such as a lot or many, few,

good, bad, fast, slow, effective, efficient, etc- also imply a comparison, though less obviously.

Interventions:

You could ask the speaker “Compared to whom or what? And how specifically is the comparison being made.”

Two examples of comparative deletions and how you could fill out the intended or missing meaning are:

Someone could say “Wizzo is four times as effective.” You could ask “Than what? And in what way or ways?”

I could claim that “It is better to tell your pupil what you are doing.” To which you could ask “Better than what? Better than teaching silently? And if so, how – what are the advantages, and under what circumstances?”

Modal Operator of (lack of) Possibility (Limitations) (Generalisation)

Words such as *can’t*, *unable to* and *couldn’t* express limitations about either ourselves, others, systems or things. These are usually based on limited information.

Interventions:

If you ask someone “Why can’t you?” it usually just brings up excuses or justifications.

If you ask “What prevents you?” it leads to revealing obstacles and therefore to finding solutions to overcome them.

“What would be needed to achieve this?” or “What would need to be true to achieve this?” also leads to finding solutions.

To expand outside of the person’s model of the world, you could ask:

“What good things or bad things might happen if this could be achieved?”

This goes beyond their perceived limitations and looks at the possibilities, or perceived problems of actually achieving it.

Complex Equivalence (X *means* Y) (Distortion)

This *means* that. “Him frowning *means* he is angry at me.”

“Aircraft contrails *mean* that the government is spreading chemicals in the sky.”

This is ascribing meaning to an event without proper evidence. The person has jumped to a conclusion.

Interventions:

Usually we would ask “How do you know – that X means Y?”

We could ask them “Are you completely sure?”

Possibly, ask them “What else could it mean?”

Nominalisation (Something *happening* named as a Thing) (Distortion)

This is when what is happening or has happened, gets renamed as a thing. A **verb** has been changed to a **noun**. In grammar, we would normally call this an abstract noun, but by calling it abstract, we further obfuscate what has happened.

In language, nominalisations can be a very useful shortcut, but they obscure what is actually happening, sometimes innocently, though sometimes to deliberately mislead people, especially when what is happening or has happened is being sanitised. “An ongoing *humanitarian situation*” is a very nice way of covering up when “Something very nasty is *happening* to some people.”

Examples are: Love, respect, honour, integrity, fear, hatred, situation, the economy, recession, smoker, rioter, immigrant, inhibition, direction, nominalisation, language, life, The Tau!

The way to test for a nominalisation, is to apply *The Wheelbarrow Test*. If you cannot put it in a wheelbarrow, however big, then it is not a thing, but a nominalisation, or something *happening*. Note that you cannot put a nominalisation in a wheelbarrow, therefore the word *nominalisation* is a nominalisation!

Interventions:

We usually have to turn the noun back to the verb, the thing back to the action or activity, or ask what is actually happening.

“There's not enough *love*.” – “Yes, many people are not *loving* others enough.”

“What is actually happening in this humanitarian situation? Who is *doing* what, or what is *happening* to these humans?”

“He is using inhibition.” – “So, he is *inhibiting*.”

Notice how much politicians and news media use these sorts of words, in order to slip what is actually happening past us.

Modal Operator of Necessity (Rules) (Generalisation)

These are usually rules or restrictions passed on from others, where the original reasoning for it has not been passed on with it.

Must, got to, have to, obliged, need to, necessary, and mustn't, shouldn't, don't, can't, as in forbidden to etc.

Interventions:

As with limitations, asking Why? Will usually just bring up excuses or “But everyone says so.” (Everyone = universal quantifier - see later.) We need to discover the purpose of the rule, often by asking

“What would happen otherwise?” or

“What good/bad things might happen if you did/didn't? (Try all four combinations.)

“What prevents or obliges you?”

“What would have to be different in order for you to be ok with going against this?”

These often get people to explore outside of their model of the world.

Cause and Effect Ill-Formedness (X *causes* Y) (Distortion)

He makes me so angry. Money *makes* the world go round. Immigrants *force* up house prices. As you listen to the sound of my voice, *it makes* you relax.

Interventions:

- “How do you know that (*X causes Y*)?”
- “How do you know that he *makes* you angry rather than you being angry because of how *you* interpreted him?”
- “How might *X not* be causing *Y*?”
- “What *else* might be causing *Y*?”
- “What *else* might force up house prices?”

When someone examines the so-called causal link, they often realise that it is not well justified.

Universal Quantifier (All, Every, None etc) (Generalisation)

Words such as all, every, everyone, anyone, always, no one, none, never, are universals. They are part of a sweeping statement.

The person is usually considering a small group of subjects, but has generalised outward, that they represent the whole. “*No one* cares about me” sometimes means one person they are attracted to is not returning attention etc. “*Everyone* hates me” could be a few are critical, while others have been neutral or even friendly, but the speaker has not noticed.

Interventions:

Usually seek exceptions to the rule, often by repeating the word with strong questioning:

- All? Everyone? Always? No one? Never? Or “Are there any exceptions?”
- “Everyone hates me!” can be replied to by “Millions of people have never heard of you!” which demonstrates the exception, but is a bit blunt.
- “I don’t hate you” sometimes draws the response “Yes, but you don’t count.” to which you could ask “So who *does* count?”

The person often does not realise that they over-generalised, so gently questioning often brings out the deeper meaning.

Mind Reading (Thinking you know) (Distortion)

Thinking that you know peoples’ thoughts, motives, and what they will do, is a distortion. Also this is

thinking you know about situations and things, when you have insufficient information. Some people refer to it as hallucinating.

She loves me. He is angry. She doesn't understand me. I know what you are thinking. You are not going to believe me. I know you are going to like this. I just know that it won't work.

Interventions:

The standard challenge for Mind Reading/Assumption is

“How do you know this?”

They may justify their assumption, often with a universal quantifier, a cause-effect, or a complex equivalence. You could also query these.

Lost Performative (Handed down ideas) (Distortion)

All coppers are ---. Red sky at night, shepherds delight! The customer is always right. X group of people are evil.

These are ideas that we have taken for granted, but do not know the source, evidence, or justification for. The person who came up with the idea, who *performed* the judgement, is no longer here. *You* did not come up with it, but adopted it without thinking to question it.

Interventions:

- “*What* is the source of this idea?”
- “*Who* came up with this?”
- “*Where* did you get that idea from?” or
- “*When* did you get that idea?”

These get the person to trace back and either remember that they heard it from someone else, usually without proper justification, or they do not know where it came from, and therefore it is worth reconsidering.

Sometimes it is things we do, so it would be

- “Why are we doing that? Who came up with it? What was the purpose?”

Presuppositions (Treated as true) (Distortion)

A presupposition is something that is *pre-supposed*: assumed, presented or treated as if it is true. They are often unconscious beliefs, or sometimes disingenuously presented as a means of winning a point in a discussion or argument.

Presuppositions are often hidden behind the surface meaning of a sentence. An example of a cluster of presupposition is in me claiming that:

“The Alexander Technique is a way of getting back to our natural state and functioning.”

It presupposes: that we have a natural state and functioning, that we have deviated from it, and that we know what the natural state and functioning are in order to know that we have deviated from it. It also implies that we know in what ways we have deviated from it. As Alexander teachers, many of us may already agree with all of these, though others, including some fellow teachers may not.

The best way of intervening is to point out the presuppositions: “So we have deviated from our natural state? How do we know?” followed by “Do we even know what that natural state is or should be?”

Sometimes we are aware of the basis of our own presuppositions, and sometimes we have picked them up as lost performatives and need to question them. Under the Milton Model, we will also examine how presuppositions can be formed and used to influence people, whether for good or ill. Additionally, Bandler and Grinder proposed a series of overt working presuppositions. These are generally unprovable, though if you act as if they are true, they seem to be useful or self fulfilling.

How is the Meta Model Useful?

Once we are aware of the patterns, we can first learn to spot them when we think or say them ourselves, or notice others using them. Most are trivial and innocent and simply a functional way of speaking.

If something seems not right, first question it in your own mind, even if it is someone else saying it. Ask yourself:

What is being presupposed as true?”

“What has been picked up along the way, that we don’t know the source, justification or reason for?”

“Where are we jumping to conclusions without proper evidence or justification?”

“Where are we simply not being clear, either with ourselves or with others?”

If someone disagrees with you, or you think they may be misunderstanding something, you might use some of the interventions *very* diplomatically, to find out if they are willing to examine their own ideas. Remember, people dislike being made to feel wrong. In fact, even therapists have to be very careful with these patterns!

Two Easy Questions

Above, you see I have summed up four questions that address all the patterns. However, there are just two of them that also address them all adequately.

In the diagram below, you will see that all the patterns have been laid out in three columns.

Patterns in the left column usually require someone to search outside their model of the world in order to resolve them. So you can ask:
“What is the source?”

Those on the right can usually be resolved by the person checking within their own model. So you can ask:
“How do I/you know?”

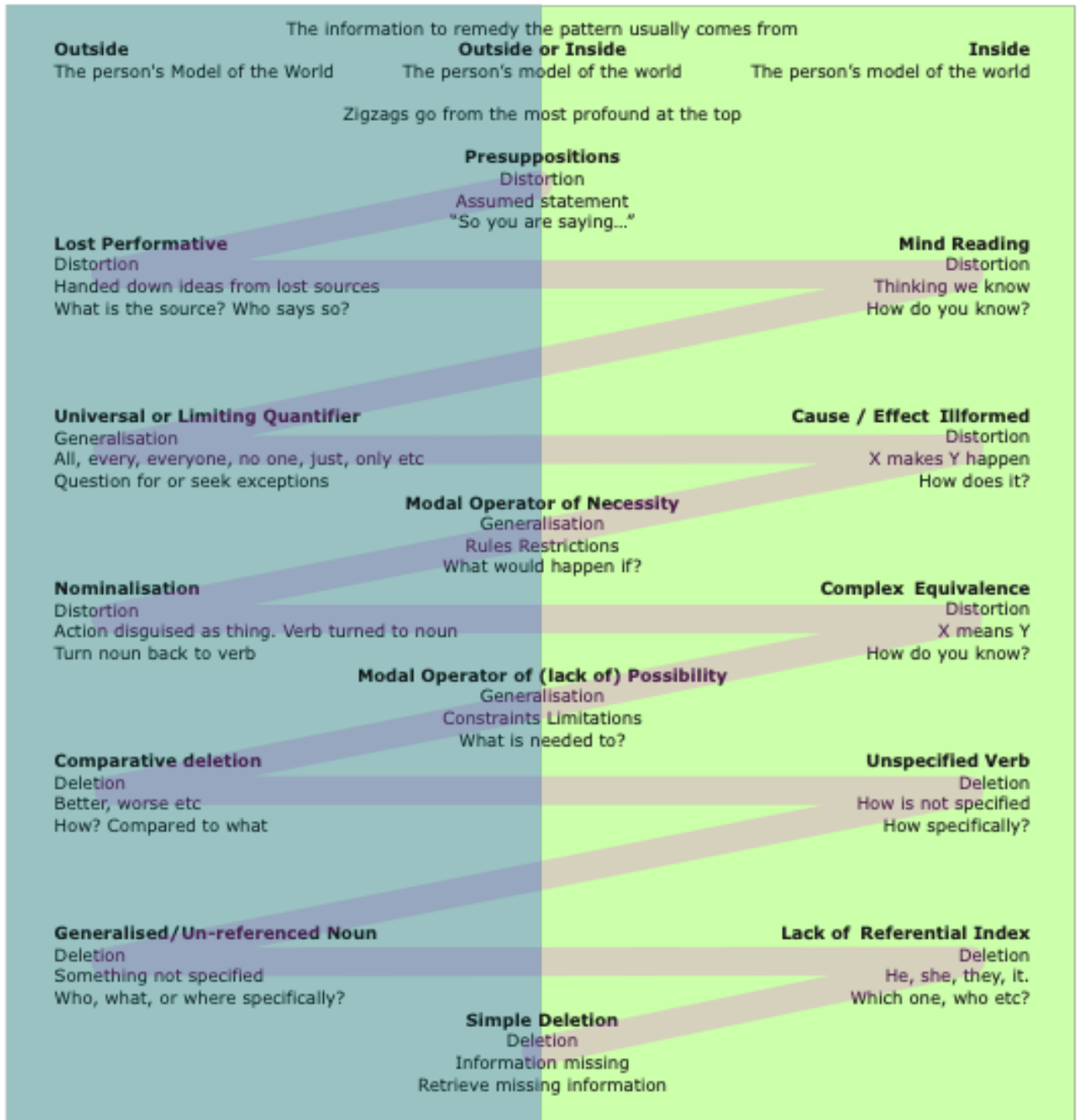
And those in the middle column may be resolved from either inside or outside their model, with either question.

To most efficiently resolve things that do not seem right:

First recover any important missing information from the lowest five patterns,

And then start from the top, working down in a zigzag, with the most significant patterns first.

Meta Model Chart



Milton Model Language and Hypnotic Patterns

One day, Gregory Bateson recommended that Bandler and Grinder go and study renowned medical hypnotist Dr. Milton H. Erickson. Whereas the Meta Model is incisive, Milton's use of language was highly suggestive. Intuitively, Milton used similar patterns to fortune tellers, preachers, politicians, salespeople and advertisers. Bandler and Grinder were able to tease out and categorise these patterns, and they named them the *Milton model*.

As with the Meta Model, we all use some of these patterns much of the time, usually innocently without even knowing it. They can be used consciously, both in hypnosis or ordinary speech, to influence people for their own benefit, or disingenuously, for the benefit of others.

Hypnotic Patterns

Hypnotists use many ways to get someone into trance. Two of them are the *Yes Set* and the *Pattern Interrupt*.

Yes Set

This is commonly used by people who want to get a point across smoothly, without it being questioned or challenged. Used by politicians and sales people – it can also be used to introduce an idea that was outside of someone's awareness.

You string three or four statements together, with the first two or three being true and verifiable, and the last one being the one you want the person to accept. It is natural to join the statements together with *and* or stronger words such as *while*, *when*, *during*, or stronger still: *makes*, *causes*, *forces*, or *requires*, or other words to link the statements.

So a hypnotist could say

“You are sitting in this chair...
and while you are sitting here, ‘you are breathing’
and this makes you ‘feel sleepy’.”

(Notice the last phrase is a deliberate Cause-Effect Ill-Formedness.)

For our own purposes, we could say:

“Many people will tell you to stand tall or hold your head up,

and that you stand out better when you do this, *while* very few people realise that they are being held back by background tension.”

The first two statements are generally recognised as true, making the third, unfamiliar statement, much more easily accepted by our neurology.

Pattern Interrupts

Two dramatic interrupts are the *Handshake interrupt* and the *Fainting interrupt*.

With the handshake interrupt, a stage hypnotist will approach one of their subjects on stage and go to shake their hand, but just before the hands would connect, the hypnotist takes hold of the subject's right wrist with his left hand and quickly raises the subject's hand close in front of the subject's face. This disorients the subject and makes them highly susceptible to trance.

The fainting interrupt is used by stage hypnotists and evangelists. A hypnotist will stand next to a subject, put one hand on the back of their neck and the other on their forehead and suddenly tip their head back, usually saying “Sleep!”. The subject is disorientated and *reflexly* falls backwards, while the hypnotist guides them skillfully and gently to the floor. It is a great convincer for the subject, the audience and for the other subjects on the stage!

An evangelist might say “The power of the Spirit is upon you!” (and may actually believe it) and then tip the subject's head back in exactly the same way, so that they again, reflexly fall backwards and are guided to the floor, also as a convincer for the congregation and the subject.

Obviously, neither of these techniques are appropriate for our work. However, if we are working silently, we wait until we are confident that we can stand a pupil up without them anticipating or end-gaining, and then stand them, using just their reflexes. If we are spelling out what we are doing, we sometimes need an interrupt or distraction to prevent anticipation or end-gaining. For this I usually use a linguistic ambiguity.

Language Patterns

Obviously, with all of the following, use deliberately intended patterns, and avoid unintentional ones.

Ambiguities

These can be two words that sound the same:

Weight and wait. As in

“Leave all the work and weight/wait for me.” Said when I am about to lift a part of them.

There is also a *punctuation* ambiguity here:

“Leave all the work, and *wait*...” with a comma, and

“Leave all the work and *weight*...” without the comma.

I also use “Think of where your head will be when you are standing.” But If I stand them during the last three words, it turns them into a statement “You *are* standing!”

All meanings of an ambiguity have to be processed by your brain to determine the intended meaning. While this happens, the person momentarily blanks out (pattern interrupt) during which time you can initiate a movement without them anticipating or assisting. Once the pupil has learned conscious inhibition, this sort of trick is no longer needed. I demonstrated these in one of my presentations at the 2025 Dublin International Congress.

Embedded Commands and Suggestions

This is when a command or suggestion is hidden within a phrase. It can be accidental or it can be deliberately either disingenuous or useful:

“Some people *anticipate* that I am going to stand them.” (Unintentional command.)

“Some people can *avoid* anticipating that I am going to stand them.” (Intentional command.)

“Some people can just *let it happen* when I stand them.” (Intentional command.)

“You may be *anticipating* that I am going to stand you.” (Unintentional suggestion)

“You will get to a stage where you have just *allowed* it to happen, when I have stood you.” (Intentional suggestion)

Note that an imperative verb: *anticipate*, *avoid* is a direct command, whereas adding *ing* or *ed* at the end of a verb: *anticipating*, *allowed*, softens it to just the concept of the activity.

Negative Commands and Suggestions

“*Don’t* use negative commands!”

If you tell a young child

“Don’t *touch* that vase, or you will *break* it”

– Then you have loaded the idea both of touching it (negative command) and breaking it (embedded command) into their mind. As young children have less resistance to these suggestions – “*Don’t be surprised* if the vase gets broken!”

For all of us, we cannot process the *don’t* until we have processed the command. We then have to fight the command to prevent ourselves from acting on it.



AI generated image via <https://yupp.ai>

Negative commands can be useful: “You *don’t* have to do the washing up.” means the person is more likely to do it if they were initially unwilling, as they no longer have to rebel against it. You also need to be prepared for them to decline to do it.

Negative commands are usually best avoided: “Keep your hands away

from the vase. It is very delicate.” We can use *avoid* or *refrain from* and then soften the verb:

“*Refrain from touching* that vase, as it is very delicate.”

One of the first things I noticed having learned NLP was teachers saying:

“*Don’t stiffen* your neck!”

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How about “*Avoid stiffening* your neck.” Better still: “Let your neck stay relaxed.” (I avoid *free* and *loose* unless I am moving their head and neck myself, as otherwise they are likely to move it to get a feeling that it is free or loose.)

Embedded questions

These are *statements* that *imply* a question.

“You may have noticed that your arm released just then.” Implies “Did you notice?”

The person will usually answer as if you had asked the question directly: “Oh yes!” or “Erm, no. I didn’t actually. Did I actually release then?”

Embedding the question softens it and avoids putting the person on the spot.

Postulates

These are usually in the form of a question, such as “Is the door open?” which is usually inviting the other person to “Shut the door.” (It postulates that the door is open and that someone should shut it.)

“Are you anticipating?” invites the person to “Stop anticipating.”

If you were to tell your pupil directly to “Stop anticipating.” it may startle or offend them, especially if they were not aware of anticipating. By asking, they can examine themselves (Are they anticipating?) or examine the situation (Is the door actually open?) and respond accordingly.

Sometimes they will simply answer the question: “No I already closed it.” or “Yes, I left it open for the cat.” or “No, I don’t think I was anticipating.” More frequently, they will simply perform the implied action automatically by closing the door or by refraining from anticipating. As you may recognise, this is a very common speech pattern, which can become rather annoying if overused.

Quotes

Saying something indirectly by quoting someone else. Therefore distracting from the fact that you *are* saying it to them directly, yourself.

My teachers told me to “Be alert!”

Alexander tells us to “Analyse the conditions.”

You can convey instructions or information, while the receiver attributes it to the quoted person, without taking it personally, as they might have had they perceived that you had said it directly. Also, you can borrow the authority of the quoted speaker in this way.

There is a story of how Richard Bandler was addressing a conference of psychiatrists. Quoting Milton Erickson, he said “Milton Erickson was once addressing a conference of psychiatrists, and he said to them ‘You’re all a bunch of turkeys!’” Purportedly, none of the psychiatrists reacted as if they had just been insulted!

Selectional restrictions

Ascribing a quality or action to something or someone not capable of it.

“The tomato can feel happy!”

This can form an embedded command to “Feel happy!” which would be more readily accepted, due to the distraction and disorientation of the incongruity. However, I might claim:

“These muscles are telling me they are not ready to release yet.”

This implies that I and the person’s muscles are in communication and that I am acknowledging them, implying quite deep rapport. It also contains the embedded command to release and also presupposes that they will be ready to release at sometime in the future. There is a certain amount of incongruity, though this is likely to be accepted as a metaphor. It certainly implies that I am sensitive to what the person’s body is doing and that I am respectful of it.

Presuppositions

Linguistically, this is anything that is presented or treated as being true, without actually stating that it is true directly.

Presuppositions occur very frequently in our communication, often innocently and positively, though sometimes disingenuously. It is useful both to be able to detect and question them, as well as to use them constructively. There are many ways of

embedding presuppositions, with many of them linked with particular types of words:

- **Time indicator words:** before, prior, as, during, when, while, once, after, since, begin, start, proceed, continue, already, still, yet, any more, end, stop.
“Once the pupil has learned conscious inhibition...” (They *will* learn conscious inhibition.)
“Are you going to do the washing up *before* or *after* you tidy your room?” (You are going to do both.)
- **Ordinal numbers:** first/firstly, second/secondly, next, another, last/lastly, finally.
“Which are you going to do *first*, the washing up, or tidy your room?” (You will do both.)
- **Awareness words:** aware, know, notice, realise.
“Very few people *realise* that they are being held back by background tension.” (They have background tension.)
- **Adverbs and adjectives:** easily, quickly, slowly, deeply.
“You can relax *deeply*.” (You *can* relax.)
- **Commentary words:** fortunately, unfortunately, luckily, eventually.
“*Unfortunately*, our model of the world is a highly distorted abstraction of what actually is.” (It is a highly distorted abstraction.) The *Unfortunately* reinforces the statement and treats it as an obvious fact.
- The word **Or**:
“Are you going to do the washing up *or* clean your room?” (You *will* do at least one of them.)

Tag questions

Finally, these are questions tagged onto the end of a sentence, which tend to get the hearer to agree with the sentence, *don't they?* Most of us use them frequently without even thinking, *don't we?* The idea is you aim to get someone to accept something that it would be reasonable for them to accept. Tag

questions are usually phrased opposite to the sentence:

“You noticed that release, ‘*didn't* you?’”
(Positive-negative.)

I could now suggest to you that:

“You now know what tag questions are, ‘*don't* you?’” (Positive-negative.) And
“Not many people are aware of these patterns, ‘*are* they?’” (Negative-positive.)

Practice Practice Practice

The NLP that can be told is not really very useful unless you put it into practice.

I strongly recommend that you get together with others: fellow teachers, family, friends, anyone you can drag in... and read this, discuss it, and then practice each bit over and over again.

Go through this article with a fine tooth comb and pick out all the meta model and Milton model patterns and where useful unpick them. Likewise, get a newspaper article and decrypt it, especially checking for anything that might be misleading.

Keep asking the two questions: “Where does this come from?” and “How do or did you or they know?”

Then, *gently* start using the meta model on what each of you says. Have someone describe a *modest* problem, and carefully and respectfully unpick how they describe it. Start filling in anything that is missing (deletions) and then start from the top down.

Then work together to craft ways of getting your most important messages, smoothly, respectfully, yet persuasively and powerfully across to other people. And especially apply this to how you explain and teach the Alexander Technique.

Meet often and regularly, until this gets to be second nature.

Conclusion

Although we communicate with as well as read body language and voice tone, spoken and written language is still a main form of detailed communication between people. I am aware that ATI is embracing *Non-Violent Communication*. It is clearly most important that we use language that is clear and honest, and yet at the same time, fully respectful. However, few of us realise how easily we fall into sloppy, distorted, and sometimes misleading communication habits, both while communicating with others, and in communicating within our own minds. Sadly, even the term *Non-Violent Communication* is a negative suggestion, accentuating the very thing we want to avoid.

We need to avoid invoking the undesirable!

The Meta Model and Milton model, both make conscious the structure of our language. This way we can communicate clearly, but also persuasively, so long as we are being respectful. We need to be able to communicate the Alexander Technique to a very unresponsive public – we need to be able to *persuade* and get our message across clearly and powerfully. We need skill and precision for this.

And whereas the Alexander Technique can enable us to pause... and make better choices and decisions

in life, NLP can enable us to detect and reject unwanted and malicious manipulation. I believe that NLP and its language patterns are essential for Alexander teachers, both to convey our message to the general public, but also to be able to teach as effectively as possible.

I intend writing further articles for the ExChange, on NLP and how it can be applied to our lives and our teaching.

Although I already have LoosenUp.org as my main site for the general public, I am also writing a new website Loosen-Up.org (note the hyphen) containing both my teaching methods and a fairly full outline of NLP. This is a free resource for teachers.

I am available to teach my Alexander Technique teaching methods, and for bespoke NLP coaching and training. I also intend running NLP trainings for Alexander Technique teachers and other socially beneficial groups.

I wish you all great success.

David Owen.

Works Cited

Lao Tsu. *Tao te Ching*. Translated © 1972 by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English. Wildwood House, London.

David Owen enjoyed a career in industry, medical physics and as an engineer in the BBC. After 2½ years of Alexander lessons, he trained with Jeanne Haahr (née Day) (STAT/Carrington) in Totnes, Devon UK, qualifying in 1990. He then trained in NLP with four major trainers, before training with Dr. Richard Bandler, its founder and his assistant Dr. Paul McKenna, the well known British hypnotist and also NLP Master Trainer. Having qualified to Licensed Trainer level, David then assisted them for several years, and now leads his own licensed trainings.



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