Develop your
NLP Skills

Third edition

- Improve your powers of communication

- Build better business relationships

- Achieve business excellence
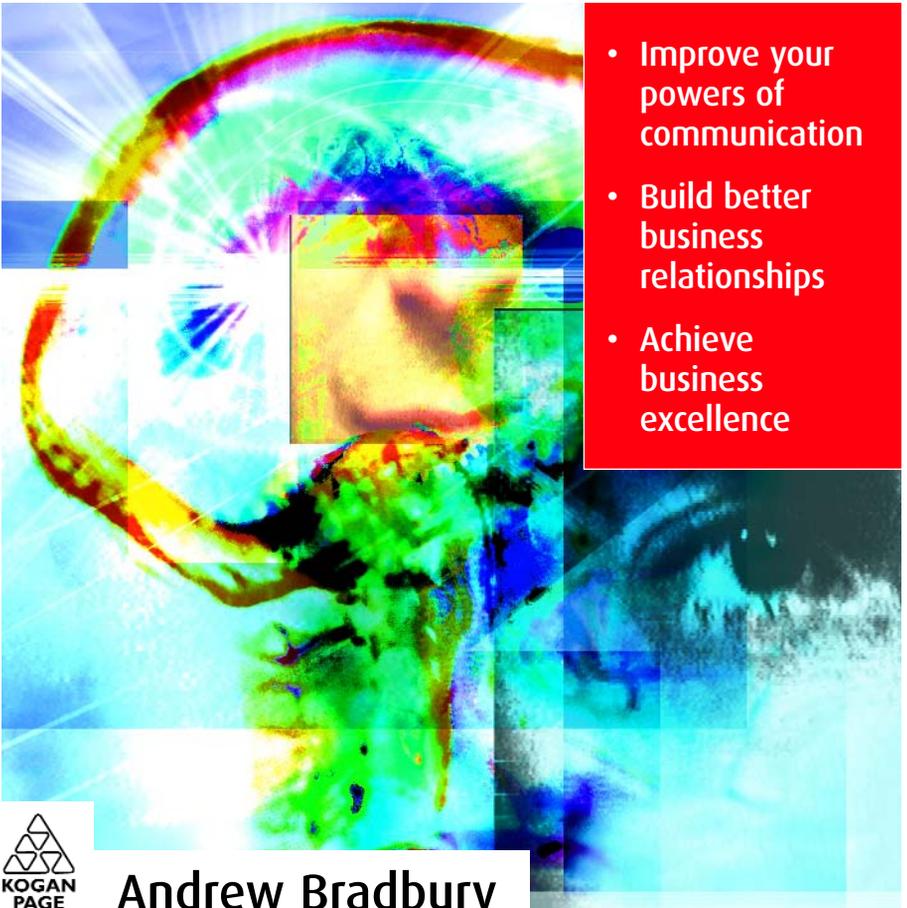
Andrew Bradbury

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Contents

Thinking NLP

Taken as read

Whenever we interact with other people and/or with our environment, we do so on the basis of a whole multitude of presuppositions – assumptions about what is, or is not, true in a given situation.

In most cases these assumptions are based on prior experience of some kind. For example, when you get out of bed first thing in the morning, do you first look over the edge of the bed to check that there is a floor for you to stand on? Or do you simply take it for granted that the floor will be exactly where you left it the night before? And how time consuming would it be if you never made any assumptions but checked everything as though you had no prior experience to go on? (Sadly we know, from observing cases of Alzheimer's disease, how crippling this approach would be.)

So presuppositions are a very useful, even essential, part of everyday life. But even some of the presuppositions we most readily take for granted are not necessarily correct. Another common, but far less easily justified presupposition says that if you and I speak the same language then we will both attach the same meanings to the words we use. In reality, however, language is a comparatively unreliable resource, and we can quickly see the weakness of the assumption of shared meaning

if we start trying to find universally agreed definitions for words like 'nice', 'beautiful', 'clever', 'justice' and 'education'.

NLP – Neuro-Linguistic Programming – has its own underlying presuppositions. Depending on who you listen to, or read, there is now a fairly flexible list of anything up to about 25 different presuppositions, from which each NLP-oriented writer and training organisation has tended to select those entries which they believe express the most important aspects of NLP's core philosophy.

I have chosen those presuppositions which I believe are particularly relevant to the use of NLP in the business environment so that you can immediately get some idea of the thinking that underlies the techniques and methods you will be reading about in the rest of the book.

The presuppositions
Context makes meaning

We sometimes assume that things going on around us have a single, universal meaning. This presupposition proposes that 'meaning' is actually a mental construct (it exists in the mind of the perceiver, rather than in what is being perceived). And because meaning is linked to perception, it is determined by the context within which the perception occurs. When someone comes towards you holding a knife, it makes a real difference whether you are in your own kitchen and the person holding the knife is preparing food or whether it's in a dark alley and the person with the knife is demanding your money.

Every behaviour has a positive intention

This is possibly the most controversial of the NLP presuppositions, since it is so open to misinterpretation. What the presupposition means in the context of NLP is that every behaviour

has a positive intention, *as far as the person exhibiting the behaviour is concerned.*

Can we really transpose such a *seemingly* idealistic concept to the business-place? George M Prince, writing in the *Harvard Business Review* some three years before the very first book on NLP was published, gives an excellent example of how this notion might be applied in management. He lists various 'contrasting assumptions' that make the difference between a negative, critical manager and a positive, supportive manager, including:

Judgmental Manager
When subordinates express themselves or act in ways unacceptable to me, I point out the flaws.

Judicious Manager
When subordinates express themselves or act in unacceptable ways, I assume they had reasons that made sense to them and explore the action from that point of view.

It is worth pointing out here that NLP does not claim that all behaviour is necessarily the best possible choice from an *objective* point of view. Nor does it suggest that all behaviour will have positive benefits for *everyone* involved.

Every behaviour is appropriate in some context

If we repeat a certain pattern of behaviour it is usually because once upon a time it produced a desired result. The trouble is that we often go on using some patterns even when, from an outsider's viewpoint, they are manifestly no longer appropriate. By implication, the most effective solution to unwanted behaviour is to find a more appropriate alternative rather than holding a lengthy, pointless post-mortem over the old behaviour (which is more likely to reinforce that old behaviour).

People will normally make the best choice available to them in any given situation

As well as having a positive intention, people will base their behaviour on *what seems to them* to be the best choice out of whatever choices they perceive as being available to them. At least two important influences are at work here.

Firstly, 'context makes meaning', but context itself is a matter of perception, and a person may perceive context A as being much like context B when, from an objective point of view, any similarities are purely superficial. Thus someone behaving inappropriately may simply have misunderstood the context.

Secondly, we have also seen that people will often repeat behaviour because it once worked, regardless of whether they see the past and present contexts as being similar.

In other words, no matter how calculating and rational we may try to be, making choices is a very subjective process, and what looks like a 'best' choice to one person may look like quite a poor choice to someone else.

The key issue is that few people ever deliberately, knowingly make a 'bad' choice.

A map is not the territory it depicts; words are not the things they describe; symbols are not the things they represent

'A map is not the territory' was originally coined by Alfred Korzybski (the founder of General Semantics):

> A map *is* not the territory it represents, but, if correct, it has a *similar structure* to the territory, which accounts for its usefulness.

(*Science and Sanity*, 5th edn, 1994, IGS, Englewood, NJ, p 58, italics as in the original)

In practical terms, this presupposition expresses the notion that we can never know everything there is to know about anything, no matter how simple. In order to make sense of the world around us, then, we 'draw' our own set of 'mental maps', but always on the basis of a selected subset of all possible information (just as a 'map' is not the landscape it depicts but merely a very limited subset of all possible information about that particular piece of the landscape).

People respond to their internal maps of reality, *not* to reality itself

At this point we can draw together the various concepts we've looked at so far and clear up a fairly widespread misunderstanding in the process. For the last 2,000 years and more, Western thinking has been in thrall to Aristotle's brand of two-valued thinking, which basically assumes that there is one right solution to every problem and everything else is wrong, that there is just one right view of any situation and every other view is wrong, and so on. This particular presupposition says that there are multiple possibilities in any problem (of varying degrees of utility), a variety of viewpoints in any situation, etc, because each person will have their own perceptions and in practice they will respond to those perceptions rather than to the objective reality that triggered those perceptions.

In contrast to Aristotelian thinking, this NLP concept of 'personal perception' is closer to the solipsistic teaching that predominated before Socrates, Plato and Aristotle started to rock the philosophical boat. There are, however, at least two varieties of solipsism, rather than just one, namely *epistemological* solipsism and *metaphysical* solipsism.

Epistemological solipsism, which is the viewpoint NLP is based upon, does not deny the existence of an external, 'absolute' reality; it simply says that each of us has an internal representation of that reality, which is what we base our thoughts and behaviour on. Metaphysical solipsism, which

some writers have (wrongly) assumed NLP supports, holds that there is *no* external reality and that therefore everything is just a fantasy playing out in someone's mind. Just whose mind that might be is anybody's guess.

As one of Bob Dylan's lyrics has it, 'I'll let you be in my dream, if you'll let me be in yours.'

If you go on doing what you're doing now you are very likely to go on getting the same results as you are getting now

This is the first part of an optimistic presupposition, which emphasises the fact that, in *any* situation, we always have choices.

Though we may not be able to control what goes on in the world around us, we can *always* control how we *respond* to those events. If we always act/respond in the same way then the most likely result is that we will maintain the status quo.

If you want something different you must do something different, and keep varying your behaviour until you get the result that you want

The second part of the presupposition is that there are solutions to every situation if you're prepared to keeping on looking until you find them.

In a business context this points us to the fact that if change is required, then it had better be genuine change, not just an exercise in 'skilled incompetence', as Chris Argyris calls it – adopting new processes, but using old methods to carry them out (like trying to play a CD on a gramophone).

The person with the greatest number of choices in a given situation is most likely to achieve their outcome

Building on the previous presupposition, from an NLP viewpoint developing multiple options in any situation is seen as being more realistic than having only one or two. Indeed, from an NLP perspective:

■ One option is no choice at all.
■ Two options is a dilemma.
■ Real choice only starts when you have at *least* three options.

Change makes change

It is a common saying that 'the only person you can really change is yourself'. NLP goes one step further and also acknowledges that changing your own behaviour inevitably has an effect on the people around you. The underlying notion, derived from cybernetics, is that when one element within a system changes, the whole system must change in order to adapt to that changed element. That 'system' may be your family and/or your friends and/or the people you work with, and so on, depending on what it is you decide to change.

You cannot *not* communicate

This presupposition simply makes the point that we are constantly communicating, both by what we do *and* by what we don't do, by what we say *and* by what we don't say, by the messages we send deliberately *and* by a host of mainly unconscious non-verbal signals.

Thus it is clearly in our own interest to understand the communication process as far as we can and to learn how to become effective communicators rather than simply leaving things to chance.

The meaning of your communication is the response that you get

The presupposition here is that people can only respond to what they *think* you mean, which may, or may not, be an accurate interpretation of your *intended* meaning.

(Please note: in this context, a 'communication' is the 'whole' message – not only what you *said* but also all of the accompanying non-verbal signals.)

What this presupposition explains is that, if we want people to respond appropriately to what we say, then we need to talk *to* them rather than *at* them. That is, we need to be constantly aware of other people's responses to what we're saying, and adjust our communication accordingly, rather than just assuming that they will have understood what we meant them to understand.
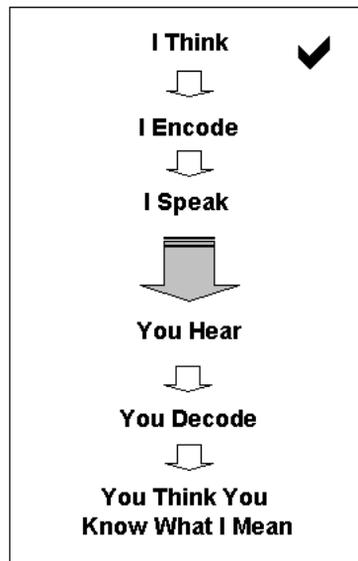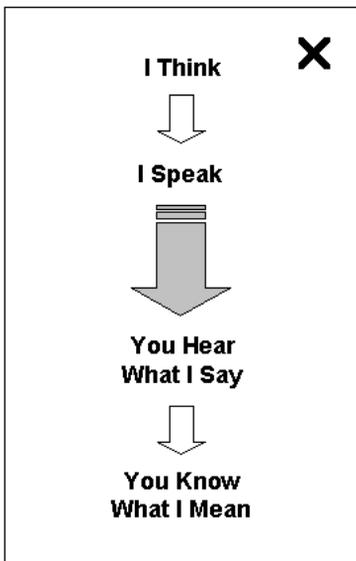
This presupposition does admittedly cause a certain amount of confusion on occasion. Quite a few people seem to think that it also means: 'Whatever I *think* your communication means must be what you *intended* it to mean.' This is an unjustified assumption and makes for poor communication.

Effective communication requires active participation on *both* sides. On the one hand it is certainly the responsibility of the person sending a message to check whether the message has been received and understood correctly, and to provide appropriate clarification if it hasn't. And it is the responsibility of the recipients of a message to indicate what clarification they need, if any, and to accept that clarification, even if it indicates a different meaning from the one in their initial interpretation.

Everyone has all of the resources they need

What this means is simply that a person is ultimately able to deal with any situation in which they may find themselves by drawing on their own inner resources (or capabilities), or by developing new resources, rather than by relying on someone or something else to give them a resource that they didn't previously have.

Having said that, according to *Bradbury's corollaries*, in order to use a resource you must:

■ know that you have it;
■ know how to use it (though not necessarily at a *conscious* level).

Genuine understanding only comes with experience

Whilst we can gain knowledge by a variety of routes – reading, talking, watching other people and so on – nothing is so completely educational, in a positive sense, as experience. You don't really *understand* something until you've done it yourself.

There is no such thing as failure, only feedback

When something doesn't go as we planned we often tend to see that as *failure*. Depending on the seriousness of the situation we might then get angry, irritated, sad, depressed, worried, guilty or whatever. None of which serves any useful purpose.

But what if we see the situation as *feedback* rather than *failure* – a demonstration of how *not* to do something? Instead of being wrong, we've learnt something. Instead of feeling bad, we are free to form a new plan of action and try again.

There is a story about a certain investment banker, one of whose assistants made a business decision that cost the company millions of dollars. When the assistant was called to the banker's office he expected to get a thorough roasting and quite possibly an invitation to seek new career opportunities – somewhere else.

'I'm so sorry, sir,' the young man exclaimed, as soon as he entered the banker's office. 'I wouldn't blame you one little bit if you fired me on the spot!'

'Fire you?' the banker answered, 'when it's cost the company several million dollars to train you in the finer points of risk management? Not a chance. I only called you in to make sure you'd learnt the lesson.'

Your brain and your body are indivisible parts of the same system

The notion that our body and our brain are separate entities seems to have developed within the medical profession in the 1930s and 1940s. If there was something wrong with the body – from a sniffle to malignant cancer – the only solution was some kind of physical treatment. And despite its position at the *head* of the central nervous system, in mainstream medicine it was received wisdom that the influence of the brain effectively stopped at the neck.

At the very same time, however, Alfred Korzybski and the General Semanticists were investigating the idea that mental activity had a direct correlation to physiological activity.

Only in the last couple of decades has practical, scientifically verifiable evidence come to light that shows beyond reasonable doubt that the immune system, for example, is integrally linked to brain activity, so that mental stress can inhibit the performance of the immune system and thus lead to a lowering of general physical health.

People aren't 'broken' and don't need to be 'fixed'

The old psychiatric metaphor put seemingly inappropriate communications and/or behaviour on a par with a broken arm or leg. This led to the assumption that people could be mentally 'broken' and 'fixed' just as they could be physically broken and fixed. According to NLP, however, this is an inappropriate and misleading metaphor. W Edwards Deming ('father' of the Japanese industrial revolution) seems to have had a similar idea in mind when he offered this advice: 'If people don't get it, don't fix the people – fix the process.'

Checkpoint action

Pause from time to time in your everyday activities and notice what presuppositions you believe in.

For example, do you think that people are basically OK – trustworthy and capable of being loyal and responsible, even though they may need a little guidance from time to time? Or do you see people as being basically self-centred and untrustworthy and therefore in need of regular monitoring to ensure that they don't get up to something they shouldn't?

Introducing NLP

Ahead of its time

NLP – Neuro-Linguistic Programming – is one of the most powerful tools currently available to the business community. The term 'neuro-linguistic' was coined by Alfred Korzybski several decades ago, but NLP – developed by Richard Bandler, John Grinder *et al* – has gone far beyond Korzybski's original ideas to become a synthesis of many of the most effective psychological techniques around.

In January 2005, for instance, an article in *New Scientist* magazine entitled 'Doors of Perception' tackled the case for arguing that we actually have at least 21 senses rather than just five, and that 'the senses are less than primary, and that perception is what we really get'. NLP has taken a similar viewpoint for two decades or more, with its emphasis on modalities (the standard five senses) *and* sub-modalities, the constituent parts of the main senses such as (for vision) colour or black and white, stills (like photographs) or motion (like a video or a film), and so on. Moreover, NLP's interest in the sub-modalities specifically addresses the way in which changes in these individual elements can alter someone's overall perception.

For example, think of a recent, pleasurable experience, something of no great importance. Depending on how you tend to remember things – mainly in pictures, or sounds, or feelings

– or any combination thereof – notice, in the case of a visual image, whether the image is brightly coloured or is in softer tones, or maybe in black, white and shades of grey. Is the picture moving or still? Is it in sharp focus, soft focus or maybe a little blurred?

If your image is based around sounds, what are you hearing – are there voices, music, street noises or the sounds of the countryside, etc? Are the noises clear or muffled? Where are they coming from and are they in stereo or mono?

And if your image is mainly about feelings – emotional and/or tactile – what *are* you feeling? Are textures involved, and if so are they rough or smooth? Do you feel warm or cool, or even cold? Does the image involve feeling relaxed or alert?

Now, whatever you answered to those questions, keep thinking of that experience and start changing the qualities of your image. For example, if you 'saw' bright colours, tone them down. If you heard soft noises, make them louder. If you felt relaxed, imagine yourself becoming tensed up.

Do this with each of the qualities of your image, and notice how it alters your experience.

What's in a name?

The name *Neuro-Linguistic Programming* breaks down into:

- *Neuro –* which covers what goes on in the brain and in the nervous system.
- *Linguistic –* referring to the way that we use words, and how this affects our perceptions of, and relationship with, the external world.
- *Programming –* an interactive process which allows us to make very precise choices about the way we think, speak and feel. The exercise on submodalities is a typical example of what we mean by 'programming'.