Book review

Neurolinguistic programming—an all-purpose wand?

Finn Tschudi

During the last ten years or so Richard Bandler (with a background in mathematics, computer science, and gestalt therapy) and John Grinder (with a Ph.D. in linguistics, much in the Chomskian tradition) have, with the help of several others, developed an impressive set of tools relevant to the whole of psychology and psychiatry and even more broadly, to every area concerned with human communication. Promoting this set of tools (by workshops, consultations and books) has grown to be a business enterprise, named THE SOCIETY OF NEURO-LINGUISTIC PROGRAMMING (NLP) and with its own registered certification mark; see Goleman (1979) for more background information.

It all started, so the story goes, when Bandler and Grinder came to watch videotapes of Virginia Satir performing her exquisite therapy. They experienced a good deal of incongruence between what she said about her therapy and what they saw, heard and felt when she actually did therapy. So they became curious about other “great therapists”, and shopped around widely. They have been influenced by Fritz Perls, and to some extent by Salvador Minuchin, but above all their source of inspiration is the techniques of the recognized master hypnotist and therapeutic wizard Milton H. Erickson. (See Barber 1981, for an independent evaluation of Erickson.) Perhaps it is appropriate to say that their main “data” stem from the behaviour of Erickson when doing hypnosis and therapy. The task they set for themselves was modelling of this (and other successful) behaviour, i.e. giving a clear and precise description of the essential features of how e.g. the therapy was carried out. This has an obvious pragmatic aim, to facilitate transfer, making successful techniques potentially available to everyone. Modelling is contrasted with theory—commitment to why it might be that it works. Not only do they studiously claim to avoid any such commitment; it is disparagingly referred to as “psychotheology”.

Bandler and Grinder have had therapeutic experience with a variety of types of clients, but most of their reported examples are from “on the spot” therapies done on therapists attending workshops. Furthermore they have done some consulting for psychiatric wards and report a lot of successful experience with “impossible” clients turned over to them from other therapists.

As far as books go they have been quite productive. Their first books, The Structure of Magic, vols. 1 and 2, were published in 1975 and in 1976, vol. 1 being dedicated to Satir and with prefaces by her and Gregory Bateson. At about the same time they published a book on family therapy with Satir (Bandler, Grinder & Satir 1976) and two volumes (the last with Judith DeLozier) describing Patterns of the Hypnotic Techniques of Milton H. Erickson (1975, 1977). Erickson wrote a preface to the first volume. So far the most systematic and comprehensive survey of their work is Neuro-Linguistic Programming, Vol. 1, The Study of the Structure of Subjective Experience (1980). This is written by the main “officers” of NLP: Robert Dilts, John Grinder, Richard Bandler, Leslie Cameron Bandler (previously known as Richard Bandler) and Judith DeLozier (married to John Grinder). The most interesting and enjoyable books to read are Frogs into Princes (1979) and Trance-Formations (1981), which essentially are transcriptions of workshops and (as far as can be done with words) carry the flair of their style. Grinder has (with McMaster) published their first volume (in a projected series) about applying their framework to work in business and organizations, but under the label Precision (1980). Furthermore three fairly comprehensive accounts as far as therapeutic techniques go are available, but each with its special emphasis: Cameron Bandler (1978), emphasizing sex therapy, Lankton (1980), valuable not only for its comprehensiveness but also for comparisons with other approaches, notably gestalt and trans-actional analysis, and Gordon (1978), emphasizing not only metaphor but also going into detail on “background work” in neuropsychology, and treating “imagery techniques” in very clear detail.

While the present review draws on all these books, it would be highly premature to settle on any evaluation of NLP. The field is rapidly developing and, as will be further commented on later, several new volumes are under way and these may well render many present judgements obsolete.
Representational systems

In his preface to *The Structure of Magic* Bateson wrote:

Grinder and Bandler have confronted the problems which we confronted [in 1955]... They have tools which we did not have... They have succeeded in making linguistics into a base for theory and simultaneously into a tool for therapy... and they have done something which... we were foolish to miss.

What Bateson "missed" is the basic foundation in NLP, which may also be seen as their major claim to systematic innovation. Bandler and Grinder introduce the concept of *representational systems* as their basic structural elements, the "building blocks" of all our experience, the basis upon which we build our maps of the world.

There are four major representational systems: V = visual/sight, K = kinesthetic/body sensations, A = auditory/hearing, O = olfactory/gustatory-smell/taste. Recall an evening at the fireplace. Consider: the image of the logs burning (V), the prickling sensation of the heat of fire (K), the crackling and hissing sound of the logs (A), the smell of the logs (O)—totally a four-tuple. Not all of these components may be equally accessible to the reader, indeed Bandler and Grinder make much of the concept of a *most highly valued representational system*. The component most easily accessed may lead the reader to identify his or her most highly valued representational system. Bringing this component vividly forth, one may then overlap into the other components. Suppose this is V... and as you see the flames... you become aware of the crackling sounds. Overlapping, a widely used technique, starts with the most available system, and this system is then used as a "stepping stone" to lead into the less available systems.

In the example the reader was asked to bring internal components to awareness. An important distinction is whether any given component refers to internal or external events. This may be indicated by an i or e superscript. One may also distinguish between e-constructed representations (e.g. visualizing something never experienced) and r-remembered representations. Any given state will usually be a mixture of i and e components. A major point is that each different combination corresponds to a separate state of consciousness. One may identify the most valued system by listening to the predicates (verbs, adverbs and adjectives) and metaphors the person uses to describe his or her experience. An incongruence experienced in a text may variously be described as "the parts not squaring with each other" (V), "a grating sound to this" (A), or "being jolted" (K).

Of course the momentarily dominant representational system will also depend upon the specific context; certain tasks put more demands on specific systems: the kinesthetic system for love-making, the visual system for driving, etc. Lack of flexibility in matching representational system to context may be one source of problems. One example of such a "representational mismatch" is a woman who represented each digit by a different kinesthetic representation. This made her almost unable to add and subtract, the "combined" feelings made her quite confused. Being stuck in one system (and/or not bringing another into consciousness) may be related to pervasive personal problems. As Cameron Bandler puts it: "When a person habitually brings only one system into consciousness often all the 'crap' is stored in another system." (1978, p. 52). Long-standing headaches may for instance be related to lack of ability to comfortably access kinesthetically. This ability may be taught, for instance by overlap techniques, and this may lead to more beneficial responses to bodily signals than headaches. This approach calls to mind the "Jungian polarity approach" and also gives a glimpse of an NLP approach to "unconscious processes" and "psychosomatic disorders".

The four-tuples are described as *primary experience*. To this we must add a more "rarefied" representation, a *coding*. This of course refers to words and symbols—which are only meaningful in terms of the *primary* sensory representations with which they are associated. So our language representations (or "digital" part of our communications) are referred to as *secondary experience*. A digital part of experience may be represented by subscripts d, A, etc. is for instance what is being said internally to oneself. (A, may denote tonal auditory representation.) This is the terminology in Dils et al. (1980); in Bandler & Grinder (1975) the terminology was influenced by Chomsky and the term *surface structure* was used instead of *secondary experience*. It is here appropriate to emphasize their primary injunction, Korzybski's "the map is not the territory". Secondary experience (the map) will have quite tenuous relations to primary experience. The relations will at a large extent be arbitrary, often with unnecessarily imposed limitations, to say nothing of deletions in the map.

Strategies

The next major question is how to describe how
the "building blocks", the representational systems, are linked together in time in larger chunks. This is done by their major systematic concept, strategy, which may be defined in the following way: a strategy is a sequence of the representational systems which at any moment has more behavioural significance than the others. While in principle all representational systems are present simultaneously, a "mechanism", called accessing, usually singles out one as more important than the others. There are a variety of accessing cues which might tell the observer which representational system is accessed. Eye-movements are especially emphasized, since they are easy to learn. Simplified: Visual accessing is correlated with upward eye-movements, auditory accessing with lateral and downward movements, kinaesthetic (and olfactory) with downward movements. Furthermore, constructed representations are associated with right movements, remembered representations with left movements. (This is for right-handed people; it is usually reversed for the left-handed.) By carefully watching the person one may then literally see a strategy unfolding itself. Here is an example of a phobia:

\[
V^t \rightarrow V^e \rightarrow K \rightarrow K^t
\]

This type of analysis forms the basis for change work. Identifying a strategy with a negative outcome will immediately suggest a number of possible points of intervention. The basic guiding principle is that if any link is changed the rest of the sequence will also be changed.

A component in a strategy will not necessarily be represented in consciousness. In our daily skills it will be an advantage not to be conscious of the separate steps. The less conscious the behaviour, the more it is completely incorporated.

The scope of the strategy concept is greatly enhanced by incorporating the basic contribution by Miller et al. (1960), the TOTE unit. (Test—Operate—Test—Exit). What this basically adds to the strategy concept is the notion of "tests" or "decision points"—which incorporate the basic notion of feedback—and then loops. One strategy for making decisions (an example to which we later return) may be represented as follows:

\[
V \rightarrow A_0 \rightarrow K \rightarrow \text{Exit}
\]

Gather information

In identifying the present state, observation of non-verbal behaviour is crucial. Not only must the NLP'er (Nelp-er) be able to identify the sequence of accessing cues as eye-movements, it is also necessary to observe other changes in non-verbal behaviour: tone of voice, breathing, skin colour, etc.

In listening to verbal content it is especially important to notice sequence of predicates; this may help to identify the specific strategy being used. However, since words mainly refer to secondary experience, it is important to have available a set of tools to reconnect secondary experience with the primary experience from which it has been derived. This may provide a richer map, and/or isolate arbitrary limitations in the map and thus set the stage for new choices. Such a set of tools, called the metamodel, is what Bateson referred to as making "linguistics a tool for therapy". Bandler & Grinder (1975a) deal almost exclusively with the metamodel; nothing has been added to this in the later works. There are a dozen or so linguistic indications for exploring by the metamodel; here there is only space to touch on a few. Unspecified verbs will be challenged: Cl: "I can deal with it"—Th:—"How specifically?" Likewise generalizations: Cl: "Nobody
pays any attention to what I say"—. Th: "Nobody ever pays any attention to you at all?" Cl: "Well, not exactly." Th: "Ok, then: who specifically?" This type of generalization is also described as lack of referential index ("who specifically?") Of special interest are modal operators ("can't", "musts" etc.) that express limits on the model: Cl: "I can't do anything right" Th: "What prevents you?" Cl: "I must not hurt anyone's feelings". Th: "What will happen if you do?" Bandler and Grinder claim that all really successful therapists they have studied seem to have all the metamodel questions automatically "wired in".

It might be added that the implications of the metamodel may be no less for management. Precision is devoted to this topic. Here the metamodel questions have been rechristened with more striking labels, e.g. "action blockbusting" for "unspecified verbs" and "boundary crossing" for "modal operators" and "Precision" replaces "Metamodel". The examples show quite convincingly how such questioning is extremely valuable for management in extracting all relevant information from "local experts" in arriving at optimal decisions. And conversely "local experts" may to advantage "Precision question" directives to avoid misunderstandings. (A valuable addition to this is the provision of "relevancy frames" and "outcome frames" to steer the discussion from straying.) Metamodelling questioning is perhaps most important in identifying the desired state. Here the outcome must be stated in terms specific enough to provide a clear-cut criterion for success or not. In organizational work and also in most therapies this is of course a crucial task.

Sometimes the desired state may be the performance of a person known to be highly successful in her or his field. By careful observation the experienced Nelp-er may by innocuous questioning "draw forth" the successful strategy of say, a highly successful manager or the salesperson may similarly elicit the "decision strategy for buying" from a prospective customer. Actually watching, or having videotapes may, however, provide more information. This, of course, is what Bandler and Grinder have done with Milton Erickson, as earlier hinted at. They claim that any successful strategy can, by careful observation, be copied and then (step 2 below) be installed in other persons.

Transform system

A sine qua non for transforming the system is to pace the client, put otherwise "to enter the world of the client". Through her own behaviour the Nelp-er will feed back to the client the behaviour and strategies she has observed in the client. She is making herself into a biofeedback device. Pacing is at the root of what is otherwise called "rapport", "trust", "persuasion", by pacing one meets the client at the client's model of the world. The Nelp-er will match the client both verbally (by predicates) and, even more important non-verbally. Breathing is especially emphasized. But matching in the same modality may be undesired: carefully matching an asthmatic in the same modalities may produce asthma in the Nelp-er! In such cases patterns of breathing can be matched across-modally, for instance by shifting inflections in tone of voice.

With successful pacing the road to changing is wide open: one may then lead the client, i.e. changes in the Nelp-er's behaviour will now be followed by the client. If this does not take place, it is simply taken as an indication that the pacing has not been successful, and it is then necessary to return to pacing before further leading can take place. (Pacing is of course also necessary for the first step, to gather information.)

We should like to suggest that the essential feature of pacing is completely capturing and focussing the client's attention. Good pacing will then by itself induce an altered state. since our attention usually is divided—"irrelevant" stimuli keep intruding. The client may then be led from the altered state and in the desired direction. One way of doing this is by what is called "a reverse metamodel", or the Milton model (so labelled after Milton H. Erickson). Essentially this involves deliberately vague and seemingly confusing messages—showing artistry in violating the metamodel in all possible ways. The trick is to do this in such a way that the client, intensely focussing on making sense of the messages, by the very process of trying to understand is led to whatever the desired state may be. A main example in Bandler & Grinder (1975b) is a case where Erickson gradually led an older man with excruciating cancer pains into a "no pain" state. Since the client was a florist, Erickson started by talking about farming, flowers, and his own liking for growing flowers, that is the therapist (verbally) paced the client's experience. One of the key phrases (often repeated) in Erickson's long monologue was "a tomato plant feels good". Since this had been preceded by "it won't be about flowers" and furthermore "feels good" is not an "acceptable" property of tomato plants, the key phrase effectively lacked a referential index. For this specific phrase the point was to lead the client to construct a meaning by supplying "I" as the referential index for "feel good."
One may also completely capture attention by a variety of surprisal techniques, for instance by interrupting highly automatic behaviour patterns. One metaphor for how such techniques may be used therapeutically is “uprooting” and then “rerooting” (Tschudi & Rommetveit 1982).

Altering the state of consciousness (so that it is fully tuned in to the therapist’s communication) may be seen as essential for change. This will serve to make unconscious/unexplored resources available or (what may be logically equivalent) serve to bypass habitual patterns of trying to solve problems. The major presupposition underlying NLP is that the person has available all necessary resources for making changes, but that these resources are not ordinarily available in the usual “normal” state of consciousness. By changing the state these resources may then be made available.

The most developed change technique following from these assumptions is reframing. The basic idea is that any “undesired behaviour” also performs some useful function for the person. This conception fits a variety of theoretical viewpoints, see Tschudi (1977). The trick in reframing is to separate the intention from the specific undesired behaviour, and then leading the person to access “unconscious resources” so that the same intention can be fulfilled, but in more benign ways. Consider as an example (Dilts et al. 1980, pp. 243–268) a seriously overweight woman in whose case it transpired that her overweight preserved a very important sense of “groundedness”, a (kinesthetic) feeling of “being in control of me”. Any weight reduction program that failed to take care of this might then have led to serious consequences. So the problem can be seen as how to combine the intention (preserve groundedness) and the desired behaviour (slimming). A unique feature of the reframing procedure is that solutions to this problem need not be consciously represented; it is even claimed that it may be best not to be aware of new ways of coping. Specifically the “intention” is accessed as if a separate part of the person were responsible for it, and this part is then asked to communicate through any “channel”. A yes/no pattern using “involuntary” behaviour is set up. Further a “creative part” is accessed, and this part is similarly asked whether it is willing to find new ways of fulfilling the intention. Communication with these parts may go through complex sequences before satisfactory solutions are found. In addition to satisfying “unconscious motivation to overheat”, as it might be put in another theoretical framework, it may also be necessary to install a different specific strategy for the desired behaviour (in the example install new eating habits).[^5]

“Reframing” may be understood in two senses: a) a trance-like state is developed to allow new ways of coping to emerge; b) the problem is seen in another frame, it is redefined as a useful signal. See Balsnes & Møller (1980) for further discussion.

The general message that comes through strongly is that we should regard our “symptoms”, stress and all, not as enemies to be fought against, but as useful allies that provide us with important signals, of which we should take heed.

The importance of pacing for successful communication (whether the context is therapeutic or not) may be underscored by considering some possible outcomes when there is “lack of pacing”. Bandler and Grinder repeatedly ridicule cases where the therapist is mainly limited to a kinesthetic system, routinely asking “How do you feel about that?” If the client is more comfortable with the visual system, the question may not make much sense to her. Not only will this impede communication; the therapist may even be inclined to infer “resistance”. Bandler and Grinder are adamant that there are no “resistant clients”, only therapists with limited ability to pace. “Resistance” is seen as the result of a lack of therapeutic variety. They repeatedly point out that the “meaning of a communication is the response it gets”, thus putting the blame squarely on the therapist if he or she does not get the intended reaction.

If the two persons in a couple have different most highly valued representational systems, they may have difficulty in pacing each other, and this may lead to what might be called “communication conflicts”. A frequently used example is that she is visual, he kinesthetic. When, for instance, he touches her (among other persons) and intends this as a plea for contact, she may just see this as embarrassing pawing. Conversely her pleas for a tidy, neat looking house. may not impress him as at all relevant to their relation. Therapeutically one choice may be to train both of them in what Bandler and Grinder claim is often a quite unused system, teach them to really listen to what is said. A supplementary choice is to overlap each of them into the other’s preferred system, thus enhancing common ground.

Roughly speaking, the desired outcome may be of two different types, to utilize an existing strategy for conveying a specific content, or to change the strategy[^6]. The first type is highly relevant to what we will here call persuasion. The basic idea is to pace the strategy, that is to package the content one wants to “smuggle in” in a form that mirrors the strategy used by the one to be persuaded. One example (Dilts et al. 1980, p.
177) is that the Nelp er wishes to persuade the judge in her favour in a court proceeding. Suppose she had ascertained that the judge uses the decision strategy mentioned earlier. Pacing this strategy one should then present one's claim in a format as below:

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
V & A_k & K & \text{Exit} \\
& \text{I had to look} & \text{A hypotenuse} & \text{of issue in perspective} \\
& \text{at \{concept,} & \text{at \{hypotenuse} & \text{concluding} \\
& \text{perspective} & \text{of issue\}} & \text{concluding \{conclusion} \\
& \text{on own claim\}} & \text{conclusion with positive outcome} \\
& & \text{for own case} & \\
& \text{and I feel} & \text{concluding} & \text{positive outcome} \\
& \text{justifying own claim} & \text{recommendation for own case} & \\
& & & \\
\end{array}
\]

The claim is made that “successful pacing is irresistible” (p. 115). A more cautious hypothesis would be that pacing will be successful to the extent that the content is not contrary to the person’s belief systems. (This will follow from Bem’s (1972) self-perception hypothesis.) Anyway, it is not hard to understand that several courses in NLP are directed at salespersons. Consider that pacing will not only be verbal, but perhaps more important also on the non-verbal level. Consider further that the Nelp-salesperson will be adept at noticing non-verbal signals of disagreement with specific lines of approach, and will then unobtrusively shift the approach ... One shudders at the possible implications.

NLP provides a rich set of techniques for changing old or building new strategies. Every person has available all the separate components in any strategy. Sometimes changing a strategy may be fairly simple: in the previously mentioned phobia example the client was simply taught to “insert” another component after looking out of the window (V’), namely to sing the national anthem (A). The phobia was then reported to disappear! If one representational system is relatively undeveloped, special techniques (like overlapping) are available to enhance it. So it amounts to putting the building blocks together in the desired sequence. The general formula for accomplishing this is by anchoring. An anchor is defined as any stimulus (a cue) that triggers a component or sequence of components. Words, of course, are anchors, and one may “sequence representations using verbal anchors” (Dilts et al. 1980, p. 227)—what is more familiarly referred to as “giving instructions”. In NLP, however, far more attention is given to non-verbal anchors, which may be a touch, a change of voice etc. Anchoring is seen as a special case of S-S conditioning, but the occurrence of one-trial learning is emphasized. It seems reasonable to suggest that the effectiveness of anchoring will depend upon the extent to which the Nelp er has paced, controlled attention.

### Test transformed system

For reframing, this test phase amounts to accessing all “parts” of the person in order to ask whether there is any objection to the unconscious resources that have been mobilized. If there is any such objection, the procedure is recycled. The therapeutic work is not considered finished until there is no such objection. This is called an ecological check. Furthermore the situation in which the new desired behaviour is about to take place is fully represented to ensure that sufficient anchors to trigger the new strategy are set up. This is referred to as future-pacing. The reader who might find an “oversimplification” in the approach to phobias previously exemplified, should consider that in “serious” therapeutic work, an ecological check would have to be passed before the phobia could be considered to be “treated”. Conversely Bandler and Grinder emphasize that changes which do not pass such a test may have very unfortunate consequences. An example of “self-induced change” may serve as an illustration. A young man managed to persuade himself to stop having internal dialogues because he had read in a book that “it takes two people to make a dialogue”. The result was a pervading lethargic state; the fact that he used internal dialogues to “motivate himself” had not been considered.

It should be evident that the ecological check is of prime importance in organizational work. Before installing any proposed solution to a problem, one has to ensure that this solution does not violate any over-all organizational goals referred to as meta-outcomes.) Examples might be welfare requirements, concern for ecological factors etc.

### Evaluation of NLP

I hope that the preceding overview indicates that NLP should be taken very seriously. To me the most fascinating aspect of NLP is that it provides a set of concepts and techniques applicable to a very broad range of areas: as for instance learning disabilities, business and management, therapeutic problems, and law. The techniques may well prove superior to most other approaches on the market. This would follow from Bandler’s and Grinder’s ability to give explicit descriptions (to model) of the skills of master practitioners.

Though Bandler and Grinder have a somewhat scornful attitude towards “theory” (to which I return), I think their strategy concept has obvious theoretical significance for the whole of psychology. It is especially valuable in pointing out sim-
ilarities between otherwise different fields, thus facilitating transfer of skills and understanding across otherwise separate areas. With more justification than most, they might have quoted Lewin: "Nothing is so practical as a good theory."

But from my entrenched academic point of view it is also necessary to ask whether their claims are backed by solid evidence. The answer is clearly no. Consider first therapy: Numerous cases of rather startling therapeutic success are reported, but it is all in the form of anecdotes. I have not seen a single case of therapeutic failure reported. It is hard to believe that there are none. Hard-headed evaluation is made more difficult by a scornful attitude towards conventional research. "The scientific model" is chastised for emphasizing "restricting everything in the situation but one variable". This is contrasted with the Nelp-er who "rather than restrict will want to vary behaviour wildly, to . . . elicit the response you want" (Bandler & Grinder 1979, pp. 167-168). But a design adequate to take care of this is simply to let the "one variable" be special training in NLP vs no such training. In other words: do Nelp-ers generally outperform otherwise comparable therapists who have no such training? Or one might have a "before-after" design: does NLP improve one's therapeutic effectiveness? (Exactly the same type of designs may be used for evaluating the value of NLP for salespersons. Here it might be easier to fulfill the requirements for "strict" experimental designs, and the dependent variable is much simpler, but these are minor points.)

No less important than research with global outcome variables is research to substantiate claims concerning how representational systems work. As an example we consider eye-movements. Again no independent research to substantiate the assumed patterns is reported. From a review of "lateral (right or left) eye-movements" (Ehrlichman & Weinerberger 1978) one may, however, note that no consistent pattern seems to exist between right or left eye-movements and type of mental processing. Here two comments of quite different natures are called for. First, the research in the review is not directly relevant to NLP. Registration of eye-movements is too crude, just left or right, whereas NLP also emphasizes up, horizontal, and down eye-movements. Furthermore, many of the questions used are ambiguous as to representational system, for instance (p. 1084) "What is your mother's first name?" This may be answered either by a visual or an auditory strategy. Suppose now, however, that research were carried out in a way that did take care of all the complexity and refinements demanded by NLP. Would this be seen as relevant evidence against NLP? Perhaps not, and this leads to our second comment, which revolves around their disdain for "theory" and "truth". Commenting upon eye-movements Bandler & Grinder (1979, p. 18) note: "all generalizations are lies . . . but most of our lies will work out really well if you act as if they are true. As modelers, we are not interested in whether we offer you is true or not . . . We're only interested in what works." Certainly there is a sense in which they may be justified (right?). Perhaps the value of their approach lies not so much in whether eye-movements really are correlated, as claimed, with representational systems, but, for instance, in whether it forces the therapist to fully tune in to the client, and thus not risk being lost in his or her own internal processes. What I find problematic is that NLP might then be seen as similar to say, astrology, in that there might be a pragmatic justification, but a faulty description of the basis.

It might, however, be further argued that such an analogy fails to do NLP full justice. "You can make up anything. Act as if it is real and it will be." (Grinder & Bandler 1981, p. 162). It may well be that there are self-fulfilling prophecies of a benign nature, and where questions of whether they "really are true or not" may not be amenable to empirical research. Examples of this would be the NLP assumption that there is such a thing as an unconscious which is of a benign nature, and that there are several "parts" of the person which may be independently accessed and which can then "answer" with involuntary movements (cf. reframing). NLP can be seen to raise interesting questions of a meta-theoretical or philosophical nature: Are there different types of assumptions "where validity depends upon belief", as Bateson (1951) puts it?

Having now touched on how NLP may profit from hard-headed research, we turn around and make some suggestions as to how NLP might invigorate selected areas of psychology and psychiatry. First of all NLP might lead to very exciting research in the field of non-verbal behaviour. To illustrate: one exercise described by Bandler & Grinder (1981) is to ask a person four simple yes/no questions and to note carefully differential non-verbal behaviour accompanying the verbal answer. For the next yes/no questions the respondent shall not respond verbally, but the questioner should be able to discern the answer just from observing the non-verbal behaviour. So an interesting question is to what extent a careful observation can replace all "lie detector" gadgets. More generally one may ask to what extent careful
observation and analogically graded responses (e.g. by touching) may replace most current “bio-feedback” devices.

In research in the Asch tradition an unanswered question is to what extent the naive person “believes” the group when the group members give a judgement contrary to sensory information, and to what extent the naive person “merely complies”. Careful observation of non-verbal behaviour to assess what type of representational system is primarily involved may be relevant to this problem. A complete “conversion” to the group judgement might for instance be indicated by eidetic visual processing, an “intermediate” stage by visual construction, and “mere compliance” by primarily auditory processing.

There is no reference to diagnostic systems in NLP, but it might be very interesting to establish whether persons similarly classified would show similar strategies or patterns of use of representational systems. Might for instance “paranoids” be deficient in visual representation? If grouping by strategies should coincide with diagnostic strategies, this would give added validity to such diagnoses. If, on the other hand, grouping by strategies would give classification at variance with conventional categories, this might provide an alternative classificatory system.

Will, however, NLP be likely to take hold in academic quarters? There are several factors that contradict this possibility: not only their lack of concern for independent research, but also the tendency to make extravagant claims. Two examples: phobias can be cured in ten minutes: the strategy of any top person (Einstein is mentioned as an example) can be copied (“cloning” is their preferred concept here) and installed in others. Without supporting evidence this “hard sell” approach is not likely to endear them to university people. Their style of almost exclusively referring to NLP work (The Structure of Magic is an exemplary exception with a broad range of references) adds to the image of a somewhat insular approach. Another complaint may partly be of an aesthetic nature. On the one hand NLP is replete with practical methods, but it also (despite the avowed atheoretical stance) contains the strands of a far-reaching theoretical perspective: that our behaviour is guided by a constructed map, how this map is constructed, and how it may be reconstructed. But it is by no means clear how theory and methods are interlocked. Consider as an example the concept “anchoring”. On the one hand, it refers to a set of specific techniques, on the other hand, one may “set up anchors in future-pacing”. The viability of the latter rests on theoretical assumptions of transfer between therapy and non-therapy situations. NLP does not provide a perspective for testing out such assumptions. The lack of separation between method and theory also makes it awkward to give an elegant presentation of NLP. Summarizing these complaints in the NLP terminology: the style of presentation does not adequately pace academic habits.

From yet another perspective practically everyone could find something to add to her or his repertoire and get a new angle on favourite techniques. There is something here for everyone to recognize: gestalt influence, uncovering “traumatic experiences”, conditioning techniques, to name but a few. But this very feature may work against NLP being accepted by “experts”, since there will also be so much for them to “unlearn”. If you emphasize “unconscious processes”, the strong appeal to conditioning techniques may be a turn off—and vice versa. Humanistic psychologists emphasizing “feeling” may not be charmed by being chastised for overplaying the kinesthetic system, and thus losing sight of visual perspectives. A possible prediction is that NLP will take hold in quarters where people will not have so much to unlearn, and thus be more willing to pick up the techniques: among social workers, lawyers, sales persons and engineers interested in the “human factor”.

An alternative, which I would prefer, would be a synthesis between NLP and George Kelly’s (1955) personal construct psychology. While Bandlter and Grinder are not familiar with this perspective, Lankton (1980) points out several similarities. The basic common point is the prime importance of subjective experience: each person constructs his/her own map of the world, which guides his/her behaviour; he/she is a “personal scientist”. And since each map has an arbitrary quality to it, it can be re-constructed. This is Kelly’s philosophical point of departure, what he calls constructive alternativism. Bandler and Grinder would strongly endorse the Kellyian dictum: “No one needs to be a victim of his autobiography”.

NLP has important contributions to add to construct theory. The emphasis on representational system may provide a much needed “operationalization” of constructs, and also give an impetus to study what Kelly calls “preverbal constructs”. But the possible influence of the other way is more important in the present context. A basic Kellyan notion is that each person has a hierarchy of constructs. One method to approach this hierarchy is “laddering” (Bannister & Fransella 1977). Any given construct may be laddered “downwards”. (How specifically would you
recognize, say “anger”?) At this point the meta-model will be a valuable aid. From the Kellian point of view, however, it would be of perhaps greater importance to ladder “upwards”. Which values/superordinate concerns will be promoted or hindered by “anger”? Put otherwise how is any construct embedded in more central belief/value systems? While NLP has not yet paid much attention to superordinate structures, there are some promising beginnings. The notion of “ecological check” is relevant, and especially its version in organizational work, where the question is whether any specific outcome is congruent with “meta-outcomes”—superordinate values (see also note 7). “Bandler and Grinder are currently working on “meta-programming” and belief systems. recognizing that reframing may not work for all belief systems. Current NLP techniques may well lead to a “therapeutic honeymoon”, but without considering the whole construct system there may later be disenchantment. So my hope would be that Kelly’s theoretical framework might serve to guide not only present NLP techniques, but also future developments.

There is more to be said. Bandler and Grinder treat all communication conflicts as if they may readily be solved by precise communication. Conflicts in management are for instance treated by eliciting more superordinate, common goals. But as Kursh (1971) cogently argues, there may be “advantages of poor communication”. Some conflicts may not be resolved without violating entrenched interests. In such cases concern for stability may—at least sometimes—necessitate “poor communication” (“let sleeping dogs lie”). In an uncertain world, beset by conflicts, clear and precise communication may for instance not allow a politician to stay in business for long periods.

The constraints imposed by the external world, and the problem of conflicting values have not been of much interest to Bandler and Grinder. Their message so far is that we have all been too prone to exaggerate the importance of such factors. Should we then pass NLP by—as being not only unsubstantiated, but also carrying an unsavoury Californian flavour, naive in its unbridled optimism concerning the possibilities for change? We might then lose something important in our complacency, the injunction to practise precise observation of behaviour, and the beginning of a language tying in with the non-verbal basis of change processes.

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Notes

1. An interesting way to vitalize the current “person-situation” discussion in the psychology of personality (see e.g. Magnusson Endler 1977) might be to systematically study how the representational systems of different persons interacted with type of context.

2. Two strategies may take place simultaneously, causing split response and behavioural incongruence of neither strategy is strong enough (saying “yes” in a tone of voice denying agreement). Quite often the recipient will respond to only one of the output channels. Habitually incongruous communications may have rather adverse effects. In Grinder & Bandler (1976), where incongruity is discussed in great detail, it is proposed that it is more profitable to describe “incongruences” than to use the more slippery term “double bind”. A variety of therapeutic techniques are discussed to sort out incongruences. It may be of passing interest to note that metacommenting is generally disparaged (it may lead to alienation); likewise one is warned against use of “paradoxical intervention” (the person may lack strategies to benefit from such manoeuvres).

3. The “pacing leading” formula is mainly elaborated in the context of “hypnosis” extensively treated in Bandler & Grinder (1975b), Grinder et al. (1977). A major point is noted that “hypnosis” as a special phenomenon. This implies that every technique developed in the context of “doing hypnosis” is potentially available in practically all of our everyday communications. “When John Grinder and Richard Bandler do a seminar on hypnosis together, one of them usually says ‘all communication is hypnosis’, and the other says ‘I disagree, nothing is hypnosis, hypnosis does not exist.’ There is a sense in which they are both right, and both are saying the same thing” (from preface to Grinder & Bandler, 1981). The clue to the common ground is to avoid any formal definition of hypnosis; it is simply treated as an altered state of consciousness (altered from the point of view of what the person considers “normal consciousness”). One may define “trance” as a state maximally different from ordinary consciousness, a state oriented towards internal representations (Grinder et al. 1977, p. 13). An explicit understanding of “altered states” should provide a set of instructions which the interested person should be able to use. This is to be found in Grinder & Bandler (1981) and their prescription(s) may well be superior to “meditation” approaches.

4. Alternatively one may refer to “accessing the non-dominant hemisphere” or “blocking the dominant
hemisphere”, as is extensively done in Bandler & Grinder (1975b). But I do not think that this is necessary in presenting NLP, furthermore it may not be consistent with their avowed atheoretical approach (see further note 8).

5. Reframing actually incorporates all three steps; here we have concentrated on “the major body” of the complete procedure. Reframing approaches that rely on conscious representations of alternative ways of coping are also available. A more extensive presentation of “reframing” is about to appear in print.

6. Dills et al. (1980, p. 158) draw on Bateson’s (1973) distinction between Learning I (“to change the specificity of response”) and Learning II (“a change in the process of Learning I”) in discussing the two types. One might also apply Piagetian concepts: Learning I mainly requires assimilating processes, whereas Learning II also requires accommodation. In teaching (which is where the distinction is discussed) it is an important choice whether to mainly place the students (Learning I) or to teach them new strategies. “Learning disabilities” may be seen as involving a “double teaching failure”; the students are not paced, and new strategies are not installed.

7. The reader who is familiar with Miller et al. (1960) will recognize that the general three-step framework is a TOTE unit. By adopting the TOTE concept one allows for hierarchies of strategies (plans), since one step in a strategy may itself be represented as a strategy. Strategies have what is technically known as a recursive structure. When actually solving a problem this will generate a tree structure. This is most clearly spelled out in McMaster & Grinder (1980), and to some extent in the detailed analysis of reframing. But it may be fair to say that the notion of hierarchies of strategies has barely begun to be explored.

8. Note that the above pragmatic view is not congruent with emphasizing “dominant” and “non-dominant” hemispheres (see note 4).

9. Watching eye-movements may indicate that external visual information immediately leads to prolonged auditory internal dialogue (A2). Concepting paranoia as a dissociated state suggests teaching the clients various forms of visualization (V)—“seeing” oneself from different points of view. This may be an “integrative experience, and thus therapeutically useful. I am grateful to Tore Heiberg and Truls Eieker for providing this clinical example from their current work.

References


