THE SKEPTICAL

INTELLIGENCER

VOLUME 11, 2008

Edited by Michael Heap

CONTENTS

GUIDELINES FOR AUTHORS

The *Skeptical Intelligencer* welcomes formal and informal contributions on any subject within the ambit of the Association for Skeptical Enquiry (ASKE).

Formal articles should be aimed at the intelligent layperson, and authors should take particular care to define or explain unusual terms or concepts. Equations, statistics or other numerical and symbolic tools may be employed whenever required. Articles should be as succinct as possible, but may be of any length.

Authors of contributions to the *Skeptical Intelligencer* should be take care to ensure that texts are temperate in tone and free of vituperation. They should also ensure that arguments are either supported by express evidence/arguments or identified as speculative. 'Do not pretend conclusions are certain that are not demonstrated or demonstrable.' (T.H. Huxley).

Before being accepted for publication, submitted texts will be reviewed by the Editor and any appropriate advisors. Where improvements or changes are desirable, the editorial team will work with authors and make constructive suggestions as to amendments.

Whenever possible, authors should submit a printed, double-spaced, hard copy of their article or letter, together with a 3.5-inch DOS-formatted floppy disk to the address shown on the front cover. Alternatively, contributions may be sent by e-mail direct to the editor at: <m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk>. Texts should in either ASCII text-only; Rich Text Format; or MS-Word.

When referring to another work, authors should:
- Cite only the surname, year, and (where appropriate) page number within the main text: e.g. '...according to Hyman (1985: p. 123), the results of this test were not convincing...' or '...according to Bruton (1886; cited in Ross, 1996)...'
- List multiple references in date order: e.g. '...a number of studies have thrown doubt on this claim (Zack, 1986; Al-Issa, 1989; Erikson, 1997)...'
- In the case of electronic material, give the author and the date the material was accessed on line
- Place Internet addresses URLs in angle brackets: e.g. <http://www.nothing.org>

A complete list of references in alphabetical order of authors' surnames should be given at the end of the article. The list should be compiled using the following conventions:
- *Articles*: Smith, L.J. (1990) An examination of astrology. *Astrological Journal*, **13**, 132-196.
- *Books*: Naranjo, X. (1902) *The End of the Road*. London: University of London.
- *Chapters*: Griff, P. (1978) Creationism. In D. Greengage (ed.) *Pseudoscience*. Boston: Chapman Publishers.
- *Electronic material*: Driscoe, E. Another look at Uri Geller. <http://www.etc.org>. Accessed 21 April 1997.

Unless otherwise agreed or indicated, all original material published in the Skeptical Intelligencer is copyright by the Association for Skeptical Enquiry.

For further information contact the editor, Dr. Michael Heap at <m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk>.

For details of back issues of the Skeptical Intelligencer contact the Editor as above. For members, all back issues are now available in the Members' Section of the ASKE Website.

EDITORIAL

_____

Michael Heap

Chairman of ASKE

The first paper in this the 2008 issue of the *Skeptical Intelligencer* previously appeared in the *New Zealand Skeptic*. It is a readable summary of the contribution of ancient Greek philosophy to scepticism. Indeed, its author, Nikos Petousis, reminds us that 'Empirical scepticism originated in ancient Greek philosophy in the 7th century BCE'. I enjoyed reading the article and, while admittedly it contains nothing new (and was not intended to do so), I think that we all need reminding from time to time that, for all our human failings as advocates of the sceptical approach, scepticism itself is a noble cause with a long and distinguished history.

The three remaining papers in this issue concern neuro-linguistic programming (NLP). I suspect that most readers will be at the most only vaguely familiar with NLP (not to be confused with the Natural Law Party which used to field candidates in elections some years ago).

The immediate impetus for these papers was a discussion on the ASKE email forum in which the topic of NLP was raised and Mark Newbrook agreed to present some of his thoughts on NLP from the standpoint of a linguist (see his paper in this issue). Around the same time I had an email exchange with Andy Bradbury, an expert on NLP, in which he challenged the conclusions of some review papers I wrote on the subject in the 1980s. These papers are on my website at <www.mheap.com> and largely concern research on the doctrine of 'representational systems' as espoused by the originators of NLP, Richard Bandler and John Grinder. In this issue I provide a summary of these reviews. Mr Bradbury kindly agreed to provide us with his comments and criticisms and outline what he considers is the correct representation of the issues that I raised in my papers.

As I explain in my paper, I became interested in NLP in the early 80s. I recall much excitement at that time amongst psychotherapists, particularly those who used hypnosis, because NLP was being heralded as a revolutionary breakthrough in delivering fast and effective therapy. Very much allied to this was a fascination with the American psychiatrist Milton Erickson who was well known for his work and publications on clinical hypnosis. Erickson died in 1980 but in the years prior to this his home in Phoenix Arizona became something of a Mecca for young psychotherapists wanting to know how he achieved his therapeutic outcomes, which according to a number of publications around that time were quite remarkable.

Well, like many others I rushed about hither and thither, attending workshops and meetings in the UK and abroad finding out more about these exciting developments, and I read quite a number of the early NLP and Ericksonian texts (most of latter having little to do with NLP). These included *Trance-Formations by* Grinder, Bandler (1981 – see my paper), a book on hypnosis that has some interesting and some odd ideas.

One idea from NLP that intrigued me was the doctrine of representational systems, namely that at any time the way we are representing our world cognitively is characterised by one of five sensory modalities (visual, auditory, etc.). This dominant modality is signalled by certain behavioural indices, notably verbal expression and eye movements and people have a preferred representational system.

All of this seemed like the kind of information that should have been appearing in textbooks on cognitive psychology, and its absence therefrom puzzled me. From my reading and my attendance at meetings I could not ascertain how these observations and generalisations about the human mind had been derived. I recall broaching this with the leader of one workshop I attended, an earnest young American of some self-confidence. Throughout our conversation he looked at me intensely and I suddenly realised that whenever I uttered the word 'yes' he flicked his forefinger up. I came away none the wiser.

Later I spent a lot of time in the University of Sheffield library (before the days of Internet searches) and was surprised to find that there were a number of experimental studies of 'representational systems', albeit mainly in the form of dissertation projects by postgraduate students.

Thus I came to write my review papers. I have given a detailed account of all this in my article herein and, as you will see, Andy Bradbury has, metaphorically speaking, rolled up his sleeves and given me a thorough beating in his paper, for which I am very grateful. I don't think it useful for me to provide any rejoinders to Andy's criticisms here. Let his words speak for themselves! Thus I am sure that readers will gain a clearer awareness of the nature of NLP and its co-founders.

ARTICLES

Modern scepticism owes a huge debt to ancient Greece. The following article is based on a presentation to the 2008 NZ Skeptics Conference and appeared in the New Zealand Skeptic, Number 89, Spring 2008.

SCEPTICISM GREEK-STYLE

Nikos Petousis

Nikos Petousis is the Greek Honorary Consul in New Zealand

I was born in Athens, Greece, and grew up during the war, one of 12 children of a poor family with a very hard working mother. She was, like most women of her time in Greece, illiterate. This made her susceptible to all the religious teachings and prejudices of the Greek Orthodox Church, which all Greeks belonged to. She was able to answer my questions with biblical quotations and prophetic clichés. When explaining to me where I came from she credited a stork – but a few weeks later the bird had changed to a pelican. When I asked her a third time, she got quite angry with me and pointed at her belly and said: 'It was cut open by the doctor.' But I had not seen any evidence of cut marks so I became sceptical.

_____

It is natural for human being to be curious and to learn. It is ignorance and superstition which stifles this innate tendency.

_____

When it rains in Athens during the summer, it lasts only for 10 minutes but it is a cloudburst with thunder and lightning. My mother used to burn incense, light candles and utter incantations. When I asked her why, she answered me that God sends the thunder to punish sinful people. When I asked her why God decided to do this when it rained, she mumbled something I never understood.

The Greeks put icons high up on the walls of their houses and they believe that some of them have miraculous properties. My mother's favourite was St Nicholas, who resided high up in the corner of the room. He had a habit of dropping to the floor before any tragedy occurred in our family. My mother always connected the sign with a following event, and took this as proof of his infallibility. 'You see, St Nicholas fell to the floor three days ago, and now this has happened.'

One day I found the icon on the floor and discovered that it only had a frayed cotton thread holding it up, so I replaced it with a piece of wire. After that St Nicholas stayed on the wall. My mother found this quite worrisome, and felt she had been deserted by him, so she took the icon down and discovered my alterations. She reprimanded me

severely, and repaired him by replacing the wire with an old bit of cotton again, thus restoring his powers. This made me even more sceptical.

My mother was obsessed with the second coming of the Messiah – she assured me it was going to be in 1948. A year later I reminded her that it hadn't happened. In response to this she muttered something I didn't understand. This confirmed my doubts about events occurring through divine intervention and started me on a path of scepticism.

In Sunday school, which I had to attend, children were told that humans were made as an exact replica of God – omniscient, omnipotent and all-loving. Why then did he give us such useless things as nails on toes and nipples on men? By then I had given up asking for answers and I started finding out for myself.

Origins of scepticism

In the Greek language the noun 'skepsis' means deep and critical thought, reflection, contemplation, debating with oneself, activities which occupy those with some intelligence. It is natural for human being to be curious and to learn. It is ignorance and superstition which stifles this innate tendency.

Empirical scepticism originated in ancient Greek philosophy in the 7th century BCE in Ionia. Ionia was a group of city states, and was the first place where events and circumstances made it possible for people to be able to inquire about physical phenomena without being circumscribed by religious dogmas and despotic oppression. For the first time knowledge no longer belonged to a religious or royal elite. Knowledge and thinking became the property of anybody who was prepared to make the effort to learn. The Greek alphabet had recently been further developed and refined, which facilitated the dissemination of the written word and Greek thought.

Egypt and Mesopotamia had achieved a high degree of civilisation but they lacked the components which the Greeks from Ionia were able to provide. These were philosophic scepticism and free inquiry. Bertrand Russell in his book 'The History of Western Philosophy' had this

to say: 'They invented mathematics and science and philosophy; they first wrote history as opposed to mere annals; they speculated freely about the nature of the world and to the ends of life, without being bound in the fetters of any inherited orthodoxy.'

_____

In the sixth century BCE Thales asked the question, 'What is the basic material of the cosmos?' The answer is yet to be discovered.

_____

As a result of this climate of freedom of thought, a flowering of scientific rigour, deductive reasoning and innovation occurred. I will now give some examples of scientific discoveries and speculations that arose as a result of being able to stretch the boundaries of thought to a limitless horizon with no institutional constraints. The Greek gods had to come to Olympus, down to Earth.

The first Sceptic

Thales lived around the mid 620s-547 BCE and was born in the city of Miletus. He was the first person to develop truly critical thought – in my opinion, the first true sceptic. Unlike the Egyptians and Mesopotamians, he tried to explain the world by observing natural phenomena, critically analysing these data and then making deductions from them. Many of his findings are still regarded as correct and he influenced most subsequent philosophical thought.

He set the seasons of the year and divided the year into 365 days. He speculated that life originated from water and was able to predict an eclipse in 585 BCE. It is said that he travelled to many countries, learning as he went, and made the first map of the known world stretching from Africa to north of the Caspian Sea and from Spain to India. When in Egypt, the Egyptian priests complained, 'You Greeks ask too many questions, just like children.' The most outstanding aspects of Thales' heritage are the search for knowledge for its own sake; the development of the scientific method; the adoption of practical methods and their development into general principles; his curiosity and conjectural approach to the questions of natural phenomena. In the sixth century BCE Thales asked the question, 'What is the basic material of the cosmos?' The answer is yet to be discovered.

Atomic theory

The putative father of Greek scepticism is Pyrrhon of Elis (ca 360 - ca 272 BCE). Even though he didn't write anything, he was influential in some subsequent philosophical schools. His contemporary, sceptic philosopher Epicurus thought that the human mind was beset by fears and ignorance that disturbed it and made people suffer needlessly throughout their lives. He believed that the fundamental constituents of the world were indivisible little bits of matter (atoms, flying though empty space).

A heliocentric universe

Aristarchus was the first to state that the sun was at the centre of the universe. He was a mathematician and an astronomer, not merely an astrologer as in the past, and was capable of thinking at a cosmic level without fear of persecution by the gods, unlike Galileo who nearly paid with his life for saying the same thing nearly 2000 years later. Aristarchus attempted to estimate the relative sizes of the Earth, Moon and Sun, and the distances between them. He used the right methodology but did not have a telescope.

He improved the sundial, which had already been invented by Anaximander, eventually leading to the sextant. Some people have suggested that Copernicus stood on the shoulders of Aristarchus when making his astronomical calculations.

> **The Riddle of Epicurus**
> If God is willing to prevent evil, but is not able to
> Then He is not omnipotent.
> If He is able, but not willing
> Then he is malevolent.
> If he is both able and willing
> Then whence cometh evil?
> If he is neither able nor willing
> Then why call him God?

The size of the Earth

Eratosthenes was one of the greatest thinkers. He was the chief librarian in the famed library of Alexandria. He was also a mathematician, poet, athlete, geographer and astronomer.

He was the first person to calculate the circumference of the Earth and the tilt of the Earth's axis, both with remarkable accuracy. He may also have accurately calculated the distance from the Earth to the Sun. He devised a system of latitude and longitude and is regarded as the most innovative geographer of his time. It had already been deduced that the Earth was spherical, but he was able to estimate its circumference with an error of less than two percent.

Yet, a thousand years later a Byzantine adventurer, Kosmas Indicopleustes, travelled as far as India, and when he came back to Constantinople he drew a map of the world – a square – and at the centre of it he placed Jerusalem. Worse even than this, books written by Eratosthenes and other geographers were regarded as heretical and blasphemous and were ordered to be destroyed by the Christian authorities.

Eureka!

Archimedes is regarded as one of the foremost scientific minds of Greek antiquity. He owes this reputation to his

critical observation of natural phenomena. His theorems on moving bodies are well known to those who have studied mathematics or physics, and of course he had the world's first Eureka moment. Archimedes was the inventor of the helix, commonly known as the Archimedes screw, which has been used for drawing water from rivers and lakes since ancient times and is still in use today.

Steam engines

Heron, also a chief librarian in Alexandria about the first century BCE, devised a steam turbine and a double action water pump, which was in use even at the end of the nineteenth century by the Chicago fire service.

Foregoing his usual scientific principles, Heron devised a contraption to open the massive temple doors on the command of the priest without any apparent human effort, thus overawing the faithful and giving proof of his supernatural power. One wonders what the reward was for Heron's secrecy in this little matter.

We now need to look at the setting for the daily lives of ordinary Greeks of that time.

Religious dogma, meaning laws enacted by the clergy for their own benefit and which had to be strictly observed, played no part in religious observances. On the contrary, religion was kept in its place, as an adjunct to social occasions such as festivals. The clergy in a city state, as in Athens, had no power and the salary of the priest was set to be no more than the value of the lowest paid labourer. This acted as proof against corruption, as they received a portion of the sacrificial meat – a scarce commodity for ordinary people – as a perk.

So how then, did the Ancient Greeks honour their gods?

_____

The Greek people could not accept the notion that they should be enclosed, even for a short period, inside a religious building.
_____

The temple of Apollo was 125m long, not much smaller than St Paul's of London. And yet, the Greek people seldom entered the temple to worship. It was merely to house the statue and provided the venue for priests and priestesses to carry out rituals associated with it.

The Greek people could not accept the notion that they should be enclosed, even for a short period, inside a religious building. That was the business of the Hebrew synagogue.

Instead, the religious festivals changed the emphasis from submission to a deity in a building to honouring the deity through revering nature. Sculpture and painting portrayed deities with human form – omitting the combination of animal and human used by others. People competed in athletic games, such as the Olympics, in honour of the body and the psyche. Competitions of lyrical poetry, singing, music and dancing expressed human heights of excellence in honour of the gods.

Theatres were invented to honour Dionysus and provided the forum for questioning human nature and values and morals, both human and divine – even the Greek gods could not escape criticism. Crowds of up to 30,000 filled the theatre, which provided the stimulation for a public, shared, critical inquiry into morals and concepts.

_____

The zealots broke statues wherever they could and at the very minimum the nose was broken off. The rationale for this was the statues would not be able to breathe again.
_____

Theodosius' decree

In approximately 380 AD Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. For the first time the Greek people had to bow before the priests. The idea of sin and everlasting punishment in hell was introduced. Any philosophical inquiry was regarded as heresy and was punishable. Subsequent emperors enacted laws which resulted in the destruction of anything that stood for freedom of thought and expression. Theodosius, for instance, decreed that books should be burnt, the Olympic Games should cease to exist, and the Academy of Athens and the theatre should close, and he ordered the destruction and obliteration of anything which stood before in the Hellenic world.

The zealots broke statues wherever they could and at the very minimum the nose was broken off. The rationale for this was the statues would not be able to breathe again.

Theodosius also sanctioned the burning of the library of Alexandria by bishop Theophilus. During the reign of Theodosius II in 415 AD a heinous crime was perpetrated in that city. Hypatia was a scholar and teacher of philosophy, astronomy and mechanics, who was also considered the first notable woman mathematician. A mob, directed by Bishop Cyril, later to become Saint Cyril, took Hypatia inside a Christian church and flayed her alive using seashells. This was to inflict maximum pain – an example of the new religion of love. Her crime was to criticise the Christian faith.

Thus ended a period of burgeoning of human inquiry and achievement initiated by the Ionian inquiring mind. All that had been built up and developed during those productive years was destroyed, defaced or taken over by the Christian church. This initial flowering of the Ionian mind was crushed, trampled and engulfed by the Church, causing the gradual decline into barbarism and the Dark Ages.

THE VALIDITY OF SOME EARLY CLAIMS OF NEURO-LINGUISTIC PROGRAMMING

Michael Heap

Michael Heap is a clinical and forensic psychologist and chairman and a founding member of ASKE.

My knowledge of NLP began in the early 1980s when I did some basic training in the UK and read some of the main texts at that time (Bandler & Grinder, 1975, 1979; Cameron-Bandler, 1978; Grinder & Bandler, 1976, 1981; Lankton, 1980). I wrote several reviews of the experimental literature on the subject in the 1980s (Heap, 1988a, 1988b, 1989) which are on my website at <www.mheap.com>. After that, I lost interest. My last publication (Heap, 1994) on the subject was a review for *Counselling News* of *Introducing Neuro-Linguistic Programming* (Revised Edition) by Joseph O'Connor and John Seymour.

Definition and origins of NLP

In the Introduction to their book, O'Connor & Seymour (*op.cit.* p xii) state, 'NLP is the art and science of excellence, derived from studying how top people in different fields obtain their outstanding results. These communications can be learned by anyone to improve their effectiveness both personally and professionally'.

_____

There is absolutely no question that the origins of NLP and its initial impact were in the field of counselling and psychotherapy.

_____

These claims (extraordinary, but sober in comparison to many versions of the same) were made by the originators of NLP, Americans John Grinder, a linguist, and Richard Bandler who I was always given to understand was a mathematician. However, according to *Wikipedia* and other Internet sources he has a background in psychology, holding a BA in Philosophy and Psychology and an MA in Theoretical Psychology and had an early interest in gestalt therapy.

Whatever the case, **there is absolutely no question that the origins of NLP and its initial impact were in the field of counselling and psychotherapy**.

Grinder & Bandler (1976; see also Bandler & Grinder, 1979) state that they studied transcripts and films of sessions of psychotherapy undertaken by certain therapists who had a reputation for being successful and their aim was to pass on what they had thus learned to other therapists. The psychotherapists they say they studied were Fritz Perls, the founder of Gestalt Therapy, Virginia Satir, a family therapist, and Milton Erickson, a psychiatrist best known in the field of hypnosis (to which, in the opinion of some, myself included, his contribution has been vastly exaggerated and distorted) but also noted for his use of strategic interventions. Bandler and Grinder claimed to have distilled from these observations a set of ideas and practices that other therapists can learn and thus enhance their own effectiveness with their patients and clients.

Put this way, this seems a reasonable, non-contentious thing to do and indeed it is fairly standard practice in psychotherapy training. However, it becomes clear when you read the early literature that the claims that Bandler and Grinder make do not simply refer to the particular techniques, ploys and styles of the select number of individuals they studied. They are statements about the way human beings in general behave and think and communicate with one another. In other words, they are the kind of observations and assertions that one would expect to appear in textbooks of human psychology, to be taught on psychology courses at schools and colleges, to be the subject of research in psychological laboratories at our universities, and to inform broader theories of social and cognitive psychology.

However before I summarise these particular claims, I want to say more on the original promotion of NLP as a sensationally effective and rapid form of psychological therapy. In a paper that I wrote on NLP in 1988 for *The Psychologist* (the monthly magazine of the British Psychological Society) I made the following observations:

'It is explicitly stated (e.g. Bandler & Grinder, 1979, p ii; Lankton, 1980, pp 9-13) that by using NLP, problems such as phobias and learning disabilities may be disposed of in less than an hour's session (whereas with other therapies, progress may take weeks or months). A recent NLP workshop announcement claims

that spelling problems may be eliminated in five minutes *(NLP Training Programme)'* (p 261-262).

I further noted the following extraordinary claim by one of the authors of Bandler & Grinder (1979, p 103):

'I've seen a therapist take away a phobia and give it back *nine* times in a single session without the faintest idea what she was doing'.

_____

It is even alleged … that a single session of NLP combined with hypnosis can eliminate certain eyesight problems such as myopia …, and can even cure a common cold.
_____

And I also remarked:

'NLP appears to be applicable to the full range of problems which psychologists are likely to encounter – phobias, depression, habit disorder, psychosomatic illnesses, learning disorders, and so on. It is even alleged (Grinder & Bandler, 1981, p 166) that a single session of NLP combined with hypnosis can eliminate certain eyesight problems such as myopia, and can even cure a common cold (*op.cit.*, p 174)…..*(Also, op.cit., p 169)* Bandler and Grinder make the claim that by combining NLP methods with hypnotic regression, a person can be not only effectively cured of a problem, but also rendered amnesic for the fact that they had the problem in the first place. Thus, after a session of therapy, smokers may deny that they smoked before, even when their family and friends insist otherwise, and they are unable to account for such evidence as nicotine stains'.

Accordingly, in one of my papers (Heap, 1989, pp 118-119) I gave the following description of NLP, one that I still consider accurately portrays how NLP at that time represented itself:

'*(NLP)* is a model of human behaviour and cognition which describes how people represent their world, how they interact and communicate with it and with one another, how it can be that they experience distress and disappointment in these interactions, and how they can be helped to change their representation of the world to alleviate their distress and cope with life more effectively and with greater fulfilment. Based on the tenets of NLP, strategies have been formulated whereby it is asserted that counsellors, therapists and communicators may enhance their effectiveness in helping their clients, and therapeutic procedures have been outlined which it is claimed bring about far more rapid and effective changes than hitherto in the formal practice of psychotherapy.'

The historical context of NLP

There is an important historical context for the development of NLP. I have summarised this on my website and the following is an adaptation of this summary.

NLP was one of a plethora of therapies that appeared from the 1970s onwards, many originating in the USA. There were a number of reasons for their emergence at that time, notably disaffection with the prevailing orthodoxy in mainstream (i.e. medically-dominated) psychotherapy in the USA, namely psychoanalysis. (We may also include the 'client-centred' approach espoused by Carl Rogers.) The reasons for this were the slow pace of psychoanalysis, its very lengthy timescale, and doubts about its theoretical underpinnings and efficacy. One should never, however, underestimate the importance of another influence, namely the increasing reluctance of medical insurers in the USA to fund lengthy courses of psychotherapy.

In these newer therapies, the professional is actively engaged in the application of *techniques* presumed to facilitate the changes that the person is seeking. This is in sharp contrast to the psychoanalyst or client-centred therapist, who is much more passive and is trained to resist the temptation to take control of the therapy and offer advice to the client or otherwise intervene in a way that would seem to be obviously helpful to him or her. In such therapies, the major vehicle for the improvement in the client's mental health is the relationship that he or she establishes with the therapist ('transference' in the case of psychoanalysis; trust and rapport in the case of client-centred therapy).

_____

The plethora of psychotherapies that emerged during the 1970s and onwards tended to adopt as their main selling points their 'powerfulness' and the rapidity by which the practitioner could achieve effective results.
_____

It is noteworthy that in their writings, the two major pioneers of cognitive therapy, Aaron Beck (e.g. Beck, 1976) and Albert Ellis (e.g. Ellis, 1962), both describe how frustration with these restrictions led them finally to reject psychoanalysis in favour of the cognitive approach. But perhaps this period in the historical development of psychological therapies is best summed up by the following observation made by a gestalt therapist at that time:

'To justify his hire, the therapist must be able to assist the patient to move in the direction he wishes, that is, to accelerate and provoke change in a positive direction. We are rapidly leaving the time when the

therapist, in the absence of more specific knowledge, relies on "something" in the relationship that will result in "something" happening. We are approaching the time when the therapist can specify procedures that promote rapid change in a way that the patient can experience directly and others can observe clearly' (Fagan, 1971, p 96)

Predictably, then, the plethora of psychotherapies that emerged during the 1970s and onwards tended to adopt as their main selling points their 'powerfulness' and the rapidity by which the practitioner could achieve effective results. Despite this, most of these therapies have tended to remain off the mainstream, not least because of the development of 'evidence-based' approaches (i.e. grounded in ideas and research from mainstream psychology and supported by clinical trials) by far and away the most successful being cognitive therapy. (Behaviour therapy already existed, but in the USA at least, it was not so influential and was rather limited in its scope. It has however proved to be a potent ally of cognitive therapy and now 'cognitive-behaviour therapy' (CBT) is, in many quarters, regarded as *the* orthodox approach to wide a range of psychiatric disorders, not uncommonly in conjunction with medication).

_____

Our interactions with the world are informed by the mental maps that we create of it and not directly by the world itself (the 'territory').

_____

It is probably true to say that although CBT advocates do insist that it is effective and time-limited, they are not strident in these claims. Nowadays the most notable explicit expression of this movement towards short-term psychotherapy that has influenced the mainstream is 'brief solution-focused therapy'; though highly cognitive and behavioural in its approach, its origins may be traced in significant part to Erickson's followers, though less so to Erickson himself.

Some early claims of NLP

In this paper I restrict my analysis of NLP claims to those that appeared in the 70s and which are presented in Bandler & Grinder (1975, 1979), Cameron-Bandler, (1978) Grinder & Bandler (1976, 1981) and Lankton (1980). I have nothing to say about specific therapeutic manoeuvres that are advocated in these texts and little about later claims, except in general terms.

<u>The map and the territory</u>

At least at the time of the early literature on NLP, one of its central philosophies (non-controversial and certainly one that resonates with CBT) was 'The map is not the territory', which I understand is due to the linguist Alfred Korzybski

(see M. Newbrook's article in this issue). Our interactions with the world are informed by the mental maps that we create of it and not directly by the world itself (the 'territory'). Our maps may be limited in many ways - out-of-date, impoverished, distorted, inflexible and so on. The choices that we make available to ourselves based on our maps may thus be restricted and our transactions with the world may accordingly be needlessly frustrating and difficult (Bandler & Grinder, 1975, p 7). Therefore, in order to assist the client in overcoming the difficulties he or she experiences in life, it is the therapist's task to communicate with the client from the perspective of the client's map and not his or her own.

<u>The meta-model</u>

Briefly, Bandler & Grinder (1975) asserted that a person's map of the world may be adversely influenced by three processes: generalisation, distortion and deletion. (There is some affinity between these ideas and the more comprehensive classification of cognitive distortions provided by CBT.) These processes are adaptive but may also lead to an overly distorted and impoverished representation of reality and undue restriction of the choices available to the person.

Bandler & Grinder (*op. cit.*) contend that the processes may be revealed in a person's use of language and they describe in considerable detail various linguistic manoeuvres that can assist the client in developing a richer and more useful map. Specifically, the therapist asks the client (using what Bandler & Grinder term 'meta questions') to elaborate upon his or her statements (or as Bandler & Grinder say, the surface structure) whenever they appear to be incomplete or to involve distortions or over-generalisations. For example, if the client says, 'I'm scared' the therapist may say; 'Of what?' (*op.cit.*, p 41); or if the client says, 'Nobody pays attention to what I say', the therapist may ask, 'Who specifically?' or 'What specifically do you say?' (p 82).

_____

According to NLP the internal maps that people make of their world are characterised by the five senses: visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, olfactory and gustatory.

_____

Again these ideas are not controversial but once more do not appear to be very original and much of what the authors are recommending may proceed automatically anyway in everyday communication and in counselling and psychotherapy. Also, their exposition is unduly elaborate and complicated and they appear to be presenting the 'meta-questioning' process as a kind of psychotherapy in itself. What I find particularly contentious is the authors' linkage of their ideas to Chomsky's concepts of deep and

surface structure (cf. Watt, 1984, and M. Newbrook's article in this issue).

Representational system

Another of the early ideas presented by Bandler and Grinder, and one that is repeated in books on NLP to this day, is that of **representational system**. According to NLP the internal maps that people make of their world are characterised by the five senses: visual (V), auditory (A), kinaesthetic (K), olfactory (O) and gustatory (G). Kinaesthetic requires some explanation, since 'kinaesthesia' normally refers the sense of movement or muscular effort whereas in the NLP literature it refers to feelings in general: cf. '*(I)*n the kinesthetic input channel, specialised receptors for pressure, pain, temperature and deep senses (proprioceptors) have been shown to exist' (Grinder & Bandler, 1976, p 5). I have never heard an explanation of why they chose this term.

——————————————————————————

At any time, any person's conscious activity (e.g. thoughts and memories) may be using predominantly one of these modes, particularly V, A or K.

——————————————————————————

At any time, any person's conscious activity (e.g. thoughts and memories) may be using predominantly one of these modes, particularly V, A or K. According to Grinder & Bandler (1976) the representational system being employed is revealed by a person's style of speaking, specifically his or her 'predicates' (verbs, adjectives and adverbs). A person who is thinking in the V mode will tend to use expressions such as 'I see…', 'It looks to me like…' and 'I have a clear picture of…'. Someone who is thinking in A mode will use phrases such as 'I hear…', and 'It sounds like…'. The K mode is associated with expressions such as 'I feel that…', 'It's heavy going', 'I am out of touch with…'. (Presumably, examples of expressions associated with the O (olfactory) and G (gustatory) mode are, respectively, 'It all smells a bit fishy…' and 'It's rather tasteless'.)

To a degree, these claims seem quite reasonable. For example if I say, 'Sue looked very cheerful today', it wouldn't be at all surprising if an image of Sue looking cheerful pops into my mind at this point. Likewise if I say, 'I felt really sick yesterday' it is at least plausible that I bring to mind, amongst other things, the awful feeling in my stomach that I had at the time. But does it mean that whenever I use the expression, for example, 'I see', (e.g. 'I see what you mean' or 'I don't see the relevance of this') the associated cognitive activity is 'in the visual modality'? Well, according to Grinder and Bandler (1976, p 11) it certainly does mean that, as will be made clear in a moment.

Representational system and eye movements

Another important assertion that Bandler and Grinder make about representational systems is that they are revealed in a person's eye movements. They claim (Bandler & Grinder, 1979, p 25 *et seq.*) that a person engaged in cognitive activity in the visual mode will tend to look upwards (left for remembering, right for constructing); a person looking horizontally left or right will be using the auditory mode (remembered and constructed, respectively) likewise looking downwards and to the left; and the kinaesthetic mode is associated with a downward gaze to the right. A final eye position is eyes unfocused and looking ahead, which is interpreted as accessing visually represented information (see also Lankton, 1980, p 46).

Without making any systematic observations, one could speculate that people engaging in visual imagery *may* look upwards in order to project their image on the least cluttered part of their visual field, which is more likely to be above them - the ceiling, a wall, the sky, etc. - than below. Likewise when describing a bodily sensation, people might tend to look downwards because that's where the feeling is most likely to be located. For example, reference to a nauseous experience may be accompanied by a cursory glance towards the gut area and people may be more likely to look down when experiencing negative feelings – cf. the crestfallen posture of someone relating a tale of woe. However, I am merely guessing here.

——————————————————————————

Another important assertion that Bandler and Grinder make about representational systems is that they are revealed in a person's eye movements.

——————————————————————————

At the time Bandler and Grinder made these assertions there was in fact a research literature on ocular gaze and cognition. In one study (Kinsbourne, 1972), right-handed participants were found to have a tendency to turn their head and eyes to the right when interpreting proverbs, but when visualising familiar places or performing calculations they tended to look upwards and to the left. However, one influence on direction of gaze is whether the investigator is standing in front of or behind the participant (see review by Ehrlichman & Weinberger, 1978). So it is reasonable to say that at the time in question, there was some very limited collateral support for the NLP assertions on eye movements.

Preferred representational system

Another early NLP assertion was that of a preferred representational system (PRS). 'Furthermore', say Grinder & Bandler (1976, p 9) 'each person will have a most highly valued representational system which will differ from the

most highly valued representational system of some other person. From this fact – namely, that person X has a most highly valued representational system that differs from that of person Y – we can predict that each will have a dramatically different experience of the world when faced with the "same" real world experience. … In order to identify the client's most highly valued one, the therapist needs only to pay attention to the predicates which the client uses to describe his experience'.

This is later described in more detail as follows (*op.cit.*, p 11):

'Comments such as "I see what you're saying" are most often communicated by people whose most highly valued representational system is visual. And they are literally "making pictures" out of what they hear. Our students first go through a stage of not believing this; secondly they begin to listen to people in this new way and become amazed at what they can learn about themselves and those around them; thirdly they learn the value of this knowledge'.

_____

'Comments such as "I see what you're saying" are most often communicated by people whose most highly valued representational system is visual. And they are literally "making pictures" out of what they hear.'

_____

The authors then proceed to outline a simple set of instructions on how to identify a person's preferred representational system.

<u>Matching verbal and non-verbal behaviour, including representational systems</u>

The final assertion from the early NLP literature to be considered here is that to achieve effective communication and gain trust and rapport, communicators (such as counsellors and psychotherapists) should match, mirror or pace the other person's verbal and non-verbal behaviour (e.g. aspects of speech, body posture, breathing and blinking), thereby tuning into his or her representation of the world. This can be done directly, such as by matching the person's body movements or breathing pattern with one's own, or indirectly, say by slightly nodding one's head in time with the person's breathing or following the person's blinking with a finger movement. These manoeuvres were promoted as being highly effective and they influenced other authors. For example, in an exposition of the use of NLP ideas with chronically mentally ill people, one therapist (Dolan, 1986, p 67) claimed to have been able to exercise a stabilising influence on an agitated patient by discretely moving her finger in phase with the man's gross body movements.

Bandler and Grinder are also very emphatic that one must match those predicates that the person is using that reveal the representational system associated with his or her internal map at that point in time. For example, if the person says, 'I can't get a grip on things' one would not reply, 'I see what you mean' or 'It sounds like you're stuck'. The consequences of this kind of mismatch are, according to Bandler and Grinder, highly deleterious for effective communication. According to them, a good therapist takes care to match the client's representational system when communicating with him or her. For example, in response to the following (Bandler & Grinder 1979, p 11)….

'Well, you know, things are really heavy in my life…It's just like I can't handle it, you know',

….they recommend that the therapist say something like:

'I understand that you feel certain weight upon you, and these kinds of feelings that you have in your body aren't what you want for yourself as a human being. You have different kinds of hopes for this'.

Thus, the art of effective communication.

There is some plausibility in the idea of 'speaking the same language' as someone with whom you are communicating (although it may not always be appropriate if the person expects otherwise) and this probably happens automatically. There is indeed evidence predating NLP that postural congruity generally– i.e. matching body language – is associated with higher levels of interpersonal rapport (Charny, 1966; Dabbs, 1969; LaFrance & Broadbent, 1976. As an aside, I understand that when two friends are disagreeing with one another over something, their postures may become *more* congruent, as if to communicate the message 'Although we are in disagreement, we are still good friends' – *see note 1*.) However the claims that Bandler and Grinder made go considerably beyond this.

Evaluating the above claims

If the above assertions on representational systems and their behavioural manifestations are correct, then Bandler and Grinder have made some very remarkable discoveries about the human mind and brain and they would have major implications for human psychology, particularly cognition and neuropsychology. Yet there is no mention of them in learned textbooks or journals devoted to these disciplines. Neither is any of this material taught on psychology courses at pre-degree and degree level. When I speak to academic colleagues who spend their working lives researching and teaching in these fields they show little awareness, if any, of these claims.

Why this almost total neglect of a body of knowledge that, if it has any authenticity, should occupy a pivotal role in the study of human psychology? One obvious solution is to examine the original work undertaken by Bandler and Grinder that led them to their conclusions.

To arrive at these kinds of generalisations about the human mind and behaviour would certainly require the prolonged, systematic and meticulous investigation of human subjects using robust procedures for observing, recording and analysing the phenomena under investigation. There is just no other way of doing this. Yet, when they made their assertions, the authors never revealed any of this to their students and to their readers; they merely stated that this is what they had noticed.

————————————————————————

'There is only one group that we know of that is characteristically organized differently: the Basques in the Pyrenees of northern Spain. They have a lot of unusual patterns, and that seems to be genetic rather than cultural.…'

————————————————————————

Look, for example, at this claim by one of the authors when asked by a student, 'How does this pattern of accessing cues *(eye movements)* hold up under cultures?'

'There is only one group that we know of that is characteristically organized differently: the Basques in the Pyrenees of northern Spain. They have a lot of unusual patterns, and that seems to be genetic rather than cultural. Everywhere else we have been - the Americas, Europe, Eastern Europe, Africa – the same pattern exists in most of the population. It may be a neurological bias that is built into our nervous system as a species' (Bandler & Grinder, 1979, p 35).

Following this, in response to a question on ambidextrous people, the statement is made,

'They will have more variation from the generalizations that we have offered you. For example, some ambidextrous people have visualization reversed and *not* the auditory and the kinaesthetic, or vice versa' (*op. cit.*).

Concerning their claims on matching representational systems they say the following:

'Typically, kinesthetics *(i.e. people whose preferred representational system is kinaesthetic)* complain that auditory and visual people are insensitive. Visuals complain that auditories don't pay attention to them because they don't make contact during conversation. Auditory people complain that kinesthetics don't listen, etc. The outcome is usually that one group comes to consider the other deliberately bad or mischievous or pathological' (Grinder & Bandler, 1976, p 17).

And in Bandler & Grinder (1979, p 11) they say, 'We spent a lot of time going around mental health clinics and sitting in on professional communicators. It's very depressing. And what we noticed is that many therapists mismatch in the same as that we just demonstrated'.

'Would a congenitally blind therapist be at a disadvantage?' Asks one of their students (*op. cit.*, p 45).

No, because according to Bandler & Grinder there are other cues to a person's representational system:

'For instance, voice tone is higher for visual access and lower for kinesthetic. Tempo speeds up for visual and slows down for kinesthetic. Breathing is higher in the chest for visual and lower in the belly for kinesthetic. There are *lots* and *lots* of cues'.

I could fill many more pages with these kinds of extraordinary claims (and indeed Bandler and Grinder do), but let me just add one more from Bandler & Grinder (1979, p 40):

'A lot of school children have problems learning simply because of a mismatch between the primary representational system of the teacher and that of the child. If neither one of them has the flexibility to adjust, no learning occurs. Knowing what you know now about representational systems, you can understand how it is possible for a child to be "educationally handicapped" one year, and to do fine the next year with a different teacher, or how it is possible for a child to do really well in spelling and mathematics, and do badly in literature and history'.

————————————————————————

'Typically, kinesthetics complain that auditory and visual people are insensitive. Visuals complain that auditories don't pay attention to them because they don't make contact during conversation.….'

————————————————————————

Have I made my point? To be able to make with any confidence any single one of these claims about the human mind and behaviour would necessitate an enormous amount of honest systematic work, the gathering together of mass of data, and the deployment of not a little ingenuity. In the absence of such effort and diligence, it would be dishonest and perverse to use these claims as teaching material, particularly when the trainees are people who earn their living by ministering to the welfare or education of others.

Knowledge is power. Anyone making these kinds of claims is making a claim for some kind of power. With power should come accountability. Accountability in this case is making the evidence available for public scrutiny. Exactly how were the observations made? What exactly was observed – **can we look at the data please?** How was the reliability of the observations established? How were the data processed in order to arrive at the conclusions? And so on. None of this is disclosed to us.

Independent studies of NLP claims

As it happens, during the 1970s and 80s, some people took the claims about representational systems seriously enough to subject them to experimental scrutiny. Many of these experiments were in the form of dissertations for Masters degrees in the USA (though some were subsequently published as peer-reviewed journal papers). This research has been reviewed by Sharpley (1984, 1987) and Heap (1988a,b; 1989 - see <www.mheap.com>). Like much research in psychology, the results are not entirely consistent. However, a fair conclusion is that on balance the studies collectively provide little support for the claims for representational systems and their literal association with language, or for the idea of a preferred representational system, or for the claim that these representational systems are reliably associated with eye movements. Matching relevant predicates may confer some advantage for rapport but probably as part of the more general matching of linguistic content and style.

_____

My impression is that NLP has become much more practical (technique driven) than theoretical since the early days, though all of the claims that I have discussed continue to be made.

_____

The methodology of the above studies has been criticised by Einspruch and Forman (1985) but in my opinion they provide fair tests of the claims in question, which are stated in unequivocal terms by Bandler and Grinder, who make it clear that the phenomena are robust and potent psychological processes, easily demonstrable on training course by tutors and trainees, and indeed in everyday life, by following a set of simple instructions.

Further developments of NLP

I cannot comment with any authority on the developments of NLP ideas since I did my review papers. However, I have kept my eyes and ears and other sensory modalities open, as it were. Having been heavily involved in the hypnosis scene, nationally and internationally, since the 1970s, I have discussed NLP with many of its advocates (not, on the whole, psychologists like me) and not a few critics. There is no shortage of books to dip into while one is wandering around bookstores (including those at airport departure lounges) and there is of course the Internet, which has much on the topic. My impression is that NLP has become much more practical (technique driven) than theoretical since the early days, though all of the claims that I have discussed continue to be made. I also have the strong impression that many of the procedures and techniques that are recommended in the current NLP literature are little different from those described by non-NLP sources, and indeed are often informed by common sense. It is difficult to understand what they have in common with each other that merits their being given the same label, and what that label, 'neuro-linguistic programming', is supposed to mean. The astonishing claims about what NLP can achieve continue unabated and I can only recommend that readers consult the Internet for evidence of this.

I believe that the following impressions are also likely to be reliable.

1. NLP continues to make no impact on mainstream academic psychology

2. NLP has made only limited impact on mainstream psychotherapy and counselling

3. NLP remains influential amongst private psychotherapists, including hypnotherapists, to the extent that they claim to be trained in NLP and 'use NLP' in their work.

4. NLP training courses abound and NLP now seems to be most influential in management training, lifestyle coaching, and so on. Particularly with reference to this, the term 'growth industry' appears to be apposite.

I know little about this last-mentioned area of work but I am intrigued by this gradual extension of NLP beyond psychotherapy. This may have something to do with the fact that the supply side of the market for psychological therapies looks pretty much saturated and the major potential customer in the UK at least, namely the National Health Service, tends to favour a limited range of products, notably those that are labelled 'evidence based'. The same appears to be true for medical insurance arrangements in the USA. When I say 'customer' I mean not just clients and patients wanting help, but also people wanting to train as therapists (or develop their existing repertoire of skills). My impression is that the extension of NLP into management training, etc. is all to do with finding wider markets for its products (and packaging and repackaging its products to suit those markets).

Like most of what we do, much of it comes down to money in the end.

Note

1. This is based on a personal communication from Professor Geoff Beattie but I have yet to locate the references for this work.

References

Bandler, R. & Grinder, J. (1975) *The Structure of Magic*. Palo Alto: Science and Behaviour Books, Inc.

Bandler, R. & Grinder, J. (1979) *Frogs into Princes*. Moab, UT: Real People Press.

Beck, A. (1976) *Cognitive Therapy and the Emotional Disorders*. New York: International University Press.

Cameron-Bandler, L. (1978) *They Lived Happily Ever After: Methods for Achieving Happy Endings in Coupling*. Cupertino, CA: Meta Publications.

Charny, E.J. (1966) Psychosomatic manifestations of rapport in psychotherapy. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, **28**, 305-315.

Dabbs, J.M. (1969) Similarity of gestures and interpersonal influence. *Proceedings of the 77th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association*, **4**, 337-338.

Dolan, Y.M. (1986) *A Path with a Heart*. New York: Bruner/Mazel.

Ehrlichman, H. & Weinberger, A. (1978) Lateral eye movements and hemispheric asymmetry: A critical review. *Psychological Bulletin*, **85**, 1080-1101.

Einspruch, E.L. & Forman, B.D. (1985) Observations concerning the literature on neuro-linguistic programming. *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, **32**, 589-596.

Ellis, A. (1962) *Reason and Emotion in Psychotherapy*. New York: Lyle Stuart.

Fagan, J. (1971) The task of the therapist. In J. Fagan & I.L. Shepherd (Eds.) *Gestalt Therapy Now: Theory, Techniques, Applications* (pp 88-106). New York: Harper & Row.

Grinder, J. & Bandler, R. (1976) *The Structure of Magic II*. Palo Alto: Science and Behaviour Books, Inc.

Grinder, J. & Bandler, R. (1981) *Trance-Formations: Neuro-linguistic Programming™ and the Structure of Hypnosis.* Moab, UT: Real People Press.

Heap. M. (1988a) Neurolinguistic programming: An interim verdict. In M. Heap (Ed.) *Hypnosis: Current Clinical, Experimental and Forensic Practices*. London: Croom Helm, pp 118-124. (see <www.mheap.com>)

Heap, M. (1988b) Neurolinguistic programming- a British perspective. *Hypnos: Swedish Journal of Hypnosis in Psychotherapy and Psychosomatic Medicine*, **15**, 4-13. (see <www.mheap.com>)

Heap M. (1988c) Born again Mesmerism? *The Psychologist* (July), 261-262.

Heap, M. (1989) Neurolinguistic programming: What is the evidence? In D. Waxman, D. Pedersen, I. Wilkie & P. Mellett (Eds.) *Hypnosis: The Fourth European Congress at Oxford*. London: Whurr Publishers, pp 268-280. (see <www.mheap.com>)

Heap, M. (1994) Book Review: *Introducing Neuro-Linguistic Programming: Psychological Skills for Understanding and Influencing People*. J. O'Connor & J. Seymour, Aquarian/Thorsons, 1993. *Counselling News*.

Kinsbourne, M. (1972) Eye and head turning indicates cerebral lateralization. *Science*, **179**, 539-541.

LaFrance, M. & Broadbent, M. (1976) Group rapport: Posture sharing as a nonverbal indicator. *Group & Organisation Studies,* **1**, 328-333.

Lankton, S.R. (1980) *Practical Magic: A Translation of Basic Neuro-Linguistic Programming into Clinical Psychotherapy*. Cupertino, CAL: Meta Publications. (A new issue of this, co-authored by Leslie Cameron Bandler, appeared in 2003.)

O'Connor J. & Seymour J. (1993) *Introducing Neuro-Linguistic Programming: Psychological Skills for Understanding and Influencing People*. London: Aquarian/Thorsons.

Sharpley, C. (1984) Predicate matching in NLP. A review of research on the preferred representational system. *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, **31**, 238-248.

Sharpley, C. (1987) Research findings on neuro-linguistic programming: Non-supportive data or untestable theory? *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, **32**, 589-596.

Watt, F. (1984) *Changes,* **2**, No 3.

✐ *Call for Contributions*

If you have attended a conference or presentation, watched a programme, or read an article or book that would be of interest to readers, why not write a review of this, however brief, for the *Skeptical Adversaria* or the *Skeptical Intelligencer*?

NEURO-LINGUISTIC PROGRAMMING: TIME FOR AN INFORMED REVIEW

Are you enough of a sceptic to be sceptical about your own scepticism?

Andy Bradbury

Andy Bradbury is a social psychologist by training and has spent most of his working life in personnel and/or training. A fuller autobiography is given at the end of this paper.

I really found it quite hard to write this article. For two reasons.

Firstly, throughout my exchange of e-mails with Dr Heap he has been unfailingly courteous and friendly. This included allowing me to see the initial version of his own article back in the early autumn so that I could take account of it here.

I take no pleasure, therefore, in stating that virtually everything he, in common with several other critics, has written about the field of NLP is in error. Moreover, since Dr Heap has framed this discussion in terms of the accuracy of his judgement as to the validity and implications of the experiments he reviewed, I have no option, if I am to answer him adequately, but to call that judgement into question.

Secondly, precisely because there are so many errors, I hardly know where to start to set the record straight.

Exclusions

The comments I make here will, as far as possible, be based on NLP as presented by its co-creators, Richard Bandler and John Grinder - including a number of points I was able to discuss in person with John Grinder in September 2008 - rather than NLP according to Andrew Bradbury or any other third party. For reasons explained below I will ignore all references to writers such as Stephen Lankton, John Seymour, Joseph O'Connor and Steve Andreas, cited by Dr. Heap.

Evaluating the claims

When I first communicated with Dr Heap it was specifically in regard to the two papers he wrote in the 1980s, 'Neurolinguistic programming: An interim verdict' (1988), and 'Neurolinguistic programming: What is the evidence*?* (a paper delivered in 1987 but not published until 1989). Since both the 'Interim verdict', and the new paper, 'The validity of some early claims of neuro-linguistic programming' (2008), are effectively variations on the original, for the sake of brevity I will refer to them here, in order of publication, as *IV1*, *IV2* and *IV3*.

For the benefit of anyone not familiar with *IV1*, this is the only version which contains a full list of references to the material originally reviewed, and is available (along with *IV2*) on Dr Heap's web site at <http://www.mheap.com/nlp.html>. The abstracts in question can nearly all be found in the 'database': <http://nlp.de/research/nlp-rdb.cgi?action=res_authors>.

In reverse order

In his latest paper, Dr Heap has provided an extended introduction to the main points of *IV1* and *IV2*, most of which is either inaccurate or irrelevant. It is useful in the current discussion, however, in that it gives further clues as to how Dr Heap and other critics of 'NLP' may have arrived at their erroneous conclusions.

_____

NLP is a specific process, not a person or an organization, and therefore has never 'represented itself' as anything at all.

_____

The assertions about the current state of the field of NLP, for example, have the appearance of 'truth' though in fact they show a substantial mismatch with the facts. Thus:

1. '... in one of my papers (Heap, 1989, pp. 118-119) I gave the following description of NLP, one that I still consider accurately portrays how NLP at that time represented itself:

> "[NLP] is a model of human behaviour and cognition ..."'

In the first place NLP is a specific process, not a person or an organization, and therefore has never 'represented itself' as anything at all. I make this point, obvious as it may seem, because critics often use the notion of NLP as a 'thing' as a means to justify quoting almost any source going, just as long as it mentions NLP, as though all sources were equally representative and accurate. In fact Dr Heap himself seems to have taken this position (see below). In practice, however, this premise is simply not sustainable. I have personally read and reviewed over 150 books on the

field of NLP for my own web site – and the variations on a theme vary from slight modifications to complete revisions. By 'cherry picking' one's quotes one could probably show that these nebulous 'NLP writers' claim that black is white and day is night, so to speak. But such an approach would bury the details of authentic NLP, techniques and applications in a mountain of dross.

_____

NLP has in fact always been a specific modelling *process* or *technique*. It is *not*, itself, a model of anything.

_____

And in the second place, NLP has in fact always been a specific modelling *process* or *technique*. It is *not*, itself, a model of anything; though I'm happy to accept that, based on his own mental maps, Dr Heap honestly believed/believes that his definition is accurate.

2. 'There is no mention of [Bandler and Grinder's works] in learned textbooks or journals devoted to these disciplines.'

This claim is plainly untrue, since several of the references in *IV1 and IV2* were from such sources (i.e. specialist journals). But there is an even more basic reason – different writers often use different labels and/or don't know the original source of their material! For example, in the first section of an article entitled 'How to get exactly what you want' in a recent issue of *New Scientist* (May 10, 2008) we were introduced to something called 'mimicry' as a persuasion technique. The article included references to the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, vol 44, p 461 and to the *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol 34, p 754. However, no mention was made of NLP or Bandler and Grinder by name, so people with little or no knowledge of NLP would be unlikely to recognise that 'mimicry' – which was described in the article as being the subject 'of recent studies' - is nothing more than two or three of the techniques that are referred to in NLP jargon as 'pacing' – a group of techniques that began to be used by 'NLPers' more than 25 years ago. So close is the match between 'mimicry' and some aspects of 'pacing' that certain instructions in the *New Scientist* article were almost word for word what I was taught about pacing on an NLP-oriented business training course in the late 1980s.

Just as a matter of interest, even as I was working on this article I was made aware, on one of the NLP chat groups, of an even more recent unequivocally NLP-related article in a professional journal: 'Using a modified neurolinguistic programming swish pattern with couple parasuicide and suicide survivors', Gerald A. Juhnke, Kenneth M. Coll, Michael F. Sunich, and Ronda

R. Kent. *The Family Journal*, Oct 2008; vol. 16: pp. 391-396.

For more material of a similar nature, a list of serious NLP-related research papers collected by Dr. Paul Tosey of the University of Surrey can be found here: <http://www.nlpresearch.org/>.

3. An even more basic error is the subject of the next claim: 'Neither is any of this material taught on psychology courses at pre-degree and degree level.'

Quite apart from the students who e-mail me to ask questions about NLP that have come up on their degree courses, there are a growing number of places where NLP is now a degree course subject in its own right. NLP gets plenty of attention at the University of Surrey, for example, and at least two people at that institution have taken investigations of NLP as their Ph.D. projects. (Both candidates came up with results which supported the validity of the techniques being investigated). NLP also features in courses at the University of Portsmouth and the University of Kingston in the UK. In Australia there is a post-graduate course in NLP run jointly by the NLP training company, *Inspiritive*, and the University of Sydney, and those two organizations are also working together on 'scientific' studies of various NLP-related techniques and concepts.

_____

I have the word 'scientific' in inverted commas because I do not believe that we yet have investigative techniques suitable for testing 'pure' psychology.

_____

(I have the word 'scientific' in inverted commas because I do not believe that we yet have investigative techniques suitable for testing 'pure' psychology. See Gazzaniga (1998, Preface), Frith (2007, Prologue) and my FAQ on the 'eye accessing cues' at <http://www.bradbury.mistral.co.uk/nlpfax09.htm> for further discussion of this claim.)

4. Dr Heap's article also, somewhat ingenuously, I think, asks, 'Why this almost total neglect of a body of knowledge that, if it has any authenticity, should occupy a pivotal role in the study of human psychology?'

One possible reason for many people's attitude towards NLP today is that it was 'trashed,' in the 1980s and '90s, by people who supposedly knew what they were talking about. It seems that many readers – lay people and scientists alike - don't always take the time to check the accuracy of material when it is presented by people who are judged to be authoritative/reliable within their own field of study. Let me give an example:

Heap mentioned the abstract for 'Dorn (1983b)' at least twice in his *IV1* paper, including one place (p 273) where he puts it in a list of experiments which allegedly

reported '... failure to confirm the [NLP] hypothesis under discussion ...'. The trouble is, Dorn's study had nothing to do with NLP. The abstract actually refers to 'Rational Stage Directed Hypnosis', because Dorn was under the illusion that 'Rational Stage Directed Hypnosis ... is a form of neurolinguistic programming.'

In reality, as far as I can discover, RSDH is, or was, an attempt to combine elements of RET (Albert Ellis's *Rational Emotive Therapy*) with hypnosis. It had nothing at all to do with NLP. How, then, could anyone with a good working knowledge of the field of NLP accept the misguided notion that there were multiple 'form[s] of NLP', let alone the equally misleading allegation that RSDH was one such form?

───────────────────────────────

This really goes to the heart of the question of whether people like Dr Heap, Professor Levelt …. and others of similar standing, are really qualified to make objective judgements about NLP.

───────────────────────────────

This really goes to the heart of the question of whether people like Dr Heap, Professor Levelt (of the Max Plank Institute in Nijmegen, Holland) and others of similar standing, are really qualified to make objective judgements about NLP. I do not for one moment question the fact that these two men are genuine experts in their own fields of study – hypnosis and psychotherapy for Dr Heap, and psycholinguistics for Prof. Levelt. But how does that qualify them as experts on NLP? In two words, 'It doesn't'. In fact both men have proved themselves notably short on expertise when it comes to NLP, possibly because (a) it is outside of their areas of knowledge, and (b) it seems that neither of them did what was required to bring themselves up to speed on the subject.

Despite its substantial inaccuracies, Dr Heap's review has nevertheless been quoted innumerable times as though its content was reliable, for example by hypnotherapist Dr. (as in D.Phil. rather than M.D.) Dylan Morgan, writing for the *Journal of the National Council for Psychotherapy and Hypnotherapy Register,* Spring issue of 1993 (still accessible on his web site), and by Dr. Robert Carroll, who uncritically cited Morgan's commentary on Dr Heap's allegedly authoritative review in the NLP article on his so-called *Skeptic's Dictionary* web site (repeated in his subsequent book of the same name). And of course all three items have been referenced on Wikipedia at one time or another on the NLP pages.

This is indeed 'the blind leading the blind.'

A second factor may well have been that neither Bandler nor Grinder had the least interest in joining 'the establishment', so to speak. In fact John Grinder specifically told me, during our recent conversation, that he and Bandler presented their first two books – *The Structure of Magic, Vols 1 & 2* – in an academic style, just to show that they could do it, and thereafter carried out their studies with a complete lack of interest in any academic opinions regarding their work.

Given the typical response of academics to this kind of attitude – namely 'our way or the highway' – a significant mismatch between the majority of academics and the developers of NLP was pretty inevitable. For an example of this clash of attitudes in action see the comments in Dr Heap's current paper such as:

'To arrive at these kinds of generalisations about the human mind and behaviour would *certainly* require prolonged, systematic and meticulous investigation of human subjects using robust procedures, observing, recording and analysing the phenomena under investigation. *There is just no other way of doing this.* Yet, when they made their assertions, the authors never revealed any of this to their students and to their readers; they merely stated that this was what they had noticed.' (Italics added for emphasis)

In the first place, this is a highly idealised account of how research works. And in any case, compare this statement with Bandler and Grinder's own take on the subject in *Frogs into Princes* (remembering that the book is based on transcripts of actual NLP-related training seminars, edited by Steve Andreas, and therefore gives us fairly direct information about what Bandler and Grinder were saying to their students in 1979):

───────────────────────────────

'Everything we're going to tell you is a lie. All generalizations are a lie. Since we have no claim on truth we will be lying to you consistently throughout this seminar.'

───────────────────────────────

'You ask somebody a question. They say 'Hm, let's see,' and they look up and to their left, and tilt their head in the same direction. When people look up, they are making pictures internally.

'Do you believe that? It's a lie, you know. Everything we're going to tell you is a lie. All generalizations are a lie. Since we have no claim on truth we will be lying to you consistently throughout this seminar. ...

'As modelers, we're not interested in whether what we offer you is true or not, whether it's accurate or whether it can be neurologically proven to be accurate, an actual representation of the world. We're only interested in what works.' (p 18)

In other words, the criticism is not justified because it addresses an entirely different kind of claim than the one Bandler and Grinder were making. The attitude that: 'you must do research the one and only way we regard as valid' might well be okay – IF someone is claiming that they are dealing in 'proven facts', 'the truth' or whatever. But Bandler and Grinder had not made such claims. They were indeed deliberately offering their generalisations as nothing more concrete than 'what we have noticed.' Far from hiding anything from their audience, as Dr Heap seems to be implying, Bandler and Grinder have been consistently open and honest about their lack of interest in academic-style research.

_____

Some people will indeed find this claim 'extraordinary', but that is a very relative word, and in my experience usually means nothing more than: 'This doesn't fit with the way things 'are' in *my* view of the world.'

_____

5. In another part of the 2008 article we find a reference to 'Bandler & Grinder (1979, p 40):

'A lot of school children have problems learning simply because of a mismatch between the primary representational system of the teacher and that of the child. If neither of them has the flexibility to adjust, no learning occurs. Knowing what you know now about representational systems, you can understand how it is possible for a child to be 'educationally handicapped' one year, and do fine the next year. ...'

Now, I understand that some people will indeed find this claim 'extraordinary', but that is a very relative word, and in my experience usually means nothing more than: 'This doesn't fit with the way things 'are' in *my* view of the world.' Thus it is pertinent to ask, 'How well-informed is this point of view?' Have the people making this kind of statement ever read the book *Righting the Educational Conveyor Belt*, by Michael Grinder (1986 [original version], 1989 [first full-size paperback version]), which explains in detail how NLP-related techniques can be applied in education? (Michael Grinder is John Grinder's brother.)

And on a very practical note, have they read about the 'Durham NLP Project 2006' when an NLP-oriented approach was tested 'in the field'. A quite detailed report of this application of NLP-related techniques in schools can be found online here: <http://www.meta4education.co.uk/durham.pdf>.

6. Like many other critics, Dr Heap seems less than impressed with the suggestion that NLP can produce high-speed results. But have these people read Richard Bandler's book *Magic in Action* and/or viewed the accompanying videotape (which must be obtained

separately). What they would find is a record of three brief sessions (all under 30 minutes) in which Richard Bandler deals with three cases which have previously proved intransigent in the face of therapeutic intervention. I offer this as evidence with some confidence, since all three sessions were conducted under laboratory conditions and monitored and videoed by faculty members at Marshall University in West Virginia, USA, and the results checked for durability approximately 8 months later.

Note, although NLP is *not* a form of therapy, Bandler does use certain NLP-related techniques to aid him in the therapeutic process during these sessions.

I might also point out that there appears to be an ongoing link between Marshall and NLP, since a recent (September 2008) check on Marshall University's web site listed a certain William A. McDowell as Professor of Counseling, with a *Trainer* qualification in Neuro-Linguistic Programming, and describes him, amongst his various publications, as 'the producer/-developer of 20 studio videos in Neuro-Linguistic Programming ...'.

7. And lastly, in this section, I refer you to point 4 of Dr Heap's section, **Further developments of NLP**, where he writes:

'NLP training courses abound and NLP now seems to be most influential in management training, lifestyle coaching, and so on. Particularly with reference to this, the term "growth industry" appears to be apposite.

'I know little about this last-mentioned area of work but I am intrigued by this gradual extension of NLP beyond psychotherapy. This may have something to do with the fact that the supply side of the market for psychological therapies looks pretty much saturated and the major potential customer in the UK at least, namely the National Health Service, tends to favour a limited range of products, notably those that are labelled 'evidence based'.'

_____

Despite his admission that he knows 'little about this last mentioned area of work', Dr Heap promptly offers a description of *what* is going on, and an equally fictitious 'explanation' for *why* it is happening.

_____

This is, to put it mildly, a pretty definitive example of how critics of NLP tend to use their own 'mental maps' to power their criticisms, with little or no regard for what is happening in the 'real world'.

Despite his admission that he knows 'little about this last mentioned area of work', Dr Heap promptly offers a description of *what* is going on, and an equally fictitious 'explanation' for *why* it is happening. But once again, as

happens whenever he presents us with some aspect of his 'NLP = therapy' map, the explanation is hopelessly wide of the mark.

The use of NLP and NLP-related techniques in business is my own particular area of investigation and practice, and I have written an introductory 'how to' guide to the subject (now called *Develop Your NLP Skills*) which was first published over ten years ago – January 1997, to be precise. Several other books of a similar nature came out in the early 1990s, including O'Connor and Seymour's *Training with NLP* (1994) and Kerry L. Johnson's *Selling with NLP* (1994). A third book published that same year was Robert Dilts' *Effective Presentation Skills*, of particular interest here since it is little more than a description of a number of NLP-related techniques and was based on the training materials Dilts used in a seminar previously 'designed for the Italian National Railways as part of its efforts to becoming [sic] a 'learning organization'' (p xi).

_____

Dr Heap has once again demonstrated the thorough *lack* of knowledge upon which he has constructed his supposedly well-informed discussion of those topics

_____

But of course these came some years after Dr Heap's review of 1988, and therefore he couldn't have known about them at that time. What he could have known about, however, was Genie Laborde's books on NLP in the workplace: *Influencing with Integrity* (1983), and *Fine Tune Your Brain* (1988). And he could have known about all of these books – and several others of a similar nature, such as John Grinder and Michael McMasters' *Precision* (1994) – by the time he came to write his latest paper. Thus obviating the entirely erroneous claims quoted above.

Clearly, then, in making these claims about the development and progress of the field of NLP, Dr Heap has once again demonstrated the thorough *lack* of knowledge upon which he has constructed his supposedly well-informed discussion of those topics. And, unfortunately, there's more.

The heart of the matter
Before answering Dr Heap's 1988 claims, it is necessary that we consider what those claims are. Specifically:

> 'The present author is satisfied that the assertions of NLP writers concerning representational systems have been objectively and fairly investigated and found to be lacking.' (*IV1*, p 275)

I realise that, strictly speaking, this claim is incontestable. If we adopt a purely pedantic viewpoint, Dr Heap is on the face of it simply stating his opinion.

And if that is his opinion, then that is his opinion, and whether his opinion is 100% valid or utterly fallacious – or anywhere in between - is irrelevant.

It appears to me, however, that the way in which he has presented his opinions indicate beyond a reasonable doubt that he was not offering, and never intended to offer, his views as a purely personal observation, but rather that he believed that he was/is presenting an objective, fair, and above all a factually accurate assessment of the material he was/is discussing.

A second questionable aspect of the statement is the use of the words 'NLP writers', a label Dr Heap fails to define. As I said earlier, it is certainly *not* acceptable to assume that *anyone* who writes about NLP-related topics is automatically qualified to present a fair and accurate version of those topics. One book claiming to be about NLP, published only a few months ago, includes material on something the author calls 'the grey zone', which is not in any other book on NLP that I've read, and is certainly not an authentic NLP-related concept. Likewise the author drags in 'Kundalini energy', 'Chakras' and 'spiritual awakening', though John Grinder has made it crystal clear that NLP was never intended to address any aspects of 'spirituality'.

In short, if we were to accept this part of Dr Heap's statement as valid then he would be free to quote absolutely anyone who written about NLP (as in Neuro-Linguistic Programming), regardless of how accurately their claims reflected the claims of the creators and co-developers, Richard Bandler and John Grinder.

My objection, then, is not to Dr Heap holding any particular opinion, or his choice to accept any writer on NLP as authoritative regardless of whether their claims are true to the claims of the two genuine authorities on the subject. What I question is his error in presenting his beliefs as facts, over a substantial period of time, when in practice these particular opinions are almost completely erroneous.

If Dr Heap's review is to have any value at all then it must be assumed that he meant it to be, and still regards it as being, tied directly to the claims made by Bandler and Grinder – *and no one else*.

_____

Unfortunately Dr Heap, in setting out his findings, is remarkably vague as to the import of the various experiments.

_____

On this basis, given Dr Heap's overall conclusion as stated above, the following propositions must all be true:
- The 'present author' must be genuinely qualified to make a valid assessment of (a) what the creators of NLP were asserting regarding representational systems, (b) the accuracy of the understanding of

those claims by the 'investigators' whose work was under review, (c) the accuracy of the experimental findings, and (d) the degree to which the experimental findings do or do not support the assertions that have actually been made regarding the representational systems by Bandler and Grinder.

- The assertions made by Bandler and Grinder concerning representational systems must have been accurately understood by the investigators, and accurately reflected by their experimental designs.
- The outcome of the experiments under review must have shown very little support for the relevant claims made by Bandler and Grinder.

The original review
In his 1988, detailed review of various experiments on a couple of *NLP-related techniques* (Dr Heap has never discussed NLP itself in any of these papers – see point 1 in **Evaluating the claims**, above), Dr Heap included some 63 abstracts. I have been able to obtain all but one of those abstracts – which are mainly of dissertations by candidates for a Masters degree. And the first point to notice, in light of Dr Heap's choice to use them as the basis for his evaluation for the whole field of NLP, is that they are of incredibly varying quality. Some are clear and well presented. Some are equally lengthy and detailed, but exhibit significant confusion as to the nature of NLP and claims made about it. Some are rather short on the kind of details needed, in my opinion, to make any kind of meaningful assessment of their worth. And some are of such poor quality that I found myself wondering how their authors ever got on a Master's degree course in the first place.

How objective is 'objective'?
Unfortunately Dr Heap, in setting out his findings, is remarkably vague as to the import of the various experiments, saying only that 'The ... assertions of NLP writers concerning representational systems have been objectively and fairly investigated ...' (p 275).

But what does Dr Heap actually mean by 'objective' and 'fairly'?

———————————————————————

Several of the projects tried to tie eye movements to representational systems – a task that is simply impossible since there is unlikely to ever be a one-to-one relationship between these two types of signal except in very unusual circumstances

———————————————————————

In practice it seems clear, to me, that Dr Heap signally failed to take a balanced view of the material he was reviewing, disregarding even the most obvious errors. For example:

- Several of the projects tried to tie eye movements to representational systems – a task that is simply impossible since there is unlikely to ever be a one-to-one relationship between these two types of signal except in very unusual circumstances. That is to say, eye movements (which occur in groups, or 'strategies') will almost always outnumber rep' system signals (predicates, breathing patterns, etc.) several times over. If Dr Heap understood this fact, why did he not comment on it in his review?
- Although Dr Heap acknowledges the fact that most of this research is done by relatively inexperienced researchers rather than by professionals, he seems not to attach any importance to this fact. In practice, this element alone should have been enough to set alarm bells ringing and raise the question of whether the student researchers actually knew enough about NLP to design and execute meaningful experiments (see next point). This seems to me to be particularly relevant given that Dr Heap has emphasised to me that he has never carried out any related research himself and is therefore, presumably, quite unaware of the difficulties of creating meaningful research in this particular area.

———————————————————————

Going by the abstracts, in the majority of cases the students made no allowance whatsoever for the influence of the *observer/investigator effect*, or, indeed, for their own limitations.

———————————————————————

- Going by the abstracts, in the majority of cases the students made no allowance whatsoever for the influence of the *observer/investigator effect*, or, indeed, for their own limitations. Thus although several studies apparently showed that none of the subjects were using a particular sensory system as their PRS (preferred representational system), instead of questioning the design and execution of their experiments, in all cases bar one this was simply seized upon as 'evidence' that the NLP-related claims were unsupported. Again Dr Heap seems to have been happy to accept all such self-serving bias without question or comment.
- When it came to checking their results, several authors (e.g. Buckner and Mera, 1987 and Buhr, 1997) mentioned that 'trained observers' were used to check videoed interviews and suchlike. But they do not say (in their abstracts), and Heap did not ask:
  o Whether all experimenters used 'trained observers'?

- In what sense did each of these observers qualify as 'trained'?
- Whether these observers had actually attended a training course in NLP techniques and concepts, or was simply given a book or two on the subject?
- How extensive was their training?
- Who they were trained by?
- And so on.

_____

I found that if 58 of Dr Heap's 60 abstracts were included ….. some 50% of them appeared to support Bandler and Grinder's claims to a greater or lesser extent.

_____

- Yet if he relied on the abstracts for this information then Dr Heap simply had no idea as to the answers to any of these questions. And neither do we.
- Likewise several researchers made mention of previous experiments which allegedly failed to support NLP-related claims, but said nothing about whether this information had in any way affected their own expectations and/or behaviour. And yet again Dr Heap pays no perceptible attention to a potentially crucial influence on the reliability of the experimenters' reports.

Think of a number

Next, in *IV1*, Dr Heap wrote:

'... in view of the absence of any objective evidence provided by the original proponents of the PRS hypothesis, *and the failure of subsequent empirical investigations to adequately support it*, it may well be appropriate now to conclude that there is not, and never has been, any substance to the conjecture that people represent their world internally in a preferred mode which may be inferred from their choice of predicates and from their eye movements' (*IV1*, p 275. Italics added for emphasis)

Yet he has apparently never put a figure on what percentage of the abstracts he believed were pro, neutral or con in their support for NLP-related claims, nor which abstracts belonged in each group. I would like to declare, by way of contrast, that I found that if 61 of Dr Heap's 63 abstracts were included (one could not be traced, and Kinsbourne was excluded – see below), some 50% of them appeared to support Bandler and Grinder's claims to a greater or lesser extent.

To avoid turning this article into a mini series, the abstracts in Dr Heap's review which I believe offered at least partial support for the claims under investigation include:

Appel (1983); Beale (1981)*; Beck and Beck (1984); Bieber, Patton and Fuhriman (1977)*; Brockman (1980);

Day (1985); Einspruch and Forman (1985); Ellickson (1983); Ellis (1980); Falzett (1979); Frieden (1981); Frye (1980); Graunke (1984)*; Graunke and Roberts (1985)*; Hammer (1983)*; Hernandez (1981); Mattar (1980); Mercier and Johnson (1984); Owens (1977); Pantin (1982); Paxton (1980); Sandhu (1984); Schmedlen (1981); Shobin (1980); Wilimek (1979); Yapko (1981a) and Yapko (1981b).

(Notes: I have omitted Kinsbourne (1972) from the list because although his findings seem to offer some support for Bandler and Grinder's claims, the work was carried out before NLP as such existed and has little or no direct bearing on the concept of representational systems.

I have begun to build a set of analyses of the various experiments, incorporating the 6 error groups described by Einspruch and Forman (1985), on my website (see <http://www.bradburyac.mistral.co.uk/Hreview.html>.)

The items marked with an asterisk are particularly interesting since their authors, and Dr Heap, claim that they contradict NLP-related claims. But they don't.

_____

In the cases of Hammer (1983) and Graunke (1984), the experimenters correctly note that their subjects readily switched between rep' systems during an interaction.

_____

In the cases of Hammer (1983) and Graunke (1984), the experimenters correctly note that their subjects readily switched between rep' systems during an interaction. Which they would have known, had they done adequate pre-project research, is exactly what Grinder and Bandler predicted:

'Our claim is that you are using *all* [representational] *systems all the time*. You can shift from one to another. There are contextual markers that allow you to shift from one strategy to another and use different sequences. There's nothing forced about that.' (*Frogs into Princes*, p.36. Italics as in the original)

Again, I believe that in accepting the negative interpretations Dr Heap demonstrated his own lack of understanding of primary and secondary representational systems, and the eye accessing cues as described by Bandler and Grinder, and thus, I suggest, disproved his implied ability to make an accurate evaluation of the material he was reviewing.

So what went wrong?

Having read *IV1* and *IV2*, several times over, it appears to me that the objections raised all depend upon a misinterpretation of the claims made by Bandler and Grinder. I suggest that Dr Heap has constructed a map of the territory which he treats as though it were absolutely correct. And that he has done this despite having read

Bandler and Grinder's books and having in front of him incontrovertible evidence that his map was inaccurate. Thus, in *IV2* he writes (in the final section before the references):

> 'These assertions [regarding PRSs, etc.] are stated in unequivocal terms by the originators of NLP ... it ought to be the case that writers refrain from, and editors of books and journals disallow, the presentation of such allegations as though they were well-established scientific facts ...' (p 123)

Question: Where do the originators of NLP actually take this approach? Answer: Nowhere. On the contrary, in *Frogs into Princes* in particular Bandler and Grinder positively and unambiguously reject any such behaviour. As regards 'well-established scientific facts' Bandler and Grinder say:

> 'We have *no* idea about the "real" nature of things, and we're not particularly interested in what's "true",' (p 7. Italics as in the original)

and a few pages later:

> 'As modelers we're not interested in whether what we offer you is true or not, whether it's accurate or whether it can be neurologically proven to be accurate, an actual representation of the world.' (p 18)

Bandler and Grinder have always been clear that what they were studying fell within the realm of 'the study of the structure of subjective experience'

Do these really sound like the sort of statements someone would make if they are claiming to impart 'well-established scientific facts'? Of course not. Bandler and Grinder have always been clear that what they were studying fell within the realm of 'the study of the structure of subjective experience' A subject, it might be noted, that the behaviourists chose to ignore entirely, and which even now is the focus of far more questions than answers in 'conventional' psychology.

Yet here again, Dr Heap completely confuses the issue. In his latest paper, for instance, he presents us with a 'mental map' which he calls *The historical context of NLP*. It's quite interesting, but it is a map of what Dr Heap knows about that period – which has little or nothing to do with NLP. Thus he makes an absolutely fundamental claim: 'NLP was one of a plethora of therapies that appeared from the 1970s onwards' with no supporting evidence whatsoever for this allegation. On the contrary, he goes off at a complete tangent with no information whatsoever to tie NLP to the matters he is discussing.

In practice, the 'historical context' of NLP has a great deal to do with topics such as Alfred Korzybski and *General Semantics*, along with John Grinder's professional interest in *Transformational Grammar*, and the wide open field of subjective perception and experience - and little or nothing to do with anything Dr Heap discusses in this part of his paper. In short, Dr Heap's 'history' is a perfect fit for his mental map, and totally ignores* all of the evidence that contradicts the story he wishes to tell.

(*Caveat: Given the passages from *Frogs into Princes* quoted by Dr Heap I am assuming that he has read the whole book, including material from that book which I have cited in this article.)

Is NLP a form of therapy? And if not, why not?

At this point I think we are bound to consider what NLP really is, and isn't about. Dr. Heap writes:

> '... **there is absolutely no question that the origins of NLP and its initial impact were in the field of counselling and psychotherapy'** (Bold font as in the original)

This is near enough correct, as far as it goes, but after that we soon find ourselves misdirected by the implicit introduction of two related but illogical syllogisms that go something like this:

1. Fritz Perls, Virginia Satir and Milton Erickson were all therapists
2. Bandler and Grinder built NLP around their models of Perls, Satir and Erickson
3. Therefore NLP is a form of therapy.

and:

1. Bandler and Grinder carried out certain therapeutic activities
2. Bandler and Grinder created NLP
3. Therefore NLP is a form of therapy.

Problem: In neither case is Step 3 either logical or accurate.

Bandler and Grinder were interested in modelling *communication* rather than therapy as such (see *Frogs into Princes*, pages 38 and 47, for example):

> '… in your work as a professional communicator ...'

> 'The proper domain, in our opinion, of professional communicators is process.'

This brings in an important distinction frequently emphasised by Bandler and Grinder, between process and content. The focus of all genuine NLP-related techniques is on *process* rather than *content*. The focus of Heap's maps, and those of many other critics I've come across, is on content rather than process.

To be specific, Bandler and Grinder were concerned with the *process* of excellent communication, not with the *content* of therapeutic communication in particular. Although Bandler, and later Grinder as well, were involved with Gestalt Therapy (another reason why they

weren't interested in creating some *new* form of therapy), the gist of the question Bandler posed to Grinder was: 'Explain how I'm doing what I'm doing in such a way that I can teach that to other people and so that I can communicate *any* information in a more effective way.'

By limiting his attention to the *content* of what was being modelled rather than the way in which the content was communicated, Dr Heap arrived at a completely erroneous understanding of what Bandler and Grinder wanted to do, and hence a completely erroneous view of what NLP in particular, and the field of NLP in general, were/are all about. As a simple example:

- Bandler and Grinder were studying communication;
- Heap says that successful therapy depends on rapport existing between therapist and client;
- How does a therapist create rapport except through their communications – both verbal and non-verbal?
- But whilst therapy is always about communication, not all communication is about therapy.

_____

There are, as John Grinder points out, many valid forms of modelling, but only one procedure which qualifies as 'NLP Modelling'.

_____

NLP Modelling

There are, as John Grinder points out, many valid forms of modelling, but only one procedure which qualifies as 'NLP Modelling'. This was initially devised (in this context) by Richard Bandler and developed by Bandler and Grinder.

It is crucial to any understanding of the whole field of NLP to know that NLP itself is this particular modelling technique *and nothing else*. Everything else that people tend to think of as NLP is actually made up of NLP-related techniques and applications. To answer Dr Heap's query as to how such a seemingly disparate collection ever came together under a single title, these techniques and applications were created or adopted/adapted either to support the NLP modelling process (as in the case of the *meta model*, for example), or because they were discovered as a consequence of using the NLP modelling process (as in the case of the *fast phobia* technique).

The important aspects of the NLP modelling technique are as follows:

- The modeller collects as much information about the exemplar's behaviour, attitudes, beliefs, etc. as possible, with NO evaluation of the relevance/value of what is being gathered. In modelling Fritz Perls, for example, Bandler even adopted a German accent and chain smoking in order to come as close as possible to how he had seen Perls acting in filmed therapy sessions and heard him on audio tapes. He did this without pre-judging whether or not the accent and smoking were necessary to the success of Perls' communications.

- Whilst collecting this information the modeller periodically tries to replicate the performance of the exemplar, using the latest version of their model.

- When the modeller can replicate the results the exemplar achieves the modeller stops collecting information. As Bandler and Grinder put it in *Frogs into Princes* (p 7): 'We know our modeling has been successful when we can systematically get the same behavioural outcome as the person we have modeled.' (By the way, being able to replicate the exemplar's results, i.e. getting the intended result, is an example of the NLP phrase that seems to baffle many critics: 'Doing *what works*.')

- The modeller then refines the model they now have, by testing each and every element, in order to remove whatever behaviour and so on isn't actually needed to achieve the required results.

- And finally, the refined model must be recorded in such a form that it can be successfully taught to others. Again the success of the process is determined by how well the trainees can reproduce, or exceed, the results produced by the original exemplar(s).

Now, here comes the crucial information, as far as this discussion is concerned:

As a student at the UC Santa Cruz Bandler started out studying mathematics and computing, and ended up studying psychology. During this time he subsidised his studies working in the warehouse of a local book company. This led to him getting the job of editing a book on Fritz Perls, which included transcribing a number of tapes of Perls' therapeutic work. According to John Grinder, Bandler was so skilled at absorbing aspects of Perls' work with Gestalt Therapy that he ended up being able to use Gestalt Therapy even more effectively than Perls himself. Indeed, it is said that when he ran out of material for the book, Bandler was able to finish the job by writing from within his internalised model of Perls!

Bandler also spent some time with family therapist Virginia Satir, managing the sound and recording systems when she was running training sessions and demonstrations. Here, too, he built a highly effective model of her techniques, even though he allegedly spent most of his time reading books and was therefore only peripherally aware of what Satir was doing.

Thus Bandler, and later Bandler and Grinder, had detailed access to the work of two outstanding therapists, not because therapy was what they particularly wanted to study (note Bandler's initial disinterest in what Satir was doing), but because Bandler's work happened to create those opportunities. And as Grinder pointed out to me, getting close to people who are recognised by their peers as

genuine models of excellence within their chosen field is not an opportunity that presents itself very often.

The third exemplar was psychiatrist and clinical hypnotist, Milton Erickson. And again the connection was established almost completely by chance. Bandler and Grinder had by this time advanced to the point where they were able to co-author a book on family therapy with Virginia Satir, thus demonstrating the effectiveness of their modelling of her work. The only limitation at this stage was that Perls had died not long before Bandler edited the book referred to above, so Bandler and Grinder were on the lookout for a another 'model of excellence' whom they could compare with their models of Perls and Satir.

_____

In short, Bandler started getting acquainted with the work of a couple of outstanding therapists – examples of 'excellence' in their chosen activity – entirely by chance.

_____

John Grinder lived close to, and knew, the British anthropologist Gregory Bateson (who was also working at the UCSC at the time), and it was Bateson who recommended that they (Bandler and Grinder) go to Arizona to study Erickson and his work.

In short, Bandler started getting acquainted with the work of a couple of outstanding therapists – examples of 'excellence' in their chosen activity – entirely by chance. Once the process had started it was logical that Bandler and then Bandler and Grinder would continue to model therapists until that part of their project was complete. Likewise their own work in the role of therapists was a case of testing the accuracy of their models and not because they were therapists, or wished to create some new form of therapy. And they passed on their knowledge to people who would be involved or at least interested, in psychotherapy because they were in a position to use the models in their own work and thus test the final stage of the NLP modelling process.

Nor is there any ambiguity or confusion on this point. As Bandler and Grinder stated very clearly in the seminar which was the basis for their 1979 book *Frogs into Princes*:

> 'We [Bandler and Grinder] call ourselves *modelers*. What we essentially do is to pay very little attention to what people *say* they do and a great deal of attention to what they *do*. And then we build ourselves a model of what they do. We are not psychologists, and we're also not theologians or theoreticians.' (p 7. Italics as in the original.)

Let us proceed, then, in the sure and certain knowledge that the claims that NLP is a kind of therapy, are completely untrue. NLP is simply a specific modelling procedure.

Back to '88

So what about those experiments? What are the representational systems (usually abbreviated to 'rep' systems') really about? And why were the experimenters of the 1970s and '80s so far wide of the mark?

There are 5 rep' systems – visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, olfactory, and gustatory. They approximate to the five basic sensory systems, though in NLP-related jargon the term 'kinesthetic' is applied to feelings in general - tactile feelings, visceral feelings *and* emotional feelings. (If this seems untoward in any way, remember that NLP-related techniques and concepts are about what is *useful* rather than about conventional 'truths'.)

Primary Representational Systems

In all honesty I must confess that I initially made the same mistake that Dr Heap, and many others, have made about the concept of primary representational systems. That is to say, I thought that Bandler and Grinder were saying that each of us has a preference for just one representational system which we tend to stick to. In fact the matter is somewhat more nuanced. What Bandler and Grinder actually say is:

> 'How many here now see clearly that they are visually oriented people? How many people see that? How many people here feel that they are really kinesthetically oriented people in their process? Who tell themselves that they are auditory? Actually *all* of you are doing *all* of the things we're talking about, *all the time*. The only question is, which portion of the complex internal process do you bring into awareness? All channels are processing information all the time, but only part of that will be in consciousness.' (*Frogs into Princes*, p 34. Italics as in the original text)

and a few pages later:

> 'Our claim is that you are using *all systems all of the time*. In a particular context you will be *aware* of one system more than another. I assume that when you play athletics or make love you have a lot of kinesthetic sensitivity. ...' (*ibid*, p 36. Italics as in the original text)

_____

Given John Grinder's statement that people can switch rep' systems as frequently as every 30 seconds (approx.), these students had clearly missed the point entirely.

_____

Notice, here, that Bandler and Grinder are claiming that the process whereby one rep' system predominates is context specific and *not*, as so many experimenters have apparently assumed, a fixed-for-life phenomenon. In fact several researchers amongst those included in the review were testing how long what they assumed was a primary

representational system remained primary. Given John Grinder's statement that people can switch rep' systems as frequently as every 30 seconds (approx.), these students had clearly missed the point entirely. The fact that Dr Heap accepted these abstracts as relating to valid experiments argues that he shared this misconception.

_____

'A person may have more than one most highly valued representational system, alternating them. This is common in people who are incongruent in their communication.'

_____

Moreover, on the day before I sent this article off to Dr Heap, and long after I initially wrote this section, I discovered that Einspruch and Forman (1985) made this same observation in their criticism of Sharpley's (1984) review. This means that, had Dr Heap read the full text of their paper at the time, he would have known exactly what he needed to know in order to have avoided his basic error regarding the nature of representational systems.

Incidentally, the fact that Einspruch, Forman and I are all 'singing from the same hymn-sheet' – over 20 years apart and without prior reference to each other's writing - is further evidence that Bandler and Grinder have maintained the same ideas on this subject over the intervening period.

Next, Bandler and Grinder also noted that some people exhibited not one but two or more representational systems as the primary representational system, with the qualification that: '... we tend to use one or more of these representational systems as a map more often than the others.' (*The Structure of Magic 2*, p 8), and '... a person may have more than one most highly valued representational system, alternating them. This is common in people who are incongruent in their communication ...' (*op. cit.*, p 26). Given that most of the subjects in the various experiments under review were university students, this last point is especially relevant. What we now know, though we didn't in 1976, is that due to certain features of brain development during our teens and early 20s, this is a time when incongruency is, for many young people, more or less a fact of life.

The core mistake

This, then, is the core mistake made by most of the experimenters, and in the reviewing process – the expectation that people will use a single representational system (the one the experimenter/reviewer takes to be the person's *primary* representational system) in preference to all others come what may.

This is not correct, and Bandler and Grinder, as we've already seen, were not making that claim. Not even in the late 1970s. Like most NLP-related techniques, the favouring of one or two representational systems over the others has always been viewed as something that is context-based. As an example, some years ago there were several series of a UK TV programme called *Masterchef*, presented by Loyd Grossman, in which trios of amateur chefs prepared meals in the studio which were judged by Grossman, a celebrity and a professional chef – it being a knock-out contest in format.

The interesting thing in relation to the contextual nature of rep' systems was that all through the preparation cycle the professional chefs talked about the food almost exclusively in terms of smell. But once the dishes were presented for judging they switched to evaluating the food in terms of visual appearance and taste. (Note, this applied to almost every chef over several series.)

This clearly illustrates, as some of the reviewed experimenters noticed, how easily and naturally people can and do switch from rep' system to rep' system according to the requirements of the moment.

Which is why Alan Hammer (1983), was actually *confirming* Bandler and Grinder's findings when he reported that people's verbal and non-verbal signals need to be tracked ('calibrated' in NLP jargon) and responded to *throughout* an interaction – not just at the start.

_____

It is my contention that Dr Heap, and most of the student researchers whose work he reviewed, had a responsibility to find out what Bandler and Grinder were really claiming.

_____

It is my contention that Dr Heap, and most of the student researchers whose work he reviewed, had a responsibility to find out what Bandler and Grinder were really claiming. Instead they opted to rely on their own misinterpretations. Had they double-checked their maps with a genuinely authoritative source, had they read Bandler and Grinder's books with more care, then, I believe, virtually *all* of the studies would have supported the claims for the relevant NLP-related techniques.

(For what it's worth, times seem to be a'changing. Just a few weeks ago I received an enquiry from the Chair of a department in a Mid-West College who is about to embark on research of the eye accessing cues model, asking for any observations I might have.

By the way, I'm not suggesting that researchers should write to me in particular. In fact I have passed the Professor on to someone who has a particular interest in this topic and who has been working with Bandler for over 20 years.)

It is a simple fact that the field of NLP is now in its fourth decade and is going from strength to strength. It extended way beyond the original group not because of 'brilliant marketing', as one online/book author has claimed, but because it was given credence by people such as Elizabeth Loftus*, Daniel Goleman (in *Psychology Today*), Gregory Bateson *et al.*

*(Professor Loftus (1982) referred to Bandler and Grinder's account in *Frogs into Princes* of implanting entire false histories in people as a way of making them feel better. For example, working with people who had been fat all their lives, they successfully implanted false childhoods in which they had grown up thin.)

_____

There is too little space, here, to develop an in-depth response to the charge that NLP should be investigated in a 'scientific' manner.

_____

Dr Heap argues that NLP [sic] should be amenable to rigorous scientific testing. But the NLP-related techniques (which is what Dr Heap and other critics are actually talking about) were never offered as methods or models which would *always* work, for *every* NLPer, with *every* client, in *every* context. In practice, NLP in general has succeeded because the related techniques work enough of the time, for enough people, in enough contexts, to make them generally useful. Since this is a known feature of the NLP-related techniques it is clearly nonsense to expect to get useful results from subjecting them to the 'scientific method' which is predicated on more or less 100% consistent behaviour in the materials being tested.

There is too little space, here, to develop an in-depth response to the charge that NLP should be investigated in a 'scientific' manner. Instead I would refer anyone interested in the topic to read Dr. Liam Hudson's book *The Cult of the Fact* (1972). Dr Hudson was a professor of psychology and his book details the reasons why it inappropriate to apply scientific-style investigative methods to psychology.

As to NLP in particular, Bandler and Grinder have always said, if what you're doing isn't working, do something else instead - and keep varying your behaviour until you find something that does get you the results that you're after.

Postscript

In his *IV1* paper, Dr Heap concluded his report with these words:

> 'This verdict on NLP is, as the title indicates, an interim one. Einspruch and Forman (1985) were probably correct in insisting that the effectiveness of NLP therapy [sic] undertaken in authentic clinical

contexts of [sic] trained practitioners has not yet been properly investigated.

> 'If it turns out to be the case that these therapeutic procedures [sic] are indeed as rapid and powerful as claimed, no one will rejoice more than the present author. If however these claims fare no better than the ones already investigated then the final verdict on NLP will be a harsh one indeed.' (p 276)

Unfortunately, as I believe I have demonstrated here, it appears that Dr Heap:

- Was prepared to simultaneously hold the contradictory views that (a) the experiments he reviewed were 'fair and objective' but failed to support the claims he thought had been made for NLP AND (b) that what he (mistakenly) called NLP therapy had NOT been properly/adequately investigated.
- Took little or no account of the many obvious opportunities for error, and actual errors, in the various experimental abstracts.
- Had no idea that NLP itself was just a particular form of modelling.
- Was also under the impression that there was little or nothing more to 'NLP' than primary representational systems, sensory predicates and the eye accessing cues.
- And carried out such a restricted version of the research he is generally thought to have performed (online citations make claims such as 'Dr Heap carried out a systematic review'), that he specifically cited, but apparently failed to read, the one paper that would have explained why his review was so profoundly in error.

_____

All three of Dr Heap's papers demonstrate how little understanding he had of the subject, and how seriously underqualified he has been, both then and now, to offer any kind of competent opinion on the material he reviewed.

_____

(To be fair, the bibliography on *IV1* makes it clear that Heap only read the abstracts of the various papers. Unfortunately many people who have subsequently cited Heap's review seem unable to understand how very limited these abstracts are as regards the amount and nature of the details they supply.)

- Thus in *IV1* and *IV2 I* believe I am right in saying that he doesn't make even a passing reference to:
  - The Meta Model
  - Meta Programs
  - Goal setting

- o Anchoring
- o Calibration
- o Various rapport-building techniques such as mirroring and matching, and cross matching
- o Presuppositions (NLP presuppositions in particular and and linguistic presuppositions in general)
- o Chunking
- o The use of metaphors
- o NLP-related problem resolution
- o and so on, and so on.

Even in *IV3*, Dr Heap's only recognition of the true breadth of NLP seems to be his brief comment that he is concerned by the way Noam Chomsky's ideas have been incorporated. Is he aware, I wonder, of the fact that Grinder had already co-authored a college level textbook on Transformational Grammar before he started working with Bandler? And is he aware that the NLP-related 'meta model' is an *adaptation* of Chomsky's model, *not* an attempt to co-opt a carbon copy of Chomsky's ideas as an NLP-related technique?

Here, again, and I promise you that I do not say this lightly, I would argue that all three of Dr Heap's papers demonstrate how little understanding he had of the subject, and how seriously underqualified he has been, both then and now, to offer any kind of competent opinion on the material he reviewed.

References

Bandler, R. and Grinder, J. (1975) *The Structure of Magic I*. Palo Alto, CA: Science and Behaviour Books, Inc.

Bandler, R. (1992) *Magic in Action*. Capitola, CA: Meta Publications.

Bradbury, A. (2006) *Develop your NLP Skills* (3rd edition). London: Kogan Page.

Buckner, M. & Mera, N.M. (1987) Eye movement as an indicator of sensory components in thought. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, **34**, 283-287.

Buhr, K-O. (1997) *An experiment testing the eye movement hypothesis of NLP by presenting visual stimuli and measuring reaction times*. University of Bielefeld, Department of Psychology. Unpublished Masters thesis.

Dilts, R. (1994) *Effective Presentation Skills*. Capitola, CA: Meta Publications.

Dorn, F.J. (1983) The effects of counselor-client predicate use in counselor attractiveness. *American Mental Health Counselor's Association Journal*, **5**, 22-30. (Designated 1983a in Dr Heap's references.)

Einspruch, E.L. & Forman, B.D. (1985) Observations concerning research literature on neurolinguistic programming. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, **32**, 589-596.

Frith, C. D. (2007) *Making up the Mind*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Gazzaniga, M. (1998) *The Mind's Past*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Grinder, J. & Bandler, R. (1976) *The Structure of Magic II*. Palo Alto, CA: Science and Behaviour Books, Inc.

Hammer, A.L. (1983) Matching perceptual predicates: Effects on perceived empathy in a counseling analogue. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*. **30**, 172-179.

Heap, M. (1988) Neurolinguistic programming: An interim verdict. In M. Heap (Ed.) *Hypnosis: Current Clinical, Experimental and Forensic Practices* (pp 268-280). London: Croom Helm.

Heap, M. (1989) Neurolinguistic programming: What is the evidence? In D. Waxman, D. Pedersen, I. Wilkie & P. Mellett (Eds.) *Hypnosis: The Fourth European Congress at Oxford* (118-124). London: Whurr Publishers. (see <www.mheap.com>)

Heap, M. (2008) The validity of some early claims of neuro-linguistic programming, *Sceptical Intelligencer*, **12**, **6-13**

Hudson, L. (1972) *The Cult of the Fact*. Jonathan Cape, London.

Jones, D. & Motluk, A. (2008) How to get exactly what you want. *New Scientist*, May 10.

Laborde, G. (1983) *Influencing with Integrity*. Mountain View, CA: Syntony Publishing.

Laborde, G. (1988) *Fine Tune your Brain*. Mountain View, CA: Syntony Publishing.

Loftus, E.E. (1981) Memory and its distortions. In A.G. Kraut (ed.), *The G. Stanley Hall Lecture Series* (pp. 123-154). Washington DC: American Psychological Association

Sharpley, C.F. (1984) Predicate matching in NLP: A review of research on the preferred representational system. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, **31**, 238-248.

Sharpley, C.F. (1987) Research findings on neurolinguistic programming: Nonsupportive data or untestable theory? *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, **34**, 103-107.

Andy who?

I am a social psychologist by training (I took my degree at the University of Sussex in 1971) after which I have spent most of my working life in personnel and/or training, apart from a ten year stretch as a tutor and deputy principal in a sixth form college. I also have 'informal' (i.e. non-accredited) qualifications in hypnosis and hypnotherapy, and trained as an NLP Practitioner in the early 1990s, and as a Master Practitioner in 2006-2007.

I have maintained my interest in psychology throughout my career and the first edition of my book on

the use of NLP in business – originally called *NLP for Business Success*, later re-titled *Develop Your NLP Skills* - was published by Kogan Page in 1997. The book has now been translated into more than a dozen languages,

and I am currently overhauling the text for a fourth edition, which is due out next autumn.

I also have practical experience of these skills having used them in 'real life', as an occasional therapist, in my business life, and in my activities as a teacher/trainer.

LINGUISTIC ASPECTS OF 'NEURO-LINGUISTIC PROGRAMMING'

Mark Newbrook

Mark Newbrook is currently a research associate affiliated with Sheffield University. His main areas of research interest are dialectology, controversies in historical linguistics and skeptical linguistics generally.

I seek here to provide some comment on the tradition of work called *Neuro-Linguisic Programming* from the standpoint of a professional linguist. NLP is a theory of communication and thought and an associated therapeutic method which aims at improving thought processes and consequential behaviour by addressing and altering patterns of linguistic usage. I say nothing here about aspects of NLP that fall outside my expertise as a linguist.

_____

The very term *Neuro-Linguisic Programming* confusingly suggests that NLP practitioners are directing their attention to the neurology of language itself.

_____

First: the very term *Neuro-Linguisic Programming* confusingly suggests that NLP practitioners are directing their attention to the neurology of language itself. In fact, the neurology of language is still poorly understood; but there is a large and growing tradition of professional linguistic work which does attend to that side of psycholinguistics, and which is utterly different in nature from NLP. This professional work is more properly called *neurolinguistics*. NLP work addresses neurolinguistic realities, if at all, indirectly, by altering and monitoring overt behaviour; and it is not at all clear how practitioners might demonstrate the validity of their ideas in strictly neurological terms. (See also the end of this article.)

Second: the consensus position of uncommitted linguists who have examined NLP remains that where it is valid it is platitudinously valid or recapitualates ideas better developed and expressed by mainstream linguists. In this respect, it resembles the ideas of Korzybski, Hayakawa etc, promulgated in the mid-20th Century under the name 'General Semantics' (GS). Hayakawa, who later broke

away from the GS movement, was a professional linguist, but rather a quixotic one; Korzybski, who is often described as a linguist by his continuing adherents and by NLPers, was not trained in the discipline. Many GS ideas were adopted by NLP, notably the core idea that thought and behaviour are very closely determined by linguistic usage, and that crucial modifications to habitual usage can lead to radical modification to thought and behaviour (preferably for the better). This is well exemplified by the GS variety of English, 'E-Prime', which eschews the verb BE as far as possible and thus allegedly eliminates fundamental ('Aristotelian') errors and misconceptions in logic as expressed in languages like English which make heavy use of such a verb.

This kind of consideration also lies behind the NLP slogan 'The Map Is Not The Territory'. There are many ways ('maps') of talking about a given situation ('territory'), and the way usually chosen (perhaps unthinkingly, often because of the structures of one's main language) may not be the most helpful in a given situation. Other very usable ways of talking (other 'maps') may exist and may be implicated in very different views of 'the territory'.

These ideas, however, have been better discussed by genuine linguists such as Sapir and Whorf, whose work preceded that of Korzybski and had widespread influence outside the discipline – including e.g. the science fiction of Orwell (1984) and Vance. In fact, the ideas of Sapir and Whorf form the (largely unacknowledged) background to GS and NLP. Although the exact views of these two scholars remain the subject of debate (both died young, in Whorf's case after coming late to linguistics), they are together ascribed credit for the 'Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis', which proposes, like GS, that thought and behaviour are very closely linked with linguistic usage (very typically in a speaker's first

language), and in fact that they are very largely determined by it.

_____

Sapir-Whorf enthusiasts generally hold that it is not possible to arrive at a description of a situation or entity which is intelligible to humans and genuinely language-neutral.

_____

Whorf began to develop his ideas after identifying numerous practical situations in which linguistic usage clearly seemed to have affected thought and behaviour, often with very damaging consequences. For example, he studied the consequences of casual behaviour with flames and cigarettes near substances described as *inflammable* (often wrongly taken to mean '**un**-ignitable') or above open petrol drums misleadingly labelled 'empty' but in fact containing petrol vapour suspended in air and thus even more dangerous than 'full' drums containing liquid petrol. In a similar vein, Sapir (who was Whorf's tutor) examined the grammatical and lexical (vocabulary) structures of non-Indo-European languages, notably Amerindian languages such as Apache, Hopi, Kwakwala etc, and argued that these very different structures promoted, for good or ill or neutrally, very different perceptions of the physical world, and hence different behaviour. According to Sapir and Whorf, the Hopi (especially if monoglot) see clouds as living creatures, because the noun meaning 'cloud' is treated by their language as an animate noun; they also struggle with timetables, because Hopi has no means of counting periods of time, but readily grasp some principles of modern physics which Hopi expresses more easily than do Indo-European languages; the Kwakwala are very clear-headed and hard to deceive about the strength of evidence for claims, because Kwakwala verbs have obligatory endings which encode such matters; the Apache do **not** see waterfalls as entities in their own right, because the Apache word used to describe them is a verb; etc, etc.

In fact, Sapir-Whorf enthusiasts generally hold that it is not possible to arrive at a description of a situation or entity which is intelligible to humans and genuinely language-neutral, because all such descriptions (even scientific or mathematical descriptions) are couched in a given language or in forms parasitical upon language. In other words, there is **no** 'territory' which is independent of any 'map', and no 'maps' with any special status. This idea has been embraced eagerly by relativist postmodernist linguists; but it is not clear that it should be welcome to GS or NLP devotees, who often seem to be looking for alternative 'maps' seen as genuinely more accurate and/or more helpful.

It will be noted that for the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis to have major consequences for thought, there must be considerable amounts of variation in structure between languages (and some scope for significant variation in structure between different ways of expressing the same situation within any given language). Most modern (19th-21st Century) linguists have considered that unrelated languages may indeed display very different structures. If this is correct, the scope for consequential variation in thought (and hence behaviour) is also very great, assuming that Sapir and Whorf are right in thinking that language largely determines thought. (But see below on Chomsky and Sampson.)

It is important to note here that Sapir and Whorf hold that that the direction of influence is overwhelmingly from language to thought, not *vice versa*. One problem with the hypothesis is that (as sociolinguists have pointed out) there are some very striking examples of the reverse effect, where thought apparently influences language instead, e.g. some involving the influence of the physical environment, as perceived by humans, on linguistic form (e.g. the many words for types of snow in languages like Inuit).

_____

Modifying linguistic usage may at times amount only to mere tinkering with some of the symptoms of deeper non-linguistic problems.

_____

In fact, NLP seems to accept the idea that influence can run in both directions between language and thought. Problems at other levels may be 'reflected' in linguistic usage, rather than caused by it; or even in one case both may apply (see also below). But if this is the case, modifying linguistic usage may at times amount only to mere tinkering with some of the symptoms of deeper non-linguistic problems. The benefits may be limited, and perhaps **diagnosis** of these deeper non-linguistic problems is sometimes the main attainable goal – which obviously lessens the importance of NLP, while of course not nullifying it altogether. (In addition, the 'map and territory' analogy may run into difficulties here.)

More generally, it should be realised that the ideas of Sapir and Whorf remain highly controversial and are arguably exaggerated. Sampson, for instance, points out that in many cases (not all) there is no good non-linguistic (e.g. behavioural) evidence for thought patterns, which are themselves private and often unconscious. There is thus a danger of circular reasoning. In addition, many linguistic structures are slow to change and may have generated patterns of thought which are themselves no longer current. For example, grammatical gender suggests that the French see the Moon as female and the Sun as male, while the

Germans have the opposite view; but all this involves prehistoric world-views which have long been superseded, and modern adult speakers of these two languages ascribe no gender to astronomical objects.

If the more sophisticated ideas of Sapir and Whorf are arguably exaggerated, the GS and NLP versions, not informed by the same degree of sophistication, are **clearly** exaggerated and one-sided.

Another point of importance here involves the view of Sapir and Whorf that learning new linguistic structures and hence possibly altering consequential thought and behaviour patterns is very difficult indeed – at least for adults grappling with major structures in their languages rather than the odd unhelpful word. GS and NLP advocates, in order to have a mission which appears feasible, must propose (as they do) that such modifications, while not necessarily altogether easy, are quite manageable – with help from GS or NLP, of course! But it is not clear why they should differ from Sapir and Whorf at **just** this point where it suits them to do so!

_____

Grinder, one of the NLP founders, studied in Chomsky's department at MIT in Boston, and most NLP textbooks take a basically Chomskyan grammatical model for granted.

_____

Third: NLP arguably depends too much on specific linguistic analyses which by no means all linguists would accept. Grinder, one of the NLP founders, studied in Chomsky's department at MIT in Boston, and most NLP textbooks take a basically Chomskyan grammatical model for granted. (It has to be said that for much of the last fifty years Chomskyan ideas have dominated linguistic thought in the USA, which obviously promotes this kind of situation.) There are in fact various other major grammatical and general linguistic approaches to linguistic structures, some of which have very different upshots from Chomsky's (which itself has changed repeatedly; NLP Chomskyan analyses are sometimes dated).

On the other hand, many points made by NLPers do not seem to be especially bound to specific grammatical analyses. It could be suggested that the presentation of technical-looking analyses often serves more to give an impression of linguistic sophistication than to contribute usefully to an argument supporting a claim.

_____

It could be suggested that the presentation of technical-looking analyses often serves more to give an impression of linguistic sophistication than to contribute usefully to an argument supporting a claim.

_____

Another point about Chomskyan thought on general linguistic matters is that it clashes quite markedly with Sapir and Whorf's ideas in some respects. Notably, Chomskyans generally are not even especially interested in the specific relationship between linguistic forms and non-linguistic thought. But if pressed they mostly would probably hold that the relationship between linguistic structure and thought is more complex and many-sided than Sapir and Whorf believed. This seems to be reflected in the more open-ended view of these matters within NLP (see above).

In addition, Chomskyans believe that there is much less variation in basic linguistic patterning across the species than is held by followers of Sapir and Whorf. Differences which do clearly exist are typically treated as peripheral and of limited interest to theoretical linguists. But if linguistic differences are mostly shallow or peripheral, their influence on thought can only be limited. However, this point is cross-linguistic in nature and perhaps has rather little to do with the actual concerns of NLPers.

As a matter of fact, most linguists who have examined NLP have come to the view that it has rather little to do with linguistics proper more generally. Whether or not NLP holds us as a theory or a therapeutic method, maybe the entire word _neurolinguistic_, not just the morpheme _neuro-_, is misleading.
.

THE ASSOCIATION FOR SKEPTICAL ENQUIRY

ASKE is an association of people who support the following aims and principles:

- ASKE is committed to the application of rational, objective and scientific methods to the investigation and understanding of ideas, claims, and practices, especially those of an extraordinary and paranormal nature.

- ASKE is committed to challenging the uncritical promotion of beliefs and claims which are unsupported or contradicted by existing objective and scientific knowledge.

- ASKE opposes the misinterpretation and misrepresentation of science for purposes which deceive the public.

- ASKE supports the objective evaluation of all medical or psychological techniques offered to the public and opposes the uncritical promotion of techniques which are unsupported or contradicted by existing scientific knowledge.

- ASKE supports all efforts to promote the public awareness of the rational and scientific understanding of extraordinary and paranormal claims.

- ASKE is committed to a rational understanding of the reasons and motives which underlie the promotion and acceptance of irrational and paranormal claims and beliefs.

- ASKE accepts the rights of individuals to choose for themselves their beliefs about the world.

Membership of ASKE costs £10 a year or £30 for 3 years, which includes a subscription to the *Skeptical Intelligencer*. For an application form or further information, contact The Secretary, ASKE, P.O. Box 5994 Ripley DE5 3XL or you may apply for membership on line at the ASKE website: <http://www.aske-skeptics.org.uk>.