
Kluwer Mediation Blog

A Neuro-Linguist's Toolbox - Language: Using Presuppositions (Part 1)

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For readers who are new, the “Neuro-Linguist's Toolbox” series is an ongoing series focused on using Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) in our practice of amicable dispute resolution.

The first section focused on rapport (the first of which can be found [here](#)). The second section focuses on matters of self-care and personal improvement for mediators (the first of which can be found [here](#)).

This third section focuses on the use of language in amicable dispute resolution. For ease of reference and the convenience of readers, I will list in this and subsequent entries the series of entries in this section.

1. [A Neuro-Linguist's Toolbox - Language: The NLP Communication Model](#)
2. [A Neuro-Linguist's Toolbox - Language: The Hierarchy of Ideas](#)
3. [A Neuro-Linguist's Toolbox - Language: Meta-Model \(Part 1\)](#)
4. [A Neuro-Linguist's Toolbox - Language: Meta-Model \(Part 2\)](#)

It is recommended that you read the first entry (NLP Communication Model) before reading this entry.

In previous entries, we have seen how the use of language can traverse a continuum from the specific to the abstract, and how we can directionalize our communication and therefore our listener's attention in a desired direction (See The Hierarchy of Ideas). We have also explored how we can use specific questions to recover information that has been distorted, generalized and deleted, and how this can assist in challenging perceptions and creating movement in the listener's minds (See the Meta Model, Parts 1 and 2).

Before going further, I feel I should provide readers a heads up. The discussion that follows is a little involved and may feel like one is back in school learning English. My apologies in advance. It is the nature of the subject. I suggest a strong cup of coffee (or other legal stimulant of choice) and I trust that for the intrepid reader that soldiers on, you will find value.

Having said that, this entry and those following, explores how linguistic

presuppositions can be used to “incept” ideas in communication. Put simply, every statement/question contains assumptions that we must accept, as a matter of simply understanding and responding to that statement/question.

This is best illustrated by a true story from my misspent youth. During my university studies in New Zealand, I had a friend who liked to go around asking people the following question:

“Are you still beating your wife?”

Before going further, I should say that this is obviously a politically incorrect statement and should not be taken to indicate any kind of approval for said behavior (one can never be too careful in today’s “lit” world). I share this here as a factual description of what my friend said, and who obviously did so for shock value.

I was constantly surprised by how many were confounded by this. They simply did not know how to respond to this Hobson’s choice. An affirmative or a negative would be equally damning. I didn’t know it then, but this was a presupposition in action. In order to meaningfully respond to the question, one had to accept the presupposition inherent in that question, i.e. I have a wife and have beaten her at some point.

For completion, I should add that there were a rare few who recognized the obvious trap and either refused to answer, or responded by saying “I have never had a wife” or “I have never beaten my wife” which directly challenged the presupposition.

When I finally learnt about presuppositions, I immediately recognized what my friend was doing then, but more importantly how we can use presuppositions in our work as mediators to help parties come to agreement. Since then, I have taught mediators and negotiators how to use presuppositions artfully. I would like to share some of these thoughts with readers.

There are many types of presuppositions and in this entry, I will share 2 presuppositions that are often used together. These are the presupposition of “Existence” and presupposition of “Awareness”.

Looking first at the presupposition of “Existence”, simply put, every statement/question that contains a noun has a presupposition of “Existence”. Consider:

“There is a **garden** behind the **house**”

Or

“He has attained many **achievements** and **success** in his **career**”

In the first sentence, there are two concrete nouns; “garden” and “house”. Concrete nouns refer to things that can physically exist in the world. In NLP, we say that concrete nouns can fit in the palm of your hand, or you can put in a wheelbarrow. A “stone” or a “building” or a “planet” would all be concrete nouns. You may need a very large palm or a very large wheelbarrow, but it is conceivably possible.

Concrete nouns are to be contrasted against abstract nouns. In the second sentence above, “achievements”, “success” and “career” are all examples of abstract nouns. In communication, we treat them as if they exist as things in the world but they are essentially dynamic processes that have been frozen as nouns. Readers may remember that these are referred to as nominalizations in the Meta-Model. In the Meta-Model, our purpose was to denominalize these abstract nouns. However, for our purposes here, we want to be able to use abstract nouns to assist parties.

Consider the following sentences:

- “The both of you have been experiencing **conflict**”
- “This **dispute** has created some **problems** between you”
- “It is good that you have chosen to resolve your **dispute** through **mediation**”
- “There are a number of **obstacles** and **challenges** to resolving this **matter**”
- “There are a number of possible **solutions** here that can give us an **agreement**”

The words in bold are abstract nouns that are likely to occur in a mediation.

There is nothing miraculous at this point. We can easily construct sentences that contain a noun (of some kind) thereby creating a statement or a question that contains a presupposition of “Existence”. The problem is a simple single-layered statement like “There is a solution here” can be simply responded to with “There is not”.

Therefore, to effectively incept a presupposition, one needs to create a sentence of question that is multi-layered. And this is where other presuppositions can come in. Consider:

1. “There is a garden behind the house”
2. “Did you *know* there is a garden behind the house?”
3. “Did you *know* that John did not *realise* that there is a garden behind the house?”

All these sentences share the same presuppositions of “Existence”, i.e. there is a garden and there is a house. However the second and third sentence is multi-layered in that they contain presuppositions of “Awareness” (in italics). Presuppositions of “Awareness” allude to ways we cognitively interact with others and the world. Consider:

- Think
- Realise
- Know
- Feel
- Aware
- Consider

These words all allude to how we are aware of others and the world. In the second sentence above, by using the words “Did you know...”, we have added an extra layer to the communication that focuses the listener’s attention on “whether they knew”. Therefore, regardless of whether the question is answered in the affirmative or negative, the presupposition of “Existence” of the garden and house is unconsciously accepted.

The third sentence is simply illustrative of creating two additional layers using presuppositions of “Awareness”; “Did you know” and “John did not realise”. One is now asking whether the listener was aware of John (and yes, this is an extra presupposition of “Existence” i.e. someone called “John” exists) not realizing that there is a garden behind the house. In this third sentence, the presupposition of the garden and the house is even more deeply embedded. And even if the listener were to ask “Who’s John?”, the garden and house are taken as given.

How might we use this in mediation? Consider the assumptions we want to parties accept as assumptions when they engage in mediation. For example:

1. That in general 7 out of 10 **disputes** that go to **mediation** get settled
2. That **cooperation** can go a long way to resolving **disputes**
3. That there will be a number of possible **solutions** that can be created

Again, the presuppositions of “Existence” are bolded. Making these single layered statements runs the risk of parties directly challenging the presuppositions. However, if we were to layer in presuppositions of “Awareness”:

1. I don’t *know* if you *know*, but most people are surprised to *find* out that 7 out of 10 **disputes** that go to **mediation** get settled
2. It is common for parties to be pleasantly surprised when they *realise* that **cooperation** can go a long way to resolving **disputes**
3. As the **mediation** proceeds, we will begin to *see* a number of possible **solutions** that can be created so that we can *identify* the best one to solve this **problem**

I would like to make three closing points.

First, readers may find the above discussion a little two-dimensional. This is because we have really only covered the basics of using presuppositions. I have limited my examples to the two presuppositions (“Existence” and “Awareness”) discussed, and needless to say, there are many other presuppositions which I will explore in future entries.

Secondly, it clear that the information shared in this entry can be used unethically. I have addressed this in previous entries. It is sufficient to say here that how the tool is used depends on you. I take the position that all our interventions as mediators should be ethical and respectful.

Finally, some readers might feel a bit overwhelmed by the information and concepts in this entry. I invite you to take a step back and realise that as part of our day to day communication, we use presuppositions all the time. What is important to us as professional communicators is to use it purposefully and ethically. I also invite you to spend some time noticing the presuppositions we use in every day communication, two of which we have discussed.

It has been a long entry and I thank you for reading to this point. I hope you have found this entry both interesting and useful.

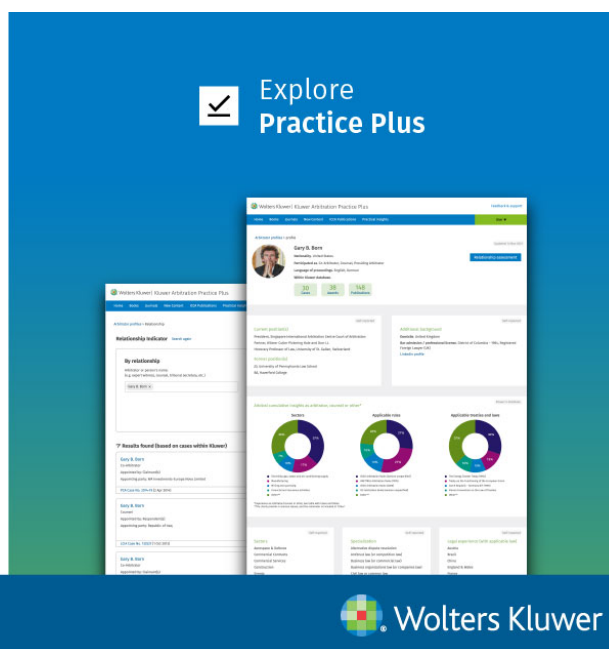
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This entry was posted on Thursday, May 12th, 2022 at 12:01 am and is filed under General, Language, Mediation Skills, Neuro-Linguistic Programming, NLP, Perception, Personal Development, Skills

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