
Kluwer Mediation Blog

A Neuro-Linguist's Toolbox – Language: The Meta-Model (Part 2)

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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 \(Part 1\)](#)

It is recommended that you read the first entry ([NLP Communication Model](#)) and third entry ([Meta-Model \(Part 1\)](#)) in this section. before reading this entry.

Essentially, the NLP Communication Model suggests that our memories and experiences are a lesser representation of our external environment because our neurology automatically filters out extraneous data so that the information that is presented to us is in manageable chunks. These filters essentially distort, generalize and delete our experience of the world.

These filters operate again when we seek to use words to describe our internal memories and experiences. Therefore, words used do not fully represent the internal memories and experiences that we hold in our head, which in turn does not fully represent the external world upon which those memories and experiences are based.

In communication, we often assume that we understand what the speaker means by the words they use. In reality, we are filling in, from our own experiences, what we understand those words to mean. However, our experiences may or may not match the speaker's reference experiences. When they do not, miscommunication and misunderstanding occurs. These filters also explain why perceptions and biases occur.

The Meta-Model was modeled from Virginia Satir's systemic family work and it is a model of

language which allows us to linguistically recognize and recover the distortions, generalisations and deletions that have occurred in communication.

In the previous entry, we considered three Meta-Model patterns and the questions to ask to recover the information that has been filtered out. These patterns were the Mind-Read, the Connecting Statement and the Lost Performative. In this entry, we will cover 3 more patterns.

The first pattern is the Universal Quantifier. These are words which imply or state absolute conditions about the speaker's perception of reality. They usually indicate that a generalization has been made from a specific experience in the speaker's life. The universal quantifier linguistic pattern is identified through the set of words like "all", "every", "always", "never", "every", "nobody".

An example of a sentence with a universal quantifier would be "He is never on time!". Another example would be "Nobody cares about the company."

There are two ways in which Meta-Model responds to the universal quantifier, both of which seek to get the speaker to loosen the belief upon which the generalization is based.

The first way is to exaggerate the universal quantifier by using the universal quantifier on itself with appropriate voice tonality. To illustrate, in relation to the two examples provided above, one could say "Never?!" or "Nobody?!" Obviously this must not be done in a way that ridicules the speaker. Rapport must be maintained and the idea is to respectfully get the speaker to consider that the generalization made is too far reaching.

The second way is to elicit a counter example from the speaker's model of the world that contradicts the generalization. Again, in relation to the two examples used earlier, one could ask "Was there ever a time when he was on time?", or "But **you** care, don't you?"

The second pattern is Modal Operators which define the boundaries of the speaker's model of the world. They are the "rules" which govern the limits of possibility and necessity for the speaker. To go beyond these boundaries would be to invite a catastrophe that the speaker believes to be beyond his control.

There are two types of modal operators. The first are modal operators of necessity or non-necessity. This refers to words that indicate a lack of choice. Examples of modal operators of necessity would be words like "have to", "must", "should"; or in non-necessity form, "haven't", "must not", "should not".

The second are modal operators of possibility. This refers to words that indicate the limits of possibility, or impossibility, in the speaker's model of the world. Examples of modal operators of possibility are "can", "will", "may"; or in the form of impossibility, "can't", "won't", "may not".

In the Meta-Model, there are two ways to respond to the modal operator linguistic pattern. The first way works with the modal operators of non-necessity or impossibility like "can't", "won't", "shouldn't" and the response is to ask "What stops you?" This serves to take the speaker into the past to isolate the experience from which the generalization was formed.

For example, if the sentence were "I can't accept this deal!", one could respond "What stops you?"

The second response is applicable to all types of modal operators whether positively or negatively stated. This is to ask “What would happen if you did/didn’t”. This response serves to take the speaker beyond the boundaries of the model of their world so that they can consider what was previously not possible for them to consider.

For example, if the sentence were “I have to stay in the company”, one could respond “What would happen if you did?” or “What would happen if you didn’t?”

These responses assist the speaker in expanding the boundaries in their model of the world that will ideally increase choice for the speaker.

The final Meta-Model pattern we will explore is known in linguistics as a Nominalization. Nominalizations are essentially abstract nouns like success, love, relationship, problem, integrity, happiness, communication and peace. Unlike concrete nouns (pen, chair, computer, wheelbarrow), nominalizations are essentially verbs or processes that have been made static and generalized across time.

Examples of statements containing nominalizations would be “Our relationship is not working out” or “We have bad communication”. The problem with these statements is that the nouns seem immovable making the situation seem final.

The Meta-Model prescribes denominalizing abstract nouns. Put another way, convert the abstract noun back into a process. For example, in response to the first statement, one could ask “In what ways would you like to be relating instead?” Denominalising “relationship” back into the process of relating adjusts the speaker’s subjective reality so that there is now some movement possible. Things don’t seem so final. The same can be done to the second statement by asking “How would you like to be communicating instead?”

In closing, it is useful to briefly repeat 2 points that was made in the previous entry about the use of the Meta-Model.

First, one should not expect a single question to make a complete shift in the speaker’s mind. This might sometimes occur but more often than not, you may need to string a number of Meta-Model together to achieve the desired shift.

Secondly, one should always pose the Meta-Model questions with care and respect. One should maintain rapport with the speaker and utilize softening frames like “Help me understand how...” Or “Let me play devil’s advocate here and ask you...”

This entry concludes our foray into the use of the Meta-Model. There is of course much more to the Meta-Model and I invite readers to find out more on their own.

In future entries, I will explore other ways in which we as mediators can use language in our work. Thank you for reading and I hope readers found this entry both interesting and useful.

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The graphic features a black background with white text and a circular icon. The icon depicts a magnifying glass over a group of stylized human figures, representing a search or investigation process. The text is arranged in a clean, modern layout with horizontal lines above the main text.

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