

# NEUROLINGUISTIC PROGRAMMING (NLP): ITS OVERVIEW AND REVIEW IN THE LENSES OF PHILOSOPHY AND PEDAGOGY

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## ABSTRACT

*Standing for Neurolinguistic Programming, the acronym 'NLP' has become an emergent approach to communication and personal development which has gained worldwide interest. Containing a set of strategies that is highly claimed to be effective in enhancing oneself personally, NLP has also become progressively more recognisable in the education sector. Nevertheless, NLP is still considered to be virtually absent from the academic realm, particularly in relation with learning and pedagogy. This silence suggests a dire need to expand academic practices studying and discussing NLP. Hence, this paper depicts the current state of knowledge regarding NLP in both the philosophical and the pedagogical aspects. This review suggests that there exist the bridging links between NLP, its philosophical foundation and pedagogy through certain theories like Constructivism and Information Processing. Some pedagogical relevance of NLP is also discovered in catering to its widespread into the educational world at all levels. Besides offering practicable knowledge to the teaching and learning stakeholders, this article is anticipated to create a more dialogic discourse within the academia, especially to add to the dearth of the discussion pertaining to NLP in philosophy and pedagogy.*

**Keywords:** *Neurolinguistic Programming, Philosophy of NLP, NLP in Pedagogy*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The acronym ‘NLP’ has burgeoned into various professionals and individuals. Standing for Neurolinguistic Programming, NLP has gained worldwide interest. NLP is seen as a model that contributes to the development of the field of human communication and behaviour (Harman & O’Neill, 1981). Despite a few provoking debates highlighting its scientifically undemonstrated concept (Witkowski, 2012), NLP remains a set of strategies that is believed to be highly effective in both a personal enhancement method and a therapeutic procedure (Sahi & Maatta, 2013; Kong & Farrell, 2012).

Since its first public training seminar in 1975, NLP training is provided to popularly known companies such as NASA, McDonald’s and Hewlett-Packard. This is not to mention its wide recognition in public administrative and educational institutions in most parts of the globe including the United States of America, United Kingdom and Asian countries like Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore. The claimed effectiveness has resulted in growing number of NLP practitioners around the world and this could explain the high commercial value it has.

Nevertheless, NLP is still considered to be virtually absent from the academic realm (Witkowski, 2012; Peker, 2010; Tosey & Mathison, 2010). This silence suggests a dire need to expand academic practices studying and discussing NLP. Hence, this paper aims at briefly revisiting the history of NLP and describing it as to allow readers to comprehend the nature of its underlying elements. Then, the paper reviews NLP from the perspectives of philosophy and pedagogy thus recommending readers to have a critical dialogue over the discussion.

## **NLP: AN OVERVIEW**

### **A short history of NLP**

It was in the mid-1970s at the University of California that Richard W. Bandler, a Mathematician and later a Gestalt therapist, and John Grinder, a psycholinguist began to develop a methodology which is intended to allow

human capabilities be modeled by others (Tosey & Mathison, 2010). They systematically studied the performance and practices, or what Stipanovic, Renner, Schutz and Dond (2010) term as cognitive and behavioural patterns, of highly successful therapists namely Fritz Perls, Milton H. Erickson and Virginia Satir. This methodology development was later joined by Leslie Cameron-Bandler, whose background is psychology, and Judith De Lozier, trained in religious studies. Other early developers who also contributed significantly include Robert Dilts and David Gordon. The combination of diverse knowledge expertise with the intention of disseminating the identified behaviours of highly excellent people (in order to enhance individuals' personal and professional life) has resulted in a procedure known as 'modeling', which then produces a set of formulated NLP tenets.

## **Defining NLP**

From the early development of NLP, we come to learn that NLP is an art of achieving excellence or success. It revolves around how people think, act and interact. This reflects how the brain functions and how the language is used to perform at a peak level, both intrapersonally and interpersonally.

The discussion brings us to look into the definition of NLP terminology in a discrete manner. The word 'neuro' refers to the mind and how mental life is organised (Sahi & Maatta, 2013). Stressing on the nervous system comprehensive function, all behaviours stem from neurological process, in which information is absorbed in through the five senses and processed by the brain. This process, according to Kong and Farrell (2012), occurs both consciously and subconsciously.

If 'neuro' means the way human experience the world through their senses, the term 'linguistic' reflects the way we use language to make sense of the world. In other words, it is used to capture and conceptualise the processed absorbed experiences and later communicate them to others. Through language, not only we transmit our thought to people, but also to consider the point of how we are affected.

As for the word 'programming', it implies the control an individual has over his or her own desired behaviour. Sahi and Maatta (2013) explain

that thoughts, feelings and actions are subconscious programs which are alterable in adjusting to the context of being. The idea of changing the program or simply known as ‘reprogramming’ reflects the flexibility element NLP propagates.

Hence, the title NLP denotes the interconnection between the brain (neuro), the language (linguistic) and the behaviour (programming) of a person. This suggests the view that an individual is a whole mind-body system proposing a tagline “What I think, What I feel, What I say and What I do is one system”. However, albeit the name and its discrete and holistic connotations, Tosey and Mathison (2003) remind their readers that the term NLP has no direct connection to neuro-science, or to computer programming.

## **DESCRIBING NLP**

In NLP, there are a set of assumptions which are familiarly known among its practitioners as ‘NLP presuppositions’. These presuppositions, according to Peker (2010), need not be accepted as absolute truths. However, if they be regarded to underlie every thought and action of an individual, there is a probability of him or her to see himself or herself as a responsible individual in leading life. Listed below are the presuppositions:

- The map is not the territory
- Life and mind are systemic processes
- Every behaviour serves a positive intention
- Every behaviour is useful in some contexts
- The meaning of one’s communication is the response one gets
- There is no failure, only feedback
- Resistance is a sign of lack of rapport

- If one human has done it, that means it is humanly possible
- All genius, excellent and amazing achievements have a structure and a strategy, thus can be learned
- The person with the most flexibility and choices of behaviour rules the system
- There are no resistant clients, only flexible communicators
- We have all the resources we need
- We create our own experience
- Communications are non-verbal as well as verbal

Learning about the presuppositions as the nature of human behaviour, we would like to also highlight the four pillars of NLP. The execution of any strategies in enhancing one's life or in promoting positive changes is basically based on these four pillars (Figure 1):

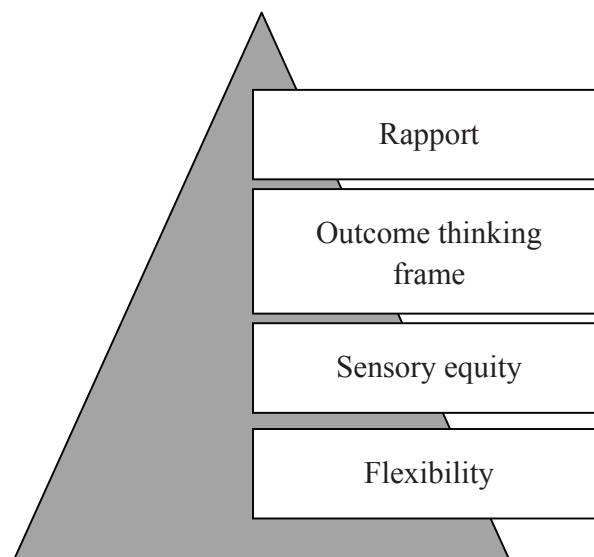


Figure 1: Pillars of NLP

Establishing rapport is among the key ingredients to a successful communication. NLP believes that having a good rapport increases the possibility of influencing others as it assures individuals trustworthiness and the desire to listen and interact. Besides rapport, NLP focuses on the outcomes or the solutions rather than the causes of certain problems. With its goal-oriented belief, NLP is claimed to challenge the assumption that personal change necessarily involves long-term therapy and is only possible with insight into the past (Bandler & Grinder, 1979 as cited in Tosey & Mathison, 2010). NLP also makes sensory awareness as its pillar. This includes utilizing the senses to understand a person's cognitive and behaviour patterns. The senses in this context refer to visual, auditory, kinesthetic, olfactory and gustatory (VAKOG). Another important concept in NLP is the matter of flexibility. Having a range of skills and techniques would allow individuals to choose the available options in reaching the goals or meeting the outcomes.

From the observation made on the leading therapists, Bandler and Grinder postulate NLP's 'meta-model', which is generally deemed to be the core model of NLP. It identifies language patterns that are believed to manifest basic cognitive process (Tosey & Mathison, 2003). In this article, we will describe the three main elements of meta-model: Deletions, distortions and generalizations.

Generally, deletions, distortions and generalizations are ways in which individuals inadequately or inaccurately represent their experiences (Harman & O'Neill, 1981). A person is said to demonstrate deletions in his or her speech when he or she says "I'm not good". This statement has some missing parts – not good at what? Another way deletion is experienced is when a person is focusing too much on certain thing or matter till he or she misses other things or matters. To illustrate, a young man is focusing on getting himself a blue book that he deletes books with colours other than blue.

As for distortions, Harman and O'Neill (1981) describe them in two situations: (1) a linguistic process called nominalization and (2) an experience in which individuals assign outside themselves responsibilities that are within their control. Nominalization happens when a person represents an ongoing process (which is alterable) as if it were a fixed or an unchangeable event. Meanwhile, the second situation could be

comprehended through this example: “My friend makes me sad”. NLP believes that it is not possible for another person to ‘make’ anyone feel a certain way. A distorted thought portrays that a person is not holding responsibility for experiences under his or her control.

Another element in meta-model, generalisation, refers to situations when individuals are not specific enough in describing certain experiences. To illustrate, when a person says, “Everybody hates me”, he or she is making a generalization in which it is almost impossible that he or she is hated by all people, while he or she does not even know everybody in the world.

These three elements of meta-model: generalizations, distortions and deletions, function as filters to the external experiences absorbed by the five senses (VAKOG). The failure of filtering the experiences the right way would possibly result in failures in setting the internal representation, thus affecting one’s state of mind and this could further impact one’s physiological reactions (one’s behaviour).

Other than the presuppositions, the pillars and the meta-model, NLP, too, stands on the notion of Preferred Representational System (PRS). The founders of NLP argue that every experience is composed of information absorbed via the sensory systems (VAKOG) (Witkowski, 2012). According to Harman and O’Neill (1981), if our PRS is visual, that is taking in experiences through seeing, then it follows that we store information (memory) in the same system and the same applies to retrieving the information. A visual person is likely to have a mental image when remembering. However, it is essential to note that people do use all their representational systems, yet they are believed to have a favoured system that they rely on mostly.

Another fundamental property of NLP is ‘Accessing Cues’. NLP practitioners use these accessing cues to determine their clients’ PRS in order to enhance rapport and communication effectiveness. One way of doing it is by listening to the predicates (verbs, adverbs and adjectives) people use. For instance, a visual person would probably say, “I don’t *see* what you are saying. I don’t get the *picture*.” An auditory client would respond, “I don’t *hear* what you are saying. It doesn’t *sound* right to me.” Meanwhile, a kinesthetic says, “I don’t *grasp* what you are saying. It seems out of

my reach.” Besides paying attention to the language used, watching eye movements is another way to identify one’s PRS. Looking upwards indicate a person’s visual cognitive activity whereas a person who is auditory would have the tendency to look horizontally. On the other hand, eyes downwards reflect the kinesthetic PRS of a person. In brief, individuals’ language and eye movements may tell us their PRS and this may help establish a good rapport.

Discussing NLP and its ostensible discoveries, in this paper, we would also like to expose readers to other NLP’s popular techniques: Matching and mirroring; anchoring; and reframing. These techniques are derived from the presuppositions, the pillars and the meta-model of NLP. As described earlier, NLP pays much attention on establishing rapport. To meet this objective, other than exercising accessing cues, practitioners practice the technique of matching and mirroring. This technique refers to the activity of establishing similarities or pacing clients’ verbal and non-verbal behaviour (Witkowski, 2012). The anchoring technique, on the other hand, is a process of attaching a desired emotional state with a specific stimulus (Harman and O’Neill, 1981). Stimuli such as a sound, a touch and a facial expression are deliberately inserted at a time when a person is fully in touch with certain experiences. Unwanted behaviours, too, could be removed through anchoring and be replaced with useful ones. As for reframing, it refers to the process of changing the meaning one holds of certain things or experiences. According to Jemmer (2006),

*Pure experience has no meaning. It just is. We give it meaning according to our beliefs, values, preconceptions, likes and dislikes. The meaning of an experience is dependent on the context. Reframing is changing the way you perceive an event and so changing the meaning. When the meaning changes, responses and behaviour will also change (p. 17).*

## **NLP THROUGH THE LENS OF PHILOSOPHY**

Being a provocative concern in today’s arguments on NLP, Bandler and Grinder omitted the critical stage of empirical verification of their assertions (Witkowski, 2012). They believed that the process was partly redundant



and deemed it unnecessary, thus directly formulated the model and put it into practice. Questions and debates arise seeking for further informed perspective on the nature of NLP (Tosey & Mathison, 2003). Taking this as a concern in the current scholarly needs, we believe that discussing NLP from the perspective of philosophy would contribute to extending its academic literature. We openly invite readers to respond to this young attempt at bringing NLP to a philosophical dialogue. This discussion would revolve around the three main philosophical branches: Ontology, epistemology and axiology.

To begin with, NLP is highly interested in the way people construct their experiences through cognitive processes (Kong & Farrell, 2012). From the lens of ontology, or the nature of reality, this idea of experience construction is basically a nature of human development. This suggests that NLP is a part of the study of mankind and its nature, or philosophically termed as humanology (Abdul Rahman, 2005). There may be arguments propagating that Bandler and Grinder's intention was to remain close to experience and avoid abstract discussion about the truths of human experience (Tosey & Mathison, 2003), yet we do believe that as knowledge expands, its stance ought to be made solid. NLP, in a deeper ontological perspective, is believed to belong to the psychological component, in which it draws much attention to the study of cognitive – impacting the domains of affective and psychomotor of a human being.

While we are clear that NLP concerns about human and their personal development, it is undeniable that many are still arguing its vague theoretical foundation. To illustrate, Tosey and Mathison (2010) agree that NLP is difficult to define succinctly. Regarded to be transdisciplinary, NLP is seen to apply the element of pragmatism as it was not intentionally developed to create a theory (Tosey & Mathison, 2003). This brings us to discuss NLP's epistemological dimension, for epistemology deals with approaches to knowledge and knowing.

To relate to the epistemological streams, we would like to suggest that NLP stems within almost both mainstreams: Rationalism (logic) and empiricism (senses). The central philosophy of the NLP model, which is summed up in the phrase 'the map is not the territory' (Witkowski, 2012) explains how a person bases his or her behaviours on the unique element

of logic and rationalism. Every person's thoughts differ from one another as rationalism considers subjectivity in the ability of thinking (which does not apply to animals since they do not possess the ability to rationalise) (Abdul Rahman, 2005).

On the other hand, NLP, too, is said to portray the element of empiricism because of the emphasis on sensory equity outlined in its pillars. According to Abdul Rahman, (2005), the philosopher Epicurus holds onto the belief that senses are the sources to true knowledge and even if there is a mistake, it is due to the mistake in the rational judgment. Nevertheless, it is essential to note that the presuppositions of NLP do indicate that the model does not rely solely on the senses as the sources of knowledge.

Hence, in facing the conflict between the rational and the empirical sources, the philosophical studies are enlightened with the establishment of eclectic philosophy. It highlights the need of the combination of both rational and empirical elements in attending any humanly problems. The diverse expertise of its founders has impacted on eclecticism in building the NLP tenets. Within NLP, according to Tosey and Mathison (2003, 2010), we can identify the influences of Gestalt therapy, person-centred counseling, transformational grammar, behavioural psychology and cybernetics, the Palo Alto school of brief therapy, Ericksonian hypnotherapy and the cybernetic epistemology of Gregory Bateson.

To add to that, in the light of epistemology, Tosey and Mathison (2003) note two aspects of how NLP is related to an individual's reality construction. First, NLP regards that verbal reports are possibly be literal accounts of individuals' inner experience. In lieu of this, people use all the senses to code experience internally and the uniqueness lies in how the internal representations result in certain thought processes and related behaviours. Second, NLP holds onto the conception that people's language patterns reveal some of their epistemological processes that is reflected through the ways we map our territory of experiences and thus guiding our actions.

As to view NLP from the perspective of axiology, it is crucial that we revisit the history of its development. It is now known that NLP is born from the intention of modeling a set a cognitive and behavioural patterns of successful people. This meaningful aim manifests the importance of

‘values’. In the earlier discussion of NLP epistemology, we did touch on the element of pragmatism promoted in NLP. According to Abdul Rahman (2005), a pragmatist focuses on what he or she is able to do, its benefits and its practicality when it comes to situational and reality contexts. Besides, from another viewpoint, we could also see the congruence between the NLP presuppositions and the value of self-responsibility in leading life. In other words, NLP indoctrinates the value of ‘pulling one’s own weight’ in its principles of achieving success.

## **NLP IN A PEDAGOGICAL VIEW**

To date, other than therapists and counselors, the academic community has also shown interest in NLP (Tosey & Mathison, 2003). With the pragmatic philosophy NLP portrays, Tosey and Mathison (2003) believe that it holds immense potential for education at all levels including higher learning. In this paper, we discuss the pedagogical possibilities of NLP according to these respects: Knowledge acquisition, teacher training and classroom management.

In regard to knowledge acquisition, we would like to first attend to the matter of related learning or educational theoretical underpinnings. Craft (2001) highlights that NLP draws on the fundamental assumptions of the social constructivism framework. This is due to its nature of promoting learning in an experiential and social manner. Besides, NLP bases its principles on actions following the negotiation of meaning construction attached to certain experiences of an individual. The concept of every person creates his or her own ‘map’ is also agreed by Tosey and Mathison (2003) to underpin the constructivist approach.

Following the idea of knowledge construction, Kong and Farrell (2012) view the process of acquiring knowledge through the principle of information processing theory. As learned in NLP preferred representational system (PRS), the five senses (VAKOG) play vital roles in aiding a person’s learning. Identifying individuals’ PRS would allow them to learn effectively. Besides, from the viewpoint of teaching and learning, recognizing the learners’ PRS helps teachers or instructors to enhance their teaching styles and techniques. According to Kong and Farrell (2012) too, NLP enables

continuous learning among learners as they may use the information and feedback to improve what they are doing. In this respect, we would like to add that NLP is also seen possible to promote independent learning when learners are exposed to the concept of meta-learning or simply known as 'learning how to learn'. Knowing the best strategies that suit ones' PRS is a key to learning effectively.

Besides, NLP is found to be pedagogically relevant in teacher training. With the model of communication it promotes, we do believe that NLP may help future teachers to instill the right philosophy of teaching when it comes to the notion of knowledge sharing. Perceiving knowledge as a constructed process, we do hope that teachers view education more than a process of merely giving and recalling the information. Not only that, we agree with Peker (2010) who claims that NLP prepares a platform for teachers to reprogram their teaching in the classroom. This refers to the communication style of the teacher, specifically in building a good rapport with the learners (Stock, 2010), establishing quality teacher-learners relationship, developing fun and engaging teaching techniques and not to forget enhancing the teachers' classroom management.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

In this article, we have attempted to briefly introduce the history of NLP and discussed its general background. Addressing the scarcity of its discussion in the academic realm, we made the endeavor to discuss NLP from the perspectives of philosophy, particularly in the views of ontology, epistemology and axiology. Besides, we also review some pedagogical relevance of NLP in catering to its widespread into the educational world. This article is anticipated to create a more dialogic discourse within the academia, especially to add to the dearth of the philosophical and pedagogical discussion pertaining to NLP.

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