

Neurolinguistic programming: verbal communication

What is it, and what has it got to do with verbal communication? **Joanne Walter** and **Ardeshir Bayat** shed some light on the matter in their first article in our series on “how to use the language of the mind”

Neurolinguistic programming (NLP) is a system that uses the language of the mind to achieve our specific and desired outcomes consistently. Our nervous systems (neuro) experience the world around us through our five senses: visual (V), auditory (A), kinaesthetic (K-touch), olfactory (O), and gustatory (G). These experiences are coded, ordered, and stored (programmed) as specific representations that can be replayed through language and other non-verbal forms of communication (for example, pictures, sounds, feelings, taste and smells). Therefore, NLP is simply a tool to help us understand these programs and use them to meet our desired goals.

Background

NLP first emerged in the early 1970s as a result of the work of John Grinder (assistant professor of linguistics at the University of California, Santa Cruz) and Richard Bandler (a psychology student at the university). Bandler was interested in psychotherapy, particularly in how certain therapists consistently achieved excellent results. In order to understand this, Bandler and Grinder studied the techniques of three therapists: Virginia Satir (family therapy), Fritz Perls (psychotherapy), and Milton Erickson (hypnotherapy). They found that the underlying techniques that enabled them to achieve excellent results consistently could be applied more broadly, and so NLP was born.

Despite its origins, NLP is not just about how to be a good therapist; it is a process that can be applied to model excellence in any field. Sports’ coaching for example uses NLP to model the correct technique and help the individual to visualise winning. All the world’s top politicians will have undergone some form of NLP training to use non-verbal communication that will subliminally make their electorates like them. NLP is also widely used in sales and advertising, as it is the most effective way of communicating the message about how good the product is and why people should buy it.

How is it relevant to health care?

In this series on NLP, we will introduce you to the concepts that may help improve your interaction with patients and colleagues, enhance your job satisfaction, and aid in the

progress of your career. If you want to know more, please refer to the material in the further information list.

Verbal communication

Effective communication will affect all areas of your working life, from improving interaction with patients and colleagues to enhancing conference presentations and helping you succeed at that job or promotion interview. It is not just about work, as communication affects all aspects of our lives and in particular our relationships with partners, family and friends.

Communication is made up of words or linguistics (7%), tonality or how the voice sounds (38%), and physiology or body language (55%).¹

Linguistic communication

The linguistic part of verbal communication comprises four major “sub-languages.” This means that, although you may be speaking to your patients or colleagues, they may not hear or understand what you say and feel confused.

These sub-languages, sometimes referred to as modalities or representation systems,² are based on how we prefer to experience the world through our senses. Each person we meet will use words that are visual (V—see, clear, light, etc), auditory, (A—hear, sound, listen, etc), kinesthetic (K—touch, feel, grasp, etc)

or audiodigital (Ad). This last term represents a small proportion of the population who are characterised by having conversations with themselves inside their heads. They use words like think, understand, and talk quite a lot and may be slow in answering your question as they repeat it inside their head to comprehend fully what you have said.

These are the four main ways in which our minds experience, store, and replay the information from the world around us. The figure shows some more examples.

To help us to improve the way we communicate and establish rapport, we need to be able to recognise these sub-languages in speech patterns, determine our own individual language pattern, and learn how to speak the other sub-languages as necessary. The first step is to determine your own major sub-language preference. Formal tests exist that can help you to do this. The box shows one such test.

In an interview between patient and doctor, we should listen to the words our patients use to identify their particular language pattern informally by listening out for the words listed in the table.³ Identifying a person’s language type by the words they use is important if we want to know how best to communicate with them. The separate types often have other characteristics in common which can help in identifying their type especially when using an informal assessment.

Visual	Auditory	Kinaesthetic	Audiodigital
See	Hear	Feel	Think
Appear	Listen	Touch	Understand
Show	Tune in/out	Grasp	Learn
Clear	Be all ears	Get hold of	Talk
Picture	Resonate	Make contact	Sense
Focused	Sound	Unfeeling	Consider
Hazy	Be heard	Get a handle on	Process
Look	Unhearing	(Get a handle)	Know
Appears to me	Clear as a bell	Solid	I understand
In light of	Give an account of	Get to grips with	What do you think
Looks like	Loud and clear	Cool/calm/collected	I need to consider
Mental picture	Unheard of	Get the drift of	Make sense of
Well defined	Word for word	Too much hassle	Informed decision

Sublanguage preference test

For each of the following statements, please place a number next to every phrase using the following system to indicate your preferences.

- 4=closest to describing you
- 3=next best description
- 2=next best
- 1=least descriptive of you

- (1) I make important decisions based on:
 - Gut level feelings
 - Which way sounds best
 - What looks best to me
 - Precise review and study of the issues
- (2) During an argument I am most likely to be influenced by:
 - The other person's tone of voice
 - Whether or not I can see the other person's point of view
 - The logic of the other person's argument
 - Whether or not I am in touch with the other person's true feelings
- (3) I most easily communicate what is going on with me by:

- The way I dress and look
 - The feelings I share
 - The words I choose
 - My tone of voice
 - (4) It is easiest for me to:
 - Find the ideal volume and tuning on a stereo
 - Select the most intellectually relevant point in an interesting subject
 - Select the most comfortable furniture
 - Select attractive colour combinations
 - (5) Which best describes you:
 - I am very attuned to the sounds of my surroundings
 - I am very adept at making sense of new facts and data
 - I am very sensitive to the way articles of clothing feel on my body
 - I have a strong response to colours and the way a room looks
- To find out how you scored see table (below)

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people like people who are similar to them.⁴ The two ways of establishing rapport are known as matching and mirroring. With matching, you copy one or more aspects of the non-verbal communication exactly. With mirroring you copy, but in such a way as to create a mirror image of the action. The key point to remember with these forms of non-verbal communication is subtlety; you would not match a strong regional dialect but you might match the speed of their speech and the pitch of their voice.

Taking the first steps outlined in this article will help you to communicate more effectively in all aspects of your personal and professional life. After you have determined your own representational system you should practise informal recognition with the people you interact with every day. Remember that only a small proportion of communication is linguistic, and noting how a person behaves is therefore also crucial to establishing rapport. Lastly, it is important to practise using the sub-language types that are not your main preference by using the words of the person you are communicating with.

If you stick with it, you will soon see clearly how easy it is to recognise and hear people's sub-language types and feel how effortlessly the conversation flows as you establish rapport allowing both parties to be understood fully. It may be beneficial to practise each technique individually and gradually incorporate the techniques into your life.

Characteristics of the four major representational types

Visual: Visual people will generally have an erect posture and will sit forward in their chair. As they talk they move their eyes upwards accessing pictures in their mind. They breathe from the top of their lungs, will be tidy and well organised, and are not easily distracted by noise. Appearance is important to them and, interestingly, they are often thin and wiry.

Auditory: Auditory people will move their eyes from side to side as they listen to you and speak in order to process and access sounds in their mind. Often they breathe from the middle of their chests and may audibly talk to themselves or move their lips when thinking. They are easily distracted by noise, will enjoy listening to music, will be able to repeat things back to you easily, and learn by listening. They respond to a certain tone of voice or particular words and like to get verbal feedback on how they are doing.

Kinaesthetic: Kinaesthetic people will often move and talk extremely slowly (you may have the urge to tell them to "hurry up" when they are speaking to you). They will be breathing from the bottom of their chest, and you will see their stomach move in and out when they breathe. They respond to touch and learn through actually doing something. They will talk in terms of their feelings.

Audiodigital: Audiodigital people will spend a lot of time talking to themselves inside their heads. Often they need to repeat what you have said to them before they can understand it, and so their response to your question may be slow. When they do this you will see their eyes move down and to your right. They can

exhibit characteristics of the other major groups but will have rehearsed what they are going to say to you before coming into the office.

What about non-verbal communication?

Communication by our physiology or body language relates to posture, gestures, facial expressions (including blinking), and breathing. The remainder of our communication, being tonality, relates to the tone (pitch), tempo, timbre (quality), and volume of our voice. We can use these forms of communication by trying to match some of these qualities in the person with whom we are trying to communicate. This is known as establishing rapport and works on the principle that

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- 1 Molden D. Managing with the power of NLP: Neurolinguistic programming for competitive advantage. London: Pearson Professional, 1996.
- 2 O'Connor J, Seymour D. Introducing NLP: psychological tools for understanding and influencing people. London: Thorsons, 1995.
- 3 O'Connor J, McDermott I. NLP and health. London: Thorsons, 1996.
- 4 Jago W, McDermott I. The NLP coach. London: Piatkus, 2001.

Scoring system

Step one: Copy your answers to the questions from box 1 here

Question 1	Question 2	Question 3	Question 4	Question 5
___ K	___ A	___ V	___ A	___ A
___ A	___ V	___ K	___ Ad	___ Ad
___ V	___ Ad	___ Ad	___ K	___ K
___ Ad	___ K	___ A	___ V	___ V

Step two: Add the numbers associated with each letter. There are five entries for each letter.

	V	A	K	Ad
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
Total				

Step three: The comparison of the total scores in each column will give the relative preference for each of the four major representational systems.