

STILL TOP OF THE POPS.

In a special issue of “The occupational Psychologist”, Margaret Chapman makes the point NLP “is often criticised for lacking a theoretical and empirical base.”(No49 August 2003) I suspect it is these criticisms which still place NLP firmly in the realm of Pop Psychology for many professional psychologists.

I believe in the book *Whispering in The Wind*, (WITH) the authors do not do much to challenge the notion NLP is indeed pop psychology by insisting it is generally not amenable to statistical verification, being driven by a discreet rather than continuous paradigm.

Whilst not responding to the authors in this article, as I do not meet their criteria, (p84 I am not a leading researcher, neither p92, am I more experienced than the authors), I do have quite a strong belief unless NLP specifically does begin to statistically verify it’s claims it will continue to be regarded as Californian hype by many psychologists, even if it does turn it’s attention to more modelling projects as the authors of WITH suggest it must.

This article is about why I believe this.

One memory I have of being attracted to NLP is reading that it is not about truth, it is about utility. If indeed NLP is about the utility it affords to fellow humans, it makes abundant sense to ask the question, how do you know it provides utility, and more importantly how do you know it is any more useful than a walk in the park to clear your head, or a chat with a good friend. Others might be more interested as to whether it is any more useful than many of the other products on the market, cognitive therapy, psychoanalysis, behavioural therapy, and so forth. In the organisational world, NLP might compete with other models of project management, change management, assertiveness training, team building, selection, etc. In order to answer these questions psychologists often seek the help of statistical probability.

Lies, damned lies and Statistics.

We know the answer to the question is impossible due to the dynamic nature of interaction between and within humans, so what we can do is match the experimental groups, (what we wish to compare), say NLP and Cognitive therapy, as closely as possible for **measurable** variables. These could be: time of year the study was conducted, length of intervention, baseline measurements of participants, age, sex, ability, and maybe also for more abstruse variables such as personality, aptitude, and quality of practitioner. What we then do is let the practitioners do their thing, on let’s say a phobia, and then compare results. If much more people in the NLP group improve compared with the Cognitive group, we say that to what ever degree of probability our statistical tables tell us, NLP is more effective than Cognitive techniques in the cure of phobia.

Traditionally in psychology in order for an effect to be regarded as significant the research needs to return a chance probability of less than 1% or 5%, or put the other way around the probability that NLP is more effective than cognitive techniques is 99% or 95%. The reason we need to do this is because as mentioned above we cannot account for all the variables between the two groups, so it could be argued any

difference in phobia improvement is down to the effect of the variability of those unaccounted variables. What this statistical probability tells us is that the chances of this being the case is only 1% or 5% and there **is an underlying patterning** hidden away which is producing this difference between the two experimental groups. The way in which psychologists become more confident of this effect, is by having other independent researchers replicate the experiment. If they come up with the same results we can be more sure they are valid and can be used to make generalisations about the efficacy of NLP compared to cognitive techniques in the cure of phobia.

Experimental design.

From my reading of WITH the authors would not disagree with any of the above. Indeed they give an example of what a psychologist might do, on page 88 to 89. Indeed a psychologist would be happy with the “weak” finding the visual strategy of NLP for spelling out performs the phonics strategy, at the group level. However what they would not be happy with is what follows which is a great example of the very effect the authors say they wish to avoid namely the Rosenthal Experimenter effect.

In order to avoid this effect the authors tell us in the well trained psychologist we would find “a healthy scepticism, a systematic attempt to set aside the conscious filtering (belief systems, for example) that too often accompanies approaching some new and revolutionary claim—that is, an active avoidance of the Rosenthal Experimenter effect.” (Bostic St Clair and Grinder. 2001 p87)

However in attempting to explain the hypothetical experimental findings that some in the phonics group outperformed some in the NLP visual group, and that some in the NLP visual group did make mistakes, much of the dialogue of the authors is concerned with finding evidence that in fact they were right all along. In other words finding evidence to accord with their expectancies. An example of such dialogue would be “...ideally she would anticipate any member of the NLP spelling strategy group who failed to spell all words correctly would demonstrate by their eye movements that they were not consistently following the sequence.” (p90). In another hypothetical experiment on elicitation of eye accessing we find the same theme in error analysis, namely: “What one would hope to discover thereby is that the subject was using internal dialogue to repeat the prompt sentence when in the down and left position and then formed a visual image of the mentioned person, either in position (down and left) or after shifting to a position above the horizon.” (p81)

One cornerstone of scientific enquiry is that whatever we propose is falsifiable. In other words if we set up an experiment, it is capable of being proven incorrect. Often what can happen is a researcher is so emotionally involved in their research they will move heaven and hell to ensure they get the results they wish, often using techniques from the Milton Model without even realising it. It is a bit like a researcher into psychoanalysis saying, this longitudinal research predicts these children of alcoholic parents will become alcoholics based upon the psychodynamic process of internalisation. When many turn out to be tee totallers, our researcher then explains this by saying this was because of the psychodynamic process of reaction formation, whereby we substitute other thoughts and feelings for the thoughts and feelings we **really** feel. Heads I wind, tails you lose!

It is important when we set up research, it is falsifiable, and if our research is falsified, then to set up further research to take account of our error analysis in the new design.

At present on the excellent web site <http://www.nlp.de/research/>, much research into NLP does not even support the weaker hypotheses at the group level. If it is the position of NLPers, that these researchers do not understand the true nature of NLP it is then incumbent upon them to carry out their own research and publish it, demonstrating that NLP is different and is useful when compared with the many hundreds of other approaches out there. Unless they do this they are left with the equivalence paradox, (Firth J. & Shapiro D.A. 1986) which basically tells us, it doesn't matter which of the 400 odd methods you use, they all render similar effects based upon what they have in common, the ability to gain rapport, ability to listen, to mirror back the clients model of the world etc. In order to develop models of excellence we do indeed work with a discrete paradigm, however to evaluate it, especially in the light of the fact a criterion of a model is the ability to effectively train others in it, thus replicating excellence, we most certainly need a continuous statistical model if NLP is to move out of the pop charts.

References:

Chapman. M. (2003). Towards a psychology of coaching, in: *The Occupational Psychologist, Special issue Coaching Psychology*. The British Psychological Society.

Bostic St Clair C and Grinder J (2001) *Whispering in the Wind*. J & C Enterprises

Firth J and Shapiro D A (1986) *An Evaluation of Psychotherapy for job related distress*. University of Sheffield.

I must admit to thoroughly enjoying reading *Whispering in the Wind*. However as a psychologist I was certainly challenged by John Grinders treatment of us.

Specifically he seems to think psychologists are only interested in group norms rather than individual excellence. He also does not see

Science is a way of not trying to fool ourselves. P63

Answers to questions are context dependent. P63

Animism is a resort of anyone attempting to deal with a situation that has too many variables to be modelled in a more rational way P64

Ongoing dialogue is intelligible only if the reader appreciates that the discourse is occurring in the context of reaction to the highly influential epistemological form known as logical positivism. P65.

Competency/Performance distinction. Actual score, different performance by 2 orchestras, or in language, underlying competency, and speech act. Does not take into account underlying competency does not have a physical score.

Underlying competency is “a perceptual strategy that we unconsciously use to process language.

For me I understood the first not the second, by inserting a comma. “the horse raced past, the barn fell. This is the difficulty of not being scientific in investigation. Does my experience mean, Like the drunk the difference between my internal speech act (in understanding the sentence) is due to a distortion due to a performance variable, or the possibility that an unconscious perceptual strategy (language acquisition device) does not actually exist. Without a specific sensory based piece of data, and a well developed isomorphic mapping strategy (like the score of Beethoven). There is no answer, and we continue to hallucinate language acquisition devices. (p69)

Hypnotic language p71. The acceptance of the competency/performance distinction. (by whom?)

Distinguish between the hypothetical and the speech act through intuition. P71
However the language which makes the hypothetical reasonable is statistical
“**stability**” and “**consistency**” p73

Again the language use later to question whether the elucidation of performance/competency can be pushed further is that of the logical positivist.... “it is an open question whether there are other sets **of identifiable** intuitions with the same startling consistency.... P 73

The whole hope of linguistics is based upon the language of the logical positivist. Sorting the confounding influence of the performance variables from the hypothetical competency variables. P73.

Thus the epistemological foundation for linguistics even in Chomsky’s time is that of the logical positivist. The only different thing they are doing from Bloomfield is, rather than treating each speech act as competent generation of speech, they are looking for **identifiable stable** and **consistent** speech acts across a **wide range of populations** (education p72) to hypothesize an internal intuitive and unconscious device which is rule based. Without the identifiable stable and consistent data across a wide range of populations (to factor out performance variables) it would be impossible to even posit a language acquisition device. Thus intuition is only an acceptable methodology if it is supported by the statistical approach of logical positivism.

The grammar, that is the linguistic competency of a native speaker of any natural language is represented neurologically. But we don’t have sufficiently refined technology to directly sense such neurological representation. P75

Changes her perception from 2 discreet points of illumination to the experience of seeing a single moving point of illumination then those reports become the data point. The relevant reference point is internal to the subject, however without an external data point (light or sentence) which is the domain of the logical positivist there is no point or future for the research in question. P76

The task of tg and nlp is the mapping of intuitions onto explicit representations. P76

The foundation of the meta model is the use of patterns of intuitions, associated with our tacit knowledge of language structure. This methodology operates securely within the field of NLP. P77

...Is firmly based on the ability of the agent of change to use the sets of reliable intuition about the structure of natural language as a leverage point to induce change. P77

On page 78. grinder is going back on all of the above.

50 do 50 don't in well defined conditions, null hypothesis supported and there is no pattern. P78

language competency is a rule governed human activity. P79

Rep system experiment, where NLP looks at 20% who do not follow predicted eye movement p80.

Language behaviour is rule governed, Patterns of excellence in human behaviour are rule governed. P81

What we are actually proposing is that an effective and useful methodology for analysing patterns of excellence in human behaviour is to assume that behaviour we are observing is representative of an intact rule-governed system and ask the question what set of rules would account for the behaviour we are observing. P81.

Last para on p81. a fundamental principle of analysis but not evaluation.
1st para on p82. I agree however for evaluation you need statistics.

P82. discrete and statistical paradigm.

P81 those rules which underpinned internal dialogue should have been put into the original experimental design.

Most strategies involve more than one rep, and are post FA. So it is unlikely according to grinder they could be verified statistically, they would need to be discreet models as different rep systems are of different logical types.

P82 to collapse such performances and average them guarantees that any pattern that may be present will be obscured.

P82. Bottom of 82 I agree a discreet model is useful for identifying patten in exceptional individuals. However once that pattern has been identified, codified and then taught to another in an NLP workshop it is most appropriate to use a statistical model to test whether the implementation of that pattern yields the excellent results it should compared with patterns from other disciplines.

P83 the reason the rep system experiment makes no sense, is that it was not set up correctly in the first place it was falsifiable.

P83 averaging is hopelessly out of place in modelling.and it's evaluation.

P83 we are not looking for "probabilistic strategies" we are looking for probabilities that implementation of an excellent strategy modelled will produce the same results as the original model.

P83 second to end para, this is exactly not how a psych would proceed.

P83-84 psych an exclusive focus on the average group. Answer to understand if excellence is indeed transfereable. Until we have research to show it is all we have is

super discreet patterns which cannot be transferred to the general population as NLP suggests it can.

P84 I am not a leading researcher. Nlp not interested in predicting the future but in creating it, I understand the sentiments behind such an aphorism however if one is confident in creating the future one would have no difficulty then in predicting what that future will be. Here is one of mine, unless NLP adopts the statistical model for pattern verification, it will remain pop psychology, maintained by creative ideas, driven personalities and excellent marketing skills but will never be taken seriously in the scientific community.

P84 benchmarking and best practice. Also selection modelling best performers and selecting against their patterning, in training modelling best workers and developing training bespoke training programs based upon their strategies.