

# Knowing the territory



Neuro-linguistic programming can enhance both interpreters' practice and their grasp of professional issues. **Brett Best** and **Paul Michaels** report

**Professional sign language interpreters** are generally attentive to how language is used and its purpose and structure. Napier and Barker (2004: 372) explain that interpreters 'must constantly analyse the linguistic structure of the source language, the semantic message presented within that linguistic structure, the message's potential impact, and the equivalents in an alternative linguistic structure that will provide the same message impact to users of the target language'. Interpreters therefore often have a heightened metalinguistic awareness, and this may lend itself well to applications of neuro-linguistic programming

## Neuro-linguistic programming

NLP offers an enhanced understanding of potential uses for language, leading to more effective communication by coding how we think and communicate, in order to realise the intended objectives of interlocution. It was originally developed in the 1970s at the University of California by Richard Bandler, a student of Gestalt Therapy, and John Grinder, a linguistics student. Noticing the success of particular therapists such as Fritz Perls and Virginia Satir, Bandler and Grinder began to identify unique approaches, many of which

were based on language patterns, used by these individuals. They believed – and confirmed – that others could achieve similar results by modelling such excellence.

Modelling excellence is a founding tenet of NLP and is relevant to interpreting. If we are able to identify strategies or practices that another interpreter consistently displays when producing a successful interpretation, then consciously modelling these may lead to similar success in our own interpretations. This requires a certain level of cognisance, and working to enhance this allows us to modify behaviours, resulting in different and better choices and outcomes.

There are several other principles that subsequently developed in NLP, some of which may be more relevant to business practices than the interpreting process. For example, some NLP techniques explore language patterns that can be used to influence people, but as practitioners we are expected to maintain impartiality. However, familiarity with such language patterns enables us to recognise when an interlocutor is attempting to apply this approach because we have greater insight into that interlocutor's mind map, which is in itself an applicable concept of NLP to interpreting.

## Mind maps

A common refrain of NLP is 'the map is not the territory' (O'Connor & Seymour 2002; Hutchinson 2015). Essentially, this means that we all perceive reality differently. Each individual develops their own personal mind map, shaped by how they filter information. Language, culture, personal interests, past experiences and other factors will either highlight or filter out certain aspects from the totality of possible perceptions and perspectives (the territory). Hence someone's personal map – their own perceived reality – will guide their understanding and perception of the world (Hutchinson 2015).

We can take the idea of language as a filter through which to look more closely at how the concept of mind maps may be most immediately applicable to interpreting. Language is a filter in that the words that comprise one's language will channel thoughts in certain directions and make it easier to think in some ways than in others (O'Connor & Seymour 2002). This is because the words we use serve as labels for meaning rather than actual meaning and, as such, meaning can be lost once placed within the confines of a label (Hutchinson 2015). An

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oft-cited illustration of this is the fact that the Sami people of Scandinavia have around 180 different words to describe snow and ice (Magga 2006). All these words distinguish between nuances in types of snow and ice that would be lost to immediate identification, and contrast with the handful of words that English typically uses to describe frozen precipitation. This is especially indicative of O'Connor and Seymour's assertion that: 'Language makes fine distinctions in some areas but not in others, depending on what is important in the culture' (2014: 89).

Even when individuals share the same language and culture, they may have different understandings of the meaning behind the same label. Hutchinson (2015) explains that we all encode information differently. So, for instance, one person may see the word 'pink' and envision the soft pink of a rose petal, while another may visualise the shocking pink of a nail varnish. Similarly, although words or signs may express thoughts, one's thoughts are also a mixture of feelings and mental images. Language, therefore, does not dictate thought. O'Connor & Seymour (2002: 89) illuminate this concept by asking: 'What happens to our thoughts as we clothe them in language, and how faithfully are they preserved when our listeners undress them?' This is an interesting question to contemplate, particularly as one considers that when a message is interpreted, it goes through more than one change of clothes, so to speak.

## Navigating mind maps

While language is a filter in itself that shapes one's map (O'Connor & Seymour: 2002), a further consideration is that an interpreted message also passes through the additional filter of the interpreter and their map. As interpreters, we should be aware that we all

have our own mind map, which will likely differ from the mind maps of those whom we are working with. O'Connor and Seymour (2002: 90) explain that '[A] professional communicator... [needs to] be able to use the precise words that will have meaning in the other person's map, and to determine precisely what a person means by the words he or she uses'. In NLP, this understanding of another's map is sought by first being aware of one's own map and accepting that it will differ from others', and then by exploring the other person's map by attending to the words they use to express themselves, since those words reflect the way they think (O'Connor & Seymour 2002; Hutchinson 2015).

NLP also teaches the importance of asking follow-up questions to elicit a deeper understanding of a person's map. Interpreters may expect to act as passive message conduits (Roy 2002; Tate and Turner 2002); however, assertively asking questions to determine the intended meaning behind an utterance can be crucial to accurately reading another's map and subsequently putting the message into the language that will make sense to the map of the receiving party.

In this way, working collaboratively is generally the best approach to creating

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understanding with others. There may, however, be times when a Deaf and hearing interlocutor share a map that the interpreter has not yet developed – such as in conversations involving technical jargon or intimate information such as inside jokes – so that both parties achieve an understanding of each other, even if the interpreter does not fully understand the communication taking place. The interpreter may understand the words, but not the meaning behind those words. In such cases, if the interpreter acts as a conduit to communicate a message, it may actually result in a smoother communicative experience than if the flow had been halted to fill in the interpreter's map. Ordinarily, however, the efforts of all participants in an interaction to create meaning will result in the most effective communication.

Several publications in the interpreting field have acknowledged the importance of the interpreter as a participant in an interaction and the need for collaboratively-derived meaning (Wadensjo 1998; Turner 2001; Turner 2005; Turner 2007). Likewise, these ideas about words serving as labels for meaning rather than meaning itself are not new to the field of interpreting. As Turner (2006) explains: ‘Since the meaning of language does not just reside “in the words”, but also in our understanding of them, everyone involved in an interpreted exchange shares responsibility for all parts of ensuring effective communication – “we’re all in this together!”’

What NLP offers, then, is a frame from which to understand these concepts. It presents a nice, neat label – mind maps – as an easily retrievable mental framework for the general concept that we all operate from different orientations of understanding. These

understandings range from varying nuances to outright disparate conceptualisations and therefore, shared meaning, must be cooperatively created. Furthermore, it is perhaps not surprising that NLP offers us a new frame because, as it happens, framing is a fundamental concept of NLP.

## Frame and re-frame

A frame refers to a perspective from which something is thought about, viewed or presented. It can be understood in NLP as guiding a person's thinking about a given topic and 'is the end result, the conclusion, that they will have made (typically unconsciously) after completing a series of thinking processes' (NLPtimes.com 2016). Interpreters may slightly re-frame certain concepts so that the intended meaning will more closely fit in with the receiver's map, so there are applications of framing to the interpreting process.

We would like to focus on how framing a concept may influence an interpreter's professional affairs, particularly in the current climate. An example is the argument used by the current government in framing the provision of interpreting services in terms of pounds spent. Austerity measures are threatening rates of interpreter pay for publicly funded services and, consequently, potentially undercutting the financial viability of a career as a professional interpreter. By contrast, the National Union of British Sign Language Interpreters (NUBSLI) has re-framed the argument with a primary focus on the quality – rather than cost – of provision of services (NUBSLI 2015). It may seem that the frames of cost and quality may be inherently at odds with one another, but this need not necessarily be the case, as the key to formulating a successful alternative

re-frame in an interaction lies in making it mesh with the receiver's map.

A good understanding of the receiver's map is a useful approach in effectively framing and re-framing concepts (Hutchinson 2015). Suggested frames are more likely to be adopted where they plausibly fit into an extant map. Thus the argument that using quality interpreters could actually save money in the long run aligns with the metaphorical map of the current government. Learning from past framework agreements in the legal sector where 'what was intended as a cost-cutting measure will now end up costing the government thousands of pounds every day in delays and adjournments' could offer more useful arguments for supporting the frame of quality interpretation rather than focusing on the impact of quality interpretation on consumer satisfaction (As UK Interpreters Strike, Google 'Scabs', 2012). This is because these arguments have important monetary elements that align with the considerations expressed by the frame of saving on costs. An ability to effectively re-frame situations, therefore, may help parties to attain overall objectives.

## Conclusion

We have specifically framed the information presented in this article, though how each reader interprets and integrates it will depend on their own mind maps. We hope, however, that readers are able to usefully incorporate these concepts from NLP into their interpreting practices, both in working situations and representations of professional issues. The map may not be the territory, but simply being aware that we are all following different maps can help us collectively construct a path toward effective navigation and shared understandings of meaning. 

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