The Impact of Language

(What yer grammar shoulda taught ya!)

By Joe Cheal

When I was at school, English grammar was a rather dry topic, taught theoretically and without much relevance to my life at that time. Now, however, it is an absolute fascination for me as to what words 'do' to (and for) people. Fortunately for me, *neuro-linguistic* programming fuels and fulfils that curiosity. I find it extraordinary the 'hidden' impact our language has when we talk to ourselves and to others. This article is designed to be a thought provoker rather than a thorough analysis...something to get your mind wondering (and perhaps wandering!)

At any given moment in time, each word we use and the relationship between those words will have a consequence at a physical, sensory level. Every word that has a meaning to us will fire off a set of corresponding neurons in our brain. For example, assuming we have learnt the word 'cat' and given it meaning (i.e. related it to something), when we experience the word 'cat', a network of neural associations will 'light up' (generating internal pictures, sounds, thoughts and related words/concepts). Then, depending on what feeling that network stimulates (e.g. like, dislike, neutral), we will have a physiological reaction. For instance, if someone is very fond of cats and they experience 'cat', they may get a warm, fuzzy feeling inside.

So, what impact do specific parts of our language have? From an NLP perspective, our words affect our states (i.e. our internal emotions, pictures, sounds, thoughts etc. at any given moment in time). As a starting point, we will be exploring the neuro-linguistic consequence of *four* grammatical types of words: nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs.

Things and relationships

Ultimately, there are two components that construct the reality we experience: things and relationships.(*1) Things are generally in relationship to other things (or to themselves). Things relate to/act upon other things.

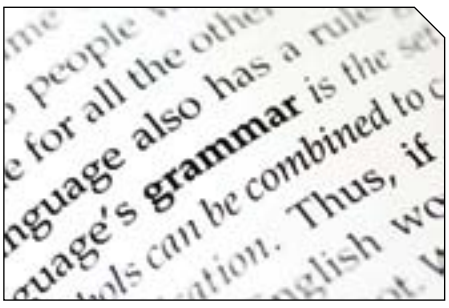
> **"I find it extraordinary the 'hidden' impact our language has when we talk to ourselves and to others"**

In our language 'things' tend to be represented by nouns. These nouns might be concrete, measurable things or abstract, intangible 'nominalisations' (where a process has been turned into a thing, like a change, a relationship or a problem). 'Relationships' tend to be represented by verbs (i.e. 'doing, having, being' type words).

Primary and secondary qualities

Here I am borrowing (and rather stretching) a concept proposed by the philosopher John Locke.(*2) He made an interesting distinction about how we experience reality, particularly between the properties of objects (known as primary and secondary qualities). The 'stretch' of Locke's idea in this article is that I am going to apply it to relationships as well as things (treating it as a metaphor as it were). Whilst these ideas might be debated philosophically, I am using them here as a psychological distinction.

Primary qualities are said to be the qualities that something has that are 'independent' of a perceiver. This might include shape, solidity, movement and location. Psychologically, these primary qualities are what we experience when we imagine nouns (particularly concrete nouns) and verbs (perhaps metaphorically).



Secondary qualities are dependent on a perceiver and are more about our own personal experience of the thing/relationship. This might include colour, brightness, focus, and loudness. Secondary qualities tend to be more descriptive, adding detail to the framework of primary qualities. Secondary qualities are akin to adjectives and adverbs and are likely to be more comparative and subjective than primary qualities.

As you may have already figured, both primary and secondary qualities will affect the submodalities (i.e. qualities of our internal representations) that we experience when thinking about a thing/relationship.

By combining the things/relationship distinction with the primary/secondary qualities distinction, we can bring 'nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs' into a framework, see Fig. 1.

	Primary qualities	Secondary qualities
Things	Nouns	Adjectives
Relationships	Verbs	Adverbs

Fig. 1

Nouns

Standard nouns are tangible, measurable things. If a group of people imagine an apple, for example, there will be a set of shared experiences and *then* distinctions that are unique to each person. Psychologically, the fundamental 'image' of the apple is the tangible noun, i.e. what is intrinsic to the apple. When we experience a tangible noun, most people will have an internal representation of something *solid, something they could touch, grasp, hold and/or contain*…it is manifest, 'see-able' and touchable. For most people, an imagined thing will be disassociated (i.e. separate

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from self) and in freeze-frame.

Of course, we also have abstract nouns, i.e. nominalisations, where a process has been turned into a thing. These can be troublesome as nouns because if you ask a group to imagine a relationship, they will probably create rather different images. In addition, if I asked you to imagine an apple, you would probably have an almost immediate response: whereas, if I ask you to imagine a change, this will probably take longer and require more effort.

Turning processes into things is perhaps a psychological attempt to try and *grasp* the process. However, when people treat processes as things (i.e. nominalise), they may have 'surreal' experiences. I have noticed that during times of organisational change, staff will often talk about *the* change and be waiting for it as if it is a thing that they are going to bump into. They try and avoid the change and worry about it. When they are reminded that change is a process that they are going through (and hence out the other side) this seems to psychologically *remove a pressure or burden*. It perhaps psychologically frees them up as they can access a point in the future where this change process has already taken place. Denominalising abstract nouns back to their verb form tends to shift the submodalities from *still to moving*.

Verbs

Verbs are the relationship between things. Verbs tend to give a sense of being, having and doing and each of those will likely produce a different sensation within you. For example, being verbs may be a *still picture*, doing verbs may be a *movie* and having verbs may bring the object *closer*. Consider the word 'sitting' and notice your internal response to this word. Then consider the word 'running' and notice the internal response. It may be subtle but there will probably be a difference. Recent discoveries around mirror neurons(*3) suggest that when we see, hear or read an action word, some of the corresponding motor neurons will fire as if we are carrying out that action! Adding 'ing' to a verb (making it progressive/continuous) will also change the internal representation. For example, consider the difference between

'relax' and 'relaxing'.

Think of something you would like to achieve and then consider your internal responses to the following modal operators:

- I'll think about doing it
- I might do it
- I want to do it
- I need to do it
- I shall do it.

What do you notice? Are some stronger than others? Do some of them create more movement than others?

Adjectives

Adjectives describe the qualities or type of thing that we are perceiving. The adjectives that describe the sensory qualities (e.g. a bright future, a red sky, the big picture, a close friend, a moving train) will also affect the submodalities in the mind of the listener. Those that change the type will likely change the content of the picture as well as the submodalities: for example, consider an angry cat or a friendly cat… what different internal representations do you notice?

"So, what impact do specific parts of our language have?"

It could be argued that all adjectives are comparative deletions. Normally we think of comparative deletions as having 'er' at the end (as in bigger) or 'more' at the front (more colourful). However, if we hear 'red sky', we still don't know how red that red is. If we hear 'friendly cat', we still don't know how friendly that is. It is for this reason that adjectives will tend to create a subjective interpretation in the mind of the listener.

Adverbs

Adverbs describe the quality of the verb and hence will likely affect the internal representations. 'Quickly' will probably generate a different internal response than 'comfortably'. Consider your internal responses to: 'sit down quickly' and then 'sit down comfortably'. What do you notice about your state in response to those two commands? How about 'he achieved his goals disastrously' versus 'he achieved his goals curiously'. Not only will the image itself probably change but also your state in relationship to that image.

Words, words, words

Every word you see, hear, read or say will have an impact on you. I encourage you to explore. Pick out some random words in the dictionary and notice what internal state they create for you. Some will be subtle and some will be distinct. This article skims the surface…we have not covered negation and we will have to explore temporal language at another time.

In the next article, we will explore another grammatical type, rather underdeveloped in NLP known as *prepositions*. These little positional 'relationship' words tend to have a massive affect on how we process 'things'. We will also be making links to the fields of cognitive linguistics and embodied cognition. Tune in next time… ■

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The Impact of Language: Part 2

(Prepositions: the invisible language patterns in NLP)

By Joe Cheal

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As a child, I remember hearing about people who were 'under pressure' which caused them to be 'under the weather'. Then they were 'under the doctor' (what fun!) I wondered how long it would take them to rise above it all, get back on top of things and then get over it. For some, it might have been a bit of an uphill struggle, of course, but that would have been down to them. Or would it have been up to them?

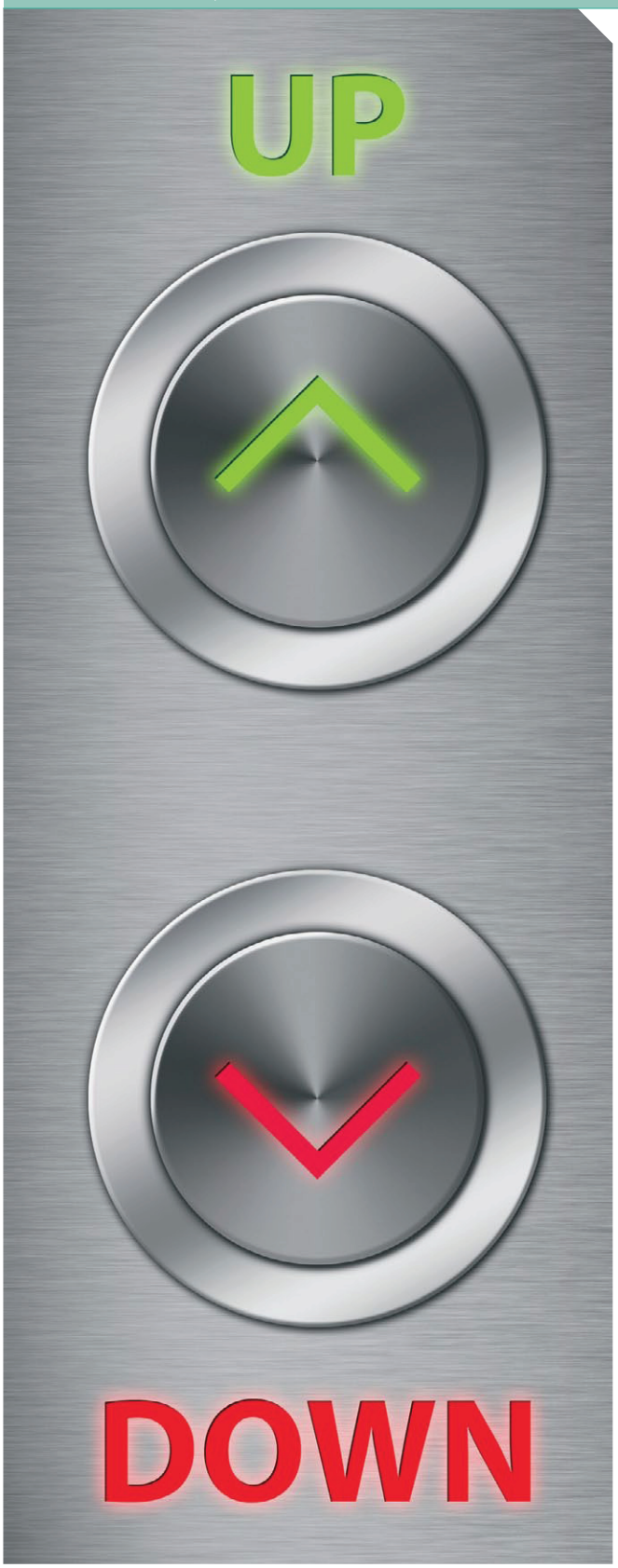
Years later, sitting at an NLP conference listening to Charles Faulkner (*1) talk about 'cognitive linguistics', I fell in love again with the prepositions in our language. Part of the field of cognitive linguistics, known as conceptual metaphor, proposes that we understand certain ideas in terms of other ideas, for example, we might say that when things are legit they are 'above board'. An extension of this notion comes from the field of 'embodied cognition', in that we use our bodies to understand and create such relational metaphors. More of this in a future article!

What are prepositions?

Prepositions are the little words that tell you the positional relationship between one thing and another. In this sense they 'pre-position' one thing to another. Examples are words like: above and below, up and down, in and out, on and off, over and under.

Linking back to 'cognitive linguistics', we tend to associate additional meaning with certain prepositions. For example, we talk of going 'deeper down' into trance and then we come back 'up' again to wakefulness (hence we 'wake up'). It is as if we have an 'up-down' vertical internal representation of wakefulness. And so we 'fall' asleep, which implies a downward direction. Of course, we might drift 'off' too, suggesting that we are not 'on' at that point (as in switched 'off' versus switched 'on').

Another generalised use of the 'up/down' prepositions is the concept that higher equals more and/or better. Who can forget the first words in Survivor's 'Eye of the Tiger': 'Rising up straight to the



“Prepositions are the little words that tell you the positional relationship between one thing and another”

top’? We go onwards and upwards as if to the top of the pile, top of the mountain, top of the tree. We go to school to get high grades. Then we move on to higher education. Then we go to work and reach higher levels of success by climbing the corporate ladder. We look up to some people and hope to get a pay-rise in the process! Then, one day we rise above it all and we get off the corporate treadmill, out of the rat-race. Perhaps we have realised a higher calling, a spiritual path where we seek to achieve heightened awareness and higher states of consciousness.

On the other hand we might frown upon people who are below par, not reaching up to their potential. Their performance has dropped; they are on a downward spiral...better make sure we don’t go down the pan with them! We can’t help but become superior as we look down on the inferior types...the gutter press and the lowlifes for example.

How about the metaphor of back and front (or backwards and forwards)? Are you ahead of the game or a bit behind? Are you at the forefront or at the rear? Are you moving forwards or backwards (or one step forward and two steps backwards)? Are things back to front? Are you a bit backwards in coming forwards?

And side to side? Which side are you on? Are you on the right side or are you a bit left field? Do you know anyone who has a bit on the side? Might you give them a sideways glance? Or is that beside the point? Perhaps we might put all that to one side for now.

The psychological impact of prepositions

In order to make sense of a statement like ‘Fred is under pressure’, we appear to create a corresponding ‘internal representation’. In this instance, we might have an internal image of Fred with a ‘pressure’ above him. If someone says ‘I am under pressure’ they may experience the internal representations (probably visuals and kinaesthetics) of being under a weight or force of some kind. Over a period of time, this may be less than healthy for an individual.

Prepositions tend to affect how we feel about things. For most people there is a difference between ‘it being all on their shoulders’ and ‘it being all off their shoulders’. Picture Fred with it being on and then off his shoulders (whatever you think ‘it’ might be). What do you notice about the pictures? Then, if you wish, notice the difference between it being on and then off *your* shoulders. How does that feel different?

Neurology and submodalities

According to Benjamin Bergen,(*2) when images are processed in the brain, the visual cortex sends information in two directions, through the temporal lobe to establish ‘what’ we are looking at (e.g. shape, colour and texture) and through the parietal cortex to determine ‘where’ it is (e.g. position and direction). It is the positional, ‘where’ direction we are interested in here. →

Prepositions affect the submodalities of location and direction (e.g. position: left, right, in front, behind, above, below; distance: close versus far; movement: movie versus still). If someone tells you they are behind on their work, they are telling you the submodalities they are using at that moment in time with respect to that part of their work. As an 'aside' (see what I did there!), isn't it interesting how people talk about their 'workload'... hardly surprising then that they find themselves under pressure! If some is 'behind' on their work, the likelihood is that the work is 'in front' or 'ahead' of them.

Prepositions in interventions

John Overdurf and Julie Silverthorn (*3) pointed out that people are often working 'on' their problems and have been for some time. Consider the positional submodalities that this creates. Not surprising it has been a problem for so long, particularly if their coach asks them: 'What would you like to work on today?' What if the coach asks them: 'What would you like to work *through* today?' By working *through* their problems, this presupposes there is a point beyond the problem where they can get to the other side and then put it behind them.

It seems that *most* prepositions have an opposite (e.g. over/under, in/out, left/right, close/far). When people present an issue, listen to the prepositions. Not only will they reveal the submodalities of where the issue is, it may also give you an idea for an outcome preposition (i.e. the polar opposite or something similar). If someone is 'in' a fix or a jam, presumably the outcome preposition is to be 'out' of the fix (and then perhaps somewhere else). If someone is under pressure, presumably they want to get above it and over it. Sometimes you can directly ask them a hypothetical outcome question: 'And what would happen when you are out of that fix?' or 'What would that be like to get on top of that pressure?' Even if they don't have an immediate answer, it will likely give them a different perspective since they will have to change their positional/directional submodalities to try it on.

Have you noticed that after an intervention people sometimes say: 'It's still there.' Consider what might happen if it changes from 'it's still there' to 'it's moving there'. For example: 'And how might that be different if it was moving there?' It is important to note here that sometimes submodalities will not shift for an 'ecology' reason. Their unconscious mind may not feel ready or may not feel as if the positive intentions of the issue have been taken into account. Metaphor can often be treated as a 'message' from the unconscious. If the message has not been heard, the unconscious may be reluctant to change.

Here's a final activity for you. Consider an issue or problem that you may have been having. Where are you in relationship to that problem (or where is it in relationship to you)? Are you in it? Under it? Is it in front of you? Now check the ecology: What might be the unconscious message, learning and/or positive intention? How is that old way of being/doing/having serving you? Whilst maintaining and storing the positive intention/learning/message, consider that problem...what is it like if you're on it? What if it's beside you? And if you're on top of it...and if you are over it? Then if you're ahead of it and it's behind you? And if it's a long way back? What do you notice now?

"We tend to associate additional meaning with certain prepositions"

It's all over...or is it?

We have really only been scratching the surface here. We have not yet delved into temporal prepositions or got that close to social panoramas. (*4) There are hundreds of prepositions and each will have an impact on our positional and directional submodalities. Listen out for the little words in between...they might just get through to you! ■

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The Impact of Language: Part 3

(Word-Play: Changing the Game of Language)

By Joe Cheal

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Mark Twain said, 'If you always do what you always did, you'll always get what you always got.'

To take Mark Twain's quotation in a more specific direction: if you always *say* what you always *said*, you'll always get what you always got. If we keep describing our issues in the same way with similar language, where is the room for change?

Language, neurology and experience: some recent research

Recent research supports the idea that *language has a direct link to our brains*. When someone looks at a set of words, they show the same brain activity patterns as when they recall the same words later. (*1) This suggests that each word we learn has a corresponding set of neural pathways. See, hear or read a word and the same set of neurons will consistently 'light up'.

Apparently, bilingual speakers exhibit the same brain patterns when hearing the same word in either language (e.g. English/Dutch speakers who hear the word 'horse' or 'paard').(*2) Although the same *area* of the brain is being used, the specific brain pattern is unique to each person. When these brain patterns are recorded, researchers are then able to 'mind read' which word the person is listening to. This suggests that we encode concepts (e.g. horse) in a consistent location in the brain *with* its corresponding word (or set of words).

Our language does not just affect our state but potentially our personality too. According to Michael Erard(*3) some bilingual speakers experience mental illness in one language but not in another. In addition, Catherine de Lange(*4) has found that bilingual speakers tend to experience different emotional reactions and behaviours to the same contexts depending on which language they are using. According to de Lange, language is a 'kind of scaffold that supports and structures our memories...the grammar of a language can shape your memory'.

The word replacement game

If a concept (or in NLP called 'internal representation') is 'negatively' emotionally charged, it will likely be linked up to the alarm system in the brain (e.g. the amygdala). If we experience/remember something we are perhaps afraid of or angry about, the amygdala is triggered and so we have an emotional and physiological reaction. Since words are anchors that fire off the corresponding neural pattern, words we see, hear or read will create emotional reactions in the body if there is an emotional charge.

When someone talks about a problem, they will tend to use the words that trigger their 'negative' emotional response. For example, if they get frustrated with a person called Cynthia, whenever they use that person's name they will likely get the frustrated feeling (even when 'Cynthia' is not there with them). As they talk about their issue with Cynthia, they are continually firing off angry anchors within themselves! Of course, a trigger word could be anything that relates to a 'negative' internal representation (including people, things, actions or events).

I have heard that Milton Erickson would sometimes have a client play a game where they replaced the 'problem trigger' word with a neutral or silly word. They would describe their problem as before but replace the trigger word with, for example, the word 'duck'. Imagine the person with the 'Cynthia' frustration: 'I just get so frustrated with duck. I delegate to duck and duck doesn't do what I ask. I don't think duck is even listening to me.' This tends to disassociate the speaker from the problem because it creates a different brain pattern. It may even create a degree of humour.

Imagine another situation where someone doesn't like flying in airplanes. We might get them to replace both 'flying' (e.g. with 'typing') and 'airplane' (with 'kibble'): 'When I think about my holiday the first thing I think about is that I'm going to have to type in a kibble. I've never liked kibbles.' When there is a significant distance or disassociation created, it is sometimes possible to reintroduce the trigger word again without the old emotional reaction. →

“If we keep describing our issues in the same way with similar language, where is the room for change?”

The word order game

In most of the Western spoken languages (e.g. English, Spanish and French), it appears that our non-verbal communication (e.g. gesturing) is slightly out of sync with our spoken grammar. The Western languages typically have the following structure:

Subject – Verb – Object (e.g. the dog chases the ball).

Some of the 'Eastern' spoken languages however (e.g. Turkish and Korean), have the following structure:

Subject – Object – Verb (e.g. the dog the ball chases).

Research led by Susan Goldin-Meadow(*5) found that despite the order of spoken language, the order in non-verbal communication is: Subject – Object – Verb (SOV). The research suggests that the SOV syntax may be our primal communication style. Added to that, other research(*6) suggests that we pay more attention to non-verbal behaviour than to the words, particularly if the two are in conflict (i.e. incongruent).

More recently, it has been argued(*7) that there was once a prototype language from which all others descended. This 'original' language also ran in the order of: Subject – Object – Verb.

From an NLP perspective, what might that mean about how we process the world? As a speaker of a language that works Subject – Verb – Object (SVO), does this mean I experience the world differently to someone who uses Subject – Object – Verb (SOV)? In addition, if the order of our spoken language has evolved differently to our non-verbal communication, does this create any form of internal tension? Is our thinking at odds with our body language?

Although it may feel unfamiliar, have a go at saying some sentences in the order that is different to yours. If you naturally speak SVO, try some SOV and vice versa. If you are bilingual, what difference does it make when switching between these patterns of speech?

On a personal note, after reading about the research, I was curious to explore word order, particularly in how it might affect (or not) the submodalities of my experience. Having played with changing the order of simple sentences, I found that it did indeed make a subtle difference to my feelings. For example, 'dog ball chases' feels somehow more complete as if there's a dog and a ball, and then I get to find out what the relationship is. So I get: 'thing-thing-relationship' which somehow makes more sense than 'thing-relationship-thing'. It is as if the first part: 'thing-thing' gives me the still picture and then adding 'relationship' adds the movie. When I have 'thing-relationship' first, there is a hole in the movie until it is filled with the final 'thing'.

> **"Recent research supports the idea that *language has a direct link to our brains*"**

If I was to change the phrase 'my friend upsets me', to SOV (thing-thing-relationship) 'my friend me upsets', this also creates a different experience for me. There is a picture of my friend and me, and then the 'upsets' provides the video. This feels less harsh. Of course, speaking in the SOV fashion creates a *still* picture for me first. The fact that I am seeing my friend and me in a picture/video means I am disassociated from the upset.

Try it out for yourself! Might this be a useful alternative approach when working with others, particularly if they are stuck or feeling at the effect of a situation or person? Even if it loosens things up a little, it may help!

If shifting from SVO (thing-relationship-thing) to SOV (thing-thing-relationship) makes a difference to how we *process* information, it may help to make a shift on how we *feel* about that information. If SOV is the unconscious structure of processing information, might it make sense to utilise it?

Conclusion

In the spirit of *Pirates of the Caribbean*, grammar is not really a set of rules...more a set of guidelines. By changing the words or the grammar or the syntax, we change the 'brain-frame'. By changing the frame, we change the experience. The impact of language is phenomenal and well worth further investigation. Let me know how you get on... ■

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The Impact of Language: Part 4

(How do we handle Negation…or not?)

By Joe Cheal

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Let us not begin with a negation… let's begin with a non-negation. Think of a 'giraffe'. Notice if your giraffe is a photo, a video, a cartoon...does it have a background or not? Now don't think of that very giraffe you thought of just now. What happens? Most people think of the giraffe again. Now, whatever you do, don't think of an elephant…but more about that later.

'Negation is the mind's first freedom...'
Emile M. Cioran

Negation?

This article is about the impact of negation and so the first question needs to be: What is negation? Negation is the opposite or absence of something. It might also be a denial, contradiction or negative statement. Simple examples of linguistic negations might include 'not', 'don't', 'can't' and 'won't'. What are we to make of it when someone tells us 'not to worry' or 'don't panic'! What are children to do if told 'Don't knock over the orange juice' (aside from make a picture of knocking over the orange juice and then follow the order)? Behavioural negations (which also have a linguistic element) might include: to 'stop' doing something (e.g. to stop snoring)...actually, forget I mentioned it.

I have previously suggested that there are three interconnected types of negation, with somewhat different meanings.(*1)

1. **Logical opposite**. If someone says: 'I don't want the light off' we tend to assume they want it 'on'. On/off is a logical opposite where the negation of 'off' is 'on' and vice versa.
2. **Notional opposite**. If we suggest that someone's style of leadership is not democratic, we might assume it is autocratic (unless you are thinking politically in the US where the negation of Democratic might be Republican). Democratic and autocratic are not logically opposite as in on/off, as there might be a sliding scale from one end to the other. Indeed, 'not democratic' could also mean 'laissez-faire' or 'paternalistic'.
3. **General opposite**. If you ask someone what they want in life and they reply: 'not ice cream', this could mean so many other things…indeed, it could mean *anything other than* ice cream.

"Now don't think of that very giraffe you thought of just now"

Each type of negation has a different impact on us psychologically. The logical opposite is usually quick and easy to find, whereas the general opposite might put us into a trance as we enter a huge 'trans-derivational search' to come up with an answer!

When the mind gets tied up in 'Nots'

How do people stop themselves feeling good? They focus on what they *don't* want. For example they might say 'I *don't* want to feel guilty if I refuse a request'. And here is the NLP 'open secret'…imagine the brain acts like an advanced internet search engine. If you type in 'not giraffe' into a search engine, what happens? It doesn't bring up the rest of the internet (i.e. every website that doesn't mention giraffes), it comes up with all the websites that reference giraffes! Of course, the brain is even smarter than that because it also comes up with things it has *associated* with giraffes, e.g. zoo, long neck, tall leafy trees, antelopes, big animals.

By saying 'I don't want to feel guilty', the brain accesses 'feel guilty' (since it fires off the neural network associated with the word and concept of 'feeling guilty'). Another way of thinking about it is

that no matter where the brain goes to search, it has only 'feeling guilty' as its reference point.

Benjamin Bergen(*2) suggests that in order for us to make sense of language, we 'simulate' what we hear or read. This means the brain 'embodies' and/or mentally 'acts out' what it processes. He references some research where subjects would be primed with words like: 'sharp', 'not sharp' and 'blunt'. They were then shown words that were associated and not associated with sharpness. When the subjects have already seen 'sharp' and 'not sharp' they later reacted more quickly to words like 'piercing' than those that had been primed with 'blunt'. This implies that 'not sharp' was mentally processed in the same way as 'sharp' and not in the same way as its apparent synonym 'blunt'. Steve Andreas(*3) follows a similar train of thought: 'A negation is represented differently than an unpleasant statement, e.g. "ugly" versus "not good looking."'

Negation seems to cause us to process the words we experience at face value and then we have to 'go meta' to make sense of the 'not'. However, if we experience too many 'nots', we may find it hard to keep up. Consider the 'Cartesian co-ordinates' question of 'what wouldn't happen if you didn't get confused?' Or how about these safety instructions for installing a power supply: 'NOTE: neither wire must not be connected to earth terminal or supply earthing wire.'(*4)

More 'Notty' negations

Both linguistically and conceptually, here are some other ways we sometimes struggle with negations.

- **Time**: when we talk of the past, we tend be talking of a negation of the present. If I say I was a bee-keeper, the listener will imagine the bee-keeper before processing that as something that is not true anymore.
- **Identity**: paradoxically, we appear to define who we are in part by identifying who we are not. In order to say: 'I am a musician', I am identifying with the category of 'musician' and negating an identity of 'non musician'. If this self-defining is values oriented: 'I am polite' would indicate a negation of e.g. 'rudeness'.
- **Loss**: the death of someone close to us, the sudden end of a relationship or the loss of something valuable tends to create a sense of negation. We think of that person (or thing) and then realise they are not there anymore. It seems as if the brain doesn't quite know what to do with the loss.
- **Unknown**: some people describe the 'scary' unknown in metaphors of an empty space, a gap, a hole or a void of nothingness. Like loss, the →

"What is negation?"

brain seems to regard the unknown as a potential negation. For some people, this can manifest as a 'fear of the future'.

- **Campaigning**: in his book, George Lakoff(*5) suggested that political campaigners were best off focusing on their own strengths rather than on the weaknesses of their opponents. According to Lakoff, 'negative campaigning' (i.e. pointing out the flaws of the other side and saying not to vote for them) only serves the purpose of raising awareness of the opposition and making oneself look negative!

Utilising negations

As well as sending people into the 'fertile void' (as Fritz Perls called it), here are a few ideas as to how negation might be useful...

When someone says things are 'hard' or 'difficult' might they be better off saying things are 'not easy'? Better still, we suggest people use 'less than easy' as it implies a sliding scale from 'difficult' to 'easy', presupposes that there is a learning process and it creates an internal 'simulation' of easy.(*6)

If a client has an outcome that is a negation (i.e. what James Lawley and Penny Tompkins(*7) call the 'remedy' e.g. 'I don't want to feel stressed') in order to help make it 'well formed' we might ask: '...and when you are not feeling stressed, what will you be feeling?' This question tends to 'flip' the client into saying what they want rather than what they don't want.

Negating can sometimes be used to help establish resources (e.g. helpful states and memories). For example, if the client says: 'I keep procrastinating', we might ask: 'Just to check...when are you not procrastinating?' It is unlikely that someone is able to do a behaviour absolutely consistently...there will usually be some exceptions in other areas of their life. These exceptions could be used to find out what strategies they use when they are doing something other than the problem behaviour.

Of course, negations can be used for embedded suggestions (and 'commands'). For example, Milton Erickson might suggest: 'Don't relax too quickly... take your time...get comfortable first....re-e-e-eally comfortable!' Under certain circumstances (e.g. with a mis-matcher – who doesn't want to do what you say, or a polarity thinker/responder – who wants to do the opposite to what you say) you might suggest: 'Don't picture yourself succeeding yet!'

"Imagine the brain acts like an advanced internet search engine"

Strange...

Negations are a strange element of language, are they not? They require us to step outside of the frame of the sentence in order to reprocess the meaning. They can create a sense of confusion and paradox which could be helpful or not (depending on the context). And if you don't think that negations are paradoxical... that's fine because nothing in this article is true... including that. ■

REFERENCES

(*1) Joe Cheal, *Solving Impossible Problems*.
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(*3) Steve Andreas, *Transforming Negative Self-Talk*.
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(*5) George Lakoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant*.
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The Impact of Language: Part 5

(The Power of 'You')

By Joe Cheal

Joe Cheal

In this series of articles we have explored how language has a direct impact on the brain of the listener. Hence, it behoves us to become more purposeful with what we say. This article you are reading now is about language that associates and disassociates the listener. But that is neither here nor there...or is it? Perhaps it was...but now it is not then.

'Mind your language...'
My grandma

Where do you want to take your audience and clients?

Whilst we will be focusing primarily on the effect of 'you' language, here and now we will be exploring not only a range of pronouns and their effect, but also other forms of grammar that generate a sense of association to and disassociation from the topic at hand.

Consider for a moment the phrase: 'You are on a boat.' What internal representation does that create for you? What do you see in your mind's eye? Most people see the scene from their own perspective, as if looking through their own eyes. In this sense, you are seeing the picture from an 'associated' perspective. Now, how about: 'Milton Erickson is on a horse.' What do you see this time? The likelihood is that you will see the picture from a 'disassociated' perspective. I'll go even further to predict that most people will see Erickson and the horse from the side (rather than from some other angle). So why is this important?

Imagine that you are listening to someone giving directions. Consider the following:

> **"Most people see the scene from their own perspective, as if looking through their own eyes"**

1. The building is 20 metres from the car park. The reception area is through the main doors. In the reception area the stairs are on the left hand side and there are four floors in total. On the third floor is a double doorway and there is an office through the doorway, along the corridor and second to the right. That is the location of the meeting.
2. From the car park, you'll find reception through the main doors. You will see some stairs on the left, so go on up to the third floor. You will then need to go through a double door and then into the second office on the left. I'll see you there for the meeting.

The likelihood is that you will experience the first set of directions from a remote perspective. You might have found them 'dull' and boring and hence switched off. Although they were there in black and white you might still not have found them very clear. They may have seemed like a stilted set of still pictures.

You are more likely to 'simulate'(*1) the second description from your own perspective as if *you* are going on that journey to the office on the third floor. Chances are (depending on the voice of the speaker) you would have found the second description lighter, possibly more in focus and clearer to follow and remember (like a flowing movie). Even if this is not an exact match to your experience, the point is that the language we use will tend to affect the submodalities (finer details) of the listener's internal experiences and hence how they process and store what you are saying.

If this was part of a presentation, most people would find the 'you' description more compelling and engaging. So, when you are presenting information, do you want the audience to feel associated to what you are saying or disassociated...in the picture or removed from it? See 'The impact of pronouns' below. ⟶

The impact of pronouns(*2)	
The pronouns you use will tend to affect the perspective of the client/audience. Change the referential index (who the subject of your 'story' is) and hence change the perceptual position, for example:	
Pronoun	**Impact**
I	Some personal stories and examples can help to build rapport and empathy with the audience. It can bring a touch of 'humanness'. However, too much 'I' can become a little tedious and egotistical!
You	By making the audience the subject of your examples and situations, you engage and associate them into 'being there'. Over a period of time, 'you' language is easier to listen to.
He/She/ They	Using a 'third person' perspective creates a picture of someone else doing something. If the story is engaging enough (even if it is about a thing), the audience may still process the story and put themselves 'in it' from time to time to make sense of the story.
We	If this is we 'inclusive' (i.e. the speaker and listener in it together), this can build a sense of 'we are on the same side and in it together'. If this is we 'exclusive' (i.e. the speaker and his own group) then it can help to build credibility in moderation (e.g. We carried out this research).
It	The third person objective language of 'it' can generate some credibility and is the style of objective scientist. However, it is rather disassociated and can become boring and hard to listen to if used for too long.

You might want to associate your audience to something when you want them to feel connected and engaged with it. You might want to disassociate your audience from something you want them to distance/detach themselves from. As well as using pronouns, here are some other examples of words that associate/disassociate:

- **Associated**: Here, Now, This/These, Is.
- **Disassociated**: There, Then, That/Those, Was.

If you want to bring something into the mind of the client/audience, you might say: 'This road we are on together here and now is our new direction' and to distance from the old way of doing things: '...because that old path was how things were back there and then and is for those people who would not adapt.'

Accidental 'You' language

I have noticed that when people are talking about problems (particularly medical issues), they tend to switch referential index (often unconsciously) from 'I' to 'you'. For example: 'I went to see my manager to explain why I had to go early, and then it's like "bang", suddenly you're on his naughty list.' The speaker has been describing the story from their own perspective and has then switched to 'you' language. It could be argued that as a speaker we do this to disassociate ourselves from the difficulty. However, it means we are 'putting it on' the listener!

Someone I know has a habit of saying: 'so there you are' after bemoaning his medical conditions. When I hear this I respond (in my mind): 'no thanks'! It is as if he is listing out his ailments and then unconsciously trying to pass them over to someone else. If you find yourself in the company of unresourceful 'you' language, imagine there is a 'flexi-glass' screen in front of you and all those negative statements are bouncing off and away from you!

Other people I meet seem to throw away all the good stuff. They might be talking about something they achieved and as soon as they get to the feeling proud or happy, they say: 'and, you know, you feel really good for doing it.' Whilst this is very kind, it means the speaker is disassociating from the good feelings and praise they are due.

Purposeful language

I encourage you to become aware of your own speech patterns and in particular your 'you' language. Where necessary, own your own experience with 'I'. If you are talking about a less than positive state or expounding a limiting belief, then you might use 'some people' instead of 'you', e.g. instead of:

❝When you are presenting information, do you want the audience to feel associated to what you are saying or disassociated❞

'It's hard doing presentations, don't you find?', use something like: 'Some people find it less than easy to do presentations, I think.'

In addition take responsibility for the images (and submodalities) you want to create in your clients/audience. Become more purposeful with your language. Where do you intend to take them with what you say?

'You' language can become 'installation' language, full of embedded suggestions that we are constantly giving out to others. If some of our 'you' language is less than resourceful, we are doing our clients/audience a disservice. To counter this, by talking in 'positive outcome' language we can 'gift'(*3) others with hundreds of positive embedded suggestions and resources! This makes us compelling people to be with and to listen to.

If you would like to be known as an engaging practitioner, friend, speaker or leader, then whenever you speak, make sure that what you say is directed towards 'what is wanted and needed' instead of away from 'what is problematic/wrong'. When you use 'you' language under these circumstances, *you can be more positive and empowering.* ■

REFERENCES

(*1) B.K. Bergen, *Louder Than Words*.

(*2) For an interesting exploration of our use of pronouns, see J. Pennebaker, *The Secret Life of Pronouns: What our words say about us*.

(*3) 'Gifting' an audience is a term used by Julie Silverthorn and John Overdurf. I love this approach to presenting and training!

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