THE META MODEL DEMYSTIFIED

Being a Simple and Jargon Explaining Introduction to the
NLP Meta Model.
With Notes and Reference to Original and Associated Patterns.

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INTRODUCTION

There is a problem in NLP.

The Meta Model, the most powerful pattern or model that NLP has developed, is poorly taught, poorly understood and poorly used.

Partly the reason for this is that the Meta Model appears complicated to the newcomer. It also, for many people, dredges up negative associations with English Language classes when we were at school.

This is often because the labels and definitions of the Meta Model were written in such a way to appeal to Academic circles, which (as those of you who have spent some time in such circles know) does not necessarily guarantee clarity.

There have been very few attempts to clarify the Meta Model or frame it in a more useful and comprehensible manner, and many NLP books and trainings regurgitate the same old stuff from outdated and outmoded source material.

Richard Bandler says that NLP is like a photocopy, the further you get from the original source the worse the quality becomes. This is no truer than in the Meta Model, where misunderstanding and misinterpretations have been handed down time after time.
This is not only very sad, but also damaging.

The Meta Model is the skeleton that the rest of the NLP Model hangs around. If you do not understand the Meta Model you will be missing out on the power of NLP.

This eBooklet is an attempt to undo this confusion and present the Meta Model in a way that is clear to understand and, most importantly, use correctly.

It is not intended to be a complete discussion on all the patterns, but a primer to help you either learn it for the first time or undo any un-useful associations so that you can relearn the Meta Model in a more useful way.
Why is the Meta Model So Important?

We all communicate and we all talk to ourselves. We think in words. Our thought process is very much a conversation with ourselves and what we say (both to ourselves and to other people) effects our understanding of the world. Therefore better control over what we say gives us better control over our lives.

Language not only explains our understanding of the world, it creates it. The worlds we use to describe our map of the world also adjusts it. Our understanding of the world is limited to our ability to describe and define it. The broader and deeper your communication skills the richer and more detailed your experience of the world around you (and therefore your own personal reality).

As an interesting aside, I have noticed that people who tend to dismiss the power of the Meta Model are often those that already have a broad grasp of language and therefore do this naturally. Because, to them, it is obvious.
A Bit of History

The Meta Model was one of the first “fruits” of NLP and was originally presented in the books “The Structure of Magic Volume 1” and “Volume 2”.

The Meta Model was based around Noam Chomsky’s Transformational Grammar. It is not important to need to understand Transformational Grammar to be able to use the Meta Model effectively. However it is important to understand that much of the principles of Transformational Grammar that the original Meta Model was based on have since been updated or abandoned completely. So attempting to use the Meta Model as it was originally presented is flawed. By all means read the “Structure of Magic”, but recognise them as a “history lesson” rather than a “how to guide”.

NLP is pragmatic and less concerned with the theory than with what works. So it is less concerned with the current state of the models of linguistics, revisions and arguments and more concerned with what has worked, practically, in the given context.
Logic Not Language

The Meta Model is often talked about as a linguistic models as we focus on the words people use, how they structure those words into phrases, and what that tells us about their thought processes (or map of the world). However if you think about the Meta Model just a linguistic tool you are missing the power of it.

It is better to think of the Meta Model as a model of logic and the words we use to explain, justify and present that logic. You are looking to use the Meta Model to explore someones thought processes, in a very real sense you a looking to use the Meta Model to explore that persons reality.

The Most Trivial Application

The Meta Model is often presented simply as a tool for the Practitioner to hoover up information in a mechanistic, knee jerk way:

Statement: “I am depressed”
Question: “About what?”

Although the Meta Model is incredibly good at information gathering and in certain contexts it is very useful, this is the most basic of uses of it. If you just use the Meta Model to gather information, it is like using a computer just to play solitaire.
It’s Much More Useful Than That

The true power of the Meta model is to create conversational change. As Bandler and Grinder put it in “The Structure of Magic Vol 1”, with artful use of the Meta Model, we can “involve the client in recovering the deep structure - the full linguistic representation. The next step is to challenge that deep structure in such a way to enrich it”.

This may be presented in the therapeutic setting in the “Structure of Magic”, however the uses of the Meta model go far beyond these limits. The Meta Model allows us to explore someone’s Deep Structure and help them unlock the full map of their experience. This is useful in many settings; from therapy, to teaching, to sales, to leadership, to negotiation and beyond.
GET THE BASICS RIGHT FIRST:

1. Basic Grammar
The old adage goes you should never run before you can walk. This is no truer than when attempting to learn these “advanced” language patterns.

People tend to be in such a rush to want to learn these “advanced” language patterns that they spend little time bothering to understand basic language patterns or grammar. If your knowledge of English grammar is shaky then the foundations of your understanding of the Meta Model and other patterns will be like the man who built his house sand.

Learn and understand basic grammar and syntax first before you attempt to learn the more advanced notions of the structure of language and how to use it.

Here is not the place to give a full lesson on Grammar, but a basic overview is this:

i) Parts of Speech
There are eight basic parts of speech, I will cover the five that are relevant to the Meta Model here:

**VERB:** a word to express the idea of action, happening or being (a “doing” word).
NOUN: refers to a person, place or thing (a “naming” word).

PRONOUN: “she”, “he”, “it”, etc, to replace a noun.

ADVERB: adds information to a verb: running [VERB] fast [ADVERB].

ADJECTIVE: adds information to a noun or pronoun: Dave [NOUN] is happy [ADJECTIVE].

ii) Syntax:
Syntax deals with the use of words, when used in combination. The main combinations are:

SENTENCE: a word (yes, a sentence can technically be just one word, I know!), or group of words expressed as a complete statement, wish, command or question.

CLAUSE: a group of words with a verb in it.

And whilst I am on about it, a PHRASE is group of words without a verb in it (thought you would like to know the difference).

A clause may be part of a sentence. A sentence may be a clause. A sentence may consist of more than one clause. Make sense? Good.
Subject - Predicate Structure: Sentences and clauses (but not phrases) in English (and remember the Meta Model only refers to English and must be adjusted accordingly for alternative languages) and other Indo-European languages (I won’t get into language grouping, it is very complicated and utterly unnecessary for this guide), are created in the subject-predicate structure.

SUBJECT: who or or what the sentence or clause is about.

PREDICATE: the part of the sentence or clause in which something is said about the subject (And normally include at lease a verb, if not an adverb or two).

For example: Dave [SUBJECT] went home [PREDICATE].

2. The Map is Not the Territory

The phrase “The Map is Not the Territory” is considered the first commandment of NLP, it is the key presupposition of the Model of NLP.

If we consider the Meta Model from the Map/Territory metaphor we can use it as much more than just a fact finding tool. We can use it as a guide to help us recognise which part of the persons map they are referencing, limitations and inaccuracies of that part of the map and we can help them recover, add or “correct” (context relevant) the details, or guide them to a more useful area of their map.
3. Chunking

Chunking is about the relative level of detail in a statement.

Big chunk “stuff” is vague and lacks detail and reference.

Small chunk things are full of sensory specific detail and explanation.

It is best understood by this simple example:

It is useful to understand chunking, as it helps you recognise how much of the map is being used in a given utterance (see generalisation, distortion and deletion below).
4. Generalisations, Distortions and Deletions

Every utterance we make contains generalisations, distortions and deletions.

We **generalise** from minimal information, it is how we learn, and on the whole it is a good thing, but if we generalise from a spurious source or in an ineffective way we can end up in completely the wrong place.

We **delete** vast amounts of information (or more accurately “de-select it”, it is still there, we just choose not to pay attention to it).

We **distort** information we are presented with. Think how you may have seen someone you know walking down the street, to notice a second later it is not who you thought it was.

We choose (often unconsciously, i.e. we are not consciously aware we are doing it) what to generalise, distort and delete through a complex filtering and feedback process. The Meta Model helps to understand, explore and adjust (where appropriate) these processes.

We express these generalisations, distortions and deletions in our language (see below).
To begin with, when learning to use the Meta Model, just listen out for **generalisations, distortions and deletions.** Don’t get carried away into breaking these down into more nuanced or detailed patterns until you are comfortable with recognising what is being generalised, distorted and deleted.

5. The Deep Structure and the Surface Structure

Hold onto your hats, this is going to get a bit complicated...

The **Environment** is everything outside of use that we experience through our five senses and convert into meaning by our thought processes.

**Deep Structure** is the “map”, our thought processes, much of which is not in conscious awareness.

**Surface structure** refers to the words we say. The statements, the utterances, the comments and phrases, the conclusions we make.

Between the environment and the deep structure and the deep structure and the surface structure, we generalise, distort and delete vast amounts of information.

But here is the kicker, what we say (our surface structure) feeds back and adjusts our deep structure. If we tell ourselves or other people something for long enough we start to think it is real.
The Meta Model allows us to explore how people decided on *that claim*, how they know *that conclusion*. It allows us to “recover” the “true” deep structure that sits behind and below our surface structure utterances.
A FEW WORDS OF ADVICE:

The Labels Are The Least Important Thing

There are two reasons you need to know the original labels:

1. You teach NLP
2. You want to appear a smart arse.

Although learning to recognise and construct each of the patterns is an essential step on the path to mastering the Meta Model it is more important to know what to do with the patterns when you recognise them, rather than just being able to label them.

Don’t Pigeonhole...

These patterns rarely exist in isolation. One phrase, sentence or utterance will often contain several patterns. Avoid the temptation to try and pigeonhole each utterance you hear in to just one pattern. This will just lead to confusion and frustration.

Know Your Outcome - Don’t Challenge Every Violation You Hear

When people first learn to use the Meta Model they (understandably) tend to challenge every violation that they hear. Challenging every violation you hear, just because you can is not big, it is not clever, it just makes you look like an arse.
Keep your outcome, or the direction you want to head in, in mind. Only challenge violations if it moves you closer to the outcome or further in direction of the outcome you want to achieve.

Ask “What is the reason I am doing this?”. This will inform the choice of questions you make and recognise when to stop. Without a clear outcome in mind you will tend to end up just going round and round in circles until you or the client gets fed up and stops.

**Be Gentle**

When challenging a violation of the Meta Model remember that you are not just challenging a statement, you are challenging the persons entire map as a whole at that moment in time.

So be nice.

Use relaxed tonality and use “softeners” like “I’m curious”, or “I wonder”.

I tend to act like I am the one who is not understanding and requesting clarification rather than suggesting they are “wrong”.

I have seen people who are exceptionally competent at the Meta Model blow it because they go in the wrong direction or challenge the violation in a clunky and painful way.
THE CLASSIC PATTERNS:

1. HOW DO YOU KNOW THAT?

Original Pattern Name: “Mind Reading”

Basic Definition: This is probably the most important pattern in the Meta Model, it is very “big chunk”. It is purely a conclusion with everything else generalised, distorted and deleted out. It is used to describe the sort statements which are unknowable to the person in that context, yet they still make a claim to know.

Words or phrases that suggest this pattern: Any claim to knowledge where the reason for making that claim is not asserted. These statements often have an “is” in them, e.g. “this organisation is in turmoil”. Alternatively it can be phrases about a third person is feeling that cannot be verified and based on assumption, such as “you must be feeling/thinking...”.

2. WHO SAID THAT?

Original Pattern Name: “Lost Performative”

Basic Definition: The “Performer” in this context is the person you are citing as the reference. That performer has been deleted or “lost” from the statement.
Words or phrases that suggest this pattern: “I have heard”, “people say”, “they say”.

3. WHAT? EVERYTHING/EVERYONE/EVERY TIME?

Original Pattern Name: “(Universal) Quantifier”

**Basic Definition:** Phrases that disallow any alternative. This pattern occurs when someone attempts to characterise something as true for everything, everyone or all those in a set. We have an interesting quirk that when we discuss things we tend to delete everything else so the thing we are discussing becomes globalised. It is our total map at that moment in time. This can be useful, but not if we forget to “de-globalise it”. We tend to “bind” a quality (“good”, “bad”, etc) to everything, or every relevant thing it refers to.

Words or phrases that suggest this pattern: Everything, everyone, no one, it’s just that.

4. I CAN’T DO THAT!/I’D LOVE TO DO THAT!/I SHOULD DO THAT!

Original Patterns: Model Operators of Desire, Possibility and Necessity

**Basic Description:** These are the language patterns that tell us about the persons limiting beliefs and limits of their map, as well as how they motivate themselves. They are very powerful patterns to explore.
Words or phrases that suggest this pattern:  Can/can’t, could/couldn’t [possibility], should/shouldn’t, must/mustn’t [necessity], would like to, would love to [desire].

5. HOW DOES THAT CAUSE THAT?
Original Pattern: Cause and Effect

Basic Description: Simply where something is stated to cause something else. Gives part of a persons structure of a belief.

Words or phrases that suggest this pattern: If I eat [a certain food] it will make me sick.

6. THE WHEELBARROW TEST
Original Pattern: Nominalisation

Basic Description: This is where we take a verb (a process, a doing word) and turn it into a noun (a fixed entity). The common definition was “any noun you cannot put in a wheelbarrow”, hence the wheel barrow test.

Words or phrases that suggest this pattern: Nominalisation exist everywhere was we tend to have to “freeze” complex processes to understand or communicate them, we then forget to unfreeze them.
Complex verbs such as “relationship”, “organisation”, “depression”, etc are common ones.

7. SEE, HEAR, FEEL, OVER THERE, NOT TODAY, BUT TOMORROW...

*Original Pattern:* Predicates of time, space and sensory

**Basic Description:** These patterns tell us about the internal structure of the persons map. Temporal predicates give us an idea about the persons timeline. Spatial predicates give us details about the persons submodalities (particularly the position in space). Sensory predicates gives us information about the Representational System.

**Words or phrases that suggest this pattern:** “I need some distance on this”, “not right now”. Also look out for gestures that reflect the statement, such as pointing to the “future” on their timeline.

8. WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THAT...? (THIS MEANS THAT)

*Original Pattern:* Complex Equivalence

**Basic Description:** This pattern gives us information about the meaning a person attributes to a certain word or phrase.

**Words or phrases that suggest this pattern:** The classic example is “saying mean things makes you a bad person”. Also, statements that tend to
start with “because”, such as “I can’t do that because....”. Look out for where the meaning is implied or deleted.

9. COMPARED TO WHAT?

**Original Pattern:** Comparative Deletion

**Basic Description:** The clue is in the title! Simply a statement where the comparison is deleted.

**Words or phrases that suggest this pattern:** “He is better than me”, “That is best”, “that is rubbish”.

10. WHO /WHAT/WHERE/WHEN SPECIFICALLY?

**Original Pattern:** Unspecified Referential Index

**Basic Description:** Refers to the use of a personal pronoun (they, them, you, he, she, men, women, ...) when the context is unknown, or cannot easily be understood based on the preceding sentences.

**Words or phrases that suggest this pattern:** Non-contextualised use of “they”, “them”, “you”, etc
NOTE: Here would be an appropriate place to discuss one of the biggest misuses of Meta Model: The overuse of the word “specifically”. People often, when presented with a Meta Modal violation frame the challenge as “Who (or what, etc) specifically...”. Framing the question in this way is ONLY appropriate if you want to find out about the lack of referential index. Which is not always useful...

11. WHICH ONES?

Original Pattern: Generalised Nouns

Basic Description: Where a group of people or things are all lumped in together.

Words or phrases that suggest this pattern: “all plumbers rip you off”, “dogs are nasty”.

12. HOW EXACTLY?

Original Patterns: Unspecified Verbs

Basic Description: Where the verb has no context, it is difficult to understand how exactly the process occurred.

Words or phrases that suggest this pattern: “She hit me”.
A SIMPLE WORKED EXAMPLE

This is a fictional worked example to demonstrate possible ways to explore someone's statement of fact. It gives two different ways to approach it depending on the responses from the questions asked.

This worked example doesn’t have a fixed outcome (see “Know Your Outcome”, page 17) and is merely used to demonstrate some of the patterns that occur, some questions you can ask and what sort of results are common. It shows how you can guide the focus of the communication simply by asking interested questions.

The “client”’s comment in this situation are written in bold italic. The “practitioners” questions are written in italic, additional comments and guidance is written in normal font.

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“It is a lovely day...”

If someone says to you, “it is a lovely day” and you wanted to explore the logical process going on behind that statement of fact you could do something like this....

“How do you know?” - The classic “starter for 10”, if you are given a statement such as this, with no or very little reference and information, this
is probably the best place to start. The client has two choices as how they can answer that, lets look at each one separately and see where they can go.

As an aside: You could of course explore it in a different way and find out what they mean by “lovely” by asking “What do you mean by lovely?” - getting the Complex Equivalence (the “this means that” pattern, page 22).

“Well, people say that it is a lovely day.” - They have gone “outside of their map” for reference a Lost Performative. So you can ask:

“Who says that?”

NOTE: If you asked “Who specifically?” here, you would more than likely get a Lack of Referential Index pattern.

“Well everyone says don’t they? So it must be a lovely day.”

This statement gives us the structure of the clients belief and the reference points (experiences that create the belief). It also includes more than one Meta Model pattern: “Everyone says [(universal) quantifier], so it must be [model operator of necessity] a lovely day” [The whole pattern is cause and effect everyone says so = lovely day].
To explore this in more detail you can drill down into the meaning of that statement (the complex equivalent ‘this means that’ pattern), by saying something like “what about that mean.

Of course they could answer:

“*Because the sun is shining*”

They go “inside their map” for validation and give you the cause and effect pattern: Sun is shining [CAUSE], lovely day [EFFECT].

“What about the sun shining makes [means it is] it a lovely day?” - Getting the complex equivalence of the structure of the belief.

“Well, it makes me feel warm and everything looks better when the sun is shining” - here we have their Complex Equivalence, but also a (Universal) Quantifier (the use of the word “everything”). Which gives us a couple of reference points to their belief structure and a choice as which to explore depending on the outcome we want to achieve.
TIPS TO IMPROVE YOUR META MODEL SKILL

1. Begin by just listening out for generalisations, distortions and deletions.

2. Use it on yourself! When you say something, particularly when making a claim to knowledge or expressing an opinion, deconstruct it.

3. Pick a “pattern of the day”, listen out for it, and generate examples of it’s use and how to challenge it. My “advanced language pattern flash cards” may help you. You can get them here.

4. Watch interviews and look for patterns, clues and hints. (Youtube is great for this).

5. Watch debate shows such as “Question Time” (UK) and observe the different maps of the people on each side and what patterns they use to explain and justify their maps.

6. When someone makes a claim to knowledge, take the time to mentally map the pattern and how you would challenge it.

7. Start to introduce it into emails and written communication (it gives you time to edit).

8. Start to use it very gently in conversation with friends, colleagues, etc.
FINAL WORD

The Meta Model is one of the most complex, frustrating and annoying patterns in NLP.

It is also the most rewarding, satisfying and powerful.

Learn to love the Meta Model, become a little obsessive with it, a little “nerdy” about practicing it. Embrace it and use it regularly. Begin with yourself and work outwards from there.

Don’t “beat yourself up” if you are struggling. Be gentle with yourself, take your time, you will get there and when you do it will be worth it.

I wish you all the best

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