

# The Metalanguage of Paul Watzlawick, John Weakland and Richard Fisch The Meta Model of John Grinder and Richard Bandler

by

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In this paper, the masculine pronoun will apply to either gender  
The nominal pronoun will apply to the first author  
The plural pronoun will apply to both authors.

Those of us who earned our accreditations as certificants in NLP in another generation required to know the metalanguage as a mandatory requisite. We were also required to know it well! It was a distinct and critical part of the accreditation examination.

The metalanguage was configured by John Grinder and Richard Bandler in their seminal work *The Structure of Magic*. This metalanguage was formally designated as the Meta Model. In time we were to abbreviate it to M<sup>2</sup> because there was to an M<sup>3</sup>.

Since those of the pre-eminence of the Meta Model, it has suffered a diminution in significance. This reduction in its station has been the by-product of an unspoken policy, the merit of which has never been fully debated, openly and fully. This state of affairs is, for us, a mysterious anomaly as it has never been formally stated that the Meta Model was to be marked down.

In this paper we propose to re-examine the concept of the metalanguage and what we believe to be its undoubted value and worth as the *lingua franca* of human communication. Indeed when it was first proposed and set forth, the first instinctive and breathtaking intuition about it was that it did have value and worth.

Sadly, as we have indexed above, this intuition has now been displaced by a policy to depreciate it. We submit that this is an egregiously grotesque error. Until 1977m we NEVER knew this work:

METALANGUAGE.

We only knew it by our encounter of it in the work CHANGE by Paul Watzlawick, Ph.D., John Weakland, Ch.E. and Richard Fisch M.D. Here then is the relevant quote from this work:

Eventually we realized that this state of affairs was directly linked to the hierarchical structure of all language, communication, learning, etc. As we pointed out in Chapter I, to express or explain something requires a shift to one logical level above what is to be expressed or explained. No explaining can be accomplished on the same level: a metalanguage has to be used, but this metalanguage is not necessarily available. To effect change is one thing; to communicate about this change is something else: above all, a problem of correct logical typing and of creating an adequate metalanguage. In psychotherapeutic research, it is very common to find particularly gifted and intuitive therapists who think they know why they are doing what they are doing, but their explanations simply do not hold water. Conversely, many gifted writers are astounded and even annoyed at the deeper meanings that others read into their works. Thus, while the former believe they know, but apparently do not, the latter seem to know more than they are willing to acknowledge - which brings us back to Laing: “If I don’t know, I don’t know; if I don’t know I know, I think I don’t know.”

**Paul Watzlawick, John Weakland and Richard Fisch:** *Change* Problem Formation and Problem Resolution W. W. Norton & Company Inc. 1974 page 79.

In this quote is the first time that the concept and the place of the metalanguage in human communication is asserted. Here it argues the logical basis for it and indexes the worth and value it can have. We have to date, not encountered any counter argument to repudiate the validity of this conclusion that these three researchers of the Mental Health Institute, Palo Alto, Ca., arrived at.

This quote indexes the distinction that it is one logical level of activity to express X. To explain X is another logical level of activity. These researchers show that to do the latter, clearly requires a shift in logical levels. To date we know NO counter arguments to discount this conclusion.

They go on to say that to do this, “**a metalanguage has to be used.**” Again, to date we know of NO counter argument to revoke this conclusion. However, they go on to say that this metalanguage is “**not necessarily available.**” This is a clear statement that in 1974 (when *CHANGE* was published) this metalanguage did not exist.

It is one of the startling wonders of life that in 1975, one year later, that the Structure of Magic was published. In this work was the Meta Model of language. Now a meta model of language

is a metalanguage. Those of us who became aware of it and read it, intuitively knew that here was an extraordinarily powerful linguistic tool for communication and for gathering information. NLPers of that generation studied it until they knew it thoroughly and were satisfied that they could apply it with facility. We know from the book of Terence McClendon that the first generation of NLP trainers were grilled in the learning of the Meta Model and were whupped for asking the idiot question “why.”

However, in time, it became clear that the Meta Model was insufficient. Its insufficiency was unmercifully contrasted by the singular style of the powerful form of questions of Richard Bandler was able to formulate and put when he was at his best. They were clearly not questions that came from the Meta Model. It became very clear that what he was doing was derived from another model. He was the equivalent of the “**gifted and intuitive therapist**” that the above quote refers to. As we recall it, Richard did not attempt to explicate how he came to know to ask the kind of questions that he did. If he tried to do so, then by the logic of the above quote he would have failed.

It was in this context that Robert Dilts et alia tried to extract his linguistic patterns. This, we are now quite sure was an anomalous thing to do. It would have been better to seek the internal structure by which he had such a remarkably atypical style and manner of seeing things and thus by which he came to produce his extraordinarily exacting questions. Given that it was anomalous, the Sleight of Mouth Patterns was to have the only fate it could have. It faded away . . . Amen.

When the Sleight of Mouth Patterns came to its end, it exacerbated and concretized the idea that the Meta Model was truly “insufficient” Thus emerged the policy to discount it. It was as if one had a dwelling. When it was determined that the dwelling was insufficient, it was decided to amend the problem by adding an extension to it. However, the extension was built on sand and it fell. When the extension fell, the owners decided to demolish the original dwelling. In doing so, everyone was left without a roof! We say, half a roof is better than no roof.

So, I recently encountered a Master Certificant in NLP. On enquiry, it was obvious that he knew next to NOTHING about the Meta Model and he admitted it. “They don’t teach it, “ he said. Can you imagine our shock!

In spite of it all, the *cause celebre* for a metalanguage still stands. We say again that there has been no counter argument to date to abandon what Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch determined so long ago and which they so concisely and elegantly expressed in *Change*.

We know that as a linguistic decryption device of human ontology, the Meta Model or M<sup>2</sup> was constructed with the frame of Causal Modeling also universally known as thinking in the Blame

Frame or by the Question of WHY. It was also a corollary of this, that as a linguistic tool, it was further crippled by the concomitant linear thinking that is welded to it. We then came to recognize that the metalanguage was a far larger and more complex matter. As a gathering information tool we know it includes:

1. The Modified Meta Model or M<sup>3</sup>
2. Informal Logic
3. The No-Y-ian Model of language
4. Calibration
5. Adumbration

The above composite is the metalanguage and we call it the GATHERING INFORMATION MODULE or GIM. We also know it as the Watzlawick-Weakland-Fisch-metalanguage or WWF-ML.

The insufficiency of the Meta Model truly comes home when you compare its application in the two cases in Chapter 5r of *The Structure of Magic* with the nine cases in Chapter 9 of *Power and Elegance in Communication*. The power, efficiency and effectiveness of the proposed new metalanguage declares itself just as the power, efficiency and effectiveness of the Meta Model expressed itself when it first came into place.

We understand how it was that the creators of NLP focused on the Meta Model and did not see the place of Informal Logic. In any case Informal Logic was also an emergent field at the time. Informal logicians recognized finally that Formal Logic as a system was absolutely inappropriate and inadequate to the requirements of linguistic usages in daily life. This set them upon the path to enquire what was the true nature of the patterns of normal linguistic usages between ordinary people. From their explorations is an understanding of the way people normally apply linguistic usages for challenges and getting information.

From our studies of Informal Logic, we are quite sure that the metalanguage that Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch speak of include Informal Logic. In the work *Power and Elegance in Communication* we have fine tuned it to work in a truly efficient way.

Causality or Cause - Effect is a way of thinking. It is, in fact, the premier and all pervasive way of thinking in the world today. As a way of thinking it is the mother of all sorting devices. It is the Number 1 EMP (Enriched Meta Program). Alas it is linked to the useless question "why"!

Given that the father of Causality was Aristotle, Alfred Korzybski called it the Aristotelian way of thinking. He showed how it was an elementalistic way of thinking; and in his work *Science and Sanity* he went on to delineate the semantic ill-formedness that emerged out of this way of

thinking. In identifying the extent of its semantic ill-formedness, Alfred Korzybski took the next logical step. He tried to supplant this way of thinking by another that he named the non-elementalistic way. He abbreviated it to the non-el system. To attempt this shift in the way of thinking was to attempt the ultimate gestalt switch. This was to shift from “why” to “no why,” from Causality to Non-Aristotelian thinking, from Causal Modeling to non-el thinking.

To this day, this is the task to which the field of General Semantics that he founded is dedicated to achieve. Manifestly they have not succeeded in accomplishing this. The basis of this failure is to be found in Alfred Korzybski’s own insight:

**We do not realize the tremendous power the structure of an habitual language has. It is not an exaggeration to say that it enslaves us through the mechanism of *s.r.* (this term in NLP refers to an anchor) and that the structure which a language exhibits, and impresses upon us unconsciously, is automatically projected upon the world around us. This semantic power is indeed so unbelievable that I do not know anyone, even among well trained scientists, who, after having admitted some argument as correct, does not the next minute deny or disregards (usually unconsciously) practically every word he had admitted, being carried away again by the structural implications of the old language and his *s.r.***

Alfred Korzybski: *Science and Sanity* The International Non-Aristotelian Library Publishing Company 1933 pages 90 - 91.

If you set yourself the task of creating a non-causal system of thinking, you would automatically infer that it is most inappropriate to write:

X causes Y

X makes Y

This is why . . .

To write in such a way is to think it first. Well, in *Science and Sanity* you will read Alfred Korzybski doing exactly that. He himself was “**carried away again by the structural implications of the old language of his *s.r.*** (i.e., anchors).” In the journal of General Semantics, *The Bulletin*, their contributors literally use “why,” “cause,” “whose fault,” “make,” “blame,” “right,” “wrong,” etc. It is for this, that the non-el system has not taken. The attempted shift from the system of “why” to the system of “no why” failed. Yet if Alfred Korzybski and his General Semanticists had succeeded, the

consequences would have been colossal:

**To pass from one language to another is psychologically parallel to passing from one geometrical system of reference to another. The environing world which is referred to is the same for either language; the world of points is the same in either frame of reference. But the formal method of approach to the expressed item of experience, as to the given point in space, is so different that the resulting feeling of orientation can be the same neither in the two languages nor in the two frames of reference. Entirely distinct, or at least measurably distinct formal adjustments have to be made and these differences have their psychological correlate.**

**David G. Mandelbaum (Editor):** *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir in Language, Culture and Personality* University of California Press 1949 page 153.

A shift from “why” to “no why” is about the shift from one geometric system of language to another even though “**the environing world which is referred to is still the same . . .**” Here, by the gift of Edward Sapir is indexed what are the parameters that determine a gestalt switch.

Calibration is without doubt a very useful information gathering tool. However, the body language is not about the micro-analog shifts only. It is also about the internal semantic states that people have and exhibit and which people can read. The supportive evidence for this is found here in this quote:

**All of us are sensitive to the subtle changes in the demeanour of the other person as he responds to what we are saying or doing. In most situations people will at first unconsciously and later consciously avoid escalation of what I have termed the adumbrative or foreshadowing part of the communication from the barely perceptible signs of annoyance to open hostility. In the animal world, if the adumbrative process is short-circuited or bypassed, vicious fighting is apt to occur. In humans in the international - inter-cultural sphere of life, many difficulties can be traced to the failure to read the adumbrations correctly. In such instances, by the time people discover what is going on, they are so deeply involved that they can't back out.**

**Edward T. Hall:** *The Hidden Dimension* Anchor Books Double Day & Company Inc. 1969 page

In our view, we recommend that in NLP trainings, future be taught to adumbrate. The value to be able to do so is clearly cited here. Problem conditions can be **“traced to the failure to read adumbrations correctly.”** It is for this that in our No-Y-ian trainings we teach our students to adumbrate

This then is a brief scan of the metalanguage, its critical worth and undoubted value as the *lingua franca* of human communication. We hold the view that without it, the chance for that wonderful NLP thing called RAPPORT will be zero-zero-zero.

#### **References:**

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