Die SOPHISTen

Neuro-Linguistic Programming: Snake Oil or Science?

In the early 1970's as Noam Chomsky's linguistic theories spread through the academic world, researchers from various disciplines recognized parallels between Chomsky's view of language and related complex questions relating to the human mind. Once such area is psychological therapy or simply, therapy.

Richard Bandler and John Grinder met while both were at the University of Santa Cruz, in California during the early 1970's. Bandler was a student of psychology and Grinder was a professor of Linguistics, but their different viewpoints mixed symbiotically. The result was a scientific study of the methods utilized by the most successful therapists known. To gain a broad perspective, Bandler and Grinder chose to study therapists using vastly different methods in practice.

After hundreds of hours of observation, Bandler and Grinder found Chomsky's linguistic theories useful to describe the process of human understanding and change. They named the three common errors of language and thought generalization, deletion and distortion, taken largely from the titles of similar terms in linguistics.

The story of three hard working dingalings. General I. Zation, Dee Leet Shun and Dizzy "Dis" Tortion (Generalization, Deletion and Distoriton, respectively).

General I. Zation likes nothing more than to make broad proclamations. Being a general, Mr. Zation naturally makes great and grand proclamations like, "Everybody but me is a knucklehead," "All people with short hair are skinheads," "All tax collectors are evil,"and similarly broad, sweeping statements fitting a General.

Dee Leet Shun is from Shangri-La. She has a hard time communicating here so she has to take a lot of shortcuts. Being from Shangri-La, Dee is also a little lazy as everything there was free and easy. She figures, why bother saying thousands of words when only a few might work just as well? She spends most of her time wishing she was back in Shangri-La and taking it easy, so work is not a great priority for her. Besides, talking in English/German isn't so easy when you are from Shangri-La.

Dizzy "Dis" Tortion is the real ringleader of the group. She has a real warped sense of humor and nothing pleasures her more than to put mustaches on all paintings, spray eyeglasses rose colored and basically add a little bit of chaos here and there. She is pretty smart and has General I. Zation and Dee Liet Shun working for her. She sits back and sees that the other two dim-bulbs do their work in a simple fashion that suits Dizzy's warped fancy. Despite her negatives, sometimes the spin she puts on a situation is hillariously funny or even downright genius in some of the ways she views at a situation.

The three of them work for Mr. and Mrs. E. Go. The Go's are naturally always on the go! Moving here, running there, planning this, doing that. The Go's like to take a lot of pictures and collect information and stuff like that. The Go's have no time to classify, store and sort all the junk they collect through their hectic modern lives so they hired three people to build their library of life expereince for them. The Go's consult this library when making decisions, before talking to people and whatnot. Being modern people, they can access the information instantaneously, anywhere in the world (through the original ethernet connection), just as soon as General I. Zation, Dee Leet Shun and Dizzy Tortion have filed, classified and integrated all information together into the library of life experience.

The Go's instructions for the three workers are simple. When storing or retrieving from the library, try to summarize expereince as much as possible so that it can be quickly retrieved when we need it. This is broken into three simple tasks. (1) General I. Zation will generalize facts to simplify dealing with things. For example, Once you have ridden a bike, you can ride (almost) any bike. (2) Dee Leet Shun will delete unnecessary information. For example, when storing information about any given day, the exact temperature is not needed. Hot, Warm or Cold usually will do fine. (3) Finally, Dizzy Tortion will distort facts as needed for humor and innovation so that different perspectives can be gotten from the same experience.

Despite their faults, all three workers mean well, are generally hard working and are extreme creatures of habit. They are just not real good at judging when they have done too much or too little work before classifying and integrating something into the knowledge bank. So when storing or retrieving information, it

usually gets over generalized, completely deleted or totally distorted and sometimes all three at the same time!

So when Mr. and Mrs. E. Go consult their library of life experience, usually the information is not quite accurate, is missing or has been altered a bit too much. Furthermore, if Mr. and Mrs. Ego are too busy to do the retrieval themselves, the one or all three of the helpers must find the information and deliver it to the Go's. Once again, generalizations, deletions and distortions can be added to the original expereince! This is not very good as it sometimes causes Mr. and Mrs. E. Go to make bad decisions, understand incorrectly or just seem like they stepped off the spaceship from Pluto with some of the stuff they proclaim! This directly and adversely affects how the world deals with the Go's and how the Go's deal with the world.

Fortunately for the Go's, Mr.'s Bandler and Grinder have discovered a way to determine how General I. Zation, Dee Leet Shun and Dizzy Tortion are messing around with facts, losing information and generally making a mess of things.

Being habitual, hard working, and well meaning , General I. Zation, Dee Liet Shun and Dizzy Tortion alter facts in regular ways before they file information into the library of experience. These regular alterations of experience data can be determined externally by trained observers merely by studying the communications of Mr. and Mrs. Ego as they interact with other people. The regular ways that Mr. and Mrs. Ego's helpers alter information for easy storage and retrieval are very similar to rules in Linguistics called transformations. Transformations play a role in linguistics that is predictable and known. Therefore, applying the science of linguistics to human behavior and interaction, Bandler and Grinder developed a technique for Mr. and Mrs. E. Go to correct the information in their library of life experience. Furthermore, with time and occasional direct supervision, new habits can be formed so that General I. Zation, Dee Liet Shun and Dizzy Tortion can be trained in their tasks to a proper degree, suitable to the situation.

The following are largely precursors to the above. Notes or semi-thoughts of a sort.

Every person has a certain model of reality with which they continually consult in order to speed communications and understanding. The model of reality is sort of like a personal library where each book and picture and sentence in the library has been organized by each individual in a way that they best understand and use. The data is stored largely by three hard working but quite stupid fellows named generalization, deletion and distortion. They do all the dog work of simplifying, organizing and storing data into the personal library. They are so dumb that they always act in the same way in regards to data of all types.

The are the right guys for the job and they like what they do. They like what they do so much that they usually overdo it. (isn't something worth doing also worth overdoing?) Generalization, for instance, likes to do nothing more than generalize everything and at all times. Hand generalization a stack of white paper with the blueprint of the universe and he would be no happier than call everything simply, "stuff". A fine generalization indeed, but not very good when one must consult the personal library and find that the blueprint for the world is simply "stuff."

Similarly, Deletion wants to remove as much data as possible so as to do everything as fast as possible. Deletion would agree with Generalizations in the above example and also call the blueprint of the universe "stuff," but not quite for the same reasons. Generalization usually wants to keep information, but in a simpler form. Deletion just wants to get rid of information, that is the simplest solution of all! Hence, Deletion might go that extra step and perhaps junk the blueprints entirely.

Distortion sort of supervisises Deletion and Generalization and when the first two can't decide what to Generalize or Delete, Distortion comes along, adds some artistic touches, holds the problem upside down and kicks it back to Generalization and Deletion or stores it himself directly. Distortion is not so much concerned for exactness but strives for higher goals like, humor and new perspectives. Distortion is also somewhat of a spin doctor as Distortion likes to put a spin on things to keep things interesting. After all, just passing data back and forth all the time is not only boring but also time consuming! Have some fun and make all the 'a"s 'e's. Or put mustaches on all the pictures!

Some people do manage to get these fellows to work really well together. Distortion distorts information in a way that provides an interesting view of reality while Generalization does make generalizations accurate to the situation and Deletion does not go crazy and throw out the baby with the bathwater!

But usually, the information stored bears little resemblance to the input data. Certain information is always deleted, other information is always over/under generalized and the rest of the information is distorted beyond recognition! The only good point in this mess is that the altered information is altered in a consistent manner by all three double-edged swords of Deletion, Generalization and Distortion! The same three guys that helped you build your library are the same ones that put some books upside down or spray painted all the pictures green and made room for new information by throwing out important information!

Because the three workers act in a consistent(ly bad) manner, trained observers are able to find the consistently made errors merely by studying how one speaks! That is really fortunate because nearly everyone can speak! The careful listener can then assist in rearranging one's personal library so that when one refers to it (as we do continuously) we can get the information in the correct form, the correct color, and the correct orientation useful to the situation.

But observing consistently made errors of memory storage is just the beginning! Besides correcting memory, one must also find those three jokers and correct them also before they mess up some more data! After all, Generalization Deletion and Distortion are working constantly extending your personal library. Each helper must be trained in their job so that they learn when to act and when they must simply record and store perceptions unaltered. After all, these three guys are sort of knuckleheads and they have their habits and it is tough to change a habit! Additionally, their job is usually so boring, they are nearly unconscious when they do it! And it is double difficult to change someone that is nearly unconscious! But their intent is to do a good job, so with persistence and review of what they do on a daily basis, one can keep one's personal library quite in order and continually organizing further in the spare time. Ultimately, one can observe one's own communication and thought patterns to find out how data storage and retrieval seems to be going on internally and make self corrections! That is ultimately better and much cheaper.

In their books, Bandler and Grinder demonstrated their results of applying objective linguistic theories to the field of psychological therapy. Convincing evidence is given which clearly exhibits that subjective psychological change has a scientific and objective component which people can be taught.

The results of their study of the process of change is summarized thusly: Bandler and Grinder discovered that people often distort their perception of reality in regular and predictable ways. Furthermore, they found that Chomsky's theory of language excellently modeled the alterations of linguistic reality. So Bandler and Grinder then applied Chomsky's theory to therapy which indicate that similar processes occur in the mind with the cognition of reality as occur in the mind in the cognition of language. (The language structures in the mind are either very similar or identical to the overall cognition facility of the mind). Fascinating.