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Jan Ardui and Peter Wrycza

Unravelling Perceptual Positions

*Real tourism is not to see new places,
but to see the world as others do.*

Marcel Proust

Introduction

NLP models come and go. Those that stay generally have something special. Such is the case with perceptual positions. A similar distinction was present in early versions of meta-programmes, with the notion of “switching referential index”. But it is the model of perceptual positions developed by John Grinder and Robert Dilts, and promulgated from their respective centres in somewhat different codings, that has caught on.

The rapid spread of the perceptual positions model and its continuing popularity reflects its practical simplicity. It provides an elegant way to understand important patterns in our relationships with ourselves and with others.

However, perceptual positions are also slippery. They lack the simple definable boundaries of sensory systems, for instance. NLP trainers define them differently; people access them differently; people often fuse or confuse them; and what one attends to in a particular position can be mistaken for the position itself.

Team-teaching with other NLP trainers in Bali in 1993, we found we had somewhat different interpretations of this model. This article results from our attempts to clarify our representations of the various positions. In the process, we found we also used an important position, long overlooked in NLP—a fourth position, “we”, representing a collective awareness, the awareness of relationship. Here we introduce our findings and application of this position. We also attempt to present a coherent model of the essential positions

and give an account of how the ability to take different perceptual positions relates to the structure of subjective experience.