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What is NLP? A Very Important Question

Although the term “neuro-linguistics” was in use much prior to the 1970s, the term “neuro-linguistic programming” and its “NLP” acronym were essentially created during that decade. It was a new term, and its creators, presumably Richard Bandler and John Grinder, certainly could not have foreseen all that was to come from it. So over twenty years later it should not surprise us that the science, field, discipline, techniques, technology and/or product that we call NLP today has outgrown the original, scant ideas about what it was back then. Today, nlp has not one definition but many, and the debate about them continues to generate a great deal of controversy, as well as confusion.

In this article I contend that the debate is based on inconsistent referencing of both context and “logical types” as described by Bateson, and that the resulting confusion is more pervasive than we might care to admit. Additionally, I will assert that the debate is vitally important to the future of NLP, and must be attended to if the field is to continue to evolve in substantive ways.

Starting definitions of NLP

The label of “NLP” was coined by Grinder and Bandler, so it is to them that I first look for definition of the term.

Richard Bandler’s oft-quoted statement is that NLP is “an attitude and a methodology that brings about a trail of techniques.” The attitude is identified as “wanton curiosity” and the methodology is that of modeling. The trail of techniques, of course, is what most people trained in NLP are most familiar with. In this definition, notice the deliberate distinction between the “attitude/methodology” and “techniques.”

In a lawsuit brought by Bandler (1997), NLP is defined as: