



NLP and other Self-Improvement

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Empiricism in NLP : Test Operate Text Exit (TOTE)

Epistemic status: Presentation of an established technique and history. I learned most of my NLP knowledge from Chris Mulzer who's one of Bandler's top students. The Origins of Neuro-Linguistic Programming by John Grinder and Frank Pucelik is my main source for the history.

What's NLP? In 1971 Frank Pucelik and Richard Bandler started teaching Fritz Perls's Gestalt therapy in a group at the University of California, Santa Cruz where the two were in a Bachelor program of psychology. They were joined by John Grinder who was an assistant professor in Linguistics who had just finished writing his PHD thesis on the topic of deletions. As a linguist he had projects like modeling the language of the Tanzanian Wagogo tribe to be able to communicate with them. He had the idea that if he would create a model of how Fritz Perls was using language to get the results he got in his Gestalt therapy work, he should be able to achieve the same results.

Just like modeling the customs of the Wagogo tribe, the goal was to copy the linguistic patterns that were present in Perls's work to be able to achieve the same results. As a side job Bandler was transcribing lectures of the late Fritz Perls, so they had plenty of video material to study. In addition to the videos Grinder could also study Bandler and Pucelik as they were doing their Gestalt work.

Modeling in NLP

Later they described the modeling process that they followed as a five-step process description of NLP Modeling:

1. Identification of and obtaining access to a model in the context where he or she is performing as a genius.
2. Unconscious uptake of model's patterns without any attempt to understand them consciously.
3. Practice in a parallel context to replicate the pattern. The intention is to achieve a performance of the model's patterns which is equal to the model him/herself.
4. Once the modeler can consistently reproduce the pattern in an applied fashion with equal results, the modeler begins the coding process.
5. Testing to determine if the pattern as coded can be transferred successfully to others who will in turn be able to get equally effective results from the coded results ... and then, ultimately to teach those processes to others

Every Monday Bandler and Pucelik had their Gestalt group and the Thursday afterwards Grinder tried to do the same thing as their group to another group of students. They also got additional students to form additional study groups. In their own account they spent around 30 hours per week engaging in modeling and experimenting.

The three lead the group and spent according to their own account 30 hours per week engaging in modeling and experimenting. In addition to Fritz Perls they modeled other famous therapists like Milton Erickson and Virginia Satir as well to learn their ways of interacting with clients. They also modeled people who they believed to have changed themselves like people who overcome their own phobias.

Ideologically, the NLP developers didn't like trusting authorities. They were also skeptical of developing elaborate theoretical models that intended to fully reflect reality. At the time the cybernetics community provided a skeptical and constructivist framework from which the NLP developers took ideas about how to deal with knowledge. They added the P in Neuro-Linguistic-Programming to refer to programming in the sense it was thought of in the Biological Computer Laboratory. The Biological Computer Laboratory was led by Heinz von Förster who saw cybernetics as an alternative way to science to gather knowledge.

Test-Operate-Test-Exist (TOTE).

From cybernetics work (over George Miller) they borrowed the concept of Test-Operate-Test-Exist (TOTE). In the classic cybernetics example of the thermostat, the thermostat first measures the temperature (*test*) and whether it's under the desired level. Then it pumps warm water (*operate*). The thermostat measures the temperature again (*test*). If the temperature is at the desired level it shuts off (*exit*) and otherwise it goes back the previous step.

In NLP the TOTE model gets used, to see whether a technique such as the Fast Phobia Cure works on a patient. Before doing the Fast Phobia Cure the NLP practitioner is supposed to calibrate a test. If a client has a spider phobia and is told to imagine a spider, their body language will react to show fear.

Once the NLP practitioner has their test that validates the fact that the phobia is there, they will do the Fast Phobia Cure. After they have done the Fast Phobia Cure they will test again with the test they calibrated earlier. If the test still shows the phobia, they know that the Fast Phobia Cure didn't do the job for the client yet and they can try again with a slightly different approach. If the test doesn't show a fear response anymore, it shows that the Fast Phobia Cure had a success.

This way of testing for the perceived body language of a patient has the disadvantage that it's subject to an ability to read body language. It's testing against a subjective measure instead of testing against an objective measure. The advantage is that the feedback-cycles are very fast. Fast feedback cycles allow a practitioner to develop practical knowledge faster than the feedback cycles of the traditional psychological research.

It's best practice to add further tests and tell a person who was just treated with a Fast Phobia Cure, to face the fear in their own lives and report back. It's however not an either/or between tests of whether the phobia exists in situations of daily life and testing whether it can be triggered verbally. Mixing tests with fast feedback with more reliable tests with longer feedback cycles allows for more learning to happen.

As rationalists, when we invent a rationality technique, the paradigm of TOTE is useful. If we are clear about the desired outcomes, both those that are directly available and those that are available over longer time-frames, we can more

effectively learn about whether our new rationality technique works and how it's done most effectively.

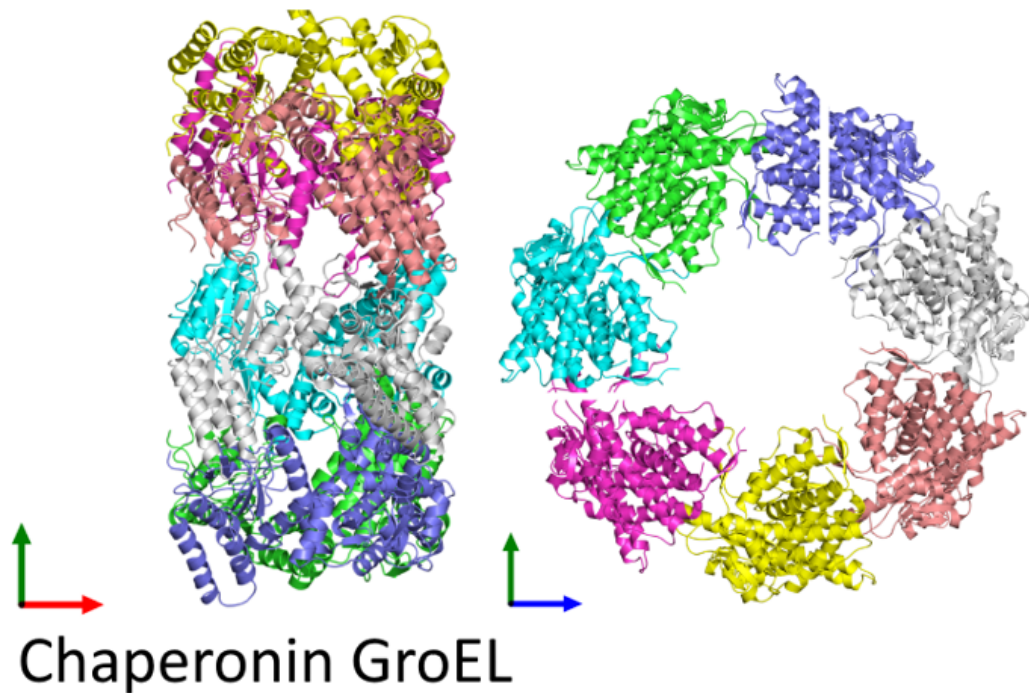
Not all communication is manipulation: Chaperones don't manipulate proteins

Epistemic status: Original work, explanation of a mental model that I developed for a few years that brings together knowledge from existing fields.

Is all communication manipulation? I hear this sentiment frequently expressed and want to explain in this article that there's nonmanipulative communication by using protein folding as an intuition pump.

It is common knowledge within molecular biology that proteins fold into their native state. That native state is the folded shape that possesses a minimum of free energy. Finding global minima is however a hard problem. For bigger proteins, it's at the time of writing - still impossible to calculate the shape.

Even in vivo protein folding is a hard problem. Cells are densely packed with many different molecules that push against each other. Frequently, resources are wasted when a protein misfolds into a shape that's not its native state.



Nature is clever and developed a way to help proteins fold into their native state. Cells produce chaperones. A chaperone surrounds an unfolded protein to protect it from outside influences to help the protein to fold into its native state. A chaperone doesn't need to know the native state of a protein to help the protein fold into that state. Instead of manipulating the protein like a sculpture, it holds space for a protein to be safe from outside influences, while it folds into its native form.

This allows a chaperone that works in an uncomplicated way to achieve a result that very complex machine learning algorithms currently don't achieve. The machine learning algorithm tries to figure out the best way for the protein to fold while the chaperone just lets the protein find this way by itself.

The psychologist Carl Rogers advocated that good psychologists act in the same way *nonmanipulative* with their patients. In his view, it's not the job of the therapist to solve the problem of their patient by manipulating the patient into a healthy form. A good therapist isn't like a sculptor sculpts a sculpture. The job of the therapist is rather to hold a space for the patient in which the patient is safe from certain forces that prevent the patient from finding their healthy authentic *native state*.

I don't intend to argue for *nonmanipulative communication* from a moral perspective. In cases where you know how to fix the problem of the person you are talking with and are confident that the other person will follow your advice, [go ahead](#). If you don't know what will help a person, taking a nonmanipulative approach is often more effective than giving the person advice that they have already heard a dozen times.

If you tell an obese person that they should lose weight *again*, you add additional stress which can make it harder for them to think about the issue. In the Rogerian model effective change isn't about creating enough pressure by telling the obese to lose weight till they finally get it. For an obese person who feels shame for being obese, it can be hard to clearly think about the issue when they are alone. Providing the person a space where they can speak about their challenges in a way where they aren't feeling judged can help them to make progress for themselves.

There's a mystic quality to being *nonmanipulative*. Even Carl Rogers, who proposed the ideal, that all interactions should be nonmanipulative, sometimes fell short of it. For practical purposes it's often more useful to do what makes sense in the moment and what helps the other than to live up to an ideal of being perfectly nonmanipulative.

On the other hand, having a mental model of what it means to be *nonmanipulative* can be very helpful to understand communication practices like Rogerian psychotherapy, Gestalt Therapy and Circling.

I invite you to explore communicating in a way that holds the space for others to find themselves.