

The Magic of Writing

Neurolinguistic Patterns for Effective Written Communication

by Annalisa Pardini

(Translation from Italian by Diana Bombelli)



Une femme écrivant une lettre (Johannes Vermeer, 1666)

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On Writing and Awareness

Neurolinguistics: coordinates of knowledge and emotions

by Annalisa Pardini

We all write, and there are times when we regret having used words that were imprecise or daring: the former, far from our reality, and the latter, sincere but inappropriate for the reader. It is very useful to be aware of these differences: motivations that lie underneath language, once understood, make our job as writers easier.

We are referring to *neurolinguistic models*, those perceptive mechanisms, those logical, psychological and emotional schemes upon which language is based. We are referring to those filters through which the subjective experience becomes thought, the thought becomes word, and the word becomes writing.

Reality and Representations

“The map is not the territory¹”: the representation of reality is not reality. Reality is objective, while any of its representations is purely subjective.

We need to create maps of the world that surrounds us. Although partial, maps are the instruments we use to feel oriented: reality (R) confronts the individual and his neuro-social ties. After this filtering process it becomes a representation of reality (RR), a personal map that guides our future experiences.

Language, in turn, translates the map of the world into words: it is the representation of the representation of reality (RRR).

Since the 60's Noam Chomsky has been using “transformational grammar” to analyze the mechanisms that allow language to represent the world. In the 70's John Grinder (a linguist) and Richard Bandler (a mathematician) synthesized transformational grammar with the studies of Gregory Bateson, those of Paul Watzlawick and of the research group in Palo Alto, CA. Grinder and Bandler added field research to these theories: they examined the hypnosis techniques by Milton Erickson and the

¹ The principle is by Alfred Korzybski, and it is published in *Science and Sanity*, The International Non-Aristotelian Library Publishing, Lakeville, Connecticut, 1933.

psychotherapies by Fritz Perls and Virginia Satir to understand how they could induce change in patients just by using words.

Subjective Experience

From this synthesis, *neuro-linguistic programming* (NLP) was born, defined as the study of subjective experience: in fact it analyzes the schemes or *programming* created by the interaction between the brain and language. As the linguist Robert Dilts explains, PNL examines how language affects our mental programming and other functions in our nervous system. It also studies the way our mental programming, together with the nervous system, affect language and the linguistic models.

This is the *dual significance of language*: it is moulded by our map of the world, and it moulds it back in return.

The map, as we've seen, is essential for people to get oriented. It is the result of innate strategies that allow us to reduce the world into a liveable dimension: these adjustments, by delimiting the experience, end up limiting it. There are three kinds of adjustments: generalization, deletion, distortion.

Generalization removes an element from the originating experience, extending it until it represents the whole category; *deletion* excludes some parts of the experience so that it narrows it down to a useful dimension; *distortion* produces changes into the actual sensorial experience: imagination and artistic transfiguration are examples of the latter.

These three processes also shape the linguistic representation.

writer

reader

$R1 \rightarrow RR1 \rightarrow RRR1 \rightarrow \quad \cap \quad \rightarrow RRR2 \rightarrow RR2 \rightarrow R2$

message

R1 and R2 (the realities of the two speakers), RR1 and RR2 (their maps), RRR1 and RRR2 (their languages) inevitably do not coincide.

The Language of the Senses

Accountable for these subjective maps are the senses. Sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell represent our neurological filters: each one of us favors one channel for perceiving and processing information. We all have a dominant representational system. According to the favored sense, we can identify three systems: *visual* (V), *auditory* (A) and *kinesthetic* (K touch-taste-smell). Favoring one over another leads to coding the experience through an involuntary choice of words: words that are specified through senses, that make the perception process behind them explicit. For example:

V: observe, exhibit; imagine, prospective; clear, spectacular; clearly, immensely. *We'll focus on details further on.*

A: listen, explain; harmony, silence; loud, screeching; subdued, clamoring. *We immediately reached an accord.*

K: try, involve; aroma, contact; heavy, tasty; concretely, softly. *Do you get it?*

Furthermore, each system is then defined by submodalities that in turn define perception: color, dimension, distance, position, movement for V; volume, tone, timber, rhythm for A; consistency, intensity, temperature, pressure for K. Individuals are more sensitive to a critical submodality: as it varies, the perception and representation of reality change as well. In the case of the kinesthetic individual, for instance, will emotions be strong, vivacious, intermittent or warm?

Building Trust

When we tune to the representational system and to the interlocutor's submodality, we get him ready to receive our message. This is the road to *rapport*: an intimate relationship that brings maps together and creates an environment of trust. The *rapport* can be instantaneous or dictated by reciprocal familiarity. But it can also be the result of a voluntary disposition towards the interlocutor, by going through three actions:

1. *calibration*: analyze his linguistic choices
2. *trace*: harmonize with those choices, imitate their useful aspects: "*Speak your reader's language*"
3. *guide*: stop the tracing and proceed with the reader to the desired objective.

To Inform or to Seduce?

Once you harmonize with the reader, you have two choices: do you want your words to be *clear* or *vague*? Do you plan to *inform* or to *seduce*? There are instances where being explicit is necessary:

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In other cases we can be fuzzy:

You might be tempted to leave behind those things that helped you get where you are now.

The paths of generalization, deletion and distortion can be also walked from end to start, in order to trace the origin of the underlying experience and enrich the message through *questions* that penetrate the interlocutor's map:

Nobody appreciates what I'm saying → who is not appreciating? What are you saying, specifically? (*generalization*)

I'm scared → by what? (*deletion*)

I regret my decision → is your decision a closed event, or an on-going process? (*distortion*)

They can also be exploited to maintain communications in a state of fascinating indetermination, stimulating the choices of the reader:

He who knows how to read your mind always knows what you want...

We have two languages then, and we should learn how to use them at their best.

Those Words Precisely

When we write, the importance of the words we choose increases with the lack of some paraverbal and nonverbal elements: we cannot share the voice, the smiles, the expressions, the body language of the writer, all very powerful in any interpersonal exchange. But we have words: *those words*, the *what* and the *how*: precious hints to understand what the writer is thinking, the reasons behind his communication. This is revealed by sense-specific words and by the way they are joined together. It is also revealed by the modelling processes, rich as they are with information and choices. Here they are:

Generalizations make specific experiences seem or become generic. It happens, for instance, in sentences that appear to be a judgement that stands by itself, without indicating the source of the judgement (these are called, as a matter of fact, *lost performatives*). Their strength lies in their ability to prompt the reader into action, by presenting a statement that appears to be objective:

Honesty is important.

The same applies to some verbs indicating the modality (called, appropriately, *modal operators*) used in the action, often more important than the action itself:

I work / I want to work / I have to work / I can work / I hope to work

They can also soften a request, or invite the reader to action:

You can do it!

To generalize a message, some adjectives, pronouns and adverbs can become very useful: *always, never, nobody, several, nothing*, known as *universal quantifiers*:

You are always nice

Even the use of generic subjects, or the use of *you* and *us* instead of *I*, triggers the process of identification with the readers, who are made to recognize a statement as their own:

You understand how one can feel in certain cases.

Deletions only select pieces of information: the informational voids may work as powerful stimuli for the reader. This is the case when sentences don't complete or specify the action, and with comparatives and superlatives:

I am satisfied.
John is the best.

Somewhere between generalization and deletion are those sentences that omit the referential indexes, that is, that lose information essential to the full comprehension of the action: who, what, how, where, when:

Young people don't read newspapers.

Distortion is an improper projection of one's personal map onto reality. The most common kinds of distortion are *nominalizations*, that is, the act of turning a verb into a noun (*to love* > *love*, *to respect* > *respect*):

It is a matter of respect.

These can drive people away from the real experience and create misunderstandings. But it is precisely this uncertainty and the resulting evocative intention that drives readers to read in them the messages that are - or appear to be - the result of their own choices.

Another kind of distortion is the mind reading: it presumes that it knows the other people's behaviours or situations. However, if there is rapport, the reader can identify with the suggested thoughts:

We provide you with the services you need.

A similar process of identification can also occur while dealing with arbitrary correlations of events (cause/effect), even when pushed to the limit where it becomes paradoxical (complex equivalence):

Your voice is soothing.

Effectiveness Propellers

We've seen how important the language of the senses and the modelling processes are. Equally important are some of the choices of lexical and morphosyntactic nature. **Maluma, takete, anchors.** Words are not only either rational or sensorial. Even when they are meaningless they have shape, sound, emotional charge: as a matter of fact, we can talk about "maluma" words that are perceived as smooth and soft, including phonemes such as *m, a, l, o, n*, etc. or, in contrast, "takete" words, pungent and rough, including significantly more phonemes *t, z, r, c, k*, etc than malumas.

Using *proper names* carries emotional impact. It brings the reader pleasantly in, or helps limit disappointment when disagreement is shown:

Do you understand the reasons behind my hesitation, Mark?

There are also words known as *anchors*, because, as the name suggests, they are anchored, attached to a feeling/sensation: they trigger memories and emotions in the reader. Anchoring is a natural process, one that can be intentionally reproduced:

Reach out and touch someone (AT&T).

Conjunctions and syntax What about the power that *conjunctions* and phrases have in guiding the reader through text interpretation? *But, although, however, if, and, even if:* they carry an emotional value that transcends their syntactic role:

I believe you, but I will check.

What the recipient reads is: *but I will check*. She feels a correction that squashes the meaning of the preceding words. In order to reduce this attrition it is better to use the copulative *and*, or the comma or the colon: *I believe you, I will check*. Even *syntax* has a precise emotional role: it shows which element we want to emphasize:

I've been waiting for her for hours
For hours I've been waiting for her
She's the one I've been waiting hours for

Questions and ambiguity. *Ambiguities* depend on multiple factors. Often they are intentional, as in newspapers' headlines, or in some advertising campaigns:

When It Rains, It Pours [Morton Salt]

And what about *questions*? Powerful emotional hooks. With some important differences: questions starting with *how?* create a sense of sympathy with the interlocutor, whereas those starting with *why?* probe into more private grounds, thus interrupting the *rapport*.

Why did you do it?

A technique that works well in rapid exchanges, in e-mail, Web forums, and chats is called *interrogative tracing*, that is, the repetition in interrogative form of the last statement made by the interlocutor.

- ... thus I would appreciate being kept in higher regard.
- You would appreciate being kept in higher regard? You could then...

The power of questions is clear also when they follow one another in order always to obtain *yes* as an answer, inducing a pleasant feeling in the recipient:

Do you want to feel good? enjoy your vacation? be happy of your choices?

A particular kind of rhetorical question, the *tag question*, requests confirmation of what has just been asked, thereby reassuring the reader:

Wise investment, right?

Questions are sometimes hidden, but they are still effective, working at an unconscious level:

I wonder whether you'd like to improve your language skills.

Suggestions and hidden commands. This is the case of phrases included in a larger context, always in strategic places such as at the end of the sentence or by the name of the reader:

You didn't have much time to appreciate my work yesterday. You can now do it at your leisure, David.

Negative commands, on the other hand, are dangerous double-edged swords: when used on purpose, while cautioning the readers *not* to do what we actually wish them to do, we can trick them:

Please don't squeeze the Charmin. (Charmin)

The brain, in fact, first perceives with the right hemisphere, instinctive-emotional, and only later with the left one: *no smoking* makes us immediately think of cigarettes. The ban usually tempts infraction: we evaluate whether to risk it or not.

Timeline. *Temporal predicates*, adverbs and verbs that express the development of an action in time (*to continue, to stop, now, while, then*), places the perception of an event or a state as being in the past, present or future:

Did you give up already? Try again.

Time, before being translated into words, is in fact a subjective perception. Neurolinguistics refers to *timeline*, or the way each of us perceives images, sounds, sensations, and puts them in the past, present or future. Using moods and tenses in a precise way can therefore help smooth a conflict or rekindle hope.

Temporal subordinates express the development of a situation, as well. When preceding the main sentence, they create a sense of anticipation in the reader – who is then ready to receive the message – thereby acting as a hidden suggestion:

When you'll be done, you will agree with me.

Incorporation. This is a technique that absorbs potentially disturbing elements, and that benefits from them. It is well applied to public speeches, during meetings and classes for instance: *As we hear the phone ringing, we should be pleased with our ability to remain focussed...* It is also applied to writing, when an element external to the argument challenges the credibility of our message, or the attention it requires:

Even during these times where we have to pay attention to cost, we can work towards developing new competencies.

Competition is getting tighter, it's a fact, but we are still able to assert our identity.

Reframing. The transformation of the meaning of an experience, having the goal of overcoming a limiting belief and creating harmony. Experiences need to be relative, as opposed to being absolute: the half-empty glass, from another angle, is half full:

You are picky: it won't help you with your friends, but it will be useful at work.

Reframing also happens when we believe that a badly-worded sentence is the result of good intentions or when we try to overcome the barriers existing between us and the reader by tuning into his representational system.

Pattern interruption. A system that unsettles the expressive clichés and moves around opposition. Especially with the rapid exchange of e-mails, we can interrupt the interlocutor's aggressiveness, for instance asking enough questions that makes it impossible for him to reply:

What do you think about it? What do you mean by saying that you don't agree? What do you suggest doing? What are your expectations?

Or avoiding responding to his message, and turning his attention to something else:

- This is hard because [...]
- By the way, there was something else I wanted to talk to you about [...]

Both choices evade the reader's strategy: his mental processes can't complete their planned course, and the subsequent sense of loss can provoke even the most reluctant of readers to open up.

An Example: “Il Pacco del Diffidente”

Neurolinguistics starts as a therapeutic tool, and then it becomes a pragmatic approach to human communications.

We can verify this everywhere, in print or online. An example? www.esperya.com. This is an Italian gastronomic site, where sales are managed in a smart and courteous way, especially because of the way the text is written. Let's analyze the “*Il Pacco del Diffidente*”, an Italian *double entendre* winking at us from the very beginning: *pacco* means both “package” and, in slang, “rip-off”. The product offered is therefore the “package for the skeptical”, and the “rip-off of the skeptical”. The ambiguity is immediately removed though, and the text proceeds to building a trusting relationship with the reader:

Text	Analysis
I don't trust that!	Following the reader's feelings, and deletion (mistrust towards what?).
I've never ordered anything from Esperya.	Assumption and universal quantifier. Negation that pushes towards considering putting an order.
You are leery, it's natural.	Mind reading and lost performative, using moreover an adjective, <i>natural</i> , that reminds the readers of the wholesomeness of the food offered.
And I want (I ought to, I'm the storekeeper!) to defeat your mistrust, to win your trust.	Conjunction <i>and</i> that draws reader and writer together, succession of modal operators (in the original Italian text the choice of the verb <i>debbo</i> (I ought to), suggests an antique, traditional atmosphere), and an anchor-word (<i>bottegaio</i> , or storekeeper reminds the reader of the familiarity of the small shop around the corner). Two verbs follow, in the infinitive form, spreading optimism.
If you are willing to give me a chance and to put me through a test, click here ,	A guide towards the desired solution: hidden question and suggestion. The potential customer is <i>willing</i> , gives a <i>chance</i> , puts through a <i>test</i> : he's the one making the decision. On the other side we find the merchant, the one who makes the offer: <i>otherwise</i> (an alternative reassuring the reader of his freedom), ellipses, everyday interjection: it all reminds of a face-to-face

otherwise... oh well, I
didn't make it!

conversation. The author and the reader are on the same side: the affable acknowledgment *I didn't make it!* is similar to the one a friend would make. We keep on reading, right?

Awareness Means Freedom of Choice

The word being heard, read, tasted. Reckless, untrustworthy, impotent messenger of emotions and thoughts. The word, fluctuating or unchanging, but always transforming a perception, a certainty, a reality. Every single linguistic choice is, for certain, a choice, with its effectiveness and its fragility. On the other hand, the limits of the word are the same ones that determine its strength: on one side, reality; on the other, subjective representations:

R1 → RR1 → RRR1 → ∩ → RRR2 → RR2 → R2

In the middle lies the awareness. Awareness that promotes rapport: *becoming* the interlocutor, being able to write something in the way we would like to read it, all corresponds to a win/win situation. We win together.

Awareness also allows us to choose when to let ourselves be guided by the automatic choices of acquired competences, or when to caress words one by one. In the end, it is really up to us.²

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After earning a Master's Degree in Modern Literature, Annalisa works in Public Relations and as School Counselor. She has taught in several High Schools and has one passion: writing. She is the author of poetry (Fulmineo memento, Giardini) and text books (Letteratura, progetto modulare, Atlas).

Least Common Multiple of her personal and professional path: the quest for efficient communications, while being aware of the multiple depth of the recipients.

² This essay is drawn from an Italian study, realized by Annalisa Pardini as II Level Master Thesis at the University of Pisa in Didactic of written and professional Italian. The complete version of the study is available (in Italian) at the address http://www.palestradellascrittura.it/doc/Tesi_Annalisa.pdf.