

# To Nominalise or To Denominalise? That is the Question

(Things, Relationships and the Limits of the Conscious Mind)

By Joe Cheal

## Introduction

This article explores an aspect of our perception and conception of reality. This is linked to the NLP distinction of nominalising and denominalising and the effect these thinking methods have on our experience of the world.

## Things and Relationships

To simplify our experience of the world, we could break reality down into two key components: things and relationships. Perhaps reality is simply a collection of things in relationship to other things. Usually, in our language, things are represented by nouns and relationships are represented by verbs.

There are plenty of things out there that we can experience and interact with. Indeed, we measure these things and make a science of it. But what of the immeasurable things: what of *love* and *change* and *empowerment* and *possibilities*? These are nouns and yet they are harder to quantify. These tricky nouns are known as 'nominalisations'. In NLP terms, to 'nominalise' is to turn a verb into a noun and to 'denominalise' is to turn the noun back into a verb. Even the word 'nominalisation' is a nominalisation, converting the process of nominalising into a thing!

In the *Structure of Magic I*, Richard Bandler and John Grinder give us two methods of testing for nominalisations. The quickest way to identify a nominalisation is the 'wheelbarrow test': "can I put this thing in a wheelbarrow?" At times, this may have to be a very big wheelbarrow because, for example, a planet is not a nominalisation; it is a 'concrete' thing and it could sit in a wheelbarrow if the wheelbarrow was big enough. 'Love' on the other hand cannot really be put in a wheelbarrow. The other test is the 'ongoing' test: "does it make sense if I place the word 'ongoing' in front of the thing?" If I can, then it is likely a nominalisation. Hence, 'ongoing love' works but 'ongoing apple' does not. The 'ongoing test' is a useful reminder that a nominalisation is a process that has been converted into a thing.

Perhaps we could also generalise that every nominalisation has an 'opposite' whereas non-nominalisations do not. 'Empowerment' (a nominalisation) has its opposite in

'disempowerment'. On the other hand, apples (non-nominalisations) have no obvious opposite.

## The Role of the Conscious Mind

A significant question now must be "What of it?" So what if we have processes and things and things that are really processes? Sometimes, a nominalisation is a useful thing, but at other times (or from other perspectives) it can be unhelpful and confusing. It appears that the conscious mind likes to work with 'things'. They are more solid, graspable and fixed. Processes keep moving and so the conscious mind cannot stop the process to analyse it. This would be like trying to analyse a river at a particular point. As long as the water is still moving, it is never the same (hence the old adage that you can never step into the same river twice). Nominalisations are the conscious mind's attempt at 'stopping the world' to have a look at it, to work with it and perhaps to feel a sense of control.

As a next step, in order to relate to reality we have the need to freeze frame and dissect. The conscious mind cannot perceive (or conceive of) it all at once. It is in part for this reason that we have developed the notion of 'time'. Time allows us to put numbers to the process, to measure it and to take 'moments' in time. Even the notion of time is a nominalisation, an attempt to turn the process of reality into a thing. We live in a present moment, and we ask if the past and future actually exist. This is yet another way that the conscious mind attempts to control its reality by assuming what is not perceivable at a given moment (as defined by the conscious mind) is not really there. This is like counting from one to one hundred and upon reaching a particular number questioning whether all the other numbers actually exist. Just because the conscious mind is not focussed there does not mean it is any less in existence.

Although the conscious mind's desire to focus on things and moments is convenient, it somehow misses another level of richness that comes from understanding the process. It is the process that gives 'some-thing' a context and hence a meaning. Of course, we have the ability to see the bigger picture, to understand that a thing or a moment in time has a context and is part of a process. However, this takes a cognitive effort, requiring us to go meta to our auto-pilot experience. When using the term 'conscious mind' here, I am referring to the short term memory that can only hold a limited amount of information at any moment (7 +/- 2 things according to George Miller in 1956... though you are not necessarily expected to remember that). Without additional thought, our primary functioning seems to be a focus on the moment and the things in it. We spend much of our waking time 'asleep' or in a trance of 'survival and do'. Of course this is not a bad thing! It is essential... as long as we remember that some things are not really things at all.

## Is Reality Actually a Nominalisation... a Process in Disguise?

One of the confusing aspects about nominalisations is that they are likely to have a wide degree of meanings. If you ask a room full of people to imagine a *change*, you will get vastly different interpretations of that word. Everyone will go off into a brief trance (doing a kind of Google for the brain) and make their own internal representations. In this sense, the metamodel from NLP becomes an essential tool in clarifying what we mean more specifically. Is it any wonder that at the end of a business meeting, many of the participants are dazed and unclear about what specifically is being changed and what needs to happen next!

A nominalisation is a verb (or process) that had been converted into a noun. However, what of the word 'apple'; ask a room full of people to imagine an apple and again you will get different internal representations. They will likely be more similar to one another than the internal representations of 'a change', but they will likely be different.

What if we were to turn the whole concept on its head and consider the opposite to what the conscious mind seems to want to do? What if we considered that there are no things, only processes? An apple is only a thing when considered at a moment in time. To consider the bigger picture of process and the movement of time, an apple is actually a process. It is not really fixed. It may move about (with the help of nature or gravity) and it certainly does not remain the same through time. If an apple is really a thing and not a process, if we leave it for a few weeks and return to it, we cannot consider it to be the same thing that it was when we left it. It has changed. This is the problem of identity, of naming and defining something. As it changes, it is not the same thing anymore. If it is, then our concept of a 'thing' already presupposes that it is really a process.

Perhaps this is all a bit philosophical, but it does raise the question: is 'every-thing' actually a nominalisation? It is not my intention to challenge or to change the laws of English grammar. It is more to challenge how we think and to change our perspective to a bigger picture and free flowing reality. Stop for a while and notice the relationship between things instead of the things themselves. Imagine that there are no things, just relationships. How might this rock (or roll) your world? If this possibility intrigues you, you might want to investigate 'loop quantum gravity' or Ichazo's 'trialectics'.

### Nominalise or Denominalise?

The title of this article is "To Nominalise or Denominalise: That is the Question". The answer to that question is a conclusive 'yes'. The key is being *aware* of what you are doing and of the ecology of nominalising or denominalising within the context that you are in. It is as important to be able to nominalise as it is to denominalise. It is not really an either/or

because neither is better than the other. Consider the following table of pros and cons of nominalising and denominalising:

*Table 1: Some pros and cons of nominalising and denominalising*

	Nominalising	Denominalising
+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Convenient way to 'capture' &amp; label a process – gives the conscious mind a grasp of reality by providing points of reference</li> <li>* It is an 'umbrella' term to cover a range of experiences</li> <li>* Creates a trans-derivational search which is useful for trance work and 'artful vagueness'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* 'Unsticks' the mind's perception, allowing free flow – like taking a video off pause</li> <li>* Puts things back into their more realistic 'process state'</li> <li>* Helps to resolve dilemmas, paradox &amp; polarity by softening the adversary 'either/or' positioning</li> </ul>
-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Misunderstanding due to vagueness</li> <li>* Collective term and therefore lacks specificity</li> <li>* Creates an inaccurate representation of the world – like looking at a picture of a horse running and trying to understand the concept of 'running' without the actual movement/flow</li> <li>* Creates a 'stuckness' if treated as real</li> <li>* Can create polarity tensions, dilemmas &amp; paradox – most nominalisations have a polar opposite</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Can be challenging to hold a process in mind</li> <li>* Can be difficult to grasp or make sense of reality and hence difficult to discuss</li> <li>* Gives no reference points and is therefore un-measurable. As soon as we find a point of reference, this becomes a thing.</li> </ul>

What can we take from this?

- 1) We might take a 'situational' approach. If the pros match our requirement in a given situation then we should select that approach but take care of the ecology of the cons. For example: If I wanted to motivate a team, I might use some positive nominalisations to get the team searching their minds for positive meanings and associations. However, it would be important to make sure that they understand what I need them to do as a result of being motivated!
- 2) Is there a third way that synthesises the best of both? Is there a higher level (chunk up) strategy that can combine the two apparently polar opposite approaches of

nominalising and denominalising? Can we create points of reference whilst maintaining a sense of movement?

In the sense of using both approaches, once the conscious mind has a label on something, it is then able to take action and move on. For example, in the expression of emotions, it is helpful to be able to acknowledge the emotion (eg. "I am feeling something"), label it (eg. "It is annoyance") and then express it (eg. "I am feeling annoyed"). Take an emotion (a process), nominalise it and then denominalise it again. I call this the ALE technique (Acknowledge - Label - Express) which is, in itself, a 'meta-process' for expressing a process!

## Conclusion

It appears that part of the human condition is the need to nominalise, to capture processes and convert them into things. Although this may serve a purpose, do we then need to keep such a tight grip on those things? Can we not acknowledge each thing and then let it go again? What seems to stop us? Perhaps it is our desire to make sense of our reality; perhaps it is a consequence of language; or perhaps it is our way of grasping reality in order to feel some semblance of control.

Things are meaningless without relationships and yet we appear to want to focus on the things and not on the process.

Knowing the difference between nominalising and denominalising allows us to catch something and then let it go again, back into process. Knowing the difference between process and things allows us the choice to let go of things for a while... to flow and become at one with the shifting river of reality... to dance with the movement and rhythms of reality's song.

## About the Author

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