

What is the Opposite of Meta?

Joe Cheal MSc

Introduction

This article is designed to address the question: “What is the opposite of meta?” with a view to creating a label to the ‘other end of meta’ which may in turn help to define, understand and utilise it.

There will be a very brief overview of the nature of meta and then an exploration into its opposite. The relationship between the two is discussed in terms of their purposes and roles and also the potential confusions between the two. The article completes with suggestions for application.

Meta?

‘Meta’ is a Greek word meaning ‘above, about and/or, beyond’. The main usage of the term ‘meta’ outside the field of NLP is ‘about’, for example, meta-communication is communication *about* communication. In this sense it is an adjective, telling us what kind of communication we are talking about. Of course, by communicating about meta-communication, we are meta-meta-communicating. This could go on ad infinitum, adding levels and levels of ‘meta’.

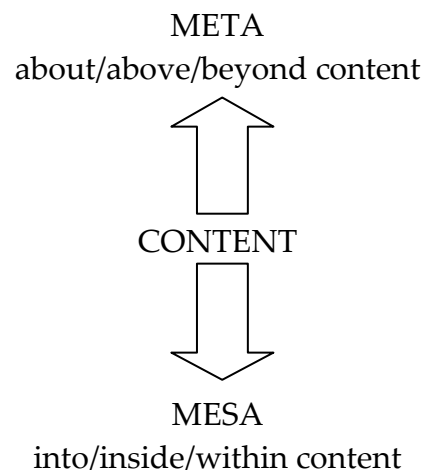
Much has been written about the concept of ‘meta’ in NLP literature, in particular through the extensive works of Robert Dilts (e.g. 1983) & L. Michael Hall (eg. Hall 2001). In NLP we also talk about meta as meaning ‘beyond’ or ‘outside’ and we use the term ‘going meta’ as if it is some kind of destination or direction. In this context, meta means stepping outside or further away from the situation, seeing something as if we are a ‘fly on the wall’ or beyond the process/event/thing. Meta is also a move or ‘chunk up’ to a higher logical level. Hall has used the thinking of meta to create a whole area of NLP known as meta-states and the meta-state model (e.g. Hall 1996).

This article however is an enquiry into the other ‘direction’. If meta implies chunking up from something, what is the equivalent of chunking down? If the answer is simply ‘chunking down’, then why does chunking up have its own special label in ‘meta’? Is

chunking up more important than chunking down? It would seem not. Of course, meta is more than just chunking up, as this article discusses later. But there may be a valuable and important concept sitting opposite meta. It is time to bring this concept out of the shadows and introduce it more formally.

What is the opposite of meta?

If meta is sometimes a direction what is the opposite direction? Surprisingly, it appears that there is no defined opposite to 'meta' in any philosophical system, NLP or otherwise. So let us propose one now. Given the Greek derivation of the word meta, what Greek word means 'into, in, inside or within'? Neatly, the word is 'mesa'. So to 'go mesa' would mean to go inside something to get more specific detail.



In their seminal work, *The Structure of Magic*, Bandler and Grinder (1975 & 1976) analysed the methodology of Fritz Perls and Virginia Satir. From the modelling of their methodologies came the 'meta-model'. What were Perls and Satir doing and how were they doing it? In particular, they were asking questions to take people from 'surface structure' (i.e. what was said) down into 'deep structure (i.e. what they actually meant and/or closer to their direct experience). They did this by seeking more specific information. They challenged generalisations, distortions and deletions by asking, for example, 'what do you mean specifically?' or 'how do you know that?' They were encouraging their clients to chunk down, to get more specific. Perhaps we could even say they were challenging people to get more 'real'. The 'meta-model' was so named as it

identifies categories of language that people use to represent their model of the world; it is an overarching model of people's individual models. However, usage of the meta-model is actually an exercise in going mesa, as it is designed to help take the speaker back to their direct experience (i.e. 'deep structure') which the person then generalised (and distorted/deleted) to create their internal model. According to Hall (2011): "When you go down into the content (i.e. "mesa") then you get details, facts, smaller and smaller pieces... you narrow to identify the referents from which the map has been created. In the Meta-Model this evokes a person to *return to the actual facts of their life* and by *breaking things down into bits* now they can rebuild—or in NLP talk, re-map. That's the power of the Meta-Model."

To go mesa to something would be to go into finer and finer detail and in doing so we begin to lose generalisations and possibly an understanding of the 'whole' (i.e. gestalt). If we keep going mesa to an event, for example a game of rugby, we will see perhaps a person kicking a ball. Without the 'whole' (i.e. the context of the aim of rugby, the rules, the scoring etc), the kicking of the ball becomes meaningless. To go mesa to ourselves is to reach direct experience (VAKOG) and to be an observer without (ultimately) any thoughts, feelings, interpretations, judgements *about* the experience. As soon as we have any experience *about* the direct experience, we are meta to that direct experience. Perhaps the experience of 'total' mesa is what is sometimes described as being 'in the now' (e.g. Tolle 2005) or in 'flow' (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi 2002).

To explore the nature of 'mesa' further, when we 'go mesa', this may take us in various chunk down directions. For example:

1. **Types:** Going mesa to 'dog' might lead us to Alsatian, Boxer or Collie. These are all types of dogs that are contained in the category of 'dog'.
2. **Components:** Going mesa to 'dog' might also lead us to legs, nose, ears, tail. These are all components of 'dog'.
3. **Functions:** Going mesa to 'dog' might lead us to the functions or uses of a dog. For example: a pet, a sled puller, a guide for the blind or a guard.
4. **Temporal:** Going mesa to a particular dog (eg. Rex), may lead us to Rex at particular ages. We might look at a photo album of Rex through his life, seeing the changes... the 'process' of Rex as it were. Going mesa to Rex is to establish where he is at any moment in time.

The first three (above): (1) types, (2) components and (3) functions seem to come to a logical 'zero point' of a smallest chunk. There comes a point where there is no more detail of types or of components or of functions. The same might be said of (4) the temporal element. There comes a zero point where the object is at a particular place at a particular

moment in time. All of these four distinctions could be considered reductionist in nature, breaking down into smaller and smaller aspects.

The purpose and roles of 'Meta' and 'Mesa'

In the same way that meta appears to have slightly different (but connected) definitions and purposes, the same is true for mesa. Table 1 (below) suggests some of these differences and hopefully provides more clarity about the need for (and purpose of) the concept of mesa.

Table 1: Comparing and contrasting the different roles of meta and mesa.

<i>Role</i>	Meta	Mesa
<i>Seeking information or data</i>	Usually a state 'about' something. E.g. thinking <i>about</i> thinking, feeling content <i>about</i> feeling good, talking <i>about</i> Fred. A meta message would be 'a message about messages'.	Looking inside something for information. E.g. a 'mesa message' would be 'a message inside a message'.
<i>Changing category level & direction of thinking</i>	Up a logical level to the next category or 'container'. E.g. from sheltie to dog (also see 'Hierarchy of Ideas' in James & Woodsmall, 1988)	Down a logical level to components or examples/ types that fall within the current category. E.g. from dog to sheltie.
<i>Going beyond current experience of the system</i>	Going outside the system to see all its levels and components. Taking a true third (or beyond) perceptual position.	Going into the system to explore the details.
<i>Changing detail level</i>	Bigger picture, larger chunk, general, vague, abstract.	Smaller picture, smaller chunk, specific, detailed, concrete.
<i>Changing language pattern</i>	Use of Milton Model (Inverse Meta Model) – usage leads to generalisations.	Use of Meta Model – usage leads to specifics of experience, narrower details.
<i>Type of Change</i>	Shifting from 1st order change to 2nd order change (see Watzlawick et al, 1974).	Shifting from 2nd order change to 1st order change. From learning II to learning I.

	<p>From Learning I to Learning II etc (Bateson 2000).</p> <p>Making changes outside the system, also known as double loop learning (see Argyris, 1994).</p>	<p>Making changes within the system, also known as single loop learning.</p>
--	---	--

The illusion of introspection: Are we really going mesa or meta?

I confess that when I first began to develop the concept of mesa, I got excited about the idea of going mesa as being a form of introspection (i.e. 'soul searching') where we could go deeper and deep into ourselves and our inner universe. However, I came to realise that I was really going in the opposite direction through layers and layers of meta-states (i.e. states about states). But in the same way that I *seemed* to be able go meta to myself, what did it mean to go mesa to myself?

To *be* ourselves is to be in the first perceptual position. Can we go mesa from there? Sara Boas (2006) writes about the 'zero position' as an individual perceptual position without ego or personality. As previously discussed, the furthest we can go mesa to ourselves is to be in direct experience without thought or judgement. As soon as we endeavour to go further in, we are meta-stating, perhaps analysing (thinking about what that would be like). Any analysis, although reductionistic, will be an analysis *of* the content (and hence taking us further away from direct experience). Analysis in this sense could be described as using a mesa process (breaking things down into component parts) from a meta perspective. In addition, if the process of analysis is designed to give meaning (and meaning is *about* the thing we are analysing), our search for self and meaning is really a meta-state quest.

Are our 'parts' mesa to ourselves? Isn't this a chunk down and hence mesa? In an analytical sense perhaps, however experientially, if we 'go inside' or 'become' a part of ourselves we are meta-stating since it is a part *of* ourselves, an abstraction and hence meta. This becomes the equivalent of taking a second perceptual position into a part. The technique of taking on the perceptual position of a thing/part was sometimes used by Fritz Perls in dream analysis (Perls 1970), where the object in the dream is considered a part of the dream and hence a part of the dreamer. Although useful, this is still not mesa to ourselves since we are working with a metaphor and acting 'as if' we were that thing/part.

As an aside, in second and third position we are experiencing our feelings/thoughts (states) about someone else's thinking/feeling (states) or the states of ourselves *and* others.

As soon as we step into second or third position we are going meta and 'meta-stating'. Modelling (the very root of NLP) appears to be about 'getting into' the mind of another person. Can we not explore someone 'from the inside'? When we take second perceptual position into another person it is important to remember that ultimately we are still mindreading – we can never really become someone else nor know for sure what it is like to be them. We are simply seeking resources within ourselves via our internal representation of someone else (and hence applying our mental state to it, i.e. meta-stating). We may gain some insights into the intentions of another person, but we cannot know for sure unless we check with them. For a grand philosophical article on this subject, see Thomas Nagel's "What is it like to be a bat?" (1974).

Philosophers and psychologists through the ages have been delving into the human condition and to themselves personally. For example, in 'Doors of Perception', Aldous Huxley seeks to journey into his own inner universe (1977), as does John Lilly in 'Centre of the Cyclone' (1973). Rene Descartes, a proponent of reductionism, used this line of thinking to eliminate everything that he could not prove about the world and himself until he eventually reached his incontrovertible truth that he was 'a thinking thing'. From here he built his philosophical system (Descartes, 1989). However, is the 'inner universe' quest really a mesa concern? Although it may *appear* to be, am I not exploring the inner universe of myself (which would imply meta)? Is a 'thinking thing' not a category in which I find myself (hence meta to myself)?

When we consider we are going 'inside' we are still contemplating aspects *of* and *about* ourselves and hence going meta. Metaphors for example are meta-states of our mesa quest:

- Are we fractal in nature, where the further we chunk down the more there is, but with distinct patterns emerging?
- Are we like an onion with layers, every layer we strip away we get nearer and nearer the core?
- Are like a building with levels, with the ability to go up to our conscious mind or down into our unconscious? In Ericksonian hypnosis, we often talk of 'going deeper' into trance, i.e. deeper/further inside ourselves? Again, the concept of 'going deeper' is a metaphor, so although it appears we are going mesa, we are really going meta.

Of course, whether we are going meta or mesa (or a combination of both in sequence) the purpose (particularly in a therapeutic sense) is to discover/access *resources*. The key here is to be able to come back in/out again and apply those resources *to* something.

As a final thought for this section, perhaps the notion of going meta or mesa to myself is also an illusion since I am still myself and cannot escape from that! To genuinely go meta to myself would seem to take me to an unattainable 'view from nowhere' (Nagel 1986). However, I *can* be myself experiencing meta-states – states about states e.g. thoughts/feelings/beliefs etc *about* other thoughts/feelings/beliefs etc. I can step from one state to another state or meta-state as I am still myself.

Interventions and Applications

Outside of NLP, interventions such as Arthur Janov's (1990) primal therapy actively encourage a client to drop into a specific point or feeling and to feel it and express it. NLP tends to work in the opposite direction, avoiding the content and focussing on the process. Indeed, it could be argued that dropping into feelings may re-stimulate the old anchor and strengthen the negative feeling. Primal therapists would no doubt counter that dropping into the feeling is not always about content (though repressed memories might emerge as a result) and that content is only used to get into the feelings. Once the feeling is fully expressed, the old anchor is then blown out.

If meta-states are states about other states (e.g. feeling guilty about feeling angry), what would mesa-states be? What might it mean to have a state inside a state? Perhaps we go mesa to meta-states in order to access a primary state. Might we be drawing from the 'onion' metaphor here, where we are peeling the meta-states away to reveal the original state?

Another way in which the mesa approach may help is in getting so close into a problem that it cannot be perceived as a problem any more. For example, when working with submodalities (which are a mixture of meta and mesa – see Hall 2005), if a problem is seen very close up (so that all you can see are the pixels in the picture as it were) it will often go beyond a threshold and collapse. Any analogue submodality (e.g. distance, colour, brightness, volume) will allow us to go mesa. If the issue is distance, how far away specifically does it need to be to feel different? What specific shade does it need to be between colour and black & white for something to change? How bright/dim does it need to be? At what specific volume (e.g. on a scale of 0-10) does the feeling disappear?

Mesa can be used as a chunk down reframe. When confronted by someone saying that they are afraid of snakes, ask which specific bit of the snake are they afraid of? Or what specific behaviour/feature do they not like? For example, the hiss... go mesa again... what specific volume/frequency/pitch does it need to be?

Mesa can be used with troublesome metaphors to bring the person back to direct experience... "My manager is an ass" – "In what way?" or "What has he done to make you think that?"

Going mesa to any experience will elicit facts and if this process is repeated the 'whole'/gestalt will fragment so that meaning dissolves. Going mesa deconstructs generalisations and hence the person's map (like the meta-model, which is an example of a 'mesa-process'). This then allows us to help the person reconstruct the map in a more resourceful manner.

Conclusion

This article was written to further understand the nature of meta and also to introduce a new label to NLP, i.e. mesa. In some ways, the information in this article is probably not new, however before now, there has been no specifically defined opposite to meta.

Perhaps it is time to update our language to give us new distinctions. This may help to give us further resourceful thinking patterns and hence a deeper, richer understanding of who we are.

Biography

Joe Cheal has been working with NLP since 1993. As well as being a master trainer of NLP, he holds an MSc in Organisational Development and NLT, a degree in Philosophy and Psychology, and diplomas in Coaching and in Ericksonian Hypnotherapy, Psychotherapy and NLP. He is also a licensed EI practitioner.

Joe is a co-founder of the Positive School of Intrinsic Neuro-Linguistic Psychology (www.psinlp.com) and a partner in the GWiz Learning Partnership (www.gwiztraining.com), working as a Management & Organisational Development Specialist.

References

- Argyris, C. (1994) *On Organisational Learning* Blackwell Business
 Bandler, R. & Grinder, J. (1976) *The Structure of Magic, Vol.2* Science & Behaviour Books
 Bateson, G. (2000) *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* University of Chicago Press

- Boas, S. (2006) "The Body of Culture: Transcultural competence in Dance Movement Therapy" in Payne, H. (ed.) *Dance Movement Therapy: Theory Research and Practice. 2nd edition*, London: Routledge, pp 111-130
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2002) *Flow*, Rider
- Descartes, R. (1989) *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*, Cambridge university Press (Translated by Cottingham, J., Stoothoff, R. & Murdoch, D.)
- Dilts, R. (1983) *Changing Belief Systems with NLP*, Meta Publications
- Grinder, J. & Bandler, R. (1975) *The Structure of Magic, Vol.1* Science & Behaviour Books
- Hall, L.M. (1996) *Meta-States* Neuro-Semantics Publications
- Hall L.M. (2001) *NLP: Going Meta* Neuro-Semantics Publications
- Hall L.M. (2005) *Sub-modalities: Going Meta* Neuro-Semantics Publications
- Hall L.M. (2011) Personal correspondence
- Huxley, A. (1977) *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell* Harper-Collins
- James, T. & Woodsmall, W. (1988) *Time Line Therapy and the Basis of Personality* Meta Publications
- Janov, A. (1990) *The Primal Scream* Abacus
- Lilly, J. (1973) *The Centre of the Cyclone* Paladin
- Nagel, T. (1974) "What is it like to be a bat?" *The Philosophical Review* LXXXIII, 4 (October) pp 435-50. Also http://organizations.utep.edu/Portals/1475/nagel_bat.pdf accessed 14.09.11
- Nagel, T. (1986) *The View From Nowhere*, Oxford University Press
- Perls, F. (1970) "Four Lectures" in *Gestalt Therapy Now* ed. Fagan, J. and Shepherd, I. Science & Behaviour Books.
- Tolle, E. (2005) *The Power of Now*, Hodder Mobius
- Watzlawick, P., Weakland, J. & Fisch, R. (1974) *Change: Principles of problem formation and problem resolution* W.W. Norton & Company: New York