

What's the Meta?

(A Brief Exploration into how 'Meta' is used in NLP and Beyond)

By Joe Cheal

What does 'meta' really mean?

Meta can be an elusive and confusing concept, particularly in an NLP context. Its main meaning outside 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 goes on ad infinitum, adding levels and levels and levels of meta.

In NLP we also talk about a 'meta-position' as the third perceptual position. Although this could be considered a position about a position, it is more helpful in this context to think of meta as 'beyond' or 'outside'. We also use the term 'going meta' as if it is some kind of destination or direction. Here, 'meta' means stepping outside or further away from the situation, seeing something as if we are a fly on the wall, disassociating.

Meta appears in many guises, from Paul Watzlavick's 'second order change' to Chris Argyris' 'double loop learning'. Both of these concepts require a shift in thinking that goes beyond or outside the current state.

Is meta the same as 'chunking up'?

When using the term 'chunking' we are talking about changing the level we are referring to. So, 'chunking up' means taking one step up the ladder of abstraction, into the bigger picture, general, broad terms. We are asking, "what category do the things we are looking at now fall into?" or "what is this an example of?"

If we 'chunk down' we are going down one step of the ladder into more detail, specifics. We are then asking "what belongs in this category?" or "what is an example of this?".

If we take the example of 'dog'. To chunk up might take us to 'mammal' because 'dog' falls into the category of 'mammal'. To chunk down might take us to 'beagle' because 'beagle' belongs in the category of 'dog'.

Obviously, we could keep chunking up into the broadest abstract or down into the most minute detail. This would create a whole system from top to bottom. If meta is the same as chunking up then 'dog' would be meta to 'beagle'. Alternatively, meta might also be looking at the whole system of levels from the outside, completely stepping back from the system of mammals and dogs and beagles etc.

This might be the core of the confusion with meta, in that it doesn't refer us to one particular place or direction. It could be a small step up one level of a system or a massive leap outside a whole system. To add to this, it could be argued that going outside a whole system is simply going up one level of abstraction to that system. So we might have levels of abstraction within levels of abstraction... or abstraction about abstraction... or 'meta-abstraction' perhaps!

Robert Dilts in his 'Sleight of Mouth' patterns distinguishes between chunk-up and meta by having them as different thinking patterns. If we are reframing a belief, for example, chunking up involves generalising to a larger classification (ie. finding a category into which the belief fits). Going meta, however, involves disassociating from and then reflecting back on (ie. establishing a belief about a belief).

The Sleight of Mouth patterns are all methods of reframing and having discussed Dilts' distinction, Bartunek (1988) argues that reframing itself is "a 'second order' or double loop shift in the understanding of some domain," and hence reframing as a whole is a way of thinking meta.

What is the connection between meta and logical levels?

Although 'going meta' is a useful notion, helping us to disassociate from a negative experience perhaps, it is also essential in the realms of language.

If someone were to say to you: "Reframing is manipulative", they may fully intend what they say, that reframing as a technique can put a positive spin on something that is actually less than positive to them. Perhaps their manager has used the term 'career development opportunity' one too many times when asking them to clean the windows.

However, the statement "reframing is manipulative" is, on the surface, somewhat paradoxical because the statement itself is a reframe which would mean, if true, that the statement itself is manipulative. This is known as self referential where the statement refers to itself and so goes round in circles. Although this example is not necessarily a true logical paradox, it certainly seems self-defeating and hypocritical.

The only way to make sense of the statement “reframing is manipulative” is to consider the statement a ‘meta-reframe’. It is a reframe about reframes and so it is not of the same logical type as the original statement.

Russell and Whitehead brought this notion into mathematics to avoid the problems of paradox. Their work led to set theory of which the premise is that *a set cannot belong to itself (or be a member of itself)*... a category cannot be a category of itself otherwise this creates the circular logic of self reference.

The category of dog may contain ‘beagle’ and ‘basset hound’ but it cannot contain ‘dog’. The category of ‘dog’ does not belong on the same level as beagles and basset hounds. It sits at a different logical level. Once again, we are saying that ‘dog’ is meta to ‘beagle’.

Herein lies the power of going meta. If you change something in a category, for example by redefining it, it usually has an affect on that one thing only. In 1920, a breed of dog was defined as the Golden Retriever. Before that time it didn’t exist as a breed by this name. Whilst this affected those dogs that would now fit into the new breed, the category of dog remained mostly unchanged. If however, we changed or redefined the category of dog, for example to add a new condition that dogs have to have golden coloured fur to fall into the category of dog, this would have a massive impact on the current canine set.

If you make a change at a meta, higher order or higher logical level, it will have a massive impact on the levels below. This then becomes a major tool for change work with individuals and organisations.

For a thorough exploration on this topic, you would be wise to read Michael Hall’s book called “NLP: Going Meta”.

Is a ‘meta position’ really ‘meta’?

The concept of meta is essential in mathematical and linguistic terms to avoid paradox. It is also helpful in stepping back from situations, seeing them from another perspective. As human beings we are perhaps one of the only animals to be able to go meta in our thinking . Even then, we are still really in the first perceptual position because when a person goes meta to them self, they are still them self, seeing things from their own unique meta position!

So is there a true meta position and can we ever experience it? Now we get into a realm of answers that depend on your own philosophical position. Do you believe that there is an objective reality, that could ultimately be measured by scientific, empirical method? Or do you take a more phenomenological position that we can know only subjective

experience and never an objective reality? Or somewhere in between, for example Ken Wilber's inter-subjectivity which is a collective agreement on what reality is?

Sara Boas has used the term 'infinity perceptual position' and Thomas Nagel coined the term 'View from Nowhere' to describe the ultimate objective perspective. But can there be an ultimate objective perspective, because as soon as we get there, could we not go meta again?

Why is 'going meta' sometimes hard to do?

When talking about perceptual positions, it could be argued that there are two possible 'third perceptual positions'. One possibility is from first to third (from myself to outside myself), known as the meta position. The other possibility requires me to go from first to second to third (from myself to someone/thing else to outside both), known as the true meta position. This is particularly useful when seeking to resolve conflicts or 'see things from both sides'. If we attempt to go meta without taking the second position, we still only have information from one side of the fence. This would make 'going meta' hard to do.

Another block in our thinking processes is the fundamental way we are taught to think in the Western World (a gross generalisation but bear with me!) Western, rational thinking is based on the philosophy, logic and scientific method of Aristotle. One of the premises of Aristotle's 'formal logic' is that a thing cannot be and not be at the same time. It must be one thing or not that thing, but not in between. Although this is hard to deny (or confirm), it leads us to 'either/or' thinking. Either I get a dog or I don't get a dog. This either/or thinking is a more Western approach to situations and is responsible for many of the dilemmas, double binds, tensions and conflicts we fall into. An alternative (though not always better) is 'both/and' thinking. This takes a different degree of thinking, but opens us up to more innovative ways forward. Although not always acted upon, the Eastern approach of Yin-Yang is a 'both/and' philosophy.

GWF Hegel used the concept of both/and thinking to develop what is known as the dialectic method. Johann Fichte developed (or simplified) the method as taking a thesis (concept) and an antithesis (opposite) and then transcending both to create a synthesis (combining the concept and its opposite). Using a dialectic method, I could get a dog and not get a dog, perhaps by sharing the dog with my brother. The point of the synthesis is to at least consider a third possibility.

In order to achieve a synthesis between two positions, it is almost essential that we 'go meta'. We ask ourselves under what conditions could both positions be valid and

workable. Obviously, in NLP terms, we might also seek the positive intentions of both positions and create a synthesis that meets those positive intentions.

Even with the dialectic method we can still continue to go meta because a synthesis is simply a thesis on the level above (which invites another synthesis at the level above that). The main criticism of the dialectic approach is that it leads to a never ending hierarchy of synthesising. Hegel believed that there was an 'Absolute Idea', which would be the end point of the synthesis hierarchy, where all things meet. Perhaps this ultimate meta position could be connected with Nagel's 'View From Nowhere'.

Conclusion

The concept of meta is an essential part of our thinking, but it is sometimes less than easy to establish its true meaning. In some situations, perhaps when we get too associated or stuck in a state, it is also less than easy to think meta. Added to that is the life training we get that encourages us to think in 'logical either/or' terms.

It is only by meta, synthesis type thinking that quantum physics arises where particles can be in one state and another at the same time. Next on the horizon is the quantum computer that works on a principle of fuzzy logic, somewhere between the '1's and '0's of traditional binary style computing.

To go beyond, outside, around. To think about thinking. To transcend to another level. It is a fascinating and freeing concept and it is delightful that the human brain has developed the ability to think in meta terms.

About the Author

Joe Cheal has been working with NLP since 1993. As well as being a licensed 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.

Joe is a partner in the GWiz Learning Partnership (www.gwiztraining.com), working as a Management & Organisational Development Specialist, focusing over 14 years training, coaching and consultancy experience into the business environment.

Thankyou

With Thanks to L. Michael Hall for his comments. For a wealth of information about "meta", I would strongly recommend Michael's site: www.neurosemantics.com.

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