



Submodalities - or how we construct our internal reality

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It is extraordinary, don't you think, that most of us go through life, experiencing the complexity of it, living it, operating in it, relating to other people, doing all manner of things, without considering how it is that we construct our internal reality? And if we do consider this, we usually pay little attention to the detail of what happens inside our heads. Only when we start to attend NLP weekends and training courses do we start to consider how our bodies and brains make sense of the outside world in ways which allow us to live successfully. In this article we The language we use reveals those differences but, unless we have trained ourselves to listen to what we say and to what others say to us we are unlikely to decipher what is going on internally either for ourselves or for others.

Let's start at the beginning and ask some questions: How do you do what you do well? How do you go about creating an inner reality that lets you operate successfully in the outer one?

The Map is not the Territory

These are questions that very few people ask themselves or indeed are asked. And if they do, they will commonly reply, 'Well, I don't know really. I just think about it.' Pushing most people beyond that point can be a struggle. We do not commonly think consciously about what we do and how we do it in smaller chunks than the level which most of us call 'thinking'. And most people work from a belief that the way in which we think is common to all of us.

Of course, it's not. We all think differently, because we all have different experiences, different role models, different strengths. We are different shapes and sizes, different skin colours and tones. Our organs function at different levels; our vision may be perfect or somewhat more or less impaired, we may have had glue ear as a child, hear only from one ear, be susceptible to high pitched noise, we may be very sensitive to touch, our pain threshold may be high or low, we may have lost the capacity to smell, or be so aware of it that, as in the case of one of the friends I met on my NLP practitioner, we are prepared to leave our partner for another who smells even more right than the first one! And so we can go on. The point I am making is straightforward. We may all think we're operating in the same territory when we consider our subjective experience but in truth we all work from our own unique maps. And these will be based on internal differences which, when we explore them, will turn out to be far greater than any one of us might suspect.



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What we are talking about here have been called by some commentators, the 'smaller building blocks' of our experience. The - technical term is 'sub-modalities' - the distinctions we make internally which mirror the visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, olfactory and gustatory experiences we live within our external world. If you commonly see pictures in your head, what are the qualities of those pictures? Are they typically big or small, coloured or black and white, close to you or distant. How about the sounds, if any, that go with your picture? Loud and piercing? Coming from what direction? And what about any feelings that may be connected, can you tell where they're located in your body, do you get a sense of them?

When we ask questions like this, the whole picture becomes clear, doesn't it? Because it is really quite simple. And like everything in NLP it takes just a little practice to become expert at it.

The first time I used submodality shifts was the day I decided I had to become an NLP'er. It was with a fourteen year old dyslexic girl whose progress in school was being blocked by her hysterical fear of a former teacher, one who I now know had hypnotically commanded her to fail. Her processing went something like this:

We would commend her on her successful completion of a piece of work and future pace her into accelerating and generalising the process into other work in other classrooms. At that point she would freeze, break out into a sweat and then leave the room at a run, shouting hysterically as she went. This went on for a while, until she was prepared to sit still for long enough to tell us what was going on inside her head. We praised her work and a huge picture would appear in front of her, blocking her vision completely. A woman, dressed in maroon, twice life size, shrieking at her about failure - a piercing note which went on and on.

Now, imagine this, I'm an NLP virgin and halfway through a book that sounds wonderful. Will it work? Indeed it did. I asked her to blur the sharp focus of her picture and soften the colours to a sepia tint while moving it away from her and to notice how the sound was becoming softer as the whole thing moved away. At that she started to laugh, shrugged her shoulders and went back to her work. Needless to say, apart from the regular shouting match with a particularly vile miniature witch of a PE teacher, her progress all round moved into fast forward.

If you want to see submodality distinctions being used by a master, sit in on Richard Bandler and Eric Robbie's workshops.



When Richard is doing therapy, almost the first question he asks once clients tell him what's wrong with them is, 'How do you do that to yourself? Teach me to do it like you do'. He models what they are doing so that he can help them change the meaning of their negative internal experiences quickly and effectively. And all it takes to change the meaning is to change one or more of the submodalities of our sensory modalities. The trick to doing it exquisitely is to know which one or two to shift.

Eric has worked out how to read submodality shifts by observing external shifts in his subjects - a brilliant process, one which is amazing to watch and which you may one day learn from him - if you're lucky enough to see him in action!

