TYPES OF (RE)FRAMING EVENTS AND THE SLEIGHT OF MOUTH TECHNIQUE IN THE BUSINESS NLP PROCESS

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Abstract. *This paper discusses different types of linguistic frames used in effective business communication. Firstly, it aims to highlight the role of our mental 'template' through which we filter our perceptions of the outside world, frame or reframe a situation or problem to make our real life experiences richly varied. The study attempts to demonstrate how the powerful set of verbal frames works well for conversational belief change. Secondly, at a neurological level, the advantage of putting an event in a different frame helps us change our attitudes, and correctly identify the hoped-for result of any meeting, negotiating or problem-solving situation. By making the Sleight of Mouth reframes explicit I aim to provide insight into the modelling of people's language patterns as well as draw attention to the power of influencing beliefs through a variety of interpretations. The outcome is to show how the magic of words and language gives us flexibility in creating a more favourable business context and seeing the possible gain of our actions and decisions.*

Keywords: *frame, Sleight of Mouth, business communication, beliefs, outcome, NLP, flexibility*

The Concept of Frame

'Frame' is an aspect of language which helps us see things from a different perspective or viewpoint, ensuring personal congruence, and identify creative solutions to problems. A 'frame of reference' deals with the way we feel about something and focuses on the essential elements of the "points of view" technique: (1) provide a *context*, a *focus* or *guidance* for our thoughts and actions; (2) *explore* other *possibilities*, i.e. help people reinterpret problems and find solutions by changing the frame from which those problems are perceived and assess their progress; (3) unlock ourselves into behaviours that support the outcome of our actions, thus expanding our frames of reference.

Frame as a linguistic device is often used in business meetings, interviews or consultations so that it can help to "make the *scope*, *content*, *parameters*, *relevance conclusions* of a meeting more meaningful or specific" (Alder 234), in other words, make interactions more efficient because they determine which issues fall within or outside of the purpose of an interaction.

Some theorists, for example Bateson (1972), refer to the relationship between the *internal psychological state* (the *frame*), which is part of our map of the world and the *context* which is an external representation of reality.

In Bateson's opinion, a frame "is not real in the same way as our map of the world is not the actual territory it represents. It is more of an indicator of the sort of thinking in interpreting" (Bateson 187). The map, as a series of signs, is a myth, as Barthes (1993) suggested. It is a misrepresentation. As it is suggested in earlier studies, Korzybski points out that "A map is not the territory it represents, but, if correct, it has a similar structure to the territory, which accounts for its usefulness" (58). Later on, Bandler and Grinder (1975) developed Korzybski's ideas. The map maker has to make choices about how much information is to be processed and what aspects need to be brought out in order to make the map meaningful and useful.

The context, more carefully studied by Leonard Bloomfield (1984), determines meaning which depends on "the situation in which the speaker utters it and the response

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which it calls forth in the hearer" (Bloomfield 139). The definition of meaning in Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) is very similar: "The meaning of the communication is the response you get…Meaning in communication is culture-bound" (O'Connor, Seymour 23, 89).

For my purposes, thinking in terms of maps is more useful when studying NLP in business English, in general, and in negotiating and selling, in particular, because our first task is to map the reality as perceived by others. The result will be deletion of some of the material irrelevant for the map, distortion of the relevant material, which will cause disproportions, and generalizations of features to fit a standard recognizable pattern in terms of colour, shape and size (Katan 119-120).

Much of a particular experience or event is framed by the context seen as strongly influencing the sending of messages in the medium. The interpretation of an experience will be determined by certain behaviour, also defined as "meta messages" about the context.

In NLP, the *physical* and *non-physical dimensions* of a context exert influence on communication. The former is related to external cues and constraints (e.g. time constraints), and the latter is concerned with "parameters such as people's goals, roles, the phase of work they are in" (Dilts, DeLozier 224). For example, a brainstorming session targeted at *designing a new product* sets up a different context than a brainstorming session targeted at *promoting* or *delivering* that product on the market.

As both terms imply, the frame and the context look at the dynamics of an interaction, focusing on the *thoughts* and *actions* surrounding an interaction.

Types of Framing Events in Business Interactions

Verbal frames look at the dynamics of an interaction, NLP being the process of discovering patterns of excellence of high achievers in areas such as business, and, most importantly, interpersonal relations. Some common "frames" in NLP related to the context of business include:

1. ***Outcome frame*** means that we tend to think in terms of what we *do* want rather than what we *don't* want, i.e. to be constantly "outcome-oriented". The basic emphasis of the outcome frame is to establish focus on the goal and desired state. By positively framing the outcome, our attention switches from taking on too much and become overwhelmed to considering the ensuing effects and the resources required to achieve our outcome. From the NLP perspective, this frame leads to a focus on desired effects and the resources used to attain them. The frequently asked question might be "What specifically do we want from this meeting / item?" It will clear up the purpose, hoped-for result and aim.

Maintaining an outcome frame would involve asking similar questions:
- "What am I trying to achieve now?"
- "What do I want?"
- "What does this get for me that is valuable?"

The counterpart of the outcome frame is the "blame"/ "problem" frame (O' Connor 2001) highlighted by: "What's wrong and who's to blame?" which places emphasis on "what is wrong", what is "not wanted" as opposed to what is desired/wanted.

2. ***Agreement frame*** seeks for a solution in case of disagreement or differing points of view. As seen by Vickers and Bavister (2004), "what often happens in meetings and negotiations is that the various parties get locked into discussing or even arguing about the areas where they are in conflict" (Bavister, Vickers 143). To put it differently, a first step in avoiding argument in the bargaining phase of a negotiation is to show respect for your partner's

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opinion and needs. Never say "you are wrong"; instead try to see things from *your partner's point of view*, by asking "Shall I summarize what we have so far agreed?" Since the 'agreement' frame establishes "what we've agreed", by using specific points of agreement (*pacing*), we can direct/lead people to a common outcome, and hence ensure a common understanding.

Reaching Agreement and Getting to Yes in Business Interactions

FUNCTIONS	PHRASES
1. Accept that you can't win your case.	1. *I suppose we have no alternative but to agree to your terms.*
2. Postpone the decision until a later date.	2. *We need to take some time to think it over. Maybe we should just leave it for now.*
3. Signal that you are near to reaching agreement.	3. *Look, we've agreed A,B and C. We're close to an agreement. We just need a bit more understanding on...*
4. Stress the benefits of finding a solution.	4. *If we can find a way to agree on this, we'll both gain.*
5. Ask questions to find out what the other side wants.	5. *What's the main problem for you? Why do you want to...? Is...important to you?*
6. Look for common ground.	6. *How can we find a solution to this? Would it help if we...?*
7. Reach agreement.	7. *O.K. We have an agreement.*
8. Summarize.	8. *Let's go over what we've agreed.*

Check and clarify a few issues to prove that we really are listening. If our partner remains unsure, give them reassurance, talk in terms of their interests and demonstrate how *agreement* can benefit us both.

3. **"*As if*" *frame*** is successfully applied to problem-solving situations by pretending that something happened in order to explore other possibilities. This frame rests upon acting / behaving *as if* a desired state (outcome) has already been realized. Along with this theory, the NLP researchers Bavister and Vickers have posited that the "as if" frame enables people to enrich their perception of what's possible for them: "By pretending – acting 'as if' – they've already achieved their outcome they can step outside their beliefs about themselves and allow their imagination full reign" (Bavister, Vickers 142). This technique works like a visualization process through which we learn about the importance of *sensory evidence* (imagine the *evidence* of success in sensory outcomes):

e.g. - What's the report going to *look like?* (content, aim, layout and so on)
(visual)

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- How will this *sound* to the Board?
(auditory)
- How will downsizing *affect* the department?
(kinesthetic)

In the negotiating process or problem-solving situation, we are likely to say:

e.g. - The sales manager acts *as if* he is the only person who understands what marketing is all about. (clause of manner: gives information about how something happens or is done).
- Let's proceed *as if* I have agreed to this demand. What would you do for me, or what would happen as a result?

If an important team member is missing from a meeting, we may say:

e.g. - Let's act *as if* Ellen were present. What would she suggest to deal with this?

Questions for the "as if" frame also include:

- *What would it be like if...*?
- *Can you guess what would happen*?
- *Can we suppose that...*?

The opposite of the "as if" frame is the "helpless" frame (O'Connor 2001): "If I don't know, then there is nothing I can do about it".

4. ***The Ecology frame*** looks to the long-term impact of a person's outcome on wider systems, such as body systems, family, friends, co-workers, community, professional interests. For example, in the workplace, what is the effect of the outcome on your colleagues, and can you mitigate / alleviate any negative effects? This frame requires taking second position with other people and evaluate how they would react. Typical ecology frame questions are:

e.g. - *How will this be over the long term*?
- *Who else is affected*?
- *What would they think*?

The "me" frame is the opposite of the ecology frame:

e.g. "If it's OK for me now, then it's OK".

5. ***The Backtrack frame*** is an extremely useful strategy in areas like coaching, training, chairing a meeting or facilitating a discussion. This technique involves repeating back to someone what they have just said by using their exact words, phrasing, rhythm and tonality. Alder also calls it "a reminder of factors, or points for action", a more or less word-for-word reiteration. In my opinion, at different points in a meeting, backtracking can be seen as a platform for facilitating the agreement frame. The backtrack frame can be used to check agreement during and at the conclusion of a meeting, to update a new arrival, or to restart a discussion. Moreover, some NLP researchers (Bavister, Vickers 2004; O'Connor, Seymour 2002) agree that this frame is not a summary, it is different to a summary, which usually *distorts* the other person's words, i.e. what he / she means. Its aim is twofold: (1) this frame *checks agreement* and understanding of the participants in a meeting; (2) it helps *enhance rapport* anytime participants get lost, because it clarifies the way forward. Backtrack can keep us on course towards the desired outcome by asking questions and making statements such as:

e.g. - *What you said was...*
- *Let me summarize the points made, and what we have decided.*
- *We've discussed the question of... and it seems that...*
- *Some of you think that...Others are of the opinion that...*
- *So, what we've agreed is that...*

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- *Can I check that I understand...?*
- *Can I summarize so far?*
- *So you are saying...?*

The opposite of the "backtrack" frame is the "paraphrase" frame: "I define what you said and what you meant".

6. ***The Negotiation frame*** assumes that the parties are already engaged in a negotiation and prepare to come to an agreement. The ground is set and the resources are available. The key question is: "*What can we both agree on*?"

The negotiation frame has its counterpart in the "war" frame which is based mostly on coercive language (measures):
"I want something and I'm going to get it if it kills us".

The Origins of the Sleight of Mouth Technique

Robert Dilts (1999), in his book *Sleight of Mouth: The Magic of Conversational Belief Change* explained what he called Sleight of Mouth (SOM) patterns, the types of verbal reframe used in conversation with the purpose of influencing beliefs and mental maps from which those beliefs arise. Through modelling the language (verbal) patterns of people such as Milton Erickson, Abraham Lincoln, or Mohandas Gandhi, a set of questions similar to the Meta Model can be used in any situation where a person experiences a criterial equivalence or cause and effect relationship involving beliefs such as:

e.g. - Money's hard to come by, so I have to work hard.
- There is far too much work to handle.
- My job is going badly and I feel depressed.
- I don't believe in reorganizing business units.

According to Ellerton (2006),

> Beliefs are often expressed in the form of a *complex equivalence* (A equals, is equivalent to, or means B) or a *cause-effect* (A causes, makes, leads to, produces, or results in B). Sleight of mouth patterns work well for belief change. To use sleight of mouth patterns, the client's belief must be expressed in terms of a complex equivalence or cause-effect assertion. (Ellerton 120)

As a technique, it stimulates multiple perspectives, or points of view, by suggesting simple questions. Most of the viewpoints are used in creative problem-solving and different aspects of business communication such as negotiating and mediation.
People's beliefs are easy to recognize, as they often appear in language with phrases like:

- "*I / we **can't** solve this...*"
- "*You **can't** do it that way...*"
- "*That **won't** work...*"
- "*They **won't** help us...*"
- "*It **isn't** going to succeed...*"
- "*It's **not** worth the effort...*"
- "*It's **not** possible...*"

These phrases usually close the pathway for constructive energy, they are limiting beliefs and describe an organization which has created a culture of negative energy where achievement is limited or constrained.

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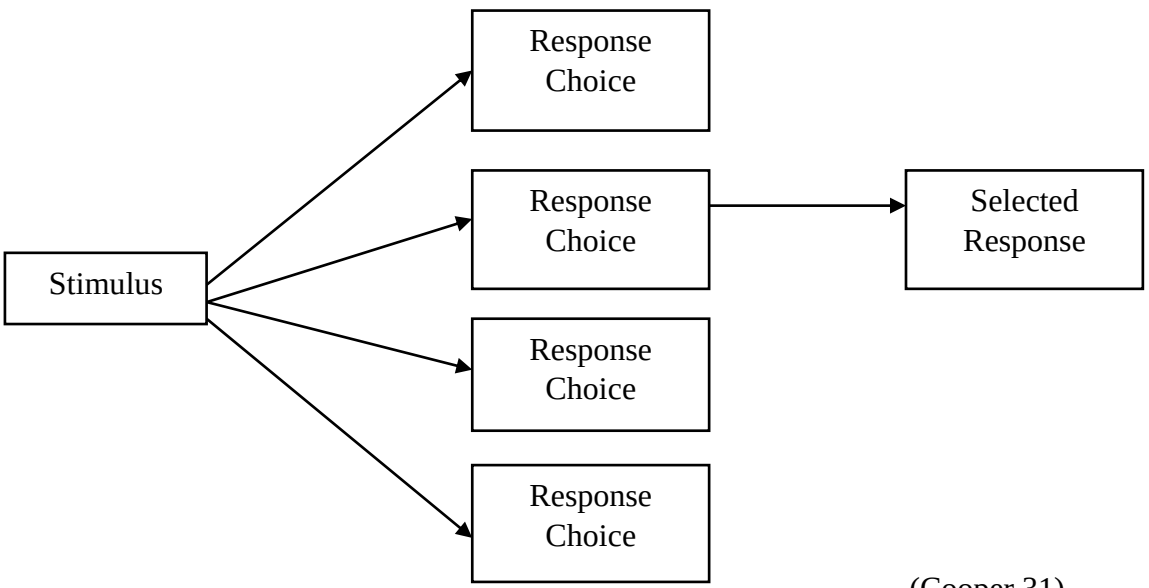
On the contrary, Molden (2001) synthesized the essence of working with people's beliefs, acknowledging that beliefs should act as a "vehicle for success", and people should "stretch their beliefs and take charge of their journey": "An organization would be different if more people adopted beliefs that were empowering and liberating" (Molden 52).
Thus, it would be better to hear in people's language phrases like:

- "I/we *can* do this", "We *will* do our best to make that work".
- "I/we *are* creative", "We *can* learn much from this project".
- "I/we *will* be innovative", "We *are* a strong team".
- "We *will* work hard to achieve the most demanding goals".

NLP can help us change our habitual, programmed response, telling us how to "extend the time between the stimulus and the response long enough to consider and evaluate more options" (Cooper 30).

Therefore, the process becomes a sequence of *stimulus – response choice – selected response* as shown in the figure below:



(Cooper 31)

Exploring alternative meanings in business, and hence more choices, is also closely related to the technique of *reframing* and problem thinking. Given the scenario where two employees' salaries have been cut by 20%, *meaning reframe* will make the difference between the first employee who focuses on the problem *only* and the second employee who experiences it as a problem solving:

Employee 1 Response: *I've lost part of my salary. I had what I consider a terrific month. My current situation is really making it tough for me to cover my expenses.*

Employee 2 Response: *Money does not mean everything to me. I don't feel it will be a problem.*

I'm sure it won't be a problem. I'm confident that I will quickly get a contract for a new arrangement with an outside firm.

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The second employee's answer is closer to the NLP flexibility principle: Choice is better than no choice. This NLP fundamental tenet expresses the ability to see things from different perspectives, i.e. the employee's perspective, the customer's perspective, the management position, or the position of other team members. Thus, there is a category of business people who have often been heard saying that they have to evaluate their work performance for reasons such as:

e.g. (1) I *need to* / *have to*/ *ought to* contract a lot of the work out to meet the deadline / to come in on budget.
(2) *I've got to* create a new company website.
(3) *Preparing* and *organizing* a one-week training course for senior executives is my *urgent* task.
(4) *No one else but me* is going to attend the annual sales conference and prepare a brochure to send to our clients.

These comments characterize *one choice businessmen* who imagine that they have ***only*** one choice to work things out. As a matter of fact, a common way in which these people limit themselves is by forming beliefs (limiting beliefs) which are rendered by the underlined structures above: modal auxiliaries like *need to, have to, ought to,* the phrase *have got to,* gerunds used as nouns such as *preparing* and *organizing*, the adjective *urgent,* the expression *no one else but me*.

Counter-examples are good for breaking down limiting beliefs as they look into the situation more broadly, and, with the help of NLP techniques, turn limiting beliefs into beliefs that make success possible:

e.g. (5) *Working on a project with an outside supplier and bringing profit to the company.*
(6) *Posting up-to-date information on the site, meeting journalists and giving interviews about new investment products*.
(7) *Recruiting two new trainees who will be given the choice to help you with either the preparation of seminars or the organization of weekly classes*.
(8) *Looking for graduates who will make an effort / are prepared to come up with spanking new marketing ideas / strategies to encourage the trendier customer base*.

These examples illustrate a different category of business people, more oriented towards permitting/motivating beliefs which, stated in the positive, act as a stimulus on improving performance and make excellent role models.

In his *Handbook of tools, techniques and practical exercises* (1997), Ted Garratt points out that the Sleight of Mouth technique makes us aware of the various meanings that could be attributed to particular words and phrases.

A More Modern Perspective on the Sleight of Mouth Technique based on Alder's *SOM* Model

Harry Alder's model calls for distinctive sets of reframes and proves extremely useful in communication fields such as training and development, negotiating and mediation, or problem-solving. In 2002 Alder proposed a new model of stimulating multiple perspectives which he called the model to the 'problem statement', treated as appropriate for addressing both strategic and operational issues. He suggested that

> The term 'sleight of mouth' alludes to the magician's sleight of hand. It applies to a reframing model that has gained some currency in NLP. This simple model helps to

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> reframe a problem or issue and produce an insight, solution, or new line of enquiry [...] Before applying the technique, draw up a clear problem statement. This simply sets down the problem succinctly in words, and you need to do this carefully. In doing this, you may need to identify a root problem (the 'presented' or 'presenting' problem). The Sleight of Mouth Model will also tend to redefine the problem, so you can re-run it using the new problem statement (Alder 237-238).

Here are some viewpoints to generate reframes (*SOM patterns*) for the same statement. There are 13 SOM categories that can be used to doubt limiting beliefs and open channels of more positive reformulations:

1. *Generalizing*: Re-evaluating the belief from the framework of a different model of the world.
2. *Apply to self*: Assessing the belief according to the criteria on which the belief is based.
3. *Elicit values or criteria*: Reinforcing the belief according to a criterion that is potentially more important than those addressed by the belief.
4. *Positive outcome*: Directing attention to a positive effect of the belief, which challenges or reinforces the belief.
5. *Change outcome/frame size*: Switching to another outcome/goal/issue which could be more relevant than the one implied by the belief; re-evaluating the implication of the belief (to represent something more positive) in the context of a longer/shorter time frame, a bigger/smaller perspective.
6. *Setting a further outcome*: Enriching the perception of the belief by evaluating from the frame of an ongoing context.
7. *Tell a metaphor*: Finding a relationship analogous to that defined by the belief.
8. *Redefine*: Substituting a new word for one of the words used in the belief statement with a similar meaning but with more positive implications.
9. *Step down*: Breaking the elements of the belief into richer and more positive chunks.
10. *Step up*: Generalizing an element of the belief to larger elements or classes.
11. *Counter examples*: Finding an "exception to the rule" that enriches the belief.
12. *Positive intention*: Directing attention to the intention of the belief.
13. *Time frame*: Evaluating the belief in the context of a longer or shorter time frame.

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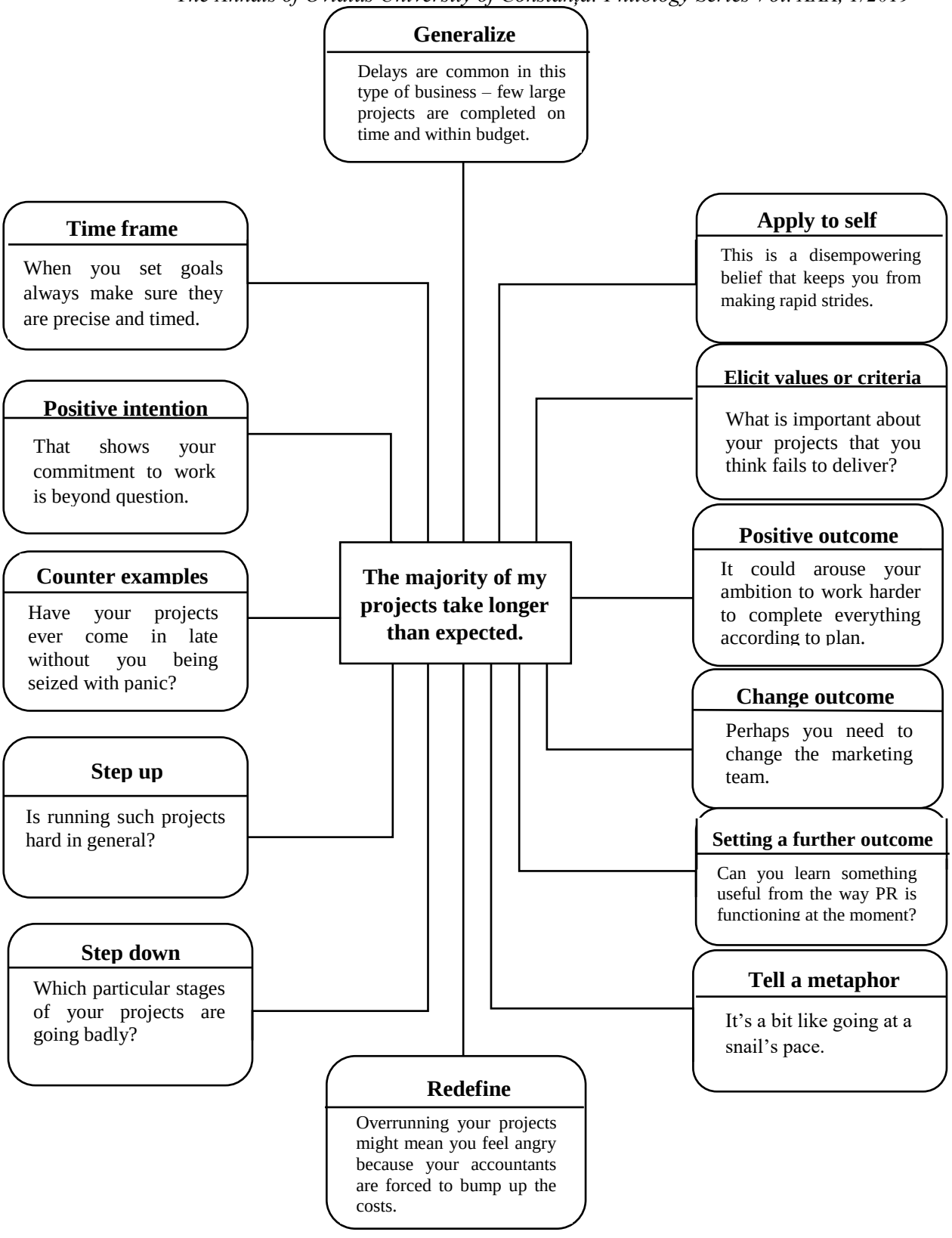

(A suggested classification of the SOM categories based on Alder's SOM model)

e.g. *The majority of my projects take longer than expected*.

1. *Generalize:* Delays are common in this type of business – few large projects are completed on time and within budget.

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2. *Apply to self*: This is a disempowering belief that keeps you from making rapid strides.
3. *Elicit values or criteria*:
What is important about your projects that you think fails to deliver?
4. *Positive outcome*:
It could arouse your ambition to work harder to complete everything according to plan.
5. *Change outcome / frame size*:
Perhaps you need to change the marketing team.
6. *Setting a further outcome*:
Can you learn something useful from the way PR is functioning at the moment?
7. *Tell a metaphor*:
It's a bit like going at a snail's pace.
8. *Redefine*: Overrunning your projects might mean you feel angry because your accountants are forced to bump up the costs.
9. *Step down*: Which particular stages of your projects are going badly?
10. *Step up*: Is running such projects hard in general?
11. *Counter examples*:
Have your projects ever come in late without you being seized with panic?
12. *Positive intention*:
That shows your commitment to work is beyond question.
13. *Time frame*: When you set goals always make sure they are precise and timed.

Conclusions

One of the major aims of my research was to demonstrate that many types of linguistic frames were derived from observing the patterns of excellence in experts from the professional fields of negotiating and selling, and their linguistic expressions. I started from the basic idea that NLP covers communication, internal experience and the way language patterns influence people's relationship with others. The mental processes of perception involve neuro-linguistic programs. They account for our behaviour and how we achieve desired outcomes. I have also brought out the importance of our mental template in modelling a person's perceptual map.

From the beginning, I have concentrated on analyzing specific sales, negotiating, or problem-solving functions and phrases whose role is to emphasize linguistic patterns with a view to leading the prospective customers in terms of their own maps. The attempt was to discuss the different kinds of filtering systems which options-motivated persons use in mastering business communication. As it has been highlighted, gaining rapport linguistically through matching verbal expressions has to be taken into consideration when one wants to get inside another person's frame of reference. In order to sharpen up goals and achieve outcomes in selling, negotiating or problem-solving situations, professional experts need to resort to effective strategies like empathic and reflective listening in diagnosing their interlocutors' communication preferences. Regarded as both necessary and sufficient for unblocking miscommunication and confusion, the openness to feedback and the acquiring of flexibility enable business people to see problems from different positions, i.e. the customer's and manager's position, to generate and maintain resourceful states of mind through effective linguistic expressions that suggest ideas for possible solutions. Attention is paid to the way in which recognizing filters in ourselves and others helps us build bridges in communication.

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My experience in working with NLP in various business situations, in general, and in negotiating and selling, in particular, has greatly helped me to recognize my own and others' language and behaviour patterns.

To sum up, a frame is an indicator of our internal psychological state, the way we perceive or feel about something, frame or reframe a situation or problem.

Firstly, the specific functions and phrases, the use of typical questions asked in relation to each of the six frames uncover all possibilities, break deadlocks, create more frames of reference and make sales/team meetings and short-term/long-term negotiations more fluid.

Secondly, they significantly narrow the difference between how we perceive a problem inwardly and the outcome we want to achieve eventually.

Furthermore, the above relationship-focused frames describe a cultural profile based on finding common ground, harmony, proactivity, personal trust, willingness, in comparison with their more confrontational opposites ('blame', 'helpless', 'me', 'war' frames) which are counterproductive, reactive, based on coercive/controlling language, win-lose mentality, and where everything is centered around arguing with others, being tough and determined, or winning people over to one's way of thinking.

Consciously or unconsciously, these highly effective skills are likely to bring about changes in people and situations, shift a belief or thing in a useful and purposeful way. According to Garratt (1997), "Either of these strategies may be absolutely appropriate, it is not a question of right or wrong; it is about having the flexibility of trainer behaviour to respond in the most effective, purposeful manner and patterned way to comments and situations" (89).

By making Dilts' and Alder's *SOM* reframes explicit I have attempted to provide insight into the modelling of people's language patterns as well as draw attention to the power of influencing beliefs through a variety of interpretations put on certain words and phrases.

I think that the technique's close similarity to the Meta Model helps us build new tools (sets of questions and challenges) which act as a 'vehicle of success' and verbal artistry. Deeply rooted beliefs can be split into two parts, i.e. A *because* B (cause-effect relationship) or A *means* B (complex equivalence), and the use of Sleight of Mouth patterns offers more flexibility in belief change.

Hopefully, through generalizing, re-evaluating and challenging limiting beliefs, we may improve not only our ability to understand a person's model of the world, but also switch the focus away from negative energy and constraints and open a pathway for empowering and constructive beliefs.

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