

# Presuppositions

by Robert Dilts.

Presuppositions relate to unconscious beliefs or assumptions embedded in the structure of an utterance, action or another belief; and are required for the utterance, action or belief to make sense. According to Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, to presuppose means to "suppose beforehand" or "to require as an antecedent in logic or fact." The term "suppose" comes from Latin, and literally means "to put under" from *sub* ("under") + *ponere* ("to put").

There are two types of presuppositions that are significant in NLP: *linguistic* presuppositions and *epistemological* presuppositions.

## Linguistic Presuppositions

Linguistic Presuppositions occur when certain information or relationships must be accepted as true in order to make sense of a particular statement. For example, to understand the statement, "As soon as you stop trying to sabotage our therapeutic efforts, we'll be able to make more progress," one must assume that the person to whom the statement is directed already has been, in fact, trying to sabotage the therapeutic efforts. The statement also presupposes that there is some kind of therapeutic effort being attempted and that at least some progress has been made. Similarly the statement, "Since they leave us no alternative, we must resort to violence," presupposes that no alternative, in fact, exists and that "they" are the ones who determine whether there are alternatives or not.

Linguistic presuppositions are typically explored or challenged in NLP by asking, "How, specifically, do you know that?"

True linguistic presuppositions should be contrasted with assumptions and inferences. A linguistic presupposition is something that is stated in the body of the statement itself which must be 'supposed' or accepted in order for the sentence or utterance to make sense. In the question, "Have you stopped exercising regularly?" for example, the use of the word *stop* implies that the listener has *already* been exercising regularly. The question, "Do you exercise regularly?" has no such presupposition.

Conclusions such as "The speaker thinks exercise is important," or "The speaker is unfamiliar with the exercise habits of the listener," are *not* presupposed by the questions. They are assumptions and inferences we might make about the question, but are not presupposed within the question itself.

Consider the following two statements:

The authorities prevented the demonstrators from marching because they *feared* violence.

The authorities prevented the demonstrators from marching because they *advocated* violence.

The two statements have exactly structure, with the exception of the words "feared" and "advocated." Depending on which word is used, we *assume* that the term "they" refers to either the "authorities" or the "demonstrators." We are more likely to think that it is the authorities who fear violence, and the demonstrators who advocate violence; but this is not presupposed by the statement itself. It is assumed by us as listeners. Both sentences presuppose that there were demonstrators who were planning to march, but that is all.

An inference related to the two statements above would be that "the demonstrators and the authorities were not the same group of people." Inferences relate to logical conclusions which are made that are based upon the information provided by the statement. Presuppositions, assumptions and inferences all reflect beliefs and values, but in different ways.

In *The Structure of Magic Volume I* (1975) NLP founders Bandler and Grinder identify twenty-nine different forms of linguistic presuppositions.

## **Epistemological Presuppositions**

Epistemological presuppositions are deep, and often unstated, beliefs that form the foundation of a particular system of knowledge. As the foundation of an epistemology, they must be "presupposed," and cannot be proven. In fact, they are the fundamental assumption upon which all of the other concepts and ideas within the epistemology are "proven." Euclid, for example, built his entire geometry upon the concept of the 'point'. A point is defined as 'an entity that has a position but no other properties'?it has no size, no mass, no color, no shape. It is of course impossible to prove that a point *really* has no size, mass, color, etc. However, if you accept this presupposition, along with a few others, you can build a whole system of geometry (i.e., "A line is the shortest distance between two points," "A 'rectangle' is four lines connected together at equal angles," etc.). The conclusions of this system can then be 'proved' with respect to their adherence to the fundamental but unproven concepts. It is important to realize that one does not have to accept Euclid's assumption about a point in order to create a geometry. There are other geometries based on different presuppositions. For instance, MIT mathematician Seymour Pappert (1980) built his fascinating 'Turtle geometry' for children substituting the notion of a 'Turtle' for a 'point'; a 'Turtle' being an entity that has a position *and* a direction.

The fundamental presuppositions of NLP form the basic epistemology upon which the methodology and technology of NLP is built. They are like the fundamental concepts of Euclidian geometry. And, similar to Euclid's notion of a "point," the basic presuppositions of NLP cannot be "proven" in any objective fashion. You cannot objectively 'prove', for instance, that there *really* is a "positive intention" behind a particular behavior; that is why it is considered

a 'presupposition'. Similarly, one cannot 'prove' that the 'map is not the territory' and that 'there is no one right map of the world'. These are part of the basic 'epistemology' of NLP - they are the basic beliefs upon which the rest of the model is based.

Thus, accepting the presuppositions that 'the map is not the territory' or 'behind every behavior is positive intention' is ultimately an act of faith. If we accept these presuppositions, then we will find or create them in our experience, rather than waiting for the proof that they are "true."

Like many other aspects of NLP, the basic NLP Presuppositions have been synthesized from many different fields: general semantics, transformational grammar, systems theory, cybernetics, pragmatism, phenomenology, and logical positivism. The essential epistemological presuppositions of NLP can be summarized as follows:

1. ***Map is Not the Territory.*** As human beings, we can never know reality. We can only know our perceptions of reality. We experience and respond to the world around us primarily through our sensory representational systems. It is our 'neuro-linguistic' maps of reality that determine how we behave and that give those behaviors meaning, not reality itself. It is generally not reality that limits us or empowers us, but rather our map of reality.
2. ***Life and 'Mind' are Systemic Processes.*** The processes that take place within a human being and between human beings and their environment are systemic. Our bodies, our societies, and our universe form an ecology of complex systems and sub-systems all of which interact with and mutually influence each other. It is not possible to completely isolate any part of the system from the rest of the system. Such systems are based on certain 'self-organizing' principles and naturally seek optimal states of balance or homeostasis.
3. ***At some level, all behavior is "positively intended".*** That is, it is or was perceived as appropriate given the context in which it was established, from the point of view of the person whose behavior it is. People make the best choices available to them given the possibilities and capabilities that they perceive to be accessible within their model of the world. Any behavior no matter how evil, crazy or bizarre it seems is the best choice available to that person at that point in time.
4. ***The Law of Requisite Variety.*** In systems theory there is a principle called the ***Law of Requisite Variety***, which states in order to successfully adapt and survive, a member of a system needs a certain minimum amount of flexibility. That amount of flexibility has to be proportional to the variety in the rest of the system. One of the implications of the Law of Requisite Variety is that if you want to get to a particular goal state you have to increase the number of operations which could possibly get you there in proportion with the degree variability in the system. It is important to explore variations in operations used to accomplish goals, rather than simply repeat

the same one \_ even if it produced creative results in the past. Because the environments and contexts in which we operate change, the same procedure will not always produce the same result. If you want to consistently achieve your goal, you must vary the operations you are using to get to it. When you always use the same procedure, you will produce a varying result. So, as a system becomes more complex, more flexibility is required. Another implication of the Law of Requisite Variety is that the part of the system with the most flexibility will be the catalytic element within that system - like the queen in a game of chess.

All of the models and techniques of NLP are based on the combination of these four principles. They form the basic framework upon which NLP is built. According to these presuppositions, wisdom, ethics and ecology do not derive from having the one 'right' or 'correct' map of the world, because human beings are not be capable of making one. Rather, the goal is to create the richest map possible that respects the systemic nature and ecology of ourselves and the world in which we live.

To explore the impact of different epistemological presuppositions, try out the following exercise:

1. Find references experiences in your own life in which you acted congruently from each of these presuppositions.
2. Fully associate into the state connected with the experience of each presupposition. Notice the posture and physiology of your body, and where your attention is focused. What perception of reality arises from this state?
3. Break state, and then think of the opposites of each of these presuppositions:

***There is one single correct map which is the territory.***

***We are not part of the same system. You are separate from the system you are in. Reality occurs linearly and mechanically.***

***You can't trust anyone because people are basically negatively intended, or act randomly with no intention at all.***

***There is only one right way to do things. If something works once, it will always work.***

***You don't have the capabilities you need. You are what you do.***

4. Act "as if" these 'counter-NLP' presuppositions are true. Notice the posture and physiology of your body, and where your attention is focused. What state and perception of the world arises from these presuppositions?
5. Go to an observer position and contrast the two states and realities. Which do you find the most "natural" for you, and easiest to sustain? Which seem most "foreign" and difficult to maintain? How do you experience the difference? What do you learn about yourself, your culture and your congruence with NLP presuppositions?
6. Consider the following beliefs:

- a. You can't control the system but it is predictable and you can prepare yourself for what is going to happen.
- b. You can get what you want in this system but you must do the right thing.
- c. You can't get what you want in this system no matter what you do.
- d. Everyone in this system is out for themselves so you must protect your own interests.
- e. If you don't get what you want right away it will be too late.

Take each belief and act 'as if' it were true. What epistemological presuppositions could be at the basis of each belief?

## Summary of Key NLP Presuppositions

The fundamental *Presuppositions of NLP* form the basic epistemology upon which all the rest of its methodology and technology are built. NLP presuppositions are like the core concepts of Euclidian geometry. They are the primary ideas and assumptions from which everything else in the field is derived. They form the philosophy behind all of the NLP models, distinctions and techniques.

Like many other aspects of NLP, the basic NLP Presuppositions have been synthesized from a number of different fields, including: general semantics (Alfred Korzybski), transformational grammar (Noam Chomsky), systems theory (Gregory Bateson), cybernetics (W. Ross Ashby), pragmatism (William James), phenomenology (Edmund Husserl), and logical positivism (Bertrand Russel and Alfred North Whitehead).

The following is a summary of the basic presuppositions of NLP, and their corollaries.

### *The Map is not the Territory.*

1. People respond to their own perceptions of reality.
2. Every person has their own individual map of the world. No individual map of the world is any more "real" or "true" than any other.
3. The meaning of a communication to another person is the response it elicits in that person, regardless of the intent of the communicator.
4. The 'wisest' and most 'compassionate' maps are those which make available the widest and richest number of choices, as opposed to being the most "real" or "accurate".
5. People already have (or potentially have) all of the resources they need to act effectively.
6. People make the best choices available to them given possibilities and the capabilities that they perceive available to them from their model of the world. Any behavior no matter how evil, crazy or bizarre it seems is the best choice available to the person at that point in time - if given a more appropriate choice (within the context of their model of the world) the person will be more likely to take it.
7. Change comes from releasing the appropriate resource, or activating the potential resource, for a particular context by enriching a person's map of the world.

### ***Life And 'Mind' Are Systemic Processes.***

1. The processes that take place within a person, and between people and their environment, are systemic. Our bodies, our societies and our universe form an ecology of systems and sub-systems all of which interact with and mutually influence each other.
2. It is not possible to completely isolate any part of a system from the rest of the system. People cannot not influence each other. Interactions between people form feedback loops - such that a person will be effected by the results that their own actions make on other people.
3. Systems are 'self organizing' and naturally seek states of balance and stability. There are no failures, only feedback.
4. No response, experience or behavior is meaningful outside of the context in which it was established or the response it elicits next. Any behavior, experience or response may serve as a resource or limitation depending on how it fits in with the rest of the system.
5. Not all interactions in a system are on the same level. What is positive on one level may be negative on another level. It is useful to separate behavior from "self" - to separate the positive intent, function, belief, etc. that generates the behavior from the behavior itself.
6. At some level all behavior is (or at one time was) "positively intended". It is or was perceived as appropriate given the context in which it was established, from the point of view of the person whose behavior it is. It is easier and more productive to respond to the intention rather than the expression of a problematic behavior.
7. Environments and contexts change. The same action will not always produce the same result. In order to successfully adapt and survive, a member of a system needs a certain minimum amount of flexibility. That amount of flexibility has to be proportional to the variation in the rest of the system. As a system becomes more complex, more flexibility is required.
8. If what you are doing is not getting the response you want then keep varying your behavior until you do elicit the response.

### **References**

*Applications of NLP*; Dilts, R., 1983.  
*Strategies of Genius*; Dilts, R., 1994-1995.  
*Tools of the Spirit*; Dilts, R. and McDonald, R., 1997.  
*Modeling With NLP*; Dilts, R., 1998.  
*Mindstorms*; Papert, S., 1980.

For information on Robert Dilts' products and services, please see [Upcoming Seminars](#) or [Robert's Product Page](#) at his web site: **[www.nlpu.com](http://www.nlpu.com)**

***These pages, and all their contents, are Copyright (C) 1998 by Robert Dilts., Santa Cruz, CA.***