What is a Meta Model for Language?

In order to think about the Meta Model it is useful to first think about the nature of human knowledge and experience in a very simplified way. At the right side of Fig.1. We see the totality of all our experience that a person has in their lives. This totality is not all available to your conscious mind. This means that some things happen to you in the womb, as a baby before you learned to speak, that happen in your sleep, such things are stored in your experience, but you cannot, for the most part, access them through your conscious mind processes.

Through a process which we call the Milton Model after Milton Erickson, processes of Trance-Formation, which we will examine later, move us into a place where we have language. In this place, The Deep Structure, lies all of the experience that you have ever had for which you might have language to discuss or think about.

On the left hand side Fig.1 outlines the first elements of the Meta Model for Language a very tidy tool designed by John Grinder from the work of Noam Chomsky in the field of Transformational Grammar. It enables a questioner to locate the meaning that resides in the spoken word, by asking questions that reach into the deep structure meaning of the speaker.
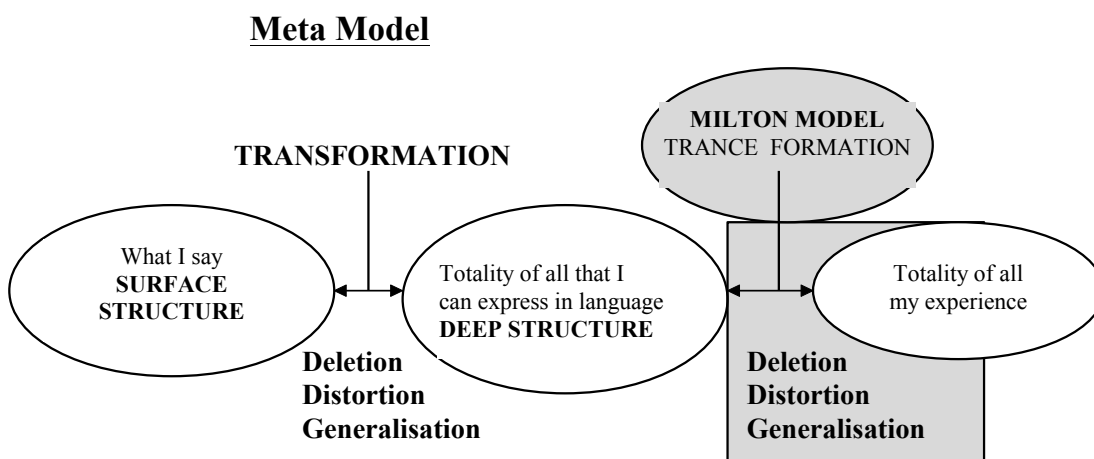
Meta Model

Fig.2 Meta Model for Language Expanded

The Meta Model uses the processes of transformation to translate the surface structure of language, ie. What is said, back into the deep structure ie. What was meant. It is designed to teach you how to respond to the form of the speakers communication so as to obtain the fullest meaning from it.

The model works because native speakers of a language in this case English, have a set of intuitions about what is called "Well-formedness". "Well-formed sentence in English should sound like." So, for example, if you are a native speaker of English you will know that … "*This a well-formed sentence, English in, is not.*" You may not be able to parse this sentence, but you do know, intuitively, that it is not a well-formed sentence in English. This is all you have to know to be able to use the Meta-Model.

This is how it works.

There are, as you will see in Fig.2 three processes that are part of the transformation of Deep Structure into Surface Structure. You might call these processes (Deletion, Distortion & Generalisation) **Violations**. They violate the conditions of well-formedness of the deep structure by converting them into superficial and incomplete surface structures. These are the things you hear when someone speaks, they are also the things that you say when you speak.
These **Violations can be Challenged** and if the challenge is effective and appropriate the result will be a more complete understanding of the deep structure meaning of the communication. You probably know the feeling of having someone talk with you and you don't fully understand what they are saying, or, if you understand, you don't believe you are getting to the heart of the matter. Well, this may well be because, you are hearing violations, you don't know what they are, and you do not challenge them appropriately. If you knew the right questions to ask (the right Challenge) you would get the meaning that you had been missing.
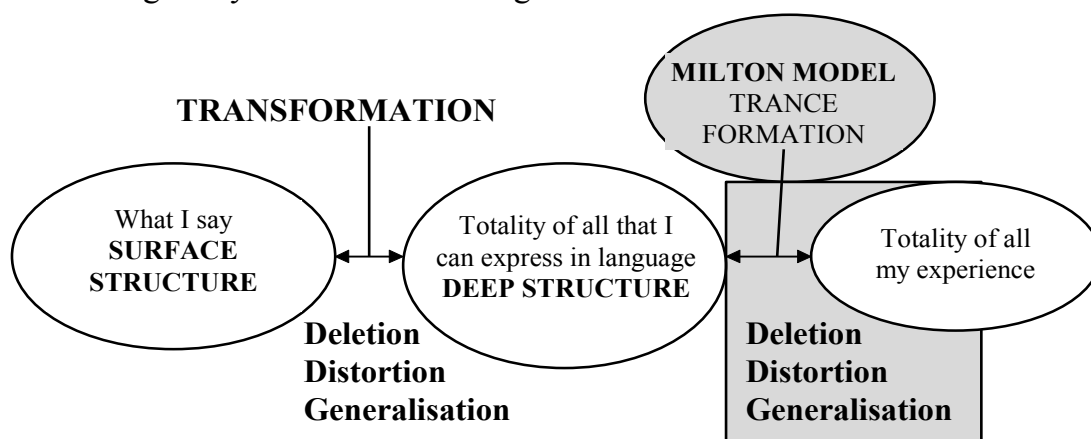

TRANSFORMATION

MILTON MODEL
TRANCE FORMATION

What I say
SURFACE STRUCTURE

Totality of all that I can express in language
DEEP STRUCTURE

Totality of all my experience

Deletion
Distortion
Generalisation

Deletion
Distortion
Generalisation

Fig.3 Meta Model for Language

If you   have ever had the feeling that you are getting nowhere in a conversation, you want to understand what is being said or meant, you don't and you have asked all the questions that you can think of. Then, you have a need for the meta-model. People who leave you feeling frustrated this way, usually are making violations you neither hear nor challenge.

In the following pages you will be introduced to the nine violations that exist in language and to the structure of the Challenges that can be made to each of them, together with some examples. This will provide the basis for you learning how to listen for the violations of others as well as your own. And, for learning how to find out what you want.

DELETIONS

Too much is happening simultaneously in your mind for you to be able to communicate everything, either to yourself, or to others. So, you delete huge amounts, you "funnel your perceptions through the reducing valve of your brain", is Aldous Huxley's way of expressing this issue.

Deletion is the process by which you selectively pay attention to some dimensions of your experience and exclude others. You need to sort and chunk and then delete information, so that the words you speak, can be managed by the limited process which is your conscious mind. Extremely limited by comparison to your unconscious mind process, that can handle not 5 - 9 information units but more than two million pieces of information every second.

We will examine here, how to undelete information. This means that what you say or hear, gets filled out, until the deep structure meaning is obtained. Thus, deletion is the overriding process, that is, the general purpose of all challenges is to expand the surface structure and reduce the essential elements that have been taken out of the deep structure.

Deletions are also specific violation which we will examine.

DISTORTION

This interesting process which creates in language such complex twists of meaning and intention is also the basis for much of your creativity. Distortion is how we alter our perceptions of sensory input and in language it is how we alter our understanding of what someone means when they speak. Remember that any process is bidirectional, if you can use it clarify, then you it to confuse, thus the Meta Model that is used to provide insights into deep structure meaning in language can be used to create confusion and trance states as the Milton Model.

GENERALISATION

A process by which pieces of information of your model of the world becomes detached from their original experience and come to represent the entire category of which the experience is an example. A powerful and valuable process preventing you from having to relearn a concept every time you come

across a variation of the original learning. In language, when you speak and use a generalisation, you lose some of the clarity and specificity and precision that was there in deep structure. So, generalisations to have a mushy and thus a depowering effect, on clear communication.

The process of gathering information is usually the business of filling in some of the missing pieces. Deletion for example, may be either Simple or Comparative.
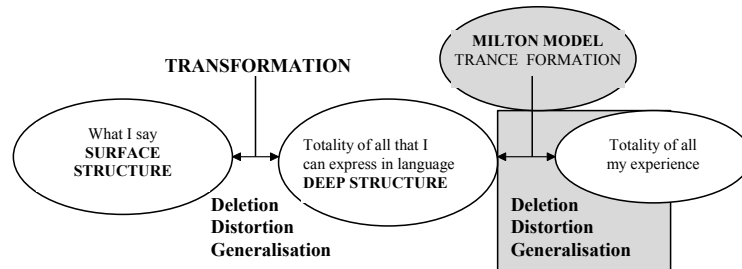
TRANSFORMATION

MILTON MODEL
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Deletion
Distortion
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Fig.2 Meta Model for Language Expanded

TRANSFORMATION

A **VIOLATION** occurs this is the signal for A **CHALLENGE.**

There are 9 transformations and so 9 violations and 9 challenges

What I say
SURFACE STRUCTURE

Totality of all that I can express in language
DEEP STRUCTURE

**Deletion
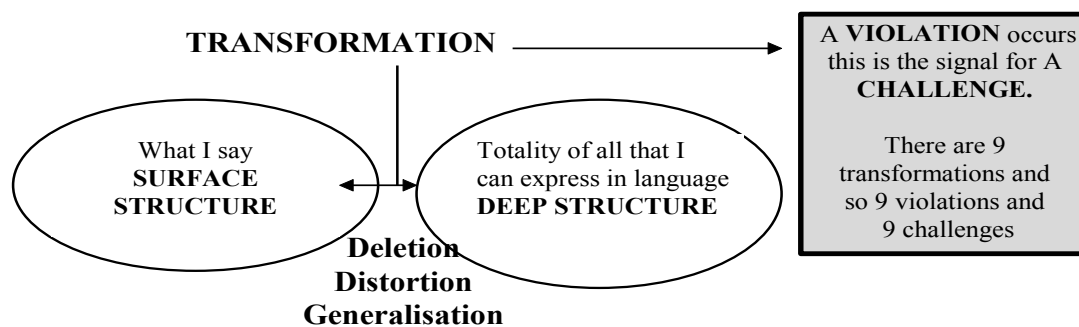Distortion
Generalisation**

**Fig.4 Meta Model for Language Expanded
to take account of the Violations & Challenges**

1. A **Simple Deletion** as a Violation might be for example "I'm just sad." The Challenge **About whom or about what?**

 A Comparative Deletion as a Violation might be " She's the best player." The Challenge **Compared to whom,** a search for the missing comparator.

2. A Lack of Referential Index (a generalisation) is when the person or thing that is the subject of the action is mentioned but not specifically. An unspecified pronoun. The Violation might be …. " I don't want to discuss it with them. "The Challenge **What specifically** don't you want to discuss and/or **with whom specifically** don't you want to discuss it.

3. **Unspecified Verbs (a generalisation)** are verbs that are less explicit than is useful for clarity. So a Violation might be … " He misled me." The Challenge **How specifically** did he mislead you?

4. **Nominalisations (a distortion)** involve the changing of a Deep Structure process or action or verb into a Surface Structure event or
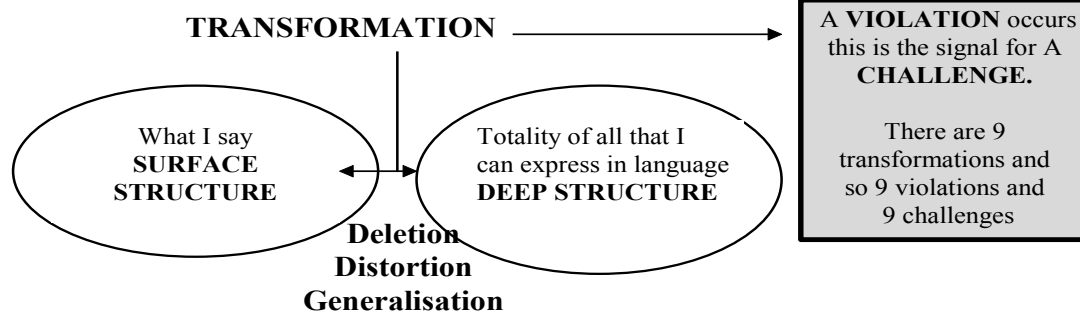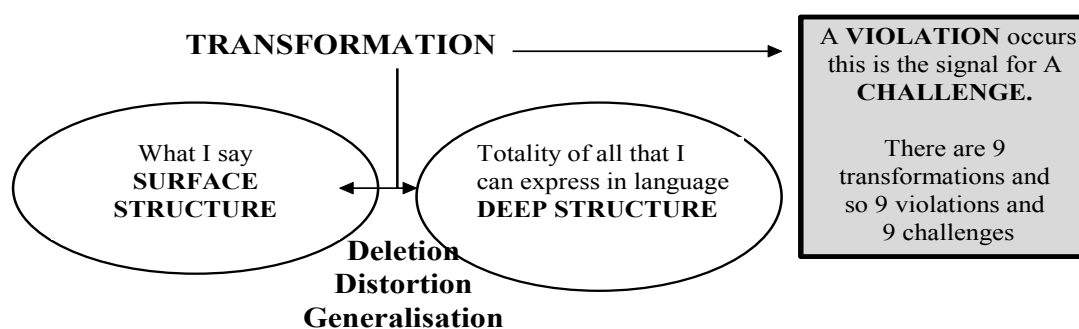
GATHERING INFORMATION
(1) Deletion
(2) Lack of Referential Index
(3) Unspecified Verbs
(4) Nominalisations
EXPANDING THE LIMITS OF THE SPEAKERS MODEL
(5) Universal Quantifiers
(6) Modal Operators
SEMANTIC ILL-FORMEDNESS OR CHANGING MEANING
(7) Cause Effect
(8) Mind Reading
(9) Lost Performatives

TRANSFORMATION ⟶

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thing. An active verb then becomes a passive noun, and you feel a sense of loss of control over your life. The simplest check as to whether a word is a noun or a norminalisation is to imagine a wheelbarrow. If you can put the thing in it is a noun eg "Our relationship / friendship / love / communication is dead!" Now you simply can't put a relationship in a wheelbarrow, because it isn't a thing, its a nominalisation. These abstract words are valuable but you need to denominalise them.

You can also check a word by putting it in the bland phrase " An ongoing …." If it makes sense it is not a noun but a nominalisation. For example " An ongoing house." Clearly doesn't make sense because it is a noun, but " An ongoing communication" does make sense because it is a nominalisation. To Challenge a Nominalisation Violation " Our relationship is dead…" **How specifically is the way you and I relate no longer a living experience for you?** The nominalisation is changed back into a verb a process word and then the verb is challenged for its unspecified quality.

5. **Universal Quantifiers (a generalisation)** imply or state absolute conditions about how the speaker perceives reality. Typically words like, **all, every, always, never, no-one, everyone….** A Violation might be "I never get anything right." The Challenge is always an attempt to **seek exception** such as an inflection of voice **never?** or **Have you ever** done anything right?

Fig.4 Meta Model for Language Expanded to take account of the Violations & Challenges

6. **Modal Operators (a generalisation)** are rules about peoples' behaviour and about the limits to it. Typically words like **Can/Can't, should/shouldn't, must/mustn't**. A Violation might be " I can't manage it." The Challenge is always a **challenge to the limits** being set, whether it is an operator of possibility or necessity.

7. **Cause and Effect (a distortion)** involving the belief, on the part of the speaker that an action by one person can cause another person to experience some emotion or change of inner state. Leaves the second person without choice how to respond. So the Violation might be "Her attitude annoys me" The Challenge is always an **attempt to seek out the way causative process** works. **How does her attitude cause her to feel annoyed?**

8. **Mind Reading (a distortion)** refers to the belief that one person can know what is going on in the mind of another, what they are thinking or feeling, without any information from the other person. No direct communication.

So the believer is acting on a delusion instead of information. A Violation might be " Jean knows I don't feel happy." A Challenge would again involve seeking how the knowledge was acquired. So a Challenge might be **How does Jean know that you don't feel happy**?

9. **Lost Performative (a generalisation)** is a statement or judgement that the speaker believes to be so for all, but they have no apparent connection with the speaker. An example of a Violation might be "That is a stupid thing to do." The Challenge would be **For Whom or According to Whom**.

Remember, in all the examples referred to above, I have simply given you one form of the category and a simple way to identify it. There are many ways in which each of the Challenges and Violations might be expressed.