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LANGUAGE IDIOSYNCRASIES AS EXPRESSIONS OF AN INDIVIDUAL'S MODALITIES

The interest of this project lies in the domain of modeling our verbal performance on the basis of what we know about our individual modalities in the context of mother tongue (L1) and foreign language (L2) use. It relates to an aspect of research in the area of neurolinguistic programming (NLP), more precisely the one which focuses on the description of our verbal interactions and the preferences we may have for certain language forms as examples of our individual modalities and of representational systems in the mind. The introductory part of the presentation looks at the major assumptions of NLP and the role of verbal expression as evidence of our representational systems. It describes the language characteristic of individual modalities, such as the visual, auditory, kinesthetic, olfactory and gustatory.

The research part of the project, carried out with a group of advanced second-language English learners, attempts to describe the subjects' individual modalities in their mother tongue and in their second language. It addresses the question whether the modalities as exemplified in idiosyncratic use of their mother tongue Polish are the same as those observed in the use of the second language, English. The data was collected by means of different recognition and production tests in the subjects' mother tongue and second language. This data was supplemented by comments made by the subjects on their individual awareness of the modalities they have. The study results have clear implications for FL/L2 classroom teaching and learning practice in respect of how to model a learner's optimum performance in FL/L2.

1. Introducing NLP

According to Young (2003:62) Neuro-Linguistic Programming can be defined analytically as:

Neuro The mind-body system and how it functions. Physiological and mental states. The nervous system through which you experience, interact with, and make sense

of your world, through the sensory systems of vision, speaking and hearing, and through touch and feeling.

Linguistic The language you use to describe, categorise, and analyse your reality. How you make sense of your world and communicate your experience to others. How you can use language to create change in your and others' models of the world.

Programming The thought patterns and habitual ways of perceiving and behaving. You learn to interpret the world based on your experience, according to your needs. You develop repeated sequences of behaviour and strategies that get you what you want, and create stories to explain those experiences. Because they are of your own making, it is possible to reprogram them.

So we can say that NLP is about studying how we think, experience the world and how we express this experience. It also shows, by the use of various techniques, that our behaviour if not satisfying and not leading to success can be remodelled. NLP defines the concept of change as the key notion in the process of remodelling. What is more, it is a change that we can create ourselves. It broadly applies to both the affective domain of our life – relations with oneself and others, but also to the professional sphere, for example demonstrating how to teach effectively and how to teach to learn, thanks to appropriate use of our brain potential.

Introducing change is based on different concepts and models created by NLP, for example:

- a. a meta-model relating to our understanding of what others really want to communicate to us, not only our perceptions based on our own experiences;
- b. a metaprogramme describing the way we filter reality, i.e. different perceptions of reality, e.g. a half-full versus half-empty glass;
- c. sensory acuity demonstrating a close interaction between thinking and the physiology of our body – physical clues allowing us to interpret certain behaviours, beyond the verbal level of communication
- d. the Milton-model based on hypnotherapy techniques and guidance through experience and states of mind
- e. representational systems describing our thinking processes as associated with different modalities such as visual, auditory and kinaesthetic; also including olfactory and gustatory ones, which are all expressed in the language we use – according to individual preferences.

NLP, in its understanding of the role of change leading to a successful outcome in whatever domain and context, can then be defined as **a learning process through modelling** proceeding through four stages:

Unconscious Incompetence → Conscious Incompetence → Conscious Competence → Unconscious Competence (O'Connor and Seymour 1995: 8)

This modelling means initially reflection and noticing the need (a specified need) for improvement and the area of improvement. This theory relates directly to present

day thinking on teaching and learning as reflective processes, where the role of, first of all, noticing and then conscious awareness are being emphasised.

The concepts of:

* Closure (certainty – convergence) versus openness (creativity – divergence),

* One (monistic perception of reality) versus the many dimensional (pluralistic perception of reality)

* determinism (objective, informal, conforming, genetic) versus free will (subjective, personal, challenging),

are building blocks of the so-called four-realities model (McWhinney, 1997), which describes different ways of thinking and perceiving reality (table 1), which if not appropriately used lead to dissatisfaction and failure. However, the general assumption of NLP (as mentioned before) is that we can change those realities through so-called change paths (table 2).

Table 1. The Four Realities Model (after McWhinney 1997)

	One	Many
Determined	Unitary (U) <i>Truths</i> <i>Rules</i>	Sensory (S) <i>Facts</i> <i>Logic</i>
Free Will	Mythic (M) <i>Ideas</i> <i>Metaphors</i>	Social (S) <i>Values</i> <i>Feelings</i>

Table 2. The Change Paths (based on McWhinney et al., 1997)

Shift	Typical Action	Examples of Movement or Change
U → Se	Add choice, Analyse, Break apart	Shift point of view, way of perceiving (...) analyse the elements, components, qualities (sub-modalities)
Se → U	Define	Find “what works” – an effective strategy, theory or paradigm
Se → M	Explore	Consequences and “what if ...” scenarios
So → M	Evoke	Set outcomes, prioritise personal goals, check ecology
M → U	Establish, Reframe	Name, categorise, find a symbol, icon or logo
M → Se	Connect, Implement	Brainstorm, sort ideas, put into practice

U – unitary, Se – sensory, So – social, M – mythic

The object of this paper however, is not a thorough discussion on NLP and how it works – as many volumes of theory on it (but more commonly practical hand-books for its use) have been written. These preliminary remarks are intended to be introductory in nature. I would like to demonstrate that NLP, quite well-known in other fields of professional activity, such as business negotiations, health therapy or law, has its place in the educational context as well, or more precisely in communication studies and language instruction. The major focus here in this study is only on one aspect of modelling in NLP, that is, becoming aware of our own modalities and how they are being manifested verbally by the language choices we make when communicating in our mother tongue and perhaps in a FL.

2. Representational systems and sub-modalities

NLP is about developing ways of communicating with others – communicating effectively what we think by verbal expression, tonality and body language, and being able to receive the same communication from our interlocutor. All our experience of the external world, what happens to us and what forms our behaviour is experienced by our senses: externally as we first for example see things happening to us and then internally, because we represent them in our minds by, for example, visualisation – just to mention one of the senses participating in our perceptions:

In NLP the ways we take in, store and code information in our minds – seeing, hearing, feeling, taste and smell – are known as **representational systems** (...) We use all three of the primary systems (visual, auditory, kinaesthetic) all the time although we are not equally aware of them all, and we tend to favour some over the others. For example many people have an inner voice that runs in the auditory system creating an internal dialogue (...) Many people can make clear mental images and think mainly in pictures (O'Connor and Seymour, 1995: 27–29).

These different representational systems are not mutually exclusive but may be complementary, with one being the major and dominant and the others minor or negligible. These systems are generally considered to be natural – in other words, inborn – and can only be developed and enhanced through practising them, which is a well-known belief in the educational practices of learner training and multisensory teaching. What is interesting however is the way in which NLP “discovers” sensory modality in communication acts. The main assumption here is that

we use words to describe our thoughts, so our choice of words will indicate which representational system we are using (ibid. 31).

A good example of how our dominant representational system works is a fragment of a possible conversational exchange:

The statement: ***I think your work is progressing well***, may bring about various responses. Here are some of the possibilities:

<i>Yes, it looks quite good</i>	(visual representation)
<i>Yes, I heard very positive comments on it.</i>	(auditory representation)

Yes, I feel good about it. (kinaesthetic representation)
Yes, it smells good. (olfactory representation)
Yes, I can taste the success. (gustatory representation)

It has assumed that only people using the same modalities (representational systems) can communicate accurately with each other, but of course this statement has to be taken with a certain degree of scepticism. Communication acts are not nearly as straightforward as that.

Also the main modalities referred to above “take more precise shapes” or so-called **sub-modalities**. For example, thinking and consequently speaking, when done

- in pictures, can refer to such qualities as: colour, depth, location, brightness, distance, etc.
- in sounds, can refer to volume, tone, duration, clarity, etc.
- in feeling, can refer to location, texture, weight, shape, temperature, etc.

What NPL theoreticians and more often practitioners believe is that these modalities and sub-modalities are expressed by the way we use the language and what lexical choices we make. And in this sense they give evidence of how our minds work.

Table 3 presents a set of sensory based words and phrases reflecting the above assumptions.

Table 3. Selected examples of sensory-based words and phrases (after O’Connor and Seymour, 1995: 46–48)

Modalities	Sensory-based words	Sensory-based phrases
Visual	<i>look, picture, focus, scene, illustrate, show, vision, hazy, reveal, clarify, shine, reflect</i>	<i>I see what you mean We see eye to eye I have a hazy notion It colours his view of life</i>
Auditory	<i>say, accent, loud, sound, monotonous, deaf, ring, tell, silence, harmonious, speechless, ask, tone, dumb</i>	<i>On the same wavelength That’s all Greek to me Unheard-of Music to my ears</i>
Kinaesthetic	<i>touch, handle, push, warm, cold, grasp, heavy, smooth, contact, stress, pressure, rough, tackle,</i>	<i>I can grasp that idea I will get in touch with you Control yourself Heated argument</i>
Olfactory Gustatory	<i>scented, stale, fishy, fragrant, fresh sour, flavour, salty, juicy, sweet</i>	<i>Smell a rat A fishy situation A sweet person</i>
Neutral	<i>think, remember, know, recognize, decide, learn, process, change</i>	

Without diminishing the importance of perceptual modalities, it has to be emphasized however that the neutral phrases given as examples of non-perceptual modalities all refer to a cognitive dimension of our thinking and may be assumed to form the most frequent language forms.

3. Study description

3.1. Research focus: research questions and subjects

As mentioned earlier, this study originated in an idea derived from NLP assumptions concerning representational systems and the preferred modalities we have. It is connected with research in the area of learning styles and strategies originating in the study of the successful language learner in the early 80's (O'Malley, Chamot, Oxord and others) which all assigned great significance to the concept of style and strategy in achieving success in learning endeavours. The above-mentioned studies looked – just to express it in very general terms – at learners' inborn predilections (styles) and the actions (strategies) learners take in order to learn, emphasizing the importance of awareness and consciousness-raising through surveying learners' preferences, to establish their profiles and through using and developing inborn modalities through training.

It seems to me that to some extent, NLP is trying to do the same, extending the repertoire of ways in which we can find out about our modalities by looking at the ways we communicate and more precisely, at the lexical choices we make in our communication acts. The modest study described here aims at verifying, or maybe just commenting on, the above since the data is not extensive enough to generalise from.

The research questions put forward are:

1. What are the subjects' modalities as evident in the language they use:
 - in the context of L1 communication
 - in the context of L2 use?
2. Do the language choices confirm what the subjects say themselves about their preferred modalities?

The twenty five subjects used in the study were Polish students of a university English department, thus L2 language users of considerable competence but also presumed to be well-developed in language awareness and learning awareness as demonstrated by their (supposed) familiarity with the notion of styles and strategies.

3.2. Research method: language tests and survey

To answer the first research question concerning individual modalities in L1 and L2 oral communication acts – what they are in each of the language contexts – the subjects were to perform lexical choice tests by either responding to a stimulus phrase in L1 and L2 or to choose their most preferred answer out of the options given (see table 4).

Table 4. Language preference tests

Type of test	Instruction:	Language	Examples of phrases
Test 1	<i>Give your response to the following phrase:</i>	L1	“Wydaje mi się, że wykonałam dobrą robotę”
Test 2	<i>Give your response to the following phrase:</i>	L2	“I think I have done a piece of good work”
Test 3	<i>Choose your preferred response:</i>	L2	“I do not understand it well enough”: a. I have a hazy notion b. That’s Greek to me c. It beats me d.
Test 4	<i>Choose your preferred response:</i>	L1	“Nie bardzo to rozumiem” a. Mam mgliste pojęcie o tym b. To dla mnie chińszczyzna e. Poddaję się f.
Test 5	<i>Evaluate on your preference frequency scale the choice of the following phrases:</i>	L2	“I have a hazy notion” ... “Show me what you mean” ... “I can’t grasp the idea” ... “Un-heard of” ...
Test 6	<i>Evaluate on your preference frequency scale the choice of the following phrases:</i>	L1	“Mam mgliste pojęcie” “Pokaż o co ci chodzi” “Nie łapię tego” “Niesłychane”

As mentioned before, the language tests performed by the subjects were both reception (preference) tests requiring recognition of lexical preferences (test 3, 4, 5 and 6), and also production tests requiring retrieval of the phrases in the subjects’ L1 and L2 (test 1 and 2). The total number of the recognition phrases was 101, whereas the number of production phrases was 40. The stimulus sentences in the production tests were all examples of informal exchanges both in Polish and English (synonymous sentences), for example:

L1: *Wierzę, że to bardzo dobry projekt*, L2: *I believe it to be a very good project*
 L1: *Mam wątpliwości, czy sobie z tym poradzę*, L2: *I doubt whether I will cope with this*

The aim of the tests was to elicit colloquial and automatized responses from the subjects (production tests), whereas the responses used in the recognition (preference) tests were frequent lexical phrases used in Polish and their translation equivalents in English. Each of them was supposed to give evidence of different modalities. Here are some examples from the tests of sensory-based phrases supplied as options given to the subjects to choose from:

Visual:	<i>To have a hazy notion</i> <i>I see what you mean</i> <i>To shed light</i>	<i>Mieć mgliste pojęcie</i> <i>Widzę, co masz na myśli</i> <i>Rozjaśnić coś</i>
Auditory:	<i>On the same wavelength</i> <i>To ring the bell</i> <i>Music to my ears</i>	<i>Nadawać na tych samych falach</i> <i>Brzmieć znajomo</i> <i>Brzmi jak muzyka</i>
Kinesthetic:	<i>It beats me</i> <i>I grasp an idea</i> <i>To catch one's eye</i>	<i>Poddaję się</i> <i>Łapię ten pomysł</i> <i>Przyciągać wzrok</i>
Olfactory- -gustatory	<i>To feel warm inside</i>	<i>Ciepłej na duszy</i>
Neutral:	<i>To understand something</i> <i>Not know what to think about</i>	<i>Rozumieć coś</i> <i>Nie wiem, co myśleć o tym</i>

Naturally, the proportions between the different sensory-based phrases reflected universal tendencies in languages – at least in European languages: the importance attached to the sense of seeing and hearing, and relative disregard (neglect of) for example the sense of smell, which in other cultures – such as Asian, for instance, would be different. An interesting study of Viberg (1993) showed that the nuclear verbs of 10 major European languages (Polish and English among them) reflect the same sequence of frequency:

see → hear → move → feel → taste/smell.

Viberg (*ibid.*) classifies verbs into:

- motion verbs such as *go*, *come*, possession verbs such as *give*, *take* and production, for example *make* – all three groups can be related to kinaesthetic modality,
- verbal communication verbs, for example *say* – related to auditory modality,
- perception verbs such as *see* – visual modality and cognition verbs, for instance *know* – an example of neutral sensory modality.

These most universally used, that is to say, most frequent verbs appear as primary counterparts, i.e. their literal meaning is realised in spoken/written discourse. However, they also appear in figurative language and in this sense they represent certain sensory modalities.

The second data collection tool was a retrospective comment made by the informants on their own modalities, formulated as an open ended question. The objective of the retrospection was to correlate it with the data from the language tests. The comments were also to reveal the degree of the subjects' awareness and their ability to verbalise explicitly on their modality profiles.

4. Data

The data collected in the **language tests** is presented in table 5. It demonstrates individual modalities as exemplified by language choices made in the mother tongue – Polish (L1) and the foreign language – English (L2).

Table 5. Modality in L1 and L2 (language tests data)

		Modality				
		Visual	Auditory	Kinaesthetic	Mixed	Neutral
Language:						
L1		24%	8%	52%	16%	0
L2		12%	4%	16%	36%	32%

A few observations can be made on the basis of the above. With **reference to the L1 context**, it is evident that:

- * kinaesthetic modality received the highest score (52%)
- * visual modality is second in importance (24%), but constitutes only 50% of the kinaesthetic one
- * auditory perceptions are minor
- * there are no language samples exemplifying neutrality (no modality evident)

As can be observed, the individual modality pattern for L1 found in the collected data can be represented by the modality sequence:

KINAESTHETIC → VISUAL → MIXED → AUDITORY

It may be hypothesized that kinaesthetic modality as expressed by the language choices made demonstrates what is believed to be the core of any communication act: the importance of non-verbal signals – which are assumed to constitute above 55% of the message expressed by a speaker. Non-verbality is translated into the verbal code of specific choices, for example that of verbs such as *grasp*, *rush*, *touch*, as a default system. Also the importance of visuality was confirmed by the language choices made by the informants, which is generally believed to be the major modality (also confirmed by the questionnaire data). What is also very interesting in the data is that actually all the language samples that were either chosen or produced were marked for modality, hence zero answers in the “neutral” category, which is identified here as cognitively based language, for example thinking or reasoning verbs, such as *think*, *learn*, *process*.

With **reference to the L2 context**, the following can be observed:

- * the dominance of a mixed category – mixed modalities (36%)
- * neutral language expressions chosen by 32%
- * also dominance of the kinaesthetic (16%) over the visual (12%) modality
- * the relatively minor importance of the auditory modality (8%)

So the individual modality in L2 may be described by the following pattern:

MIXED → NEUTRAL → KINAESTHETIC → VISUAL → AUDITORY

The dominance of mixed modality may be assumed to be the result of learning a FL by means of formal instruction and strategy development/training. It could be accredited to transfer of training and, more specifically, to multisensory teaching that may promote focus and activation of modalities which are not innately the learners' individual choices.

Also the high percentage of neutral answers points out the unmarked choices made in language use by non-native speakers. Linguistic insecurity and so-called perceived language distance may make the learners choose safe options, that is unmarked language items, and not figuratively used or sensorily grounded words/phrases, e.g. preferences may be given to the use of the verb *to understand* over the verb *to grasp*. Despite the fact that we are dealing here with advanced users of English, more literal rather than figurative language use remains a distinctive feature of non-native speakers' discourse, and it is true especially in the context of a learnt and not acquired language.

The low status of auditory perceptions in FL development may seem striking and I guess it could be hypothesized again to be the consequence of foreign language instruction (transfer of training and type of language exposure), which is so often text-based and hence tends to present a more visual rather than auditory input.

The second research tool used, a **personal questionnaire** administered in a form of a retrospective, open-ended question /comment on individual modalities, revealed that on the level of conscious awareness the subjects assume that the following are their major perceptual representations:

Visual: 70% Auditory: 18% Visual/Auditory: 6% Visual-Kinaesthetic: 6%

What is interesting in the data received is that the informants do not relate to any other context than L2 learning in commenting on their preferred modalities. This of course might mean that on the level of noticing (attention, awareness) the concept of style is seen as relevant to a learning context only, and here more specifically a FL learning context, and not a general characteristic one exhibits in his/her daily communication and preferred verbal behaviour patterns, such as the idiosyncrasies of one's language in terms of lexical choices made. And, once again, the view that it is visuality that plays the major role in learning finds its way into shaping the subjects' perceptions, and which may consequently lead to such a choice of learning strategies, irrespective of innate predilections towards other modalities.

On the basis of the modality patterns demonstrated in the study, I think that it may be fairly safely assumed that the factors shaping modalities are different for the mother tongue – a language acquired through exposure and immersion subconsciously – and those responsible for learning a foreign language. In the context of L1, they clearly are inborn, intuitive, implicit and as if automatic. In the context of a FL it will be language exposure, for example the language instructor's input – his/her choice of

modality, the type of didactic/non-didactic materials used and their frequency, for example an overuse of visual *versus* auditory ones, training, for example in a specific strategy development, types of classroom tasks favouring certain modalities, transfer of language forms, for example a “safe” preference for unmarked forms over marked forms and language specificity, for example frequency of certain language phrases characteristic of a certain modality in a given language (as mentioned in Viberg’s study earlier), which will be much more influential. The factors relating to modalities in FL use can be classified as operating on three levels of:

- language itself
- learning history
- learner training.

Having mentioned the above factors, I think that NLP assumptions concerning the representational systems (modalities) cannot really be studied through verbal behaviour in a FL. So what are the consequences for an application of this assumption of NLP to a FL teaching context if language focus in the study of the learner’s representational systems can be related only to his/her L1? It means that only if diagnosed through L1 verbal tests can it be applied in the context of a FL, perhaps to reinforce the observed preferences to be adapted to learning practices but not necessarily language use (choice) itself.

However, as promising as it may seem, the whole theory of verbal representation of modalities as presented by NLP’s representational systems still requires further rigorous investigation and confirmation. And I suggest this to be the case even in the context of the analysis of spontaneous L1 utterance to be used as a research tool to provide orientation in foreign language learning and instruction, but mindful of the possibility that it may only be of limited use, serving mainly to describe an individual’s modality but not going much beyond description into the domain of pedagogical utility.

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