

# Outcomes, Decisions & ‘Levels’ of Meaning

*Part One of Two*

Charles Faulkner

**“DECIDE, v.i. To succumb to the preponderance of one set of influences over another set.”**

Ambrose Bierce

“What do you want?” This, the first question in the NLP Outcome Process, is now asked by consultants, counselors and coaches the world over. With its answer, they swing into action, bringing their myriad skills to bear in the service of their clients’ outcomes.

Readers familiar with my metaphor work will know that my investigations began with a rejoinder question. “How do people know what to want?” Or, “Of all the ‘things’ in the world to want, how did s/he arrive at this?” I am sure I am not the first or the only one to express surprise (inside) at what some clients want. My answer to this became ‘Metaphors of Identity’. If Life is a Game for a client, then s/he is a Player and the desired outcomes include winning, playing well and staying competitive. If Life is a Journey, then s/he is an Explorer/Traveler and the desired outcomes include new destinations, the ‘equipment’ to go there and the skills to continue. If Life is a Learning Experience, then s/he is a Student and the desired outcomes include new lessons, the ability to learn them and so on. Individuals with shared or related Metaphors of Identity will understand each other, while expressing mystification at the ‘choices’ of someone identifying with a different metaphor. This is now pretty well known in NLP as well as its source materials in the Cognitive Linguistics metaphor work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson.

Their academic research and my applications suggest that cognitive processes are largely metaphoric and mostly unconscious. The entailments of any Metaphor of Identity, including outcomes, criteria, and actions may be attributed to volition, but their origins are before any such conscious considerations. Different Metaphors of Identity circumscribe different sets of entailments. We tend to want what means the most to us. What we know to want is largely symbolic and/or has metaphoric qualities as well as functional qualities. We all want to survive, affiliate, reproduce (or at least go through the motions), be recognized, and thrive in our environment and these functional qualities can be expressed through a myriad number of metaphors. When we want ‘something’ outside of our usual range of metaphoric meaning, we often find attaining it has as much to do with changing who we are as what we do.

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This being the case, and outcomes being one element of the decision making process, how much are we deciding when we decide something? Is decision-making a conscious and rational process applied to unconscious and irrational outcomes, or at least outcomes not consciously chosen? Is decision-making largely unconscious, something we dress it up for the sake of our conscious mind’s self-importance? Are our

decisions mostly a conscious continuation to what is already unconsciously, even biologically underway?

These questions are starting to become important as the models of various ‘levels’ researchers and writers interest NLPers. Almost every NLP conference now has sessions on Neuro-Logical Levels, or Spiral Dynamics, or Ken Wilber’s 4 Quadrant Model, or some combination of all of them. This should not be surprising. The concept of levels has a history as long as human beings have existed as human beings. Artifacts dating back about 50,000 years provide evidence that our ancestors were seeking higher things and deeper understandings. Every generation since, children start out physically looking up to their parents. And their parents are often looking up to or for a higher intelligence in, of, or above the world around them. Eastern and western religious art shows these as levels of existence and levels of consciousness: angels/morals/devils, higher/ordinary/lower consciousness. We are no different in our search for order in the universe.

More recent levels models differentiate themselves by claiming more psychological distinctions (though not as many as some of the ancient ones) and more correspondences with behaviors (though what constitutes behavior is up to the model). Despite these differences, all of these efforts have in common the observation that individuals and societies tend to change their outcomes, values and beliefs over time and experience, and that these changes have stages that are similar across different individuals and societies. Archetypal examples include the child who puts away childish things, and the revolutionaries who become the establishment.

All of these various levels models are descriptive models. That is, they have categories forming a typology into which various behaviors may be sorted. There are few, if any, instructions given on how to generate these categories or how to move from one category to another, which is a prescriptive model. NLP started out as a strongly prescriptive model, so it might be possible to use it to find out how to get from one of these levels to another. In recent years, this has become much easier with the distinctions Steve Andreas and I developed modeling the structures and processes of generalization. See Steve’s book *Transforming Your Self* for some early applications and examples.

The first step in doing this kind of modeling is to clean away old and confusing distinctions. In what follows the ambiguous NLP term *chunking* is replaced

with *scope* and *category*. Scope refers to the range – in time and/or in space – of a sensory-based experience. For example, seeing a car and increasing the scene to include the road and other vehicles is increasing the scope, while narrowing the scene to a single wheel of the car is decreasing it. Category, meanwhile, refers to any set, which in this example I’ll designate car. The content examples of this category ‘car’ typically refer to the brand/model/year/owner of specific cars. A smaller category could include engine size/condition/resale value or another more specific characteristic of specific cars. A larger category might refer to the car being vehicular transportation, or man-made, or owned by the author, etc. We won’t know the sub-ordinate or super-ordinate categories sorting principle until we combine it with other categories and name the category they form. There are many characteristics that could be found to be in common. We are often defaulting to a habitual one. This becomes important when thinking in terms of stages of development or increasing levels of complexity.

## Dilts’ Logical Levels

- spirituality
- identity
- values & beliefs
- skills & capabilities
- behaviours
- environment

The formal idea of levels, called logical levels, was introduced at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Bertrand Russell as a stop gap measure to prevent the collapse of his and Whitehead’s attempt to make logic the basis of mathematics. Realizing that paradoxes presented a serious obstacle to their success, they set about outlawing them with the rule that no set can be a member of itself. Gregory Bateson, recognizing that certain paradoxes resulted in dysfunctional communication identified as mental illness, brought this idea into psychology and psychotherapy in the 1950s. Robert Dilts, a college student of Bateson, adapted the concept to categorize the scopes of human neurological functioning.

All serious efforts to utilize the logical levels attempt to abide by the rule that “no set can be a member of itself”. Except, as G. Spencer-Brown pointed

out to Sir Russell back in 1967, this is easily overcome in mathematics by resorting imaginary numbers. It turns out contradictions to the logical levels rule are all around us. Take the example of the car. The word refers specifically to the car you, the reader, imagine now and also to the set of all of those specific examples. Many words have this quality. So do many experiences. Have you ever visualized seeing yourself (now)? When you do, you are member of the set of yourself. The use of the word imaginary may be more than an apt analogy. In this multi-level modeling, I will drop the logical levels rule in favor of imagination and experience.

Most of the published examples logical levels describe them as hierarchies. This, despite the fact that Warren McCulloch pointed out as early as 1945 that in biological systems (which includes us), there are heterarchies, constantly shifting levels, that if in a frozen moment of time, can be taken as a hierarchy, which in fact are not. Take the car example. There are many possible sub-ordinate and super-ordinate categories depending on the sorting principles you invoke. The observation that so many people invoke the same ones while innovators, creators and industry leaders do not goes to some of the motivations for this modeling.

Overcoming conventional hierarchical thinking is a critical first step. Doing this creates an openness to experience different hierarchical possibilities and discover how they work. A few examples might make this clearer.

Business professor Jim Collins describes in his best-selling book: *Good to Great* the qualities of a Level 5 Executive – the leadership type he finds in the most successful companies. He quotes the thinking of these CEOs: “We’re not in the pharmaceutical business, we’re in the cost-effective health care business,” [Abbott] and “We’re not in the pharmacy business, we’re in the convenience store business” [Walgreens]. These easy to recognize jumps to a larger category (and next level) echo an NLP exercise with which all Practitioners are familiar. What might surprise them is how seldom this thinking occurs in business, and that it bears no relationship to Dilts’ Neuro-Logical Levels. An original understanding of the business becomes an example in a new, and more inclusive, category of business that is not a change from one Neuro-Logical Level to another.

This is only a single jump. Meanwhile, the Sufi author Idries Shah, among others, claims there

are seven levels of meaning in any mystical text. What sense can we make of this? Take one of the Biblical Commands: “Thou shall not steal.” A child first understands this on the level of a threat to his survival or at least well being. Not stealing is enforced by larger external forces that include parents, police, siblings and peers. The child doesn’t steal, at least while being watched. Later on, s/he may conclude that punishment is not the only reason for not stealing. Respecting the private property of others and having other’s respect one’s own emerges as a new level of meaning for the commandment. This will also influence whom s/he will associate and trust. It is possible the reader will realize a further level. That the desire to steal from others is a sign of unresolved envy and greed in oneself. That to feel the need to steal, and steal, increases this weakness in one’s self, and so is a thief from oneself - and another level of the meaning. And what about the other levels of meaning? Here is where the difficulty becomes clear. Analogous to the business example, the individual or society needs to have sufficient flexibility categorizing and robust enough and numerous enough examples for the new category to emerge as a basis for the new perceptions and skills. And, it needs to be noted; this hierarchy is different from either of the previous examples.

In very different ways, each of the previous examples is a demonstration of Einstein’s principle. No amount of delving into (sub-ordinate categories of) the pharmaceutical business will result in understanding it as cost-effective health care. No amount of anchoring will disclose that there are strategies. No amount of punishment will arrive at a mutual respect for private property. In at least an imaginary sense, the self-involved must get outside the context and to do this requires violating the logical levels. The executive has to be able see his business in the context of other businesses, both like his and unlike his. The NLPer has to be able to see anchoring in the context of other processes, both like it and unlike it. The child has to be able to see stealing in the context of other ways to relate socially, both like it and unlike it. It is easy to see this requires developing a perspective, but that is not all. There is also the need for a sufficient number of different contrasting examples in each case. This isn’t the dissociation of a typical NLP technique – which can be termed a *scope dissociation*. Instead, it is a kind of dissociation that sees a number of different examples in the same category as the original experience. For the purposes of differentiation, this can termed a *category dissociation*.

Determining what can bind these examples together is a matter of choice even if most people default to conventional categories. This means the process of generating a number of contrasting examples also needs to be done in the larger category (higher level). So, choice in one category (level) is a matter of at least two rich developed inclusive categories (two levels): the one in which the choice is perceived as being made and the next larger one (above it).

This is not as difficult as it seems. Remember, we naturally violate the logical levels rule to our advantage. When we open or close a window or adjust the thermostat, we have jumped out of ourselves to change the context (environment) we live. When we look in our cupboards or closets to select our clothes for the day, we have a number of examples, which we compare against other possibilities: suit or sport coat, dress or skirt, sharp or casual, dull or bright. These choices are affected by the larger category (level) containing work, sports, leisure, parties and probably more.

**“You can’t solve a problem on the same level that created it.”**

*Albert Einstein*

Being flexible in the face of all of this daily habituation tends to create difficulties generating alternatives in more abstract categories (levels). This is commonly seen in NLP programs where Certified Trainers and paying students earnestly pursue Outcome Wellformedness. How did the students get there if they don’t know how to set goals? For that matter, how have they gathered the financial resources to pay for it? This tongue-in-cheek example is simply a memorable way to point out that the categories closest to our sensory experience are not so troublesome for us. Most people know how to get lunch or themselves to a seminar room. Meanwhile, in the more abstract and meaningful categories (levels) of love, relationships, work, career, community, and more, in a word, life, many struggle with impoverished choices for lack of rich, flexible, interconnected heterarchies.

I am sure it is clear by now that I am suggesting a different understanding and application of the idea

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of levels in NLP. Outcome formulation has been very effective for moving people forward (on the same level). It can undoubtedly contribute to ‘populating’ categories (on the same level) with numerous examples. It is time to move into larger (higher) categories and with them disclose new worlds.

Next: ‘Levels’, Meaning and Maturation. Modeling different categories (levels) of self. How EST, the Forum and other transformational technologies work. Creating evolutionary change in individuals and organizations.

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*Part 2 of 2 next edition.*