Representational systems in NLP

In neuro-linguistic programming (NLP)[1], the concept of representational systems refers to the way that people process and represent information in their minds. According to NLP, there are five primary representational systems: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, olfactory, and gustatory. The are also abreviated under the acronym VAKOG.

The **visual** representational system refers to the way that people process and represent information through their sense of sight. This can include the use of images, colors, and spatial relationships.

The **auditory** representational system refers to the way that people process and represent information through their sense of hearing. This can include the use of sounds, tones, and rhythms.

The **kinesthetic** representational system refers to the way that people process and represent information through their sense of touch and movement. This can include the use of physical sensations, emotions, and body language.

The **olfactory** representational system refers to the way that people process and represent information through their sense of smell.

The **gustatory** representational system refers to the way that people process and represent information through their sense of taste.

In NLP, practitioners may use the concept of representational systems to understand how a person processes and represents information, and to communicate more effectively with that person. For example, if a person tends to use primarily visual language (such as "I see what you mean"), it might indicate that they are using the visual representational system. NLP practitioners can use this information to communicate with the person in a way that is more aligned with their preferred representational system.

Eye movements and internal representations

One of the first people to suggest that eye movements were related to internal representations[2] was the American Psychologist, who is touted by many to be the father of modern psychology, William James in his book Principles of Psychology (1890, pp. 193-195). After observing the micro-eye-movements that were happening as the person was thinking a certain thought, James wrote:

"In attending to either an idea or a sensation belonging to a particular sense-sphere, the movement is the adjustment of the sense-organ, felt as it occurs. I cannot think in visual terms, or example, without feeling a fluctuating play of pressures, convergences, divergences, and accommodations in my eyeballs...When I try to remember or reflect, the movements in question. . .feel like a sort of withdrawal from the outer world. As far as I can detect, these feelings are due to an actual rolling outwards and upwards of the eyeballs."

In neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), the concept of eye movements is often linked to the idea of internal representations, which refers to the way that people process and represent information in their minds. According to NLP, there are five primary representational systems: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, olfactory, and gustatory. Each of these representational systems corresponds to a

particular direction of eye movement.

For example, when a person is recalling a visual memory, they may look upwards and to the left (if they are right-handed) or upwards and to the right (if they are left-handed). This is thought to indicate that the person is accessing their visual memory system. On the other hand, if a person is recalling an auditory memory, they may look to their right (if they are right-handed) or to their left (if they are left-handed). This is thought to indicate that the person is accessing their auditory memory system.
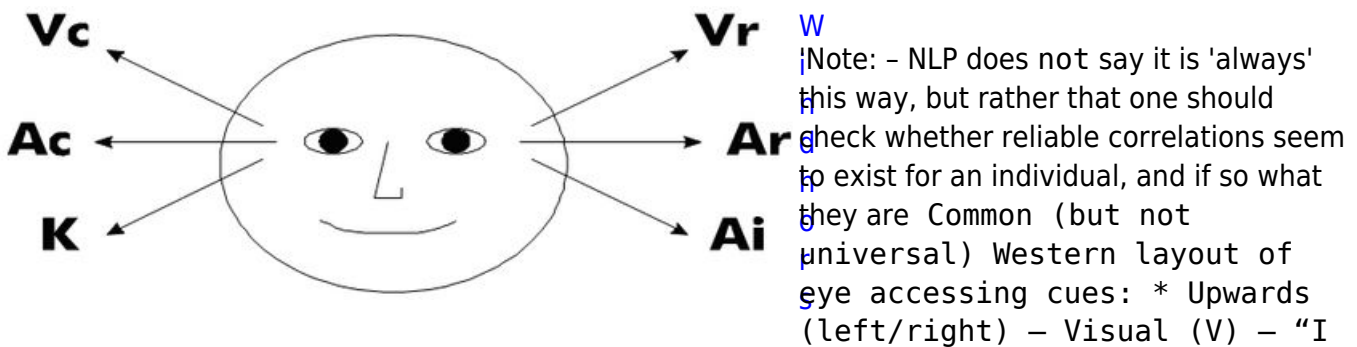
Notation and strategies

In documenting mental strategies and processing by the senses, NLP practitioners often use a simple shorthand for different modalities, with a letter indicating the representation system concerned, and often, a superscript to indicate how that system is being used. Three key aspects are commonly notated: The `representation system` being used (visual/V, auditory/A, kinesthetic/K, and occasionally, O/G), whether the `direction of attention` is internal [i] or external [e], and whether the event is a `recollection` of an actual past event [®] or `construction` of an imaginary event [©]. Due to its importance in human cognitive processing, auditory internal dialogue, or talking in one's head, has its own shorthand: A^{id}.

Putting these together, this is a very simplified example of some steps which might actually be involved in replying to a simple question such as "Do you like that dress?". The table below is useful for teaching how to identify and access each representational system in context:

Step	Activity	Notation
1	auditory external	A^e
2	visual internal	V^i
3	visual external	V^e
4	visual internal constructed	V^{ic}
5	kinesthetic internal	K^i
6	auditory internal dialog	A^{id}
7	auditory external	A^e

Logically, these or similar steps `must` take place somewhere in consciousness in order to cognitively make sense of the question and answer it. A sequence of this kind is known in NLP as a `strategy` – in this case, a functional outline of the strategy used by the mind in answering that question. In a similar way, the process leading to a panic attack of the form "I see the clock, ask myself where the kids are, imagine everything that could be happening and feel scared" might be notated as having a subjective structure: $V^e \rightarrow A^{id} \rightarrow V^{ic} \rightarrow K^i$, signifying that an external sight leads to internal dialog (a question), followed by internal and constructed images, leading to a feeling.

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¡Note: – NLP does not say it is 'always' this way, but rather that one should check whether reliable correlations seem to exist for an individual, and if so what they are Common (but not universal) Western layout of eye accessing cues: * Upwards (left/right) — Visual (V) — "I

can imagine the big picture" * Level (left/right) — Auditory (A) — "Let's tone down the discussion" * Down-right—Kinesthetic (K) — "to grasp a concept" or "to gather'' you've understood."

* Down-left Auditory internal dialogue (A^{id}) – talking to oneself inside

Do it yourself

It's important to note that while there is some evidence to support the idea that eye movements are related to internal representations, this is still an area of active research and there is not yet a consensus among experts in the field. Some research has found a relationship between eye movements and internal representations, while other research has not.

Here is a way for you to test the NLP patterns on yourself. Find someone, and get them to ask you questions like the following to notice the different movements:

Visual Remembered: Think of the color of the first car you ever drove. What is the color of the font on your toothpaste?

Visual Construction: What would a green rabbit look like? What would be the color of your dream car?

Auditory Remembered: What is your favorite song? What was the first thing you heard today?

Auditory Constructed: How would your favorite song sound like if it was sung by Donald Trump? What would the national anthem sound like if it was sung by Bob Marley?

Auditory Digital (Internal Self Talk): Can you count backward from 3754 back to 3745, inside your head? What is the thing you say to yourself the most?

Kinesthetic: What would it feel like if you were walking on hot sand right now? How does it feel like to walk in the rain?

Representational Systems
Indicated by Eye Position.

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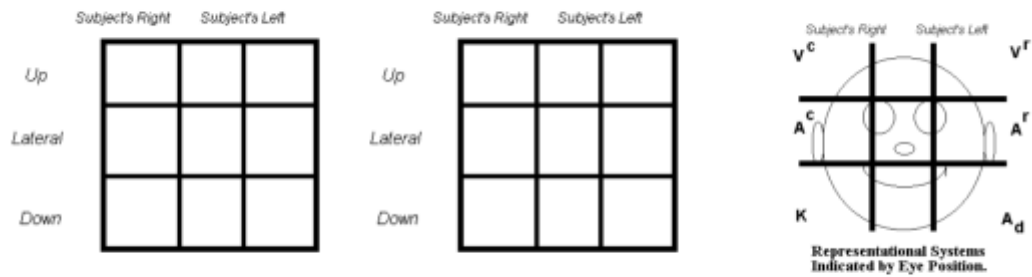
[1] NLPWikipedia
[2] Representational systems (NLP)Wikipedia

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