

## Representational System Primacy

In NLP, a person is said to have a “primary representational system” when that person values or uses one of his or her senses over the others in order to process and organize his or her experience of the world. An individual’s ongoing experience is comprised of some combination of information from each of his or her senses or “representational systems.” Each person uses his or her auditory, visual, kinesthetic, olfactory and gustatory senses to create his or her model of the world. Due to the influences in the personal backgrounds of individuals and the environments in which they develop their representational systems, there is a tendency for many people to develop or value the information processing capabilities of one of their representational systems to a greater degree than others.

Auditorally oriented people are those who prefer their ears in perception and who depend on spoken words for information. Visually oriented people primarily use their eyes to contact the world around them, and emphasize visualization for memory and in decision making. Kinesthetically oriented people are sensitive to touch and emotions. They rely on feelings when learning and making decisions. Smell and taste are typically not primary senses; however, there are people, such as cooks, who have a highly developed sense of tastes or smells, such as cooks.

The phenomenon of representational system primacy was first noted by William James. In his classic work *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) James wrote:

*In some individuals the habitual “thought-stuff,” if one may so call it, is visual; in others it is auditory, articulatory, or motor: in most, perhaps, it is evenly mixed. . .*

*A person whose visual imagination is strong finds it hard to understand how those who are without the faculty can think at all. Some people undoubtedly have no visual images at all worthy of the name, and instead of seeing their breakfast-table [in their mind’s eye when asked to describe it], they tell you that they remember it or know what was on it. This knowing and remembering takes place undoubtedly by means of verbal images. . .*

*The auditory type appears to be rarer than the visual. Persons of this type imagine what they think of in the language of sound. In order to remember a lesson they impress upon their mind, not the look of the page, but the sound of the words. They reason, as well as remember, by ear. In performing a mental addition they repeat verbally the names of the figures, and add as it were, the sounds, without any thought of the graphic signs.*

*Imagination also takes the auditory form. . .*

*Touch-images are very strong in some people. The most vivid touch-images come when we ourselves barely escape local injury, or when we see another injured. . .*

*The motor type remains—perhaps the most interesting of all, and certainly the one of which least is known. Persons who belong to this type [les moteurs, in French, motiles, as Mr. Galton proposes to call them in English] make use, in memory, reasoning, and all their intellectual operations, of images derived from movement.*

From an NLP perspective, these are classic descriptions of visual, auditory and kinesthetic learners. Drawing from the studies of Galton, Charcot, Binet and his own research, James provided numerous examples and details about the traits, strengths and problems related to individuals who place more emphasis on particular modalities. NLP has built on James’ notion of habitual “thought stuff” by developing ways to recognize and utilize sensory differences in people’s thinking processes.

According to NLP, for instance, the representational system a person is using will be reflected in his or her choice of words. Sensory based predicates, which show up in phrases such as “I *see* what you are saying,” “That *sounds* good,” or “I need to get a better *feeling* for it,” indicate which sensory modality a person is relying on at a particular time.

### *Differences in Individual Orientation*

Individuals differ in their abilities to orient their senses in these ways. Some people are able to make acute external observations with one or more of their senses. Often one orientation is developed at the expense of another. For instance, someone may have a photographic memory (**V<sup>r</sup>**) but not be very imaginative (**V<sup>c</sup>**). Similarly, highly creative people are often notoriously forgetful when it comes to remembering details, appointments, etc. (Incidentally, these two abilities have been

linked to the different functions of the two sides of the brain.) Another common example is when someone develops their internal abilities to use their senses at the expense of their abilities to orient externally, and vice versa. This often why people think that someone cannot be a good student (which involves internal abilities) and a good athlete as well (which involves external seeing, hearing, and feeling).

The most general differences occur between which representational systems are (1) *most highly developed*, (2) *most highly valued*, and (3) *most conscious*. The *development* of a representational system is determined by the capability to manipulate, organize, synthesize and distinguish information (sub-modalities, orientation, etc.) within that system. How much a representational system is *valued* is determined by the impact it has on a person's behavior (the elements that determine the impact of a particular representational system will be explored more fully in a later section of this article). Some people, for example, have a very highly developed ability to use language, yet what they say has very little to do with how they act. *Consciousness* of a representational system is a function of how much a person is aware of the information being processed through that system. Someone may be very conscious of feelings but not be able to manipulate them very well – in fact, sometimes that is why they remain in consciousness so much. Likewise a person may have a very well developed ability to create and respond to visual imagery and yet have no conscious awareness of making internal images. It is possible for someone to have one representational system which is the most developed, most valued *and* most conscious. It is also possible that these functions might each involve a different sensory system. For example, a person could be most able to manipulate words and sounds, respond most often to feelings, yet be most consciously aware of what he or she sees.

In addition to determining aptitudes for certain tasks, the over or under-development of the orientation of a particular representational system forms the basis of many fundamental personality characteristics.

A person's primary representational system will determine many of his or her personality traits and learning capabilities. In a way, people of different representational preferences live in different worlds. A challenge often arises when people with differing primary representational systems attempt to communicate and understand one another.

If a particular representational system is valued or developed more than the others, it can be either an asset or a limitation, depending on the flexibility one has in approaching or developing the others. Nevertheless, the representational system that is most highly valued will always greatly affect the way that person perceives and acts upon the world.

A person's predominant representational system will usually come out most obviously when a person is in a state of stress.

Sometimes in NLP a distinction is made between a person's primary representational system, his or her "lead system," and his or her "reference system." A person's "lead system" is the sensory channel that individual relies upon to input or gather information. Information must be input into one's nervous system before it can be internally represented and processed. A person may prefer to input information visually, for instance, but process it, or operate on it, through language (through internal self talk, for example). Such a person would be said to have a visual "lead system," but an auditory "representational system."

A person's "reference system" is the sensory modality which that person relies upon to verify conclusions and make decisions. A good speller, for instance, may receive the word he or she is to spell verbally (i.e., an auditory "lead system"), and represent the correct spelling as internal mental image (a visual "representational system"), but identify the correct spelling on the basis of a feeling (a kinesthetic "reference system"). The good speller knows the correct spelling because it "feels right."

A person with a visual "reference system" will experience "insights" and "illuminations" about choices and decisions. People with an auditory reference system will often experience being guided by an inner voice, or experiencing a sense of resonance or harmony which helps them to make decisions.

A person who is strongly "visual," may have vision as his or her lead system, representational system and reference system. That is, the person gathers information visually, through his or her eyes, processes and represents it visually, through mental imagery, and evaluates the results visually as well, by getting "insights" about what to do. A similar type of clustering may happen for people who are strongly auditory or kinesthetically oriented.

Often, there is a difference between a person's lead system and primary representational system,

allowing for more economical use of the sensory channels. A typical “rule of thumb” in NLP is that a person’s lead system is reflected in his or her most habitual eye movement, while primary representational system is revealed by the person’s language patterns.

NLP provides ways for people to extend and strengthen representational abilities through linguistic and behavioral methods. NLP tools and techniques apply James’ observations to achieve practical results in areas such as communication, therapy, business, education, etc. The following exercise, to be done in a group, helps people to become aware of how they use and value different sensory modalities. (It is a good way to begin a seminar or training program.)

### **Discovery Exercise: Sensory Contact**

1. Look around at the group, then close your eyes and recall as many group members as you can. Notice how you represent the group members.

*Do you have an internal image of individuals? clusters of people?*

*Do you remember any names? voices?*

*Do you have a feeling or some kind of ‘sense’ of people?*

*How clear or vague are your memories? How far away are your images? Are they three-dimensional or flat like a photograph? Are your memory pictures life size?*

*How loud and clear is what you hear? Is it associated with a particular image?*

*What kind of feelings do you have. How intense are they?*

2. Silently walk around the room and look at as many members of the the group as you can. It is not necessary to make eye contact, but you may if you wish.

Return to your seat and check your representation of the group using the same questions listed above. How has your sense of the group changed? In what ways?

3. Walk around the room and meet as many people as possible using the following procedure: Face each other and then close your eyes. Introduce yourself to the other person by telling them your name and where you are from. Keep your eyes closed during the introductions and listen as intently as you can to the other person. When you are done, open your eyes and find another partner.

Return to your seat and again check your representation of the group using the same questions listed above. Has your sense of the group changed? In what ways?

4. Silently walk around the room and meet as many people as possible using the following procedure: Face each other and make physical contact by shaking hands or by touching their arm or shoulder with your hand. Then, close your eyes for a few seconds and feel as much as you can about the contact. When you are done, open your eyes and find another partner.

Return to your seat and again check your representation of the group using the same questions listed above. Has your sense of the group changed? In what ways?

*Which kind of sensory contact did you find made the biggest difference for you? In what way?*

*Which kind of contact was most familiar?*

*Which of your senses do you think is your most highly developed?*

*Which of your senses do you most highly value or rely on?*