



Phenomenology

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Phenomenology can be summed up as the inquiry into what people experience subjectively, with a view to uncovering and describing new aspects of consciousness, people's subjective responses to events, and subjective experience in general. For this reason it is an appropriate methodology to use for NLP based inquiries. It has been described as the most significant philosophical movement of the 20th century.

The founder of phenomenology was Edmund Husserl (born 1859).(<http://www.plato.stanford.edu/entries/husserl/>).

The phenomenological approach is appropriate for working with people's subjective lives, because its aims to uncover and describe new aspects of people's experiences, particularly those which have been labelled as deeply subjective; (Moustakas 1994). As such it seems suitable as an approach for researching into NLP, particularly into the effects of language, as well as exploring how people have constructed their meaning schemes. Maykut and Morehouse (1994) have suggested that "the discovery of propositions by observation and the careful inspection of the patterns which emerge from the

data are the hallmark of the phenomenological approach.” (Maykut and Morehouse 1994:13). Such an approach could be criticised for being too deeply subjective, however it is the very nature of subjective experience that is under the microscope when researching into NLP.

It could be said that Bandler and Grinder took a phenomenological approach to their explorations of the effects of language on therapeutic changes that they observed people undergoing. They were uncovering hitherto little known aspects of people’s subjective experience, as well as their problem formation and resolution. They also looked at the ways in which attention to patterns of behaviour, and language structures, revealed deeper aspects of how people knew and made sense. The approach was also useful to find out what it was that excellent communicators did that made them different. Here they were observing the phenomenon of patterns of inter-personal communication from a fresh perspective, rather than imposing existing theoretical explanatory frameworks on them.

The phenomenological approach proposes that people’s inner worlds of subjective experience, however complex and difficult to pin down, are nevertheless a valid area of inquiry. Stanage (1987) claims that phenomenology is “founding, foundational and a foundation for all philosophies and for all science”, (Stanage 1987:45).

One of the processes that is used in phenomenological research is that of introspection. (www.plato.stanford.edu/entries/introspection/) Much of the information obtained using this approach is from asking people to report on how they have experienced certain events. This raises the issue of the management of both the complexity of the processes of introspection, and the reliability of the information so gained. Mangan, (1993) citing William James, reminds us that the introspection of a transitive act of consciousness is difficult. “The attempt at introspective analysis [...] is in fact like seizing a spinning top to catch its motion,

or trying to turn up the gas to see how the darkness looks,” (William James, cited in Mangan 1993:95). Chafe (1994) has pointed out that “private, introspective data provide a more direct access to the mind, but suffer from the absence of public verifiability”, (Chafe 1994:25) yet urges its use in the exploration of consciousness, because, “though difficult, [it] is an absolutely essential part of this picture”. (Chafe 1994:15). In a way this sums up the approach to using NLP to discover more about people’s ways of processing information. Chafe proposed that it was important to immerse oneself in “linguistic and introspective observations, combined with the cultivation of a creative imagination adequate to understanding these observations in maximally insightful ways”. (Chafe 1994:25). Carruthers (1996) proposed that although there was scope for error in introspection, it was nevertheless a useful vehicle for inquiring into people’s thought processes.

Stevens (2000) states that there have been few recent attempts at accessing and representing people’s immediate subjective phenomenological experience. Harre (2000) defends the use of introspectively obtained data: “the legitimacy of trying to convey to another person the nature of one’s own private experience by describing it needs to be defended,” (Harre 2000). Giorgi (1985) offers the critique that “psychology has consistently failed to explicate the phenomenon of thinking” (Giorgi 1985:86). The potential of combining a phenomenological approach with NLP has yet to be fully explored.

One of the aspects of the inquiry that laid the foundation for our research project was a pure phenomenological study which involved asking people to report on sub-modality changes in response to being asked to attend to changes in the interviewer’s language structures. This yielded some fascinating insights into the effects of words such as modal operators, and nominalizations, on people’s thinking at the levels of internal representations and their sub-modalities. This is an aspect of language processing which has not so far been mentioned in the academic literature on language and information processing, (Mathison 2004).

Phenomenology is usually classed with the qualitative methodologies. The rationale for this is that before a phenomenon can be measured and quantified, it must first be described and identified. Thus a phenomenologist would inquire into how people experience the effects of different modal operators in as much detail as possible, whereas a statistician would count how many occurred in discourse, and draw more abstract mathematical conclusions from this. Phenomenology is more inductive, as it involves the researcher in being open to perceiving the new, and only then drawing tentative conclusions.

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Useful web links:

<http://www.phenomenologycenter.org/>

<http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/>

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology> This is the most up to date, authoritative and informative web site.