

# THERAPEUTIC TALK: The Language of Change



Because I am committed to spreading these ideas, you have my permission to reproduce them for colleagues, friends or clients. Please keep my name and contact information on them. If you want to use them for any other purpose, please contact me at: Possibilities, 223 N. Guadalupe #278, Santa Fe, NM 87501 USA, 505.983.2843, website: [www.BillOHanlon.com](http://www.BillOHanlon.com); email: [PossiBill@aol.com](mailto:PossiBill@aol.com)

Other websites that might interest you:

To get help writing and publishing your book: [www.GetYourBookWritten.com](http://www.GetYourBookWritten.com)

To get help becoming a workshop presenter: [www.PaidPublicSpeaker.com](http://www.PaidPublicSpeaker.com)

Monthly audio and written magazine of cool research and resources for therapists:  
[PsychotherapyDigest.com](http://PsychotherapyDigest.com)

# The Meta Model

## **Deletion**

This occurs when the speaker leaves out the actor or the acted upon or object in the utterance.

### ***Missing actor or subject:***

*Client: My heart was broken.*

*Therapist: By whom?*

### ***Missing acted upon or object:***

*Client: I was angry.*

*Therapist: With whom or about what?*

## ***Comparatives:***

When the speaker uses adjectives with *-er* suffixes or *more/less* in front of them.

## ***Superlatives:***

When the speaker uses adjectives preceded by *most/least* or with *-est* suffixes.

*Client: I think she is better.*

*Therapist: Better than whom or what? Or Better compared to whom or what?*

*Client: That is the least difficult part..*

*Therapist: Least difficult with respect to what?*

## ***-ly adverbs***

Adverbs ending in *-ly* may contain deletions. Try dropping the *-ly* from the adverb and start a phrase with "It is . . ." followed by the non *-ly* form of the word. If it still means the same thing as the previous phrase, there is likely a deletion. Apply the previous challenges.

*Client: Obviously, you don't really like me.*

*Therapist: That is obvious to whom?*

## ***Modal operators of necessity***

These are phrases or sentences in which something is said to be necessary (or unnecessary, mostly in therapy we challenge the necessary side). What is left out is the consequence of not doing the thing that is said to be necessary.

*Client: I have to keep my job!*

*Therapist: Or what would happen?*

## ***Modal operators of possibility***

These are phrases or sentences in which something is said to be impossible (or possible; again, mostly in therapy we challenge the impossibility side). What is left out is what prevents or stops the person from doing the thing that is said to be impossible.

*Client: I can't quit my job!*

*Therapist: What stops you from quitting your job?*

### ***Cause and effect claims***

These are phrases or sentences in which the speaker claims that something or someone compels them to feel, think, do or be something. What is deleted is the means by which this cause is effected.

*Client: My mother drives me crazy.*

*Therapist: What, specifically, does she do when you feel driven crazy?*

### **Distortion**

This occurs when the speaker speaks about things in such a way as to limit his or her ability to act and increase his or her potential for pain due to the information that is distorted.

### ***Nominalizations***

These are words in which a verb is turned into a noun, or, said another way, an action is turned into a thing. This makes it harder to change and distorts the action's true nature, often leaving out the fact that someone took some action and that the process or action could change at any moment. If something is spoken of as a thing, you can apply this simple test to find out whether it is truly an object or a process that has been linguistically turned into an object: Imagine putting it into a wheelbarrow. If you can, it is a real object in the world. If not, it is a nominalization. For example, you can put a *marble* into a wheelbarrow, but not *communication* or *tension*.

*Client: The decision to return home bothers me.*

*Therapist: What would happen if you changed your mind and decided not to return home? Or Who is deciding to return home?*

*Client: My fears are overwhelming me.*

*Therapist: What, specifically, are you afraid of?*

### ***Presuppositions***

Presuppositions are assumptions about some truth upon which the utterance rests, but which may remain unspoken.

*Client: I guess you weren't aware that, as a codependent, I cannot change.*

*Therapist: What gave you the idea that you are codependent and couldn't change? And who convinced you that codependents couldn't change?*

### ***Mind-Reading***

In which the speaker purports to know the thoughts, intentions, feelings, meanings or experiences of another without specifying how he or she got the information.

*Client: She loves to bait me.*

*Therapist: How do you know she loves to bait you?*

### **Generalization**

This occurs when the speaker speaks shifts from particular experiences to global conclusions about the past, present, future, other people, the world, etc. For example, "Lois doesn't like me," gets translated into "Women don't like me."

### ***Referential indices***

These are phrases or sentences in which the specific thing or person being referred to is missing.

*Client: Some things bother me.*

*Therapist: Can you give me an example of one thing that bothers you?*

### ***Universal quantifiers***

These are phrases or sentences in which the specific thing or person being referred to is missing and in which the speaker refers to an entire class of things or people.

*Client: I never get to do what I want.*

*Therapist: Never?*

### ***Incompletely specified verbs***

These are phrases or sentences in which the specific action being referred to is missing.

*Client: She really hurt me.*

*Therapist: How, specifically, did she do that?*

## NEGOTIATING A PRESENTABLE PROBLEM

*"If your train is on the wrong track, every station you come to is the wrong station."*

*–Bernard Malamud*

### Creating an initial therapeutic reality

- Explaining how this therapy works
- Emphasis on change and results
- "How can I help you to solve the problem?"; emphasis on collaboration
- Checkable and solvable "problems" and results
- Determining customership and motivated client

### Operations for understanding and filling in deletions, distortions, and generalizations

- Ask "How, specifically?"
- Ask "When, specifically?"
- Ask "Who, specifically?"
- Ask "What, specifically?"
- Ask "What did that look like or what does it look like or what would it look like?"
- Ask "Always?" or "Never?" or "Nobody?", etc.
- Change reified nouns into verbs.
- Is there an actor, an action and an acted upon in what the person says? If not, ask about the missing pieces.
- Clarify expectations and previous therapy experiences; what was helpful and what was not

### "Neutral" questions

- "What brings you here?" rather than "What is the problem?"
- Introducing doubt/benevolent skepticism
  - ❖ Acknowledge their ideas, but keep the inquiry open
  - ❖ The multi-factor causes idea to answer queries/theories about causes
- Challenging attributions and deductions
  - ❖ "How is that relevant to the problem?"
  - ❖ Asking for evidence to support the conclusions
    - "How do you know?"
  - ❖ Suggesting alternative attributions and deductions
- Challenging evaluations
  - ❖ "So what?" or "How is that a problem?"
- Challenging prerequisites
  - ❖ Providing counterexamples or possibilities of different routes to solution

## DISSOLVING IMPOSSIBILITY TALK

It is important to both acknowledge and validate clients without closing down the possibilities for change for them. Too much emphasis on change and possibility can give clients the message that the therapist does not understand or care about their suffering or dilemmas. Too much emphasis on the acknowledgment side can give the message that the client cannot change or might encourage wallowing in the pain and hopelessness. The following methods are designed to combine both acknowledgment and invitations to change and possibility. Remember that these are methods and if they start to become formulaic, they can be used disrespectfully or superficially. They are designed, however, to be respectful and to deeply empathize with clients' suffering and possibilities.

### Method #1 Spinning Problems into the Past

Use the past tense when people speak about current problems or limitations.

*Statement: "I'm constantly suicidal."*

*Your response: So you've really been suicidal.*

*Statement: "I can't do anything right."*

*Your response: You haven't done anything right.*

### Method #2 Going Unglobal

Respond to generalized statements by restating them with slight changes in the quantifiers and qualifiers.

*Statement: "Nobody listens."*

*Your response: It's been close to impossible to get people to listen.*

*Statement: "I always leave everything 'til the last minute."*

*Your response: Most of the time you leave things 'til the last minute.*

### Method #3 Spinning Reality/Truth Claims into Perceptions

Limitations are often less in reality than in peoples' perceptions. Reflect limitation statements by inserting perception phrases into them.

*Statement: "I won't be able to keep a relationship going."*

*Your response: You don't think you'll be able to keep a relationship going.*

*Statement "He'll never change."*

*Your response: Your sense is that he really can't change.*

# PROBLEMS INTO PREFERENCES

## A future-oriented acknowledgment method

When people first seek therapy, they are often focused on the past and what isn't working. How does the therapist gently and respectfully invite them into the future without minimizing their suffering or invalidating them? I use a method that owes a lot to both Carl Rogers (for the acknowledgment and reflection of people's experience and feelings) and Milton Erickson (for the indirect shifting of attention and frame of reference). This method helps people re-orient their attention from what they cannot change (the past) and what hasn't been working (the complaint) to what they can change (the future) and what they would prefer to have happen (their goal or direction or desire). If done respectfully and skillfully, most people do not even notice the shift consciously, but many report feeling more hopeful after it is used through the interview.

- **Rephrase from what is unwanted to what is desired or preferred**

*Client: I think I'm just too shy to find a relationship. I'm afraid of women and being rejected.*

*Therapist: So you'd like be more comfortable around women and to be able to get into a relationship.*

- **Redirect from the past or present to the future**

*Client: We argue all the time.*

*Therapist: So you'd like to be able to work out conflicts without having so many arguments and even to have fewer conflicts if possible.*

- **Mention the presence of something rather than the absence of something**

*Client: He never does anything we ask him to.*

*Therapist: You'd like to see some cooperation from him.*

- **Suggest small increments rather than big leaps**

*Client: I can't stand this depression.*

*Therapist: You'd really like to find some way to feel a bit better and be a bit less depressed.*

## Action Talk

Most people communicate in a way that makes it likely that they are misunderstood or that their words do not produce the desired result. The most common forms of ineffective communication are:

- *Cab Driver Talk*: This is talk that involves assessments, evaluations, judgments, opinions, who is right and who is wrong, etc. This not only does not produce much desired effect in the world, but also often alienates, angers or shames others.
- *Politician Talk*: This is talk that uses vague, non-specific words and phrases that are easily misunderstood.
- *Someday Talk*: This is talk that leaves out time aspects, like when something will be done, or when someone will take an action, or how frequently something will be done.

The alternative, derived in part from the work of J.L. Austin and Fernando Flores, is *Action Talk*. Action Talk involves the use of specific words and phrases and is designed to coordinate actions between people. It is either action-based or observation-based, speaking specifically about actions or something one can observe with one's senses. I call this video talk, since it involves describing what you could see or hear on a videotape of the situation being referred to.

Action Talk usually includes components that specify:

- When something happened or will happen
- Who, specifically, took or is to take some action
- By when some action is to occur
- How frequently some action occurred or is to occur

I distinguish three kinds of Action Talk:

1. **Action complaints**: This involves telling another person what it is you don't like about what they have done or are doing. To qualify for an action complaint, your communication must steer away from interpretations about the person's motives or intentions, their character, and your explanations for their actions. You must also be specific, using sensory-based terms (things you can see or hear) when describing your complaint.
2. **Action requests**: This involves telling another person what actions you would like them to do in the future, again avoiding interpretations, characterizations and vagueness.
3. **Action praise/appreciation**: This involves telling another person what you have liked about what he or she has done in the past and would therefore like them to continue doing.

- Austin, J. L. (1962) *How to Do Things With Words*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Spinoza, C., Flores, F., and Dreyfus, H. (1997) *Disclosing New Worlds: Entrepreneurship, Democratic Action, and the Cultivation of Solidarity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Winograd, T. and Flores, F. (1987) *Understanding Computers and Cognition*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

## Committed Promises and Accountability Listeners

Committed Promises involve agreements that go beyond the usual practice of casually saying you will do something. These are promises that have more likelihood of being kept due to the structure of them and the follow-up built into them.

A committed promise has several elements:

- Someone promises something will happen
- The promise includes a commitment for someone to take some action to ensure that what he or she or they promised will happen
- The promise includes time elements for when, by when or how often the action or result is to occur
- The promise is checkable and some procedure for checking that it happens or is kept is made at the time the promise is made

In order to check that the promise is kept and to help people keep them, it is important to have a person who agrees to both check on the status of the promise and to coach the promise-giver if necessary. This Accountability Listener agrees to:

1. Make certain that the person who has made the agreement has fully understood and agreed to the conditions of the promise.
2. Write down the promise, who made it, a time to check on the status of the promise and a time that the promise-giver has agreed to fulfill the promise.
3. Check with the promise-giver at the agreed-upon check points and report back to the people who were involved in the original promise-making situation.
4. Coach the promise-giver to either complete the promise or to inform the people involved in the original promise that it is not done or to revoke the original agreement if necessary.

Blake, G. (1998) *In My Wildest Dreams: Living the Life You Long For*. NY: Simon and Schuster.

Goss, T. (1996) *The Last Word on Power*. NY: Currency.

Whiteside, J. (1993) *The Phoenix Agenda*. Essex Junction, VT: Omneo.

Winograd, T. and Flores, F. (1987) *Understanding Computers and Cognition*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

## EVOCATIVE WORDSMITHING

**1. Use words that are unspecified as to person, place, time, thing, or action. Use outline or “empty” words for which the client has to provide much of the specific meaning.**

- *"There are lots of learnings that you have had in the past that you have consciously forgotten about."*
- *"You can draw upon experiences, wishes, hopes, dreams, skills, abilities and anything else you need to accomplish your goals."*
- *"You can go to a certain time and certain place to get what you need; it might be a time in the past or a time in the future; it might be nearby or far away."*

**2. Use possibility, permission and empowering words and phrases.**

- *"Feel free to tune out anything that I say that doesn't fit for you."*
- *"You can just let yourself respond in whatever way you do and validate that response."*

**3. Use nominalizations (verbs into nouns).**

- *"Fears can undo learnings and courage can face up to fears."*
- *"Creativity can surprise you. The interest your deeper self shows in new combinations can lead to realizations on many levels."*

**4. Delete the actor or the acted upon (Subject/object deletion).**

- *"Your deeper self can decide."*
- *"Help can be received in many ways."*

**5. Use the passive voice.**

- *"Much was revealed."*
- *"Change can occur on various ways."*

## RECOGNIZING AND USING CLIENTS' METAPHORS

### ☐ Idiomatic phrases

- He was bouncing off the walls
- I was coming apart at the seams
- I wish we could melt the ice between us

### ☐ Metaphorical frames

#### Sports

- We've got to be on the same team
- She's got me on the ropes
- He's hard to pin down
- I just decided to punt

#### Journey

- We're going in different directions
- We've gone off course
- I took the road less traveled

#### War

- I feel like I have to defend my territory
- We've had several skirmishes in the past week

#### Cooking

- I've put that on the back burner
- She was simmering
- It was like a pressure cooker

**Two options: Go with the metaphor or switch metaphors or metaphorical frames**

### ☐ Making the metaphorical literal

- Have the couple who want to melt the ice between them stay silent after an argument until an ice cube has melted. Then they can reconnect or start the discussion again.
- Have the family who are using the war metaphorical frame have a water balloon or water pistol fight.
- Have the couple who has something on the back burner or simmering cook a meal together.
- Have the client who feels she is coming apart at the seams get some tight clothing to put on or wrap in swaddling when she feels that way.

### ☐ Making the literal metaphorical

- Have the man who is angry all the time get some red-tinted lenses.
- Have the person who feels "down" climb a hill or a mountain.
- Have a person who is desperate get some rope and tie a knot in the end and hold when they feel desperate.

## **DEVELOPING AND DELIVERING THERAPEUTIC METAPHORS**

\*Metaphor includes stories, jokes, puns, anecdotes, analogies, riddles and symbols - Anything that speaks about one thing to refer to another [Gr. *meta*, to carry and *pherien*, across]

### **☐ Purposes:**

- To introduce new possibilities
- To assess which possibilities appeal to the client(s)
- To evoke resources (feelings, memories, frames of reference, previous solutions)
- To transfer know-how/resources from one context to another
- To deal with objections
- To channel the discussion
- To join
- To normalize
- To guide associations

### **☐ Elements:**

- Stories include outline words, which give just enough structure while leaving room for clients to fill in their own details.
- Many words in the story are therefore unspecified as to person, place, time, thing and action.
- Stories include characters and action.
- Stories have beginnings, middles and ends.
- Stories are told in a novelistic way, using enough description to hold people's attention and get the listener involved in the narrative.
- Gestures and nonverbals are used to enhance the story.

## METAPHORICAL FRAMES IN NARRATIVE THERAPY

FRAME	PROBLEM METAPHORS	SOLUTION METAPHORS
<b>Oppression</b>	Intimidate; try to silence; coerce; oppress	Resist; withstand; passive resistance; speak up
<b>Prison/Hostage</b>	Imprison; incarcerate; put in a concentration camp; sentence you to death; take hostage; hold hostage; brainwash	Liberate; escape; release; served your time; parole; time off for good behavior; reprieve; pardon; appeal
<b>Spy</b>	Infiltrate; recruit; disinformation campaign	Uncovering the truth; expose; counterespionage
<b>Undermine</b>	Undermine; get you to doubt yourself; gaslight	Believe in yourself; trust yourself
<b>Sports</b>	Get a grip on; tackle; pin you; get you on the mat; on the ropes; in the corner; foul; body check; kidney punch; choke hold	Loosen its grip; play fair; get back up; release; get out of the corner; get off the ropes; win a goal against
<b>Spatial/Size</b>	Diminish; disappear; make you smaller; overshadow; loom large; stand over	Stand up to; grow larger; reappear; show up; move away from; push it away
<b>Fighting/War</b>	Attack; bully; pushed around by; defeated by; lost ground to; lost territory; pillaged; ransacked	Counterattack; fight against; marshal your forces; hold your ground; liberate territory; building your strength; attacking its flank; strategizing
<b>Seduce</b>	Coo; seduce; entice; promise; sweettalk; sweet nothings in your ear; promise you the moon; invite	Close your ears to; faithful; keep a level head; say no; reject; spurn; set limits
<b>Supernatural</b>	Monster; possess; vampire (drink your blood); haunt; ghost	Kill the monster; exorcise the ghost; drive a stake through its heart
<b>Club membership</b>	Lifetime member; member under false pretenses; sneak in	Cancel membership; revoke membership; decertify

## INCLUSIVE THERAPY

### **Injunctions**

Determine the injunctions that may have dominated the person. These are conclusions that the person has made about himself or herself or ideas that other people have suggested to them or told them are true. They can usually be thought of in two forms:

❖ Have to/Should/Must (as in, “You must always be perfect,” or “I have to hurt myself.”)

or

❖ Can't/Shouldn't/Don't (as in, “You shouldn't feel sexual feelings,” or “I can't be angry.”)

### **Binds**

Sometimes the person is stuck with dueling or seemingly opposite injunctions operating simultaneously. For example, “You must be perfect,” paired with “You never do anything right!”

### **Self-Devaluing**

Sometimes the person has come to the conclusion, consciously or unconsciously, that he or she is bad or that parts of him/her is bad. He might say, “If you only knew what I am like inside, you would see that I am evil.” She might have the sense that anger is bad and she shouldn't feel it or show that she is angry. If she does she thinks she is very bad or anger is very bad.

### **Generalizations about oneself or life**

Sometimes people generalize about themselves or life. “All men are creeps.” “Women don't like sex as much as men.” “I'm always nice.” These generalizations can be distortions and can lead to shame and bad feelings when things aren't congruent with our ideas.

### **Valuing, permission and inclusion as antidotes**

1. Give the person permission to and permission not to have to experience or be something. For example, “You can feel angry and you don't have to feel angry.” Or, “It's okay to be sexual and you don't have to be sexual.” Be careful when giving permission about actions.
2. Suggest the possibility of having seeming opposites or contradictions coexist without conflict. For example, “You can tell me and not tell me about the abuse.”
3. Include the opposite possibility when speaking about the way it was, is or will be. “You'll either get better or you won't.” “That was either a terrible thing or it wasn't.” “I'm shy except when I'm not.”

**For additional information on language and therapy**

O'Hanlon, Bill and Wilk, James (1987) **Shifting Contexts: The Generation of Effective Psychotherapy**. New York: Guilford.

O'Hanlon, William H. (1987) **Taproots: Underlying Principles of Milton Erickson's Therapy and Hypnosis**. New York: Norton.

O'Hanlon, Bill and Hudson, Pat (1996) **Stop Blaming, Start Loving**. New York: Norton.

O'Hanlon, Bill and Bertolino, Bob (1998) **Invitation to Possibility-Land: A Teaching Seminar with Bill O'Hanlon**. Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel.

O'Hanlon, Bill and Beadle, Sandy (1999) **Guide to Possibility Land: 51 Respectful Methods for Doing Brief Therapy**. New York: Norton.

O'Hanlon, Steffanie and Bertolino, Bob (1999) **Evolving Possibilities: Bill O'Hanlon's Selected Papers**. Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel.

O'Hanlon, Bill (2000) **Do One Thing Different: Ten Simple Ways to Change Your Life**. New York: Quill/HarperTrade.

O'Hanlon, Bill and Bertolino, Bob (2002) **Even From a Broken Web: Brief, Respectful Solution-Oriented Treatment of Sexual Abuse and Trauma**. New York: W.W. Norton.