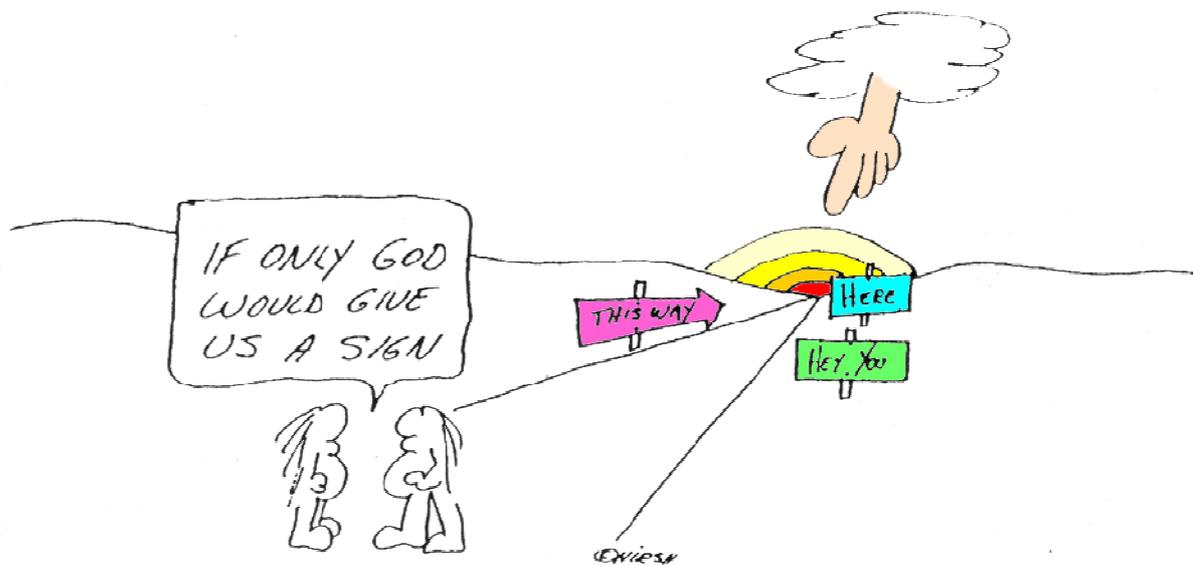


'If only God would give us a sign'

The Role of Meta-Comments

Penny Tompkins and James Lawley



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David Grove, the originator of Clean Language, was an astute observer of his therapy clients. He was the first to alert us to the importance of clients' comments which do not follow on from the previous statement and which appear incongruous. Grove called these comments *non sequiturs*. We extracted the *non sequiturs* from a number of verbatim client transcripts. We noticed that most of these remarks were a more or less thinly disguised comment about what was happening for the client in the previous moment – hence we called them *meta-comments*.

We define a 'meta-comment' as a verbal or nonverbal expression which refers to what has just been experienced. These self-reflections range from the fully conscious and explicit to the completely unconscious and implicit.

Apparently Michael Palin used the term 'meta comment' when he was part of Monty Python's Flying Circus. The Pythons used them to comic effect when an actor would refer to the situation their character was in. For example in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, following Sir Galahad's discovery of the Castle Anthrax, Dingo is telling the sad tale of her life:

"Oh, wicked, bad, naughty, evil Zoot! She is a bad person and must pay the penalty...

... she turns to the camera:

"Do you think this scene should have been cut? We were so worried when the boys were writing it, but now, we're glad. It's better than some of the previous scenes, I think..."

This is analogous to when clients meta-comment. They interrupt what they are doing to pass a judgment, reflect on their knowledge, give notification of a change, or in some other way reveal something about the current state of their inner world. To understand meta-comments you need to extract them from the flow of normal speech and recognise that the client is commenting *on* their in-the-moment experience. Because they are embedded in the client's narratives, meta-comments are somewhat hidden and easily ignored. But to ignore them is to miss out on some of the most important signposts for how best to proceed with facilitating *this* particular client at *this* particular moment.

The following example is from a client who was struggling to come to terms with her new role as a mother.

It's got a new quality about it. It's a very new thing. It's ... What I'm finding out with the mother role which I love, and it is true I have somehow taken to it naturally, I'm aware that what's creeping in is this sort of more negative side where I will more easily lose myself, the bit that I do know is me which comes through when I feel free, which is quite interesting. And before it goes too far where ... I don't want to become in some ways like my mother did, which was really putting her life on hold. And giving in to exhaustion. And I can, I know I have that in me to do. And eventually I think, you know, that's what killed her, you know with the cancer, the stuff just ate her up. So ... I am strong. I am quite a strong person and I ... that works against me sometimes, because I will do things to exhaustion. And then I collapse. There's a negative aspect which comes through as resentment. Because I can be so resentful as well because I can take on things but I'm not, I'm no saint. You know, I will go, 'oh, what about me?'

Did you notice any meta-comments? What alerted you to them? What did they point to? And what would you ask as a result?

Penny noted “which is quite interesting” was a meta-comment on “the bit that I do know is me which comes through when I feel free”. The meta-comment indicated that the client’s attention was attracted enough by what she had just said and thought for her to interrupt her narrative and pass comment. As a result of this signposting Penny used Clean Language to ask:

And what about me? And there’s a bit that you know is me that comes through when you feel free. And when you feel free and you know that bit is me, where is that bit?

In case you are interested, the client replied:

On my shoulder, sort of here [right hand gestures to right shoulder]. Like a conscience, but not a conscience. Yes, it's a knowing, yeah it's a knowing. That's interesting. It's funny identifying a place because now I can remember when I have ... m-m-m, now *that's* interesting. I've, I've, I've heard this before but not known the locality of it.

Below are some more examples of client’s meta-comments:

This is important.
 That’s a new option.
 There must be a place that knows.
 I realise I need to decide which way to go.
 God knows.
 No, that's not what I meant. [self-correcting]
 Do I want to go there?
 That’s a hard question.
 Oh look, there’s no green in the rainbow.
 Does that make sense?
 Phew, I’ve gone all hot.
 I know I shouldn't say this but ...
 ... so anyway ...
 It's obvious that
 It just occurred to me ...
 I can't believe I just said that.
 Now let me see ...
 [A tap of a watch]
 [A hand over the mouth]

The key to understanding the role played by meta-comments is to model what the client has had to do with their attention or perception to have made this particular comment.

Meta-comments indicate a momentary shift in perspective (and possibly perceiver) from a more descriptive narrative to a statement with a degree of self-reflection.

Because we are remarkably consistent beings and we cannot not be ourselves, the structure of what we do in the micro (seconds) is often isomorphic with what happens in the macro (days, months, years). In this way meta-comments in the session can be seen as fractals – vignettes that when scaled up retain a similar organisation to how we experience our 'real life'.

From a facilitator's viewpoint, meta comments can be considered as orientation pointers and as messages from the 'wisdom in the system'. In broad terms they can be taken as a directive to:

- Continue attending to the current perception (to stay put)
- Attend to something else
- Not attend to something
- Change your way of facilitating (e.g. slow down, speed up, etc.)

Since meta-comments are about the client's *relationship with their interior landscape* they often reveal something about the degree of significance or insignificance the client attaches to a part of their experience.

Why 'Meta'?

The notion of 'meta' and 'levels of communication' was extensively discussed and utilised by the groups that formed around Gregory Bateson at Stanford University in the 1950s and at the Mental Research Institute at Palo Alto, California in the 1960s. Strangely, although Bateson regularly mentions meta-communication, metalogues and metalinguistic messages in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, we could not find the term 'meta-comment' in the book.

Robert Dilts and Judith DeLozier have attempted to clarify the plethora of meta-this and meta-that in their *Encyclopedia of Systemic NLP* [pp. 718-720]:

The term *meta* is a Greek word meaning 'over', 'between' or 'above'. In English it is also used to mean 'about'. A 'meta model', for example, is a model *about* other models.

'Metacognition' is the awareness of one's own cognitive processes, i.e. cognition *about* cognition.

'Meta messages' are messages *about* other messages, which provide frames or context markers that influence the meaning of those messages. Meta messages are typically nonverbal and give emphasis or provide cues for how to interpret a verbal message.

'Meta communication' is communication *about* communication. For instance, a meta communication is often a verbal statement that sets a framework around a communication situation in the form of rules, guidelines and expectations. A study of the communication patterns of effective leaders revealed that almost half of the leaders' communication was actually meta communication.

It is important to distinguish meta communication from meta messages. Meta communication is a more macro level process from sending a meta message. A meta message operates as a kind of subtext that emphasizes certain aspects of a message. If a person says, "YOU weren't respecting the rules" it marks the communication as directed to the 'who'. Saying "You weren't respecting the RULES" shifts the emphasis of the message to the 'what'. Meta communication, on the other hand, would be saying something like, "Let's talk about what the rules are, and why we have them."

Meta-comments are another member of the above family of Meta's. They can involve metacognition, and they can be a meta message or a meta communication. Typically they are short and interspersed within ordinary speech. If they go on for too long they cease to be 'meta' and become a comment in their own right. Their primary function seems to be a communication to self and secondarily a communication to someone else. It is like the person is externalising their internal dialogue without realising it.

Meta-States

Meta-comments signal a *momentary* shift to a meta-perspective. L. Michael Hall's model of *Meta-States* covers a similar but wider territory than is relevant to this article:

In a Meta-State, conscious awareness *reflects back* onto itself (i.e. *self-reflective consciousness*). Thinking-about-thinking then generates thoughts/feelings at higher logical levels so that we experience states-*about*-states. Rather than referring to something "out there" in the world, Meta-States refer to something *about* some previous thought, emotion, concept, understanding, Kantian category, etc. In this way we layer thought upon thought. [2000, p.4]

Examples of meta-states are: Worry about worrying; reasoning about our reasoning; anger at self for being too emotional; etc. While working with meta-states opens up all sorts of possibilities, we have found great value in simply regarding a meta-comment as a pointer to what is happening for a client and a guide for how to work with their process.

Congruence/Incongruence

Because all forms of meta -communication, -messages, -states and -comments operate at a different *level* to that which they are referring to, they can be perceived by the facilitator as either congruent or incongruent. While incongruence can be considered as evidence that the client is operating with incompatible behaviours, desires, values or beliefs, from a systemic perspective if you go to a high enough level you'll find that a functioning system is *always internally congruent*. If you cannot see the congruence in what they are saying and doing that's a signal that there is more for you to model.

Categories of Meta-Comments

In everyday conversation meta-comments rarely become the topic of conversation and an inexperienced listener will barely be aware they have been said. It's like the viewers of a videoed basketball match who are so intent on counting the number of passes they don't notice a man in a gorilla suit run onto the court. However, once you start to look for these particular gorillas you'll see them everywhere.

To model the way clients use meta-comments we took the first 20 minutes of eight verbatim transcripts each with a different therapy client and picked out all the meta-comments. This resulted in over 120 different examples (excluding repetitions). On average that's one meta-comment every 45 seconds. We categorised these examples into the following broad headings:

WAYS OF KNOWING

- The first thing that comes to mind is
- I'm guessing it must be just a kind of ...
- I'm imagining ...

COMPARISON

- Scale
- Judgment/Preference
- Change/Persistence
- It's a big deal for me.
- That's odd.
- Actually in some ways that's new.

TIMEFRAME

- At the moment ...
- I'm at the stage where...
- I feel that's the end of it.

LANGUAGING

- Let me rephrase that.
- I can't verbalise it.
- The question is ...

CATEGORIES OF EXPERIENCE

- That's the pattern.
- I've no new ideas.

CONDITIONAL/POTENTIAL CONTEXTS

- My outcome is ...
- I would like that to be true.
- If only I could get some new insight.
- I *might* do something about it.

TO FACILITATOR DIRECTLY

- No, that doesn't actually feel right.
- Let me think about that.
- Bear in mind ...

NONVERBAL

- [Laughter at]
- [Tears about]
- [A sigh]

For a full list of the meta-comments by category see:
www.cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/articles/192/1/

Pattern-level comments

There is an additional category of meta-comment that rarely occurs in the first 20 minutes of a client's first session but which warrants special attention. These are comments at a *pattern-level* of organisation:

That's like my whole life.
 I'm back to square one.
 I can't stop running round in circles.
 How long am I going to complain about this?
 I realise it's never going to work.
 Here I go again.
 It's the same problem in a different guise.

Comments like these are especially important because they mark out that *the client* is perceiving at a pattern level. With skilful choice of questions you can facilitate them to stay at that level. By transcending and including the multitude of lower-level components and examples they are working strategically. And when the pattern changes the effects will filter down so they think, feel and behave differently across a range of contexts – some of which may never have been mentioned.

Common signals for meta-comments

Careful observation suggests that there are behaviours that often mark out a meta-comment from other language:

The person's body often moves slightly backwards or upwards.
 There is a change in their tonality.
 There is a discontinuity in the flow of their sentences.
 The comment has an 'about-ness' to it.

You may also notice a subtle internal sense that something different – a kind of mismatch – has just happened. This will be you noticing that the client's meta-comment has changed the frame for a second or two. With practice you can sensitise yourself to notice these cues and increase your ability to choose whether or not to respond to the meta-comment. To develop these skills we recommend you review a transcript, highlighting the meta-comments only. One indicator of a meta-comment is to consider whether the client's description makes sense without that comment. If you were to remove all of the meta-comments from a transcript and hand it to someone else they wouldn't know anything was missing. This, however, does not mean they are unimportant.

Working with meta-comments

Most of the time you can just note a client's meta-comment and use it to update your model of their model of the world. This will help you attend to what the client is attending to, and be a guide to where it would be useful for the client's attention to go next.

Hearing a client meta-comment can alert you to consider: What just happened? How did they *do* the shift? What happened just before the shift?. By 'reverse engineering' what the client has likely had to do with their attention you can get an embodied sense of how their thinking is organised in that moment.

Occasionally, however, you may decide to utilise the meta-comment more directly.

David Grove suggested that meta-comments have "a short half-life". They decay quickly and soon disappear from the client's awareness unless they are attended to. So if you are going to refer to them you need to do so immediately after they have happened. Below is a simplified framework for doing this

1. Notice/recognise the meta-comment.
2. Model the comment in relation to the current organisation of the client's interior landscape and context of the session.
3. Consider whether to:

- i. Utilise the comment directly
 - ii. Follow the direction suggested by the meta-comment
 - iii. Deliberately *not* follow the direction implied by the meta-comment.
4. If you decide to pursue one of the options in 3, we recommend you first check that *your* intention to utilise the meta-comment relates to *their* desired outcome. Then you can choose *how* you are going to do this. For example, using Clean Language, you could respond to a client who says:

Client: I've just realised I need to decide which way to go.

Facilitator:

- i: And what kind of 'realised' is that 'realised'?
- ii: And then what happens?
- iii: And where could the 'need to decide' come from?

Ways Meta-Comments can be utilised

Once you have decided you are going to make use of a meta-comment you have lots of choice about how to do that. Below we list some examples to give you a flavour of how we use Clean Language to utilise verbal and nonverbal meta-comments.

Any meta-comment

- Repeat only the meta-comment and pause.
- Or ask: And is there anything else about that [client's meta-comment]?

"There's something else I can't quite grasp."

- Do nothing, and wait to see what happens.
- Or ask: And then what happens?

"I'm trying to do this in bits."

- And how many bits?
- And what kind of trying is that trying?

"Both elements are important."

- Make sure that both elements are explored.
- Or ask: And how do you know both elements are important?

"I know this pattern."

- And when you know this pattern then what happens?
- And given you know this pattern, what would you like to have happen?

"If I'm honest ..."

- And what happens just before you're honest?
- And where does being honest come from?

"[Laugh] I've been here before."

- And what kind of [laugh] is that [laugh]?
- And what could that [laugh] know?
- And where could [laugh] come from?

"I kind of know that I want something, but [sits back] I don't know what I want."

- And what's the difference between [indicate them sitting forward] and [indicate them sitting back]?
- And whereabouts is that know that you want something?

A meta-comment that suggests something new just happened.

- Interrupt and ask: And what just happened?

When there are a lot of meta-comments

- Repeat back a list of their meta-comments and ask: And is there anything else about all that?
- And what happens just before you [list a few meta-comments]?

Attending to their own meta-comments is likely be an unusual experience for a client. While it can encourage them to become even more adept at self-reflection and open up areas that were out of their awareness, if overdone clients are liable to become self-conscious. Therefore you need to be selective and to calibrate how useful the client's responses to your questions are to them – given their desired outcome.

Conclusion

People meta-comment more frequently than you might expect. In our small survey clients averaged more than one per minute. While some people habitually comment on what is going on, others rarely do – but when they do it usually signals something significant has just happened. Despite their frequency and significance meta-comments are all but ignored by most facilitators. In so doing vital information about the current status of the client's model of the world can be missed.

In this paper we have identified several ways to make use of meta-comments, the most common being:

- Utilising the logic of the meta-comment
- Directing attention to the meta-comment itself
- Moving time back or forward using the meta-comment as a marker

Note, our way of utilising a client's meta-comments needs to be distinguished from the technique used by some schools of therapy where *the therapist* meta-comments on a client's behaviour, often their non-verbal behaviour.

On reflection, perhaps the most significant kinds of meta-comments are those that indicate the client is operating at a pattern level or that something has just changed. When you detect one of these cues we recommend that you put on hold anything else you were thinking of doing and keep the client attending to the pattern or the change.

Finally, while you can utilise any particular meta-comment, we suggest their main value is to keep you informed about what is happening for the client, and to point to how you can support the next step in their unfolding process.

Biography

Penny Tompkins and James Lawley have both been UKCP registered neurolinguistic psychotherapists since 1993. They are also supervisors, coaches in business, and certified NLP trainers. They co-authored *Metaphors in Mind: Transformation through Symbolic Modelling* and a training DVD, *A Strange and Strong Sensation*. They are the founders of The Developing Company and creators of Symbolic Modelling which uses the Clean Language of David Grove. They can be contacted through their web site: www.cleanlanguage.co.uk

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