Surface and Deep Structures
An Integral Interpretation
by Surinder Deol

[Magic] …has structure and is, therefore, learnable, given the appropriate resources.

Richard Bandler & John Grinder
The Structure of Magic

The idea of structure is one of the foundation stones of NLP. Here is the general tone of argument that Bandler and Grinder presented in *The Structure of Magic* (1975).

…since we use language as a representational system, our linguistic representations are subject to the three universals of human modeling: Generalization, Deletion, and Distortion. Secondly, we use our language to communicate our model or representation of the world to each other. (p. 22)

…people have consistent intuitions about the language they speak. By consistent intuitions, we mean that the same person presented with the same group of words today and a year from now will make the same judgments about whether they are a well–formed sentence of his language. (p. 24)

When humans wish to communicate their representation, their experience of the world, they form a complete linguistic representation of their experience; this is called the

Deep Structure. As they begin to speak, they make a series of choices (transformations) about the form in which they will communicate their experience. These choices are not, in general, conscious choices. Our behavior in making these choices is however, regular and rule governed. The process of making this series of choices (a derivation) results in a Surface Structure—a sentence or sequence of words which we recognize as a well–formed group of words in our language. This Surface Structure itself can be viewed as a representation of the full linguistic representation—the Deep Structure. (p. 35)

This initial idea was later expanded, as mentioned by Robert Dilts in his book *Modeling With NLP* (1998), to cover primary and secondary emotional experiences.

NLP has widened the use of notions of deep structure and surface structure to include more than linguistic processes and representations. NLP considers deep structure

to be composed of sensory and emotional experiences—or "primary experience." NLP views language as "secondary experience"— that is, a part of our model of the world that is derived from our primary experience. (p. 13)

A Very Brief History of Structure

Structure is a pattern of organization or behavior of particles in a large organic or inorganic body symbolizing the whole–part relationship. Since what is whole at one level is part at another, structures could appear as an endless spiral without a beginning or an end. Looked at from this macroscopic perspective everything in the universe is some form of structure creating a seamless web of interconnecting relationships.

Structuralism, as a philosophical and methodical approach in social sciences, focuses on the underlying, unconscious regularities of human expression. The approach is based on the work of French anthropologist

Claude Lévi–Strauss who derived his theory from the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist. It was Saussure who came up with the idea that human language is not random; it is structured in the sense that its elements are interrelated in non–arbitrary, regular, rule–bound ways. This means that any normal person using the language is able to competently and unconsciously use the language simply by following a set of rules. The task of the linguist is therefore to detect this underlying invisible structure, including the rules of transformation that connect the structure to the various observed expressions. Lévi–Strauss applied this idea to social and cultural life in general. His theories showed the underlying structure of major human activities as well as such routine things as cooking, eating, talking, socializing, and relaxing. The structural method detects unseen patterns of thought and human behavior. This knowledge, according to Lévi–Strauss, provides a window to understanding the basic characteristics of the human mind. Structures such as the contents of human mind, rules of grammar, and language were named "deep structures" in view of the invisibility of these structures. These structures must be discerned through intensive interpretive analysis of myths, language, or texts.

If structures are self–regulating and evolving entities in time and space, they are consequently capable of initiating and sustaining change. Our body, mind, and soul can be viewed as a structure with layer upon layer of wholes and parts. As mentioned above, what looks like a whole is a part of a bigger whole, making our inner universe a collection of whole-parts (or to use Koestler's terminology "holons"). Holons within and outside our bodies exist in a network of communion, two–way relationships, and varying degrees of embeddedness.

The Two Interactive Engines of Our Being

Surface and deep structures have their own distinctive characteristics. As mentioned above, deep structure in the study of language is an underlying semantic content of a sentence. Surface structure of a sentence on the other hand is what we make of the sentence. If we expand this idea to cover all aspects of our life, we can say that surface structure (ideas, aspirations, actions) is the medium though which we make sense of our deep structures (ideas, aspirations, and potentials). And at every stage of our development our consciousness consists of a surface structure and a deep structure. If we have one, we are bound to have the other.

Surface structure, as the name itself makes it clear, exists at the upper layers of our reality. Our learning ability molds and impacts it. Our ability and willingness to learn new ideas and skills expands and enriches it. On the other hand, our learning disabilities can constrain and impoverish it. The way we lead our life conditions our surface structure too. Our

personal history is mirrored by it and the culture to which we belong leaves a deep imprint on it. Therefore, our surface structure is culturally relative and it grows with us as we do. Being open, it absorbs the impact of different worldviews—the values of our parents and families, and teachings of our mentors. Our national origin forcefully influences our surface structure so that we readily identify ourselves as Americans, Canadians, Chinese, or Indians more than anything else.

Our deep structure, on the other hand, tells a different story. For one thing, it exists below the surface, in the deeper recesses of our inner reality. To start with, it is submergent and largely weaves a mesh of memories of our archaic origins, our human as well as animal ancestors. We can look upon it as a gift of the Unknown. But once it emerges it is universal and cross–cultural. It might change but this change is a very slow process. It is only through our deep structure that we collectively share our strongest beliefs with other human beings. It is in a way the quality of our humanness.

Although separate in many ways, these two structures are strongly joined together with deep structure having the ability (both in terms of its potentials and limitations) to influence the surface structure. If this influence works, then the surface structure becomes a manifestation of the deep structure. If not, there is a potential for inner conflict and parts disintegration.

Early Integral View

In A *Sociable God* and *Eye to Eye,* both published in 1983, Ken Wilber talked about deep and surface structures. Placing this idea in the overall holarchy of being (the reality of our being which has several layers and levels), Ken defined deep structure as a key form of each level whereas surface structure was a particular component or element within each level. He compared these levels to different floors of a multistory building where each level was the deep structure but the furniture, fixtures, and other visible items constituted the surface structure. When we move from one floor to another (in our upward climb), we actually move from one deep structure to another. Ken called this process of change "transformation." On the other hand, if we moved only the furniture around on a given floor (that refers to cosmetic changes that we often confuse with deep inner change), we shall have a change process that Ken called "translation." Both change processes are important in their own ways at the individual level.

Ken's unique contribution to this debate comes from the fact that he elevated these ideas to a higher level in order to clarify processes of social, economic and political change in human societies. He mentioned that social change can occur only through some institutional mechanisms, and that institutions can play two distinct roles in managing change. They can validate incremental or surface level changes ("moving the furniture around") and thus make the change "legitimate." On the other hand, institutions can play a more important role by facilitating and validating movement to a higher level—a situation where the society moves from one level to another (say from a rural to an industrial society). Ken called

this institutional role as making the change "authentic."

Legitimacy is a horizontal scale. It is expanding sideways, taking on more of similar roles and responsibilities. For individuals it means acquiring new skills but the skills which are in the same broad category. It is like a bank adding housing loans to its portfolio of industrial loans, or an electrical engineer acquiring new skills in business computing. That is why Ken calls it a "measure of the degree of integration, organization, meaning, coherence, and stability of or within a given level of structural adaptation or development."

Authenticity is a vertical scale. Institutions as well as individual leaders can play a transformational role by moving them from one way of thinking to another, by challenging the status quo, and showing a new path. Turkey during the early part of last century, Japan after the Second World War, and China's embrace of capitalism in recent decades are examples of how whole societies can move from one level to another with the power of new ideas. A vertical shift for our bank would be to take on a new business like elderly care, and for our electrical engineer it would be to take a course in self–management and stress reduction. In both cases skill sets required for the shift to occur would be radically different from the existing skill sets. To quote Ken once again, "Authenticity is a measure of the degree of transformation offered by any particular psychosocial institution. Every society has to act as a pacer of its transformation up to its average expectable level of structural adaptation, and thus

it must provide authentic modes of transformation up to and including that level."

The Emerging Integral View

Ken has returned to the overall theme of structures and structuralism in some of his newest unpublished writings. He defines structure as neither fixed nor unchanging; it is "unstably stable," open and circular, new and old. Structures evolve through "coupling" with enacted environments. Deep pattern of a structure is always inherited, meaning it is inherited by all members of the same class. There can be no seventh floor without the sixth floor. Surface features are not inherited; they are determined by several contingent factors, meaning we can order new furniture subject to constraints of budget, style, etc. So far it is easy and clear, but at this point Ken gives a big twist to the whole discussion: a deep pattern is not an existing form or structure but simply a term that represents *the probability of finding a particular type of holon in a particular mode of spacetime* (italics in original). Our electrical engineer could have become a fine priest but the probability was rather low because his entire family had chosen to go to schools of engineering and no one had ever stepped inside a divinity school. These probabilities can run from very low to very high depending on situational variables. The deep patterns cannot thus be deduced from a pre–existing Platonic Form. The leading edge of personal or societal change today is not given to us; we have to discover it, create it, and we have to shape it with our own skills of innovation. Ken therefore concludes that deep and surface are sliding terms; context determines their meaning. Deep refers to the class of objects whereas surface refers only to each member of the class. They are relative because they shift meaning according to the level of the class itself. What is deep to one class may be surface to another class. What is surface at one level is deep at another level.

Ken's main points may be summarized as below:

• Deep features are inherited by members of a class, surface features are not.

- Deep and surface features are relative. They shift meaning according to the level of the class itself.
- Cultures, subcultures, families can collectively inherit their deep features. Surface features for these people could be different.
- None of the deep features are predetermined in the Platonic sense.
- Deep features emerge in part as creative novelty during evolution. But they have to become deep–seated habits for some people in order for them to be inherited by subsequent generations.
- The general probability waves are impacted by habits and potentials developed at a point in time.

Conclusion

Clearly this debate is inconclusive, as some of the ideas are still evolving. Therefore, this conclusion is really a placeholder for a conclusion that might be months or years into the future. Meanwhile, how should NLPers handle issues relating to deep and surface structures? For one thing, Meta–Model is a rock solid concept and it works really well in individual coaching, counseling, and training. Continue to do what you have been doing so well over the years. On the other hand, NLP lacks a change model that could be used for institutions and large communities. That's where Ken Wilber's integral thinking comes handy.

The points summarized at the end of the last section are highly relevant in managing organizational change. If we look at issues concerning organizational culture change, for instance, we can quickly see the reality of what Ken calls "unstably–stable structures with their relative deep and surface features." Take good corporate entities like GE or bad ones like Enron, their so–called stable structures disappeared into thin air with one major shock event (Jack Welch's entry as new CEO in the early 1980s in the first case and the stock market crash in the case of the second). This logic can be seen at work in the recent collapse of deep and stable feature societies like Argentina (financial collapse brought on by economic mismanagement) and Zimbabwe (reverse racial discrimination policies pursued by Mugabe and his government).

India is an interesting example where deep features (pursuit of eternal happiness, harmony, coherence, soulful music and poetry, extraordinary numerical skills) are continuously struggling to appear as surface features but are constantly pushed back due to pathologies of political corruption, ideological fixations, and communal disharmony. It is therefore difficult to say what is what. Deep and surface features go up and down like the ride in a village fair.

Singapore and Ireland are good examples of creative novelty shaping the economic evolution of these two societies; once the creative novelty turned into a habit of the people we saw the emergence of new deep and surface features. Yet we cannot predict the future of these societies. One thing is certain. For any structure to evolve into a higher and more desirable level, holons in all four quadrants have to evolve together—they have to co-evolve or tetra-evolve. This is a broader and more important lesson of integral thinking. Structures representing I, We, It, and Its have to come together while doing their dance of accommodation and adaptation. No stable change of any consequence will come from structures limited to one or two quadrants.

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[*A Sociable God* and *Eye to Eye* appear together in The Collected Works of Ken Wilber, Volume Three published by Shambhala]

Online Resources: Ken Wilber Online at *http://wilber.shambhala.com*

Surinder Deol is a Potomac, Maryland based leadership development coach and facilitator. He is developing an integral approach for use by NLP practitioners based on the work and ideas of philosopher Ken Wilber. He can be reached at *surinder@mac.com*