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Richard Bolstad and Margot Hamblett

Why The Moon Changes Size: The Neurology of Submodalities

Making the far-away close

In 1985, Connirae and Steve Andreas introduced the world to a whole new series of Richard Bandler's NLP change techniques, based on submodalities. Submodalities, they said 'are literally the way that our brains sort and code our experience. The submodality change patterns can be used to directly change the human software' (Bandler, 1985, p.3). This article explores the neurological basis for that claim, particularly in relation to visual submodalities. In doing so, we hope to provide NLP with information about the brain's hardware which will be useful to run our new software successfully. We also expect that this article will take us far beyond the computer metaphor, to an appreciation of the miracle of human perception.

To begin, let's imagine something. It's a beautiful summer's night. As you look out across the treetops and houses, you catch sight of the full moon, hanging low near the skyline. The markings on it are sharp and clear, and the moon itself is huge. You decide to take a photo of this wondrous object, but when you look at the developed picture, the moon is a tiny dot.

Perhaps you realise that the moon cannot be changing size; it must be your perception which is altering. When the moon is directly up above, it looks small, and when it is on the horizon, it looks large. Next full moon, you attempt to change the apparent size. Amazingly, the illusion is quite resistant to change. It takes quite some practice to alter this trick of the brain.

Organic chemist Dr Graham Cairns-Smith has made a study of this and other related phenomena. He points out that 'the unconscious brain has figured out that anything near the horizon is probably far away and so will look smaller than it really is, and so needs a bit of per-