Theoretical Deficiency in Neuro-Linguistic Programming and the Dual-Track Dilemma in Knowledge Dissemination: A Critical Review Based on Bibliometric Analysis

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Abstract

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), as a theoretical and practical framework widely applied in psychology, education, and business management, has garnered increasing attention from researchers in recent years. However, despite its notable application achievements, the foundational theoretical construction—particularly regarding the "logical levels of thinking"—remains relatively weak. This paper conducts a systematic analysis of Chinese and English literature related to NLP and "Neuro-Linguistic Programming" from 2000 to 2024, sourced from the Web of Science Core Collection and CNKI databases. The analysis reveals a prominent characteristic of the field: a significant "practice-driven, theory-deficient" pattern, demonstrating a pronounced practical orientation in NLP research alongside a relative neglect of foundational theoretical exploration. Moreover, this study discusses the resulting dual-track dilemma in knowledge dissemination, namely the disjunction between theoretical knowledge and practical application. By proposing a "dual-track dilemma of knowledge dissemination" model, this paper aims to offer directional recommendations for the deeper development and refinement of NLP theory, providing researchers with a more systematic theoretical framework and avenues for critical reflection.

Keywords: Neuro-Linguistic Programming; Logical Levels of Thinking; Bibliometric Analysis; Theoretical Deficiency; Dual-Track Dilemma in Knowledge Dissemination

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1. Introduction

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), as an interdisciplinary field integrating psychology, linguistics, and cognitive science, has exerted broad influence across multiple applied domains since its inception in the 1970s. Among its core theoretical constructs, the “logical levels of thinking” framework aims to reveal crucial mechanisms underlying individual cognition and behavioral change(Bester & Meylahn, 2019). However, despite the growing adoption of NLP techniques in practice, scholarly attention to its theoretical foundations—particularly regarding the "logical levels of thinking"—remains relatively scarce, resulting in a clear phenomenon of “theory-practice gap.” Meanwhile, with the development of digitalization and artificial intelligence, NLP’s applications in healthcare, education, and mental health have increasingly expanded(Lao Changtao et al., 2023). Yet, its underdeveloped theoretical base, especially the lack of robust support from logic and cognitive science, continues to constrain its deeper advancement(Arthi & Gandhimathi, 2025). Bibliometric analysis of relevant literature reveals that although research on NLP’s practical applications has seen steady growth, significant efforts are still required in theoretical framework construction and in-depth exploration to achieve genuine integration between theory and practice.

Bibliometric analysis is a quantitative research method that uses statistical examination of literature to uncover trends, patterns, and influences within a research field(Peng & Dai, 2020). This approach enables researchers to identify the academic activity, major institutions, key publications, and scholarly impact associated with specific topics(Park et al., 2020). This study aims to systematically review literature related to NLP and its “logical levels of thinking” theory published between 2000 and 2024, revealing the current research status, characteristics of knowledge dissemination, and developmental bottlenecks. The objective is to provide theoretical references for future research and to promote the integration of theory and practice within the NLP domain. Through this investigation, This study aims to contribute to the theoretical construction of NLP and advance its academic development.

2. The Establishment and Development of NLP

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), as an interdisciplinary field bridging psychology and linguistics, traces its theoretical origins back to the 1970s when it was initially proposed by Richard Bandler and John Grinder. Their aim was to model effective techniques used in psychotherapy to better understand and improve human communication and behavior(Molzberger, 1987). This theory was grounded in their in-depth analysis and modeling of the therapeutic approaches employed by several prominent psychotherapists, such as Fritz Perls, Virginia Satir, and Milton Erickson, resulting in the development of a systematic practical model(Gökdere Çinar & Baykal, 2022). Bandler and Grinder proposed that the efficient

communication and strategic applications demonstrated by these therapists during treatment could be replicated and taught through specific language patterns and behavioral techniques, thereby helping more individuals improve their mental health and interpersonal relationships.

The core premise of NLP is the interrelationship among language, thought, and behavior, positing that changing an individual's thought patterns and behavioral habits can promote personal growth and development. Within this process, the concept of logical levels of thinking gradually emerged and evolved(Jing Milian, 2009). This concept emphasizes the hierarchical nature of human cognitive activity, proposing those different levels of thinking—such as environment, behavior, capability, beliefs, values, and identity—interact and influence individual decision-making and actions. The logical levels model was first proposed by Richard Bandler and John Grinder in the 1970s and later systematically articulated by Robert Dilts in 1989 as a six-level model, encompassing environment, behavior, capability, belief/value, identity, and spirituality(Gökdere Çinar & Baykal, 2022; Hashempour, n.d.). This model aims to assist individuals and organizations in identifying and transforming behavioral patterns to more effectively achieve their goals. Dilts' six-level model highlights the interconnection between thought and behavior, asserting that each level profoundly affects individual decisions and behavioral expressions（Table 1）. For example, the environmental level concerns how external conditions influence behavior, while the beliefs and values level pertains to internal motivations and convictions, which in turn directly impact identity and spirituality(Doğan et al., 2022a, p. 19).

Table 1 The Six Logical Levels Model

Level	Name	Primary Focus
6	Spirituality	Meaning beyond the individual; sense of mission and vision
5	Identity	Self-identity and role definition
4	Beliefs/Values	Belief systems and value judgments that drive behavior
3	Capabilities	Skills, strategies, and ways of thinking
2	Behavior	External performance and specific actions
1	Environment	External conditions and situational factors

Subsequent research has seen scholars' debate and adjust the number and connotations of these levels. Some argue that the level distinctions are not absolute and may vary in applicability depending on the context. For instance, certain studies suggest that the complex social and psychological phenomena of contemporary times cannot be fully captured by a singular six-level model, necessitating dynamic adaptation according to specific scenarios(Yousaf et al., 2009). Furthermore, as NLP research has deepened, the theory of logical levels has been enriched, with some scholars proposing additional levels to better explain complex interpersonal relationships and emotional responses(Cosic et al., 2024).

Despite controversies and adjustments regarding the logical levels model, it continues to be widely applied in fields such as psychology, education, and management. Numerous studies demonstrate that NLP techniques can effectively enhance managers' abilities in conflict resolution and interpersonal problem-solving, indicating that the logical levels model still holds significant theoretical support and practical relevance(Ghasemi et al., 2022). Additionally, recent research explores NLP's applications in healthcare and education, revealing the model's potential to promote individual mental health and learning capacities(Marconi et al., 2023). The proposition and evolution of the logical levels model not only reflect a profound understanding of human cognitive processes but also demonstrate its applicability across diverse cultural and social contexts. Future research needs to continue investigating the model's flexibility and adaptability to better address rapidly changing social environments and human needs.

NLP integrates perspectives from cognitive psychology, linguistics, and behaviorism, which contributes to its theoretical diversity and depth. First, cognitive psychology provides NLP with an understanding of thought processes, emphasizing how individuals process external information through internal mental models. By analyzing thought processes, NLP identifies key factors influencing behavior and emotional responses, enabling effective intervention in communication. Second, linguistics contributes by focusing on subtle nuances in language use—including vocabulary choice, grammatical structure, and intonation—which can significantly affect communication outcomes and relationship-building(Cosic et al., 2024). Lastly, behaviorism's emphasis on observable behavior and environmental influences guides NLP's focus on reinforcing and modifying behaviors to facilitate personal growth. NLP's theoretical foundation is not confined to psychotherapy; its applications span education, business, sports, and personal development(Kong, n.d.).

The founding context and theoretical base of NLP reflect its profound insight into human psychological processes and its integration of multidisciplinary knowledge. The pioneering work of Bandler and Grinder not only provided new tools and methods for psychotherapy but also advanced a deeper understanding of human

behavior and communication patterns. With ongoing research, NLP's theoretical system and practical methods continue to evolve, demonstrating broad application potential and far-reaching impact.

3. Research Methods and Bibliometric Analysis Design

This study utilizes the Web of Science Core Collection and China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) as the primary data sources to retrieve both English and Chinese literature, aiming to comprehensively cover the research outputs in the field of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). Web of Science and CNKI, databases with extensive literature resources, provide reliable data for bibliometric analysis. This enables comparative analysis across Chinese and English-language contexts

For the Web of Science (WoS), the Core Collection was selected, focusing on the Science Citation Index Expanded (SCI-EXPANDED) and Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI). After multiple iterations and refinements, the final search strategy was defined as TS = ("Neuro Linguistic Programming"), which retrieved 76 documents. The time frame was limited to 2000–2024, resulting in 68 publications, and when restricted to English language, 63 were retained. After authors read the titles, abstracts, and full texts and excluded those not meeting inclusion standards, articles were restricted to the "Article" format, with 38 articles selected for final inclusion.

For CNKI, the search strategy incorporated key concepts such as "神经语言程序学" (Neuro-Linguistic Programming), which retrieved 44 documents. After authors read the titles, abstracts, and full texts and excluded those not meeting inclusion standards, articles were restricted to the " academic papers and graduate theses " format, with 23 articles selected for final inclusion.

Ultimately, 38 English-language articles and 23 Chinese-language papers were retrieved, totaling 61 relevant publications. These works form a critical foundation for subsequent bibliometric analysis and in-depth discussion.

It is worth noting that, apart from the keyword analysis, the other parts of the analysis are based solely on English literature. The main reason for this is that English-language databases contain a relatively large number of publications with higher research quality, which can provide a clearer knowledge map. In contrast, Chinese literature is mainly used to supplement perspectives and compare keywords, to avoid missing context-specific research focuses. Analyzing these literature sets enables a clearer comprehension of the current research status in the NLP field and the dual-track dilemma in knowledge dissemination, thereby providing robust support and argumentation for the thematic focus of this review（Figure 1）.



Figure 1 PRISMA Flow Diagram of the Literature Selection Process for the Bibliometric Analysis of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (2000–2024)

4. Bibliometric Analysis Results

4.1 Distribution of Publications Over Time

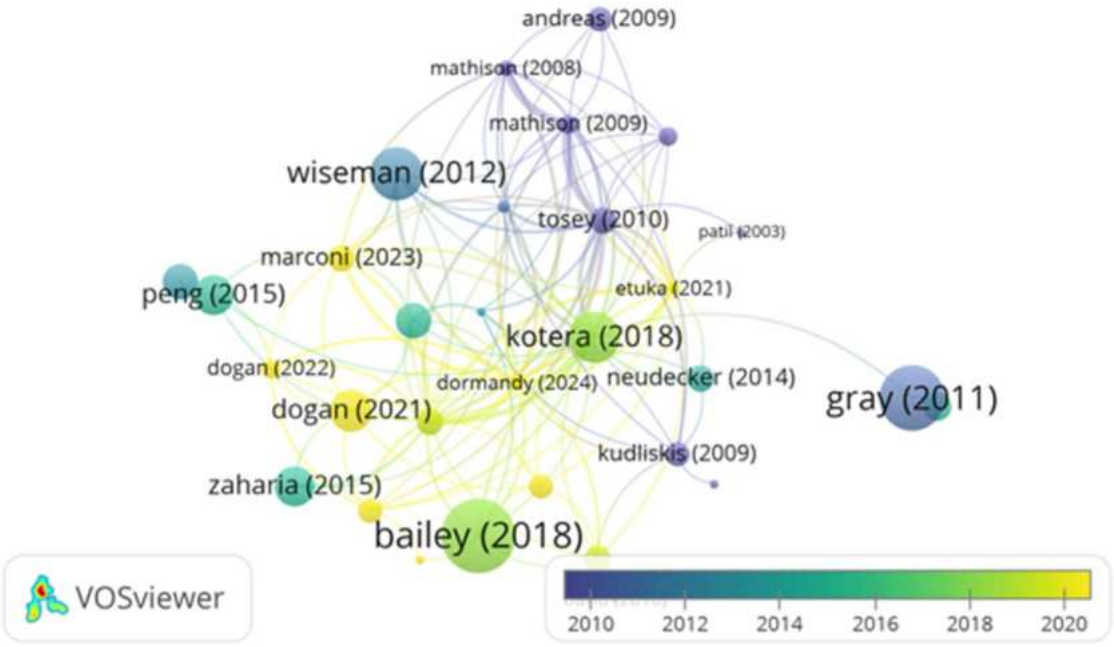


Figure 2

Figure 2 Overlay Visualization by Year of Publication. (Data Source: Web of Science; Visualization Tool: VOS Viewer) This overlay visualization illustrates the temporal evolution of NLP-related literature from 2000 to 2024. Each node represents a related literature, with size reflecting its frequency and color indicating the average year of appearance—ranging from blue (earlier years) to yellow (recent years). The lines represent co-occurrence relationships among literatures.

With a threshold T=1, a total of 33 English-language publications met the criteria, and a co-occurrence map of their publication timelines was generated（Figure 2）. In the field of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), the temporal distribution of publications exhibits a non-linear growth pattern. This phenomenon can be interpreted through an analysis of relevant literature in recent years. From 2000 to 2024, the volume of research on NLP remained relatively low and stable.

4.2 Disciplinary Distribution and Journal Characteristics

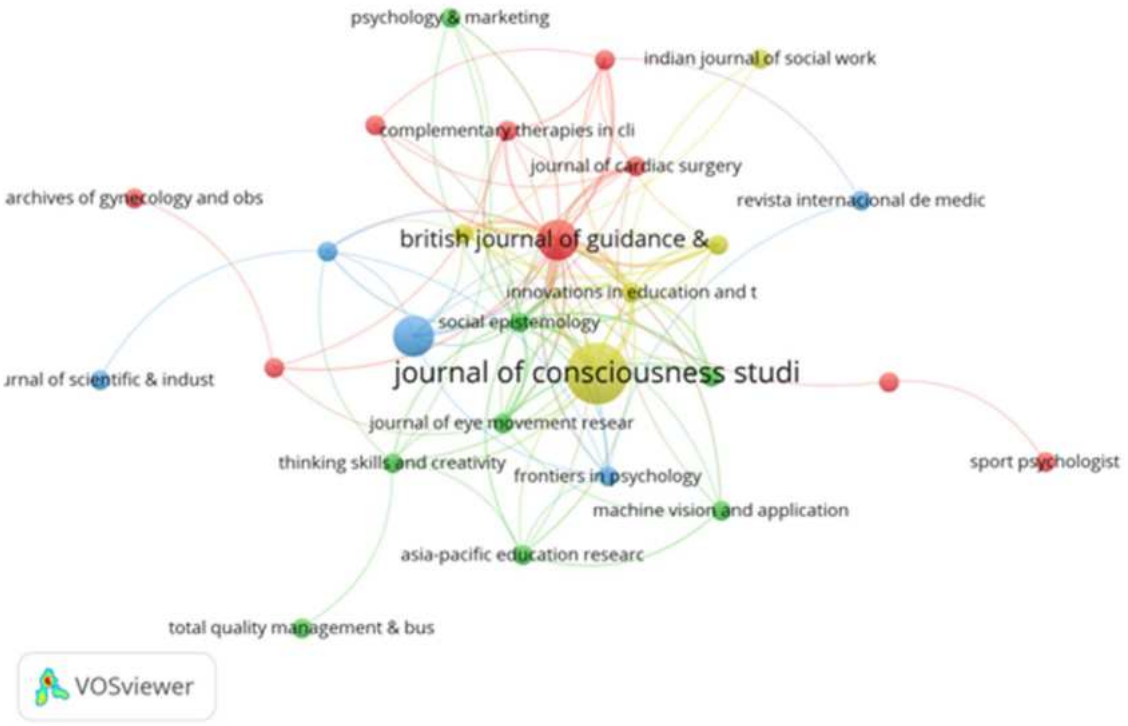


Figure 3

Figure 3 Source Journals. (Data Source: Web of Science; Visualization Tool: VOS Viewer) This co-citation map visualizes the distribution and citation structure of core journals contributing to NLP research. Each node represents a journal, with node size denoting citation frequency and color indicating its cluster within the citation network. Lines between journals represent the extent to which they are co-cited.

With a threshold T=1, 34 journals met the criteria, and a co-occurrence map of these journals was generated. （Figure 3） Based on the analysis conducted using VOS Viewer, the primary research areas of NLP span across several domains, including education and cognitive studies, clinical, health, and social work-related fields, as well as science, technology, and interdisciplinary applications. Among these, the Journal of Consciousness Studies emerges as the largest node in the visualization, indicating its high citation frequency and central role as a key source in NLP research. The core journals in the field of NLP demonstrate a distinctly interdisciplinary profile, with mainstream applications concentrated in areas such as consciousness studies, educational psychology, clinical therapy, and cognitive creativity.

4.3 Geographic Distribution and Institutional Collaboration

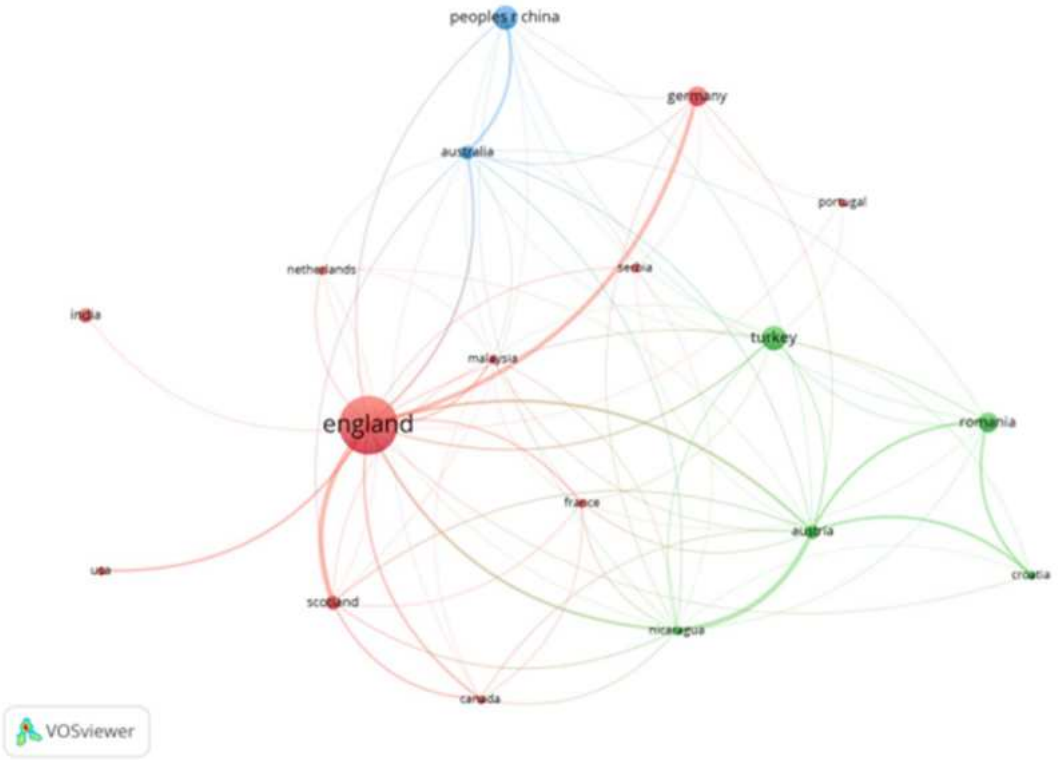


Figure 4

Figure 4 Countries of Publication. (Data Source: Web of Science; Visualization Tool: VOS Viewer) This VOS Viewer map visualizes the global distribution of research on Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) by countries. Each node represents a country, with node size indicating the number of publications and node color reflecting research activity intensity. The lines between nodes represent co-authorship or citation relationships between countries.

With a threshold T=1，a total of 19 countries met the criteria, and a co-occurrence map of these countries was generated （ Figure 4）.England emerges as the central hub in the collaboration network, represented by the largest node, indicating its dominant position in the field of NLP research. The thickness of the connecting lines suggests that the most active collaborative relationships are between England and countries such as Scotland, Germany, and Canada.

4.4 Keyword Clustering and Cross-Linguistic Comparison

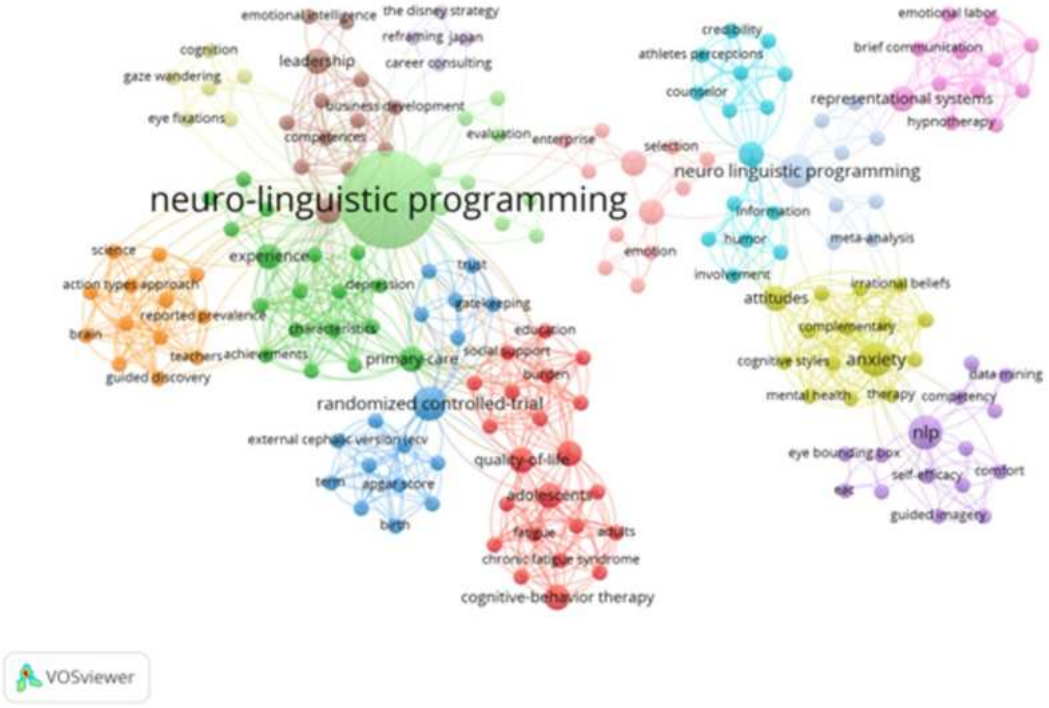


Figure 5

Figure 5 Co-occurring Keywords (English). (Data Source: Web of Science; Visualization Tool: VOS Viewer) This keyword co-occurrence visualization map displays the high-frequency keywords found in NLP-related literature. Each node represents a keyword, with node size corresponding to its frequency of occurrence. Node color indicates thematic clusters, and the lines connecting nodes represent the strength of co-occurrence within the same documents.

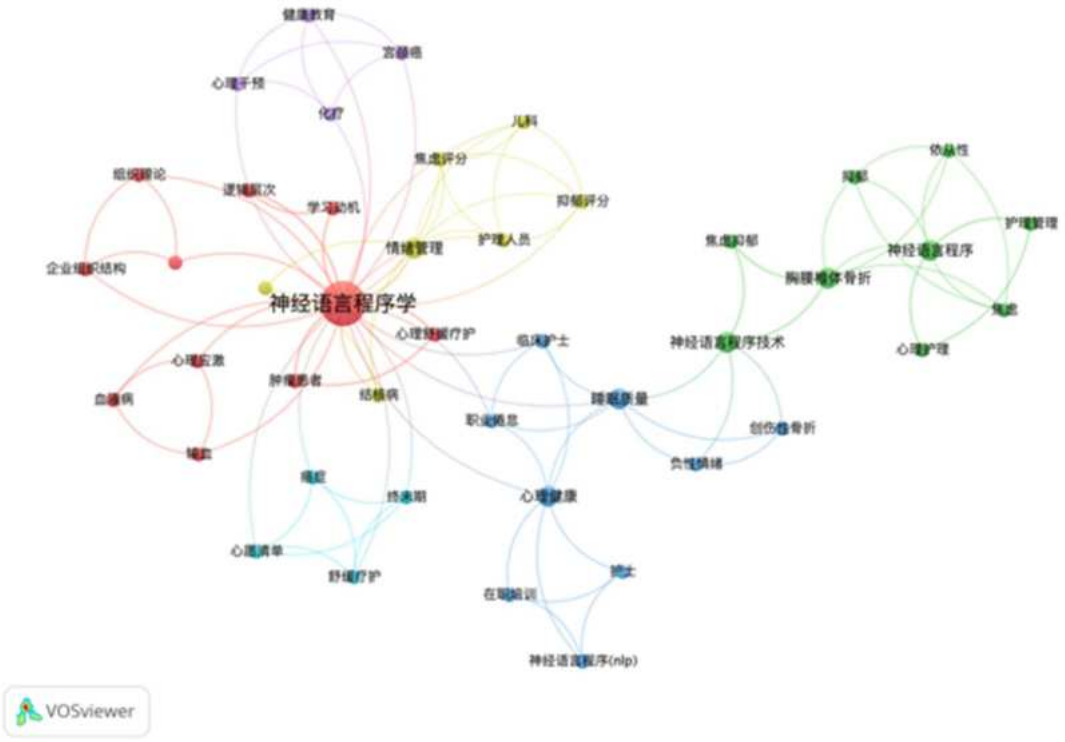


Figure 6

Figure 6 Co-occurring Keywords (Chinese). (Data Source: Web of Science; Visualization Tool: VOS Viewer) This keyword co-occurrence visualization map displays the high-frequency keywords found in NLP-related literature. Each node represents a keyword, with node size corresponding to its frequency of occurrence. Node color indicates thematic clusters, and the lines connecting nodes represent the strength of co-occurrence within the same documents.

Table 2 Comparison of Chinese and English Keywords

Core Category	English Map	Chinese Map
Core Terminology	Neuro- Linguistic Programming	Neuro- Linguistic Programming
Methodological	randomized controlled trial, CBT, meta-analysis	Psychological interventions, Health education

Core Category	English Map	Chinese Map
Target-Oriented	depression, anxiety, self-efficacy	Nurse, Terminal stage, Anxiety and depression scores
Application Context	primary care, leadership, emotion	Emotion management, sleep quality, psychological care
Theoretical Concepts	emotional intelligence, attitude	Psychological incentives, organizational structure

With a threshold T=1，a total of 223 English keywords met the criteria, and a co-occurrence map of these keywords was generated（Figure 5）. The English keyword map reveals seven well-defined clusters, reflecting a highly focused thematic structure. The dominant research orientations include methodologically driven themes, with keywords such as randomized controlled trial, meta-analysis, and intervention indicating a strong emphasis on standardized and rigorous quantitative approaches. Psychological problem orientation is also prominent, as terms like anxiety, depression, and self-efficacy demonstrate a focus on individual psychological symptoms and behavioral interventions. Clinical applicability is highlighted through the presence of terms such as primary care, mental health, and quality of life, suggesting a practical orientation toward therapeutic and healthcare settings. Additionally, organizational and emotional dimensions emerge, with keywords like emotional intelligence and leadership expanding the research focus into occupational psychology and organizational behavior.

With a threshold T=1, 66 Chinese keywords met the criteria, and a co-occurrence map of these keywords was generated （Figure 6）. Chinese keyword map displays a relatively dispersed clustering structure compared to English map, with approximately five to six thematic groups. Dominant categories include nursing and psychological support, as seen in keywords such as psychological nursing, nurses, and terminal stage, which emphasize clinical care settings and the emotional needs of healthcare recipients. Emotion regulation and sleep health are also notable, with terms like anxiety-depression scales, emotion regulation, and sleep quality pointing to applied research in mental well-being and lifestyle management. Furthermore, the theme of health education and psychological motivation emerges, illustrated by the cluster containing psychological intervention, learning motivation, and organizational structure, reflecting a tendency toward educational and institutional application in health promotion contexts. These cross-linguistic differences suggest that while English-language NLP studies

concentrate on rigorous methodological designs and psychological symptomatology, Chinese-language studies tend to favor practical, healthcare-based interventions and psychoeducational applications, reflecting different epistemological orientations and application scenarios.

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpretation of Bibliometric Findings

The bibliometric analysis reveals that the evolution of literature in the field of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) is closely tied to shifts in the external environment, technological advancements, and changing scholarly interests. Looking ahead, with the continued advancement of artificial intelligence and big data technologies, research in NLP is expected to maintain a stable upward trajectory, accompanied by an expansion in interdisciplinary applications that may serve as new drivers of innovation and societal development.

5.1.1 Journal Distribution and Disciplinary Characteristics

Research in NLP exhibits a pronounced interdisciplinary dispersion across publication platforms. While the field has historically been associated with psychology and education, recent studies have increasingly appeared in domains such as medicine, public health, and nursing(Doğan et al., 2022b). This interdisciplinary expansion has enriched both the theoretical underpinnings and the practical applications of NLP. However, it has also resulted in a fragmented literature base, lacking systemic coherence and theoretical integration, thereby posing challenges to academic consolidation and knowledge accumulation.

A particularly salient issue is the absence of a clearly defined cluster of core journals in the NLP field. Although several niche or domain-specific journals have published NLP-related studies, the scarcity of publications in high-impact, mainstream journals limits the visibility and dissemination of key research findings. This phenomenon hinders scholarly recognition and weakens the field's academic legitimacy. Consequently, NLP research suffers from a dual-track dilemma: while it spans across diverse disciplines, it struggles to establish a central forum for intellectual exchange.

To address these issues, a more coherent publication ecosystem and the establishment of interdisciplinary communication channels are needed. Promoting collaborative research networks and shared editorial platforms could enhance both the quality and impact of NLP research. The eventual formation of a cluster of high-quality, interdisciplinary journals would significantly strengthen the field’s academic stature and facilitate the systematic integration of theory and practice(Koo & Lin, 2023).

5.1.2 Geographical Patterns and Institutional Collaboration

The global landscape of NLP research is currently dominated by Western countries, particularly those in Europe and North America. These regions enjoy well-established infrastructures for technological innovation, theoretical development, and academic publication(Anjomshoaa et al., 2021). Their institutions are often at the forefront of methodological advancements and application frameworks, benefiting from abundant funding, robust policy support, and vibrant academic communities.

Collaborative networks in these regions—especially between the UK, Germany, Canada, and the US—are both frequent and structurally integrated, often involving dedicated research centers and joint laboratories. These partnerships contribute to the rapid proliferation of NLP-related innovations and reinforce the epistemological coherence of the field.

In contrast, Asia exhibits a relatively late emergence in the NLP landscape. While countries such as China and India have made notable progress, particularly in applied research domains like healthcare and education, they often lack the comprehensive theoretical systems and institutional networks found in Western contexts. Research collaborations remain relatively limited, and the publication output is often fragmented. In addition, differences in research environments and institutional frameworks further constrain cooperative endeavors.

For Asia to gain a more prominent position in the global NLP community, it will be essential to elevate research quality, foster inter-institutional cooperation, and develop localized yet internationally relevant theoretical contributions. Such efforts would not only increase regional competitiveness but also enrich the field through diverse cultural and practical perspectives.

5.1.3 Keyword Analysis and Thematic Evolution

The analysis of co-occurring keywords indicates a growing intersection between NLP and domains such as education, mental health, and conflict management. This trend underscores NLP's broad applicability and reflects increasing scholarly attention to its real-world potential. Identifying high-frequency and emerging keywords offers critical insight into the field's research hotspots and provides a valuable roadmap for future inquiry(Mezquita et al., 2024).

Over time, the focus of NLP research has shifted. While earlier studies centered on theoretical formulation and model development, recent work emphasizes applied outcomes in domains such as healthcare, education, and organizational behavior. This shift illustrates the field's maturation and its growing responsiveness to societal needs and policy demands(Cosic et al., 2024).

5.1.4 Comparative Analysis of English and Chinese Keyword Maps

The English keyword map emphasizes methodological rigor and evaluation, with high-

frequency terms such as RCT (randomized controlled trial), CBT (cognitive behavioral therapy), and QoL (quality of life). This reflects a strong empirical orientation, focusing on experimental design, quantitative assessment, and statistical validity. However, such research often overlooks practical dimensions like organizational structures and nursing ethics, which are more prominently addressed in Chinese studies. The Chinese keyword map pays more attention to target populations and care environments, with commonly used terms including nursing, nurses, terminally ill patients, and children—often focusing on emotional support and care interventions in clinical settings.

Although some studies introduce core NLP theories, such as the "Logical Levels" model, they often fail to elaborate on the theoretical foundations or applicability of these models, revealing a tendency toward superficial use of theory. Overall, English-language research generally lacks consideration of organizational structures or ethical aspects of care, which are more thoroughly explored in Chinese studies and can contribute valuable insights to global discourse. Conversely, Chinese studies typically lack critical reflection on theoretical models and methodological standardization, such as CBT protocols, RCT frameworks, and validated meta-analytic approaches—all of which are crucial for international academic engagement. It is worth noting that both Chinese and English literature insufficiently represent the Logical Levels model, a core component of NLP theory. Equally apparent is the lack of research integrating NLP with emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality. Chinese research would benefit from a stronger empirical foundation and greater methodological standardization, while English research could expand its application focus to include nursing practices and cross-cultural contexts.

In general, Chinese research emphasizes practical applicability but lacks critical reflection on theoretical models and standardized methodologies; English research, though more mature in theory and method, pays relatively little attention to the adaptability of its findings to real clinical scenarios and cultural contexts. Each linguistic context has its own emphases and shortcomings. Future cross-linguistic integration should aim to promote the localization and standardized validation of theories in Chinese research to enhance its empirical basis, while encouraging English research to broaden its application scope and more extensively embed its findings in nursing practice and multicultural settings. Through theoretical deepening, methodological integration, and contextual complementarity, a more comprehensive and profound landscape of NLP research can be constructed.

5.2 The Dual-Track Dilemma of Knowledge Dissemination

In the current system of knowledge production and application, a core challenge faced by Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) is the "dual-track dilemma of knowledge dissemination." This dilemma refers to the bifurcated pathways along which knowledge

travels during dissemination: on one hand, the "theoretical track," dominated by academic research, emphasizes methodological rigor, conceptual clarity, and empirical verifiability; on the other hand, the "practical track," driven by real-world applications and market demands, prioritizes operational feasibility, immediate effectiveness, and experiential perceptibility. These two tracks diverge significantly in their evaluation criteria, discursive systems, and validation mechanisms. As a result, theoretical findings often fail to translate into practical guidelines, while experiential practices struggle to gain academic legitimacy due to a lack of systematic support.

In the field of NLP, this dual-track structure not only hampers interaction between theory and practice but also exacerbates the fragmentation of the knowledge system, posing serious challenges to interdisciplinary integration and academic legitimization. Understanding and responding to this dual-track dilemma is crucial for advancing NLP from a "tool-based application" paradigm toward a model of "systematic knowledge construction."

Specifically, the obstacles NLP faces in the process of knowledge dissemination are primarily manifested across the following three interrelated dimensions: conflicting evaluation standards, the fragmentation of discourse systems, and the divergence in methods of knowledge validation. These dimensions reflect the tension between theory and practice in NLP and underscore the epistemological and communicative barriers to the effective transmission of knowledge.

First, the conflict in evaluation standards illustrates the gap between academic rigor and practical utility. In academia, methodological robustness and replicability are paramount, whereas in real-world contexts—particularly in clinical or educational settings—practitioners often prioritize immediacy and effectiveness. This practical orientation frequently fails to meet the standards of empirical validation required by scholarly institutions, leading to skepticism about NLP’s legitimacy. Qualitative studies, though insightful in capturing interpersonal dynamics and subjective experiences, often suffer from limited generalizability due to small sample sizes and researcher bias. In contrast, quantitative approaches, such as controlled trials measuring NLP's effectiveness in anxiety management, may neglect the complex social and emotional contexts critical to therapeutic success(Anjomshoaa et al., 2021).

Second, the disparity in discourse systems between disciplines further exacerbates the divide. Different fields conceptualize and apply NLP through distinct terminologies and frameworks, leading to semantic inconsistency. For example, while NLP is perceived in psychotherapy as a communication-enhancing tool (Dormandy & Grimley, 2024), in education, it is often regarded as a strategy for improving learning efficacy(Hussein, 2024). These discrepancies result in a lack of conceptual coherence, particularly regarding the “Logical Levels of Thinking,” a foundational yet under-theorized component of NLP. The absence of standardized operational definitions impairs the comparability and cumulative development of

research across disciplines. This issue is compounded by a trend of semantic generalization, where key NLP terms become diluted or are redefined across different domains. For instance, the concept of "anchoring" may signify emotional-behavioral linkage in psychology, while in business management, it may be repurposed as a client engagement technique—thus introducing ambiguity and potential misapplication.

Third, divergent methods of knowledge validation create epistemic blind spots. Different sectors employ distinct standards for establishing evidence, resulting in selective recognition of NLP practices. Although NLP has shown empirical promise in contexts such as nursing leadership and stress reduction among healthcare trainees,(Liu Ying et al., 2010) these outcomes remain under-theorized and insufficiently backed by neuroscientific evidence. For instance, an early study by Krugman comparing NLP to other methods for treating speech anxiety in undergraduates found no support for claims that NLP could alleviate anxiety in a single session. This highlights the critical need for rigorous, contemporary research to validate specific NLP efficacy claims(Krugman et al., 1985).Much of the research to date emphasizes applied outcomes while neglecting theoretical development, producing a lopsided knowledge base. This imbalance is also evident in professional training, where hands-on instruction proliferates while theoretical education remains sparse, limiting the depth and sustainability of NLP's integration into professional practice.

To gain a deeper understanding of the root causes behind the disconnect between NLP theory and practice, this paper adopts Bourdieu's field theory as its primary analytical framework. According to Bourdieu, knowledge production does not occur in isolation but unfolds within autonomous social fields structured by power relations, symbolic capital, and specific rules. The marginalization of NLP theory and the popularity of its practices reflect its peripheral position across multiple knowledge fields.

In diverse fields such as psychotherapy, educational training, and business management, NLP has not established legitimacy through rigorous scientific validation. Instead, it has accumulated symbolic capital via certification systems, popular narratives, and discourses of personal growth. In the educational field, NLP is packaged as a strategy to enhance learning efficiency and teacher communication skills, gaining recognition from the market and practitioners. In corporate management, it is embedded in performance evaluations and managerial logic under labels such as "effective communication" and "leadership development." In clinical nursing, it is widely adopted as a simple tool for emotional support and stress management.

While these fields have provided expansive channels for the dissemination of NLP, they have also progressively "lightened" its theoretical structure, reducing it to an operational discourse that lacks deeper philosophical and scientific integration. NLP exhibits a pronounced "practice-first" orientation, foregrounding practitioners' experiential knowledge and processes of personal transformation, while

engagement with theoretical development remains comparatively limited. Although this orientation enhances operational feasibility and participatory appeal, it also, to a certain extent, constrains the systematic refinement and conceptual consolidation of its theoretical foundations.

In summary, the development of NLP is constrained by the "dual-track dilemma of knowledge dissemination," which manifests in structural conflicts between evaluation standards, the fragmented dissemination of interdisciplinary discourse, and the multiplicity and lack of integration in knowledge validation mechanisms. Particularly noteworthy is the "Logical Levels of Thinking" model—a core theoretical construct of NLP—which suffers from weak theoretical foundations and vague conceptual definitions. In various fields, it has been overly simplified and instrumentalized, further undermining the theoretical coherence of NLP as an interdisciplinary knowledge system.

This theoretical deficiency not only weakens NLP's legitimacy within the academic community but also limits its depth of application and influence in broader societal contexts. Therefore, the key to overcoming this dilemma lies in consciously promoting the bidirectional integration of theory and practice. On one hand, cross-sectoral dialogue mechanisms should be established to break down information silos between academia, training, and the market. On the other hand, there must be efforts to standardize the theoretical foundations of NLP's core concepts and operational models, by establishing unified definitions, applicability conditions, and validity evaluation frameworks. Only in this way can a solid foundation be laid for NLP's interdisciplinary integration and sustainable development.

6. Conclusion

In the highly practice-oriented field of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), the lag in theoretical development has increasingly become a major bottleneck restricting its academic maturity. This is particularly evident in the case of the "Logical Levels of Thinking" model, where the rapid expansion of practical applications stands in stark contrast to the vagueness of its theoretical foundations. This imbalance not only reveals the deep structural tensions within the NLP knowledge system but also highlights the broader issue of the "dual-track dilemma" in knowledge dissemination—namely, the lack of systematic interaction and feedback mechanisms between academic research and frontline practice, which hinders the refinement of theory and leaves practice unsupported by verifiable evidence.

Based on a bibliometric and critical analysis of literature in the field, this paper identifies several structural obstacles impeding theoretical advancement, including the marginalization of core research communities, a high degree of methodological homogeneity, weak mechanisms for theoretical validation, and significant cultural and linguistic differences evident in cross-linguistic research. To address these limitations, this study introduces Bourdieu's field theory to analyze the legitimacy mechanisms underlying

NLP knowledge production and dissemination. This perspective reveals that the model suffers not only from internal structural inconsistencies at the theoretical level but also from challenges to its legitimacy in academic practice.

Further cross-cultural comparisons show a marked disparity between Chinese- and English-language research in terms of theoretical depth, methodological standardization, and practical orientation. In particular, the prevalence of an instrumentalist approach in the Chinese context underscores a notable lack of ontological and methodological reflection on the model. Therefore, advancing NLP toward a more scientific and systematic trajectory requires focused development along three key dimensions:1.Developing standardized and quantifiable tools to measure the Logical Levels model, enabling its operationalization and reproducible validation;2.Strengthening interdisciplinary dialogue with fields such as neuroscience, critical psychology, educational research, and organizational behavior to enhance the model's explanatory power and theoretical resilience;3.Systematically examining how cultural and technological factors mediate and shape the construction of the model, in order to achieve a dynamic balance between localization and universality.

At the same time, establishing a sustainable academic–practitioner dialogue platform is crucial for breaking down knowledge fragmentation and fostering a virtuous cycle of theoretical renewal and practical refinement. Researchers should engage more actively with practice to draw insights and feedback, while practitioners must align their methodological assumptions with scientific evidence—thus jointly cultivating a collaborative and mutually beneficial knowledge ecosystem.

Ultimately, for NLP to transition from an experiential methodology to a scientifically rigorous theoretical paradigm—especially regarding the Logical Levels model—it must rely on systemic efforts involving multidisciplinary integration, cross-cultural understanding, and institutionalized cooperation. Through this process, NLP can move toward a mature research paradigm characterized by scientific credibility, cultural adaptability, and sustained innovation, thereby continuing to unleash its dual potential in theory and practice across fields such as psychotherapy, educational intervention, and organizational development.

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