

# Autoclitics

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November 19, 2022

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2022). *Autoclitics*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=38471>

Autoclitics are verbal responses that modify the effect on the listener of the primary operants that comprise B.F. Skinner's classification of Verbal Behavior.

## **Autoclitics**

An autoclitic is a verbal behavior that modifies the functions of other verbal behaviors. For example, "I think it is raining" possesses the autoclitic "I think," which moderates the strength of the statement "it is raining." Research that involves autoclitics includes Lodhi & Greer (1989).

## **Descriptive autoclitics**

A speaker may acquire verbal behavior describes their own behavior. I said I love Noam Chomsky is a descriptive autoclitic that describes the behavior of talking about one's own behavior. They may also describe strength of response, as the emission of I think is often used to indicate some level of weakness, as in I love Noam Chomsky, I think'. Descriptive autoclitics modify the listener's reaction by specifying something about the circumstances of the emission of a response or the condition of the speaker providing the verbal response. For example, the I guess in I guess he is here describes strength of the statement he is here. It does so because I guess specifies that the speaker is not sure he is here, just guessing, thus showing weakness in the strength of the response he is here. In describing something about a response, descriptive autoclitics specify some condition of a response, such as I said in I said "Hello. The I said describes the condition under which Hello was said. Descriptive autoclitics can include information regarding the type of verbal operant it accompanies, the strength of the verbal response, the relation between responses, or the emotional or motivation conditions of the speaker. In addition, negative autoclitics quantify or cancel the responses they accompany. For example, the not in it is not raining cancels the response it is raining. Descriptive autoclitics can also just indicate a response is being emitted, or that the emitted response is subordinate in relation to what has been said, e.g., for example. Qualifying autoclitics modify the listener's behavior in their qualification of tacts in its intensity or direction. Negation is a common qualifying autoclitic, as in it is not raining, the not qualifies it is raining. Without the not, the listener's behavior would be inappropriate. No! also serves to cancel a response, while Yes! encourages a response, as qualifying autoclitics can serve to assert a response.

Quantifying autoclitics modify the reaction of the listener, in that all, some, and no affect the responses they accompany. A and the narrow a listener in on the response that follows and its relation to the controlling stimulus. For example, circumstances under which we say book vary from those where we say the book, with the functioning to modify the listener's reaction. Relational autoclitics are different from descriptive autoclitics in that they affect the behavior of the listener. For example, above in the book is above the shelf tells the listener where to find the book, thereby

altering where the listener looks for the book. Another way to look at relational autoclitics is that they describe the relation between verbal operants, and modify the listener's behavior in that way. For example, in the statement the book is black the is tells the listener there is a relation between book and black, is specifies what is black.

### **Grammar and syntax as autoclitic processes**

Skinner describes grammatical manipulations, such as the order or grouping of responses, as autoclitic. The ordering of patterns may be a function of relevant strength, temporal ordering, or other factors. Skinner speaks to the use of predication and the use of tags, contrasting the Latin forms, which use tags--and English, which uses grouping and ordering. Skinner proposes the relational autoclitic as a descriptor for these kinds of relationships.

### **Composition and its effect**

Composition represents a special class of autoclitic responding, because the responding is itself a response to previously existing verbal responses. The autoclitic is controlled not only by the effects on the listener but upon the speaker as listener of their own responses. Skinner notes that 'emotional and imaginal' behavior has little to do with grammar and syntax. Obscene words and poetry are likely to be effective, even when emitted non-grammatically.

### **Self editing**

Self editing as a compositional process follows the autoclitic process of manipulating responses. After the responses are changed with autoclitics they are examined for their effects and then 'rejected or released'. Conditions may prevent self-editing, such as a very high response strength.

### **Rejection**

The physical topography of the rejection of verbal behavior in the process of editing varies from the partial emission of a written word to the apparent non-emission of a vocal response. It may include ensuring that responses simply do not reach a listener, as in not delivering a manuscript or letter. Manipulative autoclitics can revoke words by striking them out, as in a court of law. Similar effects may arise from expression like Forget it.

### **Defective feedback**

A speaker may fail to react as a listener to their own speech under conditions where the emission of verbal responses is very quick. The speed may be a function of strength or of differential

reinforcement. Physical interruption may arise as in the case of those who are hearing impaired, or under conditions of mechanical impairment such as ambient noise. Skinner notes the Ouija board may operate to mask feedback and so produce unedited verbal behavior.

### **Self-strengthening**

Here Skinner draws a parallel to his position on self-control and notes: "A person controls his own behavior, verbal or otherwise, as he controls the behavior of others." Appropriate verbal behavior may be weak, as in forgetting a name, and in need of strengthening. It may have been inadequately learned, as in a foreign language. Repeating a formula, reciting a poem, and so on. The techniques are manipulating stimuli, changing the level of editing, the mechanical production of verbal behavior, changing motivational and emotional variables, incubation, and so on. Skinner gives an example of the use of some of these techniques provided by an author.

### **Logical and scientific**

The special audience in this case is one concerned with "successful action". Special methods of stimulus control are encouraged that will allow for maximum effectiveness. Skinner notes that 'graphs, models, tables' are forms of texts that allow for this kind of development. The logical and scientific community also sharpens responses to assure accuracy and avoiding distortion. Little progress in the area of science has been made from a verbal behavior perspective; however, suggestions of a research agenda have been laid out

### **Tacting Private Events**

Private events are events accessible to only the speaker. Public events are events that occur outside of an organism's skin that are observed by more than one individual. A headache is an example of a private event and a car accident is an example of a public event. Private events were first acknowledged by B.F. Skinner.

The tacting of private events by an organism is shaped by the verbal community who differentially reinforce a variety of behaviors and responses to the private events that occur (Catania, 2007, p.9). For example, if a child verbally states, "a circle" when a circle is in the immediate environment, it may be a tact. If a child verbally states, "I have a tooth ache", she/he may be tacting a private event, whereas the stimulus is present to the speaker, but not the rest of the verbal community.

The verbal community shapes the original development and the maintenance or discontinuation of the tacts for private events (Catania, 2007, p232). An organism responds similarly to both private stimuli and public stimuli (Skinner, 1957, p.130). However, it is harder for the verbal community to

shape the verbal behavior associated with private events (Catania, 2007, p. 403). It may be more difficult to shape private events, but there are critical things that occur within an organism's skin that should not be excluded from our understanding of verbal behavior (Catania, 2007, p.9)

Several concerns are associated with tacting private events. Skinner (1957) acknowledged two major dilemmas. First, he acknowledges our difficulty with predicting and controlling the stimuli associated with tacting private events (p. 130). Catania (2007) describes this as the unavailability of the stimulus to the members of the verbal community (p.253). The second problem Skinner (1957) describes is our current inability to understand how the verbal behavior associated with private events is developed (p.131).

Skinner (1957) continues to describe four potential ways a verbal community can encourage verbal behavior with no access to the stimuli of the speaker. He suggests the most frequent method is via "a common public accompaniment". An example might be that when a kid falls and starts bleeding, the caregiver tells them statements like, "you got hurt". Another method is the "collateral response" associated with the private stimulus. An example would be when a kid comes running and is crying and holding their hands over their knee, the caregiver might make a statement like, "you got hurt". The third way is when the verbal community provides reinforcement contingent on the overt behavior and the organism generalizes that to the private event that is occurring. Skinner refers to this as "metaphorical or metonymical extension". The final method that Skinner suggests may help form our verbal behavior is when the behavior is initially at a low level and then turns into a private event. (Skinner, 1957, p. 134) This notion can be summarized by understanding that the verbal behavior of private events can be shaped through the verbal community by extending the language of tacts. (Catania, 2007, p. 263).

Private events are limited and should not serve as "explanations of behavior" (Skinner, 1957, p. 254). Skinner (1957) continues to caution that, "the language of private events can easily distract us from the public causes of behavior" (see functions of behavior).

## **Criticism and other reactions**

### **Chomsky's review**

In 1959, Noam Chomsky published an influential critique of Verbal Behavior. "Verbal behavior" he defined as learned behavior which has its characteristic consequences being delivered through the learned behavior of others; this makes for a view of communicative behaviors much larger than that usually addressed by linguists. Skinner's approach focused on the circumstances in which language was used; for example, asking for water was functionally a different response than labeling something as water, responding to someone asking for water, etc. These functionally different kinds of responses, which required in turn separate explanations, sharply contrasted both

with traditional notions of language and Chomsky's psycholinguistic approach. Chomsky thought that a functionalist explanation restricting itself to questions of communicative performance ignored important questions. (Chomsky-Language and Mind, 1968).

Chomsky's 1959 review, amongst his other work of the period, is generally thought to have been influential in the decline of behaviorism's influence within linguistics, philosophy and cognitive science. However, it has drawn fire from a number of critics, the most famous criticism being that of Kenneth MacCorquodale's 1970 paper On Chomsky's Review of Skinner's Verbal Behavior. MacCorquodale argued that Chomsky did not possess an adequate understanding of either behavioral psychology in general, or the differences between Skinner's behaviorism and other varieties. As a consequence, he argued, Chomsky made several serious errors of logic. On account of these problems, MacCorquodale maintains that the review failed to demonstrate what it has often been cited as doing, implying that those most influenced by Chomsky's paper probably already substantially agreed with him. Chomsky's review has been further noted to misrepresent the work of Skinner and others, including by taking quotes out of context. Chomsky has maintained that the review was directed at the way Skinner's variant of behavioral psychology "was being used in Quinean empiricism and naturalization of philosophy".

Chomsky's influence was a point that Skinner himself conceded. Sam Leigland suggests that interest in Skinner's work is growing with the next focus on a variety of complex verbal phenomena.

### **Alternatives to Skinner's behavior analysis**

There is also now an alternative to Skinner's account within behavior analysis, Relational Frame Theory, and authors in that area have developed a number of behavior analytic objections to Skinner's specific approach. There is some controversy regarding RFT's status in regard to Behavior Analysis. Its founder Steven Hayes regards it as an extension of operant conditioning principles that is consistent with Skinner's analysis but goes beyond it (personal communication).

Others feel that it is consistent with Behavior Analysis but involves emergent principles not found in conventional operant conditioning. Finally, there are those who feel that it is simply another form of Cognitive Behaviorism, rather than Radical Behaviorism.