

Tact

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November 19, 2022

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2022). *Tact*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from
<https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=38470>

Tact is a term that B.F. Skinner used to describe a verbal operant in which a certain response is evoked (or at least strengthened) by a particular object or event, or property of an object or event. More generally, the tact is verbal contact with the physical world.

Chapter Five of Skinner's Verbal Behavior discusses the tact in depth. A tact is said to "make contact with" the world, and refers to behavior that is under the control of generalized reinforcement. The controlling antecedent stimulus is nonverbal, and constitutes some portion of "the whole of the physical environment".

Less technically, a tact is like a label for something, though the concept of a tact is far more complicated. Some portion of the environment is present, for example a tree, a person makes a particular response pattern (in this case he or she will say "Tree") and a listener will provide some non-specific reinforcer (the listener might say Correct!).

The tact can be extended, as in generic, metaphorical, metonymical, solecistic, nomination, and "guessing" tact. It can also be involved in abstraction. Lowe, Horne, Harris & Randle (2002) would be one example of recent work in tacts.

Extensions

The tact is said to be capable of generic extension. For example, something might be called a car; then something like the old object called a car is also called a car.

Tacts can be extended metaphorically, as when we describe something as "exploding with taste" by drawing the common property of an explosion with the response to our having eaten something (perhaps a strong response, or a sudden one).

Tacts can undergo metonymical extension when things that are paired together frequently are then used to stand for each other; as "The White House released a statement" when the President and The White House are paired together frequently so as to be "interchangeable".

When controlling variables unrelated to standard or immediate reinforcement take over control of the tact, it is said to be solecistically extended. Malapropisms, solecism and catachresis are examples of this.

Skinner notes things like serial order, or conspicuous features of an object, may come to play as nominative tacts. A proper name may arise as a result of the tact. For example, a house that is haunted becomes "The Haunted House" as a nominative extension to the tact of its being haunted.

A guess may seemingly be the emission of a response in the absence of controlling stimuli. Skinner notes that this may simply be a tact under more subtle or hidden controlling variables, although this is not always the case in something like guessing the landing side of a coin toss

where the possible alternatives are fixed and there is no subtle or hidden stimuli to control responding.

The tact described by Skinner in chapter 5 of his book *Verbal Behavior* includes three important and related events, known as the 3-term-contingency: a stimulus, a response, and a consequence, in this case reinforcement. A verbal response is occasioned by the presence of a stimulus, such as when you say "ball" in the presence of a ball. In this scenario, "ball" is more likely to be reinforced by the listener than saying "cat," showing the importance of the third even, reinforcement, in relation to the stimulus (ball) and response ("ball"). Although the stimulus controls the response, it is the verbal community which establishes the stimulus' control over the verbal response of the speaker. For example, a child may say "ball" in the presence of a ball (stimulus), the child's parent may respond "yes, that is a ball," (reinforcement) thereby increasing the probability that the child will say ball in the presence of a ball in the future. But if the parent never responds to the child saying "ball" in the presence of a ball then that response will cease to be emitted. It is important to note, though, that tact can only occur in the presence of, or immediately after the stimulus; so talking about a ball you saw yesterday would be tacting. While naming is also a form of a tact, saying "the red book" in the presence of a red book, a tact involves more than what is described above. For example, saying "Good Morning" to a person for the first time in the morning is also a tact, the presence of that person is the stimulus for the response.

Special conditions affecting stimulus control

Skinner deals with factors that interfere with, or change, generalized reinforcement. It is these conditions which, in turn, affect verbal behavior which may depend largely or entirely on generalized reinforcement. In children with developmental disabilities, tacts may need intensive training procedures to develop. Factors such as deprivation, emotional conditions and personal history may interfere with or change verbal behavior. Skinner mentions alertness, irrelevant emotional variables, "special circumstances" surrounding particular listeners or speakers, etc. (He refers to the conditions which are said to produce objective and subjective responses for example). We would now look at these as motivating operations/establishing conditions.

Under emersion conditions tacts will frequently emerge. However, in children with disabilities, more intensive training procedures are often needed.

Distortion

Distorted stimulus control may be minor as when a description (tact) is a slight exaggeration. Under stronger conditions of distortion it may appear when the original stimulus is absent, as in the case of the response called a lie. Skinner notes that troubadours and fiction writers are perhaps both motivated by similar forms of tact distortion. Initially they may recount real events but as

differential reinforcement affects the account we may see distortion and then total fabrication.

Intraverbal

Intraverbals are verbal behavior under the control of other verbal behavior. Intraverbals are often studied by the use of classic association techniques.

Audiences

In Skinner's account of verbal behavior, the audience (or, the listener) is a discriminative stimulus that signals that verbal behavior may be rewarded. This means that when an audience is present (this can also include oneself, as we can act as listener to our own verbal behavior), verbal behavior will occur; when the audience disappears, it is likely that verbal behavior will stop (because reinforcement is no longer available). This is the first function of the audience: to control whether behavior does or does not occur.

The second function (p. 173) is to determine which of two or more comparable responses will be emitted; for example, when manding for silence, you might say "shh" to a toddler, while to a coworker you might say "please be quiet." Also determined is the language in which you will speak: in Paris you would greet someone with "Bonjour, monsieur!" while in the U.S. you would be far more likely to greet someone by saying "Good morning, sir!" The third function (p. 175) of the audience involves the selection of the subject matter: while a 5-year-old may respond well to verbal behavior regarding Teletubbies, your 50-year-old boss is not likely to.

Audience control is developed through long histories of reinforcement and punishment. Skinner's three-term contingency can be used to analyze how this works: the first term, the antecedent, refers to the audience, in whose presence the verbal response (the second term) occurs. The consequences of the response are the third term, and whether or not those consequences strengthen or weaken the response will affect whether that response will occur again in the presence of that audience. Through this process, audience control, or the probability that certain responses will occur in the presence of certain audiences, develops. Skinner notes that while audience control is developed due to histories with certain audiences, we do not have to have a long history with every listener in order to effectively engage in verbal behavior in their presence (p. 176). We can respond to new audiences (new stimuli) as we would to similar audiences with whom we have a history.

Negative audiences

An audience that has punished certain kinds of verbal behavior is called a negative audience (p. 178): in the presence of this audience, the punished verbal behavior is less likely to occur. Skinner

gives the examples of adults punishing certain verbal behavior of children, and a king punishing the verbal behavior of his subjects.

Verbal operants as a unit of analysis

Skinner notes his categories of verbal behavior: mand, echoic, textual, intraverbal, tact, audience relations, and notes how behavior might be classified. He notes that form alone is not sufficient (he uses the example of "fire!" having multiple possible relationships depending on the circumstances). Classification depends on knowing the circumstances under which the behavior is emitted. Skinner then notes that the "same response" may be emitted under different operant conditions. Skinner states:

Classification is not an end in itself. Even though any instance of verbal behavior can be shown to be a function of variables in one of more of these classes, there are other aspects to be treated. Such a formulation permits us to apply to verbal behavior concepts and laws which emerge from a more general analysis (p. 187)".

That is, classification alone does little to further the analysis - the functional relations controlling the operants outlined must be analyzed consistent with the general approach of a scientific analysis of behavior.

Several behavior analysts since Skinner have suggested that the elementary verbal relations be re-categorized to deal with difficulty in incorporating many responses into the classification system of the original analysis. Michael, for example, has proposed replacing textual and echoic categories with the more general codic and dupic relations, respectively. Ernest Vargas has suggested categorizing sources of control as intraverbal, autoverbal, and extraverbal, while replacing Skinner's intraverbal with sequelic, and adding the mimetic relation to refer to imitation of sign language.

Multiple causation

Skinner notes in this chapter how any given response is likely to be the result of multiple variables. Secondly, that any given variable usually affects multiple responses. The issue of multiple audiences is also addressed, as each audience is, as already noted, an occasion for strong and successful responding. Combining audiences produces differing tendencies to respond.

Supplementary stimulation

Supplementary stimulation is a discussion to practical matters of controlling verbal behavior given the context of material which has been presented thus far. Issues of multiple control, and involving

many of the elementary operants stated in previous chapters are discussed.

New combinations of fragmentary responses

A special case of where multiple causation comes into play creating new verbal forms is in what Skinner describes as fragmentary responses. Such combinations are typically vocal, although this may be due to different conditions of self-editing rather than any special property. Such mutations may be 'nonsense' and may not further the verbal interchange in which it occurs. Freudian slips may be one special case of fragmentary responses which tend to be given reinforcement and may discourage self-editing. This phenomena appears to be more common in children, and in adults learning a second language. Fatigue, illness and insobriety may tend to produce fragmentary responding.

Autoclitics

An autoclitic is a form of verbal behavior which modifies the functions of other forms of verbal behavior. For example, "I think it is raining" possesses the autoclitic "I think" which moderates the strength of the statement "it is raining". An example of research that involved autoclitics would be Lodhi & Greer (1989).

One form of autoclitic of critical importance in the development of language, is Skinner's concept of the autoclitic frame. Autoclitic frames help for rapid learning of new verbal behavior and the building of rules. Stemmer (2000) holds: "(1) The events are responsible for the productive character of listener behavior and, via the transfer effect, of verbal behavior in general.(2) Together with ostensive events, the events are responsible for most aspects, probably even for all aspects, of early listener behavior.(3) Because ostensive learning does not require the repeated reinforcement of specific responses to vocal stimuli, the events are the main cause of the explosion in early verbal behavior."