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A Modest Proposal: Autoclitic Verbal Behavior as a Bridge to a Linguistic Conversation about Applied Behavior Analysis

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Linguistically-based intervention for individuals with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) finds a common ground with applied behavior analysis through B.F. Skinner's concept of "Autoclitic" verbal behavior (Skinner, 1957). The purpose of this presentation is to show how linguistic information, such as Brown's Stages (Brown, 1973), readily nests within the model of applied behavior analysis. Efforts to meld the seemingly different points of view -- linguistic analysis and verbal behavior analysis -- have been limited and have not gained wide- spread acceptance. It is hoped that the current efforts will be true to each of the disciplines to construct a clinically and theoretically useful bridge.

The authors suggest that part of the incompatibility of the two approaches may come from the possibility that they have different objects of study. The slower unfolding of spoken language for many children diagnosed with ASDs may allow for an empirical evaluation of the proposed nesting of these two different magisteria.

Skinner, in his process of looking at how humans come to use language, focused on the chain of motivational mediations behind the speech act as his object of study. Linguistics, on the other hand, focuses on the structure and contents of the speech act itself, often ignoring an analysis of its functional relations. A typical linguistic analysis might state, "The therapist set up a communicative opportunity; the client uttered 'Gimme it;' and the utterance was followed by its natural consequences."

In a verbal behavior analysis, the communicative opportunity would be closely observed for its origin, e.g., was there something said prior or not – Mand, Echoic, Tact, or Intraverbal. The particularities of the actual consequence would be scrutinized – reinforcement, punishment, or extinction. A linguistic analysis would parse the utterance, analyze its word order (verb/object/object) and morphology (enclitic "-me" as indirect object), noting how the length of the utterance was or was not consistent with the expected mean length of utterance (MLU) for a child of this age. Any further analysis of the communicative opportunity or its consequences typically would not be addressed.

Verbal behavior analysis has discovered and empirically evaluated elementary

verbal relations – Mand, Echoic, Tact, Intraverbal. A “Mand” occurs when a motivative condition exists without verbal stimuli, a request is made, and the request is met. An “Echoic” occurs when words are said (signed) and the same words are repeated (formal similarity, point-to-point correspondence). A “Tact” occurs when a physical sense – seeing, touching -- is contacted by an object, property, or action and named or labeled with no previous verbal stimuli given. An “Intraverbal” occurs when words are said (signed) and different words are uttered (no point-to-point correspondence). Formal Similarity is a response-product in the same sense mode as the originating stimulus – the subject says a word he/she hears. Point-to-point correspondence occurs when the response is the same as the originating stimulus – the subject says a word he/she sees (reading).

As these elementary verbal relations build, the speaker begins to affect the listener through what Skinner called Autoclitic verbal behavior or what linguistics calls syntax, morphology, etc. It is at this point that verbal relations become part of a Natural Language (NL) environment “transmitted from one generation to another.” An examination of Autoclitic behavior is an analysis of speaker’s verbal relations that are aimed at being understood by potential listeners and coincides with a linguistic analysis of the utterance. When dealing with Autoclitic behavior, both applied behavior and linguistic analysis look carefully at the conformance of the utterance to the NL used in the community. It is here that the objects of the two theories come together because a comprehensible utterance (language) is what maintains verbal behavior and goes on to shape increasingly grammatical and syntactical elaborations.

For many years, there has existed a polarization in the treatment and support of communication for children with ASD. On one wing, the Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) approach stressed a terminology and strict measuring system involving Mand, Echoic, Tact, Intraverbal, Point-to-Point Correspondence, Formal Similarities, and other chains of motivation and reinforcement considerations and data. Linguistically-oriented treatment tended to gauge its successes and failures by measuring MLU and the promotion of grammatical and syntactical elaborations. Linguistically-oriented treatment tended to call success in providing communication opportunities for children with ASD as “good clinical judgment.” This phrase, though positive, in fact dismisses a more careful and scientific analysis of what these opportunities are and how they arise. Another phrase often used in language-oriented discussions of therapeutic intervention refers to the complexities of reinforcement as “natural consequences.” Again, this phrase is positive and accurate as far as it goes but does not permit a scientific measurement – neither the collection nor interpretation of the data comes from calling everything that happens after the speech act “natural consequences.”

Linguistics and Applied Behavior Analysis also had a rough early acquaintanceship when Noam Chomsky (1959) wrote his famous critique of B.F. Skinner’s book Verbal Behavior (1957). The authors feel that data currently being gathered may indicate that both the Chomskian and Skinnerian approaches to language nest logically beside each other in Autoclitic verbal behavior. Linguistics fills a needed investigation of Autoclitic verbal behavior, and Applied Behavior Analysis provides a needed understanding of good clinical judgment and natural consequences.

References

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