

Abstract of a paper given at the Christmas Meeting of the Experimental Analysis of Behaviour Group, University College, London, 4th January 1983.

Title: *Behavioural Contingency Semantics and the Analysis of Behaviour*.

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Behavioural Contingency Semantics (Place 1983) is the view according to which an atomic sentence acts as a discriminative stimulus with respect to a contingency by virtue of the sentence mapping onto one or other of the three legs of the contingency, the *antecedent* conditions, the *behaviour* and its *consequences*.

In order to accommodate this account of the meaning of a sentence, certain changes need to be made in the conceptual framework of the Operant Analysis of Behaviour within which it is formulated.

The following modifications to conventional Behaviour Analysis will be discussed:

- (1) an extension of Harzem & Miles' (1978) term 'disinforcement' so as to include the time-out from positive reinforcement (extinction) contingency as well as the contingent aversive stimulation or punishment contingency,
- (2) the introduction of the term 'significant stimulus event' (s.s.e.) to cover any stimulus event whose occurrence or disappearance/non-occurrence is contingent on the emission of a particular operant by the organism in question,
- (3) the use of the term 'positive' to apply [to] any contingency in which the *occurrence* of an s.s.e. and the term 'negative' to apply to any contingency in which the *disappearance/non-occurrence* of the s.s.e. is contingent on the emission of an operant,
- (4) the identification of 'positive reinforcement' as the strengthening of behaviour as a consequence of the contingent occurrence of an s.s.e. = Reward,
- (5) the identification of 'negative reinforcement' as the strengthening of behaviour as a consequence of the contingent disappearance/non-occurrence of an s.s.e. = Escape/Avoidance,
- (6) The identification of 'positive disinforcement' as the weakening of behaviour as a consequence of the contingent occurrence of an s.s.e. = Punishment.
- (7) The identification of 'negative disinforcement' as the weakening of behaviour as a consequence of the contingent disappearance/non-occurrence of an s.s.e. = Extinction,

- (8) the principle whereby, if the occurrence of an s.s.e. is positively reinforcing, its disappearance/non-occurrence will be negatively disinforming, while, if its occurrence is positively disinforming, its disappearance/non-occurrence will be negatively reinforcing,
- (9) the contention that 'a discriminative stimulus' is a stimulus which prepares the organism that responds to it to encounter a situation in which a particular contingency or type of contingency is operating,
- (10) the contention that, by putting together stimulus elements which have been consistently associated with aspects of different contingencies, it is possible to construct discriminative stimuli which prepare the organism to encounter situations involving both behaviour which the organism in question has never previously emitted and contingencies which it has never previously encountered,
- (11) the contention that discriminative stimuli prepare the organism in question to encounter a situation involving a particular contingency regardless of whether that contingency is currently a contingency of reinforcement or of disinforcement for the organism.

References

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