

THREE SENSES OF THE WORD "TACT"—A REPLY TO PROFESSOR SKINNER*

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Nothing in Professor Skinner's (1985) reply to my paper "Three Senses of the Word 'Tact'" (Place, 1985) convinces me that I was wrong in my diagnosis of a threefold ambiguity in his use of that term. I am not impressed by the subjective impression of consistency in his use of the term which he reports on re-reading the passages which I quoted. As I pointed out in my paper:

It is a sound behaviorist principle...to hold that the way an author uses a word, the kinds of sentence in which it occurs, the examples he gives to illustrate his meaning, the things he contrasts it with, are a better guide to its meaning in a particular context than is the author's own subjective assessment.

The evidence which convinces me that the word "tact" is being used in the three different senses described in my paper is the observation that, in addition to his preferred definition of "a tact" as a verbal operant under the control of a non-verbal stimulus (sense 1 in my classification, illustrated in his reply by means of the example of the word *tree* uttered when "there is a tree in the [speaker's] vicinity"), Skinner also wants to say, not just of *some* tacts, but of tacts in general that they exhibit two other distinctive sets of properties. Indeed the evidence that he regards these other two sets of properties (corresponding to sense 2 and 3 in my classification) as characteristic of tacts in general comes not just from the passages I have tabulated from *Verbal Behavior*. He mentions both of them in his reply to me. Thus in his fourth paragraph we read:

Tacts are only part of the complex utterances called sentences and assertion or any other autoclitic function is carried out by other parts.

The implications of this statement are (a) that tacts are sentence constituents, i.e., words or phrases, (b) that their function in the sentence of which they form part is one which contrasts with the purely intra-sentential or syntactic function of an autoclitic like the adverb *Clearly* which indicates that the subsequent sentence is to be understood as making an assertion. This suggests that a tact, in the sense intended in this passage, is either a word like *tree* or a phrase like *the tall elm tree* or *sways in the wind* which refers to a recurrent, though not necessarily current feature of the common stimulus environment of both speaker and listener and which gives content to the sentence in the way that its autoclitic features give the sentence its form or syntactic structure. This, in other words, is sense 2 in my classification.

Likewise in the penultimate paragraph of Skinner's reply we are told:

*Editor's Note: Professor Place is well known to readers of this journal for his series of articles on Skinner's *Verbal Behavior*, the first of which appeared in Spring 1981. Professor Place has carefully compiled a set of errata for those articles, which is available on request from the Cambridge Center. Interested readers should write to Mr. Steven Simon, Production Manager, *Behaviorism*.

PLACE

The response [saying *tree*, as a tact] acts upon a listener, and it is the listener who may then act in different ways.

I take it as axiomatic that a listener can only “act on” an utterance which is either a sentence or, if less than a sentence, can be taken in the context of utterance as equivalent to a sentence. A listener might be able to take action on the strength of the utterance of the noun phrase *A tree* or even the single word *tree*; but only if uttered in response to a question like *What is that?* or *What does wood come from?* which makes it equivalent to the sentences *That is a tree* or *Wood comes from a tree*. Answers to questions, moreover, have to be information-providing sentences or sentence equivalents, and it is a distinctive feature of such sentences, in contrast to mand or behavior-directing sentences that “the listener...may then act in [a variety of] different ways” according to need. In other words we are dealing here with tacts in sense 3 according to my classification.

As I see it, in the face of this evidence there are only two ways in which Skinner could hope to avoid the charge of equivocation in his use of the word “tact.” One would be if he could show that the three sets of properties which he wants to say are distinctive of the tact define a class with the same extension such that every utterance that is a tact in my sense 1 is also a tact in my sense 2 and sense 3, every utterance that is a tact in my sense 2 is also a tact in my sense 1 and sense 3, and every utterance that is a tact in my sense 3 is also a tact in my sense 1 and sense 2. Quine (1953) gives a possible example of two logically distinct predicates, “creatures with a heart” and “creatures with kidneys,” which are said to have the same extension and the example may be extended to three co-extensive predicates by adding “creatures with either gills or lungs.” However, in the case of the three sets of properties distinctive of the tact, it is not difficult to produce examples of utterances which qualify as tacts by virtue of possessing any one of the three sets of properties without possessing the other two.¹

The only other way to avoid the charge of equivocation, while continuing to insist that all three sets of properties are characteristic of the tact, would be to restrict the application of the term to those utterances which display all three sets of properties. The effect of this would be that the only utterances to qualify as tacts would be those like the exclamation *Fox!* given as an example by Russell (1940) and discussed by Skinner on p. 85 of *Verbal Behavior*, which is (1) a response to a non-verbal stimulus (the sight of a fox), (2) consists in a single non-autoclitic referring word, and (3) constitutes an information-providing sentence equivalent. But that would be to create a technical term whose scope would be far too narrow to serve any useful purpose in a taxonomy of verbal operants.

REFERENCES

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- Quine, W. V. (1953). Two dogmas of empiricism. In *From a logical point of view*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Russell, B. (1940). *Inquiry into meaning and truth*. London: Allen and Unwin.
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- Skinner, B. F. (1985). Reply to Place: “Three Senses of the Word ‘Tact’.” *Behaviorism*, 13(2), 75-76.

NOTE

¹(a) The word *tree* emitted as a response in a word-association test, because the speaker happened at that moment to catch sight of a tree (1, but not 2 or 3); (b) the exclamation *Stop!* emitted in response to the second hand on a stop watch reaching the one minute mark (2, but not 1 or 3); (c) the reply *All of them* emitted in response to the question *Do you want all the letters in the file or only some of them?* (3, but not 1 or 2).