

The logical and functional aspects of language
with special reference to moral discourse

In Lecture 7 we discussed the distinction between the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic aspects of language. Hitherto we have been concerned with the syntactic rules as a means for throwing light on the semantic aspects of language; in this section we are concerned with the pragmatic or functional aspects of language from the standpoint of the speaker and with the syntactic and other social rules or conventions to which the speaker must conform in order to produce the intended effect on audience behaviour.

The pragmatic or functional aspect of language

In studying the pragmatic or functional aspects of language we treat language as a form of behaviour – a complex interaction between speaker behaviour and audience behaviour. Hence in explaining this verbal behaviour we are faced with the choice between different paradigms or theoretical languages (lectures 14 – 15). The distinction between explanation of facts and explanation of phenomena (lecture 6-1) suggests that the phenomena of verbal behaviour (the analysis of linguistic skills) is to be explained micro-reductively in terms of cybernetics and neurophysiology, but that particular facts of an individual's verbal utterances on a particular occasion require a molar explanation in either mentalist or S-R reinforcement terms. However since mentalist explanations explain what a man does in terms of what he says (lecture 12), to explain verbal behaviour in these terms involves circularity. Hence in explaining particular facts of verbal behaviour we need to employ the only non-mentalist alternative, viz. S-R reinforcement theory, as applied to the explanation of language behaviour by Skinner in 'Verbal Behavior' 4).

Words and sentences – mand and tacts

Unfortunately, as pointed out by Chomsky 3), Skinner's account has a major defect in that it fails to distinguish sentences, as the units of verbal behaviour from a functional standpoint, from words and phrases as the components of sentences, which only have a function in the context of a sentence, except in the case of single word sentences like 'Go!' Failure to draw this distinction vitiates Skinner's basic distinction between 'mands' and 'tacts'. Mands (verbal operants reinforced by subsequent audience behaviour e.g. imperatives and interrogatives) are sentences, whereas tacts (verbal operants variously reinforced which are under control of a discriminative stimulus) are primarily words. Skinner is right in emphasising the primacy of the mand in the initial acquisition of verbal behaviour in the child and in implying the gradual acquisition of the functional independence for tacts and other autoclitic words as they recur in different functional contexts. Equally Chomsky is right in emphasising the uniqueness of the sentential utterances which constitute the functional units in developed adult speech. In elaborated adult speech the operants which are repeated and hence reinforced must be (a) words and phrases and (b) sentence construction strategies, rather than sentences as such.

Skinner's tacts, qua words, correspond to the concept-words which fill the variables in sentence frames (lecture 8) while his 'autoclitics' are words whose function derives from their role in sentence construction strategies (sentence frames). But, as is implied by the contrast with mands. Skinner applies the term 'tacts' to sentences as well as to words and phrases. In this sense a tact is a statement or assertion and may be defined as an utterance whose component tact words and controlling sentence construction strategies are reinforced in the speaker (a) by their utility in guiding the speaker's own behaviour (b) by audience reinforcement (gratitude for information received) and (c) by their subordinate role in the construction of successful mands (e.g. hypothetical imperatives – lecture 7).

No corresponding distinction can be drawn within mands between mand-words and mand-sentences. There are, however sentence construction strategies (e.g. the imperative and interrogative form) which are peculiar to mands and also certain distinctive autoclitics (e.g. interrogative pronouns or verb auxiliaries like 'should', 'ought' and 'may'). The concept variables in typical mand-sentence frames are filled by tact-words just as in the case of tact sentences [statements].

In order for a mand to succeed in eliciting the kind of audience behaviour which is intended to elicit and which will thus consistently reinforce the controlling mand construction strategies, it must (a)

effectively tact (indicate, specify) the behaviour required of the audience and (b) provide some kind of incentive (anticipatory reinforcement of the intention to do something) for the performance of the behaviour in question by the audience. In some cases no specific reinforcing or incentive-providing phases are included in the mand. This applies in cases where the relationship between speaker and audience is an authoritarian one based on the control exercised by the speaker over a number of the most powerful reinforcers controlling the audience's behaviour. In non-authoritarian situations verbal reinforcers and verbal incentives have to be included in the mand itself. Verbal incentives and reinforcers are of two basic kinds positive and negative (lectures 25, 26, 27). A Positive verbal incentive is a case in which the speaker reinforces the intention to perform the action specified in, and thus tentatively evoked by, the tact-words comprising the occurrence of a positively reinforcing state of affairs contingent upon the emission by the audience of the behaviour in question. A Negative verbal incentive is a case in which the speaker reinforces the intention not to perform the action specified by the tact-words comprising the mand by means of a tact-sentence which either predicts or threatens the occurrence [of an] aversive event contingent upon the emission of the behaviour in question. A positive verbal incentive which involves promising is distinguished from one which entices merely by predicting positively reinforcing consequences by the fact that in the former case the reinforcing consequences are contingent on the subsequent behaviour of the speaker. A negative verbal incentive which involves a threat is similarly distinguished from which merely warns of (i.e. predicts) the probable aversive consequences of performing the action in question. Threats tend on the whole to be more effective than promises, because whatever is reinforcing the speaker's current manding behaviour can usually be relied on to reinforce his subsequent punishing of (bringing about of the aversive consequences for) the audience which constitute the fulfilment of his threat. By contrast, once the audience has performed the behaviour required of him by the speaker, there need be nothing to reinforce the speaker in carrying out the behaviour required to fulfil his promise. Hence the need for moral and ethical incentives and reinforcers to maintain promise-keeping behaviour.

Verbal reinforcers and verbal punishers

Most verbal incentives involve predicting, promising or threatening the occurrence of reinforcing or aversive (punishing) events of non-verbal kind or, in so far as they are verbal (as in the case of the words and figures in on a properly signed cheque), have dependable consequences of a non-verbal kind. There are some mands, however, whose sole function is to reinforce or punish behaviour which has just been emitted by the audience (i.e. to increase or decrease the probability of the occurrence of similar behaviour on the part of the audience in the future). Expressions of approval, congratulation and gratitude are positive verbal reinforcers in this sense. Expressions of disapproval, disappointment, indignation and blame are negative verbal reinforcers or verbal punishers in this sense.

The 'Boo-hurrah' theory of Ethical utterances

The theory that ethical judgements are expressions of approval or disapproval of actions performed by another individual rather than statements of fact, was originally proposed by Ayer 2) and elaborated in a more sophisticated form by Stevenson 5). The standard philosophical objection to such theories is that put forward by Toulmin 6), when he argues that they fail to account for the fact that ethical judgements not only are, but must be, supported by reasons if they are to be accepted as justified if not as true in the sense in which statements are true.

In meeting this objection it is helpful to consider how ethical judgements may be supposed to acquire their reinforcing and aversive properties for the audience. A plausible view would be that ethical utterances are what Austin 1) has called 'performatives' whose effect, in the case of expressions of ethical approval, is to initiate or strengthen the acceptance of the individual concerned by the social group to which both speaker and audience belong, and, in the case of expressions of ethical disapproval, to reject the individual at least temporarily from full membership of the group. Initially, no doubt, the child learns to value social acceptance and to be distressed by social rejection in the context of the parent-child relationship, which would explain why the kind of moral blindness, associated with some forms of psychopathy, is usually, if not invariably, associated with a disturbed parent-child relationship and lack of affection in the early days of life. In later childhood, however, acceptance and rejection by the peer-group becomes more significant.

There is an important difference here between the parent-child relationship and the wider group as context for expressions of ethical approval and disapproval in that, whereas expressions of acceptance and

rejection of the child by the parents require no external sanction for their effect, expressions of acceptance and rejection by another member of a wider group can only have an effect in so far as the individual in question can claim to speak for the group as a whole. Moreover, he can only claim to speak for the group as a whole in so far as he can show that the action of which he is expressing approval and disapproval falls under or outside some principle or rule which is accepted and known to be accepted by the group as a basis for distinguishing between those acts of its members which are acceptable and those which are unacceptable. This, I suggest, is the substance of moral reasoning.

Ethical disagreement

Ethical disagreements and arguments are of three main kinds: (1) disagreements about the application of the principles to a particular case, with no disagreement about the principles themselves (2) disagreement about the principles which the group ought to adopt and (3) disagreement about the reference group to which the appeal is to be made. Disagreements of type 1 occur primarily in cases where the individual is trying to avoid rejection by the group showing that his action does not fall under the principles accepted by the group as deserving group disapproval and consequent rejection of the agent. Disagreements of types 2 & 3 are more characteristic of political conflicts between different social groups or between sub-groups within a wider group.

Ethical principles – universal or contingent?

The ethical principles accepted by a group are of four main kinds: (1) Those, such as the principle of not lying in communicating with other group members or the principle of a fair and equal balance between rights and duties, advantages and disadvantages within the group, without a general conformity to which any form of social cooperation between individuals becomes impossible. (2) Those, such as the principle of group loyalty viz à viz outsiders or the principle of the common good on which the group in question depends for its survival (Utilitarianism). (3) Those which are based on mistaken, unsubstantiated or outmoded beliefs about the effect of certain actions on the welfare of the group (e.g.: the condemnation of homosexual behaviour on the grounds that it is liable to incur for the community in which it occurs the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah.) (4) Arbitrary conventions of taste and manners peculiar to the social group in question. Principles of type 1 are universally accepted by all men in so far as they are prepared to enter into any kind of cooperation with one another. Principles of type 2, though universal in that no social group can exist without them, have different and often conflicting implications depending on the group to which reference is explicitly or implicitly made. Principles of type 3 and 4 tend to vary from group to group and are subject to revision and disappearance over time.

Blaming

The performative verbal act of blaming someone for doing or not doing something is carried out and thereby succeeds in producing its normal aversive and punishing effect on the individual concerned if and only if the following five propositions are implicitly or explicitly asserted and can be substantiated:

1. the individual concerned has performed or failed to perform the action in question,
2. he intended to do what he did,
3. he could have decided to do other than he did, if he had wanted to,
4. the consequences of his action or failure to act were harmful to others,
5. he ought to have done other than he did, either
 - (i) because he had a specific duty to do so, or
 - (ii) because he knew or could have known both
 - (a) what the consequences of his action or failure to act would be and
 - (b) that those consequences would be harmful to others.

Consequently in appropriate circumstances any of the following assertions, if substantiated and accepted as true by the individual to whom they are directed can succeed as an act of blaming:

1. 'You did that!'
2. 'You did that deliberately!'
3. 'You didn't have to do that!'
4. 'That hurts!'

5. 'You oughtn't have done that!'
 - (i) 'It's your job to see that things like that don't happen!'
 - (ii) (a) 'You could have known what would happen if you did that!'
 - (b) 'You could have known that would hurt!'

Similarly blame can be deflected by denying any one of these explicit or implicit assertions, thus:

1. 'It wasn't me!'
2. 'I didn't mean to do it!'
3. 'I couldn't help it!'
4. 'It didn't do any harm!'
5. 'I was perfectly justified in doing what I did!'
 - (i) 'It wasn't my responsibility!'
 - (ii) (a) 'I didn't realize what would happen!'
 - (b) 'I didn't think it would do any harm!'

All of these counter assertions if substantiated and accepted would serve to deflect the blame from the accused. All of them except the first would constitute excuses for his having done what he did or for his having failed to do what he did not do.

Blaming in the psychotherapeutic relationship

Since blaming someone for doing or not doing something has its aversive effect on the accused by effectively ostracizing him from the social group to which he and the speaker belong or which is constituted by their interaction, and since psychotherapy is supposed to be dependent for its effect on maintaining a warm and accepting personal relationship between patient and therapist, it is evident that the therapist in such relationship must avoid any suggestion that he is blaming the patient for any of his actions. The above analysis shows how easy it is for the therapist to make statements about the patient's behaviour which are interpreted by the patient as an imputation of blame. Hence the use that is made by psycho-analysis of Freud's principle of psychic determinism which serve to deflect all blame from everything the patient does by showing that, at least as far as the therapist is concerned, he could not have done other than he did.

On the other hand, since the social function of blaming is to deter the individual from behaving in a similar way in the future, it is a perfectly normal and legitimate technique of behaviour modification, which can sometimes be used to the advantage of the client or patient himself as well as that of the social group to which he belongs in the context of a psychotherapeutic or behaviour therapeutic relationship. Such occasions are no doubt rare, simply because people tend only to seek psychotherapeutic or behaviour therapeutic help with their behaviour problems when normal methods of behaviour control by society have failed; and blame and disapproval is the most common and widely used method of securing social conformity in behaviour.

Blaming as an aggressive act

Since being blamed for something is a highly aversive event as far as the accused is concerned, unless it can be deflected by an appropriate excuse, it follows that to blame someone is an appropriate way to satisfy the desire to hurt or destroy some readily available target object in which, as we saw in lecture 25, the emotion of anger consists. Moreover, since as we saw in lecture 26, one of the primary stimulus conditions for the occurrence of reflexive fighting or anger is an unavoidable aversive event in the presence of an appropriate target, it is clear that the situation of someone who is blamed and who cannot avoid blame by an appropriate excuse is precisely such an occasion for anger on his part directed at the initial aggressor, his accuser. This means that, unless he is to resort to physical violence, he has to find some way of hitting back by likewise blaming his accuser. Since most events have a complex determination it is usually possible for him to pick on some element in the events leading up to the action for which he has been blamed for

which his accuser can in turn be blamed. In this way the typical domestic quarrel begins in which each party gradually digs up various past action of the other party for which he can be held to blame gradually moving further and further away both in time and causal relevance from the initial issue around which the quarrel began. When one of the parties to such a quarrel can no longer bring to mind a suitable past action on the part of the other with which to reproach him, he may resort at this point to physical violence, which in its turn may lead to retaliation in kind. Similar features are to be seen in public political quarrels between communities as in the case of Northern Ireland where the mutual recriminations frequently involve events which took place several centuries before any of the current participants in the quarrel were born and where the interplay of verbal recrimination and physical violence is also well illustrated.

References

1. J. L. Austin - How to do things with words, London, O. U. P. , 1962.
2. A. J. Ayer - Language, truth and logic, London, Gollancz, 1936, Chapter VI.
3. N. Chomsky - Review of B. F. Skinner, 'Verbal Behavior', Language, 1959, 1, 26-58.
4. B. F. Skinner - Verbal Behavior, New York, Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1957.
5. C. L. Stevenson - Ethics and Language, New Haven, Yale U.P., 1944.
6. S. Toulmin - The Place of Reason in Ethics, Cambridge, C.U.P., 1950.