

REPLY TO PLACE: "THREE SENSES OF THE WORD 'TACT'"

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When I first saw Place's encyclopedic listing of all instances of the word *tact* in my *Verbal Behavior*, I confess that I experienced a certain trepidation. I had written the book in bits and pieces over a period of 20 years. It was a new approach which necessarily developed slowly. Parts of the book were written before the concept of the tact had clearly emerged. While writing it I read the works of linguists, logicians, psycholinguists, semanticists, literary critics, and many others, most of whom spoke of the relation between word and thing with terms like reference, denotation, meaning, and symbolic function. I could easily have picked up intraverbals from all of that and carelessly allowed them to stand. Certainly I must have been guilty of occasional lapses.

Having now looked at Place's paper, I find myself surprisingly reassured. There are a few careless uses of the word tact, but none that I would substantially change. There is only one sense of the word and, given the setting in linguistics and psycholinguistics in 1957, I am amazed that I held to it as closely as I did.

Four of the five types of verbal operants in my book involve stimulus control. The probability of a response is affected by something in the environment of the speaker. A speaker is more likely to say *tree* if (1) there is a tree in his immediate vicinity (tact), if (2) he has just heard or read the words *Under the spreading chestnut* (intraverbal), if (3) he has just heard someone say *tree* (echoic), or if (4) he has just seen the word TREE (textual). In the tact and the intraverbal, there is no formal correspondence between the forms of stimulus and response. In echoic behavior, there is a fairly precise point-to-point correspondence, in textual behavior a somewhat less precise one. In no one of the four types is the speaker saying anything about a tree, referring to a tree, communicating the idea of a tree, or taking any other specific action upon a listener. A listener need not be present.

Responses of all four types are reinforced as parts of longer samples of speech, to which terms like assertion or description have traditionally been applied. The longer samples are produced through the addition of autoclitic behavior to primordial verbal responses currently of some strength, which are thus ordered or tagged in such a way as to have a particular effect on the listener (who, incidentally, may be the speaker himself). Tacts are only *parts* of the complex utterances called sentences, and assertion or any other autoclitic function is carried by the other parts.

I have reviewed Place's appendix carefully and am absolutely unable to understand his repeated use of words like "ambiguous," "confused," "obscure," "inconsistent" when the quotations cited are precisely what I mean and are univocal, clear, and consistent with each other. I could scarcely avoid speaking occasionally of "words," "sentences," and "references," but I have used reasonable care in distinguishing between technical and casual discourse. I say that a tact *specifies* a stimulus in the casual sense that it is used to single out a particular controlling variable.

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Perhaps a comparison with non-verbal behavior will help. Let us say, for example, that I am turning a wooden candlestick on a lathe. To do so, I will use parts of a very complex repertoire of behavior—starting the motor, placing a block of wood between head stock and tail stock, sharpening a tool, positioning the tool at the right angle, operating the power feed, and so on. Each of these kinds of behavior has been shaped as part of my lathe-using behavior upon many occasions when I have produced many different objects. No one by itself produces any one thing. But when the occasion arises, they occur in a particular order and a candlestick is the result. Now, for candlestick read sentence, and for all the different kinds of behavior in my lathe-using repertoire read tacts and other verbal operants. The latter are essential to the production—whether of candlestick or of sentence—but no one of them is “making a candlestick” or “saying anything” by itself.

Each part has a consequence: sharpening the tool produces a sharp tool, setting it in a given way produces the right cutting angle, and so on. In the same sense, saying *tree* produces the sound *tree*. These are consequences (the responses would never have been shaped or maintained if consequences had not followed), but the ultimate consequence—the production of a usable object or an effect on a listener—is more.

Possibly more interesting is the parallel between tacting and perceiving. Pere Julià and I have recently been analyzing that matter in some detail. Behaviorists often say that perceiving is behaving. But that is not quite right. Perceiving is only part of behaving. Seeing a tree is a common part of what happens when we respond to trees in many different ways. Whatever it is physiologically (and only a physiologist will be able to tell us that), it cannot have been strengthened by reinforcing consequences until behavior followed. But it can occur whether action follows or not. In other words, seeing is responding up to the point of specific action; it is the product of many instances in which action has followed. Saying *tree*, as a tact, is behaving up to the point of a specific reinforcement. It is seeing plus a common response that is the product of many different reinforcing consequences. The response acts upon a listener, and it is the listener who may then act in different ways. The tact replaces the listener's seeing. It is therefore no surprise that seeing and tacting are so close.

Full contingencies must exist before we learn to see up to the point of action, and full contingencies must be arranged by verbal communities before we can learn to speak up to the point of a specific reinforcement. But once these parts of behavior exist in strength, they may occur alone—up to the point of action in the case of seeing, and up to the point of specific reinforcement in the case of a tact.