

The role of the
listener in skinner's
verbal behavior
psychology essay



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Abstract

This paper examines Skinner's analysis of the role of a listener in a speaker-listener verbal episode as a mediation of reinforcement for the speaker's behavior. Reinforcement as a mediation is an important component yet at the same time it is insufficient definitional aspect concerning the role of the listener. As the behavior of the listener is more complex and needs to be considered more fully. Moreover, the concept of ' understanding' and listening are examined. As Skinner assumes a person who listens and does not respond effectively that means he does not understand and therefore he does not consequence the verbal behavior of the speaker. Nevertheless, a person might listen and understand but he deliberately doesn't want to comply to the speaker's verbal behavior.

Introduction

Skinner's (1957) book, Verbal Behavior, primary focuses on the behavior of the speaker; nevertheless he doesn't neglect the behavior of the listener. As skinner explains that, " an adequate account of verbal behavior need cover

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only as much of the behavior of the listener as is needed to explain the behavior of the speaker" (Skinner, 1957, p. 2). Language, for Skinner is a learned behavior under the functional control of environmental contingencies. This may be evident when a man speaks or responds that becomes a question about human behavior and in its turn a question to be answered with adequate concepts and techniques of psychology as an experimental science of behavior (Skinner, 1957, p. 5).

Verbal operant units, on the other hand, are determined by identifying functional relations between verbal behavior and the environment. For example, mand is controlled by motivational operations (MOs), the tact is controlled by discriminative stimuli (SD) in the form of objects or events, other forms of verbal operants are echoic, intraverbal, textual, and autoclitic behavior are controlled by (SD) in the form of prior verbal stimuli and all verbal behavior comes under the discriminative control of an audience composed of a listener or audience, including the speaker himself.

Skinner's Account of the Role of the Listener

Skinner defines verbal behavior as a " behavior reinforced through the mediation of other persons" (Skinner, 1957, p. 2). We notice that at this initial definition of verbal behavior Skinner does not give much attention to the role of the listener, despite the fact that there would be little verbal behavior to consider if someone had not already acquired special responses to the patterns of energy generated by the speaker. As a result, this omission can be justified, for the behavior of the listener in mediating the consequences of the behavior of the speaker is not necessarily verbal in any special sense (Skinner, 1957, p. 2). Skinner considers the listener's essential

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role to be the development and mediation of reinforcement for the speaker's behavior. In other words, the listener's role is to physically act upon the world and to reinforce the verbal behavior of the speaker.

Skinner, however, states that the presence of a listener is necessary for a verbal episode. Hence, the behaviors of a speaker and a listener taken together constitute a verbal episode, upon which Skinner emphasizes that together they compose what may be called a total speech episode. Since there is nothing in such an episode which is more than the combined behavior of two or more individuals and consequently nothing "emerges" in the social unit. The speaker can be studied while assuming a listener and the listener while assuming a speaker (Skinner, 1957, p. 2).

Skinner in addition considers the speaker to be his own listener, as in many significant instances the listener is behaving at the same time as a speaker. Since the speaker and the listener 'may reside within the same skin'. Thus, some of the behavior of listening resembles the behavior of speaking, mainly when the speaker 'understands' what is said, this could be covertly seen in verbal operants as echoics, mands, tacts, intraverbals and autoclitics. At this point the speaker may serve as his own audience. As Skinner believes that an analysis of the speaker's verbal behavior is determined by the establishment of a verbal repertoire of the listener without which there will be no verbal behavior.

The listener plays a significant role according to Skinner in consequence of the speaker's behavior this could be seen when the listener provides a suitable level of attention as an eye contact, head nods, praise or even in the way he

is standing face forward. This would give in its turn social reinforcement the speaker is hoping for. Also, responding to the speaker's mands. This may be in the form of getting things, opening doors, and other nonverbal behavior. Another form of verbal behavior that is probably important in listening is echoic. As we covertly echo what we hear. Echoics are vocal responses that have point-to-point correspondence with the vocal emissions of other speakers and that come to serve verbal functions (Skinner, 1957). A child may point to a toy and attempt to gain access to it. If a parent holds the toy while saying "toy" and the child then says "toy" in order to gain the toy, this is an example of an echoic response, in that the copying moves to a mand function. Listening, therefore is conceptualized as an operant behavior maintained by the consequence of 'what is heard'.

A speaker and a listener may rotate responses 'turn-taking' this is covertly observable. It is a particular type of interlocking verbal behavior units. As when both a listener and speaker responses are reinforced for an individual in a dyad involving turn-taking, it is an observable incidence of an episode in which both the speaker and the listener responses for each of the individuals are reinforced. In addition, there is another type of rotation as Skinner illustrates, "the verbal fantasy, whether overt or covert, is automatically reinforcing to the speaker as listener. Just as the musician plays or composes what he is reinforced by hearing, or as the artist paints what reinforces him visually, so the speaker engaged in verbal fantasy says what he is reinforced by hearing or writes what he is reinforced by reading" (Skinner, 1957, p. 439). Therefore, this type of rotations between speaker and listener that

occurs within the individual's own skin, which in some cases is covertly observable, is also reinforcing.

The listener plays another important role; as he can strengthen the speaker's verbal behavior, he can also extinguish it. This could be evident in the social punishment delivered by the verbal community in the form of an audience. There control over the speaker's verbal behavior may be emitted in the form of frowns, head nods or ignoring the speaker and not responding verbally or non-verbally to his verbal behavior. Therefore, in the presence of certain audiences whom the speaker has a previous history of being positively reinforced by a speaker may emit a certain response covertly while in the presence of a negative audience another form of response may be emitted that could be overtly or with low strength or a speaker may just stop talking. In other words, different audiences will reinforce a single response differently, and for entirely different reasons (Skinner, 1957, pp. 230-232). Nonetheless, Skinner sums the ability of a listener to reinforce or punish a speaker's verbal behavior that a listener must understand what the speaker is saying, to know what the meaning of his verbal behavior is and to act properly and effectively upon hearing the speaker's verbal behavior.

A Critique of Skinner's Account of the Role of the Listener

It seems as Skinner was progressively moving further in Verbal Behavior, he started to recognize some gaps in his discussions or in other circumstances some contradictions. But most of all he started to emphasize that the listener does hold an essential role in a speaker's verbal behavior, he admits that "[i]t would be foolish to underestimate the difficulty of this subject matter"

(Skinner, 1957, p. 3). Skinner initially started with the notion that "[i]t will be <https://assignbuster.com/the-role-of-the-listener-in-skinners-verbal-behavior-psychology-essay/>

helpful to restrict our definition by excluding instances of 'speaking' which are reinforced by certain kinds of effects on the listener. The exclusion is arbitrary but it helps to define a field of inquiry having certain unitary properties" (Skinner, 1957, p. 224). Consequently, Skinner refined this further to say that the first restriction would be to limit the term verbal to instances in which the responses of the 'listener' have been conditioned. He then elaborates that if we make the further provision that the 'listener' must be responding in ways which have been conditioned specifically in order to reinforce the behavior of the speaker, then we narrow our subject to be traditionally considered as the verbal field (Skinner, 1957, p. 224-225). Therefore, a listener according to Skinner is the individual who responds in a proper effective way to stimuli generated by a speaker's verbal behavior. This takes us back to the point that a listener must understand first the meaning the speaker is talking about in order to be able to respond and to behave appropriately. However, a listener may in some situations understand what the speaker is saying or asking him to do but he doesn't want to do it or in other words comply to and follow what he is told to do.

This could be examined in the following example when a parent may ask his 'grounded' son to: "go and take the trash out". As a sign of anger the son does not comply to what his father asked him to do but at the same time he does understand what his father asked him to do "take the trash out". This does not match Skinner's previous assumption; a listener who does not respond properly to the speaker's verbal behavior does not understand what has been said. In another instance, a listener may 'echo' a word in another language but he does not understand what it means - the speaker may say "

heureux" and the listener would say "heureux". At the same time Skinner explains that understanding something is to know what it means. The ability for a listener to engage in this behavior again in future similar circumstances as a response to the proper stimulus under suitable circumstances is 'understanding'. Since it does not involve any immediate activity on the part of the listener (although responses of the other sorts already noted may take place concurrently), we detect the change only in his future behavior (Skinner, 1957, p. 357).

A listener may say I 'understand' only when he "identified the variables which were mainly effective in leading him to make the same response [in another occasion]" (Skinner, 1957, p. 280). Yet, Skinner's discussion on this part also lacks an explicit explanation for how a stimulus in the past might bring behavior under the control of a stimulus in the present. This is also evident in the account of knowing which Skinner explains to be a hypothetical immediate condition that is detected only at a later date (Skinner, 1957, p. 363). In fact, at the last part of Verbal Behavior he argues that distant stimuli are weak variables and contingencies that involve them usually reinforce 'bridging' behavior (Skinner, 1957, p. 416-417). But, this means that behavior is abrupt and stopped at that point of time that needs to be bridged back. Yet, behavior is a continuous evolving interaction with the environment. Another point, there is no 'gap' as Skinner assumes; rather events are described in different ways and forms.

Skinner considers 'understanding' to be a covert behavior as 'seeing' and 'thinking'. Yet at the end of Verbal Behavior Skinner states that there aren't many differences between covert and overt behavior; as the variables

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controlling them are the same. We can't really distinguish covert from overt behavior along functional lines. A person is an expert listener for their own verbal behavior. Subtle behavior is easy for the listener to respond to when he is also the Speaker. Skinner elaborates further that thinking is most productive when verbal behavior leads to specific consequences and are reinforced as in the example of verbal daydreams. Skinner at the end of *Verbal Behavior* comes to the conclusion that thinking is behavior, overt or covert, verbal or nonverbal (Skinner, 1957, p. 446-452).

This takes us back to the very beginning of *Verbal Behavior* in which Skinner started by assuming that the behavior of the listener cannot be distinguished from behavior in general (Skinner, 1957, p. 2). Yet, this makes us wonder why he tackled thinking to be a separate entity and the listener was marginalized. Is the listener a subject at the time Skinner wrote *Verbal Behavior* to be a complicated subject matter to a point he deliberately avoided discussing. If that's the issue why would Skinner take the speaker to be his own listener, and how the listener and the speaker are within one skin? Does this in its turn lead us to assume that the speaker is also a behavior? Of what we have discussed so far a solution might be in separating the listener and the speaker into two established individual entities and consequently to examine the listener's role in depth. Also, to explain further how 'understanding' a verbal stimulus might be converted to a nonverbal response on part of a listener which Skinner does not give enough attention to in his discussions.

Conclusion

As we have discussed Skinner explains that the essential role of the listener is in the development and mediation of reinforcement for the speaker's behavior. But, at the same time communication is regarded to be successful only if an expression has the same meaning for both the speaker and the listener. As numerous theories of meaning are usually applied to both speaker and listener as if the meaning process were the same for both. Yet, much of the behavior of the listener has no resemblance to the behavior of the speaker and is not verbal according to Skinner's definition (Skinner, 1957, p. 33).

Skinner suggests that the behavior of the listener is more complex and needs to be considered more fully, as once a repertoire of verbal behavior has been set up, a number of new problems arise from the interaction of its parts. As verbal behavior is usually the effect of multiple causes in which separate variables combine to extend their functional control, and as a result new forms of behavior emerge from the recombination of old fragments. Consequently, this has appropriate effects upon the listener. His behavior then calls for analysis especially in the case that a speaker is normally also a listener. The speaker reacts to his own behavior in several significant ways. The mere emission of responses is an incomplete characterization when behavior is composed. As another consequence of the fact that the speaker is also a listener, some of the behavior of listening resembles the behavior of speaking, particularly when the listener "understands" what is said.

(Skinner, 1957, p. 10) However, each person is controlled by a different history of reinforcement and controlling contingencies. That leads a speaker

to self-edit his verbal behavior when he finds that what he said has a different meaning for the listener who in his turn is controlled by a different history of reinforcement and different controlling contingencies. Therefore, a speaker to avoid punishment he engages in a self-editing behavior.

We notice that Skinner's definition of verbal behavior still need further refinement to elaborate further on the nature and function of the role of a listener in a verbal episode. I find Skinner's own comments on Verbal Behavior to be proper conclusion on the listener's role for the behavior of the speaker, as he states it forward to future critics that the issue of listener needs further examination.

Most of my book Verbal Behavior (1957) was about the speaker. It contained a few diagrams showing interactions between speakers

and listeners, but little direct discussion of listening. I could justify that because, except when the listener was also to some extent

speaking, listening was not verbal in the sense of being 'effective only through the mediation of other persons.' ... But if listeners are responsible for the behavior of speakers, we need to look more closely at what they do.

(Skinner, 1989, p. 86)

Skinner has tackled a very complicated subject matter, he might not dealt with all its aspects with the same level of cohesion and consistency but at the same time he has opened the door for future thinkers and critics to continue and carry on what he has established.