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Skinnerian Categories of Verbal Behavior

Elizabeth Schoen Simmons
Department of Psychological Sciences,
University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, USA

Synonyms

[Skinner's verbal behavior](#); [Verbal behavior](#)

Definition

Skinner's view of language is that verbal behavior is under the control of consequences mediated by other people. He was less interested in the mental structures like knowledge or language competence but rather the functional relationships of the behavior in the environment in which it occurs. The child's response is conditioned by its consequence in a specified situation or what Skinner called the antecedent-behavior-consequence (ABC) structure. For example, a toddler says "bah" and his mother responds, "Sure! Here's the ball." If the child is rewarded for "emitting" a specific behavior (i.e., making a sound), the child will learn to make the sound again under the same circumstances to gain the same reward.

Skinner's categories of verbal behavior include echoic, mand, tact, and intraverbal. According to Skinner's theory, each has a different function and will be produced under circumstances that elicit that function. An echoic is the repetition of a heard word or phrase for verbal learning and practice, or an imitation. It is elicited by a request for imitation and a reward of the imitation (e.g., caregiver says "apple," child repeats "apple," child then gets to eat a slice of the apple). A mand behavior functions as a request (e.g., child says "car" because he wants access to his toy car) to immediately benefit the speaker. A tact is a label (e.g., child says "duck" because he sees one in a pond). Intraverbals are responses to others' verbal behavior (e.g., responding to questions, taking conversational turns).

See Also

► [Operant Conditioning](#)

References and Readings

- Skinner, B. F. (1957). *Verbal behavior*. Acton: Copley Publishing Group.
- Sundberg, M., & Michael, J. (2001). The benefits of Skinner's analysis of verbal behavior for children with autism. *Behavior Modification*, 25, 698–724.