



SEMANTIC ANALYSIS AND COMPREHENSION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL TERMS

Mirodilova Nargiza Mirvaliyevna

Teacher Department of Second Foreign Language

Uzbekistan State World Languages University, Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Abstract

The article covers linguistic and sociological analysis of psychological terms. Moreover, there are stressed comprehension of psychological utterances in mental events. The functional analysis of psychological expressions could be used as a strategic approach for the analysis of mentalistic terms and practices.

Keywords: psychology, cognition, mentalist, behavior, interaction.

Introduction

Psychological terms such as purpose, intention, or, from the field of cognition, schema, or even such abstract terms as exists might be analyzed in this way. To take the latter example, under what conditions is a person likely to say that something "exists" or "does not exist" (e.g., in philosophical discussions, "mental events" are often said to exist, but "unicorns" do not)? A functional analysis turns the traditional ontological question into one of human behavior and verbal practices.

Literature Review

As complex as the topic might appear, however, some relatively simple methodological strategies have been explored. Perhaps the simplest idea has been to set up conditions of environment-behavior interaction, such as a pigeon's key-peck response under the control of specific types of reinforcement contingencies, and have observers simply talk under the influence of the interactions observed, with an interest in the properties of "psychological" or "mentalistic" terms thus evoked [4]. Specific psychological terms might be targeted in a similar way. Certainly many such expressions have been subjected to interpretations in behavior-analytic terms. For example, when one describes a behavior as "purposive," the description is under the control of behavior interacting with certain contingencies of reinforcement. As noted above, Skinner's writings have many examples of such interpretations. The exercise of interpretation in this fashion should not be regarded as reductive, or asserting that the contingencies are what the term "really means" or what it "really is," or that the contingencies have a foundation in true reality while the psychological concept is a fiction.





Although his analysis of how we come to describe so-called private events was groundbreaking, and even today continues to generate discussion within behavior analysis as is evidenced by recent special sections on the subject in two journals [1], Skinner's description omits what I think may be the most important contribution of his paper: his suggestion that rather than endlessly debating the definitions of psychological terms, psychologists should deal “with terms, concepts, constructs, and so on, quite frankly in the form in which they are observed—namely, as verbal responses” [7].

In fact, this was a main point of *Verbal Behavior* (1957); terms, concepts, and constructs do not have an existence independent of the behavior of the speaker, and the function of a verbal response tells us more about its “meaning” than its topography, which Skinner detailed in the first chapter, appropriately titled “A Functional Analysis of Verbal Behavior.” As he stated in 1945, “Meanings, contents, and references are to be found among the determiners, not the properties, of a response” [3]. In other words, The extent to which we understand verbal behavior in a “causal” analysis is to be assessed from the extent to which we can predict the occurrence of specific instances and, eventually, from the extent to which we can produce or control such behavior by altering the conditions under which it occurs. [8]

This statement of a functional analysis of verbal behavior contained in his 1957 book and earlier in his 1945 paper, which Skinner could have titled “The Functional Analysis of Psychological Terms,” was (and still is) a revolutionary suggestion that has yet to be fully realized, even by behavior analysts. In essence, all Skinner was saying was that to understand any particular verbal response, what is important is not what the response looks like (i.e., its topography), but why it occurs (i.e., its function within the verbal community); and that meanings are to be found among the independent variables of which the verbal utterance is a function. These independent variables include mostly antecedent events [7]. To truly discover the causes of some bit of verbal behavior, we need to manipulate the variables responsible for its occurrence; in other words, do an experiment. Failing that, our best bet is to carry out an interpretive analysis, of which was an exercise on a grand scale [8].

Traditional psychological terms are not technical scientific terms but rather the common terms of everyday discourse. They are ingrained in our collective languages, as Skinner used the term (i.e., as the reinforcing practices of a verbal community), at least in Western cultures, and are part of what even some cognitive psychologists refer to as a folk psychology. The advantage of psychology coopting these common terms is that everyone “knows” what psychologists are talking about. The disadvantage is that the terms are not abstract facts, like the technical terms of the behaviorist's verbal





repertoire, and they do not aid in the prediction and control of behavior. As Schnaitter noted,

When a behaviorist says, in regard to a situation he is analyzing, “That response is being reinforced,” the utterance of “reinforced” is tact. The response is under the control of a complex set of properties of the situation the behaviorist observes, and the stimulus control by those properties is maintained by the reinforcing practices of the verbal subcommunity of behavior analysts to which he belongs. (p. 3)

More examples of psychological terms:

catharsis- (psychoanalysis) purging of emotional tensions

psychotherapy- the treatment of mental or emotional problems by psychological means

hypnoanalysis- the use of hypnosis in conjunction with psychoanalysis

genial personality- the mature personality which is not dominated by infantile pleasure drives

oral personality- a personality characterized either by generous optimism or aggressive and ambitious selfishness; formed in early childhood by fixation during the oral stage of development

ego -(psychoanalysis) the conscious mind

superego- (psychoanalysis) that part of the unconscious mind that acts as a conscience

id - (psychoanalysis) primitive instincts and energies underlying all psychic activity

interjection - the internalization of the parent figures and their values; leads to the formation of the

imago - (psychoanalysis) an idealized image of someone (usually a parent) formed in childhood

condensation-(psychoanalysis) an unconscious process whereby two ideas or images combine into a single symbol; especially in dreams Because the referents of traditional psychological terms (the subject matter of much of psychology) are unobserved (and probably unobservable), there are few uniformly agreed-upon definitions. And in cases in which terms are fairly consistently defined, the definitions suffer from the logical fallacies of reification and circularity. Consider the following definitions of a few traditional psychological terms from a popular introductory textbook in psychology by Zettle [9]:

Memory: “The mental capacity to encode, store, and retrieve information.”

Consciousness: “A state of awareness of internal events and of the external environment.”



Intelligence: “The global capacity to profit from experience and to go beyond given information about the environment.”

Perception: “The processes that organize information in the sensory image and interpret it as having been produced by properties of objects or events in the external, three-dimensional world.”

Conclusion. These definitions refer to capacities, states, and processes that are not and probably cannot ever be directly observed. And in some instances, the capacities and processes are said to act. In the case of memory, they encode, store, and retrieve. In the case of perception, they organize information. It has become fashionable nowadays to adopt the brain-as-person metaphor and say that the brain acts, as, for example, when perception is defined as the brain interpreting sensory information.

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