

On Pronouns

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In 2007, on the Verbal Behavior listserv, the question arose, "From a behavioral perspective, what is a *pronoun*?"

First, I think it will help to clarify the distinction between nature and our models of nature. For example, for some purposes it is helpful to say that the average height of human males is normally distributed with a mean of 70 inches and a standard deviation of 3 inches. From this statement, others can be deduced, such as that 84% of males are shorter than 73 inches; only 2.5% of males are taller than 76 inches, and so on. These statements are truths about a statistical model, not about nature itself. For many practical purposes the model is a close enough approximation, but we should never forget that the normal distribution and its parameters are just models. Even the notion of height as a single, measurable, rigid quantity is a model. We use the reading on a scale as though it represented a fixed thing, but our height varies, within a small range, according to lots of variables.

Sentence, clause, phrase, and the various parts of speech are terms that apply to our models of verbal behavior; they are not themselves behavioral units. So concepts like *subject, predicate*, and *pronoun* that apply to such models will not find precise translations into behavioral terms. To put it another way, terms in models are essentialistic and have no perfect counterpart in selectionist domains. Nevertheless, there is a phenomenon to be explained. At a minimum, we can specify the variables that control the tact *pronoun*, just as we might for *ether*, or *ghost*, but to do so would be to dodge the question, for it was inspired, not by the practices of the verbal community but by the prevalence of certain forms of responses in verbal behavior. We can't just turn away from the challenge by insisting that pronouns are not behavioral terms. But we need not worry if our analysis is incommensurate to those of the linguist.

So what might be a behavioral translation of pronoun? Here is one suggestion:

We call something a *verb* because of the autoclitic frames in which it plays a part. Verbs tend to require or imply frames, unlike most other words. For example, a word like *agree* implies the existence of one who agrees and a position or person that is agreed with. *Sarah agrees with Tom* would be one example of the frame *X agrees with Y*. If we hear lots of examples of this frame, with different variables for X and Y, the frame will start to hang together as a verbal unit glued together by the intraverbal relationship among the elements of the frame. The phonetic properties of the terms Sarah and Tom would not be part of the unit, because they occur too infrequently together. However, the stress with which Sarah and Tom are uttered is invariant from one X and Y pair to another. So perhaps the frame is best described as *X (stressed) agrees with Y (stressed)*.

If Sarah were the only person in our world who ever agreed with anything, then *Sarah agrees with Y* would presumably emerge as an autoclitic frame, and if Tom were the universal object of agreement, then *X agrees with Tom* would emerge as a unit. As it is, X and Y are variable terms, and we must look to the context to complete our autoclitic frame each time it is uttered. Thus, proper nouns seldom become part of autoclitic frames because the role they play in such frames is commonly played by other terms as well. (Perhaps in a small verbal community such as a family, proper nouns do become part of frames. Sarah's husband may have several nearly identical autoclitic frames in his repertoire: *X agrees with Y*, and *Sarah agrees with Y* under different stimulus control.)

However, the words we call pronouns do not vary from one proper noun to the next. *He agrees with me* might emerge as an intraverbal *chain* (not a *frame*) because it can remain constant over a wide variety of examples. *He agrees with Y* might emerge as a relatively simple autoclitic frame. Autoclitic frames are much more complicated than intraverbal chains, because the frame and its variables have to be woven together as the speaker speaks. In fact, it isn't clear at all how this process works. (See Button #10 on structural regularities in verbal behavior.) Nevertheless, pronouns can become part of larger verbal operants and will tend to do so to the extent that they are repeatedly used in certain constructions. Even when they are not part of larger units, pronouns are economical. The proper noun *Sarah* will tend to be weaker than the pronoun *she*, because in any given circumstance, the pronoun is more likely to have been appropriate.

So I am suggesting that pronouns emerged out of a tendency for behavior to migrate toward economy. Pronouns are placeholders in autoclitic frames freeing the speaker from the task of filling in variable terms and are appropriate to a very wide variety of social contexts.