Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science 3 (2014) 305–313

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jcbs

RFT for clinical use: The example of metaphor

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 3 October 2013
Received in revised form
18 July 2014
Accepted 4 August 2014

Keywords:
Relational frame theory
Acceptance and commitment therapy
Derived relations
Relational networks
Metaphor

ABSTRACT

The current article argues that the conceptual analysis of metaphor as offered by relational frame theory (RFT) illustrates one way in which the theory may be integrated with, and have a constructive influence on, acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). The article walks through the basic account of metaphor as the relating of relations and summarises the empirical evidence in support of this conceptualization. This understanding is then applied to a number of metaphors that are common to ACT in an attempt to illustrate how the RFT account of metaphor may be useful in aiding ACT practitioners to construct and deconstruct clinical metaphors.

1. Introduction

Contextual Behavioral Science (CBS) is a broad church that encompasses three core areas of knowledge. First, functional contextualism provides clear and pragmatic assumptions about the scientific agenda such that behavior can be understood, predicted, and influenced with precision, scope, and depth (Gifford & Hayes, 1999). Second, Relational Frame Theory (RFT) identifies basic contextual elements (i.e., relating stimuli) that permit the prediction and influence of complex verbal behavior (Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, & Roche, 2001). Third, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999) facilitates an empirically effective approach to psychological health and well-being, thus directly addressing the "challenge of the human condition" (Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, & Wilson, 2012). The challenge now faced by the CBS community is to draw these three strands into a broad, scientific, and coherent agenda. This is not an easy feat, and has rarely, if ever, been successfully achieved in the history of psychology. But as a starting point, Hayes et al. (2012) suggested the following:

> "…*a reticulated (that is, web-like) model of scientific and practical development, in which theoretical and technological progress occurs at multiple levels but in an interconnected way, with differing standards of progress appropriate to the particular level of the work*" (p. 6).

2. Integrating RFT and ACT

The integration of RFT and ACT is central to the CBS reticulated model and the program of research it promotes and relies upon. Accordingly, RFT scholars are often asked by ACT clinicians for RFT-based definitions of fusion, for example. Because the concept of cognitive fusion is pivotal to ACT assumptions and practices, and RFT is after all, an account of language and cognition, it might seem straightforward to be able to provide this. However, an RFT translation of fusion is still a long way off because the necessary experimental procedures are not yet in place, and even when begun, research on broad, colloquial, and opaque concepts such as fusion will be slow and labor intensive.

The following paragraphs will summarize where the reticulated model is at, in our view, in terms of RFT research. The *first generation* of RFT research saw the development of the core concept of arbitrarily applicable relational responding (i.e., relational framing) and identification of the basic patterns of such responding or relational frames (i.e., coordination, distinction, opposition, and comparison), as well as of the defining features of frames in general, that is, mutual entailment, combinatorial entailment, and the transformation of stimulus functions (Hayes et al., 2001). The *second generation* of research marked the expansion

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jcbs.2014.08.001
2212-1447/

into more complex relations and relational networks, such as analogy (e.g., Stewart, Barnes-Holmes, Roche, & Smeets, 2001); perspective-taking (e.g., McHugh, Barnes-Holmes, & Barnes-Holmes, 2004); and rule-governance (e.g., O'Hora, Barnes-Holmes, Roche, & Smeets, 2004). The *third generation* contained the beginnings of the integration of RFT with ACT through componential analyses of therapeutic components (e.g., Gutiérrez, Luciano, Rodríguez, & Fink, 2004), experimental analogs of de/fusion (e.g., Keogh, 2008), and applications of the perspective-taking protocol with clinical populations (e.g., Villatte, Monestès, McHugh, Freixa i Baqué, & Loas, 2008).

Although the volume of research produced to this point is substantial for such a young scientific field (we counted approx. 260 studies published from labs at Reno and Maynooth alone), a great deal has yet to be done. For example, the research described above does not yet allow for an adequate translation of ACT into the language of RFT (e.g., creating a functional definition of fusion), if that is possible. Hence, we are on the cusp of a *fourth generation* of RFT research, part of which aims specifically to try to define concepts that are central to ACT. In the remainder of the current paper, we take the example of the RFT account of analogy and metaphor and the second generation data this generated, and use it as an orienting exercise for the types of questions that will need to be addressed if CBS is to effectively integrate RFT and ACT. Of course, one might argue that the RFT account of analogy and metaphor we describe may relate to therapies other than ACT, and we would in fact agree with this view. However, it is important to emphasize that the theoretical arguments provided herein were generated specifically by the use of metaphor in ACT and by the broader conceptual field of CBS. At this stage in the paper, it is important to note that we are not arguing that RFT is preferable to any other approach to language. We are simply articulating what an RFT approach to metaphor would look like and how it may be applied in a clinical context.

3. An RFT account of analogy

Naturally, the RFT approach to analogy has the core concept of arbitrarily applicable relational responding (AARR) at its root. But what broadens AARR out and makes it specifically applicable to analogy is the more complex or higher order concept of *relating relations*. The first detailed analysis of this was provided by Barnes, Hegarty, and Smeets (1997). An example illustrating their basic account is provided in Fig. 1.

Consider the simple analogy in Fig. 1 that might be described as 'peach *is to* pear *as* cat *is to* dog' (and denoted as A:B::C:D). In essence, this analogy comprises an arbitrary coordination relation between two other arbitrary coordination relations. Let us explain.

- First, look at the vertical arrow on the left-hand side of Fig. 1 that shows a coordination relation between the words "peach" and "pear". In this case, these two stimuli are primarily coordinated on the basis that both are members of the category of fruit. This coordination relation is controlled by the phrase "*is to*" (known in RFT as a Crel because it specifies the relation) that sits between "peach" and "pear". Of course, there are other features on which the coordination of these two words can be based, but we will return to this point later. We use the term relational network to refer here to the coordination relation, even though there is technically only one relation in what is presented. Indeed, there appears to be no precise definition in the literature of how many relations are required to distinguish a relation from a network. However, we have chosen to employ the term network because as you will see below, stimuli are always related to many other stimuli and in many different ways (as is the case with peach and pear).
- Second, look at the vertical arrow on the right-hand side of the figure that shows a coordination relation between the words "cat" and "dog". In this case, these two stimuli are primarily coordinated on the basis that both are members of the category of domestic animals (although once again coordination is possible on the basis of other features). This coordination relation is embodied in the phrase "*is to*" that sits between "cat" and "dog". Again, we will use the term relational network to refer to this relation because there are a number of ways in which these two words may be related.
- Third, look at the horizontal arrow in the center of Fig. 1 that refers to the *overarching* relationship between the coordination relations or networks on each side. In this case, the relation between the two coordination relations is also a coordination relation and is controlled by the word (Crel) "*as*" that sits between the two pairs of words in the described analogy. In other words, "peach" is to "pear" (coordination relation) *as* (coordination relation between the two coordination relations) "cat" is to "dog" (coordination relation). For analogies, it appears that the networks on either side are always related to one another by means of coordination and this relation is nearly always controlled by the Crel "as".
- In an analogy, the Crel (e.g., "is to") that governs the network on one side always governs the network on the other side. For Fig. 1, the Crels for peach/pear and cat/dog specify coordination relations. However, there is nothing in the definition of an analogy that says that these Crels must specify coordination relations (i.e., the relations on either side must be the same as each other, but they need not be coordination relations). For example, consider the analogy "John is to Mary as day is to night". In this case, the Crels on either side specify opposition relations.
- In the analogy in Fig. 1, there is no transfer of properties across the networks. For example, apples are not hairy and dogs are not juicy. Hence, the stimuli inside each network only share properties with other stimuli *inside that network*, but there are no shared properties (apart from the relation of sameness itself) *across the networks*. If these properties were shared across the networks, the analogy wouldn't work so well. Consider the example "apple is to peach as banana is to grapefruit". This is not a useful analogy because the shared properties are already apparent.
- As an aside, it is important to note that we have replaced the term "equivalence" used by the original authors with the more RFT consistent term "coordination". We take no issue with the concept of equivalence itself but it is not used in RFT language because the concept of coordination is used in its place. However, the disadvantage of this consistency with RFT in the current context is that we would then need to replace the term "equivalence-equivalence" used by the original authors to describe the relation between the two coordination relations

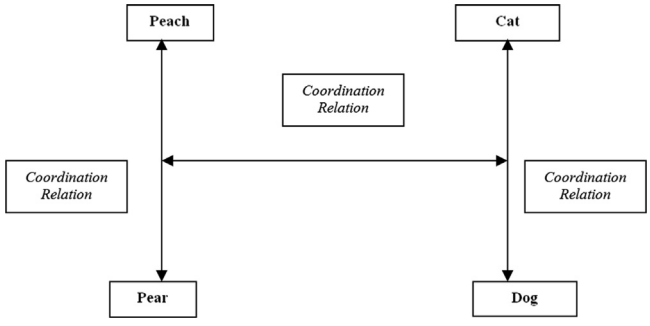

Fig. 1. An adaptation of the RFT account of analogy as outlined by Barnes et al. (1997).