

Presentation of the Series Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the book, *Verbal Behavior*, B.F. Skinner

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The following special series of articles commemorates the 50th anniversary of the publication of B.F. Skinner's book, *Verbal Behavior*. The time to celebrate is almost over, because we have had a one year delay, but in any case the occasion seems as good as any other to look back and consider such an important work, its strengths and weaknesses, and how it has influenced the field of study in the half century that has passed since its publication. The selection of papers included both in this and the next issue (first issue of volume 9) of the *International Journal of Psychology and Psychological Therapy*, under the heading of the special series, constitutes the contribution of researchers and scholars who have accepted the invitation and the challenge to express their views on different aspects related to Skinner's work or to the verbal behavior field, more generally. We greatly appreciate their contributions.

As behavior analysts we conceptualize behavior as a function of the interaction of the individual's history (phylogenetic and ontogenetic) with present conditions. This conceptualization, which is not dualistic and not reductionistic, but is functional and ideographic, has been -and still is- frequently criticized. However, the behavioral laws describing the interactions giving rise to particular instances of behavior in a given moment are the keys not only to understanding why those instances occurred, but also to a particular form of understanding, pragmatic in nature, that focuses on the possibility of controlling or influencing behavior, no matter how simple or complex. Some of these laws have been very useful in achieving such goals of prediction and control. However there are areas -and very important areas for human beings- that were obscure in Skinner's time. Among these are the topics typically called language and cognition. Skinner's book, with its publication in 1957, tackled these areas early. Someone had to do it, and he was probably the best prepared to address these topics from a functional point of view. Skinner defined his appraisal of verbal behavior as "an exercise in interpretation rather than a quantitative extrapolation of rigorous experimental results" (pp. 11). It is evident that he did not regard his ideas on the subject as finished. We may think of those ideas as entries into what were at the time obscure fields of study. Here we are, fifty years later, trying to learn more about those fields, either in terms of deeper conceptualizations, or in terms of research based upon his interpretations, or in terms of research where Skinner's conceptualization was perhaps motivating though it

did not provide definitive guidelines.

In 1959, soon after Skinner's book was published, Chomsky presented a formal response to a functional approach. This response had a clear impact in the fields of psychology and linguistics. Indeed, it was considered by many to be the ultimate answer to an approach to human behavior that in their view was simplistic and lacking in explanatory power. Skinner never replied, although others from the behavior-analytic tradition did (e.g. K. MacCorquodale and M. Richelle). In a visit to Skinner by one editor of this special series (C.L.), he responded to her perhaps naïve and repeated question, "Why did you never reply to Chomsky?", by saying that such a response would have implied rewriting the book from the very beginning, because Chomsky did not understand the functional approach to language. What is more important now, fifty years later, is not to respond to Chomsky but to achieve progress in these -apparently-complex human areas in order to be more efficient in establishing the conditions that allow for influence or control of verbal behavior.

We expect that this series of papers will let the readership of the journal know more about Skinner's conceptualization of verbal behavior, not only in its virtues but in its limitations; not only in its impact in a retrospective way but, perhaps more important, as the starting point of a series of paths into the dark areas of language and cognition, as an opportunity to open more windows to research in areas where it is still scarce.

The first paper in the series is a reprint of A.C. Catania's 1997 review of *Verbal Behavior*, originally published in *Contemporary Psychology*, preceded by a brief introduction by the author. The following papers are original contributions by Kurt Salzinger, by David Palmer, by Henry Schlinger, by Emilio Ribes Iñesta, by Joseph Spradlin and Nancy Brady, by Rick Dale, Jennifer Roche, and Nicholas Duran, and by Douglas Greer.

As the reader will see, they cover a broad range of topics related to *Verbal Behavior*. There are general retrospective considerations of the book, logical-conceptual analyses of the ideas in it, as well as discussions of specific issues, like the definition of verbal behavior or the consideration of the behavior of the listener. There are also analyses of the current relevance of some basic ideas in *Verbal Behavior* for contemporary cognitive psycholinguistics, as well as reviews of basic research in verbal behavior that are relevant to complex human phenomena, like theory of mind.

We greatly appreciate the contributions of the authors in this series and hope that this special series of articles encourages debate and research on verbal behavior, as well as further contributions on this topic to the Journal.

REFERENCES

Skinner BF (1957). *Verbal behavior*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.