

Skinner's *Verbal Behavior* In a New Century

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The article that follows is a retrospective review of B. F. Skinner's "Verbal Behavior" that was invited by the journal, *Contemporary Psychology* (1997, 42, 967-970), so that it would appear on the fortieth anniversary of the publication of the book. When I was invited to contribute to the present celebration, I did not feel I had enough to add to the content to justify a new article, and I am grateful to *International Journal of Psychology and Psychological Therapy* for allowing my review of the book to be reprinted here. I hope it will not seem obsolete.

Celebrations, whether by years or decades or centuries, are of course somewhat artificial. Skinner's work was essentially complete well before it came into our hands as a published work in 1957, and even if he may have finished off proofreading and other author chores late in the preceding year, Skinner's writings on verbal behavior have a far longer history. In 1948 he delivered an earlier version of the book in his William James lectures at Harvard University. He had also presented some of that material during a 1947 summer session course at Columbia University, a record of which is preserved in the notes of Ralph Hefferline. Not long before, a seminal article called "The operational analysis of psychological terms" in the *Psychological Review* (1945, 42, 270-277) had already introduced some of Skinner's vocabulary of verbal behavior and had outlined an argument for the origins of our language of private events. But Skinner had been working on a behavioral account of language at least as far back as his days as a Junior Fellow at Harvard in the 1930's, and in the intervening years he collected data on verbal phenomena, including sequential patterning in poetry, guessing, and multiple causation as tapped by a device he called the verbal summator. One of his earliest research papers, "Drive and reflex strength" (*Journal of General Psychology*, 1932, 6, 22-37), opens with a discussion of the verbal behavior of the experimenter: "We say that an animal is hungry if, when we give it food, it eats. We also say it is hungry if it responds in characteristic ways...to any stimulus...concerned with eating.... the use of the word [hunger] depends on the conditioning of the experimenter" (p. 22).

Taking all of this into account, perhaps it is not too soon to prepare for a celebration of the start of Skinner's work on verbal behavior. If so, it should take place some time in the early 2030s, now only a quarter of a century or so away.

What might Skinner have said about all of this contemporary attention to his "Verbal Behavior"? He regarded it as perhaps his most important work, so no doubt he would have been pleased. But having to choose between "Verbal Behavior" and its

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crucial precursor, "The Behavior of Organisms," is a bit like being forced to choose between Darwin's "The Descent of Man" and his "On the Origin of Species."

Furthermore, to focus mainly on this one book, however central it is to our continuing progress in the analysis of verbal behavior, is always at the risk of neglecting phenomena of verbal behavior that are only implicitly treated in it, if at all. Skinner himself extended his account significantly in his later treatments of verbally governed behavior and of the behavior of the listener, and others have enriched our understanding with research on the origins of naming as a higher-order verbal class and on the contingencies that engender equivalence classes and other higher-order relations, among many other topics.

Perhaps even more important, we must not be distracted from some of the problems within Skinner's account that have yet to be resolved. A few examples: the relations between his descriptive autoclitics, which rest upon speakers' discriminations of their own verbal behavior, and his relational autoclitics, which rest upon coordinations among classes of verbal responses; the difficulty of defining a mand in terms of its specification of a reinforcer, especially in instances of novel manding; the latent directionality of tacting, in the sense that a speaker is said to tact a stimulus, when the point of the new term was to emphasize a direction opposite to that of reference; and the nature of the transition from intraverbal responding to sequential verbal behavior as a functional unit.

Skinner's book became a finished work by virtue of its publication in 1957, but he would no doubt have agreed that the work of analyzing verbal behavior had only just begun. The review that follows considers the environment into which the book emerged. The evolution of the field it created will depend on the work that grows out of it, in both research and interpretation. We still have lots of work to do, but Skinner's book has gotten us off to an exceedingly good start.