

THE LONG GOOD-BYE: WHY B. F. SKINNER'S VERBAL BEHAVIOR IS ALIVE AND WELL ON THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF ITS PUBLICATION

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The year 2007 marked the 50th anniversary of the publication of B. F. Skinner's Verbal Behavior, a book that by Skinner's own account was his most important. The received view, however, is that a devastating review by a young linguist not only rendered Skinner's interpretation of language moot but was also a major factor in ending the hegemony of behaviorism in psychology and paving the way for a cognitive revolution. Nevertheless, in taking stock of Verbal Behavior and behaviorism, both appear to be thriving. This article suggests that Verbal Behavior and behaviorism remain vital partly because they have generated successful practical applications.

The year 2007 marked the 50th anniversary of the publication of B. F. Skinner's *Verbal Behavior* (1957). This anniversary is worth noting because, according to most accounts, a scathing review by a young linguist named Noam Chomsky (1959) in the journal *Language* not only undermined Skinner's main arguments but simultaneously hammered a nail in the lid of behaviorism's coffin and paved the way for the return of cognitive psychology (e.g., Hunt, 1982). Even though many linguists and psychologists said good-bye to *Verbal Behavior* and to behaviorism in the wake of Chomsky's review, both are still around and seem to be thriving. Given that the book Skinner called his most important work (Skinner, 1977) is selling as well as ever, it might be instructive to look at why it and the discipline that forms its experimental foundation have been so resilient.

The Deaths of *Verbal Behavior* and Behaviorism Have Been Greatly Exaggerated

To borrow the words of Mark Twain, reports of the death of behaviorism were greatly exaggerated (see Wyatt, Hawkins, & Davis, 1986). In fact, according to Virués-Ortega (2006), scientometric studies cast doubt on claims that behaviorism was predominant in the United

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States before World War II and that a cognitive revolution following the war signaled its demise. These studies also indicate that behaviorism (now referred to as behavior analysis) has undergone a slight but steady growth over the past 20 years. Other evidence suggests that behavior analysis is healthy.

The Association for Behavior Analysis International claims 4,962 members (Association for Behavior Analysis, electronic mail, March 2007) and 60 affiliated chapters in the United States and abroad, with a reported 13,000 members and annual membership growth averaging 6.5% over the past 10 years (www.abainternational.org). Many of these affiliated chapters hold annual conferences, each attracting hundreds of attendees. Behavior analysts have also been active in nonbehavioral organizations. For example, they have had their own division (Division 25, Behavior Analysis) in the American Psychological Association for more than 40 years, were instrumental in the founding of the Association for Psychological Science, and are represented in the Association for Cognitive and Behavior Therapies. And for the past decade or so, the Behavior Analyst Certification Board, Inc., has offered an international certification for the practice of applied behavior analysis.

In addition to a number of journals that regularly publish work by behavior analysts (e.g., *Behavioural Processes*, *Behavior Modification*, *Journal of Mind and Behavior*, *Learning and Behavior*, *The Psychological Record*), several journals in the United States and abroad are devoted exclusively to experimental, theoretical, and applied behavior analytic work, including basic and applied research on verbal behavior (e.g., *Behavior and Philosophy*, *European Journal of Behavior Analysis*, *Japanese Journal of Behavior Analysis*, *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior*, *Journal of Organizational Behavior Management*, *Mexican Journal of Behavior Analysis*, *The Analysis of Verbal Behavior*, and *The Behavior Analyst*). Moreover, the number has been increasing, with a new journal published by the Association for Behavior Analysis International, *Behavior Analysis in Practice*, as well as several electronic journals (e.g., *Behavioral Technology Today*).

At least 110 institutions of higher learning around the world offer advanced degree programs in behavior analysis (www.abainternational.org), and many more offer course work in behavior analysis. Furthermore, behavior analysts are faculty members in departments of psychology, education, medicine, public health, and social work. In addition, at least 15 universities in the United States offer graduate training in Skinner's analysis of verbal behavior (<http://behavioralspeech.com/training>).

This is hardly the picture of a discipline whose death knell was sounded almost 50 years ago. Roddy Roediger, past president of the Association for Psychological Science, said as much in a 2004 essay marking the centenary of B. F. Skinner's birth titled "What Happened to Behaviorism?" Roediger¹

1 Roediger, an avowed cognitive psychologist, suggested that Chomsky's review was at best "a minor cause of the cognitive revolution" and, moreover, was "rather effectively refuted in a commentary by Kenneth MacCorquodale, by the way" (2004, p. 42). (Incidentally, MacCorquodale's [1970] rejoinder to Chomsky, which was rejected by the journal *Language*, was eventually published in the *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior*, thus limiting its impact outside behavior analysis.)