

## Skinner's *Verbal Behavior*: A Reference List

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The language literature contains many citations to Skinner's book *Verbal Behavior* (1957), however, most of them are negative and generally unresponsive. The current list of references was assembled to bring readers in contact with the growing body of literature which supports Skinner's work. A total of 136 references were found and divided into two categories, (1) conceptual, and (2) experimental and applied. These references are presented in an effort to stimulate additional research in this important aspect of behavior analysis.

Skinner's book *Verbal Behavior* (1957) has been available for 25 years, yet relatively little use has been made of the analysis or concepts contained in that book. The literature on language does contain many citations to the book, but most of them are negative and unresponsive of Skinner's work. Many of these negative references can be traced back to Chomsky's (1959) widely cited review of *Verbal Behavior*. Neisser (1967), for example, writes "Chomsky's 32 page review of *Verbal Behavior* is far more than effective refutation of the behavioristic approach to language" (p. 246). Unfortunately, the number of negative citations seems to outweigh the number of positive citations, and as Richelle (1976) has pointed out, many have simply dispensed with reading the book or related work.

However, many people have read Skinner's book and found it to be an outstanding treatment of the topic of language. Some of these people have carried on Skinner's work with further analyses, and/or with empirical research and applications. The following collection of references was assembled to provide the reader with a list of some of that work.

There are two categories of references included, (1) conceptual, and (2) experimental and applied. The criterion used for inclusion of conceptual material was that the paper contained a positive or constructive discussion or development of some aspect of Skinner's *Verbal Behavior*. Other sources which were negative or anti-behavioral were excluded due to general misconceptions, or due to a lack of a thorough analysis of the relevant issues. Also, citing every article that

criticizes *Verbal Behavior* would take up too much space and not contribute much to the development of the behavioral analysis of language. Chomsky (1959) and Place (1981a, 1981b) are exceptions. They are included to provide the reader with a sample of how the book is typically misinterpreted.

Experimental and applied research on Skinner's analysis of verbal behavior was a little more difficult to compile. The literature (especially the applied) contains many studies which adhere to the "behavioral view of language" but in a review of JABA and related publications Knapp (1980) concludes:

for the most part this line of research ignores the written work *Verbal Behavior* and on one occasion approaches dismissal by referring to *Verbal Behavior* as theory, placing it in the category of Chomsky's and Lenneberg's work. I get the feeling that as valuable, and on occasion as relevant as this line of research is, it most likely would have occurred given only *The Behavior of Organisms* (p. 190).

Much of the applied work does indeed use behavioral principles and procedures to study language, but as Knapp points out, they fail to make use of a behavioral analysis of the contingencies involved for the individual speaker. Hence, behavioral methods are often used to study traditional linguistic concepts which are often irrelevant from Skinner's point of view.

The criteria for inclusion in the research section were (1) the paper referenced Skinner (1957), and (2) some aspect of the paper centered around the investigation or application of a feature of Skinner's book (e.g., the functional independence of the mand and the tact; teaching an intraverbal repertoire).

A review of the 14 volumes of JABA turned up 16 papers which cited the 1957 text but only 8 made some use of the analysis in their study. (One article contained the 1957 reference in the bibliography but it failed to appear anywhere in the text.) Other sources were also checked, but the ABA program books and the authors' collection of papers and reprints from other researchers provided many of the citations.

We would like to emphasize that this reference list be viewed as a beginning to the collection of work on Skinner's *Verbal Behavior*, and hope that this collection will offset the overwhelming presence of negative literature, as well as stimulate additional research in this very important aspect of behavior analysis.

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