Introduction to Verbal Behavior

A. Charles Catania

In behavior analysis, we study verbal behavior because we're interested in what we do with words. Words come in many forms. For example, they can be spoken or written or signed. We regard all of these forms as kinds of verbal behavior. We live in the midst of words, so it's hard to think about words as behavior. When we see words on a page, we're usually not reminded that they are records of someone's writing.

When we talk about what we do with words, we're likely to say that we try to communicate things with words: information or feelings or ideas or emotions or thoughts. But we do something even more fundamental with words. Words give us a very efficient way to influence the behavior of others. We communicate items of information or convey our thoughts or ideas because others often act upon them; we express our feelings and emotions because others often then behave differently toward us.

The study of verbal behavior is different from linguistics, or the study of language. Linguists are particularly concerned with the general practices of verbal communities, described in terms of the various grammars and vocabularies and phonetic units that characterize different languages. Descriptions of the form languages take don't tell us very much about the functions of those languages.

An analogy may be helpful. Biologists distinguish between physiology and anatomy. Physiology is mainly concerned with the functions of the organs of the body whereas anatomy is mainly concerned with their forms or structures. The distinction between function and form also exists in the study of behavior. For example, someone interested in walking could study its form by examining the coordinations of the legs and of the legs with other parts of the body. The study could get down to the details of particular muscle interactions or could be extended to running and other sorts of gaits. Eventually a grammar of leg movements might be written that distinguished between possible and impossible gaits. But such a grammar could never tell us when someone might switch from walking to running or which direction the person might go. In other words, the study of both structure and function can be worthwhile, but a science that concerned itself only with structure may have little to offer those who are mainly interested in function.

The distinction is important to the topic of verbal behavior because the science of verbal behavior, as part of behavior analysis, owes much to a 1957 book by B. F. Skinner called *Verbal Behavior* [now available from the B. F. Skinner Foundation.] A review of that book by the linguist Noam Chomsky appeared in 1959. The review was highly critical, and for many years it was assumed that Chomsky had demolished Skinner's position. One reason was that many behavior analysts who had read Chomsky's review concluded that Chomsky had missed the point of Skinner's book. It therefore took a while before some began to respond to Chomsky's arguments. Linguists usually still fail to appreciate the functional content of Skinner's preliminary account of verbal behavior and have typically ignored the growing body of
experimental research that has expanded Skinner's early taxonomy and has broadly extended the account to novel aspects of verbal behavior. Linguists still concentrate much more on whether what is said is grammatical, and what it means for something to be grammatical, than on what effects the verbal behavior has (even when, as is often the case, it is not grammatical).

The analysis of behavior is concerned with taking this most complex category of human behavior and figuring out how it is built up from simpler parts. Some of the many functions of verbal behavior that have been studied by behavior analysts are:

a. How we learn to talk about events in the world
Children learn the words of their native language by interacting with others. This typically happens in a natural way, because talking has many natural consequences (e.g., we get things we ask for, others respond appropriately to the things we say, and so on). By studying how this works in natural environments, we can identify things about language learning that may be helpful to children who have language problems (e.g., autistic children).

b. How we learn to talk about our own feelings and emotions
This is a fascinating problem, because parents and teachers can have no direct access to the feelings and emotions of the children to whom they would like to teach the words.

c. What goes on when we learn sequences of words, as in learning to recite the alphabet or to count
Learning word sequences and the relations among words is only one small part of our verbal behavior, but they are at the heart of many important human activities, such as mathematics and poetry and drama.

d. How what we say may be shaped by its consequences
We don't often worry about where our own verbal behavior came from, but it is important to know that what we say can be reinforced or punished by the responses of others to our statements.

e. How what we say interacts with what we do
Sometimes what we say about what we will do or what we should do determines what we do. The experimental analysis of verbal behavior has begun to explore how the relation between saying and doing depends on what the source of the saying is (e.g., did you come up with it yourself or did someone tell you, and if you came up with it yourself, how do you know someone else didn't shape what you came up with?).

f. How instructions work
People often do things not because what they do will have certain consequences, but because they were told to do them. The following of instructions is crucial to many social institutions, ranging from families and classrooms to industries and the military, so it is important to understand not only how they work but also how they can go wrong (e.g., as when unethical orders are followed without question).

A few references on the analysis of verbal behavior that some may find useful are the following:
Analysis of Verbal Behavior.


