

Verbal Behavior

A Behavioral Approach to Language Instruction

In 1957 B. F. Skinner published his text *Verbal Behavior*. The book provides a natural science approach to the acquisition of language. Skinner suggested that the basic principles of behavior that were already known, e.g. reinforcement, extinction, stimulus control etc., were sufficient to account for the development of language and his text is a description of the process by which these principles select and shape verbal behavior during the lifetime of a person. With Skinner's ideas as a conceptual guide and ultimately a set of testable hypotheses a line of empirical research was opened on the topic by Dr. Jack Michael and his student Dr. Mark Sundberg in the 1970's. Since that time dozens of research articles have documented the correctness of aspects of Skinner's analysis of how verbal behavior is acquired. These research papers are mainly published in *The Analysis of Verbal Behavior*. In recent years many behavior analysts involved in the education and treatment of children with autism have adopted Skinner's analysis as a conceptual guide to the teaching of verbal behavior to children with autism and related disorders.

The use of this research and conceptual analysis of language has sometimes mistakenly been identified as a "new" form of applied behavior analysis or even something other than behavior analysis. In fact, just the opposite is true. Those who utilize the behavioral analysis of language are striving to maintain a conceptually systematic approach that suggests no new or different principles, paradigm or analysis is necessary to teach verbal behavior to persons who do not acquire it typically. While additional research is needed to verify the effectiveness of this approach what we currently know has much to recommend to those whose work and desire it is to teach verbal behavior to children with autism.