B.F. Skinner has taken the occasional hit on this blog, but at last somebody speaks up for him.

**Note:** This week's series of posts came in response to a bibliography posted by commenter, Ray Weitzman, a retired professor of linguistics who taught for 34 years at California State University, Fresno. He was trained in Chomskyan linguistics and specialized in phonetics.
and phonology. He also taught Japanese. I contacted him before the series began to appear and he kindly agreed to provide the following response.

The blogger’s introductory post perpetuates a number of myths, mischaracterizations, inexact comparisons, and false analogies regarding Skinner’s approach to understanding behavior, particularly language behavior. I don’t blame the blogger for this; he is just the vehicle for perpetuating these urban legends. I blame the current Zeitgeist.

For some reason the blogger is abhorred by what Skinner seems to be saying about the nature of human beings. He himself points out that he is no fan of cognitivism, because it doesn’t seem to explain “the literary and artistic achievements of humanity”, which have been his central concern. But he also is very unhappy with Skinner’s or any other form of behaviorism and its implications for the basis of human creativity. These are issues that aren’t directly relevant to his discussion of Skinner’s behaviorism and Chomsky’s so-called revolution. Here I will concentrate on trying to clarify what Skinner’s behaviorism is all about and why Chomsky’s criticisms didn’t really lay a finger on the integrity and scientific value of Skinner’s behaviorism.

Since I am constrained by limitations on the length of my comments and, frankly, there are others who have done a better job of it than I ever could (see my reading list), I will try to be as concise as possible.

Skinner did not believe that all learning could be explained in terms of just stimulus and response. He recognized that there were other forms of learning, such as Habituation, and Pavlovian (or Respondent) Learning. Almost all of his research focused on Operant Learning. Many people have a rather crabbed view of what operant learning is. It is not the kind of simple-minded Stimulus-Response (you-have-an-itch-and-you-scratch-it) that it is usually identified with. It is much, much subtler than that.

In the very first sentence in Chapter 1 of *Verbal Behavior*, Skinner described operant learning this way: “Men act upon the world, and change it, and are changed in turn by the consequences of their action.” As you can see, Skinner is trying to understand behavior in terms of a living organism’s interactions with its environment.

We act on the environment and in turn there are environmental consequences, which in turn affect our behavior. How the environmental consequences affect behavior and how antecedent discriminative stimuli occasion the behavior, as well as past interactional contingencies were and continue to be primary focuses of the experimental analysis of behavior. Clearly operant learning is not some kind of automatic process. The input-output computer analogy for operant learning is totally void of any relevance, nor is the comparison with the “Newtonian concept of cause and effect” of any relevance. Skinner did not believe that humans were wet-ware billiard balls.

The blogger makes a brief but undefended remark that Chomsky demonstrated the vagueness of Skinner’s use of the terms “stimulus” and “response”, as well as others. I won’t discuss the point here since it is too involved. But if there is anything that is vague about these terms, it is only in Chomsky’s mind, not Skinner’s.

For an examination of Chomsky’s arguments see MacCorquodale’s “On Chomsky’s Review of Skinner’s Verbal Behavior.” (Here)

The blogger also quotes a claim of Chomsky’s, but gives no warrants to support that claim. The claim is that “you cannot determine the rules for organizing sentences by studying the physical organization of sentences.” As a specialist in phonetics, who has studied and done research on the articulation and acoustics of speech, I can personally vouch for that. But the implication seems to be that Skinner was making such a claim. This is one of those myths I was talking about. Skinner made no such claim. In fact the claim seems to go back to a school of structural linguistics, not Skinner.
The blogger uses some rather *ad hominem* language when speaking about Skinner. He refers to him as an “emperor”, as if Skinner was some kind of tyrant that deserved to be overthrown for his evil ways. He almost seems to rejoice when he talks of Chomsky ending his reign. This is very unfortunate and demonstrates that the blogger is unaware of Skinner’s achievements and shows no respect for his sincerity and integrity as a scientist. Such remarks are totally unnecessary and tendentious.

On a personal note I’d like to deny that I was “insisting on the importance of operant conditioning in learning language”. There is a difference between persistence and insistence. I was only trying to point out that there was another non-cognitivist possible explanation (or at least partial explanation) for language learning that has been largely ignored for the last 50 years by cognitivists too bent on trying to find explanations inside of our heads.

There is no doubt that it takes a brain to be able to carry out language behavior, but it also takes lungs, a vocal tract, vocal cords, a tongue, lips, jaw muscles, etc., as well. Also without interactions with other human beings in one’s environment, and the rest of the environment, there would not be the ontogenetic bases for language nor anything to talk about. The search for the essence of language in the brain is misbegotten.

**Links:**
Reading list: [http://wwwbabelsdawn.com/babels_dawn/2009/06/motivation-and-speech.html?cid=6a00d83452ae69e2011570d8579b970c#comment-6a00d83452ae69e2011570d8579b970c](http://www.babelsdawn.com/babels_dawn/2009/06/motivation-and-speech.html?cid=6a00d83452ae69e2011570d8579b970c#comment-6a00d83452ae69e2011570d8579b970c)
