

Editorial

The previous volume of TAVB (Volume 19) contained all but one of the articles that had been accepted during the previous year. The theoretical paper by Phil Drash and Roger Tudor on autism etiology came in too late to appear in that volume, but it seemed to me that it would make a good discussion article with invited commentaries for the present volume. My newly appointed advisory board of associate editors (Genae Hall, Sam Leigland, Dave Palmer, Bill Potter, Hank Schlinger and Mark Sundberg) agreed, and Phil and Roger were willing to provide a response to the commentaries. I invited several commentaries, and five were ultimately contributed. Mark Sundberg would provide an introduction to the series, so we had a substantial beginning for the contents of Volume 20.

Research articles are especially valuable for TAVB, and we ended up with three in this volume. I hope to receive more such submissions for Volume 21, and will solicit vigorously, by e-mail and also at ABA in Boston and at regional conferences. I hope the associate editors and members of the editorial board will do likewise, and because hope is a weak intervention, I will use e-mail to prompt the relevant behavior.

Although we need more data-based papers, this is not to detract from the importance of our historical, conceptual, theoretical papers, which have always been a highlight of TAVB. The sequence on autism etiology is a good example, as is the "Dialogue on Private Events" for which we thank David Palmer for collecting and editing the discussion that took place on the Verbal Behavior Special Interest Group listserv.

The sign language of the Deaf (American Sign Language, or ASL) is a type of verbal behavior that may be of special interest to readers of this journal for at least two reasons. (1) From a behavioral perspective it is very different from a language based on vocal behavior and auditory stimuli, and yet is equally capable of subtle and complex controlling relations. Many research issues investigated with respect to the acquisition and function of a vocal/auditory form of language could be studied as well with a signing/visual language. Similari-

ties and differences would bear on the extent to which some aspects of our theoretical and practical understanding of verbal behavior is relevant primarily to basic processes, or closely linked to the specific response/stimulus form of the verbal repertoires. Research in this journal has often been in the context of Skinner's elementary verbal relations, and with the exception of the textual and transcriptive repertoires, could be conducted as well with signing as the "speaker" behavior and reacting to the visual response products of signing as the "listener" behavior. Also there is some considerable recent activity related to the development of a written form of sign language that is related to the hand-arm-body movements and positions in the way that our phonetic writing system is related to the sounds produced by the vocal musculature. For these various reasons I invited Amy McCarty (signer with Ph.D. from WMU in behavior analysis) to submit a paper on sign language, and I hope that it generates future submissions to the journal in this area.

(2) A second reason for an interest in sign language by our readers is its role in some programs for developing verbal behavior in children with autism. It was in connection with this role that I got the idea of encouraging work on sign language in Volume 20 of the journal. I received an e-mail (partly excerpted below) from Laura House, a behavior analyst (BCABA) involved in autism instruction who is also a sign language interpreter:

I had a situation come up with the child of a friend of mine and I'd love to hear what you think of it. This child is a 7-year-old girl, deaf and autistic. Her parents are deaf, as well as her paternal grandparents, so that wasn't much of a big deal to them. Her autism, however, was a shock, and she was nonverbal as a very young child and didn't start signing until she was about 5 1/2. Her father and I are friends and together we completed the ABLLS on her and I made some suggestions about things they might add to work they do at home. While I was trying to come up with some beginning TFFC type targets I noticed an interesting thing about ASL. Typically,

with a hearing autistic child, my understanding is we would start with intraverbal ‘fill-in’ responses because they’re supposed to be easier than leaping directly to WH questions. As I played around with carrier phrases in ASL I could tell something was going on. It just felt all wrong. I started realizing that ASL just doesn’t have some of the features that strengthen “fill-in” responses in English. For example there is no *to be* verb, there is no tone of voice, vague terms like *something* are contrived and practically meaningless without tons of “context clues.” If I walked up to a deaf adult and tried to sign the equivalent of “A dog is a type of _____,” it would come out like “Dog what? (pause)”. Makes no sense. They would probably guess I was asking “What happened to your dog?” or “Do you have a dog?” Another example: “You ride a _____.” First of all, the signs for ride a bike, ride a horse, and ride in a car are all different. Also ASL doesn’t deal well with *you* meaning *one* or *someone*. *You* just means *you*, the person the signer is pointing to. So that fill in would most likely be understood as “Do you ride horses?” Not to mention all the signs where the noun and the verb are practically identical: drive = car, banana = peel, sit = chair, sleep = bed, food = eat, pencil/pen = write, etc.... Now I’m not saying that you couldn’t come up with intraverbal fill-ins that would work in ASL—I’m sure there are many. And obviously Deaf people have huge, complex intraverbal repertoires just like anyone else, but I just found it interesting that the

“fill-in” response seems to be so different. Am I making sense?

Yes, Laura. You are making very good sense, and I hope your comment encourages conceptual and experimental analyses at the juncture of verbal behavior, sign language, and autism.

For Volume 21 I am in the process of inviting something on second language learning, and it would also seem most appropriate to have a regular column on language instruction in autism and other forms of language disability. Book reviews like the ones in this volume contribute to our general goal of not becoming too narrow in our focus, and I would like to receive suggestions for books to be reviewed for Volume 21. I am also soliciting suggestions for reprinting articles that are very appropriate for our journal but are not readily available, either because of being published in sources that are no longer available, in sources sufficiently out of the mainstream of behavioral or psychological publications that they are not much accessed, or in another language than English (which would be translated).

A final, somewhat personal comment. There is no way that I can accomplish what has been accomplished by the three previous editors, Mark Sundberg, Hank Schlinger, and Sam Leigland. With a little bit of luck and some help from all of you I can possibly keep up the good work.

Jack Michael
Editor