

Chomsky's Review and Responses to the Review

To read a reprint of Chomsky's review, go to <http://www.chomsky.info> . That the review should have been so influential is of considerable interest in itself. It appeared at a moment in the evolution of psychology when cognitive science was just emerging as a coherent discipline. The review seems to have induced a saltation in that evolution by helping the adherents of the new discipline justify abandoning the methodological constraints of behaviorism, for the review is widely cited in that context. This had the unfortunate effect of cutting the field off from the bedrock of behavioral principles that are necessary for interpreting complex behavior outside the laboratory; despite their ubiquity, contingencies of reinforcement are seldom invoked in cognitive interpretations of behavior. This consequence of the review is especially unfortunate, because it is deeply flawed. Kenneth MacCorquodale wrote a detailed rebuttal of the review. See MacCorquodale, K. (1970) On Chomsky's Review of Skinner's *Verbal Behavior*. *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior*, 13, 83-89. It is available at:

<http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/picrender.fcgi?artid=1333660&blobtype=pdf>

Unfortunately, MacCorquodale's paper was not influential. See below: **The influence of MacCorquodale's critique of Skinner's Verbal Behavior**. Chomsky himself saw no reason to change his position and said as much in a 2006 interview in *The Behavior Analyst*. See the interview at the following website:

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2223151/> For a response to this interview, and for a summary of the history of the relationship between Chomsky's review and Skinner's book, see below, **Reply to Chomsky**.

Limitations of Structuralist Accounts of Language

Although we think that Chomsky's review of Skinner's book is flawed, it does not necessarily follow that Chomsky's approach to the study of language is wrong. But we think it is wrong on other grounds, both specific and fundamental. Chomsky's approach is avowedly essentialistic, and it can't be squared with the selectionist approach adopted in this text by merely translating some terms, adopting new procedures, or modifying a few assumptions. The two positions are fundamentally incompatible. **See below, Selectionism vs. Essentialism** for a discussion of the fundamental incompatibility of the two approaches, with some particular comments about the implications for Chomsky's position.

In addition, we have specific objections to Chomsky's position. Even if one grants Chomsky's assumptions, his approach achieves only an illusion of explanatory adequacy. As one case in point, whenever a formidably problem for language acquisition is encountered, he invokes the genetic endowment as an explanatory *deus ex machina*. But proposed genetic contributions must themselves be explained if the account is to have any substance. At the very least, they must be evolutionarily plausible, and the ones proposed by Chomsky are not. This and other

shortcomings of Chomsky's position are elaborated below in **Chomsky's Nativism: A Critical Review**.