

B. F. Skinner Lecture Series

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The Bidirectional Operant as Behavioral Metamorphosis

Chair: R. Douglas Greer (Columbia University Teachers College and Graduate School of Arts and Sciences)

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Born in post-war Germany, Peter Pohl spent ten very formative years (from 5 to 15) growing up in Long Beach, CA, then returned to Germany and received his PhD in clinical child psychology from the University of Munich. Subsequent clinical research (acquired aphasia in children) at the Children's Center in Munich and comparative experimental research (functional asymmetry of the auditory system in baboons) at the University of Washington's Regional Primate Research Center in Seattle followed. A position as assistant professor of clinical neuropsychology was carried out at the University of Bielefeld,

Germany. Experimental and clinical publications on various aspects of language acquisition in international journals document a longstanding professional interest in this field. A combination of child psychology practitioner and English teacher in a gymnasium in bicultural Brixen (South Tyrol), Italy were followed by a business occupation in organizational psychology for international corporations in Vienna, Austria. Peter founded the Child Psychology Practice Garmisch in the Bavarian Alps in 1997, and maintains collaborative R&D primarily in the field of verbal behavior development with various universities and enterprises in Europe, China and the US.

Abstract: Despite the excellent work carried out on the subject, from an outsider's perspective one could argue that the bidirectional operant has not been explicitly appreciated for what would seem to be its most valuable asset, namely as a manifestation of a new class of operant behavior. What distinguishes this higher-order operant, as it is called, from simple operant behavior and what constitutes its bi-directionality? These questions are addressed in an attempt to understand verbal behavior acquisition from a developmental and evolutionary perspective. Comparative data are reported which support the view that the bidirectional operant is an exemplar of extreme life-stage modularity during acquisition of verbal behavior and may be functionally homologous to the biological phenomenon of complete metamorphosis. The presentation concludes with a consideration of the potential relevance of operant bi-directionality as a behavioral phenotype which underlies the accelerated transformation of learning in a world unhinged.