Remembrance of Ernst L. Moerk

Henry D. Schlinger

California State University, Los Angeles and Northridge

I visited Ernst while he was convalescing from brain surgery in Los Angeles. It was the first time we had officially met, although I had attended talks he had given and we had corresponded via email several times when I was editor of *The Analysis of Verbal Behavior*.

Ernst greeted me at the door of his room in the convalescent center and asked if I wanted a beer. It was early afternoon and I said I didn't but that I would get something else to drink. So we walked down to the corner store, where Ernst bought himself a beer, and treated me to a bottle of water.

We walked back to the center and sat in chairs by the windows outside his room. For the next hour or so, we talked about various topics, including behaviorism, language, and Ernst's life.

He admitted he still wasn't completely facile with behavior analysis, although it was clear that was where his sympathies lay. We discussed the problem of mental events in a science of behavior, with me trying to describe a radical behavioral approach.

Ernst talked about his new book, which he said was almost finished, and his homes in Austria and Fresno. When I told him I might be in the market for a full-time academic position, he offered to put me in contact with people in the psychology department at California State University—Fresno. He described Fresno as a good place to live and spoke fondly of his house and life there.

Most of the other patients in the convalescent center were older than Ernst, and he mentioned more than once how he felt out of place. Otherwise, he was in good spirits and seemed to have little difficulty talking and remembering, despite the fact that he had just undergone brain surgery. But he grew tired and I told him that I should probably leave. Ernst walked me downstairs to the front door and thanked me

for the visit. I wished him a speedy recovery and we agreed to stay in touch via email.

I am sorry I did not get a chance to spend more time with Ernst, but glad for the opportunity to visit with him when I did.

POST SCRIPT

Since Ernst's death, Ray Weitzman informed me that several years ago Ernst had had an exchange with Steven Pinker in the *Journal of Child Language* regarding Ernst's reanalysis and reinterpretation of the data presented by Roger Brown in his 1973 book, *A First Language: The Early Stages*. Brown reported the results of a longitudinal study on three children and their parents and concluded that the frequency of parental linguistic input was not a significant factor in the children's language acquisition. Ernst (1980) argued that his reanalysis of the data showed otherwise. It seems to me that in his article Ernst went out of his way not only to be impartial in his treatment of Brown's work, but, in fact, even complimentary, referring to Brown's book as already a "classic work on first language acquisition" (p. 105), and saying that Brown "has not only provided the most encompassing summary of the findings on this topic, he has also compared and examined in an admirable manner diverse hypotheses and has attempted to evaluate them on the basis of the data at his disposal" (p. 105). Ernst concluded that a more "detailed examination" of the various hypotheses of early language acquisition was needed.

Pinker (1981) replied to Ernst's article in a decidedly less neutral way, beginning right in the abstract by referring to Ernst's analysis as containing "methodological and logical errors" (p. 477). Elsewhere, Pinker referred to Ernst's analysis as *post hoc* or *ad hoc*, at one point asking, "How does Moerk explain this embarrassing fact?" (p. 481). Since the gloves were off, Ernst (1981) replied to Pinker and took his younger colleague to task by showing the flaw in Pinker's knowledge about the relation between the number of paired observations and

Address correspondence to Henry D. Schlinger, 11325 Riverside Dr., Toluca Lake, CA 91602; email: hschlin@calstatela.edu.

the size of a correlation coefficient, and elsewhere calling Pinker's arguments about the lack of statistical significance in Brown's data "astonishing." Ernst discredited Pinker's criticisms point by point in a very convincing way. Even so, Ernst concluded that the data from Brown's study were "too weak to draw any firm conclusion even for the subjects studied" much less "to generalize to any larger sample," and he once again called for "further open-minded explorations" of the question of the role of frequency effects on early language acquisition. (1981, p. 632)

As someone who has also taken on Pinker recently (Schlinger, 2002), I was heartened to see that Ernst had done so effectively more than two decades earlier. Unfortunately, as a relatively lone voice in the linguistic wilderness, Ernst's more behavioral position on language acquisition did not carry the day, at least in mainstream linguistic and psychological circles. His emphasis on the effects of frequency of input, among other environmental variables, however, has since been confirmed by more well-controlled studies (see Hart & Risley, 1985).

Ernst Moerk's contributions to a behavior analysis of language acquisition, while not

explicitly behavior analytic, are a legacy that we behavior analysts should mine in our continuing efforts to disseminate a more functional approach to understanding verbal behavior.

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