

[Column 2 Set 2] Exploring More Mysteries of Living: Example and Style Constraints Support Content



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Why these Columns? Because human behavior causes global problems, and solving these problems requires changes in human behavior... So *everyone* benefits from knowing something about the natural science of human behavior that these columns describe. See the 72 columns of the first set, in the *Explaining Mysteries of Living* book or on **BehaviorInfo.com**, for the *basics* of this science.

These columns all provide sources for more information. They also constantly share two concerns pertaining to examples and writing style. The third column of the first set of columns provided details. So here only a brief reminder should suffice to protect us from misunderstandings.

In early columns, or with basic principles and processes, simple human behaviors as well as an occasional non-human behavior provided the examples best illustrating some particular point, because behaviorology concerns all behavior. However, the realistic explanation of ordinary, which really means complex, human behavior remains our primary emphasis as we get into later columns.

The particular difficulty with normal human-behavior examples centers on their inevitable complexity. Every realistic example contains numerous factors and effects. Many of these regularly interact with each other. While an example illustrates one or another concept or point, these other factors and effects continue to demand explanation as well. Meeting such demands would expand each example far too much, and would get me into trouble with editors or publishers.

Instead, these columns satisfy best with the patience of going without answers until satisfactory ones take a turn in the telling. This prevents simplified examples from misleading or falsely implying that our principles and concepts only work in limited areas such as human abnormal behavior or circus-animal training.

Regarding writing style, you may have noticed a need to get used to the style in these columns. The style is not designed to be hard on readers, but it is designed to avoid, or at least reduce, some linguistic characteristics that can make understanding behavior science more difficult.

In some ways our language is currently hurting its users, just as procreation, for perhaps the first time in human history, is hurting humanity. While that topic basically concerns overpopulation making many global problems worse, it remains for a later column. Right now, let's look at the linguistic concerns.

Comprehending the present writing style compels us to review a little about the rise of language, which is verbal behavior. It is a function of the same kinds of variables that produce all other behavior. One major class of variables that controls the kinds of phrasings we use in English stems from the pre-scientific *agential* viewpoint that reasonably existed at the time of the origins of language. Then, primitive animism was the most parsimonious view.

Primitive animism explained movements as the result of inner spirit agents animating both organic and inorganic objects, such as animals and rocks and wind and water and clouds. As languages evolved they often retained the certain economy of words that agentialism coincidentally enables without reference to its shrinking accuracy.

Thus today our language is laced with agential references, with personal pronouns as likely the most common. To say "I" or "you" or "he" or "she" is automatically to imply an unmeasurable inner agent of one or another variety, like a mind or psyche or self or soul or person. Thus, stylistically, in these columns we try to engage phrasings that lack, or at least reduce, these pronouns.

The result, however, while scientifically more accurate, may sound stilted, a result with which I hope you will be patient. Experience shows that increased exposure to phrasings that support scientific realities reduces the discomfort that they may otherwise cause.

A similar problem confronts us over the use of active voice (for example, Jane earned money) and passive voice (for example, money was earned *by Jane*). Active voice, due to its direct subject-predicate-object structure, enhances clarity and readability, which accounts for its preference among authors, editors, and publishers. But look more closely; you will find that active-voice structure often implies agency. Whatever is in the subject slot comprises the not always measurable agent of the action.

Passive voice avoids that problem but at the high cost of reducing readability and clarity. In spite of these problems, some scientific disciplines expect their authors to rely on passive voice to avoid the action agents. In technical papers, the action agents usually only appear in the authorship line.

Stylistically, in these columns we will continue to rely on active voice, but with fewer pronoun subjects than might occur in ordinary phrasing. Instead, words for other things or events or processes will serve better as sentence subjects.

In time, the increased quality of science and its products that may derive from recognizing and dealing with agential issues, including personal pronouns and active voice, will likely affect the way we regularly speak and write. We may come to exhibit more and more verbal behavior that, consistent with scientific reality, lacks inner-agent connotations. We may even gradually become more and more comfortable, individually and culturally, with this development.

Meanwhile, when particular topics lead us to need more explicit scientific accuracy, some of the phrasings in these columns may seem distorted to you due to the strength, only gradually reducing, of our lifelong agency-based verbal conditioning. Perhaps a new grammar is on the rise.

Note that this second set of columns also turned out to contain 72 columns, just like the first set. Is that confusing? My topic-list plans for this second set developed without any reference to how many columns the set might need. Perhaps other authors will provide additional sets of columns. Perhaps I'm getting too old for this sort of thing.

For a book that contains details of all the topics covered in both this new set of columns, and in the previous set, see my 2014 book, *Running Out of Time—Introducing Behaviorology to Help Solve Global Problems*. This book appropriately follows the pattern of a jargon-laced textbook. You will love it! The BOOKS page at www.behaviorology.org contains a full descriptions of it as well as a full description of the *Explaining Mysteries of Living* book, which contains the first set of 72 columns.

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