

## MENTALISTIC THEORY AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

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**Introduction:** The mentalistic language acquisition theory, advanced by Noam Chomsky in 1960s, supported through such concepts like Nativist Position (Nativism), Innateness Position, and Rationalist Position, claims that for the basic structure of language and how it is mastered and how human language develops, it is not the environment but language structures, processes, and ideas that dwell in mind at birth serve for the acquisition of languages. According to this theory, then, the speaker's inborn knowledge (Innateness Position) of language, not the consequences of behavior, can be held responsible for the acquisition of language. In this study, the attributes of the mentalist language acquisition theory will be explored and the truthfulness of this type of learning will be questioned.

### THE BACKGROUND OF MENTALIST THEORY

The mentalistic theory of language learning, developed in America by Noam Chomsky first and later by Eric H. Lenneberg (a neuropsychologist), came up as a reaction against the Behavioristic language learning theory, and contradicted its precedent at almost every point of basic structure. The major principle of Mentalistic language acquisition theory is that "everybody learns a language, not because they are subjected to a similar conditioning process, but because they possess an inborn capacity which permits them to acquire a language as a normal Maturation Process" (D.A. Wilkins, 1972: 168). In 1965, in a book titled **Aspects of the Theory of Syntax**, Chomsky claimed that there are innate properties of language because a child masters his native language in a very short time in spite of the highly abstract nature of rules. After this, in an article entitled "**Linguistic Theory**" Chomsky called this innate knowledge as Language Acquisition Device (LAD hereafter). He also insisted that every normal human being is born into a society with a LAD, which embodies the nature and the structure of human language. LAD is what counts for language acquisition where in environment has got no importance for the learning process at all.

LAD, in fact, was offered by Chomsky as an explanation why kids develop competence in learning a first language in a relatively short time, just by being exposed to it, owing to the fact that every normal human being is born with a LAD. In 1967, Eric H. Lenneberg in a book titled **Biological Foundations of**

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Language stated that "Language is a species-specific behavior and that certain modes of perception, categorizing, and other language-related mechanisms are biologically determined" (H. Douglas Brown, 1980: 22) Through this book he provided a biological support and interpretation to Chomsky's Mentalist and nativist claims. Thus, this very fact on biologically-oriented nature of language acquisition is very reminiscent of biolinguistics, which is "the study of language as a biologically determined activity of the organism with emphasis on neurophysical, embryological and genetic features" (Mario Pei 1966: 30).

The additional notion propounded by Mentalistic language learning theory is that the learning capacity of human being by definition is not only universal but also innate, and this innate capacity is not something to be obtained socially. In other words, language learning is not socially oriented. Then, language learning and its environment must be viewed as a biologically acquired process rather than a result of social learning. In the end, the Chomskian doctrine came up to support the fact that universals of language were a set of rules programmed in the brains of only and only human infants.

#### MENTALIST THEORY AND CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

The inborn mechanism for learning in kids mind works through a unique process. After birth, a child is exposed to language utterances which start to manipulate the learning levels as the child grows up in his family. At each learning level, the kid subconsciously forms up hypotheses, and tests them in his linguistic formations and thus he induces rules from his data. As he discovers that his hypotheses fall short for his utterances he rechecks them and makes the necessary modifications and then induces new rules. As he grows up more and more, his hypotheses become gradually complex, and by applying them to his performance he, by and by, becomes a competent speaker of the language he is born into. By 18 months of age he forms of two -word or there- word sentences that are known as telegraphic utterances that signal his competence over the language. In this way, right from his birth up to his childhood he builds up an internal adult grammar of his native language through these hypotheses. Then, "the mentalist view of the language and use accepts the fact that speakers make conscious choices when they speak. Their use of language reflects their thoughts, which may be entirely original and unpredictable" (Hubbard Jones and Thornton Wheeler, 1983: 329).

#### MAIN PRECEPTS OF THE MENTALIST THEORY REVISITED

Chomsky, who is the originator of the Mentalist theory, made a serious attack on the thesis and concepts established by B.F. Skinner's behaviorist practice. Chomsky's principal criticism of Behavioristic language learning is based on the argument that a language learning theory in the way behavioristic psychology processes cannot account for the development of language and its learning, owing to the following reasons:

1. Language learning is of inborn nature for the most part, and therefore "language is not a habit structure" (N. Chomsky, 1966: 412). In addition, language

learning and language development are a biological process, having nothing to do with the results of social learning. For this reason human knowledge is embodied as LAD at birth and develops via structures, processes, and ideas, which are all mental developments. In a word, language acquisition is innately determined. This innate property "whose nature and mode of operation are inviolable" (D.A. Wilkins 1972: 171), otherwise known as LAD, has got the following features:

- a) The power to differentiate speech sounds from each other,
- b) The capacity to organize linguistic events into various classes that can easily be redefined afterwards,
- c) Knowledge specifying the possible linguistic system and rejecting the impossible and inadmissible ones,
- d) Data-selecting ability, its constants evaluation in an advancing linguistics system and of the linguistic data that are encountered.

2. The linguistics behavior is not composed of responses to stimuli, that is, of S ---> R relationship; and it is not a matter of habit - formation and generalisation. "S --->R theory is so limited, the problem of language acquisition simply falls beyond its domain" (D. McNeil, 1966: 412). The stimuli-response is therefore nonsense, for a kid uses his cognitive capacity to discover the structure of the language spoken around himself. Moreover, Behaviourist theory mostly analyzed animal behavior in labs, but human behavior is much more complex than animal behavior. Language behavior is so unique to humans that it can never be explained by means of animal behavior. Not the external environment and its resulting responses but innate environment is important.

3. According to Chomsky, LAD is peculiar only to human beings who use language, where as other animals do not. Since all human beings learn their language successfully they have to possess some internal capacity for language learning that other animals do not own; then, this capacity cannot have been acquired socially, therefore, it must be innate. Thus, social factors have virtually no function at all in learning languages. It is the inborn capacity which is responsible for the language acquisition process.

4. Analogizing and generalisations made by children are, in fact, production and application of rules, because "ordinary linguistic behavior characteristically involves innovation. formation of new sentences and new patterns in accordance with rules of great abstractness and intricacy... therefore there are no known principles of association or reinforcement, and no known sense of generalisation that can begin to account for this characteristic "creative" aspect of normal behavior" (N. Chomsky, 1966: 48). To put it in other words, such behavioristically oriented, customary notions like imitation-practice-learn-by doing-habit-formation, as clarified by Transformational-generative Grammar, do not work positively to expose the linguistic creativity in language learning.

5. Children quite often parrot the words and structures of their parents, but in many cases children's language indicate systematic departures from the language used by their adults: then, such systematic deviations refute the deductions of a theory which relegates the learning of a language to imitative behavior. The fact here is that the kids do not always imitate what they hear. For example, in terms of overgeneralisation, irregular past tense verbs are infrequent in parents' speech, and kids do not often imitate such verbs but produce systematic forms like \*comed, \*goed, \*doed, \*speaked, and \*becomed. And this very fact indicates that the kids in a majority of cases go on their own ways in speaking. Parental frequency, approval or disapproval are very limited in terms of grammaticality because parents mostly insist on truth values of the utterances. Then, parental approval cannot be considered as reinforcement for grammaticality.

6. In brief, the gist and the summary list of the mentalist theory can be stated as follows: "Hypothesis testing instead of discrimination learning, evaluation of hypothesis instead of reinforcement of responses, rules instead of habits, productivity instead of generalisation, innate and universal human capacities instead of special methods of vocal responses" (Esper Erwin, 1968: 227).

Thus, in accordance with this type of reasoning of Mentalism, it is clear that the major concepts of behaviorism to language are entirely inefficient for a satisfactory description of language as verbal behavior. Moreover, it is obvious that behaviorist language learning processes will for the most part fall short, will be quite inefficient to explain one's ability to learn and use his mother tongue. Transformational-generative Grammar (TG henceforth) has indicated that the systems of rules in language use is highly complicated, therefore Behaviorist theory is incompetent in describing how an unsophisticated infant could abstract these rules consciously and unconsciously.

#### COUNTERARGUMENTS ON MENTALIST THEORY

To some extent, the mentalist theory seems complementary to behaviorist theory, whose major principles are further clarified and then developed by mentalist theorists. The following reasonings represent the fact that some of the precepts of Mentalist theory should be refined.

1. Language acquisition is not totally of inborn nature nor is it just a matter of biological make-up. There is also an undeniable effect in language learning coming from the social environment since infants grow up biologically in a social environment from which they cannot be divorced. The presence of a mother and father in front of a child establishes a natural social environment. No one can learn to speak if there is no one around: then, in this respect, innate language learning will be nothing but a fiasco. It is logical to think that every human being has got a biosocial nature. Though "balance between environmental influences and biological growth was still not clear" (H.H. Stern, 1983: 302)

2. At each learning level, the kid's forming up an hypothesis and trying it in his linguistic formations, recognising that his hypothesis falls short, then he makes

necessary modifications, all of these indicate that he still learns by doing: a method like trial and error; thus, acquisition is also a learn-by-doing activity to an extent. Therefore, language learning is basically a mentally-oriented verbal behavior.

3. According to Whorfian hypothesis, and later Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, language exerts an undeniably formative, limitive effect on perception and cognition of language, especially in learning one's mother tongue. On addition, the individual's world view and his cognitive system are naturally controlled and shaped by the verbal systems of all kinds given restrictively to him by society into which he is born into in the process of acquisition of native language. Then it is very difficult to buy the idea that "the social factors have virtually no role at all" in learning languages (D.A. Wilkins, 1972: 171-172).

4. The use and influence of imitations and reinforcements cannot totally be denied or disregarded by saying that they destroy or relegate the possible creativity in language learning. But before making a creative performance, that performance has to be established as an acquired skill whose formation can only be managed by imitations, repetitions, and reinforcements of certain doses, after a reasonable amount of which the "threshold level" (Mehmet Demircen, 1988: 138-139) of learning will naturally be established in the language learning process. How will you make the unknown or newly learned, say, vocabulary items mastered completely?

As it is clear, the role of imitations and repetitions cannot be wholly denied in such areas like learning vocabulary items and structural patterns. Then, to favor a considerable dose of imitations, repetitions, and reinforcement will be reasonable, provided that they should be stopped at the junction where they harm the creative use of language.

5. Analogizing and generalizations are not entirely the application of rules and transformations, but are productions and reinforcements and can only be sophisticated by repetitions. It is true to say that in analogizing or making generalizations children commit mistakes, i.e., they utter the past tense of such irregular verbs like **go**, **do**, and **make** as **\*goed**, **\*doed** and **\*maked**, which by themselves are applications. As it is apparent, not each application of rules create correct grammatical forms. It is reasonable to think that application of rules, for the most part, generates correct verbal items, not the incorrect ones, though it does both.

6. It is not true to say that behaviorism is "at least quite incapable of explaining our ability to learn and use our mother tongue" (Noam Chomsky, 1959: 26-58). On the contrary, Behaviorism is a clear-cut explanation of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which insists that one's native tongue limits and restricts his view of the world. Moreover, there tongue limits and restricts his view of the world. Moreover, there have always been negative interferences and transfers from the mother tongue in foreign language teaching process, both in competence and performance levels. The motto of behaviorism is that language is a verbal behavior, learn-by-doing activity in learning a language. Kids will naturally commit mistakes while not only learning their mother tongue but also a foreign language. Thus, this claim of Chomsky is totally baseless.

## MENTALIST THEORY AND LANGUAGE TEACHING

It is an obvious fact that behaviorism has influenced and dominated foreign language teaching for several decades. Yet, Behaviorist attitude towards the meaning in language, uncreativity, and much indulgence on stimuli-response were taken up as serious causes of attack. As for Mentalism, it seems too much theoretical. In mentalist type of learning, all that is needed is the adequate exposure to the target language which will give ideas to the kid to form hypothesis on linguistic utterances. In addition, external factors will not be influential on the learning process and learning will take place without repetitions and reinforcements. Isn't this type of reasoning entirely theoretical? Moreover, the kid will induce rules from the data and then will attempt to apply these rules in producing and understanding more of the language. The problem is to get the initial conscious learning of the rules from the data established.

As seen in the argument presented above, most of the steps taken in language teaching inclination of Mentalist theory seem rather theoretical and less practical. Without adequate drilling, which is a necessary device to maximize active language production correctly, guided rule learning, inefficient repetition and reinforcement under free conditions, all of which imprint the correct utterances into the mind of the students, nothing can be achieved. In addition, "carefully planned schedules of reinforcement are unnecessary, since learning will take place whether or not the individual is reinforced" (D.A. Wilkins, 1972: 172). The basic language teaching inclination of Mentalist theory then, will be adequate to teach foreign languages realistically and effectively, and therefore it has to be mingled and matured with the practicality of the Behaviorist theory. Behaviorism will be the best component for such a union to temper some of the basic practises of Mentalism in class.

## CONCLUSION

It is an obvious fact that Mentalist language learning and teaching theory is a clear-cut challenge to many claims of Behavioristic language use. A specific contribution of Mentalism to language learning theory is that it has bestowed a strong emphasis on human language learning behavior. In other words, according to Chomsky, human behavior is considerably more complicated. Behaviorists analyzed the results of animal behavior in labs, drew conclusions deeply dependent on laboratory experiments, whose conclusions cannot lead to explain the intricacies of human behavior. It is clear that it is not a reliable attitude to describe and explain the human verbal behavior through the learning behavior of animals.

After 1960s, as a vivid contribution of Mentalist learning theory, the child, not the animals, itself began to play by and by a major role in the analysis of the learning process "This revolution was strongly influenced by the rapid rise of a new development in linguistics, which can also be traced back to Chomsky: Transformational-Generative Grammar (was a source of inspiration for all sorts of experiments in language learning research" (Theo Van Els, et al, 1984: 28). Because TG assumed that language learning ability is inborn and it is the LAD that allows

the kids to make hypotheses about the nature and the composition of the language.

Another contribution of Mentalism is the fact that behaviorist attitude to the study of meaning was not deep and satisfactory. The term meaning was already considered as a mental process by some psychologists. Mentalism has stressed that a meaningful learning presupposes a treatment of the meaning of words, phrases, and sentences. Though the mentalists made no explanations as to how meaning should be taught.

A new discovery in language teaching is generated by Mentalism. This is the concept that not only the mental activities of the language learner himself but the impact of the external factors such as imitation, frequency of S ---> R reinforcement, analogizing and the impact of internal and external environment are to be properly analyzed. This is where Behaviorism and Mentalism meet each other as two complementary theories attempting to unearth the riddles involved in learning and teaching languages. In this respect, children's language learning is based on the on-going activity of the interaction of not only the external impressions but also the internal systems (since the child is endowed with analogy-forming and analogy-making mechanism).

Finally, Mentalist language learning theory has produced the cognitive approach in language teaching; learning is also considered to be an active mental process. Mentalist language learning produces meaningful and conscious learning. In a word, Mentalist theory has heralded the fact that, as further approved by Transformational-Generative Grammar and Cognitive view of psychology, function of the mind has also a saying in the language teaching process. Then, Behaviorist language learning theory has analyzed the surface levels but mentalism has added to this concept the analysis of the deep structures of the language. One might ask, which one do we have to choose in language learning and teaching? The answer to this question is Behaviorism plus Mentalism.

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