

Behaviorist Theory and the Mentalist Theory of L1 Acquisition

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Make a comparative study of the Behaviorist Theory and the mentalist Theory of L1 Acquisition.

Language acquisition has two main theories. The "Behaviorist Theory" says children learn their first language (L1) through environmental bases and responses. It was popular in the 1950s. They imitate sounds and are rewarded when correct. The "Mentalist Theory" argues that children have an inborn ability to learn language. It is led by Noam Chomsky. According to this view, language is a natural ability, not just learned from the environment.

Mechanisms of Language Acquisition: The behaviourist theory, championed by B.F. Skinner claims language is learned through imitation, practice, and reinforcement. In this view, language acquisition is a process of habit formation. Here, children imitate the speech they hear around them and are reinforced with correct responses.

In contrast, the mentalist theory suggests that children are born with an innate capacity for language. Chomsky introduced the concept of the Language Acquisition Device (LAD). Unlike behaviorism, mentalism focuses on internal cognitive processes and emphasizes that humans are biologically wired for language.

Role of Environment: In the behaviourist view, the environment is crucial. Children learn language primarily through exposure, imitation, and the responses they receive from those around them. For instance, when a child says "mama" and is rewarded with praise or attention, they are likely to repeat this behaviour.

The mentalist perspective, however, downplays the role of the environment. According to Chomsky, while exposure to language is necessary, it is not the sole determinant of language acquisition. Children can produce sentences they've never heard before. The mentalist theory argues that the environment provides only limited input, while the brain's innate structures process this input. The latter enables the child to acquire language.

Explanation of Errors: Behaviorism treats language errors as mistakes in habit formation. For example, if a child says "goed" instead of "went," it's seen as a failure in imitation or

reinforcement. The theory suggests that the child will eventually learn the correct form through correction and repetition.

The mentalist approach views such errors as evidence of children applying internal rules to language. For instance, the overgeneralization of adding "-ed" to form past tense ("goed" instead of "went") shows that children are actively constructing grammatical systems, not merely imitating adults.

Creativity in Language Use: One major criticism of behaviourism is its inability to explain the creative use of language. According to behaviorists, language is learned through fixed patterns. However, it fails to account for how children can produce novel sentences.

On the other hand, Chomsky's mentalist theory argues that human language is inherently creative. The LAD allows children to understand and create sentences they've never encountered before. It demonstrates that language acquisition is more than just memorizing patterns.

Critiques and Limitations: The behaviorist approach has been criticized for oversimplifying language learning. It fails to account for the complexity and abstract nature of language. For example, behaviorism cannot explain why children acquire grammatical structures that are rarely reinforced.

On the other hand, the mentalist theory is criticized for being too focused on biological factors. It often overlooks the role of social interaction and cultural context. Critics argue that language acquisition cannot be fully understood without considering how social factors shape language learning.

In conclusion, while behaviorist and mentalist theories offer valuable insights into first language acquisition and they approach the subject differently. The behaviorist theory emphasizes the role of the environment. It views language learning as a habit-formation process. In contrast, the mentalist theory focuses on innate cognitive abilities. It argues that language acquisition is a biologically driven process.