**Module:** Linguistics

**Level:** L2

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**Unit 2:** **Schools of Linguistics**

**Lesson one: Language Acquisition Theories (Part 1)**

**Introduction**

Language is GOD's special and unique gift to mankind without which human civilization would have remained an impossibility. As a distinct area of interest, psycholinguistics developed in the early sixties, and in its early form covered acoustic phonology and language pathology. But, later it has been deeply influenced by the development of the generative theory, and its most important area of investigation has been ‘**language acquisition’**. It has raised and has partly answered questions such as how do children acquire their mother tongue? How do they grow up linguistically and learn to handle the stylistic features of their mother tongue effectively? And how much do they discover on the basis of their exposure to language?

In order to account for the phenomenon of language acquisition by children, during the past forty years, there have been two main theories known as Behaviourism and Mentalism. The Behaviourist school of thought has argued that learning is entirely the product of experience and that our environment affects all of us in the same way. On the other hand, the Mentalist school of thought has suggested that everybody has an innate language learning mechanism. Let us discover with the help of these two schools of thought how do children acquire their mother tongue?

**The Behaviourist School**

The behaviourist theory, which is basically a psychological theory in its essence, focusing on behaviour, denies any independent significance for the mind and assumes that behaviour is entirely determined by the environment. During the first half of the twentieth century, [John B. Watson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_B._Watson) devised methodological behaviourism, which rejected [introspective methods](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Introspection) and sought to understand behaviour by only measuring observable behaviours and events focusing on Classical conditioning.

**Classical Conditioning**

Classical conditioning was created by Ivan Pavlov and later its concept was developed by John Watson. It is divided into three phases: before conditioning, during conditioning, and after conditioning.

1. The first phase insists on the knowledge about what are the unconditioned stimuli and what are the unconditioned results expected. For example, salivating in response to the smell of food as a natural occurring stimulus.

2. The second phase occurs when an association between the previous neutral stimulus and the natural response is established, that is, the dog associates the sound of the bell with the idea of being fed. At this moment, the neutral stimulus becomes known as the conditioned stimulus because the dog has now been conditioned to respond to the neutral stimulus as well.

3. The third, as a last phase, happens when the conditioned stimulus alone will come to evoke a response even without the unconditioned stimulus. For example, the dog starts to salivate after hearing the ring of the bell even when there is no food on sight.

**Behavioural Theory:**

Behaviours, such as acting, thinking, and feeling can be scientifically observed and measured. Language, as a behaviour, is a set of habits acquired by *operant conditioning and reinforcement*. This is the theory developed by **B. F. Skinner** and **Pavlov**. According to B.F Skinner and his colleagues, the behaviourists, learning or a change of behaviour on the part of the learner, is brought about by a process known as *operant conditioning* which **is the result of repeated training.** The term “Operant” means “voluntary behaviour” which is the result of learners’ own free-will and is not forced by any outside person, force, or thing. The learner demonstrates the new behaviour first as a response to a system of reward or punishment, and finally as an automatic response. In order to prove their theory, they conducted an experiment.

**Experiment:** In a typical experiment, a rat is put in a box containing a bar. If it presses the bar, it is rewarded with a pellet of food. Nothing forces it to press the bar. On the first time, it probably does so accidentally. When the rat finds that the food arrives, it presses the bar again. Eventually, it finds that if it is hungry, it can obtain food by pressing the bar. Then, the task is made more difficult. The rat only gets rewarded if it presses the bar while a light is flashing. At first, the rat is puzzled. Eventually, it learns the trick. Then, the task is made more difficult again. This time the rat only receives food, if it presses the bar a certain number of times. After initial confusion, it also learns to do this and so on. Thus, Operant conditioning can be summarized as STIMULUS RESPONSE REINFORCEMENT REPETITION

In operant conditioning, reinforcement plays a vital role. A reinforcer is any event that increases the probability of the occurrence of a preceding behaviour. In fact, there are two kinds of reinforcement:

**a. Positive Reinforcement:** Positive reinforcement involves praising, repetition, frequent exposure and rewards. It has been shown by the experiments that positive reinforcement works much better in bringing about good learning.

**b. Negative Reinforcement:** Rebukes (criticicsm), physical punishment and discomfort fall into the negative reinforcement category.

**Behaviourism and Language Acquisition**

The major principle of the behaviourist theory rests on the analysis of human behaviour in observable stimulus-response interaction and the association between them. Basically, "the behaviourist theory of stimulus-response learning, particularly as developed in the operant conditioning model of Skinner, considers all learning to be the establishment of habits as a result of reinforcement and reward" (Wilga Rivers, 1968, p. 73) The behaviourists believe that learning a language is no different from learning anything else; it becomes a habit by the stimulus-response-reinforcement-repetition process.

The behaviourists also claim that we learn by imitation and association. According to this claim, the baby obtains native language habits via varied babblings which resemble the appropriate words repeated by a person or object near him. Since for his babblings and mutterings he is rewarded, this reward reinforces further articulations of the same sort into grouping of syllables and words in a similar situation. (As an instance for learning by imitation and association, a little child hears the word 'apple' every time he is given one. He soon associates the word 'apple' with the actual thing. He then starts **imitating** the sounds he has heard and says a phoneme that is part of the word ‘apple’ till he utters the whole word.) His parents are pleased that he has learnt another sound/word and so his response is reinforced. If a particular response is reinforced, it then becomes habitual. In this way, he goes on emitting sounds, set of sounds, and as he grows up, he combines the sentences via generalizations and analogy (as in \***goed** for **went**, \***doed**, for **did**, **ball** for any **rounded shape fruit** or **vegetable** and so on), which in some complicated cases, condition him to commit errors by articulating inpermissible structures in speech. « Through a trial-and-error process, in which acceptable utterances are reinforced by comprehension and approval, and unacceptable utterances are inhibited by the lack of reward, he gradually learns to make finer and finer discriminations until his utterances approximate more and more closely the speech of the community in which he is growing up » **(**Wilga M. Rivers, 1968, p. 73). A verbal behaviour can be, then, shaped and modified by the environment and leads children to produce appropriate behaviours.

Longer sentences are also learned through imitation and chaining; by hearing and imitating enough examples, the child learns word associations rather than grammatical rules. A child acquires grammar by learning these frames or chains, in which each word acts as a stimulus for the next, thus, grammatical units are controlled by surrounding words. Grammar is developed through the learning of structured phrases and sentence frames. Syntactic and semantic slots within each frame are filled by substituting words or phrases that fulfill the same requirements. Word ordering is learned as adults reinforce chains of symbols that are increasingly more adult-like. According to the behaviourist theory, early language behaviour is not rule-governed, but rather shaped by the possibilities offered by the environment. Errors among children would differ from child to child. Their level of linguistic attainment would also differ from one child to the next. This depends on the frequency and degree of reinforcements. By the age of five or six, babblings and mutterings grow into socialized speech, but little by little, they are internalized as implicit speech, and thus, many of their utterances become indistinguishable from the adults.

**Criticism of the Behaviourist Theory**

In fact, psycholinguists argue that imitation, association and analogy are not enough; it is not merely by *mechanical repetition* that children acquire language. They also acquire it by natural exposure. Due to the property of creativity human language enjoys, babies would utter words or utterances that even adults do not say, i.e., words or utterances that have never been heard before. Children would not know the syntax of language. This fact is noticeably witnessed in disordered or ill-grammatical sentences produced little children before the age of five. In addition, children cannot receive reinforcement about abstract ideas. According to the principles of behaviourism, language tends to be hugely dependent on human control. These were some of the Mentalists’ criticisms, led by the American linguist Noam Chomsky, as a reaction to the principles of the behaviourist theory concerning language acquisition among children.

**Further Readings:**

- Classical Conditioning. Retrieved from : <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/boundless-psychology/chapter/classical-conditioning/>

-Behaviorist Theory on Language Learning and Acquisition. Retrieved from: <http://soda.ustadistancia.edu.co/enlinea/MAURICIO_BUITRAGO_ingles_PSYCHOLINGUISTICS_PRIMER_MOMENTO/Behaviorist_theory_on_language_acquisition.pdf>

* A summary of slideshare can be retrieved from : <https://fr.slideshare.net/coltzlauu/behaviorism-linguistics>