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THE BEHAVIOURIST SCHOOL

- How do children acquire their first mother tongue?
- How do they handle the stylistic features of their mother tongue?

In an attempt to understand the phenomenon of language acquisition by children, there have been two main theories known as *Behaviourism* and *Mentalism*.

The *behaviourist theory* focuses on *behavior* and denies any *independent significance for the mind*, and assumes that behaviour is entirely determined by the environment. During the first half of the 20th century, *John B. Watson* devised methodological behaviourism, which rejected introspection as a method of investigating behaviours and sought to understand them by measuring observable behaviours and events focusing on *classical conditioning*. *Operant conditioning* was created by *Ivan Pavlov* and later its concept was developed by *John Watson*. It is divided into three phases: **before conditioning** (the knowledge about what are the unconditioned stimuli and what are the unconditioned expected results. For example, salivating in response to the smell of food is a naturally occurring stimulus), **during conditioning** (an association between the previously neutral stimulus and the natural response is established. For example, the dog associates the sound of the bell with the idea of being fed), and **after conditioning** (it 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 in sight).

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:

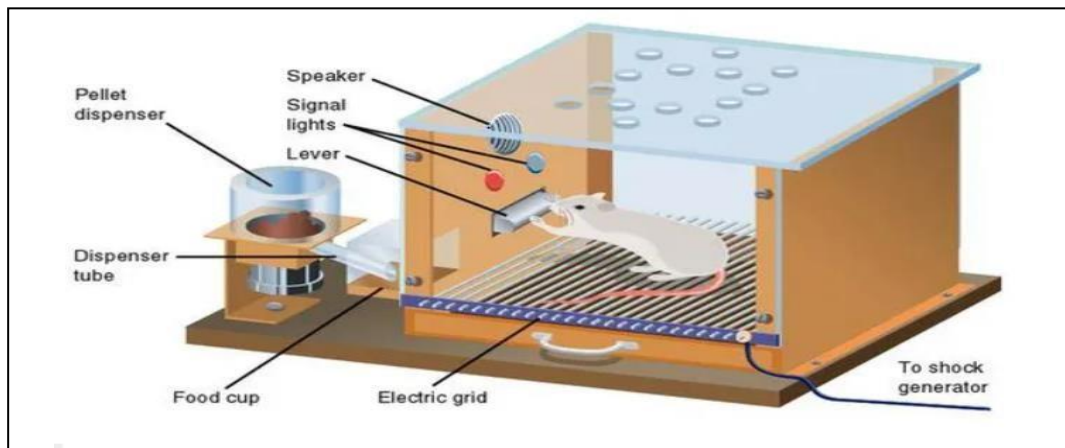


Figure 2: *Stimulus - response - reinforcement - repetition*

In operant conditioning, **reinforcement** plays a vital role. A reinforcer is any event that increases the probability of the occurrence of a preceding behaviour. There are **two kinds of reinforcement**: (1) **Positive Reinforcement** involves praising, repetition, frequent exposure, and rewards. (2) **Negative Reinforcement** rebukes criticism, physical punishment, and discomfort.

Behaviourism and Language Acquisition

- 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 learner’s free will, and who 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.
- The main principle of the behaviourist or **Skinnerian** theory rests on the analysis of human behaviour in observable stimulus-response interaction and the association between them. It considers all learning to be the establishment of habits as a result of reinforcement and reward Basically,
- The behaviourists also claim that infants learn their oral language through a process involving **imitation, association, rewards (praise and affection), and practice** in an environment that provides the stimuli and rewards, 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 learned 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 impermissible 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.

- Children also learn to utter longer sentences through **imitation** and **chaining**; by hearing and imitating others' 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, because grammatical units are controlled by the neighbouring words. Learning syntactic and semantic slots within each chain is largely dependent on substituting words or phrases that fulfill the same requirements. For word ordering, adults play a vital role in reinforcing chains of symbols that are more adult-like. Generally speaking, according to the behaviourists, early language behaviour is shaped by the corrections offered by the environment rather than being rule-governed. Errors are made by children before reaching a full linguistic attainment. Differences in this latter largely depend on the frequency and degree of reinforcements by parents and caregivers until the age of five or six when babblings and mutterings grow into socialized speech and kids start uttering sentences that are indistinguishable from those said by adults.

Criticism of the Behaviourist Theory

When a child imitates the sounds or speech patterns s/he is usually praised and given affection for the efforts made. Thus, **praise** and **affection** become the rewards. However, the behaviourist theory is criticized for a variety of reasons. If rewards play such a vital component in language development, what about the parents who are inattentive or not present when their child acquires his or her mother tongue? Furthermore, **a baby's language learning** is motivated constantly by **rewards** would the speech attempts stop for lack of rewards. 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. 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 nativist/mentalist Noam Chomsky, as a reaction to the principles of the Skinnerian behaviourism concerning language acquisition among little infants. More insight into the nativists' argument for acquiring language will be offered in the following lesson.