Mentalism

1. Background

Mentalism emerged as a reaction against the behaviorist's heavy reliance on animals in their experiments as well as their failure to recognise the importance of the mind for the child's language acquisition. The school was introduced by Noam Chomsky, the main tenets of the mentalist school, the innate or nativist school are as follows:

1. Children are born with an innate capacity to acquire language, which is a contrasting view to that of the behaviorists who claim that children learn basically from the environment.

2. It is believed that language is part of human evolution and not a learned behavior. This is because children learn similarly their first language, i.e., their all go through the same stages in their acquisition process.

3. The children's linguistic development occurs at the same age, same rate regardless the society. It is a biological process

4. Children's natural inborn ability to acquire language is illustrated in the fact that children would string together words in an appropriate way without being taught the syntactic structure.

1. Language acquisition device (LAD)

As opposed to the behaviorist's claim that children's brain is a blank slate, Chomsky states that children are born with a language acquisition device (LAD) which is activated when they are first exposed to their mother tongue. LAD is what distinguishes human beings from animals that can only produce random ungrammatical sounds. This means that we are pre-programmed to produce language. Chomsky provided the argument that children use sentences and grammatical structures they have never heard of. He also states that the child's ability to produce new structures before going to school means there is a common set of grammatical rules in all languages, which he calls Universal Grammar (UG).

1. Universal grammar

Universal grammar consists of a set of unconscious constraints that let native speakers decide whether a sentence is correctly formed. This mental grammar is not necessarily the same for all languages. But according to Chomsky, the process by which, in any given language, certain sentences are perceived as correct while others are not, is universal and independent of meaning. Thus, we immediately perceive that the sentence “Robert book reads the” is not correct in English, even though we have a pretty good idea of what it means. Conversely, we recognize that a sentence such as “Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.” is grammatically correct in English, even though it is nonsense.