

## **BEHAVIORIST THEORY AND LANGUAGE LEARNING**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

There are some basic theories advanced to describe how language is acquired and taught. The behaviorist theory, Mentalist theory, Rationalist theory (otherwise called Cognitive theory), Empiricist theory (Audiolingualism), and Cognitive-code theory are some of these theories. Of these, behaviorist theory and mentalist theory are mainly applicable to the acquisition of native languages while the rest can account for foreign language acquisition. Yet, these five fundamental theories of language learning cannot be totally divorced from each other, for "the objectives of second language learning are not necessarily entirely determined by native language competence inevitably serves as a foil against which to set second language learning." (H.H. Stern, 1983; 30).

### **Mother Tongue and Foreign Language Learning**

These five basic theories are, furthermore, very much complementary to each other, serving different types of learners or representing various cases of language learning. They must not automatically make us presume that first and second language learnings are identical or alike processes, though second language learning is strongly tied up with first language acquisition. Obviously, native language growth must pave the way for foreign language growth. Then these five basic language learning theories are fundamental pillars of language learning whose relevance to education is undeniable.

### **The Background of the Behaviorist Theory**

Behaviorist theory, which is basically a psychological theory in its essence, founded by J.B. Watson, is actually a theory of native language learning, advanced in part as a reaction to traditional grammar. The supporters of this theory are Leonard Bloomfield, O.N. Mowrer, B.F. Skinner, and A.W. Staats. Behaviorism was advanced in America

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as a new approach to psychology in the early decades of the 20th-century by making a particular emphasis on the importance of verbal behavior, and received a considerable trust from the educational world of 1950s.

The major principle of the behaviorist theory rests on the analyses of human behavior in observable stimulus-response interaction and the association between them. E.L.T. Thorndike was the first behaviorist to explore the area that learning is the establishment of associations on particular process of behavior and consequences of that behavior. Basically, "the behaviorist 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, 73). This is very reminiscent of Pavlov's experiment which indicates that stimulus and response work together. According to this category, the babies obtain 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 very reward reinforces further articulations of the same sort into grouping of syllables and words in a similar situation. In this way, he goes on emitting sounds, groups of sounds, and as he grows up he combines the sentences via generalisations and analogy (as in **\*goed** for **went**, **\*doed**, for **did**, so on), which in some complicated cases, condition him to commit errors by articulating in permissible structures in speech. By the age of five or six, or 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. This, then, obviously, means that behaviorist theory is a theory of stimulus-response psychology.

"Through a trial-and-error process, in which acceptable utterances are reinforced by comprehension and approval, and un acceptable 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; 73). To put it in other words, children develop a natural affinity to learn the language of their social surroundings whose importance both over language learning and teaching must never be underestimated. In this respect behaviorist theory stresses the fact that "human and animal learning is a process of habit formation. A highly complex learning task, according to this theory may be learned by being broken down into small habits. These are formed correct or incorrect responses, are rewarded or punished, respectively" (Hubbard Jones

and Thornton Wheeler, 1983; 326). Thus it is clear that the acquisition of learning in infancy is governed the acquisition of other habits.

### **Basic Tenets of Behaviorist Theory**

The following principles illustrate the operating principles of behaviorism:

1) Behaviorist theory dwells on spoken language. That is, primary medium of language is oral: speech is language because there are many languages without written forms, because we learn to speak before we learn to read and write. Then, language is primarily what is spoken and secondarily what is written. That's why spoken language must have a priority in language teaching.

2) Behaviorist theory is the habit formation theory of language teaching and learning, reminding us the learning of structural grammar. Language learning concerns us by "not problem-solving but the information and performance of habits" (Nelson Brooks, 1960; 46-47). In other words, language learning is a mechanical process leading the learners to habit formation whose underlying scheme is the conditioned reflex. Thus it is definitely true that language is controlled by the consequences of behavior.

3) The stimulus-response chain,  $S \longrightarrow \text{Response}$ , is a pure case of conditioning. Behaviorist learning theory "emphasizes conditioning and building from the simplest conditioned responses to more and more complex behaviors" (David S. Palermo, 1978; 19-20). This comes to mean that clauses and sentences are learned linearly as longer and longer stimulus-response chains, produced in a left-to right series of sequence like  $S_1 \longrightarrow S_2 \longrightarrow S_3 \longrightarrow S_4 \dots$ , as probabilistic incidents, which are basically Markov's processes. Each stimulus is thus the cause of a response, and each response becomes the initiator of a stimulus, and this process goes on and on in this way.

4) All learning is the establishment of habits as the result of reinforcement and reward. Positive reinforcement is reward while negative reinforcement is punishment. In a stimulus situation, a response is exerted, and if the response is positively augmented by a reward, then the association between the stimulus and response is itself reinforced and thus the response will very likely be manipulated by every appearance of stimulus. The result will yield conditioning. When responses to stimuli are coherently reinforced, then habit formation is established. It is because of this fact that this theory is termed habit-formation-by-reinforcement theory.

5) The learning, due to its socially-conditioned nature, can be the same for each individual. In other words, each person can learn equally if the conditions in which the learning takes place are the same for each person.

As is seen in these five operating principles, some points are very easily questionable.

### **Counterarguments on Behaviorist Theory of Language Learning**

Needless to say, language teaching anticipates certain theories on language learning because language learning as a fruitful area that embodies the working of human behavior and mental processes of the learners. Each theory may not be complete model for the investigation of language learning. The following counter-arguments can be made upon the working principles of behaviorist theory:

1) Basic strategies of language learning within the scope of behaviorist theory are imitation, reinforcement, and rewarding. However researches made on the acquisition of learning have demonstrated that children's imitation of structures show evidence of almost no innovation; moreover children "vary considerably in the amount that they imitate" (L.M. Bloom, L. Hood, and P.L. Lightbown, 1974; 380-420). Since children do not imitate such structures like words, phrases, clauses and sentences at the same rate they will naturally learn at different rates. Though it must be admitted that imitation is very useful in the acquisition of new vocabulary items. As for reinforcement, "Unfortunately this view of learning receives little support from the available evidence" (Herbert H. Clark and Eve V. Clark, 1977; 336), for the parents only correct the simple structures, and complex structures are occasionally corrected.

2) In behaviorist theory, the process of learning relies more on generalization, rewarding, conditioning, three of which support the development of analogical learning in children. But it can be argued that a process of learning or teaching that encourages the learner to construct phrases, clauses and sentence modelled on previously settled set of rules and drills is thought to obstruct the instinctive production of language. Then, habit formation exercises may not naturally promote intrinsically-oriented language learning.

3) Obstructions made on instinctively-based learning will doubtlessly harm the creative way of learning. It takes a long time to be capable enough to master a language at least a bit intrinsically. There is a

threshold level in language learning, this means that learners must learn consciously supported by repetition and drilling to build up an effective linguistic intuition, acquisition of which marks the establishment of threshold level. Before obtaining the threshold level, the language learner is not creative, cannot use the language properly in new situations in a real sense. It is, then, obvious that the intrinsic learning will be delayed, owing to the late acquisition of threshold level because of previously settled set of rules and drills.

4) The rate of social influence on learning is not satisfactorily explained. To what extent and rate, does the social surrounding promote language learning? This question remains unexplained.

5) It is highly unlikely for learning to be the same for each individual; that is, each person cannot learn equally well in the same conditions in which learning takes place, for the background and the experience of the learners make everybody learn differently. In addition, according to Chomsky, there must be some innate capacities which human beings possess that predispose them to look for basic patterns in language.

6) The main strategies of the behaviorist theory can only be true for the early stages of learning which takes place when the kids are in infancy and in early childhood periods. Moreover, this theory is fruitful for the most part on animal experimentation and learning.

7) Many of the learning processes are mostly too complex, and for this reason there are intervening variables, which cannot be observed between stimulus and response. "That's why, language acquisition cannot take place through habit formation, since language learners are thrown between stimulus and response chain, for language is too far complicated to be learned in such a matter, especially given the brief time available.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear that language learning and its development, for the behaviorists, is a matter of conditioning by means of imitation, practice, reinforcement, and habituation, which constitute the paces of language acquisition. It must be born in mind that all behavioristic theories of learning are associationistic, including Thorndike's, Guthrie's, Hull's, Skinner's, and the theory of the school of functionalism. Apparently, behaviorism has its shortcomings, but it cannot be denied that learning process is for the most part a behavioristic processing, a verbal behavior. In language teaching area, behaviorism establishes the basic background of exercises, either oral or written in viewing language as stimulus and

response. In addition, it gives a great deal of insight into the recognition of the use of controlled observation to discover the laws of behavior. It has exerted a great impact by influencing many teaching methods on the area of language teaching, for example, Audiolingual Method, Total Physical Response, and Silent Way embody the behaviorist view of language; also, British Structuralism has created the theory of language called Situational Language Teaching, as seen in the achievements of British applied linguistics, such as Palmer, Hornby, and Frisby, and the British linguists like J.R. Firth and M.A.K. Halliday. In a word behaviorist theory aims at discovering behavioral justifications for designing language teaching in certain ways, being a hub of many language teaching and learning theories. It must not be forgotten that it has given a push for the creation of empiricist language learning which became very fashionable in U.S.A. and in Europe.

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