

Mentalist Conception of Language Teaching

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Abstract

It is the job of the language teacher to know the language and to know how to teach the language. A language teacher certain problems when he meets the multiplicity of linguistic approaches and different language teaching methods. This paper demonstrates the difference between the Mentalistic Theory and the Taxonomic Theory. This paper also reflects the significance and supremacy of Mentalism in language teaching because it can handle many kinds of facts easily and naturally whereas the Taxonomic theory is unable to handle these facts.

KEY WORDS: Language Teaching, Mentalistic Theory, Social System.

1. INTRODUCTION

There are number of points which teachers can bear in mind during the process of language teaching and the most significant point is *the selection of language teaching methods or language teaching approaches*. The research in the fields of language learning and teaching techniques propagates the use of various classroom teaching methods and approaches. The methods and approaches of teaching a language differ according to the aims for which they are taught. The aim of language teaching has undergone an immense change during the last few decades. The unexpected developments in the area of language and Linguistics in the twentieth century have not only made an honorable place in the syllabi of schools and colleges but also have affected the ultimate aims of education at the school, college and university levels. The sign of development appeared in the field of language teaching was due to the emergence of several new theories, models, methods and approaches. Among them the theory of Mentalism is considered as the most effective to influence various models, methods and approaches of language teaching.

Mentalism is the psychological and the philosophical concept picked up and developed by Noam Chomsky in 1960s. Mentalism attempts to describe the internal (innate) language mechanism that provides the basis for the creative aspect of language development and use. Mentalism claims that the inborn knowledge of language is responsible for the acquisition of a language. The mentalistic theory of language was emerged as a concept in America by Chomsky [1] which was later appreciated by Lenneberg [2]. The mentalistic theory was emerged as a reaction against the behavioristic theory of language. Chomsky insisted that a child is born with a Language Acquisition Device due to that a child develops competence in learning a first language in a society. Lenneberg [2] claimed that language is species specific behavior. He provided a biological support and interpretation to Chomsky's Mentalist claims. Interestingly, there is another name of that legendary decade (1960s) and the name is J.J. Katz [3] who tried to show the difference between the Taxonomic conception of Linguistics and the Mentalist conception of Linguistics. Katz's (1964) work reflects the difference between Behaviorism and Mentalism.

2. TAXONOMIC CONCEPTION VS. MENTALIST CONCEPTION

In taxonomic conception of Linguistics, a linguist starts his/her investigation with observable physical events. The primary data for a taxonomic linguistic investigation is a set of utterances (utterances are stretches of physical sounds) which are taken from informers or from texts. Taxonomists classify utterances into different stages, like- phonemic, morphemic and sentential stages. On the taxonomic conception of Linguistics, there is nowhere from the beginning to the end of a linguistic investigation, any appeal to mental capacities or mental processes. According to the linguists who adopt a concept of mentalism: "purely linguistic theories cannot succeed in predicting and explaining the facts of linguistic performance without making reference to the mental events, capacities, and processes of speakers, i.e., that linguistic theories must contain concepts which enable Linguistics to formulate the principles of mental operation that underlie speech" [3].

3. THE MENTALISTIC THEORY IS BETTER THAN THE TAXONOMIC THEORY. WHY?

Taxonomists or Behaviorists are interested in description, in answering *what* questions about human behavior especially objective measurement of behavior in controlled circumstances. Mentalists are interested in the *what* question; they are much more interested in a more ultimate question i.e. *why*. That also includes the underlying reasons, thinking and circumstances caused a particular event. Katz [3] says that there are three fundamental questions with which a synchronic description of a particular language deals. These are:

- What is known by a speaker who is fluent in a natural language? That is, what facts about a language of a speaker underlie his ability to communicate with

- others in that language?
- How is such linguistic knowledge put into operation to achieve communication? That is, how does a speaker use such linguistic knowledge to convey his thoughts, opinions, wishes, demands, questions, emotions, and so on to other speakers?
- How do speakers come to acquire this ability? That is, what innate dispositions and developmental processes are responsible for transforming a nonverbal infant into a fluent speaker?

Taxonomic grammar which describes only the sentence in a corpus (=data) fails to answer all the above mentioned questions. Mentalistic theory succeeds in answering all these questions [1, 2, and 3]. Mentalists are not interested not only in describing language or achieving the level of descriptive adequacy but also in arriving at an explanatory level of adequacy in the study of language. We require a model (as shown in Fig. 1) to demonstrate the concept of Mentalism and the whole mechanism of linguistic communication operates in a real situation.

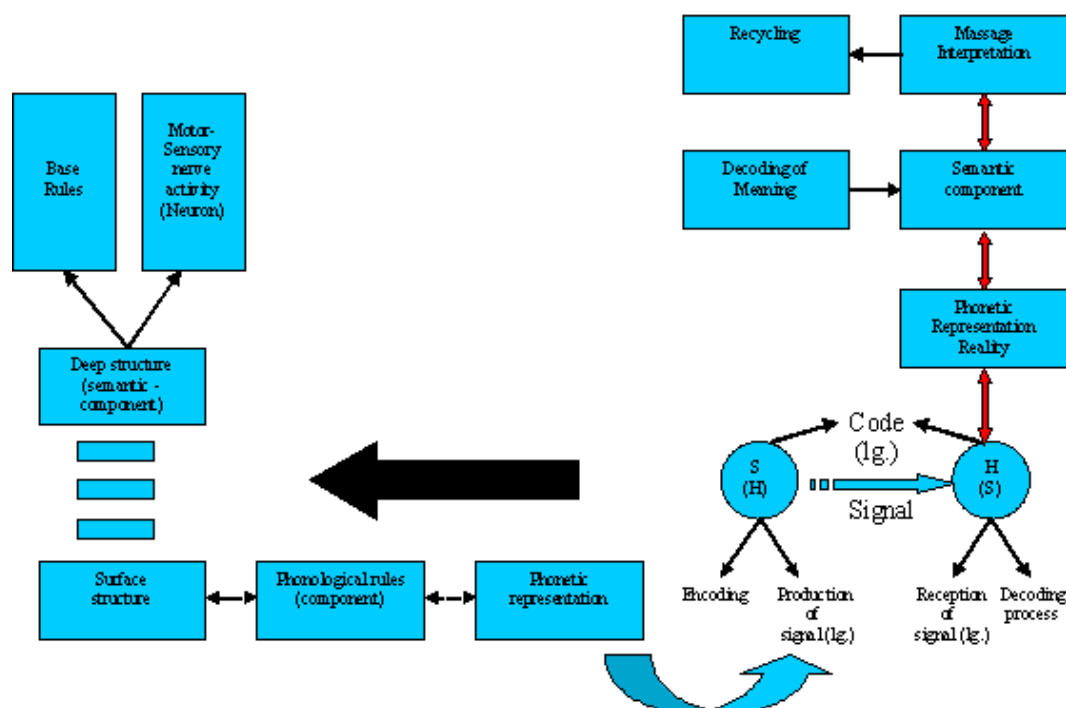


Fig. 1. LINGUISTIC MODEL OF LANGUAGE PROCESSING {based on the viewpoints of many linguists- Katz (1964), Gargesh [class lectures on Generative Phonology in M.A. (Linguistics), 2000], Sharma [class lectures on Psycholinguistics in M.A. (Linguistics), 2000], Agnihotri [class lectures on Research Methodology in M.Phil. (Linguistics), 2001] and with certain modifications }

The parameters in the model (Fig. 1) illustrate the language processing system. The speaker [(S), who is also a passive hearer (H)] encodes the message and produces the signal in the form of “language”. Production comprises of all and only the grammatical sentences of a language. The grammatical form of sentences contains two levels of structure- a semantically interpretable Deep structure and phonetically interpretable Surface structure. The Deep structure of the model of Generative grammar goes through the process of transformation to form the Surface structure. The essential part of Surface structure is the application of phonological rules of a language and these rules portray that the Surface structure does not generate empty syntactic structures, but rather structures that have a correct phonetic substance i.e. Phonetic representation. Phonetic representation of the lexical elements is received by the Hearer [(H), who is also a passive speaker (S)]. Hearer relates the sound signals of a number of sentences to his/her respective semantic interpretations with message decoding. The whole process in the model (Fig. 1) has its object of study a mental entity i.e. the linguistic competence. The linguistic competence is present in the speaker-hearer in the form of an internalized grammar, i.e. a system of rules by means of which the speaker and hearer are able to relate the sound-signals of an indefinite number of sentences to their respective semantic interpretations and vice-versa.

There are two other points [3] concerning the supremacy of a mentalistic theory:

- A mentalist theory also can provide a psychological reality for linguistic universals.
- Since the psychologist and mentalist linguist are constructing theories of the same kind i.e. theories with the same kind of relation to the neurophysiology of the human brain, it follows that the linguist’s theory is subject to the requirement that it harmonize with the psychologist’s theories dealing with other human abilities and that it be consistent with the neurophysiologist’s theories concerning the type of existing brain mechanisms. This point can be well understood by the following diagram (Fig. 2).

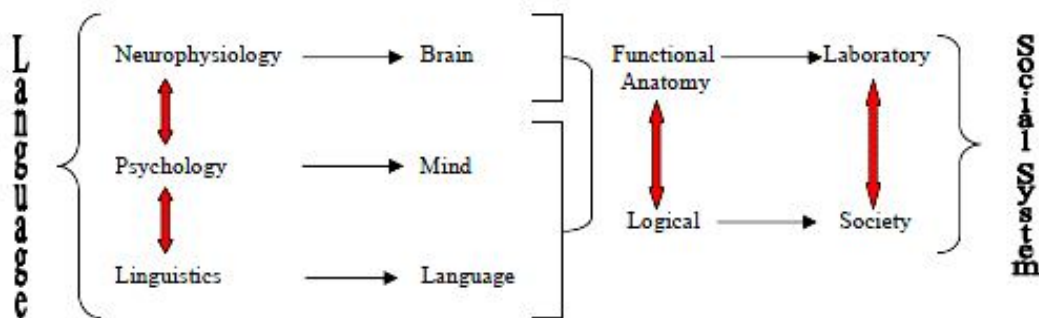


Fig. 2. LANGUAGE IN OUR SOCIAL SYSTEM: INTERMIXING OF LEVELS {based on the description and explanation given by Katz (1964) which is modified by adding many other related features}

The above concept (in Fig. 2) demonstrates the importance of three fields namely; Linguistics, Psychology and Neurophysiology in our social system. The most significant aim of teaching a language is to bring about socially desirable behavior change in the students and this can be achieved if language teaching is based on the concept of the above model (Fig. 2). If a language teacher follows the concepts of language, mind and brain, teacher can easily explore the aspects of the language problems rather than telling the students about the solution of the problems.

It is a fact that behavioristic theory of language influenced the foreign language teaching for several years, but it's much inclination towards stimulus-response concept made unpopular in 1960s. It seems too much theoretical. In mentalist type of teaching the emphasis is on the adequate exposure to the target language which is useful for the children to pay attention on linguistic utterances. Behaviorist attitude to the study of meaning was not deep and satisfactory. Mentalism on the other hand defines the term meaning in terms of mental process as described by many psychologists. It is definitely a new discovery by Mentalists in the field of language teaching. A linguistic theory that meets all above mentioned features will have a wider range of facts and so will be a better theory in the field of language teaching than one which is otherwise more or less equivalent power.

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