

# The Mentalist School of Linguistics

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## 1. Introduction

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The Mentalist School of Linguistics, also known as *Generative Linguistics*, is a linguistic theory that emerged in response to structuralist and behaviorist approaches. It emphasizes the innate structures of the human mind in language acquisition and processing. This school gained prominence with Noam Chomsky's critique of behaviorism and his introduction of the theory of generative grammar.

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## 2. Definition of Mentalism in Linguistics

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Mentalism in linguistics refers to the idea that language is an innate ability of the human mind rather than a learned behavior. It argues that humans are biologically predisposed to acquire and use language due to inherent cognitive structures.

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## 3. Key Principles of the Mentalist School

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### 1. Language is an Innate Ability (Innateness Hypothesis)

All humans are born with a *Language Acquisition Device (LAD)*, which allows them to acquire language naturally. The ability to learn language is *biologically hardwired* into the human brain. This means that language learning is not purely dependent on external factors like imitation or reinforcement. For example, children can generate sentences they have never heard before, showing that they do not simply copy adults.

- A child might say "*I goed to the park,*" applying a grammatical rule (adding *-ed* for past tense) even though "*goed*" is incorrect. This suggests they are using an internal rule rather than just repeating words they have heard.

**Chomsky (1965, p. 4):** "A child's language develops in a manner that cannot be accounted for simply by direct reinforcement or imitation."

### 2. Universal Grammar (UG)

- UG is a set of *inborn grammatical rules* that all human languages share. Even though languages differ in vocabulary and sentence structure, they all follow certain deep grammatical principles. UG explains why children can quickly learn any language they are exposed to.

## Example:

- Every language has subjects and verbs. Even if the order differs (English: *I eat apples* vs. Japanese: *I apples eat*), the grammatical elements exist in both.
- Every language has ways to form negatives, questions, and past tense, even if the specific rules differ.

### 3. Competence vs. Performance

Chomsky made an important distinction between:

- **Linguistic Competence** – The *unconscious knowledge* of a language that allows people to understand and form sentences correctly.
- **Linguistic Performance** – The *actual use* of language, which may include mistakes due to distractions, tiredness, or memory limitations.

## Example:

- A native English speaker *knows* that "He go to school" is incorrect. This is competence.
- However, if they accidentally say it in conversation, that is a mistake in performance, not a lack of knowledge.

### 4. The Poverty of the Stimulus Argument

- The language input that children receive is often incomplete, yet they still learn the rules correctly. Since they are not exposed to every possible grammatical structure, they must be relying on innate knowledge.
- A child learning English will naturally form a question like "*What did you see?*" instead of "*What you did see?*", even if they have never been explicitly taught the rule of auxiliary inversion. This suggests that some knowledge of syntax is inborn.

### 5. The Critical Period Hypothesis

- There is a *limited time frame* during which humans can acquire language naturally. If a person is not exposed to language before puberty, their ability to learn it fluently is greatly reduced.
- Cases of *feral children* (e.g., Genie, a girl who was deprived of language until age 13) show that if a child is not exposed to language early in life, they struggle to learn grammar later.

### 6. Language as a Mental Process

- Language is not just a social skill but a *cognitive function* controlled by mental structures in the brain.

- Speaking, understanding, and learning a language involve deep mental processes beyond simple memorization.

## 7. Transformational-Generative Grammar (TGG)

- This theory explains how deep structures (basic sentence meanings) are transformed into surface structures (spoken or written sentences).
- The mind applies transformation rules to convert abstract thoughts into grammatical sentences.

### Example:

- **Deep Structure:** *John loves Mary.*
- **Surface Structure (Passive):** *Mary is loved by John.*
- The meaning is the same, but the structure is different due to transformations.