

Modern Schools of Linguistics: The Mentalist School The mentalist school was founded by Noam Chomsky, who postulates that language reveals that there is a good reason to believe in the existence of mind. Chomsky is deeply inspired by the rationalist view of language represented by Descartes (1596–1650) and the Port Royal Grammarians who stress the role of reason in the discussion of topics like the philosophy of mind and language acquisition. For Chomsky, reasoning, not experience, is crucial since knowledge comes from the mind, not from the activity or events that affects one in some way. In other words, language is based on reasoned structure common to all humankind. Chomsky is also known for his anti-behaviourist tendency; he does not agree that language is part of human behaviour, but that language is “a mirror of the mind” (1972). He argues that by understanding language structure and language acquisition, we may eventually be able to explain how the mind operates, e.g., by studying language in detail, one may better understand how the language faculty of the human mind operates: “the study of language will bring to light inherent properties of the human mind (1972: 103). Thus, grammars must try to find out the general principles of organization of language which reflect the properties of the human mind. According to Chomsky, linguistics should reach two main goals: a) a theory of language and b) a theory of language acquisition. A theory of language will aim to characterize what language is, its essential properties that distinguish it from other means of communication, the similarities and differences between all the languages of the world. A theory of language acquisition will seek to discover the way children acquire their native language. In order to attain a theory of language, the linguist must start by describing particular languages in detail, that is, by giving detailed grammars of individual languages. This is called “particular grammar”. The next stage is to formulate the general (or universal) features shared by all languages. This is called “universal grammar”. A grammar, in Chomsky’s view, is a systematic description of the competence of the native speaker of a language which enables him to produce, understand, and pronounce all the possible sentences of his language. Competence, which is our unconscious knowledge of language, is contrasted by Chomsky with performance, which is the actual use of language or the realization in different situations of the linguistic rules we have acquired unconsciously as children.