

# Personal names versus 1st person pronouns in self-reference of Russian children aged 1.4 – 3.0

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## INTRODUCTION

The acquisition of personal pronouns plays a central role in the formation of reference to the person. The child's use or lack of use of personal pronouns demonstrates the level of the child's ability to identify individuals in terms of their speech role. As was revealed in many investigations (see Bates et al. 1988 for references) children differ greatly in their use of personal pronouns. Some children (so called «referential children») do not use personal pronouns at all at the first stages of language acquisition. They substitute personal names and terms of kinship for personal pronouns. For example, such a child will say «Ann wants the apple». These children may be called «NOUN lovers». Children on the other extreme (so called «expressive children») use personal pronouns from the very early stages of their development. Such a child will say «I want the apple». These children are «PRONOUN-lovers». All the abovementioned investigations, however, did not concern Russian children. Thus, the purpose of the present study is to check if this subdivision of children is actual for Russian children as well as for children learning other languages and then, if so, to link this psycholinguistic feature of children's development with some other features characteristic for linguistic and psychological development of children.

## METHOD

The study is based on longitudinal recordings of the spontaneous speech of 10 Russian children aged 1.4 – 3.0 and is concentrated on children's production of personal pronouns or on children's substitutions of personal names for personal pronouns. Additionally, in order to examine children's comprehension of 1st person pronouns, several experiments with 38 Russian children of the same age were carried out.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### **Personal name or the 1st person pronoun?**

The results show that Russian speaking children really have the same two tendencies in early child language as children learning other languages have – to use personal pronouns or to use personal names instead of pronouns. As for the Russian data, there were only a few children who unreservedly belonged to the ends of the dimension in using or substitution the first person pronoun form «I» (one child on the one hand and one child on the other); the majority

of the children (8 out of 10) used both forms of self-reference («I» or their personal names). The Russian data shows that it is more fruitful to compare children not by their use of the pronominal or substantive form in the nominative case, but by their using of the forms in the dative or genitive cases – whether they will say: «Give ME» or «Give Petya». Using this sub-criterion, the picture looks more «polarized»: 5 children out of 10 began with the personal pronoun form of dative or genitive case; 4 children began with a personal name in the form of the dative and genitive case; and 1 child demonstrated variations in using these forms and preferred not to use both forms. The last child's speech behavior may have his mother's speech strategy as its reason: this mother tried to teach her child to use his personal name, though the child, perhaps, had his own predisposition to use the forms of personal pronouns. So, for Russian children it is more sensible to compare them by what they use not in the nominative, but especially in the dative, case.

### **Only generalization or something else?**

The other question, linked with the previous one is the following: how do children get the idea of the necessity of using «I» in reference to themselves? It is easy to understand how they get the idea of using their personal names for themselves – they hear this name (used towards them) from the adults. But how can they understand that they have to say «I» for themselves? The child can not hear it from adults – at least about the child herself. On the contrary, they can hear it only towards somebody else! So, probably, the child can use «I» towards herself only after she generalized the idea of deictic function of pronouns from the adult input. But it seems that this way is common not to all the children.

As for English-speaking children, there has been a discussion of this problem. Charney (1980) suggested the idea that in personal pronouns acquisition the child begins with so called «person-in-speech-role-referring», and, in particular, she argues that at the beginning the child produces 1-st person pronouns BEFORE she understands them as referring to other people. The ideas of Charney were discussed by Chiat (1981, 1986). From the point of view of Chiat, this conclusion is impossible: if the child had not understood this pronoun as referring to other people, what basis would she have for using it to refer to herself? From the logical point of view, this critical remark sounds absolutely convincing. And we could have agreed with it, if not for the facts of our data.

In the Russian group of 10 children who were recorded over a long period of time, we found one child who really used the 1-st person pronoun at the period when it was very likely that he didn't understand it as referring to somebody else. Certainly, it was nearly impossible to be sure in his comprehension at that time, because no experiments were carried out with him. That's why it was very interesting to check if it will be find something similar to it while carrying out the experiments with the other group of children. It seems to be rather important that there was one other child in this experimental group who demonstrated a similar phenomenon. Of course, it was only one child out of 38, but he did exist! While answering questions like: Who has the ball? (when the child had it), he answered: «I», but demonstrated incomprehension when he was asked questions like: What do I have here?

In order to find the reason for these facts, which do not seem logical, we should return to the data of longitudinal recordings. The answer was found in the child's mother's speech strategy. Over a long period of time she often tried to teach her child to pronounce «I» towards himself. «Who is it?» or «Who did it?» – «Say: I. Say: I. Say: I». During some period of time the

child did not use «I» at all. Then he began to repeat it as an imitation. But then he began to use it himself! So, maybe, alongside the common way of preliminary generalization, there is some other way for small children to get the idea of the necessity of using of the 1-st person pronoun in reference to themselves. Some mothers may often provoke their children to use personal pronouns by means of teaching them to imitate or by some other stimulations (for example, often speaking, as if the mother is a child herself, playing the child's speech role and using the form of the 1-st person pronoun from the child's viewpoint). Under the influence of such speech strategies by the mother the child may begin to use 1-st person pronouns rather early. And this is caused by the fact that these children do not have to generalize the idea of deictic function of pronouns from the adult input. They are provided with it by their mother's speech, they get it as a given form. To summarize, first, some children really may use the 1-st person pronoun as referring to themselves while not understanding it as referring to somebody else; and second, if so, this means that the child narrowed the meaning of this pronoun, understood it as a word with fixed reference, as a word concerning only him/herself.

### **Marking the person or marking the image?**

Additionally, the study shows that there was one feature common to all children – both to the «personal-name-lovers» and «personal-pronoun-lovers». All children, while speaking about their own images (pictures, reflections, tape-recordings and other kinds of images), used only their personal names to name them. This is especially interesting with respect to those children who did NOT use personal names, but rather personal pronouns as referring to themselves. ALL the children named their images by personal names! It seems that this fact has a rather obvious psycholinguistic explanation: neither a picture, nor a voice on a tape-recorder is a person himself. We (adults) take it for granted – to call our images «I» («In this picture I am standing near the elephant»). But the child protests intuitively against this and thus uses the contrast between the personal pronoun (to be the marking of herself as a PERSON) and the personal name (to mark the IMAGE).

### **Structural peculiarities or functional status?**

The results also concern the dependence of 1-st person pronoun production on the agentivity and control involvement of the speaker. Taken as a whole, the Russian data corroborate the findings of American investigators (Budwig 1989, 1990) that children begin to use personal pronouns in contexts with a high degree of agentivity – when the speaker brings about a change in the world, in utterances which refer to self as agent. However, as Smoczynska (1993) once formulated, the Russian child is in a conflict situation, because in Russian functionally pronouns are needed less in the past than in the present or future, whereas structurally the past tense in Russian is the only tense where this pronoun is really necessary to use. The above-mentioned conflict seems to be the reason for some difference between our results and the results of American investigators. 5 Russian children out of 10 demonstrated the same tendency as the English-speaking children: the first sentences with «I» in their speech were sentences in the present or future and marked the situations with a high degree of agentivity. Then sentences with «I» appeared in the past, and they were mainly in conjunction with particular activity scenes. And only then did this group of children begin to use «I» in the present and future irre-

spective of agentivity. That is against the structural peculiarities of Russian language, but is concerned with the significance of situations with agens for children. However, 4 other Russian children out of 10 did not demonstrate the same tendency; contrary to English-speaking children, they began to use «I» in the utterances irrespective of agentivity. But in situations without pro-drop influence (in the past, where Russian is closer to English) these children demonstrated the same feature – the tendency to begin using «I» in utterances which were classified as control acts. One other child demonstrated some other strategy which will not be discussed here. Thus, on the one hand, we can corroborate Slobin's (1981) idea of the significant role of control acts in children's acquisition of personal pronouns, and on the other hand, we can obviously demonstrate how the peculiarities of every language may have an influence on the process of language acquisition.

## CONCLUSIONS

Thus, we have seen that the child's use of personal pronouns versus personal names is closely linked with other psychological and linguistic features of the child's language acquisition.

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