Acquisition and use of pronouns in a dialogic perspective

Anne Salazar Orvig and Aliyah Morgenstern
Université Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3

First uses of personal pronouns are characterized by their variability and instability. Since the processes involved in reference to discourse entities and to speech roles do not overlap, the use of pronouns cannot merely be explained by grammatical factors. This chapter considers dialogue as both the context and the mediator of the formal and functional mastery of pronouns. Several facets of dialogue are analyzed as the context in which linguistic units make sense for children who experience their situated use. The progressive construction of the pronominal system is examined through the lenses of factors that contribute to the pairing of forms and functions in ‘pre-constructed’ discursive sequences: adult’s uses, positioning, reflection of the other’s voice, and dialogic dynamics. Children’s mastery of pronouns is thus considered as grounded in their first dialogic experiences.

**Keywords:** personal pronouns, first person, second person, third person, dialogue, speech roles, speech genres, language games, pronoun reversal, name, interaction, format

1. Introduction

The acquisition of pronouns is at the crossroads of the structural and functional dimensions of language development, and signals children’s first steps into syntax and discourse. Research on the use of pronouns in adult-child verbal interactions can raise important issues about the complex interplay between morphology, syntax, pragmatics, and discourse in language development, as well as the influence of the adult input and the dynamics of dialogue.

Children’s initial uses of pronouns and the pattern of their development suggest that the construction of the pronoun paradigm is not only a grammatical matter. First, several factors in addition to general linguistic development are key
in accounting for the amount of individual variability observed in children’s pronoun development and use. Second, there is great asymmetry in the use of the various pronoun forms according to their reference (i.e., first, second, or third person) and to their functions (e.g., clitics are preferred as subjects, strong pronouns are preferred for other functions, children learn to use clitic subjects earlier than clitic objects). Third, form and function pairing is not one-to-one; on the contrary, children alternate pronouns, fillers, null forms and lexical forms in similar syntactic functions, mainly in subject position. A complementary perspective that can account for the interaction of multiple factors is needed in order to explain these various uses.

For adult language, it has often been stressed that since pronouns have no or very little lexical content, their (non-denotative) meaning corresponds to a series of instructions that guide the retrieval of the referent. As indexical expressions, they are context-bound and depend on the different features of the discourse under construction – in particular the speaker’s projection of the interlocutor’s possible interpretations. Personal pronouns involve two fundamental aspects: reference to speech roles, characterized by their reversibility, and reference to discourse entities, which depends on cognitive accessibility as well as on discourse representation and construction. In both cases the meaning of pronouns is determined within a discourse model (Cornish, 1999, *inter alia*). Moreover, according to dialogic (Bakhtin, 1986) and interactional approaches, the act of reference is not the product of an isolated speaker. It is the joint accomplishment of participants in dialogue (Apothéloz & Pekarek Doehler, 2003; Clark, 1996; Fox, 1987). The alternating voices of interlocutors, including their influence on each other, contribute to the construction of reference. Personal reference in particular is combined with complementary interactional aspects such as positioning and footing (Goffman, 1974, 1981) and is permeated with self-expression (Benveniste, 1971).

According to socio-pragmatic and interactionist approaches of language acquisition (Nelson, 2007; Tomasello, 2003), discourse context and dialogic interaction are crucial for children’s interpretation of referring expressions. Children experience reference and the use of referring expressions in the context of activities or, as Wittgenstein (1953) would say, in ‘language games’ which determine the use and meaning of linguistic devices. Moreover, children’s first experiences take place in quasi-ritualised contexts, called ‘formats’ by Bruner (1983, 1984). These daily dialogical activities predetermine specific practices, which carve out speech roles and their reversibility on the one hand, and reference to discourse entities on the other hand. Our contention is that dialogue has an important role in the acquisition of pronouns. Dialogue is not only the context in which competence is acquired, but it is the actual motor and source of language acquisition.
The aim of this chapter is to show the role of interaction in the acquisition of the pronominal system. Daily interactions provide the formats in which children can borrow and adopt the other’s voice and positioning in order to construct their own. In the first section of the chapter, we examine the part that dialogic factors play in the reference to speech roles, and thus analyze how first and second person are constructed in opposition to third person. In the second section, we discuss reference to discourse entities and the use of third person pronouns. We focus our study on personal pronouns primarily in French with some examples taken from English.¹

2. First and second person pronouns in dialogue

Reference to the speaker and the interlocutor is at the heart of any interpersonal exchange. For Humboldt, human speech is impossible without conversational partners, and therefore personal pronouns are the most primitive layer of language (Humboldt, 1827). For Benveniste, personal pronouns display the clear feature of reversibility and only represent the parties involved in discourse. They do not refer to actual stable objects in the world but to a discourse reality (Benveniste, 1966, p. 262) that is constantly changing. This reversibility must be seized by children in order for them to designate themselves as speakers with a first person pronoun (1stPP), when their interlocutor addresses them with a second person pronoun (2ndPP). According to Loveland (1984), “a kind of non-egocentrism is necessary for the child to grasp the shifting reference of terms such as I/you.” (p. 536). The study of children’s acquisition of that dialogical dimension and its intricate relationship with phonological, morphological, syntactic, pragmatic as well as cognitive complexities helps us understand the factors at play in referential processes. We observe that during the acquisition process, children use a number of forms for pronouns that differ from the conventional adult forms or functions that would be expected in those contexts (as detailed in Budwig, 1995; Morgenstern, 1995, 2003):

- Null form in subject position before a verb
- Transitional forms such as filler syllables

¹ For French, this chapter is based on empirical data collected and analyzed in the framework of two Research Projects, CoLaJE (Communication Langagière chez le Jeune Enfant) and DIAREF (Acquisition des Expressions Référentielles en dialogue: approche multidimensionnelle). The data are referred to with the acronym of the projects. The analyses presented for English are derived from the CHILDES data analyzed by Morgenstern (1995) and Caët (2013).
Forms that are not expected such as the child’s name instead of 1stPP or the addressee’s name instead of 2ndPP, or pronominal reversals such as you instead of I
Forms for the right person but standardly used for another grammatical function (e.g., me or my instead of I)

Children’s non-standard productions are a window into the development of their linguistic, social and cognitive skills. Some forms such as filler syllables could be considered as proto-forms due to the incomplete state of children’s phonological and morpho-syntactic systems. Others could be marks of children’s language processing: they make unconventional form-function pairings in the process of acquiring the adult system. Previous studies have indeed shown that proto-forms and non-standard forms are the result of children’s progressive appropriation of the pronominal system and of the construction of their dialogic self (Budwig, 1996; Caët, 2013; Morgenstern, 2012; Rabain-Jamin & Sabeau-Jouannet, 1989), in which the adult input plays a major role (Kirjavainen, Theakston, & Lieven, 2009). Children’s productions thus reflect the specific features of both child directed speech (CDS) and children’s own processing of the input, which evolves as their cognitive, linguistic and interactional skills develop.

In order to retrace how children acquire the dialogic aspect of the pronominal paradigm, we can try to tease apart what they directly borrow from the adult language and what they recreate on their own. Bates, Bretherton, and Snyder (1988) proposed that the multiplicity of forms arises from children testing self-made and statistically-based hypotheses derived from the language they hear. The absence of frequent and stable references in the input is considered a difficulty that children must overcome (Oshima-Takane, Takane, & Shultz, 1999). Indeed mothers refer much less frequently to themselves than they refer to the child in their daily interactions (Caët, 2013); children therefore might not have enough input on how to refer to the speaker. Rabain-Jamin and Sabeau-Jouannet (1989) have also shown that French mothers use a variety of terms (the child’s name, third person pronoun, baby, first person pronoun) in place of 2ndPPs when they speak to their children. These features of CDS might paradoxically both help children in their acquisition process and also explain the other forms they use along the way. There is a tight connection between children’s non-standard productions and uses of pronouns and proper names in the speech addressed to them (Preyer, 1887).

A number of studies illustrate how the function of each self-word used by the child can be different. Two studies suggest that baby and the first name refer to the physical self, to the image, and to the shadow, whereas the pronoun I refers to the social self in interaction with others (Bain, 1936; Cooley, 1908). In her analysis of Emily’s monologues, Nelson (1989) presents the “different temporal contents”
of self-reference: *Emmy* is the term the little girl uses at first the most to mark an “objective self”, while the pronoun *I* is used later on to mark her “subjective self” when the “system of temporal reference” emerges. Other proponents of a functionalist approach to language (Brigaudiot, Nicolas, & Morgenstern, 1994; Budwig, 1995; Morgenstern, 2006) also argue that the various forms are each used in specific contexts, and carry particular functions.

In the remainder of this section, we compare the first and second person pronominal forms used by French- and English-speaking children in the CHILDES database (MacWhinney, 2000) in different contexts. We focus on subject forms since they are much more frequent, and we analyze the factors that could influence the non-standard productions.

### 2.1 A variety of forms

Children tend to refer to themselves more frequently than to the addressee; conversely, adults make more frequent references to their child than to themselves. Caët (2013) showed in her study, for instance, that the children referred two to four times more frequently to themselves than to their parents, and the parents referred up to four times more frequently to their children than to themselves. There are very few references made to the addressee in the children’s productions at the earliest stages of acquisition around 1;6 (Morgenstern, 2006; Caët, 2013). The use of *mummy, daddy* and other types of names are observed at first. Some pronominal reversals appear in data from some children (Caët, 2013; Evans & Demuth, 2012; Morgenstern, 2012), but very few null forms occur apart from imperative utterances. The increase in reference to the addressee has been shown to parallel the development of cognitive, linguistic and pragmatic skills. This section will therefore focus on children’s self-references.

Between the ages of 18 and 30 months, various markers are used by French- and English-speaking children to refer to themselves (Brigaudiot et al., 1994; Budwig, 1995; Morgenstern, 1995, 2006). Between 30 and 36 months, the 1stPP is stabilized and non-standard forms tend to disappear. Interestingly enough, at the same time, children begin to exhibit displaced use of language (Veneziano & Sinclair, 1995) and start to manipulate different tenses, aspects, and modali-

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2. The French data are from Philippe (Léveillé corpus) recorded weekly for an hour from age 2;1 to 3;3 (Suppes, Smith, & Leveillé, 1973) and from the Paris corpus (Morgenstern & Parisse, 2012) in which we focused on Léonard, Anaë and Guillaume recorded one hour a month from 1;0 to 3;3. The English data are from Peter (Bloom, 1973) recorded twice a month from 1;9 to 3;1, and from Naima (Providence corpus; Demuth, Culberston, & Alter, 2006) who was recorded twice a month between 1;0 and 4;0.
ties, which according to Nelson (1989) indicates how the mastery of reference to time and to person are interrelated. The child’s sense of self is constructed thanks to narrative and argumentative verbal exchanges with adults and siblings, about shared and non-shared experiences set in specific times and places. These exchanges enable the child to reach a continuing sense of self in time with relations to other times and places beyond immediate personal experience.

In order to illustrate the various self-words used developmentally, Figure 1 shows the subject forms in Naima’s data from 1;4 to 2;10.

Naima’s development can be described according to three periods. Period 1 covers ages 1;4 through 1;9. At the beginning of this period, she does not explicitly refer to herself. For a long time, children’s language is grounded in the here and now and needs to be interpreted with the help of the context. Null forms seem to be default forms when the referent (the child herself) is already mentioned in the linguistic context, or when it can be inferred from the non-linguistic context thanks to gestures, eye gaze or actions. Then, from 1;6 through 1;9, she uses mostly her name when she explicitly refers to herself. During Period 2, from 1;10 through 2;5, her self-words are quite varied with a lack of stabilization and a substantial amount of pronominal reversals (i.e., you for I). During Period 3, from 2;6 on, she mostly produces the form I (non-standard uses are exceptional).

Example (1), taken from Guillaume’s data (Brigaudiot & Nicolas, 1990), illustrates the variety of forms to refer to self in one small extract (1stPP, null form, second person, name, and 3rdPP).
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(1) Guillaume 2;3

Guillaume: ze vais tourner la farine. ça y est, mis partout. t’as tourné ! t’as tourné l’œuf !!

Mother: bien !

Guillaume: ah ça colle. ze veux encore tourner un œuf. encore un.

Mother: tourne amour, tourne.

G. looks at his mother.

Guillaume: ai tourné.

Mother: maintenant il faut encore un œuf.

His mother is about to break the egg. Guillaume holds out his hand.

Guillaume: Guillaume i fait casser un œuf !!!

‘I’m gonna mix the flour. done, put everywhere. you mixed, you mixed the flour!’

‘good!’

‘oh it’s sticky. I wanna mix some more egg. another one.’

‘mix honey, mix.’

‘have turned.’

‘now we need another egg.’

The following questions could therefore be raised: How can we account for the simultaneity of these forms during a given period of time? Can these uses indicate the children’s pathway into the mastery of the dialogical nature of first and second person personal pronouns? We will tackle these issues by analyzing the non-standard forms used by children for I.

2.2 Name versus first person pronoun

Children often use bare predicates when they describe their own states or actions. However, when they first refer to themselves explicitly, they very often start by producing their own name instead of the 1stPP. Thus, they do not use the specific subject pronoun that only the speaker can use in dialogue to refer to self (I), but the form that can be used by any speaker to refer to them in non-addressed speech (their own name). As we have seen in Figure 1, this is the case for Naima. During the first period of our data, up to about 1;9, most of the explicit forms are lexical terms. This is illustrated in (2).

(2) Naima 1;7

She is putting on her Halloween costume.

Mother: hey that’s a crown! you want me to help you put it on?

Child: Naima puts it on for Halloween.

Mother: you’re gonna wear that for Halloween, here.

Child: Naima put it on.

Instead of referring to herself as speaker, Naima refers to herself with her specific social identity, which produces a contrastive value (as nouns do for discourse
entities, see Section 3). The function of the name in this context can be glossed as ‘I’ll put it on by myself without your help’.

Other children also use their name around the same age. Philippe uses his name up to 20% of the time at 2;2 in subject position to refer to himself. Léonard uses it up to 30% of the time at 2;2 (Morgenstern, 2006), Peter up to 35% of the time at 2;0 (Morgenstern, 1995), and Naima over 50% of the time at 1;9 (Caët, 2013). But in all four cases, after 2;6, their own name is only maintained to refer to themselves in pictures or videos.

The role of the adult in children’s use of their own name can be perceived at several levels. In general, parents quite often refer to themselves and to the child with names (Naima’s mother refers to herself about 10% of the time with her name, Anaé’s mother between 5% and 10% of the time). We could interpret adult uses as an ‘erasure’ of the complexity involved in speech roles – parents might avoid pronouns in contexts in which they want the identification of the child as referent to be unambiguous. Adults also have a local role in helping children clarify the referent when it is not explicitly expressed, as shown in (3).

(3) Philippe 2;1

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ Phi } & \quad \text{ chercher la voiture.} \quad \text{‘get the car’} \\
\text{ Mot } & \quad \text{ qui va chercher la voiture?} \quad \text{‘who’s gonna get the car?’} \\
\text{ Phi } & \quad \text{ c’est Philippe.} \quad \text{‘it’s Philippe’}
\end{align*}
\]

Such parental scaffolding moves help children assimilate the syntactic rules of their language (mandatory use of grammatical subjects), but also sometimes elicit the child’s name instead of a pronoun during this intermediary developmental period. These strategies set in dialogue might be effective since they help children grasp both the pragmatic and the syntactic features of their language. The non-standard forms involved could therefore be viewed as transitional forms on the way to full appropriation of the adult system.

2.3 Pronominal reversal

Pronominal reversal (using you instead of I for example) is sporadic in typically developing children. Reversals are more frequently observed in language disorders, especially in autism (it is part of Kanner’s original description, 1943). The study of reversals as a typical, although infrequent, behaviour might therefore contribute to the understanding of atypical language development.

Several hypotheses proposed to explain reversals in typically-developing children center around the idea that children are using first and second person pronouns for fixed referents rather than to refer to speech roles. These include
the name hypothesis, according to which pronouns are used as names (Clark, 1978), the person hypothesis, according to which a given pronoun is taken to refer to a constant individual, leading to pronoun reversals (Charney, 1980), and the risk-taking hypothesis, according to which precocious children take the risk of using pronouns and fail to perform a deictic shift (Dale & Crain-Thoreson, 1993). These hypotheses involve various factors that can account for reversals: lack of semantic knowledge – not knowing which words are pronouns (Bellugi & Klima, 1982); reliance on imitative, holistic strategies of language learning; not understanding perspective shifting (Loveland, 1984); and potentially impoverished input resulting in few opportunities to observe speech directed to others containing personal pronouns (Oshima-Takane, 1992).

All of these hypotheses and factors are consistent with the interpretation that children do not understand pronouns as corresponding to speech roles. Oshima-Takane (1992) explains that children better understand the relation between pronouns and speech roles when they see two speakers talking to each other and become aware that the 2ndPP refers to the addressee. She therefore emphasizes the importance of visual perspective on the shifting of roles and of the pronouns associated with those roles. Loveland (1984) also insists on the visual aspects of pronoun acquisition and the importance of seeing different speakers engaged in a dialogue in order to understand perspective shifting and the appropriate use of 1stPP and 2ndPP. Consistent with this emphasis on the importance of visual perspective for pronoun acquisition, some studies on the acquisition of pronouns by blind children have reported some delay in the use of the 1stPP and many reversals (Fraiberg & Adelson, 1973; Sampaio, 1989).

Chiat (1982) considers another possible reason for reversals – that pronouns are seen as plurifunctional. Under this interpretation, children adopt both their own and the interlocutor’s point of view as adults occasionally do explicitly by saying *I wouldn’t do that if I were you*. Example (4) illustrates such a pattern in Guillaume’s uses of *tu* ‘you’.

(4) **Guillaume 2;3**

G. is making the inventory of all the shoes in the house and he makes comments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gui</th>
<th>Mot</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>G</em> is making the inventory of all the shoes in the house and he makes comments.</td>
<td><em>It’s Daddy’s.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘c’est à papa.’</td>
<td>‘It’s Daddy’s shoes.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘c’est les souliers de papa.’</td>
<td>‘Can, want put, want.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘peux, veux à mettre, veux.’</td>
<td>‘You want to put them on?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘tu veux les mettre ?’</td>
<td>‘Yes.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘comme ça marche.’</td>
<td>‘Like that walk.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘he puts on his father’s shoes’</td>
<td>‘What?’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All rights reserved
G. stands up with the shoes on

Guillaume (Gui) marcher comme ça.  ‘walk like this.’
Mothu tu veux marcher comme ça ? ‘you want to walk like this?’
Gui ouais. ‘yea.’
<he takes a few steps>
bravo tu marches ! ! ‘great job, you’re walking!’

After Guillaume has started to walk with his father’s shoes on, he produces *tu* ‘you’ to refer to himself. This utterance is very similar to previous utterances that have been addressed to him in comparable situations (Fernyhough, 2008) with accomplishments marked by *bravo!* ‘great job!’ Guillaume here speaks about himself as if another person were addressing the utterance to him. We can therefore consider this *tu* as a device to mark both identity (he refers to himself) and otherness (with the voice of the other). In Guillaume’s data, during this period, *tu* is consistently used in utterances that are echoes of speech previously addressed to him, the verbal echo being directly applied to the current event. The mother understands these second person pronouns as referring to the child and does not question the reference.

The analysis of pronominal reversals thus illustrates how a child becomes a fully-fledged speaker through the mediation of the other’s voice in repeated scripts. The more linguistically precocious children are, the more they may use whole utterances retrieved from the input in similar situations with more or less variation. As they grow older, they continue to use the other’s voice in certain situations but they progressively learn how to systematically shift perspectives, to analyze the immediate context, to construct their own utterances, and to refer to themselves as grammatical subject and speaker. Early but temporary pronominal reversals are therefore one of the best manifestations of children’s skills in using the dialogic input and borrowing the voices around them as they construct their own.

2.4 Use of object pronouns (and possessives) as grammatical subjects

Some French- and English-speaking children use the object first person pronoun (French: *moi*, English: *me*) in place of the subject first person pronoun, and some English-speaking children use the possessive first person pronoun (*my*) in place of the subject first person pronoun. For French, the standard use of *moi je* as an emphatic contrastive form can explain children’s preverbal use of *moi*: they might drop the phonologically weaker pronoun *je* and simply maintain the strong pronoun. However, English-speaking children’s use of *me* (and sometimes *my*) in preverbal position seems to be less easy to explain despite numerous attempts, some of which are discussed in the following paragraphs.
One possible explanation for the English pattern is as follows. The pronouns me and I have the common feature of referring to the speaker, but me (and also moi for French) has more phonetic and pragmatic weight in the input. Thus, children’s non-standard uses of the strong pronouns me or moi, might represent a transitional stage in the acquisition process of the dialogic dimension of personal pronouns. Example (5) illustrates this possibility. Peter (Bloom, 1973) uses me 20% of the time in subject position at 2;3 and a little over 10% at 2;5 (Morgenstern, 1995).

(5) Peter 2;6
The handle of the record player bothers Peter as he is inspecting the various aspects of the machine; he shakes it about in order to take it off. PAT is the observer.

\[ \text{PAT} \quad \text{you don’t like that handle do you?} \]
\[ \text{PET} \quad \text{move that thing off move that thing off.} \]
\[ \text{PAT} \quad \text{mmm that handle’s in your way.} \]
\[ \text{PET} \quad \text{me move that thing off.} \]

Peter’s activity (moving tape recorder handle up and down) is complemented by his repeated utterances; no grammatical subject is needed here since the child simply states the predication. But after the adult intervenes, locates the problem and explicitly refers to the child by using in your way, the child repeats his utterance using me to identify the agent, a specific being, the speaker of the utterance. Example (6) illustrates the fact that me can also be used to emphasize an agentive contrast.

(6) Peter 2;4

\[ \text{PET} \quad \text{me working a railroad. daddy’s working a railroad.} \]

Peter could be overextending the contrastive value of me by using the marker to refer to the agent (see Budwig, 1996, for more on high transitivity). However, even if the contrastive value of me in preverbal position is clear, the construction [me + verb + object] does not exist in adult language as an independent clause so that structure is ‘incorrect’. But is Peter being creative when he uses it? Example (7), recorded at 2;4, can help us understand the origin of that production.

(7) Peter 2;4

\[ \text{PAT} \quad \text{do you want me to write?} \]
\[ \text{PET} \quad \text{me write.} \]
\[ \text{PAT} \quad \text{what?} \]
\[ \text{PET} \quad \text{me write.} \]
Peter simply takes up Pat’s subordinate clause. This type of uptake can be found quite frequently in the data (Morgenstern, 1995). The construction [me + verb + object] is therefore probably not an arbitrary choice. It is derived from complex structures used by the adult. But Peter generalizes it to a larger context. As shown by Kirjavainen et al. (2009), the frequency of those types of structures in the input influences their frequency in the children’s productions. Their data indicate, for example, that the children’s proportional use of me-for-I errors correlated with their caregivers’ proportional use of me in 1st person preverbal contexts. Pragmatic factors are also at play since me is produced in the context of self-positioning as opposed to or compared to the other (Budwig, 1996; Morgenstern, 1995).

The use of my for I is even more striking since the sequence [my + verb] is simply not found in adult language. Like a number of English-speaking children, Peter uses the form my as a grammatical subject between 2;2 and 2;6. Two complementary hypotheses could be made to interpret this phenomenon: (1) my could be a transitory form that combines me and I on the semantic and the phonetic levels (which would explain why we do not find the French equivalent forms mon or ma in the same context). (2) During the beginning of their third year, children use many possessives; they could be overextending the prenominal marker my as in my toy to preverbal position as in my open. This seems to be the case for Peter, as shown in Examples (8) and (9).

(8) Peter 2;4

Pat  let’s see you’d like some paper [#] huh?
Pet  write.
Pat  now let’s see [#] maybe if you get a magazine.
Pet  huh. my get [#] magazine. <running to the other side of the room>.

The boundary between nominal and verbal possession is particularly unclear in Example (9).

(9) Peter 2;4

Pat  it’s too cold to go home.
Pet  my go home. this my go home. this is my home.
Pat  yes it is.

This use of the possessive pronoun in place of the subject pronoun does not occur in French, probably because children use à moi instead of mon and ma to express possession at first. The strong pronoun moi therefore takes on similar semantic and pragmatic features to my. Moi is an extremely frequent word in French.
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2-year-olds’ speech; it is among the most frequent words around 2;0 for all the children in the Paris corpus. Examples such as (9) with a series of self-repairs are also clear illustrations of children’s efforts in the processing of the input. As we observe and analyze their trial and error pathways, we can deduce the various factors at play in the acquisition of personal pronouns. At the end of the longitudinal datasets referred to in this chapter, all the children end up using the conventional forms and functions to refer to self and other in dialogue.

2.5 Summary

A close study of the non-standard forms used by children for first and second person reference shows that a number of interacting factors account for the observed patterns. Those forms are transitional and result from children’s processing of the input at different levels. Links between the input and non-standard forms have been suggested in a number of studies taking a functionalist and usage-based constructivist approach to language acquisition (Budwig, 1996; Tomasello, 2003). Children might simply replicate adult speech but they might also make generalizations out of the material they find in the dialogues they actively participate in. The more frequent certain forms or constructions are in the input, the more the child might generate schemas that are not always “conventional” in context (Kirjavainen et al., 2009). But the processing and its results, non-standard forms, are necessary for children to achieve full mastery of the pronominal system. Adults’ own use of non-standard forms for I and you in CDS (such as names and third person pronouns), also illustrate how these forms help the children tease apart the complex formal and dialogic components of the pronominal system before they can integrate them by systematically using pronouns. For first and second person reference, the input plays both a global role – children learn from the constructions that are salient and/or frequent in the input – and a local role – adult turns influence the forms children use in their uptakes in dialogue. We now turn to the role of dialogic dynamics on children’s use of third person pronouns.

3. Third person pronouns in dialogue

Dialogic factors have a different role when it comes to the reference to discourse entities: the choice of referring expressions requires that the speakers project their interlocutors’ perspective and knowledge in a shared space of meanings. However this question has seldom been addressed.
Studies on children’s first steps in the construction of reference present seemingly conflicting findings on this matter (see also Allen, Hughes, & Skarabela, this volume; Hickmann, Schimke, & Colonna, this volume). On the one hand, research conducted on naturally occurring dialogues show that children, like adults, prefer weak forms such as clitic pronouns (and null forms and fillers) to encode a highly accessible, previously mentioned referent, whereas they prefer nouns, dislocations and demonstratives for activated referents that are not in focus (for English- and French-speaking children see Allen, Skarabela, & Hughes, 2008; Gundel & Johnson, 2013; Hughes & Allen, 2013; Salazar Orvig, Marcos, Morgenstern, Hassan, Leber-Marin, & Parès, 2010). On the other hand, research on older children, often in the context of narratives, indicates that children have difficulties in mastering anaphoric pronouns (de Weck, 1991; Hickmann, 1987; Kail & Hickmann, 1992; Karmiloff-Smith, 1985). Experimental data (Campbell, Brooks, & Tomasello, 2000; Matthews, Lieven, Theakston, & Tomasello, 2006; Serratrice, 2008; Wittek & Tomasello, 2005) present a more complex picture: children use null forms or pronouns when the referent has been previously mentioned but they may fail to take the perceptual availability of the referent to the listener into consideration and use null forms or pronouns where a lexical form was expected.

These contradictory results raise the issue of the cognitive abilities underlying children’s use of pronouns, with discussion focused on a possible primacy of deictic over anaphoric reference (Karmiloff-Smith, 1985), a lack of specific pragmatic assumptions (Schaeffer, 2005), or the absence of theory of mind (De Cat, 2013; Gundel & Johnson, 2013). However the studies just cited do not explain the fact that if cognitive abilities were the only factor determining pronoun use, more random results should be expected. Moreover, the hypotheses raised in these studies are not consistent with the impressive social-cognitive skills and knowledge demonstrated by children under 2 (Liszkowski, Carpenter, Striano, & Tomasello, 2006; Moll, Richter, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2008; O’Neill, 1996; Warneken & Tomasello, 2007, inter alia). This apparent contradiction between studies can be partially explained if the use of pronouns is considered in the dialogic context in which they occur.

3.1 Repetition and questions

Dialogue is, above all, the arena of joint construction of discourse. Interlocutors not only share content and information, they also share the way they speak about this content (Bakhtin, 1986). The mutual influence between interlocutors’ utterances is frequently considered through the lenses of repetition and of question-answer relations. In the DIAREF corpus, repetitions and answers account for 37% of the occurrences of referring expressions, and 53% when only the cases of
previously mentioned referents are considered. Repetitions and answers appear to be a prevalent component of reference construction. How do these contexts therefore affect the use of 3rd PPs?

First, repetitions, which correspond to the reproduction of the communicative intent of the preceding utterance, are considered one of the earliest resources for discourse cohesion (Benoit, 1982; Keenan & Klein, 1975; Salazar Orvig, 2000). This can include all or part of an utterance, as we see in Example (10).

(10) **Clément 2;3**

Clément is playing with his mother. His father is hiding.

Clément (Cle)  
si voda.  
‘si rega(rde).’ 
‘yes look.’

Mère (Mot)  
ouais il est caché. <whispering> .  
‘yes he’s hiding.’

Clément (Cle)  
il est kase aga.  
‘il est caché (r)ega(rde).’  
‘he is hiding look.’

In this example, the child draws the attention of his mother to the place where his father could be hiding with a simple imperative. The mother introduces the referent with a pronoun and the child repeats the whole utterance, and confirms it with the same verb (regarder ‘look’). When he reproduces his mother’s utterance, the child uses the 3rd PP for a previously mentioned referent. As Clark and Bernicot (2008) have shown, repetition plays a fundamental role in the process of grounding referents and establishing shared knowledge between interlocutors. Moreover, for Levy (1989) the first cohesive links correspond to the reproduction of cohesive sequences in the adults’ discourse. This phenomenon could also correspond to the prevalence of a priming mechanism in dialogue (Pickering & Garrod, 2004). In that case, first uses of 3rd PPs could be accounted for not only at the pragmatic but also at the syntactic level.

In order to assess if repetition and syntactic priming affect the production of 3rd PPs, we need to consider the overall frequency of repetitions in children’s productions and the proportion of 3rd PPs that are affected by these phenomena. The studies on the DIAREF corpus (Salazar Orvig, de Weck, Hassan, & Rialland, in preparation; Salazar Orvig et al., 2010) confirm the importance of repetitions. Thirty-two percent of all referring expressions that correspond to previously mentioned referents appear in repeated utterances (either self or other repetitions). However, nouns more typically appear in this context than clitic pronouns: 36% of all nouns in the DIAREF corpus appear in repetitions while only 21% of clitic pronouns in the corpus appear in repetitions. If we restrict the scope of our analysis and consider only the relation between the referring expression and its immediate antecedent in the interlocutor’s discourse (excluding, thus, all
self-repetitions) the proportion goes down to 15% of 3rdPPs whereas it still corresponds to 36% of the nouns used by children. These figures show that despite its importance in dialogue, repetition cannot be the unique explanation for early use of pronouns. Other dialogical factors have a stronger effect in the use of 3rdPPs in dialogue.

Several experimental studies have focused on the way questions influence the choice of referring expressions (Matthews et al., 2006; Salomo, Graf, Lieven, & Tomasello, 2011; Salomo, Lieven, & Tomasello, 2010; Serratrice, 2008; see also Allen et al., this volume). These studies contrasted predicate focus questions (What is X doing?) with sentence focus questions (What happened?). Both the previous mention of the referent and the information structure in predicate focus questions favor the use of weak expressions (pronouns, null forms) even when the referent is encoded through an unspecific form (that person; Serratrice, 2008).

When we turn to naturally occurring data, the first issue that needs to be addressed is to find out how prevalent questions are in the shared construction of reference. We find that 20% of the referring expressions in the DIAREF corpus appear in answers to questions. The proportions are similar for nouns (23%) and clitic pronouns (21%). However, the relation to the question is not of the same nature. When the referring expression encodes the common topic of the question and answer, 22% are pronouns while only 4% are nouns. However, when the referring expression encodes the referent elicited by the question, the opposite pattern is found: 1% are pronouns and 27% are nouns. Therefore, pronouns appear to be used mostly as a vehicle of continuity with the preceding utterance. For instance, in these contexts of Question-Answer relation, 3rdPPs have an antecedent in the interlocutors’ discourse that pertains to another category (noun, demonstrative, etc.) in 52% of the cases, whereas in 12% of the cases the interlocutor has used a different pronoun (e.g., object versus subject). Only in 36% of the cases does the child answer with the same pronoun as in the question.

These figures show that the Question-Answer format cannot account for all young children’s uses of pronouns. Nonetheless, the Question-Answer format is an important vehicle for the construction of discursive continuity since, just as in repetitions, adults’ scaffolding through this format gives children the possibility to contribute to reference.

3.2 Positioning in dialogue

Children also position themselves precociously in on-going interactions. Studies conducted within the framework of conversation analysis (Fox, 1987; Pekarek, 1999) have convincingly shown that referring expressions are resources used in interaction for positioning and/or to display the speakers’ understanding of the
conversational sequence. Indeed, in dialogue, referring expressions are used to instantiate contrast between relevant information features, as well as to serve as the locus of perspective confrontations, genre shifting, and interactive moves. This can be clearly observed when the speakers are dealing with highly accessible, in-focus referents. Even though pronouns are the preferred forms in contexts of high accessibility (Ariel, 1988; Gundel, Hedberg, & Zacharski, 1993), they alternate with nouns, dislocations, and demonstratives in the same contexts. Let us examine example (11).

(11) Cécile 1;11
Cécile and her mother are playing with farm figures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Utterance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cécile</td>
<td>alors je vais mettre le bonhomme dedans! `so I am going to put the little man inside! he is sleeping.'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>i(l)4 dort.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cécile</td>
<td>boum! `boom!'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cécile</td>
<td>t'es vilain. t'es vilain bonhomme. `you are mean. little man, you are mean.'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mère</td>
<td>qu'est-ce qu'il a fait? `what did he do?'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cécile</td>
<td>il arrête pas d'embêter la vache. `he does not stop bothering the cow.'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mère</td>
<td>il exagère. il a pris sa place. `he is going too far. He took its place.'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cécile</td>
<td>quand même il est coquin le bonhomme. `really, he is naughty, the little man. (the little man is really naughty)'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first utterances of the sequence promote the referent ‘little man’ to the topic position. This is confirmed by the mother’s question (qu’est qu’il a fait? ‘what did he do?’). The child uses the 3rdPP to answer her mother’s question. This answer maintains the ‘little man’ in the topic position and adds a new predication to it. So does the mother. But while the referent is still highly accessible, the child, in her last turn, uses a dislocation ‘il … le bonhomme’. This dislocation is associated with an evaluative adjective and to the (very precocious) use, of the pragmatic marker quand même ‘really’. The child executes two moves: she follows her mother who expresses a negative view about the little man’s behavior, and she also outbids her mother’s assessment by using the adjective coquin ‘naughty’ where her mother had only used the verb il exagère ‘he is going too far’. This intensification is mediated by three resources: the lexical change, the pragmatic marker, and the dislocation. The same utterance with only a 3rdPP, il est coquin ‘he is naughty’, would have only produced an effect of acknowledgement.

3. In spoken French, dislocations are a very frequent construction made of a lexical term or a strong pronoun (moi, ça) and a resumptive clitic pronoun (personal or demonstrative; see De Cat, 2007; Pekarek Doehler, 2011).

4. French speakers very often use i instead of il before consonants.
This kind of contrast between 3rdPP, nouns, dislocations, and demonstratives in highly accessible contexts was investigated by Salazar Orvig et al. (2010), and with a larger corpus in Salazar Orvig et al., in preparation. 3rdPPs, nouns, dislocations, and strong demonstratives were categorized according to their link to the previous utterance – either plain continuity (adding new predications to a previously determined topic) or contrast (opposition, shifting of perspectives, emphasis, shifting of genre). Results show that 3rdPPs are mainly used for plain continuity (69% of 3rdPP) whereas lexical forms (alone or dislocated) and strong demonstratives are preferred (75% of nouns and 80% of strong demonstratives) when the utterance draws a contrast with the preceding forms. Example (12) is a more complex example of alternation between pronouns and dislocations.5

(12) Léa 2;2
Léa and her mother are talking about a fictional character Poucelina (‘Thumbelina’).

LÉA laëpêês.  
‘elle un prince.’  
‘she has a prince.’

MOT ‘elle est grande Poucelina ?  
‘is Thumbelina tall?’

LÉA m:  
’n:lelepatit. jâmamâæetpatit.pâtitjâmamâ.  
‘no she is small. her mother is really small. small her mother.’

MÈR sa maman aussi elle est toute petite ?  
‘her mother is also very small?’

LÉA wi.  
‘oui.’

MOT et le prince il est beau le prince ?  
‘and the prince, is he handsome?’

LÉA wi.  
‘oui.’

MOT c’est vrai ? <laughs>  
‘really?’

LÉA opešijepaʃtâi iapêsdpuseliina.  
‘Fprince, he is not nice, Thumbelina’s prince.’

MOT pourquoi il est pas gentil ?  
‘why isn’t he nice?’

LÉA pasakoïjemeʃa.  
‘pa(ɹ)ce que il est méchant.’  
‘because he is mean.’

In this excerpt, mother and child use both dislocations and pronouns to speak about the same referents, Thumbelina and the prince, which have both been previously

5. Since filler syllables cannot be interpreted as grammatical morphemes, we use F to indicate their use by the child both in the French transcription and in the English translation.
mentioned. The referents are successively the topics of two dialogic sequences. A 3rdPP is used by the child to answer her mother’s first questions (nēlepetit ‘no she is small’ and paskajemējā ‘because he is mean’). Dislocations are first used here to shift topics and reintroduce a referent by the child (jamamāectutpotit/ əpitjamamāō ‘her mother is really small. small her mother’) and by her mother (et le prince il est beau le prince? ‘and the prince, is he handsome, the prince?’). But the child also uses a dislocation in a statement (spēsjepazāti Iopēspuseliina ‘F prince, he is not nice, Thumbelina’s prince’) that carries a contradiction with the previous positive answer. Nevertheless, this example shows another feature that complicates the picture. The child and the mother (or vice versa) tend to use the same forms: for instance they both use a double dislocation, with a lexical form at the beginning and at the end of the utterance.

Results of these studies, exemplified in (11) and (12), illustrate the complex dynamics involved in the use of referring expressions in dialogue. Alternation can be interpreted as the conjunction of various factors: given/new contrasts, topic dynamics, positioning as well as uptake of the adult’s frequent constructions.

3.3 Summary

In this section we examined some factors related to dialogic interaction that affect the use of 3rdPPs by young children. Our starting point was the observation of an apparent contradiction between young children’s largely appropriate use of 3rdPP for previously mentioned or in-focus referents in spontaneous speech and their difficulty using 3rdPPs appropriately in narratives or in some experimental settings. Even more puzzling was the fact that if cognitive abilities were the only relevant factor determining 3rdPP production, we could expect more random results. Therefore, one of the questions under debate is how to understand children’s sensitivity to a previous mention of the referent in both naturalistic and experimental contexts when the same children, or other children of the same age, are not able to take into account the perceptual availability of referents in experimental settings. Responses to this paradox depend on theoretical positions. For instance in generative frameworks, the answer will rest on the external status of children’s pragmatic development. For these accounts, verbal interaction does not play any role. In contrast, for socio-pragmatic approaches, the involvement in verbal interactions is the basis for linguistic acquisitions. Matthews et al. (2006) suggest, for instance, that children learn how to introduce and maintain perceptually shared referents through recurrent interactions with their caregivers without needing to assess their interlocutors’ attention or knowledge.
Children’s early ability can be accounted for in at least two different ways. One possibility is that it may be the expression of an interactive alignment mechanism (Pickering & Garrod, 2004) in dialogue (De Cat, 2013; Matthews et al., 2006). For Pickering and Garrod, alignment rests on primary mechanisms such as priming which do not call for explicit coordination of common ground or assessment of the interlocutors’ knowledge and beliefs unless there appears to be a need for repair. Indeed, Matthews, Butcher, Lieven, and Tomasello (2012) test the possibility that children’s mastering of referring expressions develops when they have to face misunderstandings and communicative breakdowns. Even though there is no evidence of these types of repairs in the DIAREF corpus, this possibility should be kept in mind. Although we have not addressed this issue in the results we present in this paper, it probably plays an important role in the mastery of third person pronouns.

Children’s early ability to use 3rdPPs should also be considered in the light of the influence of activities in which children are involved, and in light of the discourse genres that determine the choice of referring expressions. If we consider that children learn how to use referring expressions through the various language games in which they are involved, we can hypothesize that they incorporate recurrent discursive frames linking experience and speech. Children might thus begin by grasping pragmatic configurations (Nelson, 2007) that fit very routinized situations. We can think of these recurrent frames both at the macro-level of an activity and at the micro-level of question-answer contexts. These formats (Bruner, 1984) are privileged contexts that allow change and variation in a secure environment. Under this theoretical perspective, there is no need to assume that the child assesses the information needed by the interlocutors. The development of reference of 3rdPPs could thus consist of generalization and abstraction processes occurring in these contexts of interaction, developing from recurrent formats to productive paradigmatic choices according to the interlocutor’s knowledge and perspective.

Our results show a more complex picture. When particular interactive formats and discourse frames predetermine children’s discourse, they adopt the adult forms and use them very early for interactional positioning. The production of pronouns is clearly linked to a dialogical competence that has its roots in the communicative skills already involved in pre-linguistic communication such as opening and closing interactions, directing the other’s attention, opposing and accepting, and maintaining joint attention. Third person pronouns are, above all, acquired as a means to express the maintenance of (joint) attention on a referent.

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6. This particular issue cannot be addressed here. A global account is developed in Salazar Orvig et al. (in preparation).
4. Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to shed light on the acquisition of pronouns by taking into account their functions in dialogue. Based on our dialogic perspective (Bakhtin, 1986; François, 1984) and other interactionist approaches (Bruner, 1983; Nelson, 2007; Tomasello, 1999, 2003; Veneziano, 1997; Vygotsky, 1962), adult-child spontaneous everyday interactions are for us the context and the mediator of children’s formal and functional mastery of pronouns.

When children’s early forms emerge and develop in early stages, they are characterized by their great variability and instability. Since the processes involved in reference to discourse entities on the one hand, and to speech roles on the other hand, do not overlap, the use of pronouns cannot be explained by one single factor. In both cases, the processes involved are complex and might seem contradictory since they signal both obvious skills and cognitive difficulties. These contradictions cannot be resolved unless children’s uses are considered in their discursive and dialogic dynamic contexts. We therefore adopt a perspective which includes the discursive and pragmatic dimension as well as the possible interaction between them.

Indeed, dialogue is at the heart of language use and it constitutes a scaffolding context that facilitates children’s language acquisition. Dialogue is the framework in which units start making sense for children who experience their situated use. In order to understand the progressive construction of the pronominal system, we must first understand how children appropriate genres and language games as they pair forms and functions in ‘pre-constructed’ discursive sequences, as well as the ways in which they take on discursive perspectives in their interactions with their parents.

We therefore propose that children’s early uses of pronouns correspond to a more pragmatic than semantic understanding (Nelson, 2007). Children’s construction of the values of referential expressions is grounded in primary experiences that progressively develop via processes of generalization and abstraction. Therefore, we claim that children construct specific categories out of discursive gestalts. As far as pronouns are concerned, this entails that children first take up global pragmatic values in different configurations according to their communicative experience before they construct the specific meaning of each unit.
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