

Full Length Research Paper

A child with specific language impairment: Personal pronoun pattern in non-elicited spontaneous speech

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Findings for concluding remarks in the area of personal pronouns are very limited, especially related to children with specific language impairment (SLI). The goal of the present research was to explain and justify pattern change in personal pronoun usage among children with specific language impairments. For this, one child with specific language impairment from Child Language Data Exchange System/CHILDES was taken. Computerized language analysis (CLAN) v.30 for Windows was employed to analyze the non-elicited spontaneous speech of the child with SLI. Major studies have been reviewed and some patterns drawn (that is, in terms of The Syntax-Morphology Development Chart of Gard et al., 1993). Early attachment and non-elicited spontaneous speech (conversation) with primary caregivers have a very direct impact for personal pronoun production, which can be a cruise for morphosyntax development. The case of “it” with other 3rd person pronoun (“he/she”) production was clearly stated as a voyage for early treatment to children with SLI. Finally, the present research is a case study (longitudinal) and because of limited sample size, long insightful researchable hypothesis (theoretical and clinical) was drawn, so that future researchers can have a look at it.

Key words: Specific language impairment, personal pronouns, CHILDES, child language development

INTRODUCTION

It is important to learn more about pronoun acquisition in children with normal development and children with some specific language impairments for theoretical and clinical reasons. From a clinical view point, as argued by Moore (2001), it is necessary to know the rate and the pattern of acquiring pronouns in order to develop accurate expectation of typical development and typical pattern of learning in the processes of language acquisition. Nowadays, even though there are no research findings able to identify

the cause and effect relationship between nominative personal pronouns that related developmental impairments, there are studies on the area, and these revealed the diversified nature of personal pronouns among children with and without specific language impairment. In one comparative study, Ruigendijk et al. (2010) reported that production and comprehension of pronouns were different among German speaking and Hebrew speaking children, which asserts that pronoun production and

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comprehension are different across different speakers.

According to Gard et al. (1993), syntax morphology has a serial sequence for developing and/or constructing personal pronouns. Understanding concepts of first and second person pronouns (I, you) start roughly from 2 to 2½ years. This shift, as Bol and Kasparian (2009) noted, is a crucial aspect in the study of pronoun acquisition, and can reflect children conceptual relationship of pronouns during their early stages of pronoun production. It is not only in the stage and sequence that a pronoun varies, rather there were reported variation between nominal pronouns and objective pronouns. Rispoli (1994, 1998a), cited by Moore (2001), applied pronoun paradigm building hypothesis (PPBH) model and identified that nominative pronoun errors occurred more frequently than objective case pronouns. Another contrary study to Rispoli (1994, 1998a) by Caet et al. (2009), asserted that objective pronouns was found to be a frequent error on French specific language impairment (FSLI) children. On the other hand, children with autism were less likely to use third person pronouns and it seemed children with autism reflect limited communicative engagement, but first person pronouns were relatively spared (Hobson et al., 2009). In the pattern and usage of personal pronouns among children with specific language impairment and children without specific language impairment, different scholars use to come and have been coming up with different variables as presumed contributing and/or influencing factors for such errors. In one psychological study done by Kirjavainen and Teakston (2009), English speaking children shows proportional use of me-for-I errors correlated with their care givers proportional use of I-and-me. This finding was consistent with Kanner (1943), as quoted by Hobson et al. (2010), and another researcher, Fay (1979), wrote as follows:

Personal pronouns are repeated as just heard, with no change to suit the alerted situation. The child once told by his mother, "Now I will give you your milk", expresses desire for milk in exactly the same words. Consequently, he comes to speak of himself always as "you", and the person addressed as "I".

This mind boggling and insightful argument clearly uncover psychological variables, like early attachment pattern, have an impact on the development of personal pronouns and personal pronoun errors if not handled well at the very beginning of their childhood age. In more strong sense, Legerstee and Feider (1986) argued that selective contributions of general developmental mechanisms and socio-cultural and linguistic factors to young children's learning of personal pronouns are strong.

In a nutshell, regardless of the result the researchers came up with, they argued that the pattern of nominal and objective pronouns among children with SLI and children without SLI are different.

They indicated that such variation is also observed

across language and identified how children acquire personal pronouns. There is also a difference in nominative case pronouns and acquisitive pronouns among children with SLI, and such pronoun errors are always delayed to the typically developing child (Leonard, 2000). Even though researchers come up with different findings and statistical significant difference between normally developing children and children with specific language impairment about personal pronoun and related errors, they failed to uncover and/or did not agree on the underlying reasons for such personal pronoun pattern change. Thus, based on the aforementioned rationale and literature review, the following research question was formulated to answer:

Are there any scientifically explainable underlying reasons for pattern change in personal pronoun usage among children with specific language impairments?

METHODOLOGY

The present study used the transcript file of Mayes Linda (2004), from Child Language Data Exchange System (CHILDES), with a file named Malakoff as a participant. This file has been used to study language acquisition among children with SLI. The participant was between 2 to 2½ years of age when the conversation took place. This participant was selected because of three major reasons:

1. According to Gard et al. (1993), the year between 2 to 2½ is the critical time to start personal pronoun production.
2. In the literature review, early impact and influence of the caregiver is found to be correlated with the child use of personal pronouns.
3. The file is a non-elicited, spontaneous speech, non-specified, and interactive with the primary caregivers, in this case, the biological mother, who can help to come up with some concluding remarks of the pattern in pronoun development.

The data was downloaded and analyzed by Computerized Language Analysis (CLAN), Version 30 for Windows. To see the frequency of personal pronouns appearance "freq + s option" command and for searching personal pronouns (nominative) "kwal" search command was employed. Pearson correlation (r) was also calculated to see the existing relationship between the mother and the child on personal pronoun production. For the present study, the Clinical English Malakoff Cocaine Corpus with the file name 'malakoff' has been divided into three categories (in a way that we can see the personal pronoun production and development with time elapses) (the year of the child). This includes spontaneous speech file 1 (CHAT date: 1984-01-01), spontaneous speech file 2 (CHAT date: 1984-01-01), and spontaneous speech file 73. These files were subjected to CLAN command. As a procedure, the present study used both nominative personal pronoun related conversation between the mother and the child, so that we can picture out the possible relationship of the child's response with the mother's undeliberate elicited conversations.

RESULTS

As shown in Figure 1, personal pronoun production and frequency of the caregiver (in this case the mother). The

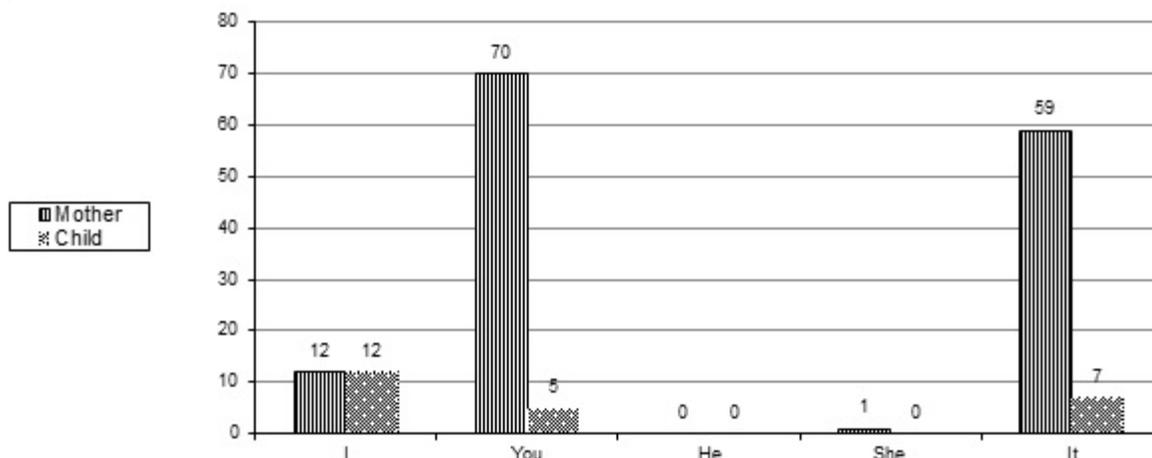


Figure 1. Frequency of personal pronouns in the spontaneous speech of both the mother and the child.

subject pronoun “I” is the most frequent used pronoun ($n = 12$). First personal (“I”) pronouns were strictly proportional with the mother, which goes consistent with a study done by Kirjavainen and Theakston (2009). Personal pronoun “it” and “you” were the second and third most frequent in occurrence on the conversation ($n = 7$ and $n = 5$, respectively). Both the mother and the child did not use 3rd personal pronouns in all cases, except “it”. Why did 3rd personal pronoun “it” get a lot of attention from the child and “he/she” was not mentioned at all in the spontaneous speech? The investigator took time to discuss and justify it with scientific evidence.

Generally, the nominal pronoun “it”, used by the child, stands for a speech directly for material and related material. The child was using it frequently to tell his mum about his toys. One of the reason underlying the use of “it” more frequently than the other 3rd person pronouns “he/she” was therefore direct exposure for such play toys and equipment at the very beginning of his childhood age, and thus, “he/she” was not mentioned at all in the spontaneous speech, for it did not have any direct relationship with his day-to-day activities, needs and plays. Nominal pronoun “it” will also have a place on the discussion part. To see whether the child use of personal pronouns is dependent on the automatic (undeclared actually) elicited speech by the mother or not, the investigator employed “kwal” of the CLAN command. *“Ma, her want you”* (Italics added). This agrammatical speech of the child was found to be directly elicited by the mother “say hi to mama”. Specially strong evidence were found on committing 2nd personal pronoun error. When the mother says “you”, the child found to be mistakenly using “you” instead of “I-me”. Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated ($r = 0.39$). Meaning, 15.2% ($r^2 = 0.152$ (15.2%)) of the variation of pronoun production of the child was accounted to his mother’s use of personal pronouns of the non-elicited

spontaneous speech.

DISCUSSION

The major purpose of the present research was to see if there was explainable evidence of pattern change and use of personal pronouns among children with SLI. The analysis of the data clearly show that 1st personal person pronoun “I” and third 3rd personal pronoun “it” have got attention from the child; while the other 3rd personal pronouns “he/she” was not mentioned at all. In this study, therefore, it is possible to take sides that first person comes first and second person was poorly produced, while there is a difference among third person pronouns. In the present study, as stated by Gard et al. (1993), there was explainable evidence which shows there is an existing serial sequence for developing and/or constructing personal pronouns among first and second person pronouns. The variation of the personal pronoun change ($r = 0.39$, or 15.2 %) is very consistent with the finding of Fay (1979), who argued that personal pronouns are repeated as just heard, with no change to suit the alerted situation. The child once told by his mother, “Now I will give you your milk”, expresses desire for milk in exactly the same words. Consequently, he comes to speak of himself always as “you”, and the person addressed as “I”. So, it is possible here to take clear side that the daily, non-elicited spontaneous speech, which directly related with personal needs and play material, were attractive enough for the child. “You”, “I” and “it” were used in the spontaneous speech to explain his personal wishes and needs to his mother, as the search command uncovers. It is possible, then, to draw strong inferences from attachment theory as to what the effect of the speech and direction of the mother to her child as a factor for pattern

change in personal pronoun usage among children with specific language impairments.

Gard et al. (1993) and Belsky (2011) argued that the first two years of life is a critical period during which the path of future development is determined, this stage of development is still regarded by many as being a sensitive period, during which trajectories are first established. Without considering the impact of such early upbringings on which language beginning is to be constructed, it is unlikely to expect an effective clinical practice among professional in language pathology and treatment. As Legerstee and Feider (1986) argued, the selective contributions of general developmental mechanisms and socio-cultural and linguistic factors to young children's learning of personal pronouns should not be ignored.

Theoretical implication

Nowadays, children are spending much of their time on pre-school and childcare arrangements, which are often considered a place of ungrammatical conversation between children being held. Thus, the only opportunity, which has an intense influence, is a non-elicited conversation with their primary caregivers, and its role and impact for personal pronoun production and development should not be discounted.

Clinical implication

The clinical implication of the present study can be summarized with the following question:

Are researchers, clinical practitioners in the field of linguistics, parents/guardians or any primary caregiver's conscious enough about the potential impact of early childhood conversation with the primary caregivers on the treatment, and even as a cause for pathology to the child?

It is inviting for clinical practitioners to use such influences of the caregiver in such critical time for treating children with SLI, which is not costly and easy to apply. To the benefit of the child with SLI, non-elicited spontaneous speech between the caregiver and the baby, in progress of language acquisition, is more inviting for clinical linguist than pre-school and childcare center. To sum up, Spitz et al. (1970), quoted by Belsky and Nezowski (1988) summarized the impact of attachment as follows:

"At all developmental levels, maturationally guided processes are turned into developmental processes as the result of adaptations enforced by exchanges with the surrounding and the organism's response to them".

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Conflict of Interests

The author(s) have not declared any conflict of interests.

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