

# *Contrastive Pronominal Subjects in Child English*



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Special Session: Same function, different forms: Pronouns, clitics and binding theory

AG 3 - Production-comprehension asymmetries in child language

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# *A Well-known Phenomenon*



Children learning English (and other languages)  
sometimes interpret non-reflexive pronouns  
reflexively

# *Widely Attested*



- English  
Chien & Wexler (1990); McDaniel & Maxfield (1992)
- Dutch  
Deutsch, Koster & Koster (1986); Koster (1993)

# *Binding Principles*



- Principle A  
Reflexives must be locally bound.
  
- Principle B  
Pronouns must be locally free.

# *Binding Principles*



- Principle A  
Reflexives must be locally bound.  
Children correctly interpret/comprehend 85% of the time
- Principle B  
Pronouns must be locally free  
Children interpret/comprehend correctly 50% of the time

# *(Loosely) Binding Principles*

- DPBE (Delay of Principle B Effect)  
Children's interpretation of pronouns is sometimes inconsistent with the target grammar (that contains Principle B).

*It's a PIP!*

- Pronoun Interpretation Problem (PIP)

Children's interpretation of pronouns is inconsistent with the target grammar.

What's the "problem"?

"During the same period, children's interpretation of reflexives is adult like"

-- Hendriks & Spender (2004)

## *Question*



Why do children sometimes interpret  
non-reflexive pronouns reflexively?



# *(English) Pronoun Production*

“Children do not use pronouns and reflexives in free variation;  
rather they use them as adults do.”

-- Bloom et. al (1994)

“production is adult-like from age 4;6 on.”

-- de Villiers, Cahillane & Altreuter (2006)

“Its remarkable that production errors have not been reported...”

-- Grimshaw & Rosen (1990)

# *Asymmetries*

1. Children correctly interpret reflexive pronouns at age 2;7;  
BUT DO NOT  
correctly interpret pronouns until past the age of 6;6.
2. Children allow Principle B violations in comprehension  
BUT DO NOT  
produce Principle B violations (Bloom et al. 1994)

# *A (less) Well-known Phenomenon*

Children acquiring English sometimes use subject pronouns of unusual case

**Me** take the wheel.

Gruber (1967)

**My** chose this one.

Huxley (1970)

## *Facts*

- *me/my* are sometimes used as subjects but *I* is not similarly overextended  
(Tanz 1974, Fee 1980, Powers 1996)
- *me/my* subjects in Child English are extremely infrequent comprising 3% of all first person subjects overall (Powers 1996)

## *Widely Attested*



- American Child English  
(Gruber 1967; Bloom 1970; Vainikka 1985)
- British Child English  
(Huxley 1970; Pine et al. 2005)
- Canadian Child English  
(Fee 1980)

## *Curiouser and curiouser!*

- *me/my* subjects are NOT attested in child languages with very similar pronominal systems like Dutch (Powers 1994;1995)
- *me/my* subjects emerge AFTER a stage of exclusive nominative pronoun subject use (Bellugi 1971, Huxley 1970, Rispoli 1994)

# Questions

1. Why do children sometimes interpret (non-reflexive) pronouns reflexively?
2. Why do children sometimes use *me* or *my* subjects?

# *In the beginning ...*



- Adam (Brown 1973)
- Eve (Brown 1973)



## *Vainikka (1985;1993)*



- Adam (Brown 1973)
- Eve (Brown 1973)
- Nina (Suppes 1976)
- Sarah (Brown 1973)

## *Bloom et al. (1994)*



- Abe (Kuczaj 1978)
- Adam (Brown 1973)
- Eve (Brown 1973)

## *Powers (1996)*



- Adam (Brown 1973)
- Eve (Brown 1973)
- Naomi (Sachs 1976)
- Nina (Suppes 1976)
- Sarah (Brown 1973)

# *CHILDES subjects*



- Abe (Kuczaj 1978)
- Adam (Brown 1973)
- Eve (Brown 1973)
- Naomi (Sachs 1976)
- Nina (Suppes 1976)
- Peter (Bloom 1970)
- Sarah (Brown 1973)
- Shem (Clark 1976)

# *Hypothesis*

An English-acquiring child uses *me* or *my* subjects in order to contrast him/herself from other potential discourse participants.

## *Prediction 1*

*me/my* subjects will (only) occur after pronominal subjects are used by the child herself or by other speakers in the discourse.

# *Let's put things in context ...*



Ferdinand (1996)

Contrastive focus shows that the **focused element is relevant as opposed to members of the same set**

Crain et al. (1995)

Contrastive or marked stress evokes **a set of entities that have already been established in the discourse context**

## *Peter 1;11.17 (Bloom 1970)*

\*CHI: fix it.

\*PAT: would you like me to fix it?

\*CHI: string # string # string xxx.

\*PAT: would you like me to fix the string?

\*CHI: fix it.

\*PAT: mmhm.

\*CHI: my fix it.



## *Peter 2;1 (Bloom 1970)*

\*LOI: want **me** to make a car?

\*CHI: car make a.

\*LOI: ok # **I**'ll make a car.

\*LOI: there's a car.

\*CHI: here's a car.

\*LOI: mmhm.

\*CHI: ok # make [/] make [//] **me** make a  
car too.

## *Peter 2;1 (Bloom 1970)*

\*CHI: Lois go home # Patsy go home.

\*LOI: I'm gonna go home?

\*CHI: a me go.

\*LOI: who's gonna go home ?

\*CHI: me go home # my go home #  
my go home # my go home.

\*PAT: my go home?

\*LOI: my go home?

\*PAT: huh?

\*CHI: my go home.

## *Nina 2;0.3 (Suppes 1974)*

\*MOT: what are you giving to bunny?

\*CHI: um.

%com: Nina pretends to take a bite out of  
her rabbit's carrot

\*CHI: I'm eating carrots.

\*CHI: eat # my eat it.

\*MOT: are you eating it?

see also Powers & Musolino (1997)

## *Nina 2;2.6 (Suppes 1974)*

\*MOT: where did I put the baby monkey?

\*CHI: on the tree.

\*MOT: that's right.

\*CHI: me have another baby monkey.

## *Eve 2;1 (Brown 1973)*

\*CHI: I can't blow it up.

\*CHI: you can blow it up.

\*MOT: I can't blow it up either.

\*MOT: there's a knot in it.

\*CHI: there # it has knot in it.

\*COL: yep.

\*CHI: an(d) Mom can't blow it up

an(d) me can't blow it up either.

## *Shem 2;5.23 (Clark 1976)*

\*INV: is this a dog+house?

\*CHI: yeah .

\*INV: is this a house that the dog lives in?

\*INV: does he live in there?

\*CHI: no # me livin(g) in there.

\*INV: you live?

\*INV: where does he live?

\*CHI: live out # an(d) he live in .

\*INV: right.

## *(Counter)example*

Non-linguistic context

The family is eating dinner (meat and potatoes) but the child does not want to eat either. Her mother gives her a plate with pickles on it.

Mommy, pickles **me** got!

Katerina 2;7

## *Prediction 1*

*me/my* subjects will (only) occur after potential referents are established (either by the child or by another speaker) in the preceding **linguistic or non-linguistic** discourse context.



## Prediction 2

If *me/my* subjects are used contrastively, children should use *me/my* subjects as well as nominative pronominal subjects.

That is, *me/my* subjects will occur in **exactly** the same syntactic contexts as *I* subjects.

(cf. Budwig 1989)

## *Finding 2*



I need her.

Nina 2;0.1

I want sauce on this dinner.

Betty 2;5.8

I coming.

Ellen 2;6

I eat the string beans

Eve 2;2

## *Finding 2*

I need her.

Nina 2;0.1

**my** need her.

Nina 2;0.1

I want sauce on this dinner.

Betty 2;5.8

**my** want sauce Mommy.

Betty 2;5.8

I coming.

Ellen 2;6

**me** coming.

Ellen 2;6

I eat the string beans after **my** eat my lunch. Eve 2;2

## *Prediction 3*

If *me/my* subjects are actually non-target contrastive subject pronouns, then non-target contrastive subject pronouns should be attested in other child languages.

Grimshaw & Rosen (1990)

“It is remarkable that production errors have not been reported, with the exception of the use of **emphatic or contrastive pronouns**”.

# *Emphatics in Child Dutch*



van Kampen (1994)

After an initial stage of target-consistent pronoun use, Dutch children sometimes use the emphatic form of the nominative first person pronoun *ikke* in a non-target way to mean 'I want'.

# *Ikke, ikke, ikke...*



## Diary Data

<i>ikke</i> bad .	Laura 1;11.21
<i>ikke</i> boeken .	Laura 1;11.21
<i>ikke</i> sokken .	Laura 2;0.5

van Kampen (1994)

\* Misschien soms "ikke" = "ik wil"

## *en de rest kan stikke*

### Spontaneous Data (Wijnen 1988)

<i>ikke</i> auto .	Hein 2;4.16
<i>ikke</i> bal .	Hein 2;5.17
en -: &I [/] <i>ikke</i> groentesoep .	Hein 2;7.20
<i>ikke</i> chocola .	Niek 3;00.09
<i>ikke</i> boom .	Niek 3;01.17

See also Powers (1994)

## *Child French (De Cat 2004)*

**moi** mettre ça comme Pol Max 2;3.20

I (want to) put it like Pol

(meaning derived from context)

mais **moi** veux mettre ça Anne 3;5.4

but me want put that

‘But I want to put that one’



# *Child French (De Cat 2004)*

moi tire ça

Max 2;1.25

me pull that

I'm going to pull that

ai gagné moi

Tom 2;1.11

have won me

I've won

et moi a gagné

Tom 2;4.8

and me have won

I've won

# *Child French (De Cat 2004)*

**moi** veux pas ranger

Max 2;9.12

me want not tidy up

I don't want to tidy up

**moi** veux l'essayer

Anne

me want it try

I want to try it

# *Widely Attested*



- Child French (France)  
(Anne - York Corpus)
- Child English (Belgium)  
(Tom - Cat Corpus)
- Child French (Canada)  
(Max - York Corpus)

## *Peter 1;11.17 (Bloom 1970)*

\*CHI: fix it.

\*PAT: would you like me to fix it?

\*CHI: string # string # string xxx.

\*PAT: would you like me to fix the string?

\*CHI: fix it.

\*PAT: mmhm.

\*CHI: my fix it.

**Child says: my fix it**

**Child means: I want to fix it**

## *Peter 2;1 (Bloom 1970)*

\*LOI: want **me** to make a car?

\*CHI: car make a.

\*LOI: ok # **I**'ll make a car.

\*LOI: there's a car.

\*CHI: here's a car.

\*LOI: mmhm.

\*CHI: ok # make [/] make [//] **me** make a  
car too.

Child says: me make a car too.

Child means: I want to make a car too.

## *Abe 2;5.16 (Kuczaj 1978)*

\*MOT: are you ready to go to bed # Abe ?

\*MOT: it's hot so **you** can sleep in the nude if **you** want to.

\*CHI: what nude ?

\*MOT: nude is when **you** sleep without any clothes on .

\*CHI: uh that nude ?

\*CHI: **me** walk around nude .

Child says:                    me walk around nude.

Child means:                I want to walk around nude.

# *Forms and Functions*

*me/my* subjects emerge only after children have learned the forms and functions of pronouns.

Why would *me/my* be used by the child  
emphasize/contrast/focus the subject?

“new functions are first expressed by old forms.”

- Slobin (1973)

## Q & A

Why do English-speaking children sometimes use  
*me/my* as subjects?

*me/my* subjects are  
contrastive pronominal subjects





## Q & A

Why do *me/my* subjects disappear?

English-speaking children learn the target-consistent way to emphasize subjects

(but maybe not until 6 years of age or later)



## *Q & A*

Why do English-speaking children sometimes interpret non-reflexive pronouns reflexively?

Because they once had a that grammar allowed a reflexive interpretation of pronouns



## Q & A

Why do children who perform poorly on Principle B seem to be insensitive to contrastive stress?

Because these so-called Principle B violations may be indicative of a grammar that marks contrastive stress in a non-target fashion.



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