

ANALYSIS OF MOTHER-CHILD PRONOUN USE

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INTRODUCTION

The work of Piaget (1948, 1950) on the development of the child's conception of physical categories is of universally recognized significance to cognitive-developmental investigators. From his classic studies, Piaget has characterized the young child as basically egocentric. The young child is primarily concerned with his own point of view and does not discern that his thoughts may be different from others. Piaget writes that this egocentric quality gradually diminishes from birth to twelve as the child develops the ability to shift perspectives or "decenter". In fact, Piaget contends that the child's level of cognitive development is largely determined by his mastery of decentration.

Piaget's work on the child's conception of the physical world has led to its application in the study of the child's conception of the social world. Specifically, there is a growing body of literature on the cognitive structuring of the social world as revealed through role-taking activity (Feffer, 1959; Feffer and Gourevich, 1960; Selman, 1971; Urberg and Docherty, 1976; Turnure, 1975). Selman (1971, 1722) has summarized the rationale for this logical extension:

"Role-taking — the ability to view the world (including the self) from another's perspective - is explicitly socio-interpersonal in requiring the ability to infer another's capabilities, attributes, expectations, feelings, and potential reactions. . . Ego-centricism refers, in part, to the young child's (from 2 to 7) inability to perform these role-taking operations. . . In Piagetan terminology, role-taking ability can be seen as the development of social and cognitive decentering."

This view has found empirical support in the work of Feffer and Gourevitch (1960) who found that the structuring of the physical world and the ability to assume different cognitive social perspectives were positively related to each other and were positively related to chronological age, thus reflecting a developmental trend. Congruent with Feffer and Gourevitch, Urbert and Docherty (1976) also

found that role taking is a progressively developmental skill which embodies decentration. Further substantiation has been offered by Turnure who suggests that "the ability to 'decenter' or shift perspectives is an important aspect of cognitive development and that this ability increases with age regardless of whether a 'social' or a 'physical' task is involved" (1975: 207).

The social-cognitive skill of role taking was initially introduced in the literature by Mead (1934) in his discussion of the development of the self. Mead proposed that the social self is composed of two parts: the "I" and the "me". The "I" is characterized as the creative or spontaneous aspect of self. It is the self as subject. The "me" is the cognitive representation of the "role of the other". It is the part of self that is an organization of the internalized attitudes of others. It is the self as object. When "taking the role of the other", the individual serves simultaneously as both subject ("I") and object ("me") of the experience.

In Piagetan terms, Mead's "I" can be described as analogous to the egocentric individual whose point of view is centered on self. Similarly, the "me" can be described as analogous to the nonegocentric individual who has achieved decentration. According to Mead, the development of these two components of self is not just a function of role taking but also of social interaction of which language is an important element. Language facilitates the process of role taking in that it assists the individual in sharing common social meanings and interpretations of behavior (Leahy and Huard, 1976). It would seem that the developmental nature of decentration would be related not just to role taking but also to the use of language during role engagement.

Like role taking and decentration, the acquisition of language is also widely recognized as a developmental process (Vygotsky, 1962; Menyuk, 1969; McNeill, 1970; Cazden, 1972; Tingley and Allen, 1975). And the acquisition of language skills has been shown to be strongly related to cognitive development (Montessori, 1969; Cazden, 1968; White,

METHOD

Subjects. The subjects for this study were 128 mothers and their children (aged 5 to 6) who were regularly enrolled in public school kindergarten in one of two southern metropolitan areas. The decision to use five and six year olds was based on the assumption that conversation should be sampled at a relatively full stage of language development. The sample was evenly divided among black and white families by sex. Only first born children were used in order to avoid variance attributable to imitating older siblings. All of the subjects were English speaking and were free of apparant health, speech, or psychological problems as reported by school authorities and as verified by direct observation.

Procedure. Near the end of the kindergarten year, we contacted each mother to schedule a home visit for the purpose of recording the mother and child conversing. At the onset of the visit, both mother and child were told that the purpose of the research was to learn how mothers and children talk to each other. Each child was promised a small gift (to be presented at the end of the visit) and the opportunity to hear play-back of the conversation. The primary purpose of the playback was to verify doubtful words for the typed transcript, most of which were proper nouns. However, the promises of a gift and playback of the recording also served as motivating forces for the children. (1968; Sigel, 1971). Thus, language itself might provide an operant index of decentration. Such an index has been suggested by Cooley (1908) in his observations of the early use of self-words by a child. With the birth of his third child, Cooley decided to keep a detailed record of her speech development with special attention directed toward pronoun usage. Examination of pronoun usage provided an index of the degree to which the self is a social conception. Cooley's observations suggest that the acquisition of self-words is developmental in nature and that normal use seems to have been acquired by the thirty-third month. A replication of this study by Bain (1936) produced strikingly similar results. Both scholars conclude that the use of "I" refers to the self as subject, not to the self as object Bain contends that the self as object has only the vaguest meaning for a young child.

TABLE 1: SUBJECT-OBJECT PRONOUN RATIO

<i>Subject:Object</i>	<i>Child</i>	<i>Mother</i>
I: Me	3.9	1.9
We: Us	5.5	4.0
They: Them	2.3	1.6
He, She: Him, Her	6.8	5.2

Following a brief interview to ascertain demographic information, each mother-child pair was recorded on a cassette type Sony stereo two track recorder, using a dual directional microphone oriented to record the mother more loudly on track one and the child more loudly on track two. This permitted consistent identification and discrimination of actors from the voice record. During the tape recording the researchers stood outside to prevent interruptions from siblings or visitors. Though 300 seconds of recording time was considered sufficient, the time was extended to 320 seconds to allow for aberrant intrusions such as noise of aircraft and heavy trucks.

Each of the 128 mother-child conversations was carefully transcribed verbatim from the tape recording by a team of two researchers and then verified against the original tapes. These transcripts were then coded to computer cards with codes for syllables, words, and sentences. Codes were also incorporated to mark dyad type of sex of child, actor speaking and grammatical type of utterance. For the purpose of this study, measures used were limited to counts of personal pronoun usage.

RESULTS

The manifest pattern for structuring social space by the child and the mother is shown in Table 2. For the child, the primary pronominal reference is clearly the self, which accounts for about 42 percent of personal pronoun references, compared to about 12 percent for the mother. The most frequently used pronoun by the child is "I", clearly establishing self as actor. The combined usage of self-reference pronouns (I, me, we, us) exceeds the usage of all other pronouns (you, they, them, he, she, him, her). Self-reference pronouns are followed in usage by specific other references (he, she, him, her). The least used pronominal reference by the child are references to the immediate other (you) and to the generalized other (they, them).

TABLE 2: AVERAGE PRONOUN FORMS PER 5-MINUTE DYAD
(Dyad N = 128)

Actor	I	Me	You	They	Them	We	Us	He/She	Him/Her
Child	15.5	3.5	5.0	2.3	1.0	5.5	1.0	9.0	1.0
Mother	5.5	3.0	38.8	2.5	1.5	4.0	1.0	10.5	1.0

TABLE 3: ORDER OF PRONOUN USE IN MOTHER-CHILD CONVERSATION (Means per 5-minute dyad; N per column = 64)

Order of Frequency	Child's Pronoun Use				Order of Frequency	Mother's Pronoun Use			
	Race		Sex			Race		Talking to	
	Black	White	Male	Female		Black	White	Boy	Girl
I, Me	18	19	17	21	You	41	36	38	40
He, She					He, She				
Him, Her	11	10	10	11	Him, Her	12	13	12	12
We, Us	7	6	5	8	I, Me	9	8	8	9
You	4	6	4	6	We, Us	3	6	4	5
They, Them	3	4	3	3	They, Them	2	6	5	3

An examination of the mother's pronominal usage shows a markedly different pattern. For the mother, the "you" references to her child heavily predominate her social structure space, accounting for 50 to 60 percent of personal pronoun expression. Pronominal references to the immediate other are followed in frequency by references to self (I, me, we, us) and specific other (he, she, him, her). Usage of these two pronominal groupings is approximately equal.

Using the grammatical form of the pronouns as an index of social-cognitive development, two categories were identified. For the nominative pronominal forms ("I", "we", "they", "he", and "she"), the pronoun is usually the initial word of a clause or sentence. In general, the person indicated in the nominative case is the subject or source of action. There is an implicit projection from the subject to the external realm. A similar but complementary function may be ascribed to the accusative pronominal forms ("me", "us", "them", "him", and "her"). This form denotes a person who is the object or recipient of action. In the case of social action, the object is the essential but lesser half, of which the source of action is the primary self.

Categorizing pronominal references as nominative or accusative and examining the data from this perspective, a decidedly higher

proportion of nominative forms can be found, as shown in Table 1. This preference for the nominative over the accusative is somewhat greater for the child's speech patterns than for the mother's although it is manifest in both. This pattern is similar for all persons, black and white, male and female. As predicted, the child shows a greater preference for the nominative over the accusative form with self references ("I", "me", "we", and "us") with a mean ratio of 4.70:1. These data suggest that the child as social actor is mainly the source of action and is less frequently the object of action. The mother's mean ratio for self references is much lower (2.80:1), suggesting a greater tendency to view self as both subject and object.

It is usually of scientific interest to determine whether dynamic processes can be described mathematically. If a mathematical formula can be adapted to, or developed for the process, it may simplify the explanation of the process, and may assist in relating it in a more precise way to other processes. The use of the different classes of personal pronouns appear to decline in the same order for independent categories of actors in our sample, as shown in Table 3. For the mother's personal pronoun categories, the order of declining frequency is similarly stable for the first four categories, but is not consistent for the fifth category.

DISCUSSION

The data tend to support the crux of Mead's discussion describing the development of the social self. The "I", as the source of action, appears to develop first. The individual as subject rather than object dominates in the child's use of personal pronouns. In fact, the "me" as the recipient of action is relatively underdeveloped at age six. These findings are also congruent with those of Cooley (1908) and Bain (1936) who have demonstrated that the child's first awareness of self is as subject.

In mother-child conversation, the five year old child was typically led into talk about preferences for activities, kindergarten and church group relations, playmates, family members, and friends. In all of these conversations, references to persons with pronouns was spontaneous and universal. About 15 percent of all words by the children were personal pronouns. The proportion was similar for the mother. Therefore, the pattern of social reference may reasonably be mapped from the expression of personal pronouns as a high-frequency indicator, extracted from the total data set. The child, like the adult in social conversation uses self reference as the most frequent personal pronoun (Guy and Allen, 1976). The child projects to specific others as third persons as a close second focus of interest. References to the we group, and to the mother as the immediate other, "you", and to the generalized other, "they" all compose a more distant and declining focus of interest.

The mapping of the social space which the mother projects in these conversations is most unexpected, because it concentrates so heavily on the child. The mother's third person references are similar in area to those of the child, and the mother's self references make up a weak third in frequency. The self-partner pattern of the child's social space is drastically reversed in the mother's partner-self reference pattern. Conversational subject matter often reveals a pattern of parental indulgence and a catering to the child's whims. For example: Mother: "What would you like me to buy you?" Boy: "A black diving mask." Mother: "But you already have a diving mask." Boy: "But not a black one!".

A question of interest in the study of social projection concerns the stability of this lopsided pattern of maternal self-effacement and

quasi-subservient catering to the child. Is this a part of the mother's orientation only with her pre-school child, or is it also manifest in her relation to other family members?

The interpretation of findings on the rather uniform declining frequency of personal pronoun use is more problematic. Declining frequency usually fits an exhaustion model in finite space. Since conversation consumes time, only a finite number of words can be expressed in a fixed time period. If a speaker tends to favor one class of terms, it reduces available time to use other related classes of terms. At the same time, for most speakers, several references to the self appear to require occasional reference to other persons. When a personal reference occurs the first time, it is likely to require both some repetition and a transfer to a related personal reference. This is illustrated in the sentence: "I thought I told you about her."

Applying the concept of social structuring with personal pronouns here should not be taken to suggest a static relation or an invariant basic structure, either from the actor's position or from that of the social object of action. In a dynamic behavioral system, the components are restructured to fit new situations, or become destructured as the action approaches completion. The conversational union breaks up, and the social structure on which the interpartner activities was based becomes deactivated. The same actors, in other social settings can, and do erect a dynamic and adaptive social structure appropriate to the new situation.

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