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"GUILLAUME I VA PAS GAGNER, C'EST D'ABORD MAMAN"

GENESIS OF THE FIRST PERSON PRONOUN [1]

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INTRODUCTION

Since the turn of the twentieth century, we know that between the ages of 2 and 3, children use several linguistic forms to refer to their self as subject of the utterances they produce. In French and in English, the two languages we have studied for this work, the following forms were analyzed by various authors :

- **preverbal vowels:** for example Bloch's daughter (1924) says /a/ in front of nouns but also in front of verbs. This phenomenon has been more recently well described by Loïs Bloom (1970) who gives two possible explanations for the occurrence of /´/ in Erik's data at 1;07 in expressions such as *"´ sit"*, *"´ home"*. According to her"one possible source for

/ˊ/ may have been the pronoun *I*; this interpretation of /ˊ/ in constructions with verbs became more tenable at Eric III (1;10), when the form was often *I* in context before verbs only. A second possible source may have been the prenoun article *a* or *the*."

- **first name or a nickname**: for example Bain's daughter Sheila (1936) says her name at 1;08 to talk about herself *Seebee eat* .

- **the pronouns** *me* and *my*, in French *moi***:** Grégoire (1937) describes his son Charles at 1;09 as saying /mapapet/ (*me not potty*, meaning "I don't want to go on the potty").

- ***You,*** in French *tu*: when Cooley's daughter (1930) says *you want cake* at 2;02, she is the one who wants a piece of cake.

- ***I,*** in French *je*: at 1;11, Bain's daughter says *I help Mama.*

We must add another phenomenon which some of these authors have referred to, the absence of form in front of verbs when *I* is mandatory in adult English and "je" in adult French.

- **null form:** for example at 2;01, Bloch's daughter says /papome/ (*hat put*, meaning "I want to put on the hat").

These examples show that the acquisition of the pronoun *I* is in progress when children are around the age of two. But how can the use of these several competing forms by young

speakers be explained? Are there stages which prepare for the use of *I* ? What are the problems we are presented with when we study the acquisition of this tiny, slippery pronoun?

Several authors go beyond the simple record of these various forms and make attempts at explaining the genesis of the first person pronoun by referring to problems which for us correspond to three different points of view.

A psychological problem: self awareness

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, psychologists have insisted on the relation between first person pronouns (*me, I*) and an important stage in the psychological development concerning self awareness: children start being aware of themselves only when they acquire "self-pronouns" (Lobish, 1851). Whether they use those pronouns is directly related to the "feeling of personality" (Wallon, 1934). "Before the appearance of *je*... children... have not understood that the representation they have of themselves is different from the one others have of them" (Piaget, 1926). Even if this feeling of self is sometimes acknowledged to be already present in the child before these productions, they correspond to psychological processes which can be considered as "a fact of introspective awareness generated by a realization of differential awareness" (Pichon, 1936). This explanation of the

absence of a form in terms of a psychological "lack" has been quite criticized.

A linguistic problem

For Pavlovitch (1920), the observers of child language often confuse the notion of person and the acquisition of pronominal forms. Indeed, self awareness cannot be said to be less intense when children use their first name instead of the pronoun *je*. The appearance of first person pronouns does not necessarily correspond to the first setting up of self awareness (Stern & Stern, 1907), and the distinction between the self and the other, but is rather in connection with the difficulty in using the linguistic system (Jespersen 1922, Sabeau-Jouannet 1975).

However, a number of works show that the reference of each selfword used by the child is not the same. "Baby" and the first name refer to the physical self, to the image, the shadow, whereas the pronoun *I* refers to the social self in interaction with the others (Nelson 1989). In her analysis of Emily's monologues, Nelson presents the "different temporal contents" of self-reference. From 1;08 to 1;11, *Emmy* is the term the little girl uses the most to mark an "objective self". After 1;11, she will prefer the pronoun *I* to mark her "subjective self" when the "system of temporal reference"

emerges. Two systems, self-reference and temporal reference, are therefore developing over the same period.

According to Nancy Budwig (1985, 89, 90) who takes both linguistic forms and discursive functions into account in her methodology, children code internal states with *I* and agentivity with *my*. Agentivity is treated as a prototype and corresponds to responsible actions with "intent to bring about a change". "Internal states" corresponds to assertive utterances, for example Jeff says *I wear it* after he has negociated with the researcher and has obtained to wear the microphone. When they want to mark their status of experiencer, children will prefer the form *I*.

Besides the question of this locutory intention expressed by the children, we must also deal with the question of the referent. Indeed, since pronouns do not have a stable and objective referent (Jakobson 1963, Benveniste 1966), children encounter great difficulties which lead to the famous "pronominal reversal". The problem is to find out whether when children say *you* instead of *I*, they consider pronouns as referring to specific persons therefore equivalent to proper names (Clark 1978), or to roles in discourse (Charney 1980, Chiat 1982, 1986, Oshima-Takane 1992). In order to analyze this problem, we must consider the conditions in which acquisition takes place.

An interaction problem

It is important to understand the consequences of the linguistic "input". There is a tight connection between the errors the children make and certain uses of pronouns and proper names in the language addressed to them (Preyer 1887). Some authors have even shown that French mothers use a variety of terms instead of *tu* (*you*) when they speak to their children: *il /elle, on, nous, moi je*. This motherese might paradoxically both help and hamper the children in their acquisition process (Sabeau-Jouannet 1975, Rabain-Jamin 1984, Rabain-Jamin & Sabeau-Jouannet 1989).

Unlike previous works, instead of wondering why children DO NOT SAY *I*, we asked ourselves: "but what DO they say when they use the various forms we have mentioned?" Our task is to seek the coherence of children's speech in their way of expressing their self with their own markers.

DATA, METHODOLOGY, RESULTS

We have studied three corpuses with dialogues between adults and children in their natural environment. One of the children, Peter, is an English speaker; the data was collected by

Loïs Bloom and her team (Bloom & Lahey 1978). It is part of the CHILDES database (MacWhinney 1991). The two other children, Guillaume and Juliette are French speakers; the data was collected by Brigaudiot and Nicolas (1990).

We have systematically listed and analyzed their selfwords. We began with the first production of their name in subject position. The three children were 1;08. We ended when they all stopped using their name in subject position. The children were 2;10. We have paraphrased each utterance in which the children expressed their self in adult speech, according to the linguistic and extra linguistic context. Here is an example of how we interpreted the following utterance in its context:

Peter (2;00) is looking at Loïs and Pat who are going to put the toys away and leave.

Loïs: We're gonna put our toys away and go home.

Peter: Peter go home.

Mother: I think the toys are gonna go home.

We know the child is sorry each time the team leaves and takes the toys away. We therefore assign the meaning "I want to go home too" to *Peter go home*, implying "not only the toys and not only you go home".

Those paraphrases have enabled us to categorize uses which we are now going to list as they appear diachronically.

We will successively analyze the categories of uses and the forms within each period.

Table 1: Use of Self-reference by Peter, Guillaume and Juliette
Categories of uses and linguistic forms

From age 1;08

Categories.

Two categories can be separated. We have named them Will/ Project, and Turn taking/Opposition (Brigaudiot, Morgenstern & Nicolas, 1994).

In the Will/Project category, we have taken into account all the utterances in which the children are saying *I want to* or *I am going to* with the meaning "I am able to do like a grownup", "I succeed".

Example: just before Juliette creeps under the bed to get a toy, she says *aller là-dessous* (*go under there*).

In the Turn taking/Opposition category, the children emphasize their doings versus others' doings. The selfwords are first used in utterances meaning "my turn", or "not you, me".

Example**:** The Brigaudiot family is going on a trip. The mother says: *Je vais faire ta valise* (*I'm gonna make your suitcase*) and

Guillaume says: *Guillaume* which for us means "I and not you am going to make my suitcase."

Forms.

Various forms correspond to the two categories of uses.

In the Will/Project category, the most frequent form used in both languages is null form. It seems as if the "verb" were enough to express actions (*do*), desires (*get*) and wills (*want*). We only find the first person pronoun *I* in Peter's data. That could be explained by the fact that the data was transcribed orthographically which could lead to over-interpretations. For Chiat (1986), various phonemes produced by children in front of verbs can be interpreted either as *I* or as *you*. But the transcription problem might not be the only explanation for the occurrence of *I* at such an early age in Peter's data. Indeed, according to Bloom, Lightbown & Hood (1975), Peter is considered as a "pronominal style" child using a high number of proforms such as *I* and *my* as agents, in contrast to "nominal style" children who use mostly names.

In order to express Turn taking and Opposition, the three children mostly use their proper name. We also find *me, my, moi,* in the data but we can note that Peter uses *I* here too. This use which we only find in the English data might come from syntactical differences between the two languages. In the situation where several protagonists are present and one of

the speakers would like to stress the fact that he wants to be the agent, an English speaker would say *I'm gonna do it* (stress on *I*) and a French speaker would say *c'est moi qui vais le faire* (use of *moi* in a set expression).

From age 2;03

Categories.

Within the framework of self-designation, the children say more things and use a larger number of forms.

The Will/Project category keeps its subjective nature. The children express their feelings, their emotions, their desires (Juliette says *t'as soif / you're thirsty* meaning "I'm thirsty"), but also make comments-evaluations (when asked what he is doing, Peter answers *I just fixing this guitar*) and narrate their past actions (Guillaume says *fait des bêtises aujourd'hui / did naughty things today* talking about his day at school).

The Turn taking/Opposition category now also includes comparisons between the self and others.

Ex: Juliette's mother describes a picture of an animal in a book: *il donne la patte* (*he gives his paw*), and Juliette says *moi aussi, donne la patte* (*me too, give the paw*).

Forms.

In the Will/Project category *I* becomes the privileged marker in English, *je* appears in French but also *tu* (*you* meaning *I*). Besides the null-form remains quite frequent.

In the Turn taking/Opposition category, there is an important use of *me* in English and the proper name in subject position has been dropped. The French children still frequently use their name along with *moi*.

The specificity of this period in the genesis of the first person pronoun is the high number of the forms used, 5 for Peter, 6 for Guillaume and 8 for Juliette.

At 2;10

We consider that the two categories merge into one, the children express a subjective *I* inside their relation to the other. Their utterances now involve Time, Mode and Aspect. Here are three examples at 2;10:

Guillaume after he has been told *T'es un petit* (*You're a little boy*) says *non, je suis grand!* (*no, I am big!*).

As he is checking out everybody's name, Peter says *I am Peter, I'm not Patsy.*

Juliette tells her mother *Regarde, je siffle comme les enfants.* (*Look, I can whistle like the children*.).

They are talking about their status and their abilities.

Some forms disappear from the language of the children such as *tu* and the first name in French, *me, my* in English. Other grammatical markers now replace the various selfwords the children used before: whereas Peter used to say *my do*, he now says *I'm doing*, with *I* to designate himself and the complete *ING* form, like adults.

ANALYSIS

Our analysis of the three children's data has enabled us to draw two categories with forms which evolve when the children are between the ages of 1;08 and 2;10. We therefore agree with Budwig's results (1989). Our two categories of uses could be considered as covering the contrasted use of *I* versus *my* by the three youngest children in her study (1;08 to 2;06). Indeed the "Will-Project, Affects, Comments-Evaluations, Narratives" category corresponds to internal states found in assertions. The "Turn taking, opposition, comparison" category corresponds to "high agentivity" as defined by Budwig: two or more participants, highly kinetic verbs, telic situation, purposeful action, affirmation. Our results comply with the semantic meaning she attributes to the two types of forms: experiencer and agent (1993).

We now propose to consider the entire data in order to set a hypothesis which would explain how these two categories help us understand the genesis of the first person pronoun. We went back to the children's first words, and we found them at the root of all further development as we will now proceed to demonstrate.

For a long time, children's language is deictic, they do not need to mark the person of the verb, they are learning to speak about what they want in the present situation. Guillaume says *ouvrir* and Peter says *open* when they mean *I want to open*. We think they already have the ability to verbalize their desire and their will before the age we have chosen to begin with in our study. Guillaume says *humhum* at 1;02 for his mother to open a box. Besides, we also think that the ability to verbalize agentivity is precocious. Children particularly learn how to word it in routine games in opposition to the other. The importance of these contexts is well-known, especially the give and take games described by Bruner (1975) in which the marking of the agent is particularly clear.

The children also have the means to deal with their competition with the adult. When Guillaume says *raconter (tell)*, his mother starts reading a story. Guillaume then has to protest: *non Guillaume* for her to understand that he wants to read.

This locutory force is fundamental for us in the genesis. We have taken up phenomena which testify to this importance in two other languages. In Spanish, Emilio, studied by Vila, and his team in Barcelona (Vila, Gonzalez, Zanon, 1987), overuses first person marks. He says *me lo como yo* (*me, I eat it)*. In French Sign language, Laurene, studied by Morgenstern (1994), overmarks the self pointing gesture where an adult only needs to use the verb, since the speaker is implicitly the subject of the sentence. Instead of signing *drink*, she signs *me drink*..

Here is a very simple figure, summarizing our view of the acquisition process of self designation.

Figure 1: Two sources of the first person pronoun

During the period in which the children's language is entirely deictic, there are two main sources of the first person pronoun in their speech.

They either express affect, modality or aspect, and in this case, their first person utterances mostly focus on the predicate (WHAT). The children stress what they have achieved, what they feel and what they want. Their utterances are of course entirely subjective and the enunciator is fully

responsible for them. The predicate is therefore constructed through the speaker's subjectivity.

Or they focus on the subject of the utterance (WHO), therefore on who is doing the action, expressing the individuality of the self as opposed to the other.

By giving the hypothesis of two sources in the genesis of the first person, we do not take into account the analysis of the various forms produced by the children as being overextensions of *I* (Rispoli 1994). In our analysis, *I* and *me* are two different words in Peter's language. For example, when he says *me found it, I find it*, we give it the meaning "I have found it, not you AND I am able to find it even if I am no more than a little boy".

At the end of this process, the children will then say WHO does WHAT (when and how) in and out of a deictic context:

(Juliette) *Tout à l'heure j'ai baillé parce que j'étais sommeil* (*A while ago, I yawned because I had tired).*

(Guillaume) *Quand je suis trois ans, je peux souffler les bougies*. (*When I be three, I can blow the candles*).

We here agree with Nelson's results (1989): the stabilization of *I* is contemporary with that of the temporal markers such as *tout à l'heure* (*a while ago), quand je suis trois ans* (*when I be three*). When we evoke what is not present, we are able to talk

about what we do and feel without having to position ourselves in opposition to the other. That is when we use a fully-fledged *I*. In a situation where the other is present, the ability to say *je* (*I*) on its own on the one hand, and *moi* (*me*) in order to oppose oneself to others on the other hand, enables the children to say *moi je* (stressed *I*). They are then wording what we call inter subjectivity.

All these hypotheses are of a psycholinguistic nature since we have tried to find regular uses over a long period in two languages. Among the processes involved in the acquisition of self-reference, we also take into account how children deal with the language they hear. For example Guillaume and Juliette only use *tu* (*you*) instead of *je* (*I*) in expressions they have heard the adults say in order to word prohibitions, achievements, or internal states. Juliette says *t'as mal* (*it hurts you*) when something hurts her and Guillaume says *t'allumes* (*you put the light on*) when he has finally succeeded in putting the light on. Our study therefore lacks a precise analysis of the mother's speech in order to be more complete. That would enable us to find out if preverbal vowels first appear in repetitions just like *tu* (*you*). For example, in Juliette's case at 1;09:

Mother: Oh! tu as fait un trou! Tu as abimé le livre! (Oh! you've made a hole! You wrecked the book!).

Juliette: /ame /

Mother: Oui, abîmé. (Yes, wrecked).

Juliette: /olabim / (Oh wreck it)

Mother: Oui, t'as abîmé! (yes you've wrecked it).

Juliette: /´bim alatabim / (wreck you wreck)

CONCLUSION

The fact that children do not use *I* to mark the first person in subject position from the very start, has been interpreted as a lack of self-awareness in the beginning of the century. However, whether the children say *veux ça* (*want this*) or *je veux ça* (*I want this*), adults know they are expressing their own desire with no ambiguity.

Besides children also use their name, *me* and *my* (*moi* in French). In that case, they are claiming responsibility for the ongoing action in a turn taking process. We have therefore drawn two categories of uses beginning at the age of 1;08, with the characteristics "Will/Project" in one and "Turn taking/Opposition" in the other.

When the children begin to talk about their feelings or past events, they take possession of the forms they have heard in those contexts (*I, you*).

And finally, since they are able to position themselves in relation to the other and to word their subjectivity (*I'm hungry, I fell, I don't want to stay here*) they now have the means to verbalize their own feelings within the inter subjectivity of discourse (When told *I love meatballs, let's have some for lunch*, they can answer *But I don't like them*).

This genesis is formally easier to trace in French than in English in which the forms *I* and *I* (stressed) are hard to differentiate even though they refer to two different values. That may be the reason why English speaking children use the forms *me* and *my* (a phonic and syntactical combination of *me* and *I*) in subject position. It would therefore be interesting to take stress into account in further analyses.

When we study the acquisition process of self-reference, it is of course important to distinguish the phenomena of a psycholinguistic nature, and those which are strictly linguistic and are linked to the formal acquisition of the mother tongue. A study of various languages, especially non Indo-European languages, would confirm that there are two problems: the formal linguistic phenomena should take on different forms, whereas the psycholinguistic hypothesis would be validated.