Playing with pronouns in French maternal speech to prelingual infants*

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ABSTRACT

Conventional and displaced uses of pronouns in maternal speech to refer to the baby were investigated in a developmental study of six mother–infant dyads using video-recordings of their free play at three, seven and ten months. These pronominal uses were analysed in a number of semantic contexts to determine how interactive situations influence the use of different types of pronouns. Results show that third- and first-person pronouns occur significantly more often in the semantic context of affect-oriented activities than in the semantic context of goal-directed activities. For second-person pronouns the results are the opposite. The contrast found between these two contexts, i.e. where the child is presented as the agent of a meaningful activity or not, shows how the place constructed for the baby as an interlocutor in maternal speech evolves with age. This study underlines the part the third person plays with its descriptive value in the acquisition of the system of pronouns.

INTRODUCTION

The early linguistic exchanges between infants and the family present a picture of an asymmetric situation. Even if children possess from birth the necessary equipment to allow them to take an active part in exchanges with the social environment, as can be seen by infants' imitations (Meltzoff & Moore 1977, Field, Woodson, Greenberg & Cohen 1982), it is no less true that it is the mother's responsibility to organize those exchanges. It takes a

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long time before children are able to establish their place in the reversible role positions of speaker/addressee and adjust their intentions to those they attribute to their interlocutor (Deleau 1985). One of the ways parents structure linguistic interaction with their infants is by incorporating the child's signals into the language they use when addressing the baby, e.g. the infant's lack of attention, his/her mimicry and postures (Kaye 1982).

The present study analyses the different linguistic ways by which mothers, through their interactions with their infants, define both the baby's and their own positions in the communicative acts and, on the basis of this, how they organize the construction and differentiation of their roles.

Many studies have been conducted on the registers of language used by caregivers addressing the child. However, there are only a few studies concerning prelingual infants (Snow 1977, Sherrod, Crawley, Petersen & Bennett 1978, Penman, Cross, Milgrom-Friedman & Meares 1983). The peculiar style of parents' BABY-TALK and especially of its prosodic features (higher pitch, extremely variable intonation contours, specific temporal organization – in which utterances are brief followed by pauses that are usually longer than those observed in conversation between adults) (Bateson 1975, Garnica 1977) has been interpreted by a number of authors as being of a type aimed at getting and maintaining the child's attention (Stern, Spieker & MacKain 1982, Stern, Spieker, Barnett & MacKain 1983) and at communicating affect (Papousek & Papousek 1981, Fernald 1984).

Generally speaking, mothers pay attention to body rhythms which underlie their infant's attention, and they use these rhythms to encourage the baby to take its turn in exchanges (Snow 1977). The mothers provide a framework for the infant's gestures by imitating them vocally, verbally or corporally. They interpret a large range of behaviours, such as head direction, gaze, arm and leg movements, stiffening or relaxing of the body, chewing, burping and smiling, as being the child's turn in the communicative situation. Adults consider that the infant's gestures, noises, posturing and gaze, and mimicry carry meaning (Ryan 1974, Bruner 1975) and apparently operate on the assumption that the child uses signs coherently. By doing so, adults put infants in the position of potential interlocutors and give them the means to establish meaningful signals.

A number of studies have shown that mothers modify their language according to their child's level of development and language ability. Snow (1977) has shown that these effects appear when the child is still in a prelinguistic stage of development and is only able to comprehend certain verbal signs and the mother's prosody. Thematic changes occur at around 5–7 months: while, during the first months of life, mothers speak to their children about the feelings and states that they ascribe to them, when the children get to 5–7 months of age mothers begin speaking much more about the child's activities and outside events. Snow suggests that these modifica-

tions in the referential aspects of the mother's speech are influenced by changes in the child's focus of interest. Trevarthen and Hubley (1978) have defined these changes as a passage from the COMMUNICATIVE MODE, which appears from the second month of life, to the PRAXIC MODE, which prevails between 5 and 7 months and which is characterized by a decline of interest in the social environment and dominant concentration on objects.

From birth the relation between mother and child can be described as 'dialogical' or 'conversational', in that there are contingencies between specific behaviours of the child and the mother's verbal responses (Snow 1977, Trevarthen 1977, Penman *et al.* 1983). Among the syntactic characteristics of maternal speech can be singled out the great use of interrogatives when the child is 3 months old. This should be seen as an intention by the adult to include the child in a dialogue rather than as an intention to help the child acquire language skills (Snow 1977). Mothers treat their babies as if they were full participants in a dialogue and mark the baby's place as an interlocutor.

To support this hypothesis, we have chosen to study how French-speaking mothers mark the place of each of the interlocutors when they speak to their babies. Our main concern has been reference to the child, in other words the addressee. As Wills (1977) has noted, one of the characteristics of the language mothers use with their babies is the semantic variety and complexity of the ways the baby is addressed. The mother uses a great number of linguistic means to construct the child's place as an interlocutor (proper nouns, personal pronouns, nouns).

Proper nouns assure reference continuity, and function as rigid designators that are invariable within a spatio-temporal framework (Gardiner 1954, Molino 1982). Personal pronouns are, in Russell's (1940) terms, EGOCENTRIC CIRCUMSTANTIALS. Just as *this* changes its *designatum* with each act of attention, *I* and *you* change with every *hic et nunc* utterance act. The pronominal mode of signifying, which is variable and reversible, contrasts strongly with the stability of proper nouns, which are specific to the individual they label. Personal pronouns mark the different places in an interaction with respect to the speaker. As they are free until anchored by the speaker, they have a certain amount of leeway in the manner they refer to people and this permits the speaker to include or exclude the partner, to put him/herself in the other person's place, to designate a generic speaker, etc. (Boutet 1986).

There are two different ways mothers use personal pronouns when interacting with their babies: their use may be conventional and direct, or it may be displaced. By DISPLACED we mean the use of *il* 'he', *elle* 'she', *on* (the generic 'one' that is commonly used in French), *nous* 'we' or *moi je* (emphatic 'I'), instead of using *tu* 'you', which would be the conventional way of addressing the baby. This displaced use, which is traditionally called

énallage des personnes 'person substitution' (Fontanier 1968, Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1980), has been studied in the case of mothers addressing their 9- to 21-month-old babies (Wills 1977).

The place the mother gives her child as the addressee of her utterance marks the event's effect on her. The following are some examples of French-speaking mothers' different uses of pronouns to address their babies.[1]

When the mother questions the child using the form *tu* 'you', she expresses an expectation and projects a situation in which the baby is regarded as being able to answer (*Qu'est-ce que tu regardes?* 'What are you looking at?') (Fabien 3 mths).

When the mother comments on the baby's activities or states using the form *tu* 'you', she presents the baby as the subject of the action; she emphasizes that the given event is part of the child's experience (*Oh! tu gigotes!* 'Boy, are you moving around!') (Nicolas 3 mths).

When the mother uses the third person *il, elle* 'he, she' to speak to the baby, she situates the child both as an addressee and as a non-participant in the speech event. In this contradictory way, she both addresses the child and points the child out as a spectacle to him/herself (*Il se tortille, Nicolas.* 'He's really twisting about, this Nicolas.') (Nicolas 3 mths).

When the mother uses the first person *Je* 'I' on the infant's behalf, she reverses roles and pretends she is speaking in the child's place (*Oh! je suis malheureux moi!* 'Oh, aren't I unhappy!') (Fabien 7 mths).

Before examining the other forms of French maternal address let us recall that other than first-, second- and third-person singular and plural definite pronouns, French offers an impersonal pronoun, *on* 'one'. This is used in informal speech as well as formal writing and serves where English might use a passive voice or a generic or indefinite 'you', 'they' or 'we'. Examples: *On peut le voir de la rue* 'It can be seen from the street/You can see it from the street'; *On travaille bien à Paris* 'We/They work well in Paris', depending on whether or not the speaker is a member of the group being referred to by *on*. If the speaker works well in Paris *on* = 'we'; if not *on* = 'they'. *On* can also be used as a first-person definite plural, as in *On est bien ici* 'We're OK here' (Boutet 1986).

When the mother uses the impersonal form *on*, she offers three possible semantic values. (1) Either it is an utterance that concerns both the speaker and the addressee as specific individuals making up 'one'. In this case, both mother and child take part in the activity (*On va mettre la couche.* 'We'll put on the diaper.') (Elsa 3 mths). (2) Or it is an utterance where the speaker is not part of the 'one'. These utterances concern the interlocutor. By using the

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[1] It should be emphasized that the English translations in parentheses here are only glosses, and may not necessarily be ways in which English-speaking mothers would typically address their children.

impersonal form, the mother avoids addressing the baby directly. (*On s'énerve, on se frotte les yeux*. 'Someone is getting upset; someone is rubbing his/her eyes.') (Stéphanie 7 mths). This use does not put the child in the position of the addressee, interlocutor and potential respondent. The nuance of endearment found in this form (which might be evaluated completely differently by an interlocutor of equal status) stems from the unbalanced relation between the partners of the interaction. (3) Or, finally, the mother uses the generic *on* 'one' to indicate norms that every subject of a given social group is expected to adhere to (*On ne jette pas sa serviette par terre*. 'One doesn't throw napkins on the floor.') (Stéphanie 10 mths).

This variety in use of pronouns by mothers would seem to contradict the results of a number of studies concerning the characteristics of maternal speech. In fact, this type of language, far from being phonologically and grammatically inadequate, is very finely attuned to the child's language abilities, as the pioneer works of Brown & Bellugi (1964), Ferguson (1964) and then Snow (1972), Phillips (1973) and Cross (1977) have shown. Not only does the mother adapt her language to the child's linguistic possibilities, but she also observes, elicits and interprets the behavioural cues the child gives as calls and responses to her.

It is well known that it is not until late in the language acquisition process that children learn to handle pronouns correctly. The reversibility and interchangeability of personal pronouns is a difficulty that is specific to their use (Benveniste 1966, Sabeau-Jouannet 1975, Charney 1980). Mothers' imprecision and substitution of pronouns would thus seem paradoxical. We hope to shed some light on this by analysing the different verbal contexts in which conventional or displaced use of pronouns occurs, and by analysing in particular the pragmatic and semantic categories of the predicates (i.e. verbs of perception, of volition, of communication, of action and of state) that are employed with the different pronouns.

We plan to show that: (1) the speech modalities by which mothers refer to their children vary as a function of the child's age; (2) different interactive situations brought out by verbal contexts influence the frequency with which different types of pronouns occur; and (3) this influence varies with the child's age and is greater when the child is young.

METHOD

Six mother–baby pairs were observed and videotaped in their homes for about six hours each. Three mothers were of a middle-class background living in Paris. The other three lived in the country about 70 kms from Paris, and two of these had a lower socio-economic status. The pairs were observed at three different times, when the babies were 3, 7 and 10 months old. Following the babies' development, the situations of exchange between

mother and baby varied. Thus at 3 months face-to-face communication and baby-care activities predominated; at 7 months there was mostly face-to-face communication and communication concerning the exploration of objects; finally, at 10 months the exploration of objects and the child's movements were predominant. The mothers were told that we were interested in the social development of infants; they were asked to chat as naturally as possible to their babies.

In the language of mothers addressing their babies, we have considered only those expressions that referred to the baby. We have thus deliberately excluded all reference by the mother to herself or to other people (father, brother, sister) or objects as such.

Pronoun occurrences were classified as a function of their semantic contexts, which were divided into two categories (Type 1 and Type 2). Semantic context was defined by type of verb, as follows.

TYPE 1
(1) perception (looking, hearing);
(2) volition (wanting);
(3) psychological activity (thinking, knowing, understanding);
(4) communication, activity whose aim is the communicative process (chatting, saying, telling);
(5) goal-directed or instrumental activity (trying to, making something work, succeeding, continuing).

In this type of speech the child is presented as a subject, the agent of a meaningful activity which implies, to various degrees, the child's own volition.

TYPE 2
(1) 'performing' activities whose goal is not clear and which might only be for show or for their own sake (moving around, falling, stretching, pedalling, hitting, jumping, rubbing);
(2) affective mood (being content or unhappy, groaning, getting upset);
(3) physiological activity (drooling, coughing, being hungry, yawning, digesting);
(4) qualifying descriptions (being lazy, greedy, a big boy).

In this type of utterance the child is not a voluntary source of a meaningful process; s/he engages in activity for its own sake, reacts reflexively or manifests a state of discomfort or happiness.

For each semantic context frequency of second person (2p) (separating 'you' and imperative forms), first person (1p) 'I', where the mother takes the child's place, and third person (3p) ('that', 'it', 'one') address to the baby were tabulated. To keep this third group from becoming too vague, we have deliberately excluded instances of *on* ('one') used to make a comment on an

activity both baby and mother took part in ('One will put on the diaper.') (Nicolas 3 mths), considering that this third person was really equivalent to a 'we'. It should be mentioned, too, that we did not maintain Wills' (1977) category of 'dropped pronominal forms', e.g. *Tousse, tousse le bébé!* 'Cough, cough that baby!' a comment on the baby's activity (Fabien 3 mths), as there were too few occurrences of utterances of this type in our data. In the counts, we did not separate out onomatopoeia, vocatives, exclamatives, greetings and all those elements having a phatic value and whose importance has already been emphasized (Kaye 1980).

The corpus was analysed separately by the two authors. Twenty per cent of the analysis was compared. Inter-rater agreement was 0·92.

RESULTS

Since the number of utterances per mother varied, a ratio of the number of utterances of each type ('s/he', impersonal, 'I', 'you' and imperative) to total number of utterances was calculated for each subject, for the two semantic contexts (Type 1 and Type 2), at each age. The mean frequencies are given in Table 1.

TABLE 1. *Distribution of different pronouns according to age and type of semantic context (mean frequency and standard deviation)*

		Type 1				Type 2			
				2p.				2p.	
		3p.	1p.	'You'	Imper.	3p.	1p.	'You'	Imper.
3 months	m	8·9	2·2	73·9	15·0	46·8	8·5	41·4	3·3
	s.d.	5·7	2·6	8·7	8·7	20·2	8·2	14·7	4·5
7 months	m	5·4	5·3	65·7	23·6	31·5	16·3	45·0	7·2
	s.d.	3·0	4·5	11·9	14·2	19·3	15·1	20·5	6·9
10 months	m	4·0	1·5	63·5	30·1	24·7	2·5	66·0	6·8
	s.d.	2·7	1·7	14·1	15·9	14·0	4·1	15·5	8·0

An ANOVA shows that the mean number of utterances per mother in Type 1 semantic contexts (perception, volition, psychological activity, communicative process and goal-directed activity) does not differ as a function of age (F n.s.). The mean number of utterances per mother in Type 2 semantic contexts (performing activities, physiological activity, affective mood, qualifying descriptions) diminishes with age ($F(2, 10) = 4·70$, $p < 0·05$). For the entire set of data, however, the number of utterances with semantic context 1 is not significantly greater than the number of utterances with semantic context 2.

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Pronoun frequencies

The data for the first, second and third person pronominals were subjected to separate statistical treatment. Overall dispersion for the three kinds of pronominals in semantic context 1 was low in contrast to the range of variability in semantic context 2.

Third person utterances (3p). An ANOVA for third person pronouns shows that at three, seven and ten months, forms of address with *elle/il*, *on*, *c'* 's/he', impersonal, 'it' are significantly more frequent in type 2 than in type 1 semantic contexts $(F(1,5) = 21.25, p < 0.01)$. Third person pronoun use decreases significantly between 3 months and 10 months $(F(2,10) = 13.45, p < 0.01)$.

Second person utterances (2p). An identical analysis performed on the second person utterances shows significantly more utterances with *tu* 'you' in semantic context 1 than in semantic context 2 $(F(1,5) = 14.48, p < 0.05)$. Partial comparison for utterances in semantic context 1 shows no age effect $(F$ n.s.), whereas utterances with *tu* 'you' in semantic context 2 increase significantly between the ages of 3 and 10 months $(F(2,10) = 12.45, p < 0.01)$. Imperative use is significantly more frequent in semantic context 1 than in semantic context 2 $(F(1,5) = 37.81, p < 0.01)$. Imperatives in semantic context 1 increase significantly between 3 and 10 months $(F(2,10) = 6.30, p < 0.05)$.

First person utterances (1p). An ANOVA shows that first person pronoun utterances occur significantly more often in type 2 than in type 1 contexts $(F(1,5) = 13.54, p < 0.05)$. No global age effect was observed, but an ANOVA reveals a significant age effect for utterances in type 1 semantic contexts, which increase between 3 and 7 months and then decrease at 10 months $(F(2,10) = 5.24, p < 0.05)$. In type 2 semantic contexts the number of first person pronoun utterances decreases with age although, due to the high standard deviation, the finding does not reach significance.

To sum up, the statistical analysis shows that the use of 3p to refer to the baby is highest for 3-month-olds and decreases with age, and that at all ages 3p utterances to refer to the child are typically used to denote performing activities, physiological activity, affective mood and qualifying descriptions. On the other hand, 2p pronouns are mainly used with verbs concerning perception, volition, psychological activity, communication and goal-directed activity. As 3p pronoun use decreases, 2p pronouns increase and are used in both semantic categories. When the child is 10 months old, however, 3p pronouns are still being employed and the differences in frequency between the different semantic contexts remain significant for all pronouns.

Just as for 3p pronouns, 1p pronouns are mainly employed in semantic context 2. However, their significant increase in use between the ages of 3 and 7 months in semantic context 1 and their extension to different semantic contexts confirm the contextual specificity of these forms. Moreover, the use of 1p pronouns varies considerably across the mothers studied. When her child was 3 months old, for example, one mother out of six did not use *je* 'I' when speaking 'on behalf of' the baby; at 7 months the ratio was 2 out of six, and at 10 months it was 3 out of six although these mothers still used *il* 'he'.

Frequency of semantic categories

Before discussing the results, it is necessary to analyse more precisely developmental changes in the frequencies with which the different types of semantic context were manifested. Do mothers modify their use of different types of verbs as the child gets older? If the answer is affirmative, what changes occur for each of the semantic categories?

Although we found no significant variation according to age in the use of *tu* 'you' in type 1 semantic contexts, but only an increase of imperative forms, nevertheless there is some change taking place in the kinds of utterances belonging to this category. We therefore regrouped the verbs into five sub-categories: c_1 includes perception, volition and psychological activity (semantic contexts where the baby is posited as the source of intention, the experiencer of perception or the source of psychological activity), c_2 includes communication, c_3 includes goal-directed activity, c_4 includes performing activities and c_5 includes physiological activity, affective mood and qualifying descriptions (this group brings together all the emotions, states and qualities of the baby that produce or manifest positive or negative affect). c_1, c_2 and c_3 make up the category of Type 1 semantic contexts, and c_4 and c_5 make up Type 2. Table 2 presents the results for relative frequency (in mean percentages) of each subcategory for each age.

The mean percentage of utterances increases significantly between 3 and 7 months for category c_1, consisting of perception, volition and psychological activity, ($t(\text{d.f.} = 5) = 3.38$, $p < 0.02$) and remains at this level at 10 months. The mean percentage of utterances in category c_2 (communication) drops significantly between 3 and 7 months ($t(\text{d.f.} = 5) = 3.37$, $p < 0.02$). The mean percentage of utterances in category c_3 (goal-directed activity) increases significantly between 7 and 10 months ($t(\text{d.f.} = 5) = 4.93$, $p < 0.01$).

No significant evolution was observed for category c_4 (performing activities). The mean frequency of utterances in category c_5 (affective mood, physiological activity and qualifying descriptions) decreases significantly between 3 and 7 months ($t(\text{d.f.} = 5) = 2.65$, $p < 0.05$). Category c_5 utterances continue to diminish between 7 and 10 months although this trend does not

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TABLE 2. *Frequency of different semantic categories according to age (mean percentages)*

			3 months	7 months	10 months
Type 1:	C1:	Perception Volition Psychological activity	16·7	31·8	30·7
	C2:	Communication	17·4	8·2	9·3
	C3:	Goal-directed or instrumental activity	11·5	13·2	28·6
Type 2:	C4:	Performing activities	11·6	18·8	14·6
	C5:	Physiological activity Affective mood Qualifying description	42·7	27·8	16·8
			100	100	100

reach significance. The overall decline in use of this category is congruent with findings reported by Snow (1977).

DISCUSSION

The way mothers use pronouns when talking with their babies changes as the child gets older. By using the semantic categories that were set up above, this change can be characterized as follows.

At 3 months utterances concerning affective mood and physiological activity (c5) predominate. Furthermore the number of utterances concerning communication (c2) is at its highest at this age. It drops significantly between 3 and 7 months. The child is recognized at this age as a communicating subject.

At 7 months there is a significant increase in the number of utterances associated with categories of perception, volition and psychological activity (c1). Mothers apparently consider that the child has entered a new stage where psychological activity can be attributed to him or her directly. From the child's first days of life, mothers seem to see what he or she will become and treat the child as an experiencing subject. However, before the child is 7 months old, probably around 5–6 months, the mother begins to see signs of the child's own cognitive activity and takes the child's perception, volition and psychological activity more and more into account.

At 10 months the category of goal-directed activity (c3) stands out

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3rd person   You
1st person   Imperatives

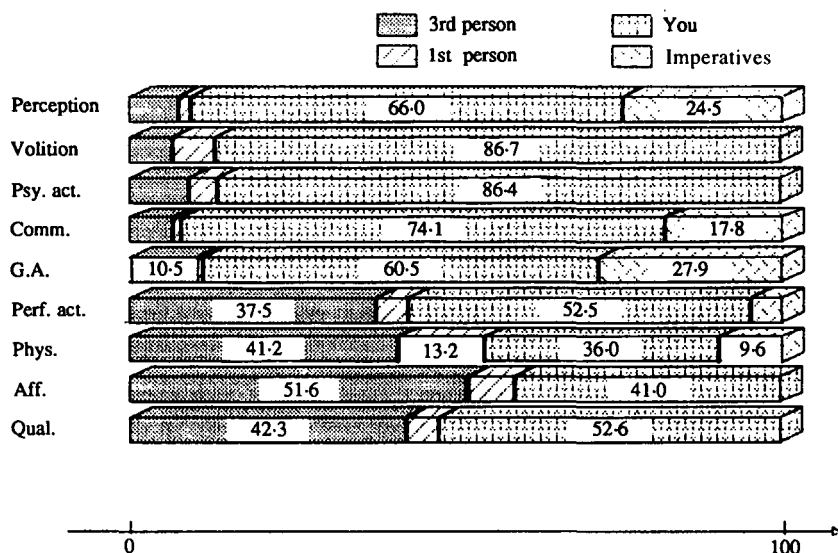|	3rd person	1st person	You	Imperatives
Perception			66·0	24·5
Volition			86·7	
Psy. act.			86·4	
Comm.			74·1	17·8
G.A.	10·5		60·5	27·9
Perf. act.	37·5		52·5	
Phys.	41·2	13·2	36·0	9·6
Aff.	51·6		41·0	
Qual.	42·3		52·6	

0   100

Fig. 1. Frequency of different pronouns according to different semantic categories at 3 months (mean percentages). Psy. act., psychological activity; Comm., communication. G.A., goal-directed or instrumental activity; Perf. act., performing activities; Phys., physiological activity; Aff., affective mood; Qual., qualifying description.
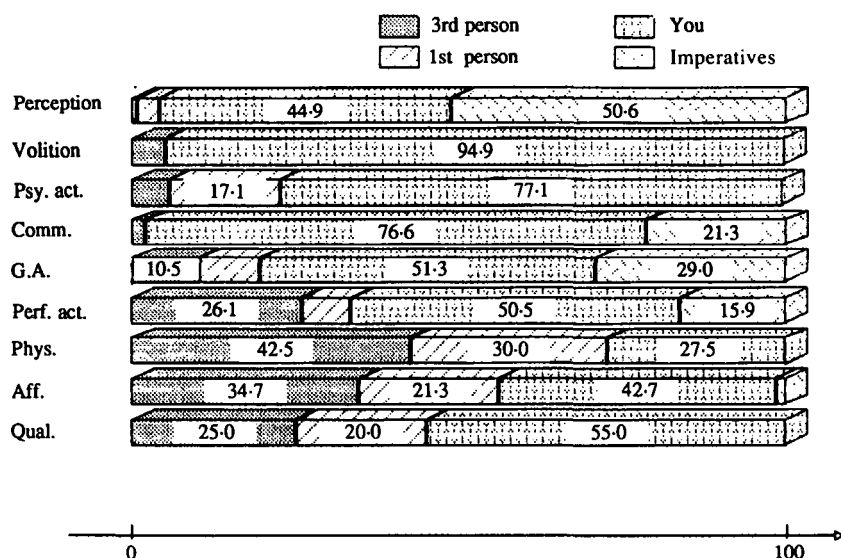
3rd person   You
1st person   Imperatives

	3rd person	1st person	You	Imperatives
Perception			44·9	50·6
Volition			94·9	
Psy. act.		17·1	77·1	
Comm.			76·6	21·3
G.A.	10·5		51·3	29·0
Perf. act.	26·1		50·5	15·9
Phys.	42·5	30·0	27·5	
Aff.	34·7	21·3	42·7	
Qual.	25·0	20·0	55·0	

0   100

Fig. 2. Frequency of different pronouns according to different semantic categories at 7 months (mean percentages). Abbreviations as for Fig. 1.
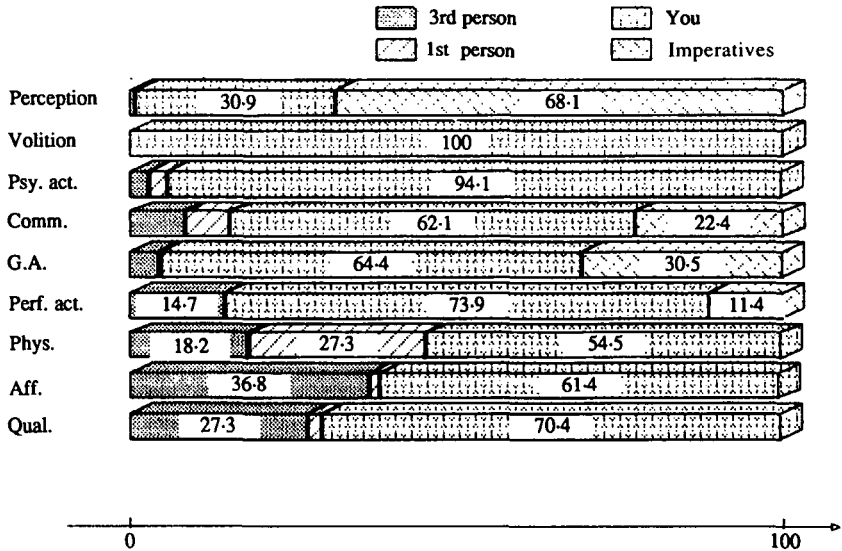
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Fig. 3. Frequency of different pronouns according to different semantic categories at
10 months (mean percentages). Abbreviations as for Fig. 1.

significantly. The mother's speech confirms the child as a volitional agent of activity.

The semantic categories described above organize the paradoxical pro-nominal forms found in mothers' speech.

(1) Comparing Table 2 and Figs 1–3 it can be seen that category c5, made up of affective mood, physiological activity and qualifying description, predominates during the first weeks of life and is a sort of backdrop to the first year of references to the child. All three grammatical persons are used to refer to the child in this semantic context, although not equally. *Tu* 'you' is the least used at 3 months and remains so at 7 months for physiological activity. *Elle, il* 's/he' and *on* 'one' predominate. *Je* 'I' is also most used in this semantic context. The number of utterances belonging to this category decreases progressively just as 3p and 1p pronouns to refer to the child decrease in general.

When the mother comments on the child's affective mood or physiological activity, she is naming a mood or an emotional reaction. By addressing the baby in the third person, she speaks as if the child were not participating in the speech event. The child's corporeal states and emotions become an almost theatrical topic of the exchange. Inserting into the exchange a reaction that has no aim (which could be a reflex like a cough), would act as a shock absorber to a state of discomfort and render it more bearable. For the mother the child's mood modifications are so many signals which she invests with

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meaning and her utterances play the role of an external 'protective shield' (Freud 1920, Piñol-Douriez 1984).

(2) Category C1, made up of perception, volition and psychological activity, where perception is the most important, increases with the child's age. This corresponds to the increased importance ascribed to references concerning volition and perception that is found in the speech of mothers. The percentage of utterances belonging to this category is not affected, whatever the age of the child, by pronoun person displacement. From the age of 3 months, the child is referred to preferentially by a second person pronoun when the utterance belongs to this category. Mothers' questions concerning the infant's visual activity, such as the direction of the infant's gaze, are rarely put in the third person. It is as if the infant proves its presence by looking. Verbs of perception may be considered elementary forms of performatives; they lend signification and precision to the relation between the subject and the environment. As for the imperative forms observed in the semantic context of perception, their frequency doubles from 3 months to 7 months and goes on increasing at 10 months. This is the result of the numerous interventions by the mothers to attract the baby's attention and point out interesting objects.

(3) The 2nd person ('you' together with imperative forms) predominates in the category of goal-directed activity (C3) from 3 months of age and the frequency of this type of utterance shoots up at 10 months. On the other hand, all three persons are used in utterances concerning performing activities (C4). Although a majority of the utterances of this type refer to the child as *tu* 'you' (57·5 %), a fair number of utterances are in the third person, *elle/il, on* 's/he', 'one' (37·5 %).

Thus it can be seen that the distribution of pronouns referring to the child varies according to type of activity which is the focus of communication. When the action can be considered goal-directed, the mother makes her comment using *tu* 'you'. When the mother uses *tu* 'you' both in interrogative and imperative forms, she is implicitly soliciting an intention; she is setting up an outline of action that implies that the child has a will of its own. When this action does not have a precise aim or reason and exists for its own sake, it apparently has a theatrical aspect, and the mother comments on this action in the third person.

How the mother structures the baby's place in the social environment

The paradox in mother–infant exchanges is this: while the mother addresses the child as a communicating subject and interprets the child's body movements, gestures and vocalizations, the child does not have the means to respond verbally.

By using pronouns in the conventional way, i.e. by addressing the baby in

the second person, the mother creates a place in the exchange for the baby as an addressee. By using them paradoxically she makes use of the possibility language offers to play with shifters and anchors them on points of reference out of line with the coordinates of the utterance. 'Any deictic that is normally dependent on the speaker and his or her situation in space and time, might in these conditions gravitate around the addressee or a third person actor of the utterance' (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1980: 64). We have already mentioned how rich the addressee's (the baby's) place in the mother's speech is. The baby is constantly posited as the centre of reference of the mother's propositions. Even if she addresses a third person to speak about different events, she punctuates her speech with pauses during which she addresses the child and includes him or her in the conversation.

(1) Using a third person to speak to the baby about him- or herself or about the mother herself (*maman, elle* ... 'mommy, she ...') positions mother and baby in front of a potential third party. This paradoxical use by the mother undermines the reciprocity of the direct relation of *tu* 'you' (Maingueneau 1981). Through such a form and by addressing the baby through non-verbal means – proximity, gestures and prosody – the mother acts on the baby, however, at the same time putting the child at a distance. Her comments on the child's activity or inner state make it seem like a show. By changing *tu* 'you' to *elle/il* 's/he' to describe a given situation, she sets up a scenario and a backdrop and shines a different light on the action. A third person utterance is often accompanied by a demonstrative (*Oh là là! Ce garçon est malheureux!* 'Oh how THIS little boy must be unhappy!' (Fabien 7 mths); *Ah! Il a pris sa valise ce bébé.* 'Oh, THIS baby has picked up the suitcase!' (Quentin 10 mths)) that emphasizes the scene-setting, almost theatrical element of the behaviour, and by doing so she renders the action taking place more conventional.

This third person form of address is not specific to mother–infant relations. It can be found in the colloquial, everyday conversation heard in public places like cafés, markets or shops. These formulas which avoid addressing the interlocutor directly and perhaps too abruptly exist in other languages (Spanish and German, for example). A regular customer who comes in looking frozen and who leans on the counter of a café might be addressed by the proprietor with: *Elle a froid? Venez donc travailler un peu ici! Qu'est-ce qu'elle veut?* 'Is she cold? Come and work here a bit! What does she want?'. These third person formulations can also be found in hospitals between the patients and those who care for the patients (*Elle a été bien fleurie aujourd'hui!* 'She has received lots of flowers today!' *On ne va pas nous refaire de la tension!* 'We won't have high blood pressure, will we!') The third person paradox seems to assume two points of view: on the one hand it is used as an indirect formula that courtesy would counsel; and on the other hand it is a way of speaking between individuals who are on familiar terms

when the speaker, going beyond the usual form of address, expects or wants to create a certain consensus. Here we find a sort of address to a third person. These third-person constructions are analogous to those used by mothers when addressing their babies. However, in adult interaction they are used in codified normative forms of social exchange which is not the case for mother–infant relations.

(2) The use of *je* 'I' on the baby's behalf stimulates a dialogue by demonstrating turn-taking. As she takes into account the two participants by using various forms, the mother may go from *tu* 'you' to *je* 'I' in a question–answer situation. The child is the subject of the utterance given as a response to *tu* 'you' (*T'aimes pas ça le hoquet? Oh non, moi j'aime pas ça!* 'You don't like hiccoughs, do you? Oh no, I don't like them!' (Quentin 3 mths); *Oh! T'as attrapé ta patte! Oh! J'attrape ma patte, moi!* 'Oh, you're holding your foot! Yeah, I can hold my foot!' (Quentin 7 mths)). The pole of the utterance may be transferred in two steps. By using *je* 'I', the mother speaks in the place of the baby; by using *elle* 'she', she speaks of herself (*Oh, moi j'ai faim. Maman, elle comprend rien.* 'Oh, I'm hungry. Mommy doesn't understand anything!' (Victoire 3 mths)).

By speaking in the child's place and by accounting for the two interlocutors in displaced ways, the mother organizes a fictive dialogue. And through her intonation, speech and accentuation of each of the sides of the dialogue, the mother sets up turn-taking and role switching. According to Snow's (1977) conversational hypothesis, the function of mothers' utterances, and especially those that by their nature call for a response (as for questions, compliments and insults), is to incite the child to take a turn (a burp or a sneeze). Snow considered that this was proved by the change in the mother's utterance as soon as the baby's response came up.

Woven into the fabric of mothers' utterances, as with so many ways of eliciting an answer, is the thread of non-verbal communication which invests the utterances with meaning and ties them together. By responding verbally for the child, the mother looks for indications of communication that are not verbal. As soon as the child can respond verbally, after 2 years of age, there are fewer interrogative forms in mother's speech (Savić 1975, Rondal 1983).

It must be emphasized that dialogical turn-taking is set up very early by non-verbal, and para-verbal (intonation, intensity) means. A number of authors have also found that intonational cues support the construction of early meanings (Siguan Soler 1977, Stern *et al.* 1982, 1983).

From a strictly verbal point of view, a question concerning what the minimal units of mother–baby dialogue are, could be asked. Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson (1974) have suggested that the minimal dialogue unit is the ADJACENCY PAIR, which they define as a turn made up of two utterances where one is pronounced right after the other by different people (in this case it

would be the fictional pair that the mother sets up). When the mothers' utterances were analysed, it was found that they often occurred in three-move sequences. When the first utterance was a question, our data concurred with Sacks *et al.*'s formal induction, i.e. question–answer followed by a third utterance that closed the unit, for example:

> *T'aimes mieux que maman parle tout bas?* 'Do you like it better when Mummy speaks softly?', *T'aimes mieux que maman parle tout bas!* 'You like it better when Mummy speaks softly!', *Oh il aime mieux! Oui bien sûr!* 'Oh, he likes it better! Sure!' (Fabien 3 mths).

The question and answer are both in the same person while the confirmation is in the third person. After the answer with *tu* 'you', the use of *il* 'he' heightens the theatrical effect. Other three-move sequences have been found where the second term, for example, picks up on the question and where the play on pronouns includes all three persons, *tu/il/je* 'you/he/I', as in the following example where the mother sees her 7-month-old son sucking a toy:

> *Dis donc, qu'est-ce que tu fais?* 'Hey, what are you doing?'
> *Qu'est-ce qu'il fait Fabien?* 'What's Fabien doing?'
> *Oh là là, moi j'ai mal aux dents!* 'Oh boy, do I have a toothache!'
> (Fabien 7 mths).

The topical coherence of the sequence is based on the reference to the child's activity. Through the use of these three-move sequences, the mother sets up a framework for a dialogue including the turn-taking component.

The mother's mood, as indicated by variations in prosody, is an essential factor in setting the scene for play on pronouns. Many authors (Tabouret-Keller 1966, Siguan Soler 1977, Josse & Robin 1983) have emphasized that the content of maternal speech refers to immediate, concrete reality. In the same way it should be noted that this play on pronouns is associated with sound play which in turn borrows from hackneyed sayings, songs and nursery rhymes. Both set up a play scene which brings together concrete reality and useful, functional actions which the mother suggests the baby carry out (Rabain-Jamin 1984*a*, *b*).

The business of dressing a fourteen-week baby is commented on by the mother with: *Je mets ma chemise* 'I put on my shirt', and is followed by the nursery rhyme *Loup, y es-tu? Oui! Que fais tu?* 'Big bad Wolf, are you there? Yes! What are you doing?' (Olivier 14 wks). Here the alternation of speaker/interlocutor roles is enriched by calling on a repertory of phrases from nursery folklore.

Wills (1977) notes that the non-conventional use of pronouns in baby-talk seems 'to obscure either the identity or the role of the person referred to or both'. The author briefly outlines a number of counter arguments and suggests that third person usage in utterances addressed to babies promotes the construction of the baby's sense of identity because these utterances

frequently include his/her first name. However, we will argue that mothers' variable pronominal usage is not a source of confusion but rather is systematic input. By varying pronominals, the mother shifts the pole around which the utterance gravitates and makes the child the centre of the interaction. Our argument here is that this shift gives the child the opportunity to assimilate how the three pronouns interact by consistently presenting situations from the child's standpoint.

When the dialogues were analysed we found that at first a mother will often ask questions about or comment on the child's activity by using *tu* 'you', thus directly positing the child as an interlocutor. Later the mother starts using a third person form, thus opening up the scene to include deixis from the points of view of both the speaker and the interlocutor. The invariability of the third person would seem to facilitate the comprehension of the *tu* 'you' utterance that preceded it.

This would shed some light on a certain number of linguistic somersaults where a parent includes in the same utterance both a second (or first) and a third person reference to the child, e.g. *Tu fais câlin à sa maman?* 'Do you give her mother a hug?' (Stéphanie 7 mths), *Je fais des gros sourires à son papa, ça!* 'I give his papa a big smile' (Olivier 7 wks). In the last example, the father accentuates each of the poles and facilitates his son's comprehension of *je* 'I' by using a third person (*son* 'his') in association with the proper noun *Papa*. As noted earlier, proper names can be assumed to be easier to handle than shifter pronouns. In the first example, which begins by addressing the child as *tu* 'you', the pronouns are not organized around the speaker but are organized in the second part of the utterance around the child.

However, it is quite common to find in maternal speech third person forms of address associated with the use of a proper name, e.g. *Il avait des grosses misères, Nicolas!* 'He has so many problems, Nicolas!' (Nicolas 7 mths), *Qu'est-ce qu'il fait Fabien?* 'What's he doing, Fabien?' (Fabien 7 mths), *Il s'en fiche Quentin!* 'He doesn't care, Quentin!' (Quentin 7 mths). This association combines in a concrete fashion a way of calling someone's attention (where the name is a label to which the child responds very early on) and setting up a position outside the dyad. This is not so for *on* 'one', which is rather a way in which the mother expresses that she is a participant in the child's experience. This pronoun sets mother and baby up as accomplices in the speech act.

A number of authors have shown that toward the end of the second year the child uses the third person to speak about him- or herself (Grégoire 1937, Leopold 1939, Piaget 1945, Weir 1962). This third person, in fact, picks up a noun. In the same way the child uses *moi* 'me' forms followed by a third person that interchanges with names, e.g. *Moi, s'appelle Eva* 'Me, calls Eva' (Eva 24 mths); *Moi, lé court (lé = Olivier)* 'Me, Olivier run' (Olivier 25

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mths); *Maman, moi l'est le crapaud noir* .... *Olivier il est tout noir* 'Mommy, me him is a black toad .... Olivier, he is all black' (Olivier 28 mths). This use associated with the third person and getting the addressee's attention was also found later, e.g. *Papa, l'est pas beau, toi, papa* 'Daddy, him is not handsome, you, Daddy' (Olivier 30 mths).

This same type of linking was found between the name by which the child calls him- or herself or gets the interlocutor's attention and the third person pronoun which the child uses to describe a reality that is not yet seen as having reversible roles. The mother, too, when speaking of herself or when referring to the baby frequently uses these same combinations. Why do parents so often and late in the language learning process use the third person form to speak to the child about themselves instead of using *je* 'I'? For example *Attends, maman elle va faire la cuisine* 'Wait, mummy, she is going to cook' (Quentin 10 mths). It would almost seem that the mother avoids using *je* 'I' to refer to herself while she is using it in the child's place. By using this form she avoids reversing poles (speaker/addressee), much preferring to designate each of them by a given form. It has been found that associating name and 1p or 3p pronouns is an intermediary state in the process of acquiring correct pronoun usage (Sabeau-Jouannet 1975). The mother's association of this type, which precedes the child's use of these forms, may facilitate this acquisition.

CONCLUSION

We have seen that pronoun substitution and some pronoun combinations have specific uses in given semantic contexts. When the reference is to the child, the semantic focus is the affectivity of the exchange. When the reference is to the mother, the preferred semantic topic is instrumental activity. The mother's activity lends itself to commenting in the third person and allows her to link an action to a verbal form.

In certain semantic contexts, e.g. those involving communication and perception, 3-month-olds establish themselves as subjects. Mother and child communicate non-verbally by their gaze and their gestures. As to perception, children establish themselves as active partners: they look at and away from the mother to explore the environment; they give non-verbal cues, e.g. the direction of gaze, to establish meaning. Babies manifest their ability to take part in the communication and to leave it. These actions can be clearly seen. The meaning of the child's behaviour is not ambiguous. The mother recognizes it by using *tu* 'you'. A *tu* 'you' utterance will typically be associated with a request for information or a request for action (interrogatives and imperatives). The child is fully recognized as a volitional agent and experiencer. It is precisely in the semantic contexts of volition and goal-directed activity that children produce their first occurrences of *je* 'I'

and *tu* 'you' at about the age of 26 months, e.g. *Je veux* 'I want' and *Tu donnes* 'you give' (Sabeau-Jouannet 1975).

In a semantic context where the actions are not goal-oriented, such as affective mood and physiological activity, events are more opaque and the cues are ambiguous. In these contexts there are far fewer questions and many more comments and descriptions. The mother develops the meaning. The act becomes an exchange through the mother's interpretation. Our results show a much higher range of variation for utterances concerning affect, body and physiological states. A number of authors have found that there is a much greater variability in mothers' language to infants than there is when the child gets older (Phillips 1973, Snow 1977) and we know how important utterances concerning the baby's states are in the first months of life. References to the semantic contexts of affective mood, physiological activity and qualifiers make up 42·7% of the utterances at 3 months. Possibly variability is related in some way to this preponderance of utterances on matters which require interpretation on the part of the mother.

The child is still an immature partner in the interaction. The child does not fulfil its role when it comes to indicating meaning. As Castoriadis-Aulagnier (1975: 36) wrote, the mother carries and creates meanings that foreshadow the child's own ability to recognize meaning and to use it in his/her own way. As she interprets the mother hesitates to take over meaning by assigning it directly to the child (by utterances with *tu* 'you'). As the addressee's role as marked by *tu* 'you' is unfulfilled, the mother is tempted to address him or her by *je* 'I'. Even more frequently, meaning is set up from the point of view of a non-participant of the exchange and she uses the third person. This contrasts with the two poles of communication and widens the scene. In this case the third person has both the value of a form of address and a descriptive value.

In the specific case of affective mood, a speaker's references to feelings felt by another pose a problem of legitimacy. As far as babies are concerned, mothers permit themselves to comment on their moods, which they often do on the baby's behalf (by using *je* 'I'), or even more frequently by setting the corporeal event or the mood modification outside the interaction as if it were being said by a non-participant. She sets up a representation of her baby's states and mood for her child and herself in such a way that a certain distance is created between her words and the infant's corporeal states and feelings.

The pronominal permutations found in maternal utterances that designate the same act, event or state and that have the same referent (the baby) would seem to be an elementary form whereby the baby's states and actions are interpreted; they are, in sum, an interpretive framework. By picking up on various indices and successively using different pronouns, the mother sets up hypotheses at the same time as she varies the conversational places to be occupied and how much she takes over the infant's internal states or the

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actions she ascribes to him or her. Pronoun permutations correspond to these variations of place and should be analysed as scenes.

It is through these interactive and cognitive phenomena that infants' affective states are controlled and that mothers offer them reference points that help them to set up their own identities in communication. By associating a shift in pronouns according to specific topics mothers set up the infant's place in their speech. The data from this study bring out the importance of the role of interaction and pragmatic parameters in the acquisition of language.

Thus the mother uses the baby's signals to differentiate between registers of description and of address. The use of the third person introduces a descriptive figurative statement. It is, in fact, the basic form or background against which *tu* 'you' and *je* 'I' stand out. The third person designates; it is directly connected to the perceptible physical reality that is under consideration. As soon as the child is 4 or 6 months old the mother tries to point out objects that are far out of reach, for example, by clicking her fingers in front of the child's eyes to catch his or her attention, and then guiding the baby's gaze by pointing her finger in the direction of the object (Murphy & Messer 1977).

For a child to take on an identity, it is important that objects be designated in a register that is different from the one used for a speaker/addressee exchange, and that it be differentiated from the immediate action and from the affective register (Ortigues 1977). There has been a tendency to consider first person usage as the exclusive way to mark identity. But, in fact, personal identity must be constructed against a background of the physical reality that is brought out impersonally by the mother and against the pragmatic reference points of the action. The ability to symbolize and use the type of language that is specific to human beings implies full comprehension of how the three persons function.

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