Development of possessive forms in English-speaking children: Functional approach

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The present study examines the development of linguistic forms which children use to refer to others or themselves as possessor. Language data on 65 English-speaking children between 15 and 29 months of age were collected from two sources: (1) a 50-minute speech sample on audiotape, and (2) a parent interview on the spontaneous use of possessive forms in daily speech. The data indicate that children begin to express the relationship between possessor and possession with linguistic forms at about the same time as they begin to combine two words in utterances. To designate others as possessor, many children used only nominal forms (e.g., "Mommy's" or "Mommy's shoe"). Only children whose language development level was relatively high used pronominal forms (e.g., "Yours" or "Your shoe"). On the other hand, to designate themselves as possessor many children used both nominal forms (e.g., "Jacob's" or "Jacob shoe") and pronominal forms (e.g., "Mine" or "My milk"). These results are discussed with regard to Deutsch and Budwig's claim that the nominal and the pronominal possessive forms in children's language express different functions of possession.

Key words: English possessive forms, possessor-possession relationship, indicative function, volitional function, functional approach.

When a child points to an object and names its owner (e.g., pointing to the father's shoe and saying, "Daddy"), this utterance is generally interpreted as an indication of the child's awareness of the relation between the object and its owner (Greenfield & Smith, 1976; Rodgon & Rashman, 1976). Rodgon and Rashman (1976) claimed that such utterances indicate the child's preliminary awareness of the possessor-possession relationship and of the conventional linguistic expression of possession. Several diary studies have reported that children start this behavior very early - when they are producing one-word speech (Greenfield & Smith, 1976; Macnamara, 1982).

However, Rodgon and Rashman (1976), who systematically examined this phenomenon by showing children a series of photographs of their own, their parents', and unfamiliar persons' belongings, found that owner naming is a relatively infrequent phenomenon in children at the level of one-word speech. They found that the children named the objects more frequently than they did the owners of the objects. When owner naming did occur, it was restricted to particular, highly familiar objects, such as the parents' possessions. Greenfield and Zukow (1978) reported that even children who began to combine two words together tended to name the objects rather than the owner, even when the objects were familiar such as the parents'
Table 1
Two functions of possession, definition and examples
(from Deutsch & Budwig, 1983)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicative Function</th>
<th>Volitional Function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Note: A=Adam, E=Eve, M=Mother.

or their possessions. In Rodgon and Rashman’s (1976) and Greenfield and Zukow’s (1978) studies, however, children were simply shown an out-of-context series of photographs of persons’ belongings. It is not clear, therefore, whether the children named the objects rather than naming the owners because they were not yet aware of the relationships between objects and owners or simply because they were not specifically asked to name the owners of the objects. Greenfield and Zukow (1978) reported that children tended not to name the owners of the objects spontaneously where the ownership was taken for granted. Thus, it still remains an open question whether children of one-word speech have some understanding of possessor-possession relationships.

Recently, Deutsch and Budwig (1983) reported an interesting observation concerning possessive forms in children’s language. They analyzed the spontaneous speech data of two children (Eve and Adam) collected by Roger Brown (1973). They found that Eve and Adam used both pronominal and nominal forms to refer to themselves as possessor for a fairly long period of time. The examination of the contexts of this use revealed that both children used pronominal forms (e.g., Mine, My book) when claiming or maintaining possession, but used nominal forms (e.g., Adam’s, Eve puzzle) when indicating the owner as a sort of attribute of the object. Deutsch and Budwig proposed that the nominal and the pronominal forms in children’s language express different functions of possession, volitional and indicative, both of which are expressed with pronominal forms in adult language. Table 1 summarizes the definitions and examples of each function given by Deutsch and Budwig (1983).

This finding is important not only because it provides evidence that children construct their own rules about relations between linguistic forms, meanings, and functions which do not exist in adult language, but also because it suggests that young children are aware of two different functions of posses-
Possessive forms

Unfortunately, Eve’s and Adam’s data do not cover an initial period in the development of possessive forms, as they already used both forms quite frequently on the first observation session and their Mean Length of Utterance (MLU) values at that time were already 1.68 for Eve and 2.06 for Adam. Thus, we do not know when children usually start to express possession with linguistic forms and with which form children first begin to express themselves or others as possessor. We also do not know whether this distinctive use of the nominal and pronominal forms found in Eve’s and Adam’s data is typical of children who are acquiring possessive forms.

The present study attempts to answer these questions. Cross-sectional data on 65 English-speaking children were analyzed for this purpose. The data included responses in a controlled production task where children were specifically asked to tell the owners of objects. Thus, all children had equal opportunities for using linguistic forms to refer to themselves and to others as possessor. The MLU values of the children ranged from 1.00 to 3.44, with a mean of 1.48. Thus, the data should provide information concerning an initial period in the development of possessive forms. Linguistic forms analyzed in the present study were first and second person pronoun singular forms, the child’s proper name and the parent’s kinship term used in reference to the speaker (self) or the addressee (others) as possessor.

Method

Subjects
Sixty-five English-speaking children from middle to upper middle class participated in the present study. The ages of the children ranged from 15 months to 29 months, with a mean of 20 months. All children correctly called at least one of their parents by a kinship term, and 63% of the children correctly called themselves by name.

Data Collection
Language data collected from the following two sources were analyzed to examine what linguistic forms children use to refer to themselves as possessor or others as possessor: (1) a speech sample on audiotape and (2) parent interview data.

Speech sample. A 50-minute speech sample was obtained by audiotaping the child’s speech with the parent in a free play situation (about 20 minutes) as well as in a testing situation (about 30 minutes). The tasks used in the testing situation were specifically designed to examine children’s knowledge of personal pronouns as part of a larger research project (Oshima-Takane, 1985). Among those, the Pointing Production Task is particularly relevant to the purpose of the present study. In this task the parent pointed to a body part of the child, the experimenter or himself/herself and asked the child, “Whose (body part) is this?” This Pointing Production Task provided children with equal opportunities for using nominal and pronominal forms to refer to themselves as possessor and others as possessor. It was expected that children using the nominal and pronominal forms to express different functions of possession would use nominal forms in the Pointing Production Task, whereas they would use pronominal forms when claiming or maintaining possession of an object in spontaneous speech contexts.

All possessive forms children used to refer to themselves or others as possessor during the 50-minute recording session were classified into two categories: (1) nominal forms (e.g., “Jacob(’s)”, “Mommy(’s), etc.) and (2) pronominal forms (e.g., “Mine”, “My book”, “Yours”, “Your nose”, etc.). The MLU as an index of general language development was calculated for each child based
on this 50-minute speech sample (Brown, 1973). Although morpheme-combining begins as soon as the MLU rises above 1.00, it seems reasonable to assume that children whose MLU is less than 1.10 generally use one-word utterances. This is because the MLU value less than 1.10 indicates that children combine two (or more) morphemes in an utterance less than 10% of the time and also because the number of morphemes in an utterance does not necessarily correspond to the number of words in the utterance.

**Interview data.** Early use of possessive forms is usually very sporadic and confined to particular contexts. This makes it difficult to be certain of collecting reliable data about a child’s use of possessive forms in a single recording session. In order to supplement the recording data, information about spontaneous use of possessive forms in daily speech was obtained from parents. In interviews, parents were asked to report whether the child had ever used any linguistic forms which refer either to self or to others as possessor. If so, parents were asked which linguistic form(s) the child had used (i.e., nominal forms or pronominal forms). Parents were asked to report examples and contexts of the use in some detail rather than simply reporting rough impressions of the use of each form.

**Results**

While the interview and the spontaneous speech data both showed that some of the children whose MLU value was less than 1.10 used possessive forms, the majority of the children at this language development level did not. The interview data showed that 60% of the children at this level did not use any possessive forms and the speech sample data showed that 86% of the children did not. However, the majority of the children whose MLU was between 1.10 and 2.00 used at least one possessive form (Interview: 83%; Speech sample: 61%), suggesting that children begin to express the relationship between possessor and possession with a linguistic form by the time they begin to combine two words in utterances. Table 2 shows the percentages of children who designated only others as possessor, only themselves as possessor or both others and themselves as possessor with linguistic forms. The mean and the range of MLU for each group of children are also presented. Four children who referred only to others as possessor did not have any linguistic form to refer to themselves; i.e., they did not yet produce their own name (e.g., Jacob) or pronouns (e.g., “me”) referring to themselves. Other children who referred only to others as possessor or only to themselves as possessor had at

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**Table 2**

Percentage of children who designated self only, others only, or both self and others as possessor with linguistic forms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Speech sample</th>
<th></th>
<th>Interview</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$n=54^{ab}$</td>
<td></td>
<td>$n=65$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Mean MLU</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Mean MLU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1.15 (1.00 - 1.69)</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>1.04 (1.00 - 1.69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others only</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.07 (1.03 - 1.11)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.09 (1.00 - 1.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self only</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1.51 (1.01 - 2.01)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.31 (1.18 - 1.53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others and Self</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>2.03 (1.28 - 3.44)</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>1.69 (1.00 - 3.44)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a Eleven children who did not complete the Pointing Production Task were excluded from the analysis of the speech sample data.

b Ranges of MLU values are in parentheses.
least one linguistic form for others (e.g., "Mommy") or for themselves (e.g., "Jacob" or "me"). Children who designated both self and others as possessor with a linguistic form tended to have higher MLU values than those who designated either self or others. There was also a tendency for children who designated others only as possessor with a linguistic form to have lower MLU values than those who designated self only as possessor with a linguistic form.

Table 3 shows percentages of children who used a nominal form, a pronominal form, or both for designating themselves as possessor and others as possessor. The interview and the speech sample data consistently indicate that, to refer to others as possessor, many children used only nominal forms. Only children whose language development level was relatively high used pronominal forms as well. On the other hand, when designating themselves as possessor, quite a few children used both nominal and pronominal forms, although there were some children who used only one of the forms. Of nine children (17%) who used both nominal and pronominal forms to refer to themselves as possessor, seven used only a nominal form in reference to others as possessor, whereas one used both forms and the remaining one used neither. The MLU range of the children who used both nominal and pronominal forms to designate themselves as possessor was quite large (Interview: from 1.01 to 3.44; Speech sample: from 1.18 to 2.48), suggesting that, like Eve and Adam, children use both forms for a fairly long period of time.

Table 4 shows the number of children who produced a name or a pronoun to designate self as possessor and others as possessor in the Pointing Production Task (n=54).

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**Table 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Self</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Mean MLU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Speech Sample (n=54)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>1.14 (1.00 - 1.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name only</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.62 (1.47 - 1.76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronoun only</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>1.90 (1.01 - 3.44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name and Pronoun</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2.07 (1.18 - 2.48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interview (n=65)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1.05 (1.00 - 1.69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name only</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.16 (1.00 - 1.32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronoun only</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1.59 (1.00 - 2.49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name and Pronoun</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>1.83 (1.01 - 3.44)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Ranges of MLU values are in parentheses.

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**Table 4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Self</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n (%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>10 (19)</td>
<td>18 (33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronoun</td>
<td>6 (11)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>38 (70)</td>
<td>36 (67)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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The **Table 3** shows percentages of children who used a nominal form, a pronominal form, or both for designating themselves as possessor and others as possessor. The interview and the speech sample data consistently indicate that, to refer to others as possessor, many children used only nominal forms. Only children whose language development level was relatively high used pronominal forms as well. On the other hand, when designating themselves as possessor, quite a few children used both nominal and pronominal forms, although there were some children who used only one of the forms. Of nine children (17%) who used both nominal and pronominal forms to refer to themselves as possessor, seven used only a nominal form in reference to others as possessor, whereas one used both forms and the remaining one used neither. The MLU range of the children who used both nominal and pronominal forms to designate themselves as possessor was quite large (Interview: from 1.01 to 3.44; Speech sample: from 1.18 to 2.48), suggesting that, like Eve and Adam, children use both forms for a fairly long period of time.

**Table 4** shows the number of children who used a nominal form or a pronominal form for designating themselves as possessor and others as possessor in the Pointing Production Task. To designate others as possessor, 33% of the children (n=18) produced a nominal form and no children produced a pronominal form. To designate themselves as possessor, 19% of the children (n=10) produced a nominal form, whereas 11% of the children (n=6) produced a pronominal form.
Table 5
The number of children who used each linguistic form to express the indicative, volitional, or both functions in the speech sample (n=54)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functions</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean MLU</th>
<th>Pronoun</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean MLU</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indicative</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.81 (1.18 - 2.48)</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.34 (1.63 - 2.95)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volitional</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1.58 (1.01 - 2.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.48 (1.01 - 1.81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.72 (1.18 - 2.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicative</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.43 (1.67 - 3.44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.56 (1.67 - 3.44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volitional</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.31 (2.14 - 2.48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.62 (1.47 - 1.76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No production</td>
<td></td>
<td>43</td>
<td>1.41 (1.00 - 3.44)</td>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1.17 (1.00 - 1.76)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Ranges of MLU values are in parentheses.
- The number of children who did not use nominal forms.
- The number of children who used nominal forms to express the indicative function.

All children who produced a pronominal form for designating themselves as possessor in the Pointing Production Task produced only a pronominal form in the rest of the recording session (i.e., the rest of the testing session and the free-play session). Out of 10 children who produced a nominal form in the Pointing Production Task, eight used only a pronominal form for designating themselves as possessor in the rest of the recording session. The remaining two children did not produce any linguistic form for designating themselves as possessor in the session other than in the Pointing Production Task.

In order to test Deutsch and Budwig’s (1983) functional hypothesis, the children’s use of pronominal and nominal forms in the speech sample data was further analyzed in terms of their functions using the definitions provided by Deutsch and Budwig (1983). Table 5 shows the number of children who used each linguistic form for expressing the indicative function only, the volitional function only, or both functions. The mean and the range of MLU for each group of children are also presented. The results indicate that nominal forms were almost uniformly used to express the indicative function (the binomial exact one-tailed test, p<.01) and that most of them were produced in the Pointing Production Task. On the other hand, individual differences were observed in the use of pronominal forms. While significantly more children used pronominal forms to express the volitional function only (the binomial exact one-tailed test, p<.01), some used them to express the indicative function only, and some others used them to express both functions. Six children out of 14 used pronominal forms to express the volitional function and nominal forms to express the indicative function, indicating that they used pronominal and nominal forms distinctively as suggested by Deutsch and Budwing. The author coded all children’s use of pronominal and nominal possessive forms in terms of functions on two occasions, six months apart, with 85% agreement.

- The binomial exact test contrasting the number of children who used nominal forms to express only the indicative function with the rest was performed.
- The binomial exact test contrasting the number of children who used pronominal forms to express only the volitional function with the rest was performed.
remaining eight children used pronominal forms only to express the volitional function. In the Pointing Production Task, the latter children either produced a body part word without specifying the possessor (e.g., “nose” in response to the question, “Whose nose is this?”) or did not respond to the questions at all. Since the mean MLU values of these two types of children did not differ significantly, these two types of children were considered to be at about the same level of language development.

Interestingly, the children who used pronominal forms to express only the indicative function and those who used them to express both the indicative and volitional functions tended to have higher MLU values than other groups of children, suggesting that they were probably at a more advanced stage than other groups of children. Out of four children who used pronominal forms to express both functions, two children used nominal forms to express the indicative function, whereas the other two did not use nominal forms at all. This suggests that the former two children may have been in a transitional stage from distinctive use of pronominal and nominal forms to the mastery of pronominal possessive forms, whereas the latter two children probably had mastered the pronominal possessive forms by then.

These results seem to suggest that there may be two groups of children following different developmental patterns: One group of children uses pronominal forms and nominal forms distinctively to express two functions of possession before mastering pronominal forms to express both functions, whereas the other group of children uses only pronominal forms during the course of acquisition.

In order to examine developmental changes in the use of possessive forms in reference to themselves as possessor, a follow-up study was conducted two to three months later. One particular interest was to investigate if children who earlier had used only pronominal forms would use nominal forms as well at the time of follow-up. Fourteen out of 25 children who earlier had produced some linguistic forms to designate themselves as possessor participated in the follow-up study. The results showed that one of the two children who had used pronominal forms and nominal forms distinctively earlier still used them distinctively at the time of follow-up, whereas the other child now used only pronominal forms. Four out of six children who earlier had used only pronominal forms to express the volitional function and did not express an indicative function now used nominal forms to express the indicative function at the time of follow-up. These children used pronominal and nominal forms distinctively as suggested by Deutsch and Budwig (1983). The remaining two children did not use nominal forms for designating themselves at all at the time of follow-up: One child still used pronominal forms to express only the volitional function and the other now used them to express both the volitional and indicative functions.

Only one child out of four who had used pronominal forms to express only the indicative function before participated in the follow-up study. This child used pronominal forms to express both functions and did not use nominal forms at all at the time of follow-up. Although this was the only case, the developmental change in her use of pronominal forms observed over time together with the earlier finding of the higher MLU values of this group of children suggest that children who produced pronominal forms to express only the indicative function were more advanced than children who used pronominal forms to express only the volitional function as well as those who used pronominal and nominal forms distinctively. It could be that they already knew that pronominal forms should be used to express both functions but
they did not use them to express the volitional function simply because they did not happen to have any opportunities to do so during their recording sessions.

Two children who earlier had used only nominal forms to refer to themselves as possessor, now used pronominal forms as well. However, they used pronominal forms to express both the volitional and indicative functions. Interestingly, they used second person possessive forms (e.g., "your" or "yours") more frequently than first person possessive forms (e.g., "my" or "mine") to designate themselves as possessor. Apparently, they were showing semantic confusion and were making pronominal errors (Oshima-Takane, 1985, 1992a).

The results of the follow-up study strongly suggest that not all children use both pronominal and nominal forms to designate them selves as possessor before mastering pronominal possessive forms. Some children use only pronominal forms throughout the period.

Discussion

The results show that a majority of children whose MLU value was less than 1.10 did not use any possessive forms, even when the owner was specifically asked for in the controlled task. This replicates Rodgon and Rashman's (1976) finding that owner naming is a relatively infrequent phenomenon in children whose speech is at the one-word level. It appears that children begin to express the possessor-possession relationship with linguistic forms at the beginning of combinatorial speech. To designate others as possessor, many children used only nominal forms (e.g., "Mommy's" or "Mommy's shoe"). Only children whose language development level was relatively high used pronominal forms (e.g., "Yours" or "Your shoe"). On the other hand, to designate themselves as possessor, many children used both nominal forms (e.g., "Jacob's" or "Jacob shoe") and pronominal forms (e.g., "Mine" or "my shoe"). No clear developmental order was found concerning whom children begin to designate as possessor with linguistic forms, self versus others, as there were two types of children: those who only designated self as possessor with linguistic form and those who only designated others as possessor.

The present data showed that a majority of children, who used both nominal and pronominal forms to designate themselves as possessor, used them distinctively to express two functions of possession as suggested by Deutsch and Budwig (1983). However, there were some children who interchangeably used both nominal and pronominal forms to express the indicative function. Since these children have higher MLU values than those who distinctively used nominal and pronominal forms, they were probably in the transitional stage from the distinctive use to the mastery of pronominal possessive forms. An interesting finding is that when children used the nominal forms, they used them to express only the indicative function. No children used nominal forms to express the volitional function. By contrast, many children initially used pronominal forms to express the volitional function rather than the indicative function. These findings suggest that even though children use pronominal forms and nominal forms interchangeably to express the indicative function, they are aware of two functions of possession and use these two linguistic forms distinctively. They probably perceive pronominal forms to express primarily the volitional function of possession (Cooley, 1908; Rudmin, 1985), while perceiving nominal forms to express only the indicative function. Greenfield (1982), who examined the use of first person possessive forms by one child, reported that first person possessive forms were used not to identify...
his belongings but rather to mark a change of possession.

Another interesting result is that there was a group of children who did not use nominal forms to designate themselves as possessor. It appeared that they began using pronominal forms to express the volitional function and then learned to express both volitional and indicative functions later. This finding suggests that not all children who are acquiring possessive forms used both nominal and pronominal forms to designate themselves as possessor. Two different routes seem to exist for acquiring the pronominal forms to designate themselves as possessor. In one route, children use pronominal forms and nominal forms distinctively to express volitional and indicative functions of possession before mastering pronominal forms to express both functions. In the other route, children use only pronominal forms during the course of acquisition.

Distinctive use of nominal and pronominal possessive forms observed in children in the present study suggests that children are aware of two different functions of possession, indicative and volitional, very early in their lives. However, why children distinctively use nominal and pronominal forms to express two functions is not known. Furthermore, it is not clear why some children use both nominal and pronominal forms to designate themselves as possessor during the course of acquisition, whereas others used only pronominal forms.

Clark (1987) has suggested that children learn such distinctive usage of nominal and pronominal forms by employing the bias that a word has only one interpretation and that different words have different interpretations. Clark (1983, 1987) called this bias the “principle of contrast”. According to this bias, children may use nominal forms and pronominal forms distinctively to express the two functions of possession, both of which are expressed with pronominal forms in adult language. Then, how do children learn to use nominal forms to express the indicative function and pronominal forms to express the volitional function? The principle of contrast does not specify which form should be used to express which function. Furthermore, even if children use pronominal and nominal forms distinctively by initially employing this principle, it is not clear how children learn to use pronominal forms to express both functions of possession eventually. In other words, how do children learn that the principle of contrast does not hold in this situation?

Individual differences observed among children in the present study suggest a possibility that children learn distinctive usage of nominal and pronominal forms from input, rather than by employing the principle of contrast bias. It is assumed that children are sensitive to different patterns in linguistic and nonlinguistic inputs and that they can extract information relevant to word learning (Oshima-Takane, 1992b). Thus, differences in input patterns available to the children would result in individual differences in usage of pronominal and nominal forms. Some children use only pronominal forms, whereas others use pronominal and nominal forms distinctively.\(^3\)

Several studies have reported that, when

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\(^3\) It should be noted that the nominal vs. pronominal distinction discussed in the present study is different from Nelson’s (1973, 1985) distinction. In the present study, nominal forms simply include possessive forms of the child’s proper names and of parent’s kinship terms, whereas pronominal forms include possessive forms of first and second person deictic pronouns only. On the other hand, Nelson’s pronominal forms include any pronouns without distinguishing between deictic and other pronouns and her nominal forms include any nouns without distinguishing proper nouns and other nouns.
talking to children, many parents often use proper names or kinship terms in reference to themselves or their child, and this unconventional use of proper names and kinship terms is known as one of the distinctive features of baby talk in English (Brown, 1977; Durkin, Rutter, & Tucker, 1982; Wills, 1977). Furthermore, there is some evidence to suggest that children’s unconventional use of nominal forms is originated from such parental usage (Durkin, Rutter, & Tucker, 1982; Durkin, Rutter, Room, & Grounds, 1982; Oshima-Takane, 1993). For instance, Durkin, Rutter, Room, and Grounds (1982) have reported that when mothers have a tendency to produce proper names or kinship terms in reference to themselves or to their children at early stages, “at least some children adopt the same style in their own productions” later. More recently, Oshima-Takane (1993) has shown that parental use of the children’s names in reference to their children as addressee was positively correlated with the children’s use of their own names in reference to themselves, whereas parental use of their kinship terms in reference to themselves was positively correlated with the children’s use of parents’ kinship terms in reference to their parents as addressee. Furthermore, the extent to which parents used kinship terms in reference to themselves was greater than the extent to which they used their children’s names in reference to their children as addressee. She also has reported that parental unconventional use of kinship terms was negatively correlated with the children’s language measures such as vocabulary size and MLU, whereas parental use of children’s names was not correlated with any of the children’s language measures. This finding suggests that parental use of kinship terms in reference to themselves may be the results of adjustments to the child’s language development level, whereas parental use of the child’s names may be a style characteristic rather than a developmental adjustment. The fact that parental unconventional use of kinship terms is more frequent than their unconventional use of children’s names may be related to our finding that children use nominal forms in reference to parents as possessor before they begin to use second person pronominal forms.

Although these studies indicate that, when talking to children, parents use both nominal and pronominal forms in reference to themselves and to their children, no systematic analysis has been conducted concerning whether parents distinctively use nominal and pronominal possessive forms to express indicative and volitional functions of possession. Furthermore, it is not clear how children who have initially learned the distinctive use of nominal and pronominal forms from their parental input eventually learn to use pronominal forms to express both functions of possession and block the unconventional use of nominal forms. Oshima-Takane (1992) hypothesizes that as children’s use of pronominal forms increases, parents gradually decrease the unconventional use of nominal forms and eventually stop using them. By hearing parents using only pronominal forms to express both the volitional and indicative functions repeatedly, children experience conflicts between comprehension and production processes. In order to solve such conflicts, children learn to use only pronominal forms to express both functions and eventually block the unconventional use of nominal forms in their production (Deutsch & Budwig, 1983). At present, no data are available to speak to these issues. Future research should longitudinally investigate the contexts in which parents use nominal and pronominal forms to express possession as well as the contexts in which children use them from onset of learning to the mastery.
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