Personal Pronouns and the Autistic Child

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The long-recognized difficulties of the speaking autistic child with the use and nonuse of personal pronouns ['reversals' and 'avoidance'] have been generally attributed either to the nondifferentiation of the self or to the frequently coexisting symptom of echolalia. These explanations are reconsidered in this eclectic analysis from the perspective of current theory and research in development of self and of language. Emphasis is on studies of normal development of personal pronouns and the roles played in that process by listening, echoic memory, mitigated echolalia [recoding], and person deixis. It is concluded that multiple developmental obstacles of a social, cognitive, and grammatical nature underlie the more obvious symptoms and militate against the child's resolution of labels and their referents. Treatment alternatives that de-emphasize the primacy of I are offered.

INTRODUCTION

When Kanner (1943, 1946) first described the syndrome of early infantile autism, he reported the children's confused and reversed pronouns as "typical, almost pathognomonic" of the condition. "Personal pronouns are repeated just as heard," he wrote, "with no change to suit the altered situation" (1943, p. 244). Kanner's original interpretation of the problem as a function of the echoing tendency has received latter-day corroboration (Bartak & Rutter, 1974; Fay, 1969, 1971, 1973; Rutter, 1978). In a review of the diagnosis and definition of the syndrome, Rutter (1978) noted that among those children who do learn to speak, an I/you pronominal reversal ("You want biscuit" meaning "I want biscuit") character-
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istically accompanies immediate echolalia and the delayed repetition of stereotyped phrases.

The autistic child’s problems with personal pronouns, nevertheless, are too complex and too deeply ingrained to be accounted for completely within the surface framework of “reversals” secondary to echolalia. One must, for example, consider the process of self-differentiation. Despert (1946) raised this issue in the discussion following Kanner’s (1946) paper on irrelevant and metaphorical language. Wrote Despert:

> It is highly significant, for instance, that the “I not I” distinction is not established in the autistic child, as it is early in the development of language in the normal child, and Dr. Kanner pointedly selects the pronominal reversal as an almost pathognomonic sign of infantile autism. Since the appearance of the first person pronoun in language development shortly follows that stage of individuation which corresponds to the child’s consciousness as one, whole, and apart from others, the importance of this sign cannot be over-emphasized. (p. 246)

Although the rationale for this statement can now be criticized and the cause-and-effect logic impugned (Fay, 1971), it seems that some recognition of selfness is nevertheless requisite for developing the referents of self and of others.

Another issue is that of the autistic child’s avoidance of the use of personal pronouns. Here is an account of avoidance as interpreted by Bettelheim (1967):

> If we are dealing here with no more than echolalia, it would be as simple for them to repeat “I want milk” as to repeat “you want milk.” We have tried this with all our autistic children, and always the result is the same. They will readily repeat “you” want such and such, but never before they have begun to say “I” in other contexts do they repeat a statement containing “I.” (p. 426)

Again, we might well argue with Bettelheim’s apparent imputation of willfulness on the part of the child to shun imitation of I, but we must nevertheless concur that echolalia fails to account for a failure to elicit imitation of I.

Finally, it has been suggested by Bartolucci and Albers (1974) that mastering pronouns is only the most obvious aspect of a more generalized linguistic handicap: the development of deictic syntactic categories. Such a broader handicap involves the question of why autistic children have difficulty acquiring and using pronouns correctly and includes more than a focus on error patterns and imitative avoidance.

In this paper we shall discuss each of these issues from the perspective of what is known about normal development of first- and second-person pronouns and about the challenge these pronouns present to autistic children. It is hoped that such an analysis will provide a better