



Pronoun acquisition in Farsi-speaking children from 12 to 36 months

Nahid Jalilevand¹
Mona Ebrahimipour²

Received on 27.07.2013, published on 16.11.2013

Abstract

Children start using pronouns when they are two, and they usually master all subject, object, and demonstrative pronouns at 36 months. In some studies, mistakes in third person pronoun are reported. Third person pronouns in Farsi language are gender-neutral. Pronouns in Farsi are not only free morphemes, but also grammatical morphemes. The purpose of this longitudinal case study is to examine the order of pronoun acquisition in Farsi-speaking children.

Two hour sample of two Farsi-speaking children's spontaneous speech was monthly recorded and transcribed from 12-36 months in kindergarten. The mean length of children's utterances was calculated and utterances with pronouns were examined. Both children used the pronouns "I" and "this" when their speech consisted of one word utterances. Single first and third person pronouns were most frequent until 36 months. "This" was used more than other demonstrative pronouns. Subject and possessive pronouns appeared before object ones.

The order of Farsi pronouns acquisition is from singular to plural. The Farsi-speaking children master single pronouns before 36 months, and they use plural pronouns with less frequency. Second person pronouns appear after first and third person pronouns. Subject pronouns are first to be developed and Farsi grammatical rules influence the pronouns acquisition in children.

Keywords: Language, Farsi-Speaking children, Pronouns, Utterances

1. Introduction

Farsi (Persian in English Language) is the official language in Iran. Farsi is a gender-neutral language and has no trace of grammatical gender. Pronouns consist of free and grammatical morphemes in Farsi language and do not differentiate gender. They are used as subject, object, or owner to prevent word repetition. They are divided in to two groups: dependent and independent. Dependent object pronouns are grammatical morphemes that convey the information about person and number. They play the role of object when they are connected with verbs or prepositions, and play the role of owner relating to nouns (possessive pronouns). So two groups of suffixes in Farsi are dependent pronouns; subject suffixes and object-possessive suffixes that convey the information about person and number. Demonstrative pronouns, personal pronouns and reflexive and emphatic

¹ Department of Speech Therapy, School of Rehabilitation, Iran University of medical Sciences, Nezam Alley, Shahid Shahnazari St., Madar Sq., Mirdamad Blvd., Tehran, Iran, Tel:+9821-22228052, Corresponding author: n-jalilevand@tums.ac.ir

² Department of Speech Therapy, School of Rehabilitation, Iran University of Medical Sciences.

pronouns are independent pronouns and free morphemes. Farsi has two-way distinction between demonstrative: proximal and distal; singular and plural. Proximal demonstrative pronouns are /ʔin/ (this) and /ʔinha/ (these), distal demonstrative pronouns are /ʔan/ or /ʔun/ (that) and /ʔanha/ or /ʔunha/ (those). Personal pronouns are capable to play the roles of subject, object, or owner regarding to morphological and syntactic rules and convey the information about person and number. Personal pronouns in combination with prepositions are object in sentence. So Farsi does not possess an objective pronoun. For example /mæn/ is a personal pronoun but in combination with /ra/ or /be/ which are prepositions, it is an objective pronoun. So translation of /be mæn/ in English is /me/. Pronouns in Farsi are given in table A in the Appendix.

The speaker can utilize dependent and independent pronouns and speak with the addressee about the third person. There is a male and female listener in the Diagram proposed by Pechmann and Deutsch (1978), but in Farsi pronouns are not gender-specific. The Diagram 1 can illustrate a communicative context in Farsi language. Third person in Farsi could be either male or female.

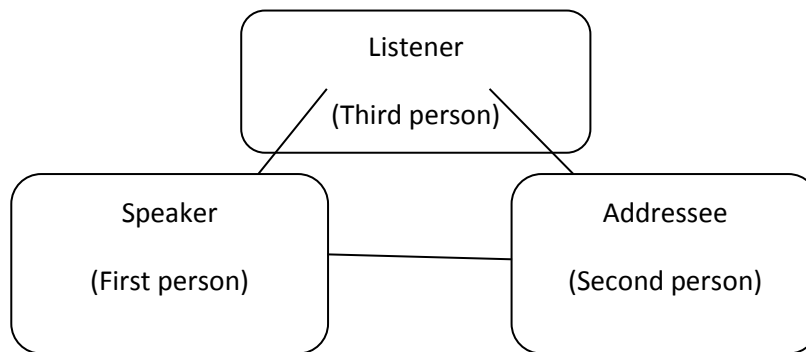


Diagram 1: A communicative context in Farsi language

1.1 The order of pronoun acquisition

English-speaking children start using pronouns between 19-24 months (Shipley & McAfee, 2004). Some pronouns develop about the age of 2, and others appear later (Owens, 2011). The child begins with “I” and “that”, and then he adds “you” (Chiat, 1986). He masters all subject, object, and two demonstrative pronouns (this and that) at 36 months (Wells, 1985). Pronoun acquisition in French and Chinese children follow the same order; “I” and “you” develop before third pronouns he, she, and it (Girouard, Richard, DeCarie, 1977; Zhengquam, 1992). Subject pronouns such as he, she, and they are acquired before object pronouns (e.g. him, her and them), and possessive pronouns like his, her and their follow them. Finally reflexive pronouns (e.g. himself, herself and themselves) are acquired at the age of 5 years (Owens, 2011). Studies in Spanish and Italian children indicate that object pronouns emerge before subject ones, which indicates the pragmatic and grammatical differences between languages (Anderson, 1998; Leonard, Sabbadini, Volterra& Leonard, 1988). Mistakes in third personal pronouns in normal children (Vainikka, 1993/1994; Chiat, 1981) and children with language disorders (Moor, 2010; Respoli, 1998) demonstrate that



substitution of “her” for “she” is oftener than the usage of “him” instead of “he”.

This longitudinal case study examines the order of pronoun acquisition in Farsi-speaking children before 36 months.

2. Methodology

Two normal children (a girl and a boy) participated in this longitudinal study. They were held in the kindergarten of the School of Rehabilitation from 8 am to 4 pm 5 days per week. The children started going to kindergarten when they were 5 months. Their parents were employed in the campus. The spontaneous speech of children was monthly recorded from 12 to 36 months in the kindergarten by a camcorder (Panasonic NV-DC30) while they were playing with their peers, teachers, and care givers. The duration of speech sample was two hours per month. Children’s intelligible utterances were transcribed, and they were checked twice for controlling the accuracy of transcribed utterances. The utterances including pronouns were selected and evaluated.

3. Findings

The girl and the boy said their first word at 12 and 16 months respectively. The first words were nouns. We give descriptive statistics of utterances of both children In the Appendix (Table B). Mean Length of Utterance (MLU) was calculated in morpheme per month. At the stage of one word utterances, “I” and “this” appeared in their speech and they frequently used these pronouns at the age of 18-20 months. The pronoun “that” was documented at 21 months when both children used two-word utterances. The pronoun “I” was semantically and syntactically used in two word combinations in the subject or owner position.

The children used subject suffixes at about 2 years of age (Table 1) including:

- Third person subject suffixes: /-d / (pronoun -d or -e in conversation) and /-ø/ (No use of any pronoun)
- First person subject suffixes: /-æm/

Boy’s utterance samples(23 months of age)		Girl’s utterance samples(24 months of age)	
Farsi	Meaning in English	Farsi	Meaning in English
/mæ xabidæm/	I slept.	/mæ tup dalæm/	I have ball.
/lala mokonæ/	She/he sleeps.	/mama nædale/	Mama doesn’t have.
/masi ?odadø/	Car felt down.	/mama dadø /	Mama gave.

Table 1: The use of subject suffixes by children

When the mean length of utterance went beyond two, both children utilized 3 word utterances (the boy at 24 months, and the girl at 25 months), and a variety of morphemes were observed in their speech (Table 2). The pronouns that documented until 30 months of age of children are

- Third person singular object-possessive suffix: /-eš/

- Second person subject suffix: /-i/
- First person singular Object-possessive suffix: /-æm /
- Second person singular personal pronoun: /to/
- Second person singular Reflexive pronoun: /xodet/
- First person singular Reflexive pronoun: /xodæm /
- Third person plural subject suffix: /-im/
- Second person singular Object-possessive suffix: /-et/

Boy's utterance samples		Girl's utterance samples	
Farsi	Meaning in English	Farsi	Meaning in English
/babaš̄/	His/her <i>dæd</i> .	/dæseš̄/	His/her <i>hænd</i> .
/mamanæm/	My <i>mama</i> .	/babam/	My <i>dædy</i> .
/ʔenane zæd gušæm/	Reyhane slapped on my ear.	/ʔæs migiri/	You take picture.
/Jurab dari/	You have socks.	/nækon be to goftæm/	Don't do that, I told you.
/to begu/	You say.	/bazi konim/	Let's play.
/ʔino bendazim/	Lets throw this.	/piše pat/	In front of your leg.
/bet midæm/	I give it to you.	/bærat mixunam/	I read for you.
/særet/	Your head.	/boro xodet bexab/	Go sleep yourself
/xodet boxor/	Eat yourself.	/xunæšun/	Their home.
/babašun/	Their dad.	/taxed xodæm/	My bed.
/xodæm mixoræm/	I eat myself.		

Table 2: The use of pronouns by children after 24 to 30 months

In the stage at which mean length of utterance was more than three, more morphemes were seen in an utterance, and some plural pronouns appeared gradually, but they were not used frequently until 36 months. The following pronouns were documented at the age of 30 months until 36 months.

- First person plural personal pronoun: /ma/
- Third person plural subject suffix: /-ænd/
- Proximal plural demonstrative pronoun: /ʔina/
- Third person singular reflexive pronoun: /xodeš/

Second person plural subject suffix /-id/, second person plural object-possessive suffix /-tan/, third person plural personal pronoun /ʔuna/, and second person plural personal pronoun /šoma/ were rare in both children's speech samples. Plural reflexive pronouns were not documented before 36 months.

The second person plural personal pronoun /šoma/ is used to respect the single addressee in Farsi language. The girl used this pronoun for single addressee, but not for a plural one. The pronouns used by both children at the age of 30 to 36 months are presented in Table 3.

Boy's utterance samples		Girl's utterance samples	
Farsi	Meaning in English	Farsi	Meaning in English
/xunæmun/	Our home.	/xunæmun/	Our home.
/dæsdamun/	Our hands.	/ʔotaqemun/	Our room.
/mamane xodeš/	His/Her mom.	/tæxde xodeš/	Him/Her bed.
/ma ʔeJaze nemidim/	We don't let.	/ʔæzæš mixorim ma/	We eat from it.
/ʔinaro midi/	Do you give me these?	/ʔinaro dær miyarim/	We put these off.
/ʔina zærdæn/	These are yellow.	/ʔina čiyæn/	What are these?

Table 3: The use of pronouns by children from 30 to 36 months.



The first person singular personal pronoun /mæn/ was the most frequent pronoun before 24 months. The Fig. 1 shows the mean of frequency of pronouns “this”, “I” and “that” (respectively “ʔin”, ”mæn”, ”ʔun” in Farsi language) for each child before 24 months.

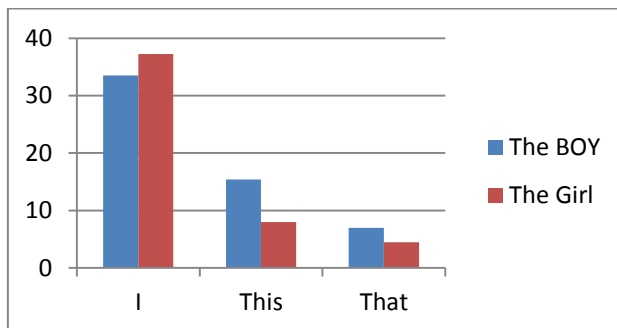


Fig. 1: The mean frequency of the pronouns for each child before 24 months.

Both children used most of the pronouns from 30 to 36 months. The frequency of each pronoun is depicted in Fig. 2. Pronouns “I” (first person singular personal pronoun:/mæn/), “this” (proximal demonstrative pronoun:/ʔin/) and “His/her/it’s” (third person singular object-possessive suffix:/-eš/) were more frequent than other pronouns in both children.

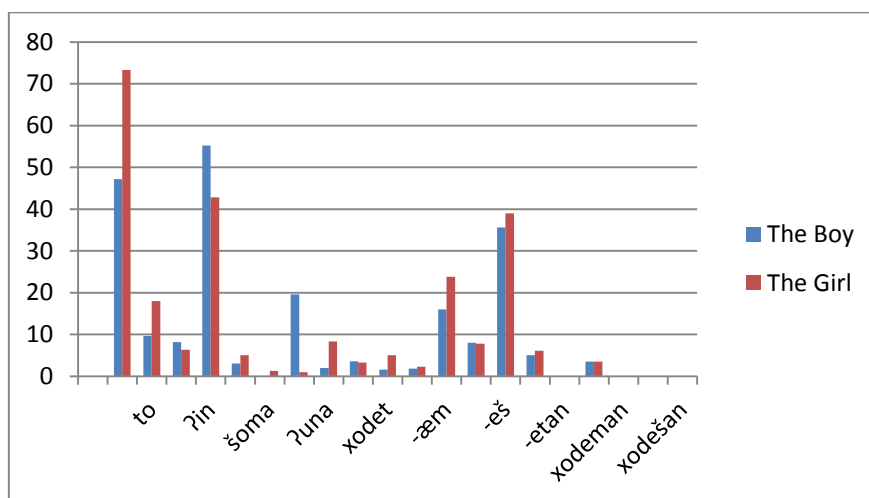


Fig. 2: The mean frequency of the variety of pronouns from 30 to 36 months in the children.

The Fig. 3 shows the higher frequency use of the first and third person subject suffixes than the other suffixes in speech samples of children from 30 to 36 months.

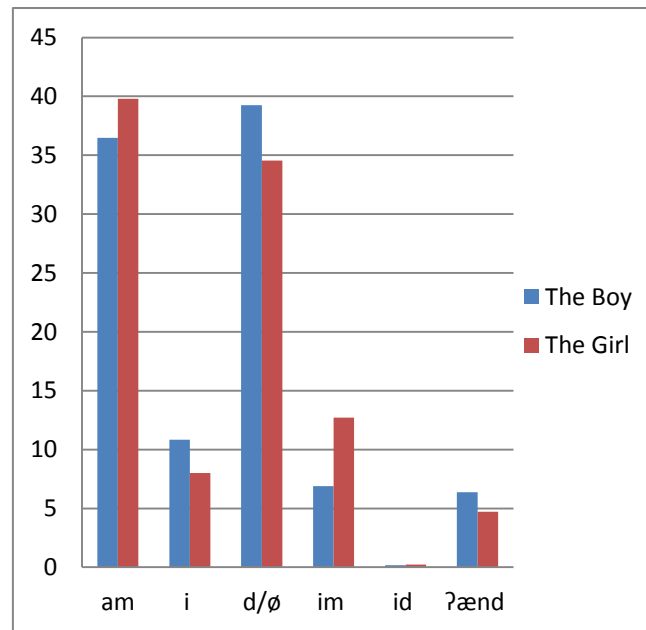


Fig. 3: The percent frequency of the subject suffixes in speech samples of children from 30 to 36 months.

4. Conclusions

Similar to English speaking children (Shipley & McAfee, 2004), Farsi speaking children started using pronouns around the age of 18-20 months. The pronoun “I” was the first one which appeared, similar to what was reported for English, French and Chinese children (Chiat, 1986, Girouard, Richard, DeCarie, 1977; Zhengquang, 1992). The pronoun “this” developed sooner than the distal demonstrative pronoun “that”. Pechmann and Deutsch (1978) believe that pronoun acquisition in children is related to language complexity. The language complexity is defined by three linguistic contrast rules: proximal-nonproximal, singular-nonsingular, speaker-nonspeaker. Therefore, the fact that the single first person and proximal demonstrative pronouns in speech of Farsi-speaking children emerge earlier than other pronouns can be explained by these three linguistic contrast rules.

In the speech of Farsi speaking children, subject pronouns emerged before object ones. When the mean length of utterance was less than two, both children could use first and third person subject suffixes connected to verbs, while in English, French, and Chinese, the second person subject pronoun develops after the first person one (Zhengyuan, Ruifang, 1992, Girouard, Ricard and Decarie, 1997). The possessive pronouns appeared before object pronouns. Italian and Spanish children acquire object pronouns earlier than other pronouns (Anderson, 1998; Leonard, Sabbadini, Volterra & Leonard, 1988). In Farsi language, personal pronouns are capable to play the roles of subject or object in sentences. The personal pronouns in combination with prepositions can be used for objective personal pronouns. So, it seems that the use of the objective personal pronouns emerge later than the subject personal pronouns and possessive pronouns in speech of Farsi-speaking children.



The children did not use plural reflexive pronouns so similar to English speaking children (Owens, 2011) it seems that the plural reflexive pronouns emerge later than other pronouns in speech of Farsi-speaking children. The findings of this case study reflect the following order of the use of pronouns in speech of Farsi-speaking children:

Subject pronouns → Possessive pronouns → Object pronouns → Reflexive pronouns

The children used the singular pronouns more than plural ones. So we show the order use of singular pronoun in speech of Farsi- speaking children in the Table 4.

Singular personal pronouns

First person → Third person → Second person
/mæn/ → /ʔun/ → /to/

Singular subject suffixes

Third person → First person → Second person
/-d/ or /-ø/ → /-æm/ → /-i/

Object-possessive suffixes

Third person → First person → Second person
/-eš/ → /-æm/ → /-et/

Table 4: The order of singular pronouns in speech of Farsi- speaking children

The third person pronouns in Farsi language are gender-neutral pronouns. It seems that the second person personal pronouns are more difficult to acquire than the third person personal pronouns in speech of Farsi-speaking children. But pronoun acquisition in French and Chinese children follow the order; “I” and “you” develop before third pronouns he, she, and it (Girouard, Richard, DeCarie, 1977; Zhengquam, 1992). So it seems that concept of gender in pronouns make them more difficult than other pronouns. Farsi is genderless language so the order of pronoun acquisition in Farsi-speaking children do not follow the order of pronoun acquisition by French, Chinese or English speaking children.

In Farsi language, agreement occurs between dependent pronoun (subject suffix) and independent pronoun (personal pronoun) in a sentence, thus, children must be following these rules of agreement. The most of speech samples of children showed the correct use of personal agreement in their utterances. Among all of the pronouns, second personal pronouns (singular or plural) were the last ones to appear.

5. Discussion

The development of pronouns in Farsi-speaking children is from singular to plural forms. Singular first and third person pronouns appear earlier than second person pronouns. Moreover, subject and possessive pronouns are used before object pronouns. First and third person pronouns are used more than other pronouns by Farsi-speaking children.

Acknowledgement

This research was supported by a research grant of Iran University of Medical Sciences (No.474).The authors are grateful to the parents of the children who participated in this longitudinal study.

We would like to give a special thanks to Dr.Yahya Modarresi for his helpful feedback for this study and article.

References

- Anderson, T. (1998). The development of grammatical case distinctions in the use of personal pronouns by Spanish-speaking preschoolers. *JSLHR*, 41: 394-406.
- Chiat, S. (1986). Personal pronouns. In P. Fletcher & M. Garman (Eds.). *Language acquisition* (2nd ed.). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Chiat, S. (1981). Context-specificity and generalization in the acquisition of pronominal distinctions. *Child Lang*, 8:75-91.
- Deutsch, W. & Pechmann, T. (1998). Ihr, dir, or mir? On the acquisition of pronouns in German children. *Cognition*, 6:155-168
- Girouard, P. C., Richard, M. & Decarie, T. G. (1997). The acquisition of personal pronouns in French-speaking children. *Child Lang*, 24:311-326.
- Leonard, L. B., Sabbadini, L. Volterra, V. & Leonard, S. (1988). Some influences on the grammar of English and Italian-speaking children with specific language impairment. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 9(1): 39-57.
- Moore, M. E. (2001). Third person pronoun errors by children with and without language impairment. *Journal of Communication Disorders*, 34(3): 207-228.
- Owens, R. E. (2011). *Language development: An introduction*. Allyn & Bacon. USA.
- Rispoli, M. (1998). Patterns of pronoun case error. *Child Lang*, 25: 533-554.
- Shipley, K. & McAfee, G. (2004). *Assessment in speech-language pathology*. Delmar & Thomson. USA.
- Vainikka, A. (1993/1994). Case in the development of English syntax. *Language acquisition*, (5)3: 257-325.
- Wells, G. (1985). *Language development in the preschool years*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Zhengyuan, L. & Ruifang, M.(1992).A study on the acquisition of personal pronoun by Chines speaking children. *Journal of Acta Psychological Sinica*, 24(4):3-11.



Appendices

		Dependent Pronouns				Independent Pronouns			
		Grammatical morphemes				Free morphemes(words)			
		subject suffixes		object-possessive suffixes		Reflexive pronouns		Personal pronouns	
		plural	Singular	plural	Singular	plural	Singular	plural	Singular
First person		-im (We)	- æm (I)	-eman (Our/Us)	-æm (My/Me)	xodeman (Ourselves)	xodæm (Myself)	ma (We)	mæn (I)
Second person		-id You	-i You	-etan Your/Yours	-et Your/Yours	xodetan Yourselves	xodet Yourself	šoma You	to You
Third person		-ænd They	-d / ø He/She	-ešan Them	-eš Him/Her	xodešan Themselves	xodeš Himself/ Herself	ʔanha They	ʔan/ʔu He/She

Table A: Pronouns in Farsi Language

	Age	Utterances		MLU	
		Min	Max	Min	Max
The Girl	18-23				
	24-29	213	427	1.01	1.68
	30-35	496	998	1.76	4.10
		601	822	3.90	5.00
The Boy	18-23	262	590	1.05	1.70
	24-29	497	1044	2.39	3.90
	30-35	515	817	3.40	4.10

Table B: Descriptive Statistics of utterances of both children