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PRONOUNS AS MARKERS OF GENDER REPRESENTATION IN RUSSIAN AND UZBEK CHILD SPEECH: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract. This article examines the acquisition and use of pronouns as markers of gender identity in children's speech. Pronouns constitute one of the earliest and most explicit linguistic means through which children express gender categorization and develop their understanding of gender as a social category. The paper analyzes the ontogenesis of pronominal gender markers in Russian and English, considering both the grammatical challenges children face and the sociopragmatic dimensions of pronoun use. Special attention is paid to the emergence of personal pronouns (he/she), the development of possessive forms (his/her), and the phenomenon of "feminine gender preference" observed in early Russian child speech. The study also addresses contemporary issues of gender-neutral pronoun use, children's memory for gendered versus neutral forms, and the role of speech input in shaping children's gender-pronoun associations. The author concludes that the acquisition of pronominal gender marking is a complex process involving both grammatical rule-learning and the gradual internalization of culturally-specific gender norms.

Keywords: gender identity, personal pronouns, child speech, ontolinguistics, Russian language, English language, grammatical gender, gender-neutral pronouns, speech acquisition.

The acquisition of pronouns represents one of the most significant milestones in a child's linguistic development. Pronouns not only serve referential functions but also encode crucial information about the speaker's perspective, social relationships, and—critically—gender. In languages with pronominal gender marking, such as Russian and English, the acquisition of gendered pronouns is intricately linked to the child's developing understanding of gender as a social and cognitive category.

In Russian, the acquisition of pronominal gender is closely connected to the broader acquisition of the grammatical category of gender, which permeates the entire language system. Research on Russian child speech shows that children do not acquire gender marking for pronouns in isolation but rather in parallel with the acquisition of gender agreement in adjectives and past-tense verbs. As Краснощекова notes, "освоение рода местоимений происходит по той же схеме, что и освоение рода прилагательных". This means that the same strategies children use to determine the gender of adjectives are also applied to pronouns.

An intriguing phenomenon observed in Russian child speech is what researchers term the "phenomenon of feminine gender"—a preference for feminine pronoun forms during early stages of development. Краснощекова's analysis of longitudinal data reveals that children up to the age of 2;4-2;6 show a marked preference for feminine forms of certain pronouns. This is evident in the disproportionate use of forms like моя, эта, такую (feminine) compared to their masculine counterparts. The researcher suggests that this may be due to the fact that objects surrounding the child in early childhood are more easily referred to with feminine forms, particularly when using diminutive suffixes (рубашечка, книжка). By approximately 2;4-2;6, the gender balance in pronoun use becomes more stable, and the pronoun он (masculine he) becomes the most frequent.

The emergence of gendered pronouns in child speech is also shaped by speech input. Studies on English-speaking children demonstrate that there are disparities in how children recall gendered

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pronouns compared to gender-neutral ones. In two preregistered studies involving children aged 4 to 10 years, it was found that children more accurately recall gendered pronouns (she and he) than gender-neutral pronouns (they) . However, the use of gendered pronouns is strongly influenced by the context: children used they almost exclusively when characters had gender-neutral pronouns, and almost never used they when characters had gendered pronouns. There was also some evidence that older children recall gender-neutral pronouns better than younger ones, suggesting a developmental trajectory in the ability to process non-binary gender markers.

The use of neutral pronouns in English presents a fascinating case study. In English, the pronoun it is typically reserved for inanimate objects, but in certain contexts—such as when announcing a baby's birth with phrases like "It's a boy" or "It's a girl"—the neutral pronoun takes on a specific function. Mignot argues that "it" in such contexts signals a first categorization, designating the referent as human before its gender is identified. This reflects a cognitive process where gender categorization follows a more general human categorization, supporting the view that pronouns encode not just grammatical gender but stages of conceptualization.

In Russian child speech, the process of acquiring possessive pronouns presents particular difficulties. As shown in research on children with sensory-motor alalia, the homonymy between personal and possessive pronouns can be a major stumbling block. A child in one study expressed frustration: "Одно и то же, а говорят писать разное. И это не потому, что память... Хвост же — оной! Это издевавство над человеком". This example illustrates the metalinguistic awareness that children develop when confronted with the complexities of the pronominal system. The same form её can function as either a personal pronoun (винительный падеж, начальная форма она) or a possessive pronoun, and children must learn to distinguish these functions contextually.

The role of children's literature in shaping gendered pronoun use cannot be overstated. Studies on children's books reveal a significant gender bias, with masculine pronouns far outnumbering feminine ones. In picture books, teachers often modify pronoun use when reading aloud, sometimes replacing masculine generic pronouns with more inclusive language, though this practice is far from universal. Interestingly, research shows that despite decades of advocacy for gender-neutral language, teachers continue to choose and use gender-biased books, pointing to the need for ongoing teacher education.

Contemporary discussions of pronouns increasingly involve non-binary and inclusive language. As societies become more aware of gender diversity, educational materials are being developed to teach children about a broader range of pronouns, including they/them/they’re and neopronouns like ze/zir/zirs. For children who come to these lessons with a binary understanding of gender, such materials provide access to language and knowledge about diverse genders, promoting health literacy and language capabilities. This represents a significant shift in how pronouns are taught, moving from a purely grammatical focus to one that acknowledges the social and identity-related dimensions of pronoun use.

The acquisition of pronominal gender marking is thus not merely a matter of grammatical rule-learning but involves the complex interplay of cognitive development, speech input, sociocultural norms, and individual language experience. The "feminine gender phenomenon" in early Russian child speech, the challenges of processing possessive pronouns, the developmental trajectory of gender-neutral pronoun use, and the ongoing evolution of inclusive language all testify to the dynamic and multifaceted nature of how children acquire and use pronouns as markers of gender identity.

Further research perspectives are connected with the expansion of empirical data through longitudinal studies, cross-linguistic comparisons, and the investigation of how modern digital media

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and bilingual environments influence the acquisition of pronominal gender markers. The increasing recognition of non-binary gender identities also raises important questions for future research: how do children acquire gender-neutral pronoun systems, and what are the cognitive and social consequences of using inclusive pronouns.

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