Inside the world of children's Bangla pronouns

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Why study children's pronouns

▪ Pronouns (eg. *she, it, them*) and reflexives (e.g. *himself, herself*) generate what is called anaphora.

▪ Anaphora is a phenomenon in which there is a relationship between a referentially dependent expression (anaphor) and a referentially independent expression (antecedent).

▪ The antecedent gives reference and semantic value to the anaphor.

(1) **Ankit** likes **himself**

(2) **The man with the red umbrella** likes **himself**

Anaphora are classic cases of poverty of stimulus!

Why study children's pronouns

(3)   Ankit said that **Kannan** saw **himself** in the mirror

(4)   * **Ankit** said that Kannan saw **himself** in the mirror

(5)   **Ankit** said that Kannan saw **him** in the mirror

(6)   * Ankit said that **Kannan** saw **him** in the mirror

- Some sort of computation is required to interpret anaphora and, thus, reflexives and pronouns. Linguists are interested in theorising this computation!

- Whatever helps the child compute the anaphora, despite poverty of stimulus, must be innate to human linguistic competence, and therefore a suspect inviolate condition/principle in linguistic theory.

Studying children's pronouns can help separate what is innate from what is not

The binding theory

A reflexive must be bound by a nearby antecedent

Principle A

A reflexive must be bound by a c-commanding antecedent that is dominated by the closest finite FinP that also dominates this reflexive.

(7)   [FinP Ankit said that [FinP Kannan saw himself in the mirror]]

(8)   * [FinP Ankit said that [FinP Kannan saw himself in the mirror]]

A non-reflexive pronoun cannot be bound by a nearby antecedent

Principle B

A non-reflexive pronoun may not be bound by a c-commanding antecedent that is dominated by the closest finite FinP that also dominates this non-reflexive pronoun

(9)   [FinP Ankit said that [FinP Kannan saw him in the mirror]]

(10)   * [FinP Ankit said that [FinP Kannan saw him in the mirror]]

Chomsky (1981), Chomsky (1986), Koeneman & Zeijlstra (2017)

Features that make pronouns

What if words are made up of bundles of features along with some information about how they are to be pronounced

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- Person – 1 , 2 , 3

- Number – SG, PL, DL

- Gender – F, M, N

- Politeness – L1, … Ln

- Deixis – PROX, DIST, MED

Q. Then what is the pronoun *they* made up of?

√THEY   [3], [PL]

Pronunciation info

See Chomsky & Hale (1968) , Hale & Marantz (1993) for more on features, and features building words

Describing Bangla pronouns

	[1]	[2]	[3] DIST	[3] PROX
	ami 'I'			
[L1]		tui 'you'		
[L2]		tumi 'you'	o 's/he'	e 's/he'
[L3]		apni 'you'	uni 's/he'	ini 's/he'

Principles A in Child Bangla

Do children know that reflexives must find their antecedent nearby?

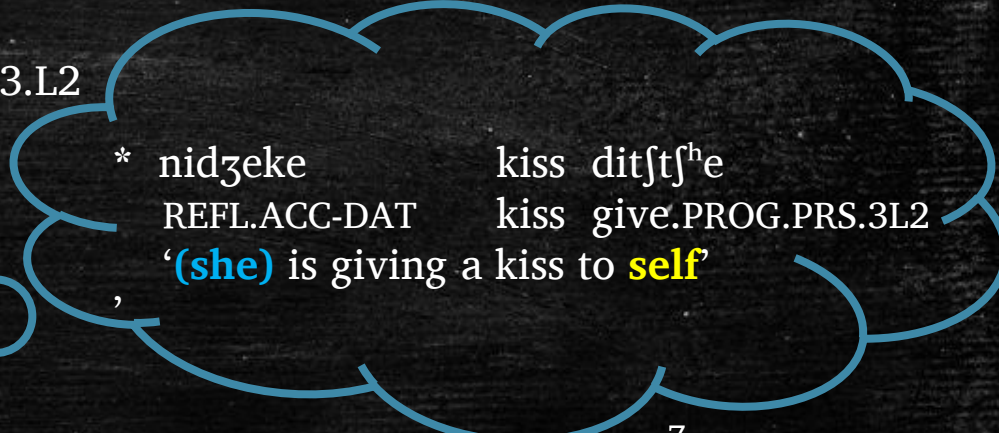**(11) Context: picture of a boy painting a picture of himself**

RESEARCHER:	kake	banat∫t∫ʰe
	who.ACC-DAT	make.PROG.PRS.3.L1
	'whom is (he) drawing?'	
CHILD (6;10):	nid∫eke-i	banat∫t∫ʰe
	REFL.ACC-DAT-i	make.PROG.PRS.3.L1
	'**(He)** is making **himself**'	

(12) Context: picture of a boy's mother giving him a kiss

RESEARCHER:	or	ma	ki	kort∫t∫ʰe
	3SG.L2.GEN	mother	what	do.PROG.PRS.3.L2
	'What is his mother doing?'			
CHILD (6;10):	oke	kiss dit∫t∫ʰe		
	3SG.L2.ACC-DAT	kiss give.PROG.PRS.3L2		
	'**(she)** is giving a kiss to **him**'			

> * nid ʒeke kiss dit∫t∫ʰe
> REFL.ACC-DAT kiss give.PROG.PRS.3L2
> , '**(she)** is giving a kiss to **self**'

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(14) Context: picture of a man (introduced formally) being given a kiss on the cheek by his daughter

RESEARCHER:	*onar*	*meje*	*ki*	*kor-tʃtʃʰ-e*	*ekʰane*
	3.**L3**.SG.GEN	daughter	what	do-PROG-L2	here

'What is his(form.) daughter doing here?'

CHILD (6;2): #	*or*	*meje*	*oke*	*ador*	*kor-tʃtʃʰ-e*
	3.**L2**.SG.GEN	daughter	3.**L2**.SG.ACC-DAT	love	do-PROG-PRS.L2

'His$_i$(infor.) daughter is showing her affection towards him$_i$ (infrom.)'

(15) Context: picture of an old woman looking into her bag

CHILD (5;5): *	*dida*	*or*	*bæg-ʈa-te*	*kitʃʰu*	*dekʰ-tʃtʃʰ-e*
	Grandma	3SG.**L2**.GEN	bag-CLF-LOC	something	see-PROG-PRS.L2

'Grandma is looking at something in her (informal) bag'

Impoliteness galore!

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(16) Context: picture of a king wearing his own shoes (contrasted with a picture of a fairy wearing a fireman's shoes)

RESEARCHER: ar   **radʒa**
                and   king
                'and the king?'

CHILD (6;6):   **radʒa-r**   dʒuto   pore
                king-GEN   shoes   wear.NF
                '(the king) is wearing the king's shoes.'

(17) Context: child interacting with researcher

CHILD (3;10): **(tumi)**   **(ki)**   **pensil-pensil**   **kʰelb-e**
                2.L2.SG   PQ   pencil-pencil   play.FUT-L2
                'Will you play pencil-pencil?'

Note:
When referent (3rd Person) older to the speaker, and in a non-formal relationship to them:
L3 pronoun too formal
L2 pronoun too informal/impolite
Only option is to use the Referential expression

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When the referent is visibly younger to the speaker but the relationship between them is formal, it is the L2 pronoun that is used, not the L3 one

Social status/Age > Formality

	younger/same age/ lower social status		older/ higher social status	
non-formal	✓	✗	✓	✗
formal	✓	✓ (same) ✗ (younger)	✗	✓
	L2	**L3**	**L2**	**L3**

Adult bangla

Child bangla

	younger/same age/ lower social status		older/ higher social status	
non-formal			✓	?
formal			?	✗
	L2	**L3**	**L2**	**L3**

Takeaways

- Children get the L3 pronoun wrong because they have not learnt the feature FORMAL. Can we then go on to conclude that they have not fully acquired Principle B?

No!

- We have to differentiate between ungrammaticality and infelicity. Using the L2 pronoun in place of the L3 one, as children do, does not cause ungrammaticaility i.e. a principle B violation. It causes infelicity.

- Some features (morpho-pragmatic?) may be acquired much later. But they are not a reflection of a lack in the child's syntactic or semantic (logical) knowledge.

References

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