

Non-canonical directive strategies in a bilingual child with prolonged pronoun reversal: A longitudinal case study

Authors: Elena Gavrusseva, University of Iowa

Abstract ID: 372

Event: Language Disorders 2026

Subject: 12. Pragmatic disorders

Presenter Name: Elena Gavrusseva

Abstract

This paper presents a longitudinal case study of directives in a bilingual English/Russian child with prolonged pronoun reversal. Pronoun reversal is often discussed in relation to autism spectrum disorder and other atypical developmental profiles, yet relatively little is known about how pronoun reversal interacts with emerging grammatical and pragmatic systems. This case is especially informative because the child was an English-dominant bilingual (residing in the US), who was exposed to English and Russian at home, was a late talker, and showed an unusually long period of pronoun reversal, lasting from approximately age 2;9 to 5;5.

The study focuses on the development of request strategies (imperatives) during this period. Canonical imperatives in English require mapping of the addressee correctly onto an implied second-person subject (e.g., *(You) build a tower*). For a pronoun-reversing child, who consistently uses *you* for self-reference (e.g., *You need a raisin* = *I need a raisin*), this mapping is disrupted, creating potential ambiguity between speaker and addressee roles. The central question is how such a child expresses directive meanings when the linguistic system for person reference is not yet fully stable.

Using longitudinal diary data with detailed contextual annotations, the study examines the child's use of *want*-constructions as a productive strategy for expressing requests. The subset of *want*-constructions includes 138 utterances, a sample size comparable to those reported in previous studies (e.g., Chejnová, 2015; Landau & Thornton, 2011). Examples are in (1):

- (1) a. *want* [_ cut it little] (3;5)
 ≈ 'I want you/mother to cut them into little pieces.'
 Context: Mother is cutting tomatoes; V. requests that they be cut into small pieces.
- b. *want* [mama's talking on the book] (3;8;11)
 ≈ 'I want you (mama) to keep reading from the book.'
 Context: Mother stopped reading aloud and animating the characters' voices. She resumes reading after 1(b).

Our analysis shows that *want*-constructions are initially used to express directives and prohibitives, and later expand pragmatically to denote counterfactual wishes. No canonical imperatives were attested in the corpus of 758 utterances.

We identify three developmental stages defined by morphosyntactic properties of *want*-complements, including (i) embedded subject realization (overt vs. null), (ii) use of the infinitival marker *to*, (iii) (non)finiteness of embedded predicates, and (iv) overt vs. null matrix subjects.

The study demonstrates that *want*-constructions constitute an intermediate but highly systematic imperative system shaped by the interaction of morphosyntax, pragmatics, and speaker–addressee reference. Pragmatically, their functions were additive: as the forms became more complex, earlier directive uses did not disappear. Instead, new functions were added, including counterfactual meanings, shown below:

- (2) _ want the tomatoes are ready (4;3)
 (Context: Wishes the tomatoes on the kitchen counter were ripe.)

The language-disorders relevance of the study lies in showing how prolonged pronoun reversal shapes the child's broader grammatical development, especially in domains that require coordination of person reference, speaker intention, and addressee-directed action. The applied contribution is that non-canonical directives such as *want*-constructions may provide clinically useful evidence of communicative intent and pragmatic competence, even when pronoun use is atypical. (500 words)