Pronouns in Estonian Child Language¹

1. Introduction

*Pronouns are words that fall on the boundaries of vocabulary and grammar. They possess several distinctive characteristics that are important for language acquisition. First, since the referent of a pronoun only becomes apparent in context, the interpretation of pronouns requires a specific kind of information. In order to understand to whom I, you or this refer, we need to know the whole communicative situation. This fact should still not complicate language acquisition too much, because the child's language development starts with 'here and now'. Yet, the acquisition of a pragmatico-grammatical complex of pronouns is bound to take time due to the variety of pronoun functions involved. On the one hand, the referents of pronouns (especially those of speech act pronouns *mina* 'I' and *sina* 'you:2SG') change constantly, making an exact repetition of what an adult said, in most cases, impossible for the child. On the other hand, the areas of use of certain pronouns (e.g., those expressing definiteness) require the mastery of narrative principles. There are also studies that show that the acquisition of pronouns after the critical age is especially difficult or even impossible (see the discussion of Genie's case in Lust 2006: 95).*

*This article gives an analysis of the acquisition of Estonian personal and demonstrative pronouns. In Estonian, similarly to many other languages, a group of frequently used pronouns functions as a device for minimal reference and for determining noun phrases for referential needs of ongoing discourse. The group consists of different types of pronouns: personal (*mina*, *sina*, *tema*, *meie*, *teie*, *nemad*), demonstrative (*see*), possessive (*oma*), and quantificational (*üks*, *mingi*). In addition, there are also some adverbs used for deictic reference, for example those of spatial reference (*siin* 'here', *seal* 'there', etc.). Some of these pro-words are typically used in deictic contexts and refer to entities present in the physical context (1 and 2sg personal pronouns and demonstratives); others refer primarily anaphorically (3rd person pronoun and demonstratives), and typically have an antecedent in the ongoing discourse. The same pronouns (except personal) can function as determiners very much like articles in Indo-European languages. Thus, we can see a group of core pro-words that are frequent and have different functions. An overview of these devices of pronominal reference is given in Pajusalu (in press).*

Key words: first language acquisition, pronouns, demonstratives, determiners

2. Data

The analysis is based on the data of Estonian children in the CHILDES² database. The Estonian sub-corpus of the CHILDES database contains data on ten children (see Table 1). Since Andreas's corpus is the largest and contains also later recordings (those made after his third birthday), it has been used the most in the analysis. Since the acquisition of definiteness takes place at a later stage, the Estonian corpus in CHILDES does not provide enough data on the matter. For that reason, the data collected by Anneli Laak (2006) was also included in the analysis. She recorded and transcribed the speech of ten children at the age of 2.7–5.9.

¹ The study was supported by grant 7492 from the Estonian Science Foundation.

² CHILDES (Child Language Data Exchange System) <http://childes.psy.cmu.edu/data/other/>

Table 1
Estonian data in the CHILDES database

Name	Compiler	Age	Number of recordings
Stella	K. Kohler	0;11.22–1;6.4	9
Helen	K. Kohler	1;1.17–1;10.17	7
Sandor	K. Kohler	1;2–2;2.22	10
Taimo	K. Kohler	1;5.8–1;11.13	9
Carlos	K. Kohler	1;7.17–1;10.29	9
Annabel	K. Kohler	1;10.28–2;1	7
Henri	K. Kohler	2;2.12–2;3.8	3
Mari-Liis	K. Kohler	2;5.7–2;8.10	7
Hendrik	R. Argus	1;8.13–2;5.30	17
Andreas	M. Vija	1;7.24–3;1.13	74
Total		0;11.22–3;1.13	152

3. Most frequent Estonian pro-forms in child language

3.1. Demonstrative *see* ‘this’

Initial uses of demonstratives are related to pointing, which is what children can do already at an early age (at least at the age of one). Research based on other languages shows that children younger than four do not know how to use distance differentiating demonstratives - thus, English children make mistakes in using *this* and *that* and *here* and *there* (Tomasello 2003, 200-201).

Standard Estonian has two demonstrative pronouns and six demonstrative adverbs. Demonstrative pronouns are *see* ‘this’ (traditionally seen as proximal) and *too* ‘that’ (traditionally seen as distal). All ten children whose CHILDES data are analysed here used the demonstrative *see* (nom) and *seda* (part). *Too* is actually rare in Standard Estonian, and there were no occurrences of it in the CHILDES data.

Table 2

The age of initial occurrence of demonstrative pronouns in the speech of ten Estonian children (CHILDES)

	Stella 0;11– 1;6	Helen 1;1.17– 1;10.17	Taimo 1;5– 1;11	Hendrik 1;8.13– 2;5.30	Henri 2;2.12– 2;3.8	Carlos 1;7.17– 1;10.29	Andreas 1;7–3;1	Annabel 1;10–2;1	Mariliis 2;5–2;8	Sandor 1;2–2;2
<i>see</i> ‘this’	1;5	1;9	1;5	1;11	2;2	1;7	1;7	1;10	2;5	1;2
<i>selle</i> ‘this. gen’	–	–	1;11	2;2	2;2	1;10	2;0	–	2;5	2;2
<i>seda</i> ‘this. part’	–	–	1;11	2;2	2;2	1;7	1;9	2;0	2;5	1;9

3.1.1. *see* as an independent NP

The Estonian demonstrative *see* functions as a proximal or neutral demonstrative (depending on whether the speaker has two spatially opposed demonstratives or uses *see* in all deictic contexts), as an anaphoric pronoun, as a definite determiner, or sometimes just expresses a hesitation. There are six demonstrative adverbs that are based on the deictic contrast proximal/distal. They have three forms: *siia* ‘to here’ – *sinna* ‘to there’ for GOAL; *siin* ‘here’ – *seal* ‘there’ for LOCATION and *siit* ‘from here’ – *sealt* ‘from there’ for SOURCE. In addition to their deictic function, demonstrative adverbs are used as anaphoric devices

for referents that can be characterized (literally or metaphorically) as a place. They can also function as definite determiners, if the head noun of NP is in a local case and can be interpreted as a spatial referent.

The first pronoun that makes its appearance in Estonian child language is *see*, which first and foremost occurs in the contexts of pointing. It is also the most frequent pronoun in the Estonian child language data, although it is less frequent than *ta* '(s)he/it' in adult everyday conversations. It is interesting to note that the partitive form of *see* (*seda*) is more frequently used by children than their mothers (see Table 3). This is probably caused by the children's limited vocabulary, which they make up for by using a pronoun instead of the missing word. Syntactic contexts in which children resort to pronouns instead of missing words mostly relate to the object position, thus the use of *seda*. The use of *seda* may also be facilitated by the fact that *seda* is a two-syllable form (see section 3.2), or by the fact that objects are frequent in child language. In example (1) Andreas wants to put a tape in the tape recorder but evidently he cannot find a correct word for naming the tape and uses the demonstrative *seda*.

(1)

Andreas 1;10.22: [Laps tahab panna lastelaulukasseti maki sisse.]

CHI: **seda seda** panna.

CHI: **seda** panna.

CHI: **seda** panna oskab [*]³.

CHI: **seda** oska.

CHI: **seda** ära ka.

CHI: **seda** siit ära.

MOT: panen selle kasseti sinna sisse või?

CHI: sisse.

Andreas 1;10.22: [The child wants to put a tape with children songs in the tape recorder.]

CHI: put this this.

CHI: put this.

CHI: [he] can put this [*].

CHI: can this.

CHI: this away too.

CHI: this away from here.

MOT: Should I put this tape in this?

CHI: in.

Table 3

Instances of demonstratives *see* 'this', *siia* 'to here', *siin* 'here' and *seal* 'there' in two children's speech (aged 1;7–2;0)

	Andreas	Andreas's mother	Carlos	Carlos's mother
	(7 recordings = 315 minutes)		(9 recordings = 400 minutes)	
SEE (nom) 'this'	29	234	50	88
SEDA (part) 'this'	58	37	12	7
SIIA 'to here'	46	37	10	16
SIIN 'here'	19	135	18	49
SEAL 'there'	2	93	18	18

³ An asterisk denotes forms or constructions that are regarded incorrect from the point of adult use of language.

Children use the demonstrative *see* in different functions, which can be seen in the fact that while at the age in which most noun paradigms have only 3-4 members, the demonstrative *see* is used in seven different case forms (Argus 2008, in press).

3.1.2. Demonstratives and indefinite pronouns as markers of (in) definiteness

The development of definiteness/indefiniteness in English children's speech has mostly been studied in connection with the use of articles. It seems that in the first stages of language acquisition, English children do not regard definiteness/indefiniteness as one category with two different subcategories but use these as two separate categories (for an overview, see Tomasello 2003, 209).

Estonian has been traditionally regarded as a non-article language similarly to almost all other Finno-Ugric languages. However, Estonian demonstratives can function as definite determiners and indefinite pronouns as markers of indefiniteness, similarly to many other languages (see Lyons 1997, grammaticalization DEMONSTRATIVE > DEFINITE in Heine & Kuteva 2002, 109-111 and ONE > INDEFINITE *op.cit.* 220-221, an overview of *see* as a definite determiner in Pajusalu 1997, an overview of indefinite markers in Pajusalu 2001, an overview of all tracking devices Pajusalu in press).

Introducing a new referent into an ongoing discourse is almost always done by a noun phrase which is determined by the indefinite pronoun *üks* 'one', or sometimes *mingi* 'some'. *Üks* and *mingi* are similar in their indefinite function in spoken discourse, whereas they are apparently interchangeable in many cases. Most frequently, they are employed to introduce a new referent into the discourse. However, unlike *üks* X, one of the functions of *mingi* X in spoken Estonian is to express vagueness, something like 'I don't know exactly what kind of X; I'm not very sure about this' (for details, see Pajusalu 2000, in press). The most frequent context for *see* 'this' as a marker of definiteness is one in which the referent of *see*NP has been mentioned (is given) previously. The need for *see*NP usually arises after some other referent has been introduced into the discourse, because in other cases, a pronominal NP would be enough.

So far, no thorough studies have been conducted of the evolution of expressions of definiteness and indefiniteness in Estonian children's speech. The analysis of the Estonian sub-corpus in the CHILDES database showed that Andreas used first markers of definiteness and indefiniteness approximately at the age of three. In example (2) Andreas's use of the pronoun *üks* is in full convergence with adult use, which is to introduce a new referent in the discourse.

(2)

3;1.11 *CHI: meil lasteaias oli **üks tüdruk**, uus tüdruk.

3;1.11 *CHI: there was **a girl**, a new girl in our kindergarten.

The analysis of Andreas's recordings shows that in many cases he is not able to choose a correct determiner. In example (3) Andreas is talking about his dog, and begins the phrase with the determiner *minu* 'my' but then replaces it with the determiner *üks* 'one, a'. Since Andreas is talking about his own dog, whom everyone participating in the conversation knows well, his use of an indefinite phrase does not match adult use. However, since the child's intentions are not very clear (he may be telling the story to a so-called unknown listener), this kind of usage cannot really be considered an error.

(3)

3;1.13 *CHI: olen näinud küll, et minu, et **üks Pitsu** oleks käpaga siit taldrikust lusika peale pannud.

3;1.13 *CHI: yes, I've seen that my, that **one Pitsu** had put (something) with his paw from the plate onto the spoon.

Based on Laak's study (2006), one can claim that four-year-old Estonian children rather regularly use *üks*NPs in order to introduce a new referent in the dialogue and *see*NPs to refer back to a known referent. In example (4) Erik is playing a game where he is calling an ambulance. First he asks the ambulance workers to take a girl (*üks tüdruk*) to the hospital. Since the girl is still unknown for the ambulance workers, Erik uses the indefinite marker *üks*, the same way an adult Estonian speaker would do. Then Erik acts as

a doctor, and finds something red (*mingi punase asja*) in the doll's ear. He uses the word *mingi*, which probably refers to the fact that he himself does not know what it actually is. Then he uses the phrase *üks ästi väike punane asi* 'something really small and red'. The use of *üks* shows that listeners still do not have an independent access to the thing inside the ear.

(4)

Erik (4;5): ma elistasin kiirabile. tsau kiirabi. palun vii **üks tüdruk** aiglasse. tsau. kohe tuleb kiirabi. oota ma kuulan sind, su kõrva natuke ka. aiaiai on kõrvas. see on **mingi punane asi. üks ästi väike punane asi.** (Laak 2006)

Erik (4;5): I called the ambulance. hi, ambulance. please take **a girl** to the hospital. bye. The ambulance comes at once. wait, I'll check out your lungs, your ear, too, a bit. Ouch is in your ear. it is **some red thing. some very small red thing.**

In example (5) Teele talks about a beach. When mentioning the beach for the second time, she uses the phrase *see rand* 'this beach'.

(5)

Täiskasvanu: aga kus huvitavates kohtades sa veel oled käinud?

Teele (5): ma olen rannas käinud. **see rand** on täpselt meie kodu lähedal.

Adult: and what other interesting places have you been to?

Teele (5): I've been to a beach. This beach is exactly close to our home.

The youngest child in Laak's study to use the definite marker *see* (a single occurrence) is Erik (2;8). In example (6) Erik says that he would like to listen once more to what Hanna says about the bogeys that she hit so hard they flew onto the cupboard. This example is also interesting in that it shows as if the child has not acquired the correct use of the demonstrative, i.e. that only a single one is needed in a phrase (*seda kapiotsa seda kolli* pro *seda kapiotsa kolli*).

(6)

Erik (2.8): pane nüüd **seda kapiotsa seda kolli.** (Laak 2006)

Erik (2.8): now put this, this bogey onto the cupboard

One aspect that characterises the interaction of 4-5-year-olds is that they cannot always adequately place themselves in the listener's role and are thus prone to mark as definite even referents that are unknown to the listener. In example (7) Erik describes the events that happened the day before. He refers to a clown with the phrase *see kloun*, although the adult he is talking to did not take part in the events that had happened the day before and does not know about the clown. Also in example (8) the listener is not able to identify the referents of the phrase *neid raamatuid* because he was not in the kindergarten.

(7)

Täiskasvanu: ahah jaah ja mis te veel tegite seal

Erik (4;5): öö me sis sai siis tegime nööri. tead **see kloun** käis ka. (Laak 2006)

Adult: ahah yeah and what else did you do there

Erik (4;5): er we then got then we made a rope. You know **this clown** came too.

(8)

Täiskasvanu: Kule, mis sa täna lasteaias tegid?

Sandra (5;9): Mängisin Pitkitiga ja vaatasin **neid raamatuid.** (Laak 2006)

Adult: hey, what did you do in the kindergarten today?

Sandra (5;9): I played with Pitkit and I looked at **these books.**

3.2. Personal pronouns

The category of person in Estonian is described as consisting of six persons (1_{SG}, 2_{SG}, 3_{SG}, 1_{PL}, 2_{PL}, 3_{PL}), which have no gender opposition. The personal pronouns of Estonian are (in the nominative case): *mina~ma* 'I' (1_{SG}), *sina~sa* 'you' (2_{SG}), *tema~ta* (3_{SG}), *meie~me* 'we' (1_{PL}), *teie~te* 'you' (2_{PL}), *nemad~nad* 'they' (3_{PL}). An important characteristic of the Estonian pronominal system is that short and long pronominal forms occur in almost all morphological cases. The choice between long and short forms is pragmatic by nature, and hence there are no grammatical rules for this alternation. Pragmatic principles are slightly different in the case of different case forms and syntactic roles (Pajusalu 2005), but the main tendency is to use long forms in the case of pragmatic contrast with some other referent (Kaiser & Hiietam 2003). It means that there is some other referent in focus when the long form is used, and it represents something opposite in respect of the referent of the long form. The principle of contrast is most obvious in the case of nominative forms and syntactical subjects while there can be competing principles in other positions. For example, some case forms of pronouns are preferred in the short form, others in the long form.

Estonian children begin to refer to themselves by using their name and the verb in the third person singular. This is also the most usual way for Estonian adults to talk to a child (Vija 2007). Our data show that the singular pronouns *mina* and *ma* that refer to the speaker himself or herself are the first personal pronouns acquired. Hence, although the child is used to talking about himself in the third person, he does not use third person pronouns when referring to himself (as do not adults when they talk to the child).

Table 4

The age of the first occurrence of personal pronouns in the speech of ten Estonian children (CHILDES)

	Stella 0;11– 1;6	Helen 1;1.17– 1;10.17	Taimo 1;5– 1;11	Hendrik 1;8.13– 2;5.30	Henri 2;2.12– 2;3.8	Carlos 1;7.17– 1;10.29	Andreas 1;7–3;1	Annabel 1;10–2;1	Mariliis 2;5–2;8	Sandor 1;2–2;2
mina 'I'	–	–	v	2;2	2;2	–	1;8	[2;0] ⁴	2;6	–
MA 'I'	–	–	–	–	–	–	2;0	–	2;5	–
sina 'you, 2SG'	–	–	–	2;5	–	–	2;0	–	2;8	–
sa 'you, 2SG'	–	–	–	–	–	–	2;0	–	2;7	–
tema 'he/she'	–	–	–	2;5	–	–	3;0	–	2;6	2;2
ta 'he/she'	–	–	–	–	2;3	[1;10]	2;6	–	–	–

Some children tend to mix up first and second person pronouns (the so-called *pronoun reversal* phenomenon, see Dabrowska 2004, 163–164), which can be difficult because of the constant change in referents involved. Dabrowska says that this kind of reversal error is especially typical in contexts where the child repeats what an adult has said, and relatively rare in contexts where the child creates his own reference. Example (9) represents the former type of situation: the child, after using the first person singular pronoun *mina* correctly, becomes confused after his mother repeats it, because in his mother's utterance the first person singular pronoun has been replaced by the second person singular pronoun *sina*. These are contexts where one of important learning strategies – imitation – leads to an error.

⁴ Age is indicated in square brackets if the child showed a random instance of pronoun use as part of an utterance that the child did not understand on the level of constituents but that he or she had memorised (cf. Annabel: *mina* ka, Carlos: *las ta oli*).

(9)
 [Antsu (= Andreas) sööb isiklikult taldrikult suppi.]
 CHI: *see on minu oma.*
 MOT: *jaa, see on sinu oma.*
 CHI: *sinu oma?* (% umbusklikult)
 MOT: *jaa, see on sinu* (% rõhutatult) *oma.*
 CHI: *see on Antsu oma.*
 (Vija 2007, 379).

[Antsu (= Andreas) is eating soup from his own plate.]
 CHI: *this is mine.*
 MOT: *yes, this is yours.*
 CHI: *yours?* (% mistrustfully)
 MOT: *yes, this is yours* (% stressing 'yours').
 CHI: *this is Antsu's.*

From the perspective of the Estonian pronoun system it is interesting to observe the dynamics of long and short pronoun forms. We carried out a thorough analysis of Andreas's earlier personal pronouns (*mina*, *tema*), whose number, compared to that of other personal pronouns, was considerably higher in the his speech (Vija 2005); therefore other pronoun forms will be discussed. There are three long nominative forms of *mina* and one short allative form of *mulle* in Andreas's recordings at the age of 1;7.24–2;0. The short form *mulle* remains more frequent than its long form *minule* throughout the whole observation period. At the same time, the frequency of *mina* decreases in comparison to that of the short form *ma* (see Table 5). Yet, the short forms *ma* and *mulle* are more frequent than the corresponding long forms *mina* and *minule* in adult speech and in Andreas's mother's speech in that particular recording. The genitive long form is more common in both adult and Andreas's mother's speech. Thus, in comparison to adult speech, Andreas prefers the rarer nominative form *mina* to its more frequent short counterpart, and the more frequent short allative, adessive and genitive forms to the less frequent long ones in an early stage of pronoun acquisition. One can hypothesize that the reason for this lies in the syllable structure of the relevant forms: Andreas prefers two-syllable, trochaic words (e.g. *mina*, *minu*, *mulle*) which prevail also in other word classes before the child turns two (see also Argus 2008, 31; Vihman 1997, 16).

Table 5
 First person singular pronoun forms in Andreas's and his mother's speech

	1;7.24–2;0		2;0–2;1.12		3;0–3;1.13	
	Andreas	mother	Andreas	mother	Andreas	mother
mina (nom⁵. long)	3	3	5	41	754	149
ma (nom.short)	–	34	5	437	1883	888
minu (gen. long)	–	3	7	22	197	51
mu (gen. short)	–	–	1	10	57	8
mind (part)	–	1	3	9	28	26
minul (ade.long)	–	–	–	–	27	3
mul (ade.short)	–	3	7	37	369	89
minule (all.long)	–	–	–	–	19	4
mulle (all.short)	1	6	4	32	185	97
'I'						

⁵ Nom=nominative, gen=genitive, part=partitive, all=allative, ade=adessive

The second person singular pronoun is semantically difficult for the child. The number of its occurrences in Andreas's speech is three times less than that of first person singular pronouns. This shows that it is more important for the child to talk about himself and his belongings and activities in everyday conversation. There are some examples of cases where Andreas, at the age of 1;10–2;0, uses the second person pronoun to describe his own activity (*sina kiigud* [^{*}] [= *mina kiigun*] 'you are swinging = I'm swinging') or to mark possession (*sinu joogitass* [= *minu joogitass* 'our cup = my cup'] (Vija 2005).

The third person singular pronoun *tema/ta* appears in Andreas's speech a little later⁶ and the distribution of its long and short forms closely resembles adult usage right from the beginning (see Table 6). At the age of both 2;0–2;1.12 and 3;0–3;1.13 the most frequent forms are the short forms *ta* and *tal*. The later acquisition period probably explains the fact why the proportion of the long forms is not as great as in the case of the first person pronouns. After his second birthday the syllable structure of Andreas's vocabulary has become more varied and he no longer shows a clear preference for two-syllable words.

Table 6
Third person singular pronoun forms in Andreas's and his mother's speech

	1;7.24–2;0		2;0–2;1.12		3;0–3;1.13	
	Andreas	mother	Andreas	mother	Andreas	mother
tema (nom, long)	–	–	1	11	65	19
ta (nom, short)	1	43	13	196	382	338
teda (part)	–	1	1	14	13	25
temale (all, long)	–	–	–	–	6	–
talle (all.short)	–	–	1	26	54	46
temal (ade.long)	–	–	–	1	24	1
tal (ade.short)	–	5	8	38	82	71
'he/she'						

Plural personal pronouns appear in children's speech later and are not so frequent as singular personal pronouns. In Andreas's speech the most frequent plural pronoun was the first person plural *meie*, the least frequent the second person plural *teie/te*.

4. Conclusions

In the acquisition of the pronoun system, Estonian children first begin to use the independent demonstrative *see* and singular personal pronouns. The use of determiners and plural personal pronouns comes later. At an early stage of language acquisition the demonstrative *see* is syntactically polyfunctional; it is used in different case forms compared to other pronouns. Children tend to use the demonstrative *seda* to mark an object. This is probably caused by the fact that the child needs pronouns to refer to unknown items that he uses and not so much for referents that occur in the subject position. Estonian children also demonstrate pronoun reversal, especially in contexts where they repeat what an adult has said.

A characteristic feature of Estonian is its short and long pronoun forms. Children prefer two-syllable forms regardless of whether the form is frequent in adult speech or not. Thus, phonological principles play a greater role than pragmatic ones in the early stages of language acquisition.

Children start to use pronouns *see* and *üks* as determiners more consistently only from the beginning of year four.

⁶ He starts to use these forms productively after his third birthday.

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