

Annemie Verbist

## The acquisition of personal pronouns in cochlear-implanted children

Today, many deaf children can be given access to oral language thanks to a cochlear implant, a surgically implanted electronic device that provides a sense of sound thanks to electric stimulation of the auditory nerve. In this study, the acquisition of personal pronouns is considered to be a measure for the effectiveness of cochlear implantation in congenitally deaf children. Pronouns are morphemes with low perceptual prominence. They are semantically complex and lack morphophonological regularity. Building on these insights, the acquisition of pronouns is quite a challenge for hearing-impaired children.

The goal of this study is to examine whether a cochlear implant provides deaf children with sufficient auditory input to acquire low salient and complex functional items like personal pronouns and to compare the results to those obtained in hearing peers. Different developmental steps in pronoun acquisition have been examined including the building of the pronominal paradigm and its morphological attributes and the acquisition of co-referring and binding relations between pronouns and their antecedents.

The results show that although cochlear-implanted children start out with a delay in the acquisition of pronouns, they are able to partially catch up with their hearing peers during the later stages. By the age of seven, most cochlear-implanted children have attained a target production and comprehension of pronouns. Based on these results, cochlear implantation below 24 months may be considered to be an effective way to provide pre-lingual deaf children with the necessary sensory input to acquire pronouns despite their initial deprivation of spoken language input.

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