

BABY TALK

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"Here, let Daddy help Mikie down from the step. He might hurt himself if he jumped."

"Mommie is very unhappy with Ashley for spilling her cereal all over the floor."

"Come here to Grandma. Does Grandma's little girl want to hear a story?"

Why do people use third person instead of first person when adopting an affectionate tone toward such subjects as babies, small children, or pets? It is usual and natural to use first person to second person in other dialogues; why do people so frequently switch to third person when talking "babytalk"?

This is a real question which seeks a real answer, not simply a rhetorical one stated for effect to catch your interest, puzzle you, then flash the answer triumphantly. No, I don't have an answer and am as puzzled as anyone else who has reflected on this.

Why doesn't Mikie's father say, "Here, let me help you down from the step, Mikie"?

Why doesn't Mommie say, "I'm very unhappy with you, Ashley, for spilling your cereal all over the floor"?

And why doesn't Grandma just say, "Come here, Brittany, and I'll read you a story"?

Notice how the second batch sound more mature and "cool" somehow? But why?

This third person or "babytalk" form of address is also frequently used by people in addressing beloved pets. "Does the nice doggie want a treat?" "Here, let me give the pretty kitty some milk", or even lovers in the depth of gushing sweet nothings too silly to even put in print ("Does little Miss Twinkletoes want to go to dinner with the big bad Wolf?").

Intuitively, it sounds more affectionate - patronising - yes, in the sense of offering the care, protection and guidance of a patron. The word derives from the word *pater*, meaning father, after all. Yes, the form does sound more affectionate and the standard "I" and "you" forms cited in the second instances seem cooler, briskly business-like, and objective as if addressing an equal. Yes, all this I sense intuitively, but what I don't understand is why or how the custom began.

I understand the use of diminutives as an intuitive way of expressing affection because small people and animals disarm our hostility by not being powerful enough to be a threat. We are more likely to feel relaxed, affectionate and protective around them, but that a simple change of pronoun should produce this effect is puzzling, especially when we thereby move **away** from the more intimate pronoun relationship (I, you) to a less-personal one (he, she). One would think that with the switch to the impersonal third person would come a feeling of increased distance. Instead it is just the opposite.

When I studied French, Spanish and German, I noticed with interest that there are two forms of "you" in these languages for different degrees of intimacy. I thought it was nice that we didn't have such a complicating form. Now I am beginning to see that there are subtle adjustments in pronouns to impart a particularly affectionate tone when speaking to babies, children or pets (or either the human or animal variety).

"Daddy's got a nice treat for Billie," uses third person but "I'm only going to tell you once to get up to the table" is first person. Of course it is possible to say, in a sharp, commanding voice, "Susan had better have her toys picked up by the time Mommie gets home or she will be in trouble", but that would sound far more odd than "Would Susie like to have some milk and gingerbread before she goes out to play?".

Why do we do this? Or (to qualify it for those lofty individuals who disdain such "babytalk" in any context), why do so many people seem to feel instinctively a need to change persons during affectionate babble? It is a mysterious mode when one reflects upon it. Logically, there should be just as much affection in "I don't want you to hurt yourself, Stevie. Here, let me help you down" as "Mommie doesn't want Stevie to hurt himself...", and yet there doesn't seem to be. Any theories on why we so frequently use the third person when talking "babytalk"? Inquiring minds want to know.

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