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## **It's all in the name : early writing: from imitating print to phonetic writing**

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## 7 GENERAL DISCUSSION

### EARLY WRITING: FROM IMITATING PRINT TO PHONETIC WRITING

In the literature on emergent writing it is assumed that children begin to construct ideas about writing long before they start school. (Sulzby, 1986; Temple, Nathan Temple, & Burris, 1993). Which ideas develop apart from knowledge about the written form? In four studies we focused on the question whether preschoolers discover that writing symbolizes referents and how development goes from written-like to symbolic and phonetic writing.

From a young age children develop knowledge of the form features of writing but the youngest participants (3½-4) revert to drawing to denote meaning. Somewhat older children (4-4½) are less inclined to revert to drawing but under some conditions they do. When the referential function of writing is strongly emphasized writing creates a dilemma for these children: to represent the two-dimensional object print or to represent the referent's meaning. They often solve this dilemma by reverting to drawing. Apparently writing is not yet an alternative notational device to these children. Older children (4½-5) stop reverting to drawing. They stick to the written form even when the referential function is emphasized, which suggests that to them writing has become a communicative device although most of them do not succeed in writing readably. In contrast, older children continue to use iconic devices to represent number and color in their writings. We hypothesize that on the verge of integrating new cognitive knowledge children use multiple strategies (Kamberelis, 1994); they mix up iconic symbolizations as number and color with linguistic symbolization, i.e. phonetic writing.

Children are more advanced in writing their names than in writing new unpracticed words, and they progress more rapidly on name writing. As early as preschool, children often spell their name wholly or partially in conventional form, prior to comprehending the alphabetic-phonetic principle. When children have learned to write their name they begin to use the letters from their name in the spelling of unknown dictated words probably because they know these forms best or because they have experienced that those letters symbolize meaning. Conventional symbols in their writings are to a large extent (52%) letters from their proper name. Especially children writing random letter strings (level 1 in the studies 4 and 5) mainly selected letters from their proper name (58% in Study 4 and 65% in Study 5). The production of phonetic spelling starts with the first letter of their proper name. Four-year-olds from high-educated families and five-year-olds from low-educated families start phonetic writing with the first letter of their name. Other letters (from the name or not from the name) also appear in

children's writings but randomly. In a group of more advanced children (those who produce some invented spelling) phonetic writing is not any longer limited to first letters of the name or any other letters from the name.

When Dutch children have just started to choose some correct letters in the spellings of dictated words they mainly succeed with the first letter of their own name. It looks like the first letter of the name, whichever it is, is the one and only letter that is written phonetically at the very start of phonetic writing. A plausible explanation is that phonemic awareness results from the instruction elicited by the first letter. Grown-ups may say: "that's 'p' for Peter." Children thus practice that a letter refers to a sound in a spoken word. As a result, phonemic awareness starts with the first letter of the name and young children are successful in recognizing the sound of this letter in spoken words preceding other sounds. The proper name thus supplies young children with a model through which they can analyze and represent spoken language (Olson, 1996). This explanation fits with the finding that in intervention programmes letters draw the children's attention to the sounds in spoken words (cf. Bus & Van IJzendoorn, 1999; Byrne, 1998). An alternative hypothesis would be that from the very beginning phonemic awareness is not restricted to particular phonemes but that children are first able to show understanding of the alphabetic principle with the first letter from the name that they best know as a letter (cf. Vernon & Ferreiro, 1999). Whatever the best interpretation of the present results, this study is the first one that demonstrates the effects of familiarity with the name and letters from the name on children's emerging writing skills.

The present results are in line with Tomasello's developmental theory (1999) that after a stage of imitating behaviour (here: copying the written form of their name and words like mama and papa) children develop a meta-cognitive understanding of their behaviour probably as a result of grown-ups' responses to successful imitations of the name ("it says Taco"). By sounding out letters ("t of Taco") grown-ups initiate children's reflection on imitative writing and pave the way to a higher level of understanding how the written form represents a referent. They focus children's attention on letter units and how they sound in spoken words thus promoting alphabetic-phonetic writing that goes beyond imitation of the form. In line with the instruction hypothesis (c.f. McGee & Purcell Gates, 1997) children in Study 5 from lower SES families do not start to represent some letters correctly until they are 5½ probably because they do not practice their proper name until they have been in school for some time. By contrast, children in 4 from higher educated families begin to write some correct letters without much school experience (4½ year old), probably because writing the proper name and other names like mama and papa and interactions surrounding name writing are an issue at home from an early age conducted by family members as routine arrangements (Gillanders & Jimenez, 2004). It seems a plausible hypothesis that instruction by grown-ups is elicited by children's more or less successful attempts to imitate writing of their proper name. In other words, name writing thus functions as the pacemaker for phonemic awareness or the alphabetic strategy (Frith, 1985).



Biennale Venetie 2003: 'Writing Wall'

