Addressing the debate on pronoun reversal, caused by Theory of Mind or by Echolalia?

Pronoun reversal is among the most interesting errors of early child language. It mainly consists in the substitution of *I* for *you*, and *you* for *I*, during these years, such reversal has often been associated mainly with Autistic Spectrum Disorder but recent studies have shown that the phenomena also occur in typically developing children with almost the same frequency (Evans, K.E., Demuth, K., 2012). Many theories on the cause of pronoun reversals have been proposed but the problem remains puzzling because a lot of children who reverse pronouns occasionally produce also correct forms. Moreover, it is a phenomenon which is not present in all the children (Dale, P.S., Crain-Thoreson, C., 1993). Of the two of the main hypotheses related to pronoun reversal, one links it to a lack of a Theory of Mind (ToM), another relates it to echolalia. Based on two different surveys I conducted, I would like to address the debate. With the first study I wanted to verify whether pronoun reversals is related to a lack or to a non-mature development of ToM (Wechsler, S., 2010) testing a group of typically developing children with a series of ToM tasks ordered by a degree of complexity, from less to more complex. Then I created four tasks to verify their competence in using pronouns: focus position, pronoun with verb agreement, null form and pronouns other than first and second singular forms. We administered this experiment to a group of 17 Italian children - 38 to 70 months of age - because such tasks have never been performed before for Italian language. In this respect, Italian is more complex than English, mainly for two aspects: it’s a pro-drop language, that is a language in which some pronouns can be omitted if they are pragmatically inferable, and there is agreement between the subject pronoun and the verb, which is another factor that we must take into account. With the second study I analysed spontaneous speech uttered by a 15-years-old boy officially diagnosed with Kleefstra Syndrome and known to be a reverser, focusing on cases of pronoun reversal. At the end of the two studies I have data in favor of both ToM hypothesis and echolalia hypothesis. Further researches should verify if echolalia can be related with a lack of ToM and the differences in pronoun reversal between typically developing children and children with disorders.