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The DPBE in English: a pronoun effect?

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Abstract

While principles A and C of Binding Theory [1] are acquired early on [2], Principle B seems to be delayed in several languages, including English [3]. Children up to age 6 accept a coreferential reading between object pronouns and local antecedents, e.g.: **John_i likes him_i*. This effect has been referred to as the Delay of Principle B Effect (DPBE).

Conroy et al. (2009)[4] argue that the DPBE in English is a methodological artefact: many of the previous studies employed experimental designs that created a bias towards the ungrammatical interpretation. To avoid this bias, the authors modified the task to make all potential antecedents equally as available. No DPBE was observed: this suggests a task effect on the DPBE.

However, Hartmann et al. (2012)[5] argue that these data are the result of the pronoun type used in the experiment, i.e. the reduced form of the pronoun him ('m). The authors replicated Conroy et al.'s design and included both forms: children were more accurate when 'm was used, compared to him. This suggests a pronoun effect on the DPBE. The reported results, however, refer to a pilot study of 10 participants only; more data are necessary to determine the nature of the DPBE in English.

This study focuses on the potential variability between the comprehension of full pronouns and reduced pronouns. The research questions are the following:

1. Does the DPBE arise in English with full pronouns (him/her)?
2. Does it arise with reduced pronouns ('m/'r)?

If there is a pronoun effect in English, the DPBE should arise with the full forms only. If there is no pronoun effect, the DPBE should arise independently of the form employed.

A Picture Verification Task will be carried out entirely online on Children Helping Science (previously, Lookit [6][7]).