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How universal are prominence hierarchies? Evidence from native English speakers
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The term prominence hierarchy has been used to refer to a ranking of nouns by how
likely they are to fulfil the agent or patient semantic role in a sentence. Prominence hierarchies
have been used to explain a variety of linguistic phenomena such as split ergativity and
inverseness (see Lockwood & Macaulay, 2012, for an overview). In general, explanations for
prominence hierarchies tend to involve functional constraints or cognitive biases (Lockwood &
Macaulay, 2012), and as these accounts generally aim to explain crosslinguistic similarities in
the hierarchies, the factors that these explanations rely on tend to be non-language-specific,
such as the cognitive accessibility of referents (Bickel & Nichols, 2007) or how natural it is to
imagine the event from the viewpoint of one of the referents (DeLancey, 1981). This raises an
intriguing possibility: that prominence hierarchies are represented in the minds of speakers of
all languages, even if their language does not explicitly encode prominence in its grammar.

The aim of the present study was to investigate this possibility. We test native English
speakers, and target the difference between first and third person. Previous crosslinguistic
research suggests the first and second person consistently rank above the third person in
prominence hierarchies (Lockwood & Macaulay, 2012); a relation which is not explicitly
encoded in the grammar of English. In the experiment, participants (N=53) were presented
with a past-tense sentence of the form verb-pronoun-pronoun, with one pronoun in the first
person and the other in the third person (matched for case, e.g., ‘HIT SHE I’, ‘LEFT HIM ME’).
They were asked to determine which of the pronouns was the ‘doer’ of the action.

The results, shown in Fig. 1, show that participants interpreted
the first person pronoun as the ‘doer’ (agent) more often than the
third person pronoun, in both the nominative and accusative case,
and both when the pronoun was immediately after the verb (Position
1) or at the end of the sentence (Position 2). Likelihood ratio testing
confirmed that this result was statistically significant – the location of the first person pronoun in the sentence had a
significant effect on which pronoun was picked as the ‘doer’ ($\chi^2(1) = 75.79, p < 0.0001$). This
preference for first person as ‘doer’ was also influenced by case.

These findings suggest that native speakers of English are indeed sensitive to
prominence distinctions between first and third person, even though English does not explicitly
encode this relation in its grammar. In other words, English speakers implicitly assume that a
first person event participant is more likely to be an agent than a third person participant. This
is consistent with the claim that prominence hierarchies are represented in the minds of
speakers of all languages. The exact nature of these mental representations, how they are
acquired, and what other effects they may have on language processing and production, are
matters for further research.