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Cross-linguistic investigation of the representations underlying pronoun choice

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Abstract

When making a reference, speakers must choose between nouns and pronouns. At what level of representation do speakers make such a choice? The non-linguistic competition account predicts that the choice of using a pronoun occurs at the non-linguistic level, so speakers should use fewer pronouns when the potential referents compete more strongly at the non-linguistic level. By contrast, the linguistic competition account predicts that the pronoun choice occurs at the lexical level; speakers should use fewer pronouns when the potential antecedents are semantically or phonologically more similar. We show that regardless of whether the selection of a pronoun requires access to the antecedent (French pronouns) or not (English pronouns, Italian null pronouns), speakers use fewer pronouns and more repeated nouns when the referential candidates compete more strongly in the non-linguistic context, whilst the similarities of their linguistic antecedents play no role. The findings provide support for the non-linguistic competition account.