

Rewriting the Rules of Reference: From Binding Theory to Mental Models



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Dr. Liam Blything is a Lecturer at The University of Manchester (Division of Psychology Communication and Human Neuroscience). Broadly speaking, his research has investigated the cognitive and linguistic skills that support comprehension of complex sentence and discourse structures — particularly those expressing time (e.g., connectives: before, after), causality (e.g., connectives: because, so), and reference (e.g., ambiguous pronouns: he, she). His work spans both child and adult populations, integrating experimental psycholinguistic methods with usage-based and emergentist theoretical frameworks.

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ABSTRACT

Patterns of (im/) possible pronoun and reflexive interpretation (e.g., does 'himself' mean 'Samuel' or 'Oliver' in 'Samuel told Oliver about himself?') have long been considered a key battleground — perhaps even the single most important battleground — for long-running debates over the mechanisms and processes underlying the acquisition of language; quite possibly the crowning achievement of our species. Binding Theory is often positioned as a cornerstone of syntactic accounts. But in this talk, I present findings from a series of large-scale, pre-registered studies (1200+ participants) which suggest the explanation is more rooted in ecological real-world plausibility than syntactic accounts allow. Specifically, discourse-pragmatic factors (e.g., which interpretation is a more likely real-world event; who is the topical “main character” in the ongoing discourse) explained the lion’s share of the variance in participants’ interpretations of both pronouns and reflexives; raising the question of whether there remains anything for other factors (perhaps including abstract syntactic principles) to explain. The overarching theoretical framework that I propose follows that reference resolution emerges through the dynamic construction of a mental model — one that integrates discourse cues, real-world knowledge, and speaker/listener perspectives. I’ll finally discuss all of the above in the context of (i) a broader pattern of “problematic” constructions for c-command-based explanations, and (ii) how this could inform a recent paper that I co-authored called “LLMs do theoretical linguistics better than theoretical linguists”.