

Evidence of principle C in 30-month-olds

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We show that infants as young as 30 months demonstrate knowledge of Principle C, the constraint prohibiting coreference between a name and a c-commanding pronoun. Previous research has shown that 4-year-olds obey the constraint, and this has been taken as evidence that it is innate. However, because much language learning occurs before age 4, this data is also consistent with the constraint being learned. Using 30-month-old infants, an early age at which grammatical structure is plausibly developing, we tested knowledge of Principle C using a Preferential Looking task. We found that 30-month-olds succeed with Principle C. We also found that the infants with the smallest vocabularies (<500 words) did not show knowledge of the constraint, while infants with larger vocabularies (>500 words) did. This suggests that vocabulary acquisition places a lower bound on children's ability to adhere to grammatical principles.