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Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8md972qb>

Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 42(0)

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Publication Date

2020

Peer reviewed

English speakers (in)ability to explicitly recognize agent and patient categories

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Abstract

Adults represent events in terms of abstract participant roles (e.g., when Edith eats chocolate, Edith is an agent and the chocolate is a patient) (Rissman & Majid, 2019). English, however, lacks commonly-known labels for these roles, which may make the distinction less accessible to people. We presented 42 English-speakers with 24 pictures of an agent acting on a patient (e.g., one person kicking another). A red dot marked the agent in half the pictures and marked the patient in the other half. We asked participants to sort the pictures into two piles using whatever criteria they liked. After three opportunities to sort the pictures, only 55% of participants sorted into agent/patient piles. When the remaining 45% were given the agent/patient piles, only half were able to explain the basis for the sort. This suggests a disconnect between the robustness of agent/patient categories in implicit processing and the availability of this seemingly basic distinction to explicit reasoning.