

Yours, mine, ours: When you and I share perspectives

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While reading a novel, as the author describes the main character washing dishes or cooking dinner, we will often create a mental image of someone in the kitchen performing these tasks. Sometimes we may even imagine ourselves as the dishwasher or top chef in these scenarios. Why do we imagine these scenes differently - when do we view the action from an outsider's perspective and when do we place ourselves in the main character's shoes?

Psychologist Tad T. Brunye from the US Army Natick Soldier Research, Development and Engineering Center (NSRDEC) and Tufts University, along with Tali Ditman, Caroline R. Mahoney and Holly A. Taylor from Tufts University and Jason S. Augustyn from the US Army NSRDEC, investigated how pronouns can influence the way we imagine events being described.

In these experiments, volunteers read sentences describing everyday actions. The statements were expressed in either first- ("I am..."), second- ("You are...") or third-person ("He is..."). Volunteers then looked at pictures and had to indicate whether the images matched the sentences they had read. The pictures were presented in either an internal (i.e. as though the volunteer was performing the event him/herself) or external (i.e. as though the volunteer was observing the event) perspective.

The results, reported in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, indicate that we use different

perspectives, depending on which pronouns are used. When the volunteers read statements that began, "You are..." they pictured the scene through their own eyes. However, when they read statements explicitly describing someone else (for example, sentences that began, "He is...") then they tended to view the scene from an outsider's perspective. Even more interesting was what the results revealed about first-person statements (sentences that began, "I am..."). The perspective used while imagining these actions depended on the amount of information provided - the volunteers who read only one first-person sentence viewed the scene from their point of view while the volunteers who read three first-person sentences saw the scene from an outsider's perspective.

The researchers note that "these results provide the first evidence that in all cases readers mentally simulate described objects and events, but only embody an actor's perspective when directly addressed as the subject of a sentence." The authors suggest that when we read second-person statements ("You are..."), there is a greater sense of "being there" and this makes it easier to place ourselves in the scene being described, imagining it from our point of view.

Source: Association for Psychological Science

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