

Linguistic study finds 'the I's have it' when it comes to education rates

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"I learn", "you learn", "she learns", "they learn", yet, according to a surprising new linguistic study, in countries where the dominant language allows personal pronouns such as 'I' to be omitted, learning suffers.

The research by Dr. Horst Feldmann of the University of Bath also finds that countries where the dominant languages permit pronoun drop have lower secondary school enrolment rates. This is the first study to analyse the effects of pronoun drop rules on education. It has just been published in the prestigious journal *Kyklos*.

The term 'pronoun drop' refers to [grammatical rules](#) that allow speakers to drop a personal pronoun (such as 'I') when it is used as a subject of a sentence. These rules are in fact commonplace around the world—including in Spanish, Arabic and Eastern languages such as Chinese and Japanese.

Permitting speakers to drop a personal pronoun, Dr. Feldmann explained, serves to de-emphasise the significance of the individual. Whereas languages of traditionally collectivist cultures do not require the use of 'I' in sentences, countries where personal pronouns are enforced tend to be more individualistic in their cultural traditions. Examples include English, as well as German and Scandinavian languages.

Dr. Feldmann's study covers an exceptionally large number of individuals and countries. Specifically, to estimate the effect on peoples' educational attainment he used data on more than 114,000 individuals from 75 countries. To estimate the effect on enrolment rates he used data on 101 countries.

In both cases Dr. Feldmann found that the magnitude of the effect is substantial, particularly among females.

Women who normally speak a pronoun drop [language](#) at home are roughly 10% less likely to have completed secondary or tertiary education than women who speak a non-pronoun drop language.

Equally, countries in which popularly-spoken languages permit personal

pronoun drop have secondary enrolment rates of around 10% lower among girls, compared with countries in which the popularly spoken languages require the use of personal pronouns. In both types of analysis, the magnitude of the effect is slightly lower for males.

Dr. Horst Feldmann of the University's Department of Economics explained: "Rules permitting pronoun drop are likely to perpetuate ancient cultural values and norms—formed and encoded in those rules in the distant past—that give primacy to the collective over the individual.

"Through such language rules, these ancestral cultural values and norms can still be effective nowadays—inducing governments and families to invest comparatively little in the education of the young, as education usually increases the independence of the individual from both the state and the extended family and may reduce his or her commitment to these institutions.

"While in many traditionally collectivist societies, collectivist norms are in retreat in contemporary culture, in such societies these ancient norms appear to live on and still adversely affect education today."

Dr. Feldmann included in his analysis numerous variables to statistically control for the impact of other factors influencing educational attainment and enrolment. These include income per person and religion.

The study builds on other recent economic research that highlights how linguistic structures, such as gender distinctions in grammar, can also affect both individual behaviour and collective outcomes.

More information: Horst Feldmann, Do Linguistic Structures Affect Human Capital? The Case of Pronoun Drop, *Kyklos* (2018). [DOI: 10.1111/kykl.12190](https://doi.org/10.1111/kykl.12190)

Provided by University of Bath

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