Pretending Something Exists Is Easier Than Pretending It Doesn't: What Pretence Reveals About Thinking of Non-Existence

Pretend play is one of the earliest ways in which humans engage with non-reality. Children readily pretend that an empty cup is full, that a stick is a sword, or that a block is a car. Yet much less is known about how the mind represents the opposite kind of situation: pretending that something which is actually present does *not* exist. This talk explores the theoretical significance of a newly observed asymmetry between these two forms of pretence, which we call *Positive Pretence* (pretending that something exists when it does not) and *Negative Pretence* (pretending that something does not exist when it does).

In pilot data from 2- to 6-year-olds (N = 72), children were significantly more accurate in Positive Pretence than in Negative Pretence, even when controlling for age and general task demands. For example, children found it easier to pretend that an empty container held an object than to pretend that a visibly present object was absent. This asymmetry is robust, novel, and not predicted by existing theories of pretend play.

Theoretically, this finding raises a fundamental question: Is pretending about non-existence representationally more demanding than pretending about existence? To address this, I draw on the *Mental Files* framework, which models thought as structured around mental "files" that track objects and store information about them. While this framework has been fruitfully applied to reference, perspective-taking, and false belief, it has not yet been systematically extended to non-existence.

I explore two broad classes of explanation. On one view, Negative Pretence requires a special representational operation—such as blocking or negating an existing mental file—which introduces additional cognitive demands. On an alternative view, Negative Pretence leaves key aspects of representation (such as location or existence) under-specified, making it vulnerable to interference from reality. Both accounts suggest that pretending that something does *not* exist is not simply the mirror image of pretending that something *does* exist.

The talk argues that this asymmetry is not a mere performance effect but reveals a deeper structural feature of how the mind represents absence versus non-existence. More broadly, the pilot data motivate a rethinking of pretence, and open up a new empirical route for investigating how humans think about what is not there.