

Children's pronoun errors: Exploring contrasting accounts of why children produce non-nominative subjects

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate different explanations of a particular pronoun error which children sometimes produce during language acquisition. This error involves children producing non-nominative pronouns in the subject position of some sentences (e.g. *Her* is kicking the ball). There has been an explanation of this phenomenon (known as the Agreement/Tense Omission Model, or ATOM) put forward by [Schütze & Wexler](#) (1996), based on the Universal Grammar theory. This account has been challenged in a number of papers ([Pine, Rowland, Lieven, & Theakston](#), 2005; [Ambridge & Pine](#), 2006), which found data that was not consistent with the predictions of the ATOM. Pine et al. (2005) went on to suggest that this pronoun error phenomenon could be better explained through a Constructivist or input-based theory. This paper endeavours to evaluate this claim, by investigating whether the language input provided to the children in Pine et al.'s (2005) study is consistent with a number of input-based explanations of these child pronoun errors. The findings of this investigation do not appear to be supportive of the Constructivist-based explanations which are investigated. Therefore, it would appear that this area would benefit from further research and theory development.

Keywords

child language acquisition, pronoun error, non-nominative subject, Constructivist, universal grammar.

Introduction

The language acquisition process has received significant interest from linguistics researchers, and a number of theories have been proposed to account for the process through which children attain adult grammar. One prominent theory is the theory of Universal Grammar proposed by Noam Chomsky (Chomsky [1981](#), [1995](#)). This approach suggests that children are born with innate linguistic knowledge that guides the language acquisition process. Another theory that has received considerable attention in the last decade is the Constructivist or input-based theory. This theory rejects the proposal that children are genetically endowed with linguistic knowledge and instead proposes that language acquisition is primarily based on children's interaction with language input, using domain-general cognitive faculties ([Ambridge & Lieven](#), 2011; [Tomasello](#), 2003; [Lieven & Tomasello](#), 2008). These different theories result in differing explanations of the various phenomena observed in the language acquisition process. In this paper, I will compare proposals based on each of these theories, which attempt to explain a particular pronoun error found in child language acquisition data.

When adult speakers of English use pronouns they mark the subject of a sentence by using the nominative Case pronoun form (e.g. *He/She* kicked the ball). The other Cases which English pronouns can adopt are the accusative Case, which is used to mark the object of a sentence (e.g. I kicked the ball to *him/her*) and the genitive Case, which can be used to show possession (e.g. The ball is *his/hers*). However, when children are approximately two years of age, they often produce a pronoun error in which they place non-nominative pronouns in the subject position of many sentences, (e.g. *Him/Her* kicked the ball) (Schütze & Wexler, 1996). One explanation for this phenomenon, framed within the theory of Universal Grammar, is presented by Schütze and Wexler and is known as the

Agreement/Tense Omission Model (ATOM) (Schütze & Wexler, 1996; [Wexler, Schütze, & Rice](#), 1998). This model suggests that there is a developmental stage which children progress through, known as the optional infinitive stage, in which the features of tense and agreement can be individually underspecified, resulting in them being omitted from the child's sentence representation¹. When the agreement feature is present, children should always use the nominative form, however, if it is omitted then that can lead to the observed phenomenon of children placing non-nominative pronouns in the subject position of their utterances (e.g. *Her* kicked the ball). They also argue that the non-nominative subject will usually take the form of the accusative Case (e.g., *him, her*), as this is the default Case in English ([Schütze](#), 1997). Therefore, if a child is in the optional infinitive stage, they may omit the agreement feature from their sentence representation, and end up producing an accusative pronoun like *him* in the subject position of their sentence. That is, they might say something like "*Him* kicked the ball" instead of "*He* kicked the ball". However, if they have the agreement feature in their sentence representation, then they should use the correct nominative form of the pronoun (i.e. *S/He*) in their productions.

This underspecification theory proposed by Schütze & Wexler (1996) can be tested by investigating children's use of pronouns in sentences with singular 3rd person pronominal subjects (*S/He*). This is because in sentences of this kind, such as, "*he walks*" or "*she is walking*", the *s* on the verb *walk* and the auxiliary verb *is* show that agreement is being expressed in the sentence representation.² Because the sentence representation contains the agreement feature, it is predicted that with this type of sentence, a non-nominative

¹ A child's "sentence representation" refers to the underlying psychological concept or syntax, on which an utterance is based.

² With some other pronoun Cases (e.g. singular 2nd person *you*), the status of the agreement feature may not be obviously observable. This is because the pronoun Case does not change the verb from the form it would adopt if there was no agreement (as in the case of non-finite verbs), for example, the verb form does not change between "*You kick* the ball" and "*To kick* the ball".

subject will be produced very rarely (less than 10%), according to the ATOM ([Schütze, 2001](#)).

This prediction was tested in a study by Schütze and Wexler (1996), which searched the transcript data from three children (Nina, Peter and Sarah) ([Suppes, 1974](#); [Bloom, Hood, & Lightbrown, 1974](#); [Brown, 1973](#)), whose data can be found in the CHILDES³ database ([MacWhinney, 2000](#)). The search found no examples of children using non-nominative pronouns in subject positions when coupled with an agreeing verb (e.g. *walks/ is walking*), thus, the results supported the predictions of the ATOM.

However, the findings of Schütze & Wexler's (1996) study have been contested by results from a later study by Pine, Rowland, Lieven & Theakston (2005). This study focused on data from three new children (not those investigated by Schütze and Wexler, 1996) in the CHILDES database, named Anne, Becky and Gail ([Theakston, Lieven, Pine, & Rowland, 2001](#)). They focused on productions of non-nominative subjects in the context of the 3rd person pronouns *him* and *her* and identified whether they were coupled with an agreeing or non-agreeing verb.

Table 1.

	Verb Type	He	Him	She	Her
Anne	Agreeing	133	1 (0.7%)	8	4 (33.3%)
	Non-agreeing	62	2	11	3
Becky	Agreeing	213	3(1.4%)	26	13(33.3%)
	Non-agreeing	58	2	22	0
Gail	Agreeing	132	4(2.9%)	14	9(39.1%)
	Non-agreeing	45	6	3	10

This table identifies the types of verbs which were coupled with single 3rd person pronouns in the language output of the investigated children (Pine et al., 2005).

³ CHILDES is an online data exchange system which provides downloadable transcripts of speech-based, child-language interactions.

The data displayed in Table 1 shows some of the results, which Pine et al. (2005) found.⁴ Firstly, it can be seen that each of these children were able to produce the nominative pronouns (*S/He*) in conjunction with both agreeing and non-agreeing verbs, so any non-nominative subjects which they produce are not as a result of missing lexical items. Regarding non-nominative subjects, as can be seen in the “Him” column, the non-nominative male pronoun (*him*) was very rarely (0.7%, 1.4%, 2.9%) combined with an agreeing verb (e.g. “Him *kicks*”/“Him is *kicking*”). Therefore, the production of this pronoun appears to be consistent with the predictions of the ATOM as all of the children’s productions were below the 10% threshold which can be discounted as noise in the data (Schütze, 2001). However, in the “Her” column, each of the children investigated produced the female non-nominative subject with an agreeing verb (e.g. “Her *kicks*”/“Her is *kicking*”) at a rate (33.3%, 33.3%, 39.1%) which was significantly higher than 10%. This finding was presented by Pine et al. (2005) as evidence against the explanatory power of the ATOM.

Pine et al. (2005) also identified the agreeing verbs which these non-nominative subjects were paired with. The verbs displayed in Table 2 provide an insight into the precise non-nominative subject with agreeing verb combinations, which were found in the child language output data. It can be seen in this table that the agreeing verb form with the highest frequency of production was the feminine accusative pronoun *her* combined with the contracted form of the auxiliary verb *is* to create the form *her’s*.

⁴ A full list of the utterances which were identified in the study by Pine et al (2005) is documented in [Table 4](#), in the Appendix.

Table 2.

Agreeing verb	Anne	Becky	Gail	Total
her's (accusative+is)	1	7	7	15
him's (accusative+is)	0	2	4	6
is	1	4	0	5
her's (accusative+has)	0	0	2	2
isn't	0	1	0	1
was	1	0	0	1
does	0	1	0	1
doesn't	1	0	0	1
has	1	0	0	1
hasn't	0	1	0	1

This table identifies the different agreeing verbs which were combined with a non-nominative subject in the child language output identified by Pine et al. (2005).

It is also interesting to note that in Table 2, none of the agreeing verbs identified by Pine et al. (2005) were lexical verbs like *walks*. Instead, these verbs tended to be auxiliary verbs (e.g. *is*, *have*, *does*). Therefore, it could be suggested that the pronoun errors (non-nominative subject with agreeing verb combinations) could be based on some idiosyncratic agreement property which is specific to auxiliary verbs. This observation was also identified by Pine et al. (2005). They suggested that this behaviour was caused by the fact that these three children produced very few agreeing lexical verbs in their speech overall. They went on to present data from another child in the CHILDES database named Abe, who produced non-nominative pronouns with agreeing lexical verbs at a similar rate to the agreeing auxiliary verb production of the other children (Anne, Becky, and Gail). Furthermore, research has been done on the production of non-nominative subjects with agreeing lexical verbs by Ambridge & Pine (2006), in which they used an elicited imitation paradigm. In this study Ambridge & Pine (2006) found more examples of non-nominative subjects being combined with agreeing lexical verbs, than with auxiliary verbs. Therefore, it would appear that the

ATOM's predictions (at least in its current iteration) are not supported by the production patterns of non-nominative subjects with agreeing auxiliary or lexical verbs, which were observed in these studies.

Pine et al. (2005) didn't stop at criticising the ATOM's explanatory power, they also went on to suggest that the observed phenomenon might be better explained using the Constructivist theory as the framework. Therefore, Pine et al. (2005) suggested that children's production of non-nominative subjects with agreeing verbs might have been caused by Case knowledge being based on lexically specific constructions. As opposed to having generalised, abstract, Case categories (Pine et al., 2005). This suggests that children are less likely to produce these pronoun errors when they are producing words (or sentences) which they are more familiar with. This would mean that if a child had considerable experience with the verb *kick*, but very limited experience with the verb *walk*, then they would be more likely to produce a non-nominative subject combined with *walk*, than with *kick* (the agreement status of the verb is irrelevant to this theory). Once a child is more familiar with a particular verb, it is predicted that the child would stop producing non-nominative subjects with that verb (though s/he may continue producing them with other, less developed verbs). In the study by Pine et al. (2005) the most frequent non-nominative subject with agreeing verb combination was the word *her's*. So, the agreeing verb in this combination is the contracted verb *is*. The verb *is* (in both its contracted and uncontracted forms) would presumably be quite common in the language input (especially compared to some lexical verbs); and consequently (according to this explanation) should not be present with these pronoun errors. Therefore, on the surface, it would appear that Pine et al.'s (2005) suggestion is not consistent with their data. However, if children had learnt this word-form (*her's*) as a single lexical item (rather than as a contracted combination of *her + is*),

then, due to its ungrammatical nature, it could have been presented quite sparsely in the input, which would be consistent with Pine et al.'s explanation. On the other hand, its ungrammatical nature also calls into question whether this form (*her's*) would have been present in the language input at all. However, there are a number of different explanations which are able to identify potential language input foundations for the production of *her's*. Three such explanations will be explored in this paper.

The first possible explanation is that despite the ungrammatical nature of this word-form (*her's*), it may still be present in the language input. This could be occurring as a result of adult language production errors or certain idiosyncratic expressions. Another possible explanation would be to suggest that perhaps children learn the construction *her's* from hearing the female genitive pronoun (e.g. "The ball is *hers*"), and are attempting to use it more productively without properly understanding the properties of the pronoun Case system. Pine et al. (2005) do entertain this idea, however, they argue against the proposal, identifying that there are a number of cases in which the children produce an uncontracted *her is* in sentences such as "*Her is* gonna make a dinner". Despite Pine et al.'s (2005) objections it could be worth investigating whether the female genitive *hers* is present in these children's input, in order to investigate whether this word-form could be having any influence on the identified pronoun error production.

Yet another possible Constructivist account for this phenomenon involves the production of certain subordinate clauses in the language input. A study by [Kirjavainen, Theakston, & Lieven](#) (2009) explored a similar pronoun error phenomenon in which children were using non-nominative subjects in first-person singular contexts (e.g. *me kick the ball*). Kirjavainen et al. (2009) suggested that this phenomenon could have been caused by children being presented subordinate clauses such as "Let me do it" in their language input.

Additionally, this form of explanation was applied to third-person pronoun errors by the noted Constructivist [Tomasello](#) (2000) as an example of how an input-based explanation might account for non-nominative subject errors. An explanation along these lines might suggest that children could hear non-nominative pronouns being used as the subjects of subordinate clauses like “Let her do it”; in addition to hearing clauses such as “She does it”. Consequently, children could create the abstract construction “She/Her+do”. If this process was repeated with enough different verbs, then they could create the abstract construction “She/Her+V”, in which the “V” could be filled by a series of different verbs (many of which could carry agreement markings) (Kirjavainen et al., 2009). However, throughout this abstraction process, the child’s constructions would at first be lexically-based (based on knowledge of specific lexical items, rather than abstract syntactic categories), before becoming a more abstract construction. Therefore, although a child may have created a “she/her+V” construction, they may not have created the corresponding “he/him+V” construction (Kirjavainen et al., 2009). This aspect of the explanation would appear to be consistent with the findings of Pine et al. (2005), as they found just such an asymmetry in their results (with “her+agreeing verb” being produced far more than “him+agreeing verb”). Based on the reasoning used by (Kirjavainen et al., 2009) to explain similar asymmetries in their own results, a Constructivist explanation would presumably suggest that the difference in the frequency of these constructions was created by a difference in the number of times these kinds of subordinate clauses were presented to the children. Consequently, it would be predicted that the number of subordinate clauses with a *her* subject in these children’s language input, would be greater than the number of subordinate clauses with a *him* subject.

This study will be endeavouring to investigate the extent to which these three Constructivist-based explanations are supported by the language input provided to the three children from Pine et al.'s (2005) study. These different explanations can be investigated as they each make certain predictions about the content of the language input. The first two explanations would expect to see the word-forms *her's* or *hers* provided to the children in some manner, in their language input. This prediction will be tested through a search for either of these terms in the available language input data for these children. The final explanation explored in this paper would predict significantly more examples of subordinate clauses with *her* as the subject (e.g. "let her do it") compared to those with *him* (e.g. "let him do it"). This prediction will be tested by comparing the frequency of subordinate clauses with a *her* subject, to those which have a *him* subject.

Method

Participants

The study will use the same transcript files as those which were examined in the study by Pine et al. (2005). These include files 01a to 24b of the children Anne, Becky and Gail (Theakston et al., 2001). However, the focus of the investigation will be on the utterances produced by the children's mother and the investigator. The recordings were an hour long and were taken in the children's homes. The recordings were taken on two separate occasions, every three week period, over the course of a year (Theakston et al., 2001). The children were recorded as they engaged in everyday interaction with their mothers and the recordings tracked the development of the children over the following age periods (Theakston et al., 2001):

Child	Age Period yr;mth.day
Anne	1;10.07-2;9.10
Becky	2;0.07-2;11.15
Gail	1;11.27-2;11.12

All of the children were first-born, were cared for primarily by their mothers, and were in monolingual English-speaking households (Theakston et al., 2001). The searched transcripts contain a total of 98,600 language input sentences, produced by either the children's mother or the investigator⁵.

Materials

The data related to each of these participants was downloaded and explored using the software program CLAN. This software is designed to work with transcripts downloaded from the CHILDES database and allows the user to research different properties of a child's language output or input through the use of various search tools. This study will be utilising the "kwal" search command, which picks out all of the utterances in the selected files containing the word/s identified in the search command.

Procedure

The speech of the mother and the investigator in each of the children's transcripts was examined in order to discover if there was evidence that the children were receiving any examples of the word-forms *her's* or *hers* in their language input. They were also explored for any examples of *him* or *her* being produced as the subject of a subordinate clause, such as "let her go to the shops".⁶

Results

⁵ Number of searchable language input sentences: Anne- 38534, Becky- 29053, Gail- 31013.

⁶ The complete search string: kwal -w2 +w2 +s"her's" +s"hers" +s"her" +s"him" -t*CHI @ >> Lang_Input

The results of the search for the word-forms *her's* and *hers* are displayed in the following table. Any utterances containing imitations were excluded from the data set.

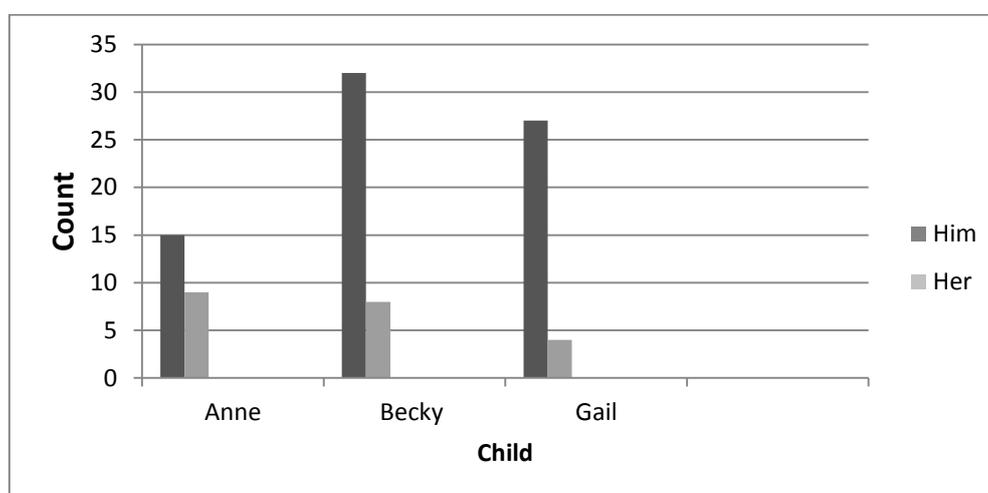
Table 3.

Word-form	Anne	Becky	Gail	Total
Her's [Acusative+is]	0	0	0	0
Hers (Genetive)	0	0	0	0
Excluded	0	1	1	2

This table presents the number of times that the word-forms *her's* and *hers* are present in the language input of each child's transcripts. Both the mother and investigator tiers were included.

This data (Table 3) shows that these children have not received any examples of the word-form *her's* in their examinable language input. Additionally, there were no examples of the genitive pronoun *hers*. The excluded items were instances where the investigator imitated the utterances that were initially stated by the child⁷.

Figure 1.



This graph displays the number of times *him* and *her* were produced as the subject of a subordinate clause in the language input of each child.

This graph (Figure 1) shows that the language input for all three children contained more examples of *him* being used as the subject of a subordinate clause, compared to *her*.

⁷ These excluded utterances are listed in [Table 5](#), located in the Appendix.

Discussion

This paper has focused on the phenomenon of children transitioning through a period in which they produce non-nominative subjects (e.g. *Him/Her* kicked the ball) in their utterances (Schütze & Wexler, 1996). It endeavoured to test a number of explanations for this phenomenon, which were founded on the Constructivist or input-based theoretical framework. These tests were carried out by investigating the available language input of the children from Pine et al.'s (2005) study, in order to see whether it was consistent with the identified potential input-based explanations.

The first explanation tested was the suggestion that the children investigated by Pine et al. (2005) might have received examples of the word-form *her's* in their language input (despite its ungrammaticality). The children could have learnt from this input that it was appropriate to use *her's* as the subject of many utterances. This explanation was tested by searching the language input for any examples of the word-form *her's*, which children might have heard and consequently adopted as a legitimate lexical item. The investigation found no examples of the word-form *her's* in these children's language input. This finding means that this potential Constructivist explanation would appear to be unsupported by the investigated language input of these children.

Another potential input-based explanation which could account for this phenomenon would be that these children were receiving input of, and incorrectly interpreting the female genitive pronoun, *hers*. This explanation was tested by searching the language input for any examples of the word-form *hers*. The investigation found that this explanation was also unsupported by the data, as no examples of the female genitive pronoun *hers* were found in the language input. However, as this word-form is grammatical, it is more likely (than the ungrammatical *her's*) to have been presented elsewhere in the children's (non-transcribed)

language input. However, even if the female genitive pronoun was presented to the children, Pine et al. (2005) were reluctant to suggest that it was instrumental in the production of the non-nominative subject pronoun errors, which they found in their child language output data. Furthermore, if it was the case that children were using the female genitive pronoun *hers* more productively (as opposed to producing the contracted *her + is*) then it would be expected that the children would need to produce a further main/auxiliary verb, as the *s* in *hers* would be part of the genitive form, instead of a contracted *is*. Therefore, a sentence which they produced like "*Hers being lovely*" would be missing the auxiliary verb *is* as the *s* can no longer be interpreted as a contracted *is*. Thus, if these children were producing the female genitive pronoun here, we would expect them to still produce the auxiliary/main verb *is*, resulting in an utterance like, "*Hers is being lovely*". However, there are no examples of this in the data, therefore any suggestion that the instances of *hers* in the production data are cases of children using the genitive form more productively is further weakened.

The final Constructivist-based explanation investigated in this paper was the suggestion that these children had heard *her* used as the subject of a subordinate clause (e.g. "Let her do it"), as well as hearing *she* used in its usual context (e.g. "she does it"). From this kind of input, children could have created the construction "*she/her+V*" (where 'V' could be filled by a number of different verbs). If this was the reason why children were producing these sentences, then as children produce more examples of *her* with an agreeing verb, compared with *him*, it would be expected that this same pattern should be found in the language input of these subordinate sentences. Therefore, the third test was whether there would be more subordinate clauses with *her* compared to those with *him* in the language input. The results of this investigation were rather interesting as they actually showed the opposite trend, that is, there were more subordinate clauses with a *him* subject (e.g. "let

him [V]”), compared to those with a *her* subject (e.g. “let her [V]”). This finding would not appear to support a Constructivist explanation along the same lines as that proposed by Kirjavainen et al. (2009), in their investigation of children’s singular first-person pronoun errors. Their suggestion that children’s production of non-nominative subjects should be positively correlated with the specific lexical items presented to them in subordinate clauses, is not supported by these findings. However, despite this, it is still interesting to note the asymmetrical gender distribution of the subordinate clause with a non-nominative subject in the input. This characteristic of asymmetry could encourage the creation of a different input-based theory. However, even if an alternate explanation were to occur, it would be necessary to explain why there was one input-based explanation (Kirjavainen et al., 2009) for first-person non-nominative subject errors, and another for the third-person variation of those errors.

Conclusion

It would appear that there is general agreement amongst different theorists that children transition through a period in their language development, in which they produce pronoun errors involving the production of non-nominative subjects (Pine et al., 2005; Schütze & Wexler, 1996). Explanations for this phenomenon have been presented, based on both the Universal Grammar (Schütze and Wexler 1996) and Constructivist (Pine et al., 2005) theoretical frameworks. The explanatory power of the Universal Grammar-based ATOM has been weakened as a result of a number of studies which produced unpredicted results (Pine et al., 2005; Ambridge and Pine, 2006). Therefore, this paper attempted to test the strength of three alternate Constructivist or input-based explanations. These explanations were tested by investigating whether the language input provided to these children exhibited

certain predicted properties. The findings of these investigations suggested that the properties of the language input were not consistent with the identified input-based/Constructivist explanations. Consequently, it would appear that both the Universal Grammar and the Constructivist-based explanations struggle to account for all of the data. Therefore, the main way this area of investigation (child non-nominative subject pronoun errors) will move forward, is through further theory development, in an effort to create explanations which are more consistent with the observed data.

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Appendix

Table 4.

The non-nominative subject with agreeing verb output utterances produced by the children in the study by Pine et al. (2005, p.282).

Participants	Utterance
Anne	Him doesn't And her has A big girl now her is I think her was crying for me Probably her's a baby
Becky	Where does him go? Her is gonna make a dinner Her is gonna make it Her's got bin, haven't they mummy Her hasn't got some nighties, has she? Her isn't Her is not here How old is her Her's being lovely Her's sixteen, Mum Her's fifteen and sixteen and nineteen Her's cross Her's finished lunch now Him's eating you, crocodile Him's ready to have in a bath Her's can take this one to home
Gail	Her's go on this Her's go in desk Her's want to do some cooking Him's go in Him's want to be a monster Him's going to bed now Her's going to party Her's going to party, Mummy Her's going to a party Her's getting cold Him's going to sleep Her's got a tie thing Her's not got any clothes on

Table 5.

The non-nominative subjects with agreeing verbs which were excluded as repetitions in this study.

Participants	
Becky	CHI: Her's finished lunch now INV: Her's finished lunch now, has she?
Gail	CHI: Him's go in INV: Him's go in, does he?