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Referential choice

3rd person pronoun: if the referent is highly activated (accessible) in the common ground (CG)

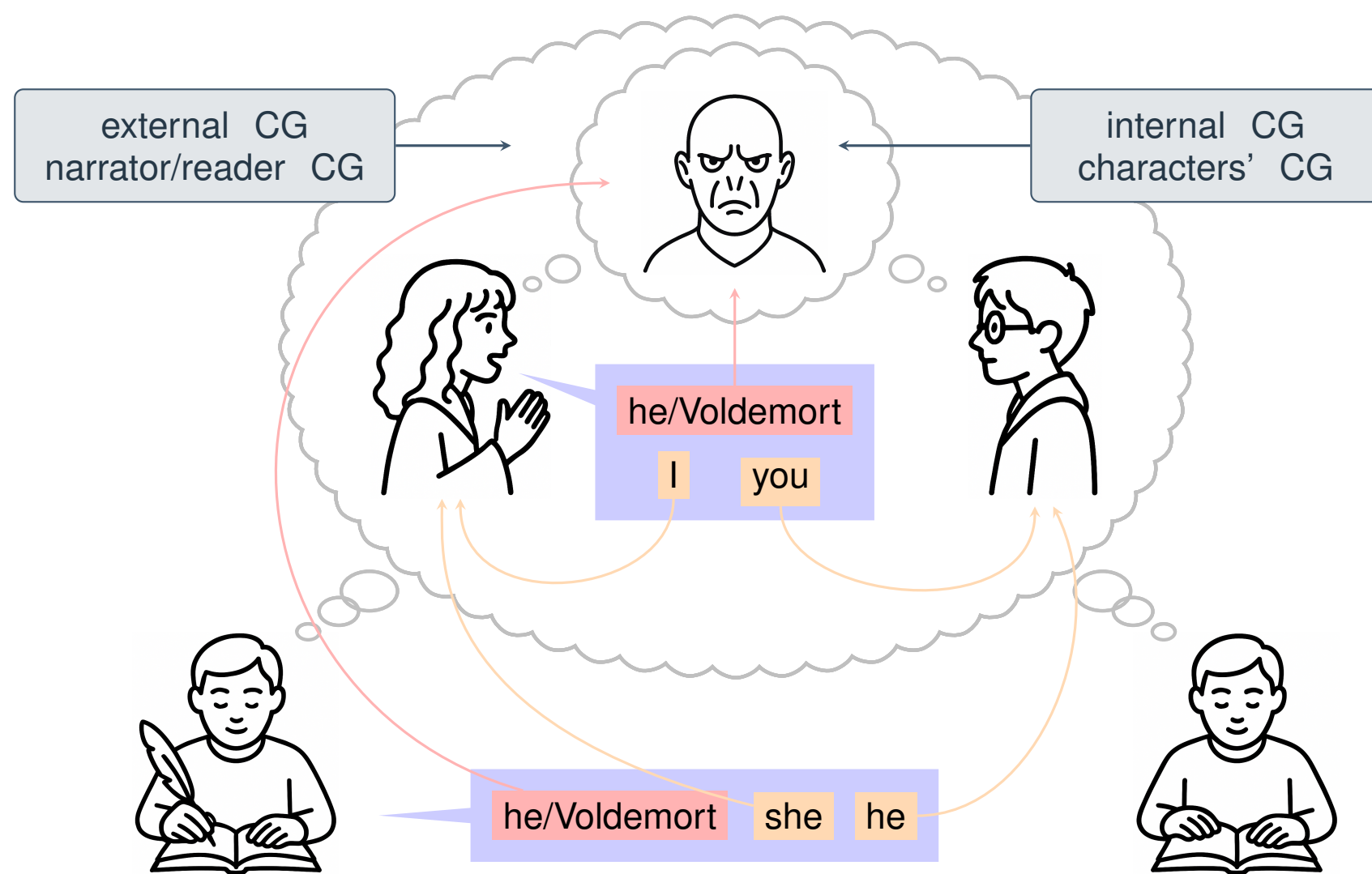
proper name: if the referent is uniquely identifiable under that name but not necessarily highly activated

factors affecting accessibility:

- unity: same or different frame, world, segment, point of view (or CG?)
- distance

Ariel 1990

External and internal CG



Research question

Activation in which CG—internal, external, or both—determines the referential choice in direct speech of characters in a story?

Referent activation in multiple common grounds

Match: low activation in both CGs

intervening speech, -reactivation:

Bill pushed the plate of scones towards me.
"Amy wants to sell the boat," he said.
"Finally," I said, picking up the dropped napkin. "The old rust bucket nearly sank twice this year, and the repairs cost half a fortune. I've promised never to set foot in it again."
I poured milk into the cups and sat next to Bill.
"She/Amy is asking a fair price, no doubt," I said and rolled a warm scone between my cold hands.

	internal CG	external CG
distance to antecedent	long	long
activation of Amy	low	low

Mismatch 2

intervening speech, +reactivation:

Bill pushed the plate of scones towards me.
"Amy wants to sell the boat," he said.
"Finally," I said, picking up the dropped napkin. "The old rust bucket nearly sank twice this year, and the repairs cost half a fortune. I've promised never to set foot in it again."
Amy was cross and hadn't spoken to me since.
"She/Amy is asking a fair price, no doubt," I said and rolled a warm scone between my cold hands.

	internal CG	external CG
distance to antecedent	long	short
activation of Amy	low	high

Mismatch 1

intervening thought, -reactivation:

Bill pushed the plate of scones towards me.
"Amy wants to sell the boat," he said.
Finally, I thought, picking up the dropped napkin. The old rust bucket had nearly sunk twice this year, and the repairs had cost half a fortune. I had promised never to set foot in it again.
I poured milk into the cups and sat next to Bill.
"She/Amy is asking a fair price, no doubt," I said and rolled a warm scone between my cold hands.

	internal CG	external CG
distance to antecedent	short	long
activation of Amy	high	low

Match: high activation in both CGs

intervening thought, +reactivation:

Bill pushed the plate of scones towards me.
"Amy wants to sell the boat," he said.
Finally, I thought, picking up the dropped napkin. The old rust bucket had nearly sunk twice this year, and the repairs had cost half a fortune. I had promised never to set foot in it again.
Amy was cross and hadn't spoken to me since.
"She/Amy is asking a fair price, no doubt," I said and rolled a warm scone between my cold hands.

	internal CG	external CG
distance to antecedent	short	short
activation of Amy	high	high

Experimental study

Design

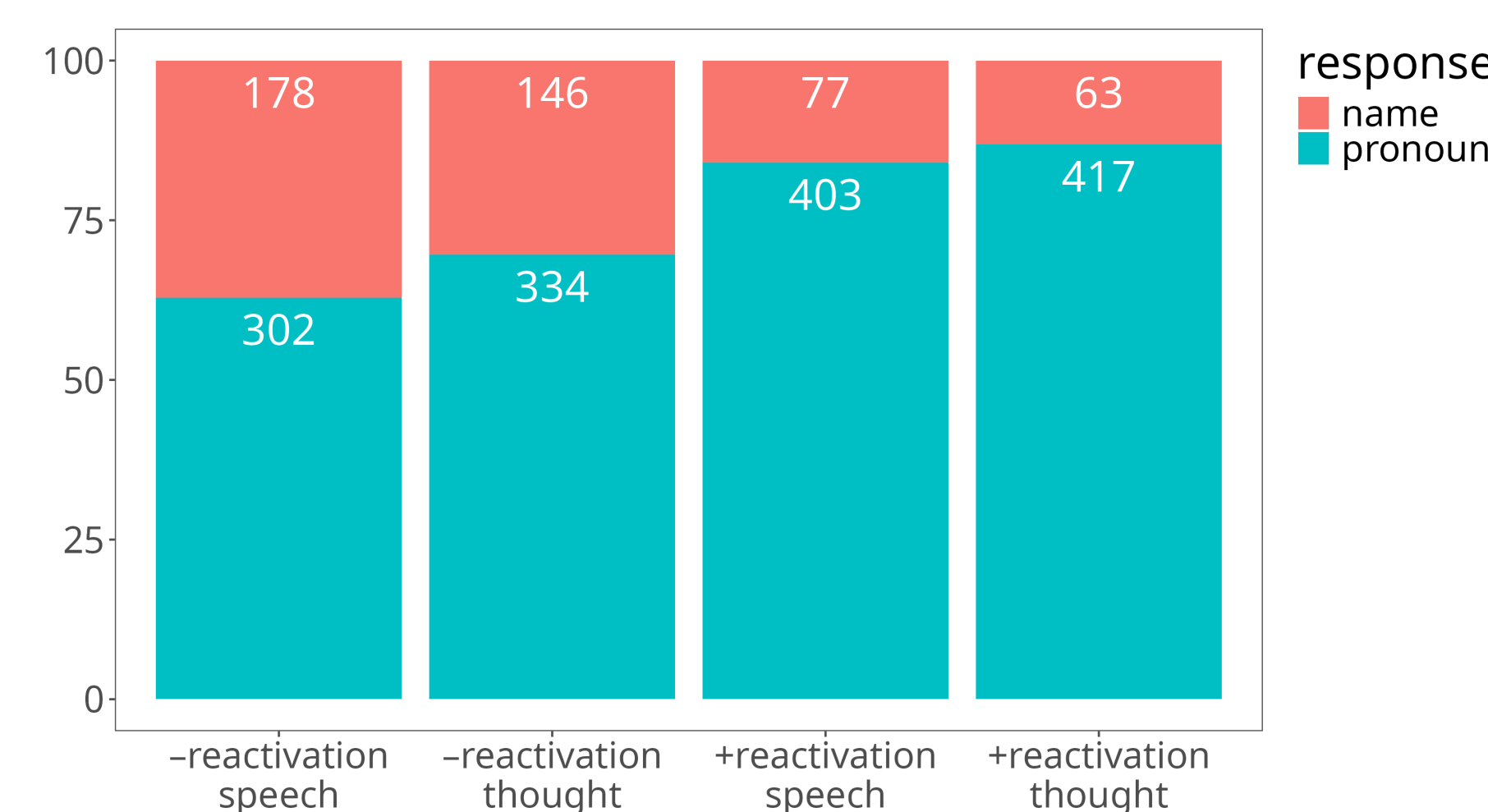
task instructions: Click on the word – a name or a pronoun – that you think should go in the gap. Be sure to read the **entire** passage before making your choice.

- web experiment implemented with Gorilla Experiment Builder (www.gorilla.sc)
- 24 items × 4 conditions; 32 fillers
- Latin square design
- randomized order of trials
- comprehension questions after 18 trials

Participants

- 80: 59 female, 20 male, 1 other
 - age 20–73, median 47
 - recruited via Prolific, paid £7.50
- Prolific screeners used:
- birth, residence & location: UK, USA, Ireland
 - English speaking monolinguals
 - no language-related disorders
 - hobbies include Literature

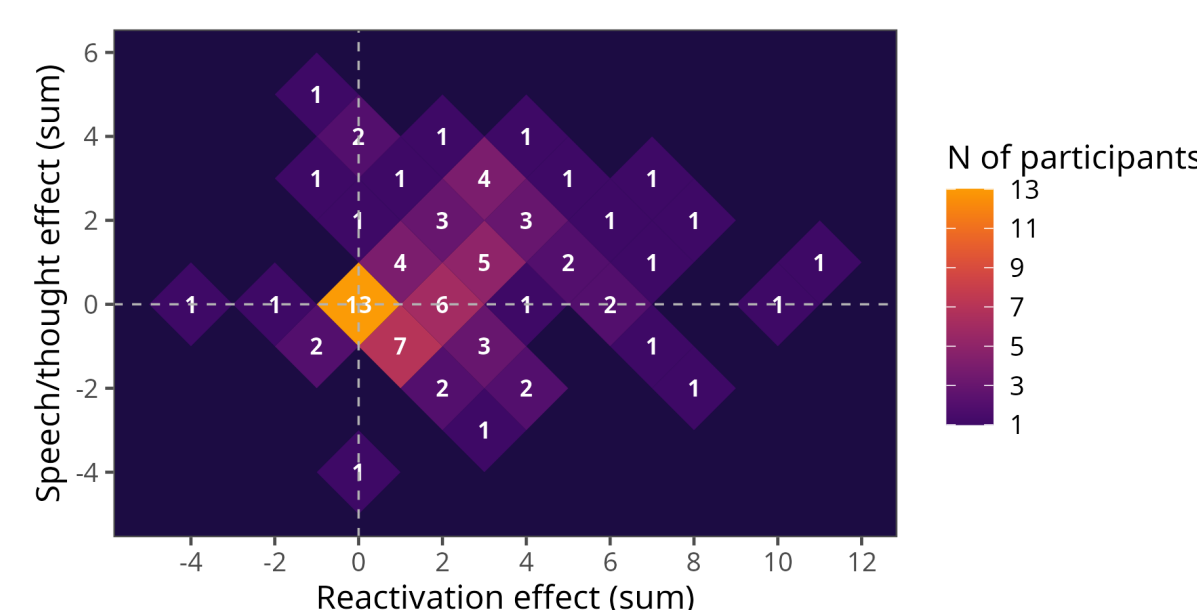
Results



Mixed-effects logistic regression with random intercepts for participants and items:
 thought/speech $\beta = 0.35$ $SE = 0.12$ $z = 2.88$ $p = .004$ **
 reactivation +/- $\beta = 1.36$ $SE = 0.13$ $z = 10.57$ $p < .001$ ***

Participant groups by effect

reactivation	speech/thought	participants, N
predicted	predicted	30
predicted	none/reverse	27
none/reverse	predicted	5
none/reverse	none/reverse	18



Discussion

- General preference for pronouns.
- Readers track activation in both CGs.
- They do not separate them perfectly. Activation in external CG influences referential choice in direct speech of characters, although it should not.
- Why?
 - processing error? cf. Heller & Brown-Schmidt 2023: default to private information
 - do CGs/contexts communicate? cf. Anderson 2025 on quoting out of context
- What is the relationship between activation and distance? How do we measure both?
- Causes of variation between participants: exposure to fictional narrative? perspective-taking skills?

References

- Anderson 2025. Anaphoric relations and quoting out of context. Talk presented at RED 2025 Workshop on Mismatches in anaphoric relations. Graz, Austria.
 Ariel 1990. *Accessing noun-phrase antecedents*. Routledge.
 Heller & Brown-Schmidt 2023. *The multiple perspectives theory of mental states in communication*. *Cognitive Science* 47, e13322.