

24.904

Language Acquisition

Class 24: Presupposition, continued

Last time: the “admittance” theory of presuppositions

- Presuppositions are admittance conditions, conditions on the appropriateness of using a sentence to increment the common ground
- Falls out from the special **semantics** of presuppositional sentences + general **principles of cooperative communication**

Last time: the “admittance” theory of presuppositions

1. **The semantics:** Presuppositions are propositions that must hold in order for a presuppositional sentence to receive a classical truth-value
2. **The pragmatics:** To assert something is to try to update the context by adding the asserted content to the conversational common ground
3. **The bridge:** Pre-requisite for successful update is that the asserted proposition must have a deterministic truth-value relative to the context

A presuppositional sentence can be asserted in a common ground in which the presuppositions are already shared belief.

A wrinkle: “informative” presuppositions

Instructor on the first day of class:

Sorry I'm late, **the car that I rented** broke down on the way here!

Presupposes: there is a unique rented car

But the sentence is appropriate even when spoken to an audience that does not share this belief!

Also in child-directed speech

Child has asked about her dad

Mother: He'll be right here.

Mother: He's just helping the man from Morgan Memorial.

(Eve, Brown Corpus)

Solution: presupposition accommodation

- Karttunen (1974):

"If the current conversational context does not suffice [in satisfying the presupposition of an uttered sentence], the listener is entitled and expected to extend it as required. He must determine for himself what context he is supposed to be in on the basis of what is said and, if he is willing to go along with it, make the same tacit extension that his interlocutor appears to have made."

The theory, full picture

- **The “rule”**: A declarative sentence S with presupposition p can be used to update a context c iff p has common ground status in c
- **The “noise”**: speakers can bend the rule; listeners can deal with that by accommodation

Sidenote: When accommodation doesn't work

- (1) Sorry I am late! **The zeppelin that I rented** broke down on my way here.

- (2) *Spoken by a 9-year-old:*
Sorry I am late! **The car that I rented** broke down on my way here.

Sidenote: When accommodation doesn't work

- (1) **She** is very smart.
- (2) JOHN is having dinner in New York tonight **too**.
- (3) Jane ate a **HAM** sandwich.
- (4) John is **indeed** having dinner in New York.

Why not?

- Accommodation fills in information that is consistent with the context — including the conversational record thus far
- The context was agnostic on whether I rented a car and so that I in fact have done so can be accommodated when I presuppose it.
- On the other hand, in an out-of-the-blue context there is no salient female, so accommodating that one is salient would contradict the previous context.
- Similarly, whether it is an issue in the context what kind of sandwich Jane ate is a matter of record.

Criticisms of accommodation and the admittance view

- **Empirical:** Loosens the connection between theory and data
- **Methodological:** Is the theory falsifiable?

The alternative view: no admittance requirement

- Presuppositions are **not** admittance conditions
- No distinctive role for presupposition; reducible to entailment and inferences about speaker intent
- Presuppositions of a sentence are what the speaker takes — and the listener infers that the speaker takes — to be non-controversial or not relevant to the main point
 - ▶ in a sense, “accommodation” is the basic rule in these approaches

Two views

Admittance view:

- Presuppositions must have common ground status
- Informative presuppositions: dealt with via accommodation

Non-Admittance view:

- Presuppositions don't need to have common ground status
- old and new presuppositions have equivalent "formal" status

Divergent developmental predictions

- **Key point of disagreement:** treatment of informative presuppositions
 - ▶ The admittance view posits a qualitative asymmetry between redundant and informative presuppositions
 - The latter recourse to an additional process, accommodation of the speaker's presupposition by the listener
 - ▶ On the alternatives, redundant and informative uses of presuppositions on equal footing and have equal theoretical significance.

Divergent developmental predictions

- Distinction translatable to developmental predictions
 - ▶ The qualitative difference between informative and non-informative uses might be reflected in the acquisition trajectory
 - ▶ **Logic:** one has to know the rule before knowing that it can be bent

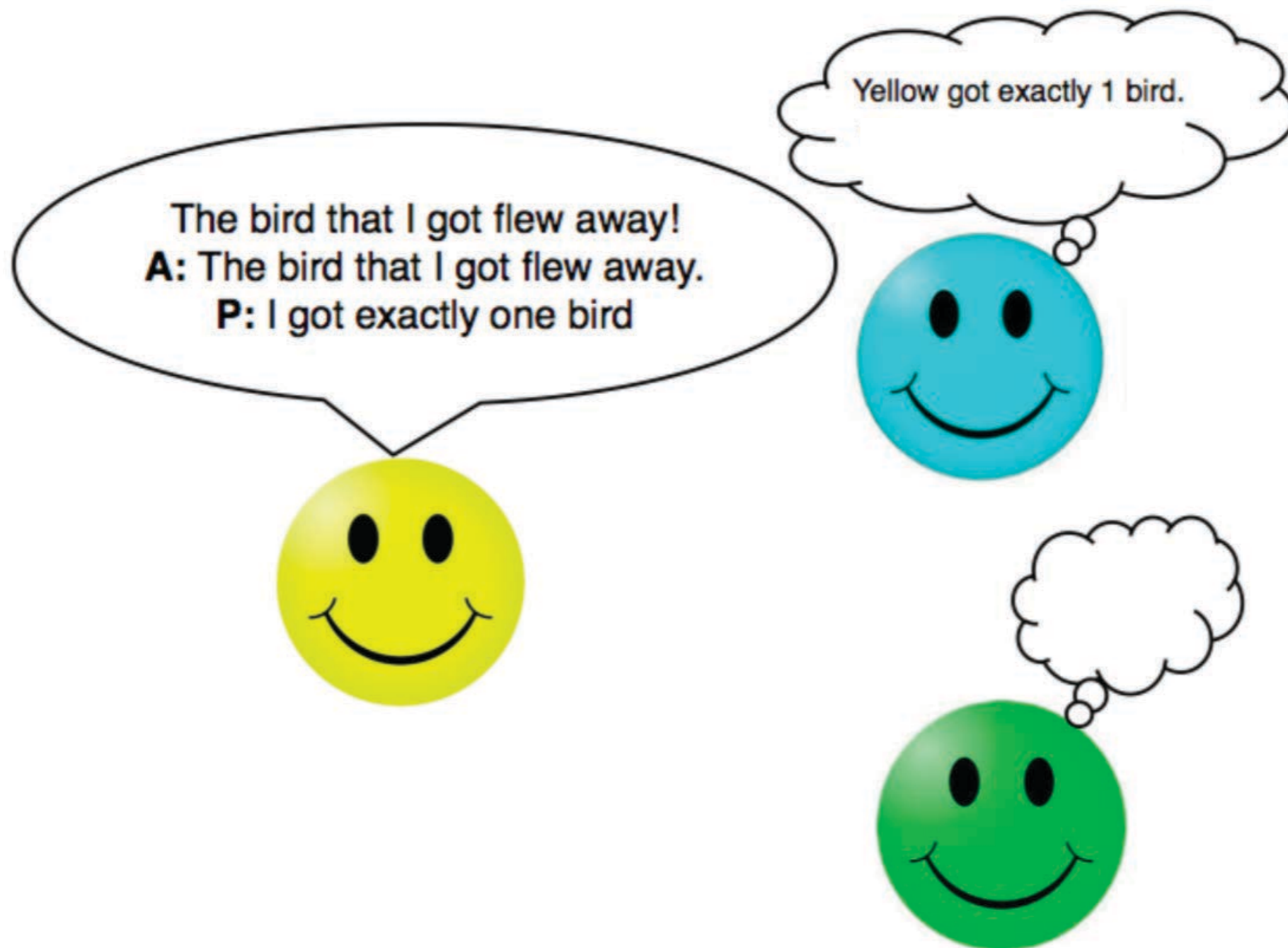
Last time

- We saw that children, like adults, expect that presuppositions of an uttered sentence be known to the listener, as well — on the surface supporting the admittance view
- even for expressions like *the*, which can be readily used informatively!

Today

- What expectations do children have about informatively used presuppositions?
- Do they, in appropriate situations, generate an expectation that the listener *accommodate* the speaker's presuppositions?

Reminder: schema from previous experiment



Aravind et al., Exp 3

- Listener Identification Task with a twist:
 - The critical conditions involve a conflict between (i) the presupposition being entailed by the input context and (ii) the appropriateness of the asserted content in the input context
 - ▶ Goal: privilege the informative use
- Control conditions identical to Experiment 2

The bird that I got flew away!
A: The bird that I got flew away.
P: I got exactly one bird



Yellow got exactly 1 bird.
Yellow's bird flew away.



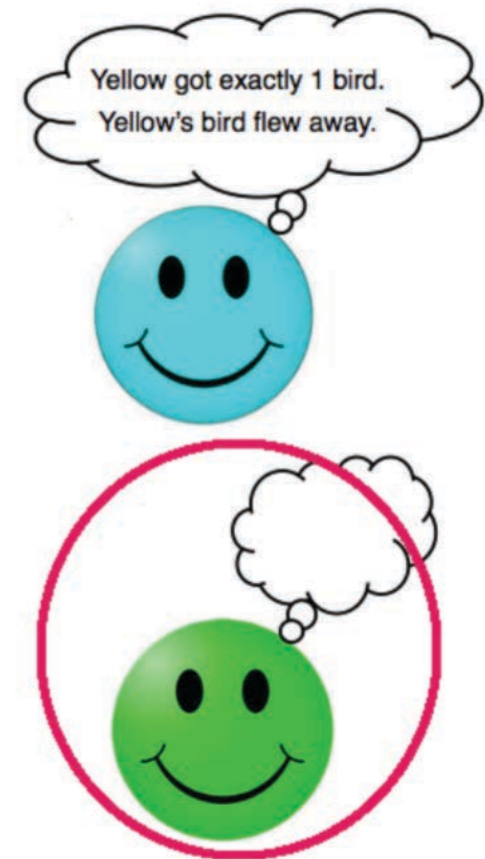
Expectations

- On anybody's view, the expected choice is the **ignorant listener**

Admittance view:

- Choice of knowledgeable listener violates a use condition on assertion
- Choice of ignorant listener violates a use condition on presupposition

⇒ Repair = Accommodation

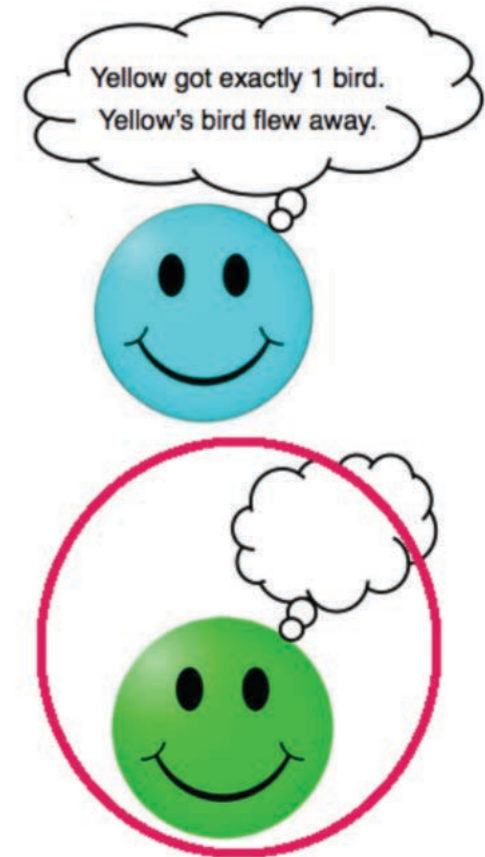


Expectations

- On anybody's view, the expected choice is the ignorant listener

Alternative views:

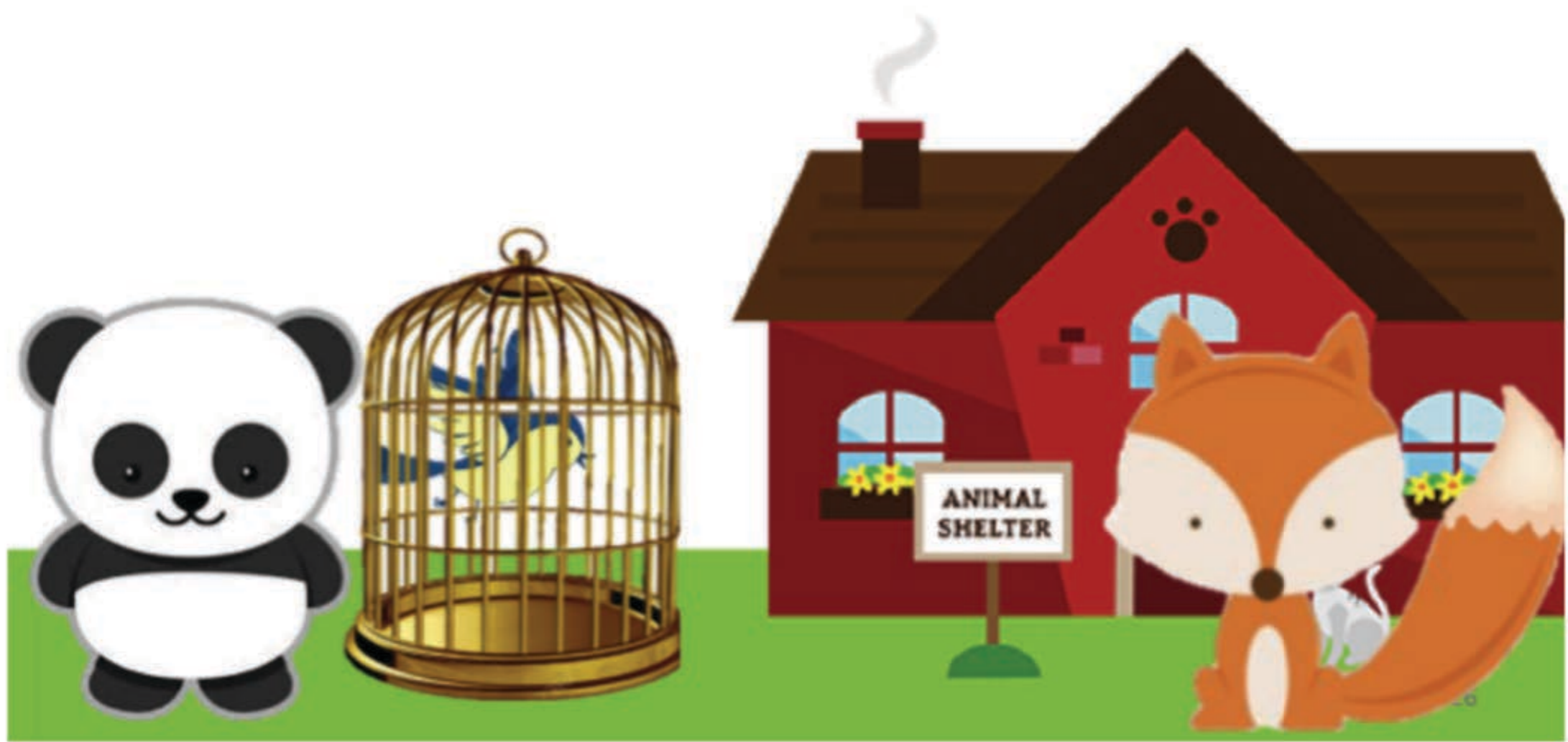
- Choice of knowledgeable listener violates a use condition on assertion
- Choice of ignorant listener violates nothing



Expectations

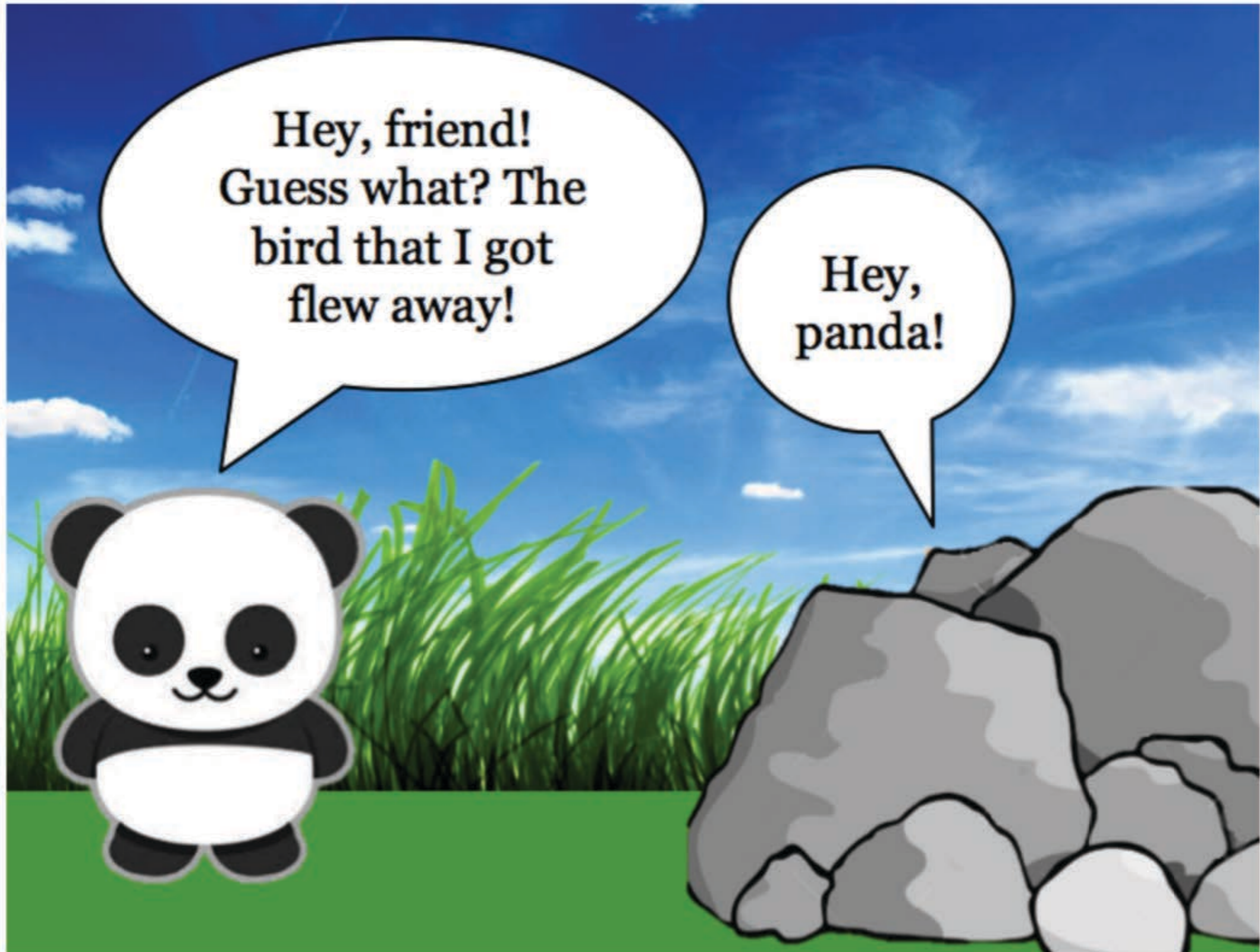
- If redundant and informative uses of presuppositions have equivalent status:
 - ⇒ No asymmetry in development
- If there is a **rule** — common ground status of p— and a **repair strategy** — accommodation
 - ⇒ Asymmetry reflected in development: rule < repair
 - ⇒ If there is a stage when children lack knowledge of the repair, no winning strategy in this task







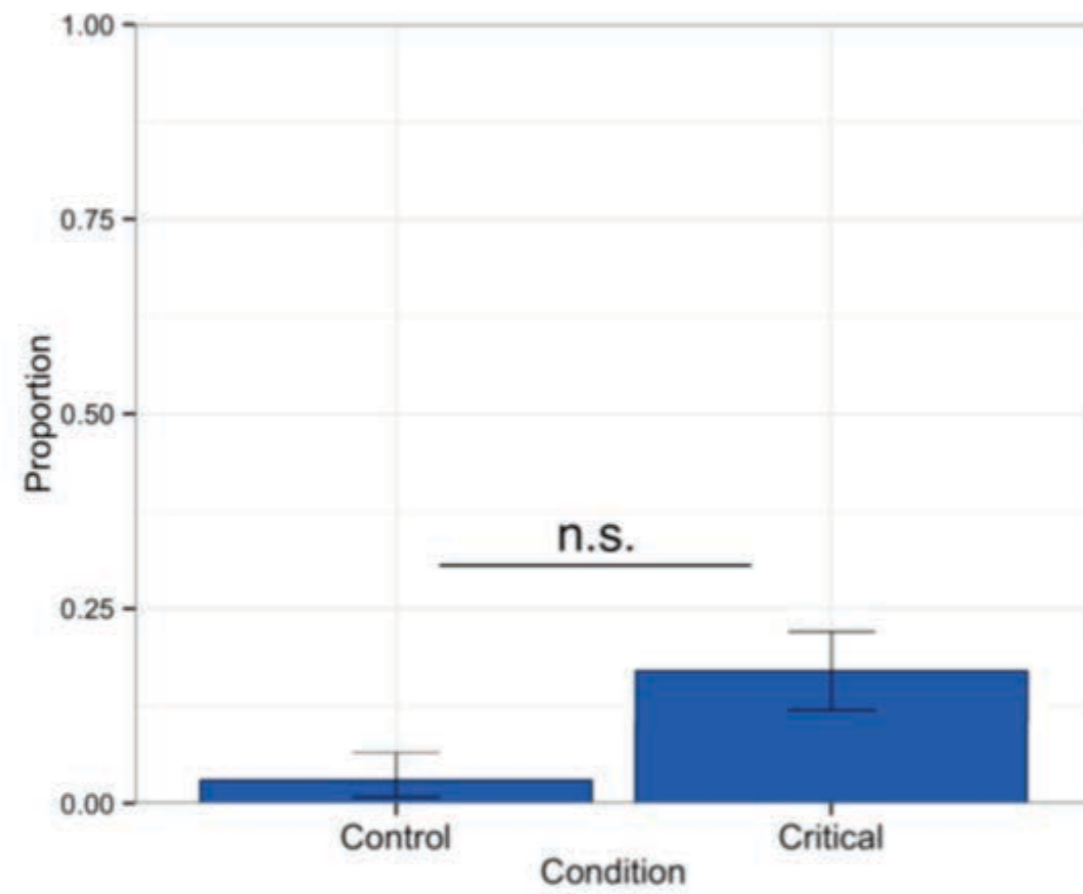
Presupposition Condition





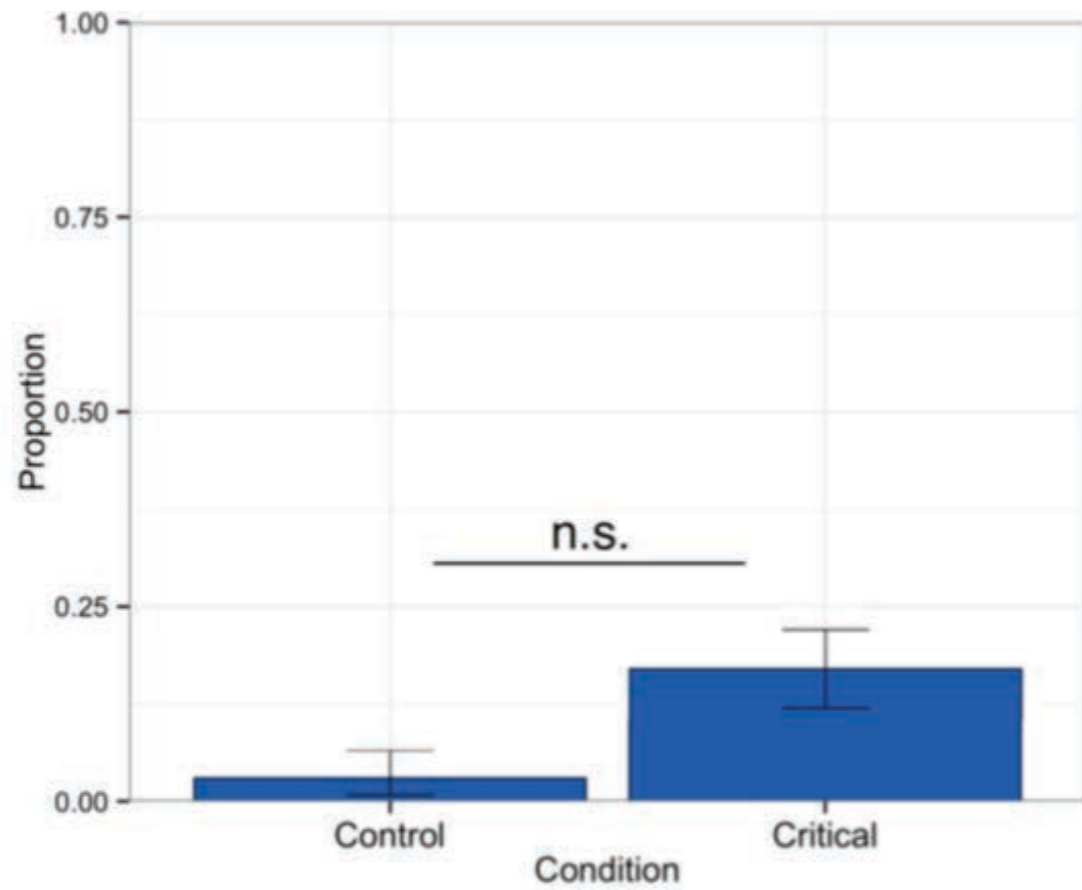
Results

Adults

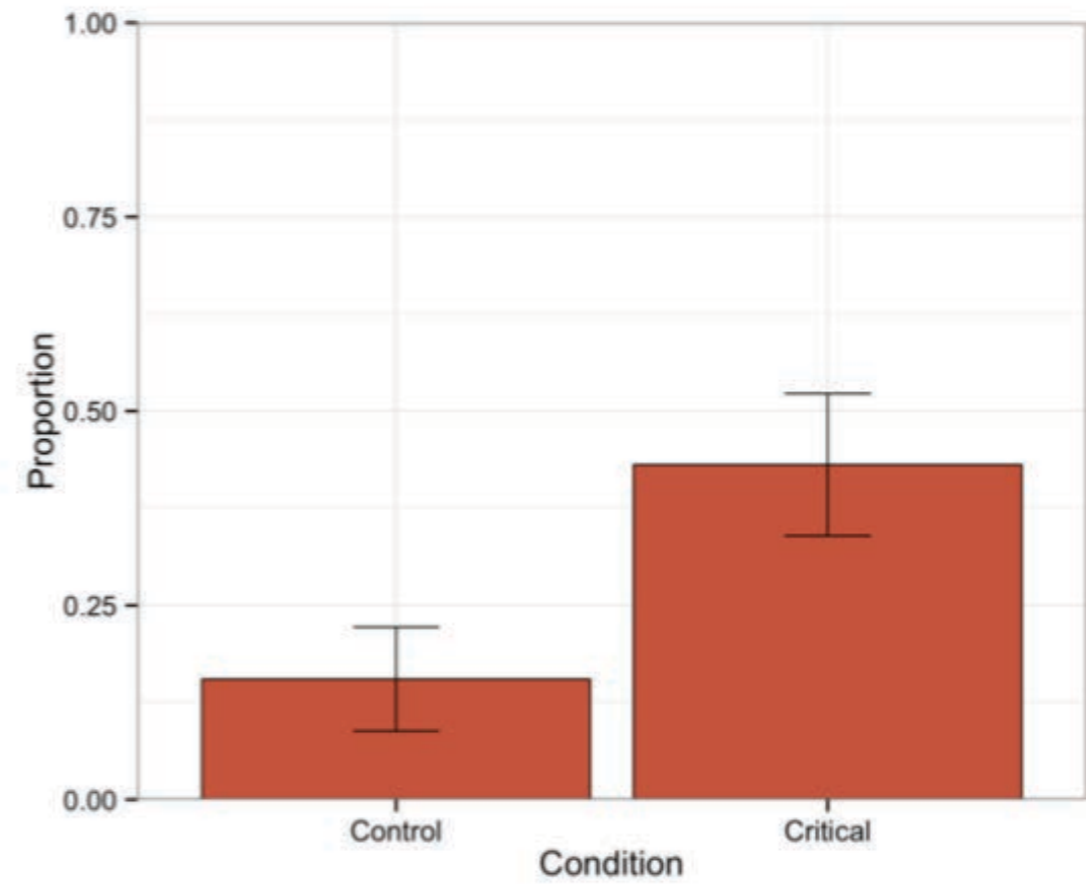


Results

Adults

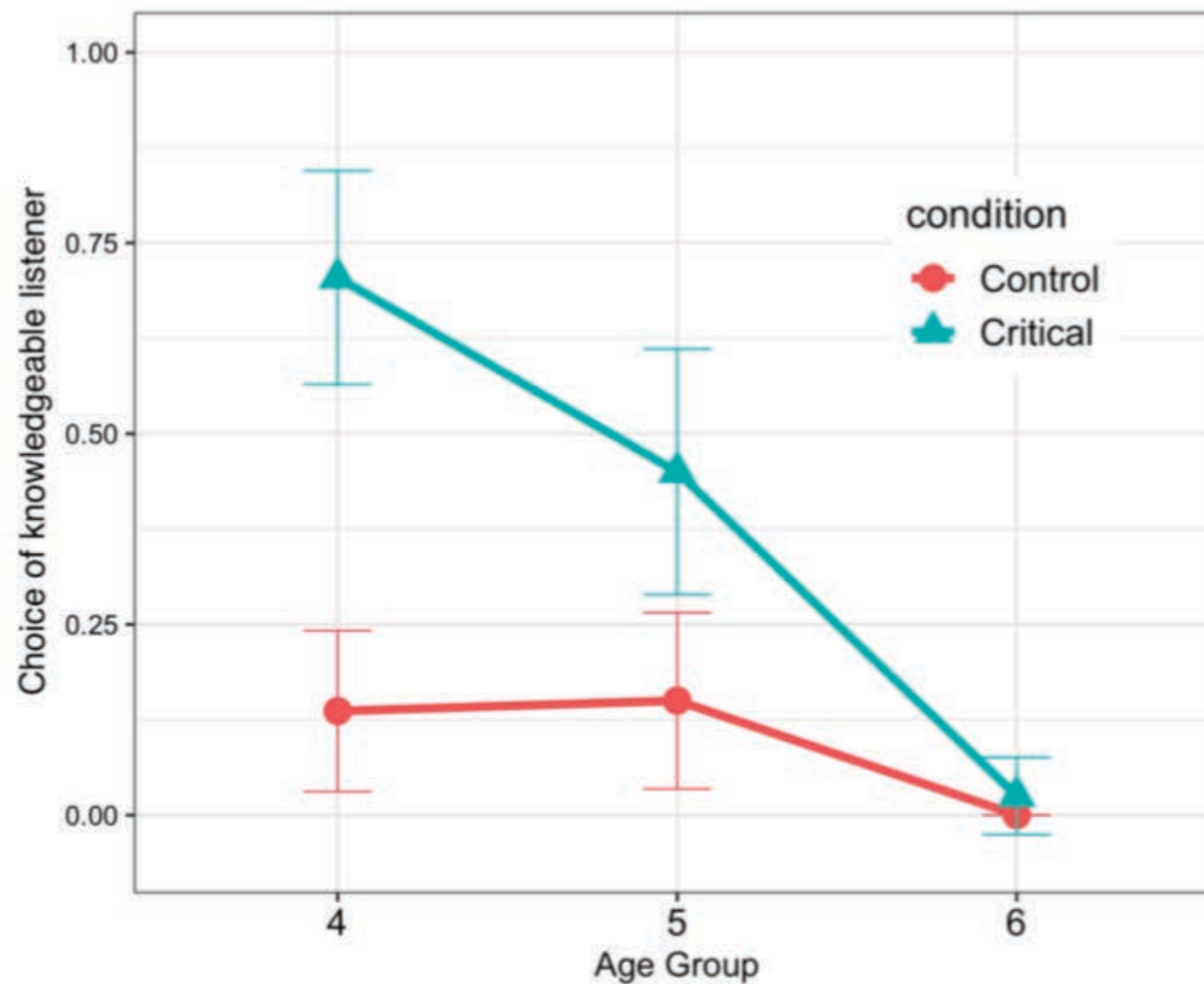


Children



Condition * Age interaction

Rates of choosing knowledgeable listener by age



Key findings

- Adults have robust expectations that the presuppositions introduced by the definite article can be used informatively
- In children, this expectation develops over the preschool years:
 - ▶ 4-year-old children clearly do not have this expectation
 - ▶ Reach adult-like levels by age 6

Implications

- Children expect presuppositions — even those that in principle allow informative uses — to be taken for granted in the common ground (what we saw last time)
- However, children have asymmetric difficulties with informatively used presuppositions
 - ▶ they seem to hold onto an expectation of common ground status even when adults don't

Implication

- The developmental asymmetry supports an asymmetry in our theory of presupposition
 - ▶ **A core to the system:** presuppositions have to be taken for granted in the common ground
 - ▶ **Extraneous factors contributing noise:** informative uses and accommodation

Early knowledge

- By the time children are 4, they seem to have a stable understanding of:
 - ▶ The distinction between presupposition and assertion
 - ▶ General principles that govern each type of speech act

Protracted development

- Defined developmental path between ages 4 and 6 for the ability to handle informative presuppositions
- Might require more “fluidity” in social reasoning, more nimbleness, more practice

How does learning happen?

- The availability of accommodation makes it so that Stalnaker's Bridge Principle, which makes presuppositional sentences assertable only when the context entails their presuppositions, is not deducible from the input.
- Why, then, do children assume it?
- **One reason:** it makes the cleanest cut between two kinds of semantic content

End-of-sem class logistics

- Final paper deadline is May 15th (no extensions — tight grade deadline)
 - ▶ Stop by my office Tu during class time if you'd like advice, suggestions, etc.

More ling stuff

- Come find me if you want to learn more about language acquisition or linguistics, even once class ends
- Other ling courses:
 - ▶ 24.902: Syntax — usually taught in the Fall
 - ▶ 24.903: Semantics & Pragmatics — usually taught in the Spring
- Have a wonderful summer!



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