



# Leave yourself a (negative) loophole

NICOLE GOTZNER AND GREGORY SCONTRAS  
(OSNABRÜCK, UC IRVINE)

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a puzzle..



the plan



the plan



reality

😌 “how's the cake?”



reality

😊 “how’s the cake?”

“not good!” 😬



reality

not good ≈ bad



reality

not good ≈ bad

not bad ≈ good



reality



# **negative strengthening**

not good ≈ bad

not bad ≠ good

# **negative strengthening**

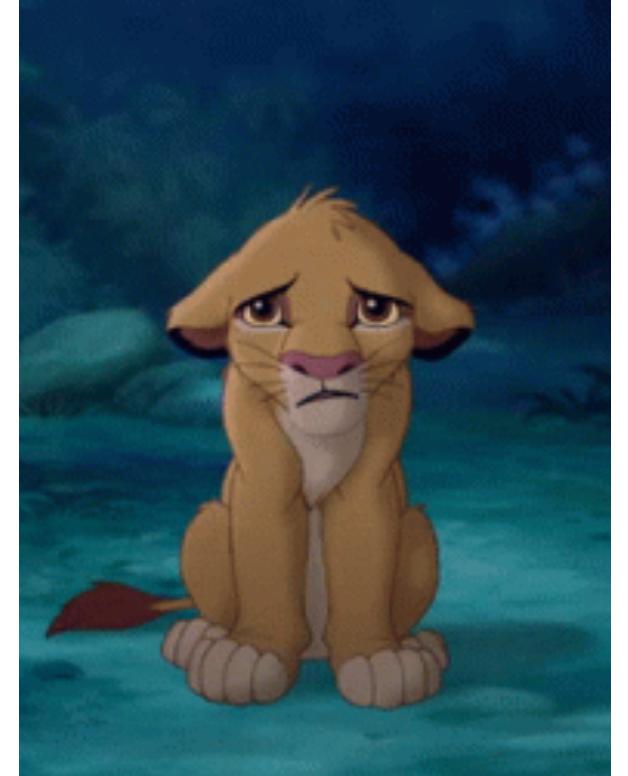
not good ≈ bad

why not just say “bad”??????



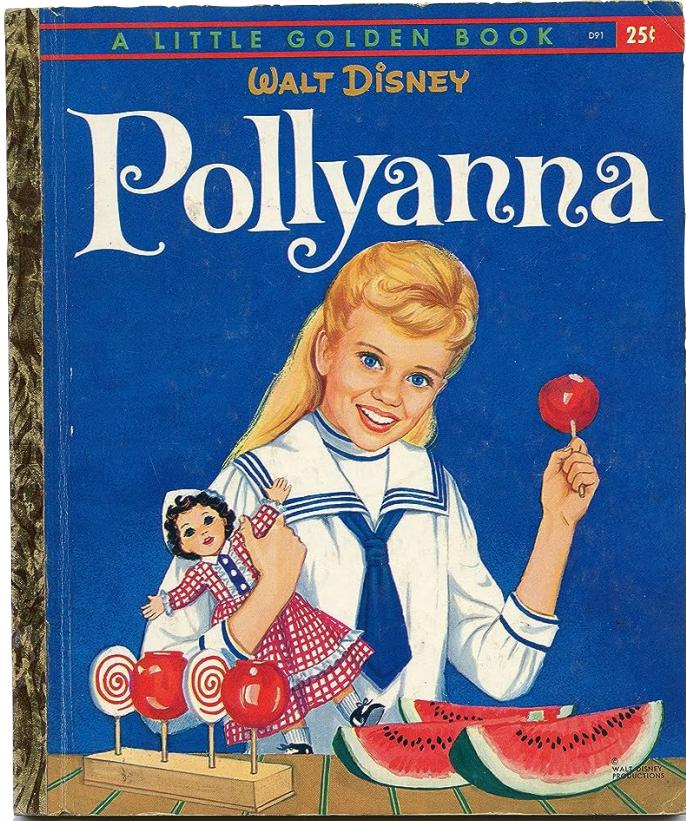
why not just say “bad”?

bad would be **face-threatening**  
to the listener



Brown & Levinson 1989

why not just say “bad”?



speakers try to avoid  
**straightforwardly-negative**  
expressions

Terkourafi et al. 2020; Mazarella & Gotzner 2021, building on Boucher & Osgood 1969

why not just say “bad”?



the negated version is less specific,  
which leaves the speaker a  
**loophole** for plausible deniability

Seright 1966; Keenan 1976; Krifka 2002

is “not good” less specific?

**what do we mean by less specific?**

subjectivity



faultless  
disagreement

# faulty disagreement

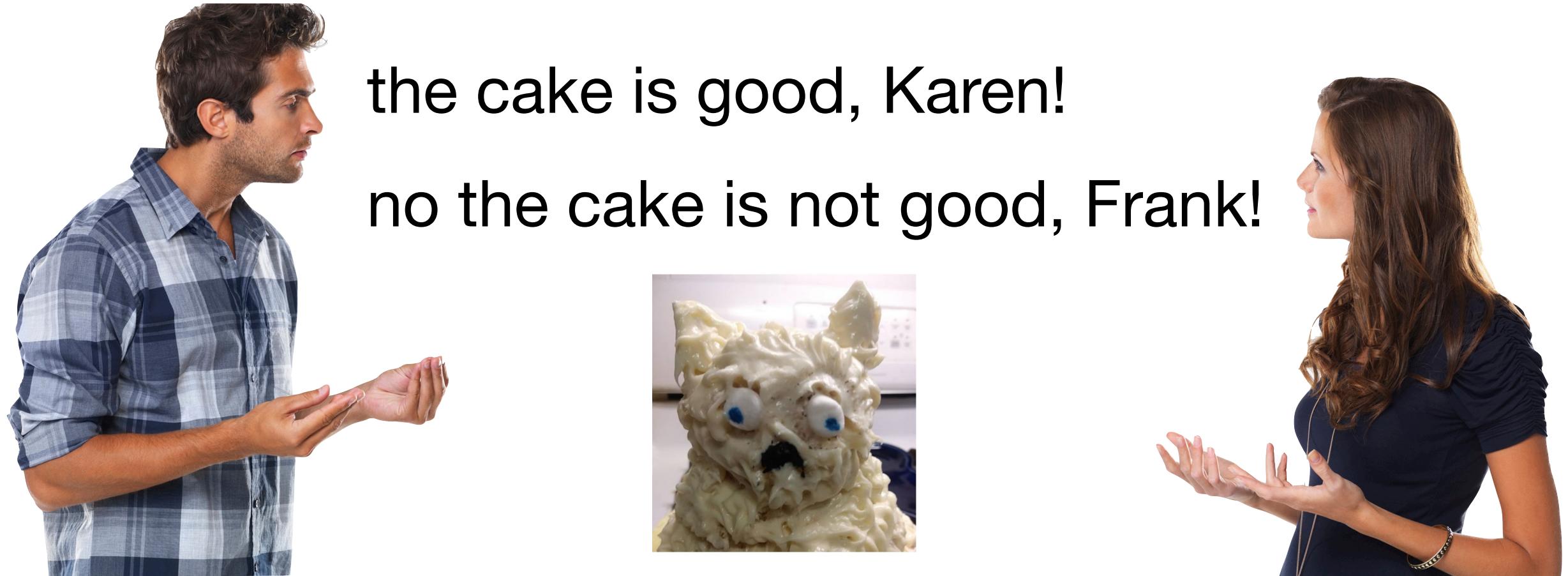


the cake is white, Karen!

no the cake is not white, Frank!



# faultless disagreement



Progress: 

Consider the following adjective:

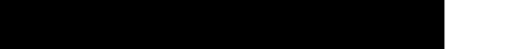
**good**

How subjective is the adjective "good"?

completely objective

completely subjective

Continue

Progress: 

Consider the following situation:

Alexander and Greg see the same banana.

Alexander says: "**That banana is good.**"

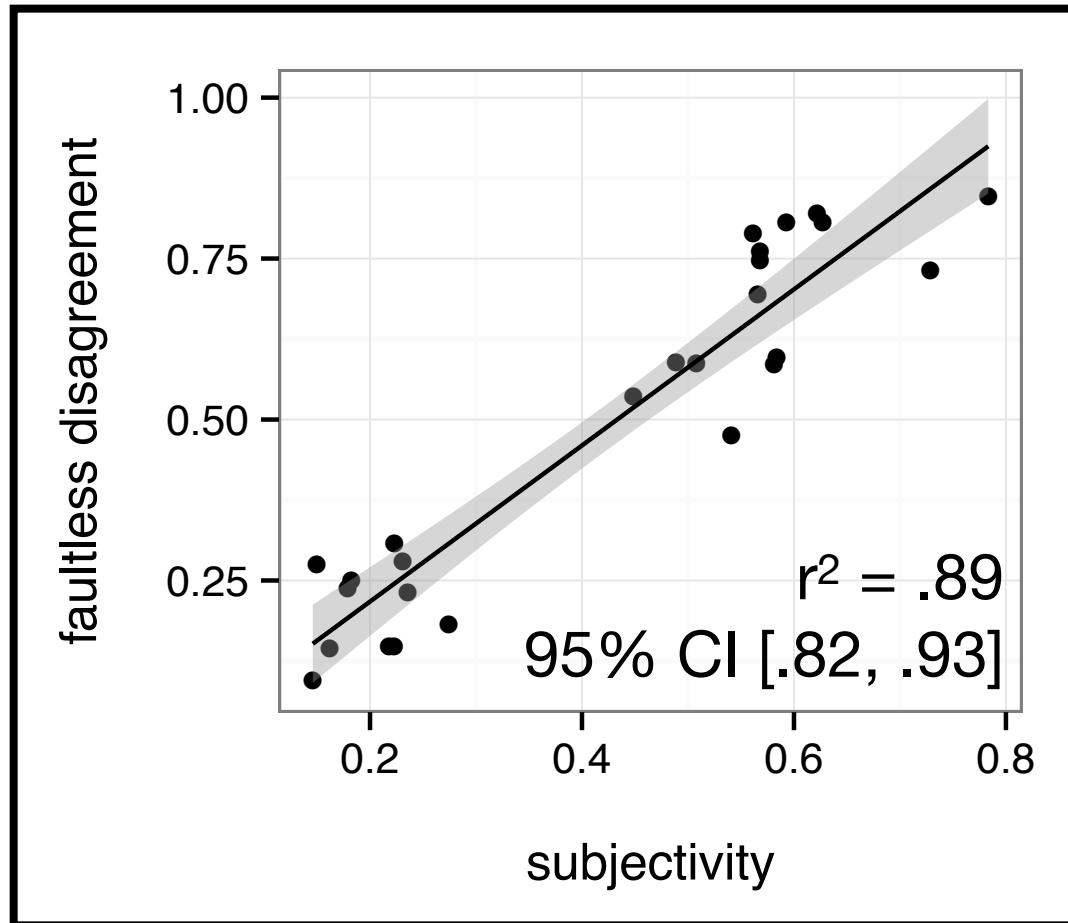
Greg responds: "**You're wrong. That banana is not good.**"

Can both Alexander and Greg be right?

No, somebody must be wrong.

Yes, it's a matter of opinion.

[Continue](#)



Scontras et al. 2017

😌 “how's the cake?”

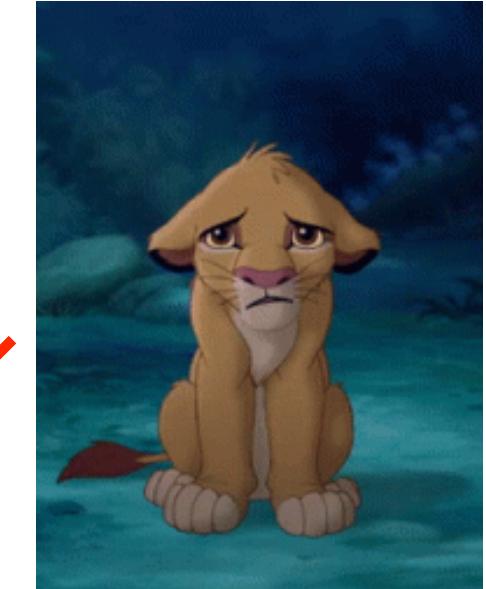
“not good!” 😬



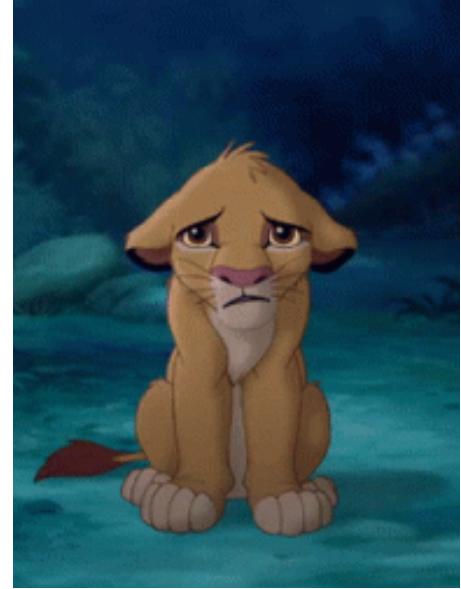
not good  $\approx$  bad

face threatening!

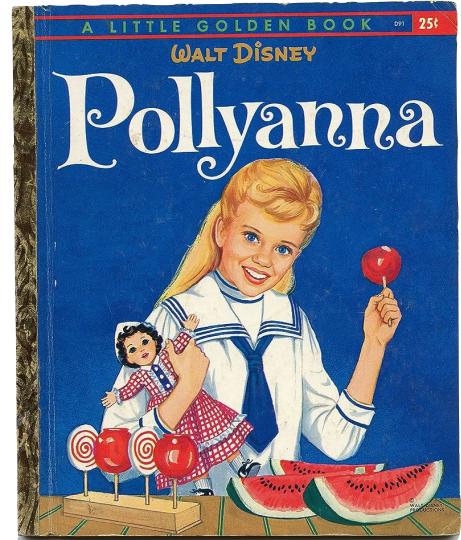
not good ≈ bad



not good ≈ bad



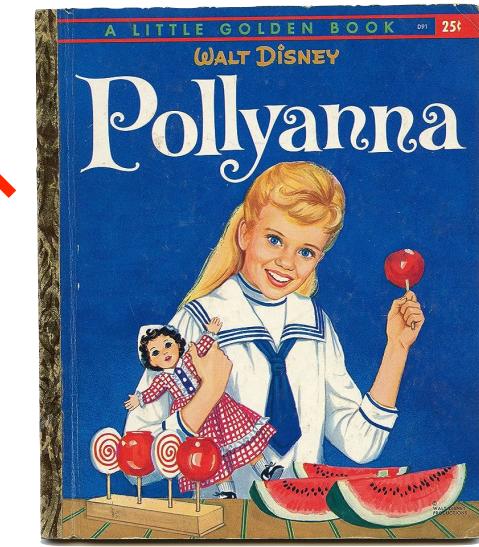
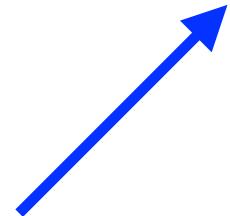
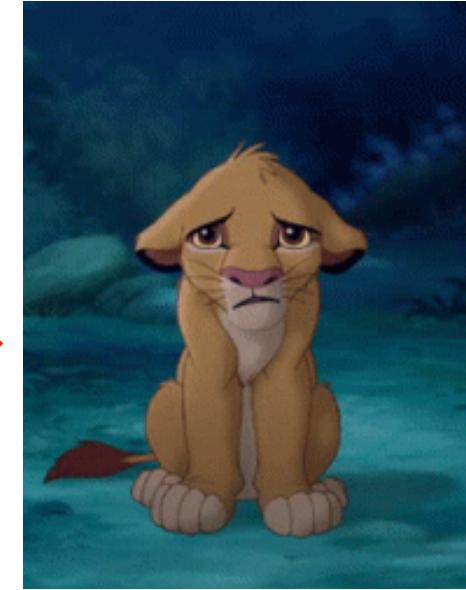
avoid negative!



loophole!



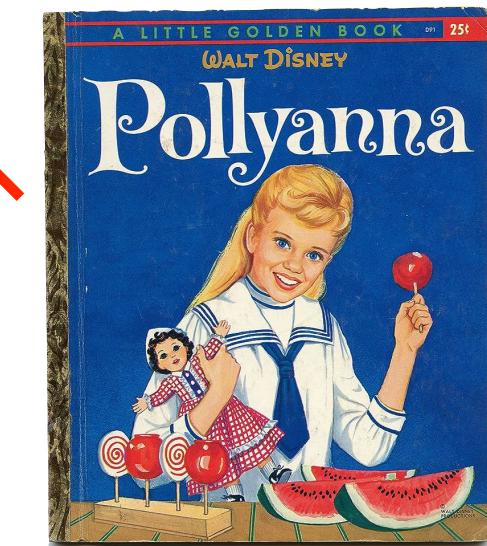
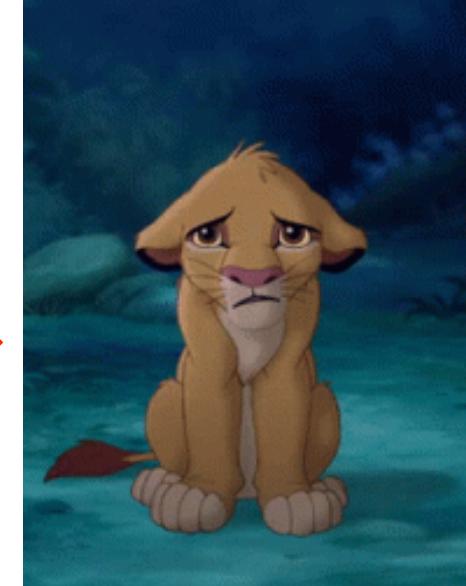
not good ≈ bad



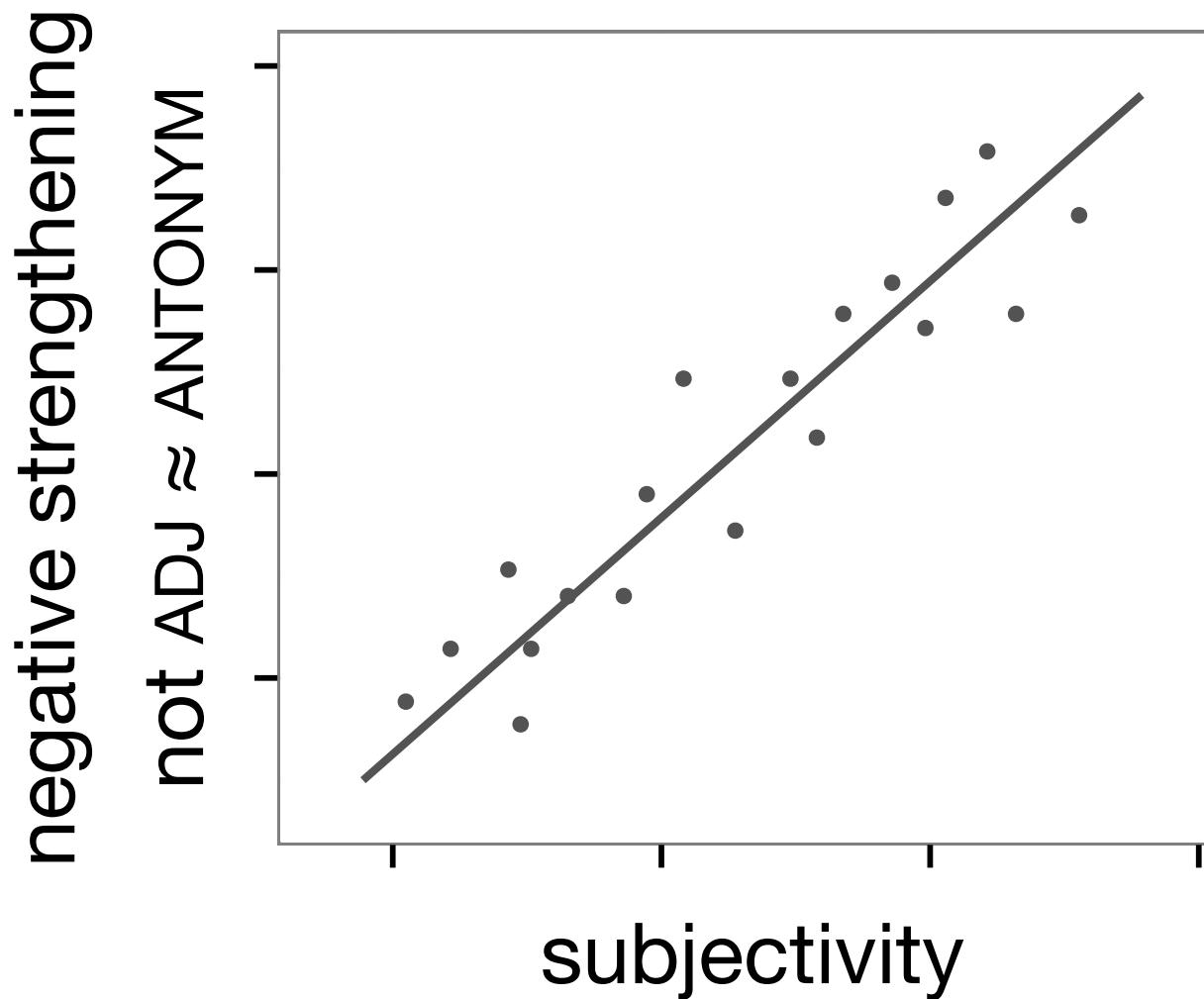
**prediction:**

more negative strengthening  
with increased subjectivity

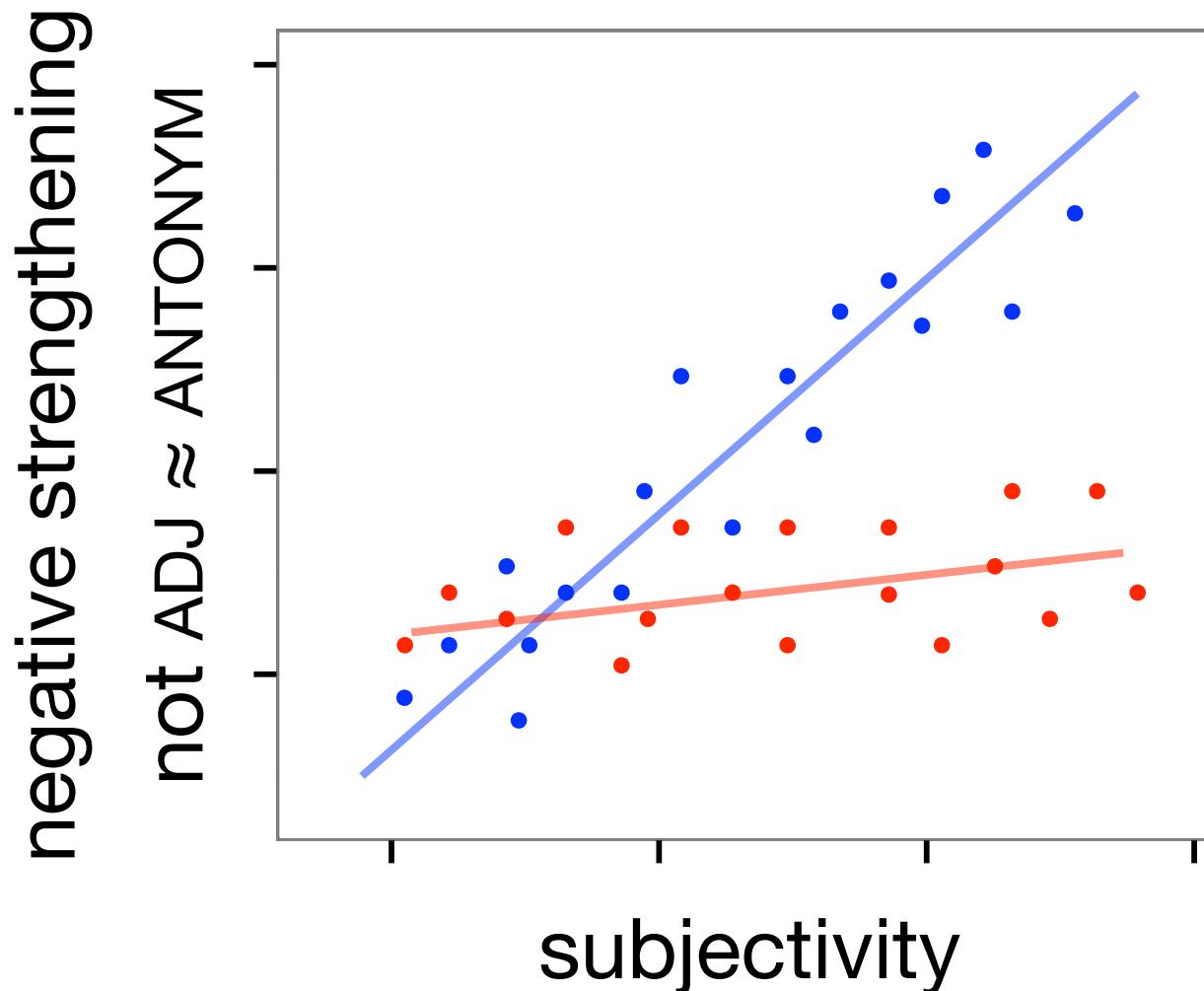
not good ≈ bad



**prediction:**  
more negative strengthening  
with increased subjectivity



**prediction:**  
more negative strengthening  
with increased subjectivity



but only for  
positive adjectives

not **good** ≈ bad

not **bad** ≈ good

**we need:**

negative strengthening

subjectivity

# negative strengthening

You want to join a prestigious company and you are competing with one of your current colleagues. After looking at your CV, your officemate tells you:

**“Your competitor’s CV is not good.”**

According to your officemate, the CV is:

**good 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 bad**

# negative strengthening

**experiment 1**  
20 antonym pairs  
n=60

**experiment 2**  
20 antonym pairs  
context manipulation  
n=89

# subjectivity

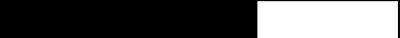
Progress: 

## Instructions

You will see 20 phrases.  
For each phrase, your task is to determine how subjective it is.

[Continue](#)

# subjectivity

Progress: 

Consider the following words:

**not good**

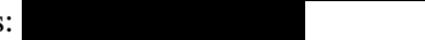
How subjective are the words "not good"?

completely objective

completely subjective

[Continue](#)

# subjectivity

Progress: 

Consider the following words:

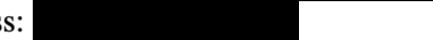
**not bad**

How subjective are the words "not bad"?

completely objective

completely subjective

[Continue](#)

Progress: 

Consider the following words:

**not good**

How subjective are the words "not good"?

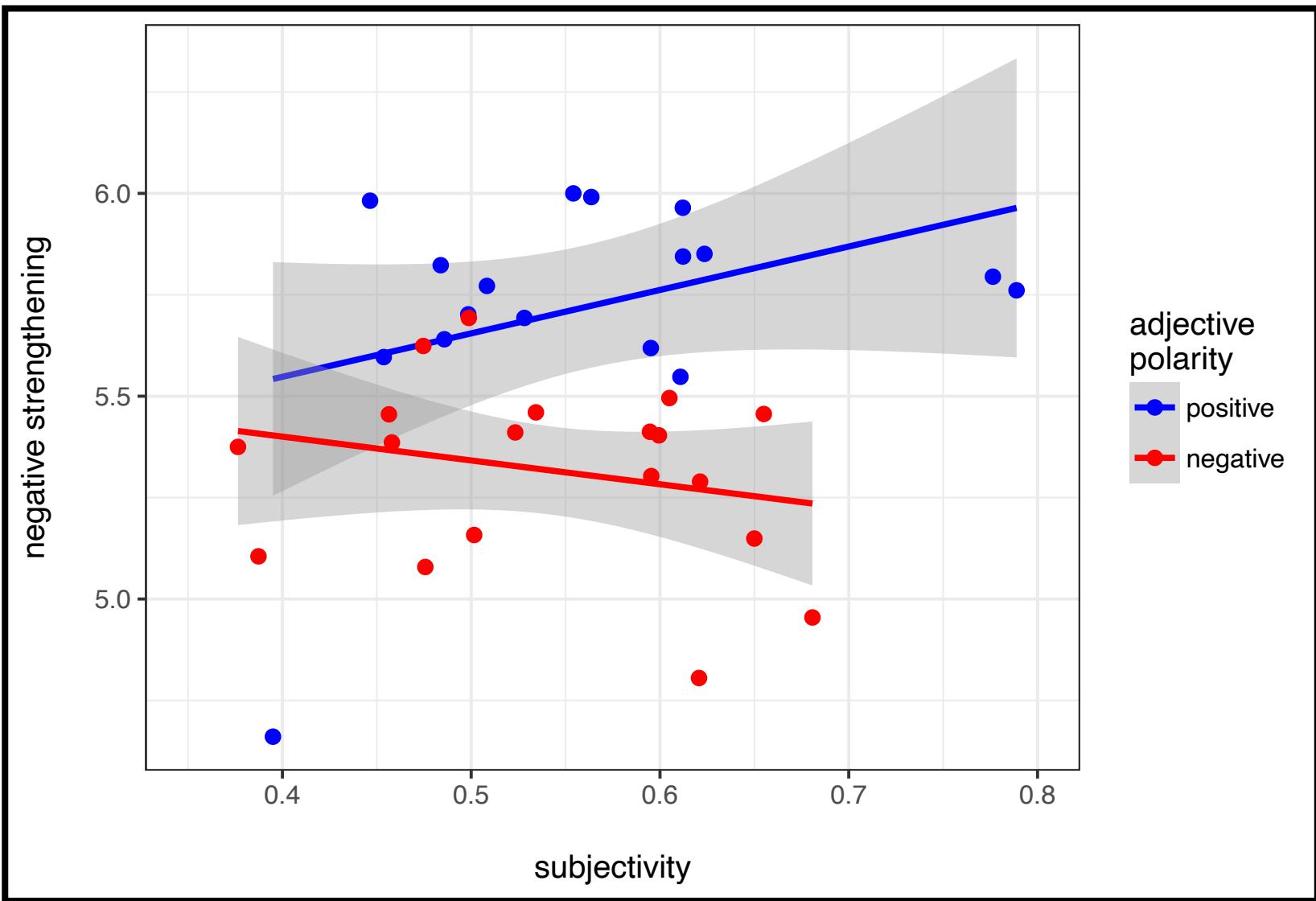
completely objective

completely subjective

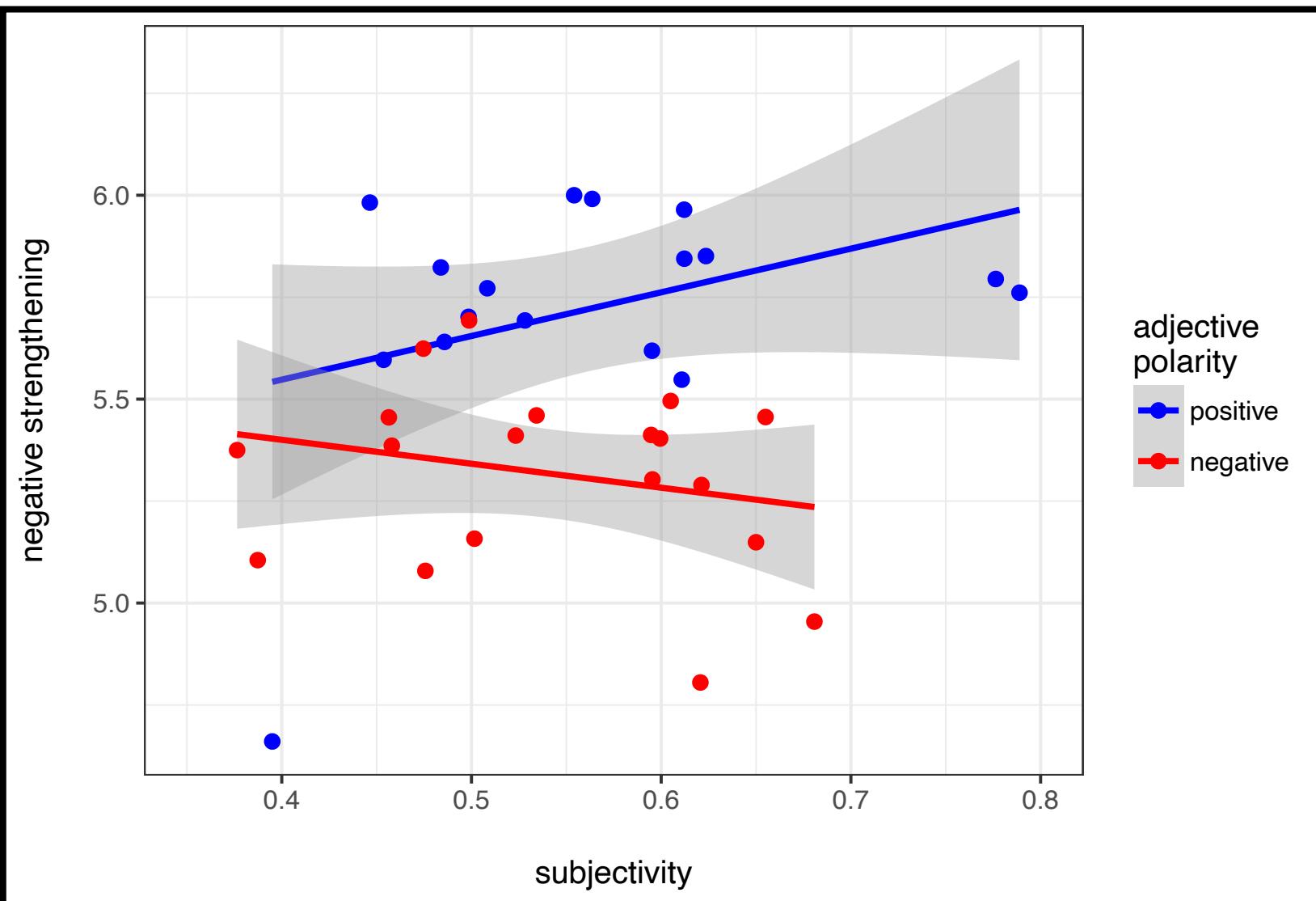
[Continue](#)

20 antonym pairs  
n=60

# results



# results



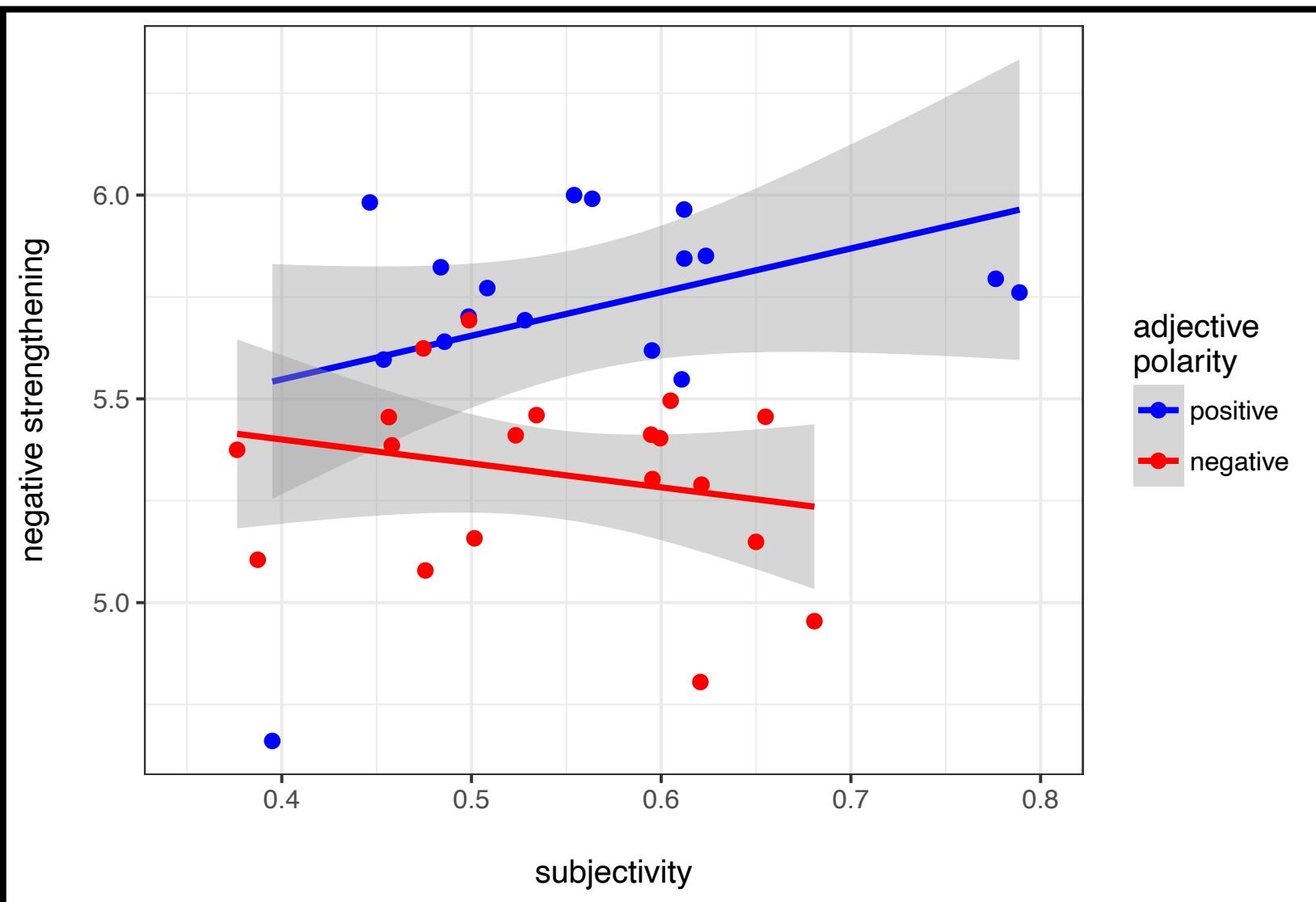
**effect of polarity**

$\beta=0.42$  ,  $z=13.78$  ,  $p<0.01$

**polarity x subjectivity  
interaction**

$\beta=2.18$  ,  $z=5.54$  ,  $p<0.01$

# results



**positive**

$r^2=0.14$

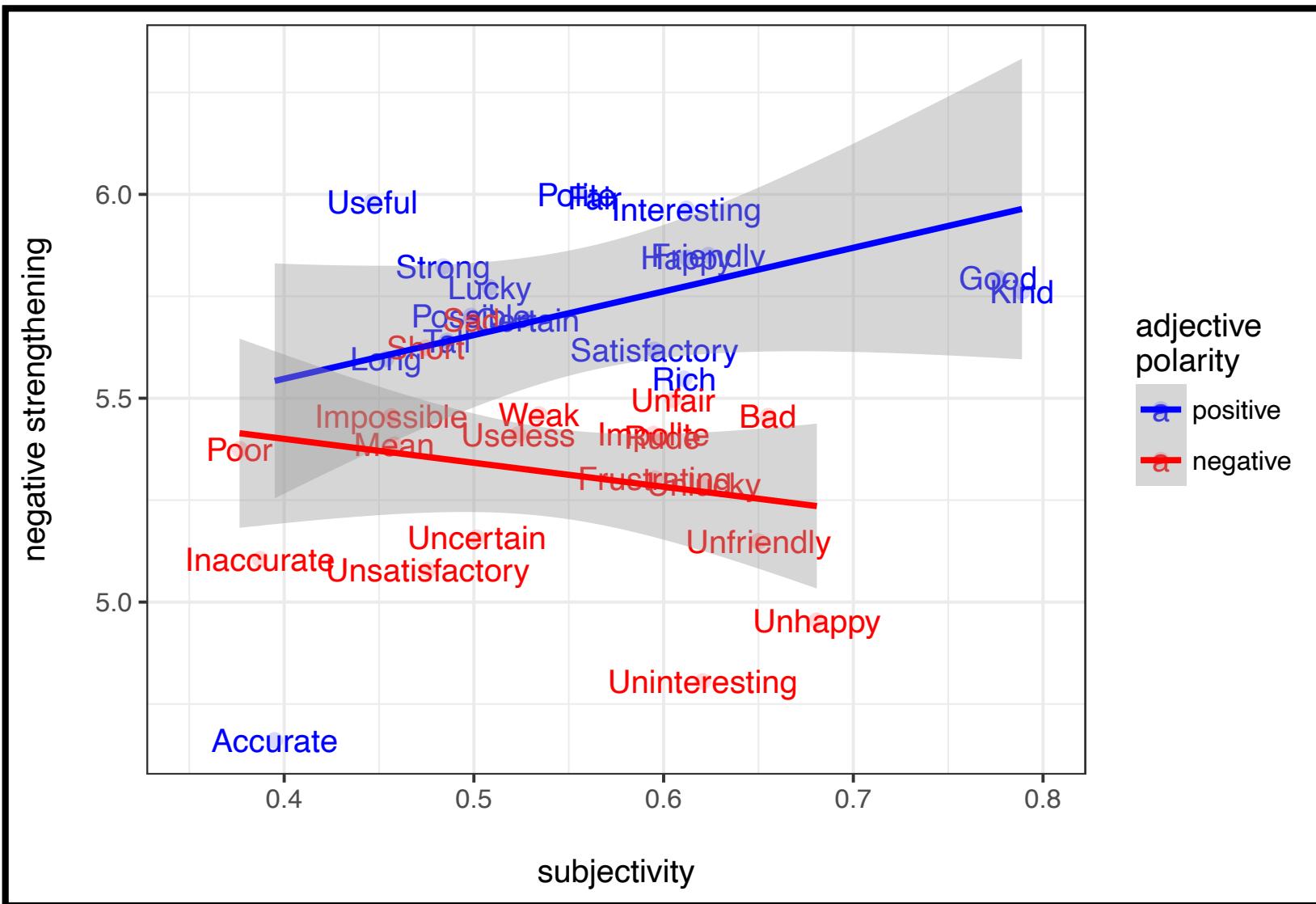
95% CI [0.001, 0.574]

**negative**

$r^2=0.06$

95% CI [0.000, 0.331]

# results



positive

$r^2=0.14$

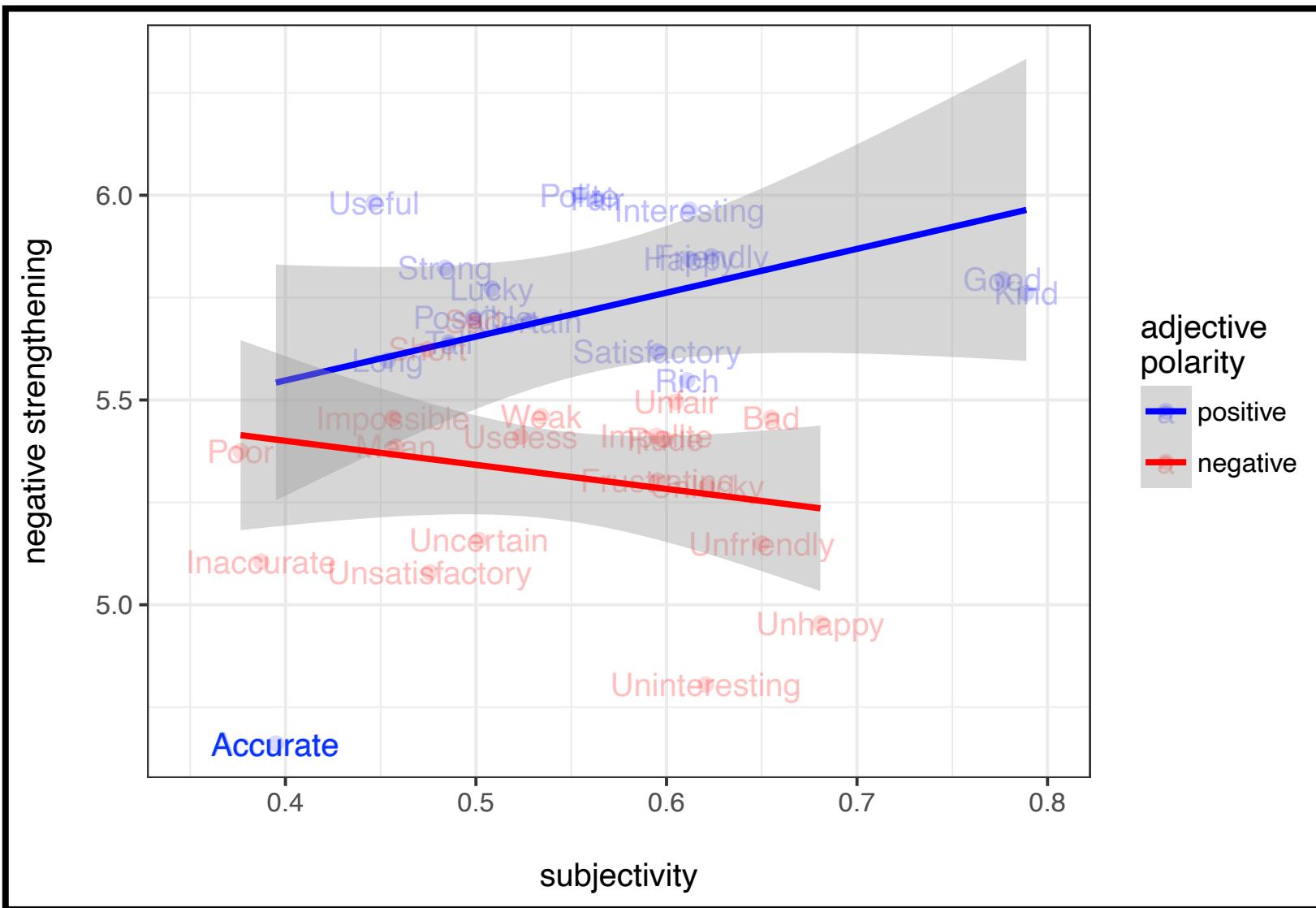
95% CI [0.001, 0.574]

negative

$r^2=0.06$

95% CI [0.000, 0.331]

# results



effect remains with  
removal of outlier!

but wait! there's more..

# negative strengthening

two additional experiments

## **experiment 3**

20 antonym pairs

speaker power (low/high)

n=59

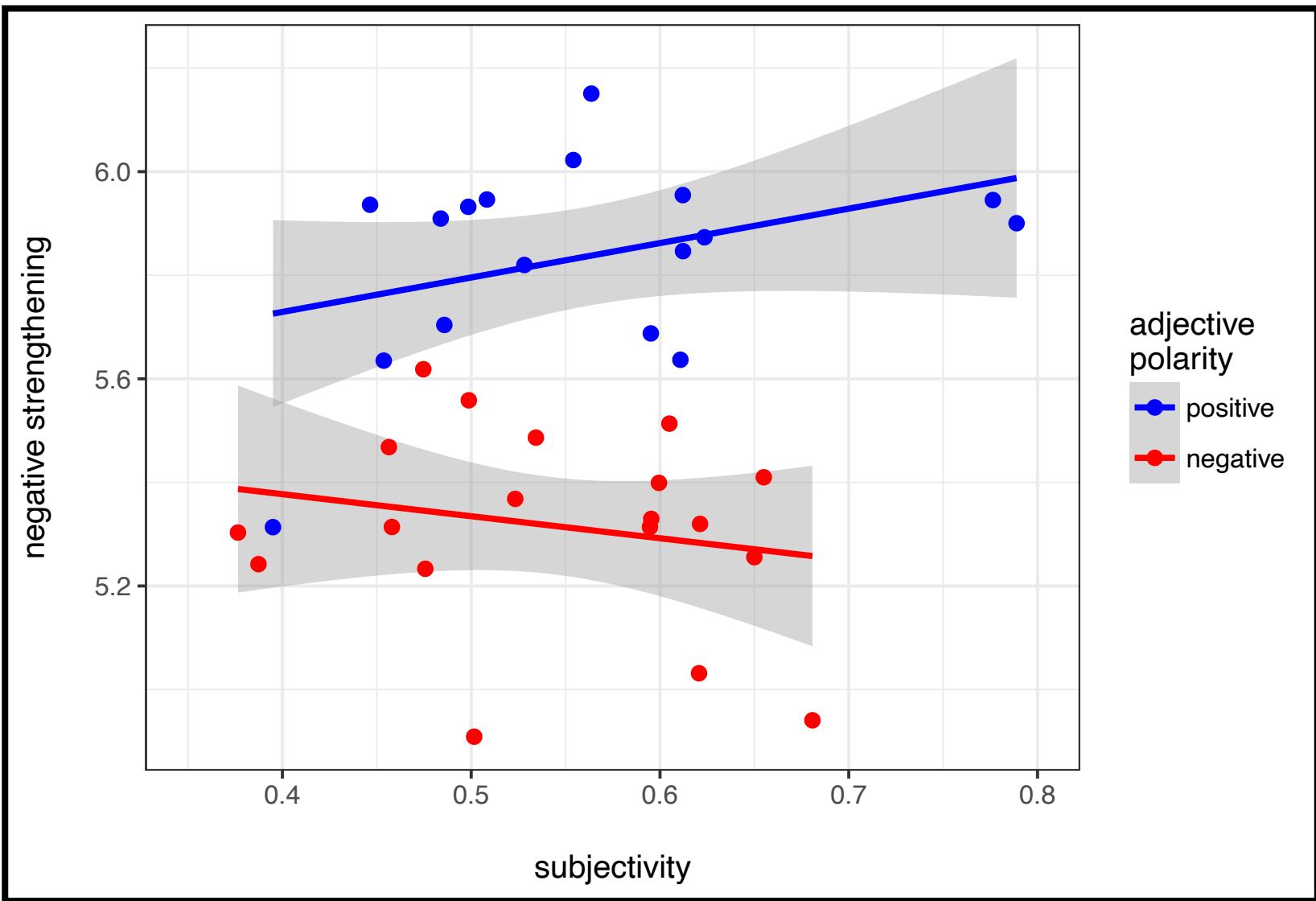
## **experiment 4**

20 antonym pairs

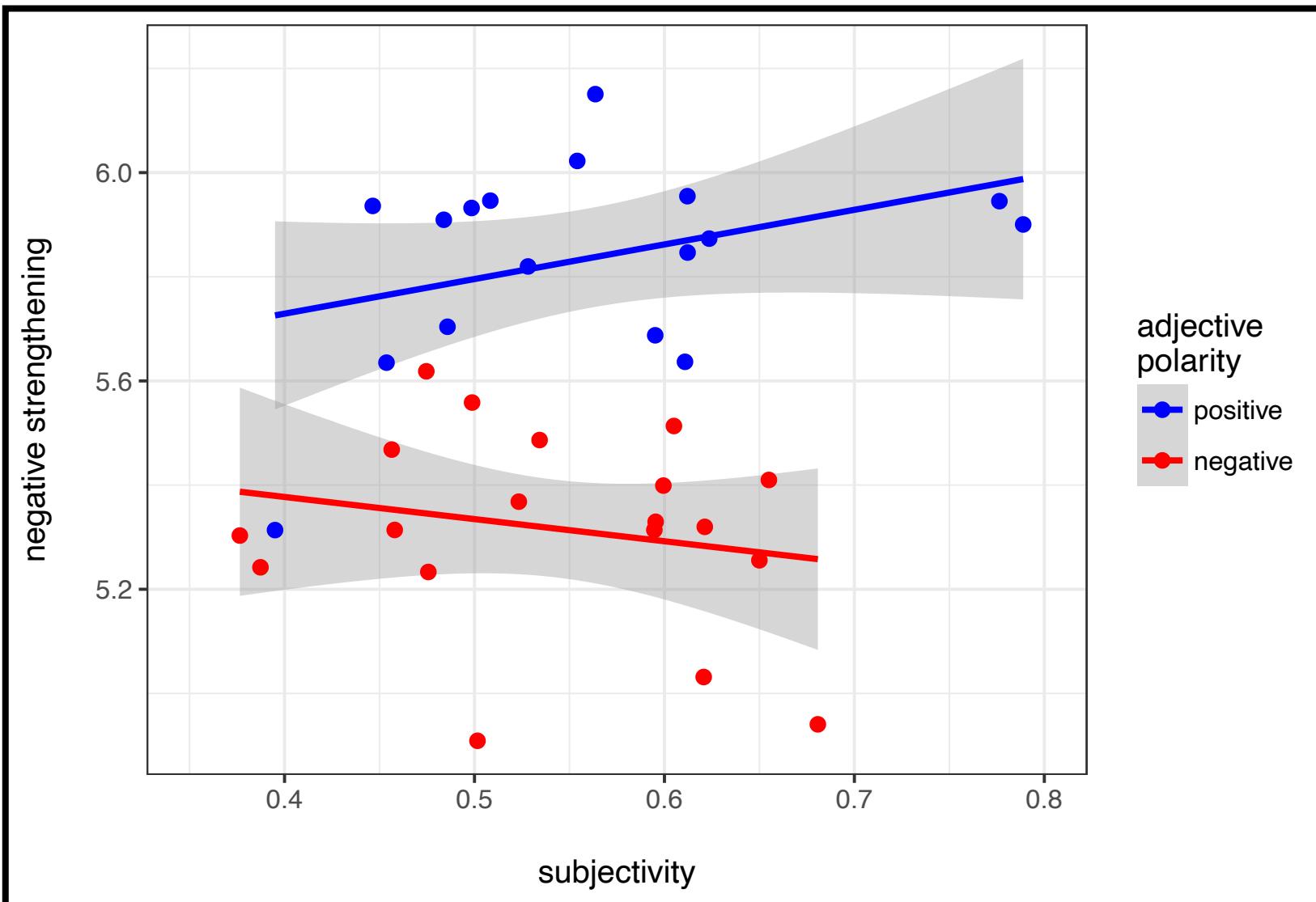
social distance (low/high)

n=59

# combined results



# combined results



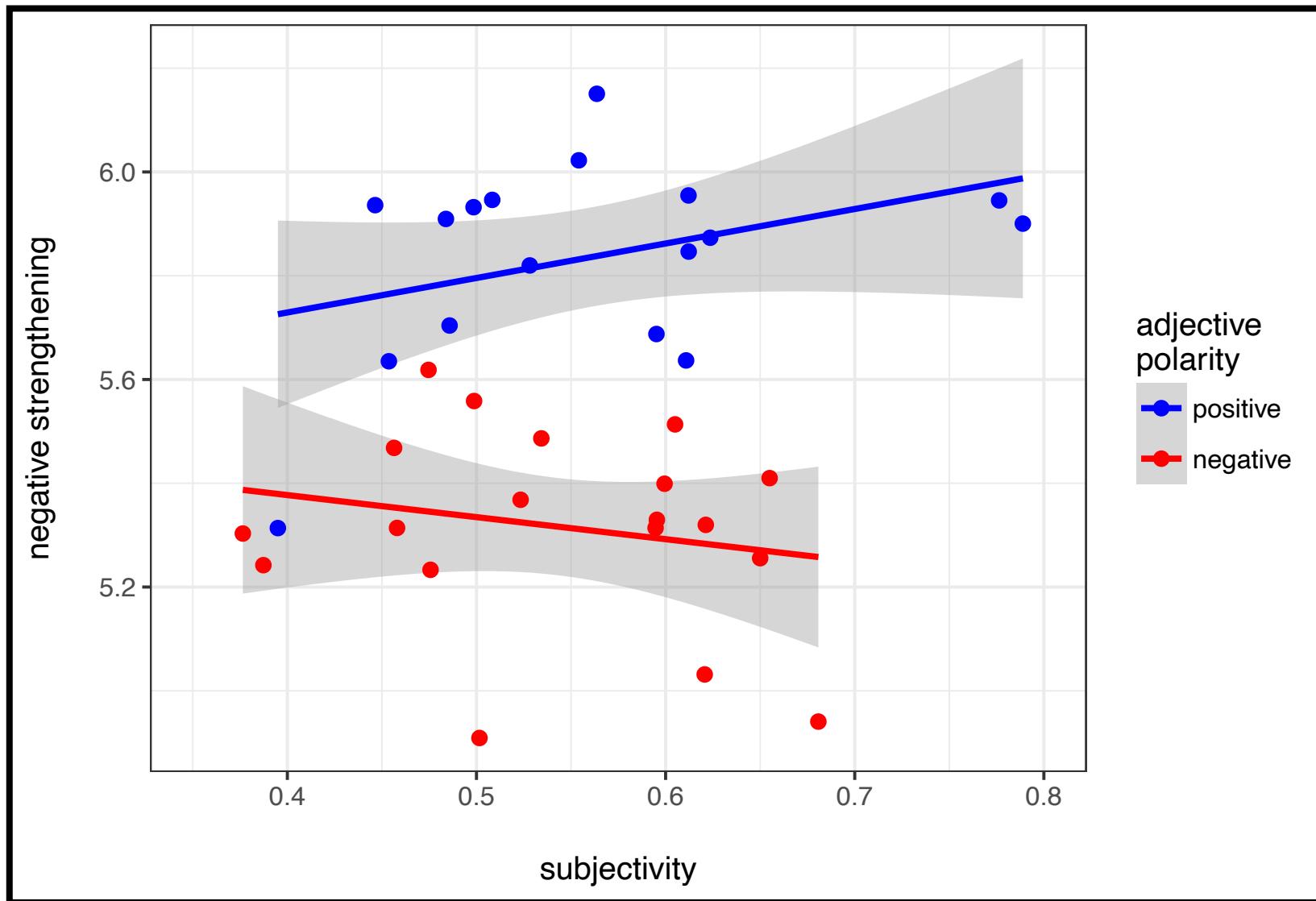
**effect of polarity**

$\beta=0.55$  ,  $z=27.74$  ,  $p<0.01$

**polarity x subjectivity  
interaction**

$\beta=1.83$  ,  $z=6.54$  ,  $p<0.01$

# combined results



**positive**

$r^2=0.14$

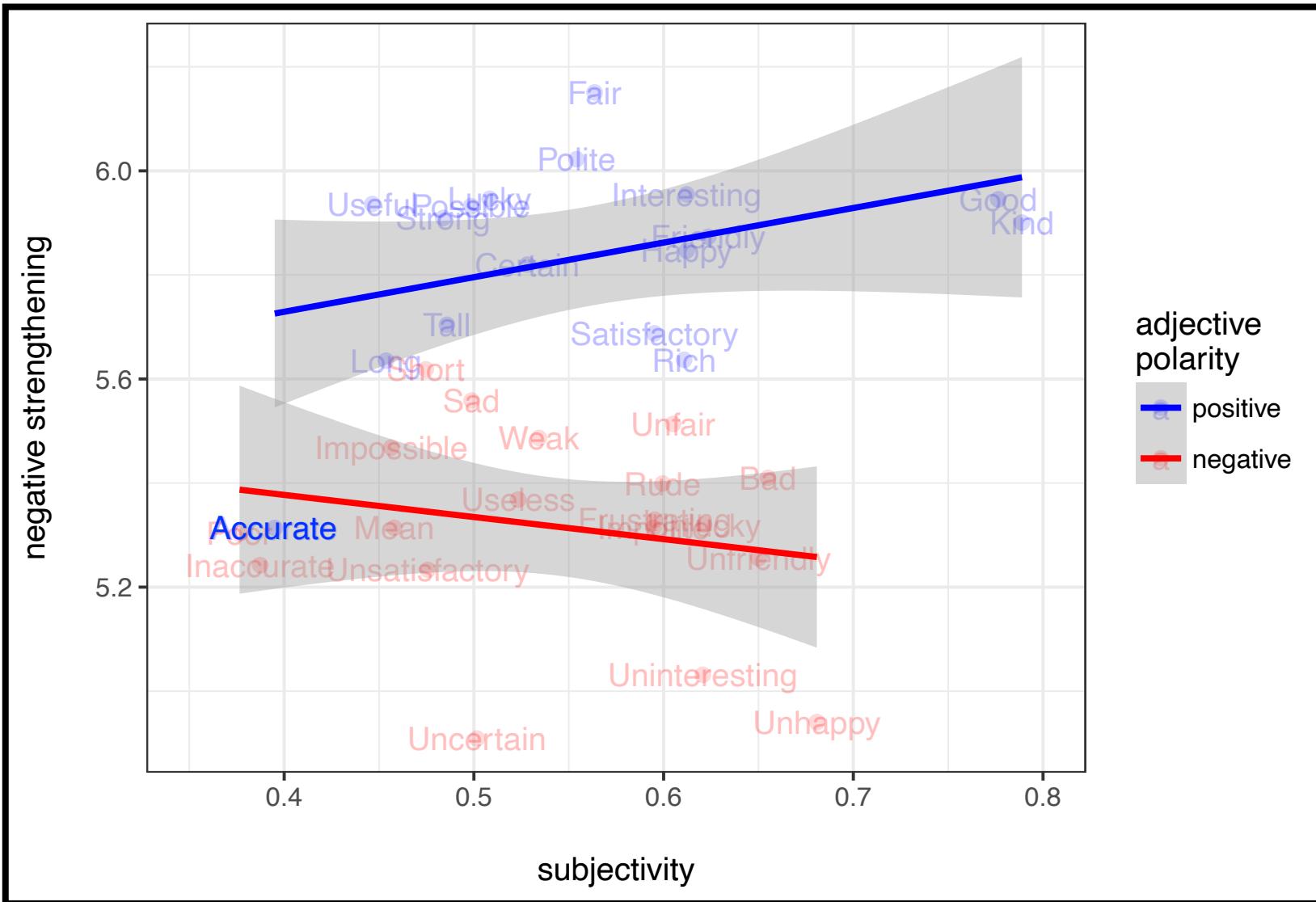
95% CI [0.002, 0.542]

**negative**

$r^2=0.04$

95% CI [0.000, 0.333]

# combined results

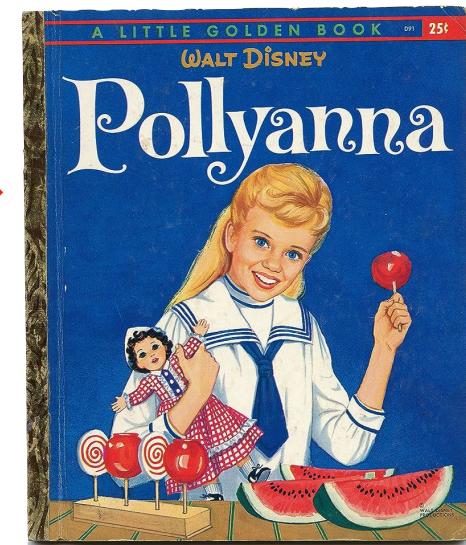
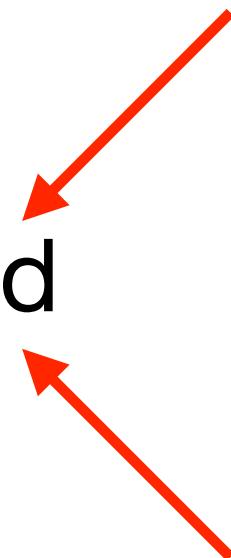
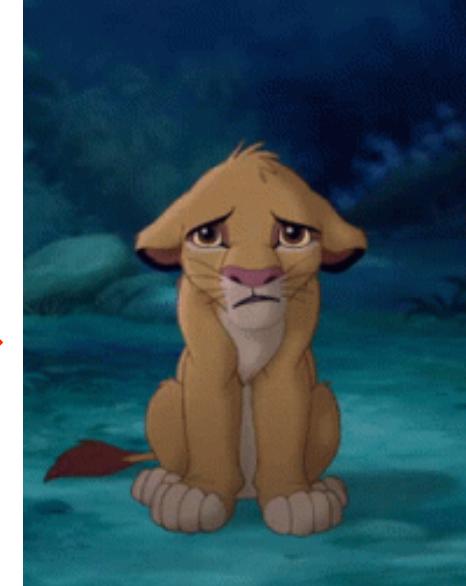


effect remains with  
removal of outlier!

**prediction:**

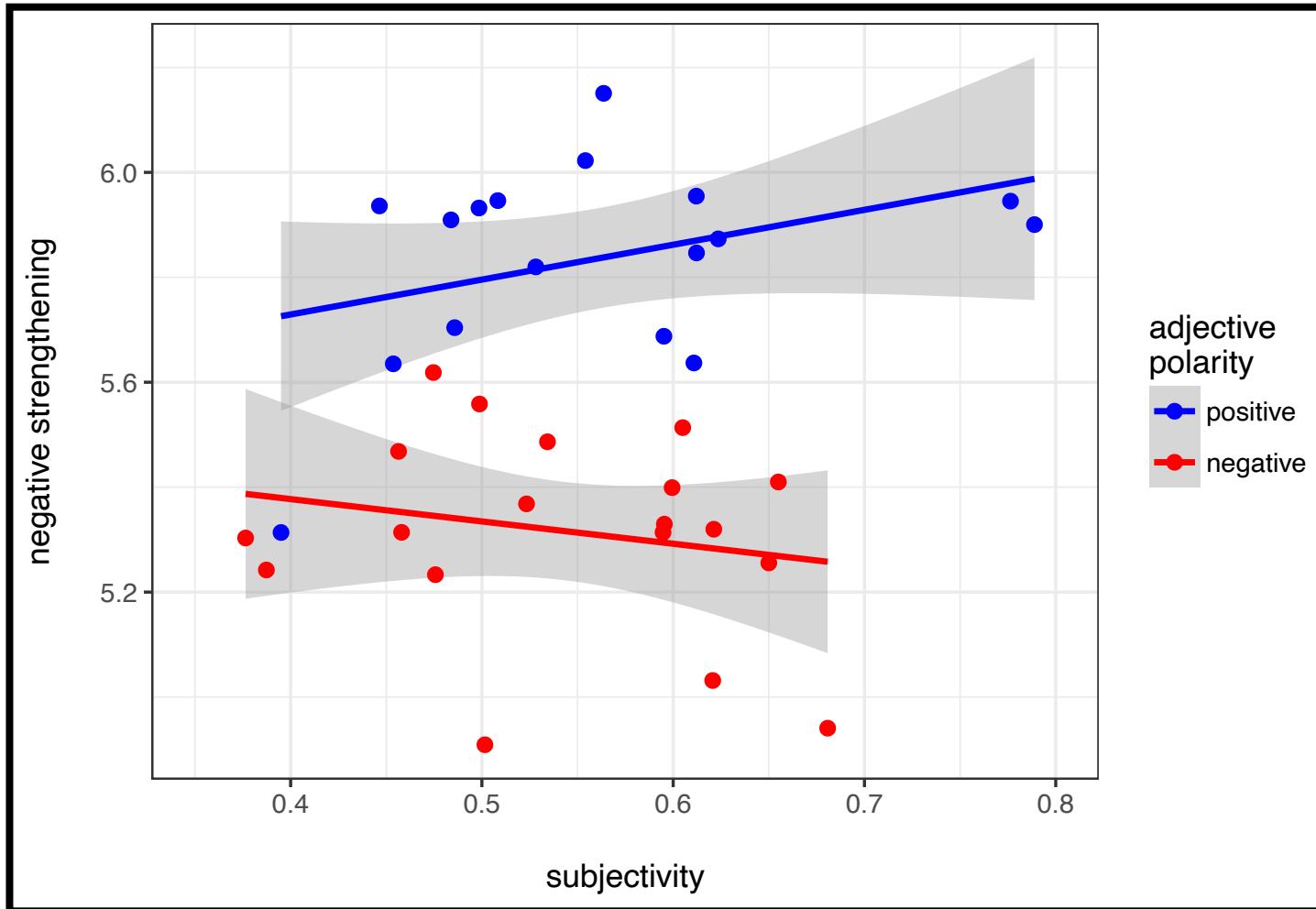
more negative strengthening  
with increased subjectivity

not good ≈ bad



# result:

more negative strengthening  
with increased subjectivity



but only for  
positive adjectives

not **good**  $\approx$  **bad**

not **bad**  $\approx$  **good**

takeaways

“specificity” as **subjectivity**

speakers exploit **loopholes**, especially if the conveyed meaning is **evaluatively negative**

negative strengthening driven by  
**semantic** and **social** factors

thank you!



the meaning lab  
@uci