Acceptability of English neopronouns

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Introduction

Neopronouns: neologistic pronouns (e.g. *ze, xe, ey,* or *fae*)
- Coined by users
- Less widely used than canonical pronouns (e.g. *he, she,* or *they)*

How do neopronoun ratings **compare with canonical pronouns** in comparable grammatical contexts?

How do **social variables** (such as age, gender, gender orientation, number of transgender/nonbinary acquaintances) affect the way people perceive neopronouns as natural-sounding and comprehensible?

Which neopronouns are rated as sounding **natural**? (Is **analogy** to canonical pronouns impactful?)
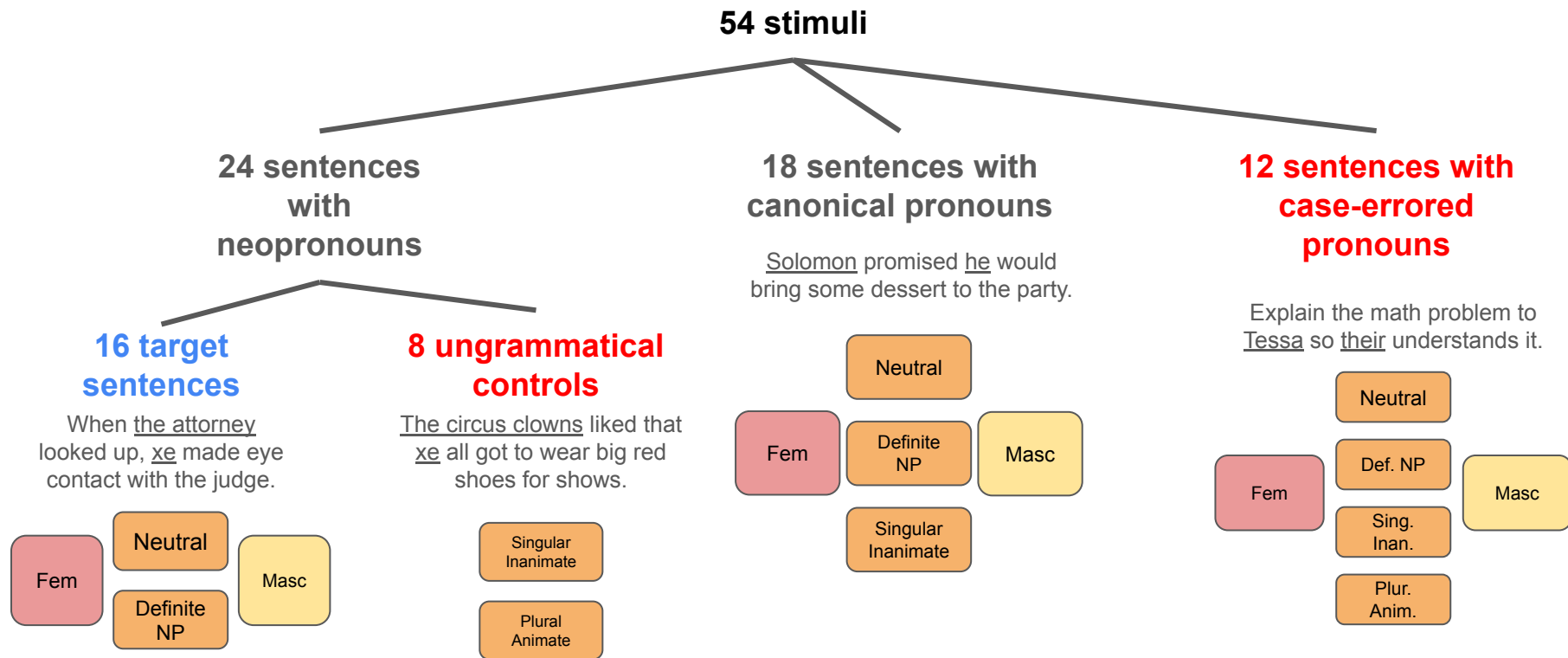
Background

Neopronouns are understudied – most research is very recent

Miltersen (2016)	Baron (2020)	Hekanaho (2020)
- Neopronoun users often coin their own pronouns to reflect a part of their identity, not always gender - Neopronouns do not carry overt gendered meaning - Neopronoun acceptance and use seems to be more prevalent online, suggesting a youth factor	- Search for new gender neutral pronouns began in the 1800s as an alternative to generic *he* (although *they* was ultimately chosen) - Belief that similarity to existing pronouns would ease implementation - Nonbinary people have used neopronouns since the 1800s	- Social factors that affect acceptability of singular *they* similarly affect acceptability of neopronouns, although neopronouns are less acceptable overall - Trans people and, to a lesser extent, cis women, are most accepting of neopronouns

Methods: Large-Scale Online Acceptability Survey

Likert-scale stimuli (1 = "completely unnatural" to 7 = "completely natural")

54 stimuli

24 sentences with neopronouns

18 sentences with canonical pronouns

Solomon promised he would bring some dessert to the party.

12 sentences with case-errored pronouns

Explain the math problem to Tessa so their understands it.

16 target sentences

When the attorney looked up, xe made eye contact with the judge.

8 ungrammatical controls

The circus clowns liked that xe all got to wear big red shoes for shows.

Fem

Neutral

Masc

Definite NP

Singular Inanimate

Plural Animate

Neutral

Fem

Definite NP

Masc

Singular Inanimate

Neutral

Fem

Def. NP

Masc

Sing. Inan.

Plur. Anim.

Social variables and ideological questions

Recruitment (n=1000): social media, email lists, word of mouth;
Requirements: over 18 years old, comfortably fluent users of English

Demographic questions

- Gender, age, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, pronouns, fluent languages
- Each demographic question had a **free response** and **"select all that apply"** component

Free response questions

- Metalinguistic commentary
  - Use of neopronouns
  - Stance on singular *they*
  - Thoughts on neopronouns
- Improvements for future studies

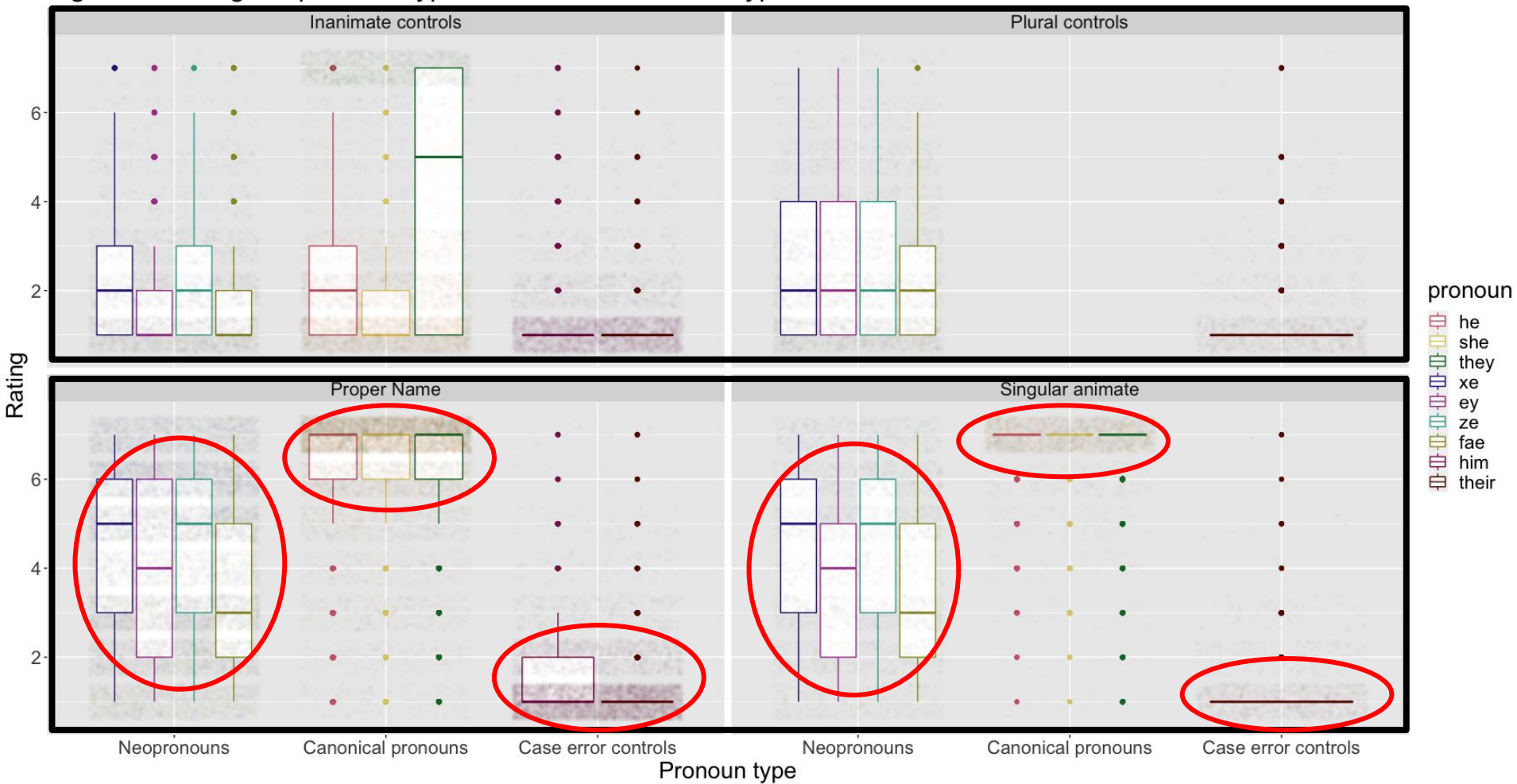Figure 1: Ratings of pronoun types for each antecedent type

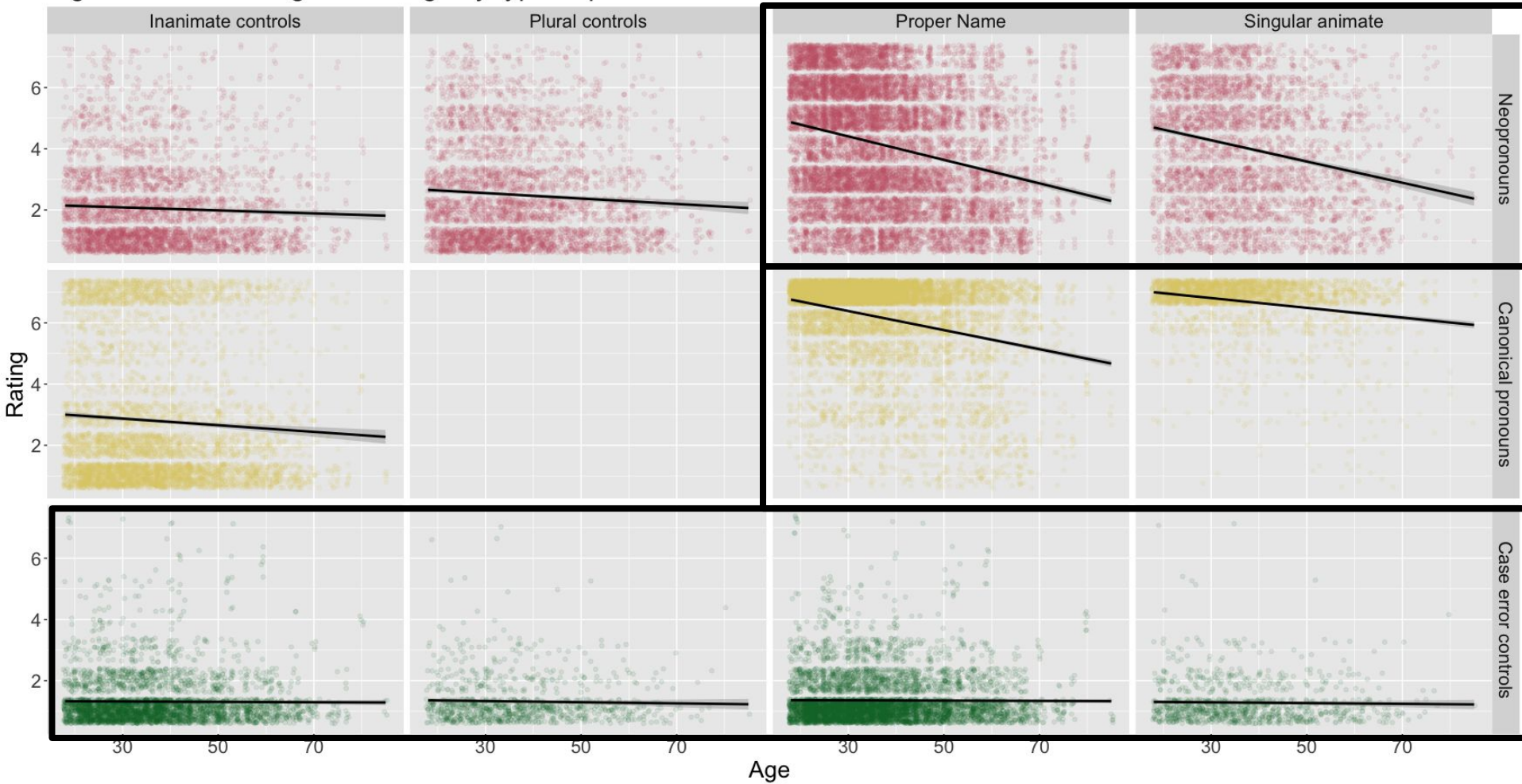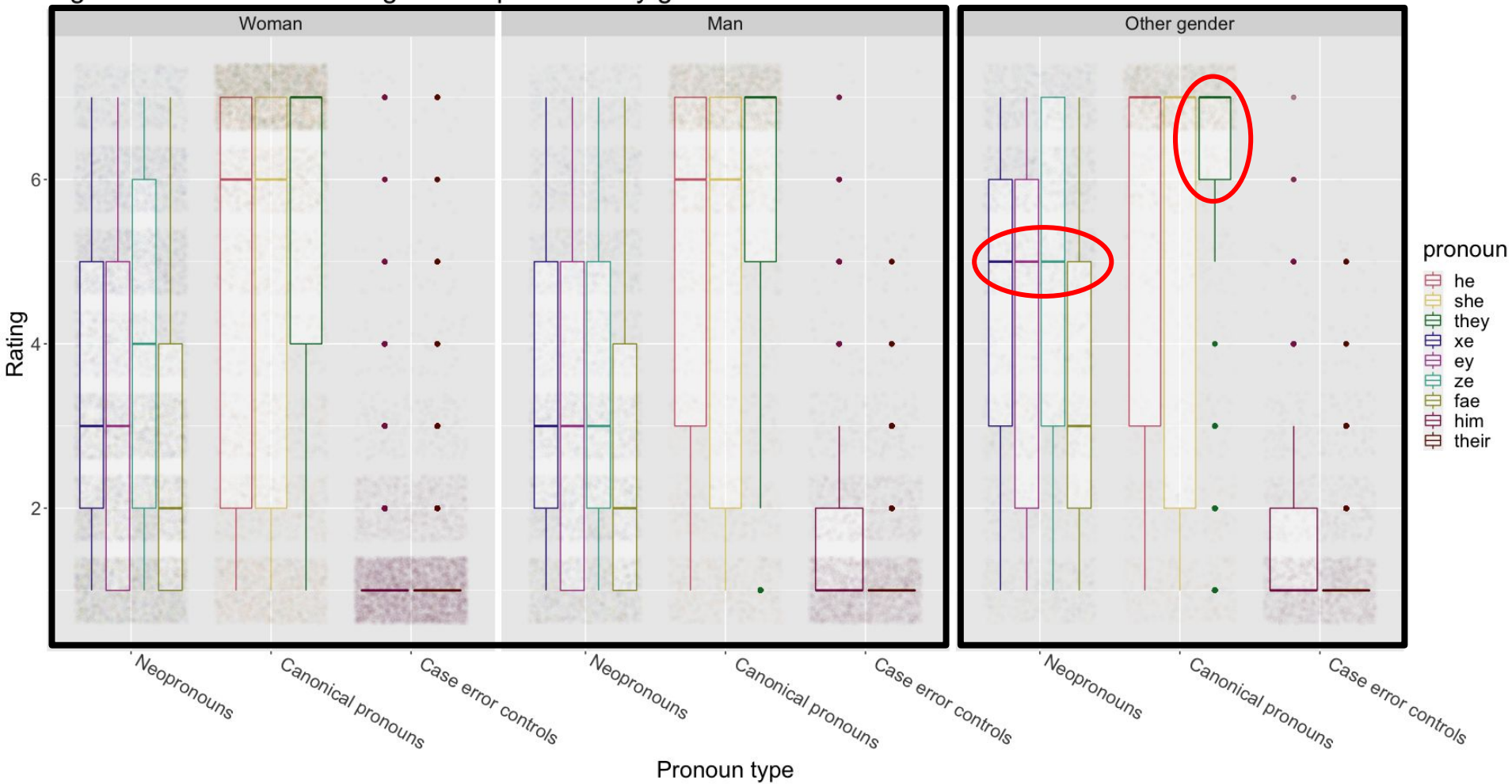Figure 2: Effect of age on ratings by type of pronoun and antecedent

Figure 3: Difference in ratings of neopronouns by gender

Responses to open questions: metalinguistic awareness

"I found it **easier to accept pronouns that sounded a little like the ones I would naturally use**, like xe for he" (Cisgender woman, 70)

"I voted sentences higher **if the pronoun had a phonetic resemblance to a name** ('fay') or a traditional pronoun (ze is like 'they' in a French accent)"
(Cisgender man, 30)

"xe/ze **naturally subbed** for he/she, while fae/ey naturally subbed in for they"
(Transgender non-binary person, 29)

"I think my grammaticality judgements were heavily influenced by **how similar the neopronoun was phonologically** to the 'conventional' he/she/they trinity."
(Cisgender non-binary man, 20)

Discussion

What does this mean for neologisms in functional categories?

Transparency is important

What does it mean for a neopronoun to be analogous to a canonical pronoun?

Is analogy the only route into a closed category?

Do the social differences indicate a change in progress?

Maybe - we are going to wait and see

Unlike singular *they*, multiple different neopronouns might be in competition

Neopronouns in general might be on the rise, rather than a specific neopronoun

Explicit reports may or may not match implicit behaviors

"I do not use neopronouns, but I would if someone wanted me to." (Cisgender woman, 73)

"If I were to interact with folks who preferred these pronouns, I wouldn't hesitate to do so." (Cisgender man, 36)

Is it part of the language if it's a very small minority using it?

Next steps

Soon:

- Follow-up to the pilot
  - Tweaking some demographics questions
  - Tweaking experimental design
- Interview study
  - Does production in naturalistic conversation track acceptability judgments?

Later:

- Production studies
- Self-reports
- Metalinguistic comments

Works cited

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Questions?

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Name Protocol

- All name-gender associations came from Social Security Administration data
- Feminine/Masculine names
  - Probability of the given name belonging to a female/male person: <1, > .9995
  - Chosen based on personal recognizability judgements with the intention of using a variety of different names
  - Data arranged by Derek Howard
- Gender-neutral names
  - "Gender neutral" → at least a third of people with the name are male, at least a third are female
  - Used most common names from this subset, regardless of the gap between male and female recipients of the name
  - Data arranged by Andrew Flowers

Demographics

	FREE RESPONSE	**SELECT ALL THAT APPLY** ("For the purposes of this study, which of these groups would you like to be included in?")
GENDER	What is your gender?	● woman ● man ● non-binary ● genderqueer ● genderfluid ● agender ● demigender ● do not wish to answer ● questioning/unsure ● none of these apply ○ transgender ○ gender-nonconforming ○ cisgender ○ other (enter) ○ none of these apply
SEXUAL ORIENTATION	What is your sexual orientation?	● gay ● lesbian ● bisexual ● asexual ● heterosexual ● straight ● pansexual ● questioning/unsure ● none of these apply
PRONOUNS		● he/him ● she/her ● they/them ● xe/xyr ● fae/faer ● ey/em ● ze/hir ● other (enter)

Metalinguistic free response

- What elements of these sentences **stood out to you**, and was there anything you'd consider changing?

- Have you **heard of neopronouns**? In what context/where did you learn about them?

- Do you think it's **bad grammar to use the pronoun *they*** to refer to only one person?

- How **frequently do you use neopronouns** (such as xe/xem, fae/faer, ze/hir, ey/em) in your daily life? For yourself or for others?

- Do you think **English language would benefit** from ways to refer to people outside of male and female genders?

Figure 2: Effect of age on ratings by type of pronoun and antecedent