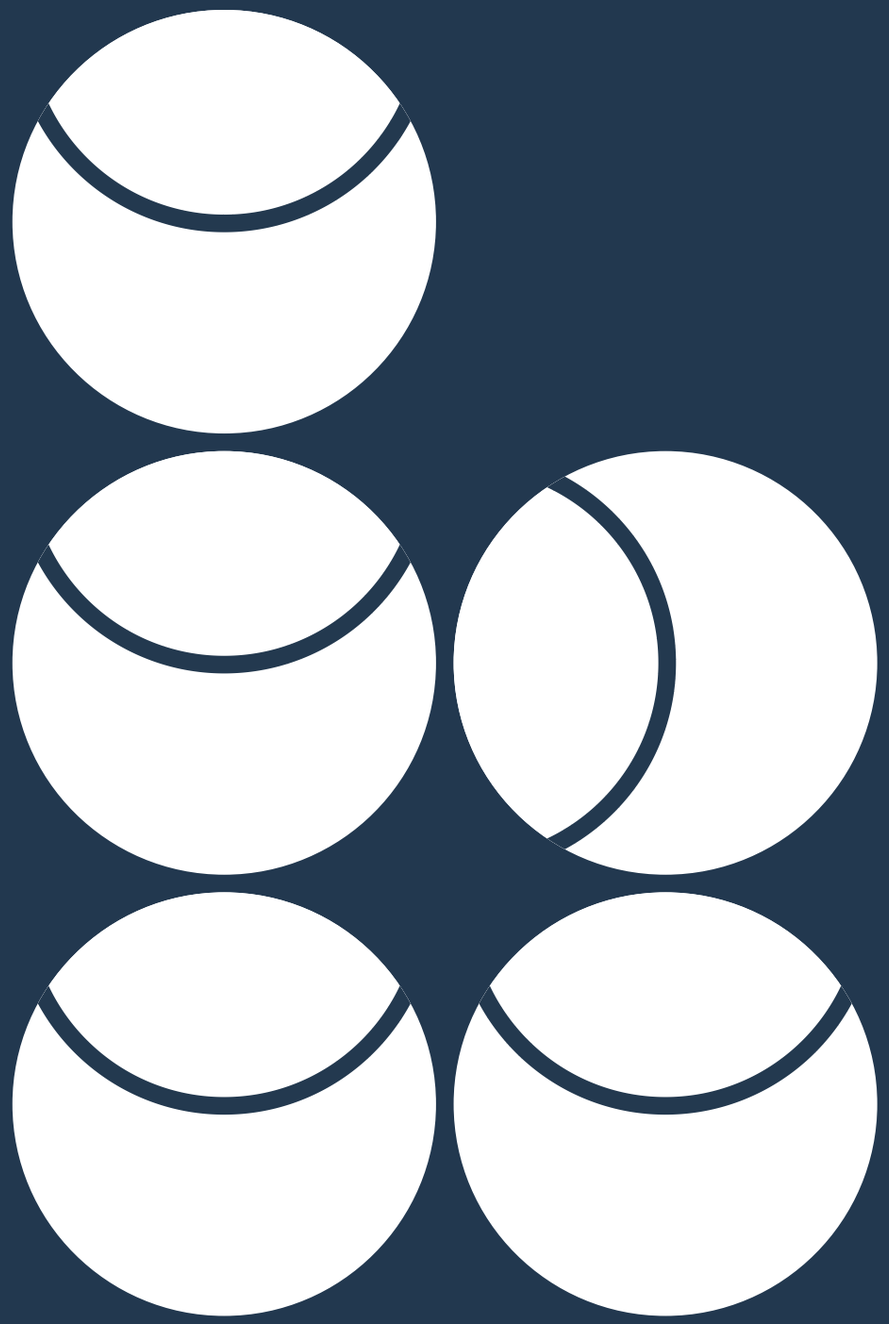

Setting the tone

How talk reveals relational structures of power

Peter McMahan
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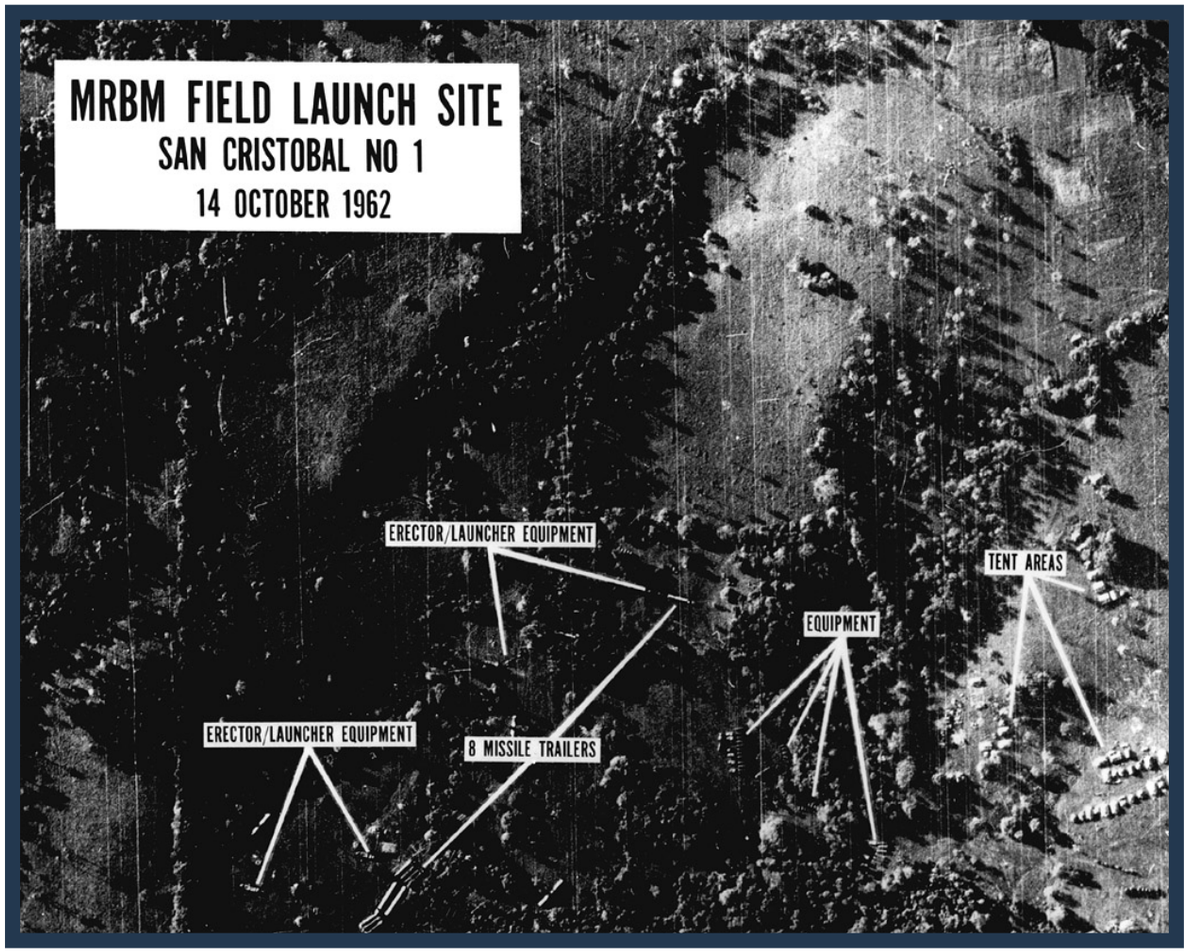
Relational structures of power

1. ExComm and the Cuban Missile Crisis
2. A model of linguistic accommodation
3. Individual orientation and group structure

1. ExComm and the Cuban Missile Crisis

The ExComm



October 1962: US intelligence discovered evidence of Soviet missiles in Cuba.

President Kennedy convened the ad-hoc Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm) to advise on the US response.

The ExComm

Consequential
Potential for nuclear war

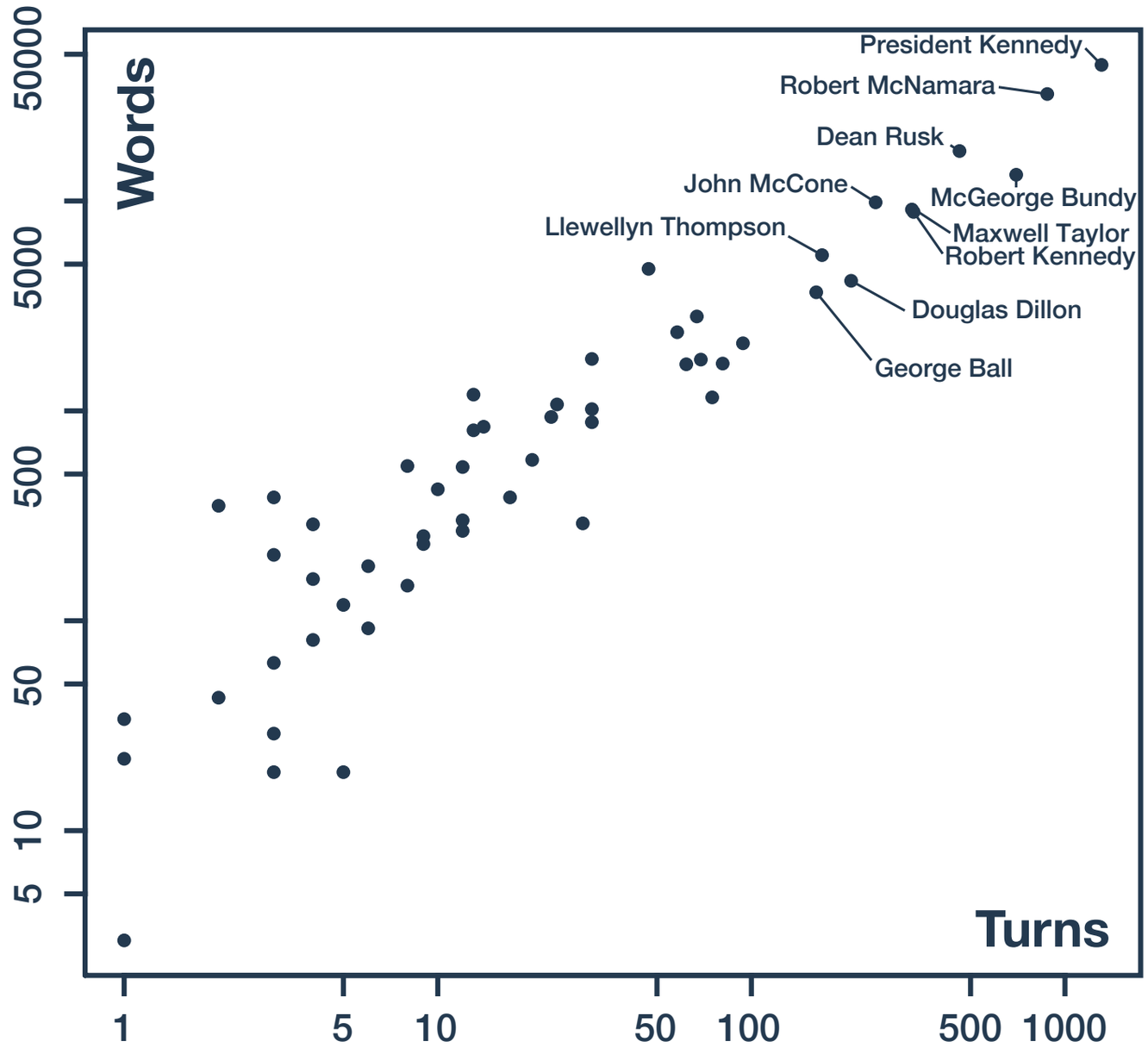
Ad-hoc
Situation negotiated *de novo*

Informal
Candid talk encouraged

Recorded
Most meetings secretly taped

The ExComm

- 16 transcribed meetings over 13 days
- 54 attributed speakers (16 “core” participants)
- 5,772 distinct conversation turns, dominated by a few active participants



2. A model of linguistic accommodation (style matching)

Style matching

Individuals adjust their ‘style’ of communication to fit different social situations (code switching).

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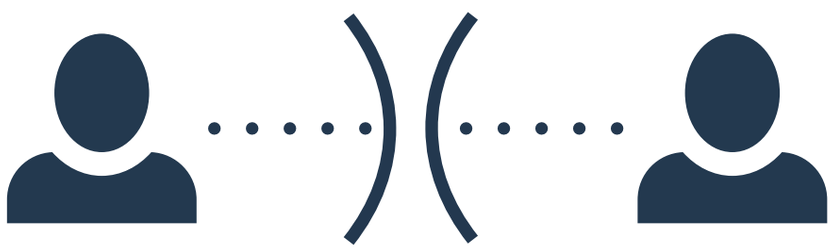

Individuals match linguistic style to conversation partners’.

Style matching

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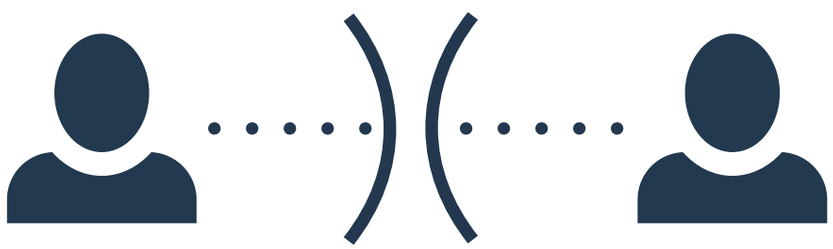

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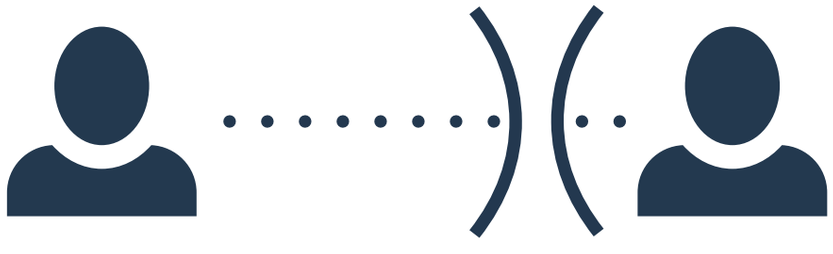

Asymmetry in linguistic accommodation associated with differences in power and status.

Defining linguistic style

Function words

Auxiliary verbs	*(should, must, may, …)*
Conjunctions	*(however, then, and, …)*
Determiners	*(a, any, per, …)*
Prepositions	*(above, of, through, …)*
Pronouns	*(them, mine, anyone, …)*
Quantifiers	*(many, each, some, …)*

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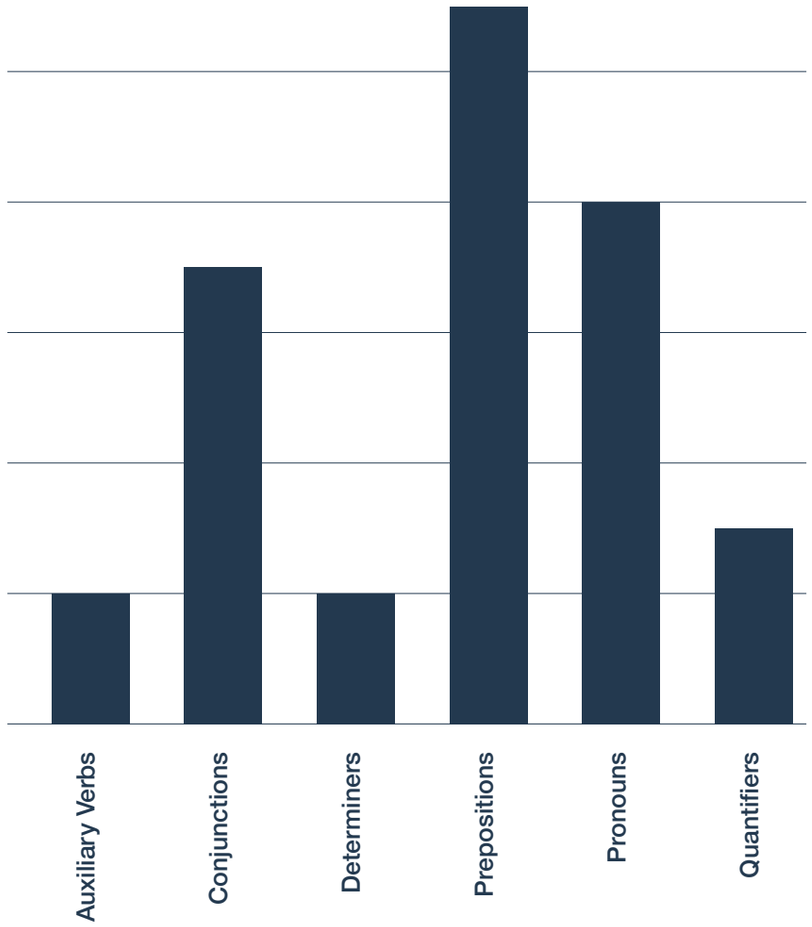
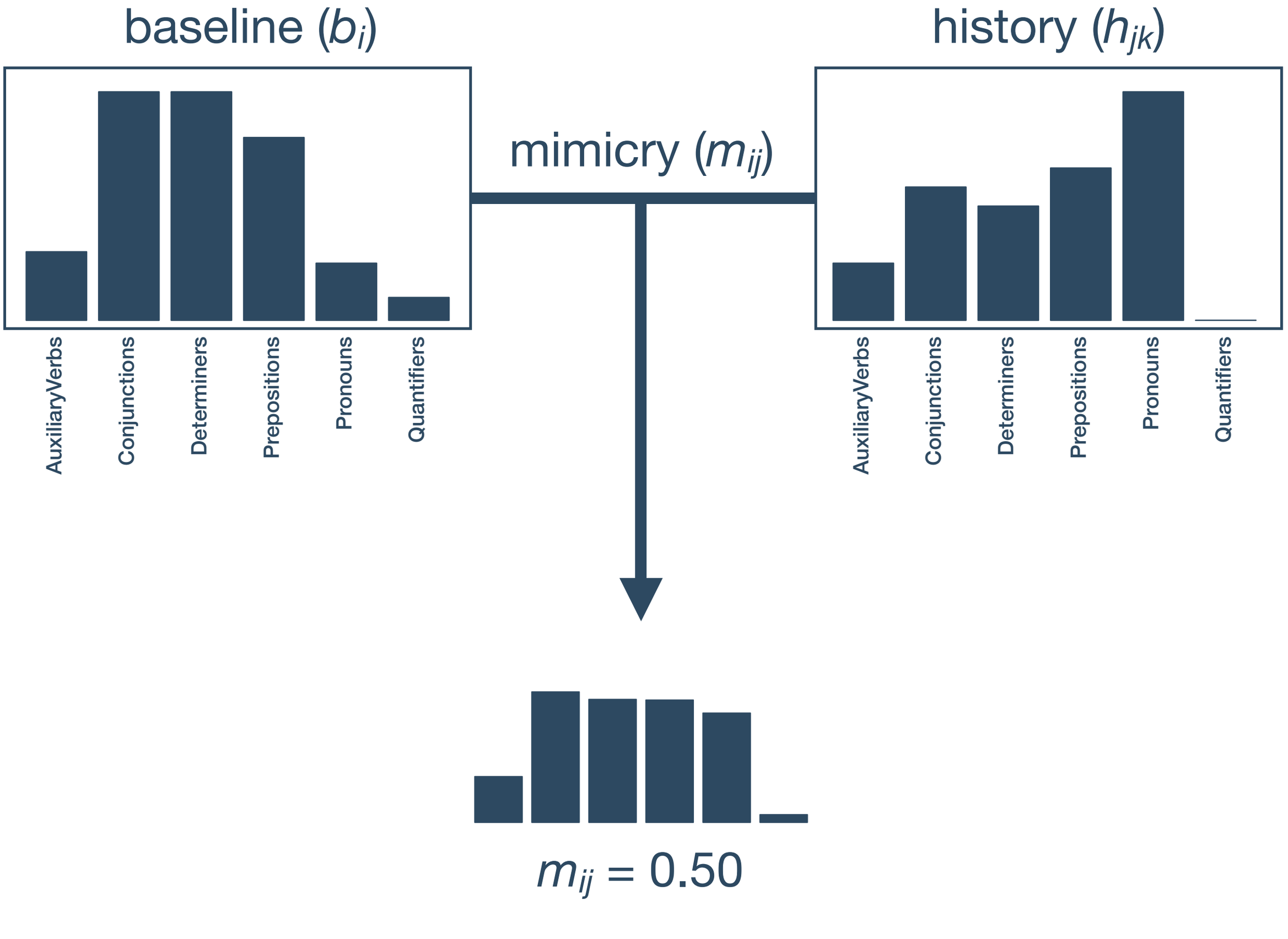
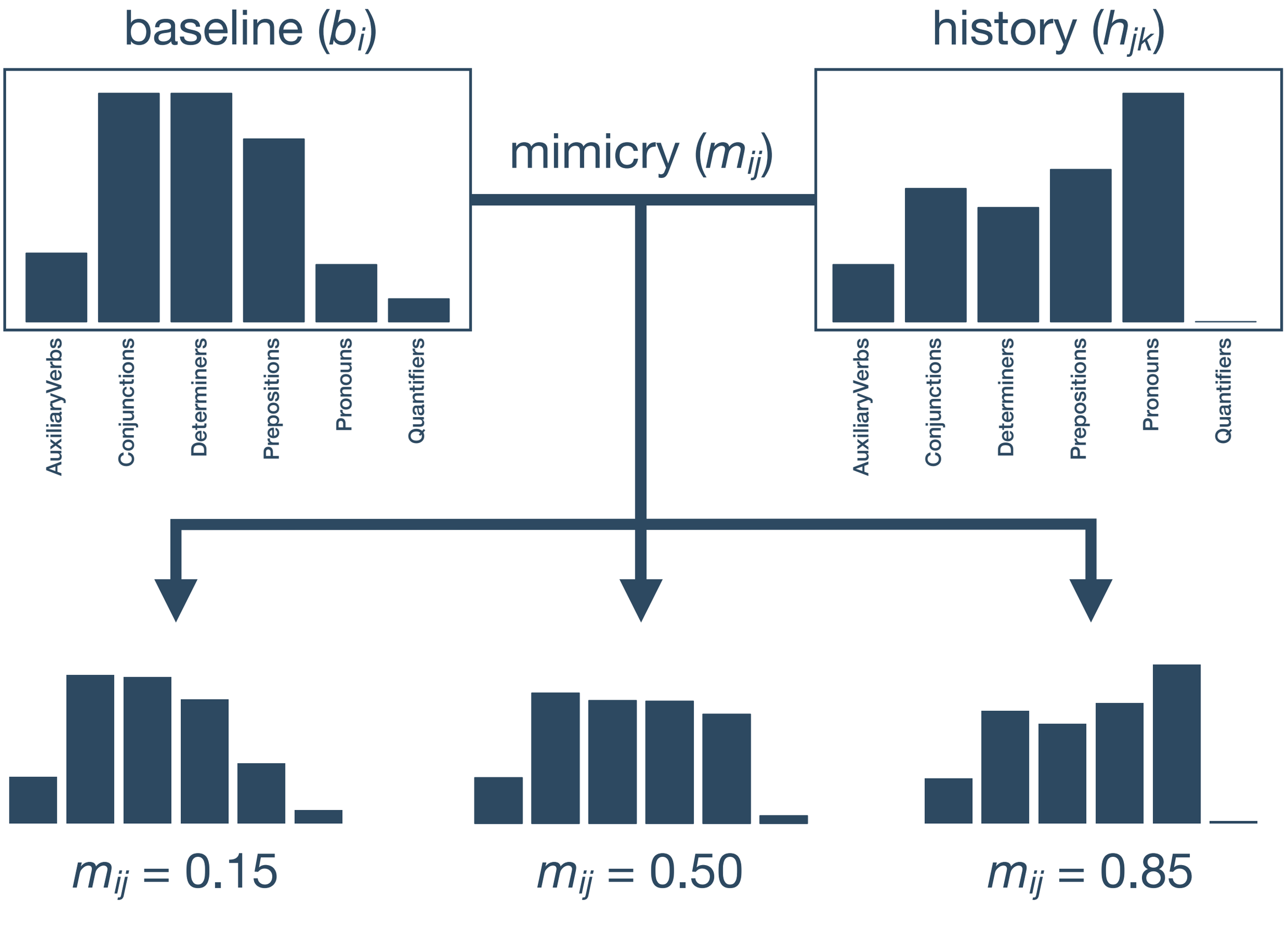
You can’t just throw more of what we’re now doing, because … And then we need to have two things ready: A government for Cuba, because we’re going to need one after we go in with bomber aircraft. And, secondly, plans for how to respond to the Soviet Union in Europe because sure as hell they’re going to do something there.



Model


baseline (b_i)
history (h_{jk})
mimicry (m_{ij})
AuxiliaryVerbs
Conjunctions
Determiners
Prepositions
Pronouns
Quantifiers
AuxiliaryVerbs
Conjunctions
Determiners
Prepositions
Pronouns
Quantifiers
$m_{ij} = 0.50$

Model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AuxiliaryVerbs
Conjunctions
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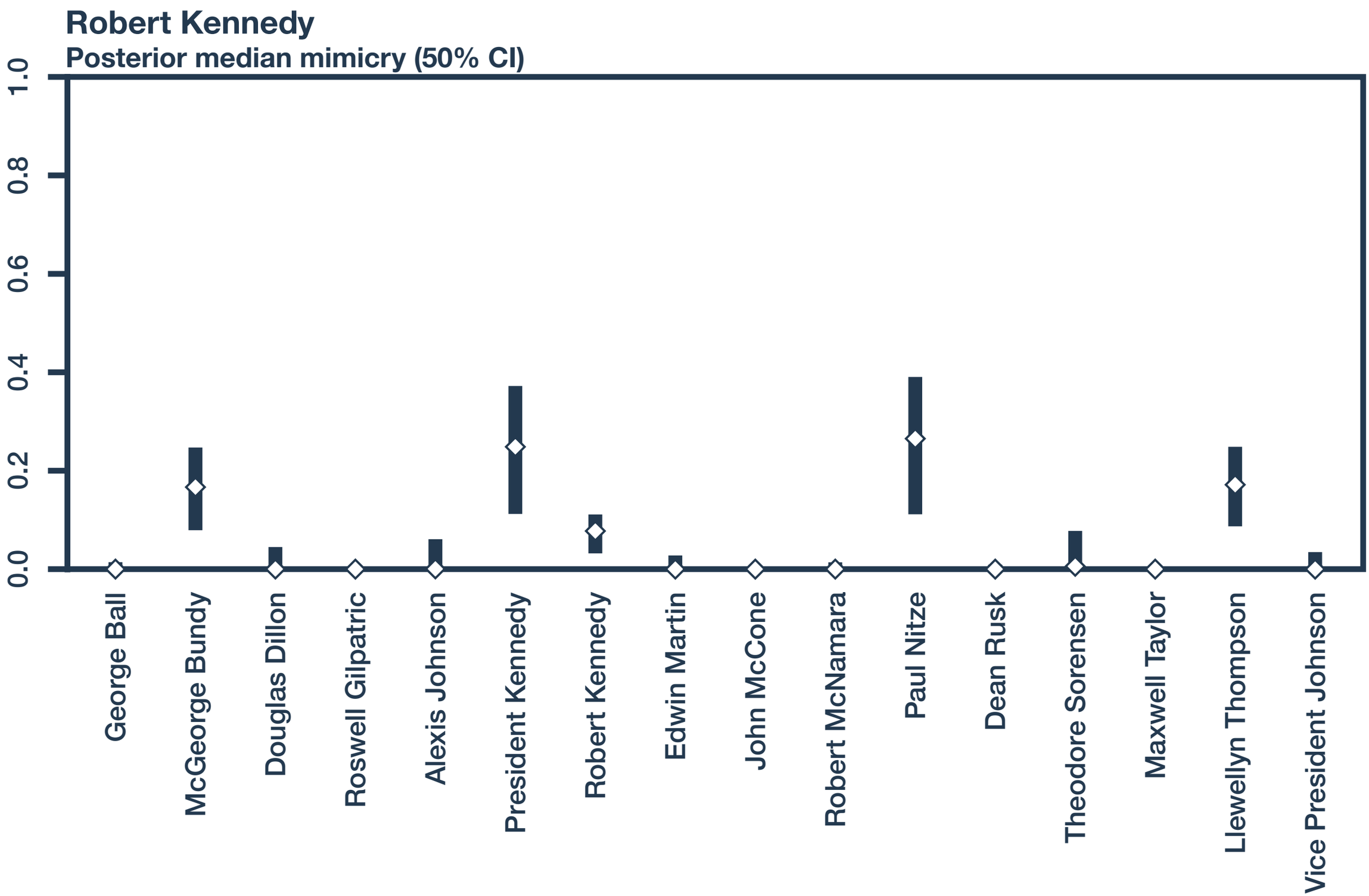
Pronouns
Quantifiers
$m_{ij} = 0.15$
$m_{ij} = 0.50$
$m_{ij} = 0.85$

3. Individual orientation and group structure (results)

Results: individual orientation



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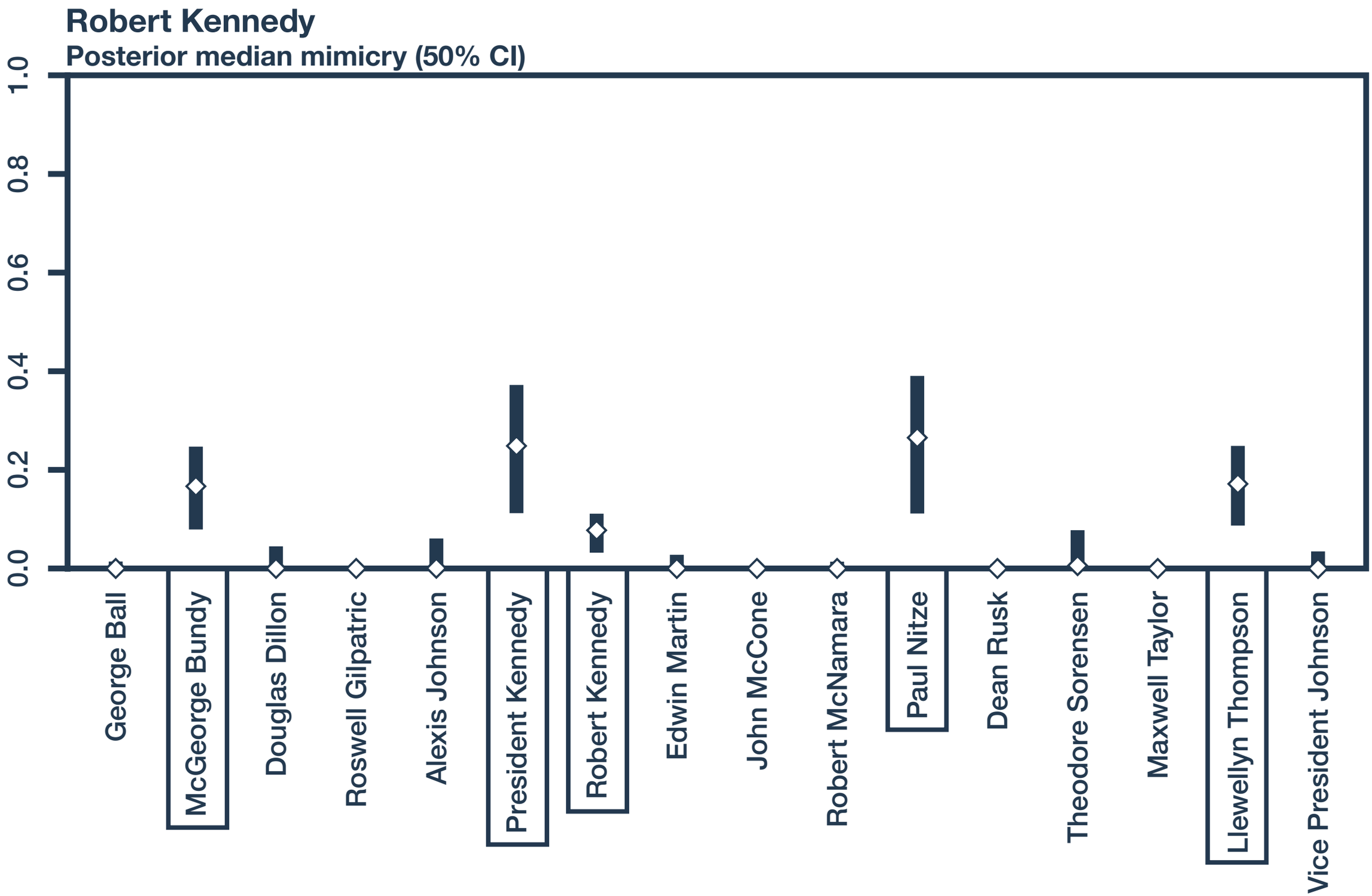

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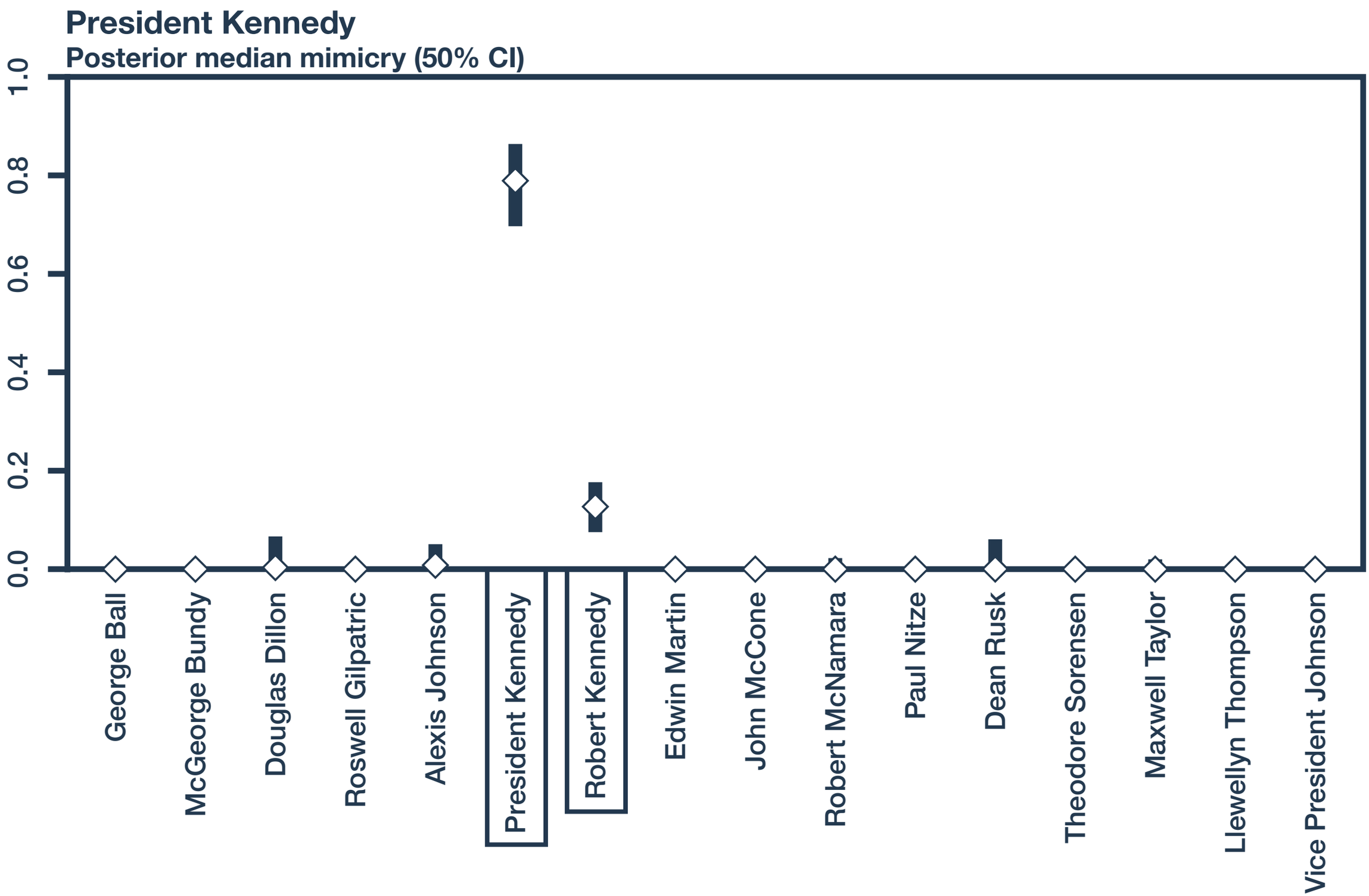
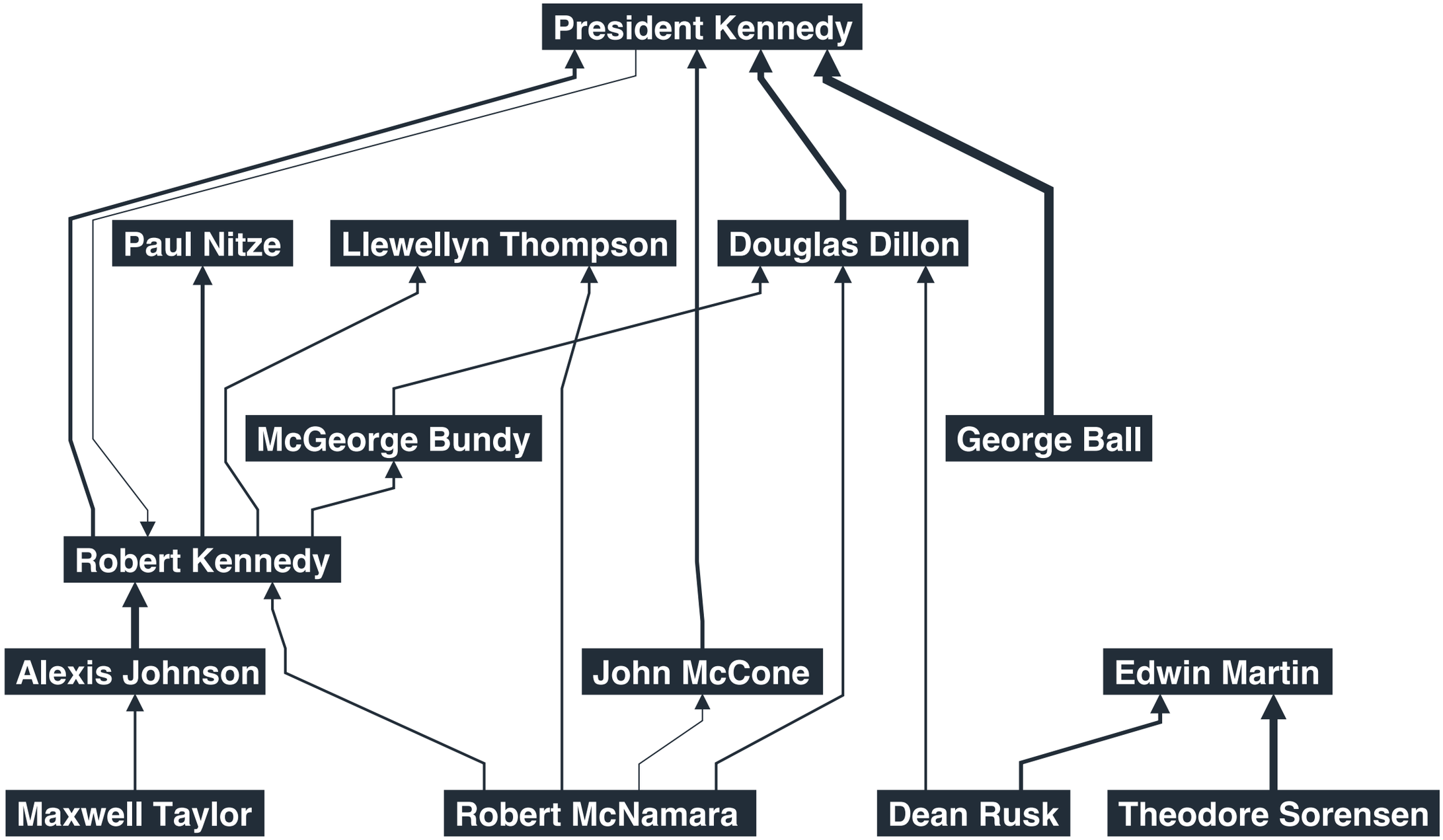


Results: global structure



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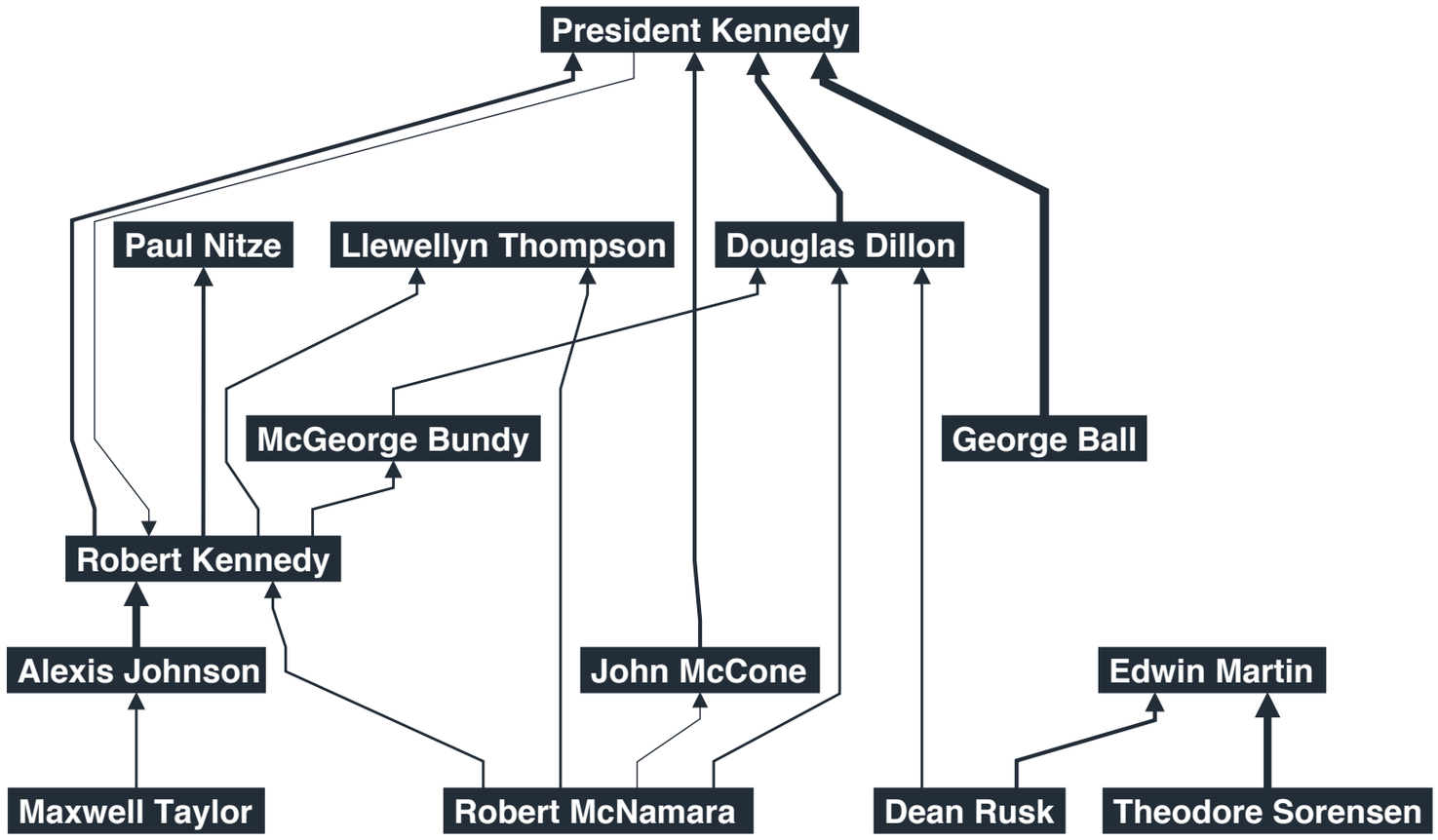


- Strict hierarchy (except President and Bobby); President Kennedy at the ‘top’
- McNamara versus Rusk
- Positions reflective of social class divides

Limitations

Spoken language is not the whole picture

- Non-verbal interactions (body language, facial expressions, physical presence, …)
- Non-human elements (intelligence reports, military equipment, written messages, …)

Conflation of statistical and situational uncertainty

- ‘Holes’ in the structural picture could represent lack of interpersonal engagement *or* a lack of statistical power

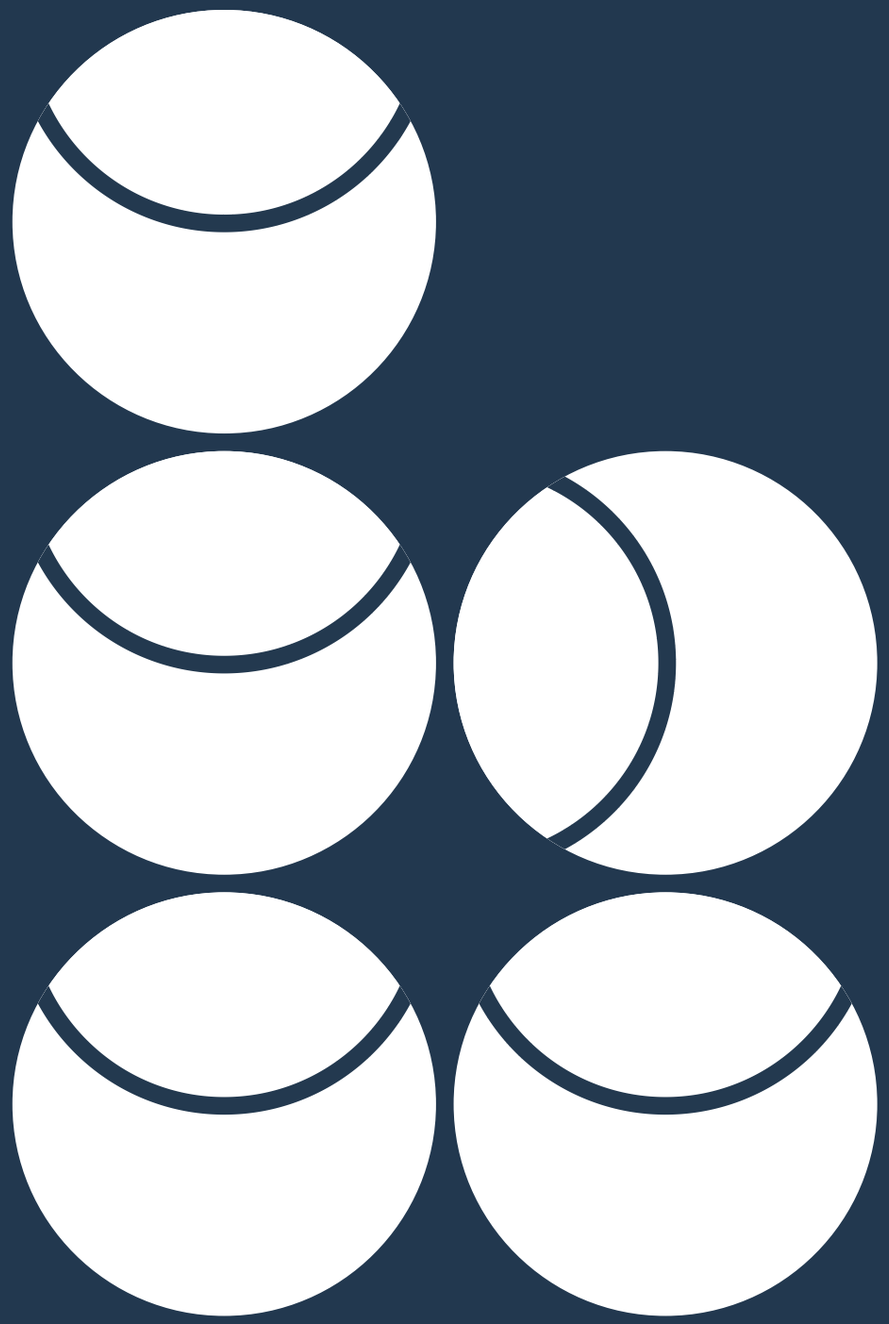
Take-away

Language reveals individuals' relations to group

- Definition of the situation at the intersubjective level
- Orientation of each participant to group as whole'

Structure emergent from relational stances

- Hierarchy is an empirical outcome rather than assumption of model/theory
- Rich structural characteristics



Thank you!

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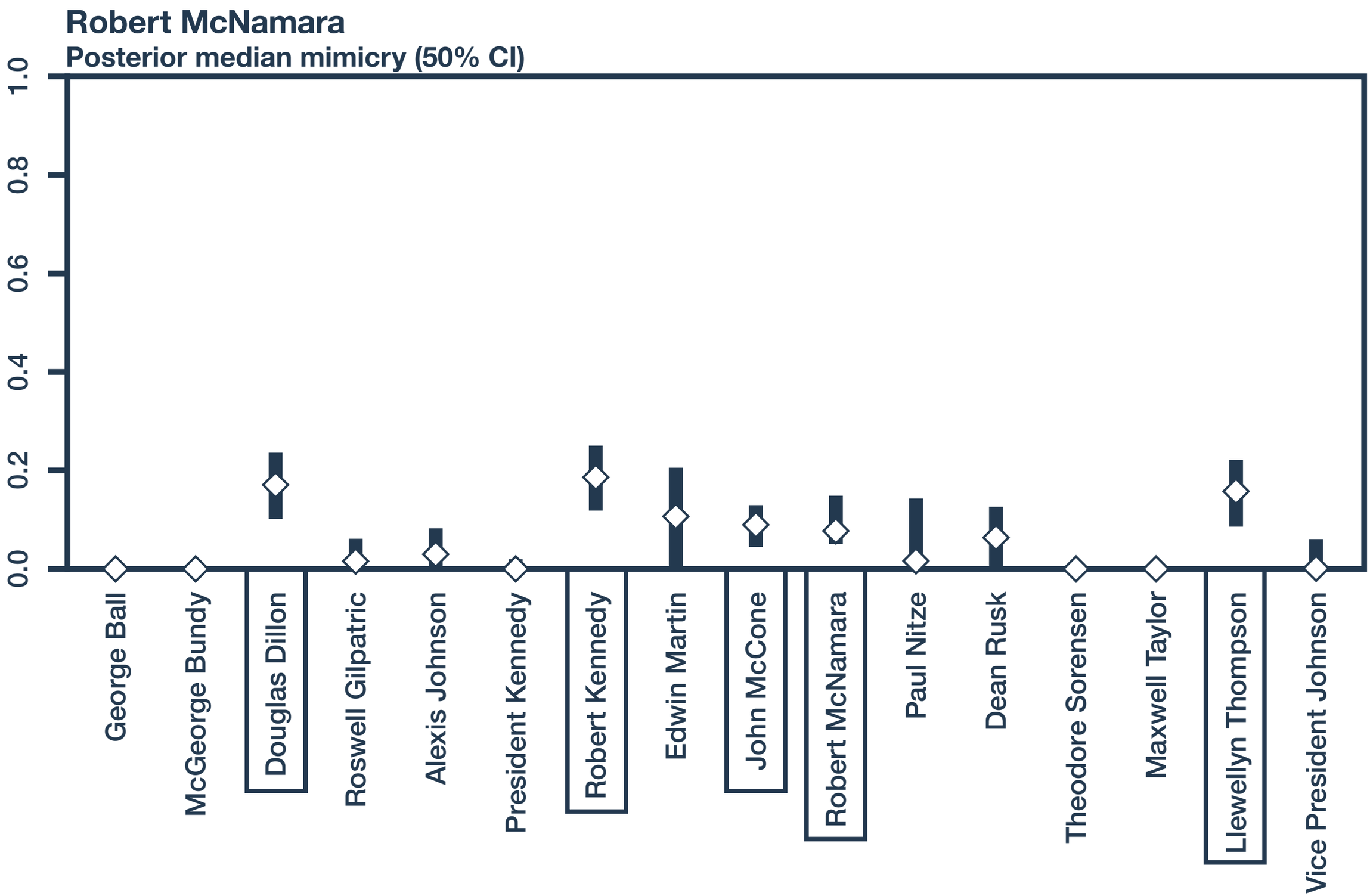

Key ExComm membership

George Ball	Undersecretary of State	Northwestern
McGeorge Bundy	National Security Advisor	Yale
Douglas Dillon	Secretary of Treasury	Harvard
Roswell Gilpatric	Deputy Secretary of Defense	Yale
Alexis Johnson	Deputy Undersecretary for Political Affairs	Occidental College
Lyndon Johnson	Vice President	Southwest Texas State Teachers College
John F. Kennedy	President	Harvard
Robert Kennedy	Attorney General	Harvard
Edwin Martin	Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs	Northwestern
John McCone	Director of Central Intelligence	Berkeley
Robert McNamara	Secretary of Defense	Berkeley
Paul Nitze	Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs	Harvard
Dean Rusk	Secretary of State	Davidson College
Theodore Sorensen	Special counsel to president	University of Nebraska, Lincoln
Maxwell Taylor	Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff	Kansas City Polytechnic Institute / West Point
Llewellyn Thompson	Former ambassador to the Soviet Union	University of Colorado

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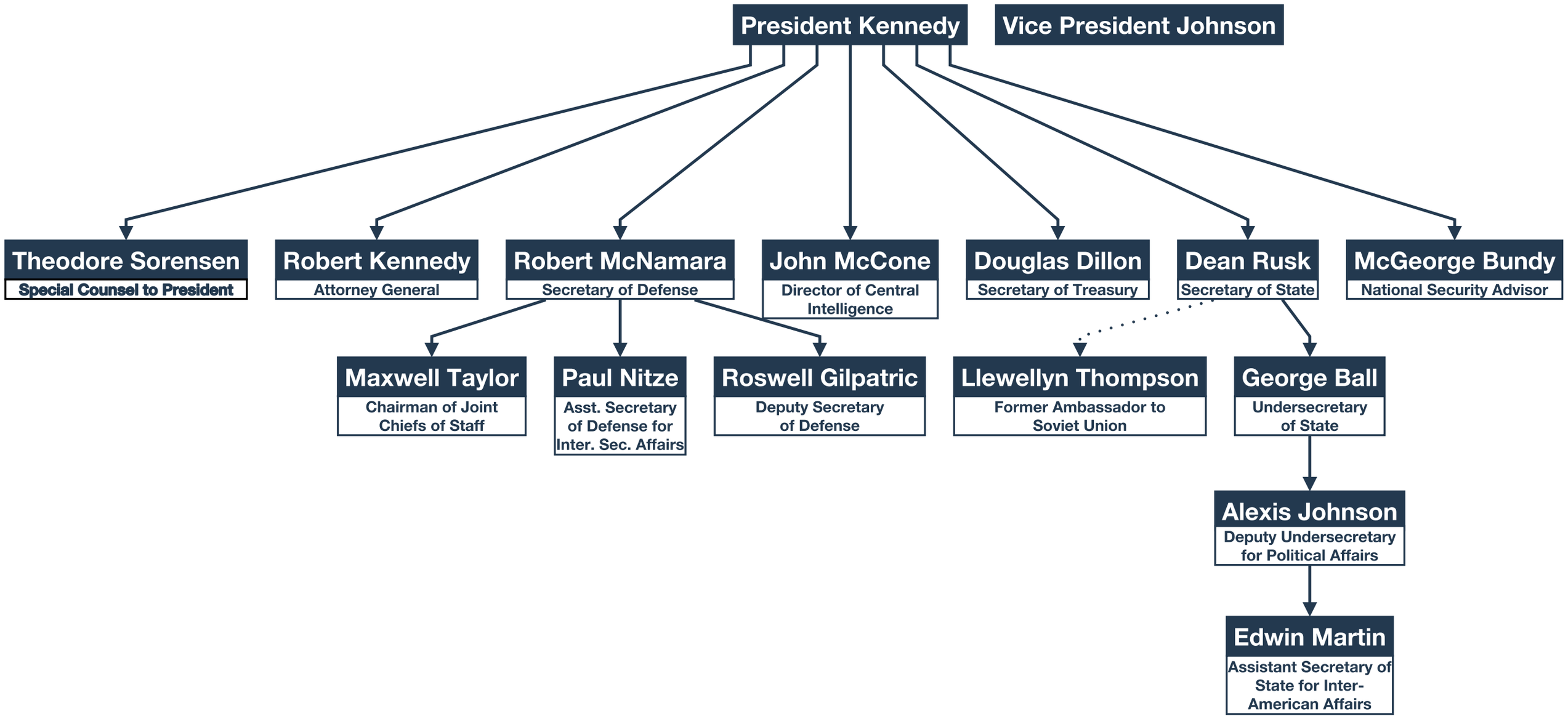


Model

$$\mathbf{h}_{kj} = \frac{\sum_{\kappa \in U(j,k)} \mathbf{f}_\kappa}{1 \cdot \sum_{\kappa \in U(j,k)} \mathbf{f}_\kappa}$$

$$\mathbf{f}_k \sim \text{Multinomial}\left(m_{\bar{k},\bar{k}} \mathbf{b}_{\bar{k}} + \sum_{j \neq \bar{k}} m_{\bar{k},j} \mathbf{h}_{jk} \; ; \; \sigma_k \right)$$

$$\mathbf{b}_i \sim \text{Dirichlet}(a_b)$$

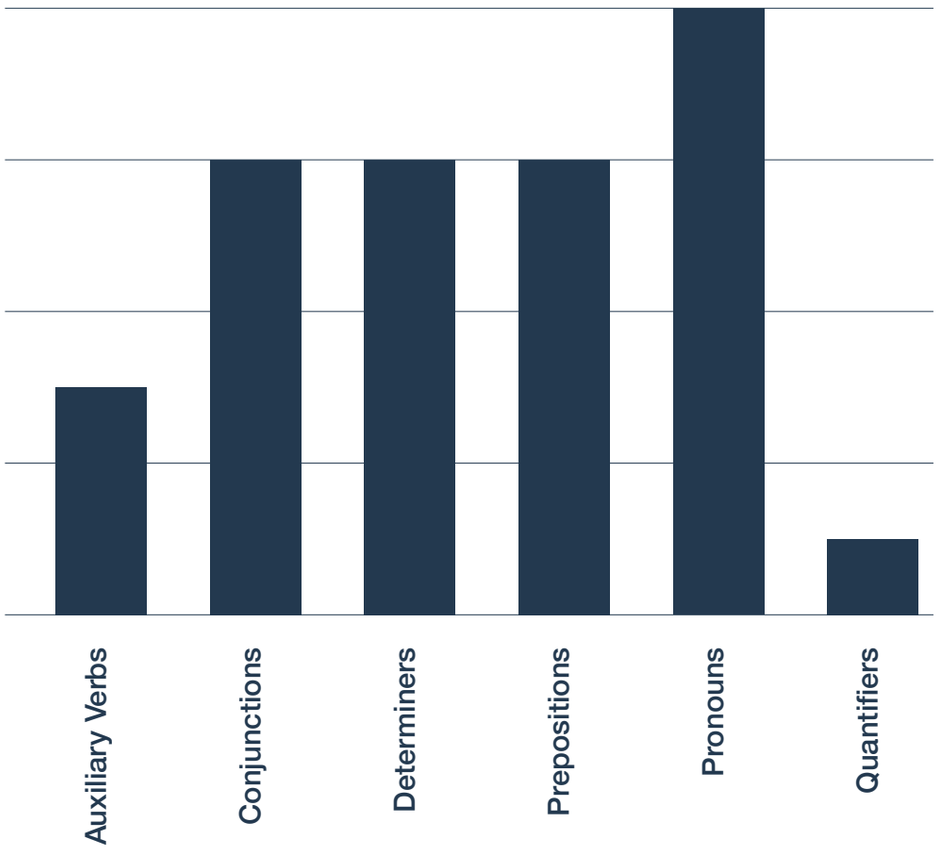
$$\mathbf{m}_{ij} \sim \text{Dirichlet}(a_m)$$

- $\mathbf{f}_k$: function word count of utterance k
- $\mathbf{h}_{kj}$: cumulative function word count by person j prior to utterance k in current meeting
- $\mathbf{b}_i$: baseline style of person j (unobserved)
- $\mathbf{m}_{i,j}$: degree to which person i mimics person j

Defining linguistic style

Maxwell Taylor:

Mr. President, I should say that the Chiefs and the commanders feel so strongly about the dangers inherent in the limited strike that they would prefer taking no military action rather than to take that limited first strike. They feel that it's opening up the United States to attacks which they can't prevent, if we don't take advantage of surprise.



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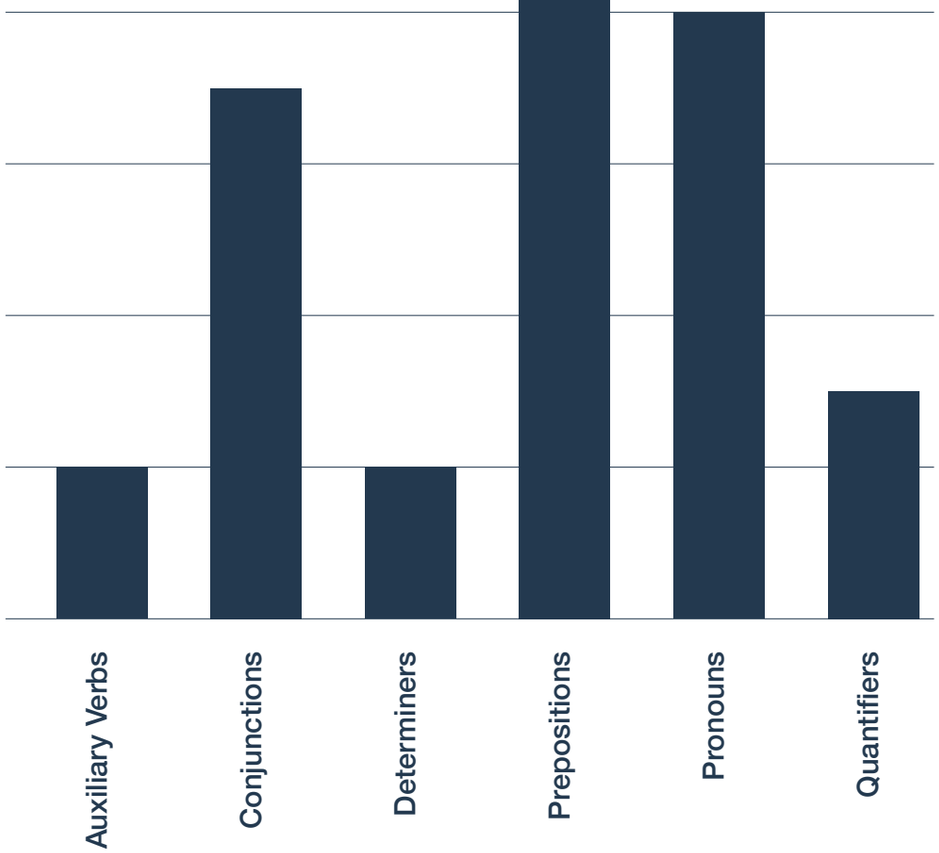
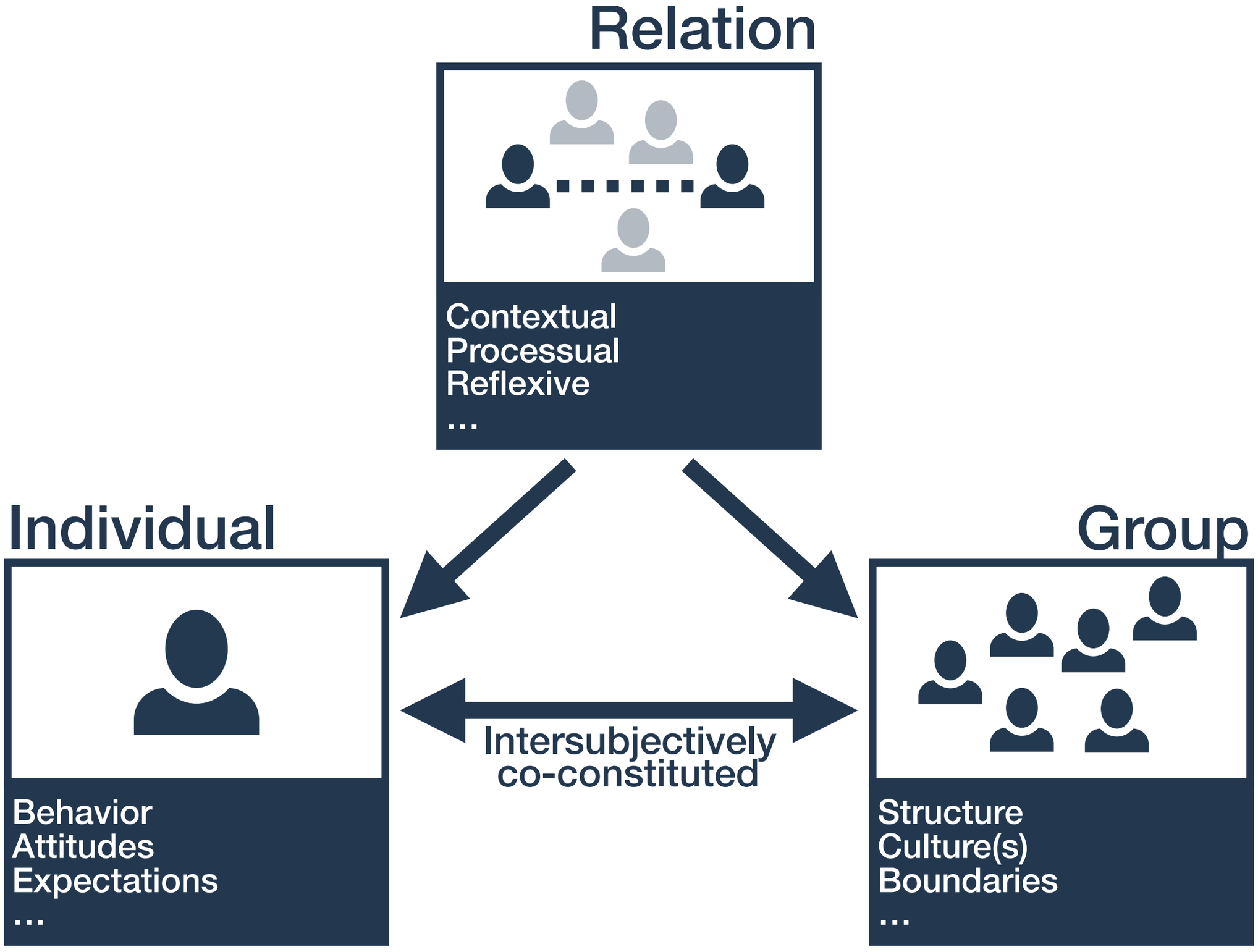


Relational power structures



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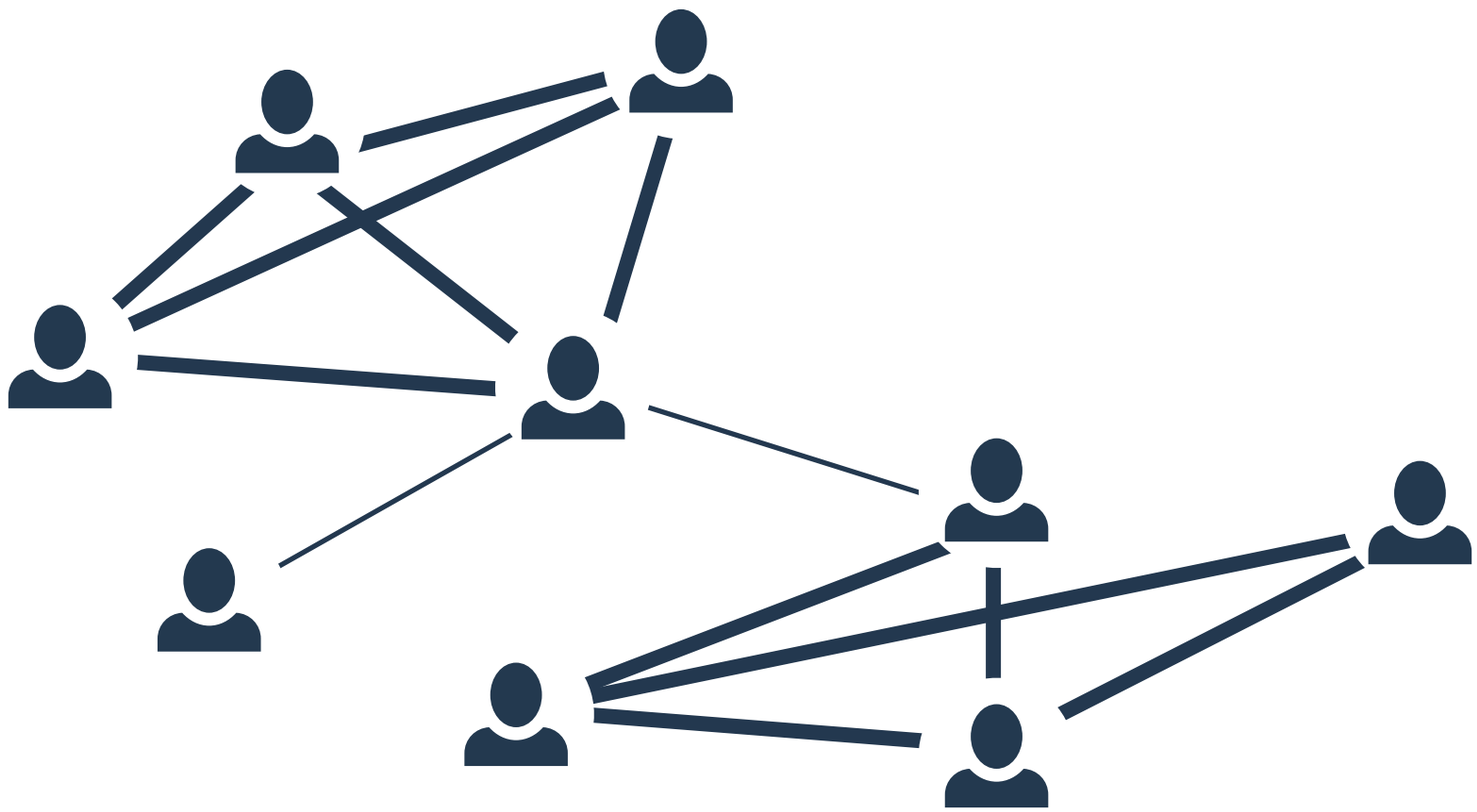

Networks as relational representations are often lacking

- Self-report (e.g. name generators)
  "Flattened" representations
  Disregard process, context

- Transactional (e.g. email traces)
  Focus on individual choice (often)
  Actor-oriented

Conversational traces

Natural language

- Empirical trace of unobserved aspects of human relations
  Reflect history, affect, social origins, etc.
- Relational structures are negotiated through talk
  Patterns of relations are influenced by observable, reflexive features of expression.
- Language is sensitive to context
  Conversations are process-based and react to changes in tone or situation.

Language use as relation

- *Structure based on process, meaning, situation*