

Language Use and Understanding

CSP 502

Wednesday Bushong

A: Do you want coffee?

B: I'd love some *caffeine*.

Does B want coffee?

How do you know?

Pragmatics

- The study of how we understand language beyond the *literal* meaning

What are the 'rules' of conversation?

- Politeness (Brown & Levinson)
- Conversational maxims (Grice)

Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson)

- We all have a public 'face'
- We want everyone to be thought of positively, so we are always trying to 'save face' or 'give face'

Politeness

Can you pass the salt?

Is the salt at your end of the table?

Indirect request to pass salt in order to be polite

Politeness

A: How did Louisa's presentation go?

B: Well, she's had a cold for the last two weeks and she missed the bus into work...

→ Louisa's presentation probably did not go well

B is 'giving face' to Louisa by:

- not directly saying her presentation was bad
- giving an explanation that places the blame of the bad presentation on external factors

- These hidden meanings are called implicatures
- Grice's Maxims give us a guide for how to derive these meanings

Gricean Maxims

- Assume your interlocuter is *rational* and *cooperative*
- Maxims for good communication:
 - Quality – tell the truth/don't lie
 - Quantity – don't say too little and don't say too much
 - Relevance – say something related to the conversation
 - Manner – say things in a clear way

Quality

- Try to make your contribution true
- Truthfulness: Don't say what you believe to be false
- Evidencedness: Don't say something for which you don't have adequate evidence

Quantity

- Don't say too little or too much; make your contribution as informative as required

A: How is your binge-watching of *Chef's Table* going?

(B has seen all the episodes)

B: I've seen all of them.

B: I've seen some of them.

Relevance

- Making your contribution relevant to the conversation

Manner

- 'I expect a partner to make it clear what contribution he is making, and to execute his performance with reasonable dispatch.' – Grice (1975)
 - maybe he should follow his own advice...
- Boils down to: be clear and unambiguous, and don't say things in a roundabout way
 - Incorporates elements of Quantity and Relevance as well

Manner

- We all have that one friend/acquaintance who uses crazy huge words and doesn't make any sense
 - What purpose does this serve?

Manner

A: How do you get to campus?

B: I bike.

B: The streets.

B: I use my bicycle to ride there.

B: I take Linden to Mt. Hope, then I take McLean to get down to the river trail.

B: First I unchain my bike from its safe and secure position. Then I roll up my pant leg for safety, because my friend once fell after getting his pants leg stuck in the chain. Then I get on my bike and start pedaling....

Flouting maxims to imply a different meaning

A: Will Shaorong go to the party?

B: Is the Pope catholic?

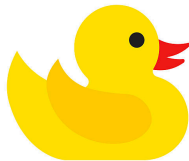
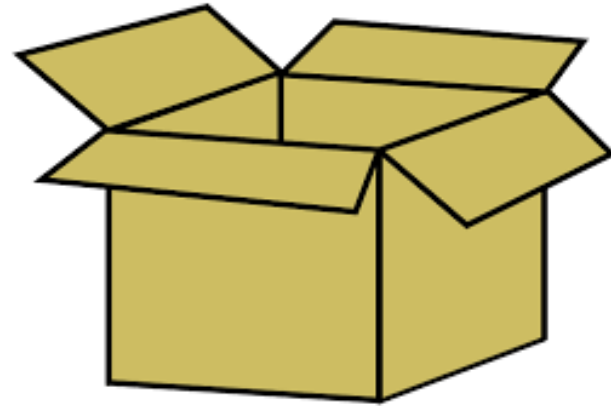
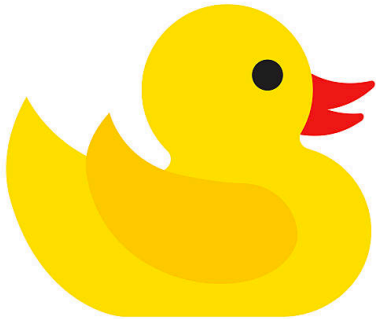
How is the Pope being catholic relevant to the conversation?

→ drawing an analogy

So we have some general principles, but how do we apply them to conversational scenarios in context?

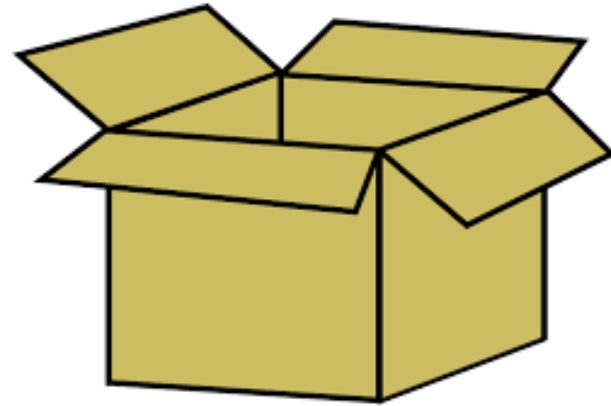
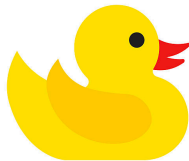
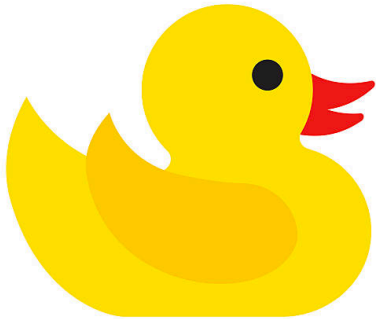
Example: Quantity Implicature

'Click on the big...'



Example: Quantity Implicature

'Click on the big...'

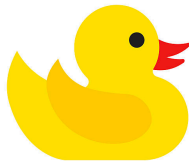
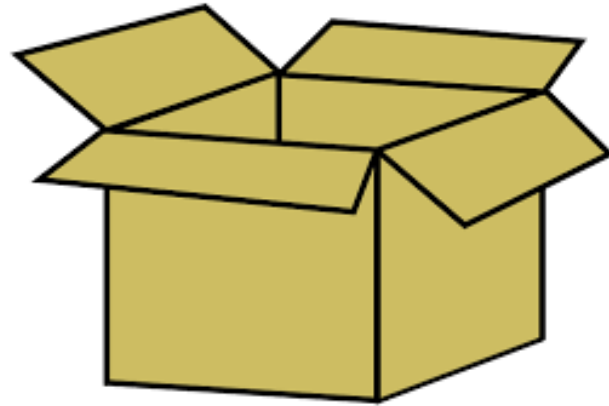
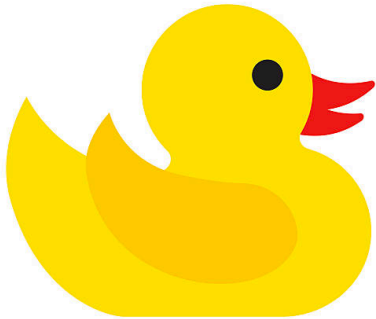


'big' is over-
informative
(violates
Quantity)

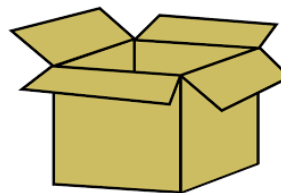
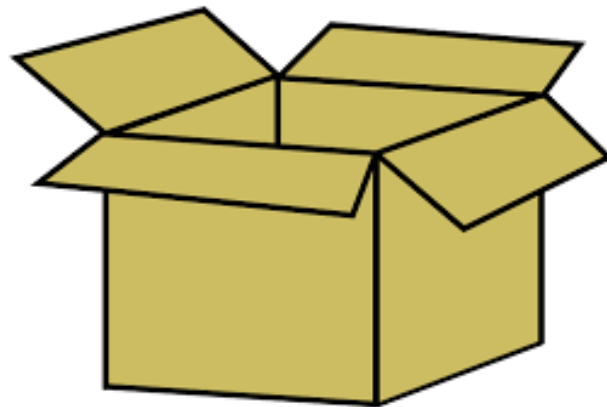
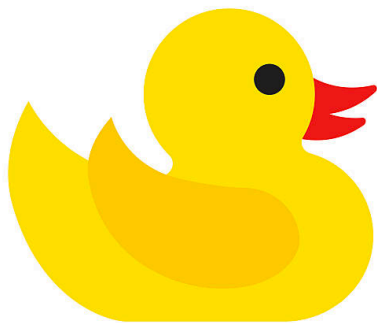


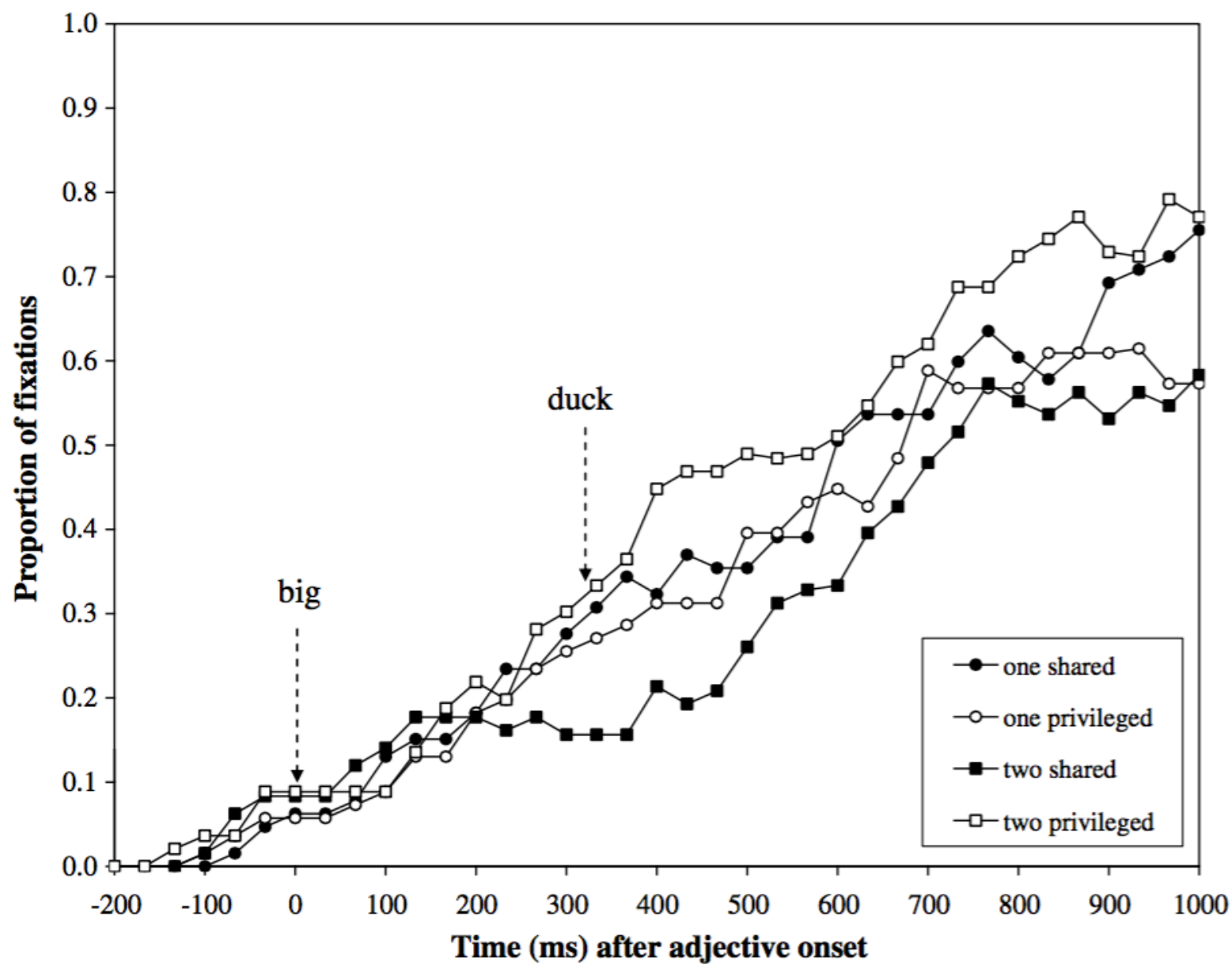
Example: Quantity Implicature

'big' should refer to the big duck



Two-contrast condition: 'big' could refer to either of the top 2

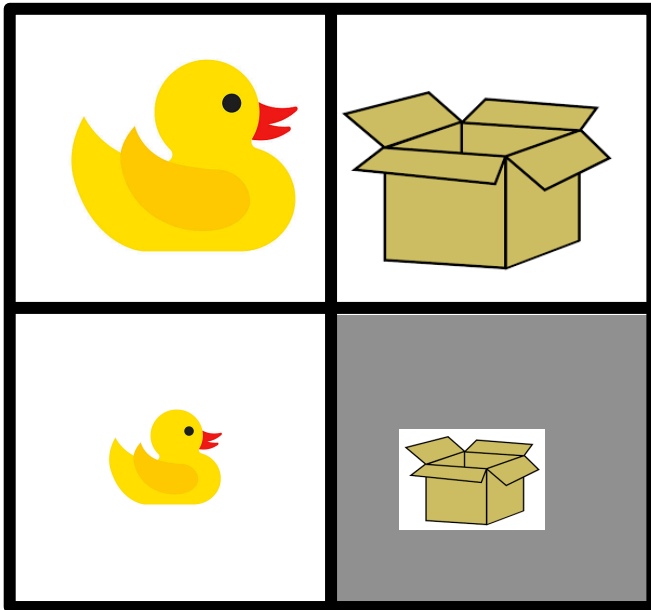




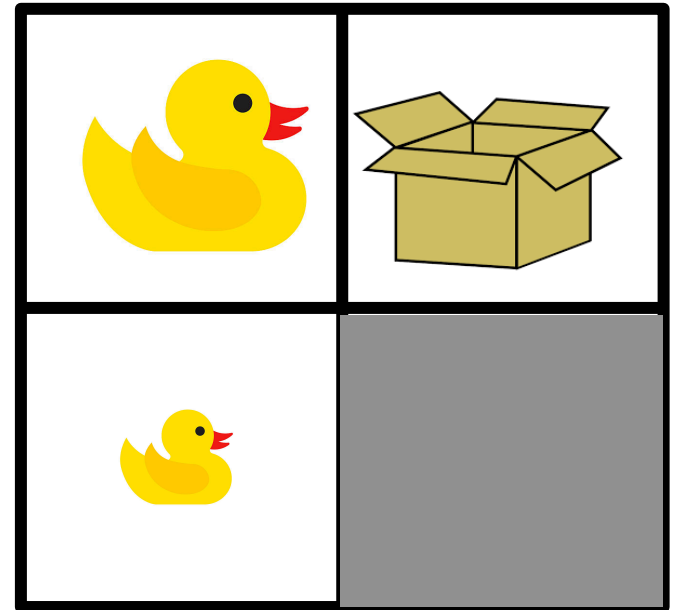
Reasoning about your conversational partner

- People can do this basic reasoning
- BUT, can they flexibly reason about their partner when presented with a different social context?

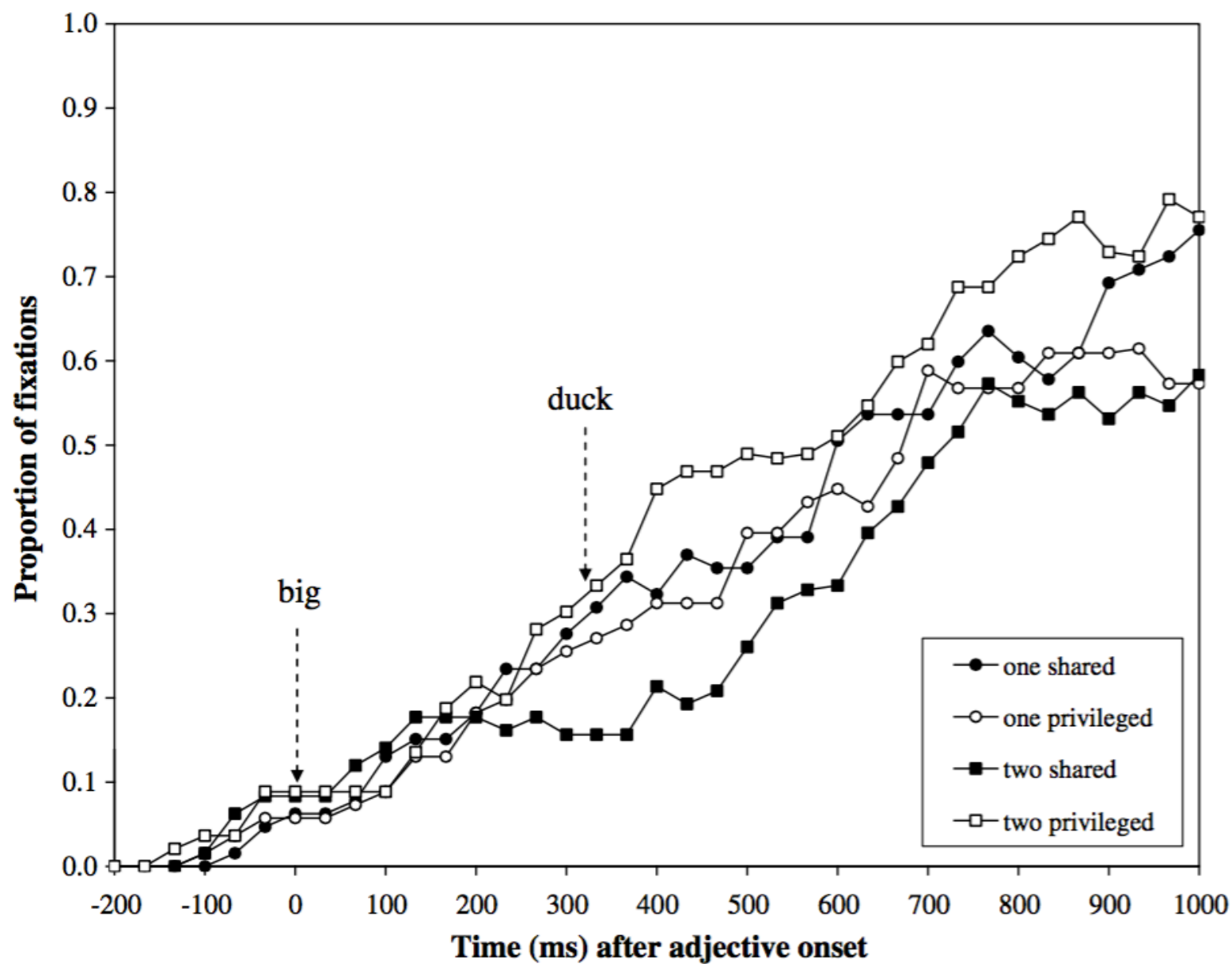
Listener's View



Speaker's View



Small box is **NOT** in common ground
Small box is *privileged ground* for the listener



Speaker → Listener Inference

- Can speakers tailor their communication to their addressee?
- Ibarra (2018): manipulate listener's knowledge

Rare Kitchen

Mandoline

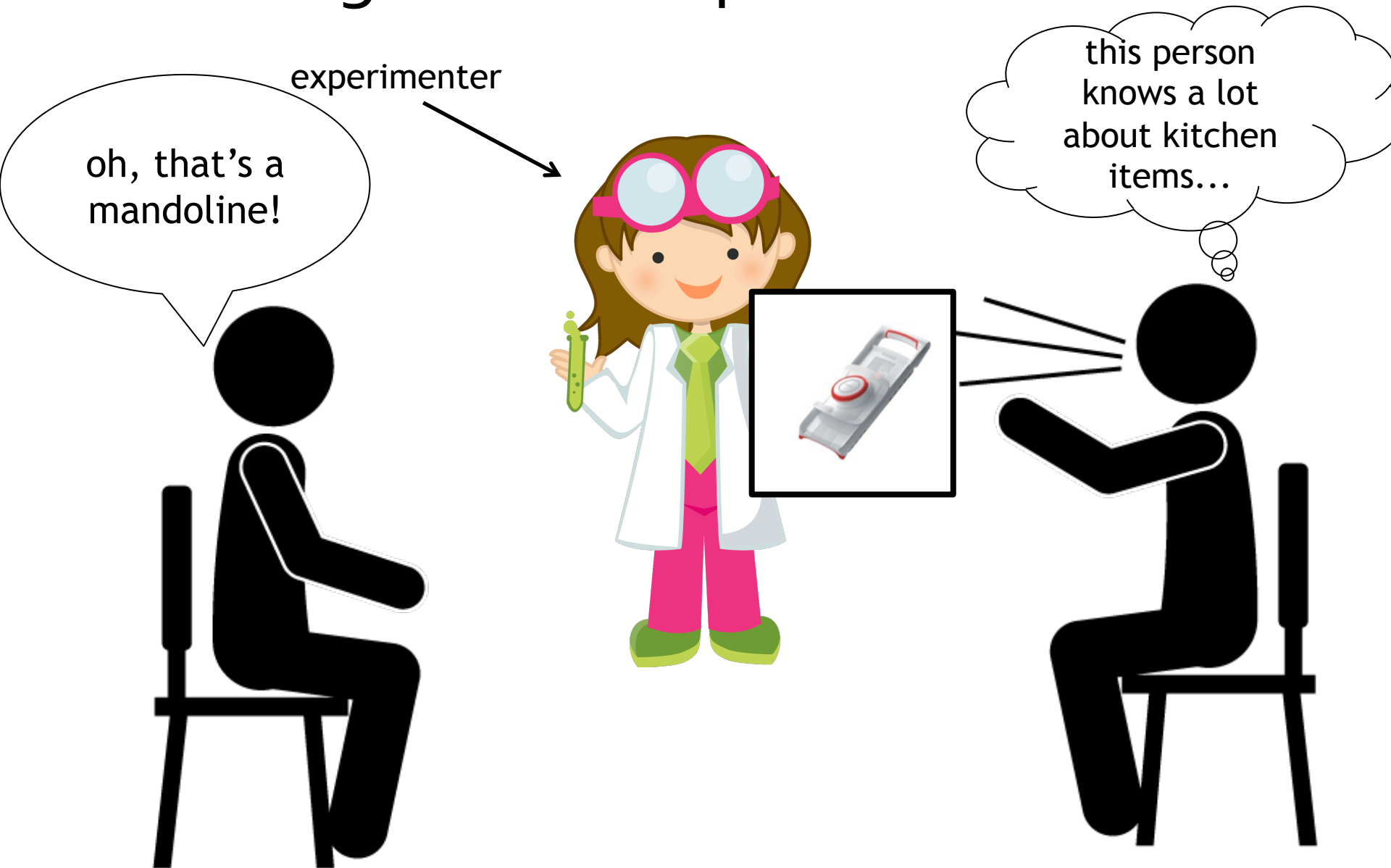


Common Kitchen

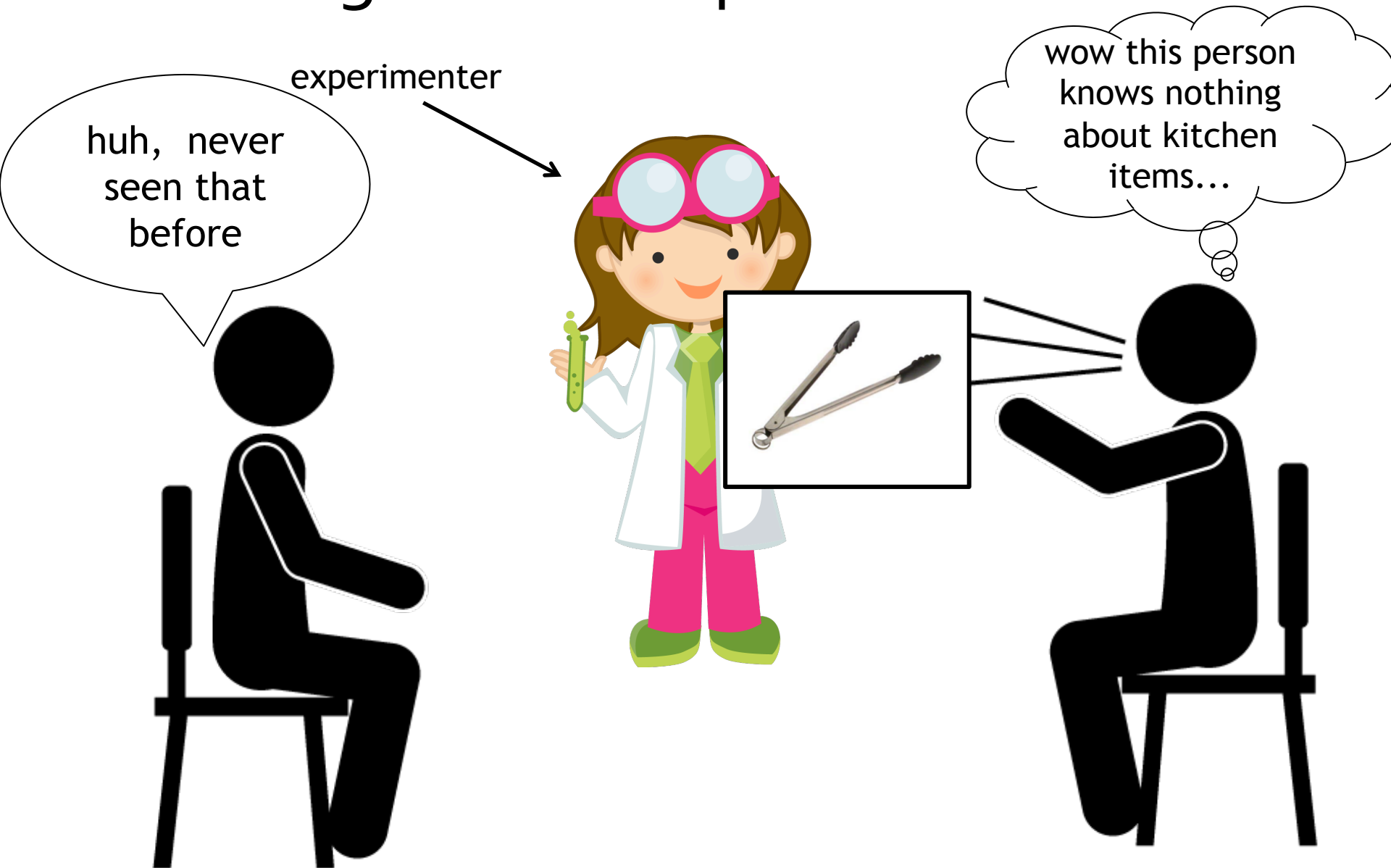
Tongs



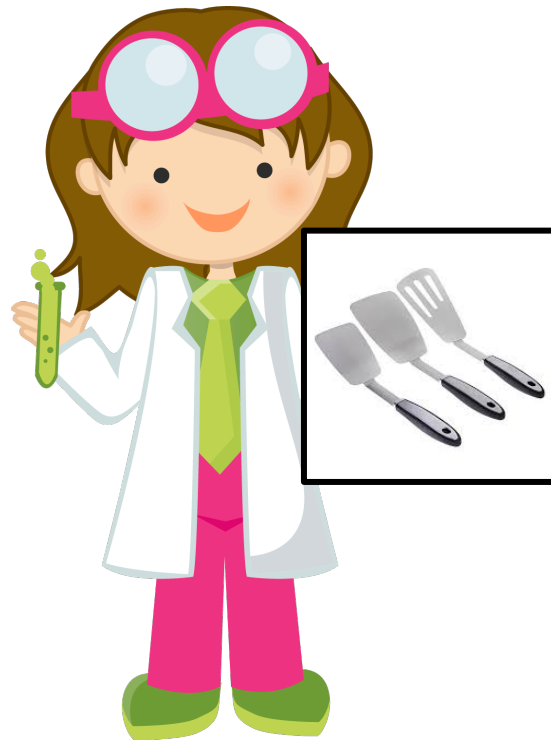
Training Phase 1: Speaker & Listener



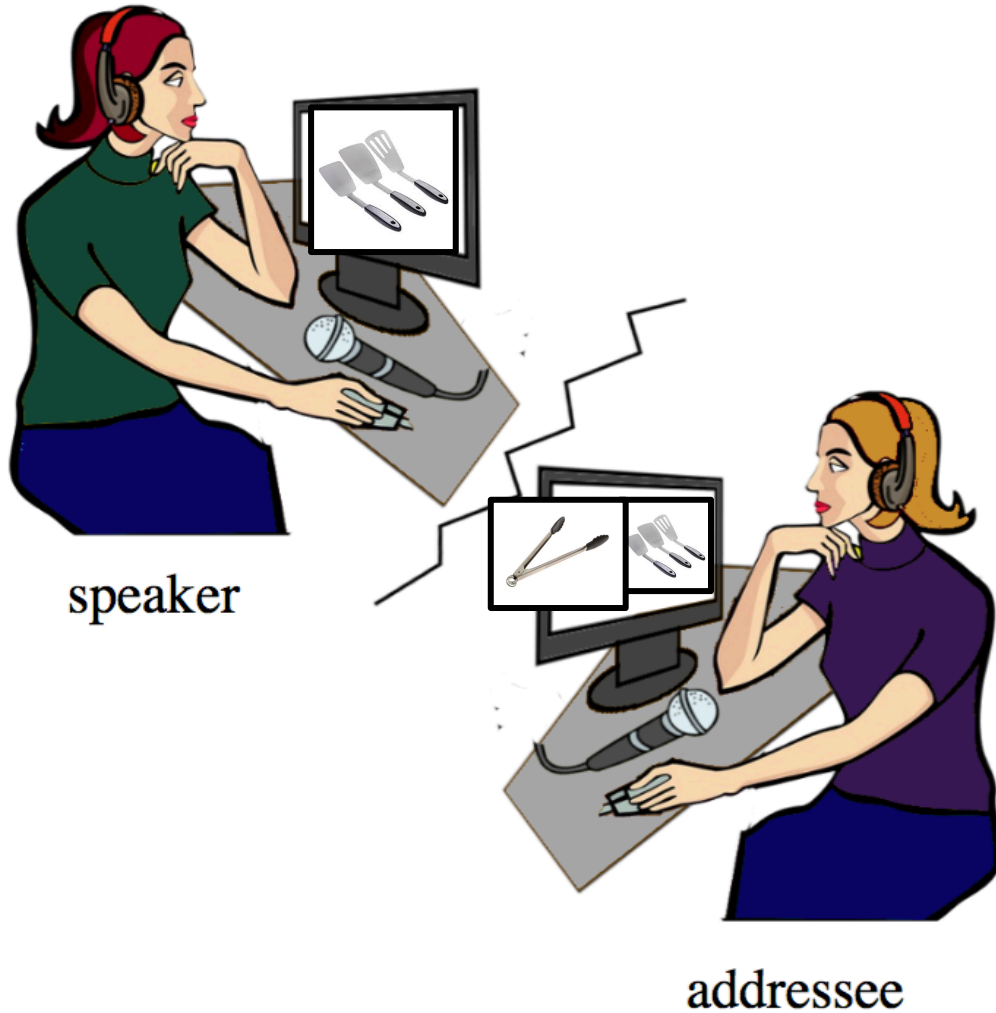
Training Phase 1: Speaker & Listener



Training Phase 2: Speaker Only



Testing Phase

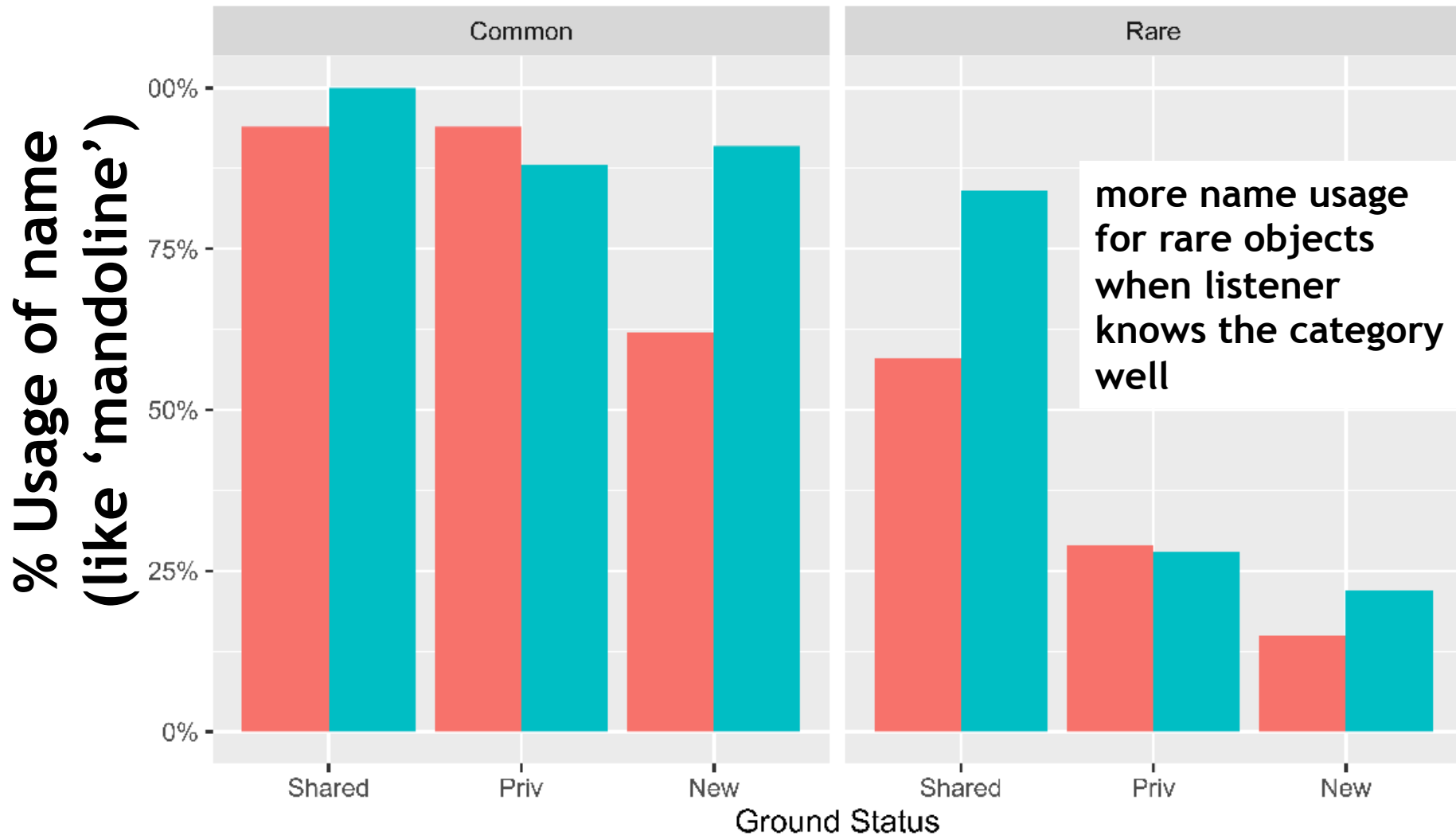


Post-Test

- Speaker and listener rate how well each other seemed to know the category

Results

- listener knows category well
- listener doesn't know category well



Summary

- During conversation and dialogue, we assume our interlocuter follows a set of loose rules which allow for structured inferences
- Interlocuters can also assess mutual knowledge on-the-fly and use it to make additional, more specialized, inferences and speaking choices