

# Linguistic experience in our theories of language

## An attitude verb perspective

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# Linguistic experience shapes grammatical knowledge and language processing

## Grammar

Grow up with English:  
learn English grammatical rules.

Grow up with Japanese:  
learn Japanese grammatical rules.

## Word recognition

*belief*

Recognized quickly  
**High frequency**

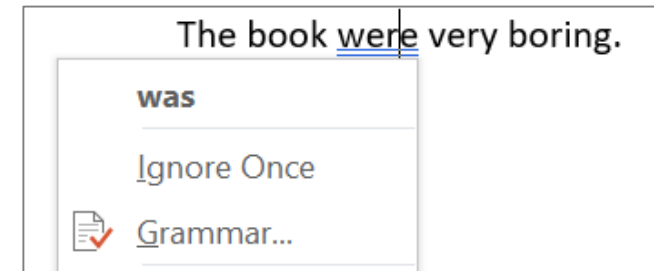
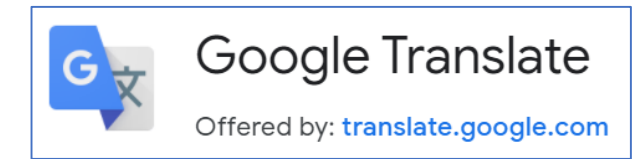
*frenzy*

Recognized slowly  
**Low frequency**

# Supported by recent advances in computational modeling

## Language models / recurrent neural networks:

- Discover statistical regularities of words in a corpus (their “linguistic experience”)
- Impressive performance in natural language processing domains, e.g. machine translation, auto-completion



## Can capture various psycholinguistic / grammatical phenomena:

- Acceptability ratings
- Long-distance subject-verb agreement
- Some aspects of meaning

# This talk

**Picture so far:** a lot of linguistic knowledge and behavior seem to be modeled by the statistics of our everyday linguistic experience (“**language statistics**”).

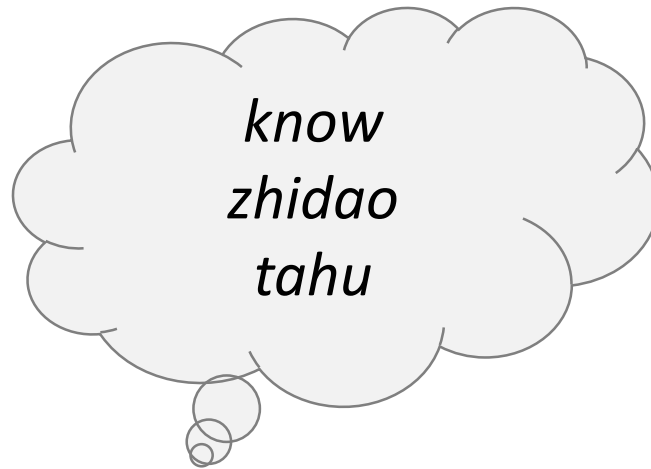
- Informal observations, lab experiments, computational models

**Today:** figuring out the limits of this approach.

1. In what cases does the “language statistics” approach run into limits?
2. How should we think about these cases?

# Two case studies involving attitude verbs

- Verbs that typically describe mental states and communication.
- Appear with complement clauses: *They **think** it's snowing.*



# Case study 1: “Bridge effects”

1. What did Kim *think/say/believe* that Jo received \_? **think**: bridge verb
2. ??What did Kim *resent/shout/hate* that Jo received \_? **resent**: non-bridge

Call this variation in acceptability “**bridge effects**”.

**Why do bridge effects exist?**

# Case study 2: how do children learn what these verbs mean?

## “Belief” verbs

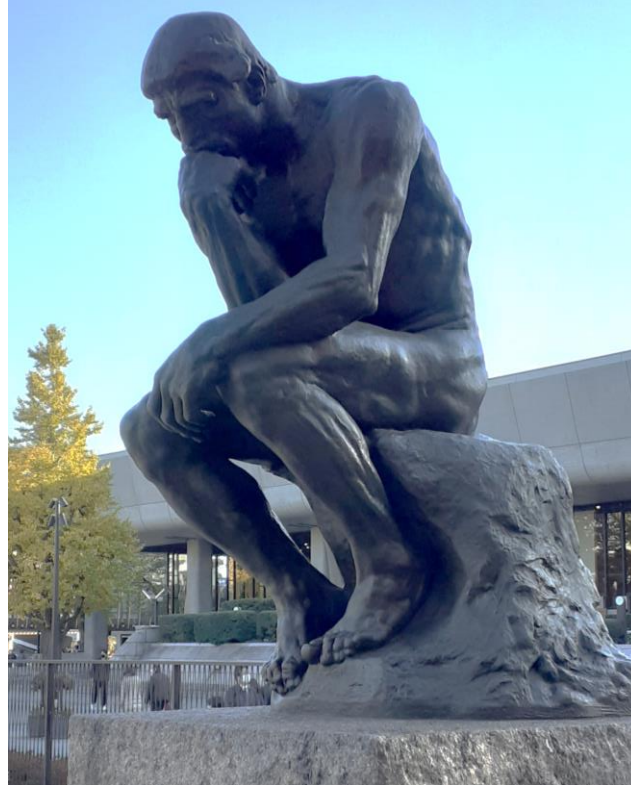
*think*

*know*

*believe*

*guess*

*say*



## “Desire” verbs

*want*

*prefer*

*love*

*like*

# Sneak preview

Language statistics play **at best an indirect role (although still an important one)** in these case studies.

These case studies serve as **a reminder of the importance** of other aspects of language, e.g. learning biases, syntax, pragmatics, ...



# Case study 1: Bridge effects

Joint work with Diogo Almeida & Jon Sprouse



Diogo  
Almeida



Jon  
Sprouse

# Bridge effects and rules on forming wh-questions

Island constraints: structural restrictions on fronting wh-words/wh-question formation.

Bridge effects – yet another set of restrictions.

How should these restrictions be explained?

Syntax? Pragmatics? Psycholinguistics?

**How do we draw the line? Implications for theories of syntax, pragmatics, psycholinguistics, ...?**

Ross 1967, among many others

# Overview

- Outline of existing theories
- Large scale experiments to evaluate these theories
- Upshot: **we need better theories.**

# Theory 1. Frame frequency

Bridge effects track how often a **verb** takes a finite complement clause.

- |    |  |                              |
|----|--|------------------------------|
| 1. | <i>What did Kim <b>think</b> <u>that Jo received</u>?</i>    | <i>think+clause frequent</i> |
| 2. | <i>??What did Kim <b>resent</b> <u>that Jo received</u>?</i> | <i>resent+clause rare</i>    |

Independent psycholinguistic evidence that low-frequency structures create processing difficulties. (e.g. Hale 2001; Levy 2008)

Kothari 2008, but see Liu et al. 2019; Richter & Chaves 2020

# Theory 2. Template-based theory

Wh-questions with *say* or *think* are very frequent, e.g.:

*What did you **say** they will do?*  
*Where do you **think** they went?*

For language processing purposes, we create “templates” based on frequently-encountered (prototypical) questions.

Say template: WH do you say CLAUSE?  
Think template: WH do you think CLAUSE?  
(Replace  with suitable material.)

Dąbrowska 2008, 2013; Verhagen 2005: see also Ambridge & Goldberg 2008

# Theory 2. Template-based theory

1. *What did Kim **think** that Jo received?*

→ Use the *think* template.

2. ?? *What did Kim **resent** that Jo received?*

→ No *resent* template; modify existing templates instead.

→ Weirdness reflects cost of modifying a template,  
which **increases** with **semantic distance** from *say* / *think*.

# Theory 3. Information structure

- “No fronting from **backgrounded** clauses” (Ambridge & Goldberg 2008)
- “No fronting from **focused** constituents.” (e.g. Erteschik-Shir 2017, also 1973)

3. Kim **thought** that Jo received the prize.

Verbs like *think* foreground/focus the embedded clause.

4. Kim **resented** that Jo received the prize.

*Resent* draws attention to the emotional state;  
the clause is backgrounded.

# Problem #1: No clear consensus from prior experiments testing these theories

E.g.

- Ambridge & Goldberg 2008, Dąbrowska 2013: experimental results **supporting information structure theory.**
- Liu et al. 2021: **failed to replicate results.**



## Problem #2: data quality

English has hundreds of attitude verbs that appear with finite clauses.

Current generalizations / experiments have small samples  
(~12-75 verbs).

**Are these findings robust?**

# Our contribution: exhaustive experimental evaluation of these theories

Bridge effects /  
relative acceptability

Relative acceptability (z-score)

Made-up data

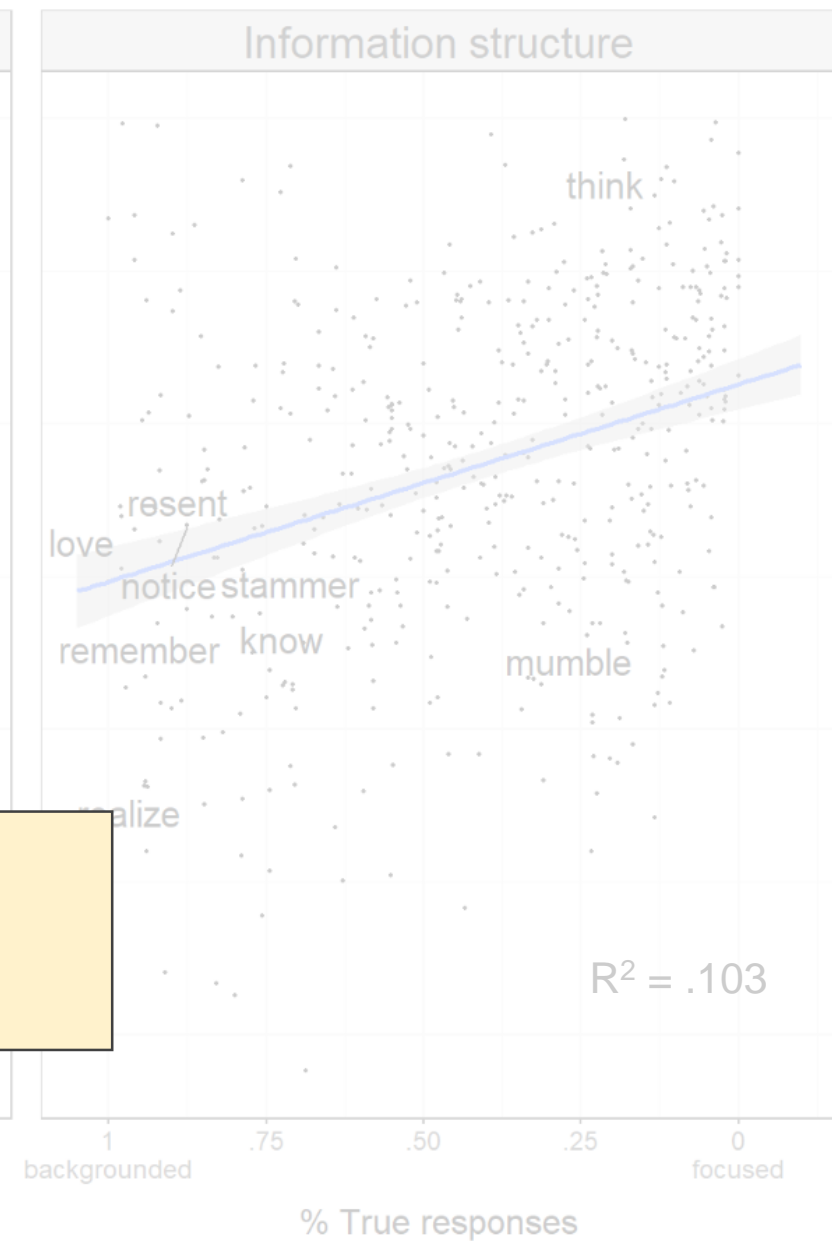
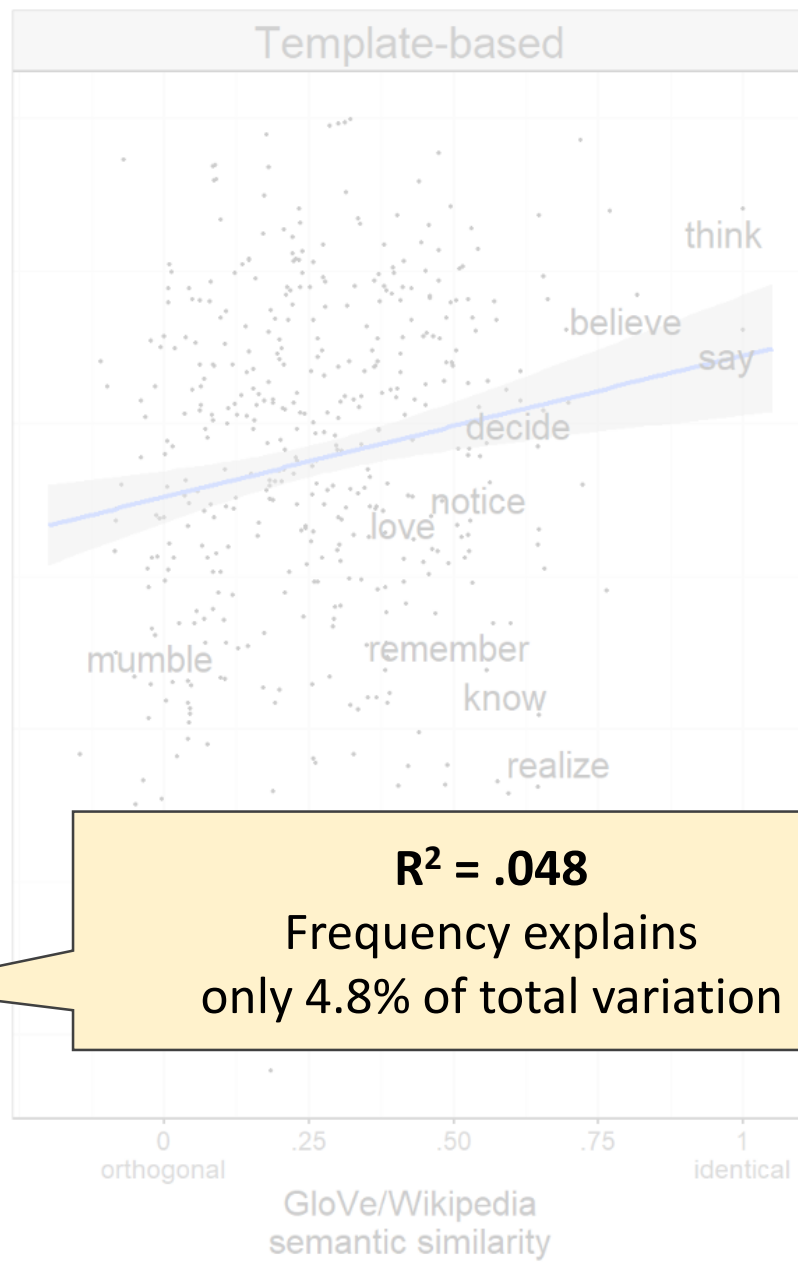
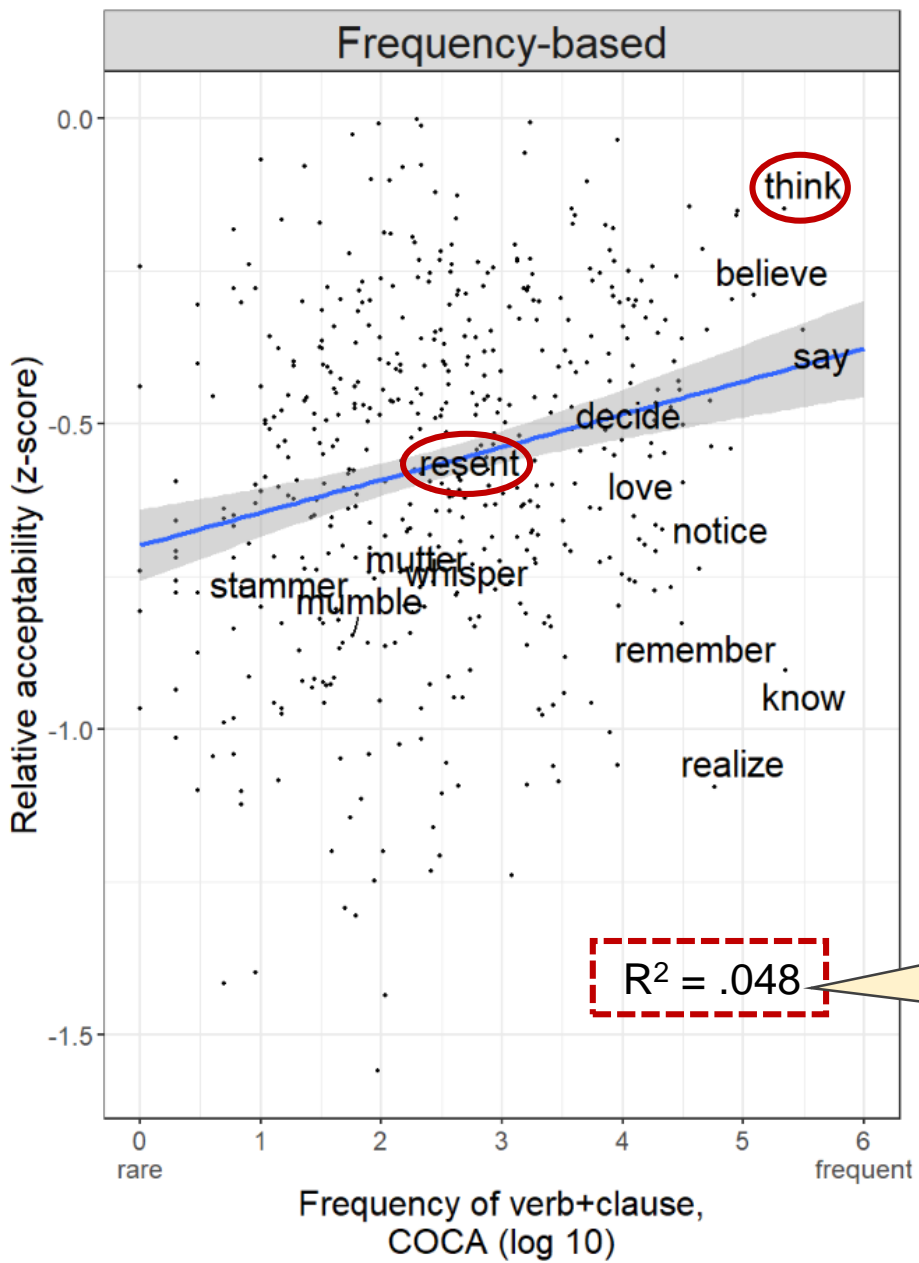
e.g. frequency of verb+clause in  
a corpus, semantic similarity,  
information structure measures

Predictor variable

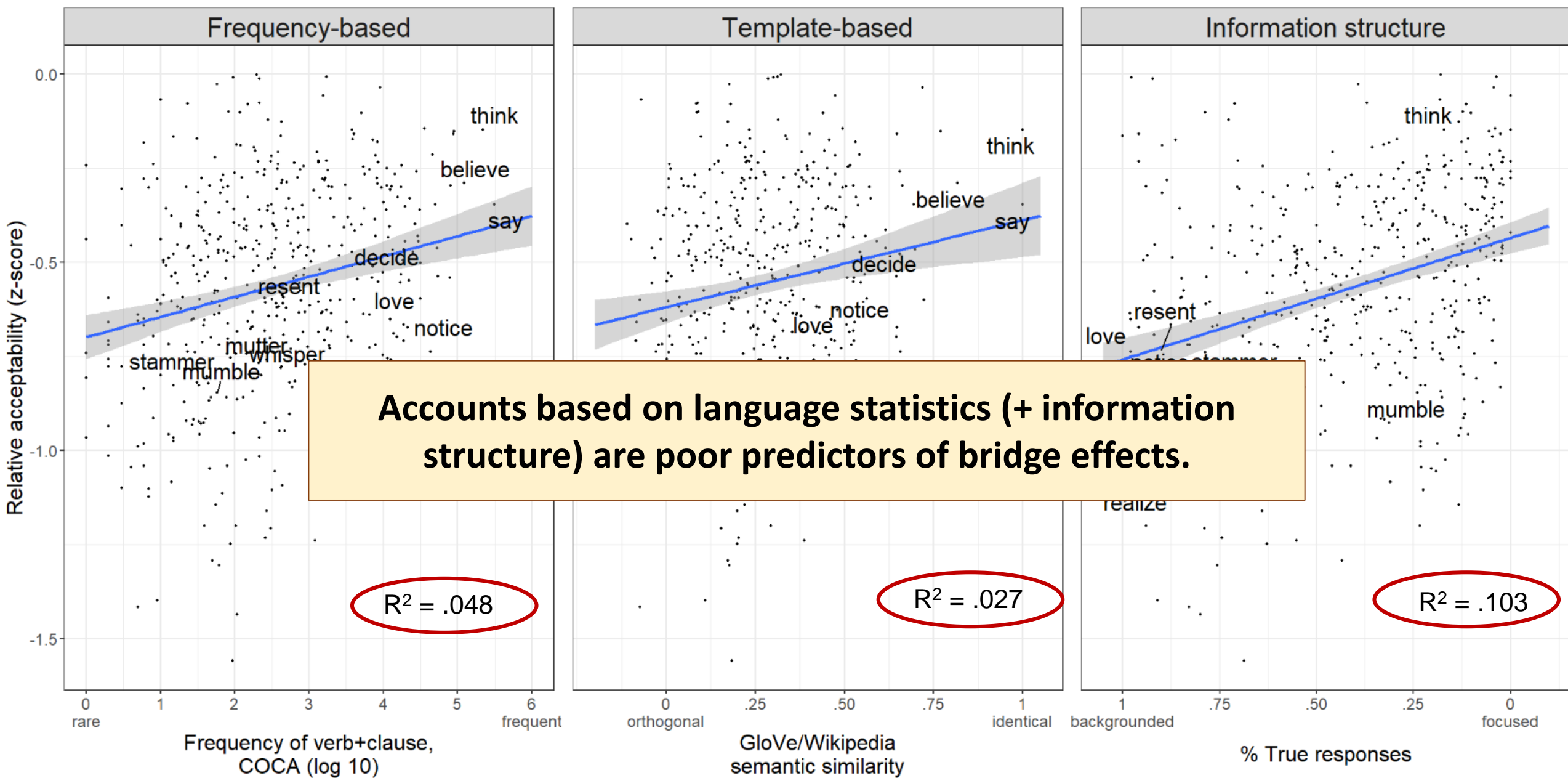
## Exhaustive

640 verbs x 60 sets of  
ratings per verb on  
Amazon Mechanical Turk  
(~9,200 participants).

- Is there a clear correlation in the predicted direction?
- How strong are the correlations for the various theories?



**$R^2 = .048$**   
 Frequency explains  
 only 4.8% of total variation



# Summarising

Prior experimental studies likely to have verb sample issues.

With a full set of verbs:

- Existing theories are **empirically weak**.

# Results call for better theories of bridge effects

**Verb classes** seem to matter: verbs allowing nonfinite clauses (*believe/expect* NP *to* VP; *claim* *to* VP) tend to have higher relative acceptability (point-biserial correlation = .40,  $p < .01$ ).

Open questions:

1. Is the verb class fact due to verb **syntax, semantics, pragmatics**?
2. **Cross-linguistic variation** in bridge effects. Why?

See also prior discussion by Erteschik-Shir 1973; Ambridge & Goldberg 2008; Fodor 1992

# Case study 2:

## Learning attitude verb meanings

Joint work with Aaron Steven White, Chia-Hsuan Liao, Valentine Hacquard, & Jeff Lidz



Aaron Steven White



Chia-Hsuan Liao



Valentine Hacquard



Jeffrey Lidz

# Outline

- Belief and desire verbs and syntactic bootstrapping
- The problem posed by Mandarin Chinese (and many Asian languages)
- How serious is the problem? Corpus analysis and a computational model of syntactic bootstrapping



# Belief and desire verbs

## “Belief” verbs

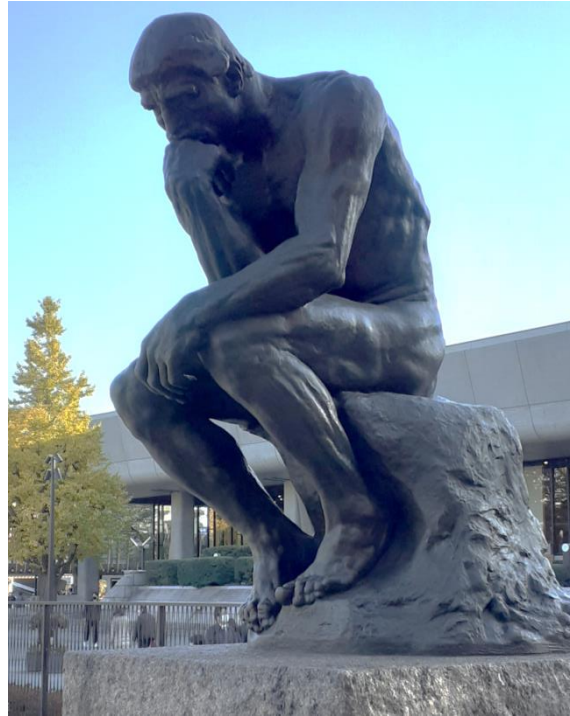
*think*

*know*

*believe*

*guess*

*say*



*Dora **thinks** Kim went to bed.*

Express **commitment to truth** of  
“Kim went to bed”

## “Desire” verbs

*want*

*prefer*

*love*

*like*

*Dora **wants** Kim to go to bed.*

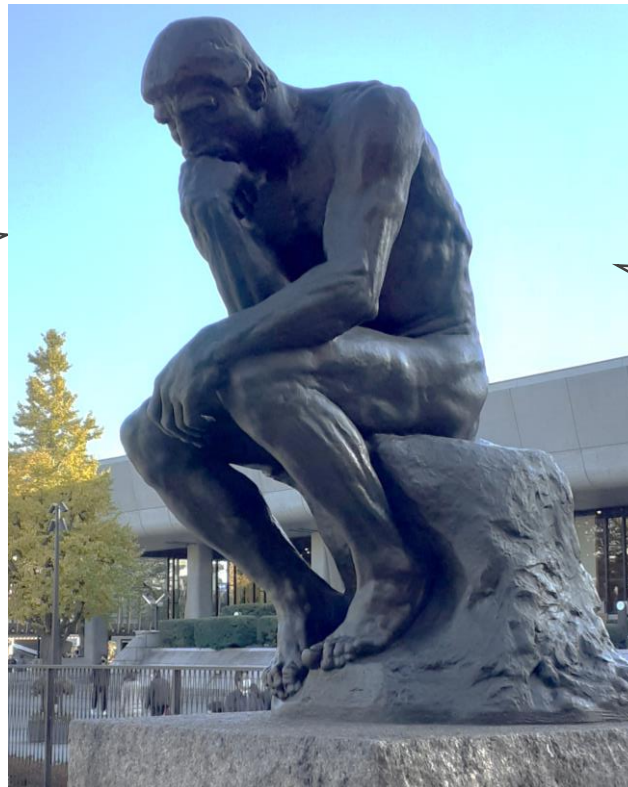
Express **preference** for  
“Kim goes to bed”

# How might a child learn the meaning difference?

**Many words have obvious physical correlates.**

**But belief and desire verbs describe hard-to-observe mental states.**

Look at the  
***statue!***



Is he ***thinking***  
or ***wanting?***

Gleitman 1990; Gillette et al. 1999

# A solution: syntactic bootstrapping

**Verb meanings can be tricky to observe, but syntax is relatively easy to observe.**

**→ Use syntax to learn semantics.**

Gleitman & Landau 1985; Gleitman 1990; Gillette et al. 1999; Hacquard & Lidz 2019; Huang et al. 2018, 2022a,b; also Fisher 1996; Lee & Naigles 2008

**Interesting points of connections** with linguistic theory: Verb meanings are robustly correlated with syntax.

Zwicky 1971, Levin 1993, Villalta 2008, White & Rawlins 2015, etc.

# Cross-linguistically, belief and desire verbs are differentiated morphosyntactically

Dora *thinks* Kim *went* to bed.

Dora *wants* Kim *to go* to bed.

	Complement clause of belief verbs	Complement clause of desire verbs
English	Finite	Non-finite

# Belief clauses resemble declarative sentences

## Declaratives

Dora *thinks* Kim went to bed.

*Kim went to bed.*

	Complement clause of belief verbs	Complement clause of desire verbs	Declarative sentences
English	Finite	Non-finite	Finite

# Syntactic bootstrapping:

## Use syntax to learn semantics

- Observing morphosyntactic differences in one's linguistic experience is **helpful** ...
- But **not enough**: it doesn't tell learners what the verbs mean.

### A learning proposal (a learning bias)

If a verb has an embedded clause that looks like a declarative sentence, that verb is a **belief** verb.

If not, it is a **desire** verb.

# Why? A role for pragmatics

*“Dora thinks Kim went to bed.”*

*“Dora wants Kim to go to bed.”*

*“Kim went to bed.”*

**Direct assertion**

# Why? A role for pragmatics

*“Dora thinks **Kim went to bed.**”*

*“Dora wants Kim to go to bed.”*

**Indirect assertion of  
“Kim went to bed”**

*“**Kim went to bed.**”*



# Why? A role for pragmatics

*“Dora **thinks** Kim went to bed.”*

*“Dora wants Kim to go to bed.”*

**Indirect assertion of  
“Kim went to bed”**

→ *Think* expresses truth judgments

*“Kim went to bed.”*

# A syntactic bootstrapping account requires belief and desire clauses to look distinct

## Proposal

- If a verb has an complement clause that looks like a declarative sentence, that verb is a **belief** verb.
- If not, it is a **desire** verb.

The requirement is easily satisfied in languages with finiteness and mood morphology.

**But what about a language that lacks such morphology, like Mandarin? (or Vietnamese, Thai, Malay, ...)**

**Learners might draw the wrong semantic conclusions.**

# Hallmarks of Mandarin declarative sentences and belief clauses vs. desire clauses

	Complement of belief verbs	Complement of desire verbs	Declarative sentences
Overt subjects	Optional	%Not OK	Optional
Modals	Optional	Not OK	Optional
Aspect markers	Optional	Not OK	Optional

**Problem:** overt subjects, modals, and aspect markers are all optional – they can be omitted in the right context.

# A good situation to be in

Subject    Modal    Aspect

Wo **juede**    **tamen**    **keneng**    chi-**guo**    shuiguo.

I    feel/think    **they**    might    eat-**EXP**    fruit

“I **think** **they** **might** **have** eaten fruit.” (**Belief**)

# A less good situation

Wo **juede** chi shuiguo.

I feel/think eat fruit

“I **think** [they] eat fruit.” (Belief verb)

Wo **xihuan** chi shuiguo.

I like eat fruit

“I **like** to eat fruit.” (Desire verb)

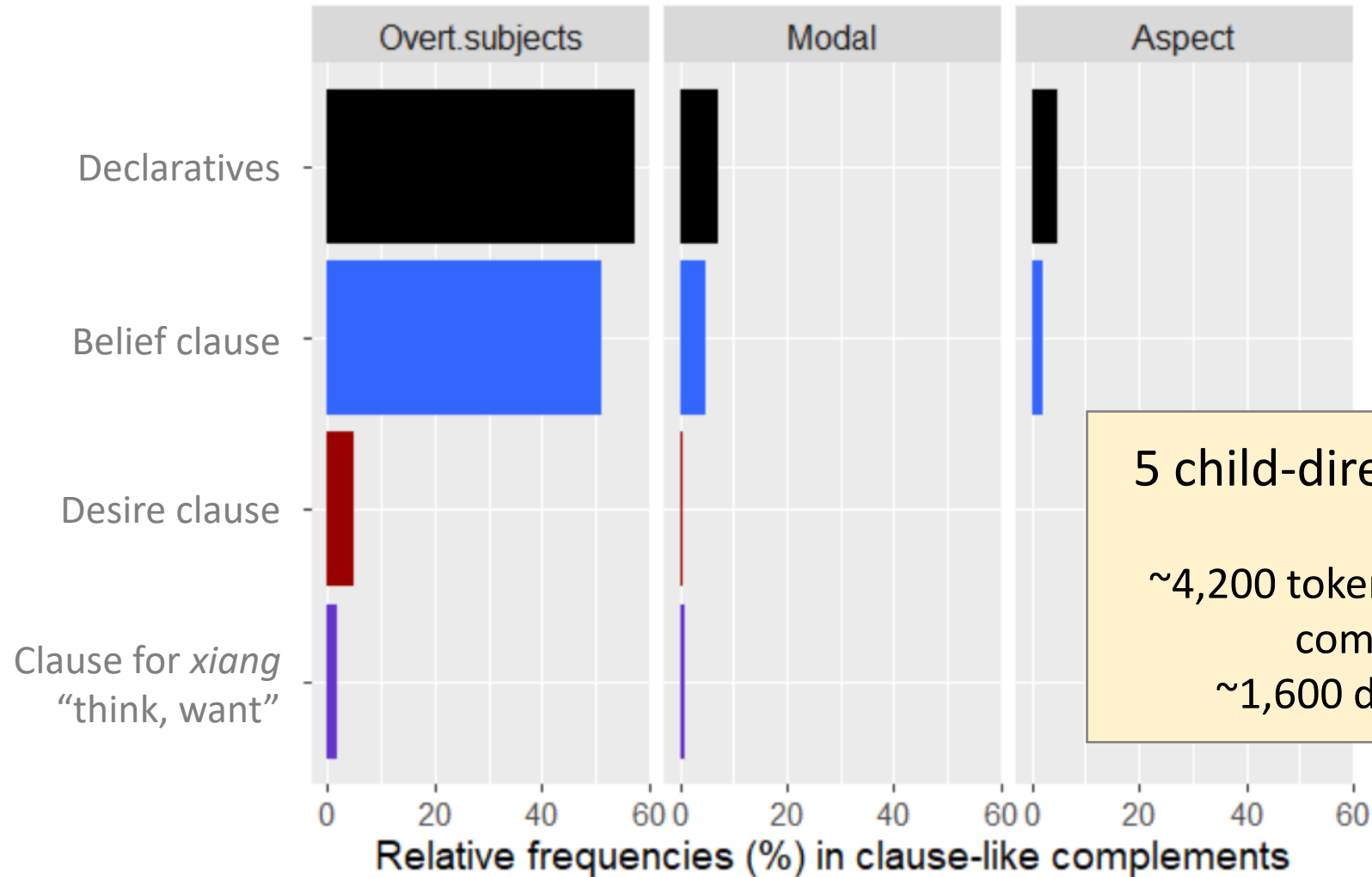
# A way out of the problem

Learners can track the **overall distribution** of various morphosyntactic features in their linguistic experience.

Perhaps belief clauses and desire clauses **look different in aggregation**.

1. Is this the case?
2. If there is differentiation between belief and desire clauses, are the differences enough for the learner?

# Q1: Are the clauses differentiated in the input?



5 child-directed speech corpora

~4,200 tokens of attitude verbs with complement clauses

~1,600 declarative sentences

## Q2: Do distributional differences guarantee successful learning of verb semantics?

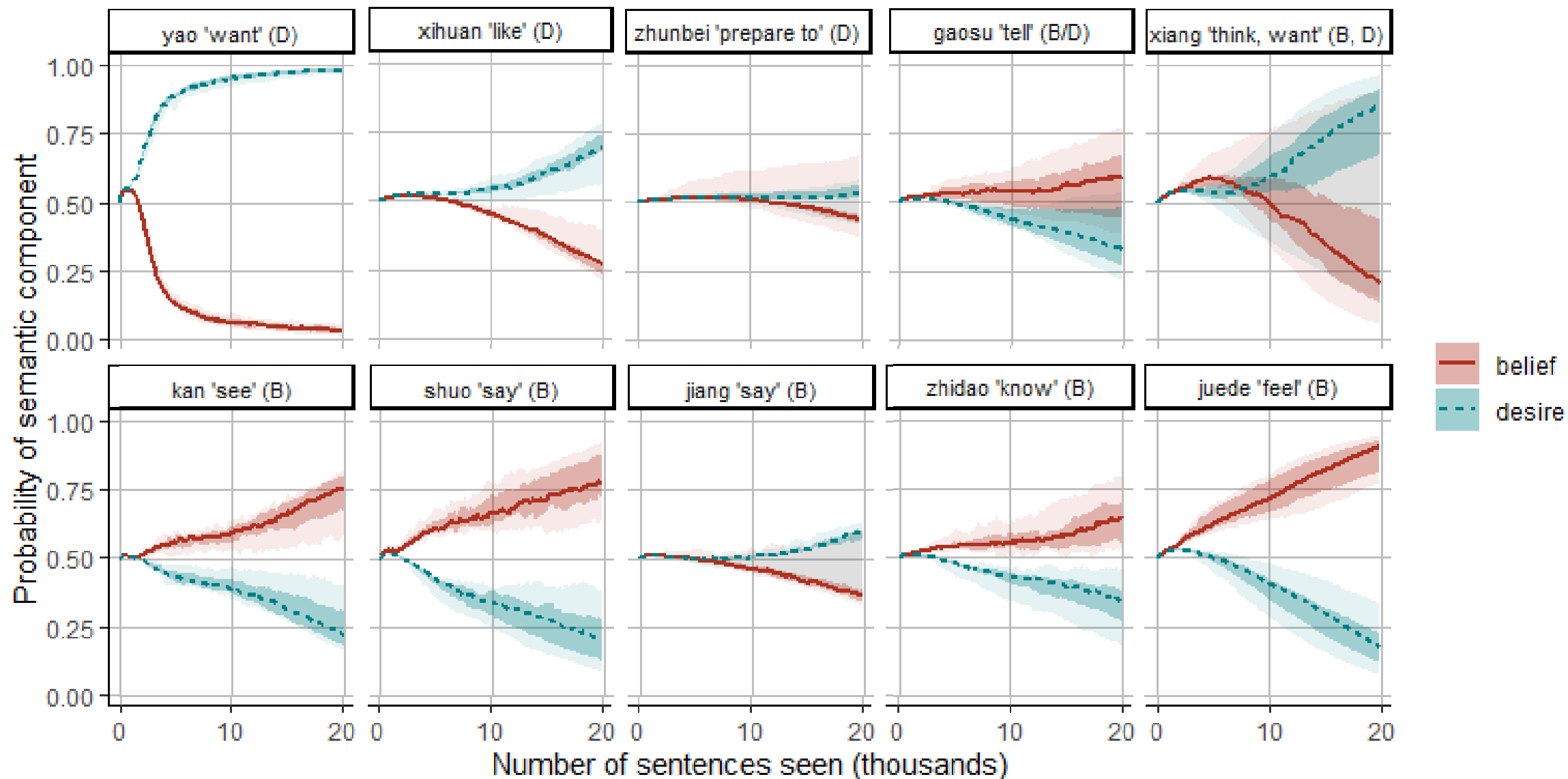
Simulate a learner.

- Adapt a **computational model of syntactic bootstrapping** by White et al. 2018.
- **Model builds in a learning bias:** if the complement clause looks like a declarative, the verb is a belief verb; otherwise, the verb is a desire verb.
- Shown to model acquisition of English attitude verbs, using English child-directed speech data.

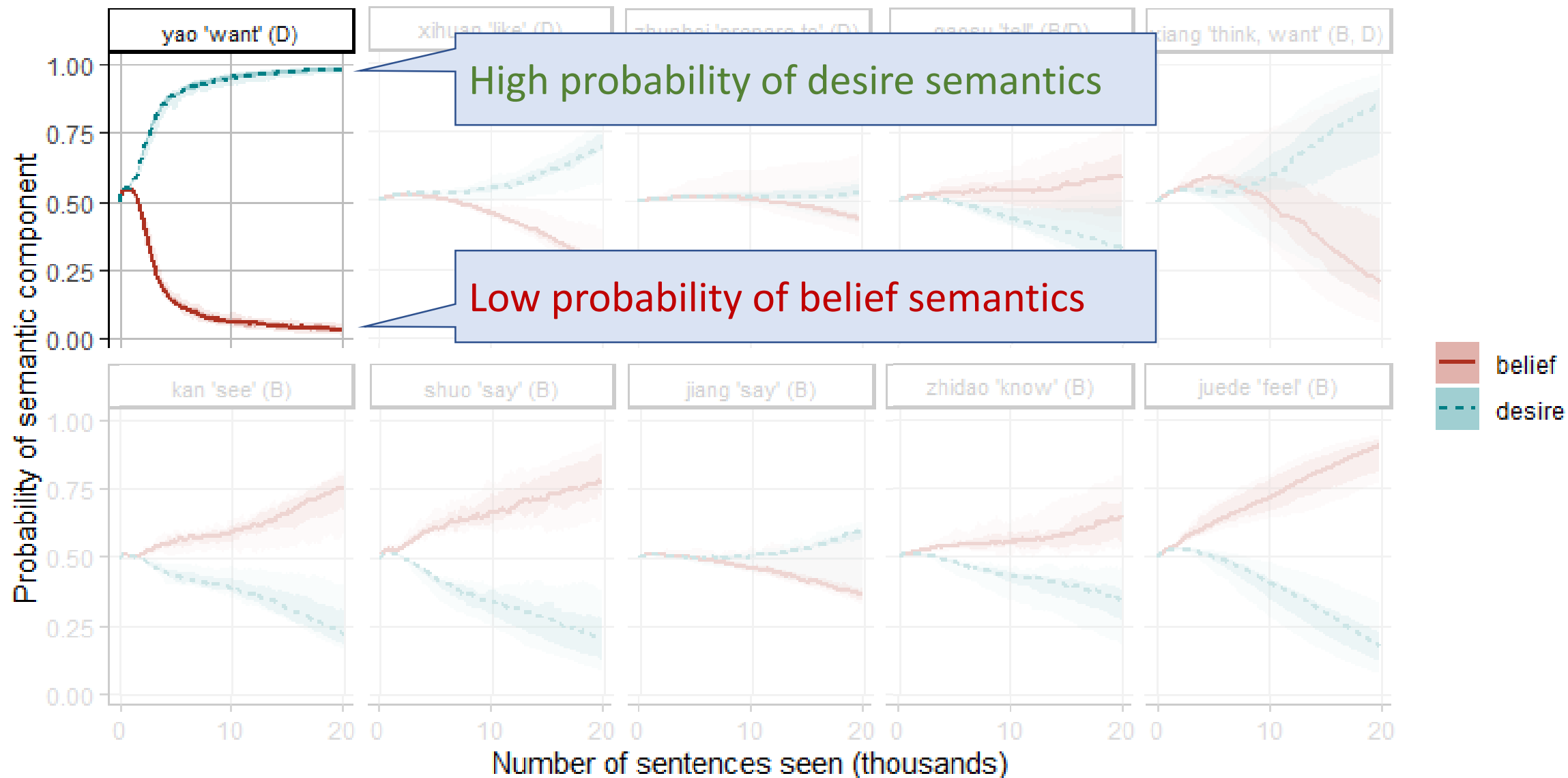
**Does this “learner” succeed with Mandarin attitude verbs?**



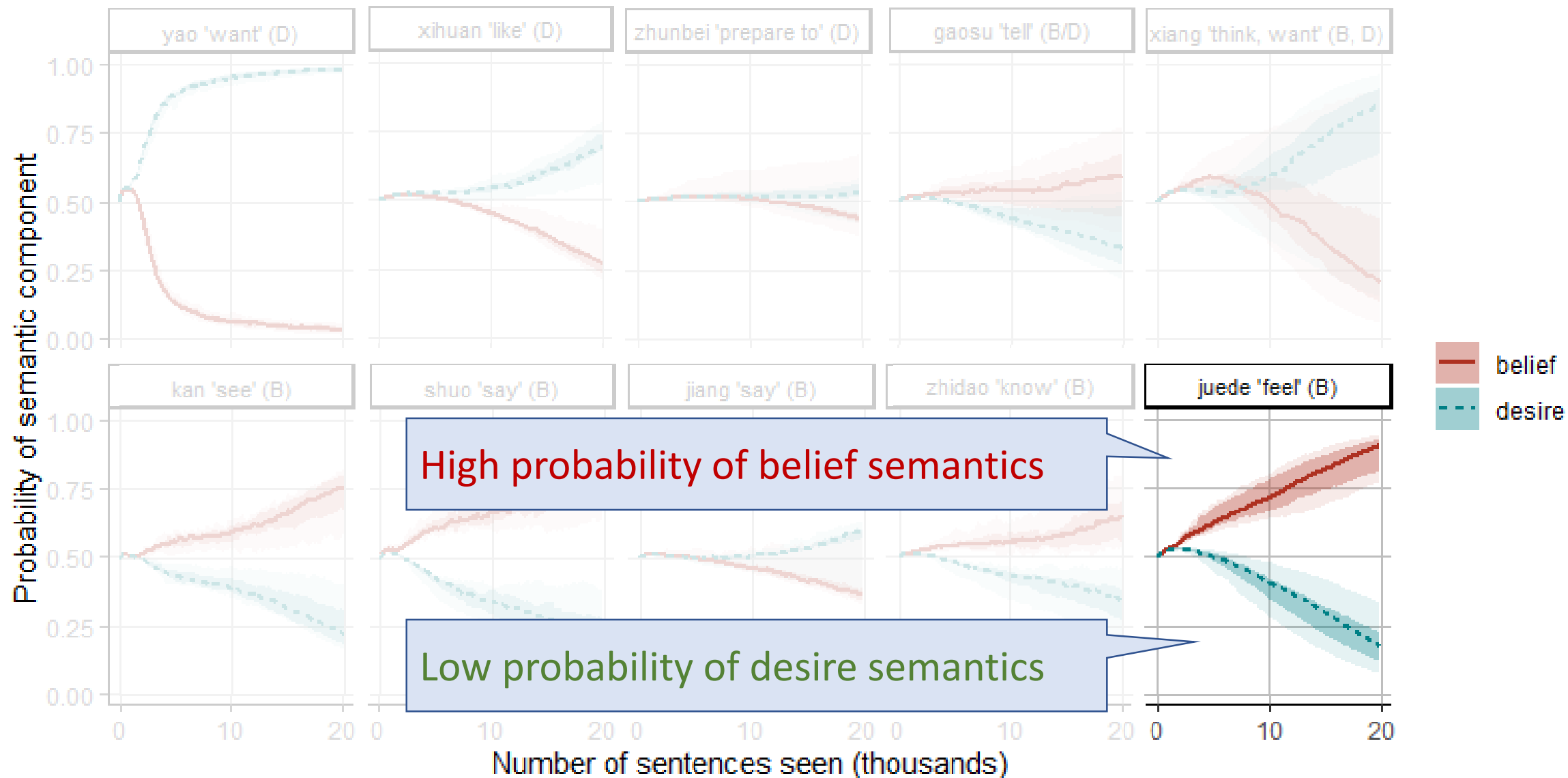
# Mandarin results (10 CHILDES corpora)



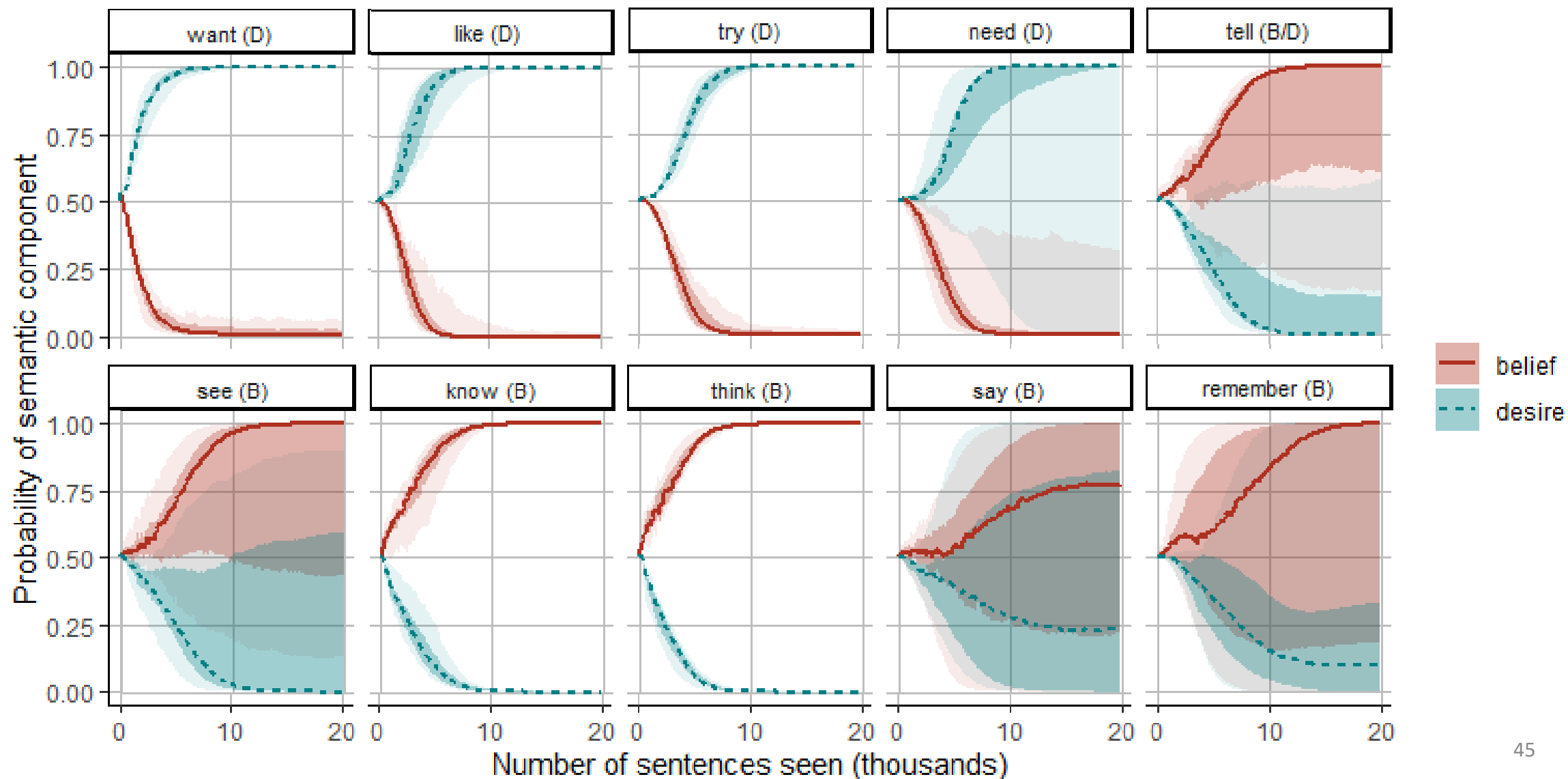
# Mandarin results (10 CHILDES corpora)



# Mandarin results (10 CHILDES corpora)



# English results (replicating White et al. 2018)



# Summing up this case study

- Mandarin morphosyntax = belief and desire verbs could have similar morphosyntactic profiles → problem for syntactic bootstrapping.
- Corpus analysis indicates that this is not the case.
- Computational model shows that morphosyntax + bias can help learners learn the right semantic contrasts in both Mandarin and English – **cross-linguistic support for syntactic bootstrapping.**

# Discussion and conclusion

# The limits of linguistic experience

## 1. Bridge effects

## 2. Learning attitude verb meanings

**Case study 1:** Theories based on language statistics are unsatisfactory accounts of bridge effects.

- E.g. role of frequency is smaller or more indirect than previously theorized.
- (Same issue applies to other theories.)
- **Methodological point:** sample size and empirical verification

# The limits of linguistic experience

1. Bridge effects

2. Learning attitude verb meanings

**Case study 2:** Belief and desire verbs have different profiles in a (Mandarin) learner's linguistic experience.

- But these differences in themselves cannot tell learners much about the actual meaning of verbs.
- Learning biases also necessary to help children acquire the right semantics.



# Conclusion

**Questions:** How does linguistic experience shape the way we learn and process language? How useful is a statistical approach?

**Findings from the case studies:** Limitations of an approach that relies only on statistics in our linguistic experience (despite empirical successes elsewhere).

Value of theories that better delineate the roles of statistics, learning biases, and processing mechanisms.

- An integrated approach to build a more nuanced, richer understanding of human language.

# Thank you!

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