The influence of recency and frequency on English comparatives

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Which would you say?

1) Children are *easier* to manipulate than adults.

2) Children are *more easy* to manipulate than adults.

Which would you say?

1) I was a national celebrity, *famouser* even than Captain Kangaroo.

2) I was a national celebrity, *more famous* even than Captain Kangaroo.

The less-preferable sentences occurred in the COCA corpus:

Unlikely according to previous studies and intuition

(a) Children are *more easy* to manipulate than adults.

(b) I was a national celebrity, *famouser* even than Captain Kangaroo.

English has two comparative forms

(1) Synthetic *easier*

(2) Analytic *more famous*

What causes speakers to select
the synthetic or analytic comparative form?

This talk examines the role of

1. prosodic shape
2. frequency
3. **recency** ***NEW***

Previous studies say that the following influence comparative form preferences:

Prosodic shape

- Number of syllables
- Word ending
- Stress

Frequency

Number of syllables influences comparative form preferences

Monosyllabic: synthetic

Disyllabic: it’s messy

Trisyllabic+: analytic

For disyllabic ADJs, some word endings are preferred with the **synthetic** comparative form

Word Ending	Example
–y	*easier*
–ly	*lovelier*
–le	*simpler*
–ow	*narrower*

(Jespersen 1949, Cygan 1975, Leech & Culpepper 1997, Quirk et al. 1985, Ballinger 1991)

For disyllabic ADJs, some word endings are preferred with the **analytic** comparative form

Word Ending	Example
–er	*more clever*
–nt	*more brilliant*
sibilant	*more famous*
& final stress	*more acute*

(Jespersen 1949, Cygan 1975, Leech & Culpepper 1997, Lindquist 2000)

There are exceptions to these preferences

Exceptions to preference for monosyllabic ADJs to occur in the synthetic form

- **apter*
- some color words like **roser*, **golder* (but redder & greener are OK)
- **chicer*

(Graziano-King 1999)

Frequency influences comparative form preferences

High frequency:	*smarter*
	**more smart*
Low frequency:	**apter*
	more apt

(Graziano-King 1999, Adams 2014)

Mondorf (2003): 'MORE'-SUPPORT explains comparative preferences

IS ENVIRONMENT COGNITIVELY DEMANDING?

YES

Ex: more syllables
complex/repetitive ending
less frequent

ANALYTIC

'more' signals comparative has begun, ADJP will follow

NO

Ex: fewer syllables
simple ending
more frequent

SYNTHETIC

'-er' is at the end of the comparative

Mondorf (2003): Recency reduces processing load, allowing selection of synthetic

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recent forms

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"… an **apt** enough location for the lion of commerce to lie down with the lamb of archaeology. Or would it be **apter** to talk … [Times 1990]" (114)

"PERSISTENCE"

PERSISTENCE: When a speaker re-uses a recent form

Szmrecsayni (2005) corpus study:

- Found persistence of analytic comparative
- Did not find persistence of synthetic comparative

HORROR-AEQUI: When a (very) recent form decreases persistence of that form

Ex:

- ?She looked upon this solution **as**[1] **as**[2] good **as**[3] that one
- ?bitterer

I address the following questions:

What causes speakers to prefer the synthetic or analytic comparative form?

Can recency increase preference for the synthetic comparative?

What causes speakers to select the synthetic or analytic comparative form?

1. Unprimed study-

   examines role of prosodic shape & frequency

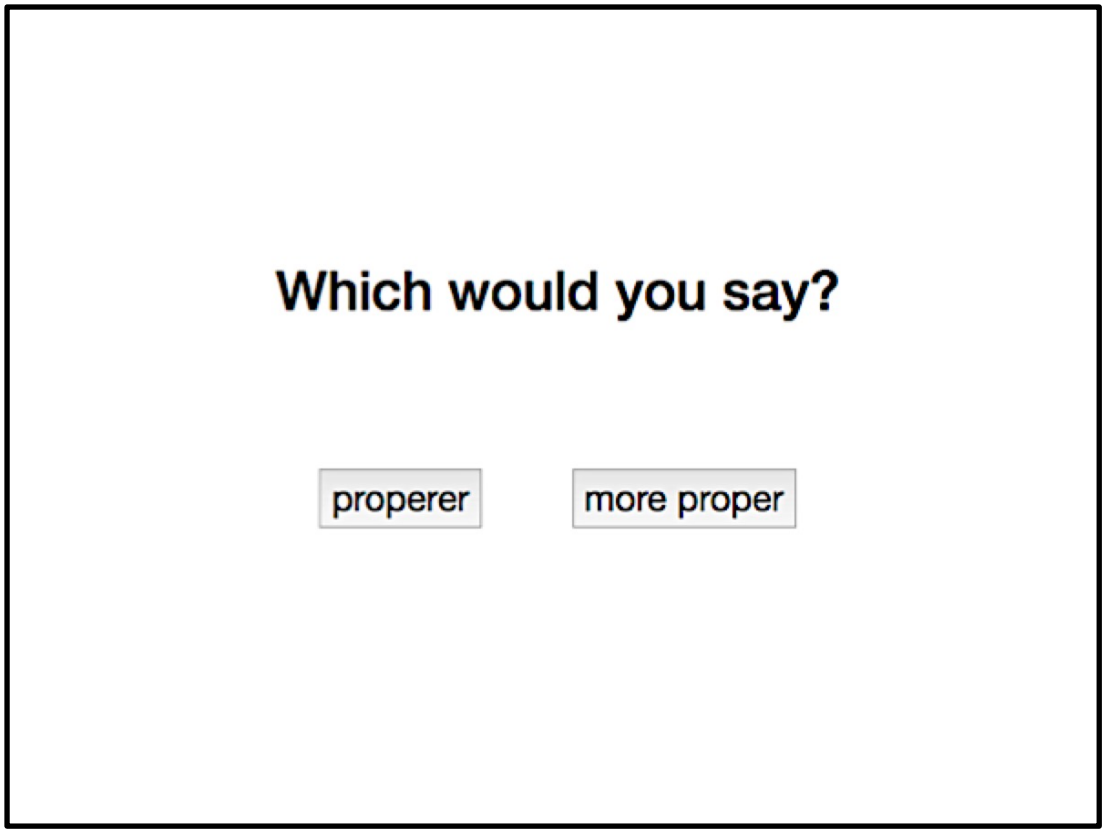
2. Primed study-

   additionally examines role of recency

Unprimed study: Do the following factors influence comparative form selection?

1. Prosodic shape
2. Frequency

Unprimed study: Forced-choice acceptability-judgment task



Unprimed study: Target prosodic shapes

1) monosyllabic
2) disyllabic & ending in

-y,	*-er,*
-ly,	*-nt*
-ow,	a sibilant,
-le,	*&* final stress

Unprimed study: Target frequencies

high: ~10,000-20,000

low: ~100-1,000

instances in NYT2000-2010 & COCA

Unprimed study: Stimuli & Participants

180 adjective pairs:

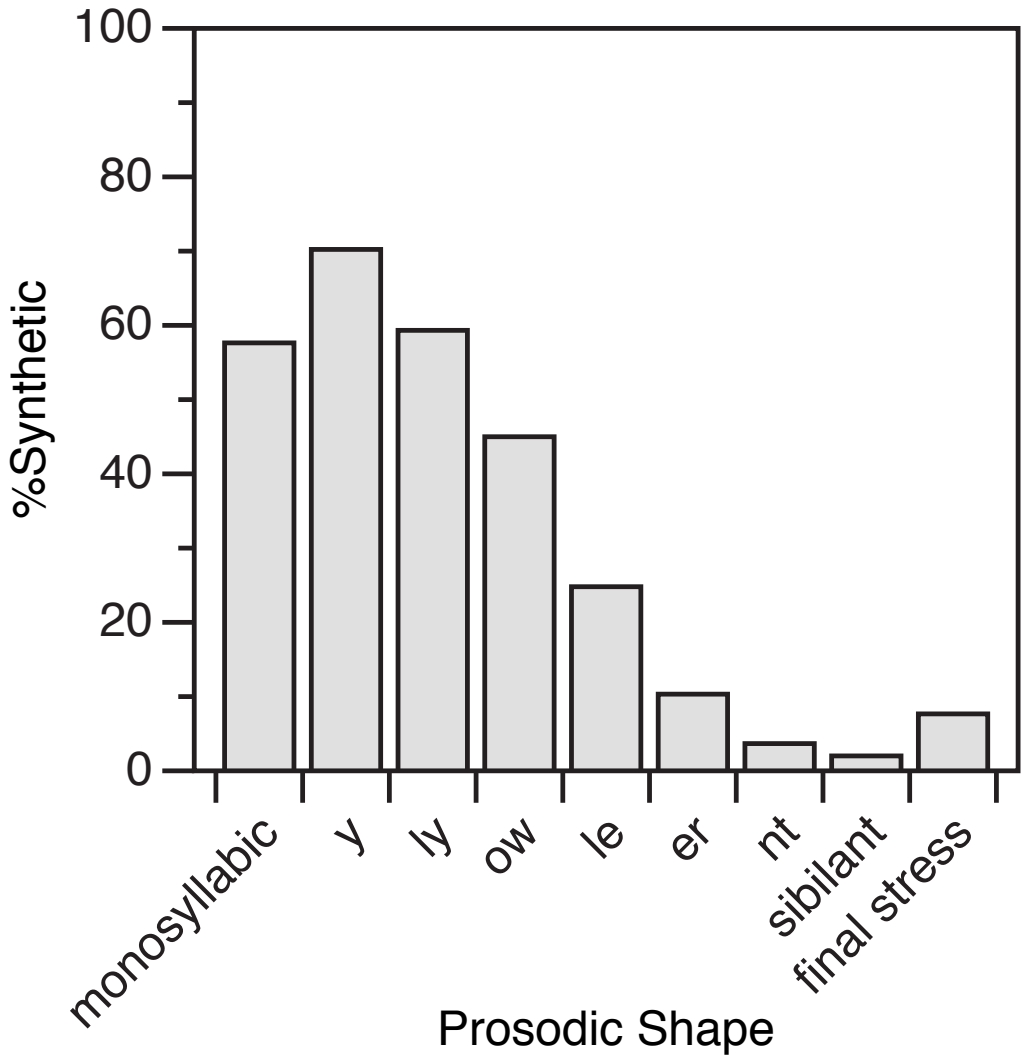
60 target – half high & low frequency

120 fillers – ranged in acceptability

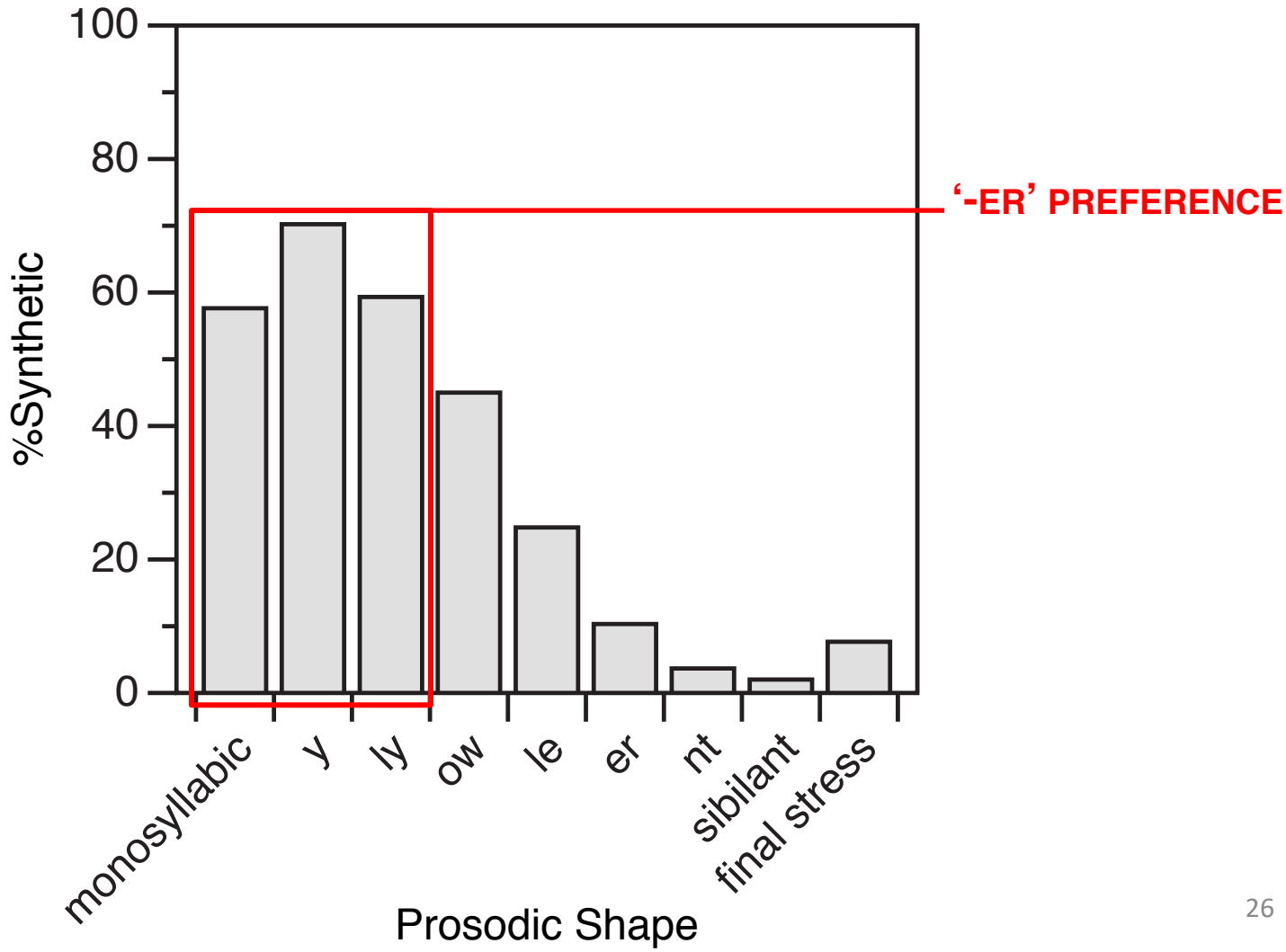
50 Mechanical Turk workers

native English speakers, in U.S.

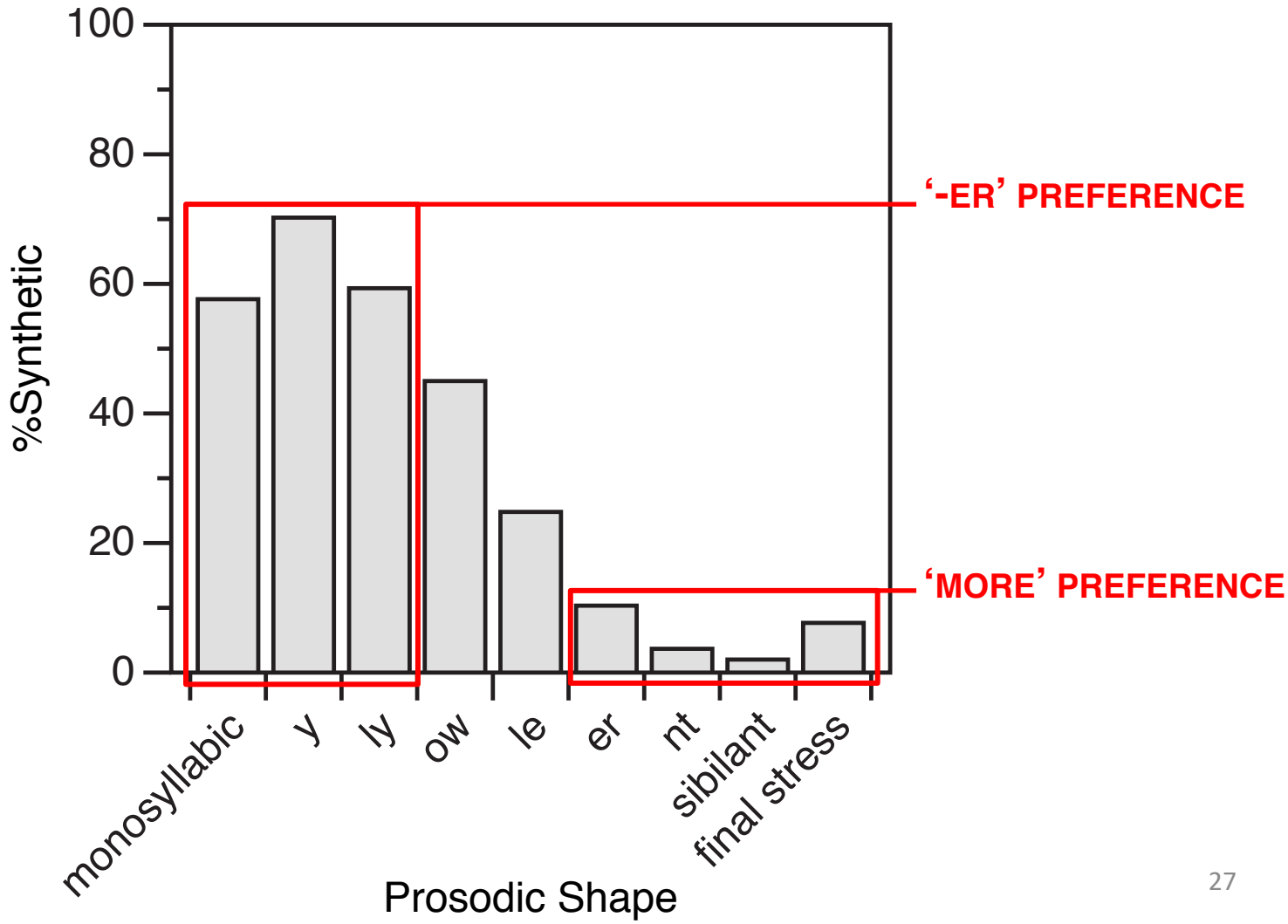
Result: Comparative form preferences differ by prosodic shape



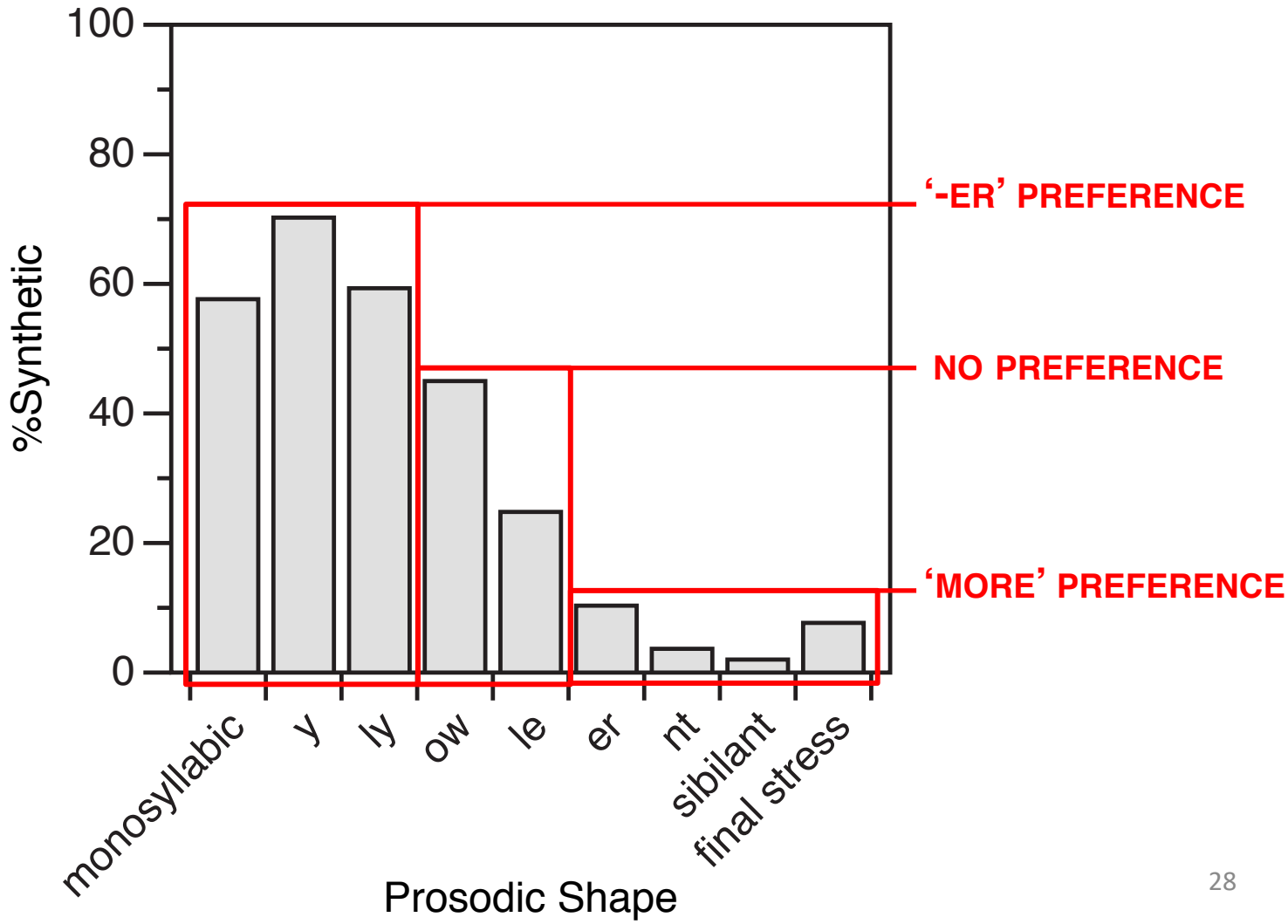
Result: Some prosodic shapes are strongly preferred in the synthetic form



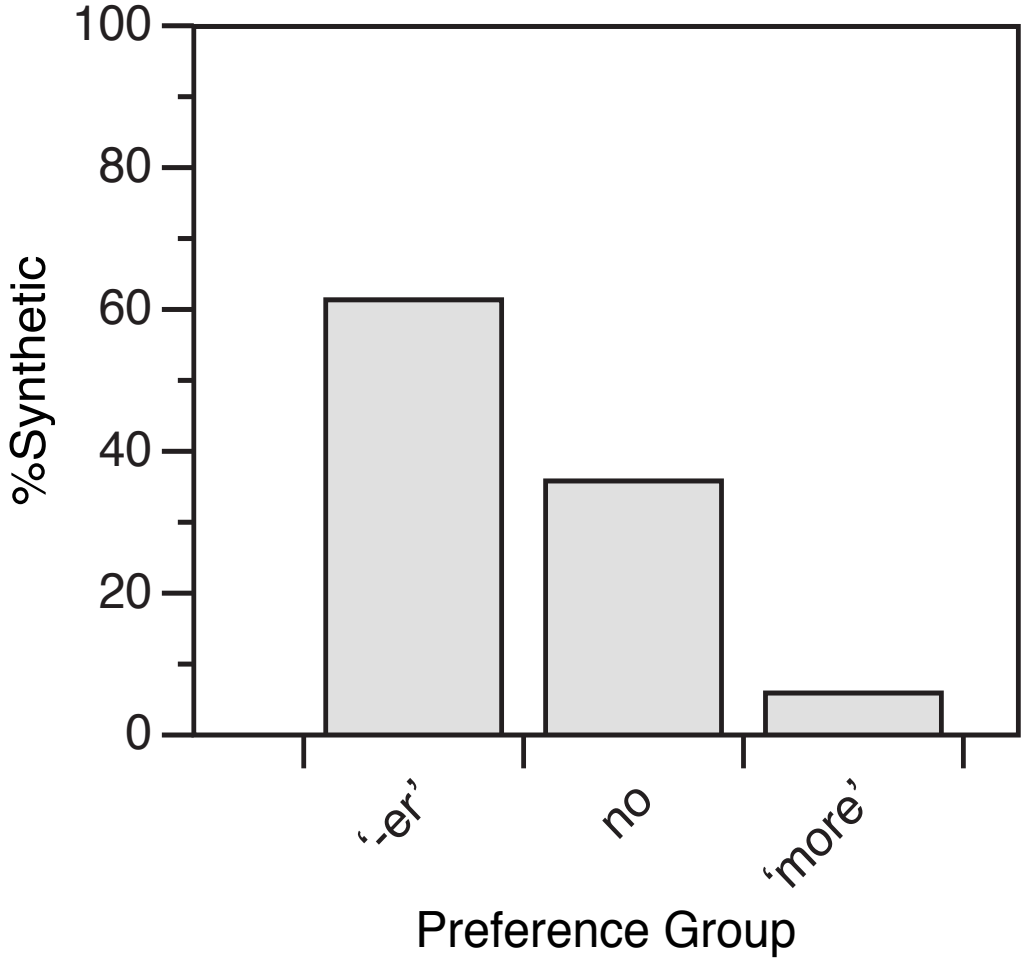
Result: Some prosodic shapes are strongly preferred in the analytic form



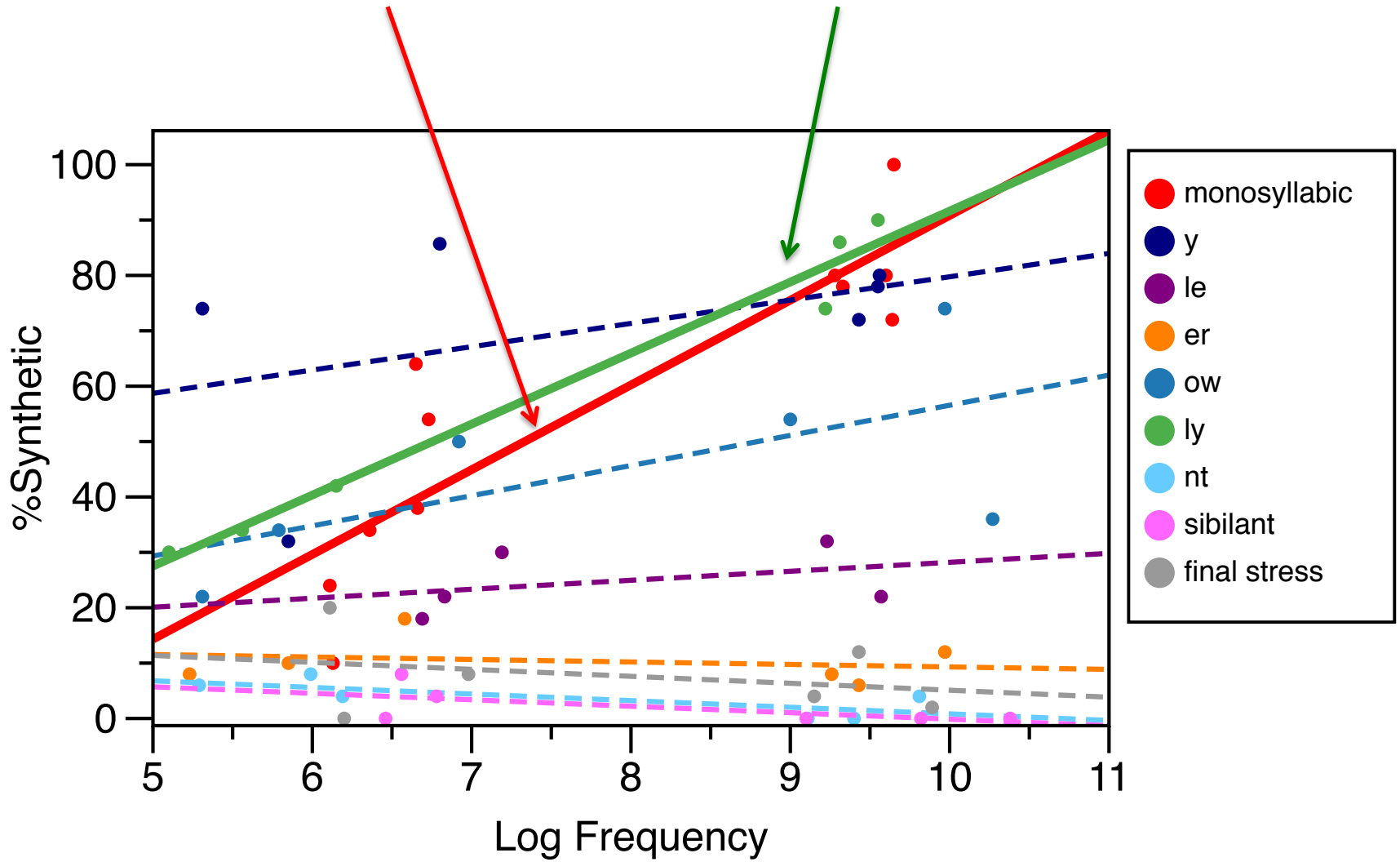
Result: Some prosodic shapes have moderate preference for either comparative form



Result: Adjectives fall into 1 of 3 preference groups: ‘-er’, ‘more’, and no preference



Result: Frequency only influences preferences for monosyllabic ADJs and disyllabic *–ly* ADJs



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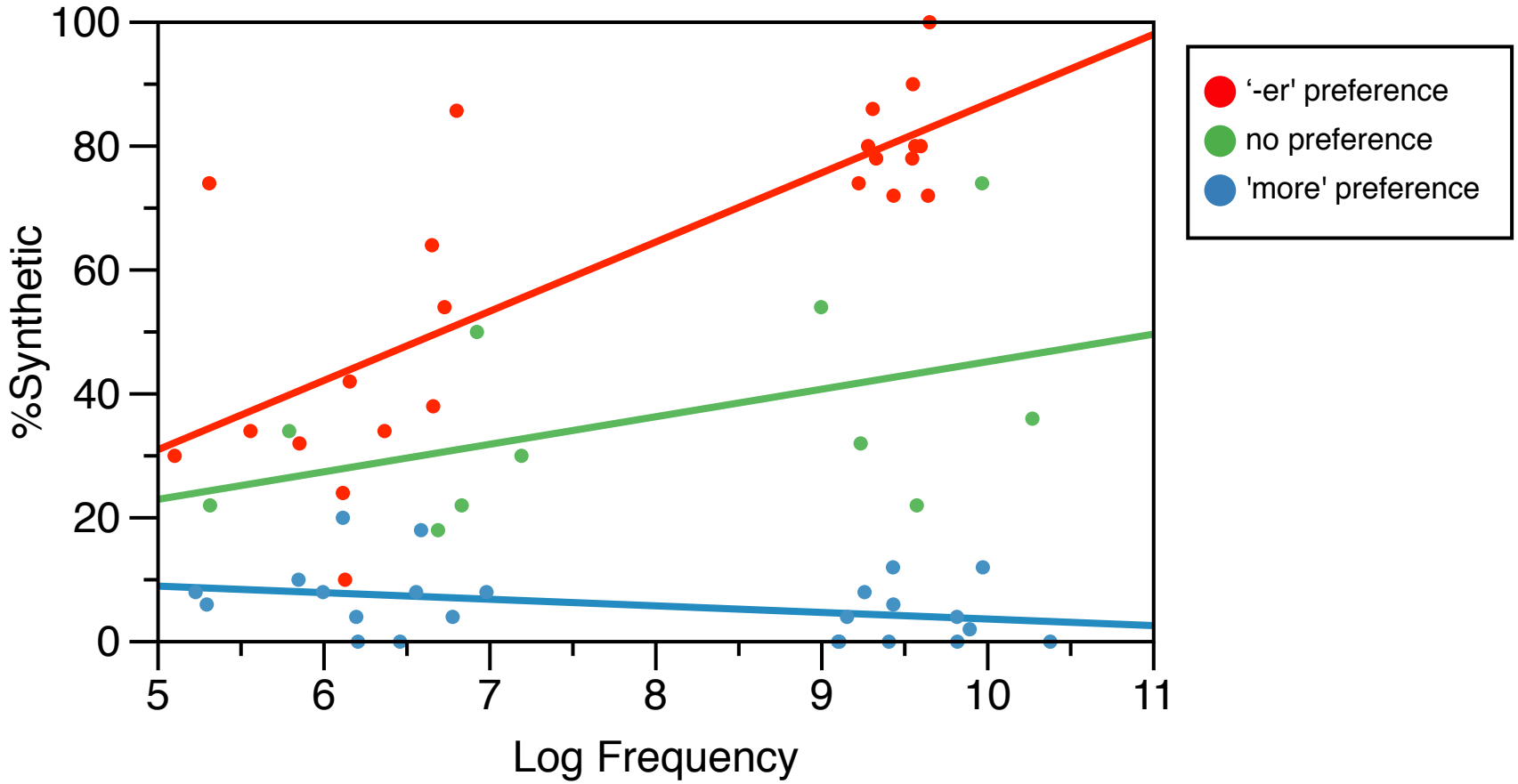

Unprimed study: Conclusions

Comparative form preferences differ by prosodic shape

Some prosodic shapes are preferred more strongly with ‘–er’ or ‘more’

Frequency influences monosyllabic ADJs and disyllabic –ly ADJs only

What causes speakers to select the synthetic or analytic comparative form?

1. Unprimed study-

   examines role of prosodic shape & frequency

2. Primed study-

   additionally examines role of recency

Primed study: Does recency of the following increase selection of the synthetic form?

Ex: target =	*famous*
1. Base only	*famous*
2. Same synthetic	*famouser*
3. Different synthetic	*roomier*

Primed study: Forced-choice acceptability-judgment task with priming

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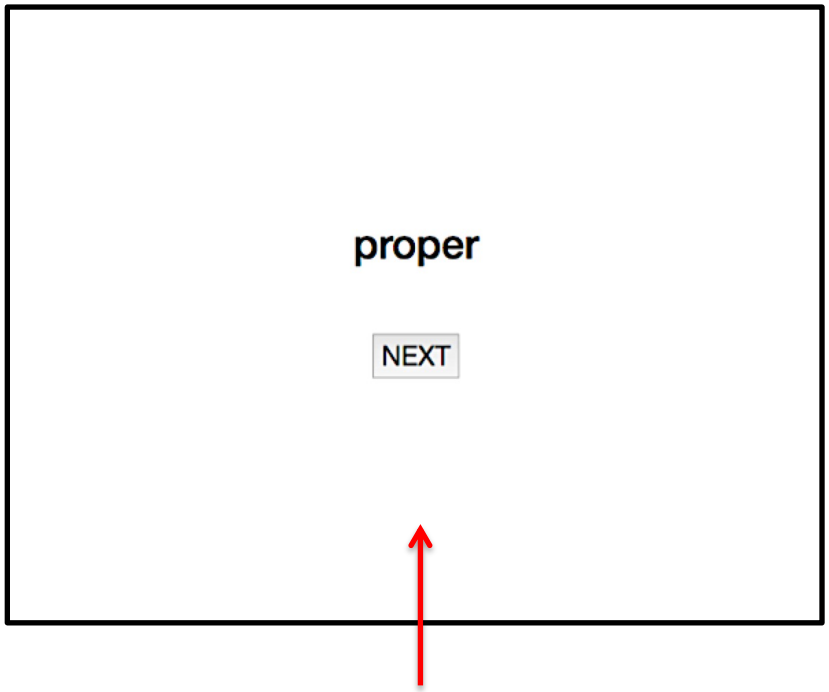
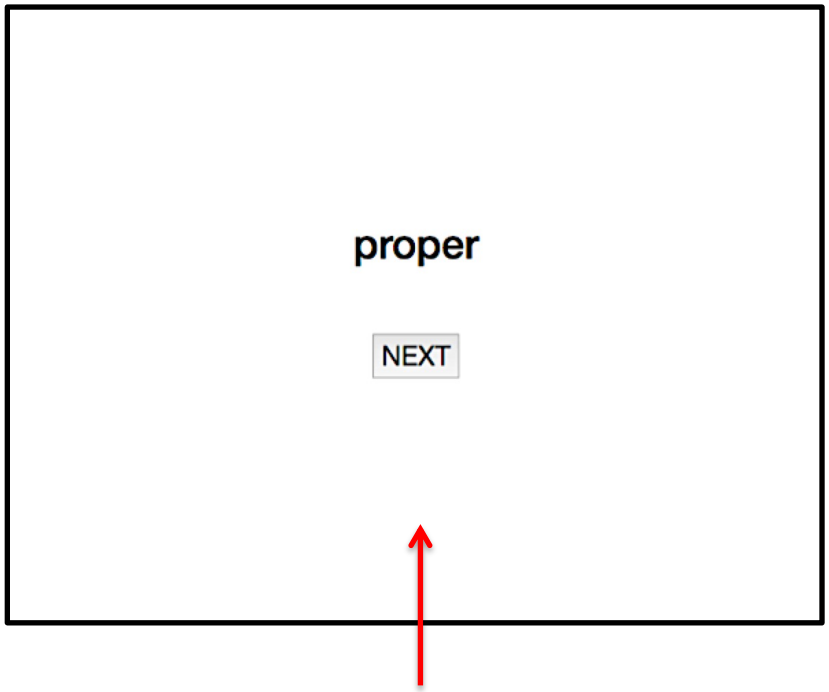
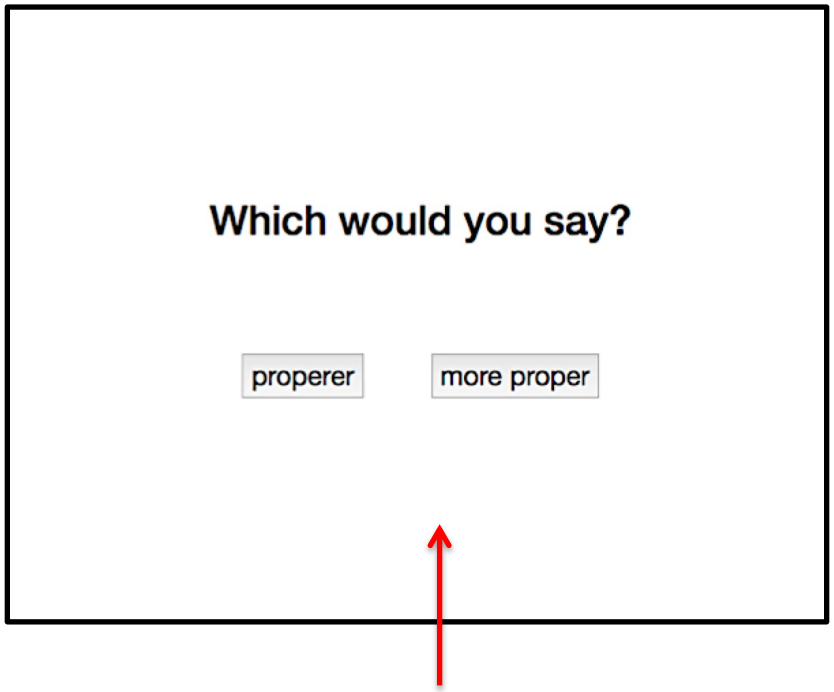


priming screen

Primed study: Forced-choice acceptability-judgment task with priming



priming screen



task screen

Primed study: Target stimuli & primes

Same target ADJs as unprimed study

3 primes per target word:

Ex:	target =	*famous*
base only:		*famous*
same synthetic:		*famouser*
different synthetic:		*roomier*

Primed study: Primes were distributed across 3 versions of the experiment

Target	Version1	Version2	Version3
pure	pure	purer	rosier
firm	firmer	merrier	firm
weird	speedier	weird	weirder

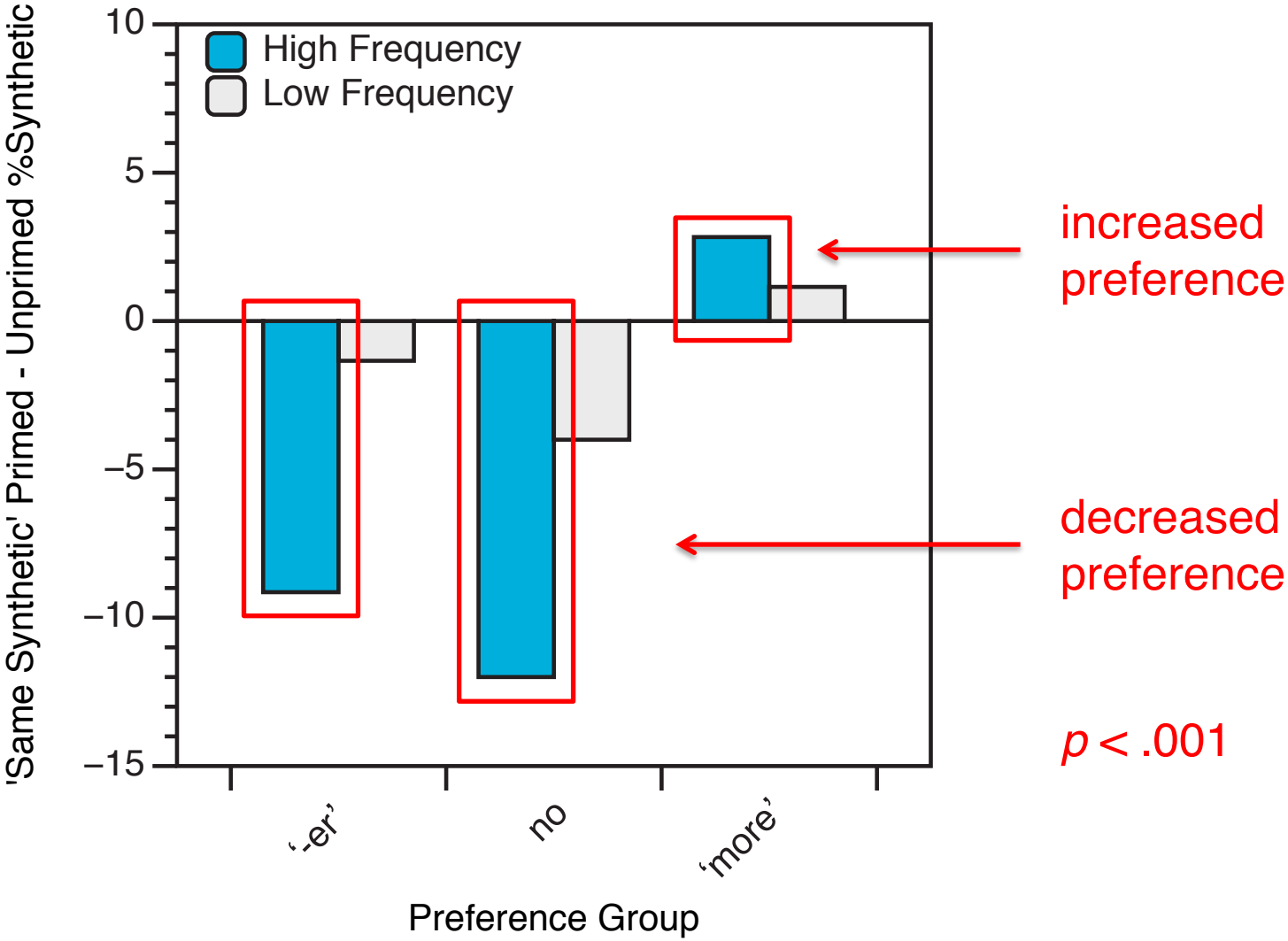
Primed study: Participants

150 participants:

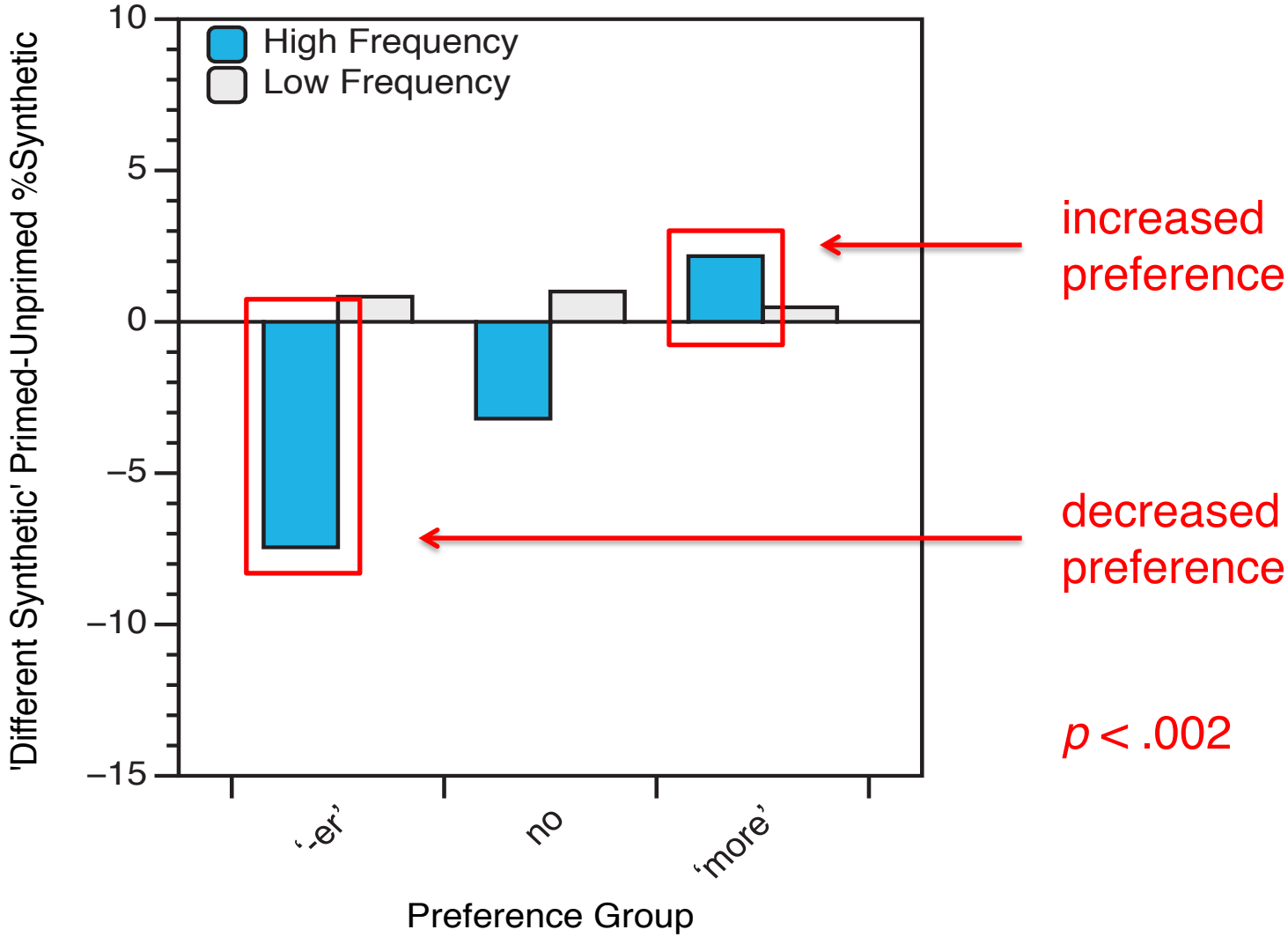
50 per 3 experiment versions

No participant completed more than 1 version of the experiment

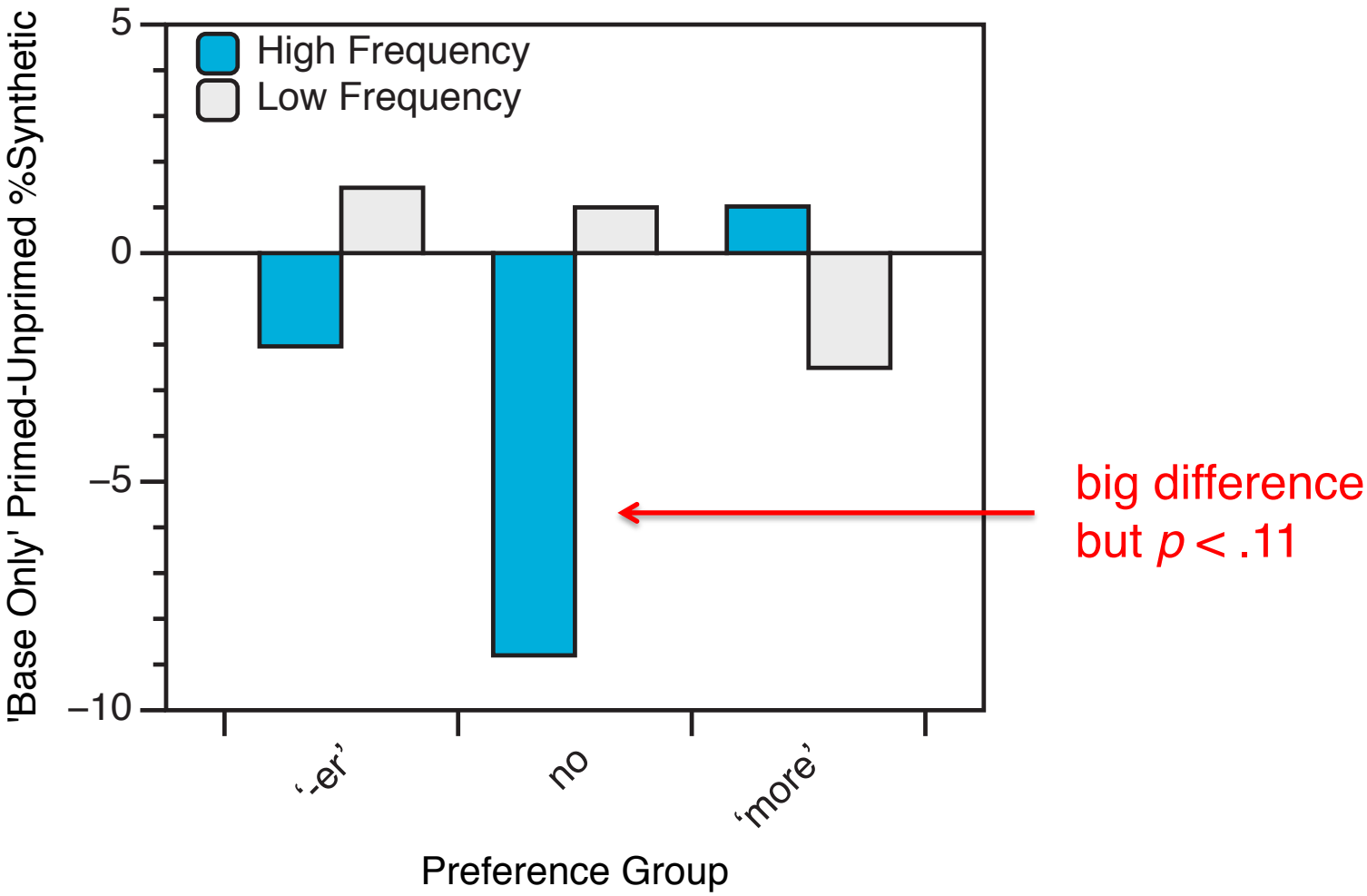
Result: ‘**Same synthetic**’ prime influenced comparative selection for high-frequency ADJs



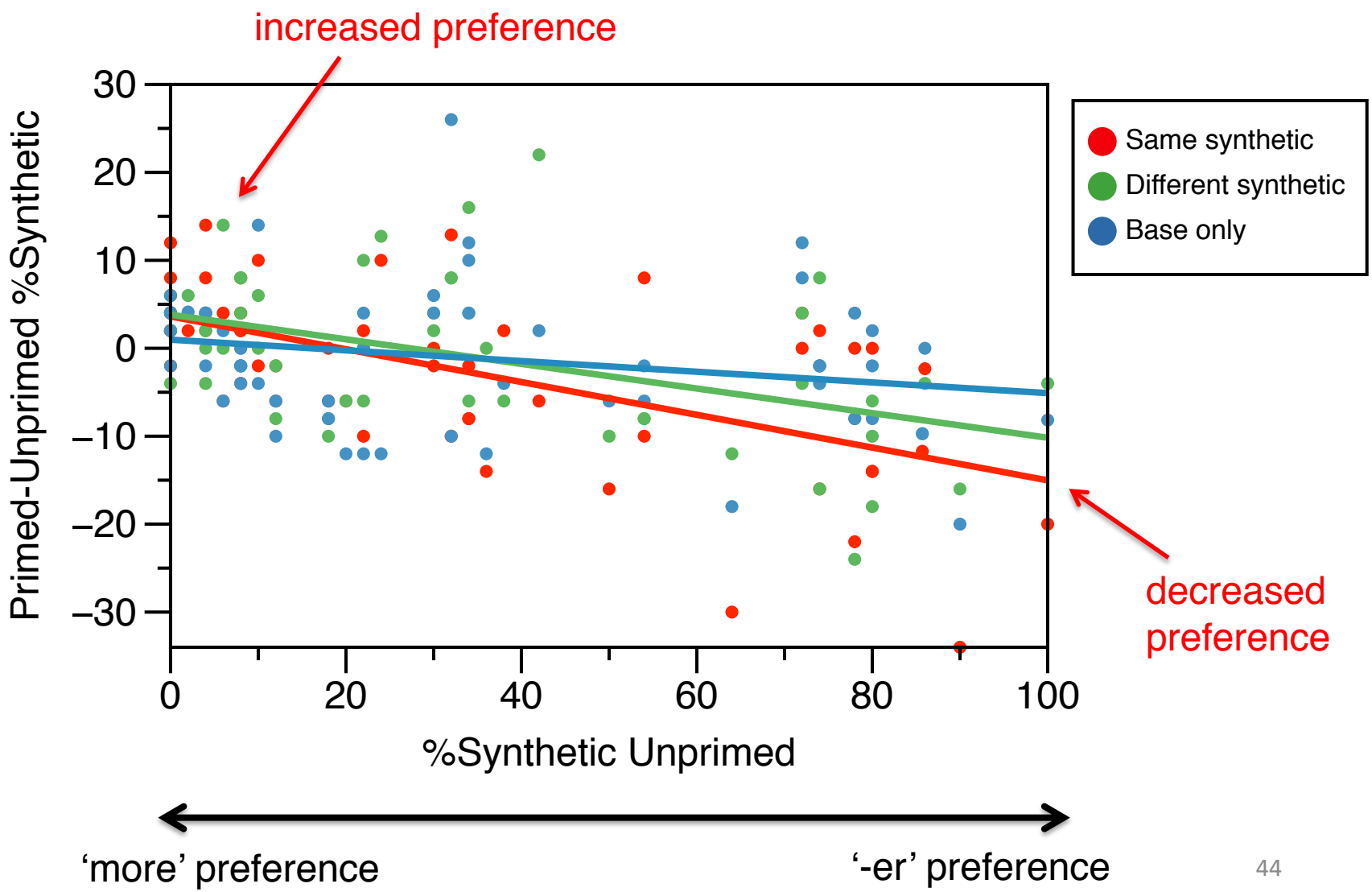
Result: ‘**Different synthetic**’ prime influenced comparative selection for high-frequency ADJs



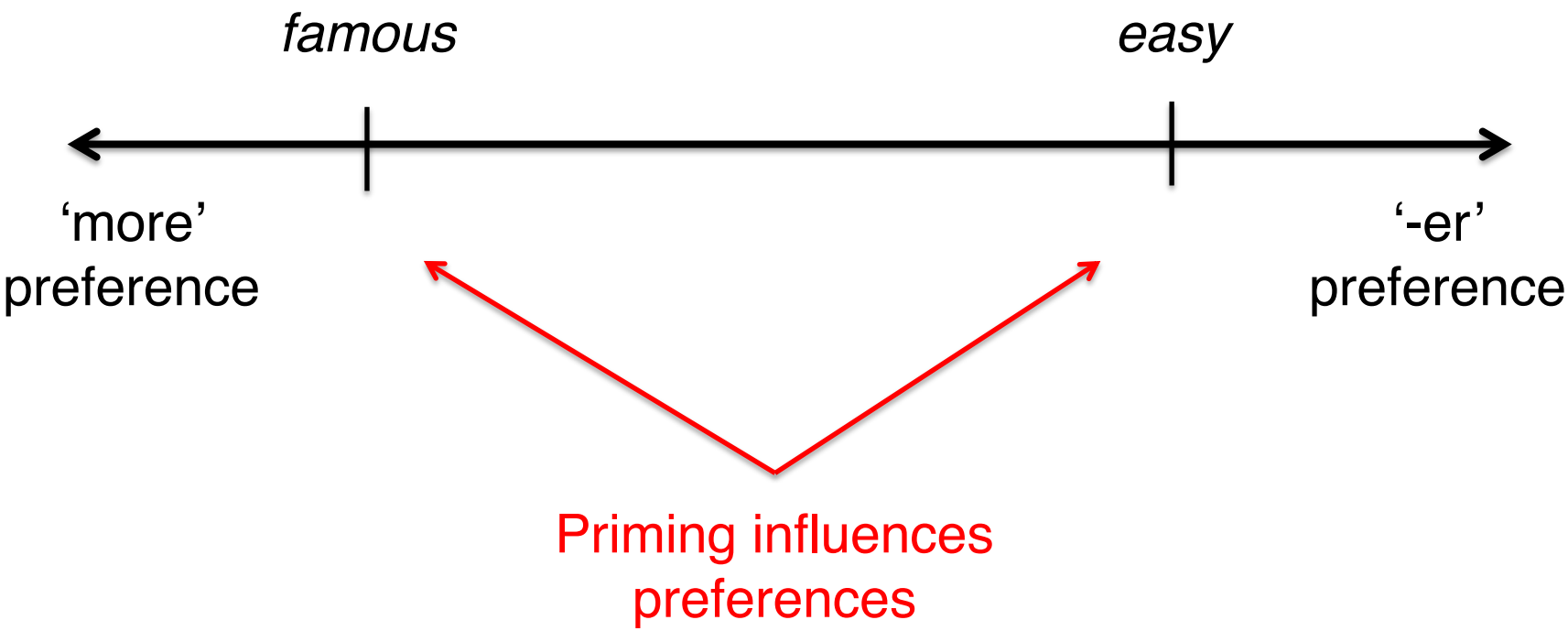
Result: ‘**Base only**’ prime did not influence comparative form selection



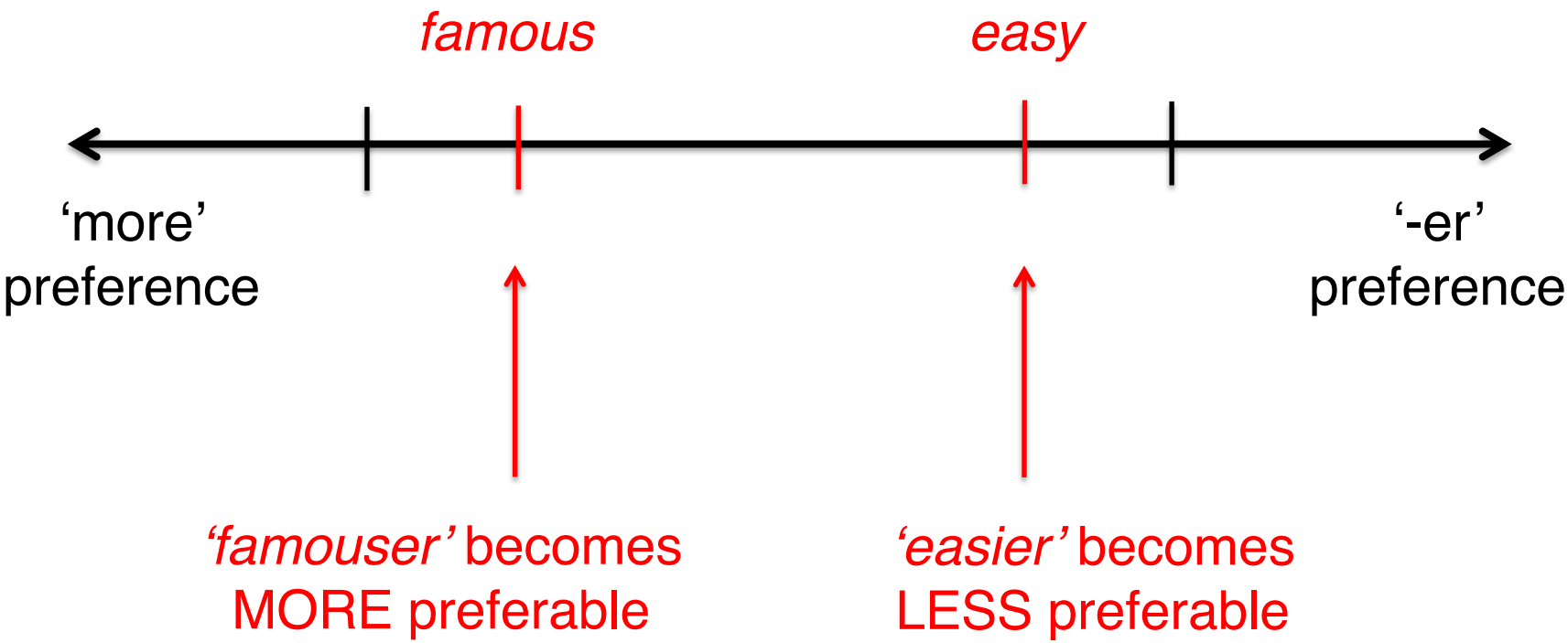
‘**Same**’ and ‘**different**’ synthetic primes affect ‘-er’ preference and ‘more’ preference ADJs differently



Conclusion: Comparative form selection can be influenced by recency of '**same**' or '**different**' synthetic forms



Conclusion: Recency affects '-er' and 'more' preference ADJs differently



We are left with two questions:

1. Why does recency affect ‘–er’ preference and ‘more’ preference ADJs differently?

2. Why are high frequency ADJs affected the most?

Why does recency affect '-er' preference and 'more' preference ADJs differently?

'-er' preference ADJs:

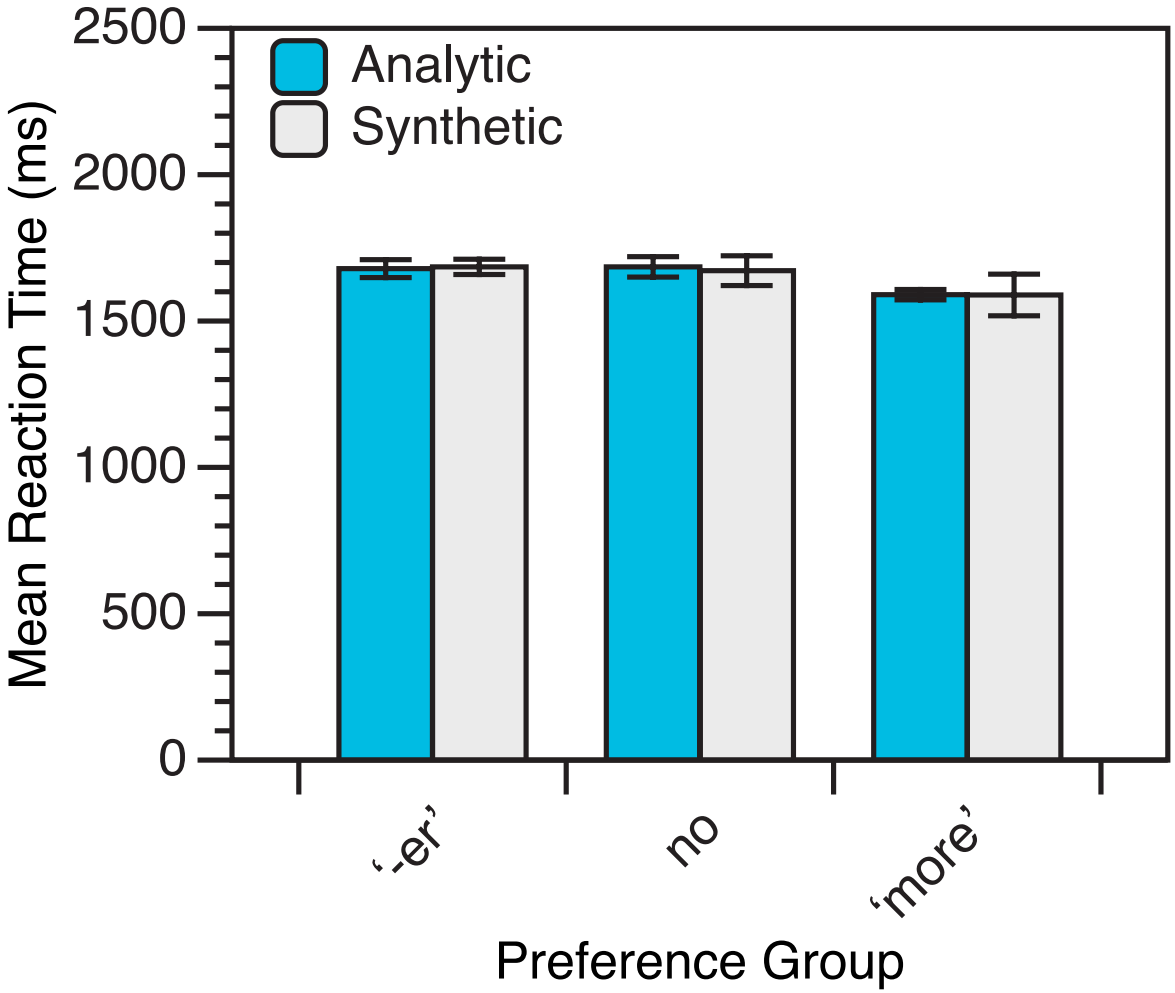
inhibition effect

= more "errors" and slower RTs

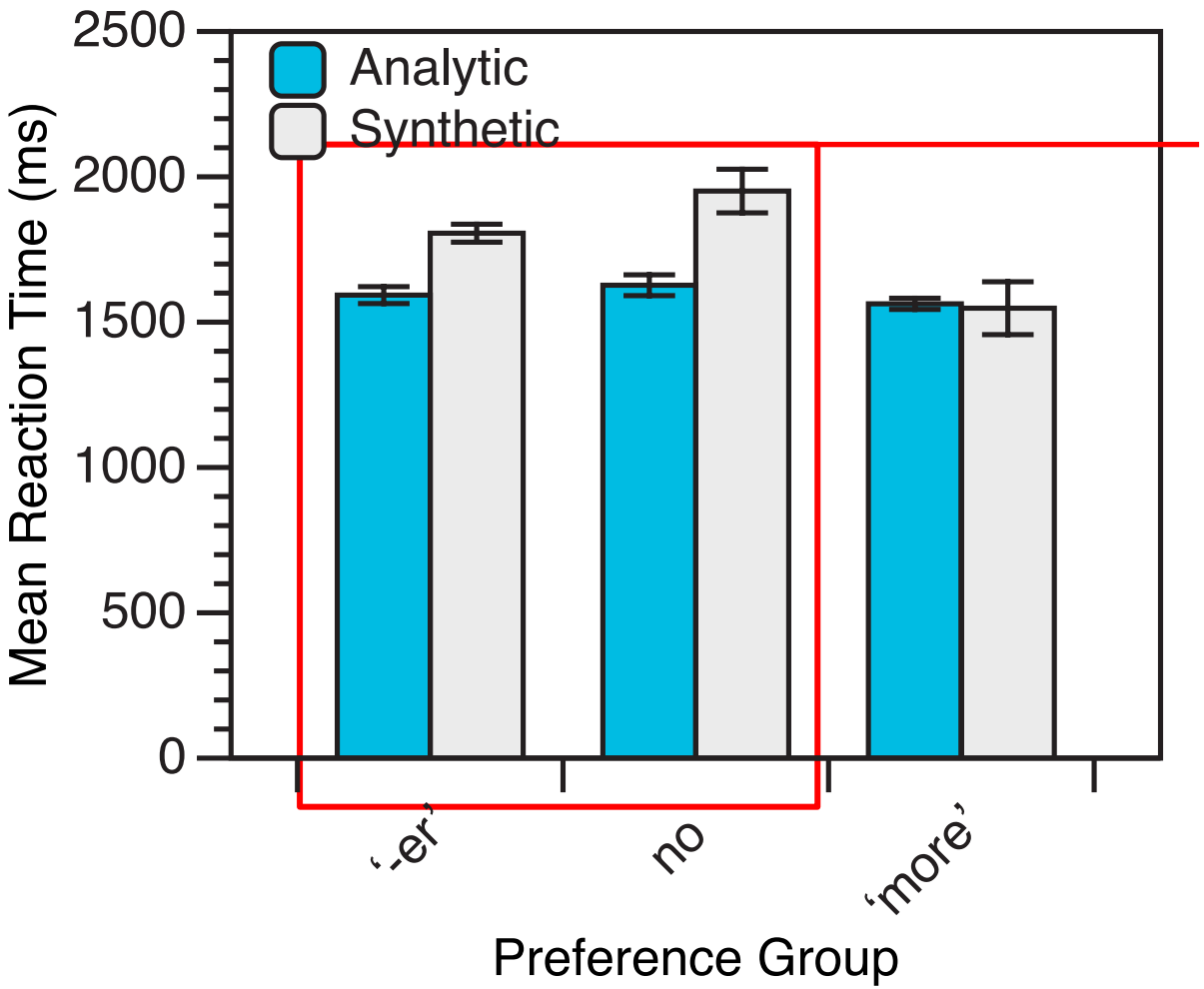
decreased '–er' preference

This happens too!

When unprimed, there is no difference in reaction times

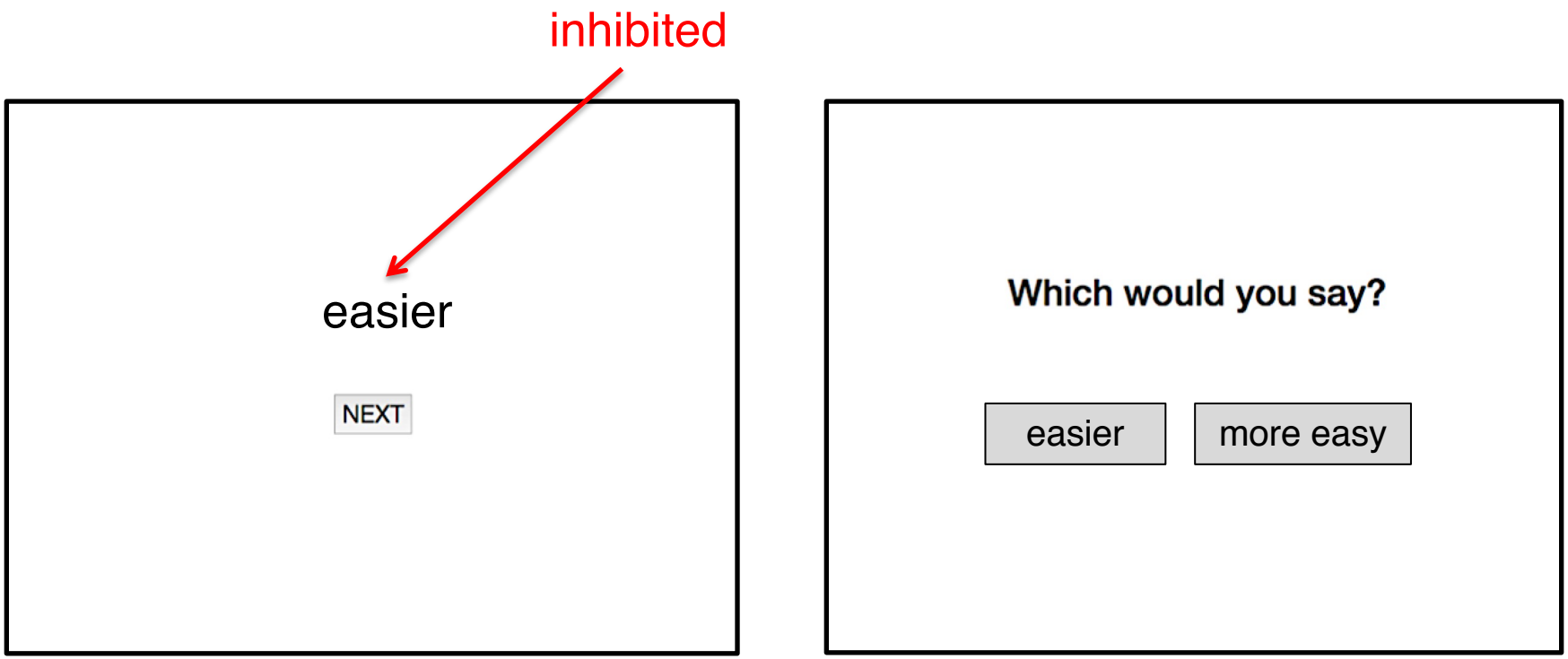


When primed with a synthetic prime,
RTs were longer for '-er' & no preference ADJs
when participants selected the synthetic form



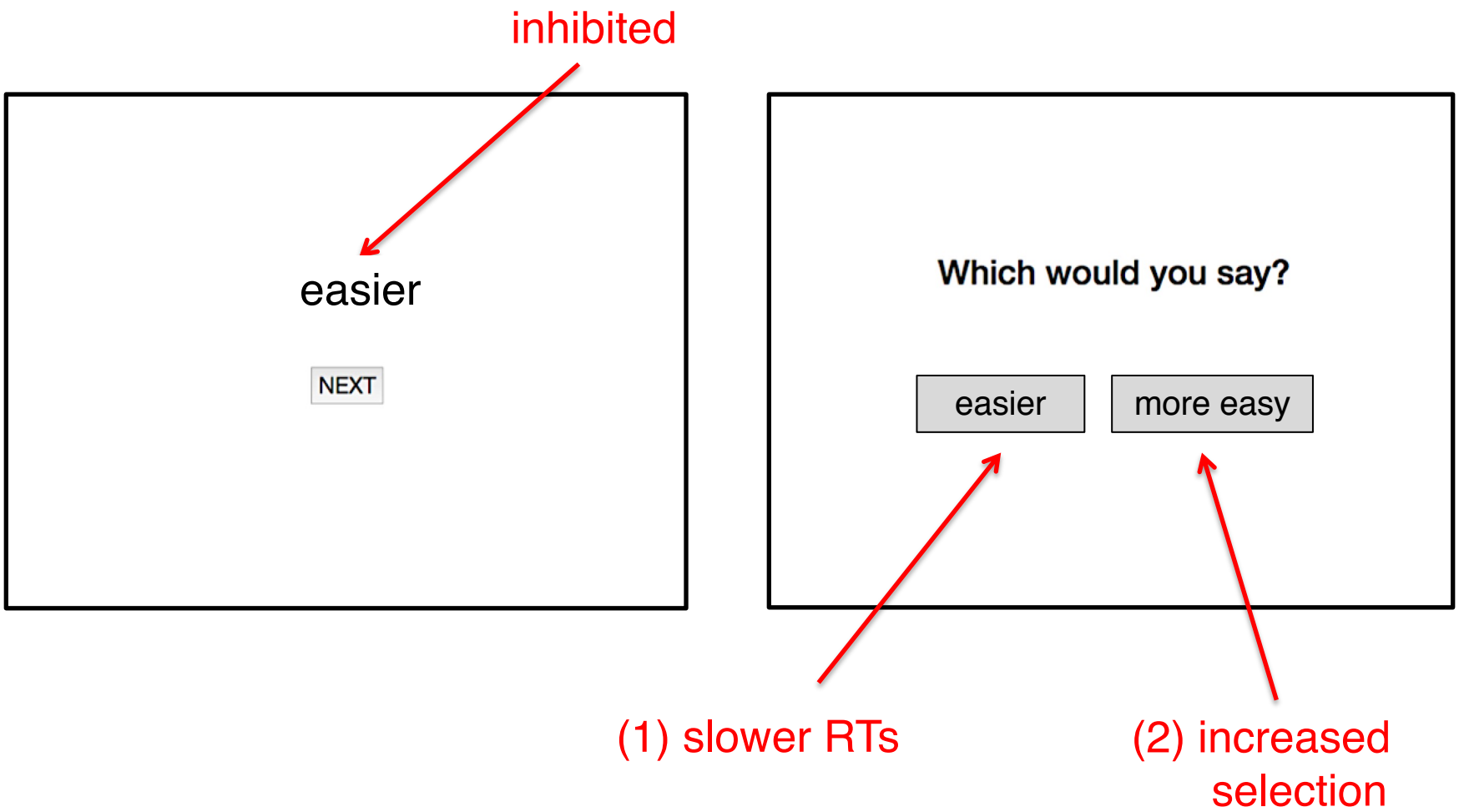
Choosing synthetic comparative is more difficult!

When primed with a synthetic comparative, participants inhibit the synthetic option



Inhibiting the synthetic option causes two effects:

(1) slower RTs, (2) more analytic selection



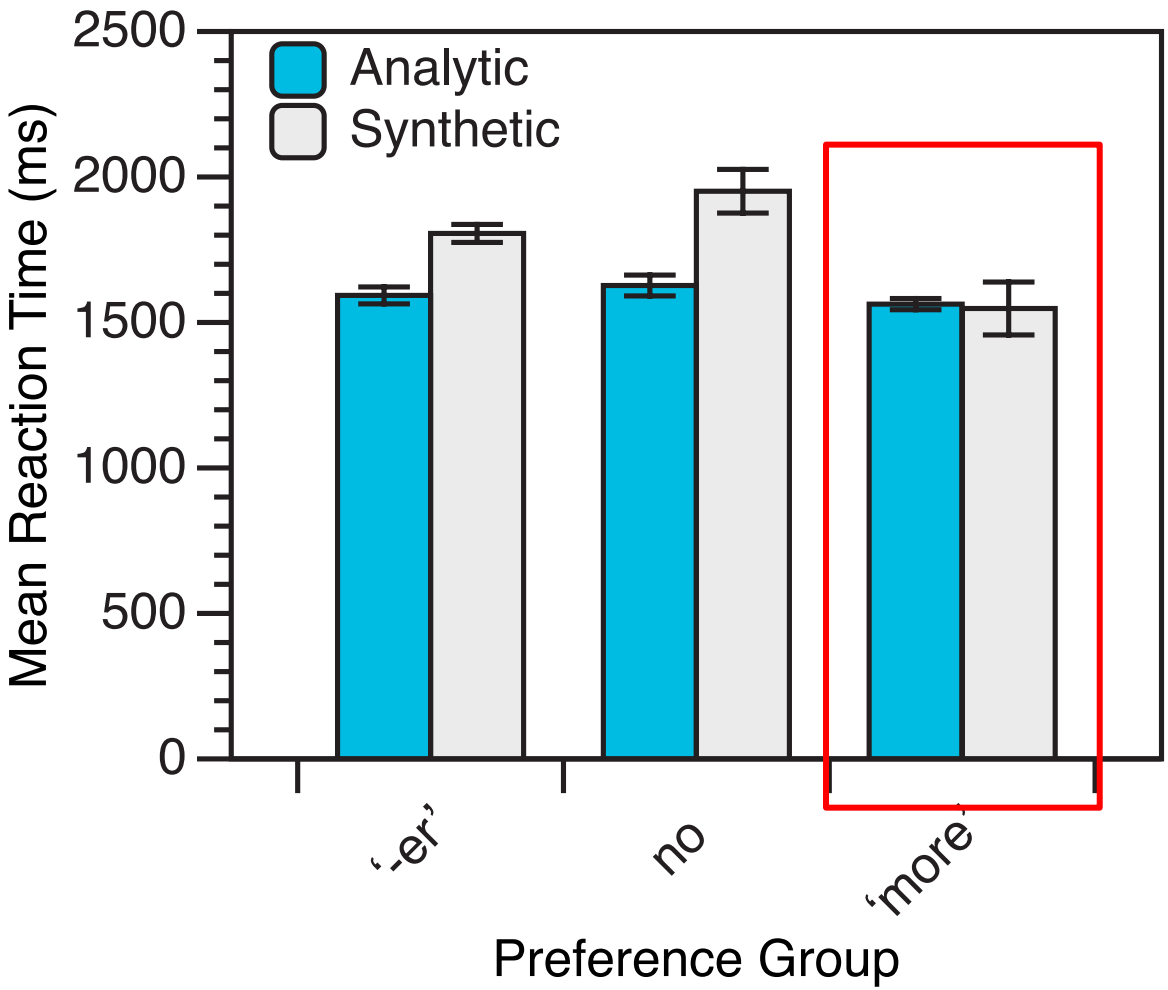
Why does recency affect ‘-er’ preference and ‘more’ preference ADJs differently?

‘more’ preference ADJs:

facilitation effect

= increased selection of prime

For **‘more’ preference ADJs**, there is no difference in reaction times



Recency affects selection processes differently depending on speaker's experience with ADJ

ADJ often occurs in synthetic form:

recent synthetic forms inhibit selection of synthetic form

= Horror-aequi

ADJ doesn't often occur in synthetic form:

recent synthetic forms facilitate selection of synthetic form

= Persistence

We are left with two questions:

1. Why does recency affect ‘–er’ preference and ‘more’ preference ADJs differently?

2. Why are high frequency ADJs affected the most?

Mondorf (2003): Frequent forms do not need ‘More’-Support

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YES

Ex: more syllables
complex/repetitive ending
less frequent

ANALYTIC

‘more’ signals comparative
has begun, ADJP will follow

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Ex: fewer syllables
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recent forms

SYNTHETIC

‘-er’ is at the end
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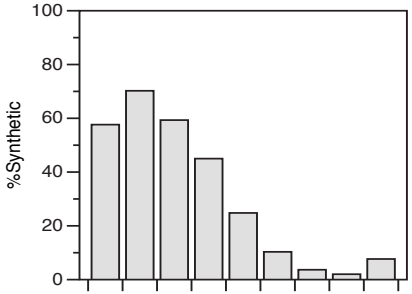

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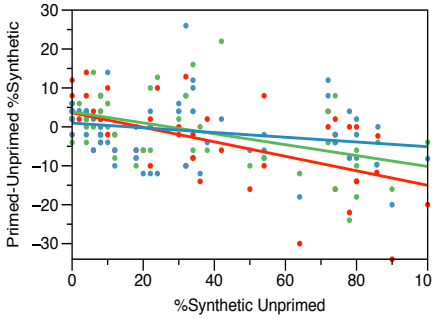
examines role of prosodic shape & frequency



2. Primed study-

additionally examines role of recency

This gives us insight into
why less-preferable forms occur

Children are more easy
to manipulate than adults.

I was a national celebrity,
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