

Generic *they* is generic and singular and shows remnants of plurality

Background & Motivation

- besides the prototypical plural *they*, there are at least four other types of *they* [1]
 - generic indefinite: **Someone** ran out of the classroom, but **they** forgot **their** backpack.
 - generic definite: The **ideal student** completes the homework, but not if **they** have an emergency.
 - specific definite ungendered: The **math teacher** is talented, but **they** hand back grades late.
 - specific definite gendered: **James** is great at laundry, but **they** never wash their dishes.
- while there is research from sociolinguistics and syntax [e.g. 1-4], there are no semantic analyses of singular *they* and pronouns in general yet
- RQ: What are the semantics of generic *they*?

Method

Naive Discriminative Learning – NDL

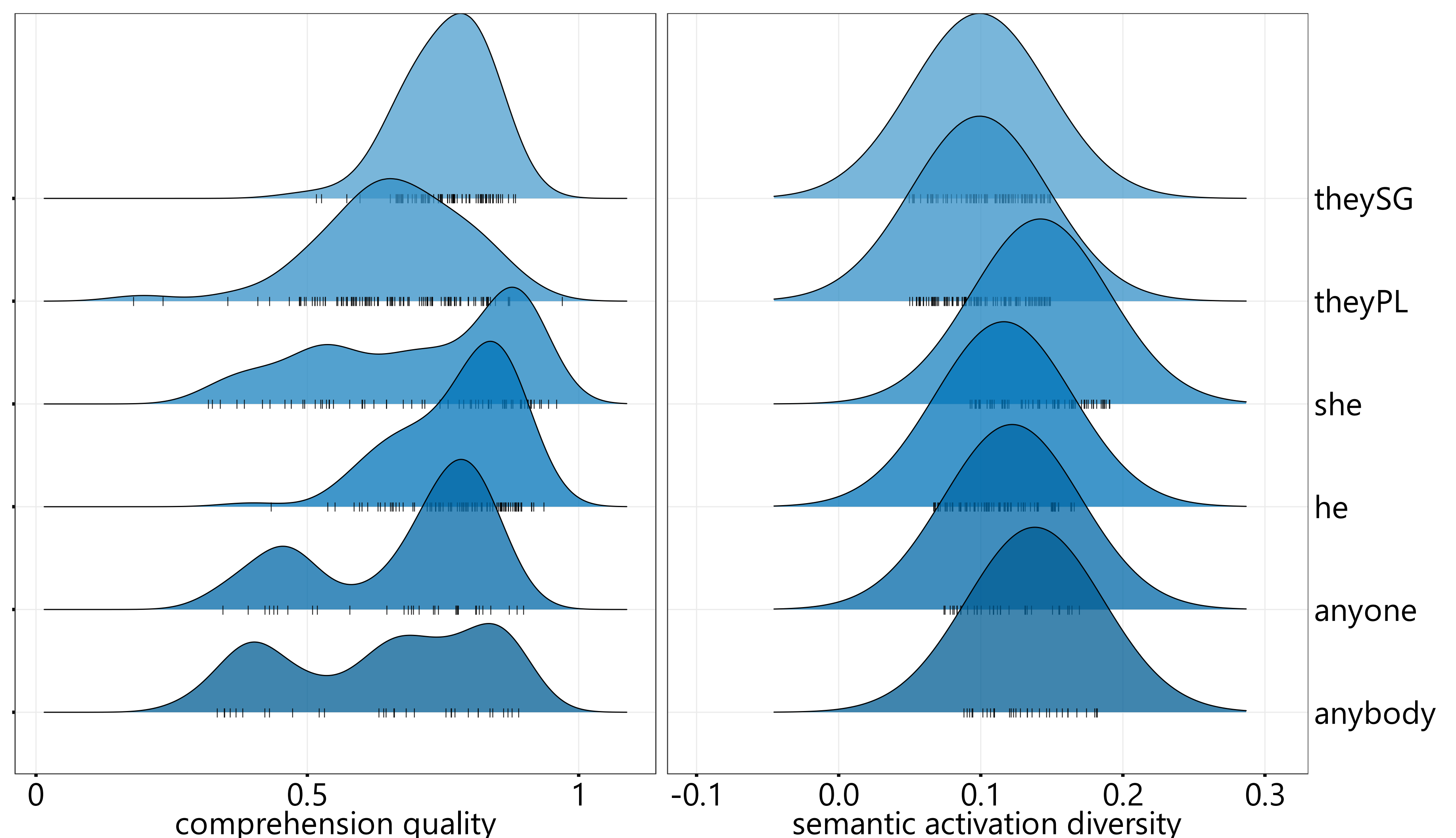
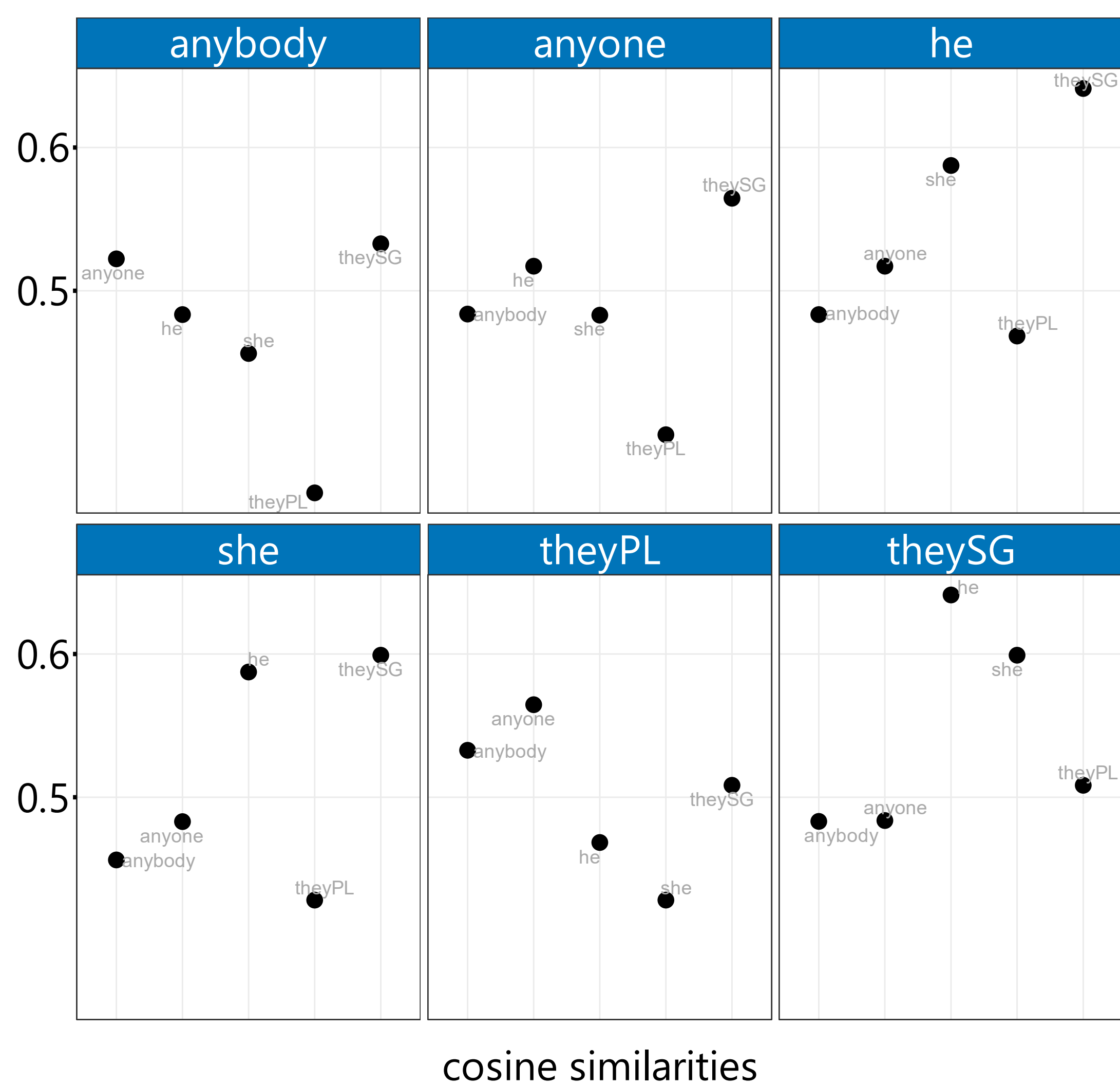
- based on well-established theory in cognitive psychology [5-6]
- computes semantic vectors of words and inflectional features via cues and outcomes

Instance Vectors

- the mean of vectors of words and inflectional functions surrounding a target word token [7]
- computed based on the semantic vectors generated by NDL

Linear Discriminative Learning – LDL

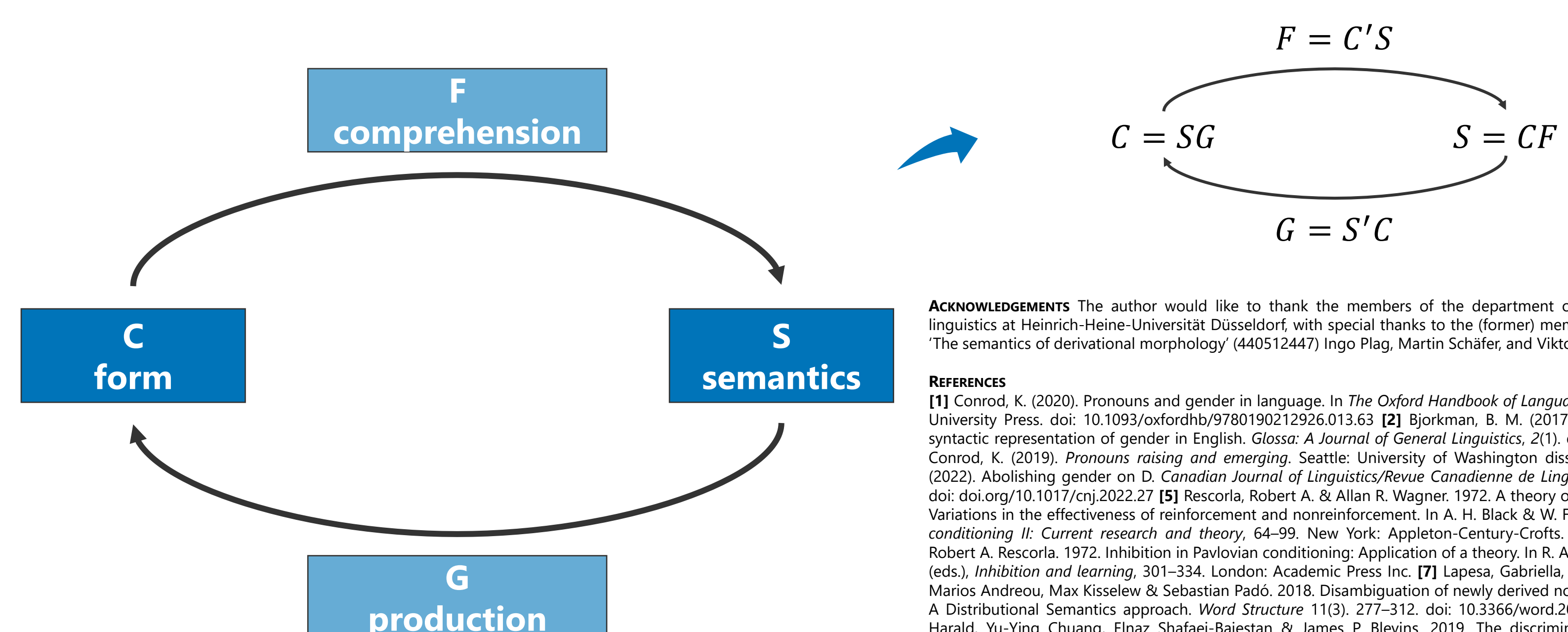
- linguistic knowledge and underlying features are product of speakers' experience [8-9]
- maps forms onto meanings and vice versa; simulates mental lexicon and its interrelations



Discussion

- generic *they* appears to be a generic singular pronoun with remnants of plurality
- generic *they* is comprehended significantly better than plural *they*
- generic *they* coactivates entries in the lexicon to same degree as plural *they* does
- semantic analyses of pronouns appear to be fruitful
- the Discriminative Lexicon [9] is a framework fit to explore pronoun semantics

Linear Discriminative Learning – Background



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