Preferred Argument Structure in Mapudungun Narratives

Florian Matter
Institute of Linguistics

Morphosyntactic alignment

- How are the arguments of intransitive and transitive verbs marked?

  - S: Marking of sole argument of intransitive clause

  - A: Marking of more agent-like argument of prototypical transitive clause

  - P: marking of more patient-like argument of prototypical transitive clause

- Verbal arguments can be expressed with nominal (case) marking or verbal (person) marking

- Depending on the alignment type, different types of arguments can be marked the same

Alignment types

(1)   Nominative-accusative (German)

    a.   [Der   gross-e   Hund] knurr-te.
            DEF.NOM big-NOM dog   growl-PST

          'The big dog(S) growled.'

    b.   [Der   gross-e   Hund] biss   [den   klein-en Mann].
            DEF.NOM big-NOM dog   bite.PST DEF.ACC small-ACC man

          'The big dog(A) bit the small man(P).'

Alignment types

(2) Nominative-accusative (Latin)

    a.   Puella   veni-t.
          girl.NOM come-PRS.3SG

          'The girl(S) comes.'

    b.   Puer-um puella   audi-t.
          boy-ACC   girl.NOM hear-PRS.3SG

          'The girl(A) hears the boy(P).'

Alignment types

(3) Ergative-absolutive (Lezgian)

  a. **Za**   zi   balk'an   c'ud xipe-qh   ga-na.
      1SG.ERG 1sg.poss horse.ABS ten   sheep-for give-PST

      'I(A) gave away my horse(P) in exchange for ten sheep.'

  b. **Zun**   ata-na.
      1SG.ABS come-PST

      'I(S) came.'

  c. Aburu   **zun**   ajib-da.
      3PL.ERG 1SG.ABS shame-FUT

      'They(A) will shame me(P).'

Alignment types

(4)   Ergative-absolutive (Basque)

    a.   **Gixona-k** liburua   erosi dau.
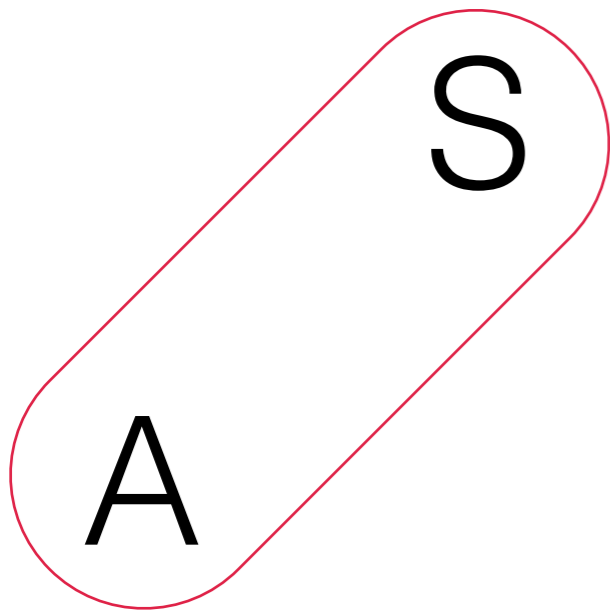   man-ERG book.ABS buy   AUX.3SG

       'The man(A) has bought the book(O).'

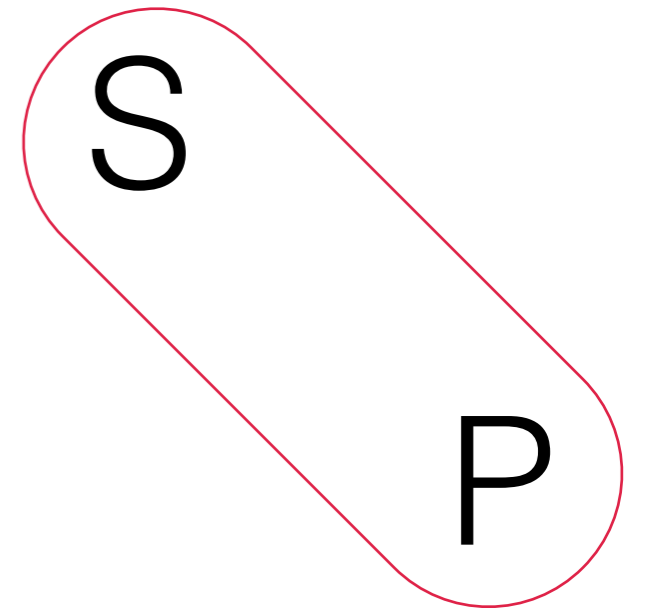   b.   **Gixona**   etorri da.
       man.ABS come AUX.3SG

       'The man(S) has come.'

Accusative vs. ergative

S

A   P

S

A   P

Ergativity

- Ergative-absolutive alignment: S is expressed the same way as P

- Popular topic in the 1970s and 80s

- Source of nominative-accusative alignment: Grammaticalization of agent+topic => "subject"

- Source of ergative-absolutive alignment: ?

PAS: Preferred Argument Structure

- Du Bois (1987): Corpus study of Sakapultek (Mayan), which has ergative alignment

- Pear film corpus shows ergative patterning for ratios of lexically expressed and newly introduced referents in different syntactic roles

- S and P have high ratios of new/lexical referents, A has low ratios.

- Statistical preference for this distribution possible explanation for ergative alignment ("Discourse basis of ergativity")

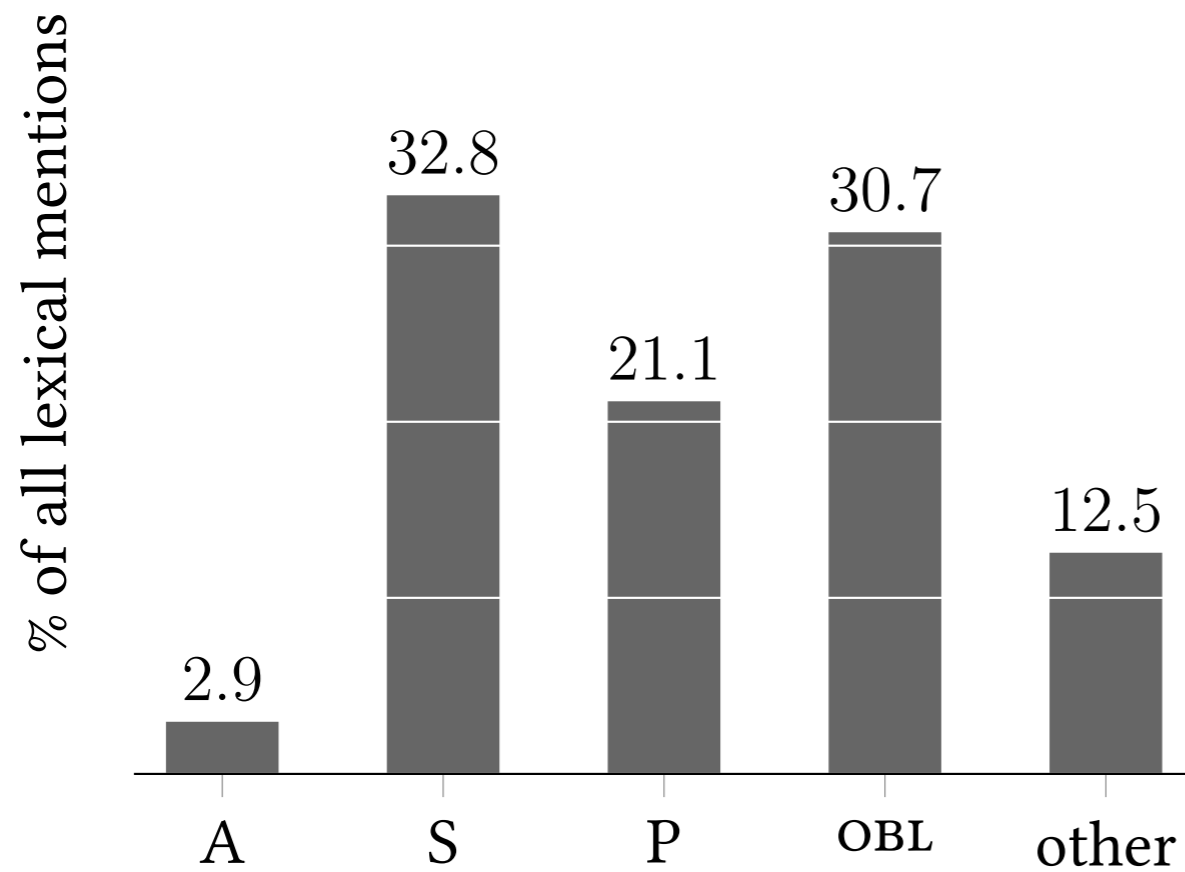# Ergative patterning in Sakapultek discourse
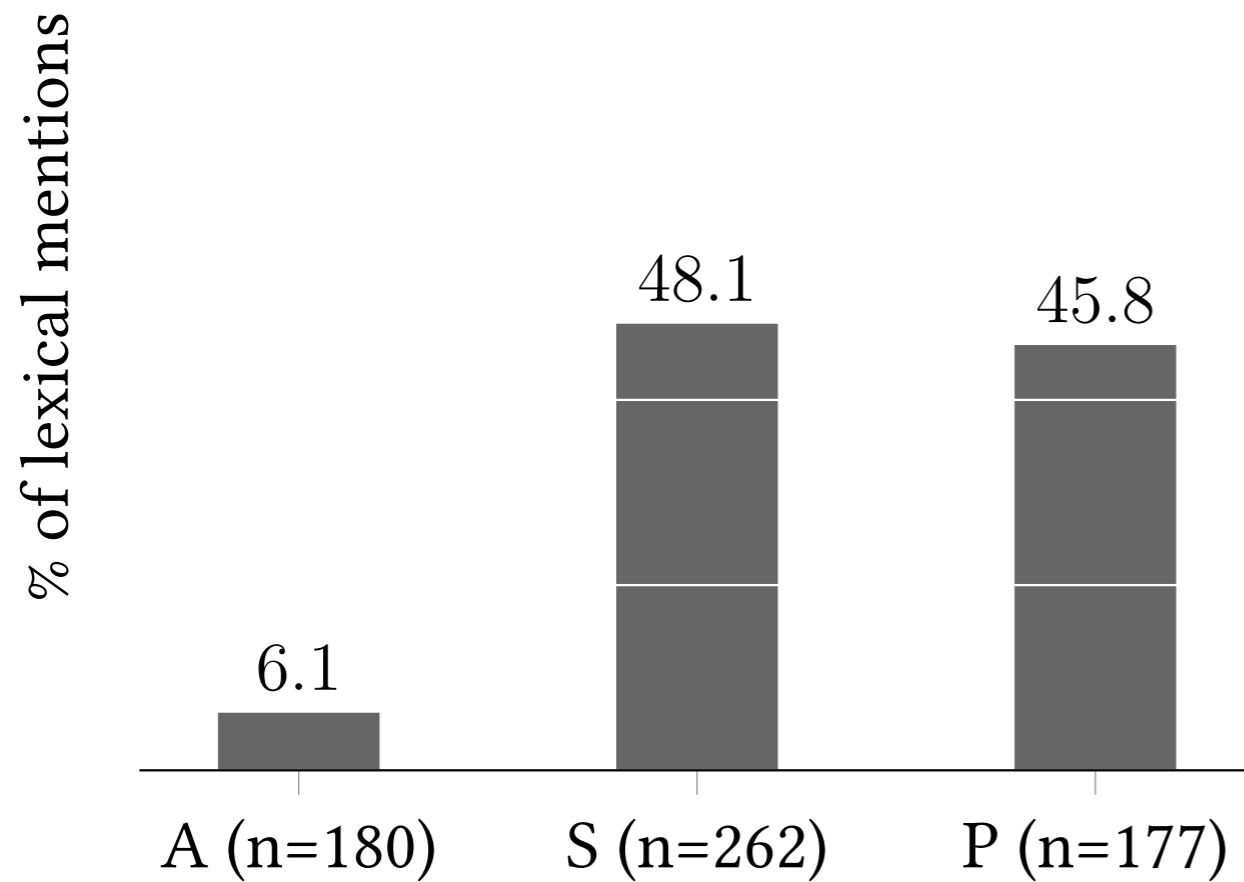
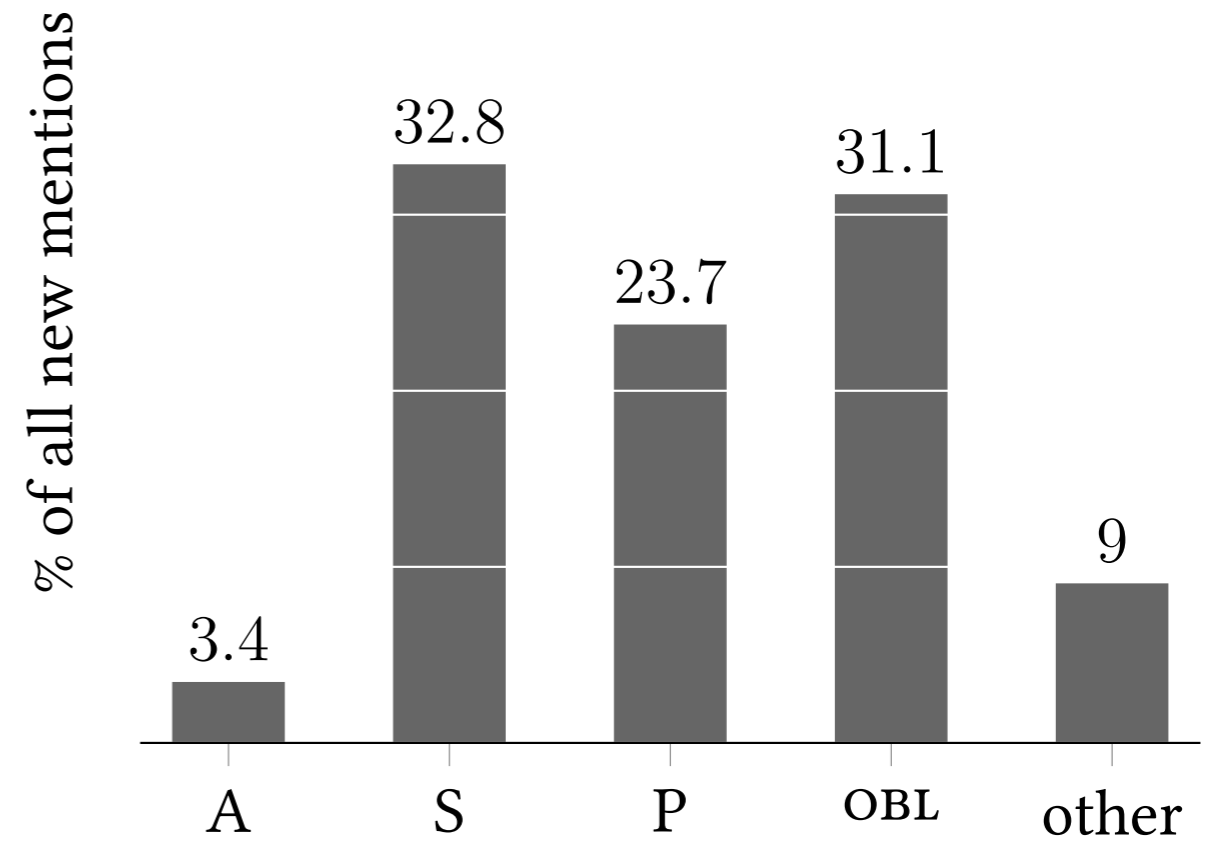(a) Ratio of lexical mentions in core roles
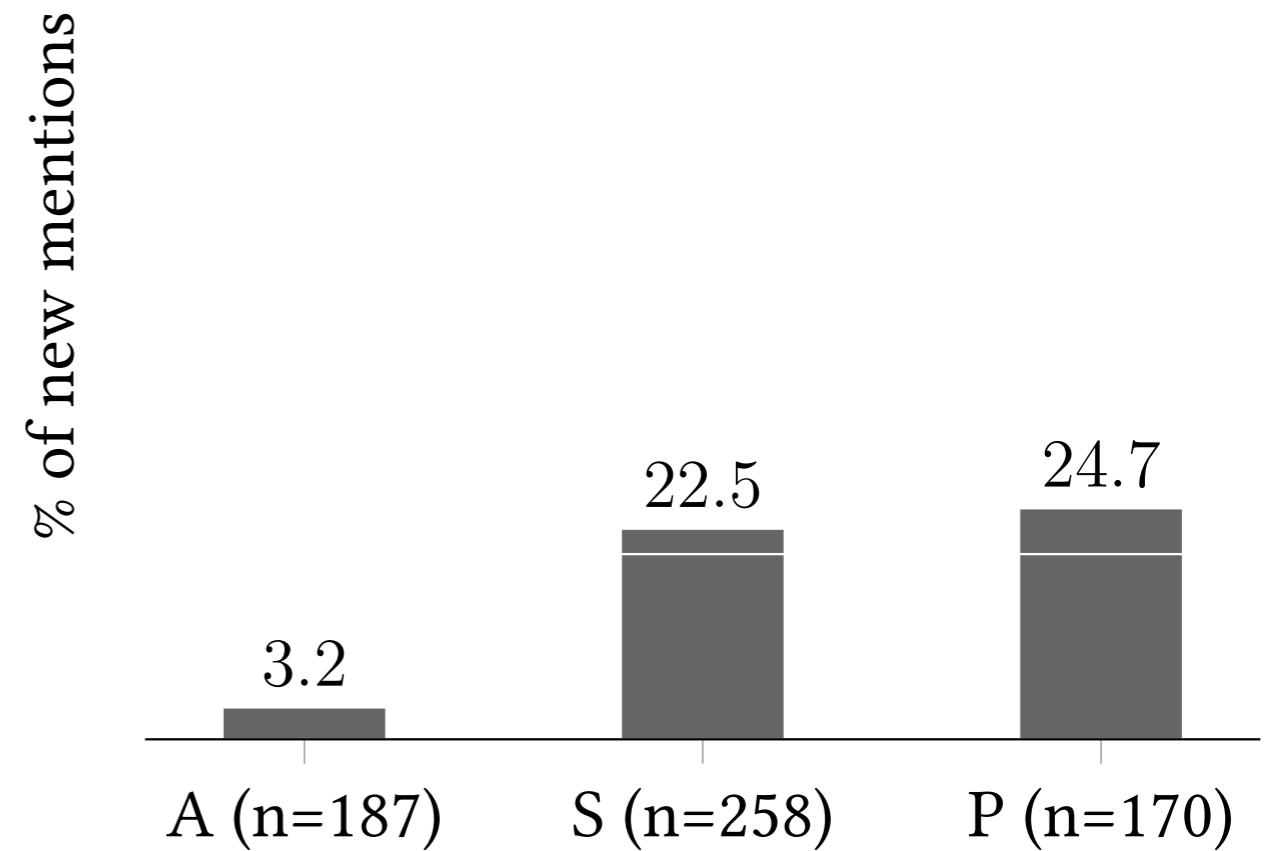
(b) Ratio of new mentions in core roles

Distribution of new & lexical mentions in Sakapultek discourse

(a) Distribution of lexical mentions (n=384) across syntactic roles

(b) Distribution of new mentions (n=177) across syntactic roles

Du Bois' constraints

	Grammar	Pragmatics
Quantity	One lexical argument	One new argument
Role	No lexical A	No new A

- These make up P[referred] A[rgument] S[tructure], which results in an ergative patterning of lexical/new mentions

Motivation for PAS

- Du Bois' explanation: Referent tracking is cognitively demanding on the listener

- Communication facilitated if listener "knows" where to preferrably expect newly introduced referents

- Points of introduction are S and P, because of the constraints operating on A

PAS literature

- Sizable body of literature examining PAS in different languages

- Du Bois' constraints seem to hold for various languages around the world

- PAS – possibly universal?

Critics

- Haspelmath (2006), Everett (2009), Haig & Schnell (under review)

- Quantity constraints are not independent of role constraints – disfavoured new/lexical A automatically leads to few new/lexical A

- Transitive clauses with lexical P should have lower proportions of lexical A – not true for studies in Du Bois (2003)

- **Alternative explanation for pattern: Human referents tend to be topical (→ non-lexical) and agentive (→ in A position)**

- Studies taking animacy into account show that **animacy is a better predictor for lexicality**

- Many studies don't really show A ≠ S = P in terms of newness/lexicality, but A < S < P

- Introductory role of S does not seem to hold

TL;DR: Competing explanations for differences between A / S / P

- Du Bois: Syntactic roles have cognitive constraints, preferring introduction of new referents in S or P role, leading to uneven distribution of new/lexical mentions across syntactic roles.

- Critics: (In narratives,) humans are typically topical, hence non-lexical, and agentive, hence A has lower ratio of lexical mentions.

Mapudungun

- Language isolate spoken in Chile and Argentina

- Agglutinative and polysynthetic verbal morphology

- Comparably sparse nominal morphology

- Direct-inverse system

Direct-inverse

- Transitive verbs can either be direct or inverse

- Depending on the relative position of A and P on a saliency/animacy/topicality hierarchy

- More "important" referents receive A marking

- Generally: Speech act participants higher than third person

- Unambiguous marking of S/A/P and transitivity

Direct-inverse in Mapudungun

(5)   Direct-inverse system in Mapudungun

    a.   wentru pe-fi   domo   ruka   mew
            man   see-3.PAT woman house POSTP

          'The man(A/AGT) saw the woman(P/PAT) in the house.'

    b.   domo   pe-eyew   wentru ruka   mew
            woman see-INV.3AGT man   house POSTP

   'The man(P/AGT) saw the woman(A/PAT) in the house.'

Method

- Created corpus of 25 Mapudungun folk narratives: 2997 clauses, 4180 mentions (12 from 1910, 13 from 1991)

- Every mention of a referent categorised according to

  - syntactic role (S, A, P, T, R, OBL)

  - formal expression (lexical, pronoun, Ø)

  - animacy (human, animate, inanimate)

  - information status (previous subject, active, old, new)

  - semantic role

- **In other studies: Often only lexicality considered, information status ignored.**

Results: PAS

- No 1-to-1 correlation of lexicality and newness

- Quantity constraints not independent of quality constraints

- S intermediate between A and P for lexicality and newness

- A and S have high, P low proportions of humans

- Not many new humans, but relatively high lexicality of humans

- S shows higher lexicality for human referents than A

Results: Information status & lexicality
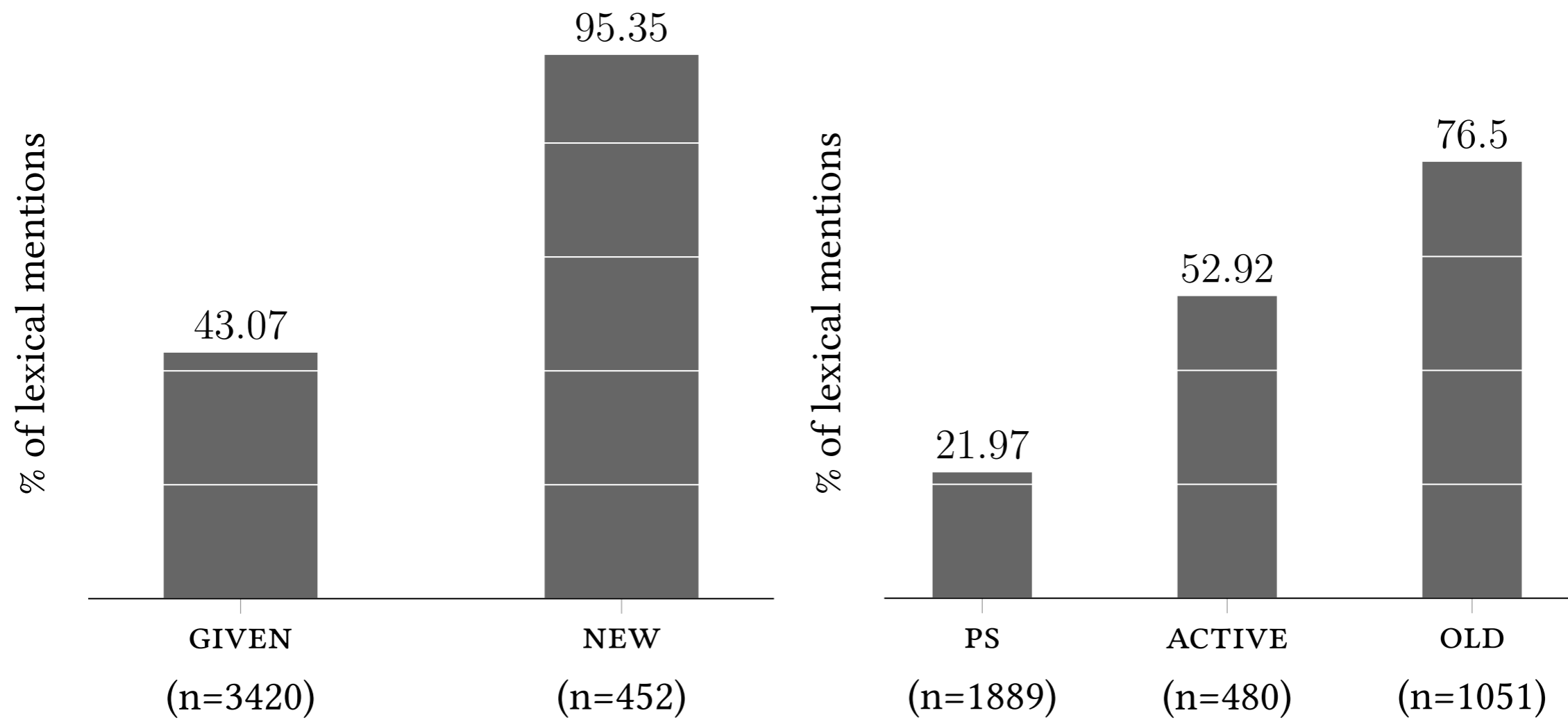
(a) Lexicality of given and new core arguments

(b) Lexicality of given core arguments with different salience

Results: Quantity and role constraints

	New A	Given A	Total
New P	18	183	201
Given P	2	620	622
Total	20	803	823

Table 10: Number of new A in clauses with new P compared to clauses with given P (Fisher's exact test p<0.0001)
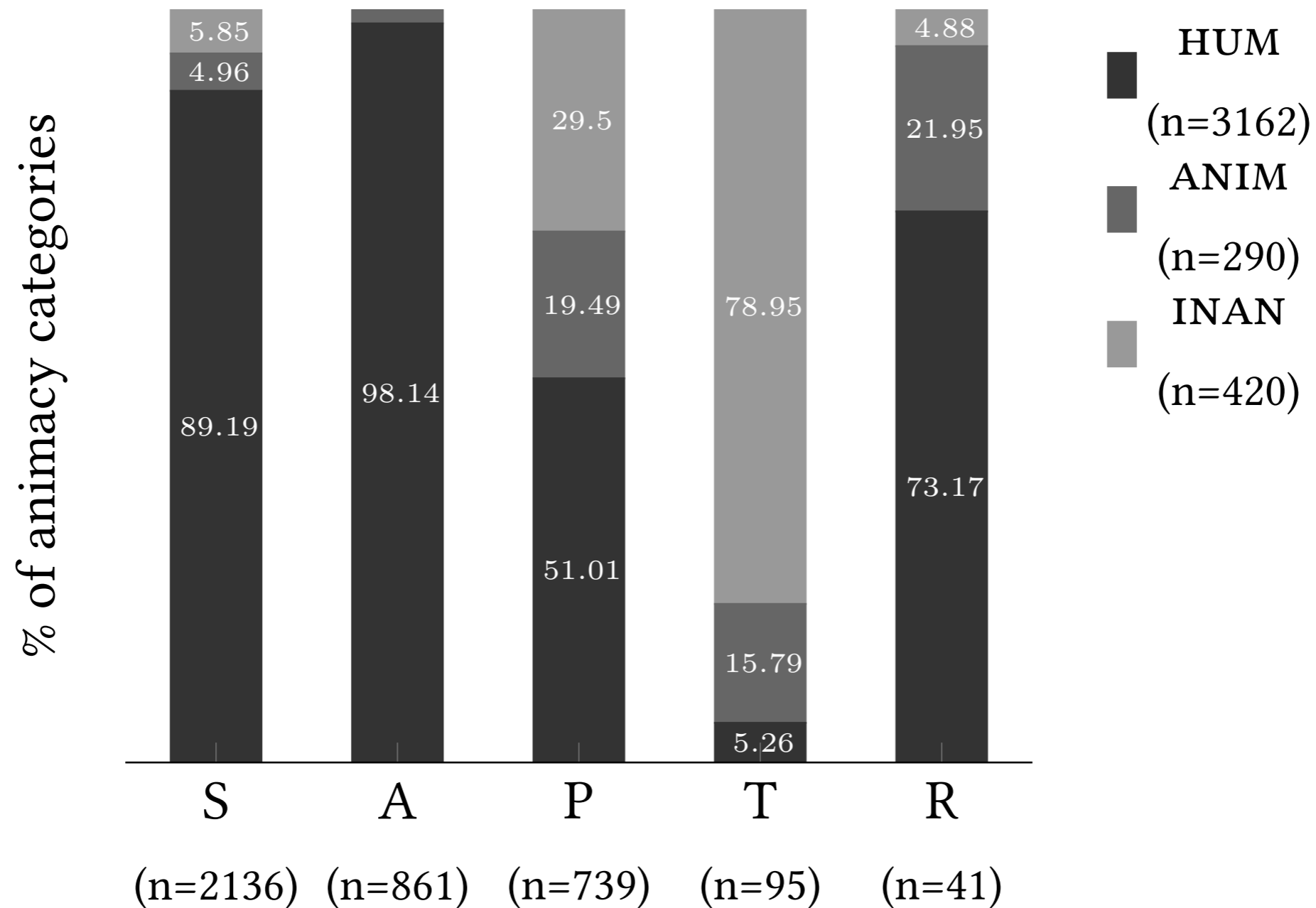
Results: Quantity and role constraints

	Lexical A	Zero A	Total
Lexical P	131	434	565
Zero P	37	221	258
Total	168	655	823

(a) Lexical A in clauses with lexical P

compared to clauses with zero P
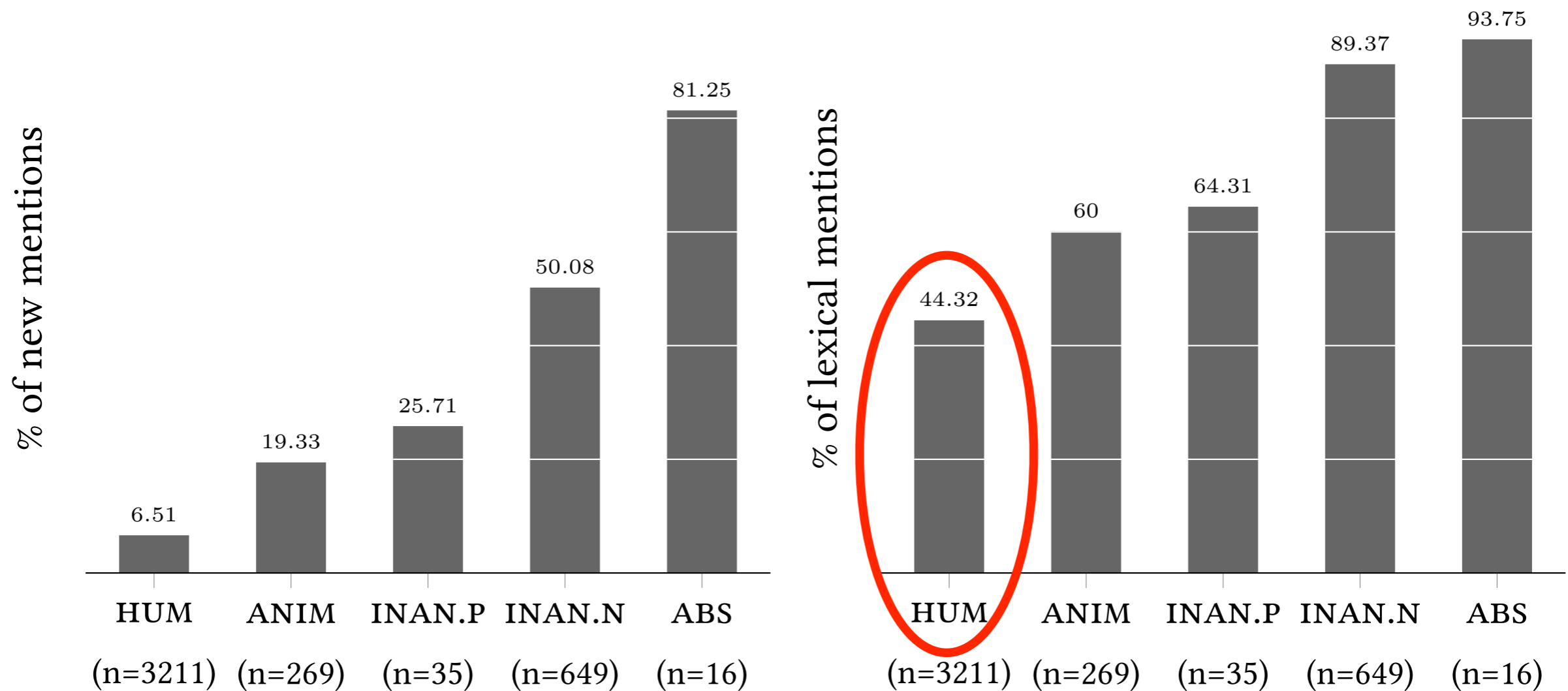
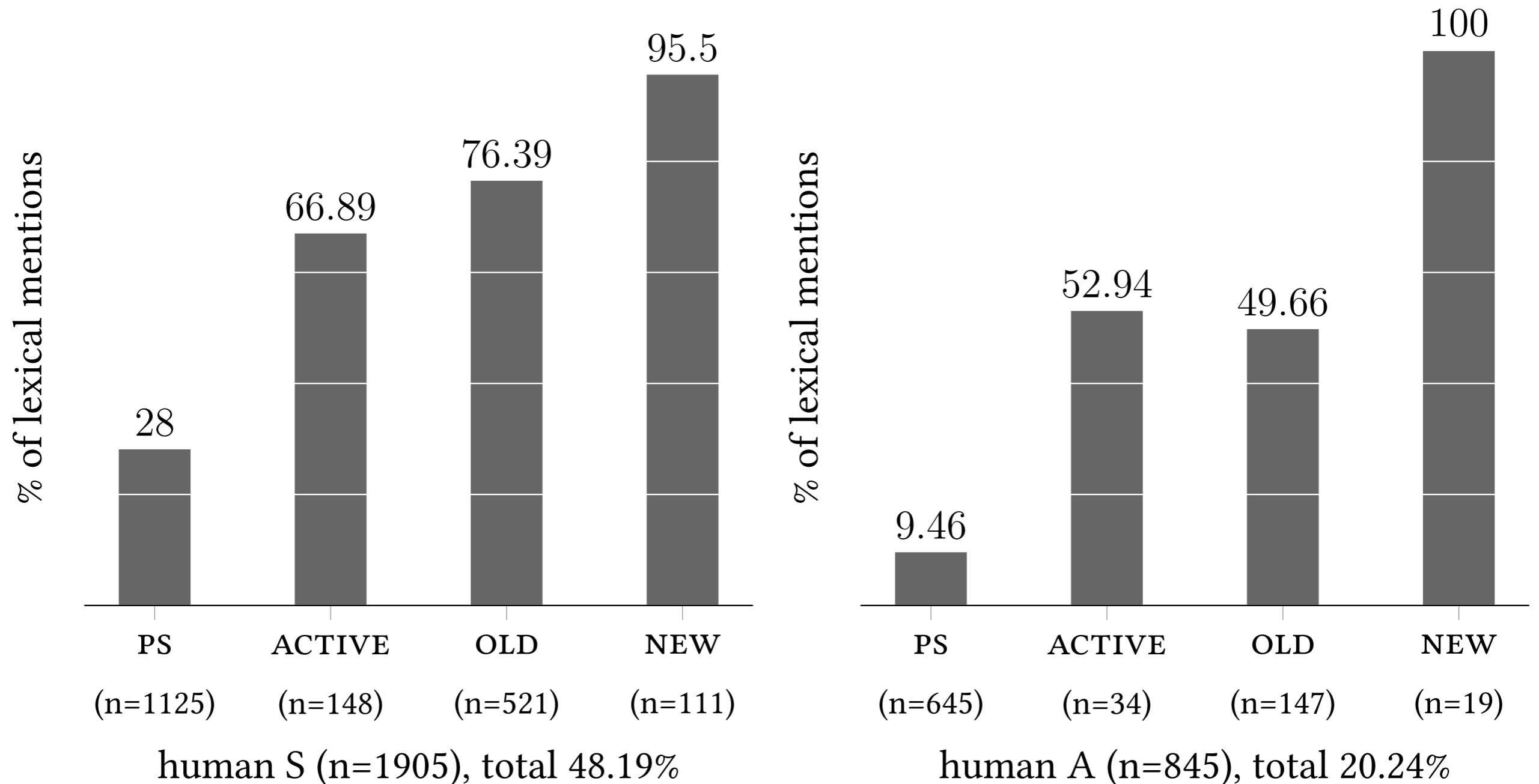(Fisher's exact test p=0.004)

Results: A<S<P
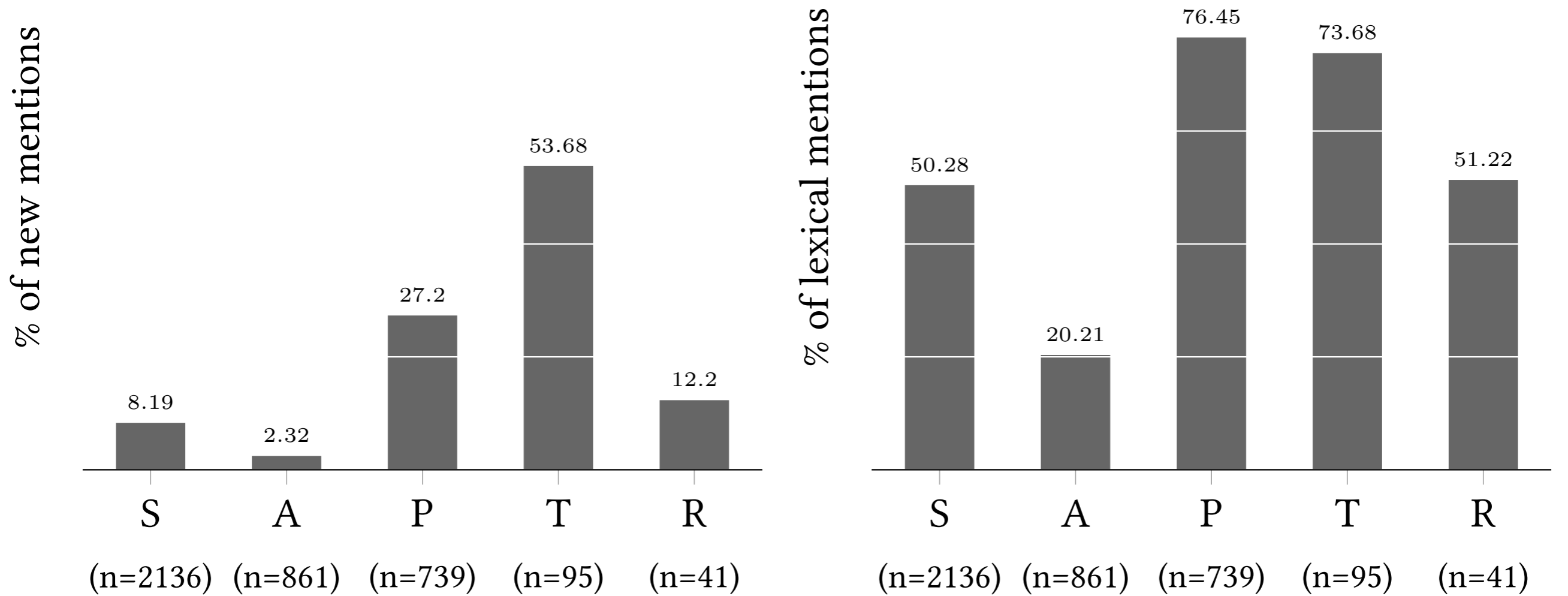
Results: Animacy and roles

Results: Animacy and newness/lexicality

Results: Human S's high lexicality

Discussion: PAS

- Humanness indeed good predictor for lexicality, as suggested by critics of PAS.

- However, (human) S has high lexicality (compared to A) regardless of information status.

  - Cannot be explained by introductory role of S in information management.

  - But no alternative explanation found.

- Important to consider information status in this type of study.

Future research and open questions

- Is the independently high lexicality of human S in my corpus coincidental?

- Large-scale study of PAS including information status

  - Formal expression of referents is representative of saliency only to a limited degree.

  - Information status important in assessing syntactic roles' function in information management.

  - Cross-linguistic differences in correlation between expression and saliency?

Du Bois, John W. (1987). "The Discourse Basis of Ergativity". In: Language 63.4: 805–855.

Du Bois, John W., Lorraine E. Kumpf, and William J. Ashby, eds. (2003). Preferred Argument Structure. Grammar as architecture for function. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Everett, Caleb (2009). "A reconsideration of the motivations for preferred argument structure". In: Studies in Language 33.1: 1–24.

Haig, Geoffrey and Stefan Schnell (Under review). "The discourse basis of ergativity revisited". URL: http://www.academia.edu/12395366/The_discourse_basis_of_ergativity_revisited.

Haspelmath, Martin (2006). "Preferred Argument Structure: Grammar as Architecture for Function (Review)". In: Language 82.4: 908–912.