Above and Beyond Phonology in Ethnolinguistic Variation:
Plural Existentials in Toronto English

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Variable Agreement in Plural Existentials

- *Plural Agreement*

  We had to hang our food because there **were** bears. (004:774)

- *Singular Agreement*

  There**'s** black bears, I believe there**'s** brown bears. (006:059)

Linguistic Conditioning

- Lexicalization
  - frequent collocations favour singular agreement
- Definiteness
  - definite subject NPs favour plural agreement
- Default Agreement
  - elements intervening between the verb and subject NP favour singular agreement
- Processing
  - the presence of plural *-s* in the subject NP favours plural agreement

Social Conditioning

- age
  - Britain & Sudbury 2002; Smallwood 1997; Tagliamonte 1998
- sex
  - Britain & Sudbury 2002; Eisikovits 1991; Schreier 2002; Smallwood 1997; Tagliamonte 1998; Woods 1999
- social class/education
  - Britain & Sudbury 2002; Meechan & Foley 1994; Smallwood 1997; Tagliamonte 1998
- ethnicity
  - Britain & Sudbury 2002; Meyerhoff & Walker 2008

Social Conditioning

- “these topic-introducing constructions … do not seem to be available for social evaluation and the consequent marking of social groups” (Cheshire 1998:20)

Questions

- What linguistic factors condition the speaker's choice of singular agreement?
  - Are the factors conditioning singular agreement different from those conditioning *there's*?
- Is singular agreement available for social evaluation?

Data

- Toronto
  - 29 English native speakers
- 401 tokens
  - existential *there* constructions with unambiguous plural reference

Linguistic Factors

- Tense + Form
  - present uncontracted, present contracted, past (uncontracted)
- Plural *-s*
  - absent, present
- Intervening Material
  - present, absent

Linguistic Factors

- Extension
  - none, adverbial, clausal
- Polarity
  - positive, negative
- Type of Determiner
  - bare, number, definite, indefinite, other

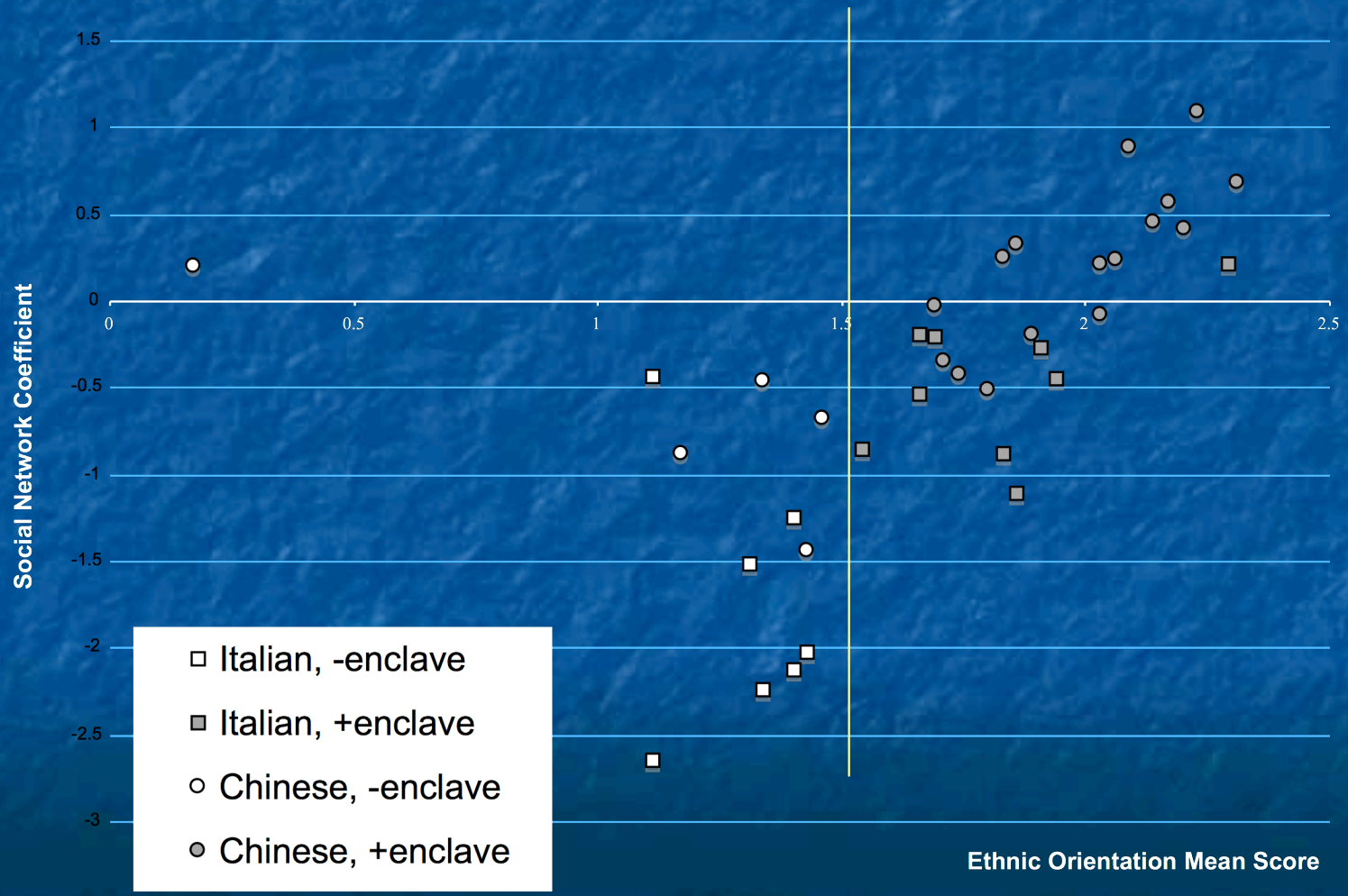
Social Factors

- Sex
- Ethnicity
  - British-descent
  - Italian
  - Chinese
- Enclave Status
  - + enclave
  - - enclave

Enclave Status

- [+enclave]
  - stronger orientation to ethnic identity
  - greater use of ethnic language
  - more ethnically homogeneous social networks
- [-enclave]
  - weaker orientation to ethnic identity

Figure 1: Ethnic Orientation



there's

- present-tense contracted forms (*there's*) have categorically singular agreement
- *there's* occupies 57% of the data

Table 1: Factors Contributing to Singular Agreement

Tense	
Past	.63
Present	.31

Table 2: Factors Contributing to *there's*

Type of Determiner		
Indefinite		.71
Definite		.52
No determiner		.52
Number		.42
Other		.24
	Range:	*37*
Intervening Material		
Present		.65
Absent		.46
	Range:	*19*
Plural *-s*		
Present		.54
Absent		.42
	Range:	*12*

Figure 2: Rate of Singular Agreement and *there's* in Toronto English

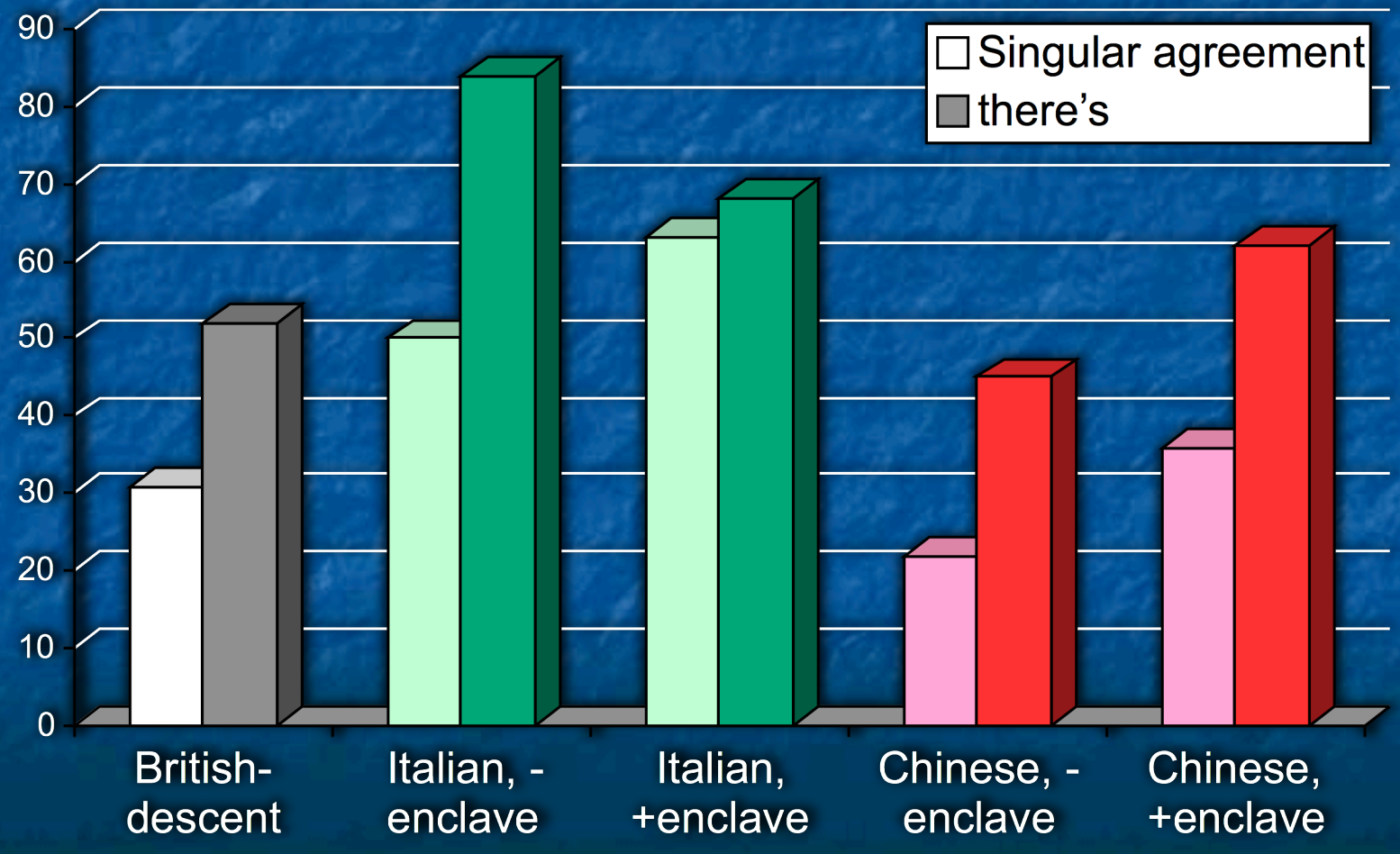


Figure 3: Effect of Tense on Singular Agreement

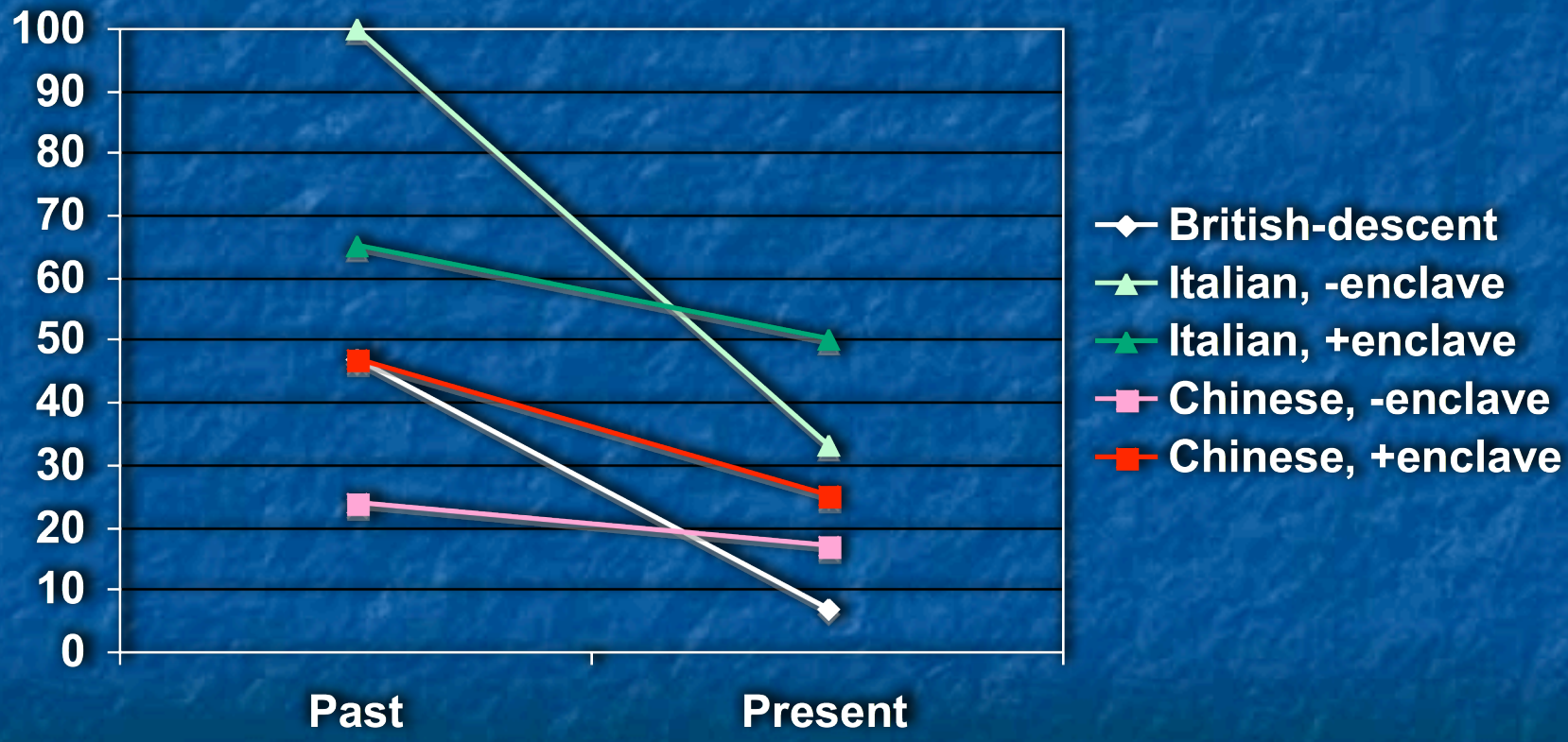


Figure 4: Effect of Determiner Type on *there's*

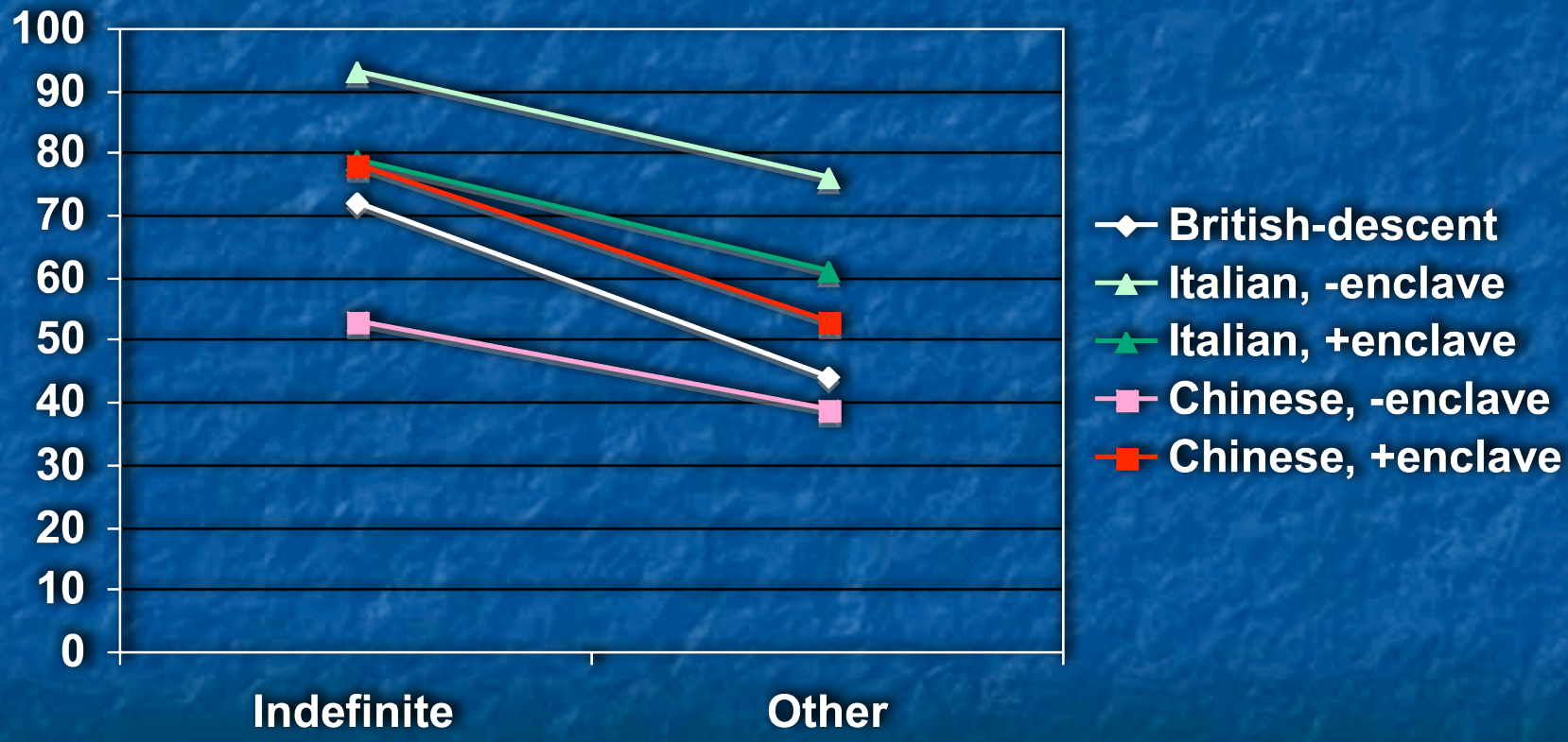


Figure 5: Effect of Plural *-s* and Intervening Material on *there's*

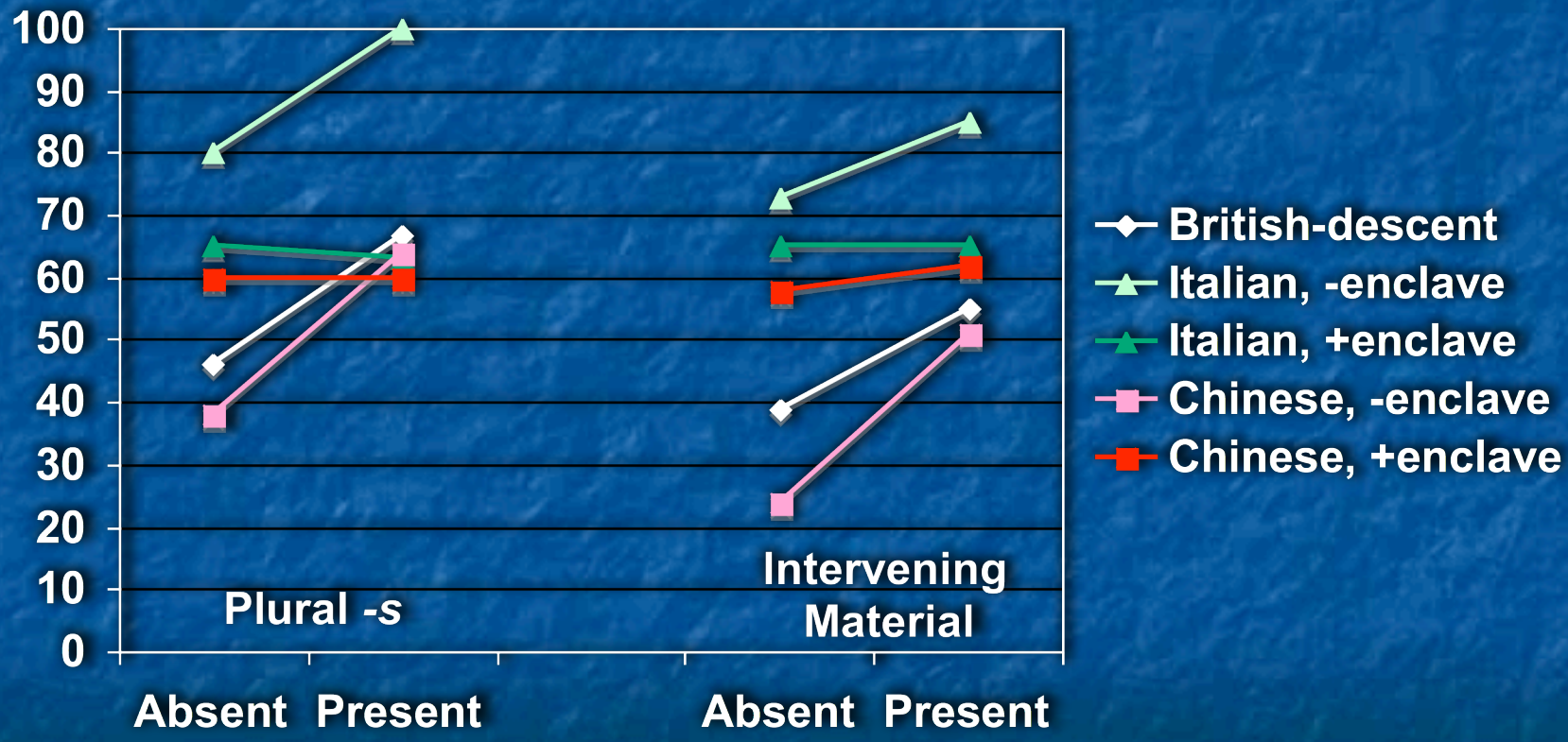
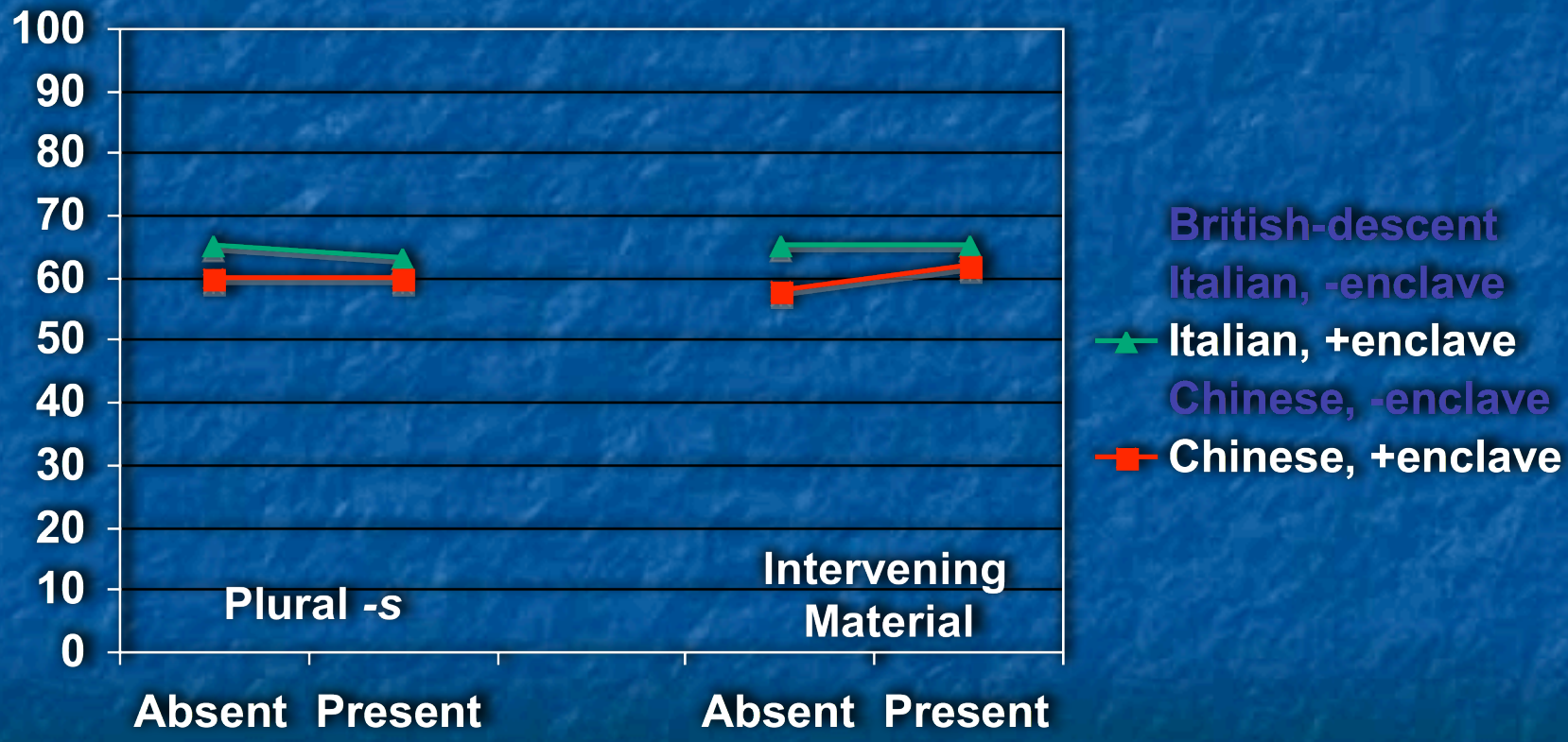


Figure 5: Effect of Plural *-s* and Intervening Material on *there's*



Conclusions

- linguistic conditioning differs for singular agreement and *there's*
- existentials appear to be available for social evaluation
  - rates differ according to ethnicity and enclave status
- groups follow community in linguistic conditioning
  - rate of singular agreement relative to *there's*
  - primary effects parallel across groups
  - secondary effects for there's weak in +enclave groups

Thank you!