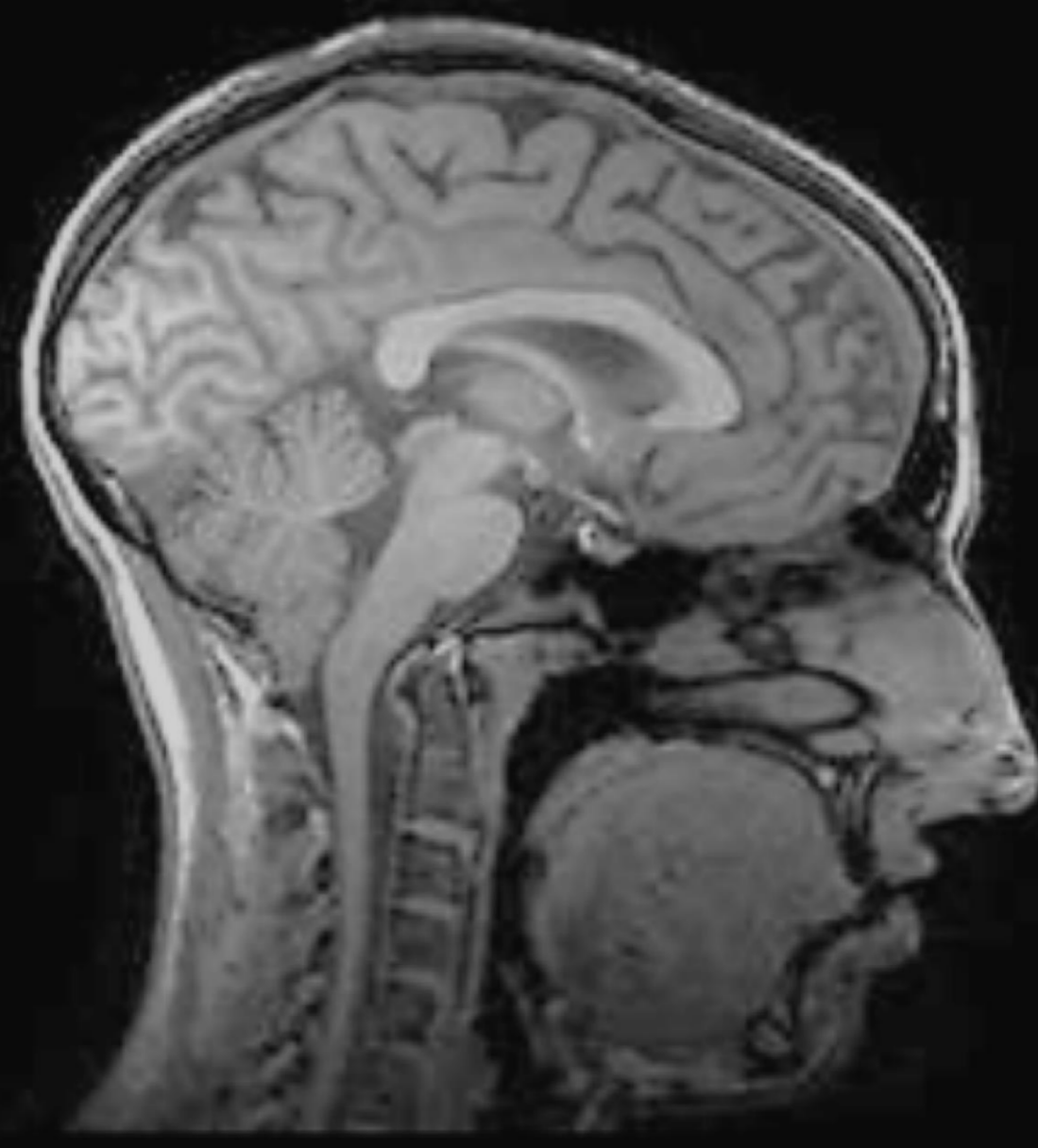


When we speak, we infer a lot of information from the real world context...

- Who the speaker is
- Who the addressee is
- Where the topic of conversation is taking place
- Who is being talked about



...but how much information is encoded in grammar?

In English we mark tense, aspect, mood and number on different parts of the language.

But what about the gender of the speaker or addressee, the evidence they have for what they're saying, or their relationship to others in the discourse?

An example of speakers and addressees in grammar: Basque

In Basque, the gender of the addressee is marked on the verb:
To say "I am Rebecca" in Basque, you can use one of three options:

In formal language:

"Rebecca naiz." – literally, "I am Rebecca."

This can be used in conversation with any addressee.

In spoken language:

To a male addressee: "Rebecca nau-k." – literally, "I have Rebecca."

To a female addressee: "Rebecca nau-n."

The highlighted part of the verb represents the 2nd person, the addressee. The 'k' ending marks that the addressee is male, and the 'n' ending that the addressee is female.

Speakers and addressees in English grammar?

In English, certain words are interpreted as referring to the speaker or the addressee. We can assume that this interpretation is led by grammar if a) it does not change with context and b) it changes with the sentence structure.

Sentence adverbs like **seriously** and **definitely** are used to express a person's attitude about a sentence. However, they are interpreted differently in statements and in questions:

- (1) "**Seriously**, Andy can play rugby." (the speaker is serious)
- (2) "**Seriously**, can Andy play rugby?" (the addressee is expected to be serious)

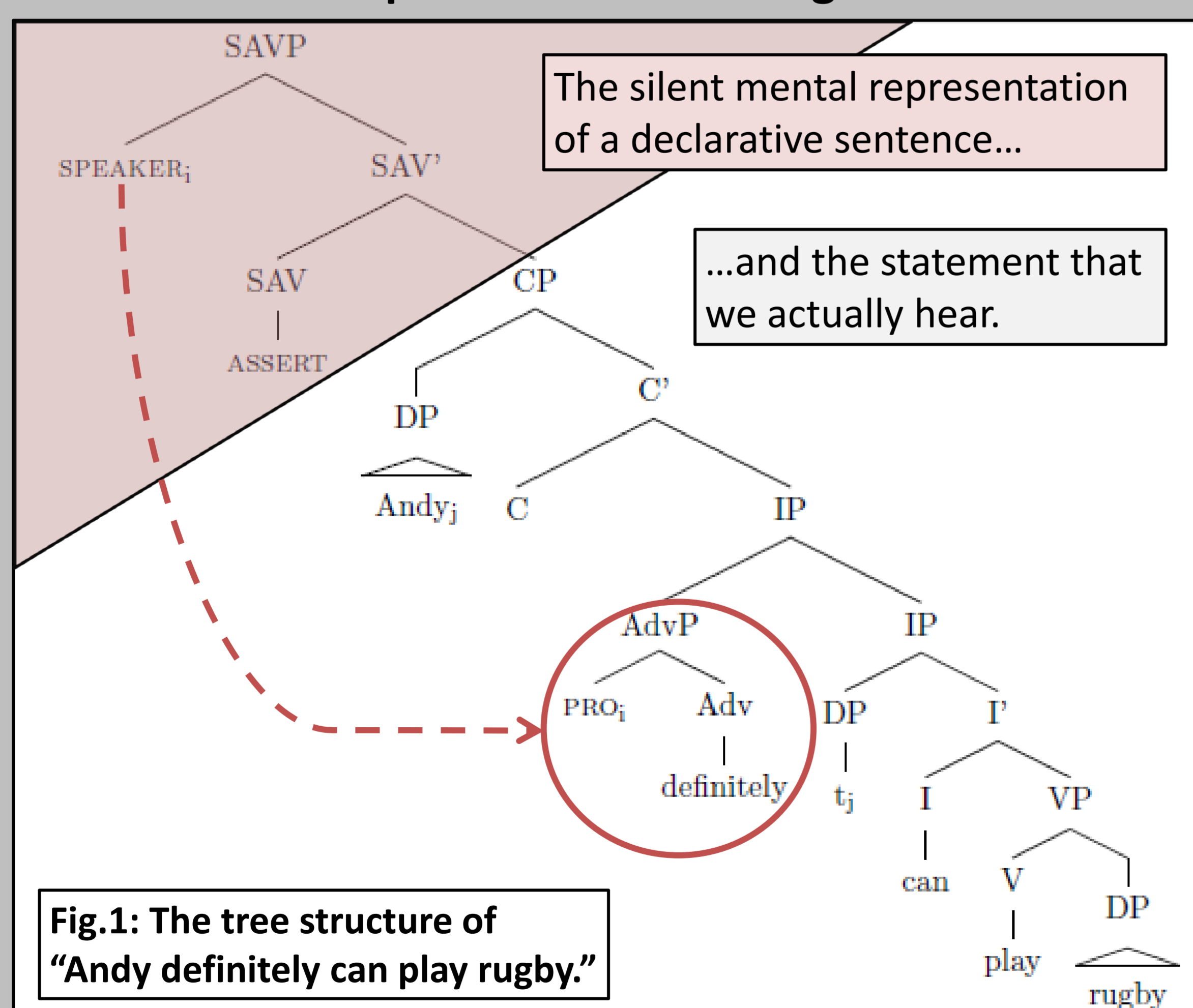
They are also interpreted differently if they are in a subordinate (dependent) clause following a verb of communication:

- (3) "John said that Andy can **definitely** play rugby" (John is definite, not the speaker)
- (4) "John asked Sally whether Andy can **definitely** play rugby" (Sally is expected to be definite, not the addressee)

Modelling speakers and addressees

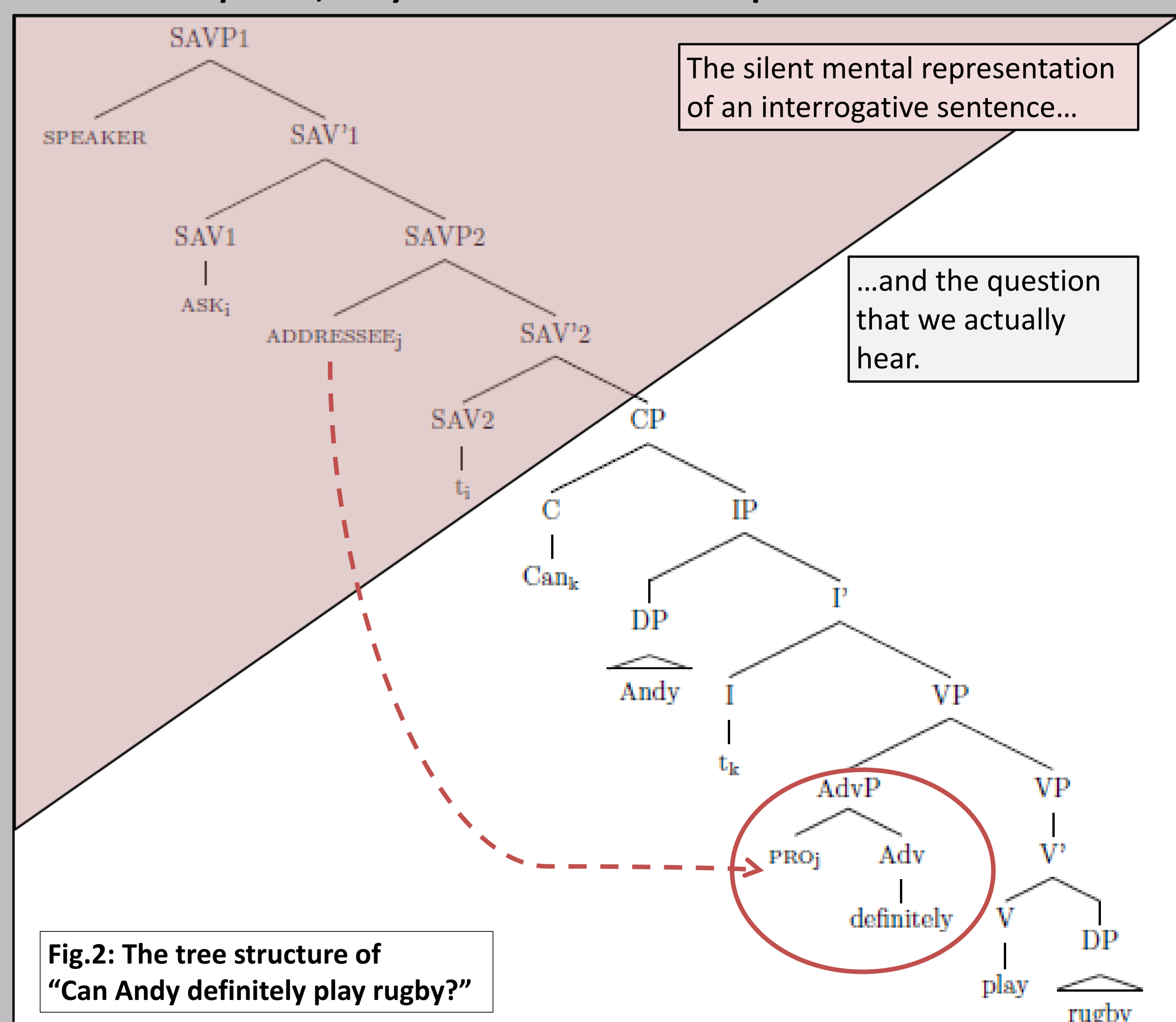
Linguists use trees to model hierarchical relationships between parts of a sentence. For example, reflexive pronouns such as "himself" require a male noun higher up in the tree to be understood: hence why "John likes himself" is fine but "Mary likes himself" is bad.

Trees include elements in a sentence which we don't hear as well as those we do. The pink sections in the trees below contain structure which we don't hear: a silent verb **ASSERT** introduces statements and a silent verb **ASK** introduces questions. **ASSERT** requires a silent **SPEAKER**, whereas **ASK** requires **SPEAKER** and **ADDRESSEE**. These elements interact with the internal structure of the adverb (as indicated by the arrows) to guide the adverb's interpretation. So although we don't hear speakers or addressees *per se*, they enter into relationships with elements we hear.



The trees show that differences in structure trigger differences in interpretation. Only **SPEAKER** is available in a statement's structure, so **SPEAKER** must guide the adverb's interpretation. In questions, the **ADDRESSEE** is available and is structurally closer to the adverb than the **SPEAKER**, so the **ADDRESSEE** guides the adverb's interpretation.

Modelling sentences in this way gives psychologists a base from which to test the realities of structural relations in the mind, e.g. using brain imaging. Educational researchers also use such trees to better understand how language(s) are acquired and learned.



References

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