

The discipline of experimental linguistics

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Experimental work is now pervasive in linguistics, and one of the pressing questions has to do with the need to combine theoretical and experimental approaches to languages. In the present talk I evaluate those contexts in which experimental work can, in my opinion, be truly useful, versus those contexts where I believe such work it does not move the field forward. The main conclusion is that theory and experimental work on language go hand in hand, and experimental work constitutes yet another diagnostic tool in the analysis of data. In thinking about experiments, it is important to draw a line between **confirmatory studies**, which help us choose one theory over another, and **exploratory studies**, which are needed to establish a general idea of the empirical landscape — before a solid theory is built. Formal experiments are well suited to the needs of confirmatory studies, which test competing theories, but it is less clear whether such experiments are fit for exploratory work. In the context of confirmatory studies, successful experimental work should be driven by theoretical questions. Worthwhile experiments build on theoretical knowledge and feed back into existing linguistic theories, forcing us to revisit familiar concepts and develop new theoretical principles. This unsurprising conclusion also suggests an important corollary: that we may get the best overall results by working in teams. A successful team needs a theoretical linguist, an empirical expert who controls the subtleties of the language under investigation, and a good experimental linguist. Building on this premise, this talk concludes by considering a number of readily available opportunities for team building, including dissertation committees, community involvement, cross-disciplinary projects, and international collaborations.