

Theories of linguistic inferences: What experiments can tell us

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Linguistic meaning encompasses a typology of inferences, characterized by their conversational status and their behavior in complex sentences. This typology of linguistic inferences is usually thought to be specific to language and in part lexically encoded in the meanings of words. In this talk, I will present a few examples of recent experimental work that engages with theories of linguistic inferences. In the first half of the talk, I focus on particular types of linguistic inferences, and present examples of how experimentally investigating pairs of inferences, for example, free choice versus scalar implicatures (Tieu, Bill & Romoli 2023), can inform and help to adjudicate between competing theories. In the second half of the talk, we continue comparing linguistic inferences — but across modalities. In particular, I'll present experimental evidence of implicatures, presuppositions, homogeneity inferences, and supplements, triggered variously by gestures, visual animations, sound effects, and emoji (Tieu, Pasternak, Schlenker & Chemla 2017, 2018; Tieu, Schlenker & Chemla 2019; Pasternak & Tieu 2022; Tieu, Qiu, Puvipalan & Pasternak 2023). The presence of what are normally thought to be language-specific inferences — outside of what is usually considered to be language proper — raises exciting new questions and challenges regarding the fundamental nature of linguistic inferences, and how we might acquire them.