

Workshop proposal for *Societas Linguistica Europaea* (SLE 2026), to be held in Osnabrück, 26–29 August 2026

Linguistic symbiosis: Exploring the mutual benefits of integrating theoretical and experimental linguistics

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Summary:

Linguistics has long advanced through diverse methods, ranging from introspective reasoning and formal theory on the one end to empirical, data-driven research on the other. While these traditions were once seen as divergent—Chomsky’s (1957) formal models versus Greenberg’s (1966) typological universals—they ultimately pursued the same goal: a deeper understanding of language as a system. Today, the integration of theoretical and experimental approaches is reshaping the field, yielding insights that neither tradition could achieve alone. It builds on a careful re-examination of previously established conceptualisations and assumptions (Abbuhl et al., 2021). The studies on the phenomenon of agent-first are a good illustration of these new integrative tendencies.

The agent-first refers to a cognitive bias of the human mind that processes the agent before the patient, even in languages which syntactically place the patient first. It is experimentally observed that participants tend to make more mistakes when they are asked to identify agents and patients in passive sentences, where the patient is usually realized as the subject (Esaulova et al., 2021). Additionally, recent neurolinguistic studies have supported the claim that agents are universally prominent in language processing, irrespective of the morphosyntactic organization of grammatical relations (Reisberg et al., 2019; Milin & Divjak, 2025). The concept of agent first has also been vastly explored by other scholars such as Cohn & Paczynski (2013) and Hafri et al., (2013), recording eye-movements in experimental setups.

In line with the mentioned studies, the proposed workshop seeks to advance the integration of theoretical and experimental approaches by exploring various linguistic phenomena that focus on how participants are related to the event. It also highlights how experimental methodologies—ranging from behavioral tasks, like self-paced reading and eye-tracking, to neurocognitive techniques, including EEG, MRI, and MEG—provide the means to test, refine, or occasionally refute traditional theoretical claims. At the same time, the workshop also aims to demonstrate how theoretical models, in turn, steer experimental design and interpretation, ensuring that data collection addresses core questions about linguistic representation and processing. This synergy between data and theory forms a mutually reinforcing cycle that advances linguistic inquiry.

The workshop invites contributions that demonstrate the complementary strengths of theoretical interrogation and experimental evidence. Illustrative examples include mentioned research on the agent-first bias, with similarly fruitful intersections emerging in studies of word order, case syncretism, motion verbs, grammatical voice, and bilingual cognition.

By bringing together scholars across subfields, this workshop will provide a platform to:

- Demonstrate how experimental methods can validate, refine, or challenge theoretical accounts.
- Showcase theoretical frameworks that shape and sharpen experimental design.
- Foster dialogue on future directions in bridging these traditions.

Keywords: Language cognition, Linguistic theory, Experimental linguistics, Cognitive processing, Data interpretation

References:

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Submission Guidelines:

We invite submissions for presentations at the workshop. Please send your abstract of max. 300 words (including examples and excluding references) to the convenors (anindita@zmail.iitm.ac.in; p.milin@bham.ac.uk; d.divjak@bham.ac.uk) by 10th November 2025. Abstracts should clearly identify the central linguistic question and show how it is addressed through experimental methodology.