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Project Title: Implicit language learning: A cross-linguistic investigation

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This project aims to contribute to our understanding of one of the most intriguing of all mental phenomena - the human ability to acquire language without effort (ie incidentally) and without conscious knowledge of the complex and subtle regularities that underlie it (ie without awareness).

Reaction time methodologies adapted from those used in experimental psychology will be used to examine implicit learning of form-meaning connections in miniature linguistic systems containing hidden regularities. For example, the distribution of novel articles may depend on the animacy of the accompanying noun.

Our previous research, using simple search tasks, revealed performance disruptions when the hidden regularities are violated, even in participants who claim to have no awareness of what those regularities are. This project will investigate:

1. whether there are predispositions to learn certain types of form-meaning mapping and not others,
2. whether such predispositions derive from the first, or second, languages, or universal grammar,
3. the processes leading to conscious insight into the target regularities in some participants.

The methodology will also be extended to investigate whether eye movement tracking can be used as a non-invasive and indirect measure of implicit learning.