To the Editors,

We submit our research article “A case for systematic sound symbolism in pragmatics: Universals in *wh-words*” for consideration in the Journal of Pragmatics.

We test a bold new idea: that a pressure to rapidly recognise the pragmatic content of turns in conversation can have an impact on the lexicon of a language.  Specifically, we hypothesise that languages should evolve so that content interrogative words (*wh-words*) sound similar within a language so that they function as a cue to facilitate pragmatic inference in conversation.

The observation that interrogative words sound similar (who, what, why, when, where ...) is not new - and the mechanisms by which they become similar have been studied.  However, we provide an ultimate explanation for their similarity and do two new things:

1. We use bespoke quantitative tests of similarity using a corpus of over 900 concepts in 172 languages.
2. We produce a novel prediction: that the similarity will be greater for languages which place wh-words at the beginnings of clauses.

We find positive evidence for our hypothesis.  But more importantly, we show that it’s possible to link the domains of processing, pragmatics and cultural evolution, and then rigorously test hypotheses using quantitative methods.  The work won an award for best talk at this year’s SLE conference, and we feel that the readers of the Journal of Pragmatics would be interested in it.

Our paper is slightly longer than the suggested length for a research article, but we have 4 studies which each use a method that requires explaining, so we feel the length is justified.  We are happy to follow reviewer suggestions about parts that might be placed as supporting information.

Here are list of researchers who would be suitable reviewers:

Michael Cysouw (expertise on interrogatives and typological distributions)

Philipps-Universität Marburg, cysouw@uni-marburg.de

Terry Regier (evolutionary explanations of cross-cultural differences)

    University of California, Berkeley, terry.regier@berkeley.edu

JP de Ruiter (On-line processing of pragmatics, quantitative methods)

    Tufts University, jp.deruiter@tufts.edu

Lynn Perry (Iconicity and cognition)

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Soren Wichman (Lexical databases, statistical patterns in the lexicon)

    Leiden University, s.k.wichmann@hum.leidenuniv.nl

Morten Christiansen (Processing constraints on language evolution)

    Cornell University, christiansen@cornell.edu

Also, a list of researchers who have the right expertise, but are currently working with the authors, and so have a conflict of interest:  Stephen Levinson, Fiona Jordan, Bodo Winter, Damian Blasi, Marcus Perlman

Yours,

Anita Slonimska & Seán Roberts