Is “experimental” a gradable predicate?

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A theoretical linguist’s use of a contrast can be seen as an “experiment” at its most atomic: control for everything but a single factor, and a difference judgment provides insight into someone’s grammar. Despite linguistics being a strongly empirical science, though, discussion of “experimental linguistics” has become common, often implying overlap with psycholinguistic questions of representation, processing, and development. Investigations in those areas do typically require fully fledged experimental paradigms, but they can have separate goals from those of a theoretical linguist. I’ll use several case studies in sign language semantics to suggest that we don’t always have to think about linguistic experimentation as “all or nothing”. The argument will be that sometimes a partial borrowing of methods from the lab can provide data and insights that would otherwise be inaccessible, especially in research on understudied languages.