Expletive Insertion

FSEM CORE S119: Language as Human Nature
Fall 2025
Prof. Forrest Davis

August 27, 2025

Warm-up

1. Introduce yourself to the person sitting next to you and tell them about the best and worst film you saw this summer.

Logistics

- Course website: https://forrestdavis.github.io/cores119

Learning Objectives

- Build intuitions about our tacit knowledge of language

Summary: We begin to build intuitions about our linguistic knowledge and uncover there is more to swearing than we thought.

Figure 1: The course TA and reason why I haven't done something on time.

A bit about me

I MET EACH ONE OF YOU YESTERDAY, but I thought I would add a bit more formal information about myself. You can call me either Forrest or Prof. Forrest, either works for me. My pronouns are he/him. I did my undergraduate studies in Computer Science and Mathematics. Then, I switched to Linguistics in graduate school. I did my post-doc in a Linguistics department as well. My research is about the **limitations** of large language models in learning natural language. I use cross-linguistic variation and psycholinguistic studies in my work. In particular, I have worked on Italian, Spanish, Chinese, and English. I swam competitively in college and now enjoy not swimming, drinking coffee, watching movies, and hanging with my cat Fig (see Figure 1). **If you have a cat, please feel free to bring a picture of your cat to hang on my office door (Bernstein 322).**

A bit about the course

YOU CAN FIND THE SYLLABUS on the course website. It contains details about the course, including grading, policies, and important
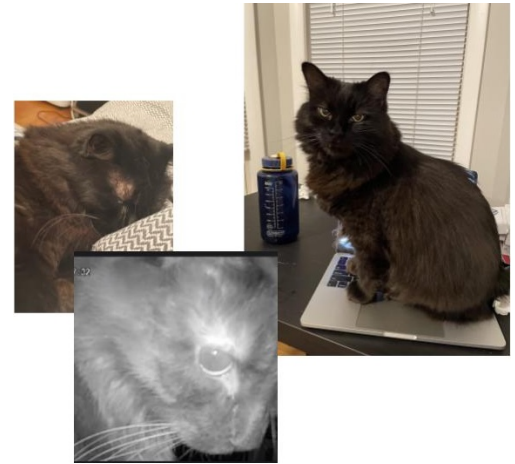
links. To give you feel for the course, we will have a mix of lectures and group work. There will be around 6 written reports that will help build your scientific skills, including presentation of data, technical writing, and analysis. The course builds to a final project, which is a *squib* on a topic of your choice. There will be more details on this as the class unfolds. **Note: There will be no programming in this course.**

 For the remainder of the class we will tackle the following problem in small groups. Please look at the slide to find out who you will work with.

This is my first time teaching an FSEM, so we will be building this course, in part, together. So things are subject to change depending on the interests of the group, the timing of material, etc.

Expletive Insertion

KNOWING A LANGUAGE INVOLVES IMPLICIT or tacit knowledge of a variety of "rules".[1]. The central aim of this course is to argue for the existence of this knowledge and map out its complexity.[2] To begin, we need to build some intuitions and train ourselves to judge sentences.

English has a particularly fun rule that you have probably never reflected on! It's called **expletive insertion**. Expletives are, generally, swear words, although only some can undergo expletive insertion. Namely, we will consider 'fucking', 'freaking', and/or 'flipping' (if you know British English, 'bloody' would also work).

You may have said the following while moving into Brown Commons:

(1) **Hamil**-fucking-**ton**   (or, Hamil-freaking-ton, Hamil-flipping-ton, maybe even Hamil-bloody-ton)

In your small groups, your task is to **characterize the rule that describes our tacit knowledge** of expletive insertion. This should be done with the least **stipulations** and in the form of a **general rule** which applies to the most data.[3]

But first, we need some data![4]

[2] A good motivation for this is presented in Chapter 2 of Chomsky (1957).

[3] Note: the most succinct rule which appears to best conform to our knowledge requires the use of some representations we will not discuss in this class (namely, prosodic structure) – just do your best!

[4] An additional fun example is from the movie *Forrest Gump*: Viet-Fucking-Nam - Forrest Gump.

Data

For the following words, discuss in your group where you think the expletive would go. Indicate with a **consistent mark** in each word the position you determine. If there is disagreement, indicate that below the word. Note: Some words may **not** work with expletive insertion. If it sounds markedly weird to place it anywhere, just indicate that.

Alabama	Louisiana	Nebraska
Arizona	Maine	Ohio
California	Maryland	Oklahoma
Montana	Massachusetts	Pennsylvania
Illinois	Michigan	Tennessee
Iowa	Minnesota	Vermont
Kentucky	Mississippi	Wyoming

Rule

As a group, work out a rule to account for your data above. It is often helpful to do this iteratively by first grouping data together, positing a rule, looking for counter-examples, and repeating.

For the Road

Consider the following examples. Do they violate your rule?

everybody	amalgamated	hypocrite
every-fuckin-body	amalga-fuckin-mated	hypo-fuckin-crite

How might you adjust your rule to accommodate these data?

Before Next Class

- No class this Thursday (for the 20-minute class).

  – Please feel free to stop by my office (322 Bernstein) during our slot if you would like to discuss something. You may also email me all the times that work for you, if you'd like to meet at some other point that day.

- Getting to know you survey:

- Read the article linked on the course website for Friday's class

  – You will engage with a primary source that critiques a prevalent approach to language in the 50s (which is no being resurrected) called *behaviorism*. Behaviorism theorizes that (i) language is entirely a learned behavior (like juggling as opposed to walking, which children do naturally and without the need for instruction) rather than drawing on innate capacities, and (ii) the best way to theorize about language is to only draw narrowly on external behavior.

  – Friday is a Tuesday schedule

- Complete the brief pre-class quiz on Moodle (and linked on the website)

References

Chomsky, N. (1957). *Syntactic Structures*. Mouton, The Hague.