

How do We Explain Language?

FSEM CORE S119: Language as Human Nature

Fall 2025

Prof. Forrest Davis

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Warm-up

1. Talk to the person next to you about your weekend plans

Logistics

- Office Hours 3-6PM on Tuesday in 331 Bernstein (upstairs conference room)
 - An opportunity to come ask question about the course or for advising question
 - A space to work with others
 - I will have snacks / coffee / tea

Learning Objectives

- Understand some debates about the nature of language and human behavior
- Identify different goals of linguistic theories

Summary: We discuss some background debates to the content of this course. Namely, how do we characterize human linguistic behavior and how might advances in AI relate?

Behaviorism debate remains relevant

WHILE THE DEBATE IS OLD, Chomsky (1959) has gained new relevance recently. In particular, the claimed successes of generative pre-trained models (e.g., ChatGPT) have led to renewed questioning on the nature of human language and how we explain our capacity. Let's watch the first section of this video together (to around the 3 minute mark): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjZofJX0v4M>.

An argument against behaviorism

Consider the four questions below based on Chomsky (1959). First think through an answer yourself. Then you will pair with a small group to discuss your thoughts. Finally, we will share parts of answers together as a whole class.

1. What is Skinner's basic experimental setup? How do key terms in the reading like *stimulus*, *reinforcement*, and *operant behavior* relate to the design? Draw the basic design on the nearest white board.
2. How would human language relate to Skinner's ideas of learning? What are issues identified by Chomsky for this approach?
3. In the concluding section, Chomsky lays out an approach to understand human language and its acquisition by a child. How does this differ from Skinner's approach? How do you think AI may relate to these ideas?
4. Skinner's work has been associated with propaganda and a belief that human freedom of choice is an illusion.¹ Why do you think that is? How might Chomsky's approach differ in its understanding of human nature?

¹ In particular see Skinner (1971).

Thoughts about language

To wrap up class today, please complete this brief survey: <https://forms.gle/XpA2u7MDkGz7jrk88>.

Before Next Class

- Please read and complete the pre-class quiz for Tuesday

References

- Chomsky, N. (1959). A Review of Skinner's Verbal Behavior. *Language*, (1):26–58.
- Skinner, B. F. (1971). *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. Knopf, New York, 1st edition.