

# Abstract booklet

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# The syntax of placeholders: An incremental grammar approach

Tohru Seraku, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies

Introduction: Placeholders (PHs) are generally defined as a type of dummy item with which a speaker fills in the grammatical slot of a target form that she is unable or unwilling to produce (Seraku 2022). Despite a growing body of work on PHs in the world's languages, most extant studies are devoted to descriptive and/or functional analysis (Amiridze et al. 2010; see Seraku in press for further references), and only a few studies deal with syntactic data in formal terms (Cheung 2015; Seraku 2023). In this paper, I aim to fill this gap in the literature by examining Japanese *are*, illustrated in (1), a nominal PH that is related to (and possibly derived from) the distal pronominal demonstrative *are* 'that' (Hayashi & Yoon 2006; Seraku et al. 2021).

(1) *Kinō*            *Ken-ga*        *are-o...*,        *sushi-o*        *tabe-ta-yo*.  
yesterday    Ken-NOM    PH-ACC        sushi-ACC    eat-PST-FP  
'Yesterday, Ken ate PH..., sushi.' [Japanese]

More specifically, the present work attempts to (i) provide new syntactic data as an empirical challenge to grammar modelling and (ii) develop an incremental grammar account in Dynamic Syntax (Cann et al. 2005; Kempson et al. 2001). In this talk, I concentrate on the former. Empirical outcomes: I reveal the following syntactic properties of PH are:

- There may be multiple occurrences of *are* in a single sentence, and the target form of *are* itself may contain another instance of *are*.
- The use of *are* is not a 'root phenomenon' and may be licensed in a non-matrix clause.
- *Are* is positionally flexible and may occur in various places of a sentence.
- The relation between *are* and a target form may be inter-clausal, island-insensitive, or even inter-sentential.
- A target form shows 'connectivity effects' with respect to binding and quantification.

I also argue that these data would pose a challenge to two conceivable accounts in 'mainstream' generative grammar: a 'right dislocation' account and a 'fragment' account.

Theoretical outcomes: Seraku (2023) articulates a Dynamic Syntax account of PH *are* but does not discuss the above syntactic data. Dynamic Syntax is a grammatical framework that reflects the time-linear, incremental parsing in its architectural design:

- A structure is **progressively** built up as a string of words is parsed **time-linearly**.
- The structure is not syntactic but **conceptual**. A string of words is mapped to a conceptual structure **without** any intermediate level of syntactic representation.

If time permits, I show that Seraku's (2023) account is extendable to the above syntactic issues without postulating non-orthodox assumptions or mechanisms.

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## Placeholders and related items: reassessing the typology

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Inspired by the seminal volume of Amiridze et al.<sup>1</sup>, interest in placeholders and related items in the languages of the world has burgeoned in recent years, both from a descriptive and a theoretical perspective (cf. among many others, <sup>2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7</sup>). A particular focus of the recent literature has been on the pragmatic extensions of placeholders, demonstrating that these are not merely used in situations of disfluency to substitute for words that momentarily elude the speaker<sup>8</sup>, but are frequently used intentionally to avoid terms for reasons of politeness, ‘conspirational’ motivations, or rhetorical purposes (e.g. <sup>9, 6</sup>). In this paper, we return to morphosyntactic aspects of placeholders and related items to further advance the typology first proposed by Podlesskaya<sup>10</sup>, based on recent descriptions.

First of all, it has become clear that in many languages, one item functions as the predominant placeholder. This is not necessarily restricted to nouns, as suggested by Podlesskaya<sup>10</sup>; instead it is frequently a universal placeholder, being able to substitute for both nouns and verbs, and often even other parts of speech. In some languages, such as Komnzo<sup>11</sup> or Dalabon<sup>12</sup>, placeholders can even substitute for larger phrases and clauses. Contrary to previous expectations, the target is very often left unexpressed, with speakers leaving it to their hearers to deduce its referent from the context.

Furthermore, although Hayashi & Yoon<sup>8</sup> view placeholders and hesitatives as separate categories, in many languages, such as Northern Pastaza Quichua<sup>13</sup> or Nasal<sup>14</sup>, it is one element that fulfills both functions; this could thus be considered a generic ‘filler’. As shown by detailed corpus studies of French<sup>7</sup>, Besemah<sup>15</sup>, and Negidal<sup>16</sup>, the two functions of these fillers are not necessarily prosodically or syntactically distinct, indicating that they represent a continuum from pure hesitation at one end to pure placeholdering at the other end, via various intermediate degrees of hesitation and substitution.

It is not only the distinction between placeholders and hesitatives that emerges as being rather more vague than initially thought, but the distinction between fillers and their sources is frequently also fuzzy, for instance in Komnzo<sup>11</sup>, where a demonstrative has grammaticalized into a placeholder, or in the Lamunkhin dialect of Even, where the interrogative proforms *iak/ia-* ‘(do) what’ function as fillers.

While numerous studies have focused on the part of speech of the placeholder target, very few address the question of the part of speech of the placeholder itself. Based on our emerging typology, it is clear that this is highly language-specific. For example, in Negidal a dedicated form has both hesitative and placeholder uses and substitutes for nouns, verbs, and other parts of speech<sup>16</sup>; this could hence be viewed as a dedicated part of speech ‘filler’. In Teko, a generic noun has developed distinct hesitative and nominal placeholder functions<sup>17</sup>; these could thus be assigned to two distinct parts of speech, ‘hesitative’ and noun.

We hope that the data presented here will be useful for further typological studies on the topic and provide analytical models for descriptive linguists.

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- <sup>10</sup>Podlesskaya 2010. In Amiridze et al *Fillers, pauses and placeholders*, 11–32.
- <sup>11</sup>Döhler submitted. *That* placeholder pronominal in Komnzo.
- <sup>12</sup>Ponsonnet submitted. Placeholders and polysynthesis: The case of Dalabon (Australian, Gunwinyguan).
- <sup>13</sup>Rice submitted. Mashti: A multipurpose filler in Northern Pastaza Kichwa.
- <sup>14</sup>Billings & McDonnell submitted. Fillers in the gray: Indeterminacy in their use in everyday conversation.
- <sup>15</sup>McDonnell & Billings submitted. Choosing fillers.
- <sup>16</sup>Pakendorf submitted. A corpus-based investigation of fillers in Negidal (Northern Tungusic).
- <sup>17</sup>Rose submitted. One more thing ‘thing’ can do in Tupi-Guarani languages : ‘thing’ as a filler in Teko.

# Placeholder Indefinites in Reportative Contexts

Todor Koev, University of Constance

This talk discusses the semantic and pragmatic properties of an understudied variety of placeholder indefinites, which I refer to as Quotational/Quotative Indefinites (QIs). QIs are attested in languages such as Bulgarian (e.g., *edi koj-si*; Koev 2017), German (e.g., *der und der*; Cieschinger and Ebert 2011), and Japanese (e.g., *dare-dare*; Sudo 2008), and are akin (though not equivalent) to English placeholder words like *whatshisface* or *so-and-so* (cf. Clark and Gerrig 1990). QIs exhibit a number of idiosyncratic empirical properties. That is, while they display the usual behavior of indefinites, QIs typically occur in the scope of a reportative operator (such as a verb of saying or an evidential marker) and are linked to a referential antecedent expression (such as a proper name, a definite noun phrase, or a demonstrative), thus effectively giving rise to the intuition that they are placeholders for referential expressions that have been used in a prior conversation. To capture these properties, I will propose that QIs have a mixed semantics, making reference to both linguistic expressions and their denotations. The formal analysis is framed within a two-dimensional semantics (Potts 2007), which cleanly separates the indefinite force and the reportative implications of sentences containing QIs. This work uncovers important interactions between indefiniteness, quotation, and reportativity, thereby broadening our understanding of the typology of indefinites and the role of placeholder expressions within it.

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## Spanish *fulano*: Lexicalization of a proper name placeholder

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Spanish *fulano/a* is a placeholder for any proper name; it substitutes the name of an unknown or hypothetical person. Thus, *fulano/a* is similar to placeholders like Sp. *cosa* 'thing', a hypernym that substitutes more specific and lexically specified terms (Mihatsch 2006a: chap. 5; Hennecke & Mihatsch 2022). Similarly, according to Bajo Pérez (2019), *fulano/a* is best analyzed as a hypernym of anthroponyms, i.e., a generic umbrella term for specific proper names. This usage is exemplified in (1):

- (1) Evita escribir en páginas web tu dirección de correo personal, la que no quieres que caiga en manos de *spammers*. En su lugar, puedes utilizar una imagen con el texto de tu dirección o recurrir a trucos como escribirla con todas las letras: *fulano arroba gmail punto com*. (CORPES XXI)

The term *fulano/a* in this specific function is an early loanword from Arabic (DCECH; Casado-Velarde 2000; Gerhalter & Salaaoui 2020). In Spanish, *fulano/a* developed a pejorative, derogatory use when referring to a specific person whose name is deliberately avoided:

- (2) O, mejor dicho: era «esa», digamos, ella, la que la tía Amalia y mi madre, pero sobre todo Amalia, porque mi madre evitaba hablar del tema, llamaba «la *fulana* esa». Haciendo una especie de hincapié fonético en la última palabra. Sobrentendido: no una *fulana* cualquiera, sino que «esa». (CORPES XXI)

In example (2), *fulana* is used as a noun and has a lexical meaning similar to that of insults or similar expressions (e.g., *la tía esa/el sujeto aquel* 'that person [pejorative]'). In addition, the feminine form *fulana* is used in Present-day Spanish as a synonym for *prostituta*. We therefore argue that *fulano/a* underwent a process of lexicalization, from placeholder to noun, assuming the following four functional stages:

1. Placeholder for any unspecific, hypothetic proper name (any name)
2. Placeholder for the name of a specific unknown person (unknown name)
3. Placeholder for the name of a specific known person (known name)
4. Noun referring to persons in a derogatory way, often with sexual connotations

In stage 3, a pejorative connotation may arise in certain contexts, where the refusal to call a person by his or her proper name is meant as a sign of disrespect. In stage 4, this pragmatic meaning is lexicalized as part of the semantic meaning. Furthermore, this process leads to a syntactic change: stage 4 *fulano/a* can be preceded by a determiner (definite or indefinite article, possessive, quantifier, etc.), as in *la fulana esa, una fulana cualquiera* (example 2).

In our paper, we will discuss this diachronic evolution on the basis of corpus data from CDH and CORPES XXI. The proposed lexicalization path may mirror the opposite development from noun to placeholder in terms of grammaticalization or pragmatization (e.g., Sp. *cosa*, Fr. *machine* or *truc*, cf. Hennecke & Mihatsch 2022; Mihatsch 2006b). We will discuss two further aspects in support of our hypothesis:

First, *fulan* is also used in Arabic as a demonstrative or indefinite adjective before nouns, meaning 'such', 'said', or 'a certain'. This use was also adopted in medieval Spanish (e.g., *fulana isla* 'a certain island'), but was abandoned in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, except in Venezuela (DCECH). Interestingly, the adjective *fulano/a* takes on a pejorative meaning in contemporary Venezuelan Spanish: 'referring to things: that

cause discomfort' (DA), as in *esos fulanos plátanos* 'those damned bananas' (CORPES XXI). Therefore, the lexicalization path proposed above can also be applied in a parallel way to the adjective *fulano/a*.

Second, the diminutive variant *fulanito/a* is also used as a placeholder, especially for unspecific or unknown names (stages 1 and 2), and can therefore be analyzed as a hypernym of diminutive anthroponyms (*Juanito, Carmencita, Paquita*, etc.). Compared to *fulano/a*, the diminutive variant seems to have less pejorative or disrespectful connotations and presumably did not reach stages 3 and 4 to the same extent, as we will discuss based on corpus data. Therefore, in present-day Spanish, *fulanito/a* may be preferred over *fulano/a* as a proper name placeholder when speakers want to avoid possible negative connotations of the latter.

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# General nouns as clues for a non-semantic type of content

Marco Fasciolo, Sorbonne Université

In my talk, I propose to consider general noun phrases as clues to the need to recognise a particular level of content that is distinct from both semantics and cognition.

My starting point is the fact that general noun phrases exhibit a paradox. On the one hand, they seem to denote basic concepts: the same kind of concepts that are analysed by Strawson's descriptive metaphysics: e.g. thing, place, object, person, etc. On the other hand, their content is very general and seems to be semantically poor: In texts they function like pseudo-pronouns and do not seem to be able to classify entities in a cognitively relevant way. The paradox lies in a divergence: the basic and general character of the content of these noun phrases is inversely proportional to their semantic and lexical relevance. Simply put, the more these nouns are philosophically charged, the more they are semantically light.

In my opinion, this divergence is the best evidence that the content of these nouns is simply not semantic in nature. General nouns thus indicate that for each lexeme a level of content must be distinguished that belongs neither to semantics, nor to the lexicon, nor to cognition, but to natural ontology. The natural ontology is an independent content level that fulfils a specific function in relation to semantics and cognition and must be recognised as such. General nouns emphasise this kind of content because this is their only kind of content. In my talk, I will defend this idea and try to clarify the function of natural ontology in relation to semantics and the lexicon.

## Pragmatic and variable aspects of placeholders in Portuguese

Eduardo Tadeu Roque Amaral, Federal University of Minas Gerais

Recent research on vague language has encompassed a wide array of elements within the category of placeholders (Núñez Pertejo, 2018; Seraku, Park & Yu, 2022). Among these elements are general nouns (GN), which are labeled differently based on the theoretical and methodological framework of the author (Adler & Moline, 2018; Benninghoven, 2018). In Brazil, studies on this category of nouns have been conducted since 2011 at UFMG. In general, items that tend to receive the [-HUMAN] feature are analyzed, such as *coisa*, *negócio*, and *trem* (all meaning 'thing' or 'stuff' with sporadic uses for humans), and items with the [+HUMAN] feature, such as *pessoa* ('person'), *indivíduo* ('individual') and *cara* ('guy').

In addition to studies focused on identifying and elucidating lexical, grammatical, and sociolinguistic aspects of these elements, whether using contemporary (Amaral, 2014; Amaral & Ramos, 2014) or historical data (Duchowny & Oliveira, 2021), there are others that aim to observe the processes of grammaticalization in which some GN are involved (Amaral & Mihatsch, 2019).

For this presentation, it is assumed that GNs are linguistic units whose definition consists solely of very generic semantic features and, therefore, possess minimal intension and maximum extension (Mihatsch, 2006; Koch & Oesterreicher, 2007 [1990]). In pragmatic terms, they are elements used to facilitate reference to entities whose name the speaker does not know, does not wish to mention, or cannot name (Kleiber, 1987). Many GN can also perform other functions (still within the grammatical realm), as in the case of encapsulators or certain constructions such as extension of lists.

Despite several studies published on GNs in Brazilian Portuguese, their inclusion in the broader set of placeholders has not yet been discussed, nor has their distribution among the varieties of the Portuguese language been analyzed. Therefore, this study initially presents a proposal for classifying GNs in Portuguese. Subsequently, a semantic and pragmatic analysis of data from Portuguese varieties from the Americas (BP = Brazilian Portuguese), Africa (AP = Angolan Portuguese; MP = Mozambican Portuguese), and Europe (EP = European Portuguese) is presented. Data has been obtained from sociolinguistic recordings, complemented by occurrences from the Corpus do Português.

Broadly speaking, it's worth noting the strong dialectal or sociolectal marking of *trem* ('thing' or 'stuff') and *treco* ('thing' or 'stuff') in BP, and *tareco* ('thing' or 'stuff') in EP, as well as the productivity of forms derived from *coisa* and *negócio*. These forms contribute not only to the expansion of placeholders in the formation of adjectives, adverbs, and verbs but also of locutions, such as *com coisa que* (BP 'as if'); *o tipo da coisa* (BP 'kind of the thing', 'something'), *tal e coiso* (EP and AP 'something like that'). The results, related to Cutting's (2015) classifications, allow for demonstrating the importance of dialectal variation in the less prototypical elements and explaining to what extent the Brazilian variety of Portuguese differs from others and even from other Romance languages.

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# On morphology and pragmatics of Georgian placeholder verbs

Nino Amiridze

As observed in descriptive and typological studies [Pod10], [ADM10], placeholders are mainly used in the following cases:

- to fill a pause, when the speaker experiences a lexical access failure during their turn in conversation,
- to replace a lexical item, when they have a lack of knowledge and/or information regarding the discussed subject, and
- to deliberately avoid using lexical items for any reason.

Georgian placeholder verbs are based on the root originally referring to “do”. The placeholder verbs can have all the grammatical characteristics that finite verbs have. The only thing that makes them different from lexical verbs is the item *imas-*, inserted pre-radically. This item is originally a DAT form of the distal pronoun but in placeholders it does not function as a pronoun. Neither it corresponds to any argument of the intended verb that gets replaced by the placeholders in the discourse.

In this talk, I will look at the placeholder verbs with different complexity of the form and discuss how affixes can be manipulated to serve the intention of the speaker to either reveal or withhold information carried by those affixes.

Observe the verb form *gamo-m-i-gzavn-a* “(s)he send it to me” (1), which can be replaced by any of placeholder verbs in (2). Namely, if the speaker wishes to give away as less information as possible about the intended verb (1), the simplest placeholder will suffice (2a). If the involvement of the indirect object argument needs to be revealed by the speaker, the corresponding agreement marker *m-*, will surface in the placeholder verb form (2b). If, additionally, the spatial information of the intended verb needs to be revealed, the placeholder verb will show the corresponding affix, namely the preverb (see *gamo-* in (2c)).

(1) *gamo-m-i-gzavn-a*.

PV-IO1.SG-PRV-send-S3.SG.AOR

“(S)he sent it to me.”

(2) Georgian placeholder verbs of different complexity

a. *imas-kn-a*.

PHM-do-S3.SG.AOR

“(S)he thingumajig-ed it.”

b. *imas-m-i-kn-a*.

PHM-IO1.SG-PRV-do-S3.SG.AOR

“(S)he thingumajig-ed it to me.”

c. *gamo-imas-m-i-kn-a*.

PV-PHM-IO1.SG-PRV-do-S3.SG.AOR

“(S)he thingumajig-ed it out to me.”

And the other way around, if the speaker wishes to withhold the spatial information, the placeholder verb will lack a preverb (as in (2b) or (2a)). Or in case the presence of the indirect object argument has to be disguised, the agreement prefix will be absent in the uttered placeholder verb (as in (2a)).

There is a variation with regard to the placement of agreement markers (cf. (2c) vs. (3)). To

complicate things even more, there are cases of multiple exponence [Har17], when the agreement markers are given twice in the same placeholder verb forms, as in (4):

(3) *gamo-m-i-imas-kn-a*.  
PV-IO1.SG-PRV-PHM-do-S3.SG.AOR  
“(S)he thingumajig-ed it out to me.”

(4) *gamo-m-i-imas-m-i-kn-a*.  
PV-IO1.SG-PRV-PHM-IO1.SG-PRV-do-S3.SG.AOR  
“(S)he thingumajig-ed it out to me.”

I will overview the data collected during a linguistic experiment on the morphological acceptability of placeholder forms [AF23]. It was conducted to study the acceptability of placeholder verbs varying in position of agreement prefixes.

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**Abbreviations:** 1=1st person, 3=3rd person, aor=aorist, dat=dative, io=indirect object, phm=placeholder marker, prv=pre-radical vowel, pv=preverb, sg=singular, s=subject.

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## The placeholder *chose* : an overview

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As an equivalent of the English word placeholder, the French gives several expressions such as *terme vague*, *relais*, *postiche*, *vicaire*, *passe-partout*, *caméléon*, *interpréteur générique*, *extenseur*, and some others (see the abundant literature on the subject). Each of these terms is associated with a different approach, even if there are common characteristics between them.

The aim of our study is not to untangle the terminological network briefly mentioned above, although we will inevitably have to return to it. Instead, we choose to enter the subject through the other end of the spyglass, the one obstructed by the placeholder uses of the noun *chose*. In this sense, our initial interest will focus on the reasons for the existence of such a noun: why does a speaker use a noun without any real 'descriptive content' (Kleiber 1987)? Like *truc*, *bidule* or *machin*, the noun *chose* is recognised as a noun, even though it does not strictly speaking embrace the functions and values traditionally and/or generally attached to them. The particularities of the way *chose* functions, from a semantic, referential, syntactic and pragmatic point of view, will be most instructive in this respect.

We will take advantage of a systematic study of the occurrences of *chose* as a placeholder. We will see that regardless of its determiner, its function, or the syntagmatic and/or syntactic structure in which it is embedded, certain constants emerge. These are not unlike those determined for general nouns, noun shells and/or underspecified nouns.

The debate as to whether *chose* belongs to one or more of these categories is still open.

The primary intention is to consider that the looseness of the semantic part is balanced by a certain number of constraints on the syntactic level. For a certain number of sites, it is necessary to go through a combination of clauses, between which there must be a hierarchical dependency, the host clause of the noun *chose* necessarily being the first, the second filling the semantic emptiness of *chose*.

The second intention is to consider the possibility of setting up, on the basis of the constants thus highlighted, a prototypical construction scheme (in the sense of construction grammars). This scheme then could be extended and adapted to that which would characterise other French placeholders, such as *truc*, *machin* or *bidule*.

In any case, the underlying position is to consider that through this noun, language finds a solution to vicariance, which, as Berthoz (2013) shows, is a fundamental property of the living and all its beings and manifestations, a defining characteristic of all forms of social life. By doing so, language responds to the need for speakers to free themselves from reality in order to relate to an imaginary world, a world that does not yet exist but whose designation is nonetheless necessary to the current communication situation.



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# “Placeholders” à trait [+hum] en français : panorama et typologie

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Les études consacrées aux expressions du vague linguistique (cf. Channell 1994) et en particulier aux « placeholders »<sup>1</sup> (désormais PHs) ces dernières années ont permis des avancées notables dans notre compréhension de leur paradigme, de leur fonctionnement dans divers systèmes linguistiques (anglais, allemand, chinois, japonais, polonais et russe entre autres) et ce, tant au plan de la description morpho-syntaxique et sémantico-pragmatique (Enfield 2003 ; Seraku 2022) ou sociolinguistique (Cutting 2015 ; Palacios Martinez & Nunez Pertejo 2015) que de celle de l’usage ou de l’analyse contrastive (Amiridze *et al.* 2010). Dans ce domaine très riche, les travaux consacrés au français restent aux marges, même si nombre d’entre eux portent sur les noms dits généraux généralement conçus comme formes vagues (cf. Stosic & Rebeyrolles (éds), 2021 pour des travaux récents). Plus rares encore sont ceux qui se consacrent aux placeholders et, notamment, aux formes nominales dotées du trait sémantique [+hum] (cf. Schnedecker 2011, à par. ; Tárnayiková, 2019). Et pour cause : soit celles-ci sont quasiment absentes des dictionnaires et/ou définies laconiquement (voir l’entrée *tartempion* du Petit Robert ci-dessous) :

■ Péj. Nom propre utilisé pour parler d'une personne quelconque. → *machin*, **1. truc**. « Roberti devient sous-secrétaire d'État sans portefeuille dans le cabinet Tartempion qui dure une semaine » (Dutourd). ◆ Individu quelconque. Un vague tartempion. ◆ Mod. **un tel, une telle, tenant lieu d'un nom propre**. J'ai rencontré un tel, une telle. → *machin, tartempion*. « *Machin, chose, un tel, une telle* Tous ceux du commun des mortels » (Brassens). ◦ (En un seul mot et avec une majuscule) **Madame Untel. La famille Untel. Les Untel**. (© 2023 Éditions Le Robert - Le Petit Robert de la langue française)

Soit leur inventaire, comme celui proposé par *Wikipédia*, le seul disponible pour le français, n’est pas parfaitement opérant, comme nous serons amenés à le montrer :

In slang: *Tartempion, Machin, Machin-chose, Mec, Trucmuche, Chose-binne, Patante, Duchnoque, Duchmolle*; de Machin-Chose to refer to people who carry longish, noble names  
In proceedings and other more formal settings: "X" (Monsieur X), "Y", *Monsieur Untel, Madame Unetelle...* (see XYZ Affair)  
*Pierre-Paul-Jacques* or *Pierre-Jean-Jacques* designates anyone and everyone at the same time, in the third person, in an informal context. The very common *Jean Dupont* is used the same way as John Doe is in English.  
*Monsieur/Madame Tout-le-Monde* or *Toulemonde* (Mr. Everybody), is the average citizen.  
*Madame Michu* is the average homemaker or (when speaking about technology) a relatively unsophisticated user. [...]  
*Les Dupont-Durand* are the average extended family; they could also be a couple looking for a bargain, e.g. buying an apartment. [...]  
([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_placeholder\\_names\\_by\\_language#French](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_placeholder_names_by_language#French))

Notre contribution vise donc un triple objectif. A partir d’un état des lieux des définitions en usage et des inventaires disponibles (cf. Cutting 2015 ; Fox 2010 ; Jucker *et al.* 2003 ; Seraku 2023 ; Seraku *et al.* 2022, entre autres), nous tâcherons, dans un premier temps, de dissocier le statut des PHs de celui des noms généraux humains

<sup>1</sup> <https://french.stackexchange.com/questions/780/how-would-you-translate-placeholder-to-french>

(Tárnyiková 2019). Ensuite, de manière à faire le tri dans les inventaires en cours, nous proposerons une typologie des PHs nominaux [+hum] (désormais PHNHs) fondée sur un double faisceau de critères :

- morphologiques (origine et modalités de construction) (cf. Cheung, 2015 ; Haspelmath, 1997 ; Podlesskaya 2010, 2015) et sémantico-pragmatiques visant à spécifier leur rôle référentiel (à la suite de Enfield 2003 notamment),
- fonctionnels, suivant les fonctions dites réparatrice vs diplomatique suggérées par Tárnyiková (2019).

Une étude sur corpus des locutions *tu sais qui/vous savez* (Enfield 2003 ; Guryev 2021 ; Kaye 1990) illustrera notre propos et permettra à la fois d'explicitier les liens entre PHNHs et certaines sous-catégories des pronoms dits indéfinis et de replacer la question parmi certains enjeux sociétaux tels que le droit à l'anonymat ou l'anonymisation des données<sup>2</sup>.

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# Les termes “omnibus” *truc* et *machin* en français : Description, Théorie, Enseignement

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Dans les ressources dédiées à l’enseignement du français, les explications relatives à l’usage des lexèmes « omnibus » *machin* et *truc* sont peu courantes. Lorsque ces termes y sont évoqués, leur fréquence est souvent relevée, mais les appréciations à leur propos divergent : tantôt ils font l’objet de censure ou de stigmatisation, en raison de leur imprécision sémantique, de leur caractère familier ; tantôt ils sont loués pour leur élasticité référentielle et les avantages qu’ils procurent dans la conversation quotidienne. Quoi qu’il en soit, la façon dont ils sont traités demeure lacunaire et superficielle. Pourtant, des pistes d’utilisation réalistes seraient pertinentes pour un public d’apprenants FLE.

La présente communication vise à faire le point, dans un premier temps, sur les emplois de ces deux lexèmes « passe-partout » du français. En explorant divers corpus oraux et écrits (messages vocaux, Ofrom, Frantext, bande dessinée, SMS, web...), et en nous appuyant sur la littérature scientifique à disposition, nous verrons s’il est possible de mettre en évidence des usages spécifiques à chacun des deux termes. Ainsi p. ex., les restrictions posées par O. Halmøy (2006) (*souligner plusieurs trucs /\*plusieurs machins ; il y aurait bien des trucs /\*des machins à ajouter ; théoriser un peu le truc /\*le machin ; c’est pas vraiment mon truc /\*mon machin*) se vérifient-elles dans les faits ? Les facultés de fonctionner comme « shell noun » (*on avait trouvé le truc de mettre les volets comme ça* [Ofrom], cf. Schmid 2000), ou pour assurer le double-marquage d’une valence verbale dans une pseudo-clivée (*Il y a eu un truc plaisant, c’est que le pianiste est venu avec des amis* [...], S. de Beauvoir, 1930 [Frantext], cf. Blanche-Benveniste 1986), sont-elles le propre de *truc* ? La fonction d’« extenseur de liste » sans déterminant (*ouais communication prévention santé machin donc* [Ofrom]) est-il, au contraire, spécifique à *machin* ? Quelles conclusions tirer, d’autre part, des situations où *truc* et *machin* alternent dans un même contexte, soit pour désigner un seul et même référent, soit pour désigner des référents distincts ? Et qu’en est-il, enfin, de la présence et de la répartition de *truc* et *machin* en fonction des périodes considérées, des types de discours, des idiolectes ?...

Après avoir apporté notre contribution aux descriptions en circulation (cf. Mihatsch 2006, Schnedecker 2011, Ducard 2017, Béguelin & Corminboeuf 2017, Moline 2021, Corminboeuf & Johnsen 2023...), nous tirerons de nos observations, dans un second temps, quelques propositions didactiques en vue de l’enseignement du FLE, en essayant d’éviter de propager des règles ou des normes non corroborées par les faits. Avec un certain éclectisme, nous ferons état des connaissances non seulement lexicographiques et morphosyntaxiques, mais aussi historiques et littéraires, qui pourraient alimenter un guide d’utilisation de *truc* et de *machin* destiné aux non francophones. Notre objectif sera de donner des clés de compréhension aux professeurs et aux élèves, en évitant, autant que faire se peut, censure et surcharge cognitive.

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# L'emploi de mots passe-partout dans les échanges à l'hôpital

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La langue des médecins, en tant que langue de spécialité, présente une certaine complexité (Vecchiato & Gerolimich, 2013) et nécessite une précision et une scientificité (Giroud, 2022) qui paraissent, *a priori*, peu compatibles avec des mots passe-partout. L'objectif de cette présentation est de rechercher si des mots tels que *chose*, *truc*, *machin*, se retrouvent dans les échanges entre médecins et patients lors de consultations à l'hôpital et de préciser leur répartition et leur rôle.

L'analyse s'appuiera sur le corpus DECLICS2016 (Blasco, 2022) qui contient des interactions de patients avec deux types de professionnels de santé (des médecins et des psychanalystes) afin de mieux cerner les comportements langagiers différents selon les interlocuteurs.

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## *Domno mihi illo necnon et coniux sua illa ego illi* - placeholder in Latin formularies from the Merovingian period

Rembert Eufe (University of Tübingen)

Formularies offer collections of exemplary charters in which “early medieval scribes systematically removed virtually all internal evidence of particulars (names, dates, places) in order to create a generalisable product” (Rio 2008: 7-8). Therefore, placeholders are deliberately used with high frequency. In our talk, we will analyse the use of *ille* as a placeholder in the formularies of Angers and Marculf, lemmatised and PoS annotated during the project *Le passage du latin au français* (PaLaFra).

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# (Im)Possible Substitution Targets of *Wh*-Placeholders Across Six Languages

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**Background:** It is widely acknowledged that placeholders can substitute various linguistic forms (e.g. syllables, words or even phrases) that the speaker fails to produce in language production. On closer look, the range of forms that placeholders can target are actually far more restricted. Past studies typically exemplified the use of placeholders using substitution of nominal elements. Indeed, placeholders in many languages are most natural and acceptable in such a context. Yet, recent studies have offered basic description of placeholders that can flexibly replace forms beyond nominal expressions, e.g. verbal, adjectival and clausal elements, in individual languages such as Mandarin (Cheung 2015), Japanese (Seraku 2022) and Tagalog (Nagaya 2022). However, systematic grammatical comparison of targets is generally lacking. Further, less is known about the substitution range by the sub-class of *wh*-placeholders (i.e. placeholders using interrogative words).

**Questions:** The goal of this study is to examine the diversity of substitution targets of *wh*-placeholders across six Asian languages that have *wh*-placeholders. They include Cantonese, Mandarin, Malaysian Malay, Golog Tibetan, Tagalog and Japanese. Two questions are addressed. **First**, what is the range of linguistic targets that *wh*-placeholders *can* and *cannot* substitute? **Second**, how do *wh*-placeholders differ across the six languages?

**Analysis:** Part One of the study focuses on Cantonese and Mandarin (C/E) *wh*-placeholders (primarily equivalents of ‘what’ placeholders) because C/E *wh*-placeholders are reasonably well documented (Cheung 2015; Chor & Lam 2023). They also exhibit more substitution flexibility than other languages in my preliminary survey. To understand the set of possible targets, the analysis considers various substitution targets that are attested and unattested in the literature. The list of targets examined are: (A) N, definite DP, indefinite DP, quantified DP (e.g. less than half of X, no X); (B) V, VP; (C) A, AP; (D) Adv, AdvP; (E) P, PP; (F) (non-morphemic) syllable; and (G) interrogative *wh*-expressions.

We found that C/E *wh*-placeholders can target the underlined items on the list. The acceptable targets are much wider than those of the interrogative ‘what’ counterparts in C/E. What is revealing are those unacceptable ones. *Wh*-placeholders are good for substituting definite nominals but not indefinite and quantified nominals. Nor are they acceptable for substituting PP and interrogative *wh*-expressions even when the intended targets are contextually salient. No account so far seems to explain the grammatical pattern. One important observation is that the acceptability of the substitution targets is contingent on whether the grammatical environment provides strong cues for the intended syntactic category of the *wh*-placeholder. As a result, a *wh*-placeholder in a position selected by a syntactic head is usually acceptable but a *wh*-placeholder occurring in an adjunct position is generally unacceptable.

Taking the findings in Part One, Part Two examines the extent *wh*-placeholders in the other four languages are similar to those of C/E. Our findings are that Malaysian Malay, Tagalog and Japanese permit substitution targets comparable to those of C/E. In contrast, Golog Tibetan *wh*-placeholder only accepts substitution of non-morphemic

syllable. On the whole, N, definite NP and non-morphemic syllable are most acceptable; predicative elements such as V, VP, A and AP are sometimes less natural but can still be used in many of the languages studied.

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# *Bagay* and (z)*afè* as placeholders in French-based Creole languages

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French-based creole languages emerged in the context of colonial expansion and are mainly spoken in the Caribbean, parts of the Americas as well as in the Indian Ocean (cf. Hazaël-Massieux 2011). Their lexicon originates primarily from the French superstrate while other linguistic features show a strong influence from several African, Caribbean and other indigenous languages (cf. Patzelt 2014).

The present talk retraces the emergence and development of the two placeholders *bagay*, derived from French *bagage* 'luggage', and *zafè*, derived from French *affaire* 'affair', in different Antillean, American and Indian Ocean Creoles. Both nouns did not develop placeholder functions in French but can be used as placeholders to different degrees in French-based creole languages. According to Mihatsch (2006b) many placeholders emerge either from generic abstract nouns or concrete nouns denoting worthless objects. This talk retraces the first occurrences of *bagay* and *zafè* from historic texts from the 18th and 19th century and compares the functions of the two nouns with recent corpus data. The analysis shows the diachronic development of the semantic and pragmatic functions of *bagay* and *zafè* as well as differences in the diatopic distribution of the placeholders and their functions.

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# Lexical sources of Romance placeholders

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While there has been an increasing interest in forms and functions of placeholders from a synchronic perspective, the evolution of placeholders has been rarely addressed so far, although there appear to be a few crosslinguistically attested types of sources. Podlesskaya (2010: 12-13) suggests three broad categories: a) pronouns (demonstratives, indefinites, interrogatives), b) lexical items, mostly general nouns, as well as c) lexicalized constructions.

In the first part of the talk I will give an overview over the relevance of these types of sources for Romance languages for different types of placeholders (nominal and verbal placeholders, variables, notably of proper names, metalinguistic placeholders) and I will try and situate the evolution of placeholders within the framework of grammaticalization and pragmaticalization research, but will also show the divergence of the case of placeholders. This will not only shed light on their diachrony, but also on their linguistic status, which has not been entirely clarified so far. I will point out the association of different source types with discourse strategies linked with particular motives, notably word-finding problems (see the hierarchy of motives proposed by Seraku 2024), the role of discourse traditions and possible bridging contexts, subsequent transitions between different types of placeholders, as well as functional and semantic reanalyses in the course of conventionalization. I will further address the question whether the evolution of placeholders has formal, i.e. morphosyntactic and phonological and prosodic, consequences.

In the second part of the talk I will present a case study of Spanish *cacharro*, roughly 'thingy', derived from the lexical noun *cacharro* 'crude pottery vessel', 'shard', mainly based on data from the Corpus COSER as well as CDH. I will first offer a synchronic description of the placeholder uses of *cacharro*, its subtle semantic distinctions (see Bosque 2019, but also De la Hoz 2005) as well as the problem of distinguishing placeholders from general nouns spontaneously used as placeholders (see Seraku 2023 on the ad-hoc creation of placeholders). I will then explain why this particular noun seems a good source for placeholder uses and how semantic generalization may proceed and whether we can detect any formal changes. I will close with reflections on the role of grammaticalization for the case of *cacharro*, shedding light on the evolution of placeholders in general.

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# A Cross-linguistic Study of Placeholders in Hindi and Assamese

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Communicators may experience cognitive difficulties in their speech, so they try to improve their utterances using the linguistic means available in their language. Placeholder (PH) fillers are one of the devices that speakers use to fulfil the syntactic projection of the sought-after item whenever there is a word formulation problem (Nino Amiridze, 2010). The usage of placeholders (PH) to fill up the position of the sought-after item by the speakers of languages is ubiquitous. According to Seraku (2022), a speaker may use a placeholder to substitute for a concept she has in mind. The speaker may have only a vague idea and have difficulty verbalising it. It can be challenging to search for a word suited to express her intended concept, or she may use a PH as it allows her to form her utterance without being specific. Therefore, a PH is a word or a lexicalised phrase that is used as a tactical move to replace any word, clause, or concept.

However, the variety of placeholders found in the Indo-Aryan group of languages has yet to be documented or studied. This paper will fill this gap by studying placeholders in Hindi and Assamese. In India, there are around 528 million and 15 million native speakers of Hindi and Assamese, respectively, according to the 2011 census of India. Both languages act as the lingua franca in their respective regions, and many other languages exist among these two. Assamese is one of the official languages in Assam, and Hindi is the official language in nine Indian states. Speakers employing placeholders are typical in regular conversations and modern entertainment media such as YouTube vlogs and podcasts.

This paper presents a cross-linguistic investigation focusing on the usage of placeholders in Hindi and Assamese. Primarily, this paper aims to observe and document the elements used as placeholders by the native speakers of these two languages in an acceptable manner. Placeholders' usage in both languages will be shown to differ according to their versatility in replacing various syntactic categories. It is argued that Hindi speakers generally employ a variety of placeholders like 'wo', 'waha', 'weise', 'weisa', 'yaha', 'ye', and 'eisa' according to the necessity of linguistic item sought-after. Meanwhile, in Assamese, speakers mostly resort to 'heri' as the only placeholder for replacing any syntactic category. This paper adopts a

Relevance Theoretic framework, as proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1995), to elucidate the procedural meaning of placeholders. Rather than conveying a conceptual meaning, placeholders guide the interpretation of utterances. Therefore, it is posited that the fundamental procedural meaning of a placeholder is encapsulated in the directive: "Find an entity that the communicator could have meant" (Seraku, 2022a).

Consider the following arbitrary examples,

Hindi

- 1) **wo waha** gaya aur **wo** kar-ke aya  
PH PH go.PFV and PH do-PFV come  
He/she went there and did that work

Assamese

2) *heri heriya-t gol aru heri kori ahil*

PH PH-LOC go.PST and PH do come.PST

He/she went there and did that work.

In (1), it is observed that for Hindi, the speaker has employed 'wo' to replace a pronoun and verb in the utterance. 'waha' is a demonstrative derived PH to replace the name of a location. In (2), for Assamese, the speaker has employed 'heri' to replace a pronoun, location, and a verb/action. The data for this paper is derived from observations of regular spontaneous speech by Hindi and Assamese native speakers. Also, a few examples are taken from online podcasts and vlogs on YouTube. No textual placeholder data is included in this study. Thus, this paper explicitly shows a contrastive analysis of the meaning and functioning of placeholders in Hindi and Assamese.

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## Placeholder *na* in Quechua/Spanish bilingual speech

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The current study analyzes the lexical item *na* in Cusco-Callao Quechua (Southern Peru), illustrated in (1) below. Using sociolinguistic interview data from bilingual (Quechua/Spanish) speakers from the Cusco region, we observe two primary uses of *na*. First, it functions as what Fox (2010) refers to as a “placeholder filler” (henceforth ‘placeholder’ similar to English ‘whatchamacallit’) to stand in for another word in the discourse (1-2). Second, Nobel and Lacasa (2007) observe that *na* can be “used alone as a hesitation filler while the speaker is contemplating the next word, but it must have affixed to it the particle that would be affixed to the missing word” (226). In the Quechua data, our analysis reveals patterns, not yet described in the literature, in which *na* is used with reference to taboo or sensitive topics. Moreover, our Spanish data demonstrate considerable borrowing of *na*, where it varies with other hesitation markers.

Hornberger and Hornberger (2013) describe Quechua *na* as “a declinable and conjugatable root used to take place of a forgotten or deleted word” (65). In (1) *na* is affixed to a locative marker *pi* ‘in’, and with example (2), *na* is affixed to both a locative marker and person/number inflection. For example (1), *na* may be interpreted as a typical placeholder, allowing the speaker to fill the pause while recalling the name of a location (*Ururu*). In (2) the lexical item substituted with *na* is made clear in context, where the speaker uses *na* to avoid referring directly to his father’s death, mentioned previously in the discourse—as in *wañu-pu-n* ‘he died.’ We argue that the use of *na* in (2) represents a pragmatic strategy intended to avoid direct reference to the sensitive topic of death. Similar examples (e.g., reference to body parts) are also attested and analyzed.

As indicated with example (1), *na* can also be interpreted as indicating hesitation (see also Appel & Muysken 2005 on *-ña* in Bolivian Quechua). Following on recent work regarding hesitation markers in Spanish bilinguals (Erker & Brusco 2017), we demonstrate that *na* is used both to mark hesitations, as shown in (3) and (4), and to stand in for another word, as in (5), which demonstrates that, like Quechua, *na* can be inflected depending on the lexical class it replaces—i.e. *na-r* for verbs. Our data suggest that cases of inflected *na* with Spanish/Quechua bilinguals are infrequent, particularly when compared to its use as a hesitation marker. We also examine the use of *na* in comparison with other hesitation markers, such as *ah* (in example 6) and *ps/pues* ‘well’ (example 7), the latter demonstrating that *na* can co-occur with Spanish markers. Our quantitative analysis reveals that, despite a lower rate of occurrence than other markers, it has a wide functional domain suggesting retention of its use in Quechua to avoid reference to sensitive topics. More generally, our study illustrates that discourse structures in peripheral domains (e.g., placeholders and hesitation markers) are subject to borrowing and that they often display meanings akin to their source (see Zavala 2001 for *pues* in Andean Spanish).

## Placeholders in Selected Hunter-Gatherer Languages from Africa

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We provide a preliminary analysis of placeholders in a small sample of hunter-gatherer languages from southern (Ts'ixa, Shua - Khoe-Kwadi) and eastern Africa (Hadza - isolate). We survey their formal and discourse properties and discuss their diachronic developments.

While placeholders pattern as nominals in all languages surveyed, they differ in their agreement morphology: in Ts'ixa and Shua, they can be analyzed as noun phrases consisting of a (variable) demonstrative base marked for common gender plural (-na / -ra) and the noun xuu 'thing', e.g. ?e-ra xuu o r ?a-na xuu. In Hadza, they are nominals formed on an invariant demonstrative base (ina-) which combines with a morpheme -me-/mi- and agreement morphology for gender (masculine / feminine) and number (singular / plural), e.g. iname (m.sg.), inamiko (f.sg.), inamebe?e (f.pl.), inamib?ii (m.pl.).

Discourse properties of these expressions vary across the languages and may provide some clue as to their diachronic origin. In Ts'ixa and Shua, the placeholder is commonly used when one fails to recall a word. In the Shua example below, the placeholder ?u.ra.xuu replaces t<sup>h</sup>obolo 'gun' in the main class and is appropriately marked as oblique. t<sup>h</sup>obolo then appears as apposition, without any kind of syntactic marking.

(1) tʃxoɑ ?u.ra.xu ka k<sup>h</sup>o ka llao-e-ta, t<sup>h</sup>obolo.

elephant something OBL person OBL shoot-PASS-PST gun.

'The elephant was shot by a person with something, a gun.' (Shua, own data)

In Hadza, the placeholder is used when one forgets a name or word, or if does not know a name for something (e.g. hinámepe (sic) (f.pl.) for 'tomatoes', Bleek 1956: 61). It is also used when avoiding certain words (e.g. iname (m.sg.) for 'penis', inamibi?i (m.pl.) for 'testicles'). The placeholder is structurally similar to vocative (avoidance) terms of address for one's husband (iname), and one's sister-in-law (inako, or inakoye) (Miller et al. 2023). We will report on the results of field research to be conducted in June 2024 examining the extent to which animate or other feminine referents in Hadza may have a -ko- morpheme in place of me- in the placeholder construction.

From a historical perspective, it is interesting to note that the placeholder expressions in all languages surveyed appear to contain an element marking plurality, even in cases where the referent is clearly singular: in Hadza, the -me-/mi- morpheme resembles the associative plural marker, but also the masculine relativizer. In Ts'ixa and Shua, the morphemes -na / -ra convey common gender plural, but appear to be fossilized in the placeholder construction. We will use comparative data from other Khoe-Kwadi languages to trace the historical development of Ts'ixa and Shua placeholders and comment on their distribution across the wider language family.

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## The situation of *situation* in French and Hebrew

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We all remember the famous line from the movie *Die Hard* (1990): "Gentlemen, we have a situation", referring to a security situation, or the line "we have a situation" in *Toy Story 4* (2019), uttered when Forky realizes he is not a real toy. In many respects, "we have a situation (here)" could be regarded as a completely uninformative utterance, similar to "we have [(adjective → "∅")] weather (here)," which, being completely obvious, would not normally be uttered. One could thus argue that the sole function of the noun *situation* in the example above is to "fill" the syntactic position of the direct object in order to produce a grammatical sentence. According to Keevallik (2010: 139), fillers "are used to delay the next due unit in talk". This kind of "projection" (Auer, 2005: 8) may stem from various reasons, such as formulation problems, error avoidance, uncertainty, etc. While these features alone are sufficient to classify *situation* as a "filler", the linguistic literature typically reserves the term "filler" for sound-stretches like English *um*, interjective hesitation devices like French *ben* ("well"), or items like the Hebrew *az* ("so").

Therefore, perhaps it would be better to call *situation* a placeholder. Placeholders are sometimes seen as a specific kind of filler, one that stands in for a delayed item or holds the turn until the speaker can provide a more lexically-specific item (Fox, Hayashi & Jasperson 1996: 204–206). But the term "placeholders" is usually applied only to cases where the item participates in the syntactic structure of the utterance, thus signaling to the addressee that the speaker means to articulate a more specific lexical item (Fox, 2010). In the following expanded example – "We have a situation here: one of the diamonds seems to be missing" – where *situation* is in an appositional relationship with the subsequent propositional content ("one of the diamonds seems to be missing"), *situation* can indeed be categorized as a placeholder. That being said, we feel that the term "placeholder" fails to capture the variety and complexity of the uses of *situation* in referential contexts. So how to define *situation*? Although the object of this paper is to determine the semantic and discursive properties of French *situation* and Hebrew *matsav* (both of which are roughly equivalent in meaning to English *situation*), this question cannot be simply set aside, considering not only the complex nature of these lexemes, which, like their English counterpart, are often used to "save the day" in various linguistic and extralinguistic situations, but also the terminological ambiguity of many of the categories used to describe the function of linguistic items that serve as variables. These lexemes display characteristics typical of pronouns; that is, they function as "general nouns" (Halliday & Hasan, 1976), "carrier nouns" (Ivanič, 1991), "shell nouns" (Schmid, 2000), "signaling nouns" (Flowerdew & Forest, 2015). The question becomes all the more crucial given the overlapping characteristics associated with these categories, as noted by Hennecke & Mihatsch (2022). We will thus examine whether *situation* fits into one of the abovementioned categories, or perhaps into several of them, depending on the context (or, should we say, depending on the situation), before identifying the idiosyncratic features and specific value(s) of *situation* in each one of the two languages.

Our examples, in both French and Hebrew, will be mostly drawn from WebCorp<sup>3</sup>. The raw data will be filtered and synthesized manually into phraseological groups inspired by Adler and Legallois 2018's lexicogrammatical typology. This typology will enable us not only to determine the most appropriate characterization of *situation* and *matsav*, but also to outline common denominators and idiosyncrasies in each of the languages.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.webcorp.org.uk/live/>

# Specifying underspecification: placeholders in contrast with general nouns and shell nouns

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Placeholders are words that serve various functions in discourse, such as filling lexical gaps, compensating for difficulties in formulation, or avoiding lexical specification in context (Amiridze et al. 2010). Many placeholders are nominal in essence and, as universal denotators, they are underspecified with respect to their reference. As far as nouns are concerned, semantic underspecification has been described as a distinctive property of both general nouns and shell nouns. In this presentation, we will explore how nominal placeholders can be compared to these two types of nouns.

According to Halliday and Hasan (1976: 274), general nouns can be defined by their “generalized reference within the major noun classes”. They include nouns such as *person*, *object*, *stuff*, *matter* and *place* in English. At first sight, placeholders could be viewed as meta-general nouns, since they are not a priori limited to specific ontological domains. However, possible semantic restrictions may be observed, especially in languages where competing placeholders can be found (e.g. *choses*, *machin*, *truc*, *bidule* in French, see also Ganenkov et al. 2010 on Agul). Furthermore, it seems that placeholders can result from the semantic extension of general nouns primarily assigned to a specific domain (e.g. *thing* for concrete objects in English, further extended to all types of entities). The distinction between placeholders and general nouns can therefore be questioned, calling for further investigation.

Shell nouns, on the other hand, are defined by the fact that they can encapsulate a propositional content in an abstract object characterized by its cognitive form (Vendler 1968, Winter 1992, Schmid 2000, Flowerdew and Forest 2015, a.o.). Examples of shell nouns include *idea*, *assumption*, *fact*, *possibility*, and *attempt* in English. Shell nouns rely on contextual specification and are frequently used anaphorically, playing like general nouns an important role in discourse cohesion. In theory, placeholders should fundamentally differ from shell nouns in that they do not describe a cognitive form and are not necessarily “in search of a context” (in the terms of Ivanič 1991). However, one may ask whether the ability to denote an informational content and to be contextually specified is not a possible function for placeholders, given their general purpose. Interestingly, some nominal placeholders can be used in typical shell-noun constructions, such as *thing* in English (*the thing is that P*) and *truc* in French (*le truc c’est que P*) – whereas others, such as *whatchamacallit* in English and *machin* or *bidule* in French can hardly be used in such constructions. By comparing placeholders with both general nouns and shell nouns, this study will investigate the semantic properties of placeholders and the different facets of semantic underspecification in the nominal domain.

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## Hesitation and Flow of information: The generic classifier used a place holder in *Sà'án Sàví ñà ñuù Xnúvúkó* (Mixtepec Mixtec)

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*Sà'án Sàví ñà ñuù Xnúvúkó* (Mixtepec Mixtec; Otomanguan) contains a large inventory of forms historically related to a noun *ñà'a* 'thing', which serve syntactic and discourse functions. Their uses in discourse are examined in this presentation, based on data from a corpus of unplanned naturalistic data from 19 recordings from 11 different speakers, totaling 2 hour and 51 minutes, covering different genres.

A pervasive use of *ñàà* in *Sà'án Sàví ñà ñuù Xnúvúkó* is as a hesitation marker, which refers to a discourse marker signalling hesitation over a lexical choice. As such, it may be used after any word class, and it tends to appear at the end of Intonation Units as a placeholder. In example (1) the speaker is unsure of what was inside the burger and needs to pause to think before venturing two guesses.

(1) *Ntsàtsí ñàà késù tsi ñàà á pepínò kúu ñàà v àà ínkáà títsi hamburguésà-ka.*

[MYUC-1008; JS; 02:15]

ntsàtsí= <sup>L</sup>	ñàà	késù	tsi	ñàà	á	pepínò	kúu	ñàà
PFV.eat=1	DISC	cheese	and	DISC	or	pickle COP	DISC	
	v àà	ínkáà	títsi	hamburguésà=ka				
	maybe	IPFV.stay	inside	burger=ANA				

'I ate... cheese and... or was it pickle maybe inside the burger.'

Another common use of *ñàà* is that of a floor-keeping device, defined as a strategy that “allows speakers to signal continuation that extends beyond the end of a given phrasing type” (Himmelman 2022: 20; cf. Auer 1996). This function is well attested for fillers and placeholders in other languages (see, for instance, Fox Tree & Clark 1997), and is probably best analyzed as a multi-level construction involving both these placeholders and prosodic cues such as lengthening (see *prolongation hypothesis* Clark & Fox Tree 2002). This, at the same time, allows the speaker to maintain a single new idea per Intonation Unit (Chafe 1994) while ensuring that thematic foregrounding is given to the appropriate information and that Intonation Unit boundaries are more salient. This can be seen in narratives and in conversations.

This discourse strategy often leads to a structure in which subjects appear in a separate Intonation Unit from the verbal complex, which is then packaged with the previous Intonation Unit. This way, the subject is given more prosodic prominence, occupying now the initial position of the Intonation Unit instead of the medial position it would occupy if packaged with the verbal complex. Similar structures can be observed with objects and with obliques, the latter appearing in an Intonation Unit separate from the preposition that introduces them.

We can observe this structure in example (2), in which the speaker has been talking about how they left their village with their mother and brother and then they crossed the border to the US and met with their father. Packing this last event into two separate Intonation Units allows the speaker to ensure that enough attention is paid to the father, who then becomes the topic of the following Intonation Units.



(2) *Cha ñàà ñikitsàà-yù frontèrà sáná ntàkitá'an tsi ñàà pá-yù rì ñàà táná tiémpù sàǎn ra ñàà Estados Unidos yó'o yéè pá-yù ra.* [MYUC-1008; JS; 00:44]

cha	ñàà		ñikitsàà=yù	frontèrà	sáná	ntà-kitá'an= <sup>L</sup>			
and	DISC		PFV.arrive=1	border	then	PFV.again-meet=1			
	tsi	ñàà		páá=yù	rì	ñàà		táná	tiémpù
	sàǎn								
	COM	DISC		father=1	because	DISC		like	time
	ra	ñàà		Estados-Unidos	yó'o	yéè		páá=yù	
	TOP	DISC		States-United		PROX	IPFV.exist	father=1	
	ra								
	TOP								

'And I arrived at the border and then I met with my father because at that time my father was living here in the US.'

Both of these functions (hesitation markers and floor-keeping devices) are extensions of the placeholder construction, which we argue consists of the generic classifier and prosodic lengthening at the end of an Intonation Unit. This became a common strategy to project (Auer 2005) new information, offering a platform (see Ariel et al. 2015) to introduce new information. There is a relation between the use of classifiers and discourse properties such as 'thematic importance' (Craig 1986: 271), which in turn could explain the development from a classifier into a floor-keeping device. This floor-keeping construction then became a widely used strategy for combining prosodic units in unplanned speech and was therefore also used to combine clauses when these two units coincide.

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# Practical information

## Contact (WhatsApp and mobile phone):

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## Venue

The conference location is: “Brechtbau” / Neuphilologie, on Thursday room 027 (ground floor, to the left of the main entrance), on Friday room 226

**Wilhelmstraße 50 (number 70 on the map), 72074 Tübingen**

The venue is a 3-minute walk from the hotel Meteora, 15-20 minutes from the other hotels

## Bus connection from Tübingen train station or ‘Neckarbrücke’:

Take the bus 1, 2, 6 or 7 until the stop Lothar-Meyer-Bau (takes about 4-5 minutes). Walk back against the driving direction for about 30 meters and the Brechtbau (Wilhelmstraße 50) is located on your left

**BUS TICKET!!!** Tickets can be purchased with money in coins or by card directly at the machines in the buses or at some bus stops.



**Internet Access:** Internet can be accessed via Eduroam

# Social programme

## Wednesday October 9

Warming-up from 19:00

Restaurant 1821 (number 12 on the map below)

Wilhelmstraße 3

## Thursday October 10

Lunch 13:15

Uni-Café-Ristorante Unckel (just across the street from the venue)

Wilhelmstraße 17

Dinner 19:30

Weinstube Forelle (close to the marketplace, midway between the points 5 and 6 on the map below)

Kronenstraße 8

## Friday October 11

Boat trip "Stocherkahn" meeting at 17:00 at:

Wöhrdstraße 25

>> number 10 on the map below, we will meet in front of the boats at the waterfront!

Dinner 19:30

Restaurant Wurstküche (number 7 on the map below)

Am Lustnauer Tor 8

