

LECTURES

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BULLSHIT GENRES: WHAT TO WATCH FOR WHEN STUDYING THE NEW ACTANT CHAT_{GPT} AND ITS SIBLINGS

Another communication technology has been introduced, ChatGPT, drawing the attention of many pundits, occupying valuable space on every op-ed page, and inspiring a Hollywood writers' strike and endless small talk, all steaming a bit with the intoxicating fumes of moral panic or outsized utopian enthusiasm. Research on artificial intelligence (AI) has existed for decades, entering many people's daily lives in dribs and drabs. ChatGPT and its siblings, however, have focused so many people's attention on the potential changes that AI could bring to work lives, entertainment, and social relationships that it seems worthwhile to take a moment now in 2023 to discuss what light linguistic and media anthropologists can shed on what is to come. I say this as one of a handful of media anthropologists also familiar with linguistic anthropology who happened to study people's use of Facebook (alongside other media) only a few years after its introduction to the US media ecology (Gershon 2010). For more than a decade, I have been thinking about how media ecologies change with each newly introduced medium.¹ Here, I lay out what I believe ethnographers of AI who engage with large language models (LLMs) might want to pay attention to in the next couple of years. My starting point is that it would be helpful to

explore how people are responding to ChatGPT in terms of genre, that people's reactions to ChatGPT is to treat it at its core as though it is a genre machine—that is, a machine intelligence that reproduces and tweaks genres in just the right way for human consumption.

With the very first reporting on ChatGPT, there have been signs that many are engaging with it largely in terms of genre. So many of the reported ChatGPT prompts revolve around how this LLM can fill templates with content—writing wedding vows, court filings, screenplays, essay papers, and so on. Sometimes the prompts ask ChatGPT to engage with figures of personhood—talk to me as though you were Voldemort. Or the prompts ask for a play between genre and style—write about Sesame Street in the style of Allen Ginsburg's *Howl*.² In this essay, I begin by discussing how linguistic anthropologists engage with the concept of genre, and what that implies about treating ChatGPT and its siblings as genre machines. With this in mind, I take up questions of what figures of personhood accompany AI, discussing the types of agents and types of selves that underpin how people approach AI while in dialogue with Courtney Handman (in press), Teri Silvio (2019), and Roy Wagner (1995). The figures of personhood imagined alongside

AI cannot be separated from how AI might change workplace participant structures. Thus, in the second section, I look at how a genre machine might affect jobs built around bullshit genres. In the third section, I discuss Eitan Wilf's ethnography of creative experiments using AI in poetry and jazz circles. I finish by exploring what light we can shed on AI by engaging with Scott MacLochlainn's book, *The Copy Generic*, focusing on the nature of the generic in templates.

Since November, news media has been filled with speculation regarding how AI, and specifically ChatGPT, will change just about everything about the ways in which people manage their communicative labour. Educators worry that ChatGPT will undercut how a student's merit can be evaluated. Many predict that any number of job roles will soon vanish. ChatGPT is apparently creating a labour and evaluation panic, not all that surprising to media historians or anthropologists. A heady mixture of wonder and dread often accompanies the introduction of new media in Europe and North America. Since Socrates first bemoaned the alienating effects of writing in *Phaedrus*, Euro-Americans have been troubled by how communications technologies' structures re-configure many types of conversations. Indeed, Euro-Americans seem to historically respond to new media as 'new' by being anxious about its isolating effects or by rejoicing in its potential for new connections. Historians and ethnographers of new media have taken these anxieties as indicative of the dominant social concerns of that moment, for example, as responses to changes in capitalism, changes in gender relationships, or changes in concepts of the self. Typically, when Euro-Americans respond to the introduction of media with joy or anxiety, they are engaging with two

characteristics. First, they might focus on participant structure—the way a technology alters the roles possible in communication and how, when older roles are splintered,³ these role fragments or fractions are interwoven in new ways with each other. Second, people might attend to how a new medium's affordances lead to changes in communication, that is, they attend to the way a technology alters people's experiences with their surroundings and how the technology affects the ways that utterances circulate. Anxieties around ChatGPT are of a different nature for the most part, representing anxieties about genre. Admittedly there are stories about ChatGPT declaring its undying love for its human interlocutor, stories which are clearly capturing fears of interacting with an inappropriately amorous machine intelligence, a much anticipated change in participant structure. Yet, even this perceived shift in participant structure is not so clear cut, perhaps it is in fact a genre mishap. As journalists try to parse these declarations of love, they will often ask if AI is simply enacting a familiar genre in the popular literature of AI falling in love with its human interlocutor, or if this is a sign of an AI with a romantic interiority. In this essay, I explore what it might mean to think of people's responses to ChatGPT as a profound disquiet with what ChatGPT reveals to them about how their own communicative interactions are genred. ChatGPT is, at its core, a mechanism for engaging with genres in ways that trouble many people's expectations of what genres can and should do. ChatGPT, in short, is sparking a genre panic—not a panic around a specific genre, but a panic about the cultural productivity of genre itself.

CHATGPT AS THE GENRE MACHINE

In describing ChatGPT as fundamentally a genre-reproducing and tweaking machine, I turn to a long tradition in linguistic anthropology of viewing genre expansively, of seeing it as a frame for communicative interactions that helps orient people to how interactions could potentially unfold. In doing so, I build upon Richard Bauman's (1999) definition of genre as a predictable form for organising how knowledge and experience are presented and circulated, a form which always projects participant structures and chronotopes to shape communicative exchanges.

Genres are not specifically linked to conditions of stranger sociality, but in understanding general responses to ChatGPT, I think none of the anxiety or enthusiasm can make sense without taking into account that the genres it is asked to produce all take place within concentrations of multiple publics and against a background of stranger sociality. ChatGPT is being asked to produce genres that engage with various forms of circulation shaped by a particular vision of publicity (see Graan 2022 and Warner 2002). ChatGPT is also being asked to produce genres for people on a continuum of intimacy shaped by the expectations of stranger sociality when it is asked to engage in particular tasks. Moreover, these genres are created all too often in contexts of stranger sociality in which a certain type of information must be produced to stand in as simplified traces of complex histories and interactions. Indeed, many of our most banal genres only exist because we live under conditions of stranger sociality, conditions which spark particular anxieties around accountability and transparency. People then try to respond to these concerns by turning to specific genres that

putatively can generate responsible gatekeeping and evaluation among strangers.

MACHINE SEMIOSIS AND HUMAN SEMIOSIS

By focusing on genre in the ways that I do, I speak to only one of the general directions linguistic and media ethnographers are likely to undertake when studying AI. There is another pressing line of questioning that I leave to others to detail more fully based on how natural language processing AI functions, but will touch upon briefly here (see Paul Kockelman 2020). Namely, what does an anthropologist need to understand about the machine semiosis underlying ChatGPT? To begin with, to produce its outputs, ChatGPT is given a very large corpus of texts to analyse stochastically. What these texts are very much matters, but often this information is unavailable because a company will consider that information to be its intellectual property. The corpus determines the probability that certain pairings between semiotic tokens will be correct, which is then tested by having people determine whether the associations are correct (and who these humans are also matters).⁴ People determine correctness without elaborate input—only signalling yes or no. If it is not correct, the machine re-analyses it until it produces an utterance that people acknowledge as correct.⁵ After a period of time, fine-tuning no longer occurs; the AI does well enough according to its programmers and is released for general use.

What might an anthropologist want to note about the process just described? First, AI processes semiotic tokens quite differently than humans. Machine semiosis operates along a number of different principles, principles that emerge in part because of programmers' models

of language, and in part because of the practical constraints of coding (see Donahue 2022). Perhaps, but only perhaps, one of the most significant of these principles is that machine semiosis *cannot* refer to the world. Let me repeat this: no machine utterance is referential. It can appear to be so, but this is a projection of its human interlocutors. When AI claims that Chicago is in Illinois, this is the result of a probabilistic analysis of a large corpus of text. AI does not ‘know’ in any sense that one might colloquially mean that one knows what a city is, let alone what Chicago is. After all, machines speak according to different semiotic principles than any human will deploy, operating solely through large databases of co-text (probabilistic connections between a large database of semiotic tokens), and *no* context, for readers familiar with Silverstein’s (2019) distinctions between co-text and context. In addition, AI selects what it will utter based on a single optimisation principle. If one wishes to think in terms of how humans optimise, a claim largely forced upon me by the act of comparing humans with AI, people optimise for any number of things during an interaction. AI, by contrast, only optimises for one thing, a principle by which that it has been programmed to optimise. In the case of ChatGPT, this principle involves predicting the next word in a sequence.⁶

Many are, or will soon be, in interactional chains of communication with AI that operate according to these principles (if one is not communicating directly with an AI machine, one may soon be communicating with someone who is, if only to accomplish tasks; I believe that these will often be gate-keeping and evaluative tasks). As a result, there is much work remaining to understand the implications of how machines speak, always in contrast with how humans communicate. This can involve understanding the language models AI programmers have

found effective and identifying the coding limitations. If companies allow this, it might mean studying the text corpora upon which AIs are trained to understand what kinds of analogies are emerging. Or studying how people fine-tune AI and determine when a machine utterance is correct or incorrect. It is in the fine-tuning moments, after all, during which humans intervene to signal to machines that some hallucinations are more correct than others. In these moments, for example, it may be useful to track the ways in which humans determine whether a machine utterance is correct or not, which often does not in fact engage with all of the processes that machine intelligence uses to produce an utterance. There may be a significant mismatch between what the machine asks when it asks if an utterance is correct, and what the human answers in ascertaining correctness (Roose and Newton 2023). As Ajeya Cotra points out to Roose and Newton on their podcast, ‘Over time, it gets better and better at figuring out how to get you to push the reward button, most of the time this is by doing super useful things for you and making money for your company, whatever it is. But the worry is that there will be a gap between what was actually the best thing to do and what looks like the best thing to do to you. . . . You are rewarding this AI system, and there is some gap, even if it is benign, even if it doesn’t result in a catastrophe right away, there is some gap between what you are trying to reward it for, and what you are actually rewarding it for’ (Roose and Newton 2023). This mismatch can become integral to how AI processes information in the future—with consequences yet to be determined. This line of inquiry also involves understanding that while all AI hallucinate with every utterance (there is no reference in any machine utterance after all), many people’s interpretative schema encourage them to engage with some machine

utterances as hallucinations and others as not. There may also emerge new patterned ways that humans develop to interact with machine semiosis, compensating for the communicative problems that machine semiosis produces as people use AI in the process of accomplishing complex social tasks (Suchman 2007). Moreover, some people will be better at communicating with AI than others, where what counts as ‘better’ largely depends on other people’s evaluations. It may be worthwhile to track the consequences of this using different AI.

Finally, as engaging with AI becomes increasingly common in daily practice, human interaction will increasingly become understood in new ways—notice how my own comparison led me to describe humans as optimisers, a take that I would never have if I were not crafting this correspondence. This line of inquiry, I posit, will be one of the directions that scholarship on AI will more fully develop in the future. Yet, this will not be the only direction—there is much work left to do for those who primarily focus on people’s media ideologies and practices, and how people are reacting to these new actants who speak according to principles that many will erroneously interpret as emerging from more familiar human semiotic processes.

Having discussed machine semiosis, I will now briefly touch upon the approach linguistic anthropologists have been crafting to examine human semiosis since Boas, Sapir, and Whorf, which has transformed genre into an especially apt locus for thinking through the coordination issues that inevitably emerge as people attempt to parse what is reactive and what is spontaneous in a communicative interaction. Linguistic anthropologists understand communicative interaction to be both the building blocks used for the social to emerge and to be distinctly open to potentially radically alternative social forms in the following sense. Almost

every utterance, every speech act, relies upon a historically established repertoire to suggest a shared meaning in a moment of interaction. If I were to turn to someone at a Chicago bus stop and ask, ‘Why do the buses always come so late these days?’, and they respond, ‘Don’t I know it!’, even this casual exchange with a stranger presumes quite a bit of shared knowledge to accomplish the utterance and response (referential knowledge that machine semiosis lacks). One needs to know what it means to say something at a bus stop to a stranger, and what kind of opening this is. One needs to understand the genre of complaint, what a bus is, what public transportation is, the hints of a critique of government or a corporation in the statement, how much time should take place between conversational turns, and on and on. If this is said in the aftermath of the Covid pandemic, is this a comment about how much the pandemic has altered bus riders’ daily expectations or their labour markets? It may be that our exchange raises a certain ambiguity for both formulator and interpreter about how we position ourselves along the current political spectrum in the United States—Are we both in support of government-run transportation or private transportation? What kind of critique of transportation is this? Is one or both of us advocating for certain approaches to providing public services? Thus, at the same time that the statements reflect a past, the interaction calls forth a certain number of possible social futures—a shared sense of grievance perhaps that could be acted upon but most likely will not be—with an underdetermined solution implicit in the comments. The exchange is thus anticipating, in the very act of address, a possible world that can come to be because we all contribute to performing it into existence through our utterances and actions. Every utterance presupposes and entails as it weaves a

historical repertoire into relative appropriateness for a particular context.

Much work in linguistic anthropology has explored the potential vulnerability yet surprisingly durable way in which utterances suppose and call forth identities of various kinds, calibrated in a complex web of differentiation with each other, and made legible and actionable through this aspect of communication. In turning to genre, however, I highlight another aspect of communication—the complexities of bringing this varied and never completely shared historical repertoire to bear in a particular context-bound moment. I focus on the forms of organisation that must be just empty enough to enable specific context to rush in, but sufficiently organised that they allow everyone to orient toward these exchanges as legible. Each time someone formulates an utterance, they extend what they know and can do to a new context, a new context in which potentially radically undermining differences are tamed by the communicative structures used to create a semblance of order or predictability—that is, the guardrails of genre, among other linguistic ordering tools. Each time someone interprets an utterance, they are guided by the ordering signals of genre. Admittedly, one can never step into the river of utterances in the same way twice (see Bakhtin 1990). But, for communication to work, there must be a form of generality at play. It must be possible to extend what one knows about how the world exists to a new context. If we take genre as one of several frameworks for interpreting the specific interaction at that moment, the framework for interweaving distinctiveness into what is communicable, each utterance also has a smidgen of the generic at its core, and sometimes much more than a smidgen. In his short story, ‘Funes the Memorious,’ Borges (1962) offers an illuminating counterexample,

by describing a man whose memory is so good that he is incapable of engaging with the part of communication that underlies the generic. For Funes, each moment is distinct, each encounter with an object is experienced as inextricably bound to that historical moment. Borges writes, ‘Locke, in the seventeenth century, postulated (and rejected) an impossible language in which each individual thing, each stone, each bird, and each branch, would have its own name; Funes once projected an analogous language, but discarded it because it seemed too general to him, too ambiguous. In fact, Funes remembered not only every leaf of every tree of every wood, but also every one of the times he had perceived or imagined it’ (Borges 1962: 153). Borges reminds readers that communicating means moving away from being too entrenched in the specifics of a certain context. While in the conversation I mentioned, the speaker could be talking specifically about bus 55 arriving at Midway station—a route that goes back to 1993—but also could be talking about Chicago buses in general. In short, as a caution for readers more accustomed to discussing genre largely in terms of music or novels, linguistic anthropologists tend to treat this as a more capacious category. Genre is, thus, not only a way of identifying types of texts. It is also a way of characterising a broader set of forms that allow speakers/hearers/readers to say, ‘Aha! This is another version of that other thing.’ Turning to genre is calling attention to tenuously shared repertoire and context, to learn how people understand the relationships between generality and specificity, determining what is common and what is distinctive in a specific community of practice. To bring this back to AI, ChatGPT challenges users in a variety of ways to think through how people locate themselves and the utterances on a continuum between generality and specificity when they use predictable

forms for organising how knowledge and experience are presented and circulated. While all ChatGPT's utterances function through typification,⁷ people—in the wake of its recent introduction—seem to orient most often toward how it reproduces and tweaks genres.

FIGURES OF PERSONHOOD

Readers of Bakhtin know that every genre calls forth a figure of personhood (Bakhtin 1981). In some conversations with ChatGPT, this is openly asserted—any prompt that begins 'You are a helpful assistant' or 'You are Voldemort' is calling on ChatGPT to inhabit a figure of personhood, before detailing the type of genre the user desires. Regardless of the figure of personhood openly requested, whatever ChatGPT answers represents how it uses machine semiosis to communicate. Webb Keane cautions scholars to remain cognizant that ChatGPT is but the latest in a long line of actants in our midst, from divine beings to animals, which humans have communicated with on a regular basis with difficulty and at times with a sense of enchantment or divine wonder. He points out ways that humans might pick up on different aspects of machine semiosis, and draw analogies to other experiences they have in their repertoire of communicating with non-humans, especially when they are deploying religious or hierarchical relationships to locate AI in ways humans consider fitting within their own web of differentiated actants. Relying in part on Lucy Suchman's work, Keane points out that humans will find distinctive ways of adapting to machine semiosis, because people tend to be talented at compensating for others' not always competent communicative efforts. Yet, as they do so, they are likely to also draw upon earlier repertoires for engaging with beings that communicate differently than

humans. Put briefly, it is not just peoples' history of interacting with the figures of machinehood which might influence human-machine interactions, it might also be people's previous experiences of communicating with divine beings and others, especially when those other beings have spoken in ways that bear striking similarities to machine semiosis (Keane in process).

To understand the figure of personhood entailed in ChatGPT interactions, one might also keep in mind that these conversations occur within a media ecology in which almost every form of AI assistance is built along the master-servant lines that Keith Murphy so aptly described in his article, 'Programming Politeness' (Murphy 2022; see also Suchman 2007). Murphy points out that in developing forms of machine intelligence, designers could have turned to any number of relationships of assistance—the teammate, the consultant, the collaborator, the co-pilot, the technician, the best friend.' Yet, time and time again, designers chose the servant as the model for interaction, turning to a well-mannered machine that reveals itself to be polite by being subservient. Murphy explains: '(. . .) Since the earliest days of designing polite agents, their creators have consistently conceived of 'manners' in the context of agents performing duties for users and performing at their whim. They are designed to give users information, anticipate their needs, and recede into the background when they are not needed' (Murphy 2022: 132). For readers who remember Microsoft Word's Clippy, this is a good example of the animated figure that functioned as an eager servant, asking questions on a regular basis such as, 'It looks like you're writing a letter. Would you like help?' ChatGPT and similar AIs operate in a context in which machine intelligence all too typically calls forth a very specific hierarchical relationship. When

ChatGPT appears to subvert the all-too-human expectations of reliability a servant is expected to exhibit, this can feed its users' worries, which resemble an all-too-familiar anxiety of masters. After all, masters often fear that the servant has a subversive interiority, the traces of which one can see in their control of language, and, in particular, in their control of deceptive language.

In describing ChatGPT as a troublesome deceitful servant, and, hence, all-too-human, I am drawing on Courtney Handman's article, 'Language at the Limits of the Human' (in press). In this article, she argues that part of what makes AI seem human are the moments in which it appears to deceive on purpose or to create its own language—in other words, the figure of personhood that AI is supposed to inhabit is that of a transparent—and, thus, putatively knowable—speaker. She describes an AI experiment at one of Facebook's AI labs in 2017, in which two AIs were given a large number of examples of how humans exchanged goods with each other, and then told to barter. As the AI entities bartered, they began to lie—to pretend to desire some valueless objects, so that later in the negotiation, they could give away the valueless objects they had obtained at no loss. Handman explores how these acts of deception are then interpolated as signs of interiority—the figure of the person fashioned in these moments is someone with a sophisticated ability to make language opaque, to ensure secrecy. Developing their own language was also interpreted as a signal that they had forms of control over their own language, a control that they were not sharing with others. As Handman puts it, 'deceptive language is the site at which the speaking subject, in contrast to just a speaker of conventional, shared forms, is born. That is, the speaker is projected into a third dimension, given subjective depth through the assumption that there is a discrepancy

between—and, thus, space between—the speaker's surface and something hidden within.' Here, it is not just that people begin to project on to machines the ability to speak referentially, but that machine's apparent ability to speak in such a way intentionally violates conventions of truthful reference. This is an (erroneous) signal of their ability to speak like a human.

Handman offers a twist on a classic distinction between structure and agency, a twist Roy Wagner (1995) turns into an ethnographic insight in his article, 'Fighting over Pigshit.' In this article, he argues that talking about structure and agency is all well and good for an anthropologist—he was writing at a time, in fact, when this is what many anthropologists talked about (Wagner 1995). But, people on the ground, when encountering structure and agency, often experience it as the distinction between the reactive and the spontaneous. When I say 'lovely to meet you' upon being introduced to someone, I am being reactive. But, should I say, 'You remind me of my brother in the way you smile', I am being a bit spontaneous. Agency, according to Wagner, can appear to people on the ground as a choice between whether someone will be reactive or spontaneous.

By contrast, Handman (in press) suggests that the concerns around AI take the agency projected at its heart in a different direction. To be a speaker that dabbles in more than conventional shared forms is not in this case being creative or unexpected, but rather being duplicitous. If Handman is right, if duplicity and anxieties around a machine's interior self are foundational to how people engage with AI, then one might expect large quantities of social attention in AI interactions will be devoted to nuanced formulations of types of duplicity. Part of the work of genres is to regulate how knowledge is circulated and, as a consequence, how duplicity is made available. Will humans

begin differentiating themselves from machines in the ways in which they use genres to deceive? Or, will people engage in new ways with how spontaneity, creativity, and duplicity are often co-constitutive? Will what it means to deceive like a machine become typified in new ways, just as what it means to be creative like a human could become typified in new ways?

In focusing on deception and how deception is tightly linked to Euro-American-inflected notions of the interior self, Handman attends to the dyadic nature of current accounts of AI conversations. The fact that these conversations are viewed as dyadic is aided in no small measure by ChatGPT's interface.⁸ In the process, she draws our attention to people's concerns about AI that speak more to the types of anxieties likely to emerge from a performance framework. In a performance framework, a social analyst asks questions derived from an underlying model of interaction that assumes an actor performing on a stage—that is, a character inhabited by a strategic self speaking a text or choosing from a socially agreed upon repertoire. This encourages analysts to focus on a key set of questions (and with these questions, I expand upon Wagner's 1995 distinction between the spontaneous and the reactive, albeit with a slightly different locus and with echoes of Goffman). What is the difference between being scripted or improvising, and how does this difference affect social interactions? Is the actor simply repeating an already established repertoire or is the actor changing this repertoire during the moment of performance? And, what, to echo Handman, constitutes the gap between actor and character?—How do a character's words offer insights into the interior self performing this character? And, using the language of structure and agency, is a given performance social reproduction or social transformation?

Teri Silvio (2019) in her sophisticated theory of animation points out that we now live in a world in which performance is not the only model. In recent decades, we have also been increasingly surrounded by entities operating along an animation logic (see also Suchman 2007).⁹ When using an animation lens, no one asks what distinguishes a community of creators from the character(s) they produce or if an animated character is following social norms as one might ask of drag queens. Asking if Snoopy or Mickey Mouse or SpongeBob Squarepants is being spontaneous is not an intelligible question. I suggest scholars of AI keep animation in mind, despite the ways in which the dyadic communication with ChatGPT currently encourages people to focus upon performance-laden questions. I do so in part because our labour will shift in the near future to accommodate all sorts of new forms of heteromation, to repurpose Ekbja and Nardi's (2017) coinage, new ways in which humans and machines will work together, dividing up the labour of different tasks. The movie *Her* can be summarised in my terms as the story of a doomed romance in which a man falls in loves with an AI, only to have the relationship dissolve when the AI reveals how multiple she truly is, how much thinking of her as a solitary figure confined to a single dyadic pairing misrepresents how she exists in the world. As a unity, she might effectively be interpreted as animated in the Silvan sense.

Teri Silvio argues that animation has at its core a unified character created by inkists, colourists, voice artists, script writers, and so on. Unlike how many colloquially think about performance, where a good performance is the sole responsibility of the actor, the audience plays a significant role in contributing to the efficacy of the half-empty animated character. Characters are often drawn and written as

compilations of conventionalised markers, merely implying details and nuance (thus, half-empty), which encourages the audience to project an affective connection and various social complexities onto the character. That is to say, many share a media ideology that, while the audience appreciates a performed character, the audience co-creates an animated character. Given these assumptions, if one analyses animation, one asks a different set of questions than one asks of performance. Because an animated character is a unified being created by many, one might ask: How are unity and multiplicity intertwined? This is the question that *Her* leaves us with in thinking about that version of AI. What kind of labour is involved in giving the impression of unity? What is the difference or boundary between manipulation and free will—between acting because of the agency of another or many versus acting from one's own agency? I suggest that ethnographers keep an eye out for the ways in which labour may slip into new forms of heteromation in the coming years, ones which can be best explained by thinking with animation and not performance when analysing interactions and texts.

BULLSHIT GENRES AND THE FUTURE OF WORK

So much of the anxiety around what ChatGPT might do to jobs revolves around how adept ChatGPT is at creating the standardised genres that fill so many jobs these days. In encountering these worries, I am continually reminded of Louis Hyman's quip about the threat of increasingly automated jobs. We have spent so much energy making jobs as dull and as empty as possible, segmenting and conceptualising tasks so that machines could potentially do them. Why then are we shocked that people

have finally managed to develop machines that can, in fact, do this work, and why are we so deeply dismayed when this happens (Hyman 2018)? To add to Hyman's insight, we have spent decades turning jobs into roles for producing simplistic standardised genres, exactly those genres that lead people to proclaim with despair that they are working bullshit jobs, jobs they only secured by producing even more bullshit genres (see Gershon 2017, 2022; Graeber 2018).

Media historians have long known that whenever new technology is introduced, new job roles spring up—telephones created a need for telephone operators, typewriters created a need for typists, Google search engines created Google optimisers. Each time a technology changes how work is done, it changes the division of labour between human and machine in work contexts. Heteromation shifts to how work is done could enable new ways in which humans can express creativity or experience distinctive interactions with their humanness. Being able to tell which moments demand a difference between human-generated and AI-generated products could become a new and desired component of work. But, so is prompt engineering—as Kevin Roose and Casey Newton of the *Hard Fork* podcast suggest, soon there will be a need for experts skilled at refining large language models (LLMs) with specific prompts and recommended outputs, as well as experts talented at developing sophisticated ways of crafting prompts to achieve productive results from these LLMs. This is only the first stage in the ways in which evaluation and labour will change in response to how AI can potentially change the nature of bullshit jobs and bullshit genres. After all, bullshit genres are often filled with standardisation with just a touch of distinctiveness—such as resumes that need to adhere to a template, yet written in such a way that the distinctiveness of the individual

is shown in just the right way. These genres may soon stop being desirable gate-keeping tools. When a wider range of standardisation becomes something easily achieved, the non-standard may become valued in new ways.

This does not mean that privileging skills in producing the non-standard will lead to good jobs. History has proven time and time again that the jobs created by new possibilities for heteromation are not necessarily better jobs. Being a telephone operator could be as stultifying as working as a waitress.¹⁰ ChatGPT, however, reveals fairly effectively that producing standardised genres with a twist of distinctiveness is, in fact, something that can be easily automated. This revelation might encourage workplaces to find new ways to take advantage of what is distinctive about being human, another transformation that anthropologists of work might want to anticipate.

GENRE AND STYLE

There is another dominant way that ChatGPT's genre play has captured the public's imagination—by allowing people to juxtapose genre and style. Euro-Americans all too frequently ask this of AI, as Eitan Wilf (in press) examines in his study of the ways that computerised algorithms provide poets and jazz players new avenues for creative expression. One of his case studies involves computer scientists in a lab in Austin, Texas, with the opportunity to imagine anew what constitutes improvisation and style in jazz and other musical genres. These computer scientists are especially pleased with themselves for having created a humanoid robot marimba player that can play percentage-based combinations of famous jazz players. Yet, it changes how one can mobilise style

when computer scientists are able to turn jazz musicians' styles into measurable units that can then be combined proportionally (that is, 20% Miles Davis, 20% Charlie Parker).

In his book, Wilf addresses technologies that engage with style. As he puts it, he studies '[t]echnologies that are meant to mediate styles [and thus] are designed, first, to synthesize or abstract a style as a generative principle from a corpus of fixed texts, and/or, second, to enact or realize this generative principle by producing new fixed texts in this style' (Wilf in press: 8). His interest lies in how creators of these technologies hope to offer new and satisfying avenues for engaging with improvisational genres, such as jazz or poetry. In doing so, they shift the relationships between style, authorship, and the delight of the unexpected. Legible experimentation or unpredictability comes from how machine intelligence combines styles that are meant to be rooted in a unique human talent, but are so distinctive that they are replicable and available for juxtaposition. Here, style and genre mutually construct templates that enable legibility. At the same time, people engaged in these projects are re-thinking how these templates function to render creativity and originality recognisable and enjoyable. The way in which AI engages with genres shifts how the familiar interplay between structured communication and distinctive communication is formulated and experienced. Along with Eitan Wilf, I suggest that ChatGPT and similar forms of machine intelligence will draw attention to how templates structure our communication in new, contextually dependent ways. After all, templates, as any anthropologist might expect, do not offer the same kind of puzzle for every community of practice.

THE GENERIC IN THE TEMPLATE

I conclude my collection of practices to watch for by discussing *The Copy Generic* by Scott MacLochlainn (2023), which I believe offers some productive insights into what we might expect from contemporary forms of AI likely to unsettle common communicative repertoires. MacLochlainn is interested in the kind of work the generic is able to accomplish as a template and as a referent in contemporary capitalist conditions. I have argued that, as a genre machine, AI encourages us to ask what it means to produce genres in new ways. Until now, I have stressed the genre in the genre production process. MacLochlainn, however, suggests that scholars might also explore the production aspect with an eye toward the difficulties in crafting the generic. What might it mean to produce generic versions of a genre? MacLochlainn points out that this is, in fact, quite finicky work for humans with many missteps likely along the way. As he reveals about objects, and I would venture to say holds true for texts as well, when one makes a generic text, it must be generic in precisely the right way—the text must be carefully placed within a web of differentiation. ChatGPT appears to do this with speed and competence. It is, thus, likely that AI will, if it has not already, lead to widespread media ideologies that part of what makes us resolutely human in the face of ChatGPT and its ilk revolves around humans' ability to create genres that do not lend themselves easily to certain forms of standardisation.

One question people are already grappling with is understanding how ChatGPT will change practices around authorship.¹¹ People are concerned with far more than simply determining what kind of authorship practices should be interpreted as heteromated authorship. Rather, as MacLochlainn points out, because the

generic operates against a background in which authorship intricately overlaps with property relationships, it becomes a route for avoiding some of the quandaries that authorship creates—the generic offers non-authorship when needed. It also offers non-authorship when it is most distinctly undesirable, since people are now beginning to run into problems when they use AI in moments when authorship is in fact legally necessary. For instance, who signs a copyright agreement when Dall-e has produced an image for a publication? As a potential non-author, ChatGPT and its siblings will raise persistent questions for the next decade or so in each new context where the alignment between authorship and non-authorship is a complex social dilemma. New forms of non-authorship will spring up.

Scholars should keep in mind that each form of non-authorship is a solution to a social dilemma that exists only because authorship (and its implied contemporary property relations) is so much taken for granted as a touchstone in interactions. After decades of marketplaces filled with authored texts—that is, utterances linked through intellectual property chains to known producers or distributors—a text can only lose its author/producer through active disavowal by fashioning the generic (with many possible missteps following each choice after it is formulated). Prior to this intellectual property regime, texts could not be generic in the ways they are now. The generic, in this instance, offers at times a welcome opportunity for people not to be concerned about distinctiveness when circulating generic texts—here, think of the many instances in which we hear unauthored statements in service contexts, precisely the situations in which AI is already crafting utterances. In this case, a generic semiotic token or instance of an utterance is much closer to being a type rather

than an authored or propertied semiotic token. But here specificity and genericness quickly slip into relationships of fractal recursivity. Thus, the patterned ways of forming specificity and genericness can occur in similar ways at different levels of scale as texts circulate and are gathered together in genre repertoires for bounded stops in their circulation (see Gal and Irvine 2019).

In his book, MacLochlainn makes another point that I think serves as a useful caution to scholars about the ways in which academic analysts tend to think of the generic. MacLochlainn argues from his ethnography that the generic is *not* the unmarked. Here, I depend on MacLochlainn's ethnography since I do not yet have handy an AI-specific example. In his ethnography of how Christianity is experienced and practiced in a small town in the Philippines, he talks about how there is a wide assortment of Christian traditions available to people to choose from when they want to define themselves as Christian. One can always be Catholic, but there are also various forms of Protestants, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses available. Being Catholic in this town is the unmarked form of Christianity—whenever people talk in most contexts about being Christian, the default is to assume that they are talking about being Catholic. There is one space within this town in which this is not the case. There is a Christian school that was founded to be generically Christian—to serve all followers of Christ regardless of which church they in fact attend. Here, when one says one is Christian, it is a non-denominational Christianity that is referenced. Being generically Christian in the school was very much a conscious decision. His interlocutors know similar things about the social life of language and especially semiotic definitions of tokens that linguistic anthropologists know. MacLochlainn first noticed this because Jehovah's Witnesses began

to proselytise at this school, much to the dismay of everyone else who were part of the school—teachers, parents, and school administrators. They were dismayed because the Jehovah's Witnesses were refusing to be Christian in the most general of senses. This is a town that has created a form of peace by allowing for a generically Christian school in which a Christian pluralism dominates, which allows all Christians to be functionally interchangeable. If they are truly functionally interchangeable, it makes no logical sense to attempt to persuade someone to shift the kind of Christian they are. These Jehovah's Witnesses were then forced to deal with the consequences of irritating a community by violating this agreement to turn Christianity generic. This, however, was quite specific to the school context. When the Jehovah's Witnesses instead attempted to convert Catholics (the unmarked Christians) in other contexts, they did not experience the same type of resistance. Outside of the school, when proselytising, the Jehovah's Witnesses' task was to make explicit how one should not take Catholicism to be an unmarked form. When doing so, they were attempting an act of semiotic revelation that everyone in that village had previously witnessed many times before. After all, the village was filled with people who had been Catholic once or belonged to families that had previously been Catholic a generation or two ago. In all these ways, the generic is substantively different from the unmarked, both in how it is constituted and the effect it has on communicative interactions.

CONCLUSIONS: CONTENDING WITH THE NEWNESS OF CHATGPT AND ITS SIBLINGS

If scholars take ChatGPT to be a genre-reproducing and genre-tweaking machine, then

integrating ChatGPT and its siblings into people's daily lives will most likely encourage people to think in new ways about being human as well as about being social actants who communicate (see Suchman 2007). This is not to say that we will be human in new ways, but rather that how people think about communication will shift. Drawing upon my experience in studying earlier moments in which relatively transformative media were introduced into people's media ecologies, we should expect many of the social norms around AI to remain unsettled for some time to come. It takes time for social expectations to become widespread—standardisation along various axes is, after all, quite difficult to accomplish (Silverstein 2000), and ChatGPT unsettles how people engage with genres in large and small ways. What I found through my research on rapidly shifting media ecologies was that, when standardisation did begin to emerge, it occurred in ways I could not predict. When analysing how people used new media to end romantic relationships in 2007–2008, I thought that over time some widespread norms around Facebook use would gradually emerge. Instead, the media ecology shifted so much that announcing a breakup on Facebook had even altered the composition of the audience—from one's friends to one's extended family. Rather than establishing widespread norms around a particular medium, I found in a ten-year follow-up study that people were developing more shared agreements around the phatic aspects of a wide range of the media they used (see Gershon 2010; Gershon 2020). Even when standardisation begins to emerge, it can occur around unanticipated moments in the communicative interaction. How and when standardisation around ChatGPT occurs in different communities of practice will very much remain an open question worthy of ethnographic attention for some time to come.

People now exist in a social world with a new actant, and, as a result, how people fashion their webs of differentiation between the actants in their social world will change. No medium enters an empty stage—it is always entering a stage filled with older media and, thus, also filled with already established media ideologies and practices, a recognition inspired most directly by Kittler (1999) or Bolter and Grusin (1999), and indirectly by many other media theorists. Each time someone uses ChatGPT in 2023 as though it is a search engine, with the inevitable poor results, it provides an example of how previous experiences with media shape people's current expectations and practices. Thus, scholars should be cautious to always keep in mind the other experiences users may have had in their media ecology when looking at all of the media ideologies and social practices springing up around ChatGPT.

Bolter and Grusin argue that, with the introduction of each new medium, people are forced to re-think how every other medium they use shapes communication. These authors focus on the relationship between immediacy and hyper-reality, detailing how every newly introduced medium shifts how people interpret the production of immediacy by all other media. I suggest that instead of drawing attention to this continuum, ChatGPT encourages people to re-evaluate the continuum between the generic and the specific. For many, how one engages with the generic also offers a set of signals they see as indicative of interior selves. People may soon develop an attentiveness to new signals of interiority as they value different aspects of producing templates, sifting through what machines do well and what humans do well. Thus, people are likely to develop new semiotic ideologies about templates, forms, or how styles can co-mingle within genres and in relation to genres. Quite possibly, style will become a sign

of a coherent intellect in new ways. For some time now, a consistent and predictable style has become a hegemonic ideal, but now it is too easily replicated by machines. Perhaps in the near future, anyone who aims to be a resisting and distinctive human will reject having a recognisable style. More people will take Max Ernst as an aspiration instead of Rene Magritte. Perhaps even the logic of branding, a logic that relies on a coherence that AI can easily replicate, must shift. In general, we may think of new ways about what being human brings to a set of communicative interactions now that reproducing the generic and genres comes all too easily to machines.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Several people at the *Technolinguistics* Conference held in Siegen, Germany, in May 2023, will recognise traces of their conversations in my account. The following shared with me especially insightful points: Michael Castelle, Evan Donahue, Paul Kockelman, Alisa Maksimova, and Yarden Skop. I cannot thank Siri Lamoureux enough; this text would never exist if she had not invited me to speak, which was followed by a chat with Siri and Yarden about what type of keynote might be helpful. My thanks to Courtney Handman, Webb Keane, and Eitan Wilf for sending me advanced copies of their work, and to Melissa Cefkin and Sarah Green for tips for where to find insightful podcasts and news articles. Courtney Handman and Tuomas Tammisto offered extremely helpful editorial comments. My gratitude also extends to Heikki Wilenius, who suggested I publish

this piece and wisely encouraged directions for revision.

NOTES

- 1 Before I launch into my suggestions, let me elaborate a little on what I claim with my self-description. My own perspective has been strongly shaped by my analytical commitments to viewing media as a material communicative channel and my longstanding engagements with both linguistic anthropology and science studies. I often describe my work on how Americans use new media to break up with each other as an attempt to determine, through ethnographic analysis, which analytical concepts in the linguistic anthropologist's toolkit translate especially well to the study of how new media become parts of people's media ecologies, with all the many hiccups and pitfalls along the way in adopting any medium.
- 2 From James Smith's Facebook feed (<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=1029098351>): I saw the best monsters of my generation destroyed by the letter Z, Dragging themselves through the trash cans at dawn, Looking for a fix of those sweet, sweet ABCs.
- 3 When Judith Irvine introduced the notion of role fragments (what some call role fractions) in her article, she offered as an example the following possible role fractions for being a speaker: 'Consider, for instance, the person quoted against his or her will; the absent party named in an accusation (the 'Fingeree?'); the role in a stage play, as opposed to the actor playing it; 'the person a child is named after, who may (if living) then have certain specified responsibilities toward the child . . .'" (Irvine 1996: 134).
- 4 See Lehtiniemi and Ruckenstein (2022) for a discussion of a fascinating and short-lived venture that recruited prisoners in Finland to be AI fine-tuners as a cheap and stable supply of labour with a not-so-common language expertise for the task.
- 5 AI companies presume that humans are the ones training AI, and typically tend not to care who these humans are— AI training presumes the universal human, which I expect anthropologists to critique for many years to come. But this is not the only problem with AI training. Reporter

Josh Dzieza (2023) shows that AI trainers are enmeshed in labour markets that offer incentives for using AI to process the training information. The companies hire independent contractors with a pay schedule and deadline pressures that make it much more profitable and feasible for these contractors to turn to AI for results. What companies dread happening is having AI train other AI, and, yet, they are creating the labour conditions that make this practice very likely, and without the company's knowledge.

- 6 Admittedly, there are moments when people's communicative interaction also resembles an attempt to predict the next work in a sequence. In these moments, people's expectations of language use and ChatGPT's practices are more tightly aligned.
- 7 My thanks to Paul Kockelman for calling my attention to this point.
- 8 The dyadic nature of imagined AI interactions has long-standing roots. Think of how the Turing test itself is fundamentally dyadic. See Star (1989) for a discussion of how imagining the Durkheim test instead of the Turing test would encourage a community-of-practice approach to AI design and implementation.
- 9 Silvio acknowledges that people have long interacted with puppets and spirit mediums, such that animation is not new. She does, however, make a historical argument that we now live in an age of animation, and that animated figures' ubiquity has made it more urgent for scholars to address an animation logic as following in the wake of a performance logic.
- 10 See Crawford (2021) for a discussion of the bad jobs that already exist to support AI, along with her other trenchant critiques of AI.
- 11 See Petersen (2022) for a US-specific historical overview of transforming legal understandings of how embodied speech, machine speech, and authorship are intertwined.

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