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Language, politics, power: What is AI's mother tongue?

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AI was never raised with language. It is being fed tons of data, learning to be perfect and accurate, with no scope for silly spelling mistakes and no joy in learning new words. (Photo: Canva Pro)

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What is AI's mother tongue? Who taught it speech, cadence, metaphor, and syntax?

AI was never raised with language. It is being fed tons of data, learning to be perfect and accurate, with no scope for

silly spelling mistakes and no joy in learning new words. It has never had writer's block, delivering passages at lightning speed. Yet, it is increasingly finding itself in positions of authority, silently evaluating the process it has never lived. In a world where language is survival and identity, what tongue does AI truly speak?

I felt the weight of this question on an ordinary workday when a familiar green icon on my office laptop flickered, questioning my authorship and flagging some sentences as potentially AI-generated. I habitually keep it on to avoid typing errors. But that day, it became something else — a silent accuser. The assistive tool appeared to cast doubt, subtly implying that my carefully shaped and worded thoughts might not be entirely my own. But I had written every word. It was startling since these exact words have been part of my vocabulary since school. If “deliberation”, “interplay”, and “foster” make sentences sound too AI-like, should we replace them with “talk”, “mix”, and “help”? In fact, “foster” carries a tender sense of nurturing and quiet care that no synonym can fully capture. Therein lies the inimitable beauty of words — each holding a depth of meaning, emotion and memory.

What began as a technical glitch must compel us to face something more unsettling — an accusation that our voices, perhaps fluent and confident, are, somehow, not ours to use. It makes us ponder whether a more profound bias in our digital tools leads us to suspect those who manage to sound articulate. Who does society think deserves to sound like a wordsmith?

The AI vocabulary trap

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A growing list of words and phrases — such as “foster”, “deliberation”, “synergy”, “nuance”, “nestled”, “robust”, “interplay”, “pivotal”, “forging pathways” — are now considered “red flags” by AI detectors, not as plagiarism but as indicators of machine-like writing. Even the good ole’ em dash (—), once integral to literary writing, has not been spared, reducing it to a meme as the “ChatGPT hyphen” because of its overuse in AI-written content. This exposes an insidious vocabulary trap, where specific words and phrases are considered too coherent, too suspicious. It also involves control, deciding who is capable of sophistication and literary eloquence, and who is trusted when they write with power. With the advent of generative AI models, the line has blurred between assistance and authorship, polish and plagiarism, focusing on something structurally deeper: The automation of linguistic elitism. This thrives on the illusion

of a single, “correct” way to speak and write, mirroring the language of the privileged — urban, upper-caste, upper-class and Western-educated.

How AI detection works — and fails

Understanding how these detection systems work reveals the logic behind large language models (LLMs). Unlike human reading, AI detectors scan for statistical patterns, word probabilities, and tonal consistency. Two key metrics — perplexity and burstiness — assess predictability and sentence variance, with lower levels indicating robotic output. Ironically, a well-written, coherent human text can mistakenly trigger low perplexity scores, flagged as AI-generated. Phrases like ‘furthermore’ or ‘in the light of’ make writing sound stylised, resembling templates fed into LLMs for academic, corporate, or literary prose. This is worrying because the fluency valued in academia and professional writing is now viewed with suspicion, particularly for Global South scholars who have laboured to claim this space. It’s not just a tech issue — it’s a political one.

Democratising knowledge or language policing?

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An equally jarring fact is the policing of expression. In its dual role as mentor and gatekeeper, AI now wields the unsettling inheritance to decide whom to amplify or erase. And, therein lies the profound contradiction. The same system that promises to equip people with fluent language can double as a gatekeeper, tying good writing to invisible codes of class, caste, and privilege. In doing so, it erases the scope for language to become a currency of opportunity. It penalises the texture of difference — accents, idioms, and all the vibrant messiness of language. It also stifles creativity, forcing writers to self-censor for fear of triggering AI suspicion. It overlooks that accents, grammar, and vocabulary, shaped by access, are also learned and claimed through struggle, practice, and cultural exchange. Since LLMs mimic these patterns, we are now being accused of imitating the machine when it was the machine that learned from us. This tongue is undoubtedly ours. What colonial gatekeeping once enforced, faceless algorithms now replicate, flattening the multiplicity of Englishes into a narrow, sanctioned register. This shift hits marginalised voices hardest — first-generation learners, regional writers, and self-taught professionals who have painstakingly claimed fluency in so-called

“standard” English, for whom language is not just a tool of expression but also a site of struggle and aspiration.

To critique is not to reject technology — AI can be a valuable collaborator, enhancing learning and accessibility. But its impact depends on how it’s built, whose norms it follows, and who gets to shape its rules. To safeguard linguistic diversity and fairness, AI detection tools — and the editorial practices that rely on them — must be transparent and accountable to those they most affect. This means involving educators, writers, linguists, and communities from the margins in designing and calibrating these systems. Because the politics of language has always been the politics of power, which is being coded into algorithms. And we owe it to each other to make that power more justly shared.

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