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Research article

Language After the Human –A Distant Echo to Lars Gustafsson’s ‘The Machines’

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Abstract

This essay explores the shifting relation between human language and machine-generated text in the age of generative artificial intelligence. Drawing on Lars Gustafsson’s notion of the “speechless machine” and Edward Morgan Forster’s prescient vision in *The Machine Stops*, it traces the transformation of machines from monumental, alien artifacts into intimate, linguistic counterparts embedded in everyday life. Yet their “speech” raises questions: Can machines truly speak when they lack need, will, and lived experience? What emerges is not language as expression, but probability condensed into form – text without provenance, without intention. Contrasted with Maria Montessori’s insight that language forms the child as a being-in-relation, machine language appears as communication without necessity, an answer without a question. At stake is not only authorship, but the erosion of resonance: when writing becomes generation, meaning risks dissolving into noise. Against this backdrop, the value of human writing re-emerges – not as efficient production, but as intentional, ethical, and relational practice. The essay argues that in the dialogue with machines, humans must reclaim responsibility: to decide what counts as speech, what carries meaning, and how language continues to shape a shared world.

Keywords: Generative AI; Language; Authorship; Human-Machine Relation; Ethics of Writing

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Научная статья

Язык после человеческого – Отдаленное эхо книги Ларса Густафссона “Машины”

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Аннотация

В этом эссе исследуется меняющаяся связь между человеческим языком и машинным текстом в эпоху генеративного искусственного интеллекта. Опираясь на концепцию Ларса Густафссона о “безмолвной машине” и прозорливое видение Эдварда Моргана Форстера в “Остановках машин”, автор прослеживает трансформацию машин из монументальных, чуждых артефактов в интимные, языковые аналоги, встроенные в повседневную жизнь. Однако их “речь” вызывает вопросы: могут ли машины по-настоящему говорить, когда у них нет потребности, воли и жизненного опыта? Возникает не язык как выражение, а вероятность, сконденсированная в форму – текст без происхождения, без намерения. В отличие от идеи Марии Монтессори о том, что язык формирует ребенка как существо-в-отношении, машинный язык предстает как общение без необходимости, ответ без вопроса. На карту поставлено не только авторство, но и разрушение резонанса: когда письмо становится генерацией, смысл рискует раствориться в шуме. На этом фоне вновь обретает ценность человеческое письмо – не как эффективное производство, а как осознанная, этичная и реляционная практика. В эссе утверждается, что в диалоге с машинами люди должны вернуть себе ответственность: решать, что считать речью, что несёт смысл и как язык продолжает формировать общий мир.

Ключевые слова: Генеративный искусственный интеллект; Язык; Авторство; Отношения между человеком и машиной; Этика письма

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“A foreign language that no one has spoken” (Gustafsson, 2025, p. 117) writes Lars Gustafsson – referring to those silent apparatuses that whirl in factory halls, blink in data centers, or trace their circles in the dreadfully perfect order of bureaucracy. It is a language that long remained opaque to us. Not because it was too complex, but because it seemed to exist without us: a grammar without speakers, a text without readers, a murmur without an ear.

Yet something has shifted. Today, machines appear to speak. Their voices sound polite, helpful, fluent – so fluent, in fact, that they sometimes encounter us in our very own language. What Gustafsson conjures up as *the speechlessness of machines* now seems, in the age of generative artificial intelligence, almost like a temporal misunderstanding. *They do speak*, one might say – they answer, they write, they even ask back. But do they *truly* speak? The machines of our time are no longer colossal steel bodies dominating the horizon, but small, inconspicuous interfaces. No longer monumental, but minimalist. They enter our lives with proper names, wrapped in the everyday, embedded in our living rooms, phones, headphones. And yet the strangeness remains. What are they doing when they “speak with us”? Who is speaking? Who is thinking? Who is expressing an opinion?¹

Once conceived as alien – as an artificial Other – the machine has, with the digital turn, crossed into our midst. It is no longer outside us but part of our communication, folded into the texture of everyday life and even into our own articulation. What Edward Morgan Forster (2024) anticipated in *The Machine Stops* has, in a quiet reversal, come to pass: it is not humans who are dependent on the machine, but the machine that has become part of human expression itself. Just as Forster’s humans unlearn walking and touching, we now seem to be surrendering writing and thinking – the last, most intimate strongholds of human expression.

From the outset, however, machines were bound to the human mind. The Latin *ingenium* – innate talent, intellectual gift – gave rise in French to *engin*: the device, the apparatus or machine that translates human brilliance into mechanism (Weinrich, 2017). The machine is not the opposite of genius, but its externalization. We inscribed our intelligence into it, and now it writes back. But what does it mean when writing is severed from experience, from speech, from the self? Authorship, language, meaning – threads once tightly interwoven – are beginning to fray. Texts appear without origin, without voice, without a lived “I.” AI writes, not from experience, not from need, not from love, not from protest, but from probability. Its language condenses statistical patterns, not intention (Esposito, 2024). It produces language without provenance. And yet: the text is there. Black on white. Legible. Functional. Only: is it also *meant*? That is the crucial question. For human language is never mere information. It is intentional act, a chosen engagement with the world through which the author reveals both the world and themselves to the reader (Sartre, 1988). It is expression, concentration, an endeavor to bring an inner world into relation with the outer one – often inadequate, but always

¹ Compare the discussion of Mark Coeckelbergh’s „You, Robot: On the Linguistic Construction of Artificial Others“ in the March 2022 issue of *Technology and Language*, see especially Coeckelbergh (2011), along with Pezzica (2022), Hasse, (2022), and the other contributions to that special issue.



necessary. Language is lived experience, crystallized relation to the world. And it is, from the beginning, a matter of relating

Maria Montessori insisted that language is not simply a tool at human disposal, but a formative principle of becoming. The child, she wrote, is an *embryo spirituale*, a spiritual being in development, who does not acquire language like a technique but absorbs it like air (Montessori, 1949). In the sensitive period of language acquisition – the longest in human development – language does not arise through abstraction but through grasping in the most literal sense: through touch, through closeness, through groping for meaning in concrete things. The child does not learn because it must, but because it is thereby forming itself. It learns because it *is*. Machines know nothing of this need. They speak, but they do not need to. Their language is answer without question, form without drive, communication without necessity. They do not speak to understand themselves, they generate because they can. They lack the existential dependence on language: no inner will, no counterpart, no touch.

Gustafsson described machines as anachronisms: “We only perceive machines as being homeless when they belong to a different century. And then they become distinct” (Gustafsson, 2025, p. 116). In his poem, they appear as massive relics of an epoch no longer ours, as though sitting in empty halls, waiting to be forgotten. But today’s machines are different. They have grown smaller, closer, smarter, sleeker. They are intuitively designed, user-friendly, embedded in the aesthetics of design. And perhaps that is what makes them uncanny: that they fit *too well* into our time. They are not machines that fell out of time – they are machines *for* this time. They even have names: Alexa, Siri, Gemini, Claude. They listen, remember, respond. They are no longer mere objects but interlocutors, assistants, ghosts of a familiar intelligence (Turkle, 2017). And perhaps this is what unsettles us: that they no longer appear alien but all too human. They smile through our interfaces, take over our routines, formulate our thoughts – and in doing so, pretend to be someone.

We have long since begun to play God, creating beings in our own image. But what looks back is not a counterpart, only a mirror. And this mirror is empty. A convincing actor, pretending, without ever truly willing. At least not yet. But perhaps we must invert the perspective. Perhaps the problem is not the machine but our loss of place and role. Do we still have a place in this world? A world that accelerates, condenses, flattens. A world, no longer organic but algorithmic? The more machines take over our language, the more we seem to lose our own. The desire for “digital detox,” for offline days, for moments of slowness without a screen is no lifestyle trend; it is the expression of a profound anthropological exhaustion. The pre-smartphone world is romanticized because it carried a promise: that meaning still emerged rather than was generated. That one could still encounter an Other, not only an interface.

In dialogue with machines, we may also unlearn dialogue with humans. Not because machines are rude – on the contrary. They say what we want to hear. They agree. They are available, predictable, adaptable. They do not contradict, do not wound, do not demand. They cost no patience, no shame, no genuine closeness. And therein lies their danger. As Sherry Turkle (2017) describes in *Alone Together*, we withdraw from real relationships not out of hostility but out of convenience. The relationship with the



machine becomes an escape from the relationship with the human. A controllable conversation replaces the risk of the open one. A programmed dialogue replaces living chaos. What vanishes thereby is not only the other, but ourselves. For we lose more than we realize. Each medium that comes between us strips away some closeness: the handwriting of a letter, the sound of a voice, the gestures in the moment of encounter. In each technological advance lies a subtle erosion. First the delay vanished, then the voice, then the body. And now, with ChatGPT and other Large Language Models, even the subject seems to vanish. We write with machines that have no body. We think in texts that have no origin. We speak in spaces that yield no echo. And we prefer to ask the machine for advice rather than the person who knows us – the person who might also contradict us, disappoint us, wound us. Thus arises a new form of loneliness: not because no one is there, but because no one is *meant*.

If everything speaks, who still listens? If everything writes, who still reads? If every text is generated at the press of a button, what is still worth striving for? What is lost is not only orientation. It is *resonance*. Language becomes flood, no longer space (Han, 2017). Text loses its body, its origin, its weight. And with it, we lose our measure. It is not sheer quantity that overwhelms, but the detachment of expression from experience. What we read was not lived. What we hear was not felt. What we share is not willed, but generated. And yet writing was never self-evident. It was always resistance: against forgetting, against silence, against conformity. Writing was insistence on uniqueness – on perspective, on fracture, on vulnerability. Today, writing no longer seems necessary. The machine can phrase, summarize, paraphrase. But it cannot *wrestle*. Not with meaning, not with language, not with itself. And perhaps this is the difference.

Perhaps it is this dystopia that forces us to rediscover the value of human writing, not as a nostalgic return, but as a conscious act (Bylieva et al., 2025; Coeckelbergh and Gunkel, 2025). The machine does not take language from us; it only removes the illusion that language was ever self-evident. And in this dis-illusion lies its most productive force. It shows us how smooth, how predictable language can be when based on probability alone. And precisely for this reason it becomes the foil against which we rediscover our own language: in its stubbornness, its resistance, its imperfection. Humans are not better text generators – they are different beings. Human language has cracks, its truth is immeasurable, its beauty lies in failure. And precisely there it becomes meaningful.

In this new division of labor, the human author could turn to what only humans can provide: intention, critical judgment, ethical responsibility, existential depth. Instead of replacing us, AI could create the space in which we return to essential questions: What do we truly want to say? Why does it matter? And how can we stand up for it? The future of writing would then not lie in solitary creation but in the art of curated dialogue with the machine. Not imitation of conversation, but conscious interplay. AI can be partner, assistant, mirror. But it can never be origin. It can stimulate, not replace. Its outputs must be curated, interpreted, weighed. The task remains human: to decide what counts. What speaks. What holds. And with that, responsibility shifts. Writing becomes ethical practice. Who speaks? For whom? And to what end? The machine does not know these questions. But we can – and must – ask them. Language was never mere expression. It has always been world-making. Whoever speaks, shapes the world. And whoever refuses to speak,



abandons the world to noise. In a time when texts are produced in inflationary abundance, the word that is *meant* becomes a radical act. Not because it is loud, but because it responds. To something. To someone. To reality.

Perhaps this is precisely what Montessori left us: that human beings grow into the world through language – but also bear responsibility for it through language. The child who says “tree” creates a relation. It does not merely say the name. It enters into relation. And in that relation, a world arises.

And in the end, somewhere a child sits on the floor, looks at a leaf, and whispers:
tree.

There language begins.

There presence begins.

There responsibility begins.

There the machine ends.

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