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AI's Ready-Made Phrases

WOULD GEORGE ORWELL HAVE USED CHATPGPT?

Like most writers, I hate business jargon. However, I never considered it a serious problem until the arrival of generative artificial intelligence (AI) like OpenAI's ChatGPT.

In my other work as a ghostwriter, I've spent over 11 years interpreting business jargon. When a CEO preaches about "customer-centric experiences" or a "win-win partnership with a value-added reseller," I don't know what they mean. Sometimes, they don't know either. So, we have a conversation, and then I replace the client's jargon with clearer language.

Last year, though, that process went sideways on one occasion. I ghost wrote a piece about "business intelligence (BI)" software, doing my utmost to de-jargonize the topic. After I submitted the piece, my client responded with a draft of his own. "I've basically rewrote it to feel better with flow and narrative," he said.

...Ouch...

Only it turns out he didn't rewrite it. He fed our writing prompt to ChatGPT and copy-pasted the output into his draft. How did I know? The piece opened with "In today's data-driven world" and the last paragraph started with "In conclusion." Classic ChatGPT. I confirmed my suspicions with GPTZero, a web application that detects AI-generated text. In fairness to me, the AI draft didn't have "flow" or anything resembling a "narrative." It was unpublishable.

ChatGPT packed its piece with jargon, which it usually does when asked to write a business article. It repeated the word "leverage" seven times (business-speak for "use"), "real-time" (4x), "efficiency" (5x), "informed" (5x), and variations of "automate" (9x).

Normally, jargon shapes what people think in a contained community, like a company. Clearly, OpenAI has fed biz jargon to its GPT models, which increasingly have the power to influence what billions of people read, say, and think.

In 1946, the English novelist George Orwell wrote a cutting essay about this relationship between words and thoughts called "Politics and the English Language." He referred to jargon, buzzwords, and their ilk as "ready-made phrases."

Orwell warned that ready-made phrases "...will construct your sentences for you — even think your thoughts for you, to a certain extent — and at need they will perform the important service of partially concealing your meaning even from yourself."

Business jargon performs those functions today. For example, consultants invent jargon like "workforce optimization" because it sounds better than "underpaying part-time staff to show up on short notice to minimize your HR costs while maximizing uncertainty in their lives."

In other words, ChatGPT is learning to speak the language we use to conceal meaning from ourselves. However, we can't have a genuine conversation with ChatGPT about what it means by "workforce optimization" because it doesn't mean anything. It just arranges words in ways that sound smart (but are often quite dumb).

Orwell didn't fear that machines would think on our behalf. Rather, he wrote, "A speaker who uses that kind of phraseology has gone some distance toward turning himself into a machine."

Perhaps we are machine-like in business. Overwhelmingly, companies



publish things on the internet so that it will be amplified by social algorithms or found in Google search. Businesses thus write for machines first and people second.

As AI performs more of our communication, machines will inevitably write for other machines, as in the case of ChatGPT writing for my client. In that case, AI really will construct our sentences, think our thoughts, and conceal our meaning from ourselves.

Our best defense is dialogue. When AI gives you jargon, give it scrutiny. Run it by other human beings. AI doesn't know what it's talking about, and neither will we if we take its words for granted.

Perhaps ChatGPT is a reminder that we gain or lose our humanity in proportion to how much we think for ourselves. That reminder probably isn't part of OpenAI's business plan, but hey, it sounds like a "win-win" to me.

