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WEEKEND

// BY REETI MALHOTRA

Helen Keller, a disability rights activist, author and figure of popular culture fascination, writes about her life before language in her 1903 autobiography, "The Story of My Life."

Keller elucidates a dreary scene. She compares her experience to being trapped at sea in a dark, dense fog. Keller describes her fevered, anxious quest for something to happen, her "wordless cry" for light that might illuminate the inarticulable, murky melange of feeling contained within her. She had no way to recognize or express her feelings, no language by which she could comprehend her existence.

That agonizing restlessness was only assuaged by her teacher, Anne Mansfield Sullivan, who taught Keller her first word and filled her world with possibility.

I was introduced to this excerpt from Keller's wider narrative in my high school's "Theory of Knowledge" class, a mandatory International Baccalaureate course that compelled us to question how we know what we know and often left me stumbling out of a class with a pounding migraine. My teacher, Mr. Scheelbeek — who remains one of the most intelligent people I have had the privilege of learning from — pointed to the stark feat that Keller's unique circumstances had led her to accomplish: articulating life without language, acquiring language and extending her capacity to think by gaining language.

In other words, Keller's story pointed to a striking, yet hardly contemplated, revelation: without language, our lived experiences become inaccessible to even ourselves. Language therefore becomes more than a mere tool for expression and communication passively acquired from infancy and our first words. It is painstakingly honed over a lifetime and deeply intimate — the only means by which we can make sense of ourselves.

Of course, it is one thing to think in language — to articulate one's stream of consciousness. It is another thing entirely to put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard to translate thoughts into coherent prose on a page. The latter act is more vulnerable. Writing, after all, demands exposure: the looming presence of the potential, unseen reader, who can analyze and evaluate your language and, in turn, you.

It is maybe for this reason, amongst others, that artificial intelligence has become such an attractive tool to some. But if the relationship between language and lived experience is as true and profound as Keller illustrates it to be, what happens to our ability to understand ourselves when we outsource the very language we use to make that understanding possible?

I do not have a firm answer. So, I decided to experiment with the large language model ChatGPT. I asked the model:

> *RM: Given this opening, write the next paragraph that flows from my argument, emulating my voice.*
>
> *CHATGPT: I began to notice this tension in my own writing in ways that were, at first, almost imperceptible. What started as a harmless convenience—asking an AI to smooth an awkward sentence or suggest a more precise word—gradually reshaped how I approached the act of writing itself. I would paste in paragraphs I had laboured over, not to clarify what I meant, but to make them sound more polished, more assured, more like what I imagined "good writing" ought to be. And yet, when I read the revised version, I often felt a quiet dissonance. The sentences were undeniably better—cleaner, more fluid—but they no longer felt entirely mine. In relinquishing the struggle to find the right words, I had also, in some subtle way, relinquished the process by which those words had come to carry meaning for me at all.*

The model's response intrigued me because it wasn't entirely incorrect. I had used AI-powered assistants like Grammarly in the past, which parse through your writing, sometimes even prompting "rewrites" for clarity. Yet, syntactical structures that did not sound like me — including excessive negation and "purple prose," relying on flowery, figurative language that sounds good while bearing little substance — turned me away from the approach. The "dissonance" was thereby felt and true. But were the sentences "undeniably better?" I would argue no. AI cannot account for the stylistic and register choices made by a writer. It vies for algorithmic standardization that vanquishes individuality.

I similarly disagreed with the act of relinquishing. AI merely fit into the "struggle to find the right words," the means by which I had sought to temper my voice and make it clearer for my taciturn, overlooking reader. The words would only lose their meaning when they did not sound like me, and that would only happen if I were to turn to AI entirely. But I think this would be futile, destructive and destabilizing — not simply because I desire to be a journalist and author, but as a human being who wishes to maintain that capacity to articulate her own lived experiences without the assistance of a computer aggregating data that lacks the ability to know or inhabit her mind.

Contact **REETI MALHOTRA** *at reeti.malhotra@yale.edu.*