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THE DEN · ESSAY SERIES

I have started writing a little worse on purpose

An essay from The Den, the Fox Curriculum series on AI, writing, and learning.

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I doubt I am the only one, and I have spent a few weeks trying to work out whether what I am watching is a small stylistic tic or the front edge of something linguists will find obvious in thirty years, which is the kind of question I cannot leave alone. What I think is happening is this. We are not simply abandoning the words and punctuation that AI overuses. We are also adopting the ones it does not.

Two moves to one instinct.

The retreat is the easy half to see. I wrote a while back about deleting my own em dashes, not because they were wrong but because I did not want anyone assuming a robot had written my sentences, and the same quiet exit is now underway for "delve," for "moreover," for the tidy three-item list that used to be perfectly ordinary and now reads like a tell. None of those are errors. They are good English being dropped for social reasons, which is a thing that happens to languages, though usually across generations, not eighteen months.

The second half is the one I do not see anyone naming. The contraction is having a moment. So is the fragment. So is the typo somebody noticed and left in anyway, and the sentence that runs on too long because the writer got excited, and the aside that goes nowhere and stays in.

We are not only fleeing the machine's fingerprints. We are manufacturing our own.

The pressure all of this pushes against has been measured, which moves it out of vibes and into something I can hand a skeptic. Kobak and colleagues went through 15 million biomedical abstracts for Science Advances last year and found an abrupt spike in AI style words after 2022, estimating at least 13.5 percent of 2024 abstracts had passed through a language model, reaching 40 percent in some fields. Their comparison point is what stopped me. The effect on scientific vocabulary was larger than COVID's.

I am a historian before I am anything else, so this is the part I keep circling. The Gileadites in Judges 12 sorted Ephraimites out of a crowd by how they pronounced a single word, and armies and resistance movements have run some version of that play ever since, which suggests a language always ends up carrying a password whether or not anybody designed one.

Every shibboleth on record separated humans from other humans. This is the first one built to separate us from a machine.

I have no idea what that does to English over fifty years. I know it is not nothing. I know we are all doing it without having agreed to any of it.

So tell me what you have started avoiding. I am collecting them.

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