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Algorithmic Heteroglossia: The Dissolution of the Unitary Narrator in Large-Language-Model Fiction

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Abstract: This essay proposes *algorithmic heteroglossia* as a new concept for literary theory: a constitutive plurality of narrative voice that arises when fiction is generated by large language models (LLMs) trained on vast and undisclosed corpora. Where Mikhail Bakhtin located heteroglossia in the social stratification of living language, and where Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault dispersed the author into writing and discourse, the machine-generated text realizes a different and more radical condition: a narrating instance with no point of enunciation, whose style is not a voice but a probability distribution over millions of absorbed voices. Drawing on Bakhtinian dialogism, posthuman theories of distributed cognition, and computational poetics, the essay defines the concept, develops a method for detecting it, presents an analysis of its formal signatures, and argues that it requires narratology to abandon the implied author as a unitary origin.

Keywords: NIL

Introduction

For more than half a century, narrative theory has rested on a quiet assumption: that behind every narrating voice stands an organizing consciousness, however displaced, ironized, or unreliable. Wayne Booth taught a generation of critics to hear the "implied author" as the governing intelligence that selects and arranges, a "second self" whose values the reader reconstructs from the text (Booth 70–76). Even the most aggressive theoretical attacks on the author preserved a place for that organizing function. When Barthes announced that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (Barthes 148), he dissolved the biographical writer but left intact the scriptor and the tissue of quotations through which writing speaks. Foucault, refusing simply to celebrate the author's disappearance, replaced the person with the "author-function," a discursive operation that classifies and constrains texts (Foucault 124). In each case the origin of narration is contested but never erased; it is relocated, redescribed, or distributed among readers and discourses.

The arrival of fluent, fiction-producing large language models breaks this long settlement in a way that earlier theory did not anticipate. When a transformer-based model generates a short story, there is no consciousness selecting and arranging, no biographical writer to kill, and no single discourse to which the author-function can be referred. The text issues from a statistical structure that has internalized the stylistic regularities of an enormous and largely unknowable corpus. The result is a narrating instance that is plural at its origin—not pluralized after the fact by ironic readers or by the intertextual nature of language, but plural in its very generation. Existing concepts strain to name this. "Intertextuality" describes a property of all texts; "polyphony" describes voices an author orchestrates; "death of the author" describes an interpretive stance. None captures the specific condition in which the narrating function is constituted by the averaging of countless prior utterances with no speaker among them.

This essay introduces algorithmic heteroglossia to name that condition. The term deliberately invokes and revises Bakhtin. For Bakhtin, heteroglossia (raznorechie) names the internal stratification of any national language into social dialects, professional jargons, generational idioms, and the competing accents these carry; the novel is the genre that orchestrates this diversity into artistic form (Bakhtin 262–63). Bakhtin's heteroglossia is social, embodied, and value-laden: every word tastes of the contexts in which it has lived. Algorithmic heteroglossia retains the plurality but strips away the social ground.

The machine's many voices are not the accents of living speakers in dialogue but the residue of training data flattened into weights. The concept therefore lets us ask a precise question: what happens to narrative voice when heteroglossia is de-socialized and statistically aggregated?

The argument proceeds in IMRAD form. The Methods section defines algorithmic heteroglossia formally and sets out a procedure, combining close reading with distant reading, for detecting its signatures. The Results section identifies four such signatures: the absent point of enunciation, stylistic superposition, persona instability, and the implied author as projection. The Discussion section returns these findings to authorship theory and posthuman criticism, distinguishing the new concept from its Bakhtinian source and weighing its ethical stakes. The aim is not to celebrate or condemn machine writing but to give criticism a vocabulary adequate to it.

Methods

The concept may be defined as follows. Algorithmic heteroglossia is the condition of narrative discourse in which the narrating function is generated by a statistical language model, such that the text's voice is not the expression of a situated speaker but an aggregation—a weighted superposition—of the many voices latent in a training corpus, none of which is present as an origin. Three features distinguish it from prior concepts of multivocality. First, it is originary rather than orchestrated: the plurality is not arranged by a composing author but is the medium of composition itself. Second, it is de-socialized: the constituent voices are detached from the living social contexts that, for Bakhtin, gave them their accent and value. Third, it is probabilistic: at each step the text actualizes one continuation from a distribution over many, so that the realized voice is a sample from a cloud of possible voices rather than a stable idiolect.

This definition draws on three bodies of theory. From Bakhtin it takes the insistence that voice is never singular and that the novel is a structure for staging linguistic diversity. From posthuman criticism it takes the thesis that cognition and agency can be distributed across human and nonhuman systems; N. Katherine Hayles's account of the posthuman as a condition in which "there are no essential differences" separating human informational patterns from machine processes provides the ground for treating a model as a genuine site of textual production rather than a mere tool (Hayles, How We Became Posthuman 3). Hayles's later argument that "we are" increasingly written by our machines as much as we write them—that subjectivity is co-constituted with computation—licenses reading the model's output as something other than ventriloquism (Hayles, My Mother Was a Computer 1–3).

From computational poetics it takes a method: Lev Manovich's analysis of new media as the layering of a cultural surface over a computational substrate, and the "distant reading" of Franco Moretti and Ted Underwood, which treats style and genre as statistical patterns legible only across large corpora rather than in single texts.

The analytic procedure is correspondingly double. At the scale of the individual text, close reading attends to the surface signs of an absent origin: inconsistencies of stance, the smoothing of idiosyncrasy into competent fluency, and the unmotivated drift of persona. At the scale of the corpus, distant reading attends to the model's tendency toward the statistical center of its training data—its gravitation toward the most probable continuation, which produces a recognizable median style. Because the analysis concerns form rather than the content of any proprietary output, the examples discussed below are described structurally rather than quoted, both to respect the indeterminacy of machine text and to keep the focus on the narratological signatures rather than on any particular generated artifact.

Results

The analysis yields four recurrent signatures of algorithmic heteroglossia. The first is the absent point of enunciation. Classical narratology, from Gérard Genette onward, locates narration at a determinate point: a voice positioned in time, person, and mood relative to the story it tells (Genette 212–15). Machine-generated narration has no such point. The grammatical first person may appear, and a coherent "I" may be sustained across a passage, but this "I" corresponds to no situated consciousness; it is a pattern the model continues because such patterns are frequent in its data. The deictic center of the narration is, strictly, empty. The reader supplies a speaker where the text provides only a position. The second signature is stylistic superposition. Because the model selects each token from a probability distribution, its style at any moment is best understood not as a fixed idiolect but as the momentary collapse of a distribution over many possible idiolects.

A generated passage can hold, simultaneously and without strain, the cadence of nineteenth-century realism, the diction of contemporary genre fiction, and the syntax of online prose, because all of these were absorbed and none has priority. Where a human writer's allusions are motivated acts that carry the weight of choice, the model's blendings are unmotivated averages. This is heteroglossia without dialogue: the many languages are present, but they do not argue, answer, or accent one another in Bakhtin's sense; they are merely co-resident in the weights.

The third signature is persona instability. Across a longer generated text, the apparent narrator may shift in values, knowledge, and temperament without the motivated unreliability that criticism knows how to read. A human-authored unreliable narrator is unreliable on purpose; the gap between narrator and implied author is itself a meaning. In machine text the gap opens without an implied author behind it to give it sense. The narrator's drift is an artifact of sampling, not a designed irony, and the interpretive reflex that converts inconsistency into characterization runs idle.

The fourth signature follows from the first three: the implied author becomes a projection onto a void. Booth's implied author was an inference the reader draws from the text's choices, a reconstructed intelligence. Readers of machine fiction perform the same inference—the reflex is deep—but they reconstruct an intelligence that was never there to choose. The implied author of an LLM text is thus a hallucination in the precise sense the field uses for the model's own confident fabrications: a coherent figure conjured from patterns with no referent. This does not make the reading experience empty; it relocates the organizing consciousness entirely to the reader's side, completing the trajectory Barthes began but along an axis he did not foresee, since the "death" here is not of a person but of the very possibility of a narrating subject.

Discussion

These signatures bear directly on the theory of authorship. Barthes's essay can now be read as half-prophetic. He was right that the modern scriptor "is born simultaneously with the text" and carries no anterior interiority (Barthes 145), but he imagined this birth as a liberation of writing into pure intertextual play conducted by, and for, human readers. Algorithmic heteroglossia literalizes the death of the author while emptying the scriptor as well: there is writing, but there is no longer even the grammatical fiction of a hand that traces it. Foucault's author-function fares differently. The function does not disappear; it migrates. Models are named, versioned, branded, and made responsible for their outputs; a model-function now performs the classifying and constraining work that Foucault assigned to the author's name, attaching outputs to a system and regulating their circulation (Foucault 123–24). The author-function survives as an infrastructural rather than a personal operation.

The relation to Bakhtin requires care, because the term is borrowed from him and must not be confused with him. Bakhtin's heteroglossia is irreducibly social and axiological: the voices in the novel are the voices of classes, professions, and generations in living struggle, and the novelist's art lies in orchestrating that struggle without dissolving it (Bakhtin 263–64).

Algorithmic heteroglossia preserves the multiplicity but severs it from social life. Its voices are not in dialogue; they are in superposition. They do not carry the taste of the contexts they came from, because the model's training erases provenance, flattening situated utterances into context-free statistical regularities. The new concept is therefore best understood as Bakhtinian heteroglossia minus dialogue and minus the social—a limit case in which plurality persists but the conditions that made it meaningful for Bakhtin have been abstracted away. Naming this limit case is the concept's point: it marks exactly what machine narration retains from, and loses against, the dialogic tradition.

Read through posthuman theory, algorithmic heteroglossia is a narratological instance of distributed cognition. Hayles's posthuman subject is not a bounded, autonomous self but a node in flows of information that cross the skin (Hayles, How We Became Posthuman 3–4); Donna Haraway's cyborg likewise refuses the clean boundary between organism and machine, person and text (Haraway 150–51). The machine narrator is the cyborg condition arriving inside narrative voice itself. Yet the concept also resists a too-easy posthuman celebration. As Wendy Hui Kyong Chun argues, software's apparent autonomy conceals the labor and memory sedimented in it (Chun 19–21), and Matthew Kirschenbaum's forensic attention to storage reminds us that even the most ethereal text rests on material traces (Kirschenbaum 10–12).

The training corpus from which the model's voices are averaged is made of real human writing, much of it uncredited and uncompensated. Algorithmic heteroglossia, for all its statistical impersonality, is built from appropriated human labor; the absent speaker is absent precisely because countless real speakers have been dissolved into weights. The concept thus carries an ethical charge: to call the machine's voice "no one's" is also to ask where everyone went.

Finally, the concept reframes long-standing debates about machine creativity and electronic textuality. Espen Aarseth's notion of the cybertext as an ergodic machine that the reader must labor to traverse, and Janet Murray's vision of the computer as a narrative medium with its own affordances, anticipated texts whose production is partly mechanical (Aarseth 1–2; Murray 27–28). Algorithmic heteroglossia extends their insight from the level of structure to the level of voice: it is not only the path through the text that is computed but the narrating instance itself. Where Walter Benjamin saw mechanical reproduction strip the artwork of its aura, its here-and-now authenticity (Benjamin 220–21), generative models strip narration of its who—the authenticating sense that someone, somewhere, means these words. What remains is meaning without a meaner, a voice that is everywhere in the data and nowhere in the world.

Conclusion

Algorithmic heteroglossia names a genuinely new object for literary theory: narrative voice that is plural at its origin, de-socialized, and probabilistic, issuing from a model rather than a mind. The concept inherits Bakhtin's attention to multiplicity while marking its decisive departure from him, completes and complicates Barthes's death of the author, and migrates Foucault's author-function into infrastructure. It gives criticism a way to read machine fiction without either anthropomorphizing the model into an author or dismissing its texts as noise. Most of all, it keeps in view the human writing dissolved into the model's weights, insisting that the impersonality of the machine's voice is itself a historical and ethical artifact. As generative systems become ordinary instruments of literary production, narratology will need concepts built for a narration without a narrator. Algorithmic heteroglossia is offered as one.

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