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THE SILENT PROVINCE

## Abstract

Digitalisation, datafication and networking have profoundly changed the spaces of human drama on Earth, and the linguistic space is no exception. ChatGPT speaks in the language of the average speaker, referred to by Heidegger as “das Man”, incapable of innovation or discovery, in contrast to the multitude of unspoken sentences waiting to be uttered, with the excitement of discovery, novelty, and adventure. Yet, behind the unspoken but pronounceable utterances, there is a silent realm whose events are the unspeakable.

**Keywords:** space, generative language models, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, silence, linguistic innovation, silent domain

## Introduction

John Maynard Smith and Eörs Szathmáry correctly state, that: “It is impossible to imagine our society without language” (Smith–Szathmáry 1999: 149). Moreover, we should add that imagining human beings without language is impossible. Language elevates man from the constraints of the eternal “here and now”, which rules in the animal kingdom. Deprived by the fixed environment (Umwelt) set by genes, human beings, by the power of language, can create their open environment (Welt) where past, present, future, and here and there exist. Reality by linguistic means becomes constructed and shared. Heidegger realised this, stating that “language is the house of being. In its home Man dwells” (Heidegger 1978: 217).

Smith and Szathmáry treat language as the last significant inheritance transition system evolving into one with potentially unlimited heredity. In

their somewhat limited approach, the authors fail to understand that language is more than a means of transmitting information. Nevertheless, they are right to emphasise two significant changes in how data has been transmitted since the emergence of language in human life. The first significant change was the invention of writing, which made the appearance of large-scale civilisations possible. The authors wrote in 1999, that the second change, “through which we are living today, is the use of electronic means for storing and transmitting information.” They were right, assuming that the effects of this change “will be as profound as were those after the origin of the genetic code, or of language, but we are not rash enough to predict what they will be (Smith–Szathmáry 1999: 179).

The changes brought about by digitisation, datafication, and networking reaching all corners of the world have fulfilled Smith and Szathmáry’s prophecy. Digital transformation has radically changed almost every aspect of people’s lives. The latest wave of change reached the language itself.

On November 30, 2022, OpenAI launched a chatbot using statistical linguistic patterns to extrapolate and generate new texts prompted by user requests. By January 2023, the magic device had gained over 100 million users, each contributing to developing software constantly enriched by each new prompt.

Generative language models, which are constantly being expanded and improved by users, are based on sentences previously written and spoken by the users of a given language, which Chomsky identifies as performance for individual language users, as distinct from competence, which is the condition for the creation of new sentences (Chomsky 1957). Generative language models are based on the collective performative performance of the users of a given language but lack the constant readiness to innovate, surprise, and create, which is characteristic of competence.

The creator and beneficiary of the collective linguistic performance embodied in generative language models is the faceless collective being that Heidegger calls *das Man* “who is not this one, not that one, not oneself, not some people and not the sum of them all. The ‘who’ is the neuter, the ‘they’”. In contrast, the “real others, as distinguishable and explicit, vanish more and more. In this inconspicuousness and ascertainability, the real dictatorship of the ‘they’ is unfolded. We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *they* take pleasure; we read, see, and judge literature and art as they see and judge. Likewise, we shrink back from the ‘great mass’ as they shrink back, we find ‘shocking’ what they find shocking” (Heidegger 1962: 164).

Being familiar and accessible to everyone, the sentences of ChatGPT produced by the prompts never get to the heart of the matter; the sentences are

completely insensitive to genuineness. The language of ChatGPT never goes beyond the averageness “with which it prescribes what can and may be ventured, it keeps watch over everything exceptional and thrusts itself into the fore. Every kind of priority gets noiselessly suppressed” (Heidegger 1962: 165).

The language of ChatGP, undoubtedly useful in everyday routine cognitive operations, is counterposed to a living language, which selects from an inexhaustible wealth of competence, and constantly expands Man’s scope for adventure in search of sentences never uttered before (Hankiss 2014).

Wittgenstein famously said, “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (Wittgenstein 1921: 5). In the context of the silence required by Wittgenstein, Géza Balázs raises the point that in the silent domain, speakers must also struggle with the challenges of sentences not yet uttered, but which can be uttered (Balázs 2020).

The silent domain can be divided into two halves. In one-half of the domain are the utterable sentences, which, sooner or later, when uttered, get entered into the database of generative language models. In the other, more exciting half of the domain, there are the unutterable contents, which are impossible to force into the language machinery. At the same time, their existence is implicitly indicated by linguistic manifestations whose code needs to be deciphered.

Nietzsche would claim that the house of existence has two inhabitants, one being Apollo and the other Dionysus. The house of existence consists not only of the living quarters inhabited by the god Apollo, which can be imagined and represented by language. In the house of existence are the silent quarters of Dionysus outside of language, where individuals and communities have their secrets, sins, and fears.

The appropriate procedure for addressing the contents of the mind, which are banished to the depths of the individual consciousness and cannot be expressed in sentences, is psychoanalysis and its predecessor, confession. The unspeakable contents locked up in the unconscious of communities can break out of the silent realm through the mediation of myths and rituals. A unique example is the occasion of the meeting between Paul Celan and Martin Heidegger on 24 July 1967. Celan read his poetry in the main auditorium of the University of Freiburg, where Martin Heidegger, who was rector of the university in 1933, was seated in the front row.

The poet and the philosopher mutually admired each other, but apparently could not cope with the fact that fate had led them on divergent paths in the past. Heidegger was an active supporter of Hitler’s National Socialist dictatorship, which persecuted Celan because of his Jewish origins. Heidegger had been writing his monumental philosophical works in peaceful conditions

in Freiburg. Meanwhile, the poet, who lived in Bukovina, was forced into a ghetto after the German troops had entered in 1941 and deported to a labour camp after the ghetto was eliminated. In the meantime, the parents of the poet were deported to an internment camp, where Celan's father died of typhus and his mother was shot. Celan remained imprisoned until February 1944.

At Heidegger's invitation the next day, Celan went up the mountain, where they talked for an hour and a half at Heidegger's farmhouse, between the hut and the well. There were no witnesses to the conversation, but according to the participants' retrospective accounts, it seems that their sentences were only meant to be spoken, and they talked about the landscape, the birds, the well, and the trees in the garden. However, they were silent about the past (Bíró 2000).

Following the visit, the poet wrote these words in the philosopher's guest book: "In the hut's book, glancing towards the well's star, in the hope a word to come". Later, the poet wrote a poem about the visit, a poem of poignant beauty. In the poem, the poet reiterated the hope that the thinker would utter the word he had been unable to utter on 25 July 1967 in Freiburg.

Celan had been waiting in vain. Not even three years after their meeting, he committed suicide by throwing himself into the Seine in Paris on 20 April 1970. He did not know that on 30 January 1968, 35 years to the day after Hitler came to power, Heidegger had written him an unsent letter, a letter in which he did not, however, write the words the poet had been waiting for. The philosopher remained a prisoner of the silent province.

Celan's poem *Todtnauberg* in German and in English

Arnika, Augentrost, der  
Trunk aus dem Brunnen mit dem  
Sternwürfel drauf,

in der  
Hütte,

die in das Buch  
– wessen Namen nahm's auf  
vor dem meinen? –  
die in dies Buch  
geschriebene Zeile von  
einer Hoffnung, heute,  
auf eines Denkenden  
kommendes  
Wort  
im Herzen,

Arnica, eyebright, the  
draft from the well with the  
star-die on top,

in the  
Hütte,

written in the book  
– whose name did it record  
before mine – ?  
in this book  
the line about  
a hope, today,  
for a thinker's  
word  
to come,  
in the heart,

Waldwasen, uneingebnet, Orchis und Orchis, einzeln,	forest sward, unlevelled, orchis and orchis, singly,
Krudes, später, im Fahren deutlich,	crudeness, later, while driving, clearly,
der uns fährt, der Mensch, der's mit anhört,	he who drives us, the man, he who also hears it,
die halb- beschrifteten Knüppel- pfade im Hochmoor,	the half- trodden log- trails on the highmoor,
Feuchtes, viel.	humidity, much.

[URL1]

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[URL1] <https://writing.upenn.edu/epc/authors/joris/todtนาuberg.html>

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