The Jargonaut's Legacy: A Personal Journey Through Automated Language and the Ethics of GenAI

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Abstract

This essay recounts a personal narrative of early language automation – the creation of the "Jargonaut," a program developed in the 1970s to generate jargon-laden phrases – and uses it as a springboard to reflect on the evolving role of generative AI in intellectual work. The author, a longtime academic and programmer, shares a pragmatic, ethical, and pedagogical approach to using GenAI tools, emphasizing curiosity, clarity of intention, and human agency. This essay challenges binary moral framings of GenAI use and advocates for a mindful integration of such tools into the scholarly process.

1 The Invention of the Jargonaut

Long before the term "generative AI" entered public discourse, I had my own playful encounter with automated language. In the 1970s, under the wry tutelage of a mentor I now refer to as "The Great Professor," I was introduced to a simple exercise: take three sets of phrases, choose one at random from each set, and concatenate them into a sentence. The result? Elegant, abstract-sounding nonsense – the kind often paraded in academic or managerial settings. This technique mirrored Ackoff (1999)'s critique of the MBA degree, which he famously claimed equips individuals with the confidence to speak authoritatively on subjects they do not understand. Variants of this formulaic generation have long existed – even codified in educational satire such as the "Academic Jargon Generator" (Grey, 2004).

As a natural reflex, I turned it into code. A short program, fewer than 30 lines, running on the machines of the time. Years later, I resurrected this code as a mobile app disguised as a clock. A gentle tap on the screen would produce a fresh sentence of synthetic profundity. I named it, appropriately, the *Jargonaut*.

During my tenure as dean, this little linguistic contraption proved oddly useful. When confronted with ambiguous questions in senate meetings, I would discreetly invoke the Jargonaut. The result – a cascade of polished but perplexing verbiage – often produced the desired effect: a pause, a nod, a quiet deference. After a few such performances, no further clarification was requested. The fear of appearing uninformed outweighed the pursuit of understanding. The Jargonaut, in its own way, had become a rhetorical shield.

2 From Automation to Generation

Let us ask the question plainly: Was this automation? Certainly.
Was it generation? Yes.
Was it GenAI? I would argue – yes, in embryonic form.

Though crude by contemporary standards, the Jargonaut exhibits key features of generative systems: randomization within structured constraints, the use of templates, and the production of novel, if not meaningful, outputs. These characteristics echo early experiments in computational language modeling – from Markov chains applied to text sequences (Markov, 1913) to the conversational simulation of ELIZA (Weizenbaum, 1966), all building upon the formal structures of generative grammar proposed by Chomsky (Chomsky, 1957), and even affective modeling in Colby's simulated paranoid patient (Colby et al., 1971).

Though lacking in sophistication, it compensated with intentional design – it was not meant to replace thought, but to satirize its pretense. The ambition behind such tools parallels the early reflections of von Neumann on computation and cognition (von Neumann, 1958).

Today's GenAI systems operate on a vastly more complex scale. They parse, predict, and produce language that can rival human expression. But the temptation to equate capability with culpability must be resisted. Tools do not sin. People do – or rather, people err, when they disengage intellectually.

3 The Ethics of Engagement

It is neither novel nor controversial to assert that using GenAI to compose and submit work verbatim, with no intellectual engagement, is both unethical and unproductive. But it is equally unhelpful to suggest that all uses of GenAI are suspect. The line between aid and abdication is not defined by the tool, but by the user's intention and integrity – a point echoed in Floridi's insistence that artificial intelligence must not be mistaken for artificial wisdom (Floridi, 2022).

My own methodology is shaped by decades of writing, editing, and teaching:

1. Use GenAI to brainstorm and pose preliminary questions.

2. Ask GenAI to surface obscure references and relevant sources.
3. Provide a conceptual scaffold – a framework and sequence of ideas.
4. Draft original material, often longer and denser than the final result.
5. Use GenAI as a faithful speechwriter: follow instructions, no improvisation.
6. Revise thoroughly, then again after sleep has reset perspective.

This process is not a shortcut. It is a partnership – one in which human authorship is never relinquished, only enhanced.

4 Conclusion: Of Jargon, Judgment, and Joy

In retrospect, the Jargonaut was more than a parlor trick. It anticipated, in miniature, our contemporary dilemmas: the allure of fluency without meaning, the performative dimension of expertise, and the uneasy boundary between automation and authorship.

The difference lies not in the tool, but in the *telos*. If we use GenAI to avoid thinking, we do ourselves a disservice. But if we use it to expand the perimeter of our thought – to challenge, extend, and sharpen – we step toward what Dennett called the "intentional stance" (Dennett, 1991), not because the machine thinks, but because we still do. The illusion of understanding, as Searle warned in the Chinese Room analogy, remains ours to dismantle (Searle, 1997).

We have merely updated the ancient art of rhetoric with modern instruments – recursive, self-referential, and – as Hofstadter might say – eternally entangled with ourselves (Hofstadter, 1979).

Though not the focus here, one must acknowledge the broader context: GenAI exists within ecosystems of data extraction and algorithmic power (Zuboff, 2015).

To those who remain wary, I offer this parallel: I feel no more guilt using GenAI than I do using a spell checker. Both correct. Neither create. And neither absolves me from the responsibility to mean what I say.

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