REVIEW

PHILIP SEARGEANT, THE FUTURE OF LANGUAGE: HOW TECHNOLOGY, POLITICS AND UTOPIANISM ARE TRANSFORMING THE WAY WE COMMUNICATE, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024, 256 pp.

The Future of Language: How Technology, Politics and Utopianism Are Transforming the Way We Communicate is an essayistic, reader-friendly introduction to what can be termed academic linguistic futurology. Throughout ten chapters, the author selectively chooses historical cases, current controversies, and both theoretical and empirical studies to explore four possible scenarios for linguistic futures. Two of them are conjured up in positive terms, and two reframed in dystopian contexts. These include:

1. Creating a universal language, for example a code excerpted from brain waves, that bypasses the Babel mix-up and optimizes communication and social harmony.

2. Coming up with AI and biotechnological solutions that allow efficient communication with different beings and streamline the messiness of languages developed by *Homo Sapiens*.

3. Allowing technologies to unseat language and social skills, discontinue culture and history, reduce humans to brainless animals, for whom language is no longer necessary.

4. Advancing language technologies that evolve into perfect tools of surveillance and manipulation.

The book meanders between past, present and future of language use, dwelling on landmark examples of "disruptive" technologies that illustrate larger technological trajectories that changed communication, from print to keyboard to machine translation apps. Its style is approachable and the ref-

erences to extant literature do not put the strain on the readers' processing capacity. Bridging scholarly and popular writing is always a challenge, and one that Seargeant, the author of another book *The Art of Political Story-telling* (Seargeant, 2021), is well aware of. His bringing well-known and broadly studied literary, political and corporate cases as starting points for futuristic considerations helps to follow an intricate argument, which is not devoid of paradoxes.

1. Why engage in linguistic futurology?

In the introductory part contained in the first two chapters, Seargeant sets the scene noting that language futurology seems to enjoy increasing interest, especially in the world of unprecedented technological development that generates anxiety and uncertainty. This is related to dashed hopes that new communication technologies are designed to empower and democratize public spheres and embrace humanity. Yet, research is already available to prove that these very technologies are "stirring up an epidemic of mental health problems, and allowing for the wholesale manipulation of electorates" diminishing liberal democracy and increasing vulnerability while enriching mostly huge global corporations (p. 2). Seargeant also notes that, paradoxically, digital technologies were to spread openness and understanding through a variety of perspectives and reasoned argumentation, while in fact they reduced deliberation to "a seemingly endless round of antagonism and outrage, of hyperbole and flat-out lying" (p. 3). These are strong words, which seem to echo other moral panics and conspiracy theories, including the ones that our language is being corrupted or hijacked by politicians and media elites, that AI is going to outsmart humans, or that corporations devising technological innovations are doing that deliberately to make people easier to control, lazier and dumber.

Indeed, according to the author, the aim of most technological innovations is to make life more convenient for people: "to simplify, streamline or otherwise support the everyday tasks" that we have to grapple with (p. 4). With features such as autocorrect and predictive texting, for example, technology is relieving us of the burden of having to remember the right spelling or collocation. Generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, go one step further to compose complete texts for us based on smart prompts. However, the un-

bridled welcoming of these technologies sparks uncritical techno-utopianism with its principle that the world transformed by technological innovation is inherently good.

Here (and in the reminder of the introductory chapters) Seargeant places the language component of communication technologies at the center, asserting its role as the "equipment" we should use to exercise our cognitive and conceptual abilities and to make sense of the physical environment in order to create ever complex societies. He also exemplifies the "failures" to predict the much larger consequences that new communication technologies would have on societies: be that the proliferation of "fake news", the rise of "surveillance capitalism", the disintegration of democratic public discourse and the platformization of the economy.

With a rhetorical flair, he takes a step back to the end of the middle ages to make parallels with the "disruptive inventions," such as the invention of print, which became a driver of social and linguistic change, comparing historical and recent changes to how we communicate with the digital revolution. In our times, cyberattacks rival the way traditional gunpowder technologies changed warfare, GPS-related technology has superseded the compass for navigation, while smartphone-based social media has disrupted democratic institutions (p. 18). This illustrates the argument that "disruptive technologies" first change the way we communicate and then the social structures we live in, but rarely in a predictable manner.

When asked if language and communication can be put to the task of addressing social ills rather than exacerbating them, Seargeant takes a look at science fiction writing and scholarship to compare how the two see language evolution. With a "hypothetical" task of devising the way to inform future generations of radioactive waste sites, the author reviews some creative solutions offered by exceptional minds, imagining what language and communication would look like in thousands of years from now. He weaves into his narrative the issues of language extinction, language standardization, normative literacy practices, language policy and planning as well as language contact (including contact with aliens). To stir the imagination, he uses examples that range from the rise of English to a global lingua franca, to the Unicode Consortium which tries to preserve all languages past and present. He tells a story of a Future Library in Oslo that keeps manuscripts written but to be published only one hundred years from now, and of a Japanese

temple that is rebuilt every 20 years to keep the knowledge of the building technology preserved. The conclusion is inescapable – change is the only constant in linguistics.

2. Theorizing language within and beyond humanity

In the third chapter, Seargeant moves from empirical sociolinguistics to theoretical – and imaginary – realms of linguistics. He points out how hard it is to theoretically define language (as opposed to knowing how to use it). The procedural knowledge of language breeds oblivion to the linguistic forms in the quest to retrieve meaning, and yet it is the form (that is never transparent) that activates the meaning. But language is functional, not only formal; It enables us to think, to communicate (or mask) our ideas, to express emotions and needs, to enact identity and engage in social bonding, to transfer culture and history, to find out about the others and understand the world – ultimately to reduce uncertainty and risk and to survive.

There are three distinct contingencies of language in its evolving uses: (1) human exceptionalism – language is what makes us human, so engineering the language is likely to change our humanity; (2) human civilization – language is responsible for civilization, so changing it will alter the course of civilizational progress, (3) politics – language is an instrument of control and coercion, so whoever controls communication technologies has immediate access to power. For Seargeant, people's lack of understanding of the larger ramifications of linguistic functions leads to prejudice and conflict. Hence, language should not be seen as a thing to possess or preserve, but as a set of competences to develop and refine.

In chapter four, Seargeant returns to his linguistic futurology, which deals with predictions and recommendations. After all, if we know what the language will be like, we will know what the society will be like, since our language is said to set the boundaries of our perception. For that matter, science fiction has creatively approached the motifs of language and communication technologies, including universal translation devices, as "thought experiments" that can be either aspirational (and lead to new inventions) or fear-infused (and lead to reactance and mistrust).

In this context it is illuminating to look at popular "imaginary languages", which often have their fitting mythologies, cultural formations and even rhetor-

ics. Inevitably, existing human languages are powerful prototypes for fictional languages, no matter if spoken by primitive or sophisticated communities. Be that Klingon or Dothraki, linguists who develop a fictional language, have to apply formal originality, but also functional understanding. For example, artificial languages must possess known alphabets and be able to be vocalized. Quite often, they are Europocentric versions of linguistic and cultural systems, perhaps giving us an insight into possible future Englishes.

On that note, political fiction championing anything from "Basic English" to "Newspeak", offers varieties of communication systems that have specific or exotic phonic, semantic, syntactic characteristics. Looking at classics, from Well's *The Time Machine* to Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it becomes apparent that the colonialist undertones in science fiction are represented by standard American English as an unmarked variety, and by Creole or Asian-English in negative character stereotyping. Language can also be tied to dystopian control and social decay, even regression (Hoban's *Riddley Walker*) or youth gang violence. There are multiple examples of pop artists from David Bowie and Mick Jagger, to Rihanna and Lady Gaga appropriating elements of dystopian worlds and their fictional languages in their shows.

Alternative sci-fi plotlines also mention universal translation devices, and usually gloss over the challenges in aligning the infinite variety of conceptual systems behind languages. The radical scenarios include eliminating language and picking brain waves and other signals in order to transpose them onto a common "linguacode" that all intelligent civilizations would be able to decipher and translate (with human assistance if necessary).

Further in chapter four, the considerations of "xenolinguistics" become a pretext to exploring intriguing hypothetical challenges to communicating with alien races with radically different communication systems and technologies. With their strange physical and conceptual affordances, alien races are likely to experience the reality differently, which is likely to be reflected in their means of communication (as in the plot of the film *Arrival* by the Canadian filmmaker Denis Villeneuve). According to the theory of linguistic relativity, the area of overlap between these systems may be slim, so much imagination will be needed in the case of alien contact. So "Galactic Basic English", which seems to be often imagined as a universal lingua franca, is an unlikely development.

Retreating to linguistic theory and current research, Seargeant deconstructs a tight relationship between thinking in a language and the dictionary work as a means to "control of thought". Language cannot be permanently fixed in dictionaries and grammar books and there are even satirical dictionaries and lexicons that expose the hidden assumptions behind apparently objective definitions. In the process of reverse engineering, dictionaries (artistic, academic) can be used to re-envision the world and refurbish its domains with new meanings. *The Urban Dictionary*, for example, is a diversified repository of infinite varieties of meaning-making. It radically departs from the notion of augmented writing platforms and contradicts AI as a standardization tool developed in the desire to enhance and automate writing.

3. From language to future communication technologies

Chapter five is devoted to the question if the logic or philosophy of language could provide us with a future universal language that would reflect reality in an unbiased way. The answer is "no", mainly because all languages carve up reality in different manners and the categories and notions that exist in one language may not be reflected in another. Even a Linnean way to catalogue elements of reality, such as in the case in botany and natural sciences, may not work, as whoever does the cataloguing is inherently biased and arbitrary. Formal philosophical languages of the past were to do away with the messiness of everyday language use, as well as its evolution, and to settle the symbolic nature of fundamentals of language as a human faculty. They fail to do so thus far.

In that very same chapter, Seargeant revisits the rise of global English (perhaps best explained in David Crystal's 2009 *The Future of Language*). English hegemony has been problematized by influential linguists, who declare that English is an international language now, so it is no longer in the custody of its native speakers. Still the "proper" versions of English, notably British and American, continue to dominate education and to privilege those in society who can speak them, even though mutual intelligibility between dozens of English accents and varieties is rarely a problem. Having a prestigious variety gives one more options and further perpetuates disadvantages. While inequality is a persistent social, political and economic issue, it is important that unequal access to language and linguistic resources does add

to it. One way to overcome this trend, according to Seargeant, is to provide quality language education; Another one is to lessen the grip of linguistic prejudice by allowing more diversity and recognition to various varieties, accents and dialects. While geopolitics might help to decenter British and American standards for the sake of other European, Asian or African ways of speaking, the challenge to English language hegemony may actually come from technology.

Chapter six on "Cyborg speech" traces the developments of brain-machine interfaces that allow to use brainwaves to control devices and to communicate ever faster and more precisely through technology-enhanced "telepathy". This may be of interest both to the military and the corporate world. This version of the future is illustrated by Seargeant with scenarios of wearable technologies translating words and images for seamless communications, or through voice operated systems, virtual reality goggles or "mind-typing" devices working in tandem with our brainwave activity.

To contextualize these technological advances, Seargeant gives the historical example of how keyword invention may have determined the way we communicate with letters and punctuation used as carriers of meaning, emotion and thought. As with any technological affordances, linguistics may offer incremental augmentations that become so fossilized that they no longer seem constructed and artificial and in fact become common-sensical, just like standardizing the spelling and style in autocorrect and autocomplete is taken for granted.

Borrowing from Margaret Boden's *AI: Its Nature and Future*, the author explains the advances of AI and its roadmap to sentiency, discussing the Turing test, which is commonly used to check the level of human-ity of algorithmic conversational exchanges. The language models that are currently developed cannot make chatbots comprehend what they are writing, as they do not have a self-governing communicative intent, which is behind usual human interactions. But communication is sometimes wider than meaning and intent, and its relevance resides in the context of interaction and social values that shape it. While important breakthroughs are taking place in the areas of machine translation, technology-assisted telepathy, language in robotics and interaction with AI, creativity, emotion, humor, banter that are routinely embedded in human interaction are not yet fully grasped by language models.

According to Seargeant, all these technologies must be constantly assessed for possible risks and threats, primarily regarding privacy, bias, inequality, safety, security. Are they helping to develop better autonomous military hardware, better self-navigating vehicles, better fact checking services for fake or wrong information? There are solutions to be enforced in the future: data protection and encryption to ensure privacy, language inequality elimination through plug-ins for various accents, retraining language models to represent more varieties and speech patterns. However, better language technologies do not help to eliminate discrimination and exploitation, for example at international call centers discussed as an example in the book.

While we badly need customizable universal designs for communications to be tailored to individual needs, better AI technology should not undercut the demands for quality education and more inclusive mediaspheres. The new language technologies rely on the homogenization of data that is needed for algorithmic and technological solutions, which in the end rids us of variety and diversity inherent in our societies. The author highlights such controversies by referencing a score of whistleblower cases at top tech companies, who voiced concerns over the ways language models were trained with datasets that were either unrepresentative, racist or "stolen" from internet users. While the language for modeling is real and authentic, it is never neutral. Neither are the large language datasets ethically and ideologically transparent.

The author also wrestles with the pros and cons of machine translation, which, potentially can solve the Babel issue. However, since language is always tied to its cultural and social contexts, using algorithmic and statistical methods for translation and interpreting can cause us to lose nuances and peculiarities of specific meanings. Hopefully, enhanced translation technologies, embedded in well-designed online services and communication technologies, will be available not only to those who can afford them, and that all languages in the multilingual metaverse will be translatable (which is not the case for the time being). The utopian strand of language futurology, exemplified by individuals like Zamenhof (Esperanto as a panacea for meaning lost in translation) or Zuckerberg (metaverse preserving language diversity but equipped with instantaneous translation) carries many hopes, but is also emblematic of some potential losses: of authenticity, individuality, spontaneity, personal touch, local context, creativity, heritage and art.

Chapter seven, aptly titled "Is anybody out there?", explores yet another facet of language futurology, namely the imagination that goes into CETI (communication with extra-terrestrial intelligence) projects, given the enormous spatio-temporal challenges of reaching out beyond the galaxy. Music, iconicity, emojis may offer as shaky a ground for transfer of meaning as language, if the aliens have a completely different conceptual system and signaling technologies. What we deem to be "universal" for humans is likely not going to be so for a different intelligence with different optimization strategies for subsisting in a different linguistic or communicational environment.

4. Future language technologies, future social systems

The following chapters explore the darker, conspirational futures of communication technologies and focus on the diminishing quality of language use in society and politics. If language is what oils the machinery of community, then the loss of language sophistication, the tolerance for language decay, debasement and disregard for truth will ultimately bring communities down. With the roots of medieval trivia, the language grammar is considered as the basis for the art of speaking and writing correctly, and has been personified as a woman tending a garden. This anecdote opens Seargeant's considerations on language education and on standards of contemporary literacy. Starting with the claim that "language never deteriorates, it simply changes" (p. 152), the author inquiries into the question why many people believe otherwise, and… blame the internet. Ample research seems to trace the human adaptability and creativity, given the new text messaging channels, fora and chat rooms, with none of it testifying to a loss of communicational acuity. In fact, the English language seems to be able to grammatically embrace social progressivism with the evolving conventions for inclusive and equitable formulas. Some, however, seem to frown on language engineering, especially for political reasons and when married to post-truth power games.

Chapter nine with the ominous title "They who control the past, control the future" is a reminder of the fact that those who own the technologies that we routinely and unreflexively use to communicate are at all times collecting information about our preferences and behaviors. This enables them to predict, modify and manipulate that behavior in the future. The pertinent question is: how do we hold on to our freedom of speech in the highly constrained and

automated algorithmic metaverse. After all, apart from laws, market forces and social norms, there are technological architectures that ultimately "regulate" our expression whether we acknowledge it or not.

Through a somewhat philosophical reasoning, Seargeant observes how internet and media infrastructures are evolving to, for example, silence the minority, disadvantage the already disadvantaged and, for that matter, exclude those with no resources to access premium features, perhaps leading us to a future with a heavily censored mediascape. With unelected and non-transparent governance at corporate tech, the enormous capacity to control communications may end up escaping public scrutiny, avoiding legal regulation and subverting public good. With hypothetical and real examples, Seargeant explains how AI technologies may clash with the ideals of the freedom of expression, introducing their own determiners of what is harmful (or ironic) content. As a result, AI technology will contravene "prior restraint" and "equal access" provisions. Using AI to eliminate hate speech, abuse, exploitative sexually explicit content, terrorism may yield unwanted consequences in AI's banning certain words or blocking certain functionalities that we take for granted, or surveilling us to the point of making everyone potentially prosecutable.

On a more optimistic note, the author concludes that the art of subversion, social movements, freedom initiatives and human rights monitors are active in lobbying for better architectures and regulations and for making AI more attuned to social rather than corporate needs. There are responsible ways to "take back control" and "futureproof" the world, which are discussed in the final chapter, from limiting screen time to exercising critical thinking. The chapter lays out eight principles leading to mindsets that would help us avoid the dystopian scenarios outlined above and reminds us that language, in its infinite variety, is a precious and fragile human asset and an element of mankind's heritage. Hence, attention should be paid how we use it and how we want it to be used in the future.

For those interested in philosophy of language, implications of linguistic theory and current critical issues in applied linguistics and natural language processing, Seargeant's book is a perfect opportunity to consider in more depth a host of current controversies and ramifications of technological progress. It does not offer one recipe, but takes many angles in its presentation and argument; nevertheless, it is relatively heavily focused on points relevant to the English language and the Anglo-centric culture and history, with the

dystopian scenarios firmly rooted in the current plagues of the technologized western world.

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