

Guest blog post by Vyvan Evans (at Beyond Romance) 19 May 2023

Topic: Tell my readers about the genesis of your premise for *The Babel Apocalypse*. Where did the idea come from? How did you develop it?

The Babel Apocalypse imagines a future in which we stream language directly to neural implants in our heads. Today, we stream anything from movies, to books, to music, to our ‘smart’ devices, and consume that content. Smart devices use streaming signals—data encoded in IP data packets—encoded and distributed via wi-fi internet.

Given my background as a professor of linguistics, a “what if” question occurred to me: What if we also streamed language? And what would the consequences be for us as human beings, if we no longer had to learn it? What would we gain, and more importantly, what would we lose, if language became a commodity, controlled by big tech? Clearly, with recent developments in AI and Chatbots, this is no longer far-fetched.

Language streaming would work, in principle, in the same way as streaming wifi devices today. With a ‘language chip’ implanted in our brains, in the future we will be able to ‘stream’ language from internet-in-space on demand, 24/7.

Moreover, based on an individual’s level of subscription to a language streaming provider, they would be able to stream any language they chose, with any level of lexical complexity. This means that someone could, potentially, apply for a job in any country in the world, without needing to be concerned about knowing the local language. Rather, the individual would just draw upon the words and grammar they need, to function in the language, by syncing to a language database, stored on a server in space. And call it up, over the internet, in real time, as they think and talk. It means that everything someone needs to know, to be able to use a language, is streamed over the internet, rather than being stored in someone’s head. Language learning, thus, becomes obsolete.

Science fiction has a long and illustrious habit of predicting the future. In 1940, with his first in the Robot series of stories, Isaac Asimov predicted some of the ethical issues that would arise as artificial intelligence comes to have a more pervasive influence in our daily lives.

Today in the twentieth first century, we are on the brink of a Fourth Industrial Revolution, sometimes dubbed 4IR. This is where automation and connectivity, via the internet, will dramatically alter the way in which we interact with each other, as well as everything around us, in our increasingly joined-up technological environment. And I predict, in less

than one hundred years from now, this new technology will transform many aspects of our daily lives that we currently take for granted, including language itself.

Indeed, in 2015, many of the world's leading scientists, warned, in an Open Letter and accompanying report, against the new dangers of AI, as a consequence of 4IR. This Open Letter was issued in response to new breakthroughs in AI that, without adequate control, might pose short and long-term existential threats to humans.

But potential dangers come not just from the use of AI, in the sense of, for instance, The Terminator series of movies, in which AI seeks to wage war and destroy the human race. New implantable devices, that will enhance how we as humans can interact with our new tech-landscape, will also give rise to potential dangers. Language is, arguably, the single trait that is the hallmark of what it is to be human. And yet, in the near-future, language-chipped humans, or 'transhumans', will have enhanced abilities that bring new opportunities, as well as ethical challenges and even threats.

Of course, for a new ecosystem of implantable language chips to gain traction, as predicted in The Babel Apocalypse, big tech would need to lead with the initial investment, once the value of the product has been established. And there are significant initial costs, in terms of implanting the body-borne hardware.

The Babel Apocalypse imagines the process beginning with a public referendum, in California, after which all adults must undergo "chipping". And there would be a transitional generation, as minors also undergo language chipping at the age of eighteen, and newborns at birth, moving forward. And from there, the initial benefits of language streaming would appear to outweigh any ethical or civil liberty concerns.

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