

Defining Moments, Definitive Programs, and the Continued Erasure of Missing People

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Whenever I am asked, “where are we?” I am tempted to respond with a question—a linguistic strategy that is popularly considered to be a Ghanaian trait where Ghanaians have the tendency to answer questions with questions. The question I normally ask is this: who are “we”? For how can I tell you where we are, when I do not know who we are? In the context of this where-we-are article, I choose to think of “we” as those who find that a Ghanaian who teaches writing in the English language at a college in the United States of America is a representative of who they are. People like me are often thought of as “international” and found at the margins of our discipline despite the good intentions of those who manage that space. We are the “missing people” that the feminist continental philosopher Rosi Braidotti refers to. We are those whose epistemological and literacy practices are measured by western standards and not standards of our own. We are those defined rather than definers. So, now that we know who we are, we can talk about where we are/have been. In short, I believe that we are in a defining moment where definitive programs continue to define for us who we are and what we can be or ought to be.

When I say we are in a defining moment, I am claiming that the discourses around the proliferation and use of AI (Artificial Intelligence) technologies in writing are shaping, to some extent, how we define writing and who a writer is. As is exemplified by the numerous statements on AI writing tools that our discipline’s associations and gatekeepers have produced (see the position statements of AWAC and MLA-CCCC for examples), we are grappling with the possibility that writing is not a uniquely human activity. Now that these non-humans are generating strings of meaningful texts, do we need to re-think what it means to write? Has writing become an object-oriented activity and not a human-centered one? The AWAC statement is, for example, careful to label what ChatGPT does as text generating and not writing. While I am not sure that AI tools write, the suggestion that they are merely generating texts reminds me of how writing has been historically tied to colonial thoughts of what it means to be fully human (literate) in opposition to being less than human (illiterate), and how the literacy practices of my ancestors were not considered writing because they were not alphabetical in nature (Brokaw). These discourses, as J. W. Hammond contends, are programmed to define reality and they arise, partly, through our engagement with definitive programs. Definitive programs are “rhetorical technologies that define ‘slices’ of reality’ by assigning

values, characteristics, or meanings to them” (50). What they define, and how they define those values, characteristics, and meanings is something that we (in this case, the entire discipline) should pay attention to.

As someone who is historically defined and not a definer, my experience of AI writing tools was to wonder how these tools were actively defining me. In a sense, I was curious to find out what realities it promoted and how it was sponsoring certain values, characteristics, and meanings. So, I set one such AI, ChatGPT, a simple task. I asked it, “can I write an academic paper in Ghanaian English?”¹ The machine’s initial response brought me joy as it affirmed that Ghanaian English is “a valid form of English that can be used in academic writing.” It seemed that the machine was aware of my right to use my own language. However, this joy was short lived as the machine went on to explain that “In summary, while it is possible to write an academic paper in Ghanaian English, it is important to use standard English grammar.” In that single sentence, the machine went through a defining activity that established Ghanaian English as having a grammar that was non-standard and that its non-standard nature could adversely affect the ability of a wider audience to comprehend what was written. ChatGPT was echoing decades of imperialist framing that positioned English varieties of the Global South as being diametrically opposed to the English varieties of the North.

Rather than give up on ChatGPT at this point, I began to wonder how using Ghanaian English could significantly affect intelligibility to the point that it might be incomprehensible to an American or British audience. In my experience, my American audiences have not had significant challenges in understanding my Ghanaian English at conferences. So, I gave the machine the following prompt: Can you write your answer in Ghanaian English. The response that I received was hard for even me to read! According to the AI, “E be possible say you fit write academic paper for Ghanaian English.” No wonder it had concerns about comprehension. None of what the AI generated as Ghanaian English was actually Ghanaian English. It had mistaken Ghanaian Pidgin English as Ghanaian English. To this AI, these varieties of English were the same. Tellingly, despite the values and emotional attachment that Ghanaians place on our institutionalized variety of English (Owusu-Ansah), the AI writer believed that the less formal variety was more indicative of the norms of Ghanaian writing. The error is more grave when we place it in the context of the fact that pidgin is not even considered an official language in Ghana (Adika), and users of pidgin suffer an Othering within the country as they are assumed to be illiterate (Dako and Yintah). Why would an AI assume that this variety is most indicative of a people? What resources are these AIs learning from? As someone from the Global South, I would like to know who has a say in determining what becomes a part of the corpus that feeds the output.

Answers to these questions should be the business of rhetoric, composition, and literacy scholars because AIs are actively defining what it means to write and be a writer based on these resources and decisions.

In seeking answers to the questions listed above, we should not lose sight of the fact that AIs are definitive programs and they, therefore, have a definitive prehistory charged with competing ideas about who can write and how they ought to write (Hammond). Literacy studies has long been aware of how technologies of literacy are steeped in histories that are violent towards those who live at the margins of society (Stuckey), and we are aware of how racial injustices are embedded in the code of digital online technologies (Benjamin). To assume that AIs in writing have not come with the same problems would be to participate in a willful ignorance towards that violence. The history of ChatGPT, for example, is enough for us to be cautious in its use. Open AI acknowledges that it has a “limited knowledge of the world and events after 2021”. It also acknowledges that it has “social biases.” My experience, though limited, shows us how these biases cannot be ignored. While my single experience is by no means the basis for generalizing on what it means for missing people to be defined by AIs, it is an indication that rhetoric, composition studies, and literacy studies should be concerned with the kind of writing that AIs are likely to facilitate.

So where are we? While we have made progress, we cannot ignore the warning that Cynthia Selfe gave us twenty-three years ago that we should not lose sight of our mission to reveal the injustices that are embedded in the way literacy technologies are invented. As she pointed out all those years ago, great technologies become less visible as they are woven into the fabric of reality—a reality that they are active in creating. More recently, Timothy Laquintano and Annette Vee told us to “acknowledge the robots among us” (59). We must also ensure that the robots we build acknowledge the missing people among us. These tasks will be possible when our discipline looks beyond those who have for years controlled the center and address those whose marginalized identities are not as apparent as the ones we find in the United States.

In the end, I would like to think that this article, in suggesting where we are, sends out a call to action in a defining moment for both the missing people of literacy studies who are being defined by AI writing, and the humans who have enjoyed the privilege of receiving both human and machine acknowledgement. It has become common practice to declare that rhetoric, writing, and literacy scholars should help shape AI writing by “creating their own software” (Jones and Hirsu, 8), and to declare that missing people need to be at the table to ensure representation and diversity during the conception and implementation of the algorithms that run under the hood of these AIs (Broussard). However, it is less common to seek representation for those

missing people who exists outside the United States. As we rightfully pay attention to the AIs around us and “listen to their languages and pay attention to their noise” (Jones and Hirsu, 8), we should not lose sight of the fact that these languages and noises drown out the language of missing people who do not have the global capital to increase the volume of their utterances. Shall we lower the voices of the machines for a moment and hear the voices of “we,” the missing people. Or, as we listen to the machines, we can pause and reflect on how they are defining us using the same values, characteristics, and meanings that colonialism has placed on us for centuries.

A

Can I write an academic paper in Ghanaian English?



Yes, it is possible to write an academic paper in Ghanaian English, as long as it is appropriate for the intended audience and meets the requirements of the academic institution or journal.



Ghanaian English is a variant of the English language spoken in Ghana, with its own unique vocabulary, grammar, and syntax. While it may not be as widely recognized as British or American English, it is a valid form of English that can be used in academic writing.

However, it is important to note that in academic writing, clarity and precision are of utmost importance. Therefore, it is essential to use standard English grammar and avoid overly colloquial expressions, slang, and other informal language. Additionally, it is important to ensure that the writing is comprehensible to a wider audience, including those who may not be familiar with Ghanaian English.

In summary, while it is possible to write an academic paper in Ghanaian English, it is important to use standard English grammar, avoid overly informal language, and ensure that the writing is comprehensible to a wider audience.

A

Can you write your answer in Ghanaian English



Yes, I fit write my answer for Ghanaian English.



E be possible say you fit write academic paper for Ghanaian English, as long as e make sense for the people wey you want communicate with, and e follow the requirements wey the academic institution or journal demand.

Ghanaian English be variant of English wey people speak for Ghana, and e get e own unique vocabulary, grammar and syntax. Although e no dey as widely recognized as British or American English, e be valid form of English wey you fit use for academic writing.

But, e important make you sabi say for academic writing, clarity and precision be very important. So, e dey essential make you use standard English grammar, no use too much colloquial expressions, slang or any other informal language. E go good if you ensure say your writing dey easy to understand for all the people wey go read am, even those wey no dey familiar with Ghanaian English.

For summary, although e dey possible to write academic paper for Ghanaian English, e dey important make you use standard English grammar, no use too much informal language, and ensure say your writing dey easy to understand for all the people wey go read am.

Notes

1. I have attached screenshots of the complete interaction to the end of the paper.

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