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Introduction: Navigating Trust and Uncertainty in Language and Literature

The present volume of SPELL is based on the 2023 SAUTE conference held at the University of Fribourg on the topic of *Trust and Uncertainty: Perspectives from Linguistics and Literary Studies*. In hindsight, the timing for a conference dedicated to a spectrum of topics related to truth, reliability, doubt, and incredulity, among others, could not have been any better, for a variety of reasons. Most acutely, there was Chat GPT 3. Launched at the end of 2022 and swiftly followed by a fourth version, the publication of this large language model, able to produce meaningful text with just a few prompts and clicks, felt like an earthquake. Relatively young and still flawed, generative AI technology is swiftly evolving. Scholars working in disciplines that, like English, rely strongly on the use of language and writing as means of intellectual inquiry are now confronted with tools that have profound impact on their work and methods. After all, chatbots challenge scholarly writing as well as the skills traditionally passed on to students by taking over the intellectual work necessary to fill a page thanks to the sheer force of algorithmic modelling.

While plagiarism, among other violations of scientific integrity, has its own long history, leading to variably efficient preventive and penal measures, chatbot technology is now putting to the test these habitual responses as its algorithmic predictions no longer operate with identifiable sources. Since there is potential for fraud when not declared, but attributed to a human author, such work calls for a reconceptualisation of what commonly counts as plagiarism, originality, and the author. In addition to these by no means exclusively academic concerns, profounder and far more general anxieties arise, considering the, it appears, hardly controllable development of AI and its potentially more-than-human potential for self-improvement.

With the global surge of ChatGPT in the spring of 2023, dormant controversies about originality, provenance, and intellectual property have been revitalised. Consider, for example, postmodernism's popular play with authorial identities. Once confusing for readerships, it has become a somehow stale and predictable feature of a by now quaint aesthetic. The

twisted and often ludic relationship between authors and their literary alter egos, and the scandals caused when the autobiographical pact was broken, exemplify the “trust versus uncertainty” dyad that has played out across literary history and that informs linguistic communication in general. Of course, even before the arrival of postmodernism, critics and scholars of literature implicitly tended to consider uncertainty, ambiguity, and ambivalence not as a flaw but rather as an inherent feature of what makes literature engaging and worth studying. As John Keats famously puts it in a letter to his brothers George and Tom from December 1817, negative capability, “that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason,” is the central quality that “went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously” (109). Trustworthiness is not an essential requirement for great literature either, as the usually positive critical evaluation of unreliable narration in canonical works of fiction such as Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-1769) or Ford Madox Ford’s *The Good Soldier* (1915) suggests. Some illustrious literary types, such as the picaresque hero or the trickster figure, have owed their popularity to not being epitomes of trustworthiness.

Evidently, uncertainty can serve a wide variety of purposes in literature. As Mette Leonard Høeg observes, it can be “used either to disrupt the seeming naturalness of a narrative or as a mimetic method to authentically render the uncertainty of reality and human perception” (“Introduction” 1) to the extent that “it still functions as a criterion for credibility in both fictional and nonfictional narrative” (“Introduction” 2). Uncertainty can thus paradoxically increase trustworthiness. Høeg further characterises uncertainty as “a structuring principle, a guiding philosophical idea and theme, and as a primary conveyor of meaning” in modernism (*Uncertainty and Undecidability* 3), but the dynamic interplay between trust and uncertainty arguably dates back already to the origins of novelistic consciousness in the late seventeenth century. Spiritual autobiography, for instance, with its intense search for the signs of election in the believer’s soul, false starts, self-deception, and backsliding, bequeathed a new sense of a complex inwardness to early English novelists that was predicated on the interplay of trust and uncertainty about divine grace (Starr). Within the transatlantic anglophone world, such repercussions of a Puritan legacy have affected literary practice and the formation of genres tied to life writing throughout the modern period. For medievalists and early modernists, too, uncertainty is a fundamental aspect of their work – also beyond the

content of literary works itself. From questions of authorship attribution over manuscript transmission and dating to, more recently, the processing of large text corpora in the digital humanities, uncertainty needs to be consciously factored into methodological reflections in these fields, as a roundtable on the topic at the SAUTE 2023 conference made abundantly clear.

Uncertainty is, of course, not the exclusive province of literary studies but also occupies a prominent place in linguistics. Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916), a central founding text of modern linguistics, is notably grounded in a new sense of uncertainty: De Saussure famously claimed that meaning derives not from a stable relationship between the signifier and the signified, but from the ever-shifting interplay of signifiers, which had a momentous afterlife in the deconstructionist tendencies of much literary theory and criticism in the second half of the twentieth century. The rise of pragmatics following the work of ordinary language philosophers such as J. L. Austin, John Searle, and Paul Grice, with its insistence on the contingency of meaning, its dependence on intention, action, and context, likewise left its mark on various disciplines in the humanities and their interpretative methodologies, such as Reader-Response Theory (Iser 53–62) or the Cambridge School of the History of Political Thought (Skinner). Linguistic uncertainty thus can have its sources in semantic as well as pragmatic ambiguities, as several conference contributions illustrated, in ways that are also relevant for literary analysis. Conversely, communication arguably also involves a dimension of trust. Pragmatic understandings of communication usually assume that its success requires the trust of all parties in the communication process that certain principles, e.g. the principle of relevance (Sperber & Wilson; Sperber et al. 361–369), are adhered to.

Generative AI, however, takes scholars, especially in the Humanities, outside their comfort zones, as these new technologies still must find their place in our research and our repertoire of teaching and assessment tools. There is still debate, for instance, on whether large language models actually *understand* language and use it *meaningfully* or whether they simply recognise and reproduce patterns like a parrot and what exactly meaningful language usage would mean in the case of AI (Bender et al.; Grindrod). This element of doubt is inscribed into a relatively early literary example touching upon several of our contemporary anxieties surrounding AI.

The prospect that artificial intelligence would get to a point where it threatens standards for research and writing can be traced back to specu-

lative accounts of what technology can do at the margins of and beyond science fiction. Richard Powers' novel *Galatea 2.2*, first published in 1995, can be labelled as a fake autobiography given the author's self-inscription into the novel as its main character. But Powers' novel mirrors the conference theme of trust and/versus uncertainty in yet more intricate ways. Powers, the protagonist, is a writer who comes out of a turbulent romantic relationship and recently arrived at his former Northwestern university as a writer in residence. Unable to write, he participates in an experiment launched by a neurologist at his university, aiming to teach computers how to produce literary criticism. Skeptical at the beginning, Powers complies, driven by his desire to overcome his writer's block. He trains their "circus animal" (63) by feeding it texts by William Faulkner and Thomas Gray, but the early stages of the experiment are unglamorous. Lentz, Powers' colleague and the neurologist heavily invested in the experiment,

cobbled up a card cage to the back plane of your basic vanilla workstation. A few I/O devices, registered antiques all, hung off the ports, windows to this poor contraption's soul. [...] However humble, the rig gave us an entree. A workable learning algorithm can run on any platform. The brain, Lentz had it, was itself just a glorified, fudged-up Turing machine. Our cerebrum-to-be had no neurons, per se. No axons or dendrites. No synaptic connections. All these structures hid in simulation, dummied up in the standard linear memory tray. [...] We used algorithms to imitate a non-algorithmic system. (Powers 79)

After some initial hiccups, "Helen," the software, ultimately provides promising results, as she enters conversation with her makers with such aplomb that she seems to effectively have developed sentience. Doubt remains as "an algorithm for turning statements into reasonable questions need know nothing about what those statements said or the sense they manipulated to say it" (235). Helen learns by imitation. Observing her grow and adapt, Powers starts to question his own understanding of what knowledge means (235). While Powers acknowledges that Helen may well be about to become too powerful (194) – after all she acquires a sense of time (222) and is keen to understand the human world – he moves in a grey zone of ambiguity, unable to tell apart Helen's production of genuine meaning from its mere replication. As the novel unfolds, Helen learns to make conjectures, to situate herself in a here-and-now, and she embarks on literary discussions with Powers based on a reading list they are plodding through. What, for Powers, is a marker of her consciousness (295) comes down to her mimicking "with shocking accuracy some fea-

tures of high-level cognition,” a once-in-a-lifetime “heuristic tool” harnessed for “investigative discovery” (323) in the eyes of the neurologist. The novel’s experimental frame serves the larger purpose of interrogating (self-)knowledge and (self-)convictions, the nature of the bonds that keep humans together, and the roots of meaning.

Powers foresaw technology outperforming humans even, or rather specifically, in domains where humanist notions of individualism and self-governed agency are writ large, i.e., our ability to reason, to synthesise, to abstract, and to act on such precepts. The contents that Powers, the novel’s protagonist, feeds the machine – literary classics, answers to existential questions, a portion of his own beliefs and ideas – will come back to him transfigured. In *Galatea 2.2* the experiment ends because Helen decides to shut herself down. This is a convenient ending as it spares the protagonist his growing discomfort in Helen’s presence, caused by her inscrutable nature. Besides, this kind of gentle, docile, and non-predatory artificial intelligence ultimately concedes authority to humans (if only out of despair given what Helen believed would be her loneliness among humans). In the end, technology serves human causes by stilling scientific curiosity and by solving Powers’ personal crisis, but it does not win. In 2024, such amenability is not in sight.

The uproar caused by ChatGPT was not predictable at the planning stage of the conference. Instead, the organisers hoped to open both synchronic and diachronic perspectives on entwined discussions of trust, certainty, and truthfulness, and its nuanced counterparts – distrust, uncertainty, and deception – as they manifest in literary studies and linguistics in multiple forms, discourses, and genres. The articles included in this volume reflect the many guises and nuances of the force field that opens between these charged notions of trust and uncertainty. The conference theme coupled “trust” not with “distrust,” thereby placing the two in a relation of deficiency, but with “uncertainty” as its more multifarious counterpart.

The papers that this edition of SPELL brings together shed light on a variety of topics, theoretical approaches, or issues that ultimately tie questions of trust back to concepts of selfhood, language, and the power of the human imagination. Following the tradition of SAUTE conferences, SPELL volumes combine literary and linguistic perspectives, which, in the case of a topic that is so heavily invested in the sources and transmission of meaning (however defective or deceptive these may be), appears to be more than just a convention, but an asset. The contributions are grouped

in three sections: “Speculation”; “Language and Translation”; “Selfhood and Ambiguity.” They revisit literary classics and explore less well-known literary voices, alerting us in different ways to the linguistic choices and procedures that instil literary representation with uncertainty or ambiguity. They reflect on language in translation and the uncertainties that are inherent in communicative acts. But they also introduce readers to literary texts that offer responses to experiences of crisis that shape our lived experience of the world.

1. Speculation

In the first article of this volume, “Fictions, Fakes, and Futures: Uncertainty in Untrusting Times,” Max Saunders contextualises our own current efforts to grapple with rapidly evolving AI and political disinformation campaigns in speculative thinking about the future and literary reflections on trust and uncertainty in the early twentieth century, as exemplified by Ford Maddox Ford’s *The Good Soldier* (1915). Saunders further juxtaposes the rise of modern AI with earlier future thinking, more specifically, in the To-Day and To-Morrow book series (1923-1931), which speculates about a wide range of future possibilities ranging from women’s rights over in vitro fertilisation to, indeed, the future of intelligence. By highlighting the human agency which such speculation enables, Saunders concludes that, with regard to modern AI, neither fatalist acceptance nor wholesale rejection is in order, but that the uncertainties that it generates should rather be seen as a chance to creatively reconceptualise our own ways of thinking about the future in our efforts to align AI with human goals and values.

By focusing on the work of a significant contemporary poet in her article “Peter Reading’s Poetic Ecology of Catastrophe,” Jole Fontanesi examines the impact of the experience of crisis caused by climate change on contemporary poetry. Tracing an oftentimes bitter and ironic stance in the late Reading’s book-length poem *-273.15 [absolute zero]* (2005), Fontanesi investigates his poetics of ecological crisis as an attempt to come to terms with the uncertainty and unknowability that shapes our present understanding of climate change as cause of environmental disaster. Reading’s salient strategy is to connect the literary ecology of his poetry, imbued with the retelling of Biblical stories, to the real, present-day problems of our ecology.

In his article “Cherish Your Fantasy: Thomas Pynchon’s Paranoid Meanings and Entropic Dissolutions,” Matthew Scully reads Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) from a psychoanalytical perspective in the field of tension between paranoia as an excess of meaning, e.g., as it manifests itself in conspiracy theories, on the one hand and entropy, as contingency and the lack of meaning, on the other. Although this opposition is structurally central to the novella’s plot as well as its wider ideological reflections, Scully argues that paranoia and entropy are, in fact, mutually constitutive in the novella and that Pynchon’s refusal of a single organising principle, be it paranoid or entropic, does not simply amount to debilitating uncertainty but keeps open pathways for alternative possibilities to any closed system of thought.

2. Language and Translation

In his article on “Translation, Uncertainty, and the Spirit of Trust,” Ian MacKenzie examines the conceptual changes that occur during interpretation. He draws on theories by W. V. Quine and Donald Davidson concerned with meaning and language – and especially their indeterminacy – to trace the complex interplay between trust and uncertainty that shapes each act of translation. Translation happens on a day-to-day basis despite this indeterminacy. While Quine and Donaldson propose the notion of a “charitable attitude” that rests on agreement whenever possible, MacKenzie argues for greater awareness of conceptual change and innovation in translation processes by engaging with the notion of the “spirit of trust.”

Andreas H. Jucker’s article “‘Is That a Request or a Command?’: Speech Act Meta Discourse and Illocutionary Indeterminacy,” focuses on instances in the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* in which the illocutionary force or point of a given speech act is uncertain and up for negotiation. Working towards a theory of illocutionary indeterminacy, Jucker argues that such underspecification is not the exception to the rule but a common phenomenon that does not always require clarification. Some degree of vagueness may, in fact, be more efficient or, in terms of relevance theory, relevant than unnecessary overspecification. However, Jucker speculates that especially speech acts involving high degrees of face loss or maintenance, respectively, may be liable to trigger meta discourse on their illocutionary force or point.

Anita Auer, Anne-Christine Gardner, and Mark Iten approach uncertainty from the perspective of corpus linguistics and digital databases in

their article “Creating a Corpus of Late Modern English Pauper Letters: Uncertainties, Challenges, and Solutions.” Taking their creation of a corpus of pauper letters under the Old Poor Law (1795-1934) as a starting point, they discuss the challenges relating to unknown or uncertain metadata, dating, palaeographic issues of legibility, orthographic variation, and normalisation that can cause considerable uncertainty in sociolinguistic conclusions from large-scale linguistic corpora. Throughout, they emphasise their reliance on established scholarly practices but simultaneously point out the need for new solutions to the unique challenges of new text types and the need for documenting these decisions in detail in order to offer guidance for future research.

3. Selfhood and Ambiguity

Stella Castelli’s article on “‘It Was That Smile That Maddened Irene’: Ambiguous Antics and the Power of Uncertainty in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*” examines the novella’s insistence on linguistic undecidability as more than just a narratological device (think “unreliable narration”). Instead, the ultimate ambivalence of linguistic expression opens liminal spaces that allow a transgressive and yet ‘safe’ view of socially hardened views of sexuality, class, and race. As Castelli shows, drawing upon Wolfgang Iser’s notion of the “Gestalt” and Jacques Derrida’s concept of the cryptic, Larsen’s poetics of the uncertain is enmeshed with identity politics seen through the prism of the opaque: that which is visibly invisible.

Patrick Jones’ article on “Henry James and the Phenomenology of Life” shares this interest in the power of language to undermine certainties we may think we hold about the experience of life – and its linguistic representability. Maybe somehow unsurprisingly in an author such as Henry James, who is so attached to a literary engagement with human consciousness, a closer examination of human agency and its limitations suggests that language cannot suffice to express certainty about existence and one’s own subjectivity. James’ novel *The Ambassadors* (1903) serves as a case study of how the experience of life in James’ oeuvre reflects a phenomenological complexity that sees human action directed by a fluid interplay of determinism and volition.

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