

The Question Concerning Large-Language Models

Callum Yeaman

Abstract: In 1954, Heidegger’s “The Question Concerning Technology” warned that technology’s true danger emerges when we mistakenly view it as something “neutral,” urging rigorous questioning of our relation to emerging technologies. Today, nearly 75 years later, technological development has spiraled to heights likely inconceivable in Heidegger’s time—most recently with the arrival of artificial intelligence. This paper revisits Heidegger’s seminal work to undertake a phenomenological analysis of large-language models (LLMs).

I begin in Section II by expounding Heidegger’s phenomenological method and unpacking his key terminology, clarifying what it means to question technology’s essence. In Section III, I explore Heidegger’s claim that technology’s essence is a “realm of revealing,” adopting this as my guiding framework for investigating LLMs. Section IV argues that LLMs, as a realm of revealing, disclose our relationship to language and understanding—what Heidegger explores through “discourse.” In Section V, I unpack Heidegger’s theses on authentic and inauthentic discourse, explaining why the degree to which discourse is inauthentic correlates to how thematic it becomes. Finally, in Section VI, my investigation culminates in the conclusion that the essence of LLMs is idle talk. My central aim is not merely to argue that LLMs exemplify inauthentic discourse, but to suggest that their proliferation reveals—and is enabled by—a “flattened” understanding of language, one that reflects the pervasive influence of what Heidegger calls the they.

I. Introduction

In 1954, Heidegger’s “The Question Concerning Technology” warned humanity to be wary of technology’s profound grip on modern existence. The true danger of technology arises, he argued, when we make the grave mistake of viewing it as something “neutral.”¹ Amidst a time of rapid change, Heidegger urged us to recognize the necessity of rigorously questioning our relation to emerging technologies.

Today, nearly 75 years after Heidegger published his seminal essay, technological

¹ Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (Harper & Row, 1977), 1.

development has spiraled to heights that were likely inconceivable in his time. In the age of artificial intelligence, it's possible our relationship to technology has never been so mysterious. In this paper, I revisit Heidegger's renowned essay in the epoch of artificial intelligence. This paper seeks to apply Heidegger's phenomenological mode of inquiry to explore the essence of large-language models (hereafter, LLMs).

Before I approach "The Question Concerning Technology," I begin Section II by briefly expounding Heidegger's phenomenological method and unpacking some of his key terminology, as well as explaining what it means to "question" technologies' essence. Then, in Section III, I unpack Heidegger's nebulous claim that technology's essence is a "realm of revealing." I adopt this definition as my guiding framework as I investigate the essence of LLMs.

In Section IV I argue that, as a realm of revealing, LLMs disclose our relationship to language and understanding—what Heidegger explores through the term "discourse." My leading contention is that an analysis of the architecture of LLMs reveals the prescience of Heidegger's writings on *authentic* and *inauthentic* discourse and, in particular, the pervasiveness of what he calls *idle talk*. My central aim is not just to argue that LLMs exemplify *inauthentic discourse*, but to suggest that their proliferation reveals—and is enabled by—a "flattened" understanding of language. In Section V, I unpack Heidegger's central theses on *authentic* and *inauthentic* discourse, and explain why he claims the degree to which discourse is *inauthentic* is correlated to how *thematic* it is. Finally, in Section VI, I argue that the architecture of LLMs reflects the prevalence of highly *thematic*, *inauthentic* forms of discourse today. LLMs reveal the pervasive influence of *idle talk*: the way the "flattening" of language engenders the domination of what Heidegger calls *the they*.

II. On Questioning: Heidegger's Phenomenological Method

"Questioning builds a way,"² mysteriously begins Heidegger's seminal paper, "The Question Concerning Technology." I seek to question the essence of LLMs. But what does it mean to *question* the essence of something? According to Heidegger, the ultimate purpose of questioning something's essence is to expose our relation to it.³ This is the case because the broader aim of Heidegger's analytic method is to elucidate the meaning of a word he claims has been overlooked throughout the history of philosophy: *being*.⁴ In order to achieve this, Heidegger often relies upon commonly used words and develops his own unconventional definitions for them (e.g., *discourse*, *assertion*, *authentic*). I will indicate such terms by italicizing them. Heidegger believes that an inquiry into something's essence must always begin from an examination of our own sort of being: what he refers to as *Dasein*⁵ (although often left untranslated, this most literally translates to *being-here* or *openness*).⁶ Heidegger views it as futile to contemplate the essence of entities in the world by examining them over and against a subject—because the being of *Dasein* and the being of entities in the world can't successfully be separated in philosophical inquiry.⁷ Therefore, he insists phenomenological inquiry must begin by investigating the joint structure of *being-in-the-world*.

2 Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 1.

3 Daniel O. Dahlstrom, *The Heidegger Dictionary* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

4 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Harper & Row, 1962).

5 Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

6 Dahlstrom, *The Heidegger Dictionary*.

7 Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

An inquiry into *being-in-the-world* could not begin by investigating the material composition of particular entities, a mode of inquiry Heidegger refers to as *ontic*.⁸ An *ontic* inquiry into a butter knife would investigate the knife's build, measurement, and properties. No more can an inquiry into *being-in-the-world* proceed through an investigation of the *being* of those entities, which he defines as *ontological* inquiry.⁹ *Ontological* inquiry investigates the universal properties of butter knives—like, as Heidegger will argue, that a butter knife is something that cuts. Nor can a proper examination of *being-in-the-world* begin by analyzing facts about *Dasein*'s current circumstances, which are *existentiell* properties, in Heidegger's language.¹⁰ The object of *existentiell* inquiry might be to think of how and why you most recently used a butter knife. According to Heidegger, phenomenological inquiry must begin by expounding the *ontological* structures of *Dasein's existence*, which he calls *existential* properties.¹¹ *Existential* properties are what Heidegger refers to as the "internal enablement" of either an entity's *ontic* manifestation or the emergence of an *existentiell* fact.¹² This means that the *existential* structures of *Dasein's existence* are what make it possible for something (either *ontic* or *existentiell*) to manifest externally in the way that it does. For example, the existence of a butter knife is *existentially* enabled by the structures of *Dasein's existence* which render it possible for us to conceive of cutting something (most importantly of which, as I will explain in Section IV, is our pre-reflective relationship to time). As Heidegger explains in his later lectures, "On the Essence of Truth," when questioning the essence of something—whether technology or a butter knife—it's always necessary to begin by investigating its *existential* enablement.¹³ By exploring the *existential* enablement of LLMs, this paper will investigate what technology and LLMs reveal about *being-in-the-world*.

III. The Question Concerning Technology

Despite the relentless vicissitudes of technological development, Heidegger doesn't see the "essence" of technology as something indeterminate. Undoubtedly, technology is an amorphous, continually evolving force, which might make its essence seem impossible to pin down. How is it possible to reach conclusions about the essence of technology that hold across thousands of years of human evolution? According to Heidegger, such misgivings stem from a fundamental misunderstanding. For Heidegger, the essence of technology is "by no means anything technological."¹⁴ In other words, when inquiring about the essence of technology, it's pernicious to focus on qualities or properties of particular artifacts, because we shouldn't be questioning the essence of technology from an *ontic* standpoint in the first place.

Heidegger traces every purported attempt to capture the essence of technology back to Aristotle's fourfold causal definition. Aristotle claims that behind any *techné* (craft) are four causes: *i*) the material cause: the materials the craft is made out of *ii*) the formal cause: the general "shape" or form of the artifact *iii*) the maker cause: the builder who produces it

8 Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

9 Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

10 Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

11 Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

12 Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

13 Daniel O. Dahlstrom, "Im-position: Heidegger's Analysis of the Essence of Modern Technology," in *Heidegger on Technology*, ed. Aaron Wendland, Christos Hadjioannou, and Christopher Merwin (Routledge, 2018), 39-56.

14 Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 1.

(*poiei*) and *iv*) the final cause: what the artifact is used for, or its end.¹⁵

This definition conveys the essence of a technological artifact as the purpose it serves. Aristotle's final cause (*i*) suggests that the essence of a *techné* is simply its function. Indeed, this is an intuitive way to think about the purpose of a technological artifact, like a butter knife or a windmill, for example.

Heidegger argues that portraying technology's essence as a "mere means to an end"¹⁶ neglects its profound complexity. In particular, he believes Aristotle has overlooked the importance of *iii*): the maker cause.¹⁷ The Greek word for the production of a craft is *poiesis*. This word, however, was not just used in reference to technology but also for the creation of art and poetry. In Heidegger's view, the translation of *poiesis* as "production" is insufficient, and it is better defined as *bringing-forth*. According to Heidegger, *bringing-forth* is the *existential* enablement of technology.¹⁸

Bringing-forth is a deeply human process. It is a structure of existence that not only influences but actively reflects *being-in-the-world*. According to Heidegger, in the same way writing a poem reflects your worldview, the way we *bring-forth* technologies makes visible a quality of our being. This may seem like a jump. "Where have we strayed to?" Heidegger asks his reader, "What does the essence of technology have to do with revealing? The answer: *everything*."¹⁹ Heidegger traces the importance of "revealing" to the Latin term for truth, *aletheia*,²⁰ which more literally translates to unconcealment. The essence of technology, therefore, is the way it unconceals an aspect of *Dasein's being-in-the-world*. This might seem like a trivial claim because, according to Heidegger, a butter knife also reveals something about *being-in-the-world*. What is quite radical about Heidegger's argument is that he's not merely suggesting that technology is a particularly helpful concept to analyze, but that technology is *the locus* of revealing:²¹ the arena where our way of being is revealed in its entirety.

Heidegger elucidates this rather abstract argument with the example of the steamship. What is the essence of a steamship? A natural Aristotelian response would be that the steamship's essence is some combination of the materials it's made up of, the way it looks, and its purpose: traveling across the sea. Heidegger, on the other hand, views the essence of the steamship as what it reveals about *being-in-the-world*. Accordingly, Heidegger claims that the *existential* enablement of modern technologies like the steamship lies in what they reveal about our relationship to nature. Therefore, he suggests argues the essence of modern technologies like the steamship lies in what it reveals about our relationship to imperialism and globalization. In his words, the essence of the steamship is *enframing (gestell)*:²² the way it reveals how we view the natural world as a collection of resources at our disposal.

If the essence of technology is, as Heidegger says, what it reveals about *being-in-the-world*, what is the essence of LLMs? In other words, what do LLMs reveal about our way of being?

15 Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 1; Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W. D. Ross (Princeton University Press, 1984).

16 Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 1.

17 Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 4.

18 Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 5.

19 Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 5.

20 Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 5.

21 Dahlstrom, *The Heidegger Dictionary*.

22 Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 7.

IV. The Question Concerning Large-Language Models

LLMs are systems trained on vast amounts of data that provide responses to a wide variety of queries. According to Aristotle's final cause, the essence of a given *techné* lies in the purpose it serves. Accordingly, an Aristotelian definition might convey LLMs' essence as their capacity to democratize access to information. Just as the steamship orders oceans as navigable routes and continents as accessible markets, an LLM transforms vast repositories of text into accessible, contextualized knowledge tailored to individual needs. Heidegger would argue that in order to investigate the essence of large language models, it's necessary to begin by reflecting upon what they reveal about our *being-in-the-world*. In order to do this, it's first necessary to consider their *existential enablement*. What about the ontological structures of our existence makes the *bringing-forth* of large-language models possible?

When a user opens an LLM, they compose a prompt and receive a linguistic response. At first glance, this exchange appears merely instrumental: one may seek automation, summarization, drafting assistance, or task completion. Yet even these cases presuppose an orientation toward understanding. To summarize a text, to automate correspondence, or to generate code is not to bypass understanding altogether, but to redistribute or mediate it through language. It's evident, therefore, that the *existential* enablement of LLMs must concern our relationship to language and understanding. The leading question of this paper becomes: what do LLMs reveal about the way we use natural language to *understand*?

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger dedicates a term to this very concept—what he refers to as *discourse*.²³ Heidegger defines discourse as the process by which one's "understanding of being-in"²⁴ is disclosed to others through language. Importantly, Heidegger sees the *existential* enablement of the *ontic* existence of language as *discourse*. In other words, the particular letters on a page or the definitions in a dictionary are external manifestations of the *existential* structure of discourse. As Heidegger puts it, "the *existential ontological* foundation of language is discourse or talk."²⁵ *Discourse* doesn't literally refer to talk or conversations, but the very possibility of transferring *understanding* to one another. In technical terms, *discourse* is the *existential* possibility of successfully disclosing one's understanding. As a realm of revealing, LLMs must disclose something about our relationship to *discourse*.

V. The Flattening of Language: Heidegger on *Discourse* and *Idle Talk*

In order to make sense of Heidegger's perspective on *discourse*, it's first necessary to unpack what he means by understanding. What sort of understanding does effective discourse convey? Perhaps surprisingly, Heidegger argues that true (i.e., *authentic*) *understanding* is intimately grounded in phenomenological experience. *Authentic understanding*, he argues, can't be accessed completely through theoretical argumentation or logic.²⁶ This implies that understanding must have a pre-verbal, pre-theoretical dimension. In fact, Heidegger suggests that our most authentic form of understanding has a *pre-reflective* element: an aspect that precedes even conscious self-awareness.²⁷

The central component of our *pre-reflective* form of understanding, according to

23 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 203.

24 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 204.

25 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 203.

26 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 341.

27 Daniel O. Dahlstrom, *Heidegger's Concept of Truth* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 192.

Heidegger, is our relationship to time.²⁸ The most authentic form of phenomenological understanding is the way we *project* our own *possibility* onto the world around us and the entities in it.²⁹ Heidegger’s term for this complex form of understanding is the *ready-to-hand*.³⁰ We understand something as *ready-to-hand* when we interpret it in terms of our own future. That is to say, we interpret it as equipment: what it can be used “as.” For example, let’s return to the example of the butter knife. Heidegger says we understand a butter knife as ready-to-hand when we actively interpret it as something that we can *use*. In other words, our most *authentic* way of *understanding* what a butter-knife is, is the way we pre-reflectively interpret it as something we can cut with. Heidegger sees the deepest form of human *understanding* as a relational activity, where the entities in front of us are endowed with meaning contextually in terms of time. Hereafter, I will refer to this phenomenological form of understanding as *primary understanding*.

Perhaps controversially, Heidegger argues that the ultimate purpose of *discourse* is to disclose *primary understanding* to others. However, a problem arises: to what extent is it possible to convey this rather abstract form of understanding to one another through words? Heidegger argues that *discourse* varies drastically in its effectiveness. In order to explain this, he makes an important distinction between *authentic* and *inauthentic* discourse.³¹ *Authentic discourse* is *discourse* that largely preserves one’s *primary understanding* of something. *Inauthentic discourse*, on the other hand, is discourse where one’s *primary understanding* is either drastically obscured or distorted.³²

Heidegger suggests that the fundamental cause of *inauthentic* discourse isn’t one’s general motivations or attitude—but a fundamental misunderstanding of the purpose, function, and limitations of natural language.³³ Controversially, Heidegger argues that all language is derived from our *primary understanding*. In his words, it’s impossible for a word or sentence to “disown its ontological origin,”³⁴ because all language is grounded in ready-to-hand understanding. However, words inevitably veil the complexity of the *primary understanding* they purport to express. This is because, according to Heidegger, we compress *primary understanding* into words by forming “assertions.”³⁵ One can imagine assertions as the way a gift (phenomenological understanding) is compressed so as to make it compact enough to wrap (express in words). According to Heidegger, when we construct *assertions*, our *pre-reflective* form of *understanding* is stripped of its temporal complexity as it “gets pushed into the uniform plane of that which is merely present-at-hand.”³⁶ The process by which understanding is stripped of its temporal complexity by turning into something *present-at-hand* (the opposite of the *ready-to-hand*)³⁷ is what Heidegger calls the “flattening” of language.

28 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 203.

29 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 183, 342.

30 Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

31 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 341.

32 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 341.

33 Although Heidegger’s doesn’t state this explicitly, this is clearly implied by his analysis of thematic discourse.

34 Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

35 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 195.

36 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 201.

37 *Present-at-hand* is what Heidegger refers to as the mode in which entities are encountered when they are considered theoretically or objectively, as isolated things with properties, detached from practical use and everyday involvement.

The concealing nature of assertions doesn’t suggest that it’s impossible to disclose primary understanding through discourse altogether, however. Although language inevitably conceals *ready-to-hand understanding* to a certain degree,³⁸ it’s possible for language to recover a significant portion of *primary understanding*.³⁹ According to Heidegger, the central difference between *authentic* and *inauthentic* discourse is whether language is used “thematically” or “unthematically.”⁴⁰ In highly *thematic* discourse, one takes the words in a sentence at face value. A thematic sentence is interpreted strictly according to the literal meaning of the words within it. Therefore, what is disclosed by the sentence is confined by the limitations of propositional truth. Somewhat controversially, Heidegger argues that the distortive process of forming assertions renders it *impossible* for *thematic discourse* to effectively disclose *primary understanding*. As Dan Dahlstrom explains in *Heidegger’s Concept of Truth*, “trying to recover the dynamics of this primary understanding by means of the logical structure of assertions or the parts of a sentence structure would be equivalent to trying to put Humpty Dumpty back together again.”⁴¹

In *unthematic* discourse, on the other hand, the subject of a sentence isn’t reducible to propositional truth.⁴² Although the distortive nature of assertions means *primary understanding* is invariably obscured to some extent, in *unthematic* discourse, other vehicles are relied upon to rediscover it. Heidegger argues that in *unthematic* discourse, *primary understanding* is primarily “made known in discourse and indicated in language by intonation, modulation, and the way of speaking.”⁴³ Our ready-to-hand understanding is expressed most effectively through the *way* something is said, not through mechanical propositional analysis.

Under this account, there is a clear hierarchy to how thematic—and thus, how *authentic*—various forms of discourse are. As Heidegger explicitly states, poetry preserves primary understanding to the highest possible extent. In poems, sentences are used extremely *unthematically*, as rhythm, tone, and metaphor disclose something altogether distinct from what is semantically encoded in them. On the other hand, an example of highly *thematic, inauthentic* discourse would be a Wikipedia article. In contrast to a poem, in online encyclopedia definitions, words are often used quite literally to convey meaning. Heidegger would likely argue that this is the case because Wikipedia articles are largely summaries of older online articles. Scientific articles cited by Wikipedia articles today have an average of 130.52 citations.⁴⁴ Crucially, whereas the words in a poem more directly aim to express an object of conscious experience (whether an emotion, or our *primary understanding* of a butter knife), most sentences in a Wikipedia article are constructed out of previous online sentences. Since each new sentence inevitably obscures *primary understanding* to a certain degree (whether they are thematic or unthematic), a sentence that takes another sentence as its inspiration inevitably distorts *primary understanding* more than a sentence that takes conveying *primary*

38 This is proven by Heidegger’s analysis of assertions in Section 33.

39 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 206.

40 Dahlstrom, *Heidegger’s Concept of Truth*, 194.

41 Dahlstrom, *Heidegger’s Concept of Truth*, 192.

42 Dahlstrom, *Heidegger’s Concept of Truth*, 194.

43 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 205.

44 Joshua M. Nicholson et al., “Measuring the Quality of Scientific References in Wikipedia: An Analysis of More than One Hundred Fifteen Million Citations to over Eight Hundred Thousand Scientific Articles,” *FEBS Journal* (author manuscript published July 1, 2020, final edited form November 19, 2020), PMID: 33089957, PMCID: PMC8060352.

understanding as its primary object. In consequence, as new sentences are repeatedly constructed out of older sentences to construct Wikipedia articles, *primary understanding* takes on less of the weight, and propositional truth takes on more. This engenders a pernicious cycle, where propositional truth constitutes a larger part of what is disclosed in a sentence, *primary understanding* is increasingly veiled, and as *primary understanding* is veiled, the more weight propositional truth carries.

Highly *thematic, inauthentic* discourse like Wikipedia articles is an example of what Heidegger would likely deem *idle talk*. In *idle talk*, discourse is interpreted completely “through what-is-said-in-the-talk, rather than through genuine primordial understanding.”⁴⁵ *Primary understanding* is entirely forsaken and forgotten, as sentences are only valued for their *thematic* meaning. As the pursuit of expressing *primary understanding* is entirely abandoned, *discourse* derails into a mere circulation of *thematic* word meanings. This leads to the rapid proliferation of sentences that no one phenomenologically “makes their own”⁴⁶ through *primary understanding*. Such ideas, in Heidegger’s terminology, are ultimately “groundless:”⁴⁷ devoid of true meaning.

The peril of *idle talk* is the way it encourages the continual reformulation and circulation of groundless ideas. As empty thematic sentences are used more often, they begin to “spread in wider circles and take on an authoritative character.”⁴⁸ The danger of *idle talk* is that sentences that are never phenomenologically understood are increasingly given credence. As such sentences proliferate, it becomes impossible to distinguish between what has in reality “been drawn from primordial sources and what is just gossip.”⁴⁹ Although Heidegger uses the word gossip here, his point likely pertains less to celebrity drama and more to philosophy students who use lots of complicated words they understand according to their semantic definitions. In *idle talk*, when we fail to acknowledge the limitations of natural language, we forget the value of *primary understanding* altogether.

The ultimate consequence of highly *thematic, inauthentic* discourse is way it bolsters the force of *Dasman* (i.e., *the they*.) *The they*, according to Heidegger, is an *existential force* that interferes with Dasein’s capacity to *understand* things *authentically*.⁵⁰ Many scholars interpret *the they* as referring to an anonymous, impersonal public or crowd that dictates norms, opinions, and behaviors in everyday life. The influence of *the they* further contributes to an obscurity of *authentic understanding*, because Dasein is tempted to yield their personal *primary understanding* in favor of what *the they* “says” or “thinks.” Crucially, *the they* is “nobody,”⁵¹ meaning Heidegger isn’t referring to a particular set of social norms, but more generally analyzing the process by which ideas gain social traction and authority. Heidegger conveys *primary understanding* as our ultimate mechanism of defense against the pernicious influence of *the they*. In consequence, as *primary understanding* is eroded through highly *thematic idle talk*, *the they* reinforces its domination. The radical consequence of *highly thematic discourse* is that, eventually and inevitably, “*the they* prescribes one’s state-of-mind,

45 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 207.

46 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 213.

47 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 213.

48 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 212.

49 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 212.

50 Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

51 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 166.

and determines what and how one sees.”⁵² Broadly put, Heidegger claims a highly *thematic* use of language serves to reinforce social norms. The radical aspect of Heidegger’s argument is his suggestion that the primary cause of *inauthentic* discourse, which fortifies *the they*, is an overreliance on propositional truth in our understanding of language (what he later refers to as “the logical prejudice”).

In Heidegger’s time, this theory was largely dismissed as overly vague and speculative. However, I believe, as a realm of revealing about our relationship to discourse, LLMs reinforce Heidegger’s view.

VI. A Realm of Revealing: Large-Language Models, *Idle Talk*, and *The They*

In this final section, I argue that as a realm of revealing LLMs, they reveal the veracity of Heidegger’s assessment of the “flattening” of language. I contend that: *i*) LLM’s formulation of words into vectors reflects Heidegger’s theory of assertions, *ii*) upon accepting *i*), LLMs training process resembles an incredibly *thematic* form of discourse, and *iii*) the qualitative mysteries of LLM’s high-dimensional vector spaces reflect the *existential* force of *the they*. Ultimately, I argue that LLMs instantiate *idle talk*. Therefore, as a realm of revealing, they reveal an already present mode of flattened discourse. In other words, I argue that the architecture of LLMs proves that the internal enablement of LLMs is a world already dominated by *idle talk*.

LLMs are trained on massive datasets collected from books, websites, articles, and other text sources to learn patterns in language.⁵³ These datasets often contain hundreds of billions or even trillions of words, drawn from diverse sources ranging from literary fiction to technical manuals, from historical documents to contemporary social media posts. By analyzing billions of examples of how often words appear together across these diverse texts and contexts, LLMs develop statistical representations of language patterns.⁵⁴ In other words, they statistically model patterns by tracking how frequently one word follows another. These linguistic patterns are quantified through their conversion into high-dimensional vectors—numerical representations in a space with thousands of dimensions.⁵⁵ For example, the word “flower” might be represented in vector space as “3492094290420,” where each number is a discrete dimension. This is easier to imagine in three-dimensional vector space, where each number in a vector represents a point on each of the three axes. At the beginning of the training process, each word’s vector denotation is assigned completely randomly.⁵⁶

The act of representing words with vector digits vividly reflects Heidegger’s theory of assertions. Recall Heidegger’s argument that we purport to express *primary understanding* in language by forming *assertions*: consolidating phenomenological complexity into something simple enough to express in words by conferring upon it a “definite character.” He claims that the temporal complexity of *ready-to-hand understanding* is inevitably veiled when we do this—the first step in the “flattening” of language. When he claims that assertions give *understanding* a “definite character,” Heidegger means that we strip *understanding* of tem-

52 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 213.

53 Jay Alammar and Maarten Grootendorst, *Hands-On Large Language Models: Language Understanding and Generation*, 1st ed. (O’Reilly Media, 2024).

54 Alammar and Grootendorst, *Hands-On Large Language Models*.

55 Alammar and Grootendorst, *Hands-On Large Language Models*.

56 Alammar and Grootendorst, *Hands-On Large Language Models*.

poral aspect by reducing it to something present, concrete, and possible to externalize (i.e., write down). I contend that the representation of words as numbers vividly symbolizes this process. According to Heidegger’s definition, numbers seem to be as “definite” as something could possibly be. What could be more “definite,” “present-at-hand,” and feasible to write down than a numerical vector? Furthermore, the attribution of words with an arbitrary vector blatantly veils understanding (recall that although Heidegger sees words as distorting *understanding*, he doesn’t claim they are completely devoid of *primary understanding* altogether). In LLMs, whatever *primary understanding* is preserved in words is converted into a random number. It would be absurd to claim *any* sort of understanding, let alone Heidegger’s *primary understanding*, is intrinsic to these arbitrary number assignments. As in Heidegger’s theory of assertions, putting something into words strips understanding of its complexity; the transformation of words into vectors in LLMs obscures understanding completely. What does this aspect of LLMs reveal about our use of language? It seems the depiction of words as statistical digits reflects the way that assertions “flatten” understanding.

In *thematic* discourse, sentences are only interpreted according to the literal meanings of the assertions within them. The training process of LLMs physically embodies this process; words are only endowed with meaning according to the geographical representation of vector embeddings.⁵⁷ In the first stage of the process, a word is attributed with a completely arbitrary vector—which is analogous to the way assertions give *understanding* a definite character. LLMs are trained with continual mathematical reshaping and reforming of vectors. Each update involves calculating distances between vectors—measuring their dot products, their cosines, their geometric relationships—and shifting them incrementally to better predict co-occurrence patterns.⁵⁸ When a model incorrectly predicts the next word in a sequence, it adjusts the vectors slightly to improve future predictions. After processing billions of text examples through this optimization process, the vectors settle into configurations that maximize the model’s statistical accuracy.⁵⁹ Crucially, even more extremely than *assertions* in thematic discourse, vector assignments are completely empty of *primary understanding*. Thus, the only way LLMs form new sentences is by way of their mathematical representation in vector space (which is analogous to the meaning of the assertions—thematic meaning, in our analogy.) Assertions are the only basis for the production of new sentences, because the LLMs’ training process is devoid of true understanding. Therefore, their training process is an extraordinarily *thematic*, and thus radically *inauthentic* form of *discourse*.

Throughout this training process, each dimension (digit, or coordinate in vector space) is adjusted. Dimensions are sorted to represent a certain linguistic pattern, which can represent anything from “size” to “amplitude” to “offensiveness.” Each dimension is simply a numerical value—a coordinate in abstract mathematical space—with no inherent meaning outside the model’s internal system.⁶⁰ The model has no access to what “size” actually signifies; it only knows that certain tokens cluster together statistically. In fact, even experts cannot pinpoint the semantic meaning of each particular dimension. Although it’s possible to identify linguistic patterns, the difference between what dimension 2,393 and dimension 2,340 tracks remains mysterious.⁶¹ All that remains are linguistic patterns, but their precise

57 Alammar and Grootendorst, *Hands-On Large Language Models*.

58 Alammar and Grootendorst, *Hands-On Large Language Models*.

59 Alammar and Grootendorst, *Hands-On Large Language Models*.

60 Alammar and Grootendorst, *Hands-On Large Language Models*.

61 Alammar and Grootendorst, *Hands-On Large Language Models*.

meanings are unclear.

These dimensions are a vivid ontic representation of *the they*. Recall that *the they* is “nowhere:” it doesn’t refer to a particular social force, but the way ideas gain traction and credence through statistical social accumulation. Each dimension is given meaning by tracking linguistic patterns in books, websites, and articles, some of which are already deeply ingrained with linguistic patterns that reflect social norms. As these words are reduced to numerical digits, the socially influenced linguistic patterns are all that remain. As a meta-level mathematical representation of the way words tend to be used, LLMs are the ultimate embodiment of what “*they-think*” and what “*they-say*.” Literally, in LLMs, *understanding* is reduced to what word *they* tend to use after each word in a given context.

As a system that sorts and produces words by following linguistic patterns, LLMs are a potent representation of *idle talk*. By reducing understanding (words) to empty assertions (vectors) and continually passing them along through highly thematic discourse (repeated mathematical reconfigurations), LLMs completely forsake *primary understanding* in their production of novel sentences. This creates a system where sentences are perpetually reproduced and reformulated with no primordial *understanding* behind them. This leads to the constant “passing along” of *groundless* ideas. This perpetual recycling of empty word meanings ultimately leads to the reinforcement of what “*the they*” say: a bolstering of socially influenced linguistic patterns. According to Heidegger, this will lead to a world where *the they* (the linguistic patterns) dictate what and how we think.

The crucial conclusion of Heidegger’s “The Question Concerning Technology” is that LLMs don’t just symbolize, but actively reveal something about our way of being. The proliferation of LLMs isn’t just a bad example of discourse: it is a mirror. It reflects a world where our understanding of language has already been flattened. LLMs do not enable *idle talk*—*idle talk* is the *existential* enablement of LLMs. If, as Heidegger argued, a certain degree of human language hadn’t already been reduced to the passing along of *groundless* ideas we don’t understand, the success of LLMs would be impossible. In other words, their success proves that a significant part of our modern-day understanding of language has been reduced to *idle talk*.

Towards the end of “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger suggests that technology not only reveals our way of being-in-the-world but actively shapes its course.⁶² Through *destining* and *enframing*, technology not only reflects but actively determines the way we relate to the world around us. Heidegger would likely predict that LLM models will constitutively reinforce our already flattened understanding of language. The *existential-ontological* implications of this continual process extend far beyond misinformation or the perpetuation of social biases:

“Ontologically, this means that as Dasein maintains itself in idle talk, it is—as being-in- the-world—cut off from its primordially genuine relationships-of-Being towards the world, towards Dasein-with, and towards its very Being-in. Such a Dasein keeps floating unattached, yet in doing so, it is always alongside the world, with Others, and towards itself.”⁶³

A world dominated by *idle talk* is a world in which we have forgotten to understand one another. In Heidegger’s language, as the bond between language and primary understanding erodes, authentic discourse will fall apart. Most of language will devolve into the constant rein-

62 Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 9.

63 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 214.

forcement of the ideas of *the they*: the meaningless regurgitation of groundless linguistic patterns.

VII. Conclusion

This paper has sought to question the essence of large-language models through Heidegger’s phenomenological framework. By investigating their *existential* enablement, I have argued that LLMs reveal something profound about our relationship to *discourse*. Their architecture—the conversion of words into vectors, the statistical reformulation of linguistic patterns, the perpetual circulation of assertions devoid of primary understanding—reflects the prevalence of highly *thematic, inauthentic discourse* in the modern world. As a realm of revealing, LLMs disclose the veracity of Heidegger’s claim that language has been “flattened.”

The proliferation of LLMs is not merely symptomatic but revelatory. It suggests that our understanding of language has already been reduced to *idle talk* to a considerable extent. If *primary understanding* had not already been largely forsaken in favor of propositional truth, the success of systems that operate purely through statistical patterns would be impossible. In this sense, LLMs are not the cause of idle talk but its manifestation—and perhaps its ultimate confirmation.

Whether LLMs will further entrench this flattening or prompt us to recover authentic discourse remains an open question. What is certain, however, is that questioning their essence has revealed something unsettling about our current way of *being-in-the-world*: a world where *understanding* is increasingly detached from phenomenological experience, and where *the they* maintains its pervasive influence over what and how we think.

Towards the end of “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger offers us a glimpse of hope. Heidegger claims that the potential *saving power* from technology—which will enable us to reclaim a more authentic relationship with it—is a reclaiming of the act of *bringing-forth (poesis)*.⁶⁴ In Heidegger’s view, technological danger stems from the way it has corrupted the process of *bringing-forth*. Returning to the Greek term, *poesis*, which also translates to poetry, Heidegger suggests that a possible remedy for the corruption of language is poetic thinking. Clearly, LLMs can write poetry. However, on my reading, poetic thinking, doesn’t refer to poetry in the traditional sense—it designates a use of language that recaptures our primary, ready-to-hand form of understanding. Perhaps in this context, this paper, then, we can interpret him literally. Perhaps, the remedy to LLMs’ contamination of our understanding of language is a return to a more poetic way of speaking and thinking. In a world where LLMs reflect and encourage a flat understanding of language, perhaps we should turn to poetry to reclaim an *authentic* relationship with discourse.

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