



Rubrique Technologie / Tech Section

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ABSTRACT

I argue, through a concrete example of collaborative artistic work that I helped to develop, that computational literary art offers important new ways to investigate the culturally significant properties of language, aspects of text generation, medium specificity, and conventions of a genre of writing. In particular, I have personally learned about all of these in developing a bilingual text generator with Patsy Baudoin, one that takes three forms. *Rubrique Technologie / Tech Section (RT/TS for short)* automatically produces short French and English news items that imagine some of the ways technology will impact us in the near future. *RT/TS* has three manifestations, as (1) a website, (2) an installation, and (3) a book, the last of which is still in the final editorial stages. It uses two text generation methods to produce these items: Classical template-based generation and a large language model (LLM). We elaborated the project, doing further poetic and software development, as we devised each of these manifestations. Different languages, generation technologies, media, and genres could be used in other projects that are (at a high level) conceptually and formally similar; this could address different cultural concerns. Thanks to our artworks being free/libre/open source software (FLOSS), others can study and modify the work at the level of code and function.

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1. Introduction

Computational literary art can certainly treat its specific topic or subject matter in a compelling way, using the unique abilities of the computer and the network. At the same time, such a work can explore what it is made of — language and computation — to tease out the cultural, social, and political dimensions of both of these.

With Patsy Baudoin (who among other things is a professional translator), I developed *Rubrique Technologie / Tech Section (RT/TS)*. This is a text generator that produces French and English news items from the near future, describing events impacted by technology in some way.

Most of the generated news involves people getting struck by autonomous vehicles or even aircraft. Others describe labor disputes, hostile takeover attempts, inventions, and the termination of online services. While many of the texts are stamped out using an almost trivial method, a significant minority of them are generated using a large language model (LLM), leading to outcomes that are sometimes more amusing, but that do not obey the norms of news writing, often are not even narrative, and sometimes can be much less coherent.

One reading of *RT/TS* would consider it as a speculative fiction work, presenting a future of human interaction with computational technologies. If so, readers will note that what is imagined is not apocalyptic or discontinuous but features many of the same problems we face today. They are more severe: Driverless collisions with pedestrians seem almost ubiquitous in this future, for instance — and these are relegated to the “news in brief” section rather than being notable enough for a real article.

There is another reading, however, in which the particular content of these short news items is not as important as (1) their being produced across two languages, (2) the generation process using two distinct methods, (3) their manifesting in three different material forms and presentation formats, and (4) the play with the conventions of news writing. The whole system (in all three manifestations) is one in which human news writers have been replaced, for instance. The texts generated by one method are exceedingly repetitive after a bit of reading; those produced using the other are more varied but often nonsensical. There are also jarring mismatches across languages. Technological breakdown is not just what is happening in the system’s story world. It is enacted and exhibited at the level at which these events are told, of the narrative discourse (Genette 1980).

Creating a project that behaves in this seemingly broken way requires writing a computer program that works, one that generates text properly. The whole process involves a sort of copy-editing and proofreading of French and English text that is more iterative than usual, as the underlying system must be modified to address each error found. The result, however, is a piece of software that not only works in a way that suits us and may be of artistic value but could also be used in future projects. *RT/TS*, a literary artwork in itself, is, from a software development perspective, a fork of an earlier computational artwork of mine, *Tech Section* (Montfort 2023a). (A fork is a new project that originates as a copy of the source code of another project; this code is then modified, sometimes extensively.) *Tech Section* could have been forked and modified by anyone, because it is free/libre/open source software (FLOSS). *RT/TS* is also FLOSS, so others can study it and even use it as the basis of their own projects, which may be in languages other than French and English, may use other text generation methods. They may, for that matter, manifest in yet other material ways and engage with different genres of writing.

2. Working across French and English

A fundamental aspect of *RT/TS* is that it generates “pseudo-parallel” texts in French and English. A careful monolingual French reader, and a monolingual English reader who reads closely, will have a fairly similar experience of the project, missing a significant dimension of it. A reader who knows both languages and catches on that some of the supposedly parallel texts are divergent will have a very different experience of the project, as discussed in the next section.

We decided to develop text generation that was “localized” to a French context in a few ways. The names of characters, for instance, are almost entirely French ones, with only a handful of names from other national and cultural contexts. Company names (some of which are generated) were also crafted to be French-like. Finally, we felt that the selection of professions or roles for characters needed to accommodate what could be expressed in a native way in French.

In all of these cases, some of the nuances of French influenced *RT/TS* and resulted in different choices than were made in the English predecessor project, *Tech Section*. In both *Tech Section* and *RT/TS*, the characters have unisex or gender-neutral given names. In both projects, there is an ironic edge to this, because the characters end up being spoken of as male or female, with masculine or feminine pronouns. It’s as if a Utopian idea from years ago, in which the society was beyond gender, collapsed into a gender binary once again. One cultural aspect that became very clear during the project is how the supply of current French unisex names is much smaller than those in English. *Tech Section* also forms company names by combining two words into a phrasal verb without a space, e.g., “ChewUp” and “DropDown.” French isn’t amenable to such phrasal verb constructions. We needed to accommodate this in different ways — using morphological combinations beginning with “Mini,” for instance — a subtle reference to the Minitel — and simply admitting that some companies will have English-sounding names. Finally, there were some challenges providing native French names for professions or roles that correspond to very cutting-edge names in English. Our “pundit” corresponds to “un expert «à la mode»” or “une experte «à la mode»” — a solution we found pleasing. Unfortunately, we found no good way to express “disruptor” in French, and we sought to only use the names of professions that could be expressed plainly in French and English. Although there are disruptors (those who attempt to stir up change in industries) in the earlier *Tech Section*, *RT/TS* is not a translation of that project, and we did not end up using this term or a similar “profession” in our collaboration.

3. Classical and contemporary natural language generation

The project uses two types of text generation. The difference between these may be amusing to select readers. It could be seen as a critique of both generation methods.

The classical mode of text generation that is used is even simpler than most serious natural language generation (NLG) methods from the 1970s on (Reiter 1995). I call it “template-based,” even though our project’s method is slightly more sophisticated and involves using small-scale schemata, higher-level structures. A template is a string of text with blanks or slots in it. Different words are placed in these slots at different times to produce a final output. For instance, in *RT/TS*, the names of human characters and the types of robots which strike them and which report the collision are used to fill slots in standardized templates. These templates are parallel in French and English; filling a pair of templates results in two texts that say more or less the same thing, although the syntax often varies. From an author’s or developer’s standpoint, it is easy to devise templates that result in exactly the sorts of sentences desired. However, because these templates are all enumerated in the underlying program, there is a small set of them and the sentences that result become repetitive quite quickly. Although this repetition cannot be revealed by a single example, one template-generated text pair is:

Un endoscope autonome qui étonne les experts a été conçu par Alex Oraison, 25 ans, qui a commencé sa carrière en tant qu’administratrice système.

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Alex Oraison, 25, who initially worked as a system administrator, invented an autonomous endoscope that astounds experts.

Other texts are generated by a large language model (LLM), a “deep learning” system using the Transformer architecture and pre-trained on large amounts of data (Stryker n.d.). The model we used was a FLOSS model by French AI startup Mistral and has about seven billion parameters. The LLM-generated pairs of texts begin with a parallel sentence, e.g., “Apparemment les robots se débrouillent bien dans la cuisine quand les chefs de cuisine n’y sont pas / Robots manage very well in the kitchen, apparently, when the cooks are away.” Because of how LLMs function, the texts that follow do not align. They are simply continuations that sounds somewhat plausible. In fact, even when a completion is generated multiple times *in a single language*, the LLM-generated text continuation has a completely different sense. For instance, the English example sentence was completed by the LLM in these different ways:

⌘ “They also manage very well in schoolyards, when the kids are away.”

⌘ “But the question is: how far are they really from taking over the whole thing? Will there be any need for humans in the next years?”

⌘ “This is evidenced by the study of Italian physicists, who developed an intelligent robot cooker, able to cook a dinner according to your taste.”

None of the French continuations mean anything like these or other English continuations. The result is that this mode of generation is less repetitive and sometimes might be judged as whimsical or even creative. The author / artist can control exactly what is stated in template-based generation, whereas the LLM produces plausible-sounding texts that have no connection to any meaning, intended or otherwise. We used continuations that were exactly as output by the LLM, making only very minor orthographic corrections. For instance, we replaced non-typographical apostrophes and quotations marks with typographical ones. We did not correct any spelling or similar errors, choose to generate a new text if there were any mistakes of this sort. A complete example of a French / English pair of this sort is:

Avec son bras mécanique, un robot déjà bien connu s’est recyclé en podcaster. Doté de l’une des voix les plus appréciées, l’acteur américain fut l’unique voix de l’ordinateur de la fameuse machine à voyager dans le temps.

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With its mechanical arm, an already-famous robot pursued a new career as a podcaster. It covers, for example, how 3D printing is helping to feed the hungry; the world’s coolest pizza-making robot; a high-tech prosthetic limb that feels almost like a real limb.

4. Three different manifestations

As is the case with other projects of mine, *RT/TS* has multiple manifestations. The first of these was a website created for the online IMPEC Galerie and posted there on July 1, 2024 (Baudoin & Montfort 2024). Visually, this manifestation was similar, although not quite

identical, to *Tech Section*. Both have black-on-white text. French/English pairs are added one at a time, slowly enough to be read. Once the text reaches the bottom, the items scroll upwards as each new one is added.

The next manifestation was included in the exhibition *Le Monde selon l'IA / The World through AI* in Paris, at the Musée de Jeu de Paume, April 11–September 21, 2025 (Baudoin & Montfort 2025). We made only a few corrections to the text generation but developed a new visual appearance. The new concept was that of a news ticker, appearing on a curved monitor and scrolling right to left, with the French above the English in each individual generated pair of texts. To invite readers to think about the work in a historical as well as contemporary context, we included a shelf next to the monitor with two books: Félix Fénéon's *Nouvelles en trois lignes* and the English translation of this book by Lucy Sante, *Novels in Three Lines*. These contain short news items that appeared in *Le Matin* in 1906, admired today for their style and the special way they represent that historical moment.

The third manifestation, nearing completion, is a book we hope will be published by Rrose Editions in Paris. It will likely have a different title from the overall project, perhaps *Faits divers / News in Brief*. While the text generation done in first two manifestations was quite similar, the distinction between scrolling text on a screen and text printed in a book led us to extensively revise and correct the functioning of the system. In the previous manifestations, it was not a problem for a pair of texts to be repeated verbatim a few minutes later. It was also fine for two inconsistent news items to appear a few minutes apart — e.g., the online service BouffeCourse could be shut down by one company at noon, while another pair of texts at 12:15 p.m. could declare that it was shut down by a different company. This couldn't plausibly happen in the fictional world being reported on, but the way the artwork is experienced in a gallery means that it is unlikely that visitors will notice such inconsistencies. If they do, it might simply amuse them that the system is glitching.

Expectations for a book, even a computer-generated one, are different, however. It is fine, with the proper framing for there to be the core types of “problem texts” — repetitive template-generated news, nonsensical LLM-generated paragraphs. But exact repetition, and contradiction as well, are more likely to make it seem as if the authors / artists have made mistakes. While we were dealing with these issues to prevent them from cropping up, we took the opportunity to revise and improve the store of personal given names (to make them more entirely unisex) and to provide French-like names for more services and companies.

5. All the news that's barely fit to print

In English, what is produced might appear in a “news in brief” section. In French, these texts might be called *faits divers*, brief items about miscellaneous occurrences that are in some way amusing or telling. Fénéon was a remarkable writer of these; the *RT/TS* system, whether it is using template-based or LLM techniques, does not match him or contemporary journalists working in this genre. The template-based texts may seem a bit interesting the first time they are read, but as similar incidents are related, there is little stylistic variation at first. Eventually, a reader will find even that variation exhausted. The LLM-generated texts might be livelier, but they seldom provide a short narrative in the *faits divers* genre.

These failings might be considered a defect of our project, or they might be seen as critiques of these two modes of text generation. In any case, the output does represent things that are just barely worth mentioning in a newspaper, which is a comment on the future these writings are supposed to describe. The events are uncommon enough to get a very short writeup but don't warrant a full article.

6. Free/libre/open source software

I release my individual and collaborative computational art and poetry projects as free/libre/open source software (FLOSS), so they are available for anyone to study, share, and modify. I also promote FLOSS as a publisher and through my lab/studio, The Trope Tank.

My FLOSS projects can be used as the foundation for other digital media artworks, because anyone is welcome to fork (or “remix”) my projects — taking the source code and modifying it for their own purposes. There are dozens of forks of my short computational poem *Taroko Gorge* that I know about; because it is frequently used for classroom exercises, it is likely that it has been modified and made into new artworks hundreds of times.

The complexity of *RT/TS* makes it unlikely that it will be as widely used in this way, but others may study this project in order to critique it, use components of it, combine it with other computational artworks, or elaborate it into something else. Releasing software (including software art) as FLOSS is part of an ethos of sharing and supporting all people who use computers; it is an alternative to corporate enclosure and obscurity.

7. Conclusion

Rubrique Technologie / Tech Section is an artistic and poetic project. I also consider it an investigation — not a traditional research project, but one that can help us learn. It is an investigation into the nature of *faits divers* as a genre of writing, into the potential of FLOSS, and into literary collaboration. I find it most important that *RT/TS* works across French and English, template-based generation and LLM generation, screen-based and print-based manifestations, and the levels of narrative discourse and that of story. By doing so, *RT/TS* investigates these aspects in a particularly rich and comparative way. I can conclude that I have personally learned from the collaborative artistic process and can summarize the insights I have gained on this journey. Then, I can explain what I hope the project will offer to others who wish to think across languages, technologies, media, and the levels of expression and content.

I've completed several projects that have screen-based and print-based manifestations (including *Autopia* and the collaboration 2x6), have done many screen-based digital projects, and published several computer-generated books with different presses. Nevertheless, *RT/TS* revealed in a particularly clear way that the transient appearance of language on screen can be a “forgiving” manifestation when compared to a printed book. Perhaps my beginner's French, inadequate to the task of even basic copy editing and proofreading, made this more evident to me. Even if language-based projects shown in galleries and museums may allow for repetition and contradiction (as in *RT/TS*), they can be difficult to accomplish in certain other ways, because it is a challenge to invite museum visitors to read them (Montfort 2023b). Juxtaposing a screen-based work with books, as done in the *Jeu de Paume* installation, may help suggest to visitors that they become readers.

Those who experience this project in its several manifestations are welcome to take from it whatever they wish, but if they are willing to read deeply, they have the chance to notice how the way *RT/TS* tells its news stories (though two different flawed forms of text generation) and how it relates to the underlying story world that is presented as speculative fiction. While Baudoin and I have been the most engaged in the way different manifestations (on-screen vs. printed) have their own interactions with code and concept, it seems to me that those who experience the project are less likely to read across manifestations and more likely to read across languages, across generation technologies, and across the levels of narration and diegesis.

There is a third way that people can engage with *RT/TS* — neither by originating the project, as we collaborators did; nor as readers who encounter it online, in a museum, or as a book. Others may decide to make their own projects that draw on our work, either conceptually or by using our code. These projects could be across different languages, and more than two. They could use different text generation methods — grammars provide another option, for instance. They could present their new projects in different material forms and/or different contexts. For instance, neither a screen nor printed output is necessary to present computer-generated language; a speaker producing synthesized speech could be employed. Finally, while we have focused on one subgenre of news writing, the *fait divers*, many other fine-grained genres could be investigated by artistic, poetic text generation systems that are somewhat like *RT/TS*. I certainly do not mean that a project by collaborators in the United States, generating two European languages, should colonize the world and be re-staged across cultures. Because of the freedoms that FLOSS allows, it could be quite the opposite: The project's code and concepts are open for exploitation. If any of these are of use to anyone who wishes to use them, they could support profoundly different projects not only in many languages and genres but also languages rooted in disparate cultural traditions.

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