**////Title: Grammalepsy: The Art of Language as Culture Goes Digital**

**////Standfirst:**

The term literature refers to a wide and diverse range of work, including novels, poems, plays, and essays. While literary experts agree that all literature is composed of language, they often argue about which texts can or should be considered as a part of the literature that we value. In recent years, technological advances have led to the creation of innovative works that merge language with digital media, state-of-the-art technologies and computation itself. In a fascinating book called *Grammalepsy*, Professor John Cayley of Brown University introduces a new theory of aesthetic linguistic practice that could shed new light on digital literature or, more comprehensively, language art.

**////Main text:**

Over the course of history, our understanding of literature has continuously evolved, with different forms of literary expression emerging and countless new authors publishing their work. Generally speaking, most of us still view literature as the highest form of linguistic art.

While novels and other creative written works are unquestionably referred to as literature, dramatic writing may not always perceived as ‘literary.’ Many experts are also in disagreement about, for example, forms of language art that are performed – like spoken word poetry – read out loud, or presented through different types of media.

Over the past few decades, technological developments have opened up new possibilities for the creation of language-based art, not only enabling the production and dissemination of artistic texts using digital media tools and electronic devices, but also using algorithms, code, and emerging technologies – such as AI (co-called Artificial Intelligence) – to compose and create language for us to read. While many artists and writers are now using technology to create their art, the relationship between literature, language art, and digital media is still somewhat undefined and confusing.

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John Cayley, a professor of literary arts at Brown University, as well as a poet, translator, and publisher, was one of the pioneers of language-based digital art. For more than three decades, since the beginning of personal computing, he has been experimenting with the use of computer programs and algorithms to create poetic texts.

In September of 2018, Professor Cayley published a book called *Grammalepsy: Essays on Digital Language Art*, which brings together writing on work that he produced over the past decades, along with his theoretical understanding of language-based digital art. The book offers valuable insights into the world of what is generally known as electronic literature, while also introducing a theory of aesthetic linguistic practice that could aid in the production and critical appreciation of digital literature and language art that is not printed: work that is, literally, outside the ‘world of letters.’

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The terms ‘grammalepsy’ and ‘grammalepsis’, coined by Professor Cayley, refer to the processes through which humans create, understand, and appreciate language, to the ‘grasp’ (*lepsis*) and understanding of traces of language (*gramma*) in any form. In his book, Professor Cayley highlights the overall tendency of literary critics to underestimate aesthetic linguistic works created using digital technology. Language can be grasped, says Professor Cayley, through any readable media.

He suggests that digitally-based or generated language art is a powerful means of expression for writers who are particularly drawn to aesthetics and audio-visual art. This work should not be dismissed or pigeon-holed as ‘electronic,’ but should instead be read for its art of language, with the same appreciation as the literature we know best.

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Rather than focusing primarily on the specific media used to create innovative language-based art, Professor Cayley believes that scholars and literary critics should focus on the true medium underlying these works, which is language, and not on any particular technology that supports this language. Just like novels and other forms of literature, therefore, these new creations are forms of language-based art, which are simply aligned with the digital cultural architecture of our times.

Professor Cayley affirms that the digital media and technology used to create digital language art does indeed break with convention and creates new forms of literature. In other words, he agrees with a number of scholars that literature and language should adopt the digital forms now available to artists – responding to changes in society and reflecting – critically, creatively – on the current digital era.

The literature we still know and love is, typically, produced in the form of books: novels, poetry, dramatic writing, and so on, but digital technology has brought enormous changes, allowing writers to produce works that convey ideas and feelings by appealing, all at once, to more than one of the human senses, and by allowing words to move and change over time, on our screens and also in the voices of our ‘smart speakers.’

According to Professor Cayley, if they can be read by humans, then strings of letters and punctuation that are generated by code are traces of language, irrespective of the fact that they are encoded inside a machine. They can be grasped by us as language. Therefore, instead of emphasising any distinction between conventional literature and ‘digital’ forms of language art, he prefers to focus on the effects of digitalisation on those arts that we value as literature.

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In his book, Professor Cayley talks about the meaning and significance of language, as a core capability that sets humans apart from other animals. He reflects on the meaning of language throughout history, summarising the views of some of the most renowned philosophers.

He then emphasises that any differences we perceive between language and so-called digital language is not the readable content that this language conveys, but merely the ways in which this content is delivered or generated, and the historical era in which it is produced. At the core, however delivered or generated, the texts or traces of languages remain linguistic expressions that are processed, understood, and interpreted by readers. He sees all this as readers actually bringing language into being through what he calls ‘grammalepsy’ (or ‘grammaleptic reading’) – our moment-to-moment grasp of what the language means.

This new theoretical insight offers a different way of understanding language-based art including digital language art, insisting that for a reader to ‘read’ and appreciate literary work, it does not necessarily need to be presented as conventional text in a book. In other words, as our culture has evolved, so has our art and literature, yet new forms will have an equal impact on society and individuals.

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Professor Cayley’s new, fascinating outlook on the new forms of digital literature also stresses the importance of distinguishing between the digitisation of sound and the digitisation of language in aurality – linguistic sounds that can be grammaleptically read by humans.

As technology continues to develop and transform our society, we will most likely encounter an increasing number of linguistic artworks expressed through digital media, particularly in the realm of aurality and currently in the form of artificial listeners and speakers: smart speakers, speech recognition and speech synthesis. Professor Cayley’s recent book and the new theory he proposes could prove incredibly valuable for understanding these works, helping us to see them in a new light: as co-evolved literary and language art works that are aligned with the current times.

Ultimately, Professor Cayley hopes that his theory and artistic efforts will encourage other writers and artists to help reconfigure the conception of literature that has been in place for centuries, using modern technology and computation to convey language and its art in new, immersive, and engaging ways.

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This SciPod is a summary of the chapter ‘At the End of Literature’, from the book *Grammalepsy: Essays on Digital Language Art*. [doi.org/10.7273/hk5k-2350](https://doi.org/10.7273/hk5k-2350)

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