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Through the Magic Lens: Management, Language, and AI

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Abstract: In this essay, we explore management, language, and artificial intelligence (AI). We highlight how management performs generative AI as magic and argue for the continued crucial role of humans under conditions of AI hype. We view language as an essential part of management to impress, to weave the illusion of expertise, and to manufacture our consent. We argue that performing AI as magic brings this into sharp relief, showing how power and ideology in and around AI operate when its advancement is constructed as inevitable. We encourage discussion on this and propose more research on resistance to management performing AI, on the gendered nature of AI and its consequences, and on AI-powered management clones and their language when agentic AI enters the stage. The magic lens offers a fruitful way forward in studying these fundamentally important topics.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, management, language, magic

Introduction

In this essay, we apply the lens of magic to explore management, language, and artificial intelligence (AI). How executives and managers—people at the top echelons of organizations—accomplish outcomes with language, often with problematic effects and dire consequences for others, is a crucial subject of inquiry. We argue that this is particularly timely and relevant under conditions of AI and the hype around it. However, while critical studies sensitive to language have uncovered the workings of power in management (for different ways, see e.g., Fischer & Alvesson, 2025; Jackall, 1988; Spicer, 2017), the seemingly inevitable progress of AI as a solution for everything today seems to be stifling language-based critique. The focus has shifted to technologies and their advancement, and critical work drawing on social sciences and humanities can be dismissed as outmoded by proponents of AI (Vesa & Tienari, 2022).

We see this lack of attention to the language of management under conditions of AI as deeply problematic because it ignores the continued crucial role of humans in organizations and workplaces. It also silences discussion

on the darker side of AI, for example, its lack of transparency (Hannigan et al., 2024) and its in-built biases (Manasi et al., 2022). The focus on technologies over humans is reflected in how AI is reshaping academic work, and it risks rendering research and writing acontextual, uncritical, and unreflexive (for critique, see e.g., Bechky & Davis, 2025; Larson et al., 2024; Lindebaum & Fleming, 2024).

To challenge these developments, we draw on the rich tradition of studying new technologies through the lens of magic (Gell, 1988; Kuhn et al., 2008). We look at generative AI as illusion rather than supernatural, although the distinction is often difficult to make when witnessing magic in action. We understand AI magic in management as "appearing to perform supernatural feats" (Tienari, 2025) and scrutinize how language contributes to these performances, rendering AI as taken for granted (cf., Fairclough, 1989). We hope to spur discussion on management performances that seek to secure our consent to "truths" about AI. The magic lens enables us to shed light on aspects of management, language, and AI that often pass unnoticed.

In the following, we first establish the case for critical scrutiny of management, language, and AI. We then outline our take on management and language, moving from a focus on management talk to performances where management engages with new technologies. Next, we specify our critical approach to language and power, focusing on the manufacturing of "truths". We go on to introduce our magic lens and use it to interpret an illustrative example of management performing AI. Finally, we offer conclusions and provide ideas for future research.

Management under conditions of AI

Looking at management, language, and AI through the lens of magic is not as far-fetched as it may seem. Management is grounded in language, and it can be studied through discourses, narratives, stories, speech, talk, or whatever concept one prefers. Language helps executives and managers to get things done in ways that appear convincing in the eyes of key stakeholders. Through language, management can gather support for change; articulate visions and strategies

and solidify business models; excite and satisfy investors and customers; and engage employees. If magic is understood as creating senses of illusion (Kuhn et al., 2008), this seems inherent to management. Under conditions of AI hype, management language arguably takes magical forms—and the magic is driven by advancing technologies and their promises of success.

Today, no self-respecting executive or manager can ignore AI. A journalist for the Finnish daily newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* (Wacker, 2025) followed company presentations for investors and noticed that executive-level AI talk today follows the same pattern: AI will transform the industry, the executive's company is at the apex of the development, and AI is thus more of an opportunity than a threat to them. The journalist lamented that AI is becoming an absolute value rather than a technology or tool for companies. He noted that executives present AI as *the* solution to everything. The risk, he said, is that organizations will not be developed in their entirety, but through the assumed benefits of AI.

Interestingly, a recent study by MIT claims that "despite $30–40 billion in enterprise investment into GenAI […] 95% of organizations are getting zero return" (MIT, 2025, p. 3). The authors describe a great divide where "just 5% of integrated AI pilots are extracting millions in value, while the vast majority remain stuck with no measurable P&L impact". One aspect of this is that while AI is likely to increase productivity of individuals, this does not necessarily translate into organizational productivity. Of course, the magic of AI may be further perpetuated by such observations where it seems to benefit only the chosen few.

Unconditional AI talk is not coincidental. It reflects a fundamental shift where new technologies and AI in their multiple forms are sweeping through organizations, societies, and markets. Hype around AI is orchestrated by those who develop, sell, and invest in it, and it is sustained by media and researchers who are tempted to follow the money and fail to act as a check on industry power (Narayanan & Kapoor, 2024).

Also, there is not one AI but an endless number of AI technologies, tools, and applications. These are computer systems that can perform tasks that would traditionally be understood to require humans and their intelligence. Generative AI models are created using algorithms and training data, and

they learn from experiences. Popular tools such as ChatGPT are types of large language model (LLM) that respond to user prompts with AI-generated images, texts, or videos, simulating conversational interactions. They are based on sophisticated machine learning algorithms that have been trained on large data sets published on the Internet (see e.g., Jiang & Hyland, 2025).

AI is also a marketing term used by those who develop and sell these technologies to make others "believe that their technology is similar to humans, able to do things that […] require human judgement, perception, or creativity" (Bender & Hanna, 2024, p. 5). Narayanan and Kapoor (2024) note that "consumer--facing AI has finally, after many, many decades, crossed the threshold of usefulness" (p. 166). However, they warn us against "AI snake oil", referring to "AI that does not and cannot work as advertised" (p. 2). This is why there is a strong case for critical scrutiny of management and language under conditions of AI.

Management talk

Our essay is grounded on the premise that language does not merely describe the world but helps to socially construct it. While this is nothing new to linguists and social scientists, most mainstream management, technology, and AI theorists continue to downplay or ignore the power of language. Yet, mastering the "right" language has always been a fundamentally important part of management. It helps those who manage to navigate the complexities of their everyday work clouded by ambiguity, incomplete information, multiple points of view, and conflicting responsibilities (Andrews, 1989). Jackall (1988) talked about "moral mazes" in management. He elucidated how moral consciousness is shaped in a corporate world where "instead of ability, talent, and dedicated service to an organization, politics, adroit talk, luck, connections, and self--promotion are the real sorters of people into sheep and goats" (ibid., p. 3). Jackall (1988) concluded that successful managers are "dexterous symbol manipulators" and that "adroit talk" is a crucial part of their work.

Scholars have also noted that the language of management is selective and at times only loosely coupled with what is done in practice (see e.g., Fischer

& Alvesson, 2025). Management talk tends to be (overly) positive: drawing people's attention to positive aspects of what ought to be happening and providing positive interpretations of what seems to be happening. This leads to gaps between talking and doing. Fischer and Alvesson (2025) argue that these gaps are systemic. The key is not whether management talk is truthful or deceptive—it is about responding to systemic pressures and opportunities, and it offers "egocentric, psycho-relational, and public-image benefits" for those doing the talking (p. 1).

Of course, these insights seem to suggest that talking is not doing. For us, talking is at the very heart of doing or performing management. This is what makes management language and talk fascinating—and prone to magic. Scholars have elucidated discrepancies in how management and employees in organizations experience and talk about AI (Einola et al., 2024). Executives and managers embrace the future, use bold discourse, and talk about substituting humans with technologies. Employees often inhabit a different reality, where they are forced to grapple with the present, struggle to make progress in practice, and continuously meet new demands at work (ibid.).

At the same time, management talk tends to be complex and filled with jargon. This is because everyone wants a piece of it: current and potential owners and investors, clients and customers, employees, competitors, politicians, policymakers, and social media influencers. The list is endless. Complex and at times ambiguous management talk is needed, it seems, for navigating complex spaces that are filled with contrasts, contradictions, tensions, and struggles. Management talk aims to impress and to give the impression (or illusion) of expertise and control (Laine et al., 2016)—and it allows one to blather on without saying much that is worthwhile. Spicer (2017) argues that management talk can be bullshit. Bullshit is talk that is intended to persuade without regard for the truth (Frankfurt, 2005).

Spicer (2017) shows how bullshit as "empty talk" helps management dodge tough questions and rally support for "hollow change" that is constantly discussed but often meaningless. Even if executives and managers know that turning to bullshit is probably not the best idea, they may feel compelled to do it. And the more they do it, the more naturally it can flow. Soon, executives and

managers may start to think that empty words will trump reasonable reflection and considered action. Sadly, this often seems to be the case. Spicer (2017) concludes that bullshit empties out language and makes management less able to think clearly and soberly about the real issues. This is why management talk can sometimes be not only "adroit" (Jackall, 1988) or "empty" (Spicer, 2017) but dangerous, too.

Peppering management talk with AI is an example. However, exploring management and language in conditions of AI arguably calls for a more comprehensive understanding where language is viewed as performative, and talk is intertwined with managerial bodies and technologies.

Management performances

In studying management, language, and AI, we broaden our view from talk to performances. First, executives and managers are not what they used to be— and their appearance is different—and this is reflected in the talk. They have turned into trimmed managerial athletes whose bodies and movements radiate energy and stamina (Johansson et al., 2017; Meriläinen et al., 2015). Gone are the double chins and wobbly stomachs that once signified management status and affluence. Managerial athletes today have no time for boozy lunches and long dinners. They exercise and train, keep a strict diet, and monitor their sleep. They perform managerial athleticism effectively and efficiently, making sure that they are at the top of their game every day. They are on an eternal quest for fitness and wellness (cf., Cederström & Spicer, 2015).

Second, technologies have become a crucial part of management performances. Long before AI, technologies enabled executives and managers to optimize, improve, and impress. Technological gadgets are ever more sophisticated and they offer new ways to measure and monitor the self and others. Applications in smart phones, watches, and rings persuade executives and managers to optimize their bodily functions and to take their "self--improvement" to new heights (Cederström & Spicer, 2017). Executives and managers with healthy and fit bodies routinely engage in talk that embraces

the opportunities offered by advancing technologies to the extent that it can be argued that management performances today are technologized. They are enabled by technologies—and they increasingly take place on digital platforms that help make them instantly viral. As the AI hype testifies, management performances are also increasingly *about* technologies.

Advancing technologies unleash human creativity in setting standards, measuring, and assessing how we—and, crucially, others—behave and perform in organizations. Executives and managers tend to be driven people and they cherish competition and competitiveness. AI-powered tools and technological gadgets encourage competition as well as measurement, and social media and other technology-enabled platforms provide spaces for sharing "results" and comparing them with those who matter. There are thus endless new opportunities for impressing others. This underlines how management is commonly portrayed as omnipotent, visionary, and in control (Laine et al., 2016), and how its language and performances reflect these ideals.

In all, viewing management as performances, we extend understandings of language beyond what is said and written. This includes managerial bodies as well as the visual and aesthetic and, crucially, the technologies that enable management to be performed in new ways. Under conditions of AI and the hype around it, scrutinizing management performances arguably calls for a critical focus on language and power.

Language and power: Looking at management and AI critically

Building on the premise that language helps to construct the world and that it is performative, we adopt a critical perspective. Our focus is on how management uses language and engages in performances to advance their own interests (and the interests of the companies they represent), often against the interests of those who are not beneficial for the management agenda. It follows from this that we understand language to be related to power or, more precisely, that language use is connected to unequal relations of power in organizations

and society (Fairclough, 1989). Following Fairclough's ideas, we explore how language contributes to the domination of some over others, in other words, how language arises out of specific relations of power and how it gives rise to these very relations when management is performed with talk, embodiment, and technologies.

Fairclough's (1989) interest in theorizing ideology is noteworthy here. His take on how ideology works in and through language to reproduce taken-for--granted assumptions and understandings and "truths" is valuable for unmasking management language and what it does under conditions of AI hype. When something becomes considered as "common-sense", we think, critical scrutiny is needed. How management is performed in the name of AI is an example, and how this is related to unequal power relations is a crucial question. We focus on how power is exercised through the manufacture of consent. Fairclough (1989) reminds us that its primary means is ideology. We are interested in the workings of power in management performances; how management language is embedded in embodied and technologized performances that make us believe that AI can achieve what is envisioned.

Forms and consequences of developing and using AI are already visible in organizations. Research tells us, for example, that AI interacts with humans in decision-making and problem solving (Murray et al., 2021), and that it influences management team dynamics (Vuori, 2025) and strategic choices in organizations (Krakowski et al., 2023; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021). AI stirs emotions and interaction (Einola et al., 2024) as well as trust among organizational members (Vuori et al., 2025). As observed in a study in financial services, AI relieves customer advisors of routine tasks, leaving them with more complex queries that can cause stress, especially as their performance is measured by daily query volume (Einola et al., 2025). While customer advisors turned AI trainers may see their roles as an upgrade, their new position risks obsolescence once AI becomes sufficiently intelligent (ibid.). The power of AI thus operates through multiple ways involving humans across organizational hierarchies. In our view, its language warrants more critical scrutiny.

In all, looking at management performances critically means that we explore power in performing AI. How humans and technologies are intertwined is not

a new question (Einola & Khoreva, 2023; Orlikowski, 2005) but under conditions of AI it attains new meanings (Scarbrough et al., 2024). AI pushes management to perform—and to convince and impress us—in unforeseen ways. A bit of magic seems to be needed in management performances.

Through the magic lens

Magic is a way of dealing with the world by trying to achieve something by doing something else. The concept is multifaceted (Bailey, 2006) but it is associated with illusion and the supernatural, and it straddles our social realities and fantasies. In Obadia's (2022) words magic "injects the extraordinary into the ordinary". Crucially, magic feeds on our assumptions. As illusion, it is grounded in the magician's ability to control attention, distort perception, and influence choice (Kuhn et al., 2008; Truitt, 2015). Magic produces a sense of wonder and skilled magicians can manipulate our assumptions, leading to a result that seems inconsistent with what is occurring. Part of the magic is that we are kept in suspense as to what we will witness and experience next (Kuhn et al., 2008.).

In many fields of research, AI is likened to magic. AI represents new technologies through which magic can be expressed (Davis, 2015; Obadia, 2022). When interacting with humans, AI requires "some illusion of animacy and thought" (Sharkey & Sharkey, 2006). Viewing AI as magic is part of a long trajectory of critically discussing the magical features of technologies (see e.g., Gell, 1988; Leaver & Srdanov, 2023; Obadia, 2022). Societies and markets tend to set unrealistic expectations for technologies, and this is a major reason for likening them to magic (Stivers, 2001). Also, references to magic help signify the potential that AI holds for us (Francisco, 2015), for example, in dealing with our human desire to find connections, to understand complex phenomena, and to "address the fundamentally indeterminate condition of human existence" (Larsson & Viktorelius, 2024, p. 189).

One basis for its magic is that AI intrudes into our lives with a discourse that is oriented towards the future, offering promises of inevitable progress.

The powerful discourse of AI can be thought of as "unruly" (Lagerkvist & Reimer, 2023) and its capacity to straddle reality and fantasy combined with the future orientation fuels ever wilder representations of AI as magic. When we assume that AI is (like) magic, it helps us make sense of the world and imagine what could be (Tienari, 2025). Magic triggers "the hyped imagination of what is possible, not what is realistic" (Elish & Boyd, 2018, p. 58).

Because magic is about manipulating symbols—and about catching our attention and working on our assumptions—making AI appear magical is very much about language and performances (Tienari, 2025). For AI magic to materialize, however, audiences must believe that AI will deliver on the promises made in its name. In their performances, AI magicians rely on audiences who become complicit in magical acts and in amplifying AI hype (ibid.). Keeping up the hype is necessary to repeatedly capture our interest, allowing AI magicians to continue appearing to perform supernatural feats.

The problem with AI—and the basis for its magic—is that it is not transparent. AI-powered tools and technologies (and their algorithms and training data) remain opaque (Hannigan et al., 2024). The grounding for their capacity to shape and transform our practices often passes unnoticed (Lange et al., 2019). AI gets under our skin but often so subtly that we do not recognize its power over us—or even care about it (Tienari, 2025; Hannigan et al., 2024). As audiences, we become prey to management performances that are designed to convince us, and it is increasingly difficult to question what is sold to us in the name of AI. We end up reproducing taken-for-granted assumptions and "truths". Power operates in and through magical management performances of AI, manufacturing our consent (cf., Fairclough, 1989).

Although technologized management talk is often difficult to decipher, we must not take the magic performed in the name of AI at face value. AI algorithms are not free from biases but have learnt to efficiently automate them (Maaranen et al., 2022). They help AI tools to "automate bullshit", as computer scientists Narayanan and Kapoor (2024) put it. In his critical take on business bullshit, Spicer (2017) reminds us that where there is demand, there is supply. Talking up change, transformation, and disruption requires a constant supply of new management fads and fashions. A massive industry of business bullshit

merchants has supplied these long before the present AI hype (Spicer, 2017). AI is not a fad or bullshit, of course, but bullshit can be manufactured and sold in its name. Hannigan et al. (2024) talk about "botshit", drawing our attention to "untruthful content" produced by AI-powered tools—and uncritically used and spread by humans (p. 471).

As magic, then, opaque AI feeds on our assumptions and imagination. When the seemingly impenetrable workings of AI are the subject of media hype, its magical appearance is bolstered (Leaver & Srdanov, 2023). This paves the way for AI performances that are designed to draw our attention. While previous tech hype cycles have ended in some form of disappointment, we are persuaded to believe that now everything will be different—that we are living through a transformation where AI technologies will disrupt everything in our lives (for critical views, see e.g., Bender & Hanna, 2024; Narayanan & Kapoor, 2024; Tienari, 2025; Vesa & Tienari, 2022).

Welcome to the magic show!

To illustrate the arguments above, we present an example of how AI is performed as magic. This is not one of those mundanely magical management performances that characterize daily organizational life, but an event, spectacle, or magic show where a high-profile figure takes the stage to convince us of their views and visions. The Magician in question is a famous innovator and corporate executive and poster boy for AI that is accessible to all. He has established in media and social media the status of a visionary. In our example, he performs in a carefully staged and broadcast conversation with a professional host. A video of the conversation is publicly available online and AI offers a transcript of it alongside the video. The following vignette offers our interpretation of what happens in the conversation. We watched the video some four months after it was shared online, and by that time it had been viewed over two million times.

The Magician in action

Lights. Camera. AI. Action. Two white men sit on stage facing each other, with a low table between them. The conversation is carefully staged and performed. The younger man, The Magician, appears casually lean and fit, wearing a dark tight-fitting pullover, jeans, and sneakers. A bright spotlight is on the performers before a live audience, with big screens behind them. Several cameras film the performance, which is distributed through online channels. A local event becomes a global, viral performance enjoyed by viewers across time and place.

After the greetings, we are offered a cue for the performance. The host celebrates The Magician's company and its incredible products. The host is excited about how The Magician's AI tool generates images and videos. He tells us that he used the tool to create an image of his guest and himself. We are shown this image on the screen, and the audience laughs as they discover how it looks astonishingly like the two men. The host and The Magician joke about the AI-generated image. The host suggests that it is above average, and The Magician modestly agrees. The banter highlights its notably high quality.

The performance is in full swing. AI is performed, using the local venue amplified with global technologies to construct authority, vision, and legitimacy for millions of viewers. If this is an above average result for The Magician and his company, we can only imagine what new wonders are in store for us. The host continues with his exciting examples, and while the first was about what the AI tool can do visually, the next zooms in on its intelligence. The host shares his astonishment as he tells us how he asked for a diagram on a tricky subject and the AI tool obliged, creating an amazingly witty mix of text and image. The screen behind the two men shows the AI-generated outcome, and the audience remains silent. We witness something that is akin to a miracle, it seems, because the example shows intelligence in action.

The Magician casually responds by recounting the intelligence of his product and, with a modest smile, confirms that this is why people love it. The host quickly chips in and suggests that many professionals are uncertain about their future when AI can produce something like this. The Magician goes on to envision two very different views we can take. We can either worry about what is going to happen to us when AI does what we do, only better, or we can—like with every technological innovation in history—embrace it as something that helps us to do more and better ourselves. Much more is expected of humans, The Magician concludes, but AI enables us to develop our capabilities so that he is confident that we can rise to the occasion.

The host proceeds to share yet another example of what the AI tool can do, this one referring to a well-known comic character. He steers the conversation toward questions of intellectual and creative property rights, and the resistance to AI from human creative workers who may feel that AI tools steal their work. The Magician dodges criticism with skillful talk, constructing AI as inevitable and transformative. He performs AI as a force of progress and a tool that will redefine science, creativity, and even our personal identity. His language is visionary and optimistic. The Magician imagines a future that is desirable, constructing AI as benevolent and a force for good. The resisters' point of view is acknowledged and dismissed. We get a sense that they are old-fashioned, denying progress. With what we have just witnessed (and how we have engaged with AI in our lives, we can assume), it is hard to disagree with this.

The Magician envisions future AI as a companion and a lifelong assistant that will know us humans deeply and help us to be the best and do the best we can. He explains how AI will be embedded in our everyday lives so that it becomes both necessary and natural. The Magician claims that AI is a scientific catalyst and portrays it as a tool that will accelerate exciting discoveries in physics as well as software development, emphasizing how we are on an unbelievable and exponential learning curve. He downplays the risks associated with AI while highlighting the possibilities that we cannot even imagine today. The Magician constantly returns to security

concerns, but in a way that reinforces the mystique and awe of AI—yet, with a sense that he can be trusted—rather than challenges or seriously questions its invasion into every aspect of our lives.

When the host presses The Magician on agentic AI, or AI that is set free online to make decisions on its own, he calmly indicates that like with any new technology, people adjust. He takes the discussion back to how he and others at his company work relentlessly for safety and security. Judging by the clapping, the audience enjoys it when the host challenges The Magician on the dangers of letting agentic AI loose. They also seem to appreciate The Magician's sharp and convincing answers. The host encourages The Magician to reflect on his extraordinarily powerful position and asks whether he sees the risk of being corrupted by the lure of power and wealth. Again, The Magician dodges possible critique and, with a thoughtful expression, establishes himself as a visionary who is sensible and responsible.

The conversation ends on the same enthusiastic and reliable note. The host asks The Magician to envision the future world where his child will grow up. The Magician first looks back in time to earlier technological innovations, sharing a compelling example about a toddler who encountered a physical artifact that did not live up to their expectations of interactivity. The dull artifact seemed like a broken technological gadget, making the toddler annoyed. The toddler in the story seems to signify progress and the future, while adults signify inertia and the past. For adults, the technology back then was amazing because it was so new. It was like a miracle. For the toddler, it was just normal, how things are.

After again convincing us of the inevitability of technological advancement, The Magician looks into the future. With a serious expression, he envisions a world where AI outsmarts humans and where products and services are incredibly capable. He elaborates on a world where computers understand us humans and how this leads to material abundance. After these impressive words, The Magician predicts a rate of change that is astonishingly fast and a world where amazing new things happen all the time. He casually remarks that it will be beyond the ability of what anyone can do

today. The Magician then delivers a powerful punchline where he predicts that his child and others will look back at us with some nostalgia, pitying how we lived such limited lives. He envisions a fantastic future for us all.

Towards the end, one final time, the host celebrates The Magician, AI, and what they can do now and in the future. He uses words like incredible and unbelievable to show his enthusiasm for all the products that The Magician and his company have developed and shared with us. The host states that The Magician will face some of the greatest opportunities, moral challenges, and decisions to make that perhaps any human has ever faced. The host constructs The Magician once more as an extraordinarily powerful person who holds the key to our common future, it seems. The host concludes with a modest wish, begging The Magician to do the right thing. The Magician assures us that he will do his best. After the performers have thanked each other, we are left with a sense of awe. The performance is over for now, but we eagerly look forward to the next one.

Understanding the staged conversation as a magic show, we can see that The Magician's performance is not just about using language to tell us what AI can and will do. It is about imagining, convincing, and constructing a future for us that feels magical and desirable. With his examples of engaging AI, the host (and focal audience in the conversation) helps to stage The Magician. We witness with our own eyes what AI can do as The Magician and his company appear to perform supernatural feats. References to agentic AI further blur the line between reality and fiction, but in a way that arouses our curiosity and tickles our emotions, including excitement and anxiety, perhaps. The Magician's powerful position over our fate is bolstered.

At the same time, what AI can do is deeply visual and symbolic. The performance on stage is aesthetically designed to signal intellectual prestige, authority, and vision. The staging contributes to the magical aura of AI—embodied in The Magician who is lean and dynamic—with the help of large screens and AI-generated images and talk that is exciting and inspiring yet notably ambiguous. The host plays up The Magician's vision and powerful position and urges him to use it responsibly. He brings up The Magician's

unforeseen power over our future, as if begging him not to become an evil sorcerer. In the name of all, the host asks The Magician to do the right thing as if our fate seems to be in his hands.

All this creates a show that blends AI magic with The Magician's embodied presence, supported by an excited but mindful professional host. The Magician radiates energy and stamina, and he appears to be honest and sincere, with a clear sense of direction. What he says, how he says it, how he is staged, and who he becomes on stage all blend into his performance. We see two powerful men in the spotlight, embodying masculinity, whiteness, and techno-leadership. Their calm, serene, and confident posture and behavior symbolize control and rationality as well as excitement, responsibility, and visionary thinking. The host's behavioral style is professional and The Magician's sensible and down--to-earth, and together they contribute to a sense of credibility for an amazingly wide audience.

The stage for the magic show is grandiose, and the words are upbeat and often vague. The show, watched by millions, constructs a sense of inevitability about AI, without giving away its magic. The Magician's performance serves to assure us that we are in safe and secure hands, facing an unknown but exciting future full of opportunities for those of us who are ready and willing to seize them. As such, The Magician offers us an illustrative, powerful example of management, language, and AI. The fact that The Magician may change his mind, that his company's new products may not live up to the great expectations, or that he may be lured by power and wealth do not seem to matter. The sense of magic is so strong that we can forget about the downside of technologies. As the audience for The Magician's performance, we can use our imagination and get carried away.

Conclusion and future research

In this essay, we have focused on management and language by highlighting how generative AI is performed as magic. We have conceptualized management as performances and argued for the continued crucial role of humans under conditions of AI hype. Our point of departure has been that language continues

to be an essential part of management to impress, to weave the illusion of expertise, and to manufacture our consent to the inevitability of the future that is constructed (cf., Fairclough, 1989). We have argued that AI brings this into sharp relief and offered the magic lens to elucidate how management is performed. It seems to us that the inevitability of AI and its advancement is becoming the dominant ideology in organizations and society, vesting some of its magicians with a sense of extraordinary power.

We have aimed to spur discussion on studying management and language under these conditions. As management is technologized, and as AI in its myriad forms takes the world by storm, human-centered critique and a focus on language seem outmoded. This is how power and ideology in and around new technologies operate: their promise of inevitable progress is rendered taken-for-granted and critique is positioned as old-fashioned and irrational (Vesa & Tienari, 2022). Our consent is manufactured, often so subtly that we may fail to recognize what is happening (Tienari, 2025; Hannigan et al., 2024). By offering a language-based understanding of management and AI, we have sought to challenge this.

As a lens, magic has allowed us to shed light on the continued crucial role of human executives and managers as well as their audiences. This is important as magical performances of AI can lead to problematic outcomes. An increased divide between executives and managers, on the one hand, and employees, on the other, has attracted research attention (Einola et al., 2024). This has much to do with performances where management discursively operates in the future, excited, while others are forced to fill in the gaps in the present, often grudgingly (ibid.). The opacity of AI, sprinkled with a touch of magic, is problematic because it helps to mask its challenges and problems.

In this essay, we have not discussed resistance. Yet, resistance is an important avenue for future research on management performances of AI. Resistance is traditionally viewed as oppositional, and as refusal to submit to power, typically viewed as domination, oppression, or control. However, power and resistance can also be thought of as mutually constituting, following Foucault (1978), who claimed that "[w]here there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to

power" (pp. 95–96). If we understand power as something that operates through forms of knowledge, which establish regimes of truth in society (Foucault, 1980), then our complicity in management performances of AI deserves more research attention. Why is the magic of AI so difficult to resist? Why is our consent so easily manufactured?

Resistance ranges from overt (public or open) to more covert (hidden) forms. Mumby et al. (2017) identify forms of resistance that they term individual and collective infrapolitics, insubordination, and insurrection. Given the ubiquitous nature of AI and the sometimes extraordinarily powerful management performances, we turn attention to collective forms of resistance. Infrapolitics refers to "a wide variety of low-profile forms of resistance that dare not speak in their own name" (Scott, 1990, p. 19). Infrapolitics can be "collective, yet quiet, disguised, hidden or anonymous" and serve "to challenge or unsettle the dominant discourse" (Mumby et al., 2017, p. 1167). Mobilizations of resistance to management performances of AI can remain "anonymous and under the radar", yet be influential. Also, insurrection, or publicly declared collective resistance that embodies "different forms of mutuality with or without hierarchy" and is characterized by "lack of access to institutional channels" (p. 1170), is relevant under conditions of AI hype. Resistance can be highly visible, and it can challenge the status quo and envision alternatives to it.

For both infrapolitics and insurrection, we conclude with Mumby et al. (2017) that "resistance always needs to be understood contextually; what counts as resistance shifts with the economic, political, and socio-cultural terrain" (p. 1173). Management performances and AI magic—and resistance—operate differently in different contexts, and critical research must explore their varying conditions of possibility. Paradoxically, perhaps, this variety is another reason why it is so difficult to resist magical management performances through which AI is sold to us as inevitable. The magic is often skillfully tailored, and viral global performances like the example above blur our senses of context. AI magic must be studied in its many forms.

Further, when we consider that management and language are embedded in unequal gender relations in organizations and society, how inequalities are reproduced and bolstered under conditions of AI hype is an important subject of

inquiry. We suggest that more research sensitive to questions of gender is needed on management, language, and AI. Power relations in and around management are gendered and so, too, are embodied management performances (Johansson et al., 2017). At the same time, technologies have traditionally been associated with men and masculinity (Cockburn, 1985). Gender relations in society continue to materialize in technologies because designing, implementing, and using technologies rely heavily on social categories such as gender (Wajcman, 2010). This is evident in different forms of AI. Gendered biases manifest in how AI is developed, how datasets are trained, and how AI-generated decision-making plays out (Manasi et al., 2022). Most AI magicians are men. In the Global North, management is also predominantly white, and its dominant discourses and representations reflect this (Liu & Baker, 2015). How gender and race (including whiteness) intertwine in management performances under conditions of AI hype deserves more critical research attention.

There are also new questions awaiting us in the not-so-distant future. AI contributes to the blurring of offline and online realities and AI-powered "clones" are entering management. Many executives and managers are exploring these opportunities by letting AI carry out some of their tasks and duties in their name. More generally, we must critically study agentic AI that are autonomous AI systems, which require minimal human intervention and make decisions proactively. Important questions related to agentic AI include how humans interact and collaborate with them, and how they take increasing agency and impact on organizations (Korzynski et al., 2025). What must be noted again is that technological advancements are embedded in opacity and in discourse that constructs advancing AI as an inescapable trajectory to which humans have little say. The magic lens helps shed light on how new forms of agentic AI are sold to us, showcasing how social construction is intertwined with technology and pinpointing its problematic and perhaps detrimental consequences.

The scenario—celebratory or alarmist, depending on the viewpoint—is typical of future-oriented discourse surrounding new technologies (Fleming, 2019). Envisioning new opportunities for management clones and agentic AI is an example of how new technologies are sold to us as transformative and disruptive. While Haraway (1985) introduced the idea of the "cyborg" already in

the 1980s as a critical metaphor for fragmented identities and technological, bodily, and social realities, management performances have acquired a new twist with AI hype. How AI-powered clones perform management, how gender and race play into "their" performances, and how they can be resisted must be studied in detail. Magic is one lens through which linguistic and human aspects of management—intertwined with technologies—under these new conditions can be critically explored. AI challenges the idea of the managerial body as a human body. We suggest that language in management continues to matter even when we can no longer assume that managerial athletes who perform under conditions of AI hype are "real" humans. The magic of AI is taken to new heights when it is performed by non-humans. "Their" language and performances remain to be scrutinized.

Finally, we come back to The Magician and his host. In the conversation, The Magician shares his view of life after he became a father, talking seriously about his responsibility and his conviction to create the best possible future for all. This appears like a hopeful human message. However, in its vagueness it is part of the story that makes AI magical while downplaying the complex realities behind it and the adverse effects it may have on our lives. We believe that the language of management needs to be studied closely also from ethical perspectives under conditions of AI. The magic lens helps us to see through the illusions and apparently supernatural feats and ask tough questions. Most importantly, it allows us to critically explore whether the world being shaped by AI and its new incarnations aligns with the values we hold, to consider who holds the power to define those values and why, and to question and resist their ability to exercise power over us today and tomorrow.

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