

AI notification summaries are inventing words that don't exist

AI is hallucinating brand-new words in phone notification summaries. Here's the tech behind "imbixtent" and its cursed cousins.

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AI can produce all sorts of weird hallucinations. There is now even an online encyclopedia where all the entries are hallucinations—including one called "The Society for the Prevention of Unnecessary Tuesdays," which sounds like it'd be a fun club to join. But despite their reputation for making things up, AI models aren't known for inventing brand-new words out of thin air.

So we did a double take this week when our phone's weather app cheerfully informed us there would be "Imbixtent light rain for the hour."

Imbixtent? It sounded plausibly real, but just ... off. Was the app hallucinating?

Apparently, we weren't the first to wonder. A quick web search turned up a Reddit thread where someone had gotten the exact same phrase from the exact same weather app, plus others reporting similar weird-word phenomena elsewhere on their phones.

So what's going on?

Here's the most likely culprit: AI notification summaries typically run on a small language model that lives on your phone instead of in the cloud. That's good for privacy, but it also means the model has less computing power to work with. It also has to make sense of notification text, which is often chopped up or missing the context that helps language models predict what comes next. Every so often, that prediction process misfires, stitching together something that looks and sounds like an English word without actually being one. It produces "imbixtent" and moves right along.

Humans, of course, are very good at concocting these kinds of pseudo-words. The 1972 Italian hit song "Prisencolinensinainciusol" was famously written entirely in gibberish designed to plausibly sound like English. The Simpsons gave us "embiggen" and "cromulent," both of which are now in real dictionaries. Those were creative and intentional pieces of art, though; this is just a bug.

But language evolves in funny ways. If enough phones keep saying "imbixtent," don't be surprised if it ends up in the dictionary, too—though we'd have to figure out what it means first.