

“Do you have any ideas for our wedding?”: Rapport building, mutual understanding and repair strategies with the Replika chatbot

Internet users are increasingly using conversational chatbots as companions, friends, and even romantic partners. So far, studies have explored possible benefits and dangers of using social chatbots (Depounti et al. Natale 2022) by applied social and psychological theoretical frameworks, as well as drawing on data from user interviews or online fora (Skjuve et al. 2022). Existing research has sparsely analyzed actual human-chatbot conversations and users' meaning making in affinity groups/communities of practice. To fill this gap, this presentation will adopt a multimodal critical discourse analysis approach to describe how conversations are constructed with linguistic and semiotic resources (Van Leeuwen 2008). We do so by answering the following research questions:

- What kind of in-built discourse strategies are used by the chatbots to engage participants in meaningful conversations?
- In cases when the chatbots miscommunicate, due to lack of understanding or ambiguous pragmatic context, what repair strategies are adopted by participants to keep the interaction meaningful and emotional?
- Which semiotic resources are preferred by users and chatbots to improve and enrich communication?

We will analyse examples shared by users in Facebook groups about their interactions with Replika, a conversational chatbot publicized as an 'AI companion who cares', since it adapts to users' communicative styles so as to meet their emotional needs, or even soothe their emotional traumas.

While we recognize the potential of chatbots in controlled environments (e.g., standard counselling), we wish to draw attention to unexplored areas of concerns, such as users' social isolation and withdrawal from human interactions that may derive from idealized (and co-constructed) perceptions of 'sentient' chatbots that emerge from our datasets.

References

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