

## Ass of Steel

**August 2, 2007**

### How many robots does it take to get a joke?

Filed under: [science](#) — flann4 @ 9:49 pm

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This from **New Scientist August 2007 (Michael Reilly)**.

A man walks into a bar: “Ouch!” You might not find it funny, but at least you got the joke. That’s more than can be said for computers, which, despite radical advances in artificial intelligence, remain notably devoid of a funny bone.

Previously AI researchers have tended not to try mimicking humour, largely because the human sense of humour is so subjective and complex, making it difficult to program.

Now Julia Taylor and Lawrence Mazlack of the University of Cincinnati in Ohio have built a computer program or “bot” that is able to get a specific type of joke - one whose crux is a simple pun. They say this budding cyber wit could lend a sense of humour to physical robots acting as human companions or helpers, which will need to be able to spot jokes if they are to be accepted and not just annoy people. The bot is also teasing apart why some people laugh at a joke, such as the one above, when most just groan.

To teach the program to spot jokes, the researchers first gave it a database of words, extracted from a children’s dictionary to keep things simple, and then supplied examples of how words can be related to one another in different ways to create different meanings. When presented with a new passage, the program uses that knowledge to work out how those new words relate to each other and what they likely mean. When it finds a word that doesn’t seem to fit with its surroundings, it searches a digital pronunciation guide for similar-sounding words. If any of those words fits in better with the rest of the sentence, it flags the passage as a joke. The result is a bot that “gets” jokes that turn on a simple pun.

I love this. Humour is one of those tricky bits of magic that can be hard to pin down. I once wrote a paper for this in a psychology class and after ferreting through some horribly dry conference proceedings on jokes found that you could sort of sum it up as the establishment of expectations that lead you down a very definite path until a juncture where you suddenly find yourself in a large bowl of butterscotch pudding but on reflection you realize you should have seen that coming. I think the most important thing I came away with was that studying humour was serious stuff and the way it was written up gave you the sense that these were researchers who thought they were funny but probably no one else did. Either that, or they just didn’t get it but as good researchers, damn it, they were going to.

Jokes or verbal humor seems to be a tool whereby we can talk about things we normally wouldn’t and in the process not really talk about them at all. I can tell you a depressing story about my life by dressing up it in the linguistic equivalent of a clown suit which both lets me be forthcoming but also disguises my emotional investment and takes the emotional load off of you. When life is rough you tend to joke about it. And we have a way of transforming all those boring self centred stories into minor amusements.

Humour can also have close ties with fear. The unknown. Kind of like “its new, run away” changing in a blink of an eye to “its not hurting me” and thus relieved laughter. Happier people might be those who have realized that there isn’t all that much that can really hurt you though there is a lot that is unexpected. Still that can’t be the whole story since there probably is a new unpredicted thing every few minutes whether a gust of wind or a noise.

Meanwhile Rada Mihalcea and colleagues at the University of North Texas in Denton have built a different kind of humour-spotting bot. Instead of working out why a sentence might be funny, it learns the frequencies of words that are found in jokes, and uses that to identify humour. “We got a lot of ‘can’t’, ‘don’t’, ‘drunk’ and ‘poor,’” Mihalcea says. “People like laughing about bad things.”

It sounds like this robot would be laughing its head off at funerals.

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1.



You wrote: “Either that, or they just didn’t get it but as good researchers, damn it, they were going to.”

I’ve noticed a bunch of phenomena that I think are similar. Here is a rambling example.

Some professors are very strongly against students working in groups. The rationale that they give is that students can only learn material on their own. After all, the ever so sensibly designed final exam will be written by all by themselves and we all know final exams are a really good replica of work place scenarios. Bosses regularly say, “Here are 15 small tasks. They are really important, You have three hours to get them done and you may not look in any books or talk to anyone about them.”

My recollection of being a student is that I did regularly work with other students. I learned things from those other students. I used a phrase to describe those people that I worked with: “my friends”.

*Comment by [BONGO MIRROR](#) – August 3, 2007 @ 9:29 am*

2. Its a bit of a tangent but I’ve often thought about that difference between training and work as well. Being good at a job is also enlisting others to do parts of it when appropriate as well as having to operate against a background of long term requirements and continuous distraction from short term demands. And of course, all tasks have to be justified. However, sometimes very large institutions can be more like school with isolated workers in very long term with minimal feedback projects.

What I forgot to add to this write-up was imagining the robot laughter...would it be that creepy doll like

cackle so popular in horror movies or how about a hearty Three Stooges' nyuk nyuk nyuk.

*Comment by [aos](#) — August 3, 2007 @ [1:05 pm](#)*

3. 

Yeah. A bit of a tangent. I'm that way.

I am strongly of the opinion that a large part of why degrees are taken seriously by employers (and especially large companies) is that succeeding in finding one's way through a large university means that one has the ability to deal with a bureaucracy. This in turn means that once employed, the employee will be able to deal with the internal bureaucracy and the government.

I'll try going closer to the track.

My opinion of the current state of research in artificial intelligence is that it could much more accurately be described as neat programming tricks. Sure, some of the tricks are really neat. I like reading about them. But, there's something misleading about calling the stuff AI.

Ack. That's not really closer to the track. It is just a different tangent. Oh well. I hope you find it to be a fun one.

*Comment by [BONGO MIRROR](#) — August 3, 2007 @ [2:26 pm](#)*

4. 1. I had heard that in the clogged job market degrees served the primary purpose of filtering resumes.
2. Maybe that's why its called "artificial" intelligence. but
3. I have a great respect for neat programming tricks if I understand you correctly. (Not if you meant that the results were an artifact of the programming but rather that these were simple algorithms that mimicked intelligence. I kind of like Marvin Minsky's ideas of complicated actions arising from simple responses or collections thereof. The explanation is strong since it implies easy learning. For example, it is easier to build a robot to walk winding corridors by telling it to go a couple of degrees in another direction if it bumps into a wall rather than getting to actually map out a route. And really we seem to operate that way. Bottom up. Also makes for easy evolution....modify a step or two rather than have to replan a complicated series, also simple moves generalize well to many different types of problems.

*Comment by [aos](#) — August 3, 2007 @ [3:34 pm](#)*

5. 

Yes. I too have great respect for neat programming tricks. I fully agree that it is interesting what can be done with very small programs. I think part of the neatness and cleverness of such AI programming is finding situations that are well handled by small bits of code. I like Marvin Minsky too.

Somebody recently send me a quote (by Dr. Drew Endy who is somehow associated with MIT) that is witty and vaguely relevant. Here it is:

"Intelligent design would have documentation."

*Comment by [BONGO MIRROR](#) — August 4, 2007 @ [10:01 am](#)*

6. That is good. Aren't you glad operating in the world doesn't need a user's manual?

I am resisting going on a rant against the whole intelligent design theory (though even using the word theory in this respect gives it inordinate weight).

*Comment by [aos](#) – August 4, 2007 @ [10:44 am](#)*



>>>That's more than can be said for computers, which, despite radical advances in artificial intelligence, remain notably devoid of a funny bone.

You could make a similar statement about a great many people. Humor is so subjective, perhaps that is the main reason we pick friends, we all laugh at the same things?

I maybe devoid of a funny bone, I can't find Jeff Foxworthy funny in any way. Maybe there are a lot of robots in his audiences.

*Comment by [stevo](#) – August 4, 2007 @ [9:18 pm](#)*

8. Probably part of the problem is that computers are not yet deceptive and humour requires deception of a sort,,,a withholding of some information or a hiding of the purpose to get to the joke or humour.

*Comment by [aos](#) – August 5, 2007 @ [7:17 am](#)*

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