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Now, PCs that can crack jokes

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WASHINGTON: US researchers at the University of Cincinnati have equipped a computer with a sense of humour.

The scientists say the technology could lead to programmes that can solve problems that are informally stated, as well as to robots that are able to interact with humans more naturally.

"We rely on computers more and more, yet they don't seem to handle the way we communicate. I think it would be great for computers to understand natural language the way we use it," said Julia Taylor, a Ph.D. candidate for computer science and engineering at the University of Cincinnati, Ohio.

Taylor developed a programme with associate professor Lawrence Mazlack, coordinator of the university's Applied Artificial Intelligence Laboratory.

As programming a computer to have a total world knowledge seemed overwhelming, Taylor and Mazlack restricted the domain of humour to children's jokes that had similar sounding words, the way puns and knock-knock jokes often do.

According to *Discovery News*, the programme consists of two parts: a knowledge base derived from a children's dictionary and a collection of children's texts, and an algorithm that takes into account how the word sounds, how it's spelled, and what it means.

The knowledge base, called 'an ontology', represents an innovative, and more complex approach, said Christian Hemplemann, chief scientific officer at Hakia, an Internet search engine company.

Hakia conducts searches based on meaning, instead of popularity of key words or phrases. However, more popular approaches rely on statistics, which analyzes millions of words in a text and looks at what words occur frequently around other words.

While words like 'bank' can mean a financial institution or land beside a river, words such as 'teller,' 'check' and 'account' indicate financial institution, while 'fish,' 'rapids' and 'water' indicate land beside a river.

The scientists said with 'an ontology' in place, they are now trying to build a database that includes all of the things and events in a given world – in this case, the world of children's jokes – and how they relate to each other.

The relationships are then categorised in a hierarchical structural from general to a more precise meaning, they said.

"Humour is a very specific form of meaning that's related to a specific emotional response in humans that occurs in specific social situations. If you understand how to do it artificially, that may give you an idea of how it works for the real thing," said Hemplemann.

To test the computer's understanding, Taylor entered text into the system and then let the

program tell her if it thought the text was a joke or not.

Taylor and Mazlack are currently working to build the knowledge base for the computer so that it can eventually recognise more sophisticated jokes, and is able to generate jokes of its own.

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