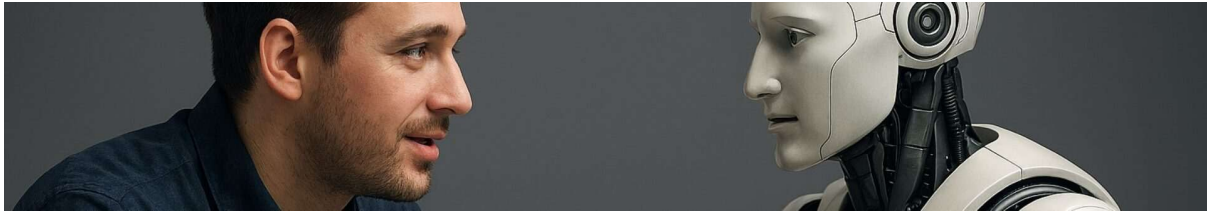


Workshop Report



HUMIC - Humans and Machines in Conversation: Linguistic, Social and Relational Perspectives

16 June 2026 – University of Surrey, Guildford

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Workshop Summary

The rapid growth of generative AI and large language models has transformed how humans interact with machines, including chatbots, voice assistants and conversational agents. Yet despite technological progress, these systems still struggle with the nuanced layers of language: interpreting intentions, simulating social dynamics, and managing complex contexts.

HUMIC addressed these challenges through interdisciplinary approaches to language and social interaction. With an explicit focus on the social, linguistic and relational dimensions of conversational AI—areas often overshadowed by technical or engineering approaches – HUMIC engaged academic researchers from diverse disciplines as well as industry stakeholders, primarily from the conversation design industry. HUMIC created a space to discuss how conversational technologies can be designed to represent their users' social, linguistic and relational needs through an enhanced understanding of language. Such insights are vital for developing inclusive systems in health and public services and in educational and commercial contexts.

Workshop Aims

The workshop had the following aims:

- To identify key themes with respect to the challenges and opportunities for human-centric design of conversational technologies
- to showcase Surrey as a hub for technical innovation with human insight in particular through the work of the Surrey Institute for People-Centred AI
- To create opportunities for discussion and collaboration with industry and other external stakeholders
- To create space for collaborative real-life problem solving
- To identify opportunities for further interdisciplinary research.

Workshop themes

The HUMIC symposium brought together researchers and practitioners from different fields and industries to interrogate how humans and machines talk to each other and how conversational systems need to be designed to be ethical, accessible and trustworthy. The following key themes were evident in the presentations and the discussion.

Empathy: Empathy was a central concern across several presentations, particularly on use cases in clinical and medical settings. The research shared emphasised the need to look not only at what language and interaction patterns create empathy, but also how users' empathy needs relate to their social and cognitive worlds. Training systems to be empathetic therefore requires not only authentic data, but also contextual data investigating the specific needs of users. This is particularly important for users from vulnerable groups whose needs are not always met by systems which are designed the average user.

Describing and defining conversation with AI tools: A second theme discussed how conversation with AI tools can be described and defined. For new and emerging AI systems, which orchestrate tasks, workflows and recommendations which exceed traditional notions of dialogue, conversation may not be the right metaphor. In addition, different users may have different ideas about what kind of task they are engaged in, and different ways of engaging with the AI system through language. Presentations showed that this has implications for the system output, but also for users' downstream decisions. Describing the nature of human-AI interactions and understanding its users is therefore becoming ever more important for future systems design.

Describing and maintaining the richness of conversational data: This theme concerned how conversational data are collected, processed and repurposed for system design. Common practices of "cleaning" data – removing hesitations, repairs, false starts or prosodic variation – can strip away precisely those resources that humans use to signal uncertainty, negotiate understanding and manage face. Describing conversational data at a micro-level and preserving their richness may directly affect how safely and transparently systems can act in socially sensitive contexts.

Recognising identity, preserving fairness: Fairness and its link to user identity emerged as a powerful theme. Conversational AI systems often privilege dominant languages and standard varieties, with serious implications for fairness and inclusion. Models can also reproduce racialised and cultural stereotypes under the guise of realistic personas, raising questions about how identity is represented and negotiated by systems. Addressing these issues requires not only technical enrichment of language resources, but sustained engagement with affected communities to ensure that conversational technologies support, rather than erode, linguistic diversity and social equity.

The central role of language: Overall, HUMIC emphasised the central role of language in human-machine and human-AI interaction. Driven by the disciplines they represented, HUMIC participants did at times use different terminology to discuss what users do interaction with machines, but the role of language in shaping interactions with machines and user perceptions of language and interaction remained prevalent overall. Therefore, the workshop underlined that

technical choices need be underpinned by social values and linguistic building blocks to develop ethical, fair and empathetic conversational AI.

Workshop feedback

Feedback on the workshop was shared through a post-workshop survey as well as LinkedIn. 100% of survey respondents said that the workshop met their expectations. Participants particularly valued HUMIC's interdisciplinary approach, the ability to collaboratively explore questions, with intentions expressed to apply what was learned in future research:

- *"I hope we meet again for Humic 2! I found particularly valuable the multidisciplinary exposure to human-AI interaction topic."*
- *"Good conversation and realisation that the big questions everyone is still stuck and acknowledge that everyone should work on them together."*
- *"It was amazing being able to speak to experts across disciplines, and to be able to see how human-centric approaches are being applied to AI and language technology. I plan to apply much of what I learned about pragmatics and HRI into my future studies."*

One of the presenters posted on LinkedIn to emphasise the need for closer collaboration between disciplines. *"It was a pleasure to present some early results of our ongoing conversation analysis of instructor-instructee interactions at the HUMIC workshop on Monday. And one of the rare occasions for me to talk to (socio-)linguists and pragmaticists. I'm convinced we need a closer collaboration between these disciplines and robotics if we want to get away from the rather awkward kind of human-robot interactions that are still common in the field and caused by a lack of understanding of human-human interaction in such "hands-on" practical scenarios."* (Frank Förster)

LinkedIn posts also attracted comments from professionals who had not participated in HUMIC, providing evidence of the relevance of the workshop themes and its reach, e.g. *"the research, practice gap closing in real time is the move here. most interdisciplinary events stay siloed, but practitioners who actually build these systems in the room changes what gets asked and what stays invisible."* (Peri C, Full stack developer)

Outcomes and next steps

Follow-on activities after HUMIC include the following:

- Collaboration on a collaborative Position and Action Statement, translating the workshop's insights into policy and practice guidance for key stakeholders in the conversational AI industry. The aim is to write this up as a White Paper and distribute it through relevant social media platforms and professional / academic platforms.
- A special issue with papers relating to the themes of HUMIC. A special issue proposal to 'AI & Society' (fall-back option: Journal of Responsible Technology) is currently in preparation.
- Continued discussions on future industry-academic collaborations and new academic research are currently in progress as a result of discussions during HUMIC.

Acknowledgments

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We particularly wish to thank all keynote speakers and speakers for contributing new and challenging ideas. Particular thank to Maaïke Groenewege, who supported designing the collaborative challenge and co-organised ConvoclubIRL, an industry-led workshop on the 17th of June, which allowed for continued discussion of some of the conference themes and deepening the relationships between researchers and industry.

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Pictures





