

Department of English
Research Seminar Series

**Don't Just Use Algorithms.
Co-Create Meaning with Them**



Speaker: Prof. Dennis Tay

Dennis Tay is Professor at the Division of Humanities, The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. His research interests include metaphor, healthcare communication, discourse analysis, and data analytic approaches to the study of language. His recent work bridges artificial intelligence and the humanities by using machine learning and deep learning to examine discourse patterns, while also showing how discourse analytic expertise can inform computational assumptions. This is exemplified by his most recent monograph *Machine Learning Meets Discourse. Algorithms, Performance, and Interpretation* (Routledge, 2026). He is Co-Editor-in-Chief of *Metaphor and the Social World* and Associate Editor of *Metaphor and Symbol*.

ILP: 1 Unit (IED)



22 October 2026 (Thu)



4:30 - 5:30 PM



LYH201/2

(Lau Lee Yuen Haan Amenities Building)

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Abstract

Computational algorithms are increasingly used to find patterns in language, but who decides what those patterns mean? This talk argues that humanistic expertise actively shapes the knowledge we produce with AI. I describe this 'humanistic agency' as our capacity to guide computational analysis and question its assumptions. The talk maps a spectrum of increasing agency through three studies of language in social life.

The first study uses deep learning to identify latent writing styles in student essays. Researchers interpret the resulting groups, while relying on a model whose internal workings remain difficult to explain. The second examines how counseling conversations unfold. Here, knowledge of therapeutic interaction guides the analysis of conversational sequences and the simulation of possible pathways. Human expertise becomes closely involved in how computational patterns are investigated and understood. The third examines language over time in social media. Two models describe the data almost equally well, yet suggest contrasting interpretations. Discourse analysis turns the algorithms themselves into objects of critical inquiry, questioning whether similar numerical results offer equally convincing explanations.

Together, these studies show how humanistic agency increases as researchers gain greater influence over what computational analysis means and how it should be judged. Co-creating meaning with algorithms requires an exchange in which computational findings challenge our interpretations, while human knowledge helps determine what counts as an adequate explanation. The broader aim is to strengthen the role of humanities scholars in shaping what we learn from AI.

ALL ARE WELCOME