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ChatGPT Doesn't Understand the Languages It Appears to Speak

Date : 9 February 2026 (Monday)

Time : 16:45 – 18:15

Venue : LKK303 & Zoom Seminar

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Claims about the otherwise astonishing linguistic capabilities of ChatGPT and other Large Language Model (LLM)-based AI chatbots must be qualified: such chatbots do not understand the natural languages (e.g. English or Chinese) they appear to speak. In this talk, I present and defend an argument for this conclusion. The argument hinges on a premise concerning the causal processes involved in designing, training, and using LLMs and the chatbots based on them. Empirical facts about these processes reveal that, despite the very strong appearance of linguistic understanding in these AI systems, this is an illusion, similar in a crucial respect to the 'ELIZA effect' produced by some earlier 'symbolic AI' systems. After presenting the argument and offering positive justifications for its premises, I reply to several potential objections, including the objection (inspired by recent work by Cappelen and Dever 2025) that there is an enormous amount of evidence against its conclusion, taking the form of the perhaps billions of ordinary users' sincere, literal, and ordinarily highly reliable ascriptions of linguistic understanding to ChatGPT and its ilk.

All are welcome

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