

UNIT 12 B

READING SKILLS

“Please” and “thank you”: can robots be taught how to be polite?

By Tom Goldberg, Staff Writer | December 28, 2018 11:30am ET

1 Imagine you were at an important meeting, and your cellphone rang. You would probably mute the phone or go outside to pick up the call. Now, imagine the call was answered by a robot. Obviously, without the kind of social awareness that humans possess, it would just automatically answer the call and disrupt the meeting. After all, robots can't learn human etiquette. Or can they?

2 ¹Shockingly, in the not-so-distant future they might be able to, thanks to a number of groundbreaking discoveries in the field of artificial intelligence (AI), which studies the “intelligence” of machines.



3 Scientists across the U.S. are working on complex formulas that they believe will allow machines to learn and interpret a large number of social rules. By analyzing tons of data on human interaction, they decided that robots could ²theoretically learn, for example, how to say “please” and “thank you,” respect personal space, move through crowds without bumping into people, or avoid interrupting them. This raises an important question, of course: _____?

4 Some people would ³understandably dismiss these discoveries as a waste of time, but if “machine courtesy” is not relevant now, it might matter in the near future when robots are part of our everyday lives. So if you walked into a coffee shop and you were greeted by an automated barista, at the very least you'd expect it to say “hello,” serve you coffee, and thank you at the end. If it yelled at you or dropped your coffee, you'd probably look for another store – and get mad at robots in general. “If robots are rude, people will become even more resistant to artificial intelligence,” says Marie Martin, one of the scientists studying the topic.



5 So far, the researchers have managed to create some concepts for this kind of machine learning, but there is still a long road ahead. For robots to learn “good manners” and apply them flexibly, beyond everyday business transactions, they would need to be taught a never-ending list of subtle social rules that humans take decades to pick up on, such as when it’s appropriate to interrupt someone and how to have complex interactions with complete strangers. These “rules” are context-sensitive and may also vary from one culture to another. _____?



6 ⁴Obviously, it’s too soon to tell. Robots might never be able to display human-like behavior – at least not in our lifetimes. But one thing we can be sure of: while robots are busy saying “excuse me” and “thank you,” ⁵luckily we won’t have to worry about them taking over the world!

Text builder adverbs and intended meaning

Adverbs can help you understand a writer’s intended meaning clearly. Often these are “comment adverbs.”

Will robots take over the world? **Fortunately**, the answer is no. (I’m glad they won’t.)

Apparently, scientists are working on a new model. (This is what I’ve heard.)

The XKX model is **surprisingly** intelligent. (I didn’t expect it to be.)

Read the Text builder. Then look at the underlined adverbs in the text. Are the sentences below true (T) or false (F)?

The writer is:

- 1 very surprised that robots might be able to learn good manners. _____
- 2 sure that robots will learn how to say “please” and “thank you” at the right time. _____
- 3 surprised that some people think this research is a waste of time. _____
- 4 not sure whether it’s possible to teach robots complex social rules. _____
- 5 happy that robots are not going to take over the world. _____