

Symbolism and Meaning in Large Language Models

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Large language models (LLMs) have demonstrated impressive fluency across many languages, raising questions about what kinds of meaning such models can represent. In this talk, I approach these questions through the lens of symbolism, in which meaning is indirect, culturally mediated, and dependent on convention and context rather than explicit statement.

Drawing on recent computational work on symbolic interpretation, I discuss systematic patterns in how LLMs handle symbolic language. In particular, I focus on distinctions between highly conventionalized symbolic associations and interpretations that are situated, novel, or pragmatically complex. These patterns highlight the kinds of cultural regularities that large-scale models readily encode, as well as the interpretive judgments that remain more delicate or unstable.

Rather than treating these behaviors as simple successes or failures, I argue that they are linguistically informative. LLMs can be viewed as empirical artifacts that embody a particular, distributional view of meaning, whose strengths and blind spots bring into focus long-standing questions in linguistics concerning the nature of convention, the role of context and shared cultural knowledge, and the limits of such a view. The broader goal of this talk is to invite dialogue: how might scholars of Chinese linguistics engage with LLMs not only as tools, but also as objects of analysis in the contemporary study of language and meaning?