Microsoft to turn next chapter in raising talk to conversations

7 May 2019, by Nancy Cohen

Credit: Microsoft

On Monday at Build 2019, Microsoft's annual conference for developers, the company showed off the technology for a conversational engine, to integrate with voice assistant Cortana.

Actually, it became apparent that the focus was not on Cortana per se but on unveiling the "vision" for the next leap in natural language interface technology. Microsoft announced plans to incorporate this technology into all of its conversational AI products and tools, including Cortana.

It's not difficult to agree with tech watchers who think assistants need to step up their game in interactions with people.

An instruction and confirmation as reply do not a conversation make...what do we expect in machines? When can we dive fully into conversations with them, not just do-this, tell-me, but human-like two ways, where you ask, you are answered, and then you ask or comment even more?

Senior Editor Devindra Hardawar, *Engadget*:

"...shouting commands isn't exactly how you'd interact with another human being."

John Roach addressed the situation in Microsoft's AI Blog. "Today's intelligent assistants are full of skills. They can check the weather, traffic and sports scores. They can play music, translate words and send text messages. They can even do math, tell jokes and read stories. But, when it comes to conversations that lead somewhere grander, the wheels fall off."

Ian Sherr in CNET said, "Today, we've had to learn a mishmash of odd phrasing and repeated commands to get voice-controlled technology to do what we want it to."

A new chapter awaits in conversational AI. Microsoft is showing the way in its bid to raise your expectations.

On Monday "Microsoft's Semantic Machines Showcases New Conversational AI Technology" appeared as a video and the video is all about new conversational AI technology from Semantic Machines, which Microsoft acquired in 2018. Listen in on this juggling exec flip through meetings, reviews, sit-downs, lunch dates, with the new Cortana seamlessly responding with solutions.

Ian Sherr on Monday in CNET noted an ongoing conversation tracking scheduling, reminders and other tasks with little effort.

Windows Central said new Cortana features were coming, powered by conversational AI that will also be made available to developers, who will get it through the Bot Framework and other Azure surfaces.

(A GitHub description of the Bot Framework SDK is especially useful here, because it makes one aware of how technology is beating a path to build up interactions to the conversation level. "With the Bot

Framework SDK, you can build bots that converse free-form or your bot can also have more guided interactions where it provides the user choices or possible actions. The conversation can use simple text or more complex rich cards that contain text, images, and action buttons.")

Windows Central noted third parties would be allowed to build their own virtual agents for specific use cases.

Today's intelligent assistants? They do a list of isolated things that a programmer anticipated. The [machine](#) learning in these systems primarily focuses on words that trigger a skill, said Microsoft technical fellow Dan Klein, a professor of computer science at the University of California at Berkeley.

"They aren't focused on learning how to do new things, or mixing and matching the things they already know in order to support new contexts," said Klein, who was also a co-founder at Semantic Machines.

Dan Roth, Microsoft corporate vice president and former CEO of Semantic Machines, said his team's technology will enable computers to understand us, converse with us and do what we want them to do.

New Cortana should be able to handle multiple queries and skills at once and string together multiple different commands said at different times.

Sherr summed up the tomorrow versus today of it all: "For example, today we can typically ask voice assistants to read back our calendars, but Microsoft believes that in the not too distant future, we won't need to bark out 'Siri!' or 'Cortana!' Instead, we'll merely ask our always-listening assistants what our schedules are, whether the right people have been invited to meetings and where we have lunch plans set. And Microsoft says we won't need to use the stilted language most voice assistants require these days."

Hardawar brought up a good point in its favor, in that "Cortana's responses sounded like an actual human's, complete with 'umms' realistic language ticks, and the executive never had to [phrase](#) things like a command."

When are we talking with the new Cortana? Zac Bowden in *Windows Central*: "It's unknown when we can expect to see this new engine show up in Cortana, but Microsoft says it should arrive relatively soon."

More information:
[blogs.microsoft.com/ai/microso … of-natural-language/](#)

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