The Future of Conversation is Evolving from Human Dialogue to Hybrid Human-Agentic Discourse

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Abstract. In an era increasingly dominated by artificial intelligence (AI), the essence of human conversation is undergoing significant transformation. Once exclusively human, conversation is now increasingly mediated by AI agents, voice assistants, and digital platforms. This paper critically explores this profound shift, examining the nature and implications of hybrid human machine discourse. Addressing three fundamental questions, we interrogate what constitutes genuine conversation when one party lacks consciousness and emotion; how traditional norms of human dialogue translate into human-machine interactions; and what considerations developers and governance frameworks must prioritize in this evolving context. Building upon Nass and Brave's (2005) concept of "voice activation," which demonstrates humans' inherent social responses toward artificial speech, this study identifies the dual promise and peril of conversational AI, emphasizing the risks of confusion, over-trust, and emotional misdirection. Arguing that AI-driven dialogue is not merely automation but a profound cultural and ethical shift, this research advocates for new literacies, ethical frameworks, and a re-evaluation of what authentic communication entails. By tracing the philosophical roots and current technological practices of conversation, the study underscores the urgency of rethinking communication ethics, literacy, and practice in our increasingly hybrid human-machine conversational landscape.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Hybrid Conversation, Voice Activation, Communication Ethics, Human-Machine Interaction, Agentic Systems.

1 Introduction: The Emergence of Hybrid Conversation

In an era increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence (AI), most people remain largely unaware that the very nature of conversation is undergoing profound transformation. What was once an exclusively human activity, rich in nuance, emotion, and cultural complexity is now being reconfigured by our growing interactions with AI agents and agentic systems, chatbots, voice assistants, and digital platforms [1,2,3]. From casual queries to Alexa to emotionally charged exchanges with chatbots, we are entering an era in which hybrid human machine discourse is no longer speculative but increasingly

woven into the fabric of everyday communication. While comparisons between human and AI discourse are not new, this paper builds on existing literature by synthesising conversational dimensions through a socio-ethical lens and proposing a new framework for evaluating hybrid dialogue in real-world contexts.

This evolution is not merely technical; it raises profound social, cognitive, and ethical questions [4]. At its core, conversation is a fundamentally human experience characterized by active listening, empathy, humour, timing, cultural awareness, and non-verbal cues. As AI agents increasingly assume the role of conversational partners, we are challenged to critically examine and potentially reformulate these qualities, in light of machine-mediated interaction. This paper seeks to explore how AI-mediated communication is reshaping the norms and ethics of conversation, particularly in contexts where emotional, social, and cultural stakes are high. The objective is to better inform both technological design and governance by understanding how conversational practices change when one participant lacks consciousness, intent, or emotion. To this end this paper explores three pressing questions:

- What constitutes a "conversation" when one participant lacks consciousness, emotion, lived experience, and is non-human, particularly regarding non-verbal cues?
- How do established human norms of dialogue translate into interactions with machines?
- What distinct considerations must AI developers and governance frameworks each address to ensure ethical and meaningful hybrid human–machine dialogue?

This paper explores these questions by examining both the design imperatives for AI developers (such as transparency, trust-building, and cultural sensitivity) and the policy responsibilities of governance frameworks, including ethical safeguards, regulatory oversight, and accountability mechanisms.

We define “conversation” as a dynamic, interactive process involving the exchange of meaning through language, turn-taking, non-verbal cues, and contextual awareness. While conversation can occur in many modalities, this study focuses primarily on voice-based and text-based forms as mediated by AI systems. Although examples like Alexa involve spoken interfaces, the discussion includes text-based agents such as ChatGPT, reflecting the hybrid and multimodal nature of contemporary conversational AI. Thus, conversational AI, in the context of this paper, refers to AI systems capable of engaging in dialogue with users through natural language, either via speech or text. These systems include voice assistants, chatbots, and large language models (LLMs) that simulate human-like interactions.

While this paper adopts the term “conversation” to describe interactions with AI, it does so with the recognition that such language is metaphorical. AI systems do not possess consciousness, intentionality, or lived experience; thus, what appears as dialogue is in fact a simulation of communicative exchange, shaped by algorithms rather than human reciprocity. To support these inquiries, this paper identifies and draws upon key dimensions of conversation, such as turn-taking, empathy, silence, context, and trust, which will be examined in relation to both human and human–AI discourse.

Nass & Brave's [5] work on voice interfaces highlights how deeply ingrained our social responses to speech are regardless of whether the speaker is human or artificial. In their book "Wired for Speech", they show that people respond to machine-generated voices as if they were human, applying the same social expectations, biases, and emotional reactions. This "voice-activation" phenomenon explains both the promise and the peril of conversational AI: it can feel natural and intuitive, yet it can also lead to confusion, over-trust, or even emotional misdirection. Hence, while digital conversation brings specific capabilities (i.e. speed, scalability and availability), it also introduces new challenges for us to navigate. Issues of trust, mutuality, and meaning become especially significant when dialogue lacks a shared human consciousness. This paper looks at the evolution of conversation with the rise of hybrid human-agentic conversation not just as a technical development, but as a cultural shift that requires new literacies, new ethics, and a rethinking of what it means to truly communicate. This paper traces the evolution of conversation from its philosophical and civic roots to its current technological reconfigurations in agentic systems. Drawing on classical concepts of rhetoric and dialectic as well as contemporary examples of agentic systems, we argue that we are not simply automating dialogue but are redefining it as rapidly as the technology advances with far-reaching implications for literacy, ethics, and the future of communication.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: the next section outlines the inherent complexities within human conversation. The following section discusses the intricacies of AI agents acting as conversational partners and the problems therein. The Rethinking Dialogue section outlines the contrasts in conversations between human and machine across a range of dimensions and the many implications for system designers and governance models. The paper is concluded in the final section.

2 Human Conversation: The Art and Complexity of Dialogue

Human-to-human conversation is a deeply embodied, culturally situated, and emotionally intelligent process. It relies on a complex set of interwoven skills such as active listening, empathy, shared meaning-making, turn-taking, appropriate use of silence, and non-verbal cues [6]. At its most powerful, conversation is not just about exchanging information but rather about an emotional and deep connection and exchange with one or more human beings. Unlike transactional communication, human dialogue is rich with nuance, shaped by timing, tone, context, emotional presence, and cultural background. Human conversation has long been shaped and extended by technologies, from telephones to instant messaging platforms, each influencing norms of interaction, timing, and trust.

Silence is a potent multimodal feature of conversations, often experienced differently by participants. While some individuals may perceive silence as uncomfortable, prompting them to fill gaps quickly, others view it not as an empty void but as a meaningful communicative act, conveying profound emotions, respect, or contemplation. Conversations can also unfold as rapid exchanges of diverse and seemingly disconnected ideas. While appearing fragmented, such dialogues often vividly reflect active

engagement, curiosity, and genuine interest between participants. These contextual subtleties shape how we interpret intention, meaning, and trust.

As Maynard & Zimmerman [7] illustrate, even the beginnings of conversation between strangers or acquaintances involve subtle "pre-topical sequences" and "setting talk" which we as humans use as ritualized strategies to negotiate who speaks, what gets discussed, and how intimacy or distance is managed. These forms of conversational scaffolding reveal how dialogue is not just a cognitive task but a deeply social one, grounded in shared categories, mutual recognition, and interpersonal norms. Moreover, conversation is not a solitary cognitive act, rather it is a form of moment-by-moment co-creation by both (or all) participants. We constantly adjust our speech based on cues from others: we mirror tone and pace, we recalibrate when someone looks confused, and we intuitively switch (and adapt) how we do all this depending on formality, familiarity, or emotional tone. In this way, dialogue is both responsive and adaptive, demanding not only linguistic skill but social and emotional intelligence [8].

At its core, conversation is also ethical in nature requiring mutual respect, willingness to listen, and often for the vulnerability to be heard in full. It can affirm dignity, build trust, and resolve conflict and on the flip side it can just as easily exclude, dominate, or manipulate. These human competencies make conversation not only a means of communication but a foundation for collaboration, social cohesion, and the development of interpersonal trust. Through discourse (which can take many approaches), we construct a sense of who we are and present ourselves to others [9,10], cultivating a sense of belonging and membership within social groups [11]. Conversational interactions also allow for the play of wit and humour, which serve not only as expressions of personality but as social tools for connection and inclusion. It is this depth of engagement that AI systems, for all their sophistication, struggle to replicate or fully understand [12].

3 Enter the AI Agent: Human-AI Conversation and Its Implications

This section bridges both voice-based (e.g., Alexa) and text-based (e.g., ChatGPT, Copilot) forms of AI interaction, reflecting the convergence of modalities in contemporary conversational systems. Although the emphasis on voice activation theory highlights our social reactions to speech, similar dynamics can occur with text when anthropomorphic cues (e.g., tone, emojis, name) are present. As AI systems evolve, they are no longer mere tools for information retrieval but are increasingly assuming the role of conversational partners. Whether asking Alexa to play music, engaging in therapeutic exchanges with the soon to be decommissioned mental health chatbot *Woebot*, or turning to ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot or Azure AI for help with writing or decision-making, we are now directly speaking with machines, not just through them. This shift from transactional command-based systems to seemingly relational, dialogic agents, marks a fundamental transformation in how communication technologies are integrated into everyday life. Clark et al. [8] found that users are increasingly negotiating blurred boundaries between utilitarian and social uses of conversation, highlighting the need

for a reconceptualization of what it means to “converse” with a machine. Crucially, these AI agents draw on sophisticated language models trained on large data sets of human communication [2]. Yet, while they may simulate conversational competence, they lack the embodied consciousness, emotional resonance, and social accountability that define human dialogue [12]. Their "listening" is statistical, their "responses" probabilistic [1]. AI systems neither remember, nor feel, nor genuinely understand; they lack the capacity for comprehension. Yet, paradoxically, we still engage with them conversationally, thanking them, trusting them, and at times even confiding deeply personal thoughts to these digital entities.

This paradox is explained, in part, by the social psychology of voice which Nass and Brave [5] discuss in Wired for Speech on how humans are “voice-activated” (meaning that we respond to machine-generated voices with the same emotional and social cues that we would apply when conversing with real people). Whether it’s trusting a friendly GPS voice or attributing personality to a customer service bot, we engage in human-like ways even when intellectually we understand that the other “speaker” is not a person (reminding us that what we call a ‘conversation’ with a machine is a simulation, shaped by design and data, not by reciprocal understanding). This social response mechanism helps explain why AI-driven conversation can feel surprisingly natural and, at times, deceptively so [5]. Building on this, Bickmore and Cassell [13] argue that humans use a variety of relational conversational strategies, such as small talk, to establish trust. This can be embodied by conversational agents that can leverage similar strategies using multimodal social cues to promote similar levels of user trust. The Bickmore model of social dialogue shows that even minimal relational engagement from agents can significantly impact user perception, especially for extroverted users. Trust, they argue, is not just a technical precondition but a communicative achievement requiring intentional social signalling.

However, it is important to recognise that these agentic discourses have limitations, yet humans often continue to project the same expectations onto AI agents as they would onto human counterparts [14]. Nass & Moon [14] explore such “mindless” behaviour by exploring conditioned behaviour and habits like humans being “polite” with their AI agent. This brings us to the relatively recent work by Jawale et al. [12] whereby they highlight the technical and cognitive challenges AI systems face when processing natural human conversation. Through detailed attention entropy analysis and domain-specific comparisons, their study revealed that Large Language Models (LLMs) struggle with the demands of human-to-human dialogue. Unlike structured text or mathematical queries, natural conversation involves dispersed attention, long-range dependencies, and nuanced context management. The research in [12] shows that conversational data exhibits uniquely complex patterns of interdependence that current models are not well-specialized to handle. Their findings underscore that, despite appearing fluent, AI systems often lack the deeper contextual anchoring needed for human-like interaction. In this light, we might view agentic AI not as a seamless conversational partner but as a partial proxy which is capable of mirroring form but not always function. These responses may sound convincing, but they are detached from lived experience, embodied emotion, and ethical self-awareness. All of this has profound implications for how we interpret meaning, assign trust, and navigate relational boundaries in

human–machine interactions and is critical we take the time to work out how to integrate ethical and human values and norms into shaping this hybrid dialogue which leads us into the next section of this paper.

4 Rethinking Dialogue

As we move into an era of ever-increasing hybrid communication where humans converse not only with each other but also with AI systems, it becomes essential to understand how these different forms of discourse diverge, converge, and influence one another. This includes distinguishing among different modalities of AI-mediated conversation, such as voice-based systems, text-based chatbots, and ambient conversational agents, as each presents distinct technical and social dynamics [15]. As discussed earlier, human-to-human conversation is rich in social, emotional, cultural, ethical and non-verbal dimensions [8,6]. By contrast we have seen that human-to-machine interactions remain structurally and experientially distinct and often raise unique design and governance challenges. For instance, it is essential to recognize that AI agents operate through feedback loops, adapting their responses based on structured inputs, reinforcement signals, or refined human prompts, where conversational turn-taking is procedural rather than intuitive [2,3,16]. To illustrate these distinctions, Table 1 presents the key dimensions that underpin a conversation and contrasts them for human-to-human and human-to-machine discourse. This table also highlights where the design of AI systems must diverge from natural conversational norms, and where governance frameworks must intervene to uphold trust, dignity, and meaningful and safe engagement.

Table 1. Comparison of Human-to-Human and Human-to-Machine Discourse with Implications for AI and Agentic System Design and Governance.

Conversation Dimension	Human-to-Human Conversation	Human-to-Machine Conversation	Implications for AI and Agentic System Developers & Governance Frameworks
Turn-Taking	Fluid, often overlapping; regulated by social cues like gaze, intonation, and gestures.	Sequential and linear; typically constrained by system architecture and lacks the fluid adaptability of human interaction. Interruptions or overlaps are often not recognised.	Design systems to manage real-time responsiveness, including handling interruptions and overlaps more naturally, where possible. More adaptive turn-taking models developed using multimodal inputs (e.g., voice tone, facial expression); governance should mandate transparency

			about conversational boundaries and interaction rules.
Silence/Pauses	Can be meaningful (e.g., respect, reflection, emotional weight); culturally nuanced.	Often interpreted as malfunction or prompt for user to repeat.	Train AI systems to handle silence more contextually; avoid forcing interaction loops. Governance should ensure systems are culturally aware and sensitive to non-verbal communication norms.
Contextual Memory	Humans recall shared history (or experiences), emotional tone, and adjust based on the type of relationship or context.	Memory is limited; lacks genuine continuity or personal history in a human sense.	Developers must clarify memory limitations; governance should require explainability around memory use, data retention, and consent for long-term contextual awareness.
Empathy & Emotion	Emotion is felt, sensed, and reciprocated; empathy emerges through shared vulnerability.	Empathy is simulated through affective cues but is not genuinely felt by the machine (or algorithm).	Design emotional cues with ethical limits (avoid deceptive anthropomorphism). Governance should mandate safeguards to prevent emotional manipulation or overtrust in vulnerable users.
Trust-Building	Built through relational cues (e.g., small talk, consistency, ethical behaviour).	Trust may be assumed due to fluency or personality-like traits, but lacks genuine reciprocity.	Require user awareness of agent limitations (however relatable or lifelike they are). Developers should integrate calibrated trust mechanisms. Governance bodies should ensure users are not misled by false human-like abilities.
Cultural Sensitivity	Conversational style adapts to	Rapidly evolving; multilingual	Developers must diversify training data

	cultural background, language use, and norms.	models and culturally adaptive features are emerging (e.g., Microsoft's cultural AI projects), but limitations remain in local nuance and depth.	and fine-tune for cultural contexts. Hence, continued investment in culturally adaptive training and localisation required. Policy should ensure culturally appropriate and inclusive design standards.
Non-verbal Communication	Includes gestures, eye contact, body language, facial expressions (some of which can be very subtle).	Largely absent or simulated (e.g., emoji, avatar movement); likely to miss subtle cues by the human in the discourse.	Consider integrating multimodal interaction (e.g., embodied agents that are better able to respond to their environment and use non-verbal communication). However, governance should establish standards for meaningful non-verbal communication in AI–human interfaces.
Intent & Ethics	Often guided by shared moral intuitions as well as social and cultural norms and upbringing.	AI lacks intent or ethical awareness. It is only able to simulate moral reasoning.	Developers must avoid implying agency or intentionality. Governance should require ethical design standards and prevent anthropomorphic misrepresentations.
Dialogue Evolution	Shaped by shared experience, mutual adjustment, evolving relationships.	Often one-off, impersonal, and static (unless context continuity is deliberately built-in), lacks lived shared experience.	Promote dialogic continuity in long-term agentic use cases. Governance should encourage designs that allow for meaningful but bounded and safe relationship modelling (especially when interacting with vulnerable individuals and in therapeutic settings).

Shared Sense-Making	Emerges through mutual negotiation, layered interpretation, personal investment and shared understanding.	Generated probabilistically based on language prediction and surface relevance as well as stored memory.	Developers must not conflate fluency (and contextual prediction) with understanding. Governance should require clear disclosure of AI's lack of true comprehension, especially in emotionally sensitive or decision-critical contexts.

While AI can replicate certain distinct conversational features of dialogue (such as semantic coherence and emotional tone), it lacks the deeper socio-emotional and ethical substrates that define and are imbedded within what we take to be meaningful human communication [17, 14]. Developers and policymakers must therefore consider not only what AI can say, but how, why, and in what contexts these systems are deployed. By mapping these distinctions (and dimensions of conversation), this paper suggests that there needs to be a new ethic of hybrid discourse that centres on transparency, shared responsibility, and cultural sensitivity. AI-mediated conversation must not only be intelligible and functional but also aligned with the human values embedded in communication: empathy, dignity, trust, and respect.

As interactions with AI become increasingly frequent and personal, the conversational qualities inherent in human-to-human dialogue will no longer serve merely as desirable extras in human-to-machine interactions. Instead, these human-like qualities will become critical for safeguarding the integrity, inclusiveness, and meaningfulness of hybrid discourse. Therefore, reshaping conversation involves more than refining language models; it demands a reimagining of conversation as an ethical and social practice that bridges human and digital participants. As we reimagine hybrid dialogue, it might help to reflect back to how Aristotle framed rhetoric, not as manipulation but as a moral act rooted in ethos (credibility of the speaker), pathos (emotional appeal to the audience), and logos (logical arguments), whilst he also recognized that meaningful dialogue also draws from dialectic (the pursuit of truth through reciprocal reasoning) and the role of coffee houses as early incubators of civic discourse [18]. All this should remind us that conversation, at its best, is both culturally situated and ethically charged. This shift requires dialogue among designers, regulators, researchers, and civil society to ensure these technologies foster ethical communicative inbuilt ability.

5 Designing for Human Values in Hybrid Conversations

This paper has aimed not only to understand hybrid conversation, but also to foreground actionable insights for AI developers and governance stakeholders. Ethical design, contextual sensitivity, and user transparency must be embedded at both the system and regulatory levels. By integrating social norms and values into AI systems, we can move

toward more humane and trustworthy interactions. As conversational AI becomes more embedded in everyday life, it is reshaping not just how we communicate, but the social norms that govern communication itself. Turn-taking, once a fluid and culturally nuanced dance between humans, is now regulated by code (shaped by prompts and at times frustratingly, system glitches and network overload) rather than shared social intuition and non-verbal cues. Silence, that can be rich with meaning (and opportunity) within a human-to-human conversation, is often flattened into a technical signal when having a dialogue with an AI agent. As users increasingly project emotion, trust, and even companionship onto machines, serious ethical questions arise around manipulation, consent, and the treatment of vulnerable populations such as children and the elderly. These shifts raise urgent questions about accountability: Who is responsible when a seemingly benign conversation with an AI lead to harm or misunderstanding? Meanwhile, the very structure of conversation is changing as we enter an age where there can be multiple AI agents within our human environments (e.g. homes with multiple voice assistants, offices with ambient AI, public spaces where machines participate in dialogue). Conversational ecosystems powered by AI offer significant promise, including improved decision-making, novel forms of support, and enhanced accessibility. However, these advancements also introduce critical risks, such as the amplification of bias at scale, potentially undermining trust in hybrid discourse, and fostering overreliance on systems that simulate understanding without genuine comprehension. Navigating these complexities requires not just advanced AI models, but a fundamental reassessment of what it means to speak, listen, and genuinely understand within increasingly hybrid communicative landscapes.

6 Conclusion and Limitations

This paper has mapped the ethical, social, and communicative dimensions of human–AI discourse, offering a structured lens for evaluating hybrid conversation. While it contributes to theory-building in this emerging space, the analysis is limited by its reliance on secondary sources rather than empirical data. Future work should incorporate qualitative methods (such as interviews and focus groups) to validate and refine the proposed conversational dimensions in real-world human–AI interactions.

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