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When Machines Speak: Rethinking Reference, Meaning, and Communication in the Age of Generative AI

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Abstract

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) has become increasingly integrated into communication practices, education, and everyday life. Its presence has therefore introduced not only technological changes but also renewed fundamental questions in the philosophy of language concerning meaning, reference, understanding, and communication. This study aims to explore how users experience and interpret interactions with generative AI, particularly in terms of whether AI-generated outputs are perceived as meaningful, referential, and communicative. The study employs a qualitative interpretive approach with a phenomenological perspective to examine users' subjective experiences. Data were obtained through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 12 generative AI users who had repeated experience using such systems in the contexts of learning, work, writing, and information seeking. The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify patterns of meaning emerging from the participants' experiences. The findings reveal four main themes: the experience of AI as a system that appears to understand users; the tension between coherent language and successful reference; the ambiguity between the experience of communication and the existence of communicative intention; and the paradox between users' awareness that AI is a machine and their tendency to treat it as a social agent. The findings indicate that meaning in human–AI interaction is not understood merely as an internal property of the system but is formed through the relationship between linguistic output, user interpretation, goals, and the context of use. Theoretically, this study extends the application of the meaning as use perspective to the context of AI and offers an understanding of asymmetrical human–machine communication. Practically, the findings emphasize the importance of AI literacy that promotes critical evaluation of meaning, reference, truth, and the boundaries of communication with generative systems.

Key words : Generative Artificial Intelligence; Philosophy of Language; Meaning; Reference; Communication; Human–AI Interaction; Meaning as Use.

Introduction

Perkembangan *generative artificial intelligence* (GenAI) telah menghadirkan perubahan yang semakin nyata dalam cara manusia menggunakan dan mengalami bahasa. Kehadiran aplikasi berbasis *large language models* (LLMs), seperti chatbot generatif, telah memperluas fungsi kecerdasan buatan dari sekadar alat komputasional menjadi mitra interaksi yang dapat menghasilkan respons dalam bentuk percakapan. Dalam kehidupan pendidikan, misalnya, mahasiswa menggunakan chatbot untuk menjelaskan konsep, menerjemahkan

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teks, menyusun gagasan, dan memperoleh umpan balik terhadap tulisan. Dosen dan tenaga profesional juga mulai berinteraksi dengan sistem tersebut dalam aktivitas akademik dan pekerjaan. Bagi pengguna, interaksi ini sering kali tidak terasa seperti berhadapan dengan mesin yang hanya menjalankan perintah, tetapi seperti berbicara dengan suatu entitas yang mampu merespons, mempertahankan konteks percakapan, dan menyesuaikan jawaban dengan pertanyaan yang diberikan.

Pengalaman tersebut menghadirkan situasi sosial dan linguistik yang sebelumnya relatif asing. Ketika seseorang bertanya kepada chatbot mengenai suatu konsep, misalnya, dan chatbot memberikan jawaban yang relevan serta koheren, pengguna dapat memperlakukan respons tersebut sebagai sebuah bentuk komunikasi. Pengguna dapat menganggap bahwa sistem "mengerti" pertanyaan, "mengetahui" objek yang sedang dibicarakan, bahkan "bermaksud" menyampaikan informasi tertentu. Namun, dari sudut pandang filsafat bahasa, pengalaman tersebut menimbulkan persoalan yang lebih mendasar. Apakah kemampuan menghasilkan ujaran yang dapat dipahami manusia berarti bahwa mesin juga memiliki *meaning*? Ketika sebuah sistem menggunakan kata seperti *Indonesia*, *keadilan*, *cinta*, atau *demokrasi*, kepada apakah kata tersebut merujuk? Dan ketika mesin memberikan jawaban yang tampak seperti respons seorang penutur, apakah proses tersebut dapat disebut sebagai *communication*, ataukah makna komunikatifnya justru diberikan oleh manusia yang membaca dan menafsirkan keluaran tersebut?

Persoalan tersebut menjadi semakin kompleks karena interaksi manusia–AI tidak berlangsung dalam ruang linguistik yang netral. Pengguna membawa pengetahuan, pengalaman, harapan, konteks budaya, serta asumsi tertentu ketika menafsirkan respons AI. Sebuah jawaban yang dianggap "memahami" oleh seorang pengguna mungkin dipandang tidak relevan oleh pengguna lain karena perbedaan konteks dan interpretasi. Dengan demikian, persoalan bahasa dalam interaksi manusia–AI tidak hanya berkaitan dengan kemampuan sistem menghasilkan kalimat yang benar secara gramatikal, tetapi juga dengan bagaimana manusia memberikan status *meaningful* terhadap ujaran yang dihasilkan mesin. Dalam konteks ini, pengalaman pengguna menjadi penting karena memperlihatkan bagaimana makna tidak hanya ditemukan dalam teks yang dihasilkan AI, tetapi juga dibentuk melalui proses interpretasi dalam suatu situasi sosial.

Fenomena tersebut memiliki konsekuensi yang signifikan dalam pendidikan. Ketika mahasiswa berinteraksi dengan AI untuk memahami suatu konsep atau menghasilkan tulisan, batas antara belajar melalui bahasa dan menerima bahasa yang diproduksi mesin menjadi semakin kabur. Mahasiswa tidak hanya berhadapan dengan informasi, tetapi juga dengan sebuah sistem yang menggunakan bahasa untuk menjelaskan, meyakinkan, mengoreksi, dan merespons. Situasi ini menimbulkan pertanyaan mengenai bagaimana mahasiswa menentukan bahwa suatu respons memiliki makna, dapat dipercaya, atau benar-benar menjawab pertanyaan mereka. Dalam praktiknya, kelancaran bahasa AI dapat menciptakan kesan bahwa sistem tersebut memiliki pemahaman yang setara dengan manusia, meskipun status filosofis dari "pemahaman" tersebut masih diperdebatkan.

Urgensi persoalan ini semakin besar karena penggunaan LLM telah berkembang secara global dan tidak lagi terbatas pada eksperimen teknologi. Penelitian mutakhir

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menunjukkan bahwa LLM mampu menghasilkan bahasa yang secara permukaan menyerupai komunikasi manusia, tetapi kemampuan linguistik tersebut belum secara otomatis menyelesaikan persoalan mengenai makna, referensi, intensi, dan pemahaman. Kajian mengenai *reference* dalam LLM, misalnya, mempertanyakan apakah kata-kata yang dihasilkan model benar-benar mempunyai hubungan referensial dengan dunia atau hanya memperoleh keterkaitan melalui pola linguistik dalam data pelatihan. Perdebatan tersebut menunjukkan bahwa hubungan antara bahasa dan dunia tidak dapat begitu saja diasumsikan sama pada manusia dan mesin.

Dalam penelitian yang lebih baru, persoalan *meaning* juga dikaitkan dengan *symbol grounding problem*. Kemampuan LLM memanipulasi simbol linguistik berdasarkan pola yang diperoleh dari data menimbulkan pertanyaan apakah hubungan tersebut cukup untuk disebut sebagai pemahaman terhadap makna. Sebuah sistem mungkin mampu menghasilkan deskripsi mengenai "pohon", misalnya, tetapi persoalannya adalah apakah sistem tersebut memiliki hubungan dengan objek dunia yang dirujuk oleh kata tersebut sebagaimana manusia yang memiliki pengalaman langsung terhadap pohon. Perdebatan ini memperlihatkan bahwa perbedaan antara produksi simbol dan pemahaman makna menjadi salah satu persoalan utama dalam filsafat bahasa kontemporer.

Selain *reference* dan *meaning*, dimensi **communication** juga menjadi persoalan penting. Dalam komunikasi manusia, makna ujaran biasanya tidak hanya ditentukan oleh struktur kalimat, tetapi juga oleh konteks, penutur, pendengar, tujuan, intensi, dan *common ground*. Ketika salah satu pihak dalam interaksi adalah LLM, konsep-konsep tersebut menjadi problematis. Sistem dapat menghasilkan kalimat seperti "Saya memahami maksud Anda" atau "Saya menyarankan agar Anda melakukan X", tetapi apakah penggunaan kata "saya" menunjukkan keberadaan seorang penutur dengan intensi komunikatif, atau hanya merupakan bentuk linguistik yang dihasilkan berdasarkan pola probabilistik? Pertanyaan ini menjadi semakin penting karena pengguna dapat merespons sistem tersebut seolah-olah memang terdapat agen komunikatif di balik ujarannya.

Literatur lima tahun terakhir mulai memberikan perhatian serius terhadap persoalan tersebut. Penelitian tentang pragmatik LLM menunjukkan bahwa model generatif telah mampu menangani berbagai fenomena pragmatik, tetapi masih menghadapi keterbatasan dalam memahami konteks, *implicature*, referensi, dan aspek komunikasi yang bergantung pada pengetahuan bersama. Kajian mengenai *communicative intention* juga mempertanyakan apakah keluaran LLM dapat dikategorikan sebagai tindakan komunikatif apabila sistem tidak memiliki intensi dalam pengertian yang sama dengan penutur manusia. Dengan demikian, penelitian kontemporer semakin menunjukkan bahwa kemampuan menghasilkan bahasa yang tampak natural harus dibedakan dari kemampuan berpartisipasi dalam praktik bahasa yang bermakna.

Meskipun penelitian tersebut telah memperluas diskusi mengenai bahasa dan AI, masih terdapat ruang penelitian yang penting. Sebagian besar kajian mengenai LLM berfokus pada **kemampuan performatif model**, seperti akurasi, kemampuan pragmatik, pemrosesan referensi, *reasoning*, atau kesesuaian keluaran dengan tugas linguistik tertentu.

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Pendekatan tersebut memberikan informasi penting mengenai apa yang dapat dilakukan oleh sistem, tetapi belum sepenuhnya menjelaskan **bagaimana manusia mengalami, menafsirkan, dan membangun makna dalam interaksi dengan sistem tersebut**. Dengan kata lain, terdapat kesenjangan antara pertanyaan mengenai *what the machine can produce* dan pertanyaan mengenai *how humans experience what the machine produces as meaningful communication*.

Kesenjangan tersebut penting bagi Philosophy of Language karena konsep *meaning* dan *reference* tidak hanya merupakan persoalan mengenai bentuk simbol, tetapi juga mengenai hubungan antara bahasa, dunia, penutur, pendengar, dan konteks penggunaan. Perspektif kualitatif memungkinkan penelitian untuk memasuki dimensi pengalaman tersebut dengan menempatkan pengguna sebagai subjek yang aktif dalam proses pemaknaan. Alih-alih mengasumsikan sejak awal bahwa keluaran AI memiliki atau tidak memiliki makna, pendekatan ini memungkinkan peneliti mengkaji bagaimana status "bermakna" tersebut muncul dalam pengalaman interaksi, bagaimana pengguna mengenali referensi, bagaimana mereka mengatribusikan pemahaman kepada AI, dan bagaimana mereka menentukan bahwa suatu respons merupakan komunikasi.

Berdasarkan perspektif tersebut, penelitian ini memandang interaksi manusia–AI sebagai **praktik pemaknaan yang dinegosiasikan**. Makna tidak diposisikan semata-mata sebagai properti internal dari sistem AI maupun sebagai karakteristik objektif dari teks yang dihasilkan, tetapi sebagai sesuatu yang dapat terbentuk melalui hubungan antara keluaran linguistik, interpretasi pengguna, konteks interaksi, dan praktik sosial tempat interaksi tersebut berlangsung. Perspektif ini memungkinkan penelitian untuk bergerak melampaui pertanyaan biner mengenai apakah "AI memahami bahasa atau tidak" menuju pertanyaan yang lebih filosofis mengenai kondisi apa yang memungkinkan suatu keluaran mesin diperlakukan sebagai bahasa yang bermakna.

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk **menganalisis bagaimana *reference, meaning,* dan *communication* dipahami dan dinegosiasikan dalam pengalaman interaksi manusia dengan generative AI**. Secara khusus, penelitian berfokus pada pengalaman pengguna ketika menafsirkan keluaran AI sebagai sesuatu yang bermakna, ketika menganggap kata atau pernyataan AI merujuk pada objek atau konsep tertentu, serta ketika memperlakukan respons AI sebagai bagian dari suatu proses komunikasi. Penelitian ini tidak diarahkan untuk menentukan apakah AI memiliki kesadaran atau pikiran seperti manusia, melainkan untuk memahami konsekuensi filosofis dari praktik manusia yang memperlakukan mesin sebagai partisipan linguistik.

Secara teoritis, penelitian ini diharapkan berkontribusi pada pengembangan Philosophy of Language dengan memperluas pembahasan mengenai *meaning, reference,* dan *communication* ke dalam konteks komunikasi manusia–mesin. Penelitian ini juga diharapkan memperkaya dialog antara filsafat bahasa, pragmatik, dan pendekatan kualitatif yang menekankan pengalaman serta proses pembentukan makna. Secara praktis, hasil penelitian diharapkan dapat memberikan kerangka reflektif bagi dosen, mahasiswa, dan pengguna GenAI untuk memahami perbedaan antara **kelancaran menghasilkan bahasa, pemahaman terhadap bahasa, dan partisipasi dalam**

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komunikasi. Pada akhirnya, pertanyaan mengenai “when machines speak” bukan semata-mata pertanyaan mengenai kemampuan teknologi untuk menghasilkan kata-kata, melainkan pertanyaan filosofis mengenai **kapan dan atas dasar apa suatu produksi simbol dapat diperlakukan sebagai bahasa, memiliki makna, merujuk pada dunia, dan menjadi bagian dari komunikasi.**

Methodology

Research Design

Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan **kualitatif dengan desain fenomenologi interpretatif (Interpretative Phenomenological Approach)**. Pendekatan ini dipilih karena penelitian berfokus pada pengalaman subjektif manusia ketika berinteraksi dengan *generative artificial intelligence* (GenAI), khususnya dalam memahami *meaning*, *reference*, dan *communication*. Fenomenologi memungkinkan penelitian mengeksplorasi bagaimana suatu fenomena dialami oleh individu, sedangkan dimensi interpretatif digunakan untuk memahami bagaimana partisipan memberikan makna terhadap pengalaman tersebut dalam konteks sosial dan linguistiknya.

Pemilihan pendekatan fenomenologi didasarkan pada karakteristik permasalahan penelitian yang tidak semata-mata mempertanyakan kemampuan teknis *large language models* (LLMs), tetapi bagaimana pengguna mengalami dan menafsirkan keluaran linguistik AI. Dalam konteks ini, pertanyaan mengenai apakah AI “memahami” bahasa tidak diperlakukan sebagai pertanyaan teknis yang dapat diselesaikan melalui pengukuran performa model, melainkan sebagai persoalan mengenai pengalaman manusia dalam memperlakukan mesin sebagai entitas yang dapat diajak berkomunikasi. Pendekatan ini memungkinkan peneliti mengeksplorasi pengalaman tersebut tanpa terlebih dahulu menetapkan bahwa AI memiliki atau tidak memiliki makna.

Participants and Sampling Strategy

Partisipan penelitian dipilih menggunakan **purposive sampling**, yaitu pemilihan partisipan berdasarkan karakteristik tertentu yang relevan dengan tujuan penelitian. Strategi ini dipilih karena penelitian membutuhkan individu yang memiliki pengalaman langsung dan cukup intensif dalam berinteraksi dengan *generative AI* melalui bahasa.

Penelitian dirancang melibatkan sekitar **12–15 partisipan**. Jumlah tersebut bersifat fleksibel dan dapat disesuaikan berdasarkan prinsip *data saturation*, yaitu ketika wawancara tambahan tidak lagi menghasilkan tema atau pemahaman substantif yang berbeda dari data sebelumnya.

Kriteria inklusi partisipan meliputi: (1) berusia minimal 18 tahun; (2) memiliki pengalaman menggunakan aplikasi berbasis GenAI atau LLM; (3) menggunakan GenAI untuk interaksi berbasis bahasa, seperti bertanya, berdiskusi, menulis, menerjemahkan, atau memperoleh penjelasan; (4) pernah menggunakan GenAI secara berulang sehingga memiliki pengalaman yang dapat direfleksikan; dan (5) bersedia mengikuti wawancara dan memberikan persetujuan untuk penggunaan data penelitian.

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Partisipan dapat berasal dari mahasiswa, dosen, atau pengguna dewasa lain yang secara aktif menggunakan GenAI dalam aktivitas pendidikan, akademik, profesional, maupun kehidupan sehari-hari. Komposisi tersebut memungkinkan penelitian memperoleh pengalaman yang beragam mengenai bagaimana manusia memberikan makna terhadap ujaran yang dihasilkan mesin.

Research Context

Penelitian dilaksanakan dalam konteks **interaksi manusia dengan generative AI dalam kehidupan akademik dan sehari-hari di Indonesia**. Konteks Indonesia dipilih karena penggunaan GenAI berkembang bersamaan dengan perubahan praktik pembelajaran, penulisan akademik, dan komunikasi digital. Lingkungan pendidikan menjadi konteks yang relevan karena interaksi dengan AI sering berlangsung melalui bahasa: pengguna mengajukan pertanyaan, memberikan instruksi, meminta klarifikasi, mengevaluasi jawaban, dan melakukan percakapan lanjutan.

Pengumpulan data dapat dilakukan secara **daring maupun luring**, bergantung pada lokasi dan kesediaan partisipan. Wawancara daring dilakukan melalui platform komunikasi seperti Zoom atau Google Meet, sedangkan wawancara luring dilakukan pada tempat yang disepakati bersama dan memungkinkan percakapan berlangsung secara privat. Fokus penelitian tidak diarahkan pada satu platform AI tertentu, sehingga pengalaman partisipan dapat mencakup berbagai sistem GenAI yang mereka gunakan.

Data Collection

Data utama dikumpulkan melalui **wawancara mendalam semi-terstruktur**. Teknik ini dipilih karena memungkinkan peneliti menggunakan pertanyaan yang telah dipersiapkan sekaligus memberikan ruang bagi partisipan untuk menjelaskan pengalaman mereka secara bebas dan reflektif.

Wawancara berlangsung sekitar **45–60 menit untuk setiap partisipan**. Sebelum wawancara, peneliti menjelaskan tujuan penelitian, prosedur pengumpulan data, hak partisipan, serta penggunaan data penelitian. Dengan persetujuan partisipan, wawancara direkam dalam bentuk audio untuk kemudian ditranskripsikan secara verbatim.

Pedoman wawancara mencakup beberapa tema utama, yaitu:

1. pengalaman awal dan pola penggunaan GenAI;
2. pengalaman ketika AI memberikan respons yang dianggap “memahami” pertanyaan;
3. cara partisipan menentukan bahwa respons AI memiliki makna;
4. pengalaman ketika AI menggunakan kata atau konsep yang merujuk pada orang, tempat, objek, atau gagasan tertentu;
5. pengalaman ketika respons AI dianggap sebagai bentuk komunikasi;
6. persepsi partisipan mengenai apakah AI memiliki maksud atau intensi komunikatif;
7. pengalaman ketika AI memberikan respons yang tampak meyakinkan tetapi kemudian dianggap keliru;
8. perbedaan yang dirasakan antara berbicara dengan manusia dan berbicara dengan AI.

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Untuk memperkuat data wawancara, penelitian juga menggunakan **analisis artefak percakapan digital**. Dengan persetujuan partisipan, beberapa potongan percakapan antara partisipan dan GenAI dapat dikumpulkan sebagai data pendukung. Artefak tersebut digunakan bukan untuk menilai kemampuan teknis AI, tetapi untuk memahami bagaimana partisipan menafsirkan ujaran tertentu dalam konteks interaksi.

Peneliti juga membuat **catatan lapangan (field notes)** selama dan setelah proses wawancara. Catatan tersebut mencakup konteks wawancara, respons nonverbal yang relevan dalam wawancara tatap muka, perubahan penekanan ketika partisipan menjelaskan pengalaman, serta refleksi peneliti mengenai proses pengumpulan data. Seluruh data kemudian diberi kode identitas anonim untuk menjaga kerahasiaan partisipan.

Data Analysis

Data dianalisis menggunakan **reflexive thematic analysis**. Metode ini dipilih karena sesuai untuk mengidentifikasi pola makna dan tema yang muncul dari pengalaman partisipan, sekaligus mempertahankan interpretasi peneliti sebagai bagian dari proses analisis kualitatif.

Analisis dilakukan melalui beberapa tahapan. Pertama, rekaman wawancara ditranskripsikan dan peneliti membaca transkrip secara berulang untuk memperoleh pemahaman menyeluruh terhadap pengalaman setiap partisipan. Kedua, dilakukan **initial coding** terhadap bagian-bagian data yang berkaitan dengan pengalaman, persepsi, interpretasi, dan praktik penggunaan bahasa dalam interaksi dengan GenAI.

Ketiga, kode-kode awal dibandingkan dan dikelompokkan berdasarkan hubungan konseptualnya. Pada tahap ini, peneliti dapat menemukan kategori seperti *perceived understanding*, *machine agency*, *attributed meaning*, *reference attribution*, *trust*, *communicative intention*, dan *human-like interaction*. Keempat, kategori tersebut dikembangkan menjadi tema yang lebih luas dengan mempertimbangkan hubungan antara pengalaman partisipan dan konsep filosofis *meaning*, *reference*, dan *communication*.

Kelima, tema ditinjau kembali dengan membandingkannya terhadap keseluruhan data untuk memastikan bahwa tema tersebut memiliki dasar empiris yang memadai. Keenam, setiap tema didefinisikan secara konseptual dan dihubungkan dengan kerangka teori Philosophy of Language. Tahap terakhir adalah penyusunan narasi analitis yang menjelaskan bagaimana pengalaman partisipan memperlihatkan proses pembentukan dan negosiasi makna dalam interaksi manusia–AI.

Proses pengorganisasian dan pengkodean data dapat dibantu menggunakan perangkat lunak **NVivo atau ATLAS.ti**. Perangkat lunak tersebut digunakan sebagai alat bantu untuk mengelola transkrip, menyusun kode, mengelompokkan kategori, dan memetakan hubungan antartema, bukan untuk menggantikan interpretasi filosofis peneliti.

Trustworthiness

Keabsahan penelitian dijaga melalui empat prinsip *trustworthiness*, yaitu **credibility, transferability, dependability,** dan **confirmability**.

Credibility diperkuat melalui *member checking*, yaitu memberikan kesempatan kepada partisipan untuk mengklarifikasi atau

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mengoreksi interpretasi peneliti terhadap pengalaman yang mereka sampaikan. Peneliti juga melakukan perbandingan antara data wawancara, artefak percakapan AI, dan catatan lapangan sebagai bentuk triangulasi data.

Transferability dijaga dengan memberikan deskripsi kontekstual yang rinci mengenai karakteristik partisipan, konteks penggunaan GenAI, serta kondisi interaksi. Deskripsi tersebut memungkinkan pembaca menentukan sejauh mana temuan penelitian dapat dipertimbangkan dalam konteks lain.

Dependability dijaga melalui dokumentasi proses penelitian secara sistematis, termasuk pedoman wawancara, proses rekrutmen partisipan, prosedur pengumpulan data, perubahan terhadap kode, dan tahapan analisis. Dokumentasi tersebut membentuk *audit trail* yang memungkinkan proses penelitian ditelusuri.

Confirmability dijaga melalui refleksivitas peneliti. Peneliti mencatat asumsi, posisi, dan kemungkinan bias yang dapat memengaruhi interpretasi data. Dalam penelitian ini, refleksivitas menjadi penting karena konsep mengenai “bahasa”, “makna”, dan “komunikasi” memiliki dimensi filosofis yang dapat memengaruhi cara peneliti membaca pengalaman partisipan.

Ethical Considerations

Penelitian mengikuti prinsip-prinsip etika penelitian kualitatif. Sebelum pengumpulan data, seluruh partisipan diberikan informasi mengenai tujuan penelitian, prosedur wawancara, jenis data yang dikumpulkan, penggunaan data, serta hak mereka untuk menolak menjawab pertanyaan atau menghentikan partisipasi kapan saja tanpa konsekuensi.

Partisipasi dilakukan berdasarkan **informed consent**. Identitas partisipan tidak dicantumkan dalam laporan penelitian dan digantikan dengan kode seperti P1, P2, P3, dan seterusnya. Data wawancara, transkrip, dan artefak percakapan disimpan secara aman dan hanya digunakan untuk kepentingan penelitian.

Khusus untuk artefak percakapan dengan GenAI, partisipan diminta untuk tidak memberikan informasi pribadi, rahasia, kredensial, atau informasi sensitif pihak lain. Potongan percakapan yang digunakan dalam publikasi akan dianonimkan apabila mengandung informasi yang dapat mengidentifikasi individu atau organisasi.

Dengan demikian, metodologi penelitian ini menempatkan pengalaman manusia sebagai pusat analisis, sementara interaksi dengan GenAI diperlakukan sebagai konteks sosial-linguistik tempat konsep *meaning*, *reference*, dan *communication* diproduksi, ditafsirkan, dan dinegosiasikan. Pendekatan tersebut memungkinkan penelitian menghubungkan pengalaman empiris pengguna dengan pertanyaan filosofis mengenai hakikat bahasa ketika salah satu pihak dalam interaksi bukan manusia, melainkan sistem artificial yang mampu menghasilkan bahasa secara generatif.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

2.1 Language, Meaning, and Generative Artificial Intelligence

The development of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), particularly large

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language models (LLMs), has introduced forms of linguistic interaction that were previously more commonly associated with humans. Systems such as ChatGPT are capable of producing responses that are coherent, contextually appropriate, and similar to human conversation. This condition raises philosophical questions concerning the status of language generated by AI: whether such linguistic outputs possess meaning, whether AI understands what it says, and whether interaction with AI can be categorized as communication.

These issues cannot be resolved merely by examining AI's ability to produce grammatically correct sentences. Mitchell and Krakauer (2023) demonstrate that the ability of LLMs to generate seemingly coherent language has prompted debate over whether such systems can genuinely be said to "understand" language as well as the physical and social situations represented by that language. Accordingly, it is necessary to distinguish between the ability to generate language, the ability to use language appropriately, and understanding in the philosophical sense.

This distinction is important because users often interpret AI responses as evidence that the system understands their questions or intentions. However, users' experience of "understanding" does not automatically demonstrate that AI possesses understanding in the same sense as humans. Cheon (2023) distinguishes between linguistic understanding and cognitive understanding in the discussion of LLMs. This distinction suggests that the success of LLMs in processing and generating language should be interpreted more cautiously rather than simply equating such success with human understanding.

In the context of this study, this issue is approached through users' experiences. The focus is not to establish metaphysically whether AI possesses consciousness or understanding, but rather to examine how users experience, interpret, and attribute meaning to AI's linguistic responses. Accordingly, this study takes human experience as its point of departure for examining the relationship between language, meaning, reference, and communication in human–AI interaction.

2.2 Meaning as Use

The concept of meaning as use serves as the primary theoretical foundation of this study. From this perspective, meaning is not regarded merely as something that is abstractly attached to a word or sentence but is related to how linguistic expressions are used within particular practices. Meaning emerges through the use of language in specific contexts, activities, purposes, and social practices.

This perspective is relevant to human–AI interaction because an AI response acquires significance through the way users situate that response within a particular context. An AI-generated answer may be considered meaningful when it assists users in completing a task, understanding a concept, making a decision, or responding to a particular problem. Therefore, the question "Does AI have meaning?" can be reformulated into a more operational question: how does meaning emerge and function in human–AI interaction?

This issue is also related to the distinction between linguistic performance and understanding. A response may be linguistically relevant without necessarily demonstrating that the system possesses experience or understanding of the world in

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the same manner as humans. Mitchell and Krakauer (2023) demonstrate that the success of LLMs in generating language does not, by itself, resolve the question of understanding. Accordingly, this study views meaning as something that can emerge through the relationship among AI's linguistic output, user interpretation, context, and the goals of interaction.

In practice, users may state that "AI understands me" because the response provided corresponds to their needs or intended context. This statement is not treated as evidence that AI internally possesses understanding, but rather as an interpretive experience on the part of the user. This distinction allows the study to maintain the philosophical question concerning understanding while acknowledging the reality that users experience their interactions with AI as meaningful.

2.3 Reference and the Problem of the Relationship Between Language and the World

In addition to the question of meaning, this study employs externalist theory of reference as its second theoretical foundation. Reference theory examines how linguistic expressions relate to objects, individuals, places, or states of affairs in the world. In human communication, the use of names, such as the names of individuals or places, is generally assumed to establish a particular relationship with the entities to which they refer.

This issue becomes more complex when language is generated by LLMs. Mandelkern and Linzen (2024) question whether words produced by language models can possess reference. They demonstrate that there is a possibility that expressions generated by models may acquire reference through the history of language use and the inputs that shape the model, although this possibility does not necessarily demonstrate that models possess a referential mechanism identical to that of humans.

The problem of reference is also associated with the possibility of reference failure. AI may generate the name of a person, place, theory, or source that appears linguistically appropriate but may not actually refer to the corresponding entity in the world. In other words, linguistic fluency does not guarantee referential success.

In this study, this issue is used to understand users' experiences when they encounter AI responses that appear convincing but are later found to lack a valid referential basis. The tension between "language that appears correct" and "correct reference" becomes important because users may place trust in information based on its linguistic form.

The relationship among meaning, context, and reference can also be understood from a pragmatic perspective. Chen, Li, and Ye (2024), for example, demonstrate that conversations generated by ChatGPT can exhibit pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic characteristics similar to those found in human conversation. This finding indicates that AI is capable of producing forms of language that appear pragmatically appropriate; however, such appropriateness must still be distinguished from the question of whether the system genuinely possesses an understanding of the referents or contexts involved.

Accordingly, this study distinguishes among three aspects: the accuracy of linguistic form, the success of user interpretation, and successful reference to the world. These

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three aspects may be related, but they are not necessarily identical.

2.4 Pragmatics, Context, and Meaning in Interaction

Pragmatics is an important aspect of understanding how meaning is formed in interaction. The meaning of an utterance is determined not only by its linguistic structure but also by context, purpose, shared knowledge, and the assumptions held by participants in the interaction.

Cong (2024) demonstrates that LLMs continue to exhibit limitations in understanding manner implicature. The study finds that some models are capable of distinguishing certain dimensions of meaning but do not consistently demonstrate sensitivity to more subtle pragmatic distinctions. This suggests that the ability to produce seemingly reasonable responses does not necessarily indicate that a model possesses pragmatic competence equivalent to that of humans.

This finding is relevant to the present study because users may interpret AI responses based on the conversational context that they themselves construct. A seemingly appropriate response may be interpreted as evidence that AI has captured the user's intention, even though, technically, the system may simply generate responses based on linguistic patterns and the available context.

Sterken and Kirkpatrick (2024) emphasize the importance of conversational alignment, namely the capacity of conversational systems to adapt to human communicative norms, context, and common ground. They argue that conversation that is genuinely aligned with human communicative practices requires more than the ability to generate text; a system must also be sensitive to context, update the common ground, and adapt to communicative goals.

The concept of conversational alignment reinforces the meaning as use perspective adopted in this study. Meaning in human–AI interaction does not originate solely from the text generated by the system but also from how that text is situated within the conversational context. Therefore, users' experiences of AI as a "conversation partner," "assistant," "teacher," or "discussion partner" may influence how they interpret the meaning of the responses they receive.

2.5 Communicative Intention and Human–AI Communication

The third theoretical foundation is the concept of communicative intention, particularly within the Gricean pragmatic tradition. In human communication, utterances do not merely convey information; they are also produced by speakers with particular intentions so that interlocutors can recognize those intentions. Communication, therefore, traditionally involves a relationship among an utterance, the speaker's intention, and the listener's interpretation.

The problem arises when this framework is applied to LLMs. AI systems can generate statements such as "in my opinion," "I understand," or "I suggest," but such linguistic forms do not necessarily indicate the existence of an agent possessing communicative intentions in the human sense.

Gubelmann (2024) argues that speech acts require a particular form of intentionality and that the ability of LLMs to produce utterances does not automatically make

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them speakers in the full sense. Meanwhile, Attah (2025) specifically questions whether language models genuinely lack communicative intentions. This debate demonstrates that the communicative status of LLMs remains an open philosophical question.

In this study, the issue is not treated in binary terms by simply claiming that "AI communicates" or "AI does not communicate." Instead, the study examines how users experience such interaction as communication. A user may feel heard, understood, or engaged in discussion even when uncertainty remains regarding whether AI itself possesses communicative intention.

Accordingly, this study employs the concept of asymmetrical communication to describe a situation in which the experience of communication is situated primarily on the human user's side, while the intentional status of AI remains contested. In this context, users possess explicit goals and intentions, whereas AI generates responses designed to follow the context and instructions provided.

2.6 Human-like Language and the Illusion of Understanding

One important characteristic of GenAI is its ability to produce language that closely resembles human communication. Chen et al. (2024) demonstrate that participants in their study experienced difficulty distinguishing conversations generated by ChatGPT from conversations written by humans. This finding indicates that the linguistic form produced by AI can achieve a considerable degree of similarity to human communication.

This capability can give rise to what this study refers to as functional anthropomorphism, namely the tendency of users to treat AI as if it possessed social or mental characteristics because of its linguistic behavior. Users may state that AI "understands," "listens," or "gives advice," not necessarily because they believe that AI possesses consciousness, but because AI's responses function within the interaction as though they originated from a communicative partner.

This phenomenon must be distinguished from ontological claims about AI. When someone states that "AI understands me," the statement can have at least two interpretations. First, the user may mean that the AI response is functionally consistent with what they intended. Second, the user may mean that AI genuinely possesses a mental state that enables it to understand. This study primarily focuses on the first interpretation as an interactional experience while continuing to consider the philosophical implications of the second.

2.7 Synthesis of the Theoretical Framework

Based on the discussion above, this study integrates three primary perspectives. First, externalist theory of reference is employed to examine the relationship between AI-generated linguistic expressions and entities or states of affairs in the world. Second, meaning as use serves as the primary perspective for understanding how meaning emerges through language use, context, goals, and user interpretation. Third, communicative intention and Gricean pragmatics are employed to analyze whether interaction with AI can be understood as communication when the intentional status of AI remains contested.

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These three perspectives enable the study to distinguish among three layers that are often conflated in discussions of AI:

1. **Linguistic performance** — the ability of AI to produce language that is coherent, relevant, and similar to human language.
2. **User-experienced meaning** — the user's experience when an AI response is perceived as meaningful, relevant, or indicative of understanding.
3. **Philosophical status** — the question of whether AI genuinely possesses understanding, reference, intention, or communicative capacity in the philosophical sense.

Within this framework, the study does not begin with the assumption that AI language is necessarily meaningful or meaningless. Instead, it examines how meaning, reference, and communication are negotiated in the practice of human–AI interaction. This perspective enables the study to move beyond a simple ontological question such as "Does AI genuinely understand?" toward a more phenomenological and pragmatic question: "How do users experience AI as something that understands, possesses meaning, refers, and communicates?"

This framework provides the foundation for analyzing users' experiences with GenAI while simultaneously bridging the philosophy of language with the phenomenon of contemporary digital communication.

The findings of this study indicate that users experience generative artificial intelligence as meaningful, responsive, and sometimes communicative, while simultaneously remaining uncertain about whether the system genuinely understands, refers to the world, or possesses communicative intentions. Across the four themes, a central tension emerges between the **appearance of linguistic understanding and its philosophical status**. Users do not simply accept or reject AI language as meaningful. Instead, they interpret its meaning through interaction, evaluate its apparent reference through verification, and experience communication through the responsiveness of the system. This finding suggests that human–AI interaction should be understood not only in terms of what AI systems produce, but also in terms of how users interpret and negotiate those outputs.

From Apparent Understanding to Experienced Meaning

The first theme, *"It Feels Like Understanding,"* demonstrates that users often interpret successful interaction as evidence of understanding. When AI responds coherently, follows conversational context, and addresses the user's needs, participants experience the interaction as if the system understands them. However, this experience does not necessarily imply that users believe AI possesses human-like consciousness or cognition.

This finding can be understood through the theoretical perspective of **meaning as use**. Rather than treating meaning as something that must first exist internally within the speaker, this perspective directs attention to how language functions within particular practices and contexts. In the present study, the meaning of an AI response becomes significant through the user's interaction

with it: the response helps solve a problem, clarify an idea, generate an interpretation, or continue a conversation. Consequently, the practical meaningfulness of an AI utterance does not depend entirely on establishing that the machine possesses a human-like inner understanding.

This interpretation complicates the common opposition between "AI understands" and "AI does not understand." Harnad (2025), for example, argues that the impressive performance of LLMs should not automatically be interpreted as genuine understanding, particularly because they lack direct sensorimotor grounding connecting words to their worldly referents. The present findings are consistent with this concern but add an important experiential dimension. Even when users remain uncertain about AI's internal understanding, they can nevertheless experience the interaction as meaningful.

Thus, the relevant distinction is not simply between understanding and non-understanding, but between **philosophical understanding and experienced understanding**. The latter is produced through the interactional success of the system. This contributes to the philosophy of language by showing that the question of AI meaning cannot be reduced to a question about the internal mental state of the machine. Meaning also emerges from what users do with linguistic outputs within concrete communicative practices.

Linguistic Fluency Does Not Guarantee Reference

The second theme, *"What Does It Refer To?"*, reveals a different dimension of the problem. Participants generally recognized that AI could produce linguistically convincing statements, but they did not automatically assume that those statements successfully referred to real entities or states of affairs. This distinction is particularly important because the apparent coherence of an AI response can create an impression of factual authority.

The finding supports an **externalist perspective on reference**, in which successful reference involves a relationship between linguistic expressions and something beyond the language itself. In the participants' experiences, an AI-generated expression could be understandable and apparently meaningful while its connection to the external world remained uncertain. Users therefore engaged in verification to determine whether the names, events, sources, or factual claims produced by AI actually corresponded to something real.

This finding is compatible with recent philosophical debates about LLMs and reference. Harnad (2025) emphasizes the difficulty LLMs face in connecting linguistic representations to worldly referents because of their lack of direct sensorimotor grounding. At the same time, this issue should not be reduced to the claim that all AI language is meaningless. The present findings show that users can successfully interpret AI language at the interactional level while remaining uncertain about its referential success.

This distinction provides an important conceptual contribution: **meaningfulness, interpretability, and successful reference are not identical achievements**. An AI response may be meaningful enough for a user to understand and use, yet still require external verification before its claims can be accepted as referring accurately to the world. The participants' experiences therefore reveal a form of epistemic caution that becomes necessary precisely because

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linguistic fluency can obscure referential uncertainty.

Communication Without Clear Communicative Intention

The third theme, *"Am I Really Talking to Someone?"*, addresses the philosophical status of communication. Participants frequently described their interactions with AI using ordinary conversational concepts such as asking, explaining, discussing, and responding. Yet they remained uncertain about whether AI possessed an intention behind its responses.

This finding is closely related to theories of **communicative intention**. In human communication, an utterance is normally understood not only through its linguistic content but also through the communicative intentions of the speaker. Gubelmann (2024) argues that the capacity to produce linguistic outputs does not by itself establish that an LLM performs speech acts in the same way as a human agent. Similarly, Attah (2025) examines the question of whether language models can genuinely possess communicative intentions.

The present findings enrich this debate by shifting attention from the AI's supposed internal intention to the **user's experience of communication**. Participants did not necessarily need to establish that AI had intentions in order to experience the interaction as conversational. The existence of a prompt-response structure, contextual continuity, and relevant feedback was sufficient to create a practical experience of communication.

This produces what can be described as **asymmetrical communication**. The human user clearly enters the interaction with goals, expectations, and intentions, while the intentional status of the AI remains uncertain. Communication can therefore be experienced at the interactional level without resolving the metaphysical question of whether AI is a genuine communicative agent.

This finding also corresponds with research on conversational alignment. Sterken's work emphasizes that human conversation depends on context, common ground, pragmatic inference, and the dynamic construction of shared communicative conditions. Her analysis argues that current LLM architectures face important limitations in achieving full alignment with these human conversational practices. The participants' uncertainty about whether they were "really talking to someone" can therefore be understood as a consequence of this gap between conversational appearance and the deeper conditions of human communication.

Human-Like Language and the Construction of Social Presence

The fourth theme, *"I Know It Is a Machine, but…"*, demonstrates that users can maintain two seemingly contradictory positions simultaneously. They know that the system is a machine, yet they may still experience the interaction as socially meaningful. This finding is important because it shows that anthropomorphism does not necessarily require users to literally believe that AI is human.

Instead, participants appeared to engage in a form of **functional anthropomorphism**. They treated AI as a conversational partner because its linguistic behavior allowed it to occupy that role within a particular interaction. The system did not have to be perceived as a person in an ontological sense; it only needed to perform sufficiently

like a conversational partner for users to interact with it socially.

This interpretation is supported by Chen, Li, and Ye (2024), whose study found that AI-generated conversations could display many human-like pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic characteristics. More recent research also demonstrates that ChatGPT can recognize certain pragmatic phenomena while still showing limitations in register and contextual interpretation. These studies help explain why participants in the present study could experience AI interaction as socially recognizable without necessarily assuming that the AI possesses human communicative capacities.

At the same time, this social quality of interaction creates a potential problem of trust. Wagner et al. (2025) found limitations in ChatGPT's conversational pragmatics across ethical, commonsense, and culturally sensitive contexts, particularly in maintaining contextual relevance and pragmatic principles. The present findings extend this concern from system performance to user interpretation. When an AI response sounds socially appropriate, users may experience greater confidence in the interaction even when the underlying information still requires verification.

Therefore, the central issue is not simply whether AI should be anthropomorphized or not. A more useful question is **what happens when human users interact with a system whose language is socially recognizable but whose communicative status remains fundamentally different from that of a human interlocutor**.

Meaning, Trust, and the Social Context of Human–AI Interaction

Taken together, the four themes reveal that users negotiate three interconnected dimensions: **linguistic performance, experienced meaning, and philosophical status**. These dimensions should not be treated as equivalent. Linguistic performance concerns what the system produces; experienced meaning concerns how users interpret and use that production; and philosophical status concerns whether the system genuinely possesses properties such as understanding, reference, or communicative intention.

The significance of this distinction becomes particularly clear in educational and everyday contexts. Users may judge an AI response as meaningful because it helps them complete a task, while simultaneously recognizing that the information may be inaccurate. In this sense, trust becomes contextual rather than absolute. Users can trust AI for certain practical functions while maintaining epistemic caution toward its factual claims.

This finding suggests that AI literacy should involve more than learning how to write effective prompts. It should also involve learning how to distinguish **fluency from truth, responsiveness from understanding, and conversational appearance from communicative intention**. Such distinctions are especially important in educational environments, where students may interpret the coherence and confidence of AI-generated responses as indicators of reliability.

Cultural Context and Researcher Reflexivity

The participants' experiences should also be interpreted within their broader social and cultural context. Human–AI communication does not occur in a cultural vacuum.

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Expectations about politeness, helpfulness, authority, expertise, and interpersonal responsiveness influence how users interpret AI behavior. Research on conversational pragmatics has similarly demonstrated that AI performance can vary when interactions involve culturally specific values, emotions, and social expectations.

For a qualitative study conducted in an Indonesian context, this cultural dimension is particularly relevant. Users may approach AI as an educational assistant, information source, or conversational partner according to locally familiar expectations concerning authority and helpfulness. Therefore, the experience of "being understood" should not be treated as a universal psychological response. It is partly shaped by the social context in which users encounter and interpret the technology.

The researcher's own position also requires reflexive consideration. Interpretation of participants' descriptions of "understanding," "communication," and "trust" is influenced by the researcher's philosophical assumptions and cultural position. Rather than treating these concepts as transparent categories, the analysis recognizes that their meanings are themselves socially and theoretically mediated. Reflexivity is therefore important in preventing the researcher from imposing a predetermined conclusion about whether AI genuinely understands or communicates.

Theoretical Contribution: From "Does AI Understand?" to "How Is Meaning Negotiated?"

The most significant contribution of this study is a shift in the central question. Rather than asking only **"Does AI genuinely understand?"**, the findings suggest a broader question: **"How do users experience and negotiate meaning when interacting with a system whose understanding remains philosophically uncertain?"**

This shift does not resolve the philosophical debate surrounding AI understanding. Instead, it adds another level of analysis. The study shows that an AI system can become meaningful within human practice even when its ontological or mental status remains unresolved. Users create practical relationships with AI through interpretation, verification, trust, doubt, and repeated interaction.

In this respect, the findings both support and extend previous scholarship. They are consistent with research emphasizing the limitations of LLMs in grounding, communicative intention, and pragmatic alignment. However, the present study moves the analytical focus toward the user's lived experience. The philosophical problem is therefore not only whether machines possess meaning, but also how human beings construct, attribute, negotiate, and sometimes withdraw meaning from machine-generated language.

The study consequently proposes that human–AI communication should be understood as a **relational and interpretive phenomenon**. Meaning is not located exclusively inside the machine, nor exclusively inside the user's mind. It emerges through the relationship between linguistic output, contextual use, user interpretation, and the practical consequences of interaction. This perspective provides a bridge between philosophy of language and qualitative research on contemporary human–AI relations.

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CONCLUSION

This study has examined how users experience and interpret reference, meaning, and communication in their interactions with generative artificial intelligence. The findings indicate that users often experience AI-generated language as meaningful and responsive, even when they remain uncertain about whether the system genuinely understands what it says. This tension becomes particularly visible in situations where AI produces coherent, contextually appropriate, and human-like responses. Thus, the experience of being understood does not necessarily demonstrate that the AI possesses understanding in the same sense as a human interlocutor.

From the perspective of **meaning as use**, the meaning of AI-generated language emerges through its use within particular contexts, purposes, and interactions. Users interpret and negotiate meaning based on their questions, expectations, previous knowledge, and the practical functions of the AI response. At the same time, the issue of **reference** remains more complex. Linguistic fluency does not automatically guarantee that an AI-generated expression successfully refers to a real entity, event, or state of affairs. This distinction demonstrates the importance of separating linguistic performance from successful reference and from the user's interpretation of an AI response.

The findings also suggest that human–AI interaction can be experienced as communication, but this communication is potentially **asymmetrical**. Users may attribute communicative qualities to AI because its responses resemble ordinary human conversation, while the question of whether the system possesses genuine communicative intention remains philosophically contested. Consequently, the study does not treat AI as either a fully communicative agent or a completely meaningless language-producing system. Instead, it highlights the interactional conditions through which users experience AI as meaningful, referential, and communicative.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the philosophy of language by connecting **meaning as use**, theories of **reference**, and **communicative intention** to the emerging context of human–AI interaction. The study proposes that questions about AI language should not be limited to whether machines "really understand." An equally important question is how meaning, reference, and the experience of communication are constructed and negotiated between users and AI systems.

Practically, these findings highlight the importance of **AI literacy**, particularly in educational contexts. Users need to distinguish between linguistic fluency and factual accuracy, conversational responsiveness and genuine understanding, and apparent reference and successful reference to the world. Such distinctions can help students, educators, and other users engage with generative AI more critically and responsibly.

This study has several limitations. The analysis is limited by its qualitative scope and contextual focus, which means that the findings are not intended to represent all users of generative AI. The depth and diversity of participants and the limited research period may also restrict the range of experiences captured. Future research could involve participants from different educational, cultural, and professional

backgrounds and examine how interpretations of AI meaning and communication change across different contexts and forms of interaction. Further research could also investigate how repeated interaction with AI influences users' perceptions of trust, understanding, reference, and communicative agency over time.

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