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'JUST A COOL THING'? EXPLORING THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF POLARISATION IN EARLY PUBLIC STATEMENTS ON CHAT GPT

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Abstract

In the last two years, we have been witnessing a rapid development of Large Language Models. These are increasingly advanced systems of artificial intelligence which, by use of human language, can perform a large number of tasks and generate human-like responses to any question, with an unprecedented potential for application. However, they are raising significant ethical concerns related to authorship, misinformation, or data privacy, as well as fairness and representation in language use. The language model which irreversibly popularised these systems is ChatGPT, released in late 2022 and gradually adopted on a large scale in the first half of 2023. It can assist with cognitive tasks, such as translations or generation of textual, visual or audio content on any topic, providing instant access to all human knowledge. Since its emergence, public discourse around ChatGPT has become increasingly polarized, reflecting broader societal tensions surrounding digital transformation, largely dividing society into 'techno-optimists' and 'techno-pessimists'. This article proposes a discourse analysis of the early phases of the global conversation on ChatGPT highlighting the roots of the polarised views on this topic. The data for analysis consist of a selection of public statements made by leading public figures Sam Altman and Noam Chomsky in 2023 and early 2024, reflecting perspectives on the state of affairs in the period following the program's launch. The analysis aims to expose how this polarisation is constructed at the level of discourse, in view of outlining a series of features of the LLM, that underlie the way in which it is perceived by society at large. Methodologically, data interpretation follows a three-dimensional framework, starting from (1) a componential analysis of speech acts, drawing on traditional speech act theories with data-required particularisations, (2) a lexical-semantic analysis to examine how local meanings of the selected words build into larger sense systems, also employing (3) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), to examine the representation of agency, further seeking to provide a reflective basis for an optimal engagement with AI-LLMs.

Keywords: ChatGPT: AI language model; Discourse analysis; Expert statements; Speech acts.

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1 Introduction

Ever since it was launched, ChatGPT has become "a sensational hit" (Niu & Mvondo, 2024, p. 10) through its content-generating capacity covering basically any topic. The phenomenon has been described as "the AI revolution happening once in human history transition, when humans turn from the smartest creatures on earth to not the smartest creatures on earth" (Grant, 2025). Currently unfolding, rapidly changing and not yet fully understood, the phenomenon quickly gave rise to a heated global debate reflecting both optimism and concern (Vasilescu, 2025, p. 288). While optimism is centred on AI's potential to solve complex problems and advance human capability, concern focuses on degradation, bias, even considering existential threats for humanity. These opposing positions divide discourse into two broad orientations i.e. techno-optimism and techno-pessimism, each producing and reinforcing distinct narratives and emotional responses, ranging from excitement to fear about future consequences. This polarised debate revolves around a fundamental question: Will AI challenge human supremacy in the domain of thinking? (Kohs, 2024).

This paper proposes a discourse interpretation of a selection of statements made by landmark figures considered opinion leaders in the two directions of the polarisation marking the discussion around the topic, accounting for both techno-optimists and techno-pessimists, or -scepticals. To document the emergence and growth of the optimistic outlook on Chat GPT evolution in society, several interviews were selected to present the celebratory views of Sam Altman, cofounder and CEO of OpenAI, while to trace the ideas fuelling techno-scepticism, statements by public intellectual Noam Chomsky were examined from interviews given online in the first half of 2023 (before the unfortunate stroke he suffered, making it impossible for him to continue public appearances).

The following sections will present a Literature review of topic-related issues examined in studies so far (2.), some basic principles of polarisation in discourse (2.1) and several critical perspectives shared by scholars on public discourse and ChatGPT (2.2); the Methodology section (3.) explains data collection and selection criteria (3.1) as well as the analytical framework (3.2) employed in the data analysis section (4.). This section presents the analysis of the dataset i.e. statements made publicly by the two selected experts i.e. Sam Altman (4.1) and Noam Chomsky (4.2.). The results of the analysis are presented in the Discussion section (5.) and are organised along the two coordinates reflecting the discussed polarisation i.e. the positive presentation through discourses of optimism (5.1.), and the negative presentation through discourses of concern (5.2.). Building on these aspects within a descriptive-interpretive approach, the analysis further seeks to provide a reflective basis for informed engagement, responsible integration, and ethically grounded decision-making regarding AI-LLMs.

2 Literature Review

Recently, there has been a massive increase in studies examining various aspects of AI language models, of which a significant one is their role in shaping language(-use), learning, knowledge and discourse(s), as key aspects of society. Literature review reveals that studies so far have approached this topic focusing, inter alia, on comparative analyses on human vs. AI communication (Hill et al., 2015; Mou & Xu, 2017), cognitive effects of human-AI conversations e.g. the power of dialogues with AI to change conspiracy beliefs of human users (Costello et al., 2024), investigation of the pragmatic competence of ChatGPT, introducing the concepts of 'generative machine-bound pragmatic competence' and 'trans-pragmatics' (Vasilescu, 2025), efficacy and reliability of AI-generated information in research (Kecskés & Dinh, 2025; Zhang et al., 2023), ChatGPT and linguistic experiments (Dynel, 2023), ChatGPT and (im)politeness (Andersson & McIntyre, 2025; Lee & Wang, 2023), ChatGPT and political communication (Garassino et al., 2024), as well as posthumanism (Nath & Manna, 2023).

To complete the growing number of studies and extend the literature on the nature of and perspectives on LLMs, this article contributes with a critical perspective on public statements characterising ChatGPT made by leading voices which influenced the development of optimistic and sceptical views, in the aim of exploring the discursive construction of polarisation surrounding LLM-related discussions. This section provides an overview of the emergence of polarisation in discourse, as well as a screening of current critical perspectives on public discourse regarding ChatGPT.

2.1 Polarisation in discourse

Considering the controversial nature of the topic under discussion, i.e. large language models and ChatGPT shaping the future of humanity, polarisation, largely understood as a "division into two sharply distinct opposites" (Merriam-Webster), is an inevitable outcome of the related public discourse.

Polarisation is one manifestation of ideological discourse reflecting opposite fundamental beliefs, with positive presentation of one belief and negative presentation of the other, a pattern underpinning the 'ideological square' (van Dijk, 2008). The positive features are most frequently attributed to the personal side of the dichotomy and are expressed in terms of "goodness" and "boasting", while the negative features are attributed to the other and take the form of "badness" and "derogation". Here, polarisation is used to refer to the two opposite discourses surrounding the mentioned topic.

At a linguistic level, polarisation builds on clearly distinguishable elements: meta-pragmatic strategies of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation (van Dijk, 2008), performed pragmatically through a variety of speech acts adapted to fulfil specific communicative goals, while, lexically, it is built

through specific word choices employed to construct broader semantic representations associated with positive versus negative perspectives.

Recent discourse-oriented research has further refined this understanding by emphasising the constructive and interpretative nature of polarised discourse. Analysing the emergence of polarisation allows for an examination of how particular beliefs are discursively constructed in such a way that "paradoxical realities are created" (Filardo-Llamas & Morales-López, 2022, p. 358), enabling incompatible representations of the same phenomenon to coexist within public debate. From this perspective, polarisation has been described as a "concept that characterises a certain type of logical contradiction" (García-Riverón et al. 2022, p. 310), structuring discourse around divergent interpretative frameworks rather than mere differences of opinion.

Scholars also pointed out that polarisation is not to be described by a single, universally applicable definition, as its configuration depends on contextual factors and other relevant variables (Muñoz et al., 2024, p. 2). Moreover, polarisation does not describe a fixed status quo, but a fluid condition that can intensify, diminish, or change in nature in response to new information or broader societal change (Muñoz et al. 2024, p. 3). This dynamic understanding is particularly relevant for the analysis of early public discourse on emerging technologies, where positions are still being articulated, negotiated, and stabilised through discourse.

2.2 Critical perspectives on public discourse about ChatGPT

Since the launch of what was to become the most popular LLM, i.e. ChatGPT, relatively few studies focused on the analysis of early public discourse surrounding its appearance, potential evolution and projection in public debates. Studies so far have tackled, among other issues, discursive representation of AI-related information across various media in the immediate period after its release, simultaneously highlighting the aforementioned optimism and concern (Vasilescu, 2025, p. 288). In other words, a sharp polarisation of discourse has been observed arising from the outset, as the phenomenon is increasingly evident in democratic societies (Filardo-Llamas & Morales-López, 2022, p. 360).

Analysing over 600 news media headlines in the UK, Roe and Perkins (2023) reveal a paradoxical and often sensationalist perspective oscillating between the revolutionary potential of the technology and dramatic warnings of imminent systemic dangers, prioritising an "imminent danger frame" to attract attention in the digital environment through "clickbait" tactics.

Explorations of highest-engagement themes and keywords in a large twitter corpus by Ng and Chow (2024) reveal a "double-edged public perception", where high levels of excitement regarding professional and creative utility were matched by scepticism about its accuracy, reflecting a social divide between the excitement about a revolutionary tool and the fear of its potential for misuse, endangering humanity.

Starting from one of the deepest concerns related to the evolution of AI, i.e. loss of jobs, Sobiech-Buzala (2023) conducts a discourse analysis on three Polish corpora to identify whether Polish online discourse on the matter could qualify as 'moral panic' or reflect issues of trust in technology and generated content. The author concludes that society is actively engaged in the debate with a "reasonable, moderate" anxiety level, further aligning with other scholars who emphasise the need for public trust in AI, promoting 'trustworthy AI' (Sobiech-Buzala, 2023, p. 49).

Alternatively, Coeckelbergh and Gunkel (2024) seek to transcend ethical anxieties related to ChatGPT through a "deconstruction of the metaphysical assumptions" underlying current debates, arguing that feeding on the Platonic distinction between appearance and reality i.e. questioning whether AI-generated text is "real" or simulated is fruitless and proposing an integrative framework where humans, technology, and language work together as co-authors in the production of meaning, pursuing the same line of thinking with Vasilescu (2025).

Complementing these discourse-oriented perspectives, recent pedagogical research provides insight into how such views materialise in educational practice. For example, Popescu (2024) investigates the integration of ChatGPT in academic writing instruction, showing that the tool can offer immediate and valuable feedback, improving students' linguistic accuracy and overall writing quality. At the same time, the study highlights important limitations, such as the risk of over-reliance on AI-generated suggestions and the need for critical evaluation of its output. This balanced perspective reflects a moderately optimistic stance, aligning with broader observations of a "double-edged" public perception, where enthusiasm for AI's potential is accompanied by concerns regarding its impact on learning and autonomy.

3 Methodology

3.1 Data collection and selection criteria

In an attempt to trace the ideas that fuelled the polarisation surrounding the societal impact of ChatGPT in the early phase of the global conversation and explore the linguistic devices employed in this discourse, the analysis was guided by the following main research question (MRQ): *How is polarisation discursively constructed in early expert discourse on ChatGPT?* This MRQ is further broken down into three operational research questions – ORQs (detailed in 3.2.).

To address this question, an analysis was conducted of the discourses of two landmark public figures whose positions reflect and fuel the two main directions of optimism and concern underpinning the polarisation. The selected speakers were Sam Altman, CEO of OpenAI and a key architect of ChatGPT, whose discourse emphasises innovation, scalability, entertainment, and positive societal impact, and Noam Chomsky, public intellectual, renowned linguist, cognitive scientist, philosopher, and social activist, who frames ChatGPT as a form of 'high-tech plagiarism' that revolves around statistical mimicry not genuine comprehension,

while also emphasising the potential dangers of AI, particularly in relation to education and science, advocating careful development and regulation.

The data collection was conducted in early 2024[1]. The examples selected for analysis are extracted from YouTube interviews with the two speakers. Given the particularities of the interview as a genre of discourse-in-interaction, in which speakers respond to questions posed by an interviewer, the data naturally take the form of statements expressing the speaker's position on the issue under discussion. The dataset consists of statements concerning the potential or envisaged future impact of ChatGPT on society, selected in order to represent the two main perspectives of optimism and scepticism, i.e. positive representation and negative representation (further detailed in 3.2).

The views examined are characteristic of the early post-release phase, spanning approximately one year after ChatGPT's launch, also reflecting longer-standing perspectives on AI and its potential evolution.

3.2 Analytical framework

The analysis of the selected statements is conducted within a three-dimensional analytical framework designed to capture both macro- and micro-level discursive features. The framework addresses the study's main research question (MRQ) i.e. *How is polarisation discursively constructed in early expert discourse on ChatGPT?,* , which is further broken down into three operational research questions: (ORQ 1) *Which speech acts are predominantly used to articulate opposing positions on ChatGPT?* (ORQ 2) *What lexical choices contribute to the construction of the positive versus negative representations of ChatGPT?* and (ORQ 3) *How is agency attributed or distributed in the two discourses surrounding ChatGPT?*

At a pragmatic level, a componential analysis of speech acts is conducted, drawing on traditional speech act theory as developed by Austin (1962) and further systematised by Searle (1976), with data-required particularisations. From this perspective, utterances are examined not only with regard to their propositional content but also according to the type of illocutionary act performed, with respect to the illocutionary force employed, accounting for what speakers 'do with words' (Austin 1962). The conventional classification distinguishes major categories of acts such as ASSERTIVES, DIRECTIVES, COMMISSIVES, EXPRESSIVES, and DECLARATIONS (Searle, 1976), further adapted to capture illocutionary nuances.

In the present study, the unit of analysis is the 'statement', understood in the Searlean sense as a sentence in which speakers state, describe, characterise, assert, claim, predict, or even warn i.e. tell that something detrimental is the case (Searle, 1976, pp. 19-20). The analysed statements are, therefore, treated primarily as ASSERTIVES, expressing the speaker's commitment to the truth of a proposition

[1] A primary phase of this research was presented at the 13th Conference on Linguistic and Intercultural Education (CLIE), held on 28–30 June 2024 under the special theme *Language and Artificial Intelligence. Perspectives and Challenges on Research, Learning, Teaching, Translation, and Communication*, at the "1 Decembrie 1918" University of Alba Iulia.

constructing either a positive or a negative representation of the societal impact of ChatGPT. According to their communicative purpose, these ASSERTIVES are further categorised into functional subtypes derived from the propositional content: (assertive) evaluations, predictions, descriptions, claims, warnings, or even indirect commissive or expressive acts etc. These categories are detailed in section 4.

At a lexical-semantic level, the analysis focuses on the locally constructed meanings of key word choices used to lexicalise "referents of discourse" (van Dijk, 2008, p. 86). Particular attention is paid to evaluative and metaphorical vocabulary and to the semantic patterns through which opposing perspectives are represented.

At a level of discourse, in order to examine how agency is attributed or distributed, how actors are projected, what types of authorities are referred to, the analysis draws on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), specifically van Leeuwen's (2008) framework for the representation of agency i.e. social actors and social actions. This threefold approach enables an integrated examination of how polarised positions on ChatGPT are enacted pragmatically through speech acts, encoded in lexical meaning, and embedded within broader ideological representations of agency and accountability.

4 Data Analysis

The analysed statements present the key elements of polarisation i.e. distinct opposite views which create paradoxical realities, discussing the emergence of AI-LLM ChatGPT and its potential consequences upon society at large. In this section, statements made by the two selected speakers are presented and interpreted in the key of the reflected views underpinning the polarised global conversation between techno-optimists and techno-scepticals.

4.1 Sam Altman

The discourse of SA around ChatGPT largely pertains to optimism, with a celebratory tone, but also occasionally validates concerns expressed previously. Within the positively oriented statements, assertive predictions constitute the dominant speech-act type, followed by evaluative assertives. Claims are present but less frequent, while directives and commissives occur only marginally. This distribution indicates that the positive discourse is primarily future-oriented and evaluative rather than action-imposing or commitment-based. The discourse is further shaped by constant interplay between the exclusive 'we', i.e. the 'official' position of the product-developer, and an inclusive 'we', as a regular product-user, or a mix between the two. The data selected for analysis were extracted from interviews available online on youtube.com and time.com (links in the references).

Predictions constitute a dominant speech-act pattern in SA's discourse, projecting a future in which AI integration is both inevitable and beneficial:

(1) [A] baby born today *will never know* a world in which the products and services they use are not intelligent, *will never know* a world in which cognition is not like abundant. (Logan Bartlett Show, YouTube)
(2) If we could go see what each of us can do 10 or 20 years in the future, I think *it would astonish us* today. (idem)
(3) *Demand will increase* by a huge amount. (idem)
(4) I bet that intelligence *gets better and cheaper every year*. (idem)
(5) *In 5 years from now*, if you're texting me, you're going to want to be clear about whether you're texting me or my AI assistant. There will be value in keeping these things separate. (idem)

These future-oriented statements construct a projected reality structured around inevitability and expansion. In (1), generational framing ("a baby born today") and the repetition of "will never know" normalise AI as a permanent condition of human existence. Lexical choices such as "intelligent" and "abundant" shift cognition from a human attribute to an environmental quality, naturalising AI integration in everyday life. In (2), hypothetical projection foregrounds enhancement ("what each of us can do"), while the evaluative "astonish" intensifies positive anticipation, without specifying concrete outcomes. Statements (3) and (4) embed AI within semantics of economic growth through "demand will increase" and "intelligence gets better and cheaper", framing technological development as continuous expansion and improvement. In (5), the near-future scenario of interacting with an "AI assistant" presents coexistence between human and artificial agents as ordinary and expectable. From the perspective of social actor representation (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 52), human agency is impersonalised through abstraction e.g. "demand" [of AI services by humans], while AI is represented as an infrastructural condition. Humans are represented generically ("a baby", "each of us", "you") and positioned as beneficiaries. This distribution of agency reinforces an optimistic framing of technological change as inevitable yet beneficial.

Predictions are often combined with explicit evaluation or expressive stance, as in the following examples:

(6) Another [threshhold] is when the systems help you generate new scientific knowledge. *That will be, I think, a very world-changing moment*. (La Repubblica)
(7) Nine more years, if you're nice enough to invite me back, you'll roll this question and *people will say, like, how could we have thought we didn't want this?* (The Wall Street Journal, YouTube)
(8) We're clearly dealing with something very powerful that'*s going to impact all of us* in *ways we, we can't perfectly foresee it. Like, what a time to be alive* and, and, and get to witness this. (idem)

In (6), the future projection, represented not as potential but as certain, "when" AI systems "help you generate new scientific knowledge" is framed as "world-changing," expanding the scale of anticipated impact. The evaluative adjective elevates the prediction from technological development to historical transformation.

In (7), the temporal projection ("nine more years") constructs future validation of present optimism. The imagined retrospective reaction "how could we have thought we didn't want this?" is a rhetorical question aimed to pre-empt scepticism, framing resistance as temporary and misguided. (8) combines acknowledgment of uncertainty with an expression of enthusiasm. While "we can't perfectly foresee" introduces epistemic limitation, the dominant framing emphasises power and impact of AI on the collective experience ("very powerful," "impact all of us," "what a time to be alive"), transforming technological uncertainty into excitement through absolute superlativity, indefiniteness and exclamatives. Concerning distribution of agency, AI is activated as a powerful transformative force ("systems help," "impact all of us"), while humans are generically represented through "we" and "people" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 52). Agency is thus distributed between a powerful technological actor and a collective human beneficiary, reinforcing a narrative of receiving-end participation in large-scale progress.

The following examples foreground positive evaluation, combined with descriptive or expressive elements:

> (9) A *great, free AI tool* available for hundreds of millions of people. Hopefully billions of people will use it in the future. (The Logan Barlett Show, YouTube)
> (10) It's like each of us has a *full company, full of brilliant experts* of anything *working super productively together.* (idem)
> (11) It's *just a cool thing*. (idem)
> (12) This technology, even with all its limitations is *far more useful than we thought* and we can integrate into our lives in a *much more valuable* way *than we thought*. (Axios, YouTube)
> (13) I think the future is gonna be, like, *amazingly great*. I think this is one of the most significant inventions humanity has yet done. Um, so I'm super excited to see it all play out. (The Wall Street Journal, YouTube)

In (9), the technology is described as "great" and "free," with scale emphasised through "hundreds of millions" and "billions" [of human users]. Functioning as both an evaluative and speech-act sentence adverb (Popescu, 2021, p. 114), "hopefully" constructs widespread adoption of AI as both desirable and expected. Through a metaphorical description, in (10) AI is likened to "a full company, full of brilliant experts," intensifying its perceived productivity and competence. The lexical cluster ("brilliant," "super productively") amplifies value, presenting AI as a certain enhancement of individual capacity. In (11), the minimalist evaluation "just a cool thing" functions as informal normalisation, displaying two potential interpretations favoured by the adjunct "just", either as a restrictive or an intensifier. The colloquial tone downplays complexity and reframes technological sophistication as accessible and appealing. (12) combines evaluation with claim, as despite "limitations," the technology is "far more useful" and "much more valuable" than previously assumed. The repetition of comparative structures ("more useful," "more valuable") reinforces a narrative of exceeding expectations and progressive integration. Finally, (13) merges evaluation with expressive stance. The future is described as great,

complemented by the stance adverbial "amazingly" to express assessment of expectations (Biber et al. 1999). The accumulation of intensifiers constructs enthusiasm not merely as assessment but as affective commitment. Concerning agency, AI is impersonalised through objectivation as "tool" or genericisation as "technology" while humans are generically represented through collectivisation as "billions of people", "each of us," "humanity," "we" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 52).

In the same direction of strategic normalisation, in (14) SA praises the model's post-human capabilities, in this case, speaking any language so that humans would no longer have to, framing the outcome as positive. Performed as a direct assertive, indirect expressive speech act, this is a commitment to the truth of a desirable scenario:

> (14) I think we want AI systems to do their cognition in language, to communicate with us in language. It's a very human-focused thing, so my hope is we don't all have to be bilingual. (The Logan Barlett Show, YouTube)

Specifically, the fact that, thanks to these capabilities, people, represented inclusively through "we", will no longer have to make the effort to learn foreign languages is represented as desirable with expectation of fulfilment. In this case, the exemption from effort also comes with the loss of important intellectual and cultural capabilities[2], which, from the perspective of humanity and its further development into lower capability, is neither beneficial, nor desirable. Similarly, referring to the impact of ChatGPT on education, SA evaluates the phenomenon as "really remarkable" and "quite amazing", as can be observed in (15), in complete opposition to the other side of the polarisation spectrum, as further discussed in 4.2:

> (15) What's happening in education right now is really remarkable to watch and the ability for people to learn better, to do more, to use this as a tool alongside human teachers, that's quite amazing. (La Repubblica, YouTube)

To a much lesser extent, SA also performs expressive speech acts, to express personal feelings related to the model. The expressive-reflective statements in (16) and (17) differ from predictive discourse in that they foreground stance-taking and affect, while continuing to perform subtle work in the representation of agency.

> (16) It *seems to me useful* to have some voices saying let's not act out of fear but proceed with some reasonable caution. (The Logan Barlett Show, YouTube)
> (17) I know I'm going to be *nostalgic for this time* and it's sort of a *strange thing to like feel that* while you're living through it. (The Logan Barlett Show, YouTube)

[2] More recent interventions of SA continue to refer to an increasing number of human capabilities being taken over by AI-LLMs as a positive outcome: "You know, I can't spell complicated words anymore because I just trust that autocorrect will save me. I feel fine about that." (Sam Altman, ted.com, January 7th, 2025 https://www.ted.com/pages/sam-altman-on-the-future-of-ai-and-humanity-transcript)

In (16), the utterance functions as a deliberative assertive, modulated by epistemic hedging ("it seems to me"), which softens authorial commitment while enhancing credibility. From a CDA perspective, agency is collectivised and impersonalised, e.g. "some voices" are activated as (indefinite) social actors advocating restraint, while the generalised imperative "let's not act out of fear" distributes responsibility across an undefined collective, thereby diffusing individual accountability and framing caution as a shared moral stance rather than imposed by institutions. Contrastively, (17) represents a subjectivised affective stance, where agency is fully deagentialised through eventuation ("[nostalgic] for *this time*") (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 73). The temporal framing constructs the present moment as historically exceptional in a positive way, subtly implying loss of present benefits with exemption of accountability through deagentialisation, further shifting the attention to expressing personal feelings.

From a critical perspective, the analysed statements reveal positive presentation as manifested through descriptions of the model as excellent and beneficial, the integration of the model by human users as an inevitable yet beneficial condition for prosperity, a future decrease of human capabilities as an undisturbing consequence of AI use and as a natural way of the future, nevertheless causing nostalgia for the present time, implying certain future sadness in recalling what will no longer exist, constantly framing AI-driven developments as inevitable or self-propelling, legitimate and beneficial.

4.2 Noam Chomsky

As with most controversial topics over time, NC has been frequently invited to share his views on AI-LLM's impact on society, as one of the early proposers of the hypothesis that discourse is a primary condition in 'manufacturing the consent' of others (Herman and Chomsky, 1988). From the beginning, NC expressed scepticism, both about the performance of models themselves and the importance of the discussions surrounding them, arguing that, by design, LLMs are synthetic programs incapable of understanding or processing linguistic meaning, and therefore are incapable of making significant contributions to science. At the same time, he acknowledged potential societal benefits of such models on marginal cognitive tasks e.g. speech transcription benefitting people with poor hearing, but tempered optimistic perspectives, profoundly distrusting decision-makers, whom he believes lack the intention to pursue outcomes that would genuinely benefit humanity.

In strong contrast with SA, for example, NC adopts a position which clearly demystifies the narrative of societal progress and development. The selected extracts display a critical perspective on LLMs through a combination of assertive speech acts with expressive elements, metaphorical illustrations and a reconfiguration of agency.

The data selected for analysis were extracted from online interviews on Chomsky.info, YouTube and The New York Times (links in references).

In contrast to SA's future-oriented optimism, NC's discourse is dominated by assertive claims that foreground epistemic limitation and scientific inadequacy. Main ideas are often repeated from one interview to another, denoting coherence in discourse and a firm ideological position.

> (18) One [problem] is that the LLM systems are designed in such a way that they cannot tell us anything about language, learning, or other aspects of cognition, a matter of principle, irremediable. (Chomsky.info)
> (19) [These systems] are designed in such a way that in principle they can tell us nothing about language or cognition. The better they work, the deeper are their inadequacies. (IPT YouTube)
> (20) They differ profoundly from how humans reason and use language. These differences place significant limitations on what these programs can do, encoding them with ineradicable defects. (nytimes)
> (21) The crux of machine learning is description and prediction; it does not posit any causal mechanisms or physical laws (nytimes)
> (22) The predictions of machine learning systems will always be superficial and dubious. (nytimes)
> (23) LLM approaches sharply limit understanding of the internal processes that are the core objects of inquiry into the nature of language, its acquisition and use. But that is not relevant if concern for science and understanding have been abandoned in favor of other goals. (Chomsky.info)
> (24) Perversely, some machine learning enthusiasts seem to be proud that their creations can generate correct "scientific" predictions without making explanations. But this kind of prediction, even when successful, is pseudoscience. (nytimes)

The epistemic limitation of ChatGPT is presented as a structural flaw of LLM systems and is lexically intensified through multiple negation (Biber et al., 2021, p. 180) and categorical qualifiers e.g. "cannot tell us *anything*," "tell us *nothing*," "*always* superficial," "ineradicable," "irremediable", framing inadequacy as intrinsic rather than contingent. The contrastive formulation in (19) "the better they work, the deeper are their inadequacies" reinforces paradox, suggesting that apparent performance masks fundamental defect and results in lower quality outcomes. A second lexical pattern dissociates description from explanation. In (21), machine learning is reduced to "description and prediction," with no access to "causal mechanisms or physical laws." Similarly, (24) contrasts "correct predictions" with "explanations," culminating in the verdictive, delegitimising label "pseudoscience", complemented by the stance adverbial of style "perversely". This semantic opposition constructs a hierarchy in which explanation, causality, and understanding occupy superior epistemic status. From a CDA perspective, LLM systems are impersonalised through objectivation e.g. "are designed," "are encoded" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 52), shifting responsibility for structural constraint to AI creators, themselves passivated as non-identifiable. At the same time, phenomena such as "machine learning," "LLM approaches," and "predictions" are activated as epistemic agents that "limit understanding". Humans appear primarily as epistemic authorities,

implicitly aligned with "science" and "understanding", while "machine learning enthusiasts" are backgrounded as misguided actors (24), an effect further enhanced through the indefinite "some".

A frequently occurring assertive subtype is the argumentative claim, often combined with evaluative/verdictive values, through which LLMs are categorically delegitimised on bases of structural flaws and conceptual deficiencies.

> (25) It simply has no relation to any question having to do with science or philosophy. It's basically high-tech plagiarism. (IPT, Youtube)
> (26) Chat GPT is basically high-tech plagiarism. It's a system that accesses astronomical amount of data and finds regularities, straits them together to look more or less as what somebody might have written on this topic. Plagiarism. Just happens to be high tech. It's the only contribution to education I can think of, it makes plagiarism harder to detect. Absolutely no value to science or understanding. (EDU Kitchen)
> (27) I don't think it has anything to do with education except undermining it. (idem)
> (28) A student learns nothing from this, absolutely nothing. It is just a way to avoid learning. (idem)
> (29) It is at once comic and tragic that so much money and attention should be concentrated on so little a thing, something so trivial when contrasted with the human mind. (nytimes)

These statements advance the speaker's discourse from epistemic limitation to explicit delegitimisation through evaluative and verdictive claims. Lexically, the discourse is marked by absolute negation and intensification: "no relation," "absolutely no value," "nothing… absolutely nothing.", framing ChatGPT as fundamentally incompatible with science, philosophy, and education. In (25) and (26), the repeated metaphor "high-tech plagiarism" annuls the value and usefulness of LLMs celebrated by SA in (10), (12), (13) etc, attaching to it a morally charged label. The repetition of "plagiarism," including its isolation as a single-word sentence, reinforces verdictive force, enhanced by the stance adverbials ("simply", "absolutely", "basically") employed to determine (in this case, intensify) the viewpoint from which a predication is expressed (Popescu, 2021, p. 121). The descriptive sequence in (26) ("accesses astronomical amounts of data," "finds regularities," "strings them together") presents the system mechanistically, stripping it of the creativity or understanding advocated by SA in (2), (6), (10) etc. This reduction supports the final evaluative judgement: "Absolutely no value to science or understanding." Statements (27) and (28) extend the critique into the educational domain, in radical opposition with SA's claims in (6), (14), (15), leading to the creation of the paradoxical realities mentioned as a feature of polarisation (2.1). The verbs "undermining," "learns nothing," and "avoid learning" frame AI use as corrosive rather than supportive. The focus shifts from system limitation to social consequence, intensifying the negative stance. In (29), contrastive evaluation is foregrounded. The juxtaposition of "so much money and attention" with "so little a thing" and "trivial" constructs a hierarchy in which AI is diminished against the

"human mind." The expressive pairing "comic and tragic" adds rhetorical amplification, signaling moral and intellectual misplacement. From a CDA perspective on agency, ChatGPT is impersonalised ("it") and reduced to a mechanistic process, while education, science, and "the human mind" are represented as normative reference points, framing AI as an epistemically empty system whose prominence is due to misallocation of social value and intellectual authority.

Another salient component of NC's discourse is warning against the threat posed by ChatGPT on society, as can be observed in the following examples:

> (30) No scientific interest, no intellectual interest, but it might have major effects, it's a very threatening dangerous development. (Chomsky.info)
> (31) One of the worst parts is *it preys on human gullibility*. People tend to think that these things are real, they start asking them questions, "should I leave my wife?", "should I change my job?". They get back something totally ludicrous and they follow it. There are plenty of cases on record already. I mean, there are even people who do that with things like Alexa, you know, ask it questions, somehow thinking somehow it's real, it's a R2D2 you know a little cute little robot who answers your questions. *That's very dangerous*. (Through Conversations Podcast, YouTube)

In (30), categorical dismissal of any scientific value ("no scientific interest, no intellectual interest") is followed by modal caution ("might have major effects"), culminating in warning through intensified evaluation, in "very threatening dangerous development." The juxtaposition of intellectual insignificance with social danger constructs AI as both trivial and harmful. (31) combines an assertive form with a directive function upon raising the awareness on aspects of manipulation and vulnerability. From a lexico-semantic perspective, verbs such as "[AI] preys", "[people] tend to think", and "[people] follow" reveal a scenario of human weaknesses exploited by AI as a predator, activating the latter as untrustworthy while simultaneously passivating humans as gullible and misled social actors. The anecdotal exemplification through the pop-culture metaphor "R2D2" frames harmful effects as emerging from naively misinterpreted anthropomorphism. From a CDA perspective, agency is sharply activated in negative terms. ChatGPT is personified ("preys," "exhibits"), while humans are often represented as passive or misguided recipients of its outputs. This distribution constructs AI as a socially disruptive force acting upon vulnerable subjects, reinforcing the pessimistic pole of the polarised discourse.

From his legendary position of distrust in decision-makers, NC draws a disconcerting conclusion about the prospects related to the analysed phenomenon, in the context of discussions regarding regulation to the advantage of users.

> (32) I can easily sympathize with efforts to try to control the threats posed by advanced technology, including this case. I am, however, sceptical about the possibility of doing so. *I suspect that the genie is out of the bottle*. (chomsky.info)

The expression of doubt concerning the willingness to reduce the threats posed by "advanced technology" upon humanity in (32) adopts a concessive structure, beginning with a full alignment with advocates of AI regulation ("I can easily sympathize") before asserting scepticism through another metaphor ("the genie is out of the bottle"). Semantically, this is a figurative expression of irreversibility, conveying the idea that it is already too late to fully contain or undo the effects of the self-propagating phenomenon. In this framing, "the genie" stands metonymically for the social and cognitive consequences of "advanced technology", implying the impossibility of effective human control.

5 Discussion

Following the data analysis, a series of tendencies could be observed regarding the discursive construction of polarisation in the early public talk on the appearance and potential evolution of large language models, focusing on ChatGPT, as the program which irreversibly popularised user engagement with AI.

Retracing the discursive construction of polarisation in the mentioned discourses started from identifying the "distinct opposite" viewpoints on the matter, pinpointing the referents of discourse around the impact of ChatGPT on human society. The data analysis crossed off a componential analysis of speech acts looking at the particularisations of the statement (assertive speech act) to serve data interpretation, a lexical-semantic interpretation to document meaning and sense at local and broader levels, and a CDA approach to discuss representation, focusing on the attribution/distribution of agency i.e. types of authorities referred to in the analysed excerpts.

The results of the analysis conducted to illustrate the construction of polarisation are organised along the two discursive directions identified in the discussion i.e. the positive presentation through a discourse of optimism (5.1.), and the negative presentation through a discourse of concern (5.2.).

5.1 Discourse of optimism

The analysis reveals that the positive presentation of ChatGPT, in the data unfolds predominantly through a discourse of optimism, which frames technology as beneficial, inevitable, and socially transformative. The discourse of optimism is primarily enacted through future-oriented assertives, complemented by positive evaluations and expressions of excitement, projecting technological development as inevitable, expansive, and beneficial, while evaluative statements reinforce desirability and enthusiasm.

The referents of discourse e.g. AI, intelligence, demand, the future are semantically realised through superlatives and intensifiers ("world-changing," "amazingly great," "huge amount," "better and cheaper"), as well as expansive

quantification (“hundreds of millions,” “billions”). Indefiniteness and open-ended formulations (“what each of us can do,” “impact all of us”) contribute to a forward-looking horizon that is positively charged yet non-specific, enabling broad anticipation without detailed accountability. Optimism is directed, first, toward the capabilities of the program as an entity in itself, then extended to the integration of AI-LLMs into professional and everyday practices. Probably most controversially, an optimistic perspective is shared upon the constantly decreasing human capabilities as a consequence of interaction with AI, in depiction of an undisturbing and natural way of the future concerning human cognition.

In terms of agency representation, humans are frequently genericised and collectivised (“we,” “each of us,” “people”), often positioned as beneficiaries or recipients of technological progress. Through abstraction and impersonalisation, entities such as “intelligence” and “demand” are activated as quasi-autonomous entities that “get better” or “increase,” naturalising systemic evolution. AI is alternately represented as tool, assistant, or transformative system, activated in terms of capability with rare mentions as morally problematic, basically constructing a scenario in which technological change is both inevitable and beneficial, reinforcing an optimistic narrative of collective advancement.

5.2 Discourse of concern

In contrast to the discourse of optimism, discourse of concern is primarily realised through assertive speech acts functioning as argumentative claims, verdictive evaluations, and warnings. The dominant pattern is the epistemic claim, through which AI-LLMs are categorically positioned as incapable of contributing to science, understanding, or genuine cognition (“cannot tell us anything,” “no value,” “pseudoscience”). These claims are reinforced by multiple negation and intensifiers, which construct limitation as structural and irremediable rather than contingent. Evaluative and metaphorical labels such as “high-tech plagiarism” function as delegitimising devices, annulling any technical complexity into moral and intellectual flaws.

From a lexical-semantic perspective, the discourse draws heavily on semantic fields of harm, defect, and degradation with evaluatives such as “dangerous,” “threatening,” “ineradicable defects,” “gullibility,” “undermining,” “trivial”, a perspective argued by a recurrent opposition prediction and explanation, description and understanding, as AI vs. human capabilities, thereby establishing a hierarchy in which machine learning is confined to superficial pattern reproduction, contrasted with the causal and explanatory standards of science, also underpinning the argument that apparent performance masks epistemic emptiness.

Regarding the representation of agency, ChatGPT, in association with LLMs in general, are frequently impersonalised and abstracted (“machine learning,” “LLM approaches,” “predictions”), yet simultaneously activated as socially disruptive forces that “prey [on humans]” “undermine [education]” or pose “threats [to humanity]”. Human actors and “the human mind” are represented as the intellectual

authority, also frequently framed as vulnerable or misled ("people tend to think," "they follow it"), while AI enthusiasts are marginally activated as misguiding promoters. Through this configuration, the discourse of concern constructs polarisation not through alternative future projections, but through systematic epistemic delegitimisation and moral, as well as existential warning.

6 Conclusions

In the context of a rapidly evolving public discussion, this study focused on the early phase of public discourse on the emergence and potential impact of ChatGPT on society, aiming to better understand how polarisation was developed from contrastive underlying beliefs, and in which directions it evolved. By examining this incipient stage, the analysis sought to trace the initial configurations of optimism and concern that structured the debate around AI-LLMs and to identify the discursive mechanisms through which these positions were articulated and reinforced.

Looking at the "early phase" of polarisation as a moment when interpretations were still being negotiated and stabilised (Muñoz et al., 2024, p. 10), the analysis show that polarisation is grounded in incompatible yet internally coherent interpretative frameworks. On the one hand, AI-LLMs are represented as transformative tools, sources of abundance, and extensions of human capability, while on the other, they are framed as epistemically deficient systems, morally problematic artefacts, and socially disruptive forces. These divergent representations give rise to "paradoxical realities" (Filardo-Llamas & Morales-López, 2022, p. 358) in which the same technological phenomenon is simultaneously perceived as progressive and regressive.

This polarised configuration remains dynamic rather than fixed. As the debate continues to unfold, it reflects broader tensions concerning knowledge, agency, responsibility, and the status of human cognition in an increasingly automated environment. By analysing how these positions are discursively constructed through speech acts, lexical-semantic representations, and patterns of agency attribution, this study contributes to the understanding of the ideological forces shaping contemporary engagement with AI. In the context of this – yet another – paradigm shift in contemporary life, developing such an understanding is valuable not only for navigating the inevitably emerging challenges, but also for creating the conditions under which the undeniable benefits brought about by AI can be realised responsibly, reflectively, and sustainably, to the greatest possible advantage for humanity.

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