Arria scientists report on successful conference at INLG 2019 in Tokyo

New home in Scotland after selling in part the 12th International Conference on Natural Language Generation, Arria NLG, the University of Aberdeen, Professor Ehud Reiter and Applied Research Scientist Craig Thomson had lots to share about their experiences.

With the conference’s jam-packed schedule — an extra half-day was added this year to accommodate the presentations — it was no wonder Ehud and Craig had a lot to be excited about. Presentments included a mixture of research, industry case studies, panel discussions, keynotes, tutorials, workshops, and evening networking and framing, and generation of high-level think with thought leadership and conditional templates. Craig said that one of the most memorable moments from the conference was when our esteemed Professor Reiter raised his hand and asked “what constitutes good hype?”

From a commercial perspective, Arria found it noteworthy that Amazon, Facebook, Microsoft, and Google were all present and talking about NLG work, Arria and Facebook being specifically involved in a shared working arrangement in Alexza — the Interactive Natural Language Technology for Explainable AI workshop.

Ehud and Craig also noted interesting applications already in progress, including the generation of hotel descriptions for an online travel site, and the generation of personalized response letters for people who write to their congresspeople. Clearly, the range of commercial applications of NLG continues to expand as enterprises recognize the value of human-language explanation and machine-generated, personalized writing that feels distinctly human.

Several conference speakers addressed the problem of reducing “naturalization” in trainable NLG systems. Systematic in this context is when NLG systems are saying things “in a natural way” without a complete understanding of the context. “Naturalization is a big barrier to the use of natural techniques in NLG,” Ehud said. “It can be addressed only through a systematic approach.”

Craig also found the neural NLG discussions interesting. “Neural NLG is neat for various reasons,” he said. “Once you know that it’s easier to build quickly. But this is why evaluation is such an important topic now. How do you make it easier to evaluate the quality of output?”

Evaluation of NLG systems was indeed a key theme this year, and Ehud’s involvement in the conference was largely focused on this. An outcome of such evaluation would include more realistic and better-synthesized forecast generators produces better forecasts before existing forecast generations. Throughout the four days of the conference there were diverse applications and use cases were discussed by researchers — there was a lot of discussion about methods of evaluation for NLG systems.

On Friday at the DSNNLG workshop, participants discussed designing experiments that involve human-in-the-loop. Arria’s Craig Thomson is an expert in this field. He explained that revealing things to people through such online platforms is becoming increasingly popular when what we are dealing with is the kind of NLG systems that focus on ways to make NLG systems better, while also improving the work environment. Craig’s presentation focused on how to make NLG systems work more fun or interesting by gamifying the task, and paying workers ethically.

Craig greatly appreciated his conversations with other researchers, including some who were interested in future collaboration, or even just helping each other out. “It’s fun to think about NLG in terms of the future directions of NLG research,” said Craig. “I was thrilled to be a partner in this project. At the INLG conference, it was the NL4XAI project that Professor Reiter presented, which is about the use of an NLG platform for generating written language for Explainable AI.”

One last thing to mention here before we close out this conference wrap-up is this: There is an exciting new multi-million-pound new EU project, called Language for Sustainable AI (L4SAI) that is focused on using NLG and AI techniques to work more efficiently to improve the lives of people. Ehud is thrilled to be a partner in this project. At the INLG conference, it was the NL4XAI project that Professor Reiter presented, which is about the use of an NLG platform for generating written language for Explainable AI. At INLG, Ehud and Craig had so much to talk about. They have now had more concrete ideas for their next experiments,” he said.

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