

Response to N.C. Rowe's review

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The cordial tone of Mr. Rowe's commentary on my assumptions about natural language interaction with database systems was appreciated, but I was not swayed by the arguments he makes. I still feel that computers are tools which offer impressive speed in carrying out precise instructions without error, potentially unlimited storage capacity, and distinctive input-output devices.

Rather than continue a lengthy, philosophical, and ultimately futile debate, I would rather urge a more scientific approach. Controlled psychologically oriented experimentation can provide reliable evidence about which situations lend themselves to natural language systems. I would like researchers in natural language systems to set testable goals for themselves and conduct experiments which compare user performance with the use of query languages or menu selection. Dependent measures might include time to learn system usage, performance time on a benchmark set of tasks, error rates, user satisfaction, and retention.

There is ample conjecture about why and when natural language interaction will succeed or fail, but I hope that these vague claims will be replaced by testable hypotheses and statistical results. Experimentation can provide deep insights into human cognitive processes such as knowledge representation, query formulation, and problem solving.