The Guardian

one stop english

Why do we gender AI?

Level 2 • Upper intermediate

1 Warmer

Rank these uses of voice assistants in order from 1 (most useful) to 6 (least useful).

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

a. making phone calls
b. setting alarms
c. telling you which song is playing
d. making reservations
e. finding and reading emails
f. reminding you about important events or dates

2 Key words

Fill the gaps in the sentences using these key words from the text. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

bias	scope	sceptical	binary	blush
abuse	compliant	inclusive	shortcomings	impairment

1. If something is _____, it involves all types of people. (para 1)

2. _____ are faults or problems that make something less effective. (para 2)

3. _____ is angry, offensive comments. (para 2)

4. If you _____, your cheeks become red because you feel embarrassed or ashamed. (para 2)

5. _____ is an attitude that makes people treat someone in a way that is unfair or different from other people. (para 3)

6. A _____ person is too willing to do what other people want. (para 4)

7. If something is _____, it has two parts. (para 4)

8. _____ is the opportunity that is needed to develop something. (para 5)

9. If people are _____ about something that other people think is true or right, they have doubts about it. (para 9)

10. If you have an _____, a part of your body is unable to do something fully. (para 9)

3 Find the information

Find the following information in the text as quickly as possible.

1. By what percentage is Alexa's understanding of native accents greater than its understanding of non-native accents?

2. By what percentage is Google's speech recognition more accurate for men than it is for women?

3. What is Project Q?

4. How many people were involved in Project Q's voice sample?

5. What was the aim of Mozilla's 2019 Common Voice project?

6. Which organization is planning to launch a voice assistant called Beeb in 2020?

Why do we gender AI? Voice tech firms move to be more inclusive

Kieran Yates

11 January, 2020

1 In 2020, we can expect new developments in the field of voice technology. These include technology that can understand regional accents and gender-neutral voice assistants. Products such as Alexa and Siri have been criticized because they often misunderstand women, ethnic minorities and those with regional accents. In response, a range of new projects aims to make the voice tech industry more inclusive.

2 Dr Charlotte Webb, of Feminist Internet, described some of the current technology's shortcomings. "Voice tech has failed because it doesn't respond adequately to abuse," she said. "A well-known example is Siri stating 'I'd blush if I could' when insulted." One study asked people to read out different news headlines and then looked at what Alexa thought people had said. The difference between what was said and what Alexa understood was 30% greater for people with non-native accents. Recent research also indicates that Google's speech recognition is 13% more accurate for men than it is for women.

3 Feminist Internet has developed a piece of software called F'xa to raise awareness about bias in AI systems, including voice technology. Another enterprise that intends to make voice tech more inclusive is Project Q, a "gender-neutral voice assistant" expected to launch in 2020.

4 "Current voice technology is gendered," says Ryan Sherman, of Project Q. "When we look at Siri or Google Assistant, they mainly start out as female by default, so we asked the question: why do we gender AI? Research shows that female voices are more helpful and more compliant. Whenever male voices are used, it's to indicate superiority and intelligence. All voice tech only offers two options, and the world has moved past only seeing gender as binary."

5 Project Q launched in 2019 with a prototype voice developed by non-binary linguists. They then asked a sample of 4,500 people from across Europe whether it sounded male or female. The answers were split 50/50. "We are now working on developing this as an actual voice that can be used across voice assistants but also metro stations, games … there is huge scope," says Sherman.

6 Established companies are also trying to diversify voice tech. Mozilla launched the Common Voice project in 2019. Its aim is to recruit global voices as a dataset to help diversify AI speech through machine learning.

7 "Something we learned early on about companies that started years ago with voice recognition is that they often took datasets that came from public radio," said Katharina Borchert, Mozilla's chief innovation officer. "Those tended to be male, native speakers with really trained voices. That automatically led to a biased result because that is all the machine has. There are not a lot of female voices, and it doesn't have people with regional accents. That's why the early version had real issues understanding women because they speak in a different pitch. So the larger the diversity of speakers, the greater the quality over the long haul."

8 The BBC is developing a voice assistant called Beeb to launch in 2020, designed to respond to users' requests. Mukul Devichand, executive editor of voice and AI, says it is also looking at how to respond better to regional accents. "We've been trying to get people to provide voices from all corners of the country to help us ensure that it can be a conversation assistant that represents regional accents," he says.

9 Dr Saul Albert, of Loughborough University, is sceptical that these projects give full assistance and highlights one area that needs attention. "If these technologies are going to live up to their marketing promises, Amazon, Google and other technology companies are going to have to involve disabled people in design at every stage of the process," he says. "There are standard accessibility features designed into products like the Google Home and the Amazon Echo, as well as specialist initiatives such as Google's Euphonia project, which learns the voice patterns of individual users with speech impairments."

10 Dr Leigh Clark, of Swansea University, is more optimistic, but he says there are still considerations when developing some of these projects: "If we have gender-neutral voices, do these become the norm or do these become another option for the user to select?"

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4 Comprehension check

Are these statements true (T) or false (F) according to the text?

1. According to research, female voices sound superior and more intelligent.

2. Voice assistants often misunderstand women, ethnic minorities and people with regional accents.

3. Half the people in the Project Q sample thought the voice sounded male.

4. Google Euphonia learns the voice patterns of people with speech impairments.

5. The BBC's voice assistant will not be able to recognize regional accents.

6. Project Q's voice is already being used in metro stations and games.

5 Find the word

Find the following words and phrases in the text.

1. a two-word adjectival phrase meaning *language that does not refer specifically to a particular gender* (para 1)

2. a two-word noun phrase meaning *a group of people with the same culture and traditions who live in a place where most people have a different culture and traditions* (para 1)

3. a two-word verb phrase meaning *increase people's understanding of a situation or issue* (para 3)

4. a verb meaning *start selling a product or service* (para 3)

5. a noun meaning *the high or low quality of a sound* (para 7)

6. a four-word adjectival phrase, mainly used in American English, meaning *over a long period of time* (para 7)

7. a three-word phrasal verb meaning *be as good as what is expected or promised* (para 9)

8. a noun meaning *something that is usual or expected* (para 10)

6 Two-word phrases

Match the words in the left-hand column with those in the right-hand column to make expressions from the text.

1.	regional	a.	station
2.	by	b.	impairment
3.	voice	c.	accent
4.	metro	d.	recognition
5.	speech	e.	feature
6.	standard	f.	default

7 Word-building

Complete the table using words from the text.

	adjective	noun
1.	accessible	
2.	superior	
3.	diverse	
	verb	**noun**
4.	initiate	
5.	respond	
6.	impair	

8 Discussion

Discuss the statements.

- Voice assistants will soon become part of everyone's lives.

- Voice assistants just make people lazy.

KEY

2 Key words

1. inclusive
2. shortcomings
3. abuse
4. blush
5. bias
6. compliant
7. binary
8. scope
9. sceptical
10. impairment

3 Find the information

1. 30%
2. 13%
3. a gender-neutral voice assistant
4. 4,500
5. to recruit global voices
6. the BBC

4 Comprehension check

1. F
2. T
3. T
4. T
5. F
6. F

5 Find the word

1. gender-neutral
2. ethnic minority
3. raise awareness
4. launch
5. pitch
6. over the long haul
7. live up to
8. norm

6 Two-word phrases

1. c
2. f
3. d
4. a
5. b
6. e

7 Word-building

1. accessibility
2. superiority
3. diversity
4. initiative
5. response
6. impairment