

Semantic Networks: the Path to Profitability

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Abstract

In recent years, we have seen a surge of “Question and Answer” Systems (Answer Logic, iPhrase, Lingway, Albert, Baobab, Weniwen), triggered by the phenomenal IPO success of Ask Jeeves (www.ask.com). For the first time in a long time, linguists were being chased by professional head-hunters and were commanding sky-high salaries. Then it all came down. Or did it? Surprisingly, there appears to be another “surge” of Q&A companies. The message is a bit confusing. Such systems could make a lot of money, but then maybe not, but then again they ought to, etc. etc.

In any case, ontology plays a critical role in such systems. Some systems are based on an ontology/semantic network that is automatically “adaptable” by training on domain-specific data. Others make use of expert-system-like hand-written rules. The difference is not obvious at a demo stage, but emerges more clearly during deployment. The pros and cons of empirical methods vs rules has been argued to death in the 1990s in academia. This talk will discuss how this debate is currently unfolding in the commercial arena.