

This is a translated transcript of the following podcast episode:

[Aflevering 3: Hilde van Zeeland – Writefull \(of: AI is meer dan ChatGPT\) - Nooit meer schrijven? | Podcast on Spotify](#)

In keeping with the theme of this podcast series – AI tools in education – we've used AI tools to create the transcripts and translations. The Dutch transcript was created using Amberscript. This transcript was in turn translated into English using DeepL. We've done a minimal edit of both the Dutch and English transcript to remove some errors and clarify really unclear passages.

00:00:05

Gea: Welcome to "Never Write Again?", a podcast about artificial intelligence and writing skills. Thanks for listening. My name is Gea Dreschler. I am assistant professor of English linguistics and academic director of the Academic Language Program, or the ALP, part of the humanities faculty. In each episode of this podcast, I talk to someone who is involved in some way with the topic of ChatGPT and AI tools. The conversations are about how these tools actually work, what they can (and cannot) do, and most importantly, what we should do with them in education. Ban them, test students differently, don't let students write any more? Together with the guests, I examine the subject from all angles.

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Gea: Today's guest is Hilde van Zeeland, Applied Linguist at Writefull. I talk to Hilde about what Writefull actually is and about the pilot the VU did with Writefull this year, to find out if this is a useful tool for students to work on their writing skills. Writefull is a great example of an AI tool that is different from ChatGPT because it does not generate text but corrects existing text. In doing so, it gives us a broader view of AI tools in writing skills education.

00:01:30

Gea: Hilde, welcome! Like every time, I start with a series of questions for you, for yourself as a writer. What kind of writer are you? Are you a Mozart or a Beethoven? So do you think out the whole symphony and then write it down all at once, or do you keep endlessly polishing your text?

00:01:48

Hilde: I think indeed that first one. Yes, I do really plan of "what do I want in the text" and "what is the structure." And then I start writing those pieces and then I keep editing it until I'm happy with it.

00:02:01

Gea: And what is the best place to write?

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Hilde: For me, just at home at my desk, I like it best.

00:02:07

Gea: Music or silence?

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Hilde: Depends, but often music, yes, but music without lyrics.

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Gea: Okay so what, uh classical music, jazz?

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Hilde: Yes, often a bit of classical, quiet, classical music. And then I don't know anything else about classical music, but then I know I like that to write with.

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Gea: Yes, and what AI tools do you use yourself when you are writing?

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Hilde: Actually none, no, actually none, no, so you would expect: Writefull but I actually only use that when I really need to see how it works and really test it myself. But I'm not used to using it myself.

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Gea: Funny. And then the last question: AI in education; ban or embrace?

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Hilde: I think embrace yes, but yes, I think banning also becomes very difficult. So that's actually the reason I say embrace.

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Gea: Yes, okay, well, we're going to talk at length later about what Writefull is and does and can do and so on. But first: what does a Chief Applied linguist do?

00:03:11

Hilde: What I do at Writefull as chief applied linguist is mainly to think about that language feedback that Writefull gives and the language models, see how they do, what kind of feedback they give. What could be better? But also: how do we communicate about this? So we also kind of do the material around that for the students and researchers or the institutions, how they use it. How can it be used?

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Gea: And how did you actually end up with AI yourself? You're actually working with these kinds of tools every day. Is that something you've always been interested in or something you kind of got into?

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Hilde: Actually rolled into it because I did work at Writefull from the beginning, so when we really started it. But back then it wasn't AI yet because back then that wasn't so big and applicable to writing tools so it actually started as once a bit of a simple tool that you can use to look at: How often are words used in academic texts. So just a bit of a corpus linguistic approach to look at what is common. And at some point we started using AI because people said: Yes, but we actually want to get automatic feedback on the text and not have to look for ourselves: how should we use something?

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Gea: Okay, and maybe, maybe it's a bit of a technical question right away, but so what is the difference between corpus linguistics and AI?

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Hilde: Corpus linguistics, then you're really looking at... So then you have a corpus of language texts and then you start looking into that of, "What patterns do we see?" So, how is that language being used? And in the case of Writefull, that was then, if you have a sentence, what is a common word in that sentence? So you actually kind of look at the statistics behind the language. And AI, of course, uses that language. A lot of data to learn uhm yes some kind of rules from that and be able to automatically apply them to new language.

00:05:14

Gea: Well, we've heard some things about what Writefull is by now, but maybe good for those who don't know it: what is Writefull and what does it do? What can we do with it?

00:05:25

Hilde: Writefull offers a number of tools, software tools and apps for students and researchers to help them with academic writing. And it uses AI to do so. One of the things students and researchers can do is write their text, activate Writefull and get language suggestions. So then it's often corrections on grammar, word usage and so on. But we have also developed some widgets that use AI to, for example, automatically paraphrase something or write an abstract for a paper based on the text or generate a title and so on. So we are trying to use AI in different ways that are useful for students and researchers.

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Gea: And yes, I've had the opportunity to try it out myself, but what does it look like practically? Like, do you go to a website somewhere or upload your text somewhere? What do those edits and the widgets look like?

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Hilde: We have different tools, so we have an add-in for Word. So students can go to the website and they can download that add-in there and then it's added to Microsoft Word. And within that, they can, they still just see the text in their document and in addition the language suggestions for each sentence that Writefull gives. But we also have a website, Writefull X we call it, and there you can also use all the widgets right in the browser itself. You don't necessarily need to download an extension for that.

00:07:01

Gea: And of course we've been hearing a lot about ChatGPT lately, also an AI tool, is Writefull somewhat similar to that or is it something completely different? How would you describe that?

00:07:14

Hilde: Yes, it is something completely different, especially because Writefull is so really created or the AI is really designed to give language feedback on texts, and especially academic texts. And ChatGPT of course is really a generative language model, so you give the text and it gives back text and it can be anything. But it's a logical response to what you give. So often that is: you give a question or a prompt

and you get a response. So GPT can certainly also be used to ask: hey, I have a text here or I have a sentence here. Can you improve that one? Can you rewrite it? You can, but that's not what it's trained for. So in that sense they differ.

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Gea: And are students indeed the main target audience for you?

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Hilde: Yes, students and researchers, basically anyone who writes academic texts and wants to improve them. But we also supply it, for example, to companies that want to proofread texts or publishing houses that publish texts and want to do a quick language check on them or offer it to their authors who submit an article.

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Gea: And is it still, there are of course other tools as well so you have you can of course in word just already spell check or you can do a language check. People might also know Grammarly, which is also used a lot among students. Is that somewhat comparable or are there other... Does that work differently?

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Hilde: I think in the functionality that the language check in Word or Grammarly that those are similar though in the sense of you write something and you get language corrections on that. And Grammarly of course also uses a lot of AI and Word meanwhile also. But the big difference in that is that those other tools are often not trained really on academic texts. So the language feedback you get is often just a bit more basic. Or if you have a long, complicated academic sentence, they often can't do much with it. So you do see the difference in the data that the models are trained on.

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Gea: Because that's actually the case with many AI models, which are often actually of "You get out of it what you put into it", in a sense. So you train your model only on scientific texts.

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Hilde: Yes right yes, those are the real open access articles that have been published. Well those that are "proofread" so those that are really with peer review as well. So we do have the good publishers because otherwise, of course, you don't know what you're getting. But they are all academic texts, yes.

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Gea: And how? In what kind of order of magnitude should I think? If you [look at] ChatGPT, which is obviously huge. There are larger corpora of of scholarly texts as well. How about that?

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Hilde: Yes, then you really are talking about millions of texts. How many I don't know exactly either. But it's not a small corpus and sometimes we also get a request from, for example, a company that says: we also have to edit our articles, we still have something like 100 articles. Can you please fine-tune the language models a bit so that what works also works for our house style? Yes, of course you can't, because you really, you really need much, much more data.

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Gea: Yes, that may be something people don't always realise either; it all seems so easy now.

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Hilde: Yes, there is a lot of computing power behind that, but indeed also time, because we do it for some publishers, for example, who are in the medical field and who say: yes, who is good for the generic language? Feedback but we actually really want to have for that medical text, we still need slightly different AI. So we can do that, but it often takes a few weeks, at least to fine-tune and, of course, evaluate. And then again and again that that really gives the feedback that that editor.

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Gea: and what is actually so special about scientific texts or academic texts in terms of language?

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Hilde: Yes, what we do at Writefull is really just language correction at the sentence level. So yes, apart from of course how the text as a whole is constructed, the sentences are well, more complex is the word usage, the words that are used are not so frequent, right, so you're talking about the words that are in general English, a lot less frequent anyway. And also how those are combined is, is obviously quite different.

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Gea: Writing it is of course super, yes, actually quite a very complex task. So we, we are also kind of thinking of well, what what? What does a student actually need to be able to do in order to write a good text? And ehm, this of course also involves thinking, structuring and so on. Is it true that Writefull then mainly focuses on the kind of finishing of the text, i.e. correctness and style?

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Hilde: Then you can, yes, indeed, it's the the structure of the text and "what do I want to say at all", so the content. Then that really lies with the student, but where it's a lot more than the language and correcting it, that can be used very well for that.

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Gea: And one more question about this, of special interest to me as a historical linguist. I am also interested in language change what I always wonder with such a model is it obviously works very much with frequencies. Is that going to sort of reinforce itself so that you actually get a sort of yes unitary language. Is that something that could happen over time?

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Hilde: Yes, that I think especially if you stick to the texts you have. But if you keep updating the corpus as well then actually that language change should you have to start seeing that in there as well, so it the word used, that changes by or using "We" more often in an article, which is now allowed in many areas. And before, that was really, well, you just don't do that in the academic text. Of course, you're going to see that reflected if you keep up with that.

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Gea: Yes, yes, so that style can also be.... The model can be re-trained or trained on new data.

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Hilde: Yes, yes, and what we also see, for example, is that you do have bias that is obviously taken from the data. We had something like I think a year ago or maybe a bit longer ago, someone on Twitter also put a screenshot of Writefull and they had given feedback on a sentence where "she" was used and it was corrected in like "he". Yes, that shouldn't be possible.

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Gea: Yes, but indeed, because those are very technical things that you can indeed ask: How does AI deal with that? Because those are of course choices as a writer. Even if you want to use "They" instead of "He" or "She" in inclusive language or gender-neutral language. That might be something more difficult to extract from such a model than less passive or formal expressions.

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Hilde: Yes, that's really very tricky, so you can either say: we let the model do its thing and we really take it out post processing, they call it. So really at the very end we take that out. But that is difficult, because you still miss a lot of cases that are then given by the model. So then you just haven't filtered it all out properly or you say: we'll deal with the training data and we'll just extract it from the data that is put into the model for the training. So there are two two ways actually to try, to prevent that, but it is, it can always occur.

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Hilde: Anyway, we now know a bit about how Writefull works, what it is, what it does. Let's see what it can also do within it within education. How will it help students?

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Hilde: Yes, I think it will mainly help students correct their English academic texts, so then it's about grammar, word usage but also academic style. So in which ways can that be improved? And of course that can easily be done while they are writing in word, so that can be done for a one, a sentence and for a paragraph. This can also be done at the very end, when they say: well, I'm actually quite happy with this text, I have everything on paper and now I just want to throw that language check over it and I think that if students use it for a longer period of time and if they hopefully also look at the feedback and see the same things coming back regularly, that they also learn from that.

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Gea: How much explanation do they actually get at the, at the, at Writefull's suggestions at the moment.

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Hilde: Yes, well, we happen to be now. We are now working on a Dashboard that we are still piloting, together with the VU. And what we do in that Dashboard is: we collect metrics from the feedback Writefull gives to students. So if they write in Word, then they can go to their Dashboard and then they can see there of I see so many

edits within a grammar I see so many edits within word usage and from there they can also go directly to the Support website of.... You know what it's called.

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Gea: English Language Support online.

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Hilde: And so from there they actually see tips for language use. So if they get very many suggestions within a certain subcategory of grammar, for example articles of propositions then they can get more feedback on that.

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Gea: Maybe good if I indeed explain about that feedback website, it has been around for much longer, and we use it at the Academic Language Programme to give feedback on student texts. But then that is feedback from the teachers and the students, in a kind of second step, get access to the website explaining grammar topics and also exercises. And actually from the dashboard, they come to that same website where they normally come through the tutor's feedback file. So so they indeed have the automatic feedback that we normally as teachers cannot give, because that takes time and we don't see while students are writing, we don't always see those intermediate products. And they also get the automatic feedback and then they do get access to the website with the exercises and explanations.

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Hilde: Yes. Yeah and so that's really really nice because we have the ease of it while writing which hopefully also makes them a bit more confident. And from there they see like well I need to work on that and then you get them really focused language tips.

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Gea: And is there any benefit for teachers there actually, with that Dashboard.

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Hilde: Yes, because the lecturers, they can also, they can invite students to their their group. And then if a student gives permission, then a teacher can also see that student's dashboard. So then the teacher can also see. Well, I see the student is still struggling with this. Maybe and this goes a little bit better and then they can either class or individual there. Can they pay more attention to that.

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Gea: And maybe one of the one of the concerns, also with ChatGPT for example there is also very much about privacy and about data of the students. To what extent is that actually with Writefull with something like this have students, then their texts are just passed on do they have a say in whether they want to use this or not?

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Hilde: Well, at Writefull: in any case, we never save texts. So the language feedback is given on a text, and that text is sent back with the language feedback. So that is not stored or used to improve the AI. And within this dashboard, that also means that the only thing we do store are those metrics from the student. So not the actual sentences behind that and the specific suggestions behind that. And of course that has the disadvantage that a student or a teacher with a dashboard cannot see the

exact corrections. But of course the big advantage that we really yes, don't store those texts, don't use them.

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Gea: And are there actually things that you sort of don't do as a matter of principle, or that universities don't want to allow, precisely because of possible plagiarism or something to do with data going somewhere and perhaps being stored? Or well, maybe people are now also a bit wary of all AI actually because of ChatGPT, have you started working differently because of that too, or are you adapting to that?

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Hilde: Yes, well, that part of not storing the data that we have always had and we will certainly continue to do that, because that is also of course a big concern, also from the institutions. So we always communicate that very clearly. And that is also very different from, say, Grammarly or Quillbot, which do explicitly do this and which also say it clearly on a website: we use the data, but that is one thing. In addition, we also see that institutions are indeed concerned about AI, especially the widgets we offer, such as the paraphraser.

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Gea: Because what does the paraphraser do?

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Hilde: it paraphrases sentences or paragraphs.

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Gea: So it's kind of like in, a student has a quote and they throw it through the paraphraser, and then it's, that's going to be a new kind of copy+paste.

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Hilde: Yes, there is a lot of use for that. That's not the intention, of course. It was developed for when you're struggling with a sentence, you're not sure how to word something else: Put it in and you get a number of alternatives. But of course institutions say: Yes, but how do students use this? Because for a student it's very often okay, "paraphrase something", and it's now my words. And then they often don't quote the source or still do, but they still take it as if it's blindly, and that's a problem, of course. So what we do is if an institution says: well, we don't like this widget, we don't like the idea, they can turn that off for their students.

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Gea: Paraphrasing is perhaps also a good example of all those different skills involved in writing, because yes, with a paraphraser you might be able to word just a little differently. But that's actually not what we want students to be able to do at the time of paraphrasing. Because, of course, that is also very much about understanding the content and being able to say something in their own words.

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Hilde: Yes, yes, no, right, that's, that's a good point. So in that sense is and we do see that at Writefull that it's always a bit of a yes, you have to find a bit of that balance in: What do students and researchers need? What helps them to be able to write a text faster or use those sources faster? But at the same time, you still want them to get something out of it and that they do continue to write their own texts and continue to do their own research. And that's kind of where we do strike that balance.

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Gea: And so actually the role of a tool like Writefull is to make... yes, maybe make a text faster or or easier to find synonyms, uh an easy grammar check. That said, there are a lot of other things that students still have to learn in other ways as well.

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Hilde: Absolutely, yes.

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Gea: Because, how should I picture that? If a student is not a good writer? Does he then run his text through Writefull, and is that then a good text?

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Hilde: Well no, [it won't] work miracles yet. No, if a text is really, ... well, badly written or if the language level is not very high. Writefull will be able to pick out the errors, but if a sentence is so incredibly crooked that even an AI can't make anything of it, then it can't give good suggestions either. Or then it might try to rewrite a sentence, but not in the right way because it doesn't really mean what the student...

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Gea: And and then we may have correct lyrics, but not necessarily good lyrics.

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Hilde: Yes.

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Gea: Yes, yes, so the student should still be able to do something.

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Hilde: Absolutely yes.

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Gea: I think with this we have seen a very nice example of how a specific AI tool can be used in education. But of course there is a lot more going on right now around AI. AI tools are of course hugely hip, uh currently. Or also well, precisely the big enemy. Does that actually make your work at Writefull easier or can you kind of piggyback on that? Or does that actually make it more difficult because you get a lot of uh, yes, maybe a lot of criticism and critical questions, or that people think: well, that's pretty much the same thing. And yes, very scary.

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Hilde: Well, it's trickier for us indeed. On the one hand, because of ChatGPT, you get people actually have the expectation of, that Writefull is a second ChatGPT. And of course it is not, it is a very different tool, very different models. But on the other hand, there is indeed also, well, a bit of a fear of AI. What does it do and is it safe? And do students still learn to write themselves and those kinds of questions we certainly get a lot more now than six months ago.

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Gea: Did that make you develop other things or are you communicating in a different way about what Writefull is doing then?

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Hilde: Not very much, but that what I just mentioned, of still being able to think along with those settings and being able to turn those widgets on and off. And I hope that

the dashboard, that settings, like that very much. The idea of if we are going to introduce an AI tool as an institution uh to our students that it is one that at least also gives those uh those metrics uh to be able to learn from it. So it's not necessarily students get very lazy from it, they don't even have to do anything anymore and they can definitely learn from it.

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Gea: Yes, and do you guys also do something with "how do we recognise AI generated texts"? So can you guys say or recognise something about that?

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Hilde: Yes, we have a ChatGPT detector so.... yes that. ChatGPT Zero is another one, you might know that one. That's also a really big one, so you can actually throw in a text and that gives in the case of the GPT detector it gives to so much percent certainty that that's either uh from GPT or written by a human.

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Gea: How? How does something like that actually work? Because I've also heard that those actually, those kind of detectors are actually not that very not that reliable.

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Hilde: It actually works [as follows]: It recognises the patterns of ChatGPT language use, because that's fairly, yes, what do you call it? It does repeat itself a lot in the type of sentences it writes and how those sentences are constructed. But we do also see with GPT-4 so the latest version of it, which is already a lot better than three and three and half were as in. It does sound a lot more like a human, so those type of detectors that are becoming less accurate, less accurate actually in their judgement.

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Gea: So basically, those detectors should also evolve with new developments.

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Hilde: Yes, and to some extent that works, so we also try to develop it over and over again. But at some point we have to start saying: yes, people, we can actually, we don't see the distinction anymore and I think that's pretty much yes at that point we have almost arrived, I think.

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Gea: Yes.

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Hilde: Yes.

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Gea: Yes, which is what does still often what I hear and what I myself actually ChatGPT writes, well very boring, and it's, it's texts, he makes up all kinds of things, but I don't feel like reading it.

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Hilde: It is, it is, it is not inviting or tantalising no.

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Gea: We might imagine that ChatGPT will soon write uh boring reports. But maybe not creative texts. Where do you think scientific texts are located, functional or creative? And so how easy is that for such a model to adopt?

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Hilde: Yes, I think academic texts.... Of course, those are often kind of the same anyway and they are also boring. Very predictable. Especially the abstract. which is very formulaic, because the beginning is like that, the middle part is like that, the end is like that. And the same goes for the conclusion for example often. So I think a GPT and the better GPTs get, that will be able to write a whole article very, very quickly. For which you can't say is it coming from an AI or is it really coming from a researcher?

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Gea: Yes, and in research on second language acquisition, of course, there is already a lot of focus on those actually standard expressions, standard phrases, formulations that actually recur every time.

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Hilde: Yes, yes, right.

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Gea: But yeah, it's a shame of course, if it starts... kind of reinforcing itself, and that it becomes that kind of magnifying each other yeah, where you actually kind of, a certain genre reinforces itself so much that you actually only get the same kind of texts. Is that the future?

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Hilde: That could very well be the case, and maybe [in the short term]. Because we already see a lot of tools now, of course, that can also summarise articles very well. Those are also getting better and better and they also do that very well because it's so predictable. So they know exactly from which pieces of the articles they need something. So I can well imagine that we are moving towards a very short version with really just the most important points and hopefully still with the references, so that people really do keep reading themselves.

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Gea: And even maybe the occasional slightly creative sentence in between. Are there actually any kind of tools for that, to write more creatively? Or yes, maybe more varied?

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Hilde: Yes, I can't think of any at the moment, but there are a few and so can ChatGPT by the way, who can also do poems or songs or rhymes or whatever. So I imagine that might also be fun to do an abstract on an article, and see what comes out of it.

00:28:45

Gea: Of course, there is a lot of talk now about regulating AI and there is a new uh law also in the making at the European Union about what is allowed, what is not allowed and so on, and in doing so it is mostly said was that it should actually not be left to the private sector and the big tech companies, but that there should be more steering on that. What do you think of that kind of statement?

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Hilde: Well, I think it's really good that they're working on that in any case. It seems to me very difficult to with, not with, something like ChatGPT because of course it's

really a black box, OpenAI gives very little information about how it works. And that will have to change and only then will we know what mechanism is behind it and what data is being used and what it can and cannot be used for

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Gea: Yes, and two final questions in conclusion. What will you be paying particular attention to in terms of developments in AI in the near future?

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Hilde: I do wonder also where tools like Grammarly are going when it comes to generative AI. Because Grammarly now also has Grammarly Go, where so students can also also ask like "hey, can you write a text about this, do that for me." And I'm very curious to see how that so, what role that's going to play in education and what institutions are going to do with that, how students are going to deploy that, because that's... Yes, ChatGPT can already be used for that now but ChatGPT... *hesitates*

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Gea: Yes, why don't they have a better name for that?

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Hilde: Very tricky, yes. OpenAI does not offer licences to institutions. Students can use it themselves, but in Grammarly, they do. So I'm very curious to see how they will approach that.

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Gea: And ten years from now, students will still be writing essays and papers, or will that all be sort of outsourced.

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Hilde: Yes that outsourcing, that's that's a good one. It's possible. I think it also just depends... Articles, sharing scientific research will continue to exist in whatever form, but really a student essay... I don't know if that form will last very long. Because what, what do you want to test with that if a student can actually have it written all the way through? So something uh will change in that I think.

00:31:13

Gea: Thank you so much for being there.

00:31:14

Hilde: Yes, like it. Nice!

00:31:20

Gea: I was able to make this podcast thanks to a grant from the centre for teaching and learning's BKO SKO alumni fund.

00:31:27

Gea: Also contributing to this podcast were: Jens Branum, Abby Gambrel, Joost Canters, Megan van der Vorst and a host of AI tools.