

Softbank to add learning technology to empathetic robot

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In this June 6, 2014 file photo, humanoid robot Pepper is on display at SoftBank mobile shop in Tokyo. Japanese mobile carrier Softbank said Tuesday, Feb. 10, 2015 it will incorporate artificial intelligence technology from IBM into its empathetic robot Pepper that goes on sale in Japan this month. (AP Photo/Koji Sasahara, File)

Japanese mobile carrier Softbank said Tuesday it will incorporate artificial intelligence technology from IBM into its empathetic robot Pepper that will be available to Japanese consumers around midyear.

The AI engine "Watson" is already used in health care, travel and insurance services in English, but an adaptation was needed to make it work and think in Japanese, said Steve Gold, Vice President, IBM Watson Group.

Unlike other cognitive technology that responds rather mechanically, Watson can learn over time like a human brain, and understands the concept of probability, which makes it sophisticated and more human-like for applications, according to IBM.

"It depends on the context of the conversation as to what the right answer would be," as opposed to how a computer would generally try to answer correctly, Gold told The Associated Press. "The world is seldom absolute."

Software developers who have made reservations for Pepper robots will get them sometime this month for 198,000 yen (\$1,700), according to Softbank Chief Executive Masayoshi Son.

Consumers won't be able to get Pepper until between June and August, he said. Details of the sales plan were undecided, Son said. No decision has been made on overseas sales.

Softbank had said earlier that sales to Japanese consumers would begin this month as well. He did not elaborate on the reason for the delay, but he said giving it first to the developers will mean more fun applications will be available when consumers get the robot, implying it wasn't quite ready as a product.



In this June 6, 2014 file photo, journalists surround humanoid robot Pepper on display at SoftBank Mobile shop in Tokyo. Japanese mobile carrier Softbank said Tuesday, Feb. 10, 2015 it will incorporate artificial intelligence technology from IBM into its empathetic robot Pepper that goes on sale in Japan this month. (AP Photo/Koji Sasahara, File)

Pepper has a stunned face a bit like C3PO in "Star Wars" and moves around on wheels. In early demonstrations it was a bit mechanical in its responses. Gold said Watson will change that and make the robot a smarter, more charming companion.

For example, two plus two is four in arithmetic but in another context it could refer to a car design, Gold said. Watson is designed to figure out context and know which answer is more likely.

A call center using Watson will get the caller to the right solution more

quickly and make for a less frustrating consumer experience, he said.

But the complexity of the Japanese language, including thousands of characters with various meanings and several phonetic options, challenge even Watson, Gold said.

Son said Pepper will not result in big profits immediately, but it points to a new lifestyle, promising to turn into a real business in perhaps 30 years.

Besides Pepper, Softbank will use Watson inside the company, resell it in Japan to businesses such as call centers and work with other companies to develop new applications, according to IBM.

Softbank, the first carrier to sell the iPhone in Japan, has widespread global investments including Chinese e-commerce company Alibaba, which listed in New York last year. Softbank is also aggressively investing in India.

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