LLMs Don't Find Meaning, They Pattern-Match. And That Matters.

The phrase "LLMs find meaning in data" is driving me crazy. It is a linguistic shortcut that conceals more than it reveals. While Large Language Models can extract patterns, generate coherent text, and simulate aspects of human communication, they do not, and cannot, understand, create, or find meaning in any human sense of the term. The meaning is still made by a human interpreter, not found by the model.

What Is Meaning? (in the Human Sense)

Let's define it carefully.

Meaning, in the human sense, is the significance we ascribe to symbols, experiences, or patterns in relation to goals, context, emotion, and shared understanding.

It has several key properties:

Intentionality: meaning is 'about something'.

Contextual relevance: meaning emerges within a specific social, cultural, and temporal frame.

Embodiment: it is shaped by our physical, emotional, and perceptual engagement with the world.

Interpretation: it requires a mind that understands, not merely computes.

Meaning is 'relational, emergent, and constructed', not found like a stone, but made like a story.

What Do LLMs Actually Do?

LLMs (like GPT-4, Claude, Gemini, Co-Pilot & Grok) do not 'understand' text. They:

- Take in sequences of tokens (words, parts of words, language symbols, etc.),
- Predict the most statistically probable next token based on learned patterns from vast corpora,
- Generate fluent continuations of text.

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This is ‘pattern-matching’, not comprehension.

They operate on:

- Syntax, not semantics.
- Co-occurrence, not causality.
- Statistical similarity, not subjective significance.

Even when they produce text that appears meaningful, it is only because they have been trained on our meaning-making outputs (books, emails, dialogue) and are mimicking the **form** of meaning without possessing the **function** of understanding.

Why the Language Is Misleading

Saying “LLMs find meaning in data” is:

- A category error, confusing pattern recognition with interpretive reasoning,
- A misleading anthropomorphism (ascribing human-like faculties to statistical processes), and
- An epistemic distortion (implying that models can independently discern significance or truth).

It suggests that models can do what only human minds can do, interpret data in relation to lived experience, goals, values, and embodied knowledge. They can’t. Only we can.

The Consequence of the Confusion

This isn't just academic pedantry; it matters deeply:

Mistaken Belief	Real-World Risk
LLMs understand the data	People over trust machine output without critical review.
LLMs find insight	Decision-makers attribute agency to systems that lack intentionality.

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LLMs reason	We confuse output fluency with cognitive grounding.
LLMs make meaning	We overlook the human role in sense-making and moral judgement.

By obscuring the human role, we risk:

- De-skilling human interpreters, who are reduced to consumers of machine output.
- Eroding accountability, as decisions get offloaded to non-agents.
- Undermining agency, by outsourcing judgment to tools that cannot possess it.

A Better Frame

Let's use more precise language:

Mistaken Belief	Real-World Risk
LLM finds meaning in data	LLM identifies statistical patterns in token sequences.
LLM understands the question	LLM generates probable continuations based on prior token context.
LLM creates insights	LLM surfaces information that a human may interpret as insightful.
LLM makes a decision	LLM outputs a result based on optimisation over learned patterns.

The key is this: LLMs simulate the form of meaning, but only humans generate the function of meaning.

The Human Role: Meaning Is Still Ours to Make

Every LLM output, however fluent, remains 'inert' until a human:

- Interprets it,
- Connects it to context,

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- Assesses its truth-value or relevance,
- Decides what to do with it.

In short: we make the meaning, not the machine.

The model is a mirror. It reflects, distorts, and reshapes what we've put into the world. But it does not see, care, or know.

Final Takeaway

To say an LLM finds meaning in data is like saying a compass wants north.

- It functions.
- It can be useful.
- But it has no understanding of what it's doing, or why.

Meaning remains a uniquely human act: interpretive, intentional, embodied, and embedded in life. We must not lose sight of this, especially as machines get better at appearing to have humanity, without ever being human.

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