



# Neurological Disease Diagnosis with Watson

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## 1 Introduction

We used IBM’s “Watson” cognitive-computing services to create an application for diagnosing rare neurological disorders. The application interacts with the user through a chat-bot interface: it poses several questions about the user’s symptoms, the user types their answers in natural language, the app processes the user’s answers, and then a list of diseases consistent with those symptoms is presented to the user. If no relevant diseases are found, we tell the user - and we make it clear that this application is narrow in scope and should not be used for diagnoses and treatment decisions in its current state.

## 2 Why Use Cognitive Computing?

Our inspiration for this project came from Dr. Filiano, a neurologist at DHMC. Marissa met Dr. Filiano when he came to the DALI Lab with the idea of making his book on rare neurological diseases available in app form. He had placed in DEN’s “The Pitch” with this idea. Marissa was only on the project for part of a term and did not know what had become of it.

Cognitive computing solves a number of problems. First, the natural language processing allows the app to accept information in whatever form the user provides it. For example, the user can say “Why does my head hurt?” or “My head aches” or “I have a headache,” and in each case Watson will recognize that they are referring to the “headache” symptom.

### **3 Implementation Details**

The three IBM Watson services we used were the Watson Conversation Service, Document Conversion, and Retrieve and Rank. We divided the work of the project equally: Marissa developed the conversation service and front end web component, Evan handled the client-server interaction of the chatbot with the other Watson services, and Kevin developed and trained the Retrieve and Rank Service.

The basic flow of the application is as follows: The user navigates to our the web application and is greeted by a ChatBot interface that asks the user for their symptoms. The user then, in NLP, conveys their symptoms, which are identified as entities in the Watson conversation service, and then passed to the Retrieve and Rank service via an HTTP request. The Retrieve and Rank service returns the documentation of the disease most closely related to the symptoms entered. The app.JS javascript file then parses this JSON response and informs the user in NLP whether their symptoms match a neurological disease, if so, recommends that they seek the advice of a medical professional.

We faced some challenges while setting up and training the Retrieve and Rank service. We started using curl commands to set up the service and switched to Watson's web interface but returned to using curl commands for the increased flexibility and customization it gave us. Watson rejected our first few trainings because of an insufficient number of feature vectors, and then an insufficient number of queries in the ground truths file. We were able to update the ground truths file with a total of seventy-one queries spanning the three neurological diseases.

### **4 Assessment of Results**

Our application successfully executes its intended purpose - to be able to identify neurological diseases.

### **5 Areas of Improvement**

We know a number of ways that we would improve and expand the capabilities of the application. Our Retrieve and Rank Application is able to understand queries in NLP, and we established the training framework for it to be able to interpret follow-up questions, such as "How many people per year are diagnosed with ALS?" or "Tell me more about ALS."

Our application can identify the symptoms of three distinct neurological diseases: ALS, Parkinson’s Disease, and Giant Cell Arteritis. An expanded version of this application would be able to identify more neurological diseases, as there are quite a number of them.

## 6 Conclusion

“Do you think it would succeed?”

Our motivations for this project stemmed from the fact that many neurological diseases go undetected, and individuals miss the opportunity for treatment when it’s most effective. We wanted to lower the “barrier to entry” for gaining medical insights (i.e. asking Watson a few questions is quicker and cheaper than a Doctor’s visit) and help people who think they might be afflicted with a neurological disease get help. With the disclaimer that Watson and our project are not substitutes for professional medical advice, we believe that we have built an MVP (minimum viable product) of a cognitive computing medical adviser.

While we don’t believe that cognitive computing will replace doctors, we absolutely think that cognitive computing can be used to provide medical assistance in situations where a doctor isn’t needed or perhaps where one isn’t available. We envision a future where access to basic medical knowledge is immediate and freely available to all. Imagine the benefits of medical chatbots or speech to text systems that can walk a human through providing first aid before first responders arrive.

### References:

Special thanks to Charles Palmer and Armen Pischdotchian  
We developed our chatbot by modifying Armen’s tutorial code.

### Data Sources:

<http://www.webmd.com/parkinsons-disease/guide/parkinsons-common-symptoms>  
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