

Report from the international workshop
„Conflict and Communication. Multimodal Social Signals of
Conflict and Negotiation in Humans, Animals, and Machines”
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The workshop „Conflict and Communication. Multimodal Social Signals of Conflict and Negotiation in Humans, Animals, and Machines”, which took place on 29-31 October at Roma Tre University in Rome (Italy), was an interdisciplinary workshop that brought together scientists from many European countries as well as from Japan, Israel and the USA. The theme of the workshop were interpersonal and group conflicts seen from the perspective of psychology, sociology, linguistics, criminology, political sciences etc. The full list of participants as well as detailed information about the workshop can be found on the workshop’s website at: <http://www.dcs.gla.ac.uk/~vincia/conflict/index.html>. Below you will find a short summary of selected papers presented at the workshop, which JMCS’s readers may find interesting.

Cristiano Castelfranchi (Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche (CNR), Institute of Cognitive Sciences and Technologies, Rome) “The Cognition of Conflict”.

In his lecture, Cristiano Castelfranchi made an attempt at answering the question about the relationship between a person’s mental representations (his/her beliefs, goals etc.) and the conflict between them as well as about the relation between conflicts among an individual’s goals and conflicts among the goals of a group. This question lead to further questions, like for example: how to build a systematic ontology of conflicts taking into consideration both kinds of conflict (objective and subjective, internal/individual and external/social)? Further the question about the difference between a “conflict” and a “contradiction”, and finally the need for mental “coherence”. The author sees conflicts as a partly positive events and even acknowledges them as the value of ‘real condition for democracy’, which allows the development of values such as social cohesion, solidarity, cooperation (as seen by E. Durkheim) in the human society.

Isabella Poggi (University Roma Tre), Laura Vincze (University Roma Tre), Francesca D’Errico (University Uninettuno) “Insult: Verbal and Bodily, Direct and Indirect Attacks to Another’s Image”.

The article was the result of cooperation between three above mentioned scientists, but at the workshop it was presented by Isabella Poggi. In her speech, Isabella Poggi discussed a model of insult from socio-cognitive view of multimodal communication. She defined the notions insult, insulting sentence, insulting element and proposed a typology of insults in talk shows and on the Internet. According to I. Poggi, an insult is “a communicative verbal or bodily act that a Sender S performs to discredit a Target T (a person, group, an object like for example an institution or its symbol)”. An insulting sentence is “a verbal act containing an insulting element: a word, phrase, concept that expresses or implies an evaluation of T considered as very negative by S, and believed by S to be shared by T and possibly an Audience A”. I. Poggi noticed that unlike other discrediting acts (e.g. accusation, criticism), an insult conveys the goals on the part of the Sender to attack the Target’s image before other people, to offend him/her (i.e. to diminish his/her reputation before other people), to attack the Target and thus reduce his self-respect. Further I. Poggi distinguished between direct and indirect insults. The first category of insults refers to a negative evaluation that

Target is given by Sender – he/she is compared to an animal, an inanimate object, etc., i. e. to a category of things considered by Target as inferior. Having explained that, I. Poggi gave examples of direct insults taken from the Internet and political debates. Verbal insults can also be accompanied by non-verbal elements (gesture, gaze, facial expression) or non-verbal elements can convey an insulting meaning themselves. A verbal or non-verbal insult can only be effective when an expression or gesture is considered offensive by both Sender, Target, Audience due to the cultural knowledge they share (e. g. not saying ‘hallo’ when meeting someone can be used as a means to offend someone). The lecture was ended with a presentation of a corpus of verbal and bodily direct and indirect insults taken from the Media where the items had been ordered according to different abasing categories shedding light on the criteria according to which the single items of the corpus are considered offensive in a given social group.

Alessandro Vinciarelli (University of Glasgow), Björn Schüller (Technische Universität München) „Computational Paralinguistics and Conflict Detection“.

The authors noticed that despite its importance in social life, conflict had made relatively few attempts at detecting and measuring it. Thus the authors’ aim was to partially fill this gap by presenting experiments on automatic conflict perception based on the detection of nonverbal behavioural cues. The experiments the authors referred to had been performed on a corpus of 1430 extracts from political debates (the SSPNet Conflict Corpus, <http://www.dcs.gla.ac.uk/vincia/?p=270>) annotated with regard to conflict level. The authors showed that conflict level perceived by annotators can be predicted to a high extent. Thanks to the experiment, it was possible to identify the cues that possibly influence the perception of conflict.

Silvia Bonacchi, Mariusz Mela (University of Warsaw): A Proposal of a Dynamic Model for Multimodal Analysis of Conflict and Conflict Management.

In the lecture, the authors attempted to define a conceptual framework for conflict management strategies for the purpose of analyzing concrete communicative interactions marked by conflict caused by verbal aggression and impoliteness. The output hypothesis of the authors’ was that verbal aggression and impoliteness are expressions of a non-dialogic communicative behavior aimed at gaining power and rejecting the Other motivated by the need for power, hostile illocutions, asymmetries in knowledge, compensation mechanisms. This antialogic behavior is expressed in a multimodal way with the help of both verbal forms and nonverbal forms. Having considered various attempts at classifying antialogic behavior, made on the basis of Brown and Levinson’s concept of face (Brown/Levinson 1987), the authors proposed a dynamic model of verbal aggression, in which the face needs of interactants (together with further elements like allocation of power and definition of interactional space) were considered in their mutual dependence. The multimodal analysis of a scene from a German reality show conducted at the lecture, made it possible to distinguish phases within conflict formation, to point at recurrent moments and to analyze the cues at verbal level, at the level of gesture and facial expressions and at the level of the use of voice.

Jens Allwood, Elisabeth Ahlsén (University of Gothenburg) “Stages of Conflict Escalation”.

In the lecture, the authors tried to answer the question about the kind, number and characteristics of conflict escalation phases. The authors started by noticing that various authors (among others F. Glasl, D. Noll, Eric Brahm) had named different numbers of stages and had given them different characteristics. Further the authors expressed the opinion that there could not be one definite answer to the question about the number of conflict stages as their number and type depended on the type of conflict. The authors then illustrated their claim with short scenes of conflict in political debates in various languages. The conflicts presented in the video involved aggressive, ironic, accusing, triumphant etc. stances. Multimodal expressions of these stances brought about behaviour on the basis of which it was possible to name the stages in the presented conflict episodes. The authors’ aim was to concentrate more on the stances and behaviour of the politicians and thus to show how different types of conflictive situations made it possible to highlight different

affordances of conflicts. The authors expressed their hope that this might contribute to developing various models of conflict escalation.

Laura Bonelli (University of Genoa) “Ma che abbiamo fatto di male, noi?: Disaffiliation and Pragmatic Strategies of Emotive Communication in a Multiparty Online Conflict Talk”.

The subject of L. Bonelli’s speech were multiparty conflict talks in a computer mediated community. Particular attention was paid to the pragmatic resources and sequential strategies that users express their stance with. The pragmatic resources can be described using the multimodal emotive devices of evaluation, proximity, specificity, evidentiality, volitionality, and quantity as proposed by Caffi & Janney (1994) while the sequential strategies can be described by identifying the users’ disaffiliative responses. The author’s aim was to show the way these communicative choices interact with each other in signaling disagreement among the participants of a computer mediated community. First, the author presented theoretical background to her research. Then the results of a micro- and macro-analyses of a conflict talk in a post from an Italian online forum were presented. The micro-analysis included an analysis of (1) linguistic means used in the posts; (2) discursive dimensions with a particular focus on the dimensions that dealt with meta-communicative, contextual and co-textual communicative strategies; (3) psychological dimensions; (4) sequential aspects of presentation and reception of negative affect. At the end of her speech, the author highlighted the role of emotive aspects co-constructed by the participants as well as affective and epistemic tokens of stance used to define the users’ identities.

The Workshop gave its participants the opportunity to view conflict from the perspectives of other sciences and to exchange ideas about theory of conflict and methodology of investigating this phenomenon. The organizers of the Workshop expressed their hope that it had only been the first session of a series of interdisciplinary meetings dedicated to conflict.