

featured research: spoken language understanding

The information age has led to an information overload; there is so much within easy access, but sorting through it all can be terribly unwieldy. A Google search of “How many bombings happened in Iraq this week?” brought up over 2.5 million highly redundant search results, but no direct answer. As increasing amounts of data become accessible, the need to sift through it quickly and intelligently will become all the more urgent. Within ICSI’s large and diverse Speech Group, Dr. Dilek Hakkani-Tür leads a team of researchers that is training computers to answer questions, as well as distill information and summarize multiple information streams; essentially, to help computers understand language independent of the source – text, speech, or translation – and genre.

INFORMATION DISTILLATION

Information distillation – the retrieval of specific information in response to a query – is, on its surface, a straightforward task of combining information retrieval and topic-focused summarization: dig through the various data sources you have at your disposal, and return the information that responds to the original query. Consider a basic query such as “LIST FACTS ABOUT [US Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld’s visit to China].” It is possible to search through several documents and identify a number of sentences that contain Rumsfeld’s name or title along with a mention of China. It requires a significantly more robust system to be able to handle more complex queries such as “DESCRIBE THE ARRESTS OF PERSONS FROM [Al-Qaeda in Iraq] AND GIVE THEIR ROLE IN THE ORGANIZATION,” which is more indicative of the types of queries that ICSI has worked with as part of the DARPA-funded multi-site GALE project. This query asks for more detailed information: names, affiliations, locations, and functions within a group. Since these pieces of information won’t

all occur explicitly in a given sentence, it requires the system to resolve pronouns, and understand the correlation between different named entities. For example, the distillation system has to understand that arrests of persons from Al-Qaeda in cities of Iraq like Basra and Baghdad should be included in its answer to this query. As queries and question-answering systems grow, their methods for returning relevant and non-redundant information must become more nuanced.

The GALE program – Global Autonomous Language Exploitation – presents some challenging goals. Distillation systems must handle complex queries and return results from a number of different sources such as print news, broadcast news, broadcast conversations, and blogs in different languages, namely English and Chinese. There are, naturally, some difficulties in realizing this goal. The distillation systems are being developed and evaluated with training data provided by DARPA; to deploy this kind of distillation system over real-world data presents new difficulties. Distilling information from spoken data requires accurate automatic speech recognition (ASR). Dr. Sibel Yaman points out that if an ASR system makes an error on a word or name it hasn’t encountered before – like the name Sibel Yaman or, at one time, even the company-name-turned-verb “Google” – the ASR system is likely to also botch the word boundaries around the name and render the entire sentence unusable.

Even when ASR systems work, there is no method of verifying data or accounting for any inconsistencies. It’s not hard to imagine events that might be described very differently by an official news source and a blog; a distillation system in this setting could return potentially conflicting statements. It’s still up to the user to make judgment calls in these situations.

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as i see it by Nelson Morgan, Director

Age is a question of mind over matter. If you don't mind, it doesn't matter.

- Satchel Paige

Today, I had lunch with a favorite uncle. He turned 96 recently, and is starting to appear a bit frail, though this is new for him – two years ago he seemed perfectly fit. His mind is still fine, and he retains much of the inner fire that he had as a young man. In those earlier times, he was an actor, a playwright, and a union organizer (in the electrical union). He also was blacklisted for a quarter century after an appearance before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). In that episode, he refused to testify (rather than taking refuge in the 5th Amendment), and challenged HUAC's right to hold such "witch hunt" hearings. This was during the Red Scare in post-WWII America, and the Committee used these hearings to intimidate and harass anyone who had dared to join or even associate with left-wing organizations. Uncle Manny essentially dared them to press charges, but instead, they blocked his ability to act, stage plays, or work for any American firm; this was standard fare for the blacklisting scenario of that time.

For me, Uncle Manny was (and is) a "working class hero." But he is something more – he represents an uncompromising embrace of life. At 96, while certainly delighting in telling stories of earlier days, he primarily looks forward – he is still considering what to do next. In recent years he has continued to write, perform (for instance in a one-man play that he wrote), and teach. He frankly recognizes his new physical limitations, but still aims his mind forward to new creative acts. And he has also continued to be active politically, serving as an advisor to organized labor, and writing op-ed pieces critical of government actions (and inaction).

I'm probably all the more intrigued by his story because I recently turned 60. In our base-10 culture, each of these decade transitions seems to have special meaning. Becoming 60 often reminds people of the typical retirement age, coming up in a few years. But my uncle only had his career rejuvenated in the last 30 years or so. Working with so many brilliant and creative young people at ICSI and in Berkeley in general is invigorating in some ways; but sometimes being with someone much older who still is creative and ambitious is also a great reminder that we can still contribute for a long time. It also doesn't hurt my sense of being young just to be with someone who is almost 4 decades older....

In many ways, ours is a youth-oriented culture. And yet, we also have an aging population, with increased longevity and baby boom demographics. Increasingly, there are many people past the typical retirement age who are looking for things to do and ways to be relevant. In our own professions, those of computer science and engineering, we have many examples of researchers who have continued to inspire and create long after the standard retirement age. And ICSI (and the Berkeley campus overall) has creative people with a wide range of ages.

All of these creative people, including my uncle, inspire me to look forward. Uncle Manny is also inspiring in a completely different way: his uncompromising drive to improve society. Even his art was focused on improving the lives of working people, though he also always revealed the human side of his cause: his fight with HUAC caused many conflicts within his family, creating problems that he revealed freely in his writings. It's not so easy to live up to his example. But we can try – looking where we can for research directions that: (1) present creative challenges; (2) offer some opportunity to satisfy a societal need, and (3) pay the bills. There are often conflicts between these goals, but we do our best.

One of the ICSI groups working to reconcile these goals is the Speech Group, featured in this issue of the Gazette. ICSI has worked on different aspects of speech processing for 20 years, and it's fair to say that we've made some significant contributions. Behind these efforts lies a notion of improving the accessibility of information for a wider range of humanity. As computers have spread throughout every aspect of our lives, we have run the risk of creating an environment that was more hospitable to machines than to people. Computers are ubiquitous, most notably the computers in our cell phones. And as access to information has become so much broader, the human interface for that access has often become more difficult, particularly for the wider population. Speech processing is not the whole answer to this, but it's part of it. It's part of the broader goal to make machines more human-friendly, rather than making people more machine-like; part of being able to ask for what you need in human terms: "call Hynek Hermansky" rather than having to use 10-digit codes for each person we want to contact. Of course, the ICSI Speech Group has moved significantly beyond the speech recognition task, as you will see in the rest of this issue. Enjoy.

news briefs

BFOIT, the Berkeley Foundation for Opportunities in Information Technology, hosted its 10th Anniversary Reception on Friday, August 14th, at the Sibley Auditorium in the Stephen D. Bechtel Building at UC Berkeley. BFOIT has also received a generous donation for \$5,000 from Paula Hawthorn and Michael Ubell of the Agape Foundation. BFOIT is an ICSI program that supports historically underrepresented ethnic minorities and women in science and engineering.

ICSI Bioinformatics researchers have made significant contributions to a recently published study in *Nature Genetics* which links a single gene mutation to follicular lymphoma. The disease, a type of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, affects approximately 66,000 Americans per year, resulting in 20,000 deaths. ERAN HALPERIN and LUCIA CONDE of ICSI's Algorithms Group performed the statistical analysis of the genetic data used in the study, which was led by Christine Skibola of UC Berkeley and Kevin M. Brown of TGen (Translational Genomics Research Institute).

UC Berkeley's Linguistics Department and ICSI hosted "FRAMES AND CONSTRUCTIONS: A conference in honor of CHARLES J. FILLMORE" on the occasion of his 80th birthday. The conference, whose theme was Fillmore's contributions to Linguistics for nearly five decades, took place on the UC Berkeley campus from July 31 - August 2, 2009.

New Scientist's May 11 edition (issue 2707) featured botnet infiltration work done by CHRISTIAN KREIBICH and other members of the Networking Group in an article titled "Cyber Espionage Reveals Spammer Strategies." This work was also featured in *The Berkeley Science Review* in an article by ICSI's own DAN GILLICK, a graduate student in the Speech Group.

TOBIAS FRIEDRICH, a DAAD Fellow in the Algorithms Group, along with co-authors Christian Horoba and Frank Newmann, has won a Best Paper Award in the Evolutionary Multiobjective Optimization category at the 2009 Genetic and Evolutionary Computation Conference (GECCO) for their paper, "Multiplicative Approximations and the Hypervolume Indicator."

Mouton de Gruyter's "Multilingual FrameNets in Computational Lexicography," edited by ICSI alum HANS C. BOAS of the University of Texas, features several articles contributed by ICSI's past and present FRAME NET members.

Congratulations to LUKE GOTTLIEB and his wife Emy on the birth of their son Judah Richmond Gottlieb, who was born on July 27th, weighing 9 lbs 1 oz.



Judah Richmond Gottlieb

ICSI's Joke-o-mat was selected as a finalist in the ACM Multimedia Grand Challenge 2009. Created by GERALD FRIEDLAND, LUKE GOTTLIEB, and ADAM JANIN of the Speech Group, Joke-o-mat is designed to parse sitcoms by identifying the main characters, the best jokes (as signaled by the loudest and longest laughs), and scene changes. It was made in response to a challenge from Yahoo! on how to segment video along thematic lines. The winner of the Grand Challenge will be announced in October at the ACM Multimedia Conference.

PAUL KAY and co-authors from the University of Hong Kong and the Chinese Academy of Sciences published a paper in the May 4-8 issue of *Proceedings of The National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)* titled "Language Regions of Brain are Operative in Color Perception." Kay, a linguist working in the AI Group, has been published in PNAS several times for related work on color naming and color perception.

ULRICH RÜCKERT, a DAAD Fellow in the Algorithms Group, has won the Best Paper Award at the recent Siam International Conference on Data Mining (SDM 2009), for a paper titled "Adaptive Concept Drift Detection" that he co-wrote with Anton Dries.

STEVE SINHA of the AI group has received an AAAS Science and Technology Policy Fellowship and will be working at the DHS Office of Policy Development. Sinha is among 190 scientists and engineers who will spend a year providing valuable science and technology expertise to the government.

featured research, cont.

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The continuing growth of distillation systems implies that solutions to these problems are within reach. Information retrieved by current distillation is parsed in a number of useful ways. The systems can indeed make correlations like Baghdad ~ Iraq; it understands people's titles and group affiliations, filters out redundant information, and can even identify causation. New developments include the ability to sort the information coming back to the user; instead of just regurgitating relevant sentences, the information can be broken down by who, what, where, how, and why, allowing for quick sorting of relevant information.

SUMMARIZATION

If a distillation system can answer specific queries from a pool of data, it seems like a logical next step to develop a system that can go through the data and summarize its contents. The Speech Group is also working on just such a process.

Whereas distillation determines if given information is relevant to a specific query, summarization finds the important elements from a source and summarizes them, either independently, or with content ranking by the user.

When a human summarizes a set of documents, he or she will read them, intuitively understand what they are talking about, and generate novel sentences explaining the key points. Robust language generation is still quite difficult for computers, so the current approach to computer summarization differs from human methods. First, the computer must determine what the important concepts are in a set of documents, and then it must present the important concepts back in the summary. ICSI's work in this field was initially fueled by the DARPA-funded CALO project (Cognitive Assistant that Learns and Organizes), led by ICSI's research partner SRI. The Speech Group's portion of CALO work developed ASR tools to summarize meetings by key items discussed. A robust diarization system looks at patterns of who speaks when to determine who the important speakers are, which identifies action items. University of Texas at Dallas visitor Shasha Xie's

work incorporates prosodic features to identify salient sentences in meetings.

ICSI grad student Dan Gillick observes that "people have tried a lot of different techniques, and things have gotten fancier over time. But nobody has ever figured out the simplest thing that works really well." Accordingly, ICSI's approach to summarization tries to be as straightforward as possible. ICSI researchers use n-grams (sequences of n words) to identify the most often discussed concepts in the documents. The greater the frequency of a concept, the greater is its value. Taking into account the natural tendency of larger sentences to cover more concepts, a sentence with a greater weight is more likely to be

a useful sentence in summarization. The value of a summary is the sum of the values of the unique concepts it contains; the ideal summary contains the most important concepts within the size constraint.

People have tried a lot of different techniques, and things have gotten fancier over time. But nobody has ever figured out the simplest thing that works really well.

Now working with a pool of sentences that are both important and minimally redundant, the system condenses the data into a small summary, on the order of about 100 words. The search for the greatest number of important concepts in a limited space is an optimization problem. This particular NP-hard combinatorial problem is a variation of the knapsack problem, and is similar to one addressed by ICSI Professor Richard M. Karp in his landmark 1972 paper "Reducibility Among Combinatorial Problems." The Speech Group's form of extractive summarization is proving itself very successful in creating summaries that contain large amounts of information; the group was among the leaders at the 2008 Text Analysis Conference evaluation.

A summary may contain a lot of information, but that doesn't mean that it is going to be easy to read or even sensible. Some of the same problems that make it hard for a computer to create well-formed and reader-friendly language also make it hard for a computer to determine if its summary is easily readable. An additional layer of constraints encourages the summary to include sentences that will work well together. The sentences which are more independent – those without relative

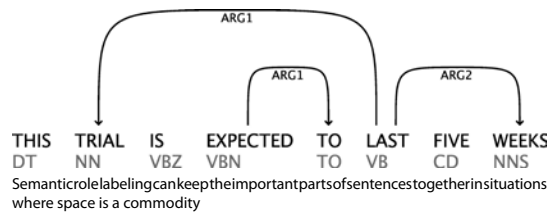
dates or unresolved pronouns, for example – will work better when concatenated. It may seem natural that the closer a sentence is to the beginning of a document, the more useful it will be in summarizing the document’s contents; however, this is only partly true. Weighting all sentences based on their location in a document doesn’t actually increase the quality of the summary. ICSI has recently experimented with a baseline system that uses only the very first sentence of documents, and it turns out that this system produces summaries that score as highly as any other systems currently in use. Other than the first sentence, it’s not the case that earlier sentences are more useful than later ones. ICSI Postdoc Benoit Favre points out that it’s easier for these systems to achieve satisfactory results, because returning complete sentences has little risk for error. A more robust, semantically derived system would construct more intelligent results, but runs a greater risk of making errors in evaluations.

In order to keep the summaries compact, the Speech Group is developing methods of condensing the data within sentences. Sentence compression based solely on syntactic roles can leave sentences syntactically well-formed, but nonsensical. ICSI is exploring the use of semantic role labeling to enhance sentence compression. If a sentence has been annotated, the computer will be able to isolate the important parts of a sentence. Different annotation systems offer different benefits. PropBank, the annotation system currently in use, is a practical choice because of the large amount of annotated data within the corpus, but PropBank’s annotation only extends deep enough to syntactically connect verbs with their prepositions, e.g. X gave Y to Z. A more robust annotation system, such as ICSI’s own FrameNet, would greatly serve the summarization work being done in the Speech Group. FrameNet’s robustness is not only its greatest strength, but is also a major obstacle in applying it to other technologies. FrameNet’s annotation process is very rich, and thus takes more time (and funding) to develop into a comparatively comprehensive corpus. As FrameNet grows in size, it will prove to be another invaluable collaborative tool that ICSI researchers can leverage by simply walking down the hall.

WHAT’S IN STORE?

In addition to the more established research directions discussed above, Dr. Hakkani-Tür is actively exploring other fields where ASR-fueled information extraction can be helpful.

NSF has funded some recent ICSI work introducing distillation to the field of emergency response. In times of emergencies and disasters, emergency response dispatchers can get absolutely swamped with calls, with some callers having to wait upwards of 10 minutes to speak with a dispatcher. A large number of these calls can be in regards to the same incident, e.g. a broken levee or a car accident. Dr. Hakkani-Tür is training a system



to distill information from callers on hold to determine the content of their calls. An additional level of information is extracted from the prosody (voice quality) of the speaker. These

data work together to prioritize calls, so that someone with an urgent health need won’t be stuck waiting behind a dozen calls about a single car accident.

SRI has also funded some exploratory work on using ASR in elderly care centers. Health care decisions in situations like this can be very subjective; moreover, questions upon which these decisions are made can be uncomfortable for some. Dr. Hakkani-Tür’s group has been studying to what extent automation of these conversations can yield improvements in service. ASR can facilitate these conversations happening more frequently, more privately, and more objectively.

Finally, Speech Group researchers focusing on language processing have collaborated with ICSI Networking researchers to explore how information distillation can be used to track black market activity on the internet. Conversational language recognition technology is useful in filtering out advertisements from chat logs to locate illegal solicitations in multiple languages. These tools can combine to identify the locations and content of various illicit activities that occur online, and trace the locations and behaviors of people trading stolen credit card information, social security numbers, and other exploitable personal information.

new study: protecting privacy in dna research

In the last few years, genome association studies have led to breakthrough medical discoveries. However, due to privacy concerns that the identity of individuals could be determined through DNA data, health institutes in the US and abroad have removed public access to the genetic data coming from these association studies. Such association studies have been shown to shed light on diseases such as cancer or Alzheimer's disease, and sharing the raw data from these studies with other scientists can aid tremendously with further discoveries. For this reason, Dr. Eran Halperin of the International Computer Science Institute and Tel Aviv University, and colleagues at the University of California, Berkeley have developed "a mathematical formula and a software solution that ensures that malicious eyes will have very low chances to identify individuals in any study," says Dr. Halperin.



Eran Halperin

The team found a mathematical formula to determine which SNPs -- small molecules of DNA that differ from individual to individual in the human population -- can be publicly accessed without compromising information about the participation of specific individuals in the study. Using software designed with this formula, NIH and other institutes can distribute important research data and make it available to scientists without compromising anyone's privacy.

genome that may be associated with an increased risk of disease, such as cancer. For instance, Dr. Halperin was recently involved in a study that found a link between a specific genetic mutation and risk of a type of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. By allowing access to genetic information from such studies to the scientific community, other scientists can leverage these studies to find more connections between genetics and diseases.

"We've been able to determine how much of the DNA information one can reveal, without compromising a person's privacy," says Dr. Halperin.

Dr. Halperin has developed a solution to ensure that malicious eyes will have very low chances to identify individuals in any way.

"This means the substantial effort invested in collecting this data will not have been in vain. Making this data publicly available again could speed up research and allow people to make new discoveries, more quickly."

The authors of the study plan to provide access to their software to NIH, and hope that scientists will use it, thereby providing public access to their now secure collected data.

Genome association studies compare data from many individuals to identify specific positions in the

A complete list of authors: Sriram Sankararaman and Michael Jordan of UC Berkeley. Guillaume Obozinski from Willow, a joint research team between INRIA Rocquencourt, École Normale Supérieure de Paris and Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique. Eran Halperin of ICSI and Tel Aviv University.

visiting scholars

Since its inception, ICSI has had a strong international program consisting primarily of ties with specific countries. Current formal agreements exist with China, the European Union, Finland, Germany, Spain, and Switzerland.

CHINA

Bo Xu (Networking)
Youquan Zheng (Networking)

FINLAND

Yoshia Hirase (Industrial)
Joakim Koskela (Networking)
Kimmo Kuusilinna (Industrial)
Tommi Lampikoski (Campus Affiliation)
Tiina Lindh-Knuutila (AI)
Annukka Näyhä
Jarno Rajahalme (Networking)
Jouni Similä (Campus Affiliation)

SPAIN

Oscar Ferrandez (AI)
Eduardo Lopez (Speech)
Carlos Subirats (AI-FrameNet)
Enrique Torres (Architecture)

GERMANY

Jan Baumbach (Algorithms)
Gerald Friedland (Speech)
Tobias Friedrich (Algorithms)
Martin Gairing (Algorithms)
Oliver Guenther (Industrial)
Ulrich Rückert (Algorithms)
Thomas Sauerwald (Algorithms)
Guido Schryen (Networking)
Holger Ziekow

EUROPEAN UNION (AMIDA)

Carl Henrik Ek (Vision)
Shasha Xie (Speech)
Carolin Mende (Speech)

SWITZERLAND (IM2)

Nikhil Garg (Speech)
David Imseng (Speech)

In addition, we often have visitors associated with specific research and projects.

AI

Alberto Amengual
Terry Regier

ALGORITHMS

Dorothea Emig
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Kyoko Ohara
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Chitra Muthukrishnan
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SPEECH

Oded Ghitza
Carlos Vaquero

OTHER

Angès Voisard



Agnès Voisard



Jan Baumbach



Tiina Lindh-Knuutila

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