CS498-SOCIAL VISUALIZATION

READING 8 - THE FACULTY OF LANGUAGE: WHAT IS IT, WHO HAS IT, AND HOW DID IT EVOLVE?
SOCIAL CATALYSTS: ENHANCING COMMUNICATION IN MEDIATED SPACES; PRIMATES ON FACEBOOK

SUBMITTED TO:
PROFESSOR KARAHALIOS

SUBMITTED BY:
MANI GOLPARVAR-FARD [~MGOLPAR2]
Primates on FaceBook

*From the Economist, Feb 26th 2009*

Critiqued by: Mani Golparvar-Fard [-mgolpar2], CS498kgk

This article published in the Economist mainly discusses networking vs. broadcasting on FaceBook, Twitter and/or other online social networks. It obviously mentions that social networks in general increase the size of human social groups. I guess this is a fact that no one really argues about, nevertheless interestingly the article starts a case study about the effect of social networks on people’s circle of friends. It is reported that Robin Dunbar at the Oxford University has concluded that the size of each human being is limited to 148 people. In my opinion and as stated in the article, this is a number that shows the more stable social network among human beings. Within the circle of almost 150 friends, apparently the empirical studies show that women are more active than men. On a much related issue and as a proof of concept, it is reported that many human institutions since the Roman’s time, were organized around Dunbar’s number. It is also reported that other anthropologists have reported twice as much as the number that is reported by Dunbar. I myself am among those people who frequently use Facebook and Orkut and I guess my circle of close friends is way higher than what has been reported by Dunbar. The reason is I am living far from all my family members, high school and undergraduate years’ friends and since I have travelled around the Northern America for quite a while I have got to know many people and have made both loose and strong friendships. Among my friends, I also know of many people who have large circles of friendships which override the hypothesis of a limited 150 people circle of friends. On another historical proof, I can also make an example of the Shi’ite Muslims who believe in an army of about 330 supporters for their twelfth imam (religious leader). This circle of supporters also known as Mahdi’s close friends is closer to the latter theory on the size of friendship circle.

Re the research conducted on the size of maintained relationships on Facebook, I think the categories selected (maintained friendships, one-way as well as mutual communications) are interesting. Nonetheless I do not support the visualization technique which was used for representing these relationships. In my opinion the scales should have been kept consistent across these visuals to allow a more scientific comparison among the categories be made and instead of choosing transparency for showing the relationships, some other cue (for example different colors) should have been used. In my opinion visualizing the networks of friendship was also interesting. One of the interesting issues reported is the considerable contrast between reciprocal and passive networks which supports the role of technologies such as News Feed on communications. If other types of technologies even such as phones were used in these experiments, probably we would have seen more reciprocal networks where people are connected to smaller sized circles of friends. I guess one take-home message of is that in case of important events, at a national level, these social networks could be used as campaigning or advertisement tools since it will allow the event to be propagated very quickly through this highly connected network.
The Faculty of Language: What Is It, Who Has It, and How Did It Evolve?

By Hauser, Chomsky, and Fitch

Critiqued by: Mani Golparvar-Fard [-mgolpar2], CS498kgk

This article addresses and explores the language evolution. Within such a framework as authors mention in the article, it is important to distinguish between types of questions that concern language as a conversational system and/or questions which concern multiplication underlying language system. One of the main arguments of the authors is that many aggressive debates in language evolution are initiated based on a failure in proper distinction between these problems associated with this differentiation. I agree with the view that believes in questions concerning abstract multiplication mechanisms are distinct from those concerning communication. The latter targeted at problems at the interface between abstract computation and both sensory-motor and conceptual-intentional interfaces. This view should not, of course, be taken as an argument against a relationship between multiplication and communication. Key multiplication capacities evolved for reasons other than communication but, after they proved to have effectiveness in communication, were adjusted because of constraints imposed at both of the peripheries.

In my opinion, paying attention to the theory of “Shared versus Unique” among the debates on language evolution is quite important. Although animal communication systems lack the rich expressive power of that of human being’s language, but the important question which concerns the evolutionary puzzle is given the fact that this discontinuity exist, how human beings started from the animal communication system and made it all the way to be what they are now. Of course no matter what the point of view is, everyone needs to pay attention to the empirical challenge in determining what has been unaffectedly inherited from our predecessors and what has been revolutionized. Given the context of change, what types of pressures and/or adaptive changes channeled this evolutionary process. I guess the right way of approaching this issue is to take an interdisciplinary step among linguistics, biologists, psychologists as well as anthropologists. The combination of these fields can help researchers in understanding the problems by performing a collaborative program of empirical analysis on discovering both homologous and analogous components of the faculty of language.

I agree with authors that Faculty of Language in a broader sense is shared between humans and other species, but the Faculty of language in a narrow sense is definitely unique to human beings. Though further empirical investigate is required for this. I guess entertaining the hypothesis that recursion evolved to solve other multiplication problems such as navigational problems, number quantification, or social relationships, makes it possible to note that other animals have such abilities, however the research conducted by the authors is more targeted at an overly constricted search space that does not allow this to be empirically established. As argued by the authors if evidence for recursion in animals in a non-communicative domain is found, then scientists can identify the mechanisms that underlying this ability. If this issue is discovered, another important question could be answered that why humans and not other types of perhaps animals take the power of recursion to create an open-ended and limitless system of communication? And it can also serve as a baseline for another question on the fact that human’s recursion function over a broader range of numbers, words (inputs) as opposed to that of other animals. In my opinion the hypothesis that recursion in animals represents a modular scheme designed for a particular function (e.g., navigation) and is impenetrable with respect to other systems needs to be further tested.
This thesis explores the conversational and physical interactions within semi-public and public spaces. It argues that despite great efforts in creating public or semi-public workspaces that are linked through video conferencing, due to issues such as lack of privacy, gaze ambiguity, spatial incongruity and fear of appearing too social in work places, these technologies have not been very successful. Instead of suggesting a new technology, modes of interactions within these blended spaces (site-specific designs) are studied and the design needs and principles which may best suit such spaces and the criteria which need to be considered are well discussed. These principles that may serve as Catalysts to encourage new special interactions are entitled as “Social Catalysts”.

In my opinion the hypothesis behind this research, the notion of using external stimulus in linking people (basically strangers), is really motivational. In connecting spaces, the appearances of familiar audio-video wall interface are augmented with stimuli that are initiated at either end of the connection. The application of “the wall” is extended to be not only a display but also an event in itself. This in turn supports the author’s argument that the system becomes both medium and catalyst.

One of the interesting reviews that are conducted in this thesis is the Hole-in-Space communication sculpture which was unveiled by Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz on November 13, 1980. This communication medium seems very fascinating to me and despite the reported confusion associated with symmetry in the display, in my opinion, none of the current audio-video connections are that powerful in bringing so much attention. Based on the reviews conducted, it is argued that the act of instantaneously visualizing social cues (e.g., feedback, message personalization, simultaneously being reminded of a need to talk to someone, having a communication channel, turn-taking, repair, stylized openings) provides feedback and allows the users to alter the joint space by their interactions. These cues are well understood by human’s sense and provide a context wherein space, situation and interaction can merge.

One of the other interesting things mentioned in this thesis was more around the Visiphone’s size and shape. I guess the scale of visualization tools as such definitely affect people’s interest in interacting through such media. Another interesting example was the Chitchat club. I myself have experienced back in 1998 being in a cyber café. I think the idea if communicating through an interface at the same level as a human being (as opposed to a monitor) as sitting face to face was really fascinating. I guess the physicality and the human-scale factor of ChitChat Club were definitely central social catalysts to this technology. I guess one of the important implementation lessons that could be learned from this thesis is that all these visualization should be installed for public and made available to them so as to provide these revelations from social catalysts.