

## **CNRS Research Project**



**Pr. Séverin Lemaignan**

Academic track record and contributions

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## Academic profile

Since I completed my joint PhD in Cognitive Robotics from the CNRS/LAAS (France) and the Technical University of Munich (Germany), for which I received the GdR Robotique *Best PhD in Robotics 2012* award from French CNRS and the prized *Cumma Summa Laude* distinction in Germany, I have emerged as a rising leader in HRI.

Soon after my PhD, I created and successfully led for 2 years a HRI research group within the AI for Learning CHILI Lab at EPFL (Switzerland). While my original training was in **symbolic cognition & AI for autonomous robotics**, my postdoctoral stay at the highly cross-disciplinary CHILI Lab gave me the opportunity to become an expert in **child-robot interaction** and **robotics for learning**, while providing me with a solid footing in **experimental sciences, socio-psychology and education sciences**.

I was then awarded an EU **H2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowship** and I engaged in basic research on artificial cognition at the University of Plymouth, UK: over 2 years, I explored the **underpinnings of artificial social cognition**. I **contributed significantly to the framing of the emerging field of data-driven HRI**, also releasing the PInSoRo open dataset [1], a one-in-a-kind dataset of natural child-child and child-robot social interactions.

I join the Bristol Robotics Lab (BRL, largest co-located robotic lab in the UK) in 2018, first as a Senior Researcher, and since 2019, as a permanent **Associate Professor in Social Robotics and AI**. I am **in charge of defining and implementing the lab's research strategy in human-robot interactions**, and my field of expertise covers **the socio-cognitive aspects of human-robot interaction, from the perspective of human cognition, social signal processing and the design and implementation of cognitive architectures for robots**. I focus my **experimental work on real-world, natural human-robot interactions**, with a particular interest on **child-robot interactions in educative settings**, exploring how robots can support teachers and therapists to develop engaging novel learning paradigms.

## Significant awards

<b>HRI'2017</b>	Best Paper award
<b>HRI'2016</b>	Best Paper award
<b>AAAI'2015</b>	Best Video award in Artificial Intelligence
<b>HRI'2014</b>	Best Late Breaking Report award
<b>2012</b>	GdR Robotique <b>Best PhD in Robotics 2012</b> award, CNRS, France
<b>2012</b>	PhD with <b>High Distinction</b> ("Summa Cum Laude"), TU Munich
<b>Ro-Man'2010</b>	Best paper award

## Significant fellowships and grants

<b>2020</b>	<b>Submission of an ERC Consolidator</b> fellowship (unsuccessful)
<b>2020</b>	PI <b>robots4SEN</b> project, UWE VC Grand Challenges, £30K → <i>deployment of autonomous robots in a school for autistic children</i>
<b>2019</b>	UWE Vice Chancellor Accelerator Fellowship
<b>2018</b>	Co-I <b>CAV Forth</b> project, Innovate UK, £5M → <i>first paying-service deployment of an autonomous bus in Scotland</i>
<b>2015 – 2017</b>	<b>EU Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowship</b> → <i>Theory of Mind and social robotics, Plymouth University, UK</i>

## Scientific and technical contributions

My main scientific contributions are:

1. a pioneering work on *symbolic knowledge representation* and *semantic-aware decisional architecture* for interactive robots;
2. a key role in the development of *situation assessment*, and more recently, *social situation assessment*, as the formal investigation of the models required by robots to achieve autonomy in human environments;
3. a key role in bridging research in cognitive psychology and sociology with robotics, with a number of cross-disciplinary literature surveys and experiments;
4. a major contribution to the field of child-robot interaction, in particular by studying the importance of a *social* interaction between the child and the robot;
5. a leading role in the recent development of *data-driven human-robot interaction*, via for instance the acquisition of large datasets, and the development of novel 'human-in-the-loop' machine learning algorithms.

In addition to these scientific contributions, I have led a number of efforts on the methodology and technical tools used in robotics and human-robot interaction through targeted publications and numerous open-source contributions. This section contextualises all these contributions, and presents the impact of my research through key scientific outputs.

Table 1: PI's domains of expertise relevant to the research project

<b>Psycho-social underpinnings of HRI</b>	
human factors	anthropomorphism[2], cognitive correlates[3], social influence[4]
trust, engagement, social presence	[5][6][7][8][9]
theory of mind	perspective taking[10, 11], social mutual modelling[12, 13]
<b>Social signal processing</b>	
non-verbal behaviours	attention[14], child-child dataset[15], internal state decoding[16]
verbal interactions	speech recognition[17], dialogue grounding[18]
<b>Behaviour generation</b>	
social behaviours	[19], verbal interactions[20, 21], physical interactions[22]
interactive reinforcement learning	[23, 24, 25, 26]
<b>Socio-cognitive architectures</b>	
architecture design	[27, 28, 29, 30, 31]
knowledge representation	ontologies [32, 33]
spatio-temporal modelling	object detection [34], physics-aware situation assessment[35, 36]
<b>Fieldwork in HRI</b>	
	in classrooms [37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42], at home [43], in public spaces [26]

My scientific contributions cover three main research directions: **Knowledge representation and cognitive architectures**, **Social Robotics** and **Data-driven Human-Robot interactions**. I detail each of those, as well as my main methodological and technical contributions, in the following subsections.

Table 1 gives an overview of my scientific fields of contribution, focusing on those which are directly relevant to the research programme I propose to conduct at CNRS.

My research on these topics has resulted in a substantial track record of academic outputs. Since 2008, I have authored or co-authored **75+ peer-reviewed publications** in international journals and conferences, leading to **2700+ citations**, h-index of 26, i10-index of 43 (source: Google Scholar).

## Knowledge representation and cognitive architectures

My early research focused on investigating how high-level symbolic reasoning could benefit human-robot interaction. My main insight was to bridge the research performed in the Semantic Web community (that I had already researched during my MSc [44]) with robotics, **integrating ontologies into the robot's decisional architecture** [32, presented below]. This work, that I developed between LAAS-CNRS (Pr. Alami) and the Technical University of Munich (Pr. Beetz), has had a large impact in AI for interactive robots, **bridging low-level robot perceptions and commands, to human-level semantics**.



Lemaignan, S., Ros, R., Mösenlechner, L., Alami, R., Beetz, M.  
**ORO, a Knowledge Management Module for Cognitive Architectures in Robotics**  
*IEEE IROS 2010*

One of the very first knowledge base designed and integrated in service robots. Pioneering work which played a key role in understanding how intelligent robot can represent their knowledge to facilitate communication with humans.

[Contribution: *principal investigator; 177 citations to date* ]

One of the most significant application of this work has been on **natural language understanding**: by relying on ontologies with human-level semantics to annotate information flows in the robot's decisional layers [33], **establishing a semantic common-ground with a human user was greatly simplified**, as I show in [18, presented below] and in eg [45].



Lemaignan, S., Ros, R., Sisbot, E. A., Alami, R., Beetz M.  
**Grounding the Interaction: Anchoring Situated Discourse in Everyday Human-Robot Interaction**  
*Intl Journal of Social Robotics 2012*

In this paper, I develop a natural language parser and I show how symbolic knowledge representation can be used by robot to ground natural language interactions, also taking into account the unique perspective of the human interactor.

[Contribution: *principal investigator; 110 citations to date* ]

I then integrated this work on knowledge representation and manipulation into a much larger **semantic-aware architecture**. I led the design of this architecture, to which a number of addi-

tional cognitive and manipulation capabilities designed by colleagues, were added (including eg 3D manipulation, human aware navigation and task planning). To date, the resulting system [27, presented below] is still **one of the very few complete robotic architecture enabling high-level human-robot interaction**.



Lemaignan, S., Warnier, M., Sisbot, E.A., Clodic, A., Alami, R.  
**Artificial Cognition for Social Human-Robot Interaction: An Implementation**  
*Artificial Intelligence* 2017

Landmark article: one of the first complete, semantic-aware, robotic architecture for human-robot interaction, including symbolic knowledge representation, situation assessment, natural language grounding, task planning, human-aware motion planning and execution.

[Contribution: principal investigator & coordinator; 210 citations to date ]

## Social robotics and child-robot interaction

From 2012 onwards, and building on my research on semantic-aware human-robot interaction, I shifted my scientific focus to the **social aspects of the interaction**, with a particular emphasis on the **psycho-social underpinnings of social interaction with robots**. This work started with an investigation of perspective taking, and what is called 'mentalizing' in psycho-linguistics (the cognitive ability to model what others know about the world, a key pre-requisite of interaction). This led to several publications [10, 11, 12, 13] and I was awarded in 2015 a EU H2020 Marie-Sklodowska Curie fellowship to specifically investigate this question.

I also investigated a range of other psycho-social determinants, with significant work on anthropomorphism while supervising J. Fink on this topic [3, 7, 46, 6], trust and engagement [5, 6, 7, 9], or social influence [8, 4] (topic of K. Winkle's PhD).

In parallel to this basic work, I have developed an expertise in real-world field deployments of social robots, in particular in educational settings: in addition to numerous lab-based experiments, **I have led about 15 field studies over the last 8 years**, in schools [37, 39, 40, 41, 47, 42, 48], medical surgeries [38], people's homes [43], sport [49, 26] facilities and entertainment [50] venues.

This breadth of experience gives me a **unique understanding of the scientific value, as well as the practical and technical challenges, associated with real-world deployments of interactive robots**.

My work in child-robot interaction is particularly well recognised, with some highly-cited publications [51, 37, 38, presented below], [52, 17, 39]. My main contribution in this field is a better **understanding of the role and importance of socio-cognitive engagement** between the child and the robot, rather than a more traditional tutor/learner relationship. Using psychological mechanisms like meta-cognition and the *Protégé effect*, I was for instance able to demonstrate long-term engagement in a difficult learning task for children with learning impairments [38].



Lemaignan, S., Jacq, A., Hood, D., Garcia, F., Paiva, A., Dillenbourg, P.

### **Learning by Teaching a Robot: The Case of Handwriting**

*Robotics and Automation Magazine* 2016

Long-term studies with children and therapists, where we *reverse* the social role of the robot to significantly improve the children' engagement and self-confidence. A highly-cited, landmark contribution to social robotics for education.

[Contribution: *principal investigator; 179 citations (incl. sister conf. article)* ]

## **Data-driven Human-Robot Interaction**



Senft, E., Lemaignan, S., Baxter, P., Bartlett, M., Belpaeme, T.

### **Teaching robots social autonomy from in situ human guidance**

*Science Robotics* 2019

A novel human-in-the-loop machine learning approach to implement social autonomy in a robot, with several deployments in UK public schools. This is a first-in-kind demonstration of learning autonomous action policy in a high dimensional, socially complex, environment.

[Contribution: *main study supervisor* ]



Bartlett, M., Edmunds, C. E. R., Belpaeme, T., Thill, S., Lemaignan, S. **What Can You See? Identifying Cues on Internal States from the Kinematics of Natural Social Interactions**

*Frontiers in AI and Robotics* 2019

Investigates how partially hidden 'internal states' (like emotions, cooperativeness, etc) can be decoded from simple visible cues, like skeletons. Also demonstrates that social situations can be described along 3 simple dimensions.

[Contribution: *main study supervisor* ]



Lemaignan, S., Edmunds E. R., C., Senft, E., Belpaeme, T.

### **The PlnSoRo dataset: Supporting the data-driven study of child-robot social dynamics**

*PLOS ONE* 2018

A first-in-kind, large scale dataset of child-child and child-robot social interactions. Design with machine learning in mind, this dataset effectively opens up the field of data-driven social psychology, with direct applications in AI and social robotics.

[Contribution: *principal investigator* ]

## Methodological contributions

Over the past years, I also have had a significant impact on research methodology. Inspired by the high scientific standards found in eg psychology literature, I have been a strong and vocal advocate of open-science, experimental replicability and statistical robustness.

Indeed, and grounded in my extensive fieldwork experience, I have co-authored several publications on 'meta-science' in HRI:

- I evidenced the current methodological weaknesses in HRI, along with recommendations [53] to address them;
- I showed that HRI researchers sometimes overly rely on, and blindly trust, questionable (and typically old) results from psychology [8];
- I also made the case for a more balanced view of how robots are perceived, in particular in educational settings [41].

I also created and shared with the community tools and dataset to develop our methodological toolkit and ultimately support better science. For instance, I proposed a novel methodology to assess in real-time user engagement, based on gaze patterns [14]. This work received the Best Methodology Paper award at the IEEE/ACM HRI conference in 2016; we also created in 2017 a dataset and a set of recommendation to improve speech recognition for child-robot interaction [17].

Many of my other technical contributions (presented hereafter) have had a methodological impact for the broader community (eg I created morse in 2012, the first robot simulator for human-robot interaction; I played an important role in developing and disseminating the Robot Operating System ROS; etc.)

## Technical contributions

Since 2010, I have made a number of significant technical contribution to the field. I have always adopted a open-science approach, releasing all of my software and hardware contributions to the wider community under open-source licenses. I list hereafter the most significant of these technical contributions.

- the oro knowledge base [32] – this highly cited work introduced the usage of ontologies (and associated techniques like semantic reasoning) in robotics;
- the natural language processing with semantic grounding tool dialogs [18] – this other highly-cited tool demonstrated how natural language and interactive semantic learning could be realised by combining semantic reasoning with advanced human perception;
- the MORSE simulator [54, 55], one of the very first simulator enabling human-robot interaction simulation, and used by tenths of universities worldwide since its inception;
- the GenoM verifiable software module generator [31] – this tool makes it possible to abstractly specify a robotic module, and automatically generate a code skeleton whose behaviour can be proven correct;
- the Python-based pyRobots asynchronous supervision framework [56] – adapted some of the concepts originally created in the URBI language to Python, making it possible to easily write asynchronous supervisors for robots using eg ROS;
- integration of the LAAS architecture for social robots [27] – I coordinated the effort of a large team of researchers at LAAS to integrate a significant number of software modules in a coherent architecture for social interaction. One of my most-cited paper;
- a high-accuracy 2D localisation method based on structured patterns [57] – I supervised this work in which we attempted to address the difficult issue of high-accuracy indoor lo-



calisation in complex, highly-occluded environment. Our method, which relies on decoding structured patterns placed in the environment, allows for sub-mm localisation with very low computational cost (can fully run on a microcontroller);

- Cellulo, a novel holonomic and back-drivable mobile robot with haptic feedback, designed from the ground-up for child-robot interaction [58, 59];
- the 3D situation assessment platform *underworlds* [35] – this tool is a distributed scene-graph, making it possible to maintain a joint dynamic 3D model of environment across software modules. It features sensor fusion, and spatial reasoning capabilities like perspective taking;
- a new algorithm for interactive reinforcement learning [24] – the algorithm, developed by one of my student, has enabled for the first time to teach a robot both a task and a social action policy *while being in use in the field*. We were able to show that after a short training phase, the robot was able to reach fully autonomy on a complex educative task.

In addition to these academic outputs, other significant technical contributions include:

- **The port to Python3 of the Robot Operating System (ROS)**, the large software framework used by the vast majority of the robotics community worldwide
- The **ROS4HRI** suite of software module to streamline complex human-robot perception pipelines (pre-print: [60])
- a multi-player online game to simulate human-robot interactions, used for teaching and research (eg online studies)
- The initial support of the widely used Softbank Nao robot to ROS (this work was later officially endorsed by Softbank, ex. Aldebaran Robotics), as well as the HOAP-3 humanoid robot
- a review of object recognition techniques [34],
- a number of tutorials and lectures on software engineering for robotics.

## Contributions to the development of individuals

In addition to my scientific contributions, I have played an increasingly important role in managing junior researchers and research groups.

While at the ‘AI for Learning’ CHILI Lab at EPFL, I created and successfully led for 2 years the HRI research group, supervising in total 10 students (including 4 PhD students with whom I co-authored a total of 18 papers). Within that short timeframe, I established CHILI as an internationally recognised research lab in robotics for education.

Then, during my EU Marie Skłodowska-Curie post-doc at Plymouth University, I further co-supervised 3 PhD students (co-authoring 17 publications with them).

My current role as a permanent **Associate Professor in Social Robotics and AI** at the Bristol Robotics Laboratory (BRL, largest co-located robotic lab in the UK) recognise my leadership. I am **in charge of defining and implementing the lab’s research strategy in human-robot interactions**. I created the Embedded Cognition for Human-Robot Interactions (ECHOS) research group, that I now co-lead, supervising 15+ PhDs and post-docs. I also supervise the BRL’s Connected Autonomous Vehicles research group (5 students and post-docs). Specifically, the ECHOS group covers most aspects of situated AI for human-robot interaction, **my role includes strategic planning of the group activities, scientific guidance, recruitment of staff and prospective students, and**

grant applications.

### Supervision of graduate students and postdoctoral fellows

2018 – 2019	2 post-docs, 5 PhDs, 4 MSc students, Bristol Robotics Lab, UWE, UK
2015 – 2018	3 PhDs, Plymouth University, UK
2013 – 2015	5 PhDs, 5 MSc students, EPFL, Switzerland
2012 – 2013	2 MSc students, LAAS-CNRS, France

### Teaching activities

2019 –	<b>Associate Professor</b> teaching at postgraduate level, UWE, UK
2018 – 2019	<b>Senior Lecturer</b> teaching at postgraduate level, UWE, UK
2015 – 2018	<b>Lecturer</b> teaching at undergraduate & postgraduate levels (robotics fundamentals, software engineering, human-robot interaction), Plymouth University, UK
2013 – 2015	<b>Teaching Assistant</b> teaching at undergraduate level (Visual Computing), EPFL, Switzerland
2008 – 2012	<b>Teaching Assistant</b> teaching at undergraduate level (programming, databases, ontologies), INSA Toulouse, France

### Contributions to the wider research community

Since my PhD, I have established strong peer recognition in the field of human-robot interaction and cognitive robotics. This includes:

- numerous **invited talks** at national and international symposiums and events (9 invited talks since Jan. 2018, including **keynotes** at the UK Robotics and Autonomous Systems 2019 conference, and at the 2018 AAAI Fall Symposium);
- invited to **high-profile editorial roles**: Programme Committee member of the HRI conference since 2015; editor of Frontiers In Robotics and AI journal; editor or Programme Committee member of several leading conferences in AI and Robotics (RSS, IROS, IJCAI, HAI, AAMAS);
- invited member of the UK EPSRC Peer Review College; member of the EU H2020 peer review college; invited reviewer for the French, Dutch, Israeli research agencies;
- active role (organisation committee and/or programme committee in major conferences in robotics and AI (eg IEEE IROS, RSS, IEEE/ACM HRI, IJCAI);
- six invitations to PhD defense committees over the last two years.

## Organisation of scientific meetings

2021	<b>ACM/IEEE Human-Robot Interaction conference</b> , Student Design Competition chair, virtually held
2020	<b>ACM/IEEE Human-Robot Interaction conference</b> , 700+ participants, local chair, Cambridge, UK
2017	<b>ACM/IEEE Human-Robot Interaction conference</b> , 400+ participants, alt.HRI chair, Vienna, AT
2016	<b>2nd Intl. workshop on Cognitive Architecture for Social HRI</b> , 45 participants, programme chair, Christchurch, NZ
2014	<b>Intl. workshop on Simulation for HRI</b> , 35 participants, programme chair, Bielefeld, DE
2012	<b>Intl. workshop on MORSE and its applications</b> , 30 participants, programme chair, Toulouse, FR
2009	<b>Cognitive Sciences' Young Researchers Conference</b> , 150 participants, steering committee, Toulouse, FR

## Institutional responsibilities

2019 –	Full member of the EPSRC Peer Review college
2017–	EU H2020 member on the Peer Review College
2019 –	Head of the Outreach cluster, Faculty of Technology and Environment, UWE, UK
2019–	Invited PhD committee examiner (Örebro U., Uppsala U., KTH, Bielefeld U., LAAS-CNRS, BRL)
2018 –	HRI module co-lead, MSc level, University of the West of England, UK
2017 – 2018	Module leader, Robotics fundamentals (undergraduate level), University of Plymouth, UK

## Editorial activities

2019 –	Member of the Robotics, Science and System (RSS) Programme Committee
2018 –	Editorial board of <i>Frontiers in AI and Robotics</i>
2017 –	Member of the IJCAI Programme Committee
2015 – 2020	Member of the IEEE/ACM HRI Programme Committee
2017 – 2019	Member of the IEEE IROS Programme Committee
2017 – 2018	Member of the HAI Programme Committee

## Contributions to the broader society

I **actively engage with policy makers, at national and European level**: for instance, over the past 2 years, I have been directly interacting (through participating to panels, visits and one-to-one discussions) with the EU Research Executive Agency (MSCA AI Cluster 2019); the UK minister for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Greg Clark; the UK minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation Chris Skidmore; the chair of the West of England authority Tim Bowles; the UK Research & Innovation Portfolio manager for Robotics Clara Morri.

I have a **strong track record of tech transfer**, through patenting (US patent US20190016213A1) and involvement in national (UK) and EU-level projects focused on tech-transfer (InnovateUK

ROBOPILOT, CAPRI, CAVForth; EU Terrinet, SABRE).

Finally, I actively engage in **research communication**: my past research has been covered several times by mainstream international media, including press releases by Reuters, Press Association; TV coverage by the BBC, Sky News; radio interviews and broadcast. My academic website ([academia.skadge.org](http://academia.skadge.org)) showcases this media coverage. I also maintain an active, science-focused, presence on the social media (Twitter handle: @skadge).

## Policy making

- 2020 –** **Expert Collaborator for the European Joint Research Centre** contributing to the UNICEF Guidelines for Responsible Child-Robots Interactions
- 2019** **Invited panel by the EU Research Executive Agency** at the 2019 MSCA AI Cluster, sharing expertise in Human-Robot Interaction

## Technology transfer

- 2018 –** Co-I on UKRI InnovateUK projects ROBOPILOT, CAPRI, CAVForth, involving direct transfer of technology for automated verification of autonomous vehicles
- 2018 –** Scientific advisor for KickSum Ltd., in the frame of the EU-funded SABRE project
- 2018** Co-inventor on US patent US20190016213A1 on back-driveable, haptic locomotion for small robots

## Selected outreach and public dissemination

- 2019–** Cluster Lead for STEM outreach, University of the West of England
- 2019–** Scientific advisor for the Bristol's Science Centre
- 2019** Hosted large media event for the Couch25K study [26]
- 2016–** UK & EU Robotics Weeks coordinator, University of Plymouth, University of the West of England
- 2015** Hosted large media event for the CoWriter study [38] (coverage by Reuters, BBC Arabic, FastCompany)
- 2011** 'Roboscopia' Human-Robot public theater performance, Science Day'11 <http://bit.ly/1LQpNWA>
- 2008–2011** Toulouse's Cognitive Sciences Students Association, Co-chair
- 1997–2012** Executive Committee & Head of Educational Robotics, Planète Sciences (including coordination of the *EUROBOT* Robotic Competition)

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