Institute of Argumentation, Linguistics and Semiotics (IALS)

PhD student position at the Institute of Argumentation, Linguistics and Semiotics, Faculty of Communication, Culture and Society, USI Università della Svizzera italiana

Università della Svizzera italiana (USI) is a young and lively university, a hub of opportunity open to the world where students are offered a quality interdisciplinary education in which they can be fully engaged and take center stage, and where our researchers can count on having the space to freely pursue their initiative. Established in 1996, USI is in constant evolution, always taking on new challenges while remaining true to its three guiding principles: quality, openness and responsibility.

The Institute of Argumentation, Linguistics and Semiotics (IALS) represents a lively research environment for a PhD student who specializes in the study of argumentation. Interaction with several researchers specializing on argumentation in different contexts, as well as interdisciplinary interactions with colleagues inside and outside the Faculty is an asset for a PhD candidate who wants to work on empirical argumentation.

The Institute invites applications for a PhD position in *Argumentation, Corpus Linguistics and the Discourse Analysis of Digital Media* within the project "*iTrust - Interventions against Polarisation in Society for Trustworthy Social Media. From diagnosis to therapy*" funded by SNF in the framework of ERA-NET + EJP.

The PhD position is funded at 100% for 4 years.

The PhD candidate will develop their dissertation within the *iTrust* project with a focus on the annotation and analysis of argumentation, rhetorical ethos and frames in a corpus of social media texts. The dissertation will be supervised by Prof. Andrea Rocci. Depending on the thesis topic, a co-supervision involving one of the international project partners could be activated. Moreover, the PhD candidate will participate in the PhD Program in Applied Linguistics *Managing languages, arguments and narratives in the datafied society*.

The project

Digitalisation is rapidly transforming our societies, transforming the dynamics of our interactions, transforming the culture of our debates. Trust plays a critical role in establishing intellectual humility and interpersonal civility in argumentation and discourse: without it, credibility is doomed, reputation is endangered, cooperation is compromised. The major threats associated with digitalisation - hate speech and fake news - are violations of the basic condition for trusting and being trustworthy which are key for constructive, reasonable and responsible communication as well as for the collaborative and ethical organisation of societies. These behaviours eventually lead to polarisation, when users repeatedly attack each other in highly emotional terms, focusing on what divides people, not what unites them.

The *iTrust* project will deliver (i) the largest ever dataset of online text, annotated with features relevant for ethos, pathos and reframing; (ii) a new methodology of large-scale comparative trust analytics to detect implicit patterns and trends in hate speech and fake news;
(iii) a novel empirical account of how these patterns affect polarisation in online communication and in society at large; and (iv) AI-based applications that will transfer these insights into interventions against hate speech, fake news and polarisation. The iTrust consortium is coordinated by Prof. Katarzyna Budzynska (Warsaw University of Technology), while the local team leader at USI is Prof. Andrea Rocci. The consortium members are experienced researchers with expertise in rhetoric, comparative political science, corpus linguistics, natural language processing, multi-agent systems and computational argumentation.

The Ph.D. Position

Coursework. The doctoral student will be enrolled as PhD student in the Faculty of Communication, Culture and Society, in the Ph.D. school in Communication Sciences, with a specialization in “Discourse and Argumentation”. Furthermore, the doctoral student will participate in the PhD Program in Applied Linguistics Managing languages, arguments and narratives in the datafied society, through which they will be able to attend doctoral courses in the areas of Argumentation Theory, Discourse Analysis, Corpus Linguistics and Computational Linguistics.

Research and Thesis. The PhD candidate will collaborate to the development of the institute research agenda, with a primary focus on the iTrust project. They will have a significant role in the manual annotation of the corpus of the project and in other key research tasks connected to it. Their dissertation will be empirical and based on the project’s corpus data. The PhD candidate is also asked to present papers at scientific conferences, and produce publications for scientific journals, in co-authorship with other project members of the project and as a single author.

Teaching. On the teaching side, the PhD candidate will work as teaching assistant in the Argumentation and Discourse Analysis courses taught by Prof. Andrea Rocci at the master and bachelor levels, helping in the preparation of teaching materials and tutoring students.

Candidates’ profile

Ideal candidates should satisfy the following requirements:

- A Master (or equivalent title) in linguistics, argumentation, rhetoric, discourse analysis, applied linguistics, computational linguistics, communication sciences or related disciplines.
- High personal interest in the analysis of discourse, dialogue and argumentation. Proven attitude for a fine-grained analysis of discourse and language. An interest for exploring the discourse of social media and digital journalism.
- Passion for interdisciplinary work and an open-minded willingness to learn about a wide range of topics and subject areas (including Linguistics, Argumentation, Media Studies, Ethics, Philosophy of Language, Political Science and Artificial Intelligence), to work with both qualitative and quantitative methods and to acquire some computer programming skills.
- A strong work ethic and the willingness to carry out painstaking manual linguistic annotation of corpus data maintaining the highest standards of quality. Willingness to learn annotation software (e.g. INCEpTION, OVA+).
- A strong motivation to develop and complete a PhD thesis and the ability to work in a team as well to collaborate more broadly with colleagues at IALS (engage in scientific dialogue, listen and think critically).
- Excellent fluency in English is necessary. Knowledge of Italian, German or French will be considered an added value. Working knowledge of a programming language (e.g. Python) will be also considered a plus.
- Interest for teaching and tutoring students is also required.
Contract terms
The position is funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF) and the salary levels correspond to those set by the SNF for PhD researchers. Please, consult the SNF salary ranges guidelines (in English):
http://www.snf.ch/SiteCollectionDocuments/Annex_XII_Ausfuehrungsreglement_Beitragsreglement_E.pdf

Workplace is USI Università della Svizzera italiana, located in Lugano, Switzerland. Availability to travel to other parts of Switzerland and abroad (for purposes of collaboration and research) is required.

Starting date is December 1st, 2022 (at the earliest). However, the position will be kept open until a suitable candidate has been found.

The Application
Applications should contain: (1) a letter in which the applicants describe their research interests and the motivation to apply to this specific position, (2) a complete CV, (3) copies of relevant diplomas, certificates as well as the full transcript of records that prove the candidates’ eligibility for doctoral studies in Communication Sciences, (4) an electronic version of a research work (Master thesis or other scientific publication). The latter must be accompanied by a short summary in English (1 page maximum). A support letter written by the Master thesis supervisor (or another Professor who knows the candidate well) is equally welcome.

Please send your application in electronic form or requests for further information to Prof. Andrea Rocci (andrea.rocci@usi.ch). Applications received before November 15, 2022, will be given priority. However, applications will be received until the position is filled.

As an institution that values diversity, USI particularly encourages applications from women and from all individuals from underrepresented groups.

Lugano, October 10, 2022