

# Fuzzy Inference-Based Person-Following Robot

Samir Shaker, Jean J. Saade and Daniel Asmar

**Abstract**—Person-following is an important ability that needs to be possessed by a service robot when required to accomplish some human-related tasks. Such ability has requirements, which cannot be met satisfactorily using classical mathematical methods. Most notably, the robot has to remain at a certain safe distance from the person that is being followed and at the same time move in a smooth manner that does not appear threatening to the person. In this paper, therefore, a fuzzy inference system is developed and used as a controller to provide decisions achieving smooth and safe person-following behavior. The Fuzzy system is made to work in conjunction with a leg detection algorithm and a laser range finder to detect a person's legs giving the inference system distance and velocity information necessary for the control process. The experimental results showed that even though the detection of legs was subject to noise and false negatives, the robot achieved the smoothness and safety objectives while following its target.

**Keywords**— Fuzzy control, Fuzzy inference, Leg detection, Person-following robot, Smoothness, Safety.

## I. INTRODUCTION

**F**OLLOWING a person is an important ability for mobile robots that interact with people. Also, any robot that interacts with a person needs to exhibit movement and behavior, which appear unthreatening to a person who had no interaction with robots before [1]. For instance, a jerky movement by a robot can be perceived as a threat by a person having no a priori interaction with a mobile robot and even by someone who has whether the movement turned out to be totally unexpected. Take the example of an elderly person equipped with a robot wheelchair required to follow a nurse. Smoothness of robot motion is especially required in this case since the elderly passenger might get hurt by a sudden and abrupt wheelchair motion.

Therefore, this paper proposes a fuzzy inference system meant to control and smoothen out the motion of a robot while following a person and, at the same time, keeping it at a safe distance from the person that is being followed. This control ability has been developed in [2] for the case of a car following another one. The developed ability, however, has been modified here to accommodate the case of a robot following a human. This has been done since the human

motion is not always as smooth as that of a car, and autonomously detecting and tracking of people is relatively more difficult unless the person is fitted with specialized tracking equipment [3], which is practically inconvenient and not always possible.

The problem of person following by a robot has been addressed previously in some research. The method developed in [4] requires a previously acquired map of the environment to achieve tracking. This imposed limitation makes the method unsuitable for cases where the robot is required to frequently change the place in which it operates. The method proposed in [5] uses two kinds of sensors, a laser range finder and a camera for tracking. This entails unneeded extra cost for the implementation of the method seeing that it requires two sensors instead of one to achieve its goal.

The authors in [6] propose two different methods for tracking people. The first one failed because of the lack of needed environmental features, which were not adequately provided by the sole use of an omni-directional camera. This motivated the authors to pursue another method that compensates for the camera shortages by adding a laser to keep track of the person and, thus, increasing the overall system cost. The method developed in [7] also uses an omni-directional camera and requires a new training of an artificial neural network for each person that has to be followed. Such a requirement restricts the generality of the method and makes it unsuitable for emergency situations such as an elderly sitting on a robot wheelchair having to follow a new doctor or nurse.

Consequently, in order to achieve the smoothness and safety objectives of the person-following problem of a mobile robot while keeping the offered problem solution as general as possible and its implementation cost as low as possible, a method is proposed in this paper based on the use of fuzzy inference. It makes use of a laser range finder mounted on a wheeled mobile robot to detect a person's legs and follow them in a smooth motion while keeping a safe distance from that person. The fuzzy inference system is designed with the aid of a specially developed visualization program and is made to work in conjunction with a leg detection algorithm that uses the data provided by the laser to provide the information necessary for the fuzzy system decisions in controlling the robot motion. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section II describes the algorithm used to detect a person's legs. The fuzzy inference system design and role are described in Section III. Then, Section IV presents the test platform and Section V shows the results of the tests, which were performed on the person-following robot. Section VI concludes this study.

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J. Saade, corresponding author, is with the department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, American University of Beirut, P.O.Box 11-0236, Riad El Solh, 1107-2020, Beirut, Lebanon, phone: 961.1.340 460. fax: 961.1.744 462, e-mail: jsaade@aub.edu.lb

S. Shaker and D. Asmar are with the department of Mechanical Engineering, American University of Beirut, P.O.Box 11-0236, Riad El Solh, 1107-2020, Beirut, Lebanon, e-mail: szs04@aub.edu.lb, da20@aub.edu.lb

## II. LEG DETECTION

The leg detection algorithm has the role of providing the information needed by the fuzzy inference system to perform the control of the robot motion. The algorithm processes the data read by the laser sensor to detect the person's legs. It provides the position of the person's legs relative to the robot, the differential of which is the relative velocity of the person with respect to the robot. The obtained relative distance and relative velocity are then made available as input information to the fuzzy controller, which will determine how much speed change is needed by the robot in order to follow the person's legs.

The leg detection algorithm is based on the work of Milella et al. [8]. It works as follows. First, a 180° laser scan is performed with a 1° separation between two consecutive readings [9]. Actually, the laser has a maximum resolution of 0.5°, but this was not used since it was not necessary in the practical setting of the problem and also to improve real-time performance. Then, the data is processed as indicated in the flowchart of Fig. 1 and explained in the following two paragraphs.

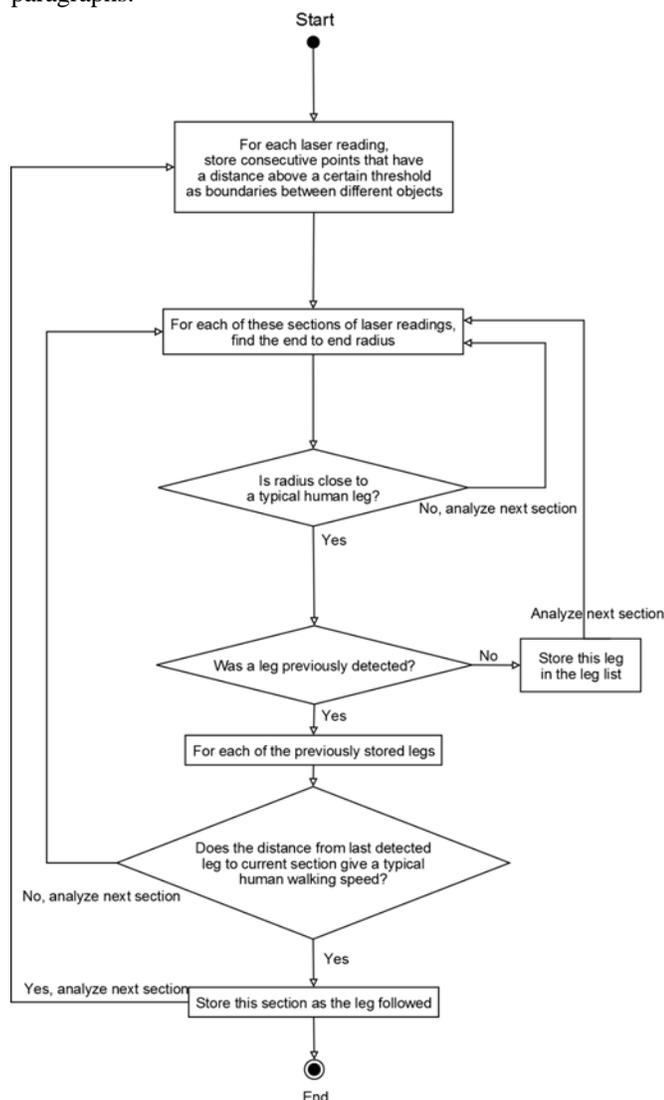


Fig. 1 Leg Detection Algorithm

The laser range readings are scanned consecutively looking for a large difference defined to be above a certain threshold, here taken to be equal to 1 m. This threshold was chosen because a moving person will typically not have an object in front of him closer than 1 m. So, any laser beam passing next to or between his legs will stop at a distance of at least 1 m above the one blocked by his legs. The boundaries we are looking for are shown in dots in Fig. 2. These also include the first and last laser readings. The regions between these boundaries constitute possible legs. Then, each region's width is compared with that of typical human's leg. If it matches, then the location of the leg and its size are stored. On the next scan, this information is used to make sure that the same set of legs is being followed.

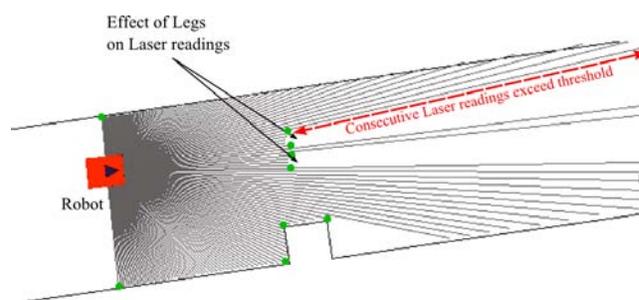


Fig. 2 The laser readings are shown as lines and the identified boundaries are marked with dots.

Once one or more legs are detected, the closest moving two legs are considered those of the person, which needs to be followed. To get the position of that person (*i.e.*, distance to the robot), the positions of the person's two legs are averaged to obtain the center position of that person. In case only one leg was detected, the center of that leg is taken.

## III. THE FUZZY INFERENCE SYSTEM

Fuzzy inference is called for when the problem to be dealt with is humanistic and complex and where the use of classical mathematical models is deemed too precise for a situation, which is imprecise by nature. Hence, fuzzy inference is most suitable when the available information is noisy, and the solution requires an approximate type of reasoning. Following a person while maintaining smoothness and safety of motion would be better dealt with using approximate rather than precise reasoning because first, it is a human or intelligent behavior that is being duplicated, and second, the data acquired by the robot from the detection of moving human legs is sometimes noisy and could be occasionally wrong.

The fuzzy inference system that is designed and used in this study to control the robot motion while following a person is based on the one developed for car-following [2]. The system has been adapted, however, from the car-following scenario to following people using a specially developed visualization program, which gives real-time feedback in response to direct manipulation of the membership functions. It is important to note here that such adaptation is one of the major advantages of fuzzy logic over artificial neural networks since the fuzzy

system allows redesign and modification based on its easy-to-understand linguistic description of the problem solution.

As was previously emphasized, the robot should follow the person's legs in a smooth way. That is, it should accelerate or decelerate smoothly if the legs change speed. It should also keep a safe distance to account for situations in which the person stops abruptly. Hence, the robot should remain at a larger safe distance if it were moving faster. This implies that the safe distance should be dependant on the current robot speed. After some experimentation, it was observed that a parabolic formula is the most suitable to relate the safe distance to robot speed. The empirically derived parabolic equation is as follows:

$$Safe\ Dist = 88 \times 10^{-6} V^2 + 0.66336V + Min\ Safe\ Dist,$$

where  $V$  is the current robot velocity in mm/s. The minimum safe distance was taken here to be equal to 1 m to account for the bounding radius of the used robot.

The fuzzy system uses two inputs, the relative velocity of the robot to the person's legs and the difference between the relative distance and the safe distance. The output is the needed acceleration. In order to account for distances and velocities of human beings, the ranges of the input and output variables of the fuzzy inference system as well as the ranges and shapes of the assigned membership functions, as in [2], were modified appropriately using the visualization program developed for the adaptation purpose. The final membership functions are shown in Fig. 3.

Moreover, the amount of acceleration outputted by the system is influenced by the inference rules. The rules in [2] used with the membership functions in Fig. 3, or even with those obtained before the final ones, for the case of person following produced a lot of oscillations and very slow movement towards the person when the person is obviously far away waiting for the robot to arrive. Therefore, the rules in [2] were modified in a major way to make the robot keep going forward towards the person in such scenarios. Also, they were modified to make the robot arrive to a complete stop when it is within the defined safe minimum distance. In addition, the highly negative decelerations, which were used in [2], were not applied here. While such decelerations are justified for the case of automobiles in order to avoid accidents, robots move much slower and therefore can use lower accelerations while ensuring relatively speedy and safe arrivals with minimal oscillations. The final inference rules are shown in Table 1.

As for the defuzzification technique used, the first of maxima was tested in the beginning but it gave large values of acceleration between different acceleration levels. Going from Normal to Mild acceleration, for example, resulted in a large change in speed. This is why this method was replaced by the centroid defuzzification method, which yielded a smoother change in robot velocity.

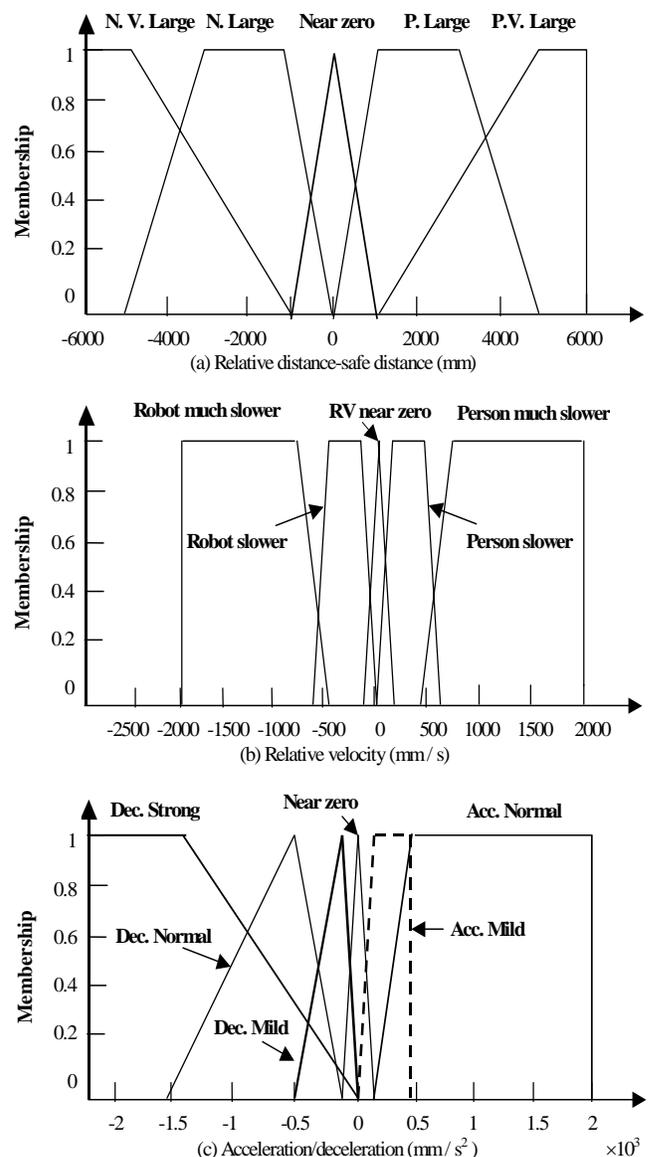


Fig. 3 Membership functions for the fuzzy system input and output variables.

For all possible inputs, the output acceleration can be visualized in a 3D graph as seen in Fig. 4. The drawn surface shows a smooth transition in different acceleration plateaus (*i.e.*, whenever smoothness is needed). This translates into an even smoother transition in velocity given that acceleration is its derivative. Note here that the flat parts appearing in the surface are simply limits put on the boundaries of the system so that the robot will not exceed the maximum velocity once it is attained. Modeling such a non-linear function would have been very difficult using classical mathematics and without the aid of fuzzy logic, and if that were to happen, it would have been computationally expensive. Moreover, the developed fuzzy system is much easier to modify and adapt to other robot movement situations.

Table 1. Fuzzy inference rules for the robot controller

Acc/Dec		RD – SD				
		N. V. Large	N. Large	Near Zero	P. Large	P. V. Large
RV	Robot M. Slower	Near Zero	Acc. Mild	Acc. Mild	Acc. Normal	Acc. Normal
	Robot Slower	Dec. Strong	Dec. Mild	Acc. Mild	Acc. Normal	Acc. Normal
	RV. Near Zero	Dec. Strong	Dec. Mild	Near Zero	Acc. Mild	Acc. Normal
	Person Slower	Acc. Normal				
	Person M. Slower	Dec. Strong	Dec. Strong	Acc. Mild	Acc. Mild	Near Zero

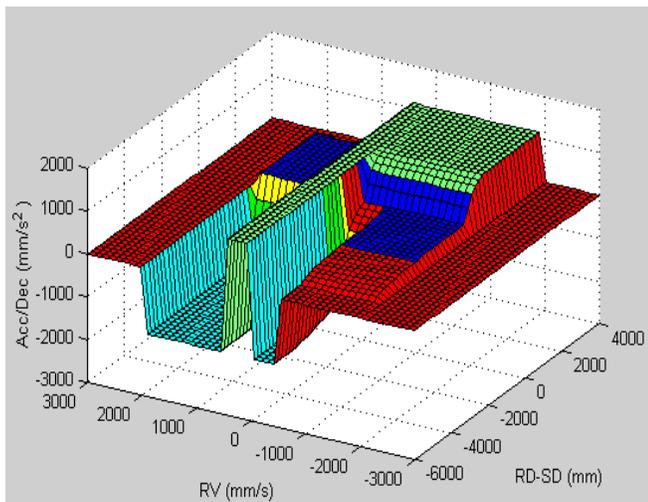


Fig. 4 Acceleration in response to all possible inputs.



Fig. 5 Lab hallway and robot where the testing is performed.

#### IV. TEST PLATFORM

The leg detection algorithm (Section II) and the designed fuzzy inference system (Section III) were made to work collectively to control the robot motion while following a person, and they were implemented on P3-AT Mobile Robot [10] shown in Figure 5a. The P3-AT robot is a research platform suitable for many research areas including mapping and localization. It has a Pentium 3 processor on board with USB and serial ports to mount different sensors. For the application at hand, a laser range finder [9], shown in Figure 5(a), was mounted on the robot and interfaced to the serial

port of the on-board computer.

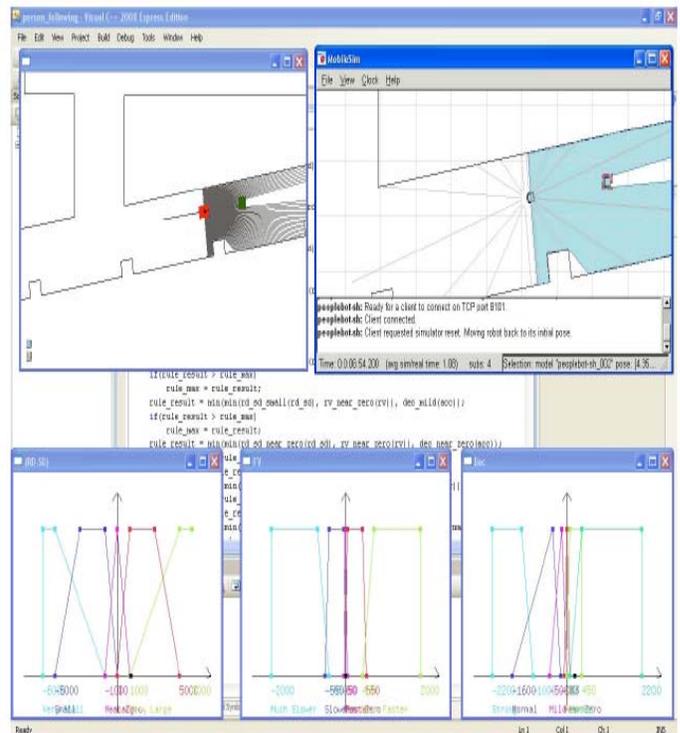


Fig. 6 Relative Algorithm Simulation and Visual Tweaking Platform. The OpenGL rendering of sensed data (Top Left), the MobileSim simulator (Top Right) and the membership functions of three fuzzy variables (Bottom three windows).

The algorithm was implemented in C++. The system sent its commands using the Advanced Robotics Interface for Applications (ARIA) [11] and then was simulated on MobileSim (Mobile Robots Simulator) [12]. After numerous successful simulations, the system was implemented in real-time on the robot.

For additional visualization, the results of laser scans, leg detection, and membership functions were drawn using the Open Graphics Library (OpenGL) [13] as seen in Fig. 6. These visualizations were made interactive or modifiable at runtime. This allowed the tweaking of the membership functions experimentally and online to find the ranges and shapes that gave the optimum results: no oscillations, smooth ride as well as reasonable time to arrive at the target (i.e., the person being followed).

#### V. RESULTS

The system was first tested on the MobileSim simulator. As seen in Fig. 7, the relative distance minus safe distance always tends to zero smoothly combating sensor noise. Also, Fig. 9 shows the velocity of the robot when the person's velocity varies and is perceived by the leg detection algorithm as shown in Fig. 8. Even though the velocity of the person's legs shows high-frequency and high velocity fluctuations, the velocity response of the robot (Fig. 9) shows much smaller fluctuations. In reality, when the system was tested on the

robot, these minor fluctuations in velocity that appeared in the simulation were barely noticeable. Also, the robot turned out to follow the person closely. Therefore, the system achieved the goal of moving the robot smoothly towards the safe distance, without exhibiting any noticeable oscillations.

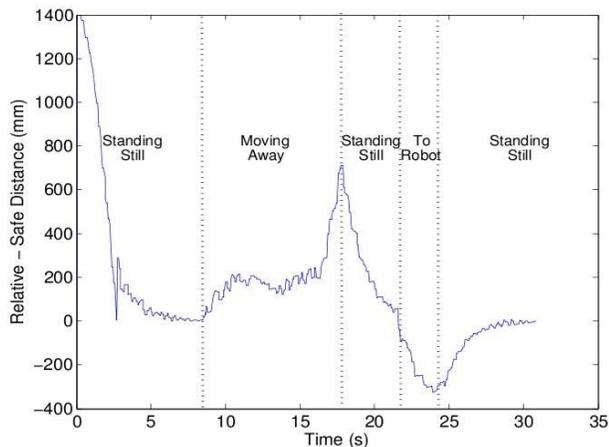


Fig. 7 Relative distance minus safe distance versus time

Then, the system was tested in the lab hallways shown in Fig. 5. First, detection of legs was tested by letting the robot orient itself towards them while staying in its place. Then, the robot was allowed to follow a walking person in the hallway. The robot followed the person in front of it smoothly and moved backward when the person approached it at a distance smaller than the safe distance. Moreover, when another person passed during the experiment, the robot kept following the original person as it detected that the legs of the person originally followed were closer to the last known position of the legs.

## VI. CONCLUSION

In this paper, a system that can be used by a robot to follow people in a smooth and safe manner has been developed. It consisted of a fuzzy rule-based inference system, which can provide the acceleration needed for a robot to follow a human detected through the use of a range sensor and a leg detection algorithm. Actually, the fuzzy system and the algorithm have been made to work collectively to achieve the stated smoothness and safety objectives and this has been done despite the noisy data that could sometimes be provided by the laser sensor and the highly fluctuating velocity of the detected human legs. Fuzzy inference is especially suitable for such situations and this has been verified in this study. In addition, only a laser sensor had been used to detect the legs of the person, which reduced the cost of the system. Also, the system does not require any special adaptation or mapping of the environment in which it is supposed to operate. These objectives combined were not met in previous studies. The robot ability acquired through the use of the system offered in this study opens the way for new and innovative applications in various fields to aid people in their tasks.

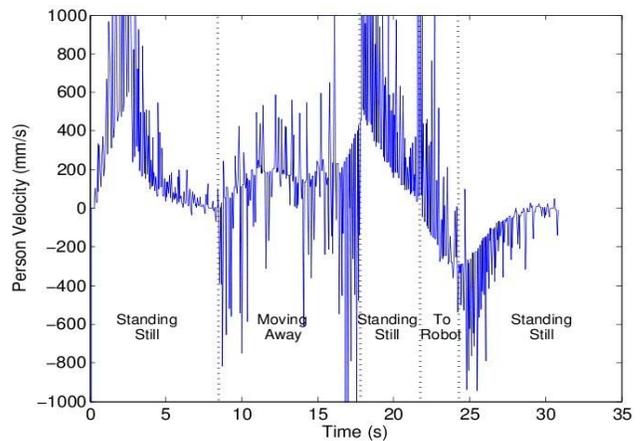


Fig. 8 Person's velocity versus time

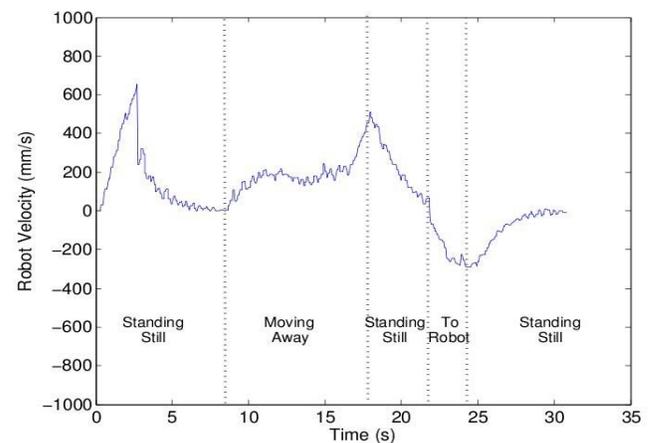


Fig. 9 Robot velocity versus time

Future work should address the testing of the system using other sensors such as a camera for measuring the width of a person's legs as a way to estimate their distance from the robot instead of a laser. Measuring the distance in this manner, which should prove to be more prone to error than using a laser, would test the system against more noisy data in order to determine the extent to which it can be noise insensitive. Also, it might be useful to develop a technique that can be used to easily adapt the system to any sensor from which range data can be extracted.

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**Jean J. Saade** (corresponding author) was born in Lebanon in 1954. He received the B.Sc. degree in Physics from the Lebanese University, Lebanon, in 1979 with a scholarship to pursue graduate studies. He then received the M.Sc. degree in Electrical Engineering in 1982 from Boston University, MA, USA, and a Ph.D. degree, also in Electrical Engineering, from Syracuse University, NY, USA, in 1987.

He taught for four years at Syracuse University during his Ph.D. studies and served for one year as a Visiting Assistant Professor at the same University after graduating. In 1988, he joined the American University of Beirut, Lebanon, and is currently a Professor at the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, teaching various analog and digital communication courses, detection and estimation principles, electromagnetic theory, and fuzzy logic. Dr. Saade published a good number of papers in international journals. These publications address the development of essential mathematical aspects of fuzzy sets and logic. He also applied these developments to practical engineering programs related to signal detection, radar, fuzzy control, and robot navigation. His recent publications have been concerned with the development of fuzzy controllers modeling algorithms and learning schemes based on expert data. This is in addition to the development of novel defuzzification methods for fuzzy controllers. In November-December 2006, Dr. Saade's paper on robot navigation published by Elsevier in 2003 has ranked first in the area of computer science according to Science Direct data base and it also ranked between second and fourth in the areas of decision sciences, engineering and mathematics.

Dr. Saade has received special invitations to present his research work at high-level international conferences attended by Nobel prize winners and VIP forums. He has also refereed a good number of papers for international journals including *Fuzzy Sets and Systems* and *IEEE Transactions on Fuzzy Systems*. He is a member of the International Fuzzy Systems Association (IFSA) and the European Society for Fuzzy Logic and Technology (EUSFLAT).

**Samir Shaker** received his B.Eng. degree in Computer and Communication Engineering with Highest Distinction and his B.Sc. degree in Computer Science from Notre Dame University, Lebanon, in 2007. He is currently pursuing his M.Eng. degree in Mechanical Engineering at the American University of Beirut, Lebanon. His current research interests are in robotics and computer vision.