Aligning Speech Segments Beyond Pure Semantics

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Abstract

Multilingual parallel data for speech-to-speech translation is scarce and expensive to create from scratch. This is all the more true for expressive speech translation, which aims at preserving not only the semantics, but also the overall prosody (e.g. style, emotion, rate-ofspeech). Existing corpora contain speech utterances with the same meaning, yet the overall prosody is typically different, as human annotators are not tasked with reproducing these aspects, or crowed-sourced efforts do not specifically target this kind of alignment in priority. In this paper, we propose a novel alignment algorithm, which automatically forms pairs of speech segments aligned not only in meaning, but also in expressivity. In order to validate our approach, we train an expressive multilingual speech-to-speech translation system on the automatically aligned data. Our experiments show that in comparison to semantic-only approaches, expressively aligned data yields large improvements in source expressivity preservation (e.g. 43% uplift in speech rate preservation on average), while still maintaining content translation quality. In some scenarios, results also indicate that this alignment algorithm can outperform standard, semantic-focused approaches even on content translation quality.

1 Introduction

In traditional machine translation (MT), the underlying goal is to preserve the meaning of the source. However, more recently there have been efforts to develop expressive speech-to-speech translation systems (S2ST) [\(Seamless Communication et al.,](#page-5-0) [2023\)](#page-5-0), where the aim is to maintain not only the meaning, but also the expressivity of the source speech (e.g. tone, emotion, style, etc). While different parts of translation models can be pretrained in an unsupervised manner, large amounts of highquality end-to-end data remains crucial to achieve the best performance. On one hand, human-curated parallel data for the text domain (bitexts), are freely available for several languages, for instance the well known Europarl [\(Koehn,](#page-5-1) [2005\)](#page-5-1) or UN corpora [\(Ziemski et al.,](#page-5-2) [2016\)](#page-5-2). On the other hand, human created aligned speech-to-speech parallel data is a scarce resource. To complement existing speech parallel data, automatic alignment algorithms have evolved as an important technique to provide additional data for a large number of languages and domains [\(Duquenne et al.,](#page-4-0) [2023a;](#page-4-0) [Seamless Com](#page-5-0)[munication et al.,](#page-5-0) [2023\)](#page-5-0).

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However, these speech-to-speech alignment algorithms search only for speech segments with the same semantics, totally disregarding expressive properties of the source and target speech. In this paper, we extend similarity-based speech-to-speech alignment with an expressive criterion. Our experiments show that the use of expressively aligned data substantially boosts the preservation of expressivity in a multilingual expressive S2ST system. In addition, we observe that in some cases the expressively aligned data also improves content translation quality on some test sets. The main contributions of this work are:

- We propose the first speech-to-speech alignment algorithm which aligns not only the semantics, but also the expressivity of the source and target speech;
- We applied this approach to a publicly available raw corpus, and aligned approximately 12 thousand hours of English speech in five languages (French, German, Italian, Chinese Mandarin, and Spanish). The resulting dataset and metadata can be found online^{[1](#page-0-0)};
- We validate our approach by training a multilingual and expressive S2ST on the aligned data, yielding uplifts in expressivity preser-

¹ [https://github.com/facebookresearch/seamless_](https://github.com/facebookresearch/seamless_communication/blob/main/docs/expressive/seamless_align_expressive_README.md) [communication/blob/main/docs/expressive/](https://github.com/facebookresearch/seamless_communication/blob/main/docs/expressive/seamless_align_expressive_README.md) [seamless_align_expressive_README.md](https://github.com/facebookresearch/seamless_communication/blob/main/docs/expressive/seamless_align_expressive_README.md)

vation, while maintaining content translation quality.

2 Methodology

Following [Duquenne et al.](#page-4-0) [\(2023a\)](#page-4-0), we first preprocess the data by segmenting the speech signal into plausible segments using a Voice Activity Detector model, followed by language identification of each segment, and then subsequently encode each speech segment into a multilingual embedding space introduced by [Duquenne et al.](#page-4-1) [\(2023c\)](#page-4-1). Once all segments are encoded, we then perform a k-nearest-neighbor search in the embedding space using the FAISS library [\(Douze et al.,](#page-4-2) [2024\)](#page-4-2) which allows for efficient search at scale. We then calculate a margin-based score over each candidate neighbor which has been shown to yield alignments which have a similar meaning [\(Artetxe and](#page-4-3) [Schwenk,](#page-4-3) [2019a\)](#page-4-3). In this work, we use the ratio margin R , defined as:

$$
R(x,y) = \frac{\cos(x,y)}{\sum\limits_{z \in NN_k(x)} \frac{\cos(x,z)}{2k} + \sum\limits_{z \in NN_k(y)} \frac{\cos(y,z)}{2k}}
$$

where x and y are the source and target sentences, $cos(x, y)$ is the cosine similarity of x and y in the multilingual embedding space, and $NN_k(x)$ denotes the k nearest neighbors of x .

Since the multilingual speech encoders are trained with a teacher-student method using a textbased encoder as the teacher, this forces the speech representation to focus on semantics, ignoring other elements of speech such as the prosody [\(Duquenne](#page-4-0) [et al.,](#page-4-0) [2023a\)](#page-4-0). Therefore, the k-nearest-neighbors retrieved in the embedding space above are likely based on semantic characteristics only. However, it is possible that from the neighbors retrieved, that the prosodic characteristics of some may better preserve the source than others.

In order to capture such signals, in comparison to previous approaches such as [Duquenne et al.](#page-4-0) [\(2023a\)](#page-4-0) which choose a neighbor based on semantics only, we instead choose a neighbor which maximises a blend of both semantics: R , with another term related to the prosodic similarity of the speech segments: P. We define our expressive scoring function E as follows:

$$
E(x, y) = \alpha \cdot R(x, y) + (1 - \alpha) \cdot P(x, y)
$$

where α controls the trade-off between semantic accuracy (R) and prosody preservation (P) .

Instead of modifying the nearest neighbor search, a more straight-forward strategy could involve filtering existing speech alignments such as SPEECH-MATRIX [\(Duquenne et al.,](#page-4-0) [2023a\)](#page-4-0) with a prosodic scoring function. However, the volume of the resulting dataset would likely be drastically reduced as no explicit prosody-preservation goal was enforced to begin with during the nearest neighbor search (i.e. an expressively and semantically aligned neighbor would be chosen by chance).

3 Experiment

In order to validate the effectiveness of expressive alignments, we perform a controlled experiment where we align a set of raw monolingual speech data using both a semantic-only scoring function, and our expressive scoring function. We then subsequently train two expressive S2ST systems on the resulting alignments from both approaches, and evaluate the results.

Benchmark datasets. We evaluate our models on the FLEURS, MEXPRESSO, MDRAL benchmark datasets. FLEURS [\(Conneau et al.,](#page-4-4) [2023\)](#page-4-4) in a partially n-way speech dataset with alignments in 102 languages, which is an extension of the text-based FLoRes-101 dataset [\(Goyal et al.,](#page-4-5) [2022\)](#page-4-5). MEXPRESSO and MDRAL [\(Seamless Com](#page-5-0)[munication et al.,](#page-5-0) [2023\)](#page-5-0) contain English speech aligned in five different target languages: Spanish, French, Italian, German, and Chinese (Mandarin). MDRAL is an extension of the Dialogues Reenacted Across Languages (DRAL) Corpus [\(Ward](#page-5-3) [et al.,](#page-5-3) [2023\)](#page-5-3), which contains aligned fragments from spontaneous conversations. MEXPRESSO on the other hand contains scripted sentences which are then recorded in various expressive styles (e.g. happy, sad, confused etc).

Evaluation metrics. In order to ensure that the expressive translation systems maintain content translation quality, we measure ASR-BLEU by transcribing the generated target audio using a publicly available Whisper model^{[2](#page-1-0)}, and then subsequently calculate a BLEU score using Sacre- $BLEU^3$ $BLEU^3$.

For expressivity-based metrics we follow [Seam](#page-5-0)[less Communication et al.](#page-5-0) [\(2023\)](#page-5-0). Firstly, we measure speaker style similarity by encoding the source

² [https://huggingface.co/openai/](https://huggingface.co/openai/whisper-large-v2)

[whisper-large-v2](https://huggingface.co/openai/whisper-large-v2) 3 13a tokenizer

and target audios using a pre-trained WavLM-based speaker style encoder [\(Chen et al.,](#page-4-6) [2022\)](#page-4-6), and then calculate the speaker style similarity as the cosine between source and target [\(Le et al.,](#page-5-4) [2023\)](#page-5-4). As rhythmic patterns in speech are an important aspect of expressivity, we also calculate both the speech rate and pause alignment. The rate-of-speech is calculated by measuring the number of syllables spoken per second. We then report the Spearman correlation of the number of syllables spoken be-tween the source and target speech^{[4](#page-2-0)}. In addition to the speech rate, the pause alignment captures how well silences are preserved between the source and translation. Silence was measured using the Silero VAD system [\(Silero Team,](#page-5-5) [2021\)](#page-5-5). For both speech rate and pause alignment metrics, we used the Rhythmic Toolkit implementation [\(Seamless](#page-5-0) [Communication et al.,](#page-5-0) [2023\)](#page-5-0).

Prosodic scoring function. We experiment with various prosodic scoring functions P based on different potential prosodic speech signals. w2v-BERT [\(Chung et al.,](#page-4-7) [2021\)](#page-4-7) is a large-scale crosslingual speech representation, and various sublayers of w2v-BERT have been shown to contain strong prosodic characteristics [\(Seamless Commu](#page-5-0)[nication et al.,](#page-5-0) [2023\)](#page-5-0). We explore each sub-layer of w2v-BERT for prosodic signals. PRETSSEL [\(Seamless Communication et al.,](#page-5-0) [2023\)](#page-5-0) is an expressive unit-to-speech generator which contains an expressive speech encoder capable of generating expressivity embeddings from the source and target speech. SONAR Expressive [\(Duquenne et al.,](#page-4-8) [2023b\)](#page-4-8) is a zero-shot expressive speech-to-speech translation system. Similar to PRETSSEL, it contains an expressivity encoder which has an explicit knowledge of prosodic speech signals. Lastly, AU-TOPCP [\(Seamless Communication et al.,](#page-5-0) [2023\)](#page-5-0) is a neural-based model which is trained to predict Prosodic Consistency Protocol (PCP) scores [\(Huang et al.,](#page-5-6) [2023\)](#page-5-6) for a pair of speech inputs. PCP scores are measured on a likert scale between 1 and 4 (with 4 being the highest possible score), and have been found to correlate with human judgements. For the embedding-based prosodic signals, $P = cos(x, y)$, while for AUTOPCP we use a unit normalized PCP score for each pair of source and target speech segment.

In order to determine the optimal prosodic scoring function, we measure the percentage of incorrect alignments when attempting to re-align the

4 For Chinese Mandarin, characters are treated as syllables

MEXPRESSO development set using our expressive scoring function E. As MEXPRESSO contains sentences repeated in different styles, this makes it a good choice of benchmark as we can not solely rely on a semantic-based algorithm. In other words, if each sentence in the benchmark contained a different meaning, we would not need any prosodic signal in order to attempt to re-align the dataset.

We performed a grid-search over all possibilities of both P and α^5 α^5 , yielding AUTOPCP as the best overall prosodic signal. In-depth results for each prosodic signal are reported in [Appendix E.](#page-9-0) As w2v-BERT can also contain important semantic information, we also experimented using this as the source of semantic signal (R) , but it did not improve results.

Aligning audio. Following the selection of prosodic scoring function, we then began the alignment procedure. Starting from a large publicly available source of diverse raw audio data totalling approximately 3.9 million hours [\(Seamless Com](#page-5-0)[munication et al.,](#page-5-0) [2023\)](#page-5-0), we applied audio segmentation using the Silero VAD model [\(Silero Team,](#page-5-5) [2021\)](#page-5-5), and then subsequently applied language identification on each segment [\(Seamless Com](#page-5-0)[munication et al.,](#page-5-0) [2023\)](#page-5-0). Each resulting segment was then encoded into the semantic-based multilingual embedding space [\(Duquenne et al.,](#page-4-1) [2023c\)](#page-4-1), before we performed k-nearest neighbor search 6 and then applied our expressive scoring function. For semantic-only alignments we set $\alpha = 1$ (i.e. no contribution from the prosodic scoring function). In total we aligned 11.9k hours of English source speech in five languages: Spanish, French, German, Italian, and Chinese (Mandarin). The re-sulting dataset and metadata can be found online^{[7](#page-2-3)}, along with the code^{[8](#page-2-4)}.

Model training. Following the alignment of source audios, we then trained two multilingual expressive S2ST models with the same architecture as SeamlessExpressive [\(Seamless Communi](#page-5-0)[cation et al.,](#page-5-0) [2023\)](#page-5-0) on each alignment type separately (semantic and expressive). Additionally as the difference between a semantic and expressive

⁵We explored possible values for α in $\{\frac{k}{10} \mid k \in [0, 10]\}$ 6 We set k=16 for all experiments

⁷ [https://github.com/facebookresearch/seamless_](https://github.com/facebookresearch/seamless_communication/blob/main/docs/expressive/seamless_align_expressive_README.md) [communication/blob/main/docs/expressive/](https://github.com/facebookresearch/seamless_communication/blob/main/docs/expressive/seamless_align_expressive_README.md) [seamless_align_expressive_README.md](https://github.com/facebookresearch/seamless_communication/blob/main/docs/expressive/seamless_align_expressive_README.md)

⁸ [https://github.com/facebookresearch/stopes/](https://github.com/facebookresearch/stopes/blob/main/website/docs/pipelines/expressive_alignments.md) [blob/main/website/docs/pipelines/expressive_](https://github.com/facebookresearch/stopes/blob/main/website/docs/pipelines/expressive_alignments.md) [alignments.md](https://github.com/facebookresearch/stopes/blob/main/website/docs/pipelines/expressive_alignments.md)

Direction	Corpus	Alignment	ASR-BLEU \uparrow	Vocal Style Similarity \uparrow	Speech Rate \uparrow	Pause \uparrow
$xxx \rightarrow eng$	Fleurs	Expressive Semantic	29.46 29.60	0.37 0.36	0.39 0.33	0.46 0.45
	mDRAL	Expressive Semantic	35.28 36.57	0.25 0.25	0.35 0.20	0.25 0.23
	mExpresso	Expressive Semantic	31.27 30.39	0.25 0.25	0.39 0.30	0.34 0.30
$eng \rightarrow$ xxx	Fleurs	Expressive Semantic	18.11 17.35	0.22 0.22	0.52 0.53	0.31 0.32
	mDRAL	Expressive Semantic	22.88 24.22	0.30 0.31	0.33 0.16	0.20 0.19
	mExpresso	Expressive Semantic	20.96 20.33	0.24 0.24	0.44 0.34	0.38 0.38

Table 1: Model evaluation results (averaged over all languages) for both $xxx\rightarrow eng$ and eng \rightarrow xxx directions.

alignment is a choice of neighbor in a shared knn space, the number of resulting alignments from both approaches is the same, which also controls for performance differences due to dataset size. We ensured that none of the aligned data was previously seen in any pre-training. The architecture and hyperparameters of both models was identical, and each was trained for the same number of steps. More in-depth details can be found in [Appendix C.](#page-6-0)

4 Results

Model evaluation results are shown in [Table 1.](#page-3-0) On average, both the speech rate and pause alignment expressive metrics improve in relation to the model trained on semantic alignments only. On average we see a 43% relative improvement in speech rate, while still maintaining content translation quality (-0.08 BLEU on average). In particular, on the MDRAL benchmark we see relative speech rate improvements of 106% (0.16 \rightarrow 0.33) on eng \rightarrow xxx, and 75% (0.20 \rightarrow 0.35) on xxx \rightarrow eng. For content translation quality, in three instances we see that on average the model trained on expressive alignments even outperforms the semantic model. For example, we see a +0.88 BLEU improvement on MEX-PRESSO (xxx→eng). We observed that there was very little difference between both models on vocal style similarity. However, this is perhaps partially due to the fact that the PRETSSEL unit-to-speech component of the S2ST model which mostly affects this metric was pre-trained beforehand [\(Seamless](#page-5-0) [Communication et al.,](#page-5-0) [2023\)](#page-5-0), suggesting this component had previously converged. A more detailed breakdown showing expanded results per language for each dataset, along with supplemental ASR-COMET scores can be seen in [Appendix D.](#page-7-0)

5 Related Work

Research on aligning texts was initially based on document meta-information [\(Resnik,](#page-5-7) [1999\)](#page-5-7), crosslingual document retrieval [\(Munteanu and Marcu,](#page-5-8) [2005\)](#page-5-8) or machine translation and information retrieval [\(Abdul-Rauf and Schwenk,](#page-4-9) [2009;](#page-4-9) [Bouamor](#page-4-10) [and Sajjad,](#page-4-10) [2018\)](#page-4-10). However, many current alignment techniques are based on a similarity measure in a multilingual embedding space [\(Artetxe and](#page-4-11) [Schwenk,](#page-4-11) [2019b;](#page-4-11) [Feng et al.,](#page-4-12) [2020\)](#page-4-12). One such technique for aligning text was introduced by [Schwenk](#page-5-9) [et al.](#page-5-9) [\(2019\)](#page-5-9), which uses a margin-based measure of similarity [\(Artetxe and Schwenk,](#page-4-3) [2019a\)](#page-4-3) in order to determine the candidacy of potential alignments. This technique was then extended to the speech modality [\(Duquenne et al.,](#page-4-13) [2021\)](#page-4-13), where it was used to create high-quality speech-to-speech aligned data such as SPEECHMATRIX [\(Duquenne](#page-4-0) [et al.,](#page-4-0) [2023a\)](#page-4-0) which covers seventeen languages, and SEAMLESSALIGN [\(Seamless Communication](#page-5-0) [et al.,](#page-5-0) [2023\)](#page-5-0) which provides a total of 585k hours in 95 languages. Both corpora consider only semantics during the alignment procedure.

6 Conclusion

We introduce the first speech-to-speech alignment method which can align speech not only in terms of semantics, but also the expressivity. We validate our method by performing large-scale speech-tospeech alignment, and train an expressive S2ST model on the resulting data. Our results show that expressive alignments can further boost the capability of expressive models, where such speechto-speech data is extremely scarce, and in some instances even improve content translation quality.

7 limitations

We highlight three limitations of our work. The first is that we only expressively align English with five other high-resource languages: Spanish, French, Italian, German, and Chinese (Mandarin). Given the scarcity of such expressive speech data, it would be hugely beneficial for the community to cover more mid- and perhaps even some low-resource languages, as these are at risk of underexposure. However, as our expressive benchmark dataset used to tune our alignment algorithm (MEXPRESSO) currently only supports these high-resource languages, this would require additional annotation efforts. Secondly, we experiment with two popular multilingual embedding spaces from [Duquenne et al.](#page-4-1) [\(2023c\)](#page-4-1) and [Chung et al.](#page-4-7) [\(2021\)](#page-4-7). However, there are other representations which would be interesting to explore which may help retrieve even better k-nearest-neighbors, and perhaps include some with even more prosidic preservation of the source speech, resulting in higher quality expressive alignments. Finally, we rely on automatic-based metrics in order to evaluate our models. However these do not give us a perfect assessment, and a human-based evaluation would yield more accurate results.

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A Number of source hours per benchmark dataset

B Hours of automatically aligned audio per language

C Hyperparameters for S2ST system

D Detailed model evaluation results

D.1 xxx→eng direction

D.2 eng→xxx direction

E Detailed alignment error rate on MEXPRESSO using expressive scoring function (E)

