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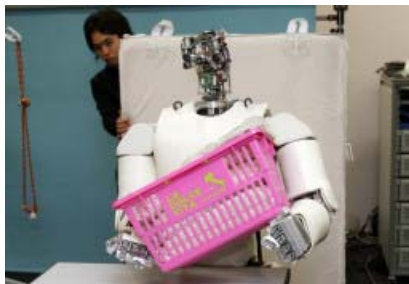
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ITALIAN LEADS NEW ROBOT PROJECT

Highly aware machines to use two hands like humans

(ANSA) - Naples, February 4 - An Italian is leading an European Union research program which aims to develop robots able to helps the elderly and the disabled in the home.

The project faces two key challenges: making robots that can use two hands together, like humans do, and making them 'aware' enough to stop what they're doing if a human being

gets in the way.

"We want to develop a system of two-handed manipulation, equipped with sensors that make the robot conscious of its surroundings and the people in its working space," said Naples University Professor Bruno Siciliano, who is to coordinate the research.

The 6.3-million-euro DEXMART programme involves research partners in France, Germany and Britain. DEXMART stands for 'DEXterous and autonomous dual-arm/hand robotic manipulation with sMART sensory-motor skills'.

Siciliano explained during a presentation of the project that the problem of using two hands together, the way humans do when they pick up a heavy plant pot, is a particularly sticky one.

At present robots can use a single arm with reasonable accuracy and flexibility. But until now they have fallen short of the technological complexity and artificial intelligence needed for a two-handed approach.

This is the key to making robots that can function usefully not only in factories, as they do already, but also in everyday human environments, where things are unpredictable.

But if they are to help and not hinder in the home, robots must also be aware of what is going on around them, Siciliano explained.

For this robots need a sophisticated system of sensors enabling them to respond to unforeseen events, such as the presence of a person in an area where they are about to perform an action.

One of the prototypes that Siciliano's team has already produced, named Justine, is flexible and precise enough in its actions to make a cup of tea and pick things up off the floor. Over the next four years the DEXMART team will try to make Justine's hands and movements more and more like human ones.

Siciliano said he was confident that within 15 years robots will be able to help us at work and in the home, doing many household chores.

Presenting the new project at Naples University on Monday, he underlined the level of expertise in his team at the university.

He said that being chosen to lead the project was an important accolade for a city which often got bad press.

"Our city is always excessive, in good things and bad. In this case we can proudly say that we are leaders in a field which borders on science fiction," he said.

Photo: a humanoid robot designed in Japan performs an experiment at Tokyo University in March 2007.

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