Detecting Autism, Emotions and Social Signals Using AdaBoost

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Abstract

In the area of speech technology, tasks that involve the extraction of non-linguistic information have been receiving more attention recently. The Computational Paralinguistics Challenge (ComParE 2013) sought to develop techniques to efficiently detect a number of paralinguistic events, including the detection of non-linguistic events (laughter and fillers) in speech recordings as well as categorizing whole (albeit short) recordings by speaker emotion, conflict or the presence of development disorders (autism). We treated these sub-challenges as general classification tasks and applied the general-purpose machine learning meta-algorithm, AdaBoost.MH, and its recently proposed variant, AdaBoost.MH.BA, to them. The results show that these new algorithms convincingly outperform baseline SVM scores.

Index Terms: speech recognition, speech technology, emotion detection, machine learning, AdaBoost.MH, AdaBoost.MH.BA

1. Introduction

Though speech recognition is undoubtedly a machine learning task, over the decades researchers developed dedicated tools for it, most notably the hidden Markov model (HMM) [1]. This is mainly because speech recognition is special in the sense that it has to handle a sequence of samples jointly, rather than simply classifying separate samples. Hence, general-purpose machine learning algorithms are rarely used for speech recognition, and when they are, they are mostly applied only for phoneme classification. In this task, in a standard frame-based framework each small portion of the speech signal has to be identified as one of the possible phonemes in the given language. A second reason is that, compared to usual learning tasks, speech recognition databases have somewhat specific database characteristics from a machine learning perspective. First, there are a moderate number of classes (e.g. phonemes distinguished in the given language). Second, there are usually few features: the very popular MFCC + Δ + ΔΔ feature set (containing the mel-frequency spectral coefficients, their first and second order derivatives) consists of only 39 features for a frame. This set can be expanded with some other attributes; still, the size of the feature set rarely exceeds a few hundred. But most importantly, a typical speech recognition database contains at least several hours of recordings (nowadays hundreds of hours is typical), which leads to literally millions of training examples. This set-up is quite uncommon in machine learning, though, and most classification algorithms are not prepared to work with such a huge amount of data. It is more typical to have significantly fewer training examples that are described by a large feature vector, and which belong to one of the few classes, like in [2]. Such tasks arise in speech technology as well, though; e.g. in speaker recognition [3] and emotion detection [4, 5].

The sub-challenges of the Computational Paralinguistics Challenge (ComParE 2013) [6], in general, are closer to this latter scenario, as the task is to classify the whole recording. In the Conflict Sub-Challenge, group discussions have to be evaluated by seeking to retrieve conflicts. In the Emotion Sub-Challenge, the emotional state of the speaker has to be identified, along with its arousal and valence (being either low or high). In the Autism Sub-Challenge, the type of pathology of the speaker has to be determined. In each of these sub-challenges, besides the wave files, a pre-extracted 6373-long feature vector per recording was also available, but the number of training samples was relatively small.

The Social Signals Sub-Challenge is quite different from the other three. In it, non-linguistic events (fillers and laughter) need to be distinguished from speech and normal pause (collectively called garbage) for each 10ms-long sample (frame) of a recording. Unlike the former sub-challenges, the feature set is also smaller, there being only 141 attributes for each frame.

We viewed these tasks as classification tasks, but the Conflict Sub-Challenge was more like a regression [7] task as we are expected to match a given numeric score instead of a class label, the latter being determined by the signum of the score. Despite getting fairly good results in finding the class label, in the end we did not participate in this sub-challenge.

With the partial exception of the Social Signals Sub-Challenge, we treated these tasks as pure classification tasks, and applied a general-purpose machine learning algorithm to classify the samples. We focused our investigations on the feature vector given by the organizers, and did not perform any kind of feature extraction from the waveforms themselves. The method applied was AdaBoost, which is an iterative learning meta-algorithm. It combines a large number of base learners, their number being equal to the number of training iterations. This algorithm was reported to perform well on various classification tasks [8, 9].

2. Learning with AdaBoost

For the formal description of the machine learning task, let $X = (x_1, \ldots, x_n)$ be the $n \times d$ observation matrix, where $x_i^{(j)}$ are the elements of the $d$-dimensional observation vectors $x_i \in \mathbb{R}^d$. We are also given a label matrix $Y = (y_1, \ldots, y_n)$ of dimension $n \times K$ where $y_i \in \{+1, -1\}^K$. In a multi-class classification one and only one of the elements of $y_i$ is +1, whereas in a multi-label (or multi-task) classification $y_i$ is arbitrary, as $x_i$ can belong to several classes at the same time. In the former case we denote the index of the correct class by $\ell(x_i)$.

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The goal of the ADABOOST .MH algorithm \cite{10} (see Figure 1) is to return a vector-valued classifier \( \mathbf{f}(x) \) by minimizing its upper bound (the exponential margin loss).

\[
\alpha_t = \frac{1}{2} \log \left( 1 + \gamma_t \right)
\]

The simplest scalar base learner used in practice is the decision stump, a one-decision two-leaf decision tree having the form

\[
\varphi_{j,b}(x) = \begin{cases} 
1 & \text{if } x_j \geq b, \\
-1 & \text{otherwise},
\end{cases}
\]

Figure 2: The pseudocode of the bandit-accelerated version of ADABOOST.MH.BA algorithm.

The optimal coefficient is then

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where \( j \) is the index of a feature and \( b \) is the decision threshold.

Although boosting decision stumps often yields satisfactory results, the state-of-the-art performance of ADABOOST is usually achieved by using decision trees as base learners, parametrized by their number of leaves \( N \). We also tested a recently proposed base learner that seems to outperform boosted trees on large benchmarks \cite{11}. This learner optimizes products of simple base learners of the form \( \varphi_j(x) = \alpha \prod_{r=1}^{m} v_j(x) \), where the vote vectors \( v_j \) are multiplied element-wise. The base learner is parametrized by the number of terms \( m \).

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where \( j \) is the index of a feature and \( b \) is the decision threshold.
But the idea behind AdaBoost.MH.BA cannot be applied directly with decision trees or decision products, since it is hard to find a suitable partitioning of the space of trees or products, due to the size of this space. Thus, we followed the setup proposed in [14] in which trees and products are modeled as sequences of decisions over the smaller partitioning used for stumps.

We employed an open source implementation – the tool called multiboost [15] available at http://multiboost.org. –, where this bandit-based approach is implemented along with the base learners mentioned above.

3. The Steps of Training

To get an optimal performance from a machine learning method on a specific learning task, we need to fine-tune the meta-parameters of the algorithm. Fortunately, the training data did not need preprocessing (e.g. feature selection or normalization), as AdaBoost was reported to be quite insensitive to the training parameters [12]. Hence, after handling some technical issues (removing all labels except one from the datasets and renaming the remaining one “class”) we only had to find the best base learner; we tried decision stumps, products and decision trees.

3.1. Social Signals Sub-Challenge

This sub-challenge was quite similar to a standard speech recognition phoneme identification task, since it required frame-level classification with a relatively low number of frame-level features, suggesting that techniques developed for speech recognition could be successfully applied here as well. One such idea was that instead of classifying just one frame at a time, we should concatenate the features of the actual, the n left and the n right neighbouring frames into one large observation vector, while keeping the original class label. We made experiments with n = 0, n = 4 and n = 8. Since the “garbage” class was overrepresented, we reduced the number of examples of this class by sub-sampling: we retained just 85034 examples from this class in the train set (the same number as for the “filler” class). We did not downsize the development nor the test sets.

We performed only one training with n = 0, n = 4 and n = 8 for the decision stumps, products and decision trees, because our preliminary tests showed that, probably due to the large number of samples, there was only a slight difference in performance among models trained in the same way.

3.2. Emotion and Autism Sub-Challenges

Before training we had to remove the unnecessary examples from the emotion database (i.e. occurrences of class “other” for the Category task, and occurrences of class “unknown” for the Arousal and Valence tasks). In the Autism Sub-Challenge we performed two-step classification. First the typicality task was evaluated, then the examples considered atypical (class label “aty”) were sorted into one of the three autistic category. 100 trainings were performed for each class with each base learner (decision stumps, products and decision trees). Then all the models were evaluated, stopping every 100 iterations, and the label of each example was determined by majority voting. The optimal iteration number was chosen as the one with the highest UAR score. Although this process does not result in the highest scores possible on the development set, we consider it a good method for obtaining stable training parameters.

Lastly, we chose the best-performing base learner and trained 100 models of it with the previously-obtained maximal iteration count on the joined train and development sets, and this model was submitted to the challenge.

4. Results

After describing the techniques used for training, we will now present the results obtained. The results will be expressed in terms of accuracy score (Acc.) and Unweighted Average Recall (UAR), for the Social Signals Sub-Challenge we will also present the UAAUC score, which is the mean of the Area Under

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Acc.</th>
<th>UAR</th>
<th>UAAUC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n = 0</td>
<td>74.63%</td>
<td>76.60%</td>
<td>89.94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n = 4</td>
<td>76.12%</td>
<td>78.61%</td>
<td>91.03%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n = 8</td>
<td>70.83%</td>
<td>81.23%</td>
<td>92.91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SVM (baseline)</td>
<td>70.00%</td>
<td>73.80%</td>
<td>87.60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Results for the Social Signals Sub-Challenge.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Set</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Acc.</th>
<th>UAR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arousal</td>
<td>dev</td>
<td>stumps</td>
<td>85.17%</td>
<td>83.43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>test</td>
<td>stumps</td>
<td>73.49%</td>
<td>73.87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valence</td>
<td>dev</td>
<td>stumps</td>
<td>80.77%</td>
<td>80.77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>test</td>
<td>stumps</td>
<td>63.26%</td>
<td>63.26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Results for the Emotion Sub-Challenge.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Set</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Acc.</th>
<th>UAR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Typicality</td>
<td>dev</td>
<td>stumps</td>
<td>93.41%</td>
<td>93.69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>test</td>
<td>stumps</td>
<td>93.16%</td>
<td>93.15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagnosis</td>
<td>dev</td>
<td>stumps</td>
<td>76.92%</td>
<td>57.18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>test</td>
<td>stumps</td>
<td>60.07%</td>
<td>60.10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Results for the Autism sub-challenge.
Curve (AUC) value for the classes “filler” and “laughter”. Besides the baseline Support Vector Machines (SVM) [16] score, we will give the scores for all three base learners got by voting on the development set, and the score got for the test set of the base learner which proved to be the best on the development set. From the scores obtained for the Social Signals Sub-Challenge (see Table 1), it can be seen that the baseline SVM result was exceeded in the \( n = 0 \) case. But using the feature vectors of the neighbouring frames helps improve the classification even more: the UAAUC score of 94.26% for the case \( n = 8 \) and tree base learners is much higher than the baseline score of 87.60%. On the test set we achieved 89.70% for UAAUC, which is clearly superior to the SVM score of 83.30%.

The accuracy and UAR scores obtained for the Emotion sub-challenge (see Table 2) tell us that all base learners were able to outperform baseline SVM on all three tasks, except arousal on the test set. It is a bit surprising, that decision stumps proved to be the best, which may be due to the small number of examples. On the Autism sub-challenge (see Table 3) the results are acceptable; the reason for not being able to match the score of SVM on the test set is probably that, due to the relatively big size of development set, we failed to determine the optimal iteration number.

5. Using multiboost for Feature Selection

Since the AdaBoost.MH.BA algorithm gradually learns the usefulness of the features during the training process, it can be used for feature selection by examining how frequently it chose a particular feature during training. Next, we will examine the feature set from just this viewpoint.

5.1. Social Signals Sub-Challenge

In this challenge there were 141 attributes, growing to 1269 and 2397 for the \( n = 4 \) and \( n = 8 \) cases, respectively. Figure 3 shows how the frequency of use varied for each (original) attribute and relative frame index for \( n = 4 \). It is quite apparent that only a few features were frequently used, but it happened irrespective of the frame index. Among the 14 most frequently used features were all but one of those related to pcm_logenergy (8 attributes in total, the exception being the first derivative), the first MFCC coefficient, its mean and standard deviation, the means of its first and second order derivatives (5 attributes), and pcm_zcr, pcm_mean. Our findings for the \( n = 8 \) case were practically identical. This supports our hypothesis that for filler and laughter detection, we need mainly gross information about the spectral content of the current portion of speech and the fine spectral details (described, for example, by the remaining MFCC components) are less important.

Another observation is that for a given attribute the more distant frames were investigated more frequently than the closer ones (e.g. the features belonging to the earliest frame were used 20% more than the ones belonging to the middle frame for \( n = 4 \), and 30% more for \( n = 8 \)). The reason for this is probably that the features already include some information about the neighbouring frames in the form of mean and standard deviation values on a 9-frame long sliding window; hence the feature vector positioned at 4 frames before the actual frame also contains information about the 8th preceding frame, while the values of the inner frames are half redundant.

5.2. Emotion and Autism Sub-Challenge

Figure 4 shows the distribution of attribute use frequency for the five tasks belonging to these two Sub-Challenges (note that the frequencies are sorted separately for each curve). Although the shape of the curves is practically identical, there is almost no overlap in the most frequently used attributes for the emotion sub-challenge (tasks emotion, arousal and valence). But there are a lot of common ones in the least used attributes: taking the 123 least important attributes for all three tasks, the list consists of only 175 separate features, 81 of them being practically ignored in all three tasks, most of them being some kind of minimum segment length (“minSegLen”).

In the Autism Sub-Challenge, the 123-123 least used attributes take up only 132 separate items altogether. The most frequently used common attributes include percentile1.0 of audSpec_Rfilt_sma 4, 5, 6, 20 and 21, and lpcs of mfcc_sma 4 and 5.

6. Conclusions

In the Computational Paralinguistics Challenge 2013, various tasks were set, where the goal was to retrieve paralinguistic information from speech recordings. Treating three sub-challenges as pure machine learning tasks, we applied AdaBoost.MH.BA to them. We outperformed the baseline SVM in almost every case, and in the Social Signals Sub-Challenge our results were excellent. Finally, we analyzed the feature set provided, based on the trained models.
7. References


