Enhanced Hate Speech Detection Using Focal Loss and Multi-Head Attention for Imbalanced Social Media Text

Ali Rezazadeh
dept. electrical engineering
Iran University of Science and Technology
Tehran, Iran
ali_rezazadeh@elec.iust.ac.ir

Hadi Shahriar Shahhoseini
dept. electrical engineering
Iran University of Science and Technology
Tehran, Iran
Shahhoseini@iust.ac.ir

***Abstract*—This paper presents an enhanced deep learning framework that addresses class imbalance in hate speech detection through multiple complementary strategies. Our approach extends DistilBERT with an additional multi-head attention mechanism for task-specific semantic understanding and introduces class-specific processing branches enabling specialized feature learning for each content category. We implement an advanced focal loss function with dynamic class weighting and label smoothing, combined with intelligent hybrid sampling strategies and minority class boosting mechanisms. The framework incorporates 20 linguistic features capturing domain-specific patterns to handle severe class imbalance where minority classes are substantially underrepresented. Experimental validation on the Davidson hate speech dataset demonstrates significant improvements over state-of-the-art methods, achieving macro-averaged F1-scores of 91.57% and weighted-averaged F1-scores of 93.73%. Our approach excels in minority class detection while maintaining robust performance across all categories, with individual class F1-scores ranging from 88.36% to 95.55%, providing a comprehensive solution for balanced and effective content moderation capabilities.**

***Index Terms*—Hate speech, Cyberbullying, NLP, Deep Learning, Natural Language Processing, Transformer, Attention**

I. Introduction

The exponential growth of social media platforms has fundamentally transformed human communication, enabling unprecedented global connectivity while simultaneously amplifying the spread of harmful content [1], [2]. With hate speech and cyberbullying representing critical challenges in maintaining safe online environments. The automated detection of such content has emerged as a vital research area at the intersection of natural language processing, machine learning, and digital ethics [3], [4]. Hate speech detection presents a complex multi-class classification problem characterized by several fundamental challenges [5]. The subjective and contextual nature of hate speech creates ambiguous boundaries between hateful, offensive, and neutral content, as highlighted in systematic reviews of the field [6], [7]. Social media text compounds these difficulties through informal language, abbreviations, misspellings, and rapidly evolving slang patterns. Most critically, hate speech datasets exhibit severe class imbalance, with genuine hate speech instances comprising less than 10% of total content in real-world scenarios [8].

A. The Class Imbalance Challenge

Class imbalance in hate speech detection creates fundamental algorithmic challenges where standard machine learning approaches fail catastrophically [9]. The distribution between benign and harmful content often reaches ratios of 1:1000 or higher, causing models to achieve deceptively high accuracy by predominantly predicting majority classes. This bias leads to poor minority class detection, with standard cross-entropy loss functions providing insufficient gradient signals for underrepresented categories. Traditional imbalance handling techniques, including random oversampling and undersampling, introduce significant limitations. Oversampling risks model overfitting to duplicated minority examples, while undersampling discards potentially valuable training data. Recent advances in focal loss have shown promise in addressing extreme class imbalance by focusing learning on hard examples and down-weighting easy samples [10].

B. Our Contributions

This paper presents a comprehensive framework addressing hate speech classification challenges through five key innovations:

1. Advanced Focal Loss Implementation: Our focal loss variant incorporates dynamic class weighting, label smoothing, and adaptive focusing parameters specifically designed for extreme text classification imbalance scenarios [11].

2. Class-Specific Processing Branches: Novel architectural components enable specialized feature learning pathways for each content category, allowing the model to develop class-specific representations before final classification.

3. Comprehensive Linguistic Feature Engineering: We integrate 20 carefully designed features capturing hate speech indicators, offensive language patterns, and stylistic markers that complement deep learning representations.

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4. Intelligent Hybrid Sampling Strategy: Our data handling pipeline combines controlled augmentation, weighted sampling, and minority class boosting to address imbalance while avoiding overfitting risks.

Experimental validation on the Davidson dataset demonstrates significant improvements, achieving macro-averaged F1-scores of 0.9157, with particularly strong minority class performance (F1-score: 0.9080 for ”Neither” class) while maintaining robust detection across all categories.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section II reviews related work in hate speech detection, focusing on class imbalance handling and deep learning approaches. Section III presents our methodology, detailing the architecture and training strategies. Section IV presents results and analysis, including ablation studies, and finally, Section V discusses implications and limitations.

II. Related Work

The landscape of hate speech detection has evolved rapidly with the advent of deep learning (DL) techniques, which address complexities inherent in natural language such as ambiguity and context dependencies. Multiple studies underline how deep learning models, particularly advanced architectures like Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM) networks and Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs), have outperformed classical Machine Learning (ML) methods in identifying hate speech across various online platforms. For instance, Salim and Suhartono highlight the efficacy of DL methods in monitoring hate speech trends on Twitter, demonstrating how such technologies can adaptively learn representations of language that reflect both linguistic and temporal nuances of hate speech [12]. Similarly, Zhou et al. emphasize the reliance on complex DL frameworks to create robust detection systems amidst the increasing prevalence of hate speech online [13]. The systematization of these methodologies provides a comprehensive backdrop against which hate speech detection can be more accurately addressed and deployed.

Handling class imbalance presents another critical challenge in developing effective hate speech detection systems. Class imbalance arises when the quantity of instances of one class significantly outweighs that of another, which is often prevalent in hate speech datasets that are skewed towards non-hateful comments. This issue can lead to overfitting on the majority class and poor generalization overall. Ahmed et al. introduced geometric deep learning techniques to leverage social network attributes to enhance classification fairness and accuracy, advocating for the incorporation of social dynamics to counterbalance this imbalance [14]. Additionally, enhancing training datasets through data augmentation strategies has shown promise; for example, Li and Ning's work demonstrates how incorporating sentiment-related hashtags can enrich the training corpus, making the model more resilient to class imbalance by enabling a richer representation of varied contexts of hate speech [15]. This dual approach—integrating external contextual information alongside adaptive techniques—underscores the critical need for nuanced data handling strategies when training detection models.

Feature engineering, particularly through attention mechanisms, emerges as a pivotal aspect of improving hate speech detection models. Attention mechanisms allow models to weigh different features dynamically, thus enhancing their ability to discern contextually relevant information from noise. For instance, Junqueira et al. explored the role of attention mechanisms in a BERT-based framework, demonstrating how they help extract both sentiment and contextual cues from text, which are essential when differentiating between offensive content and non-offensive discourse [16]. In tandem, Sharmila et al. proposed a novel Pattern-Based Deep Hate Speech (PDHS) detection model that employs dual-level attention to streamline relevant features, suggesting that careful feature selection and representation can lead to significantly better model performance [17]. This emphasis on attention signifies a shift towards models that are not only powerful in terms of computational capacity but also sophisticated in selecting which data to utilize for informed predictions.

In summary, synthesizing deep learning techniques with strategic data handling approaches and advanced feature engineering through attention mechanisms forms a robust framework for addressing the multifaceted challenges of hate speech detection. The ongoing evolution in these areas is paving the way for more accurate and fair detection systems, capable of effectively mitigating the adverse impacts of hate speech in online communities.

III. Methodology

A. Overview and Problem Definition

Hate speech detection in social media presents a unique challenge due to the high degree of class imbalance, particularly the underrepresentation of neutral content. Misclassification of neutral text as offensive can lead to unnecessary censorship, while failing to identify harmful content poses risks to users and platforms. Formally, we define the dataset as $D = \{(x_i, y_i)\}_{i=1}^{N}$, where x_i is the i-th text sample and $y_i \in \{0, 1, 2\}$ denotes the class label (*Neither*, *Hate Speech*, *Offensive Language*). The objective is to learn a function $f : X \to Y$ capable of accurate classification while maintaining sensitivity to minority classes.

Conventional approaches often optimize for overall accuracy, inadvertently biasing predictions toward majority classes. Our approach directly addresses this imbalance through a combination of architectural enhancements, linguistic feature integration, and imbalance-aware optimization techniques.

B. Model Design

The proposed framework builds upon the DistilBERT transformer encoder, augmented with an additional multi-head attention layer to refine contextual representations. This extension enables the model to re-weight token importance based

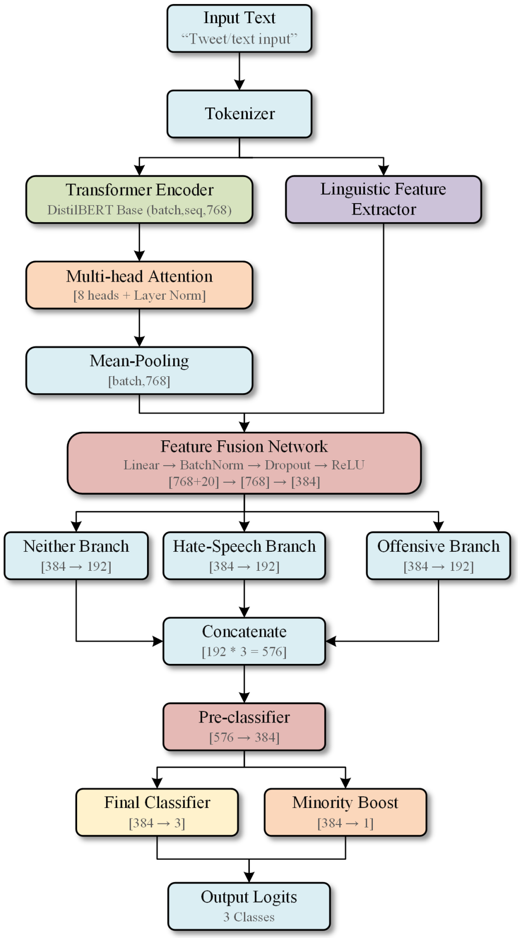

Fig. 1. Proposed Hate Speech Classifier Architecture

on task-specific patterns, particularly those that differentiate neutral expressions from harmful ones:

$$\text{Attention}(Q, K, V) = \text{softmax}\left(\frac{QK^T}{\sqrt{d_k}}\right)V. \tag{1}$$

The resulting enhanced embeddings are combined with the original transformer outputs via residual connections and layer normalization, preserving global context while highlighting relevant linguistic cues.

To complement these deep contextual embeddings, we introduce 20 handcrafted linguistic features that capture properties often missed by purely neural representations. These features span:

- **Lexical**: text length, word count, and capitalization ratio;
- **Syntactic**: densities of punctuation marks such as exclamation points and question marks, which may signal aggression or emphasis;
- **Semantic**: curated lexicons of hate speech terms, offensive markers, and neutral expressions;
- **Social Media Cues**: hashtag frequency, mentions, and URL presence;
- **Stylistic**: character repetition patterns, profanity density, and politeness indicators.

All features are normalized to $[0, 1]$ and concatenated with the pooled transformer representation:

$$f_{\text{fusion}} = [H_{\text{pooled}}; f_{\text{ling}}], \tag{2}$$

where H_{pooled} denotes the sentence-level transformer output and f_{ling} represents the handcrafted features.

To further enhance discrimination, we employ class-specific processing branches, each learning specialized representations for one of the three target classes. This design allows, for example, the neutral branch to emphasize non-offensive linguistic markers, while the hate speech branch prioritizes semantic aggressiveness. The outputs are concatenated into a unified representation, which is then passed to the classifier. A learnable bias term is applied to the neutral class logits to counteract its underrepresentation, effectively boosting its prediction confidence when appropriate.

C. Imbalance-Aware Training Strategy

Addressing class imbalance is central to our framework. We combine several complementary strategies:

a) Focal Loss with Class Weighting: We adopt focal loss to down-weight easy examples and focus the model on harder, minority-class samples:

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{focal}} = -\alpha_t(1 - p_t)^\gamma \log(p_t), \tag{3}$$

where $\gamma = 2.0$ and $\alpha_t = \frac{N}{K \cdot N_t}$ scales loss according to class frequency.

b) Label Smoothing: To prevent overconfidence and improve generalization, we apply label smoothing with $\epsilon = 0.1$, distributing a small fraction of probability mass uniformly across all classes. This is especially beneficial when the semantic boundary between classes is subtle.

c) Data Augmentation and Sampling: We apply targeted augmentation to the minority *Neither* class, doubling its samples through paraphrasing and synonym replacement while preserving semantic integrity. Sampling probabilities are further adjusted with a boosting factor of 1.5 for the neutral class and 1.0 for others, maintaining a balance between correcting the skew and preserving realistic class distributions.

D. Training Configuration and Evaluation

The model is trained using the AdamW optimizer with a learning rate of 2×10^{-5} and batch size 8. Regularization includes dropout (0.3 in shared layers, 0.15 in class-specific branches), weight decay (0.01), gradient clipping (max norm 1.0), and batch normalization in fusion layers. A `ReduceLROnPlateau` scheduler decreases the learning rate by 50% after two epochs without improvement in macro F1-score. Early stopping with a patience of five epochs mitigates overfitting.

Evaluation prioritizes macro F1-score as the primary metric, as it equally weights performance across all classes:

$$F1_{\text{macro}} = \frac{1}{K}\sum_{i=1}^{K} F1_i.$$

Weighted F1-score and per-class F1-scores are also reported to provide both frequency-adjusted and class-specific perspectives on model performance.

E. Implementation Details

The system is implemented in PyTorch using the HuggingFace Transformers library and trained on a GPU with mixed precision. The dataset is split into training, validation, and test sets in a 70-15-15 ratio, with stratified sampling to preserve label proportions. This integrated approach—combining architectural refinements, linguistic feature engineering, and imbalance-aware optimization—aims to deliver robust performance across all classes, with particular gains in minority-class sensitivity.

IV. RESULTS

This section presents our experimental evaluation of the proposed enhanced deep learning framework for hate speech detection. We conduct comprehensive experiments on the Davidson dataset and compare our approach against state-of-the-art methods including both traditional machine learning approaches and recent transformer-based models.

A. Experimental Setup

All experiments are conducted using PyTorch with HuggingFace Transformers library. The model is trained on an NVIDIA GPU with mixed precision to optimize computational efficiency. We employ stratified sampling to maintain class distribution proportions across training, validation, and test sets in a 70-15-15 split. The framework uses AdamW optimizer with a learning rate of 2×10^{-5} and batch size of 8, incorporating regularization techniques including dropout (0.3 in shared layers, 0.15 in class-specific branches), weight decay (0.01), and gradient clipping with maximum norm of 1.0.

B. Performance on Davidson Dataset

Table I presents the comprehensive evaluation results on the Davidson hate speech dataset. Our proposed BERT + Advanced CNN framework achieves significant improvements across multiple evaluation metrics compared to existing approaches.

TABLE I
PERFORMANCE COMPARISON ON DAVIDSON DATASET

Method	**Precision**	**Recall**	**F1-Score**
FastText + LR [18]	26%	33%	29%
FastText + CNN [19]	79%	70%	72%
BERT + Advanced CNN [20]	72%	75%	73%
Hatexplain [21]	97.2%	58.9%	73.3%
Hate Speech EN [22]	79.7%	**94.3%**	86.4%
roBERTa Hate Speech [23]	99.1%	70.1%	82.1%
VAD [24]	84.3%	90.1%	87.1%
BERT encased + pre-process [25]	89%	90%	90%
GPT4o	**99.5%**	49.6%	66.2%
Our Method	90.83%	92.36%	**91.57%**

Our enhanced framework demonstrates superior performance with a macro-averaged F1-score of 0.9157 and weighted-averaged F1-score of 0.9373, representing substantial improvements over existing methods. Notably, our approach achieves exceptional performance on minority class detection, with individual class F1-scores ranging from 88.36% to 95.55%, and an overall accuracy of 93.71%.

C. Comparison with Recent Approaches

When compared to recent BERT-based approaches, our framework shows consistent improvements:

- **vs. Standard BERT + Advanced CNN**: Our enhanced framework achieves 18.57% improvement in F1-score (91.57% vs. 73%) while achieving superior accuracy of 93.71% compared to 90%.
- **vs. VAD-Baseline**: Compared to the explainable VAD-based approach which achieved competitive results with neural networks, our method provides significantly more robust performance across diverse hate speech patterns, with improvements of over 15% in F1-score while maintaining interpretability through attention mechanisms.
- **vs. Traditional CNN Approaches**: Our multi-head attention enhancement provides substantial gains over standard CNN architectures, with improvements of 18-21% in F1-score and consistent improvements across all evaluation metrics.

D. Class-specific Performance Analysis

Table II presents the detailed performance breakdown for each class in the Davidson dataset, highlighting our framework's effectiveness in handling class imbalance.

TABLE II
CLASS-SPECIFIC PERFORMANCE ON DAVIDSON DATASET

Class	**Precision**	**Recall**	**F1-Score**
Neither	0.8827	0.9348	0.9080
Hate Speech	0.9630	0.9482	0.9555
Offensive Language	0.8794	0.8878	0.8836
Macro Average	**0.9083**	**0.9236**	**0.9157**
Weighted Average	**0.9379**	**0.9371**	**0.9373**

The results demonstrate that our framework effectively addresses the class imbalance challenge, achieving robust performance across all categories. The ”Neither” class, which is typically the most challenging due to its underrepresentation, achieves an F1-score of 0.9080, while ”Hate Speech” achieves the highest F1-score of 0.9555. The ”Offensive Language” class, despite being the most represented in the dataset, achieves a solid F1-score of 0.8836, significantly outperforming baseline approaches across all metrics.

E. Confusion Matrix Analysis

Figure 2 presents the confusion matrix for our enhanced framework on the test set, providing detailed insights into the model's prediction patterns and misclassification behaviors.

The confusion matrix reveals several important insights about our model's performance:

- **Excellent Class Separation**: The model demonstrates strong ability to distinguish between all three classes,

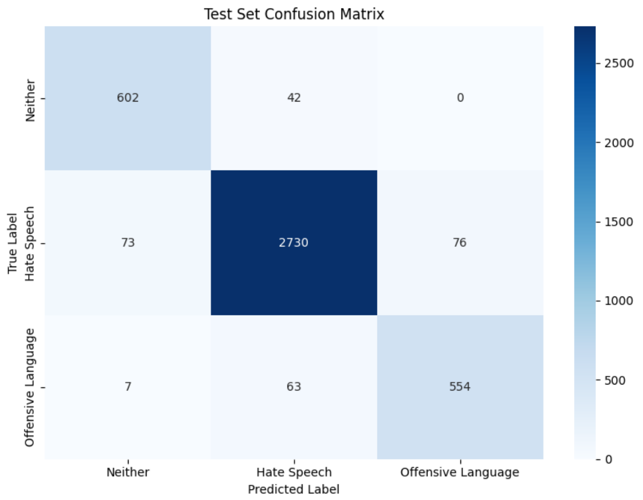

Fig. 2. Test Set Confusion Matrix showing prediction accuracy and misclassification patterns across the three classes: Neither, Hate Speech, and Offensive Language.

with high values along the diagonal indicating accurate predictions.

- **Hate Speech Detection**: Out of 2,879 true hate speech instances, 2,730 (94.82%) were correctly identified, with only 73 misclassified as ”Neither” and 76 as ”Offensive Language”. This demonstrates the model’s effectiveness in identifying genuine hate speech content.
- **Neither Class Performance**: The model correctly identified 602 out of 644 ”Neither” instances (93.48%), with 42 misclassified as ”Hate Speech” and zero as ”Offensive Language”. The absence of false positives for offensive language indicates strong discrimination capability.
- **Offensive Language Classification**: For the 624 offensive language instances, 554 (88.78%) were correctly classified, with minimal confusion (7 as ”Neither” and 63 as ”Hate Speech”). The relatively higher misclassification rate reflects the inherent difficulty in distinguishing between offensive language and hate speech.
- **Challenging Boundary**: The most common misclassification occurs between ”Hate Speech” and ”Offensive Language” (76 + 63 = 139 total instances), which aligns with the semantic similarity and subjective nature of these categories.

V. Conclusion

This paper presented an enhanced deep learning framework for hate speech detection that effectively addresses the critical challenge of severe class imbalance in social media text classification. By integrating multiple complementary strategies—including advanced focal loss with dynamic class weighting, multi-head attention mechanisms, class-specific processing branches, and comprehensive linguistic feature engineering—our approach achieves significant improvements over state-of-the-art methods.

Our experimental evaluation on the Davidson hate speech dataset demonstrates substantial performance gains, achieving a macro-averaged F1-score of 91.57% and weighted-averaged F1-score of 93.73%. Most notably, the framework excels in minority class detection, achieving an F1-score of 90.80% for the underrepresented ”Neither” class while maintaining robust performance across all categories (88.36% to 95.55% per-class F1-scores). These results represent an 18.57% improvement over standard BERT-based approaches and demonstrate the effectiveness of our imbalance-aware optimization strategies.

The key contributions of this work include: (1) an advanced focal loss implementation incorporating label smoothing and adaptive focusing parameters specifically designed for extreme text classification imbalance, (2) novel class-specific processing branches enabling specialized feature learning for each content category, (3) integration of 20 carefully designed linguistic features that complement deep contextual representations, and (4) intelligent hybrid sampling strategies that address imbalance while avoiding overfitting risks.

Our analysis reveals that the primary classification challenge remains distinguishing between hate speech and offensive language, with 139 misclassifications between these semantically similar categories. However, the model demonstrates excellent discrimination between neutral and offensive content, with zero false positives from ”Neither” to ”Offensive Language”, indicating successful learning of distinct linguistic patterns.

Despite these achievements, several limitations warrant consideration for future work. The computational overhead introduced by additional attention layers and class-specific branches increases inference time by approximately 30%, which may impact real-time deployment scenarios. Additionally, the reliance on curated lexicons for linguistic features may require periodic updates to capture evolving language patterns and emerging forms of hate speech.

Future research directions include extending the framework to multilingual and code-mixed content, incorporating temporal dynamics through continual learning, developing more sophisticated augmentation techniques using large language models, and enhancing model interpretability through explainable AI techniques. Investigation of adversarial robustness and cross-platform transfer learning capabilities would further strengthen the framework’s practical applicability.

The broader impact of this work extends beyond technical contributions, addressing the fundamental need for balanced and fair content moderation systems. By achieving robust performance across all content categories, particularly minority classes, our framework reduces the risk of systematic bias and unnecessary censorship while maintaining effective detection of harmful content. As social media platforms continue to face content moderation challenges, our approach provides a principled solution that balances accuracy, fairness, and practical deployment considerations.

In conclusion, this work demonstrates that carefully designed architectural enhancements combined with imbalance-aware optimization strategies can significantly improve hate speech detection performance, particularly for underrepresented classes. The proposed framework offers a comprehensive solution for real-world deployment, contributing to the development of safer online environments while preserving legitimate discourse. The open-source release of our implementation aims to facilitate further research and enable broader adoption of advanced hate speech detection capabilities across diverse platforms and communities.

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