

# TEMPORAL MODELING MATTERS: A NOVEL TEMPORAL EMOTIONAL MODELING APPROACH FOR SPEECH EMOTION RECOGNITION

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## ABSTRACT

Speech emotion recognition (SER) plays a vital role in improving the interactions between humans and machines by inferring human emotion and affective states from speech signals. Whereas recent works primarily focus on mining spatiotemporal information from hand-crafted features, we explore how to model the temporal patterns of speech emotions from dynamic temporal scales. Towards that goal, we introduce a novel temporal emotional modeling approach for SER, termed **Temporal-aware bi-direction Multi-scale Network (TIM-Net)**, which learns multi-scale contextual affective representations from various time scales. Specifically, TIM-Net first employs temporal-aware blocks to learn temporal affective representation, then integrates complementary information from the past and the future to enrich contextual representations, and finally fuses multiple time scale features for better adaptation to the emotional variation. Extensive experimental results on six benchmark SER datasets demonstrate the superior performance of TIM-Net, gaining 2.34% and 2.61% improvements of the average UAR and WAR over the second-best on each corpus. The source code is available at [https://github.com/Jiaxin-Ye/TIM-Net\\_SER](https://github.com/Jiaxin-Ye/TIM-Net_SER).

**Index Terms**— Speech emotion recognition, bi-direction, multi-scale, dynamic fusion, temporal modeling

## 1. INTRODUCTION

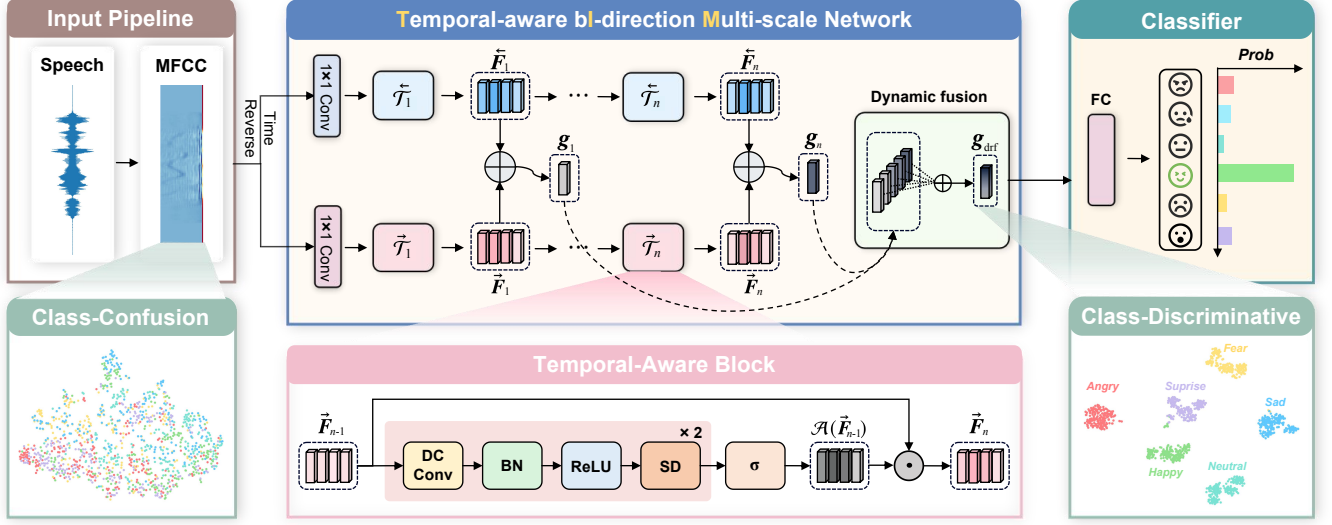
Speech emotion recognition (SER) is to automatically recognize human emotion and affective states from speech signals, enabling machines to communicate with humans emotionally [1]. It becomes increasingly important with the development of the human-computer interaction technique.

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The key challenge in SER is *how to model emotional representations from speech signals*. Traditional methods [2, 3] focus on the efficient extraction of hand-crafted features, which are fed into conventional machine learning methods, such as Support Vector Machine (SVM). More recent methods based on deep learning techniques aim to learn the class-discriminative features in an end-to-end manner, which employ various architectures such as Convolutional Neural Network (CNN) [4, 5], Recurrent Neural Network (RNN) [6, 7], or the combination of CNN and RNN [8].

In particular, various temporal modeling approaches, such as Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM), Gate Recurrent Unit (GRU), and Temporal Convolution Network (TCN), are widely adopted in SER, aiming to capture dynamic temporal variations of speech signals. For example, Wang *et al.* [7] proposed a dual-level LSTM to harness temporal information from different time-frequency resolutions. Zhong *et al.* [9] used CNN with Bi-GRU and focal loss for learning integrated spatiotemporal features. Rajamani *et al.* [6] presented an attention-based ReLU within GRU to capture long-range interactions among the features. Zhao *et al.* [8] leveraged fully CNN and Bi-LSTM to learn the spatiotemporal features. However, these methods suffer from the following drawbacks: 1) they lack sufficient capacity to capture long-range dependencies for context modeling, where the capture of the context in speech is crucial for SER since human emotions are usually highly context-dependent; and 2) they do not explore the dynamic receptive field of the model, while learning dynamic instead of maximal ones can improve model generalization ability to unknown data or corpus.

To overcome these limitations in SER, we propose a **Temporal-aware bi-direction Multi-scale Network**, termed **TIM-Net**, which is a novel temporal emotional modeling approach to learn multi-scale contextual affective representations from various time scales. The contributions are three-fold. *First*, we propose a temporal-aware block based on the Dilated Causal Convolution (DC Conv) as a core unit in TIM-Net. The dilated convolution can enlarge and refine the



**Fig. 1.** The framework of the TIM-Net for learning affective features, whose feature extraction part is composed of a bi-direction module and a dynamic fusion module. Note that the forward  $\tilde{\mathcal{T}}_j$  and backward  $\tilde{\mathcal{T}}_j$  are the same structure with different inputs.

receptive field of temporal patterns. The causal convolution combined with dilated convolution can help model relax the assumption of first-order Markov property compared with RNNs [10]. In this way, we can incorporate an  $N$ -order ( $N$  denotes the number of all previous frames) connection into the network to aggregate information from different temporal locations. *Second*, we devise a novel bi-direction architecture integrating complementary information from the past and the future for modeling long-range temporal dependencies. To the best of our knowledge, TIM-Net is the first bi-direction temporal network by focusing on multi-scale fusion in the SER, rather than simply concatenating forward and backward hidden states. *Third*, we design a dynamic fusion module by combining dynamic receptive fields for learning the interdependencies at different temporal scales, so as to improve the model generalizability. Due to the articulation speed and pause time varying significantly across speakers, the speech requires different efficient receptive fields (*i.e.*, the time scale that reflects the affective characteristics) for each low-level feature (*e.g.*, MFCC).

## 2. PROPOSED METHOD

### 2.1. Input Pipeline

To illustrate the temporal modeling capacity of our TIM-Net, we use the most commonly-used Mel-Frequency Cepstral Coefficients (MFCCs) features [11] as the inputs to TIM-Net. We first set the sampling rate to the raw sampling rate of each corpus and apply framing operation and Hamming window to each speech signal with 50-ms frame length and 12.5-ms shift. Then, the speech signal undergoes a mel-scale triangular filter bank analysis after performing a 2,048-point fast

Fourier transform to each frame. Finally, each frame of the MFCCs is processed by the discrete cosine transformation, where the first 39 coefficients are extracted to obtain the low-frequency envelope and high-frequency details.

### 2.2. Temporal-aware Bi-direction Multi-scale Network

We propose a novel temporal emotional modeling approach called TIM-Net, which learns long-range emotional dependencies from the forward and backward directions and captures multi-scale features at frame-level. Fig. 1 presents the detailed network architecture of TIM-Net. For learning multi-scale representations with long-range dependencies, the TIM-Net consists of  $n$  Temporal-Aware Blocks (TABs) in both forward and backward directions with different temporal receptive fields. Next, we detail each component.

**Temporal-aware block.** We design the TAB to capture dependencies between different frames and automatically select the affective frames, serving as a core unit of TIM-Net. As shown in Fig. 1,  $\mathcal{T}$  denotes a TAB, each of which consists of two sub-blocks and a sigmoid function  $\sigma(\cdot)$  to learn temporal attention maps  $\mathcal{A}$ , so as to produce the temporal-aware feature  $\tilde{F}$  by element-wise production of the input and  $\mathcal{A}$ . For the two identical sub-blocks of the  $j$ -th TAB  $\mathcal{T}_j$ , each sub-block starts by adding a DC Conv with the exponentially increasing dilated rate  $2^{j-1}$  and causal constraint. The dilated convolution enlarges and refines the receptive field and the causal constraint ensures that the future information is not leaked to the past. The DC Conv is then followed by a batch normalization, a ReLU function, and a spatial dropout.

**Bi-direction temporal modeling.** To integrate complementary information from the past and the future for the judgment of emotion polarity and modeling long-range tempo-

**Table 1.** The overall results of different SOTA methods on 6 SER benchmark corpora. Evaluation measures are UAR(%) / WAR(%). The ‘-’ implies the lack of this measure, and the best results are highlighted in bold.

Model	Year	CASIA	Model	Year	EMODB	Model	Year	EMOVO
DT-SVM [12]	2019	85.08 / 85.08	TSP+INCA [2]	2021	89.47 / 90.09	RM+CNN [4]	2021	68.93 / 68.93
TLFMRF [13]	2020	85.83 / 85.83	GM-TCN [14]	2022	90.48 / 91.39	SVM [15]	2021	73.30 / 73.30
GM-TCN [14]	2022	90.17 / 90.17	Light-SERNet [16]	2022	94.15 / 94.21	TSP+INCA [2]	2021	79.08 / 79.08
CPAC [17]	2022	92.75 / 92.75	CPAC [17]	2022	94.22 / 94.95	CPAC [17]	2022	85.40 / 85.40
<b>TIM-Net</b>	<b>2023</b>	<b>94.67 / 94.67</b>	<b>TIM-Net</b>	<b>2023</b>	<b>95.17 / 95.70</b>	<b>TIM-Net</b>	<b>2023</b>	<b>92.00 / 92.00</b>
Model	Year	IEMOCAP	Model	Year	RAVDESS	Model	Year	SAVEE
MHA+DRN [18]	2019	67.40 / -	INCA+TS-CNN [3]	2021	- / 85.00	3D CNN [19]	2019	- / 81.05
CNN+Bi-GRU [9]	2020	71.72 / 70.39	TSP+INCA [2]	2021	87.43 / 87.43	TSP+INCA [2]	2021	83.38 / 84.79
SPU+MSCNN [11]	2021	68.40 / 66.60	GM-TCN [14]	2022	87.64 / 87.35	CPAC [17]	2022	83.69 / 85.63
Light-SERNet [16]	2022	70.76 / 70.23	CPAC [17]	2022	88.41 / 89.03	GM-TCN [14]	2022	83.88 / 86.02
<b>TIM-Net</b>	<b>2023</b>	<b>72.50 / 71.65</b>	<b>TIM-Net</b>	<b>2023</b>	<b>91.93 / 92.08</b>	<b>TIM-Net</b>	<b>2023</b>	<b>86.07 / 87.71</b>

ral dependencies, we devise a novel bi-direction architecture based on the multi-scale features as shown in Fig. 1. Formally, for the  $\vec{T}_{j+1}$  in the forward direction with the input  $\vec{F}_j$  from previous TAB, the output  $\vec{F}_{j+1}$  is given by Eq. (1):

$$\vec{F}_{j+1} = \mathcal{A}(\vec{F}_j) \odot \vec{F}_j, \quad (1)$$

$$\vec{F}_{j+1} = \mathcal{A}(\vec{F}_j) \odot \vec{F}_j, \quad (2)$$

where  $\vec{F}_0$  comes from the output of the first  $1 \times 1$  Conv layer and the backward direction can be defined similarly in Eq. (2).

We then combine bidirectional semantic dependencies and compact global contextual representation at utterance level to perceive context as follows:

$$\mathbf{g}_j = \mathcal{G}(\vec{F}_j + \vec{F}_j), \quad (3)$$

where the global temporal pooling operation  $\mathcal{G}$  takes an average over temporal dimension, yielding a representation vector for one specific receptive field from the  $j$ -th TAB.

**Multi-scale dynamic fusion.** Furthermore, since the pronunciation habits (*e.g.*, speed or pause time) vary from speaker to speaker, the utterances have the characteristics of temporal scale variation. SER benefits from taking dynamic temporal receptive fields into consideration. We design the dynamic fusion module to adaptively process speech input at different scales, aiming to determine suitable temporal scale for the current input during the training phase. We adopt a weighted summation operation to fuse the features with Dynamic Receptive Fields (DRF) fusion weights  $\mathbf{w}_{\text{drf}}$  from different TABs. The DRF fusion is defined as follows:

$$\mathbf{g}_{\text{drf}} = \sum_{j=1}^n w_j \mathbf{g}_j, \quad (4)$$

where  $\mathbf{w}_{\text{drf}} = [w_1, w_2, \dots, w_n]^T$  are trainable parameters.

Once the emotional representation  $\mathbf{w}_{\text{drf}}$  is generated with great discriminability, we can simply use one fully-connected layer with the softmax function for emotion classification.

### 3. EXPERIMENTS

#### 3.1. Experimental Setup

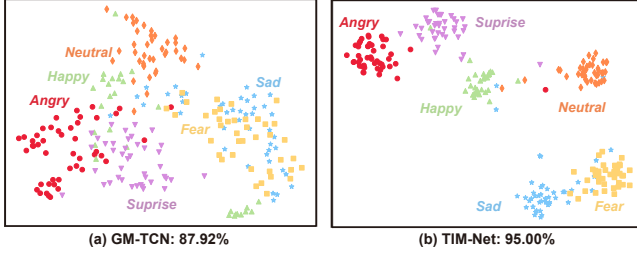
**Datasets.** To demonstrate the effectiveness of the proposed TIM-Net, we compare TIM-Net with State-Of-The-Art (SOTA) methods on 6 benchmark SER corpora, including Chinese corpus CASIA [20], German corpus EMOVB [21], Italian corpus EMOVO [22], English corpora IEMOCAP [23], RAVDESS [24], and SAVEE [25].

**Implementation details.** In the experiments, 39-dimensional MFCCs are extracted from the Librosa toolbox [26]. The cross-entropy criterion is used as the objective function. Adam algorithm is adopted to optimize the model with an initial learning rate  $\alpha = 0.001$ , and a batch size of 64. To avoid over-fitting during the training phase, we implement label smoothing with factor 0.1 as a form of regularization. For the  $j$ -th TAB  $\mathcal{T}_j$ , there are 39 kernels of size 2 in Conv layers, the dropout rate is 0.1, and the dilated rate is  $2^{j-1}$ . To guarantee that the maximal receptive field covers the input sequences, we set the number of TAB  $n$  in both directions to 10 for IEMOCAP and 8 for others. For fair comparisons with the SOTA approaches, we perform 10-fold cross-validation (CV) as well as previous works [16, 17, 18] in experiments.

**Evaluation metrics.** Due to the class imbalance, we use two widely-used metrics, Weighted Average Recall (WAR) (*i.e.*, accuracy) and Unweighted Average Recall (UAR), to evaluate the performance of each method. WAR uses the class probabilities to balance the recall metric of different classes while UAR treats each class equally.

#### 3.2. Results and Analysis

**Comparison with SOTA methods.** Table 1 presents the overall results on 6 benchmark datasets, showing that our method significantly and consistently outperforms all these



**Fig. 2.** t-SNE visualizations of features learned from SOTA method GM-TCN and TIM-Net. The score denotes WAR.

**Table 2.** UAR and WAR on the cross-corpus SER task with different methods. All values are the average  $\pm$  std of 10 runs, each of which consists of 20 cross-corpus cases.

Method	TCN	CAAM [17]	TIM-Net
<b>UAR<sub>avg</sub> <math>\pm</math> std</b>	24.47 $\pm$ 0.38	32.37 $\pm$ 0.27	<b>34.49 <math>\pm</math> 0.43</b>
<b>WAR<sub>avg</sub> <math>\pm</math> std</b>	24.39 $\pm$ 0.42	33.65 $\pm$ 0.41	<b>35.66 <math>\pm</math> 0.32</b>

compared methods by a large margin. Remarkably, our approach gains 2.34% and 2.61% improvements of the average UAR and WAR scores than the second-best on each corpus.

**Visualization of learned affective representation.** To investigate the impact of TIM-Net on representation learning, we visualize the representations learned by TIM-Net and GM-TCN [14] through the t-SNE technique [27] in Fig. 2. For a fair comparison, we first use the same 8:2 hold-out validation on CASIA corpus for the two methods, and visualize the representations of the same test data after an identical training phase. Although GM-TCN also focuses on multi-scale and temporal modeling, Fig. 2(a) shows heavy overlapping between *Fear* and *Sad* or *Angry* and *Surprise*. In contrast, Fig. 2(b) shows that the different representations are clustered with clear classification boundaries. The results confirm that the TIM-Net provides more class-discriminative representations to support superior performance by capturing intra- and inter-dependencies at different temporal scales.

**Domain generalization analysis.** Due to various languages and speakers, the SER corpora, although sharing the same emotion, have considerably significant domain shifts. The generalization of the model to unseen domain/corpus is critically important for SER. Inspired by the domain-adaptation study in CAAM [17], we likewise validate the generalizability of TIM-Net on the cross-corpus SER task, following the same experimental setting as CAAM except that TIM-Net does not have access to the target domain. Specifically, we likewise choose 5 emotional classes for a fair comparison, *i.e.*, *angry*, *fear*, *happy*, *neutral*, and *sad*, shared among these 5 corpora (except for IEMOCAP, which has only 4 emotions). These 5 corpora form 20 cross-corpus combinations. And we report the average UAR and WAR, and their standard deviation from 10 random runs for each task in Table 2.

**Table 3.** The average performance of ablation studies and TIM-Net under 10-fold CV on all six corpora. The ‘w/o’ means removing the component from TIM-Net

Method	TCN	w/o BD	w/o MS	w/o DF	TIM-Net
<b>UAR<sub>avg</sub></b>	80.45	84.92	85.45	84.85	<b>88.76</b>
<b>WAR<sub>avg</sub></b>	80.56	85.32	85.82	85.24	<b>88.97</b>

The performance of TCN over different corpora is close to random guessing with odds equal to 25%, and TIM-Net has a significant improvement over TCN. Surprisingly, TIM-Net outperforms CAAM, one latest task-specific domain-adaptation method. The results suggest that our TIM-Net is effective in modeling emotion with strong generalizability.

### 3.3. Ablation Study

We conduct ablation studies on all the corpus datasets, including the following variations of TIM-Net: **TCN**: the TIM-Net is replaced with TCN; **w/o BD**: the backward TABs are removed while keeping the forward TABs; **w/o MS**: the multi-scale fusion is removed and  $g_n$  is used as  $g_{drf}$  corresponding to max-scale receptive field; **w/o DF**: the average fusion is used to confirm the advantages of dynamic fusion. The results of ablation studies are shown in Table 3. We have the following observations.

*First*, all components contribute positively to the overall performance. *Second*, our method achieves 8.31% and 8.41% performance gains in UAR and WAR over TCN that also utilizes DC Conv. Since the inability of TCN to capture contextual multi-scale features, capturing intra- and inter-dependencies at different temporal scales is critical to SER. *Third*, when removing the backward TABs or multi-scale strategy, the results substantially drop due to the weaker capacity to model temporal dependencies and perceive the sentimental features with different scales. *Finally*, TIM-Net without dynamic fusion performs worse than TIM-Net, which verifies the benefits of deploying dynamic fusion to adjust the model adaptively.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we propose a novel temporal emotional modeling approach, termed TIM-Net, to learn multi-scale contextual affective representations from various time scales. TIM-Net can capture long-range temporal dependency through bi-direction temporal modeling and fuse multi-scale information dynamically for better adaptation to temporal scale variation. Our experimental results indicate that learning representation from the context information with dynamic temporal scales is crucial for the SER task. The ablation studies, visualizations, and domain generalization analysis further confirm the advantages of TIM-Net.



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