

Project Report

Predicting Injury Severity in Road Accidents: A Real-Time Classification Approach

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1 Application Area and Goals (0.5 pages)

Modern intelligent and connected vehicle systems, such as the mandatory European eCall service, are designed to automatically transmit crucial accident data to emergency centers when a crash occurs. These transmissions typically include location, timestamp, and the number of passengers but lack information on the severity of injuries: a critical shortcoming for emergency services, as this information is vital for prioritizing rescue efforts and optimizing medical response times.

To address this gap, we focus on leveraging historical accident data provided by the French National Interministerial Observatory for Road Safety (ONISR). This organization maintains the official “Bulletins d’Analyse des Accidents Corporels de la Circulation” (BAAC), a national database that records all injury accidents on public roads in France. The dataset captures detailed multi-table information covering the circumstances of each accident (Caractéristiques), the location and infrastructure (Lieux), the vehicles involved (Véhicules), and the individual users (Usagers). These data entries include rich contextual variables such as road category, lighting and weather conditions, vehicle type, and the user’s role and behavior at the time of the accident.

Each accident record specifies the injury outcome (grav) for every participant, coded as uninjured, lightly injured, hospitalized, or killed. Although the ONISR database provides this information retrospectively (sometimes up to 30 days after the event) it represents a uniquely valuable source for supervised learning aimed at approximating these outcomes in real time.

The goal of this project is to develop a machine learning classifier capable of predicting injury severity immediately after an accident, based solely on the information that would realistically be available to emergency responders or vehicle telematics systems at the moment of impact. Such a model can significantly enhance first-responder coordination by providing an automated injury risk assessment, enabling faster triage and more efficient resource allocation.

2 Structure and Size of the Data Set

Our analysis uses the “Annual Road Traffic Injury Databases” from 2019–2023, provided by ONISR. The data is supplied in four files per year (characteristics, locations, users, and vehicles) and includes features such as road conditions, weather, and user information. Recognizing the one-to-many relationship where each accident involves multiple participants, we defined our unit of analysis at the **individual level**. The **users** table serves as the base for our dataset.

Directly after merging the accident characteristics, locations, users, and vehicle tables, and prior to any further preprocessing steps, the consolidated dataset comprised a total of 619,817 records and 71 columns. Processing the yearly data reveals an annual volume ranging between approximately 105,000 and 133,000 records per year. The final consolidated dataset was then partitioned into a training and validation set of **493,214 samples** (covering 2019–2022) and a test set of **125,505 samples** (covering 2023).

The features we have selected are listed below. They are categorized into Original Features (retained from raw data) and Engineered Features (calculated to model complex relationships). The final dataset consists of **57 features**, comprising **23 original columns** retained from the raw data and **34 engineered features** calculated to model complex relationships.

Time context

{time_of_day, hour_sin/cos, day_of_week_sin/cos, month_sin/cos, day_of_year_sin/cos}

Captures seasonality and daily patterns using cyclical sine/cosine transformations for time units. Also includes `time_of_day`, which groups hours into broader categories (e.g., Night, Rush Hour).

Geospatial location

{latitude, longitude}

GPS coordinates (WGS84) utilized for spatial analysis and mapping.

Environment & Roadway

{lighting_ordinal, weather_ordinal, location, infrastructure, accident_situation, horizontal_alignment, reserved_lane_present, speed_limit, road_complexity_index, surface_quality_indicator}

Combines physical site attributes (urban/rural status, alignment, infrastructure type) with risk-based ordinals for lighting and weather. Engineered indices quantify road complexity (0–10 scale) and surface quality.

Crash dynamics & Maneuvers

{type_of_collision, initial_point_of_impact, fixed_obstacle_struck, mobile_obstacle_struck, main_maneuver_before_accident, impact_score, impact_delta}

Describes the collision mechanics, including maneuvers, impact points, and obstacles. Derived metrics like `impact_score` and `impact_delta` quantify the relative risk based on vehicle size differences.

Vehicle attributes & Involvement

{motor_type, vehicle_category_simplified, vehicle_category_involved_[type]}

Specifies the primary vehicle's type and motorization. Includes binary flags indicating if specific other vehicle types (e.g., heavy trucks, bicycles, buses) were involved in the accident.

Personal attributes

{role, sex, age, age_group, position, pedestrian_location, pedestrian_action}

Covers demographic data (age, sex), the user's role (driver, passenger, pedestrian), seating position, and specific actions or locations for pedestrians at the time of the accident.

Safety equipment usage

{used_belt, used_helmet, used_child_restraint, used_airbag}

Binary variables indicating the use of protective gear (seatbelts, helmets) or the deployment of airbags.

Accident Persona Clustering

{cluster}

A categorical feature derived from unsupervised K-Prototypes clustering. It groups accidents into distinct "personas" (e.g., 0, 1, 2) based on a combination of numerical and categorical attributes to capture complex, non-linear patterns in the data.

Target / Outcome

{injury_target}

The engineered ordinal target variable classifying injury severity into three levels: 0 (Uninjured), 1 (Lightly Injured), and 2 (Hospitalized or Dead).

3 Preprocessing

Given the nature of the "Annual Road Traffic Injury Database" as a raw database output provided by ONISR in multiple separate tables with complex many-to-one relationships, extensive preprocessing was required. The pipeline is designed to transform the disjointed raw data into a singular, model-ready tabular representation.

3.1 Data Standardization and Key Generation

The initial step involved normalizing column names to English equivalents. A critical challenge was the inconsistency in user identification across years. Data from 2022 onwards included a distinct `id_user`, whereas data from 2019 and 2020 did not. To ensure a consistent unit of analysis across all years, we implemented a synthetic key generation strategy. For older data, we generated a unique identifier by combining the accident ID with a cumulative count of users within that accident (e.g., 2019000001_U1). This ensured that every individual involved in an accident could be uniquely tracked and merged with their respective vehicle and accident characteristics.

3.2 Advanced Data Merging strategies

A user-centric view was adopted for merging, treating each participant as an independent instance. While accident characteristics (weather, time) could be joined directly, the relationship between users, their vehicles, and opposing vehicles required complex logic.

Vehicle Antagonist Resolution

A significant predictor of injury severity is the disparity between the user's vehicle and the "opposing" entity (the antagonist). Since a simple join cannot determine which of the multiple vehicles in an accident caused the injury, we engineered a selection algorithm. We assigned an `impact_score` to vehicle categories based on mass and risk (e.g., HGV Truck = 6, Bicycle = 2). For multi-vehicle accidents, the pipeline identifies the "antagonist" vehicle as the one involved in the same accident with the highest impact score, excluding the user's own vehicle. For pedestrians, the striking vehicle is explicitly

identified. This allows us to calculate an `impact_delta`, representing the structural disadvantage of the user (e.g., a cyclist hit by a truck results in a high negative delta).

Location Deduplication

Contrary to the dataset description, multiple location entries were found for single accident IDs, likely due to first responders logging entries for every intersecting street. To resolve this, we implemented a `completeness_score`. We assigned weights to critical columns (Road Category: 2.0, Speed Limit: 2.0, others: 1.0). For each accident, the location entry with the highest weighted score, indicating the most data-rich description of the scene, was selected, ensuring the model trains on the highest quality data available.

3.3 Handling Missing Values (Imputation Strategy)

We distinguished between "structural missingness" (values that should not exist) and "data quality missingness" (values that are unknown).

- **Structural Missingness:** Pedestrians, by definition, do not have a vehicle category or motor type. For these cases, we explicitly imputed a value of `-1` or `'none'` to indicate "Not Applicable," preventing the model from treating these as missing data.
- **Data Quality Missingness:** For users who *should* have data (e.g., drivers) but lack it, we imputed a value of `0` or `'Unknown'`.
- **Other Vehicle Imputation:** If no opposing vehicle was involved, columns related to the "other" vehicle were set to `-1`. However, if a second vehicle ID existed but its characteristics were missing, we imputed `Unknown` to differentiate this state from single-vehicle accidents.

Finally, rows missing the target variable `injury_severity` were dropped, as they cannot be used for supervised learning.

3.4 Feature Engineering

To capture complex non-linear relationships, we generated 34 new features across four domains.

Temporal Cyclical Features

Raw timestamps are ill-suited for many models due to the discontinuity between 23:59 and 00:00. We decomposed time into cyclical components using Sine and Cosine transformations for hours, days of the week, and months. Additionally, we bucketed hours into a `time_of_day` feature (Night, Morning Rush, Midday, Evening Rush) to assist tree-based models in identifying high-level patterns.

Road Complexity Index

We hypothesized that complex road environments increase accident probability but might decrease severity due to lower speeds. We engineered a `road_complexity_index`, a composite score normalized between 0 and 10. This index aggregates weighted scores from:

- **Intersection Type:** High weights for roundabouts and multi-branch intersections.
- **Road Category:** Higher weights for urban communal ways vs. motorways.
- **Traffic Regime:** Penalties for variable assignment lanes.
- **Lane Count:** Higher complexity for multi-lane roads.

Complementing this, a binary `surface_quality_indicator` was created, set to 1 only if both the pavement condition was normal and the longitudinal profile was flat.

Vehicle and User Attributes

Vehicle categories were simplified from over 30 specific codes into 6 broad classes (Bicycle, Powered 2-3 Wheeler, Light Motor Vehicle, HGV/Truck, Bus/Coach, Other) to reduce dimensionality. For users, we transformed the `year_of_birth` into an `age` feature and further binned it into sociologically relevant `age_groups` (e.g., Child/Teen, Senior). Safety equipment flags (seatbelts, helmets, airbags) were consolidated from three separate columns into binary "Used/Not Used" indicators to resolve data sparsity.

3.5 Feature Selection & Cleaning

Following engineering, the dataset underwent a rigorous cleaning process. Invalid data, such as speed limits exceeding 130 km/h or negative values for age, were filtered out. We removed high-cardinality identifiers (IDs, address strings) and columns with excessive missingness (e.g., `width_central_reservation`) that offered little predictive value. Crucially, the raw target variable `injury_severity` (4 classes) was re-mapped to an ordinal `injury_target` (0: Uninjured, 1: Light Injury, 2: Hospitalized/Dead) to address class imbalance and better reflect the triage needs of first responders. The final dataset consists of 57 refined features ready for the modeling pipeline.

4 Data Mining

4.1 Experimental Setup

We partition the dataset into a training set (2019–2022) and a test set (2023). Our primary evaluation metric is the macro F1-score, chosen to prioritize recall for the critical "severely injured" class without introducing the sensitivity of arbitrary cost matrices.

Instead of using a simple majority-vote baseline, we implemented a domain-specific baseline that relies exclusively on the speed-limit feature to predict accident severity:

$$\hat{y} = \begin{cases} \text{uninjured,} & \text{if speed_limit} \leq 50, \\ \text{injured,} & \text{if speed_limit} < 100, \\ \text{severely injured,} & \text{otherwise.} \end{cases}$$

Given the ordinal nature of the target variable, we also considered weighted Cohen’s kappa. However, considering the high cost of missing a severe injury in an emergency response context, optimizing macro-F1 ensures that the minority class (severe injuries) is not overwhelmed by the majority class (uninjured).

4.2 Model Selection

Initial screening of linear models, decision trees, and boosting algorithms revealed a performance plateau around a macro F1-score of 0.7. We applied Occam’s Razor to select three distinct architectures for optimization, each offering specific theoretical advantages:

- **Ridge Classifier with Under-sampling:** This linear model was selected for its computational efficiency and interpretability. Ridge regularization ($L2$) effectively handles the potential multicollinearity arising from our engineered features (e.g., cyclical time features). We combined this with under-sampling of the majority class to counteract the linear model’s sensitivity to class imbalance.
- **Balanced Random Forest (BRF):** Standard Random Forests often bias towards the majority class. The Balanced Random Forest addresses this by under-sampling the majority class in the bootstrap sample for each tree. This method was chosen to improve recall for the “severely injured” class while maintaining the robustness of an ensemble method.
- **CatBoost:** Gradient boosting often yields state-of-the-art results on tabular data. CatBoost was specifically selected for its native handling of categorical features, which constitute a large portion of our dataset. We utilized the `auto_class_weights = 'Balanced'` parameter to handle imbalance without external sampling strategies.

4.3 Clustering Strategy

To identify distinct “Accident Personas,” we explored four clustering algorithms, each chosen for a specific capability:

- **K-Prototypes:** A hybrid extension of K-Means that handles mixed data types (numerical and categorical) natively. This is critical for our dataset, where features like ‘road category’ or ‘vehicle type’ carry significant semantic weight that cannot be captured by Euclidean distance alone.

- **HDBSCAN:** A density-based algorithm chosen for its ability to detect noise and clusters of varying shapes. Unlike partition-based methods, it does not force every point into a cluster, which is useful for identifying "outlier" accident types.
- **Agglomerative Clustering:** Used with Gower distance to explore hierarchical structures in the mixed dataset, offering a visual way to assess natural groupings via dendrograms.

Cluster Profiling Methodology: To derive meaningful profiles from the clustered dataset, we conducted a structured categorical overrepresentation analysis. For each cluster and each categorical feature, we computed the conditional distribution $P(X = x \mid C = c)$ and compared it to the global distribution $P(X = x)$. A category was considered *cluster-characteristic* if it satisfied the following criteria:

- **Lift filter:** A minimum overrepresentation of $\text{lift}(x, c) = \frac{P(X=x|C=c)}{P(X=x)} > 1.5$.
- **Support filter:** The category must represent more than 3% of observations within the cluster.
- **Dominance filter:** Features were excluded if the same dominant category appeared in all clusters (e.g., "Daylight").

5 Evaluation

5.1 Hyperparameter Tuning

We optimized hyperparameters using macro-F1 as the objective function. For the **Ridge classifier**, a grid search yielded an optimal regularization parameter $\alpha = 2.0$. For the ensemble models, we employed Bayesian Optimization (30 iterations) with stratified 3-fold cross-validation.

The tuning process for the **Balanced Random Forest** revealed that a high model complexity was necessary to capture the nuances of severe accidents. The optimal configuration required a large number of estimators ($n = 400$) and a significant maximum depth ($depth = 18$). Furthermore, we found that disabling replacement in the bootstrap sampling improved diversity among the trees.

In contrast, the optimization for **CatBoost** converged towards parameters that mitigated overfitting. The optimal learning rate was relatively low (0.0194), and the depth was moderate (10). The regularization parameter ($l2_leaf_reg = 0.01$) suggested that the model relied heavily on the natural structure of the categorical splits rather than aggressive weight penalties.

5.2 Classifier Evaluation

We evaluated the models on the held-out test set (2023). This dataset preserves the natural distribution of the problem (47% non-injured, 36% injured, 16% heavily injured). We report class-wise precision, recall, and F1-scores. This granular evaluation is critical

because a high global accuracy could hide a model’s failure to detect severe injuries: the most costly error in our domain.

5.3 Clustering Evaluation

Clustering performance was assessed via Silhouette scores (Table 1). While HDBSCAN and Agglomerative Clustering yielded higher raw scores (> 0.08), deeper inspection revealed they produced degenerate solutions where over 85% (HDBSCAN) or 100% (Agglomerative) of the data collapsed into a single giant cluster. Such partitions offer no analytical value for differentiating accident types. In contrast, K-Prototypes with $k = 5$ produced a more balanced distribution (largest cluster $\approx 39\%$) with clear semantic distinctions, offering the best trade-off between mathematical cohesion and practical interpretability.

Algorithm	Param	Silhouette	Largest Cluster [%]
K-Prototypes	5	0.041	38.8
Agglomerative	3	0.107	100.0
HDBSCAN	10	0.089	85.4

Table 1: Comparison of clustering algorithms (abbreviated).

6 Results

6.1 Identified Accident Personas

The clustering analysis successfully identified five distinct ”accident personas,” summarizing complex categorical patterns. These profiles were derived by analyzing features that showed a statistical lift > 1.5 within each cluster.

Cluster 0: Midday pedestrian-involved accidents with older road users

This cluster captures accidents occurring predominantly around midday in moderate traffic conditions. It is uniquely characterized by a disproportionate involvement of older road users and pedestrians. The accident locations often correlate with semi-urban environments where mixed traffic (pedestrians and vehicles) interacts during daylight hours.

Cluster 1: Night-time accidents with younger adults

This profile describes accidents occurring during the night, marked by significantly reduced visibility and lighting conditions. The demographic analysis reveals a strong overrepresentation of younger adults (18–30 years). The lack of natural light appears to be a compounding risk factor, potentially amplifying the severity of incidents involving less experienced drivers.

Cluster 2: Morning rush hour collisions

Collisions in this cluster are tightly synchronized with the morning peak hours (typically 07:00–09:00). They correlate strongly with high traffic density. The features suggest standard commuting accidents, likely involving rear-end collisions or minor impacts due to congestion, though the involvement of two-wheelers in rush hour traffic remains a severity risk.

Cluster 3: High-speed urban location collisions

This cluster identifies high-frequency accidents occurring in urban settings, particularly at intersections. While the speeds are generally lower than rural accidents, the complexity of the road environment (intersections, crossings) is high. There is a distinct sub-pattern of pedestrian involvement, suggesting these are often vehicle-to-pedestrian conflicts at crossing points.

Cluster 4: Low-speed urban maneuver collisions

Distinct from Cluster 3, these accidents are characterized by low-speed maneuvers in built-up areas, such as parking or turning in narrow streets. The specific "maneuver" features are highly predictive here. While the frequency of these accidents is high, the impact forces are typically lower, often resulting in vehicle damage rather than severe injury, though vulnerable users remain at risk.

Ehrenwörtliche Erklärung

Ich versichere, dass ich die beiliegende Bachelor-, Master-, Seminar-, oder Projektarbeit ohne Hilfe Dritter und ohne Benutzung anderer als der angegebenen Quellen und in der untenstehenden Tabelle angegebenen Hilfsmittel angefertigt und die den benutzten Quellen wörtlich oder inhaltlich entnommenen Stellen als solche kenntlich gemacht habe. Diese Arbeit hat in gleicher oder ähnlicher Form noch keiner Prüfungsbehörde vorgelegen. Ich bin mir bewusst, dass eine falsche Erklärung rechtliche Folgen haben wird.

Declaration of Used AI Tools

Tool	Purpose	Where?	Useful?
Gemini 2.5/3 Pro	Rephrasing	Throughout	+++
Gemini 2.5/3 Pro	Code Generation and Code Debugging	Throughout	+++

Unterschrift

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