Chapter 1. The Machine Learning Landscape

Not so long ago, if you had picked up your phone and asked it the way home, it would have ignored you—and people would have questioned your sanity. But machine learning is no longer science fiction: billions of people use it every day. And the truth is it has actually been around for decades in some specialized applications, such as optical character recognition (OCR). The first ML application that really became mainstream, improving the lives of hundreds of millions of people, took over the world back in the 1990s: the *spam filter*. It's not exactly a self-aware robot, but it does technically qualify as machine learning: it has actually learned so well that you seldom need to flag an email as spam anymore. It was followed by hundreds of ML applications that now quietly power hundreds of products and features that you use regularly: voice prompts, automatic translation, image search, product recommendations, and many more.

Where does machine learning start and where does it end? What exactly does it mean for a machine to *learn* something? If I download a copy of all Wikipedia articles, has my computer really learned something? Is it suddenly smarter? In this chapter I will start by clarifying what machine learning is and why you may want to use it.

Then, before we set out to explore the machine learning continent, we will take a look at the map and learn about the main regions and the most notable landmarks: supervised versus unsupervised learning and their variants, online versus batch learning, instance-based versus model-based learning. Then we will look at the workflow of a typical ML project, discuss the main challenges you may face, and cover how to evaluate and fine-tune a machine learning system.

This chapter introduces a lot of fundamental concepts (and jargon) that every data scientist should know by heart. It will be a high-level overview (it's the only chapter without much code), all rather simple, but my goal is to ensure everything is crystal clear to you before we continue on to the rest of the book. So grab a coffee and let's get started!

TIP

If you are already familiar with machine learning basics, you may want to skip directly to Chapter 2. If you are not sure, try to answer all the questions listed at the end of the chapter before moving on.

What Is Machine Learning?

Machine learning is the science (and art) of programming computers so they can *learn from data*.

Here is a slightly more general definition:

> *[Machine learning is the] field of study that gives computers the ability to learn without being explicitly programmed.*
>
> —Arthur Samuel, 1959

And a more engineering-oriented one:

> *A computer program is said to learn from experience E with respect to some task T and some performance measure P, if its performance on T, as measured by P, improves with experience E.*
>
> —Tom Mitchell, 1997

Your spam filter is a machine learning program that, given examples of spam emails (flagged by users) and examples of regular emails (nonspam, also called “ham”), can learn to flag spam. The examples that the system uses to learn are called the *training set*. Each training example is called a *training instance* (or *sample*). The part of a machine learning system that learns and makes predictions is called a *model*. Neural networks and random forests are examples of models.

In this case, the task *T* is to flag spam for new emails, the experience *E* is the *training data*, and the performance measure *P* needs to be defined; for example, you can use the ratio of correctly classified emails. This particular performance measure is called *accuracy*, and it is often used in classification tasks.

If you just download a copy of all Wikipedia articles, your computer has a lot more data, but it is not suddenly better at any task. This is not machine learning.

Why Use Machine Learning?

Consider how you would write a spam filter using traditional programming techniques (Figure 1-1):

1. First you would examine what spam typically looks like. You might notice that some words or phrases (such as “4U”, “credit card”, “free”, and “amazing”) tend to come up a lot in the subject line. Perhaps you would also notice a few other patterns in the sender’s name, the email’s body, and other parts of the email.
2. You would write a detection algorithm for each of the patterns that you noticed, and your program would flag emails as spam if a number of these patterns were detected.
3. You would test your program and repeat steps 1 and 2 until it was good enough to launch.