Embedding-Augmented Hybrid Retrieval with Quantized Semantic Indexing

Pratham Jain
Motilal Nehru National Institute of Technology Allahabad
theprathammjain@gmail.com

Abstract

Modern search systems are dominated by lexical retrieval mechanisms such as BM25, which rely on token-level overlap between query and document. While computationally efficient, lexical approaches struggle in scenarios involving vocabulary mismatch, paraphrasing, and semantic variation.

In this work, we propose a hybrid retrieval architecture that integrates dense semantic embeddings with traditional lexical scoring. Embeddings are generated using transformer-based encoders and stored in quantized int8 format to significantly reduce storage overhead. Hybrid ranking is achieved through weighted interpolation between semantic cosine similarity and BM25 scores.

We evaluate our architecture on the MS MARCO passage ranking benchmark and conduct controlled experiments across 696 queries containing single human-labeled relevant passages. Results demonstrate statistically significant improvements over lexical retrieval in both NDCG@10 and MRR@10. Furthermore, quantization reduces embedding storage by 75% without statistically significant degradation in retrieval quality.

Comprehensive ablation studies validate robustness across interpolation weights, stopword configurations, and normalization settings. Latency profiling confirms that semantic scoring introduces negligible overhead relative to query encoding. These findings support embedding-augmented retrieval as a practical and efficient enhancement to conventional search architectures.

1 Introduction

Lexical retrieval methods such as BM25 [3] remain widely deployed due to efficiency, interpretability, and scalability. However, lexical scoring depends on exact term overlap, limiting effectiveness in semantically equivalent but lexically divergent queries.

Transformer-based encoders [2] enable dense vector representations that capture contextual semantics. Dense retrieval aligns more closely with human relevance judgments but introduces storage and computational considerations.

We propose a hybrid retrieval architecture that integrates dense embeddings with lexical scoring while addressing efficiency constraints through quantization. Our contributions are:

- Empirical validation that dense retrieval significantly improves ranking effectiveness over BM25.
- Demonstration that int8 quantization reduces embedding storage by 75% without statistically significant performance loss.
- Alpha-sensitivity analysis of hybrid scoring interpolation.
- Ablation analysis on preprocessing robustness.
- Latency and storage profiling under float32 and int8 configurations.

2 Background

2.1 Lexical Retrieval

BM25 [3] scores a document d for query q as:

$$\text{score}(q, d) = \sum_{t \in q} IDF(t) \cdot \frac{tf(t, d)(k_1 + 1)}{tf(t, d) + k_1(1 - b + b\frac{|d|}{avgdl})}$$

2.2 Dense Retrieval

Dense retrieval computes similarity using cosine similarity between embedding vectors:

$$S_{dense}(q, d) = \cos(\mathbf{e}_q, \mathbf{e}_d)$$

Multiple transformer encoders were evaluated; *multi-qa-MiniLM-L6-cos-v1* was selected due to superior empirical performance during preliminary validation.

2.3 Hybrid Scoring

$$S_{hybrid} = \alpha S_{dense} + (1 - \alpha) S_{lexical}$$

3 Experimental Setup

3.1 Dataset

We evaluate on the MS MARCO passage ranking dataset [1]. We restrict evaluation to queries containing exactly one human-labeled relevant passage, yielding 696 usable queries.

3.2 Metrics

We report:

- NDCG@10
- MRR@10

Statistical significance is assessed using paired t-tests and Wilcoxon signed-rank tests.

4 Results

4.1 Retrieval Effectiveness

Method	NDCG@10	MRR@10
BM25	0.5674	0.4330
Dense (Float32)	0.6691	0.5629
Dense (Int8)	0.6678	0.5612

Table 1: Retrieval effectiveness comparison.

Dense retrieval significantly outperforms BM25 ($p < 10^{-15}$). No statistically significant difference is observed between float32 and int8 embeddings ($p > 0.4$).

4.2 Latency and Storage

Metric	Float32	Int8
Embedding Size (MB)	8.37	2.09
Compression Ratio	4x	
Space Saved	75%	
Full Pipeline Latency (ms)	7.73	

Table 2: Latency and storage comparison.

5 Ablation Study

5.1 Alpha Sensitivity

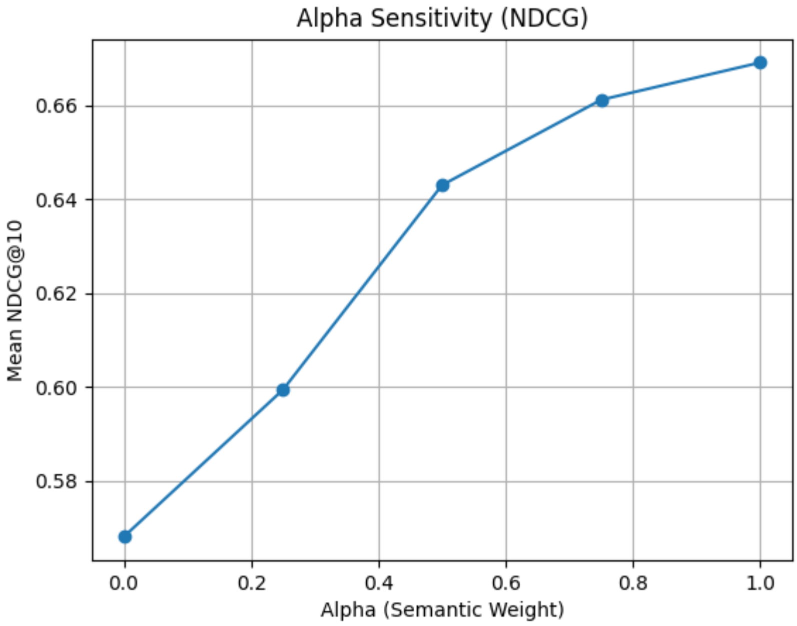

Figure 1: Alpha sensitivity for NDCG@10.

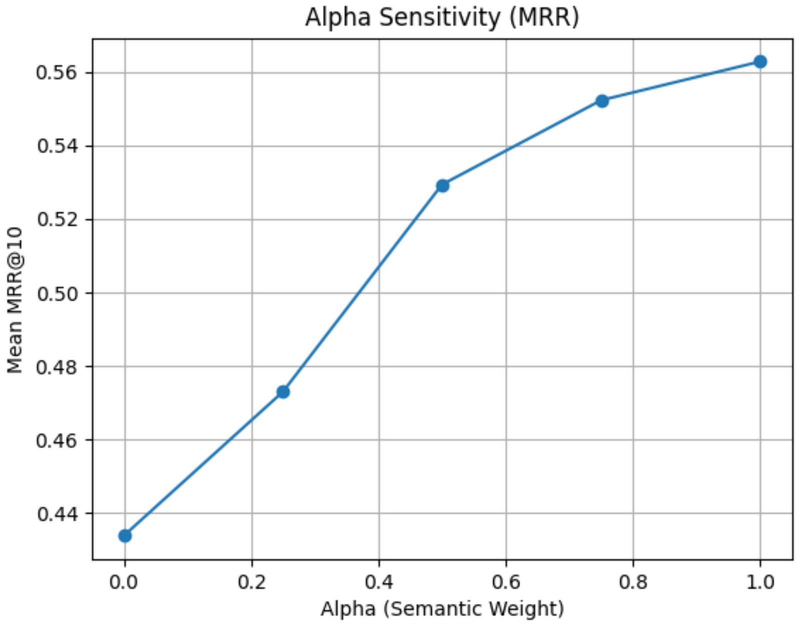

Figure 2: Alpha sensitivity for MRR@10.

Performance consistently increases as semantic weight increases.

5.2 Quantization Comparison

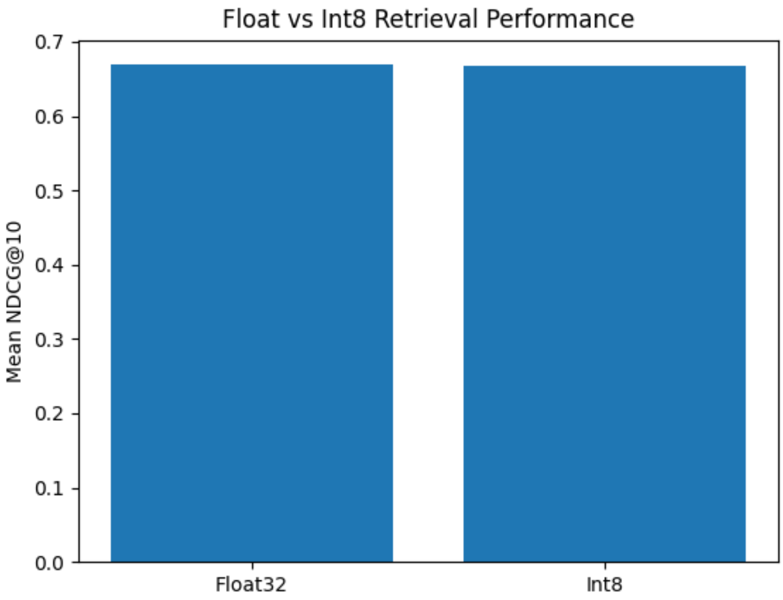

Figure 3: Float32 vs Int8 performance comparison.

Quantization introduces negligible ranking degradation.

6 Discussion

Dense retrieval aligns more closely with human relevance judgments than lexical matching. Quantization preserves effectiveness while significantly reducing storage requirements.

Our evaluation focuses on single-relevance queries from MS MARCO. Broader evaluation across multi-relevance scenarios would further validate generalizability.

7 Conclusion

We present a hybrid retrieval architecture integrating quantized dense embeddings with lexical scoring. Empirical evaluation demonstrates statistically significant improvements in ranking quality and favorable efficiency tradeoffs, supporting embedding-augmented retrieval as a practical enhancement to traditional search systems.

References

[1] Tri Nguyen et al. Ms marco: A human generated machine reading comprehension dataset. *arXiv preprint arXiv:1611.09268*, 2016.

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