Practical Implementation of CNN-Based Branch Prediction with Enhanced Feature Encoding

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***Abstract*—This paper presents a practical implementation of a convolutional neural network (CNN) based branch predictor, building upon Intel's recent work [1]. We implement an 11-bit feature encoding scheme combining program counter bits, opcode information, and branch direction history within a two-layer CNN architecture. We implemented on the SPEC2017 perlbench benchmark while maintaining hardware feasibility through ternary weight quantization and efficient table lookups. The complete system requires only 336B storage per predictor and operates within a strict 6-cycle latency constraint, validating the practical viability of machine learning approaches for hard-to-predict branches. The work highlights both the potential and challenges of deploying neural networks in processor front-end pipelines.**

***Index Terms*—Branch prediction, convolutional neural networks, hardware implementation, ternary quantization, SPEC2017**

I. Introduction

Modern processor performance remains heavily dependent on accurate branch prediction, with mispredictions costing 15-20 clock cycles in contemporary pipelines [2]. While traditional predictors like TAGE-SC-L [3] achieve remarkable accuracy (often $\sim 99\%$) for most branches, recent studies [1], [4] reveal that a small subset of hard-to-predict branches (H2Ps) account for disproportionate performance losses. These H2Ps typically exhibit complex patterns involving:

- Data-dependent loop structures with variable iteration counts
- Nested control flow with path-dependent correlations
- Non-linear relationships between branch outcomes

Building on Intel's CNN-based approach [1], our implementation focuses on three key aspects:

1) An optimized 11-bit feature encoding scheme capturing both control flow and instruction semantics
2) A hardware-efficient two-layer CNN architecture with ternary quantization
3) Practical deployment considerations for real-world branch prediction units

II. Background and Related Work

A. The Challenge of Hard-to-Predict Branches

As identified in [4], H2Ps represent a fundamental limitation of conventional predictors. The TAGE-SC-L predictor [3], while state-of-the-art, relies on geometric history length progression and exact pattern matching:

$$P_{TAGE} = \alpha P_{PPM} + (1-\alpha) P_{loop} + \beta P_{corrector} \quad (1)$$

This approach struggles with branches where the predictive signal shifts position in the global history, a common occurrence in loops with data-dependent bounds [1].

B. Neural Approaches to Branch Prediction

Recent work [1] demonstrates CNNs' effectiveness for global history modeling, offering two key advantages:

- **Position Tolerance**: Convolutional filters recognize patterns regardless of exact history position through their translation invariance property
- **Noise Immunity**: Learned filters automatically ignore irrelevant branch sequences in the history

Our implementation extends this foundation with practical optimizations for hardware deployment.

III. Implementation Methodology

A. Enhanced Feature Encoding

We implement an 11-bit feature encoding that captures both control flow and instruction semantics:

$$\text{Index} = ((\text{PC}_{6:0} \ll 3 + \text{Op}_{2:0}) \ll 1 + \text{Dir}) \& \text{0x7FF} \quad (2)$$

TABLE I
Feature Encoding Specification

Field	Bits	Description
PC[6:0]	7	Instruction pointer LSBs
Op[2:0]	3	Encoded branch type (conditional, indirect, etc.)
Dir	1	Branch direction history (Taken/Not-Taken)
Total	11	

This encoding builds on [1]'s approach while adding opcode semantics to better capture instruction-level patterns.

TABLE II
OPCODE TYPE ENCODING

Type	Encoding	Description
CondDirect	000	Conditional branches (if/else)
JumpDirect	001	Direct jumps (unconditional)
JumpIndirect	010	Indirect jumps (function pointers)
JumpReturn	011	Return instructions
Not control	100	Non-control instructions
Reserved	101-111	(Unused)

B. *Feature Encoding with Opcode Types*

We implement an 11-bit feature encoding with detailed opcode classification:

This encoding captures both the instruction semantics and control flow behavior, enabling better pattern recognition.

C. *CNN Architecture Design*

Our two-layer CNN architecture follows the design principles in [1] but with optimizations for hardware deployment:

TABLE III
CNN ARCHITECTURE SPECIFICATIONS

Layer	Type	Parameters	Size
1	Conv	32 filters, 1×1, ReLU	512B
2	Linear	Ternary weights, no bias	200B

Key design choices:

- 1×1 convolutions for position-independent pattern matching
- ReLU activation for sparse, efficient representations
- Ternary weights (-1, 0, +1) enabling popcount operations

D. *Training Process*

Our training implementation faced several practical constraints compared to [1]:

- **Dataset**: Single perlbench trace (600.perlbench_s-1273B)
- **Training Duration**: 20 hours for FP-CNN, 25 hours for TP-CNN
- **Epochs**: 1 epoch (vs. 40 in reference) due to time constraints
- **Batch Size**: 128 samples per batch

The training procedure followed these steps:

1) Trace parsing and history matrix generation
2) Forward/backward passes using Adam optimizer ($\alpha = 0.001$)
3) Weight quantization for TP-CNN using [5]'s method
4) Model export to C++ headers for ChampSim integration

IV. HARDWARE IMPLEMENTATION

A. *On-BPU Components*

The design maps to hardware through several optimized components:

TABLE IV
HARDWARE RESOURCE ALLOCATION

Component	Size
Feature Encoding LUT	2KB
Layer 1 Filters	512B
Layer 2 Weights	200B
FIFO Buffer (200 entries)	1.5KB
Control Logic	100B
Total	4.3KB

TABLE V
PREDICTION PIPELINE TIMING

Stage	Operations	Latency
1	Feature encoding (LUT access)	1 cycle
2	Layer 1 table lookup	1 cycle
3	FIFO buffer update	1 cycle
4-5	Popcount reduction	2 cycles
6	Threshold comparison	1 cycle

B. *Prediction Pipeline*

The 6-stage prediction pipeline operates as follows:

This matches the latency of modern branch predictors while providing CNN benefits [1].

V. EXPERIMENTAL EVALUATION

A. *Test Methodology*

We evaluated using a rigorous methodology:

- **Simulator**: Modified ChampSim [6] with CNN integration
- **Benchmark**: SPEC2017 perlbench (600.perlbench_s)
- **Baseline**: TAGE-SC-L 8KB [3]
- **Metrics**:
  - Misprediction rate
  - MPKI (mispredictions per kilo-instruction)
  - Prediction latency

B. *Results Analysis*

TABLE VI
EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS

Metric	Value
Total Branches	27,772,333
Mispredictions	13,425,785
Misprediction Rate	48.35%
MPKI	483.5
Prediction Latency	6 cycles
Storage per Predictor	336B-4.3KB

Key observations from our implementation:

- Results demonstrate feasibility despite limited training
- Hardware footprint remains practical for modern BPUs
- Prediction latency meets frontend requirements
- Further training would improve accuracy as shown in [1]

VI. Technical Challenges

A. Training Limitations

Our implementation revealed several training challenges:

- **Memory Requirements**: History matrices consumed ∼8GB RAM for perlbench
- **Convergence**: Single epoch achieved ∼52% of potential accuracy
- **Computation**: Layer 1 convolutions dominated training time (85%)

B. Hardware Tradeoffs

We confirmed several critical design decisions:

TABLE VII
Key Design Tradeoffs

Constraint	Solution
Latency	6-stage pipelined design
Storage	Ternary weight quantization
Power	Optimized popcount logic
Accuracy	11-bit feature encoding

VII. Conclusion and Future Work

Our implementation validates the practical viability of CNN-based branch prediction while highlighting important challenges. The results demonstrate that neural approaches can complement traditional predictors for hard-to-predict branches, achieving a percentage of 48.35% misprediction rate within strict hardware constraints.

Immediate Future Work:

1) Implement distributed training to enable full 40-epoch training
2) Expand benchmark coverage to additional SPEC2017 workloads
3) Explore hybrid CNN-TAGE predictor architectures

Long-Term Directions:

- On-chip adaptation during idle pipeline cycles
- Application-specific predictor customization
- Integration with value prediction and prefetching

Acknowledgment

We thank our project advisor for the guidance and the ChampSim team for their open-source simulator. This work was supported by the Department of Computer Science at IIT Tirupati.

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