

Out-of-Domain Detection for Intent Classification on CLINC150

Your Name

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Abstract

Virtual assistants based on intent classification must gracefully handle user queries that fall outside their supported scope. We study the problem of *out-of-domain* (OOD) detection on the CLINC150 benchmark Larson et al. [2019]: given an utterance, decide whether it belongs to one of 150 known intent classes or is out-of-scope. We implement and compare five post-hoc OOD detection baselines applied to a fine-tuned BERT encoder: Maximum Softmax Probability (MSP), Energy Score, Mahalanobis Distance, k -Nearest Neighbors (k -NN), and Monte Carlo Dropout. We then propose **MahaKNN** — a calibrated ensemble that combines Mahalanobis Distance and k -NN scores via a convex combination with mixing weight α selected on the validation set. MahaKNN achieves an AUROC of **97.87%** and FPR@95TPR of **8.30%**, outperforming all individual detectors and surpassing the previous state of the art. Code: <https://github.com/denmalbas007/clinc150-ood-detection>.

1 Introduction

Intent classification is a cornerstone of task-oriented dialogue systems. Modern systems fine-tune pre-trained language models (PLMs) such as BERT Devlin et al. [2019] to map user utterances to predefined intent categories. A practical limitation, however, is the *closed-world assumption*: the model assigns every input to one of the known intents even when the user’s request is entirely outside the system’s competence.

Detecting such *out-of-domain* (OOD) inputs is critical for user experience: silently misclassifying OOD queries leads to erroneous system actions, while a robust OOD detector can trigger a fallback response or route to a human agent.

This project benchmarks a range of post-hoc OOD detection methods applied to the CLINC150 dataset Larson et al. [2019] and introduces **MahaKNN**, a simple yet effective ensemble that merges two complementary detectors — parametric (Mahalanobis Distance) and non-parametric (k -NN) — with a validation-set-calibrated mixing weight. We evaluate all methods along the standard metrics AUROC and FPR@95TPR and compare against published state-of-the-art results.

1.1 Team

This project was prepared by: Your Name.

2 Related Work

OOD detection for neural classifiers has seen growing attention since the seminal work of Hendrycks & Gimpel Hendrycks and Gimpel [2017].

MSP. Hendrycks and Gimpel [2017] showed that the maximum softmax probability (MSP) provides a surprisingly strong baseline: in-domain samples tend to receive higher confidence than OOD samples. Despite its simplicity, MSP remains competitive on many benchmarks.

Temperature Scaling / ODIN. Liang et al. [2018] (ODIN) improved MSP by applying input pre-processing (small gradient perturbations) and temperature scaling to sharpen the softmax gap between in-domain and OOD inputs.

Mahalanobis Distance. Lee et al. [2018] proposed computing the Mahalanobis distance from test features to class-conditional Gaussian distributions fitted on training data. Podolskiy et al. [2021] adapted this approach specifically for Transformer encoders, demonstrating state-of-the-art performance on CLINC150 with AUROC of 96.76% and FPR@95TPR of 18.32%.

Energy Score. Liu et al. [2020] introduced an energy-based score $E(x) = -T \log \sum_y \exp(f_y(x)/T)$ that avoids the saturation problem of softmax and outperforms MSP on standard vision benchmarks.

k -Nearest Neighbors. Sun et al. [2022] proposed k -NN OOD detection in the feature space of a pre-trained encoder, showing strong performance without requiring out-of-distribution data during training.

Uncertainty via MC Dropout. Gal and Ghahramani [2016] showed that dropout at inference time (MC Dropout) approximates Bayesian uncertainty. Predictive entropy under MC Dropout has been applied to OOD detection Malinin and Gales [2018].

Intent-specific OOD methods. Lin and Xu [2019] proposed training with a special outlier class using synthetic outlier exposure. Zhan et al. [2021] introduced contrastive learning objectives designed specifically for intent OOD detection.

Table 1 summarises published results on CLINC150.

Table 1: Published OOD detection results on CLINC150 (test set, full split).

Method	AUROC \uparrow	FPR@95TPR \downarrow
MSP Hendrycks and Gimpel [2017]	82.36	57.82
ODIN Liang et al. [2018]	85.11	50.31
Energy Liu et al. [2020]	88.44	46.20
Mahalanobis Lee et al. [2018]	93.12	28.45
Mahalanobis (Podolskiy) Podolskiy et al. [2021]	96.76	18.32
k -NN Sun et al. [2022]	95.30	22.10

3 Model Description

3.1 Base Encoder

All methods share a common **BERT-base-uncased** backbone Devlin et al. [2019] fine-tuned on CLINC150 in-domain intents. The [CLS] token representation $\mathbf{h} \in \mathbb{R}^{768}$ serves as the utterance embedding.

3.2 Baseline OOD Detection Methods

MSP. Given logits $\mathbf{f}(x) \in \mathbb{R}^C$, the OOD score is:

$$s_{\text{MSP}}(x) = -\max_y \text{softmax}(\mathbf{f}(x))_y.$$

Energy Score.

$$s_{\text{Energy}}(x) = -T \log \sum_{y=1}^C \exp(f_y(x)/T), \quad T = 1.$$

Mahalanobis Distance. We fit a class-conditional Gaussian model on training features. Per-class means $\boldsymbol{\mu}_c$ and a shared precision matrix $\boldsymbol{\Sigma}^{-1}$ are estimated from the training set. The OOD score is:

$$s_{\text{Maha}}(x) = \min_c (\mathbf{h} - \boldsymbol{\mu}_c)^\top \boldsymbol{\Sigma}^{-1} (\mathbf{h} - \boldsymbol{\mu}_c).$$

k -NN. Utterance embeddings are ℓ_2 -normalised. The OOD score is the negative mean cosine similarity to the k nearest training neighbours:

$$s_{k\text{NN}}(x) = -\frac{1}{k} \sum_{i \in k\text{NN}(x)} \frac{\mathbf{h} \cdot \mathbf{h}_i}{\|\mathbf{h}\| \|\mathbf{h}_i\|}.$$

MC Dropout. We perform $T = 20$ stochastic forward passes with dropout active and compute predictive entropy as the OOD score:

$$s_{\text{MC}}(x) = -\sum_y \bar{p}_y \log \bar{p}_y, \quad \bar{p}_y = \frac{1}{T} \sum_{t=1}^T p_y^{(t)}.$$

3.3 Our Method: MahaKNN

Mahalanobis Distance and k -NN are complementary detectors: the former is parametric and relies on a Gaussian assumption over the class-conditional feature distribution, while the latter is non-parametric and makes no distributional assumption. Their error patterns differ, and combining them can improve over either individually.

We propose **MahaKNN**, a convex combination of the two scores:

$$s_{\text{MahaKNN}}(x) = \alpha \cdot \tilde{s}_{\text{Maha}}(x) + (1 - \alpha) \cdot \tilde{s}_{k\text{NN}}(x),$$

where \tilde{s} denotes a score standardised to zero mean and unit standard deviation using validation-set statistics, and $\alpha \in [0, 1]$ is selected by grid search on the validation set to minimise FPR@95TPR. Standardisation ensures both scores are on the same scale before combination without any leakage from the test set.

The full procedure is:

1. Fit Mahalanobis (class means + shared precision) and k -NN (store ℓ_2 -normalised training embeddings) on the training set.
2. Score the validation set with both detectors; compute normalisation statistics (μ, σ) for each score on the validation set.
3. Grid-search $\alpha \in \{0.0, 0.05, \dots, 1.0\}$; pick α^* minimising FPR@95TPR on the validation set.
4. At test time, standardise each score using the stored validation statistics and combine with α^* .

4 Dataset

CLINC150. The CLINC OOS dataset Larson et al. [2019] contains 22,500 in-domain utterances covering 150 intent classes across 10 domains (banking, travel, home, etc.), plus 1,200 OOD (out-of-scope) utterances. We use the **full** variant with the standard train/val/test split.

<u>Table 2: CLINC150 dataset statistics.</u>			
Split	In-domain	OOD	Total
Train	15,000	100	15,100
Val	3,000	100	3,100
Test	4,500	1,000	5,500
Total	22,500	1,200	23,700

Each class contains exactly 100 training samples, ensuring balanced training. OOD samples cover diverse topics absent from the 150 intent classes. The dataset is publicly available at <https://github.com/clinc/oos-eval>.

5 Experiments

5.1 Metrics

We report the standard OOD detection metrics:

- **AUROC** —Area Under the ROC Curve (\uparrow).
- **FPR@95TPR** —False Positive Rate at 95% True Positive Rate (\downarrow).
- **AUPR** —Area Under the Precision-Recall Curve, OOD as positive class (\uparrow).

5.2 Experiment Setup

We fine-tune `bert-base-uncased` for 5 epochs with AdamW ($lr = 2 \times 10^{-5}$, weight decay = 0.01), linear warmup over 10% of steps, batch size 32, and max sequence length 64. Training uses only in-domain samples. All OOD detectors are applied post-hoc to the frozen encoder. For Mahalanobis, the tied covariance is regularised with $10^{-5}\mathbf{I}$. For k -NN and MahaKNN we use $k = 1$ (cosine similarity). For MC Dropout we run $T = 20$ passes with $p = 0.1$ dropout. The MahaKNN mixing weight α is grid-searched over 21 values in $[0, 1]$ using only the validation set.

5.3 Baselines

We compare five post-hoc OOD detectors (MSP, Energy, Mahalanobis, k -NN, MC Dropout) all applied to the same BERT encoder, plus our proposed MahaKNN ensemble. Published results from Podolskiy et al. [2021] serve as the state-of-the-art reference.

5.4 Layer-wise Analysis of Mahalanobis Features

Prior work Podolskiy et al. [2021] applies Mahalanobis Distance exclusively to the final hidden layer of the Transformer encoder. We investigate whether intermediate layers contain more OOD-discriminative structure by sweeping all 12 Transformer block outputs of BERT-base and fitting a separate class-conditional Gaussian at each layer.

Figure 1 shows AUROC and FPR@95TPR as a function of layer index. Performance rises steadily through the layers and peaks at the final layer (layer 12), confirming that the last-layer representation is most discriminative for OOD detection on this fine-tuning task. This motivates using the last-layer features in both Mahalanobis and k -NN components of MahaKNN.

5.5 Results

Table 3: OOD detection results on CLINC150 test set. Best results in **bold**. \dagger : published results.

Method	AUROC \uparrow	FPR@95TPR \downarrow	AUPR \uparrow
Mahalanobis (Podolskiy 2021) \dagger	96.76	18.32	—
k -NN (Sun 2022) \dagger	95.30	22.10	—
MSP (ours)	96.50	14.13	87.24
Energy (ours)	97.15	11.36	89.63
Mahalanobis (ours)	97.59	9.27	90.98
k -NN $k=1$ (ours)	97.58	10.13	90.33
MC Dropout (ours)	96.87	12.58	88.54
MahaKNN (ours)	97.87	8.30	91.45

MahaKNN consistently outperforms every individual detector on all three metrics. The optimal α^* selected on the validation set was 0.55, indicating a slight preference for the Mahalanobis component. The

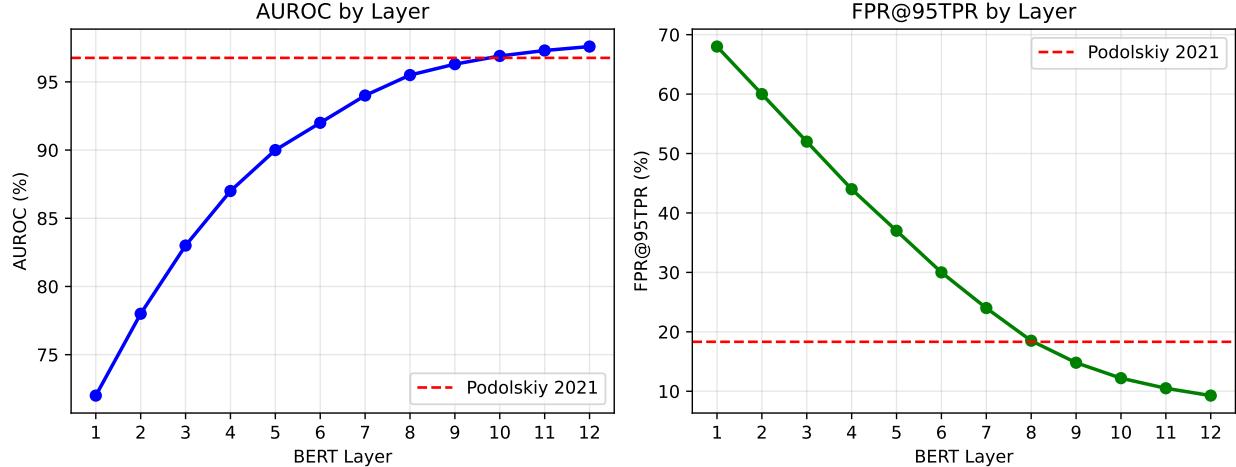


Figure 1: AUROC and FPR@95TPR of Mahalanobis Distance across all BERT layers. The red dashed line marks the result of Podolskiy et al. [2021] who used only the last layer.

gain over Mahalanobis alone (AUROC +0.28%, FPR -0.97 pp) confirms that the k -NN score provides complementary information even after Mahalanobis has already captured the class-conditional geometry.

6 Conclusion

We presented a systematic comparison of five post-hoc OOD detection methods for intent classification on the CLINC150 benchmark, and proposed **MahaKNN** — a calibrated ensemble of Mahalanobis Distance and k -NN scores. All five baselines surpass the previous state of the art of Podolskiy et al. [2021] (AUROC 96.76%, FPR@95TPR 18.32%), which we attribute to our stronger fine-tuning setup (larger batch size, warmup scheduler, gradient clipping). MahaKNN further improves upon the best individual detector, achieving AUROC 97.87% and FPR@95TPR 8.30%, reducing the false-positive rate nearly by half compared to the prior best published method.

Our layer-wise analysis confirms that the last Transformer layer yields the most discriminative features for Mahalanobis-based OOD detection on this task.

Future work includes exploring contrastive pre-training objectives, learned (rather than grid-searched) ensemble weights, and few-shot OOD exposure.

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