

**Felipe de Albuquerque Mello Pereira**

**Binary Splitting Criteria for Large Categorical  
Attributes in Decision Trees**

**Dissertação de Mestrado**

Thesis presented to the Programa de Pós-Graduação em Informática of the Departamento de Informática, PUC-Rio, as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Mestre em Informática.

Advisor: Prof. Eduardo Sany Laber

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## Abstract

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## Palavras-chave

Árvores de Decisão; Problema de Corte Máximo; Algoritmos Aproximativos

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# 1

## Introduction

Decision Trees and Random Forests are among the most popular methods for classification tasks. Decision Trees, specially small ones, are easy to interpret, while Random Forests usually yield more accurate classifications. One of the key issues in these methods is how to select an attribute to associate with a node of the tree/forest. An important related issue is how to split the samples once the attribute is selected.

There is a number of papers discussing aspects related with attribute selection, such as: how to design criteria to evaluate the quality of different types of attributes; whether binary or multi-way splits shall be used and how to remove bias from splitting criteria. For recent surveys on this topic we refer to Goethals & Rokach (2005), Loh (2014) and Barros et al. (2015).

Many criteria, with different properties, have been proposed to evaluate the quality of different types of attributes, including continuous and categorical ones. Among the most popular criteria, we have the Gini Gain and the Information Gain (Breiman et al. (1984), Quinlan (2014)).

Despite the large body of work we believe there are still questions to be answered. One of them is to how to properly handle nominal attributes that may assume a large number of values. Before explaining the reason behind our statement we would like to remark that this kind of attribute appears naturally in some applications (e.g.: states of a country or letters from some alphabet). In addition, they may arise as the result of aggregating attributes that have few distinct values with the goal of capturing possible correlation between them, as pointed out by Chou (1991). As an example, consider 5 binary attributes (e.g. medical tests) and a target binary variable that has large probability of being positive if at least 3 out of the 5 binary tests are positives. By aggregating the 5 binary variables we obtain a new attribute with  $2^5 = 32$  values that captures this relation. If we used the 5 attributes separately we would need 5 levels in the tree to be able to capture the relation between them and the target class, thus incurring a large fragmentation of the set of samples.

To properly face multi-valued nominal attributes we have to deal with the computational time required to compute good splits. Our contribution, explained in the next section, is related with this issue.

A brute force search to compute the best binary split requires  $\Omega(2^n)$  time, where  $n$  is the number of distinct values the attribute may assume. The computational efficiency can be improved if a  $n$ -ary split is used rather than a binary one. However, this may lead to a severe fragmentation of the sample space, which is not desirable: the number of samples available for each of the children of the split node may be small and, as a consequence, the underlying classification tasks may become significantly more difficult. When the target variable is binary, the Gini Gain, proposed in the influential monograph by Breiman et al. (1984), can be computed efficiently. However, when the number of classes  $k$  is larger than 2, most, if not all, of the available exact solutions take exponential time in  $(n, k)$ . The Twoing method, also from Breiman et al. (1984), is an interesting case since its running time is  $O(2^{\min\{n, k\}})$  rather than  $O(2^n)$  while being equivalent to Gini Gain when  $k = 2$ .

When both  $n$  and  $k$  are large, in the sense that an exhaustive search does not run in a reasonable time, one can rely on heuristics to compute the best binary split. As an example, the GUIDE algorithm Loh (2009), the last of a series of algorithms/developments designed by Loh and its contributors, deals with a nominal variable  $X$  as follows: if  $k = 2$  or  $n \leq 11$  the Gini Index is computed; if  $k \leq 11$  and  $n > 20$  a new variable  $X'$  with at most  $k$  distinct values is created according to a certain rule and an exhaustive search is performed over it; finally, if  $k > 11$  or  $n \leq 20$ ,  $X$  is binarized and a Linear Discriminant Analysis (LDA) is employed. These rules reflect the difficulty in dealing with multi-valued nominal attributes. Another interesting heuristic is the PC and PC-ext criteria, which calculates the principal component of the class probability vectors and uses the order given by the vector projections in this direction to look for splits. In general, the main drawback of using heuristics is the lack of a theoretical guarantee about their behavior.

## 1.1

### Our Contribution

Given this scenario, in chapter 3 we propose a framework for designing criteria, with nice theoretical properties, for evaluating the quality of multi-valued nominal attributes. Criteria generated according to this framework run in polynomial time in both the number of values and classes and have a theoretical guarantee that they are close to optimal. The key idea consists of formulating the problem of finding the best binary partition for a given attribute  $A$  as the problem of finding a cut with maximum weight in a complete graph whose nodes are associated with the values that  $A$  may assume and the edges' weights capture the benefit of putting values in different partitions. The

motivation behind the use of the max-cut problem is the existence of efficient algorithms with approximation guarantee, in particular the one proposed by Goemans & Williamson (1995), with 0.878 approximation, and local search algorithms with 0.5-approximation as shown in Angel et al. (2017).

We discuss two criteria that are derived from this framework: the first one can be seen as a natural variation of the Gini Gain, while the second criterion uses the  $\chi^2$ -test to set the edges' weights. For that, each edge  $e_{ij}$  between nodes  $v_i$  and  $v_j$  is thought as a binary attribute  $A(i, j)$  with values  $v_i$  and  $v_j$ . After discussing these criteria, we show how to extend them to handle numeric attributes.

We also present a number of experiments that suggest that one of our criteria is competitive with the Twoing method, which is – as far as we know – the only well-established criterion with binary splits that can be optimally computed for large  $n$  when  $k > 2$ . However, in contrast with our methods, Twoing cannot handle datasets that also have a large number of classes. Some criteria based on heuristics are also part of the comparison. In addition, the experiments also provide evidence of the potential of aggregating attributes for improving the accuracy of decision trees.

## 1.2

### Related Work

Many splitting criteria have been proposed to deal with continuous and nominal attributes. Arguably, the Gini Gain—used by CART—and entropy-based measures—such as the Information Gain, adopted by C4.5—are among the most popular (Goethals & Rokach (2005); Loh (2014); Barros et al. (2015)).

There has been some investigation on methods to compute the best split efficiently (Breiman et al. (1984); Chou (1991); Burshtein et al. (1992); Coppersmith et al. (1999)). For the 2-class problem, Breiman et al. (1984) proved a theorem which states that an optimal binary partition, for a certain class of splitting criteria, can be determined in linear time on  $n$ , the number of distinct values of the attributes, after ordering. The Gini Gain belongs to this class. The other three papers generalize this theorem in different directions and show necessary conditions that are satisfied by optimal partitions for a certain class of splitting criteria. These conditions, though useful to restrict the set of partitions that need to be considered, do not yield a method that is efficient (polynomial time) for large values of  $n$  and  $k$ . These papers also present heuristics, without approximation guarantee, to obtain good splits. Another related result is a theorem from Coppersmith et al. (1999) that guarantees that the optimum split can be found by separating the class probability vectors by

a hyperplane. This motivated the creation of the PC criterion, as will be shown in the next chapter.

Other proposals to speed up the attribute selection phase include Mola & Siciliano (1997); Shih (2001). The first presents a simple heuristic to reduce the number of binary splits considered to choose the best nominal variable among the  $m$  available ones. The second extends the method for another class of impurity measures.

In order to properly handle nominal attributes with a large number of values, apart from efficiently computing good splits, it is important to prevent bias in the attribute selection. Indeed, it is widely known that many splitting criteria have bias toward attributes with a large number of values. There are some proposals available to cope with this issue (Dobra & Gehrke (2001); Shih (2004); Hothorn et al. (2006)). This topic, though relevant, is not the focus of this dissertation.

### 1.3 Organization

In chapter 2 we explain how decision trees are used for classification problems and how they are constructed. We also present the main impurity measures and splitting criteria used in the literature, together with their execution-time complexity.

Chapter 3 contains the framework for generating splitting criteria that run in polynomial time. Its relation with the Max-Cut problem and its approximation algorithms are explained and some criteria obtained from this framework are presented.

Later, in chapters 4 and 5, we compare all the existing criteria and see how they perform in practice. In chapter 4 we explore how the many heuristics used to find splits with optimal impurity compare among themselves. This suggests a couple of criteria that perform better and can be used when the number of values and classes are large. In chapter 5 we analyze these methods on real datasets that contain attributes with large number of values and classes. Lastly, in chapter 6 we present our study conclusions.

## 2

## Background

### 2.1

#### Decision Trees

TODO: explicar como sao usadas pra classificacao com um exemplo/imagem.

### 2.2

#### Notation

We adopt the following notation throughout the dissertation. Let  $S$  be a set of  $N$  samples and  $C = \{c_1, \dots, c_k\}$  be the domain of the class label. In addition, for an attribute  $A$ , we use  $A(s)$  to denote the value taken by attribute  $A$  on sample  $s$ ; we use  $V = \{v_1, \dots, v_n\}$  to denote the set of values taken by  $A$ ;  $A_{ij}$  to refer to the number of samples from class  $c_j$  for which  $A$  takes value  $v_i$ ;  $N_i$  for the number of samples with value  $v_i$  for attribute  $A$  and  $S_j$  for the number of samples from class  $c_j$ . Furthermore, we let  $p_j = S_j/N$  and  $p_{ij} = Pr[C = c_j | A = v_i]$ . We observe that the estimator of maximum likelihood for  $p_{ij}$  is  $A_{ij}/N_i$ .

### 2.3

#### Impurity Measures

Many of the splitting criteria follow the structure of algorithm 1.

It is important to note that most impurity calculations on a nominal attribute are done based on what's called a contingency table. It consists of

---

**Algorithm 1** CreateTree( $S$ : set of samples,  $List\_A$ : list of attributes information,  $I$ : split impurity measure)

---

```
if  $S$  does not meet the stopping criterion then
  for attribute  $A$  in  $List\_A$  do
     $s_A =$  split of  $A$  with smallest impurity as measured by  $I$ 
  end for
   $(L, R) = s_{A^*}$  such that  $I(s_{A^*}) \leq I(s_A)$  for any  $A$ 
  CreateTree( $L$ )
  CreateTree( $R$ )
end if
```

---

an  $n \times k$  matrix where the  $ij$ -th entry corresponds to the number of samples that have value  $i$  and belong to class  $k$ . We'll assume that every decision tree node has the contingency table pre-calculated for all nominal attributes, which takes  $O(N)$  time for each attribute and cannot be avoided<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, whenever we mention the time complexity for a decision tree constructing algorithm/criterion, this cost will not be mentioned since it does not affect their comparison.

A good place to start is by presenting the two most common impurity measures found in the literature. Both can be used to generate binary splits and, as a consequence, binary decision trees.

### 2.3.1 Gini

The Gini Index for a set of samples  $S$  is given by

$$Gini(S) = 1 - \sum_{i=1}^k (p_i)^2. \quad (2-1)$$

The Gini Gain,  $\Delta_G$ , induced by a binary partition  $(L, R)$  of the set of values  $V$  is given by

$$\Delta_G(L, R) = Gini(S) - p_L Gini(S_L) - p_R Gini(S_R), \quad (2-2)$$

where  $S_L = \{s \in S | A(s) \in L\}$ ,  $S_R = \{s \in S | A(s) \in R\}$ ,  $p_L = |S_L|/N$  and  $p_R = |S_R|/N$ . Therefore, the largest the Gini Gain is, the better the partition.

### 2.3.2 Entropy

The Entropy for a set of samples  $S$  is given by

$$Entropy(S) = - \sum_{i=1}^k p_i \log p_i \quad (2-3)$$

The Information Gain,  $IG$ , induced by a binary partition  $(L, R)$  of the set of values  $V$  is given by

$$IG(L, R) = Entropy(S) - p_L Entropy(S_L) - p_R Entropy(S_R), \quad (2-4)$$

where  $S_L = \{s \in S | A(s) \in L\}$ ,  $S_R = \{s \in S | A(s) \in R\}$ ,  $p_L = |S_L|/N$  and  $p_R = |S_R|/N$ . Therefore, the largest the Information Gain is, the better the partition.

<sup>1</sup>The only exception is the attribute used to split the parent node, which can be calculated in  $O(n \times k)$ .

## 2.4

### Splitting Criteria

In this section we recall some well-known splitting criteria.

First note that, for numeric attributes, all criteria follow the same algorithm to choose the best split: the values are ordered and the valid splits have the form

$$L = \{v_i : v_i \leq v\}$$

$$R = \{v_i : v_i > v\}$$

for some chosen value  $v$ . The criteria evaluate the impurity of these splits and chooses the one with the smallest impurity. Since we only have to evaluate at a single value  $v$  between each pair of consecutive values  $v_i$  and  $v_{i+1}$ , it takes  $O(n \log n)$  time. Since this is polynomial and quite fast, its complexity is largely ignored throughout this dissertation.

#### 2.4.1

##### Gini Gain

This criterion generates all  $2^n$  binary values' split and the partition with maximum Gini Gain shall be selected. As shown in Breiman et al. (1984), for the two-class problem this optimal partition can be computed in  $O(n \log n)$  time. First fix one of the two classes and calculate each value's frequency of samples on this class. If we denote by  $v_1, \dots, v_n$  the values in this order, then the best binary split of  $S$  will have the form

$$L = \{v_i : v_i \leq v\}$$

$$R = \{v_i : v_i > v\}$$

for some chosen value  $v$ . Since we only need to test a single value of  $v$  that is between each pair of consecutive values  $v_i, v_{i+1}$ , the time complexity follows.

For problems with more than two classes, however, there is no efficient procedure with theoretical approximation guarantee to compute the Gini Gain in subexponential time in  $n$ .

#### 2.4.2

##### Twoing

The Twoing criterion for a binary partition  $(L, R)$  of the set of values  $V$  is given by

$$0.25 \cdot p_L \cdot p_R \cdot \left( \sum_{i=1}^k |p_L^i - p_R^i| \right)^2$$



where

$$p_L^i = \frac{|\{s \in S_L : s \text{ belongs to class } c_i\}|}{|S_L|}$$

and

$$p_R^i = \frac{|\{s \in S_R : s \text{ belongs to class } c_i\}|}{|S_R|}$$

When the Twoing criterion is used to generate binary decision trees, the binary partition with maximum twoing shall be selected at each node.

As shown in Breiman et al. (1984), such partition can be calculated in  $O(\min\{n(k + \log n)2^k, 2^n\})$  time by considering all possibilities of partitioning the classes into two superclasses and applying the Gini Gain criterion on each of them. We shall remark that, for the two-class problem, the Twoing criterion and the Gini Gain compute the same binary partitions.

### 2.4.3 Hypercube Cover

The Hypercube cover criterion works exactly the same as the Twoing criterion, except when it comes to the split impurity calculation. Instead of calculating the impurity based on the two superclasses, we calculate it using the original  $k$  classes. This guarantees, for instance, that the split impurity, when measured with respect to the original classes, is never worse than that of Twoing. This method was first suggested in Laber et al. (2018), together with its approximation guarantee of 2 for both the Gini and Entropy impurities.

### 2.4.4 Information Gain

This criterion works exactly the same as the Gini Gain, but replacing the Gini impurity by the Entropy. First it generates all  $2^n$  binary values' split and the partition with maximum Information Gain shall be selected. For the two-class problem, the same result valid for the Gini Gain works here, and the optimal partition can be computed in  $O(n \log n)$  time. Once again, when the number of classes is larger than 2 there is no efficient procedure with theoretical approximation guarantee to compute the Information Gain in subexponential time in  $n$ .

A related criterion is the Gain Ratio, where the Information Gain of an attribute is normalized by that attribute's potential information. This is used as a way of decreasing the bias of the k-ary Information Gain criterion towards attributes with larger number of values. Since we are only interested in binary splits in this dissertation, we will not go into its details.

### 2.4.5

#### $\chi^2$ -criterion

The  $\chi^2$  is a popular criterion that was used in Mingers (1987). It is also the first one shown here not based on impurity measures, and it only generates k-ary (instead of binary) splits. Is is mentioned here because of its relation to the framework that will be presented in chapter 3.

The  $\chi^2$ -criterion chooses the attribute  $A$  that maximizes

$$\sum_{i=1}^n \sum_{j=1}^k \frac{(A_{ij} - E[A_{ij}])^2}{E[A_{ij}]}, \quad (2-5)$$

where  $E[A_{ij}] = N_i p_j$ .

### 2.4.6

#### Conditional Inference Trees

Conditional Inference Trees are actually a framework for creating criteria that are bias-free when it comes to the number of values in an attribute. It was published by Hothorn et al. (2006) and still is the only known method of obtaining criteria that do not have any bias towards attributes with larger number of values.

It works by first choosing the best attribute to split at the current node and then evaluating all possible binary splits using any given impurity measure, picking the best one found.

To choose the attribute in which to split, first one has to calculate the permutation test's conditional expectation  $\mu \in \mathbb{R}^{nk}$  and covariance  $\Sigma \in \mathbb{R}^{nk \times nk}$  of every attribute<sup>2</sup>. Then, in order to compare the attributes, we need to calculate the p-value of a univariate test statistics  $c$  calculated on  $\mu$  and  $\Sigma$  of every attribute. The only exact form of doing this comparison is by using the quadratic form  $c_{quad}$  (see equation 2-6), which follows an asymptotic  $\chi^2$  distribution with degrees of freedom given by the rank of  $\Sigma$ . Since this involves the calculation of a pseudoinverse, which has cubic complexity on the dimension of  $\Sigma$ , this criterion can be very time consuming.

$$c_{quad}(t, \mu, \Sigma) = (t - \mu)\Sigma^+(t - \mu)^\top \quad (2-6)$$

This method, although very complicated and quite slow, is employed by the data mining community when accuracy counts for more than time spent

<sup>2</sup>Since the formulae are very complicated and won't be used throughout this dissertation, they are omitted. The interested reader can obtain them in the section 3 of Hothorn et al. (2006).

training<sup>3</sup>. Thus this criterion will be used in our experiments in chapter 5 to compare the different accuracies obtained when changing the splitting criterion used to choose the attribute's values split.

## 2.5

### Heuristics for Splitting Decision Tree Nodes

As seen in the previous section, calculating the optimal binary split takes exponential time in the number of values or classes. Therefore many heuristics were created to construct decision trees in this situation. The most used ones are listed below. All of them work with any impurity measure (e.g.: Gini or Entropy), but some of them work best with just one of them. When this is the case, it will be mentioned.

#### 2.5.1

##### PC and PC-ext

These heuristics are based on the Principal Component of the contingency table and were presented in Coppersmith et al. (1999). They are based on a theorem that states that the optimal partition of values can be found by separating the class probability vectors by a hyperplane.

In other words, the theorem above states that, in order to find the optimal partition, we just need to choose the right hyperplane. This motivates the PC criterion, which look at the hyperplanes in  $\mathbb{R}^k$  whose normal vector is the principal direction of the attribute's contingency table.

In more details, one first calculates the class probability distribution of every value, which is done by normalizing the contingency table rows to measure 1 in the sum norm. Then the values are grouped into “supervalues” where all values in the same supervalue have the same class probability distribution. Now the first principal component of these supervalues' contingency table is calculated. One then calculates the inner product of each class probability vector of the supervalues with the principal component and sort the supervalues by it. Denote by  $v_1, \dots, v_{n^*}$  the  $n^*$  supervalues sorted in this manner and denote by  $p$  the first principal component. We then calculate the impurity gain of the supervalues' splits of the form

$$L = \{v_i | v_i \cdot p \leq t\}$$

$$R = \{v_i | v_i \cdot p > t\}$$

<sup>3</sup>Since this method does not have any bias when choosing which attribute to split, the accuracy of these trees tend to be higher than the trees obtained by biased criteria.

where  $t$  is a chosen threshold. Once we find the supervalues split with the largest impurity gain, we translate the supervalues into original values to obtain a valid partition.

PC-ext is a simple extension of this algorithm, where instead of only testing the supervalues splits given by the equations above, we also test the splits given by exchanging the last supervalue on the left with the first supervalue on the right (where first and last are given by the order after calculating the inner product).

These procedures require  $O(k^3)$  operations to find the principal component and  $O(n)$  impurity calculations and inner products in the class probability space.

### 2.5.2

#### **Largest Class Alone**

This is a heuristic that, when using the Gini impurity, has an approximation guarantee of 2 compared with the optimal partition found by Gini Gain.

First one calculates the most frequent class and group the other classes in a single superclass. One then applies the Gini Gain criterion on this two-class problem. Since calculating the class frequencies can be done using the contingency table, this heuristic takes  $O(N + nk + n \log n)$  time in total.

It is also proved that there is no other way of grouping classes into superclasses that has a smaller approximation guarantee for the Gini impurity. It can also be used with the Information Gain impurity, instead of Gini Gain, but its approximation guarantee increases to 3. These bounds are all proved in Laber et al. (2018).

### 2.5.3

#### **List Scheduling**

TODO: tirar do paper, ja que saiu da icml?

Similarly to the Largest Alone heuristic, List Scheduling has an approximation guarantee of 2 for the Information Gain criterion when using the Entropy impurity (TODO: conferir).

First one calculates the frequency of every class. Then, one uses a List Scheduling algorithm to group the classes into 2 superclasses as balanced as possible (in terms of number of samples). Lastly the Information Gain criterion is applied on this two-class problem. Again, since calculating the class frequencies can be done using the contingency table and the List Scheduling

algorithm is linear in the number of classes, this heuristic also takes  $O(N + nk + n \log n)$  time in total.

It is also proved that, for the entropy impurity, the best form of grouping classes into superclasses is by balancing them the best way possible.

### 3

## Framework for Generating Splitting Criteria for Multi-valued Attributes

First we recall some definitions and results for the Max-Cut problem. These definitions will be used in the following section, when we define our framework.

### 3.1

#### The Maximum Weighted Cut Problem

We recall some definitions from graph theory. A cut  $X$  in a weighted graph  $G = (V, E)$  is a subset of vertexes of  $V$ . The weight of a cut  $X$ , denoted here by  $w(X)$ , is the sum of the weights of the edges that have one endpoint in  $X$  and the other one in  $V - X$ .

TODO: colocar uma figura de exemplo.

The problem of computing the cut  $X^*$  with maximum weight in a graph with non-negative weights is NP-Hard. However, there are good approximation algorithms available. A remarkable one is the randomized algorithm proposed in Goemans & Williamson (1995) that relies on a formulation of the max-cut problem via semidefinite programming (SDP). This algorithm, denoted throughout this dissertation by GW, returns a cut  $X$  that satisfies  $E[w(X)] \geq 0.878w(X^*)$ . It involves solving an SDP on the graph weights matrix, calculating the Cholesky decomposition of it and then generating a random partition of the values based on the inner product of the decomposition column vectors with a randomly generated vector on the sphere of dimension  $n$ . As solving such an SDP takes  $O(n^4)$  arithmetic operations (see Navascues et al. (2009)) and calculating the Cholesky decomposition takes  $O(n^3)$  operations, the time complexity is high but polynomial.

Another possibility to solve the Max-Cut problem is by using the **GreedyCut** algorithm, presented in Algorithm 2. It obtains a cut  $X$  such that  $w(X) \geq 0.5w(X^*)$ , as proved in Sahni & Gonzalez (1976). The algorithm starts with two empty sets  $X$  and  $X'$ . Then, it scans the nodes and assigns each of them to the set that provides the maximum improvement on the weight of the current cut (ties are broken arbitrarily). Is it easy to see that the time complexity of this greedy algorithm is  $O(n^2)$ .

---

**Algorithm 2** GreedyCut( $V$ : set of nodes)

---

```

 $X \leftarrow \emptyset; X' \leftarrow \emptyset$ 
for  $j = 1, \dots, n$  do
  If

$$\sum_{v \in X} w(v_i, v) > \sum_{v \in X' - V} w(v_i, v)$$

    add  $v_i$  to  $X'$  Else add  $v_i$  to  $X$ 
end for
Return  $X$  and  $X'$ 

```

---



---

**Algorithm 3** LocalSearch( $X, X'$ ): set of nodes)

---

```

label : loop_start
for  $i = 1, \dots, n$  do
  if switching  $v_i$ 's side improves cut weight then
    switch  $v_i$  and update cut weight,  $X, X'$ 
    goto loop_start
  end if
end for
for pair  $(v_i, v_j) \in X \times X'$  do
  if switching  $v_i$  and  $v_j$  improves cut weight then
    switch  $v_i$  and  $v_j$ , update cut weight,  $X, X'$ 
    goto loop_start
  end if
end for
Return  $X, X'$ 

```

---

The solutions obtained by both GW and GreedyCut can be improved via a local search. In its simplest version, it moves a node from one group to the other while some improvement on the cut weight is possible. Although this algorithm is not polynomial in the worst case, it has polynomial behavior in the smoothed analysis framework (see Angel et al. (2017)). In addition, it is always possible to set a limit on the number of moves. A more refined version allows exchanging a pair of nodes as long as the weight of the cut is improved. In our experiments we use the version presented at Algorithm 3.

### 3.2

#### A Framework for Generating Splitting Criteria

In this section we explain our approach to building binary splitting criteria for multi-valued nominal attributes.

Let  $A$  be a nominal attribute that takes values in the domain  $V = \{v_1, \dots, v_n\}$ . Our framework to produce a splitting criterion  $I$  consists of three steps:

1. Create a complete graph  $G = (V, E)$  with  $n$  vertexes.

2. Assign a non-negative weight  $w_{ij}$  to the edge that connects  $v_i$  to  $v_j$ . This value shall reflect the benefit of putting  $v_i$  and  $v_j$  in different partitions. Different definitions of  $w_{ij}$  yield to different criteria, as we explain further.
3. Ideally, the value of the criterion  $I$  for attribute  $A$  is the weight of the cut with maximum weight in  $G$ . However, this is not a reasonable possibility for large  $n$  since, as mentioned before, the problem of computing the cut  $X^*$  with maximum weight in a graph with non-negative weights is NP-Hard. Thus, the value of criterion  $I$  is given by the weight of the cut obtained by some algorithm, with approximation guarantee, for the maximum cut problem in  $G$ .

What distinguishes the criteria generated by our framework is how the weights of the edges are set and what method is employed to compute the cut on graph  $G$ . Here, we discuss two ways to set the weights: the first one yields to criteria that are related with the Gini Gain, while the second is built upon some given splitting criterion that works well for binary attributes.

### 3.2.1

#### The Squared Gini Criterion

Here, we discuss how to set the weights so that we obtain a criterion that can be seen as a variation of the Gini Gain discussed in Section 2.3.1.

In fact, Lemma 1 below show that it is possible to define the weights of the edges so that

$$w(S_L) = Gini(S) - p_L^2 \cdot Gini(S_L) - p_R^2 \cdot Gini(S_R) \quad (3-1)$$

for every partition  $(L, R)$  of  $V$ .

Note that the weight of the cut  $S_L$  in the above identity is similar to the expression for the Gini Gain given by equation (2-2). The difference is that  $p_L$  and  $p_R$  are replaced with  $p_L^2$  and  $p_R^2$ , respectively. Because of the squares, this new criterion tends to favor more balanced partitions.

For the proof of Lemma 1, recall that  $A_{ix}$  is the number of samples of class  $x$  that have value  $v_i$ , and that  $C$  is used to denote the set of classes.

**Lemma 1** *For every  $i, j$ , with  $i \neq j$  and  $i, j \in \{1, \dots, n\}$ , let*

$$w_{ij} = \frac{2 \sum_{\substack{x, y \in C \\ x \neq y}} A_{ix} A_{jy}}{N^2}.$$

*Then, for every partition  $(L, R)$  of  $V$  we have*

$$w(S_L) = Gini(S) - p_L^2 \cdot Gini(S_L) - p_R^2 \cdot Gini(S_R)$$



*Proof:* Let  $S_{x,L}$  and  $S_{y,R}$  be the number of samples of classes  $x$  and  $y$  in groups  $L$  and  $R$ , respectively. Moreover, let  $N_L$  and  $N_R$  be the number of samples in  $L$  and  $R$ , respectively. It follows from equation (2-1) that

$$N^2 Gini(S) = N^2 - \sum_{x=1}^k (S_{x,L} + S_{x,R})^2$$

$$N_L^2 Gini(S_L) = N_L^2 - \sum_{x=1}^k S_{x,L}^2$$

and

$$N_R^2 Gini(S_R) = N_R^2 - \sum_{x=1}^k S_{x,R}^2.$$

Since  $N = (N_L + N_R)$  it follows that

$$\begin{aligned} N^2 Gini(S) - N_L^2 Gini(S_L) - N_R^2 Gini(S_R) &= \\ 2N_L N_R - 2 \sum_{x \in C} S_{x,L} S_{x,R} &= \\ 2 \sum_{x \in C} S_{x,L} \sum_{x \in C} S_{x,R} - 2 \sum_{x \in C} S_{x,L} S_{x,R} &= \\ 2 \sum_{\substack{x \neq y \\ x, y \in C}} S_{x,L} S_{y,R} = 2 \sum_{\substack{x \neq y \\ x, y \in C}} \left( \sum_{i \in L} \sum_{j \in R} A_{ix} A_{jy} \right) &= \\ N^2 \sum_{i \in L} \sum_{j \in R} w_{ij} = N^2 w(S_L) \end{aligned}$$

Dividing the first term and the last term by  $N^2$  in the above expression and, using  $N_L = p_L \cdot N$  and  $N_R = p_R \cdot N$ , we establish the lemma.  $\blacksquare$

It is worth mentioning that symmetric misclassification costs can be easily introduced in this case. In fact, let  $mix(x, y)$  be the cost of mixing samples from classes  $x$  and  $y$ . We can define

$$w_{ij} = \sum_{\substack{x, y \in C \\ x \neq y}} mix(x, y) p_{ix} p_{jy}.$$

This measure favors the separation of the classes that incur a large cost in the case they are mixed.

### 3.2.2

#### Setting weights according to other splitting criteria

Our second way of defining the weights makes use of some given splitting criterion for binary nominal attributes. Such criterion is used to measure the quality of separating samples with value  $v_i$  from those with value  $v_j$ , for each  $i$  and  $j$ , and, thus, defining the edges' weights. Here, we investigate the criterion obtained by defining  $w_{ij}$  as the value of the  $\chi^2$ -test for the attribute  $A$  when evaluated over the restricted dataset that contains only the samples of  $S$  with values  $v_i$  and  $v_j$ :

$$w_{ij} = \sum_{\ell=1}^k \frac{(A_{i\ell} - E[A_{i\ell}])^2}{E[A_{i\ell}]} + \sum_{\ell=1}^k \frac{(A_{j\ell} - E[A_{j\ell}])^2}{E[A_{j\ell}]}$$

where  $E[A_{i\ell}] = N_i p_\ell$  and  $E[A_{j\ell}] = N_j p_\ell$ .

In order to reduce the bias towards attributes with many values, we divide  $w_{ij}$  by  $n - 1$ , for every pair  $(i, j)$ . We make this adjustment because each value contributes to the weight of  $n - 1$  edges.

We shall remark that, although not explored in this work, other criteria such as Information Gain or Gini Index could be used, instead of the  $\chi^2$ -test, to set the weights.

### 3.2.3

#### Handling Numeric Attributes

We observe that criteria from our framework can handle a numeric attribute  $A$  with  $t$  distinct values  $v_1, \dots, v_t$  by considering it as collection of  $t - 1$  binary attributes, where the  $j$ -th attribute,  $A^j$ , splits the samples into the groups  $\{s | A(s) \leq v_j\}$  and  $\{s | A(s) > v_j\}$ . The split obtained by criterion  $I$  on a numeric attribute  $A$  matches the split of the best attribute among  $A^1, \dots, A^{t-1}$ , according to  $I$ .

## 4

### Experiments on Splits

TODO: tirar List Scheduling?

In this chapter we compare the ability of different heuristics in finding the values' split with lowest impurity. We are interested in choosing what heuristic/criterion to use when the exact ones don't run in reasonable time. In the next chapter the performance of the best heuristics will be compared on real datasets against Twoing and criteria generated from our framework.

Our experiments are very similar to those proposed in Coppersmith et al. (1999) except for a few details. All experiments are Monte Carlo simulations with 10,000 runs, each using a randomly-generated contingency table for the given number of values  $n$  and classes  $k$ . Each table was created by uniformly picking a number in  $\{0, \dots, 7\}$  for every entry. This guarantees a substantial probability of a row/column having some zero frequencies, which is common in practice. Differing from Coppersmith et al. (1999), if all the entries corresponding to a value or a class are zero, we re-generate the contingency table, otherwise the number of actual values and classes would not match  $n$  and  $k$ . We evaluated Hypercube Cover, PC-ext, Largest Class Alone and List Scheduling for both the Gini and Entropy impurities. Note that we don't evaluate Twoing because the split selected by Hypercube Cover is always purer by construction.

Table 4.1 and 4.2 show, for different values of  $n$  and  $k$ , the percentage of times that each criterion found the best Gini and Entropy impurities, respectively. Note that the percentages do not necessarily sum exactly 100% since there were ties. In these tables we only show results for  $k \leq 9$  because for larger values of  $k$  Hypercube Cover becomes non-practical due to its running time. In addition, we do not present results for small values of  $n$  because in this case the optimal partition can be found quickly by testing all possible partitions, so that there is no motivation for heuristics.

In general, we observe an advantage for Hypercube Cover with both impurities, being more clear for the Entropy, followed by PC-ext. This suggests that the Largest Class Alone and List Scheduling heuristics are not competitive with them in terms of split impurity found.

Comparing Hypercube Cover and PC-ext in terms of speed we can see,

Table 4.1: Percentage of times each criterion finds the smallest Gini impurity, compared among themselves.

| Criterion \ # values<br># classes | 12   |      |      |      | 25   |      |      |      | 50   |      |      |      |
|-----------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
|                                   | 3    | 5    | 7    | 9    | 3    | 5    | 7    | 9    | 3    | 5    | 7    | 9    |
| Hypercube Cover                   | 97.3 | 99.2 | 99.9 | 100  | 73.9 | 65.8 | 73.3 | 85.3 | 51.4 | 33.1 | 31.0 | 33.9 |
| PC-ext                            | 91.2 | 88.0 | 86.6 | 85.0 | 72.7 | 62.4 | 58.8 | 53.2 | 50.6 | 41.1 | 40.7 | 37.8 |
| LargestClassAlone                 | 42.8 | 19.1 | 11.5 | 8.5  | 24.3 | 5.9  | 2.0  | 0.8  | 16.0 | 3.3  | 1.0  | 0.4  |
| ListScheduling                    | 42.8 | 17.8 | 10.8 | 8.4  | 24.3 | 4.0  | 1.7  | 0.9  | 16.0 | 1.3  | 0.4  | 0.1  |

Table 4.2: Percentage of times each criterion finds the smallest Entropy impurity, compared among themselves.

| Criterion \ # values<br># classes | 12   |      |      |      | 25   |      |      |      | 50   |      |      |      |
|-----------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
|                                   | 3    | 5    | 7    | 9    | 3    | 5    | 7    | 9    | 3    | 5    | 7    | 9    |
| Hypercube Cover                   | 98.3 | 99.4 | 100  | 100  | 83.3 | 76.9 | 81.0 | 87.7 | 70.0 | 57.4 | 53.5 | 52.5 |
| PC-ext                            | 80.2 | 74.2 | 73.2 | 72.4 | 54.4 | 42.7 | 39.2 | 37.7 | 29.5 | 22.0 | 21.7 | 22.1 |
| LargestClassAlone                 | 33.5 | 13.6 | 8.3  | 6.8  | 18.5 | 5.3  | 2.0  | 1.3  | 13.4 | 3.7  | 1.6  | 0.8  |
| ListScheduling                    | 33.5 | 15.3 | 10.1 | 8.0  | 18.5 | 2.6  | 1.2  | 0.8  | 13.4 | 0.6  | 0.1  | 0.1  |

as expected, that Hypercube Cover was faster up to  $k = 7$ , when PC-ext becomes faster. Another possible comparison between them is to see what happens when Hypercube Cover and PC-ext find different partitions. When Hypercube Cover's partition is better than PC-ext's, the maximum relative excess between the impurities was of 0.9% for the Gini impurity and 1.4% for the Entropy impurity. When PC-ext's partition is better than Hypercube Cover's, the maximum relative excess was of 3.48% for the Gini impurity and 6.23% for the Entropy impurity.

Lastly, we note that, due to Largest Class Alone and List Scheduling running times, they might be used when both  $n$  and  $k$  are very large and speed is an issue. When  $n = 200$  and  $k = 100$ , using a single core, they are almost 50 times faster than PC-ext, with the latter using 8 cores. In addition, they could be used together with PC-ext, incurring a negligible overhead, to guarantee that the ratio between the impurity of the partition found and the optimal one is bounded.

Taking into account these experiments, those reported in Coppersmith et al. (1999) and the theoretical properties of the available algorithms, Table 4.3 suggests guidelines on which criterion to use to solve the problem of finding the binary partition of minimum impurity in practical situation. Of course small, medium and large depend on the available hardware and the time one accepts to wait for training/testing classification models.

Table 4.3: Guidelines on how to solve the problem of finding the partition with minimum impurity in practice.

| <b>n</b>  | <b>k</b>  | <b>Suggested Method</b> |
|-----------|-----------|-------------------------|
| small     | any       | Exact                   |
| not small | small     | Hypercube Cover         |
| not small | not small | PC-ext                  |

## 5

### Experiments on Real Datasets

In this chapter we describe our experimental study on real datasets. First, we describe the chosen datasets. Next, we discuss the max-cut algorithms employed and, then, we present our results. We will compare the performance between Twoing, PC-ext and some criteria generated from our framework. Both Twoing and PC-ext were chosen based on the experiments results of the previous chapter.

All experiments described in the following sections were executed on a machine with the following settings: Intel(R) Core(TM) i7-4790 CPU @ 3.60GHz with 32 GB of RAM. The code was developed using Python 3.6.1 with the libraries numpy, scipy, scikit-learn and cvxpy. The project can be accessed in [github.com/felipeamp/dissertation-code](https://github.com/felipeamp/dissertation-code).

TODO: tornar repositório público.

TODO: adicionar Hypercube cover em todos os experimentos.

#### 5.1

##### Datasets

We employed 11 datasets in total. Eight of them are from the UCI repository: Mushroom, KDD98, Adult, Nursery, Covertype, Cars, Contraceptive and Poker (Asuncion & Newman (2007)). Two others are available in Kaggle: San Francisco Crime and Shelter Animal Outcome SF-OpenData (2015); Austin Animal Center (2016). The last dataset was created by translating texts from the Reuters database Asuncion & Newman (2007) into phonemes, using the CMU pronouncing dictionary (see Weide (1998)).

We chose these datasets because they have at least 1000 samples and they either contain multi-valued attributes or attributes that can be naturally aggregated to produce multi-valued attributes. From the KDD98 dataset we derived the datasets KDD98-k, for  $k = 2$  and  $9$ . These datasets contain only the positive samples (people that donate money) of KDD98 and the target attribute, Target\_D, is split into  $k$  classes, where the  $i$ -th class correspond to the  $i$ -th quantile in terms of amount of money donated. For the Reuters Phonemes dataset, we extracted 10000 samples containing the 15 most common phonemes as class and try to predict when they are about to happen given

Table 5.1: Information about the employed datasets after data cleaning and attributes aggregation. Column  $k$  is the number of classes and **Reg** stands for Regression; columns  $m_{nom}$  and  $m_{nom}^{ext}$  are the number of nominal attributes in the original and the extended datasets (when it exists), respectively; column  $m_{num}$  is the number of numeric attributes.

| Dataset    | Samples | k          | $m_{nom}$ | $m_{nom}^{ext}$ | $m_{num}$ |
|------------|---------|------------|-----------|-----------------|-----------|
| Mushroom   | 5644    | 2          | 22        | N/A             | 0         |
| Adult      | 30162   | 2          | 8         | N/A             | 6         |
| KDD98      | 4843    | <b>Reg</b> | 65        | N/A             | 314       |
| Nursery    | 12960   | 5          | 8         | 11              | 0         |
| CoverType  | 581012  | 7          | 44        | 46              | 10        |
| Car        | 1728    | 4          | 6         | 8               | 0         |
| Contracep  | 1473    | 3          | 7         | 9               | 2         |
| Poker      | 25010   | 10         | 10        | 0               | 0         |
| Shelter    | 26711   | 22         | 5         | N/A             | 1         |
| S.F. Crime | 878049  | 39         | 3         | N/A             | 2         |
| Phonemes   | 10000   | 15         | 3         | N/A             | 0         |

the 3 preceding phonemes. This dataset is motivated by Spoken Language Recognition problems, where phonotactic models are used as an important part of the classification system, as seen in Navratil (2006). For the San Francisco Crime dataset, we try to predict the crime category given the month, day of the week, police department district and latitude/longitude. Lastly, for the Shelter Animal Outcomes dataset, we converted the age into a numeric field containing the number of days old and separated the breed into two categorical fields, repeating the breed in both in case there was only one originally. We also removed the AnimalID, Name and the DateTime. For this dataset we try to predict the outcome type and subtype (concatenated into a single categorical field). For both San Francisco Crime and Shelter Animal Outcomes datasets we created a version of them (**S.F. Crime-15** and **Shelter-15**), containing only 15 classes, instead of the 39 and 22 original ones, respectively. This was done by grouping the rarest classes into a single one.

We also created extended versions of some of the above datasets by adding nominal attributes obtained by aggregating some of the original ones, as we detail below. Our goals are examining the impact of multi-valued attributes in the classification performance and also understanding how the different splitting criteria handle them.

Table 5.2 illustrates this construction.

- **Nursery-Ext.** This dataset is obtained by adding three new attributes to dataset Nursery. The first attribute has 15 distinct values and it is constructed through the aggregation of 2 attributes from group EMPLOY,

| parents     | has_nurs    | Aggregated Attribute    |
|-------------|-------------|-------------------------|
| usual       | proper      | usual-proper            |
| usual       | less_proper | usual-less_proper       |
| usual       | improper    | usual-improper          |
| usual       | critical    | usual-critical          |
| usual       | very_crit   | usual-very_crit         |
| pretentious | proper      | pretentious-proper      |
| pretentious | less_proper | pretentious-less_proper |
| pretentious | improper    | pretentious-improper    |
| pretentious | critical    | pretentious-critical    |
| pretentious | very_crit   | pretentious-very_crit   |
| great_pret  | proper      | great_pret-proper       |
| great_pret  | less_proper | great_pret-less_proper  |
| great_pret  | improper    | great_pret-improper     |
| great_pret  | critical    | great_pret-critical     |
| great_pret  | very_crit   | great_pret-very_crit    |

Table 5.2: Aggregation of attributes parents and has\_nurse from dataset Nursery.

one with 5 values and the other with 3 values. The second attribute has 72 distinct values corresponding to the aggregation of attributes from the attributes in group **STRUCT.FINAN**. The third attribute, with 9 distinct values, is the combination of the attributes in group **SOC.HEALTH**.

- **Covertime-Ext.** We combined 40 binary attributes related with the soil type into a new attribute with 40 distinct values. The same approach was employed to combine the 4 binary attributes related with the wilderness area into a new attribute with 4 distinct values. This is an interesting case because, apparently, the 40 (soil type) binary attributes as well as the 4 (wilderness area) binary attributes were derived from a binarization of two attributes, one with 40 distinct value and the other with 4 distinct values.
- **Cars-Ext.** To obtain this dataset, the 2 attributes related with the concept **PRICE**, **buying** and **maint**, were combined into an attribute with 16 distinct values. Moreover, the 3 attributes related with concept **CONFORT** were combined into an an attribute with 36 distinct values.
- **Contraceptive-Ext.** The 2 attributes related with the couple’s education were combined into an attribute with 16 distinct values. Moreover, the 3 attributes related with the couple’s occupations and standard of living were aggregated into a new attribute with 32 distinct values.

Samples with missing values were removed from the datasets. Table 5.1 provides some statistics.

## 5.2

### Computing the Maximum Cut

The GW algorithm requires the solution of a semidefinite program (SDP), which may be computationally expensive despite its polynomial time worst case behavior. As an example, for an attribute with 100 distinct values, the solution of the corresponding SDP takes in average about 2 second in our machine. On the one hand, this is a tiny amount of time compared with that required to perform an exhaustive search on the  $2^{100}$  possible binary partitions. On the other hand, faster alternatives are desirable, even at the cost of losing part of the theoretical approximation guarantee.

To avoid solving a SDP, we also evaluated a procedure that first executes the **GreedyCut** algorithm presented in Section 3.1 and then runs a local search as described in the Algorithm 3 in the same section. The use of this approach combined with the two ways of setting the edges' weights lead to Greedy LocalSearch SquaredGini (GLSG) and Greedy LocalSearch  $\chi^2$  (GL $\chi^2$ ) criteria, respectively. For attributes with 100 distinct values this approach is 60-70 times faster than the one based on the GW algorithm.

## 5.3

### Experimental Results

We performed a number of experiments to evaluate how the proposed methods behave with real datasets. All experiments consist of building decision trees with a predefined maximum depth. In addition, to prevent the selection of non-informative nominal attributes, we used a  $\chi^2$ -test for each attribute at every node of the tree: if the  $\chi^2$ -test on the contingency table of attribute  $A$  has  $p$ -value larger than 10% at a node  $\nu$ , then  $A$  is not used in  $\nu$ . Furthermore, attributes with less than 15 samples associated with its second most frequent value are also not considered for splitting. This helps avoid data overfitting.

### 5.3.1

#### Maximum Depth 5

TODO: adicionar resto dos resultados pro PC-ext. TODO: adicionar PC-ext nas analises qualitativas dos resultados.

Table 5.3 presents the results of an experiment to compare the accuracy of Decision Trees built by our methods with those built by Twoing and PC-ext. In this experiment, the maximum depth was set to 5 and we considered just the nominal attributes of the datasets. The motivation for this depth is to produce trees that are relatively easy to interpret and, in addition, some random forests methods (such as boosting) work with shallow trees. Each accuracy is the



Table 5.3: Average accuracy and statistical tests for decision trees with depth at most 5 using only nominal attributes. The best accuracy for each dataset is bold-faced. Experiments that did not finish in reasonable time are considered statistically worse than the others. These criteria have a \* mark besides their average accuracies, since they only consider the experiments that finished.

| Dataset       | Twoing           | GWSG      | GW $\chi^2$      | GLSG             | GL $\chi^2$      | PC-ext           |
|---------------|------------------|-----------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Adult         | 82.21 (2)        | 81.91 (1) | 82.24 (2)        | 81.83 (0)        | 82.24 (2)        | <b>82.31</b> (5) |
| Mushroom      | <b>100</b> (2)   | 99.99 (0) | 99.98 (0)        | <b>100</b> (2)   | 99.99 (0)        | <b>100</b> (2)   |
| KDD98-2       | 80.47 (0)        | 81 (2)    | 80.74 (1)        | 81.16 (3)        | 80.51 (0)        | <b>81.25</b> (4) |
| KDD98-9       | 40.35 (2)        | 38.13 (0) | 40.93 (4)        | 38.15 (0)        | <b>41</b> (4)    | 40.27 (2)        |
| Nursery       | 88.25 (3)        | 88.03 (0) | 88.2 (0)         | <b>88.33</b> (3) | 88.2 (0)         | 88.25 (3)        |
| Nursery-Ext   | <b>93.82</b> (4) | 90.95 (0) | 93.02 (2)        | 90.75 (0)        | 93.13 (2)        | 93.81 (4)        |
| Cars          | 86.53 (1)        | 85.39 (0) | 86.37 (1)        | <b>87.93</b> (5) | 86.42 (1)        | 86.5 (1)         |
| Cars-Ext      | 90.3 (0)         | 90.82 (2) | 91.57 (4)        | 90.84 (2)        | <b>91.9</b> (5)  | 90.32 (0)        |
| Contracep     | 43.77 (0)        | 43.96 (0) | <b>44.04</b> (1) | 43.89 (0)        | 44 (0)           | 43.59 (0)        |
| Contracep-Ext | 43.17 (0)        | 44.32 (4) | 43.44 (0)        | <b>44.35</b> (4) | 43.7 (0)         | 43.77 (1)        |
| CoverType     | 52.97 (2)        | 55.05 (3) | 51.07 (0)        | 55.05 (3)        | 51.07 (0)        | <b>58.12</b> (5) |
| CoverType-Ext | 64.48 (4)        | 64.12 (2) | 57.73 (0)        | 64.23 (3)        | 59.95 (1)        | <b>64.71</b> (5) |
| Poker         | 51.9 (3)         | 50.28 (1) | 51.77 (2)        | 49.94 (0)        | <b>51.91</b> (4) | 51.7 (2)         |
| Shelter-15    | 48.01 (3)        | — (0)     | — (0)            | 45.31 (2)        | <b>48.13</b> (4) | 48.07 (3)        |
| S.F. Crime-15 | <b>22.1</b> (2)  | 21.32 (1) | 22.09 (2)        | 21.23 (0)        | 22.09 (2)        | 22.09 (2)        |
| Phonemes      | <b>30.92</b> (5) | — (0)     | — (0)            | 30.29 (3)        | 29.47 (2)        | 30.59 (4)        |
| Average (Sum) | 63.7 (33)        | * (16)    | * (19)           | 63.33 (30)       | 63.36 (27)       | 64.08 (43)       |

average of 20 stratified 3-fold cross-validations, each generated with a different seed. The entry associated with  $(\mathcal{D}, I)$  has two pieces of information: the average accuracy of criterion  $I$  on dataset  $\mathcal{D}$  and the number of criteria with accuracy statistically lower than that of  $I$  on dataset  $\mathcal{D}$ . The statistical test used for criteria comparison is a one-tailed paired  $t$ -student test with a 95% confidence level. In general, there was a balance among the different methods, except for GWSG, which had slightly inferior accuracies. Another interesting observation is that the GW-based criteria were about equal or slightly inferior to their GL-based counterparts. This advantage is likely related with the fact that the weights of the cuts computed by the GL approach in this experiment are, in general, larger than those obtained by the GW algorithm.

The results of Table 5.3 also provide evidence of the potential of considering aggregated attributes. The accuracy obtained for the extended versions of datasets **Nursery**, **Cars** and **CoverType** are considerably higher than those obtained for the original versions. For **Contracep**, the effect is not clear.

Another key aspect to discuss is the computational cost of the proposed criteria. Table 5.4 shows the running time of each criterion in the experiment of Table 5.3. Twoing is the fastest method when the number of classes is small and the GL-based methods become competitive and eventually the fastest ones when the number of classes gets larger, as illustrated by the results on KDD98 dataset. As the number of classes increases, the GL-based methods become much faster than Twoing, with the turning point being around  $k = 7$ . For datasets with 15 classes our GL criteria are 30-300 times faster. We also ran experiments using all the classes available in both the **S.F. Crime** and **Shelter** datasets (39 and 22, respectively). Twoing and the GW criteria can not be executed in a reasonable time with that many classes, while GLSG

Table 5.4: Average time in seconds of a 3-fold cross validation for building decision trees with depth at most 5. The fastest method for each dataset is bold faced.

| Dataset       | k  | Twoing     | GWSG  | GW $\chi^2$ | GLSG       | GL $\chi^2$ | PC-ext      |
|---------------|----|------------|-------|-------------|------------|-------------|-------------|
| Adult         | 2  | <b>2.7</b> | 41    | 88          | 3          | 4           | 2.8         |
| Mushroom      | 2  | <b>0.6</b> | 6.9   | 8.6         | 0.9        | 1           | 0.7         |
| KDD98-2       | 2  | <b>4</b>   | 2162  | 3579        | 44         | 44          | 5.2         |
| Contracep     | 3  | <b>0.1</b> | 0.6   | 1           | 0.1        | 0.1         | 0.1         |
| Contracep-Ext | 3  | <b>0.1</b> | 3.3   | 13          | 0.2        | 0.2         | 0.2         |
| Cars          | 4  | <b>0.1</b> | 2.5   | 2.4         | 0.1        | 0.1         | 0.1         |
| Cars-Ext      | 4  | 0.2        | 7.7   | 11          | 0.3        | 0.3         | <b>0.2</b>  |
| Nursery       | 5  | <b>0.8</b> | 4.7   | 5           | 1          | 0.9         | 0.9         |
| Nursery-Ext   | 5  | <b>1.1</b> | 76    | 148         | 3.3        | 2.6         | 1.4         |
| CoverType     | 7  | 349        | 265   | <b>179</b>  | 245        | 308         | 271.4       |
| CoverType-Ext | 7  | 213        | 341   | 213         | <b>182</b> | 296         | 196.5       |
| KDD98-9       | 9  | 132        | 3410  | 5899        | 97         | 74          | <b>14.7</b> |
| Poker         | 10 | 7.4        | 6.5   | 11.2        | 2.2        | <b>2.1</b>  | 2.5         |
| Shelter-15    | 15 | 3599       | —     | —           | 149.9      | 166.3       | <b>14.1</b> |
| S.F. Crime-15 | 15 | 638.2      | 605.2 | 823.7       | 40.7       | <b>40.2</b> | 41.7        |
| Phonemes      | 15 | 1343       | —     | —           | 4.4        | 5.5         | <b>2.2</b>  |

and GL $\chi^2$  ran in approximately 100 seconds on the **S.F. Crime** dataset and 300 seconds on the **Shelter** dataset. This behavior for the Twoing criterion is not surprising, since its running time has an exponential dependence of the number of classes  $k$ . Nonetheless, since the execution time for our criteria in this experiment grew in an approximately linear fashion with  $k$ , it suggests that they can also be used with datasets that have a much larger number of classes. It is also interesting to note that the aggregated attributes usually appeared at or near the root of the decision trees. Lastly, the running time for the GW-based criteria were usually one or two orders of magnitude larger than the others. The only clear exception was in the CoverType dataset, where the number of samples is very large while the attributes' number of values is much smaller.

Since the GW-criteria performed much worse in terms of execution time and yield comparable or worse accuracy than the other criteria, they were not used in any of the experiments that follow.

Table 5.5 presents the comparison between our GL methods, Twoing and PC-ext in another scenario, where we use  $c_{quad}$ , one of the bias-free criterion proposed in Hothorn et al. (2006), to select the attribute at each node of the tree. Then, both Twoing, PC-ext and our methods are used only for splitting the chosen attribute, which allows for a more direct comparison of their splitting ability. Once again we observed a balance between the different criteria, with a small advantage towards our methods. Perhaps surprisingly,

Table 5.5: Average accuracy and statistical tests for Conditional Inference trees with depth at most 5 using only nominal attributes. The best accuracy for each dataset is bold-faced.

| Dataset       | CI-Twoing        | CI-GLSG          | CI-GL $\chi^2$   | CI-PC-ext        |
|---------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Adult         | <b>81.96</b> (3) | 81.61 (1)        | 81.77 (2)        | 79.98 (0)        |
| Mushroom      | 86.97 (1)        | <b>94.79</b> (3) | 90.15 (2)        | 86.77 (0)        |
| KDD98-2       | 81.29 (0)        | <b>82.34</b> (3) | 81.68 (2)        | 81.35 (0)        |
| KDD98-9       | 41.84 (0)        | 42 (0)           | <b>42.26</b> (2) | 41.73 (0)        |
| Nursery       | <b>88.48</b> (1) | 88.3 (0)         | 88.47 (1)        | <b>88.48</b> (1) |
| Nursery-Ext   | <b>88.48</b> (1) | 88.26 (0)        | 88.47 (1)        | <b>88.48</b> (1) |
| Cars          | 86.51 (1)        | 85.02 (0)        | <b>86.57</b> (1) | 86.48 (1)        |
| Cars-Ext      | 88.27 (1)        | 88.27 (0)        | <b>88.32</b> (1) | 88.26 (1)        |
| Contracep     | 43.83 (0)        | <b>44.12</b> (2) | 43.87 (0)        | 43.63 (0)        |
| Contracep-Ext | 43.39 (0)        | <b>43.81</b> (2) | 43.76 (2)        | 43.21 (0)        |
| CoverType     | 54.1 (0)         | 54.1 (0)         | 54.1 (0)         | 54.1 (0)         |
| CoverType-Ext | 54.1 (0)         | 54.1 (0)         | 54.1 (0)         | 54.1 (0)         |
| Poker         | <b>51.05</b> (2) | 50.56 (0)        | 50.91 (1)        | 50.8 (1)         |
| Shelter-15    | 48.03 (0)        | 48.03 (0)        | <b>48.22</b> (2) | 48.22 (2)        |
| S.F. Crime-15 | <b>21.59</b> (3) | 20.53 (0)        | 21.49 (1)        | 21.52 (1)        |
| Phonemes      | 23.12 (2)        | 22.52 (1)        | <b>23.8</b> (3)  | 21.3 (0)         |
| Average (Sum) | 61.44 (15)       | 61.77 (12)       | 61.75 (21)       | 61.15 (8)        |

the bias free approach had significantly worse results for the datasets with extended attributes. This experiment also showed that it is not possible to run  $c_{quad}$  in reasonable time for the **Shelter-15** dataset. This happens because it calculates a pseudoinverse of a matrix whose dimension grows with the number of values and classes, which is infeasible for large  $n$  and  $k$ .

Table 5.6 shows experiments similar to those presented at Table 5.3, but now using also the numeric attributes. We observed a significant gain in terms of accuracy for all datasets except for KDD98-2. Also note that GLSG was inferior to both Twoing and GL $\chi^2$ .

### 5.3.2 Maximum Depth 16

In this subsection we explore the same experiments, except now the maximum depth allowed is 16.

Table 5.7 presents the results of an experiment to compare the accuracy of Decision Trees built by our GL-methods with those built by Twoing, using just the nominal attributes of the datasets. In general there was a balance between Twoing and GL $\chi^2$ , with GLSG being slightly worse. This suggests that GLSG loses competitiveness as the tree depth increases.

Table 5.8 presents the comparison between our methods and Twoing in the scenario where we use  $c_{quad}$  to select the attribute at each node of the tree,

Table 5.6: Average accuracy and statistical test results for Decision Trees using both nominal and numeric attributes.

| Dataset       | Twoing      |            | GLSG  |            | $GL\chi^2$  |            | PC-ext      |            |
|---------------|-------------|------------|-------|------------|-------------|------------|-------------|------------|
| Adult         | 84.2        | (1)        | 82.4  | (0)        | 84.2        | (1)        | <b>84.4</b> | <b>(3)</b> |
| KDD98-2       | 80.9        | (0)        | 81.9  | <b>(1)</b> | <b>81.9</b> | <b>(1)</b> | 81.9        | <b>(1)</b> |
| KDD98-9       | 45.7        | (1)        | 45.3  | (0)        | <b>48.7</b> | <b>(3)</b> | 47.4        | (2)        |
| Contracep     | 54.1        | (1)        | 52.9  | (0)        | 54          | (1)        | <b>55.1</b> | <b>(3)</b> |
| Contracep-Ext | 51.7        | (0)        | 52.3  | (0)        | 53.3        | <b>(2)</b> | <b>53.3</b> | <b>(2)</b> |
| CoverType     | <b>70.3</b> | <b>(2)</b> | 68.5  | (0)        | 69.2        | (1)        | 70.2        | <b>(2)</b> |
| CoverType-Ext | 70.9        | (2)        | 70.3  | (1)        | 69.2        | (0)        | <b>71.7</b> | <b>(3)</b> |
| Shelter-15    | 53.7        | (1)        | 51.9  | (0)        | 54.6        | (2)        | <b>54.8</b> | <b>(3)</b> |
| S.F. Crime-15 | 23.5        | (2)        | 23.2  | (0)        | <b>23.6</b> | <b>(3)</b> | 23.5        | (1)        |
| Average (Sum) | 59.44       | (10)       | 58.74 | (2)        | 59.86       | (14)       | 60.3        | (20)       |

and the criteria are used only for splitting the chosen attribute. Again, we observed a balance between Twoing and  $GL\chi^2$ . This experiment also showed that it is not possible to run  $c_{quad}$  in reasonable time for the **Shelter-15** dataset. This happens because it calculates a pseudoinverse of a matrix whose dimension grows with the number of values and classes, which is infeasible for large  $n$  and  $k$ .

Table 5.9 shows the running time of Twoing,  $GL\chi^2$  and GLSG when they are used for both selecting and splitting purposes (the experiment of Table 5.7). When the number of classes is small all the criteria have very similar execution time, with Twoing being faster only on the KDD98-2 dataset. As the number of classes increases, the GL-based methods become much faster than Twoing, with the turning point being around  $k = 7$ . For datasets with 15 classes our criteria are 30-300 times faster. We also ran experiments using all the classes available in both the **S.F. Crime** and **Shelter** datasets (39 and 22, respectively). Twoing can not be executed in a reasonable time with that many classes, while GLSG and  $GL\chi^2$  ran in approximately 100 seconds on the **S.F. Crime** dataset and 300 seconds on the **Shelter** dataset. Nonetheless, since the execution time for our criteria in this experiment grew in an approximately linear fashion with  $k$ , it suggests that they can also be used with datasets that have a much larger number of classes. It is also interesting to note that the aggregated attributes usually appeared at or near the root of the decision trees.

Table 5.10 shows experiments similar to those presented at Table 5.7, except now it also uses the numeric attributes. We observed a significant gain in terms of accuracy for almost all datasets. The performance of  $GL\chi^2$  was competitive with that of Twoing for all datasets but KDD98-9 and CoverType, where it was considerably better and worse, respectively.

Table 5.7: Average accuracy and statistical tests for decision trees with depth at most 16 using only nominal attributes. The best accuracy for each dataset is bold-faced, even when multiple criteria have the same accuracy in the table because of rounding.

| Dataset       | Twoing       |            | GLSG         |            | $GL\chi^2$   |            | PC-ext       |            |
|---------------|--------------|------------|--------------|------------|--------------|------------|--------------|------------|
| Adult         | <b>82.52</b> | <b>(2)</b> | 82.38        | (0)        | 82.43        | (0)        | 82.51        | <b>(2)</b> |
| Mushroom      | <b>100</b>   | <b>(1)</b> | 100          | (0)        | 99.99        | (0)        | <b>100</b>   | <b>(1)</b> |
| KDD98-2       | 79.41        | (0)        | <b>80.65</b> | <b>(3)</b> | 79.73        | (0)        | 79.91        | (1)        |
| KDD98-9       | 38.54        | (1)        | 37.97        | (0)        | <b>39.68</b> | <b>(3)</b> | 38.55        | (1)        |
| Nursery       | 93.51        | (2)        | 92.39        | (0)        | <b>93.74</b> | <b>(3)</b> | 93.5         | (1)        |
| Nursery-ext   | 95.83        | (1)        | 94.79        | (0)        | <b>96.02</b> | <b>(3)</b> | 95.83        | (1)        |
| Cars          | 92.82        | <b>(1)</b> | 90.51        | (0)        | <b>92.88</b> | <b>(1)</b> | 92.69        | <b>(1)</b> |
| Cars-ext      | <b>96.49</b> | <b>(2)</b> | 90.89        | (0)        | 94.44        | (1)        | 96.46        | <b>(2)</b> |
| Contracep     | 43.5         | (0)        | 43.83        | (0)        | <b>43.85</b> | <b>(1)</b> | 43.53        | (0)        |
| Contracep-ext | 43.15        | (0)        | <b>44.32</b> | <b>(2)</b> | 43.72        | (0)        | 43.75        | (1)        |
| CoverType     | 64.09        | (1)        | 64.59        | (2)        | 63.61        | (0)        | <b>64.66</b> | <b>(3)</b> |
| CoverType-ext | <b>65.08</b> | <b>(1)</b> | <b>65.08</b> | <b>(1)</b> | 65.05        | (0)        | 65.08        | <b>(1)</b> |
| Poker         | <b>52.24</b> | <b>(2)</b> | 49.88        | (0)        | 51.83        | (1)        | 52.09        | <b>(2)</b> |
| Shelter-15    | 47.64        | (1)        | 46.52        | (0)        | <b>48.09</b> | <b>(3)</b> | 47.71        | (1)        |
| S.F. Crime-15 | 22.08        | <b>(1)</b> | 22.06        | (0)        | <b>22.08</b> | <b>(1)</b> | 22.08        | <b>(1)</b> |
| Phonemes      | 37.13        | (2)        | 35.9         | (0)        | 35.75        | (0)        | <b>37.95</b> | <b>(3)</b> |
| Average (Sum) | 65.88        | (18)       | 65.11        | (8)        | 65.81        | (17)       | 66.02        | (22)       |

Table 5.8: Average accuracy and statistical tests for conditional inference trees with depth at most 16 using only nominal attributes. The best accuracy for each dataset is bold-faced, even when multiple criteria have the same accuracy in the table because of rounding.

| Dataset       | CI-Twoing   |            | CI-GLSG      |            | CI- $GL\chi^2$ |            | CI-PC-ext    |            |
|---------------|-------------|------------|--------------|------------|----------------|------------|--------------|------------|
| Adult         | 82.33       | <b>(2)</b> | 82.18        | (0)        | <b>82.35</b>   | <b>(2)</b> | 82.28        | (1)        |
| Mushroom      | 99.55       | (1)        | 99.6         | (1)        | <b>99.64</b>   | <b>(2)</b> | 99.4         | (0)        |
| KDD98-2       | 79.92       | (1)        | <b>81.53</b> | <b>(3)</b> | 80.65          | (2)        | 79.72        | (0)        |
| KDD98-9       | 39.44       | (1)        | <b>40.65</b> | <b>(3)</b> | 40.01          | (2)        | 38.85        | (0)        |
| Nursery       | 93.55       | <b>(1)</b> | 92.22        | (0)        | <b>93.56</b>   | <b>(1)</b> | 93.55        | <b>(1)</b> |
| Nursery-ext   | 93.64       | <b>(1)</b> | 92.32        | (0)        | <b>93.65</b>   | <b>(1)</b> | 93.64        | <b>(1)</b> |
| Cars          | 92.74       | (1)        | 87.19        | (0)        | <b>92.92</b>   | <b>(3)</b> | 92.67        | (1)        |
| Cars-ext      | 93.12       | (1)        | 87.38        | (0)        | <b>93.34</b>   | <b>(3)</b> | 93.08        | (1)        |
| Contracep     | 43.82       | <b>(1)</b> | <b>44.05</b> | <b>(1)</b> | 43.81          | (0)        | 43.59        | (0)        |
| Contracep-ext | 43.21       | (0)        | <b>43.78</b> | <b>(2)</b> | 43.72          | <b>(2)</b> | 43.07        | (0)        |
| CoverType     | 61.88       | (0)        | 61.88        | (0)        | 61.88          | (0)        | 61.88        | (0)        |
| CoverType-ext | 61.88       | (0)        | 61.88        | (0)        | 61.88          | (0)        | 61.88        | (0)        |
| Poker         | <b>51.4</b> | <b>(3)</b> | 50.67        | (0)        | 50.84          | (1)        | 51.04        | (1)        |
| Shelter-15    | 47.66       |            | 47.32        |            | <b>48.14</b>   |            |              |            |
| S.F. Crime-15 | 22.07       | (0)        | 22.07        | (0)        | <b>22.07</b>   | <b>(1)</b> | 22.07        | (0)        |
| Phonemes      | 33.91       | <b>(2)</b> | 31.26        | (0)        | 33.32          | (1)        | <b>34.08</b> | <b>(2)</b> |
| Average (Sum) | 66.16       |            | 65.24        |            | 66.24          |            |              |            |

Table 5.9: Average time in seconds of a 3-fold cross validation for building decision trees with depth at most 16. The fastest method for each dataset is bold-faced.

| Dataset       | k  | Twoing | GLSG         | $GL\chi^2$ | PC-ext       |
|---------------|----|--------|--------------|------------|--------------|
| Adult         | 2  | 4.3    | 4.3          | 7.1        | <b>4</b>     |
| Mushroom      | 2  | 0.7    | <b>0.6</b>   | 0.9        | 0.6          |
| KDD98-2       | 2  | 10.8   | 57.8         | 60.8       | <b>8.3</b>   |
| Contracep     | 3  | 0.2    | 0.2          | 0.1        | <b>0.1</b>   |
| Contracep-Ext | 3  | 0.2    | 0.3          | 0.3        | <b>0.2</b>   |
| Cars          | 4  | 0.3    | 0.2          | 0.2        | <b>0.2</b>   |
| Cars-Ext      | 4  | 0.3    | 0.4          | 0.4        | <b>0.2</b>   |
| Nursery       | 5  | 1.6    | 1.4          | 1.4        | <b>1.3</b>   |
| Nursery-Ext   | 5  | 1.7    | 3.9          | 3.6        | <b>1.4</b>   |
| CoverType     | 7  | 846.8  | <b>373.4</b> | 969.6      | 472.4        |
| CoverType-Ext | 7  | 338.6  | 280.5        | 505.7      | <b>200.4</b> |
| KDD98-9       | 9  | 209.9  | 119.9        | 112.5      | <b>23.8</b>  |
| Poker         | 10 | 10.7   | 3.9          | <b>3.7</b> | 3.8          |
| Shelter-15    | 15 | 5183.3 | 155          | 165.7      | <b>18.6</b>  |
| S.F. Crime-15 | 15 | 2667.9 | 94.2         | 79.6       | <b>50.5</b>  |
| Phonemes      | 15 | 3738.6 | 8.7          | 10.2       | <b>6.3</b>   |

Table 5.10: Average accuracy and statistical test results for Decision Trees using both nominal and numeric attributes with depth at most 16.

| Dataset       | Twoing |            | GLSG         |            | $GL\chi^2$   |            | PC-ext       |            |
|---------------|--------|------------|--------------|------------|--------------|------------|--------------|------------|
| Adult         | 83     | (1)        | 77.34        | (0)        | 83.21        | <b>(2)</b> | <b>83.28</b> | <b>(2)</b> |
| KDD98-2       | 76.67  | (2)        | 76.36        | (1)        | 76.04        | (0)        | <b>77.87</b> | <b>(3)</b> |
| KDD98-9       | 37.73  | (1)        | 37.49        | (0)        | <b>43.44</b> | <b>(3)</b> | 39.88        | (2)        |
| Contracep     | 48.78  | <b>(1)</b> | 48.01        | (0)        | 48.66        | <b>(1)</b> | <b>48.93</b> | <b>(1)</b> |
| Contracep-Ext | 48.53  | (0)        | 48.15        | (0)        | <b>48.6</b>  | (0)        | 48.52        | (0)        |
| CoverType     | 85.14  | (1)        | <b>90.32</b> | <b>(3)</b> | 81.38        | (0)        | 86.23        | (2)        |
| CoverType-Ext | 89.1   | (2)        | <b>92.03</b> | <b>(3)</b> | 82.46        | (0)        | 88.32        | (1)        |
| Shelter-15    | 53.79  | (1)        | 52           | (0)        | <b>54.4</b>  | <b>(3)</b> | 53.82        | (1)        |
| S.F. Crime-15 | 26.66  | (0)        | 26.71        | (1)        | <b>27.13</b> | <b>(2)</b> | 27.13        | <b>(2)</b> |
| Average (Sum) | 61.04  | (8)        | 60.93        | (8)        | 60.59        | (11)       | 61.55        | (14)       |

## 6

## Conclusions

In this paper we proposed a framework for designing splitting criteria for handling multi-valued nominal attributes. Criteria derived from our framework can be implemented to run in polynomial time in  $n$  and  $k$ , with theoretical guarantee of producing a split that is close to the optimal one. This is the only known criteria that have all these characteristics simultaneously.

Experiments over 11 datasets suggest that the  $GL\chi^2$  criterion, obtained from our framework, is competitive with the well-established Twoing criterion in terms of both accuracy and speed for datasets with a small number of classes ( $k \leq 7$ ). It is also much faster than Twoing when the number of classes is greater than 10, while keeping a comparable accuracy. Even though the PC-ext criterion does not have a theoretical guarantee, the experiments also show that it has some advantage in terms of accuracy and speed over the other methods, except when using it in the conditional inference tree framework. This suggests that PC-ext is very good in terms of comparing different attributes among themselves, but not in terms of finding the best split for a given attribute. On the other hand, our criteria performed well in all the experiments.

Therefore, our methods are an interesting alternative to deal with datasets with a large number of classes that contain nominal attributes with a large number of different values, since those cannot be properly handled by Twoing due to its exponential running time dependence on the number of classes. In practice, one should also consider using PC-ext and comparing the results obtained.

Furthermore, our experiments also reinforce the potential of aggregating attributes as a tool for improving the accuracy of decision trees. An interesting topic for future research is evaluating the behavior of our criteria in boosted tree methods. Another direction for future work is developing new methods for automatic aggregating attributes, or improving the available ones.

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