

Land cover classification: Squeezing the lemon with AutoML

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Module "Deep Learning"
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Code: github.com/grssnbchr/ml_dl_assignment_2019

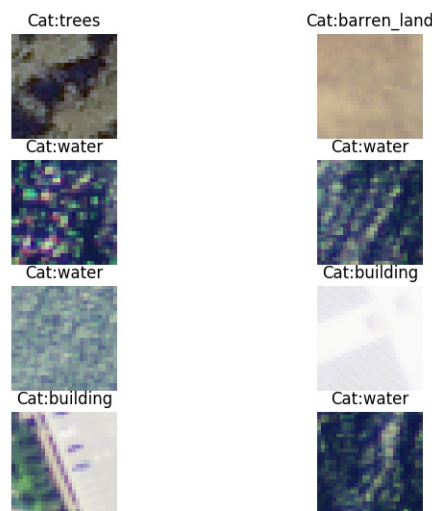
The task & data set

The goal of this assignment is to correctly **predict one out of six different land cover classes** given an input aerial image. The dataset at hand is the **SAT-6 Airborne Dataset** as available on Kaggle [0]:

> 405'000 labelled 28x28px images with 4 channels (RGB + NIR)

> **Test set** size: 81'000

Only 10% of the original data were retained, and only 80% of that were used as **training data** (25'920 images). 20% were left as hold-out validation set for preliminary tests (6480 images).



The "shallow" baseline

A "shallow" (as opposed to "deep") model, namely a **Random Forest with ~1800 trees**, was trained on the **same training data** as part of the ML course module. It reached an **accuracy of 99.0%** on the whole **test set**.

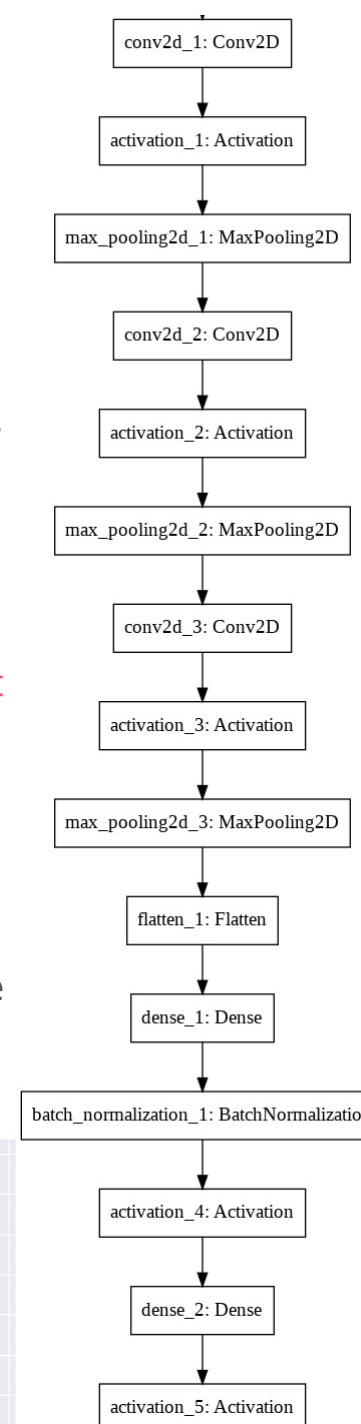
Before training, **extensive preprocessing** was applied to the data: A fifth channel (NDVI) was calculated, the pixel values were standardized, and the dimensionality was heavily reduced through the calculation of mean and st. dev. of each channel.

Simple CNN approach

In the first iteration, a simple **convolutional neural network** with 3 convolution and 3 maxpooling layers each and a total of ~700'000 trainable parameters was trained on the **training data** (see architecture on the right side).

The data were fed to the model as is (no preprocessing as in baseline). The model was trained for 30 epochs, which took about 40 minutes with GPU acceleration. After this, the model reached an **accuracy of 99.1%** on the **hold-out validation set**.

As can be seen from the below training history, the model suffered from overfitting early on. After around 15 epochs, the validation accuracy didn't improve anymore.



AutoML with AutoKeras

AutoML, specifically **Neural Architecture Search (NAS)**, is an optimization technique where the best hypothesis space is searched automatically. This takes considerable resources but is easy to use, i.e. with Google's AutoML or with the open source AutoKeras package:

```
autoclf = ImageClassifier( )
autoclf.fit(X_train, y_train, time_limit=3 * 60 * 60)
autoclf.final_fit(X_train, y_train, X_val, y_val,
retrain=True)
```

After 2 hours of search (with max. 15 epochs per model), AutoKeras had tried out **6 different architectures** without significant progress. The final architecture had an **accuracy of %** on the **validation set** and an **accuracy of %** on the whole **test set** – which is only slightly better than the baseline "shallow" model.

Learnings

1. Deep learning models for image classification **are not always better** than "shallow" models like Random Forests (and they take longer to train).
2. AutoML only makes sense if a) small improvements have a large impact b) enough resources (distributed GPUs) are available.
3. However, AutoKeras found a reasonably good CNN **without any effort** on the user-side.