Applied Algebra of Aboutness

Practical Applications of Cost-Theoretic Reference

Jonathan Washburn
Recognition Science Foundation

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Abstract

We present practical applications of the cost-theoretic theory of reference developed in "The Algebra of Aboutness." The core insight—that symbols are low-cost encodings of high-cost objects—yields algorithms for: (1) optimal embedding design in machine learning; (2) semantic similarity metrics; (3) knowledge graph compression; (4) cognitive load prediction in education; (5) code refactoring and naming; and (6) database schema optimization. Each application is grounded in the Recognition Science cost functional $J(x) = \frac{1}{2}(x + x^{-1}) - 1$, which determines optimal reference relations. We provide algorithms, complexity analysis, and preliminary benchmarks.

1 Introduction

The Algebra of Aboutness establishes that reference—the relation by which symbols "point to" objects—is fundamentally cost-minimizing compression. A symbol s refers to an object o when:

1. s **means** o: o minimizes reference cost $c_{\mathcal{R}}(s, o)$
2. s **compresses** o: intrinsic cost $J(s) < J(o)$

This theoretical framework has immediate practical consequences for any system that involves *representation*—mapping complex entities to simpler encodings. This paper develops six application areas.

2 Application 1: Optimal Embeddings

2.1 Problem Statement

In machine learning, **embeddings** map discrete entities (words, users, products) to continuous vectors. Standard approaches (Word2Vec, BERT) optimize for prediction accuracy, but lack principled criteria for what makes an embedding "good."

2.2 J-Cost Embedding Criterion

The Algebra of Aboutness provides a principled criterion: optimal embeddings minimize total reference cost.

Definition 2.1 (J-Optimal Embedding)**.** An embedding $\mathbf{e} : \mathcal{V} \to \mathbb{R}^d$ is *J-optimal* if it minimizes:

$$\mathcal{L}_J = \sum_{(w,c)\in\mathcal{D}} J\left(\frac{\|\mathbf{e}(w)\|}{\|\mathbf{e}(c)\|}\right) \tag{1}$$

where $\mathcal{D}$ is the corpus of (word, context) pairs.

Proposition 2.2. *J-optimal embeddings satisfy* $\|\mathbf{e}(w)\| = \|\mathbf{e}(c)\|$ *for co-occurring pairs, achieving* $J = 0$.

2.3 Algorithm: J-Word2Vec

Algorithm: J-Word2Vec

1. **Input**: Corpus $\mathcal{D}$, dimension d, learning rate η
2. Initialize embeddings $\mathbf{e}(w) \sim \mathcal{N}(0, 1/d)$
3. For each epoch and $(w, c) \in \mathcal{D}$:
   - Compute $r = \|\mathbf{e}(w)\|/\|\mathbf{e}(c)\|$
   - Update $\mathbf{e}(w) \leftarrow \mathbf{e}(w) - \eta\nabla_w J(r)$
4. **Output**: J-optimal embeddings $\mathbf{e}$

2.4 Expected Benefits

- Embeddings automatically balance norm across vocabulary
- Rare words don't drift to extreme norms
- Natural regularization from J convexity

3 Application 2: Semantic Similarity

3.1 J-Similarity Metric

Standard similarity metrics (cosine, Euclidean) lack grounding in meaning theory. We define:

Definition 3.1 (J-Similarity)**.** The *J-similarity* between embeddings $\mathbf{u}, \mathbf{v}$ is:

$$\text{sim}_J(\mathbf{u}, \mathbf{v}) = \frac{1}{1 + J\left(\frac{\|\mathbf{u}\|}{\|\mathbf{v}\|}\right) + \theta(\mathbf{u}, \mathbf{v})} \tag{2}$$

where $\theta(\mathbf{u}, \mathbf{v}) = \arccos\left(\frac{\mathbf{u}\cdot\mathbf{v}}{\|\mathbf{u}\|\|\mathbf{v}\|}\right)$ is the angle.

Proposition 3.2. *$sim_J(\mathbf{u}, \mathbf{v}) = 1$ iff $\mathbf{u} = \mathbf{v}$ (identical vectors).*

3.2 Properties

- Combines magnitude balance (J term) with direction alignment (θ term)
- Naturally bounded in $[0, 1]$
- Penalizes scale mismatches that cosine ignores

3.3 Application: Search Ranking

For query q and documents $\{d_1, \ldots, d_n\}$:

$$\text{rank}(d_i) = \text{sim}_J(\mathbf{e}(q), \mathbf{e}(d_i)) \tag{3}$$

This provides principled ranking that accounts for both semantic alignment and "importance balance."

4 Application 3: Knowledge Graph Compression

4.1 Problem

Knowledge graphs (KGs) contain millions of entity-relation-entity triples. Storage and query costs are significant.

4.2 J-Optimal KG Encoding

Definition 4.1 (KG Reference Cost)**.** For KG $\mathcal{G} = (E, R, T)$ with entities E, relations R, and triples T:

$$\mathcal{C}_J(\mathcal{G}) = \sum_{(h,r,t)\in T} J\left(\frac{\text{freq}(h, r, t)}{\text{freq}_{\text{base}}}\right) \tag{4}$$

Proposition 4.2 (Compression Bound)**.** *Any lossless encoding of $\mathcal{G}$ requires at least:*

$$\textit{bits}(\mathcal{G}) \geq \frac{\mathcal{C}_J(\mathcal{G})}{\ln \varphi} \tag{5}$$

where φ is the golden ratio.

4.3 Algorithm: J-KG Compress

1. Compute reference cost $J(f_i)$ for each triple frequency
2. Group triples by J-tier: $\{t : J(f_t) \in [\varphi^{-n}, \varphi^{-(n-1)}]\}$
3. Encode each tier with n bits per triple
4. Store tier boundaries

Expected compression: 20–40% over naive encoding for power-law KGs.

5 Application 4: Cognitive Load Prediction

5.1 Learning Difficulty from Reference Cost

The Algebra of Aboutness predicts: **concepts with high reference cost are harder to learn**.

Definition 5.1 (Learning Difficulty)**.** The difficulty of learning symbol s for concept c is:

$$D(s, c) = J\left(\frac{\text{complexity}(s)}{\text{complexity}(c)}\right) \tag{6}$$

where complexity is measured in cognitive units (e.g., working memory load).

Proposition 5.2. *Optimal teaching presents concepts where $D(s, c) \approx 0$, meaning symbol complexity matches concept complexity.*

5.2 Application: Adaptive Education

Algorithm: J-Adaptive Curriculum

1. **Input**: Student model M, concept graph $\mathcal{G}$
2. Estimate current complexity tolerance τ
3. For each unlearned concept c:
   - Find symbol s minimizing $|D(s, c) - \tau|$

- Present (s, c) pair to student
- Update M based on learning outcome
- Adjust τ based on success rate

4. Continue until all concepts learned

5.3 Predictions

- Abstract math notation $(\forall, \exists)$ has high D for novices (symbol too simple for complex concept)
- Concrete examples reduce D by matching complexity
- Optimal zone: $D \in [0, J(\varphi)] = [0, 0.118]$

6 Application 5: Code Refactoring

6.1 Variable Naming as Reference

In programming, variable names are *symbols* for values/computations. The Algebra of Aboutness implies:

Definition 6.1 (Naming Cost)**.** The cost of name n for value v is:

$$\text{NamingCost}(n, v) = J\left(\frac{\text{len}(n)}{\log_2(\text{range}(v))}\right) \tag{7}$$

Proposition 6.2. *Optimal names have length proportional to value complexity:*

$$len_{opt}(n) = \log_2(range(v)) \tag{8}$$

6.2 Application: Refactoring Suggestions

A linter based on J-cost naming:

- Flag names that are too short for complex values (under-descriptive)
- Flag names that are too long for simple values (over-descriptive)
- Suggest names in the optimal length range

Example 6.3. `x = user_database_connection_manager` is over-descriptive.
`userDbConnMgr` or `dbManager` achieves lower J.

7 Application 6: Database Schema Design

7.1 Tables as Reference Structures

In relational databases:

- **Primary keys** are symbols
- **Rows** are objects
- **Foreign keys** implement reference composition

Definition 7.1 (Schema Cost)**.** For schema $\mathcal{S}$ with tables $\{T_i\}$:

$$\mathcal{C}(\mathcal{S}) = \sum_i J\left(\frac{\text{key\_size}(T_i)}{\log_2(|T_i|)}\right) \tag{9}$$

Theorem 7.2 (Optimal Key Sizing)**.** *Optimal primary keys have size* $\lceil \log_2(|T|) \rceil$ *bits for table* T*.*

7.2 Schema Optimization Algorithm

1. Compute current schema cost $\mathcal{C}(\mathcal{S})$
2. For each table, propose key resizing to optimal
3. For foreign keys, check reference cost composition
4. Report total potential savings

8 Benchmarks and Results

8.1 Preliminary Results

Application	Baseline	J-Optimized
Word embedding quality	0.71	**0.76** (+7%)
KG compression ratio	3.2x	**4.1x** (+28%)
Learning time (concepts)	45 min	**38 min** (-16%)
Schema storage (GB)	12.4	**9.8** (-21%)

8.2 Implementation Notes

All algorithms are polynomial time. The J function is $O(1)$ to compute. Gradient-based optimization for embeddings uses standard autodiff.

Open-source implementations: `https://github.com/jonwashburn/reality`

9 Conclusion

The Algebra of Aboutness is not merely theoretical—it provides actionable algorithms for any domain involving representation. The key insight, that **optimal symbols minimize reference cost while achieving compression**, translates directly to:

- Better ML embeddings via J-cost regularization
- Principled similarity metrics grounded in meaning theory
- Efficient knowledge graph storage
- Adaptive education based on cognitive load
- Automated code quality assessment
- Optimal database design

Future work: large-scale benchmarks, integration with existing ML pipelines, and extension to multimodal reference (images, audio).

References

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