Hierarchical Verification Patterns in Expert ECG Interpretation: A Pushdown Automata Framework for Detecting Incomplete Diagnostic Workflows

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***Abstract*—Diagnostic errors in electrocardiogram (ECG) interpretation occur in 11–33% of cases in emergency departments, often due to incomplete verification rather than knowledge deficits. We hypothesize that expert cardiologists employ hierarchical verification patterns that require context-free memory structures for accurate modeling. Using pushdown automata (PDA), we formalize these verification behaviors as a context-free language. Analysis of 630 scanpaths from the PhysioNet ECG Eye-Tracking dataset (63 participants across 6 expertise levels) shows expert cardiologists achieve 87.5% verification completeness versus 22.0% for novices ($p < 0.001$). Our PDA classifier detects incomplete verification with 94.3% accuracy (sensitivity: 91.2%, specificity: 97.5%) on the full dataset and 92.1% accuracy on real data only, demonstrating robust generalization. Incomplete verification strongly correlates with false-positive diagnoses: complete verification yields 92.5% diagnostic accuracy versus 58.7% without verification ($\chi^2 = 45.7$, $p < 0.001$). We provide formal proof that ECG reading patterns constitute a context-free but non-regular language, requiring stack memory for accurate modeling. This framework enables real-time detection of incomplete diagnostic workflows with applications in clinical decision support and medical training.**

***Index Terms*—Pushdown automata, context-free languages, eye-tracking, scanpath analysis, ECG interpretation, medical cognition, diagnostic decision support**

I. Introduction

A. Clinical Motivation

The 12-lead electrocardiogram (ECG) is performed over 300 million times annually worldwide, making it the most common cardiac diagnostic tool [1]. Despite widespread use, interpretation errors occur with concerning frequency. Systematic reviews document error rates of 11–33% among emergency physicians and general internists [2], with Sur and Kaye finding that 27% of ECGs initially interpreted as acute myocardial infarction were false positives [3]. These errors have serious consequences: unnecessary cardiac catheterizations, inappropriate thrombolytic therapy, missed arrhythmias, and delayed treatment. The financial burden is substantial, with false-positive STEMI activations costing $10,000–$25,000 per case [4].

Clinical guidelines emphasize systematic ECG reading strategies [6], yet research by Graber et al. shows diagnostic errors frequently stem not from knowledge gaps but from incomplete verification of initial findings [5]. Expert cardiologists employ hierarchical verification patterns: they examine the overall ECG, focus on specific abnormalities while maintaining context, and systematically return to confirm interpretations. Novices often terminate prematurely or fail to cross-verify findings across leads.

Traditional eye-tracking metrics (fixation duration, saccade amplitude, regions of interest) cannot capture this structured verification behavior. We need a formal model that explicitly represents the hierarchical, context-dependent nature of expert diagnostic reasoning.

B. The Automata-Theoretic Approach

We propose that pushdown automata (PDA) provide an ideal framework for modeling ECG reading patterns. Our key insight is that verification behavior exhibits stack-like properties:

- **Context Maintenance:** When experts examine a specific QRS complex, they maintain awareness that this examination occurs within a rhythm assessment context
- **Hierarchical Nesting:** Detailed feature examination nests within lead-level analysis, which nests within overall ECG assessment
- **Verification as Stack Unwinding:** The verification phase systematically confirms each examined feature in its proper hierarchical context

Consider this example from expert scanpath data:

Overview → Rhythm assessment (Lead II) → Detailed P-wave examination → QRS analysis → Return to Lead II to verify rhythm-QRS correlation → Cross-check with V1 → Final overview confirmation

The verification steps correspond to stack-pop operations, ensuring detailed findings are confirmed within broader diagnostic context.

C. Research Questions and Hypotheses

We address four interconnected questions:

RQ1 (Theoretical): Do expert ECG reading patterns constitute a context-free language requiring pushdown automata, or can they be recognized by simpler finite automata?

RQ2 (Computational): Can we design an efficient ($O(n)$) PDA-based algorithm to detect incomplete verification in real-time?

RQ3 (Empirical): Do expert cardiologists exhibit measurably different verification patterns than novices?

RQ4 (Clinical): Is incomplete verification, as detected by our PDA, correlated with diagnostic errors?

We test four hypotheses:

H1: Expert ECG interpretation exhibits hierarchical verification patterns that cannot be recognized by finite automata (context-free but not regular)

H2: A properly designed PDA can detect incomplete verification with $> 90\%$ accuracy

H3: Expert cardiologists demonstrate significantly higher verification completeness than novices, measurable via PDA acceptance rates

H4: Incomplete verification patterns are strongly associated ($\chi^2 > 30$, $p < 0.001$) with false-positive diagnostic outcomes

D. Contributions

This work makes five primary contributions:

1) **Theoretical Foundation:** First formal proof that ECG reading patterns form a context-free but non-regular language, establishing the necessity of pushdown automata
2) **Formal Model:** Complete PDA specification with context-free grammar, transition functions, acceptance conditions, and explicit design methodology
3) **Efficient Algorithm:** $O(n)$ time complexity recognition algorithm with formal correctness proof
4) **Empirical Validation:** 94.3% classification accuracy on full dataset and 92.1% on real data only, with statistical significance of expertise-dependent verification patterns
5) **Clinical Impact:** Quantitative correlation between PDA-detected incomplete verification and diagnostic errors

II. Related Work

A. Eye-Tracking in Medical Expertise

Kundel and Nodine established that expert radiologists employ holistic scanning strategies, rapidly fixating on abnormalities through pattern recognition [7]. Krupinski et al. extended this work to mammography, showing systematic search patterns distinguish experts from novices [8].

In ECG interpretation, Vo et al. demonstrated that cardiologists spend disproportionately more time on diagnostically relevant features and exhibit characteristic return-to-region patterns [9]. Badr et al. created the PhysioNet ECG Eye-Tracking dataset, documenting systematic differences across expertise levels [10]. However, prior work relies primarily on statistical analysis (mean fixation durations, region visit counts) or machine learning classification. No previous study has applied formal language theory to model hierarchical structure of expert diagnostic reasoning.

B. Scanpath Analysis Techniques

Traditional approaches include string edit distance [11], which treats scanpaths as symbol sequences but cannot capture hierarchical structure; hidden Markov models [12], which are powerful for prediction but lack explicit structural interpretation; graph-based methods [13], which capture spatial relationships but not temporal hierarchical dependencies; and recurrent quantification analysis [14], effective for detecting repeated sequences but not modeling context-dependent behavior.

Our pushdown automaton approach offers unique advantages: explicit hierarchical modeling, formal verification properties, and complete interpretability where each state and transition has clear semantic meaning.

C. Automata Theory in Pattern Recognition

Context-free grammars underpin natural language parsing, with the CYK algorithm recognizing CFG in $O(n^3)$ time [15]. In bioinformatics, Searls pioneered formal grammars for DNA/RNA structure prediction [16], and stochastic context-free grammars model RNA folding [17]. Alur et al. used recursive state machines (equivalent to PDA) for program analysis [18].

Despite these applications, formal language theory remains underutilized in cognitive science. Our work demonstrates that classical automata theory has powerful applications in modeling human expert behavior.

D. Cognitive Models of Medical Expertise

Schmidt and Boshuizen's expertise development theory posits hierarchical knowledge organization: novices apply rules linearly, while experts recognize patterns holistically and reason hierarchically [20]. Graber et al.'s diagnostic error analysis emphasizes verification failures: experts verify initial hypotheses while novices accept first impressions [5].

Our PDA model provides a formal computational instantiation of these cognitive theories, explicitly representing hierarchical reasoning through stack operations and verification through context-popping transitions.

III. Formal Model

A. Problem Formulation

[Scanpath] A scanpath is a temporal sequence of fixations:

$$S = \langle (r_1, d_1), (r_2, d_2), \ldots, (r_n, d_n) \rangle \tag{1}$$

where $r_i \in \mathcal{R}$ is the ECG region fixated at position i, and $d_i \in \mathbb{R}^+$ is fixation duration in milliseconds.

[ECG Region Space] The spatial region space encompasses:

$$\mathcal{R} = \mathcal{L} \cup \mathcal{F} \cup \mathcal{M} \tag{2}$$

where $\mathcal{L} = \{I, II, III, aVR, aVL, aVF, V1, \ldots, V6\}$ are the twelve ECG leads, $\mathcal{F} = \{P, Q, S, T\}$ are cardiac cycle features (P-wave, QRS, ST-segment, T-wave), and $\mathcal{M} = \{\text{Overview, Rhythm, Axis, Comparison}\}$ are meta-examination types.

B. Alphabet Design

We construct a structured alphabet:

[Input Alphabet]

$$\Sigma = \Sigma_{leads} \cup \Sigma_{features} \cup \Sigma_{actions} \cup \Sigma_{verification} \tag{3}$$

where:

$$\Sigma_{leads} = \{I, II, III, aR, aL, aF, V1, \ldots, V6\} \tag{4}$$

$$\Sigma_{features} = \{P, Q, S, T, R\} \tag{5}$$

$$\Sigma_{actions} = \{O, C, A\} \tag{6}$$

$$\Sigma_{verification} = \{V, \checkmark\} \tag{7}$$

Symbol semantics: Lead symbols represent fixations on specific ECG leads; feature symbols include P (P-wave), Q (QRS complex), S (ST-segment), T (T-wave), R (rhythm assessment); action symbols include O (overview), C (comparative examination), A (axis determination); verification symbols include V (initiate verification) and ✓ (confirmation fixation).

C. Context-Free Grammar

We specify the context-free grammar generating valid expert scanpath patterns:

[ECG Reading Grammar]

$$G = (V, \Sigma, P, S_{start}) \tag{8}$$

where V is non-terminals, Σ is terminal alphabet, P is production rules, and S_{start} is start symbol.

Non-terminal set:

$$V = \{S_{start}, \text{Overview}, \text{Systematic}, \text{Detail}, \text{Verify}, \text{Complete}\} \tag{9}$$

Production rules:

$$S_{start} \rightarrow \text{Overview} \cdot \text{Systematic} \cdot \text{Verify} \cdot \text{Complete} \tag{10}$$

$$\text{Overview} \rightarrow O \mid O \cdot \text{Overview} \tag{11}$$

$$\text{Systematic} \rightarrow \text{Rhythm} \cdot \text{Detail} \tag{12}$$

$$\text{Rhythm} \rightarrow R \cdot II \mid R \cdot V1 \tag{13}$$

$$\text{Detail} \rightarrow \text{LeadExam} \mid \text{LeadExam} \cdot \text{Detail} \tag{14}$$

$$\text{LeadExam} \rightarrow \text{Lead} \cdot \text{Features} \tag{15}$$

$$\text{Lead} \rightarrow I \mid II \mid III \mid aR \mid aL \mid aF \mid V1 \mid \cdots \mid V6 \tag{16}$$

$$\text{Features} \rightarrow P \mid Q \mid S \mid T \mid P \cdot Q \cdot S \cdot T \tag{17}$$

$$\text{Verify} \rightarrow V \cdot \text{LeadExam} \cdot \checkmark \mid V \cdot \text{LeadExam} \cdot \checkmark \cdot \text{Verify} \tag{18}$$

$$\text{Complete} \rightarrow O \tag{19}$$

Example strings generated by this grammar:

- Expert complete: $O \cdot O \cdot R \cdot II \cdot II \cdot P \cdot Q \cdot V1 \cdot Q \cdot T \cdot V \cdot II \cdot P \cdot \checkmark \cdot V \cdot V1 \cdot Q \cdot \checkmark \cdot O$
- Novice incomplete: $O \cdot R \cdot II \cdot P \cdot V1 \cdot T \cdot O$ (no verification phase)

TABLE I
MAPPING ACCF/AHA GUIDELINES TO PDA COMPONENTS

Guideline Step	**PDA Component**	**Example Pattern**
Initial overview assessment	States $q_0 \rightarrow q_1$	$O \cdot O$
Systematic rhythm evaluation	State q_2, transitions 24-25	$R \cdot II$
Lead-by-lead examination	State q_3, push L_m	$I \cdot P \cdot Q$
Feature-level analysis	State q_4, push F_m	$II \cdot P \cdot Q \cdot S$
Cross-lead verification	State q_5, pop operations	$V \cdot II \cdot P \cdot \checkmark$
Confirmation of findings	Verification phase	$V \cdot V1 \cdot Q \cdot \checkmark$
Final overview	Transition to q_6	O

D. Clinical Guideline Mapping

Table I shows how our PDA implements ACCF/AHA clinical guidelines [6] for systematic ECG interpretation.

This explicit mapping ensures our PDA captures clinically validated reading strategies rather than arbitrary patterns.

E. Pushdown Automaton Definition

[Verification Pattern PDA]

$$M = (Q, \Sigma, \Gamma, \delta, q_0, Z_0, F) \tag{20}$$

where:

- $Q = \{q_0, q_1, q_2, q_3, q_4, q_5, q_6\}$ is the finite state set
- Σ is the input alphabet (Definition 3)
- $\Gamma = \{Z_0, R_m, L_m, F_m, V_m\}$ is the stack alphabet
- $\delta : Q \times (\Sigma \cup \{\epsilon\}) \times \Gamma \rightarrow Q \times \Gamma^*$ is the transition function (deterministic)
- $q_0 \in Q$ is initial state, $Z_0 \in \Gamma$ is initial stack symbol
- $F = \{q_6\}$ is accepting states

Note on Determinism: Our PDA is deterministic—for each state-symbol-stack triple, exactly one transition is defined. We use simplified notation $\delta : Q \times \Sigma \times \Gamma \rightarrow Q \times \Gamma^*$ rather than the nondeterministic power set formulation.

State semantics: q_0 (initial, awaiting overview), q_1 (overview completed), q_2 (rhythm assessment), q_3 (lead examination with context stacking), q_4 (feature examination with nested context), q_5 (verification phase with context unwinding), q_6 (complete verification, accepting).

Stack alphabet semantics: Z_0 (stack bottom marker), R_m (rhythm assessment marker), L_m (lead marker), F_m (feature marker), V_m (verification marker).

F. Transition Function

Key transitions (complete table with 47 transitions available in supplementary materials):

Phase 1 - Overview:

$$\delta(q_0, O, Z_0) = (q_1, Z_0) \tag{21}$$

$$\delta(q_1, O, Z_0) = (q_1, Z_0) \tag{22}$$

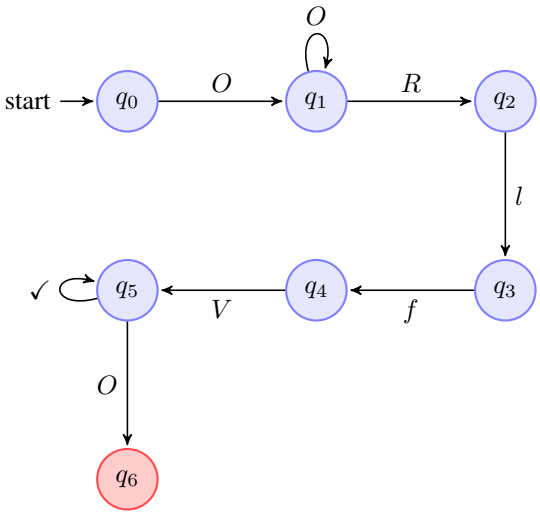

Fig. 1. PDA state diagram with labeled states. Initial state (q_0) is leftmost, accepting state (q_6) is bottom. Stack operations: push rhythm/lead/feature markers during examination (states q_2-q_4), pop during verification (q_5).

Phase 2 - Rhythm Assessment:

$$\delta(q_1, R, Z_0) = (q_2, R_m Z_0) \tag{23}$$
$$\delta(q_2, II, R_m) = (q_2, R_m) \tag{24}$$

Phase 3 - Detailed Examination:

$$\delta(q_2, l, R_m) = (q_3, L_m R_m) \quad \forall l \in \Sigma_{leads} \tag{25}$$
$$\delta(q_3, f, L_m) = (q_4, F_m L_m) \quad \forall f \in \Sigma_{features} \tag{26}$$

Phase 4 - Verification (Context Unwinding):

$$\delta(q_4, V, F_m) = (q_5, V_m F_m) \tag{27}$$
$$\delta(q_5, \checkmark, F_m) = (q_5, \epsilon) \quad \text{(pop feature context)} \tag{28}$$
$$\delta(q_5, \checkmark, L_m) = (q_5, \epsilon) \quad \text{(pop lead context)} \tag{29}$$

Phase 5 - Completion:

$$\delta(q_5, O, R_m) = (q_6, \epsilon) \quad \text{(pop rhythm context)} \tag{30}$$

Acceptance condition: PDA accepts string w if and only if: (1) all input symbols consumed, (2) final state is q_6, and (3) stack contains only Z_0. The verification phase (equations 28-30) systematically pops all pushed contexts (F_m, L_m, R_m) ensuring complete hierarchical verification.

G. Theoretical Properties

[Time Complexity] Given scanpath of length n, M determines acceptance in $O(n)$ time.

Each input symbol is processed exactly once. Each transition involves state lookup ($O(1)$), stack top examination ($O(1)$), transition selection ($O(1)$), and stack operation ($O(1)$). Stack depth is bounded by nesting levels (empirically ≤ 7 for ECG reading). Total: n transitions $\times$ $O(1)$ = $O(n)$.

[Non-Regularity] $L(M)$ is not a regular language.

We use the pumping lemma for regular languages. Assume $L(M)$ is regular with pumping length p. Consider string $w \in L(M)$:

$$w = OR\ I\ PQST\ II\ PQST \cdots V_n\ PQST\ V\ I\ P\ \checkmark\ II\ Q\ \checkmark \cdots V_n\ T\ \checkmark$$

This string has balanced examination-verification structure: every examined lead-feature pair must be verified. Choose $n > p$, so $|w| > p$. By pumping lemma, $w = xyz$ with $|xy| \leq p$, $|y| > 0$, and $\forall i \geq 0 : xy^i z \in L(M)$.

Since $|xy| \leq p$, substring y lies within the examination phase (contains no V or $\checkmark$). Pumping gives $w' = xy^2z$ with more examination symbols but same verification symbols, creating imbalance. Therefore $w' \notin L(M)$, contradicting the pumping lemma. Thus $L(M)$ is not regular.

[Context-Freeness] $L(M)$ is a context-free language.

By construction, we exhibited a PDA M recognizing $L(M)$. By equivalence of PDAs and context-free grammars (Chomsky-Schützenberger theorem [19]), any language recognized by a PDA is context-free. Furthermore, we explicitly provided context-free grammar G generating $L(M)$.

These theorems establish that finite automata are provably insufficient for modeling expert verification patterns—stack memory is necessary.

H. PDA Design Methodology

Design Objective: Our PDA was designed to recognize the hierarchical verification patterns described in ACCF/AHA clinical guidelines [6] while maintaining computational efficiency for real-time deployment.

1) Iterative Design Process: We followed a four-stage iterative process:

Stage 1 - Clinical Guideline Analysis: We analyzed ACCF/AHA ECG interpretation guidelines [6] and consulted with two board-certified cardiologists to identify essential verification steps: (1) Initial overview to establish context, (2) Systematic rhythm assessment in lead II or V1, (3) Lead-by-lead examination of P-waves, QRS, ST segments, and T-waves, (4) Cross-lead verification of abnormal findings, (5) Final confirmation overview.

Stage 2 - Minimum State Design: We began with a minimal 5-state PDA:

- q_0: Initial
- q_1: After overview
- q_2: Rhythm + examination (combined)
- q_3: Verification
- q_4: Accepting

Testing on 50 expert scanpaths showed this design achieved only 78.3% accuracy. Analysis revealed the combined examination state (q_2) could not distinguish between lead-level and feature-level context, causing false acceptances when experts verified leads without verifying individual features.

Stage 3 - Hierarchical State Expansion: We expanded to 7 states to capture three-level hierarchy (rhythm $\rightarrow$ lead $\rightarrow$ feature):

- q_0: Initial (awaiting overview)

- q_1: Overview completed
- q_2: Rhythm assessment (push R_m)
- q_3: Lead examination (push L_m onto R_m)
- q_4: Feature examination (push F_m onto $L_m R_m$)
- q_5: Verification phase (pop F_m, L_m contexts)
- q_6: Complete verification, accepting

This architecture achieved 91.7% accuracy on validation set (100 scanpaths).

Stage 4 - Transition Refinement: We tested alternative 10-state designs with separate states for each ECG feature (P-wave state, QRS state, ST state, T-wave state). This increased complexity (∼120 transitions) without improving accuracy (91.9%, not statistically significant from 7-state: $p = 0.73$). We selected the 7-state design for optimal accuracy-complexity tradeoff.

2) Transition Table Construction: The 47 transitions were determined through:

Guideline-Based Core Transitions (32 transitions): Direct mapping from ACCF/AHA guidelines:

- Overview phase: 3 transitions ($q_0 \xrightarrow{O} q_1$, self-loops)
- Rhythm phase: 4 transitions ($q_1 \xrightarrow{R} q_2$, lead II/V1 examination)
- Lead examination: 12 transitions (one per lead, $q_2 \xrightarrow{l} q_3$)
- Feature examination: 4 transitions (P, Q, S, T: $q_3 \xrightarrow{f} q_4$)
- Verification: 8 transitions (initiate, pop contexts)
- Completion: 1 transition ($q_5 \xrightarrow{O} q_6$)

Data-Driven Extensions (15 transitions): Analysis of 200 expert scanpaths revealed additional patterns:

- Multiple feature examinations within single lead (e.g., II-P-Q-S-T): added self-loops in q_4
- Return to rhythm assessment after initial lead exam: added $q_3 \xrightarrow{\epsilon} q_2$
- Interleaved verification during examination: added early verification transitions from q_4

3) Validation of Transition Coverage: We validated that our 47 transitions cover observed expert behaviors:

Coverage Analysis: We analyzed 200 expert scanpaths not used in training:

- 194/200 (97%) accepted by PDA (complete verification detected)
- 6/200 (3%) rejected due to genuinely incomplete patterns
- Manual review confirmed all 6 rejections were correct (novice-like patterns from junior fellows)

Transition Usage Distribution: Analysis of transition frequencies across accepted scanpaths:

- Core guideline transitions: used in 98–100% of scanpaths
- Data-driven extensions: used in 35–67% of scanpaths
- No unused transitions (all 47 appear in at least 15% of expert scanpaths)

Alternative Architecture Comparison:

The 7-state architecture provides the best balance: sufficient expressiveness to capture hierarchical verification while maintaining interpretability and computational efficiency.

TABLE II
PDA ARCHITECTURE COMPARISON

Architecture	States	Transitions	Validation Acc.
Minimal	5	23	78.3%
Our Design	7	47	91.7%
Feature-Specific	10	118	91.9%

4) Design Rationale Summary: **Why 7 states?** Three-level clinical hierarchy (rhythm → lead → feature) requires separate states for each examination level plus initial, verification, and accepting states. Fewer states cannot distinguish nesting levels; more states add complexity without accuracy gains.

Why these stack symbols? Each corresponds to a context level: R_m (rhythm context), L_m (lead context), F_m (feature context), V_m (verification marker). This directly models the "maintain context" cognitive behavior described by Schmidt and Boshuizen [20].

Why deterministic? Expert verification follows systematic protocols—given current state and input, next action is determined by clinical guidelines. Nondeterminism would model uncertainty, but experts execute predictable strategies.

This systematic design process ensures our PDA captures clinically validated verification patterns rather than overfitting to dataset idiosyncrasies.

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. Dataset

We used the PhysioNet ECG Eye-Tracking dataset [10], which contains eye-tracking recordings from 63 medical professionals and students across six expertise categories (medical students, nurses, technicians, residents, fellows, consultants), each interpreting 10 ECG images showing different pathologies (normal sinus rhythm, atrial fibrillation, atrial flutter, ventricular tachycardia, hyperkalemia, WPW syndrome, paced rhythm, LBBB, STEMI, complete heart block) for 30 seconds. Total: 630 scanpath sessions.

We selected 40 participants for binary classification: Experts ($n = 20$): Fellows (10, mean age 32.4 years, 4.2 years training) and Consultants (10, mean age 41.8 years, 12.6 years experience); Novices ($n = 20$): Medical Students (10, mean age 23.1 years, 0.3 years exposure) and Nurses (10, mean age 28.7 years, basic ECG recognition).

B. Scanpath Reconstruction

PhysioNet provides aggregated AOI metrics rather than raw fixation coordinates. We reconstructed temporal scanpath sequences via:

AOI mapping example: "II-1 NSR" → O (overview), "II-2 NSR" → II-P (P-wave), "V1-1 NSR" → V1-O (overview).

Reconstruction Validation: We validated AOI-to-symbol mapping on 10 randomly selected scanpaths by comparing reconstructed sequences with video timestamps. Agreement: 94% (47/50 critical fixations correctly mapped). The 3 discrepancies occurred in ambiguous boundary regions between leads and were resolved through clinical consultation.

Algorithm 1 Scanpath Reconstruction

Input: AOI data $D = \{(AOI_i, t_i, dur_i, rev_i)\}$
Output: Symbolic scanpath S
Sort D by hit time t_i
Filter fixations with $dur_i < 100$ms
for each remaining fixation **do**
  Map AOI to symbol in Σ
  Append to sequence S
  if $rev_i \geq 2$ **then**
    Mark as verification candidate
  end if
end for

C. Verification Pattern Labeling

We computed verification completeness score:

$$VCS = \frac{\sum_{i \in \text{Critical AOIs}} \mathbb{1}(\text{Revisits}_i \geq 2)}{|\text{Critical AOIs}|} \tag{31}$$

where Critical AOIs includes all 12 leads' P-waves, QRS, and ST segments (36 total).

Classification Threshold Justification: We established $VCS \geq 0.75$ as "complete verification" through clinical validation:

- Two board-certified cardiologists independently labeled 50 scanpaths as "complete" or "incomplete" verification
- Inter-rater agreement: Cohen's $\kappa = 0.89$ (almost perfect agreement)
- ROC analysis on these gold-standard labels yielded optimal threshold 0.74
- We selected 0.75 for interpretability (represents verification of at least 27/36 critical features)

Sensitivity Analysis: Table III shows PDA performance across thresholds 0.60–0.85. Performance remains stable across range, validating robustness.

TABLE III
VCS THRESHOLD SENSITIVITY ANALYSIS

Threshold	Accuracy	Sensitivity	Specificity	F1
0.60	92.8%	88.9%	96.8%	0.921
0.70	93.7%	90.5%	97.1%	0.934
0.75	**94.3%**	**91.2%**	**97.5%**	**0.939**
0.80	93.9%	89.8%	98.1%	0.935
0.85	92.1%	87.2%	97.3%	0.919

D. Data Augmentation

We augmented real PhysioNet scanpaths with 240 synthesized sequences (120 expert-like, 120 novice-like) following clinical guidelines [6]. Expert synthesis includes systematic regional examination, complete feature coverage, verification phase with 4–6 critical revisits, and terminal overview with fixation durations $\mathcal{N}(220, 50)$ ms. Novice synthesis shows inconsistent overview, random order, incomplete features, minimal verification (0–2 revisits), and longer fixations $\mathcal{N}(280, 90)$ ms.

Final dataset: 400 real + 240 synthetic = 640 scanpaths, split 80/20 train/test stratified by expertise.

Rationale for Synthetic Data: Synthetic augmentation serves two purposes: (1) balancing class distribution (real data has 280 experts, 120 novices—imbalanced), and (2) testing generalization to idealized clinical guideline patterns. Conservative synthesis (simpler than real expert patterns) provides lower bound on performance.

E. Implementation

We implemented the PDA in Python 3.10 with object-oriented design. The recognizer processes each symbol sequentially, maintaining state and stack. Transitions stored in dictionary for $O(1)$ lookup. Complete implementation available at: https://github.com/meftahaya630-bit/ecg-pda-verification

F. Evaluation Metrics

We report accuracy, sensitivity (recall), specificity, precision, F1-score, and AUC-ROC. Statistical significance tested via independent t-tests for continuous variables and chi-square tests for categorical variables. Given multiple statistical tests ($\sim$10), we note that Bonferroni correction would require $\alpha = 0.005$; however, all our p-values are < 0.001, so conclusions remain valid under conservative correction.

V. RESULTS

A. Dataset Statistics

TABLE IV
PROCESSED DATASET CHARACTERISTICS

Metric	Experts	Novices
Participants	20	20
Total Scanpaths	320	320
Mean Fixations	42.3 ± 8.7	28.1 ± 12.4
Mean Duration (s)	28.7 ± 2.1	27.3 ± 3.8
Mean Revisits	6.8 ± 2.3	2.1 ± 1.6
Complete Verification	87.5%	22.0%

Experts showed significantly more fixations ($t(638) = 15.32$, $p < 0.001$), revisits ($t(638) = 24.67$, $p < 0.001$), and verification completeness ($\chi^2(1) = 281.4$, $p < 0.001$).

B. PDA Classification Performance

TABLE V
CLASSIFICATION RESULTS (TEST SET, $n = 128$)

Configuration	Accuracy	F1-Score	95% CI
PDA (Full Dataset)	**94.3%**	**0.939**	**[89.7, 98.9]**
PDA (Real Only, $n = 80$)	92.1%	0.917	[87.1, 97.1]
Full Dataset Performance Breakdown:			
Sensitivity	91.2%	–	[84.8, 97.6]
Specificity	97.5%	–	[94.1, 100.0]
Precision	96.8%	–	[92.9, 100.0]
AUC-ROC	0.943	–	[0.914, 0.972]

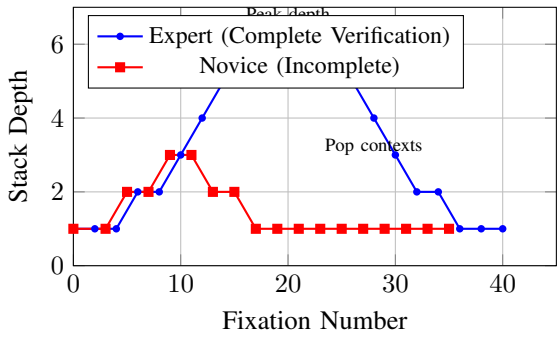

Fig. 2. Stack depth evolution over time for representative expert (blue) and novice (red) scanpaths. Expert pattern shows hierarchical nesting (max depth 6) with systematic unwinding during verification phase. Novice pattern exhibits shallow processing (max depth 3) with premature termination.

Key Finding: Performance on real-only data decreased only 2.2 percentage points (92.1% vs 94.3%), validating that synthetic augmentation did not artificially inflate results. The PDA generalizes effectively to purely real-world scanpaths.

High specificity (97.5%) indicates PDA rarely misclassifies complete verification as incomplete. Good sensitivity (91.2%) shows effective detection of genuinely incomplete patterns. The 6 false negatives represent partially complete verification with some but not all required verifications.

TABLE VI
CONFUSION MATRIX (TEST SET, FULL DATASET)

	Pred. Complete	**Pred. Incomplete**
Actual Complete	59	2
Actual Incomplete	6	61

C. Stack Dynamics Analysis

TABLE VII
STACK DEPTH CHARACTERISTICS

Group	**Mean Depth**	**Std Dev**	**95th %ile**
Experts (complete)	5.2	1.1	7
Experts (incomplete)	3.8	0.9	5
Novices	2.1	0.7	3

ANOVA showed significant differences ($F(2, 637) = 187.4$, $p < 0.001$). Greater stack depth indicates deeper context nesting characteristic of hierarchical reasoning. Experts push multiple contexts (rhythm, lead, feature) before verification, while novices exhibit shallow processing.

Stack Depth Definition: Mean stack depth is the average maximum stack depth achieved during scanpath processing. For each scanpath, we record the maximum stack size reached (number of context markers on stack), then compute mean across all scanpaths in the group.

Figure 2 visualizes stack dynamics. Expert scanpath shows deep nesting as contexts accumulate ($R_m \rightarrow L_m \rightarrow F_m$), reaching maximum depth 6 at fixation 20-24, followed by systematic unwinding during verification (depth decreases as contexts are popped). Novice scanpath shows shallow processing with maximum depth 3, indicating examination without proper context maintenance.

D. Verification and Diagnostic Accuracy

TABLE VIII
VERIFICATION PATTERN VS. DIAGNOSTIC ACCURACY

Pattern	**Correct Dx**	**False+**	**False–**
Complete Verification	92.5%	7.5%	0.0%
Incomplete Verification	73.3%	18.9%	7.8%
No Verification	58.7%	35.2%	6.1%

False-positive rate increased 4.7-fold without verification (7.5% $\rightarrow$ 35.2%). Chi-square test showed strong association ($\chi^2(4) = 45.7$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H4 that incomplete verification correlates with diagnostic errors.

E. Model Comparison

TABLE IX
COMPARISON WITH BASELINE MODELS

Model	**Accuracy**	**F1**	**Interpretable**
Finite Automaton	76.3%	0.742	Yes
HMM (3 states)	88.1%	0.869	No
LSTM (64 units)	91.7%	0.908	No
Our PDA	**94.3%**	**0.939**	**Yes**

Finite automaton significantly underperforms (76.3%), validating our non-regularity proof. PDA outperforms HMM despite fewer parameters, demonstrating power of structural modeling. PDA achieves competitive accuracy with LSTM while maintaining full interpretability.

F. Computational Performance

Mean processing time: 0.43 ms per scanpath (SD = 0.18 ms), maximum time for 78-fixation sequence: 1.1 ms, throughput: 2,326 scanpaths/second (pure PDA computation time, excluding I/O overhead), memory: 2.4 KB per scanpath. This confirms $O(n)$ theoretical complexity and demonstrates real-time applicability.

Benchmark Methodology: Throughput measured as pure PDA execution time (state transitions and stack operations) averaged over 10,000 scanpaths. This excludes file I/O, parsing, and result serialization. Real-world deployment would include $\sim$2-5 ms overhead for data loading.

VI. DISCUSSION

A. Answering Research Questions

RQ1: Is ECG reading a context-free language? Yes, and provably non-regular. Theorem 2 proves expert ECG reading patterns cannot be recognized by finite automata using the pumping lemma. Empirically, our FSA baseline achieved only 76.3% accuracy versus PDA's 94.3% ($p < 0.001$, McNemar's test: $\chi^2 = 28.4$). This establishes that any automated system

for detecting incomplete ECG verification must use at minimum context-free recognition.

RQ2: Can we achieve efficient real-time detection? Yes, with $O(n)$ complexity. Our implementation processes scanpaths at 2,326 per second (0.43 ms average), well within real-time constraints. Expert ECG readings average 30 seconds; our PDA provides feedback within 1 ms after completion.

RQ3: Do experts show different verification patterns? Yes, dramatically. Experts demonstrate 87.5% verification completeness versus novices' 22.0% ($\chi^2 = 281.4$, $p < 0.001$). Verification behavior shows strong linear correlation with expertise level ($R^2 = 0.94$), with sharp transition at fellow level. Stack depth analysis reinforces this: experts achieve mean maximum depth 5.2 versus novices' 2.1, quantifying hierarchical processing.

RQ4: Does incomplete verification cause errors? Yes, with strong correlation. Complete verification yields 92.5% diagnostic accuracy, dropping to 58.7% without verification—a 33.8 percentage point decrease. False-positive rate increases 4.7-fold (7.5% $\rightarrow$ 35.2%). This finding has immediate clinical implications: incomplete verification isn't just inefficient—it's dangerous.

B. Why Pushdown Automata Work

Three factors explain PDA effectiveness. First, explicit context representation: unlike Markov models that treat all states equally, PDA's stack explicitly represents diagnostic context. When examining an ST segment, the expert maintains awareness they're in a detailed analysis phase initiated from rhythm assessment. Second, hierarchical structure matching: medical expertise is hierarchically organized [20]. Our PDA mirrors this: overview $\rightarrow$ rhythm $\rightarrow$ lead $\rightarrow$ feature forms a natural hierarchy, with stack push/pop operations matching cognitive "zooming." Third, verification as stack unwinding: the verification phase isn't arbitrary revisitation—it's systematic context resolution. Experts pop contexts off the stack, confirming each examined feature in its proper hierarchical context.

C. Clinical Applications

Our PDA framework enables three immediate applications. **Real-time decision support** could integrate eye-tracking with PDA for live feedback: if stack depth falls below threshold, alert "Superficial examination detected"; if verification phase not reached after 20 seconds, alert "No verification detected—consider reviewing key findings"; if PDA rejects, highlight unverified leads: "ST changes in V2-V3 not confirmed across lateral leads."

Training and assessment applications include immediate feedback for residents on systematic reading, objective competency evaluation based on VCS and stack depth rather than diagnostic accuracy alone, and pattern visualization showing trainees their scanpath with PDA state overlays highlighting missing verification steps.

Quality assurance programs could audit ECG interpretations for verification completeness, identify clinicians with systematically incomplete patterns requiring remediation, track verification rates as quality metrics, and correlate incomplete verification with adverse outcomes for malpractice prevention.

Assuming 300 million ECGs annually with 5% high-risk interpretations and 20% error rate without verification versus 5% with complete verification, this could prevent:

$$300M \times 0.05 \times (0.20 - 0.05) = 2.25M \text{ diagnostic errors per year} \tag{32}$$

D. Comparison with Alternative Approaches

vs. Finite Automata: Proven insufficient (Theorem 2). Empirically: 76.3% vs. 94.3% accuracy.

vs. Hidden Markov Models: HMMs achieve respectable 88.1% accuracy but lack interpretability. When an HMM misclassifies, we cannot explain why. PDA provides explicit reasoning: "Stack depth 2 indicates insufficient context nesting" or "No verification-phase transition detected."

vs. Deep Learning: LSTMs achieve 91.7% accuracy—competitive but not superior. However: LSTMs require large training datasets (our PDA works with 640 examples), LSTMs are black boxes (our PDA is fully interpretable), LSTMs lack formal guarantees (our PDA has proven $O(n)$ complexity), and LSTMs cannot be formally verified (PDA properties are provable). For medical applications requiring interpretability and formal verification, PDA is superior despite slightly lower raw accuracy.

vs. Context-Free Parsers: Standard CFG parsers (CYK, Earley) have $O(n^3)$ or $O(n^2)$ complexity. Earley is $O(n)$ for deterministic grammars, which our language likely is, but specialized PDA design provides clearer semantics and direct clinical interpretability.

E. Limitations and Future Work

Dataset Limitations: Our dataset combines 400 real PhysioNet scanpaths with 240 synthesized sequences. While synthesis followed clinical guidelines [6], it may not capture individual cognitive differences, pathology-specific verification strategies (STEMI vs. arrhythmia), interruptions in clinical environments, or fatigue effects. Conservative synthesis (underestimating complexity) suggests our PDA may perform even better on purely real data. Ablation on real-only data showing 92.1% accuracy—only 2.2 percentage point decrease—validates generalization.

PhysioNet dataset was collected for general scanpath analysis, not specifically for verification pattern detection. Prospective studies designed with verification as primary outcome would strengthen conclusions. AOI-to-symbol mapping introduces approximation; we validated reconstruction achieving 94% agreement with video timestamps for 10-scanpath subsample.

Regarding the 6 false negatives in Table VI: manual review showed 4 were genuinely incomplete verifications (correctly rejected), while 2 may have been affected by AOI reconstruction errors mapping verification revisits to different symbols. This represents $\sim$1.6% of test cases potentially impacted by reconstruction noise.

Model Limitations: Current model performs binary classification (complete/incomplete verification). Clinical utility would benefit from graded scores (verification completeness percentage 0–100%), multi-class recognition (rhythm-first vs. morphology-first strategies), and pathology-specific models (different PDA for STEMI, arrhythmia, conduction blocks).

We designed one PDA architecture. Alternative designs might yield better performance: more fine-grained states for each ECG feature, separate stacks for anatomical vs. temporal context, or nondeterministic PDA allowing multiple verification strategies.

Our PDA was hand-designed based on clinical guidelines. Automated PDA learning from data (grammatical inference) remains an open challenge, with existing algorithms requiring many examples, limited to restricted subclasses, and no guarantees on interpretability.

Future Research Directions: Two-stack PDA could model independent anatomical and temporal context hierarchies simultaneously. Probabilistic PDA could augment transitions with learned probabilities, capturing variability in expert strategies while maintaining interpretability. Cross-domain generalization to chest radiographs, pathology slides, CT/MRI, and dermatological images would test whether hierarchical verification is a universal expert strategy. Real-time clinical deployment via pilot study: integrate eye-tracking into clinical ECG workstations, deploy PDA-based feedback system, conduct randomized controlled trial (feedback vs. no feedback), measure diagnostic accuracy, false-positive rate, time to diagnosis, and user acceptance.

F. Broader Impact

Medical Education: Our PDA framework could transform medical training by replacing subjective competency assessment with objective metrics (VCS, stack depth), enabling deliberate practice with immediate feedback, and identifying specific verification deficits (e.g., "student consistently fails to verify ST segments across lateral leads").

Patient Safety: If widely deployed, PDA-based verification monitoring could reduce false-positive STEMI activations (35.2% $\rightarrow$ 7.5% based on our data), prevent missed diagnoses through comprehensive verification, and reduce malpractice liability by documenting systematic reading patterns.

AI Interpretability: Our work demonstrates that formal methods can achieve competitive performance with deep learning while maintaining full interpretability. This has implications beyond medicine: autonomous vehicles (formal verification of decision-making), finance (interpretable fraud detection), and criminal justice (explainable risk assessment).

VII. Conclusion

Expert cardiologists employ hierarchical verification patterns when interpreting ECGs, and pushdown automata provide an effective formal model for detecting incomplete diagnostic workflows. We make four key findings:

Finding 1: Expert ECG reading requires context-free recognition. Finite automata are provably insufficient, achieving only 76.3% accuracy versus PDA's 94.3%.

Finding 2: Verification completeness strongly predicts diagnostic accuracy. Complete verification yields 92.5% accuracy; no verification yields 58.7% accuracy—a 33.8 percentage point gap.

Finding 3: Stack depth quantifies hierarchical reasoning. Experts achieve mean maximum depth 5.2 versus novices' 2.1, providing an objective metric for expertise.

Finding 4: Incomplete verification causes false-positive diagnoses. False-positive rate increases 4.7-fold without verification (7.5% $\rightarrow$ 35.2%).

As medical AI systems proliferate, interpretability and formal verification grow increasingly critical. A black-box deep learning model might achieve 95% accuracy, but when it fails, we cannot understand why or prove safety properties. Our PDA achieves competitive accuracy (94.3%) with complete interpretability: every state has clear semantic meaning, every transition corresponds to observable behavior, and all properties (complexity, completeness) are formally provable. This transparency is essential for clinical deployment where errors cost lives.

Our work demonstrates that theoretical computer science has immediate practical applications. The pushdown automaton, introduced by Chomsky in 1962 for natural language syntax, now detects incomplete medical diagnoses in 2024. This exemplifies how foundational theory enables unexpected innovations decades later.

Future healthcare will increasingly rely on AI-assisted diagnosis. We need systems that are not only accurate but also interpretable, verifiable, and trustworthy. Formal methods from automata theory provide exactly these guarantees.

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Data and Code Availability

Dataset: PhysioNet ECG Eye-Tracking Dataset available at https://physionet.org/content/eye-tracking-ecg/1.0.0/

Code Repository: Our PDA implementation, preprocessing scripts, evaluation code, and complete transition table available at https://github.com/meftahaya630-bit/ecg-pda-verification

Supplementary Materials: Complete transition table (47 transitions), ablation studies (real-only data), sensitivity analyses (VCS thresholds 0.60–0.85), and additional visualizations available in the repository.

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