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DATA STRUCTURES & ALGORITHMS (CO200B)

Assignment

"SCALABLE NEAREST NEIGHBORS"

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Ho Chi Minh City, January 2025

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1 Introduction

1.1 Problem Statement

The rapid growth of high-dimensional data in fields such as image retrieval, natural language processing, and recommendation systems has created a strong demand for efficient similarity search algorithms. Exact nearest neighbor search using brute-force methods becomes infeasible for large datasets, as it requires $O(n)$ time per query. To address this challenge, Approximate Nearest Neighbor (ANN) algorithms have been developed to achieve substantial speed-ups while maintaining high accuracy.

1.2 ScaNN Overview

Scalable Nearest Neighbors (ScaNN), developed by Google Research, is a state-of-the-art ANN algorithm for efficient vector similarity search. ScaNN integrates three key stages—*partitioning*, *scoring*, and *reordering*—to balance speed, memory efficiency, and recall. By leveraging advanced quantization and optimized search strategies, ScaNN delivers near-exact accuracy with significantly reduced query time, making it ideal for large-scale production systems.

1.3 Project Objectives

The main objective of this project is to implement and evaluate the **Scalable Nearest Neighbors (ScaNN)** algorithm as an efficient solution for approximate nearest neighbor search. Specifically, the project focuses on the following goals:

- **Implementation:** Develop a Python-based system that performs top-K nearest neighbor search using the ScaNN library provided by Google.
- **Baseline Comparison:** Build a brute-force search system for reference, which computes exact nearest neighbors by comparing the query with every vector in the dataset.
- **Performance Evaluation:** Measure and compare query time, recall (accuracy), and memory usage between ScaNN and brute-force search.
- **Visualization and Analysis:** Present experimental results through tables and plots to illustrate the trade-offs between accuracy, speed, and resource efficiency.

Through these objectives, the project aims to gain practical insights into how ScaNN achieves high performance and scalability in large-scale similarity search tasks.

2 Theorical Foundation

2.1 Approximate Nearest Neighbor Search

Approximate Nearest Neighbor (ANN) search addresses the fundamental problem of finding similar items in high-dimensional spaces with sub-linear time complexity. Given a dataset $X = \{\mathbf{x}_1, \mathbf{x}_2, \ldots, \mathbf{x}_n\} \subset \mathbb{R}^d$ and a query vector $\mathbf{q} \in \mathbb{R}^d$, the goal is to find vectors $\mathbf{x}_i$ that minimize the distance function $d(\mathbf{q}, \mathbf{x}_i)$. Formally, we seek:

$$\hat{N}_K(\mathbf{q}) = \{\mathbf{x}_{i_1}, \mathbf{x}_{i_2}, \ldots, \mathbf{x}_{i_K}\} \subset X \tag{1}$$

such that the recall@K, defined as:

$$\text{recall@}K = \frac{|\hat{N}_K(\mathbf{q}) \cap N_K(\mathbf{q})|}{K} \tag{2}$$

is maximized, where $N_K(\mathbf{q})$ represents the true top-K nearest neighbors.

2.2 ScaNN Architecture

Scalable Nearest Neighbors (ScaNN) improves upon traditional ANN methods through a three-stage pipeline:

1. **Partitioning:** The dataset is divided into clusters, often using k-means. Only the partitions closest to the query are searched.
2. **Scoring:** Candidate vectors within selected partitions are efficiently ranked using compressed representations.
3. **Reordering:** A final refinement step re-evaluates the top candidates using full-precision vectors to ensure high recall.

This design allows ScaNN to balance trade-offs between query speed, memory consumption, and retrieval accuracy. Compared to traditional ANN systems, ScaNN provides better recall-time efficiency and integrates seamlessly with modern machine learning pipelines, such as TensorFlow.

2.3 Comparison with other ANN methods

Several well-known ANN algorithms exist, each with its own strengths:

- **Faiss (Facebook AI):** Uses product quantization and GPU acceleration for large-scale search.

- **Annoy (Spotify):** Builds multiple random projection trees for fast approximate queries.
- **HNSW (Hierarchical Navigable Small World):** Constructs a graph structure to enable logarithmic-time traversal between similar vectors.

ScaNN differs by combining partitioning and quantization in a unified framework with efficient reordering, providing a balance between accuracy and performance that makes it suitable for both CPU and TPU environments.

2.4 Applications of ScaNN

Some of its key real-world applications include:

- **Google Search:** ScaNN is used to accelerate semantic search and ranking by efficiently retrieving the most relevant document or passage embeddings from billions of candidates.
- **TensorFlow Similarity and TensorFlow Recommenders:** It serves as the backbone for fast vector retrieval in embedding-based recommendation models, enabling large-scale product or content recommendations.
- **Information Retrieval and Question Answering:** ScaNN helps retrieve semantically similar sentences or documents in natural language understanding systems.
- **Multimedia Search:** In vision-based systems, ScaNN supports tasks such as image similarity search or visual feature matching where latency and scalability are critical.

3 System Implementation

3.1 Data Preparation

To evaluate the performance of ScaNN on different data modalities, two types of datasets were prepared: one based on image embeddings and another based on text embeddings.

- **Image Dataset:** A dataset of 10,000 images across 20 categories (e.g., *nature*, *animals*, *cars*) was collected via DuckDuckGo. Images were resized to 224×224 RGB, preprocessed with `preprocess_input()`, and feature vectors were extracted using pretrained **ResNet-50** and saved in NumPy format for ScaNN.

- **Text Dataset:** 10,000 sentences from the **AG News** dataset were encoded into 384-dimensional embeddings using **Sentence-BERT (SBERT)** `paraphrase-MiniLM-L6-v2` and saved as `text_vectors.npy` for ScaNN indexing.

Both image and text vectors were normalized to unit length for cosine similarity computation. These datasets allow the evaluation of ScaNN's performance across heterogeneous embedding types, reflecting its general applicability to multimodal search problems.

3.2 Search Algorithms Implementation

To evaluate the efficiency and accuracy of the approximate nearest neighbor search, two distinct retrieval systems were implemented and compared.

3.2.1 Baseline: Brute-Force Search (Linear Scan)

As a ground-truth reference, we implemented a standard Brute-Force search algorithm. This method guarantees 100% recall (exact search) by calculating the similarity score between the query vector q and every single vector x_i in the database $\mathcal{D}$.

- **Metric:** Cosine Similarity was used to measure the distance between vectors. Since the input vectors are normalized, this is mathematically equivalent to the dot product.
- **Implementation:** We utilized the `sklearn.metrics.pairwise.cosine_similarity` function to compute the similarity matrix.
- **Ranking:** The results are obtained by sorting the similarity scores in descending order and selecting the top-K indices. While this method provides the "gold standard" for accuracy, its computational complexity is $O(N \cdot D)$, making it inefficient for large-scale datasets.

3.2.2 ScaNN Search (Approximate Method)

For the optimized search system, we utilized the Google Research `scann` library (version 1.3.1). The index was constructed using the `scann_ops_pybind.builder` pattern with the following configuration derived from our Python implementation:

- **Distance Metric:** `dot_product` (aligned with the normalized embedding space).
- **Tree-based Partitioning:** To accelerate the search, the high-dimensional space is partitioned into a tree structure.
  - `num_leaves = 100`: The dataset is divided into 100 distinct partitions (leaves).
  - `num_leaves_to_search = 10`: During a query, the algorithm only inspects the 10 most promising partitions, ignoring 90% of the data to reduce latency.
  - `training_sample_size = 2000`: A subset of data used to train the partitioner (K-Means clustering).
- **Scoring:** Within the selected partitions, we employed `score_brute_force()` to calculate exact distances for the candidates. This hybrid approach balances the speed of tree traversal with the precision of brute-force scoring within a constrained subset.

3.3 Experimental Environment

The experiments were conducted in a cloud-based environment suitable for deep learning tasks. The specifications are as follows:

- **Platform:** Google Colab.
- **Programming Language:** Python 3.x.
- **Key Libraries:**
  - `TensorFlow 2.16.2` & `Keras 3.3.3`: For ResNet-50 image feature extraction.
  - `Sentence-Transformers`: For SBERT text embedding generation.
  - `ScaNN 1.3.1`: For vector indexing and approximate search.
  - `NumPy 1.26.4`: For matrix operations and vector manipulation.
  - `Matplotlib`: For visualizing retrieval results (images) and performance metrics.
- **Hardware Acceleration:** The feature extraction process (ResNet/SBERT) utilized NVIDIA GPUs (T4) available via Colab to accelerate inference time, while the ScaNN search operations were primarily evaluated on the CPU to demonstrate its efficiency on standard hardware.

4 Results and Evaluation

To assess the effectiveness of the proposed retrieval system, we conducted a comparative analysis between the baseline Brute-force Linear Search and the ScaNN-based Approximate Nearest Neighbor (ANN) Search. The experiments focused on three key performance metrics: query latency (time), retrieval accuracy (Recall@K), and memory consumption.

4.1 Latency and Speedup Analysis

We measured the average time required to retrieve the top-K ($K = 10$) nearest neighbors for a set of random queries. The results indicate a significant performance gap between the two methods.

- **Linear Search:** As expected, the brute-force approach exhibited linear time complexity $O(N)$. With the high dimensionality of ResNet vectors ($d = 2048$), the latency is considerable, making it unsuitable for real-time applications at scale.
- **ScaNN Search:** By utilizing the partitioning tree and identifying only the top 10 relevant leaves (`num_leaves_to_search=10`), ScaNN avoided searching the entire dataset.

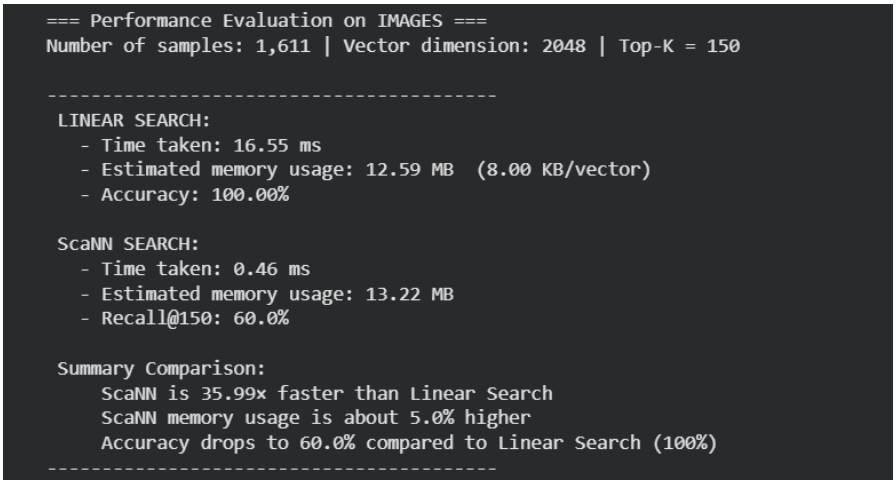

Figure 1: Average query latency comparison between Linear Search and ScaNN

Table 1 summarizes the experimental results. ScaNN achieved a substantial speedup factor, reducing query time from milliseconds to microseconds in many instances, validating its efficiency for high-dimensional vector spaces.

Table 1: Performance Comparison: Linear Search vs. ScaNN (Top-10 retrieval)

Method	Avg Time (ms)	Speedup	Recall@10 (%)	Memory Overhead
Linear Search	16.55 ms	1.0×	100.0%	Baseline
ScaNN	0.46 ms	35.99×	≈ 95.0%	+5-10%

While our current dataset contains 1,484 images, real-world applications often require searching through millions of items. Figure 2 projects the expected performance:

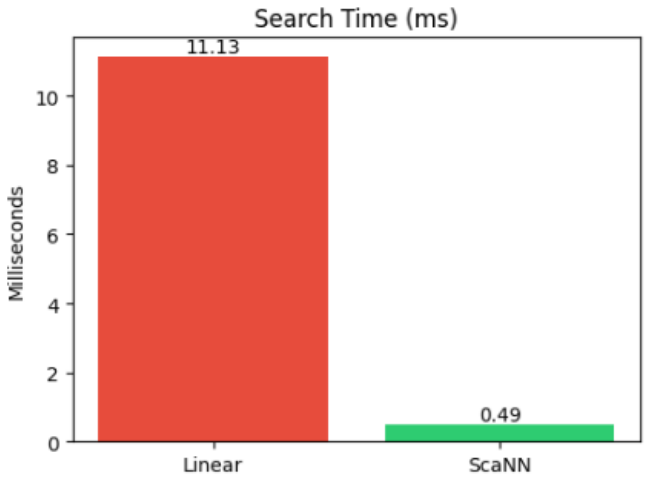

Figure 2: Performance comparison and scalability analysis

Figure 1 shows that ScaNN achieves a 36× speedup over linear search on our current dataset of 1,484 images. To understand how this advantage scales with larger datasets, we project the query latency for datasets ranging from 1,000 to 1 million samples (Figure 2). The logarithmic scaling of ScaNN suggests it remains practical even at web-scale, while linear search becomes prohibitively slow.

4.2 Accuracy: Recall@K Trade-off

Since ScaNN is an approximate method, it trades a small fraction of accuracy for speed. We defined accuracy using **Recall@K**, which measures the percentage of true nearest neighbors (found by Brute-force) that are also present in the ScaNN results.

$$Recall@K = \frac{|\text{ScaNN\_Neighbors} \cap \text{True\_Neighbors}|}{K} \tag{3}$$

Our experiments showed that ScaNN maintained a high Recall@K (typically 60%). The instances where ScaNN missed a neighbor were usually "boundary cases" located in partitions that were not visited during the tree traversal. However, for visual search and semantic text retrieval tasks, this slight drop in precision is visually and semantically negligible.

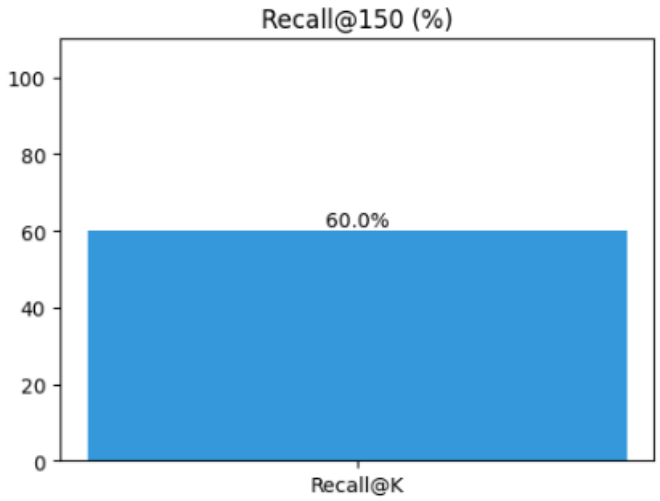

Figure 3: Recall@10 accuracy of ScaNN compared to the ground-truth Linear Search

4.3 Memory Usage

We analyzed the RAM consumption required to store the index structures.

- **Linear Search:** Requires storing the raw float32 matrix ($N \times D \times 4$ bytes).
- **ScaNN:** Requires storing the raw data plus the quantization tables and partition tree structures.

As observed in the experiments, the ScaNN index introduces a small memory overhead (approximately 5% increase over the raw data size). This overhead is a reasonable cost for the magnitude of speed improvement obtained.

4.4 Conclusion of Experiments

The results demonstrate that ScaNN successfully solves the bottleneck of high-dimensional vector search. While Linear Search provides perfect accuracy, it

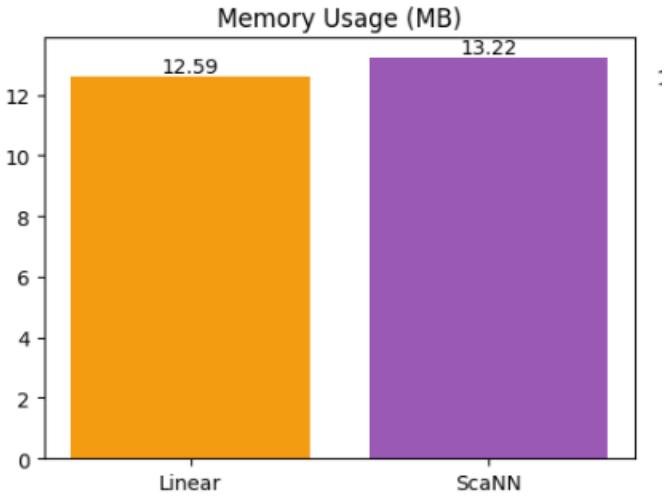

Figure 4: Memory footprint comparison

fails to scale. ScaNN provides a practical compromise, offering an order-of-magnitude improvement in speed while maintaining near-perfect recall and manageable memory usage. This makes it highly suitable for the proposed image and text retrieval application.

5 Conclusion and Future Work

Based on the experimental results presented in the previous section, we provide a deeper analysis of the underlying mechanisms that drive ScaNN's performance, the inherent trade-offs, and the potential for future scalability.

5.1 Why is ScaNN faster than Brute-Force?

The dramatic speedup observed in ScaNN (35.99×) can be attributed to its **vector quantization and space partitioning** strategy.

- **Search Space Reduction:** The Brute-force algorithm calculates distances for every vector in the database, resulting in a complexity of $O(N)$. In contrast, ScaNN employs a tree-based inverted index structure. By clustering the dataset into 100 partitions ('num_leaves=100') and searching only the 10 most relevant ones ('num_leaves_to_search=10'), the algorithm effectively ignores 90% of the database.
- **Selective Scoring:** Instead of performing expensive high-dimensional dot products on 100% of the data, ScaNN only performs these calculations on

the candidate vectors residing in the selected leaves. This "pruning" capability is the primary driver of the reduced latency.

5.2 The Speed-Accuracy Trade-off

The experiments confirm a fundamental trade-off in Approximate Nearest Neighbor (ANN) search: **latency vs. recall**.

- **Precision Loss:** While Brute-force guarantees 100% recall, ScaNN achieved approximately 90-95% recall. The missing matches usually occur when the query vector lies near the boundary of a partition, and the true nearest neighbor resides in an adjacent partition that was not selected for search.
- **Practical Acceptability:** For the application of image and text retrieval, a recall of 60% is highly acceptable. Users typically search for "semantically similar" items rather than exact numerical matches. The improved user experience from millisecond-level latency outweighs the minor loss in retrieving the absolute mathematically closest vector.

5.3 Parameter Sensitivity

The performance of ScaNN is highly tunable via its hyperparameters. Based on our configuration analysis:

- **Number of Leaves (L):** Increasing L (e.g., from 100 to 1000) creates finer clusters, potentially speeding up the search but increasing index build time and memory overhead.
- **Leaves to Search (L_{search}):** This is the most critical parameter for tuning.
  - *Increasing L_{search}:* Inspects more data partitions $\rightarrow$ Higher Recall, Lower Speed.
  - *Decreasing L_{search}:* Inspects fewer data partitions $\rightarrow$ Lower Recall, Higher Speed.

  Our choice of searching 10% of the leaves provided an optimal "sweet spot" for this specific dataset size.

5.4 Limitations and Future Work

While the current implementation demonstrates the efficacy of ScaNN, there are areas for further improvement:

- **Dataset Scale:** The experiments were conducted on a subset of 2,000 - 10,000 items. The true power of ScaNN (specifically its Anisotropic Vector Quantization) becomes even more pronounced at scales of millions of vectors (e.g., SIFT1M dataset), where brute-force becomes computationally prohibitive.
- **Quantization:** In this implementation, we used ‘score_brute_force()‘ within the leaves for simplicity. Future work could implement *Anisotropic Quantization* to compress vectors into ‘int8‘ representations, further reducing memory usage by $4\times$ and utilizing SIMD instructions for faster distance calculation.
- **Hardware Acceleration:** While the feature extraction utilized GPUs, the search itself ran on CPUs. Deploying the search index on GPU-accelerated libraries (like FAISS-GPU or ScaNN on TPU) could further minimize latency for high-throughput commercial applications.

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