

# Multiple Sclerosis Lesion Segmentation using Improved Convolutional Neural Networks

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**Abstract:** The Multiple Sclerosis (MS) lesion segmentation is critical for the diagnosis, treatment and follow-up of the MS patients. Nowadays, the MS lesion segmentation in Magnetic Resonance Image (MRI) is a time-consuming manual process carried out by medical experts, which is subject to intra- and inter-expert variability. Machine learning methods including Deep Learning has been applied to this problem, obtaining solutions that outperformed other conventional automatic methods. Deep Learning methods have especially turned out to be promising, attaining human expert performance levels. Our aim is to develop a fully automatic method that will help experts in their task and reduce the necessary time and effort in the process. In this paper, we propose a new approach based on Convolutional Neural Networks (CNN) to the MS lesion segmentation problem. We study different CNN approaches and compare their segmentation performance. We obtain an average dice score of 57.5% and a true positive rate of 59.7% for a real dataset of 59 patients with a specific CNN approach, outperforming the other CNN approaches and a commonly used automatic tool for MS lesion segmentation.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Multiple Sclerosis (MS) is a chronic neurological disease that afflicts especially the young population between the ages 20 and 50. It affects 2.3 million people worldwide and can cause symptoms such as loss of vision, loss of balance, fatigue, memory and concentration problems, among others. It remains a very challenging disease to diagnose and treat, due to its variability in its clinical expression (National MS Society, 2017). MS is characterized by lesions throughout the brain that are caused by the loss of myelin sheath around neurons in the brain, which is also known as demyelination. The lesions are visible in several modalities of Magnetic Resonance Image (MRI) with different contrasts. The number and the total volume of MS lesions are indicative of the disease stage and are used to track disease progression.

The accurate segmentation of lesions in MRI is important for the accurate diagnosis, adequate treatment development and patient follow-up of the MS

disease. Manual segmentation of MS lesions by experts is the most commonly used technique and is still considered to produce the most accurate results although it suffers from many complications. First of all, it is subject to intra- and inter-expert variability, which means there are significant differences between two segmentations performed by two different experts (due to slightly varying definitions) or by the same expert at different times (due to fatigue or similar factors). Secondly there is a shortage of adequately trained experts given the huge amount of segmentation need. Thirdly, the segmentation task requires valuable expert time and concentration, which could ideally be dedicated to other tasks. These drawbacks make it necessary and desirable to develop a semi-automatic segmentation method that would assist experts in the task with a reduced amount of time and intra- inter-expert variability or, in the ideal case, a fully automatic segmentation method which would obviate the need for experts and produce accurate/reproducible results.

Several methods previously presented in the literature resort to machine learning approaches. Some methods use supervised approaches with hand-crafted features or learned representations and some other methods use unsupervised approaches like clustering which aim to detect lesion voxels as outliers. Examples of supervised models used in MS segmentation tasks are k-nearest neighbour methods, artificial neural networks, random decision forests and bayesian frameworks among others (Garcia-Lorenzo et al., 2013). Examples of unsupervised models are fuzzy c-means or Gaussian mixture models with expectation maximization (EM) (Garcia-Lorenzo et al., 2013). Unsupervised models suffer from non-uniformity in the image intensities and lesion intensities since this variability cannot be captured by a single global model (Havaei, 2016). In this respect supervised methods present an advantage, potentially being able to capture this variability with the appropriate choice of training set or features.

Recently, Deep Learning (DL) has been very successful in the Computer Vision area, achieving improvements in accuracies sometimes as high as 30% (Plis et al., 2014). The main strength in DL, also differentiating it from other machine learning methods, is its automatic feature extraction capability. Normally, raw data has to be processed automatically or manually to extract meaningful and useful features through a process commonly known as "feature engineering". This process requires time and careful analysis, and includes subjectivity, which might bias the results or produce erroneous results. However, in DL, the feature extraction is data-driven using an appropriate loss function and learning algorithm for Deep Neural Networks, which removes the subjectivity, randomness and expert knowledge to a certain degree. Moreover, the features obtained are hierarchical, each network layer producing more abstract features using the less abstract features obtained in the previous layer. Thus feature extraction is carried out step-by-step, which is likelier to produce more complex and useful features. Another strength of DL is its ability to represent very complex functions, which might also be considered as its drawback since it is prone to easily over-fit. However, the over-fitting can be prevented with the correct guidance and regularization methods. DL methods are also robust to outliers, which is very common in neuroimaging data (Goodfellow et al., 2016), (Bengio, 2012) and (Deep Learning, 2017).

Previous work on MS lesion segmentation with DL is generally developed using voxelwise classification (lesion vs. normal) and is done on 2D/3D patches centered on the voxel of interest to obtain a complete

segmentation of the whole brain (Greenspan et al., 2016). There are also some studies considering the whole image as input and performing a segmentation in a single step as in (Brosch et al., 2015) and (Brosch et al., 2016). In some methods global context is provided to the network, in addition to the local context, to give more information about the nature of a voxel (Ghafoorian et al., 2017). Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) are commonly used as part of the architecture due to their strong feature extraction capabilities dealing with images (Vaidya et al., 2015), while Restricted Boltzmann Machines (RBMs) and Auto-encoders are generally exploited to obtain a good initialization of the network, which might affect the ultimate performance, as shown in (Brosch et al., 2015) and (Brosch et al., 2016).

In this paper, we propose a MS lesion segmentation method based on a voxelwise classification on MRI with DL using a combination of different approaches presented in the literature together with our own contributions. We explore a new sub-sampling method to improve the learning process and develop a new Convolutional Neural Networks (CNN) approach to achieve better performance results. The aim of this study is to achieve a method that will surpass the performance of existing methods in helping the experts in the MS lesion segmentation work and even make their interruption minimal. We compare different approaches with DL so far applied to MS Segmentation.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

In this section, we present our strategies for data pre-processing, sub-sampling of the training set, designing the CNN architecture and developing different approaches to improve the segmentation performance.

### 2.1 Data Pre-processing

We dispose of T1 and T2 MRI modalities, tissue segmentation and manual lesion segmentations of 59 subjects from Hospital Clínic (Barcelona). The tissue segmentation was performed by Freesurfer v.5.3.0 toolbox (Freesurfer, 2013). The manual segmentation was performed by an expert / two experts from Hospital Clínic team. The voxel resolution of the MRIs is 0.86mm x 0.86mm x 0.86mm and the image size is 208 x 256 x 256. As a pre-processing of the MRI images we apply skull stripping, bias-field correction, tissue-segmentation and co-registration. Additionally we apply 0-mean unit-variance normalization to the data. For this process we use the Scikit-Learn's pre-processing package (Scikit-Learn, 2010).

## 2.2 Sub-sampling strategy

We pose the segmentation problem as a voxelwise classification throughout the MRI image; therefore, by a sample we mean a 3D patch centered on the voxel of interest (to be classified). Initially we consider patches of size 11x11x11. A positive sample is such a patch centered on a lesion voxel, while a negative sample is a patch centered on a non-lesion voxel.

The data comes with a big imbalance of positive-negative samples; negative samples greatly outnumbering the positive ones, because the lesion regions generally make up a very small proportion of the whole brain. To overcome this problem in the training set, we take all the positive samples and select as many negative samples using two different approaches: random sampling and sampling around the lesions.

By random sampling we mean choosing negative samples randomly throughout the brain, without taking into account its location. By sampling around lesions we mean taking negative samples very close to the lesion areas. The latter approach produced better results in the initial experiments therefore we kept to this approach in the final experiments. This might be due to the fact that in the random sampling method, the selected negative samples are very similar to each other and does not represent the diversity of the negative samples. However, when we select the negative samples around the lesions, we add more variety and harder cases to the training set. In addition, we avoid the negative examples very close to (2-voxels) lesion regions, since these voxels may be in reality lesion voxels although they were not labeled as such by the expert.

Finally, it is important to note that we select the samples from white and gray matter although the studies so far generally chose their data from only white matter since the probability to have a lesion in the white matter is far greater than having it in the gray matter.

## 2.3 Patch-based classification using CNN

Our initial CNN architecture is based on the study (Vaidya et al., 2015) with several differences. We use a simple CNN architecture with two convolutional layers and one fully connected layer. The patches are 3D cubes centered on the voxel of interest, which are obtained from T1 and T2 images. The first convolutional layer uses 60 kernels of size 4x4x4 with a stride value of 1 and no padding. This layer is followed by an average pooling layer that takes 2x2x2

patches of the output generated in the previous layer and produces an average for each patch. The stride value for average pooling is 2. The second convolutional layer consists of 60 kernels of size 3x3x3 with a stride value of 1 and no padding. After this second layer of convolutions we use average pooling of 2x2x2 patches with a stride value of 2 and followed by a fully connected layer. This layer consists of 200 hidden units that are fully connected to the output of the previous layer.

In the study (Vaidya et al., 2015) authors use 3 modalities T1, T2, and FLAIR, but we use only two, T1 and T2 since we do not have the FLAIR modality for our patients. The patch size they use is 19x19x19 but since our images have nearly half the resolution of the images used in the study we choose our initial patch size as 11x11x11. They consider different modalities as input channels and start from 4D data. We chose to start with separate branches from different modalities and merge them at the fully-connected layer since our experiments show improvements with this approach. Also our subsampling method which was explained in the previous section, differs from theirs.

For the convolutional layers and fully connected layer ReLU (Rectified Linear Unit) is used as activation function. The output layer is a softmax layer of two units, which produces a probability for the two classes, which are lesion and non-lesion for the center voxel. The class with a higher probability is the decision class produced. To compute gradients and guide the training of the network cross-entropy loss function is used. We use mini-batch gradient descent with a batch size of 128 for each training step. To adjust the convergence speed of the algorithm, an adaptive learning method, namely Adam (Adaptive Moment Estimation) is used which adapts the momentum and learning rate throughout the training. At the convolutional layers, batch normalization is applied, which is known to lead to faster convergence and which serves as a type of regularization method. We apply dropout to the fully connected layer to add further regularization. The number of epochs is set experimentally. An scheme of the proposed architecture can be seen in Figure 1.

## 2.4 Improvements of the original model

Starting from the first model described above, we test several approaches with different experimental settings and improvements of the original approach: lesion location information, multi-class classification and cascade approach.

**Lesion location information.** As a second ap-

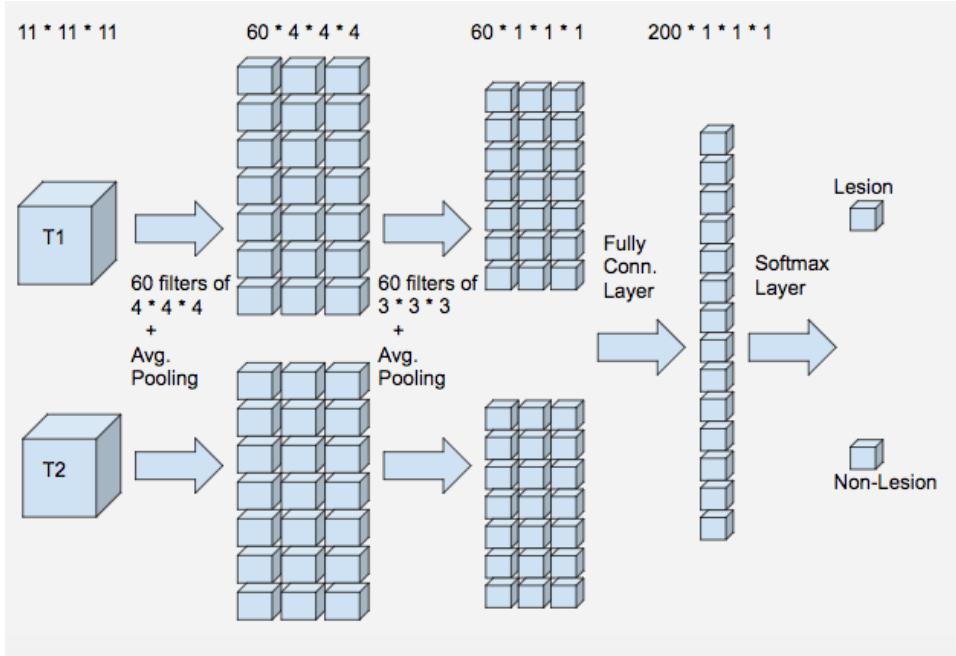


Figure 1: Proposed CNN Architecture

proach, we add the lesion location information to the feature set to test if it improves the results. We think this information might be useful since the probability of having a lesion in certain regions of the brain might show differences. For this approach we store the x, y, z coordinates of each patch, we normalize them and add these features at the fully connected layer. The additional computational cost by adding these 3 features is negligible for training and testing.

**Patch size.** As the third approach, we increase the patch size from 11x11x11 to 19x19x19 to see if giving more information of the context improves the results. Note that increasing the patch-size increases the number of initial features cubically. This means increasing the computational cost substantially. We keep the location information for this approach and further approaches.

**Cascade.** Up to this point, the main problem in the obtained results of our approaches is the high number of false positives obtained. Even though true negative rates reached levels of 96% the resulting segmentation contained a high number of false positives, even surpassing the number of true lesion voxels, due to the high number of non-lesion voxels in the brain compared to the lesion voxels. This is undesirable for an automatic segmentation technique since the human expert will need to discard these false positives, which might even make the automatic segmentation useless. The next approach focuses on decreasing these false positives.

In the fourth approach, we implement two CNNs in a cascade fashion as proposed in the study of (Valverde et al., 2017). We implement a CNN as explained before (in the second approach, with 11x11x11 patch size and location information) and obtain a first model. With this model, we segment all the training subjects automatically, which are used in the selection of training samples for the second stage. For the second model, we use exactly the same architecture as in the first stage but the sampling method differs. For positive samples, we choose all the lesion voxels; For the negative samples, we choose as many non-lesion voxels in such a fashion that half of this number comes from the false positives, which were wrongly classified negative samples in the first stage, and the other half comes from the true negatives from the first stage segmentation results. The reason to choose the false positives is to be able to remove these false positives in the second stage and the reason to choose from true negatives is to prevent the model to forget the knowledge obtained in the first model. In the original study negative samples are only selected from the false negatives, which in our case performed far from desired. The second stage model is thus trained with the samples selected as just explained. In the testing stage, an initial segmentation is obtained using the first CNN model. The candidate lesions obtained from the first model are fed into the second model and a final segmentation is obtained with the resulting positives of the second model. The

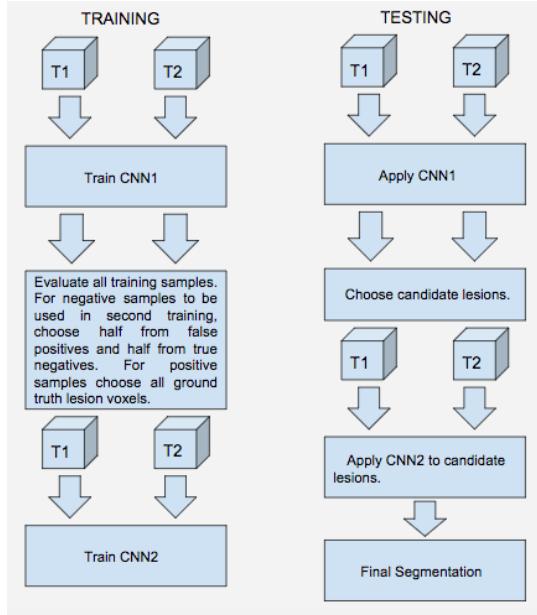


Figure 2: Two stage training and testing - Cascade

computational cost to the training of this model is more than twice the cost of a one-stage model, since it also includes the evaluation of all the training samples. However, once the training is obtained the computational cost for testing does not double since the samples evaluated in the second stage are a very small proportion of the whole sample set. Figure 2 illustrates the cascade approach.

With the cascade implementation we should reduce the number of false positives at the cost of losing also some of the true positives, but hopefully the gain is considerably higher than the loss.

**Multi-class classification problem.** We realize that there is a difference in the accuracy rates between the region along the border of a lesion and the region far-from a lesion border. This observation brought to our minds to try first a 4-class model and subsequently a 3-class model. For the fifth approach, we increase the number of classes from 2 (lesion, non-lesion) to 4 (lesion interior, lesion border, non-lesion border, non-lesion interior) during training to try to reduce the false positive rate. During testing, we merge the 4 classes back to 2 classes.

The problem with the 4-class model is that the number of lesion interior voxels is quite low compared to the number of other classes and to balance the training set we have to decrease the number of samples substantially. This is something undesirable, thus we consider lesion voxels as one class, and divide the non-lesion voxels into two classes, which are border non-lesion, interior non-lesion. Thus, for the

sixth approach, we consider 3 classes (lesion, border non-lesion, interior non-lesion).

As a last step, we test the cascade implementation with this 3-class model as a seventh approach. This is the exact same cascade approach explained before in the fourth approach, but with 3 classes instead of 2.

## 2.5 Technical Specifications

In order to develop our DL approaches we use an EC2 instance of type p2.xlarge of Amazon Web Services. This is a cloud service of Amazon with GPU that provides high computational power for computationally intensive processes such as DL (Amazon, 2017). It also comes with an execution environment that contains DL frameworks such as Tensorflow, Caffe, Theano, Torch, etc. We use Python as a programming language and Tensorflow as a DL framework to implement and run our DL algorithms. We also use cloud storage provided by Amazon to store our training samples. We handle the neuroimaging files in the NIFTI-1 format with the Nibabel library of python (Nibabel, 2017).

## 3 EXPERIMENTS AND RESULTS

In this section, we describe the validation strategy (data distribution and validation measures), the experiments and obtained results.

### 3.1 Validation Strategy

As we already described in section 2.1, the ground-truth (GT) is made by T1 and T2 MRI modalities, tissue segmentation and manual lesion segmentations from 59 subjects.

For the distribution of data to train, validation and test, we allocate 45 subjects to train, 5 subjects to validation and 9 subjects to test data. We use validation accuracy to determine the number of epochs with which to train the networks. In the experiments, after 60 epochs the validation accuracy did not improve and even started to drop, for this reason we decided to stick to this number for the training of our networks, to prevent over-fitting.

As validation measures we consider four different measures detailed next.

**Dice similarity coefficient (DSC)** is a statistical overlapping measure that quantifies the similarity between two segmentations. This measure is between 0 and 1; 0 meaning no similarity and 1 meaning a perfect match between segmentations. We compute it as

a percentage as follows.

$$DSC = 100 \frac{2TP}{2TP + FP + FN},$$

where  $TP$  is the number of True Positives,  $FP$  is the number of False Positives, and  $FN$  is the number of False Negatives.

**True Positive Rate (TPR)** is the percentage of the lesion voxels with respect to the total GT lesion voxels, which is also called the sensitivity. This measure is between 0 and 1, and the higher the better although it has to be considered together with other measures for the quality of the segmentation. We express it as a percentage.

$$TPR = 100 \frac{TP}{\#LVGT},$$

where  $\#LVGT$  is the number of lesion voxels in the GT.

**False Discovery Rate (FDR)** is the percentage of false positive voxels with respect to the output segmentation performed by the method. The measure is between 0 and 1, and low values are desired. We express it as a percentage.

$$FDR = 100 \frac{FP}{\#LVfound},$$

where  $\#LVfound$  is the number of lesion voxels detected by the method.

**Volume Difference (VD)** is the percentage of the absolute difference between the GT lesion volume and the volume of the lesions found by the automatic method with respect to the GT lesion volume. This measure does not give information about the overlap of the two segmentations but gives an idea about the relative volumes. The minimum and the ideal value for this measure is 0 but there is no maximum for this measure. 0 value means the lesion volumes in the method segmentation and the GT are the same in size, although it might not mean a perfect overlap. We express it as a percentage.

$$VD = 100 \frac{\|\#LVfound - \#LVGT\|}{\#LVGT}.$$

Moreover, we also consider the computation of **#CC lesion GT**: The number of connected components (CCs) in the GT segmentation; **#CC lesion found**: The number of connected components found; and **#CC lesion coincided**: The number of connected components in the GT that has some overlap with the connected components in the method segmentation. Note this might be bigger than the number of connected components found since one CC found can coincide with multiple CCs in the ground truth. A Connected Component (CC) can be defined as a group of lesion voxels connected with each other and it can be of different sizes.

## 3.2 Results

Tables 1 and 2 contain the results of the seven approaches considered in the paper together with LST approach. As can be seen the final model, which is the 3 class model with cascade have the best performance in all the measures except the TPR. The decrease in the TPR is understandable, since as we removed the FP we also had to sacrifice some TP; although in comparison it is very small in number. The best model also surpassed the LST method in all the measures including the TPR.

Note that values in Table 2 have to be compared with # Lesion Voxels in GT (#LV GT) which is  $11573 \pm 9873$  and # Lesion CC in GT (#LCC GT) which is  $125.6 \pm 61.4$ . As can be seen, the detected number of lesions is closest to the real number with the 3-class cascade model, which means the false negatives have substantially been eliminated. Also with this model, around 102 CCs are detected, and there is some overlap with 72 of the LCCs in the GT, which is the highest proportion among the models. Although there are other models with higher LCC coincided with the GT, these models have an exorbitantly high number of LCCs found, the majority of which are false detections.

Besides analyzing the quantitative results and to better understand the behavior of the segmentation algorithm on the MRI images, we qualitatively inspect the results in Figure 8 and Figure 4.

Figure 8 shows the results of the best model in example images from 4 subjects of the test set. The manual segmentation or TP are shown in dark blue, the FP in light blues, and the FN in pink. As can be seen from the figure, there is detection around the GT segmentation for most of the lesions and there is a high amount of overlap but there are also differences. The differences can be partly due to the subjective nature of manual MS segmentation or difficulty in obtaining the real borders, even by a human expert.

Figure 4, which is an up-close version of a region from Figure 8. It shows the T1 image (left), the T2 image (middle) and segmentation result (right) of the same region. As can be seen from the figure, the manual segmentation is more conservative while our model is over-segmenting a region as lesion if there is a corresponding hypo-intensity in T1 and hyper-intensity in T2. Also note that the GT segmentation is more jagged and dispersed while the model automatic segmentation is rounder and more connected. This is expected since the probability of two neighboring voxels being segmented as lesions both is high since they have a very similar neighborhood. Based on our observations, there were also some cases in the GT

Table 1: Final comparison between models based on DSC, VD, TPR and FDR.

METHOD	DSC%	VD%	TPR%	FDR%
LST (LST, 2017)	$42.0 \pm 19.6$	$76.7 \pm 98.0$	$49.0 \pm 18.3$	$59.6 \pm 22.1$
Patch11- w/o location	$32.8 \pm 21.1$	$746.5 \pm 891.2$	$81.8 \pm 6.6$	$77.2 \pm 16.9$
Patch 11- with location	$32.7 \pm 18.7$	$650.3 \pm 721.1$	<b><math>86.0 \pm 9.1</math></b>	$78.2 \pm 14.0$
Patch 19- with location	$45.2 \pm 20.1$	$160.5 \pm 212.3$	$62.5 \pm 16.8$	$60.8 \pm 20.3$
Patch 11- Cascade	$45.3 \pm 16.0$	$178.6 \pm 145.7$	$76.4 \pm 14.1$	$66.2 \pm 14.5$
Patch 11- 4 class	$37.3 \pm 16.9$	$333.9 \pm 285.5$	$79.8 \pm 10.3$	$74.3 \pm 13.7$
Patch 11 - 3 class	$54.8 \pm 13.9$	$39.6 \pm 33.8$	$61.4 \pm 14.5$	$48.2 \pm 16.2$
Patch 11 - 3 class, Cascade	<b><math>57.5 \pm 12.4</math></b>	<b><math>22.8 \pm 16.5</math></b>	$59.7 \pm 14.6$	<b><math>42.5 \pm 14.3</math></b>

Table 2: Final comparison between models based on # Lesion Voxels found (#LV found), # Lesion CC found (#LCC found) and # Lesion CC which coincide in GT and found (#LCC coincide). Note that # Lesion Voxels in GT is  $11573 \pm 9873$  and # Lesion CC in GT is  $125.6 \pm 61.4$ .

METHOD	#LV found	#LCC found	#LCC coincided
LST (LST, 2017)	$12936 \pm 10231$	$25.3 \pm 9.4$	$31.8 \pm 16.6$
Patch11- w/o location	$36848 \pm 11170$	$561.3 \pm 128.6$	$92.3 \pm 41.6$
Patch 11- with location	$38765 \pm 18541$	$474.9 \pm 90.3$	$91.9 \pm 42.2$
Patch 19- with location	$17468 \pm 13073$	$151.7 \pm 62.6$	$51.6 \pm 29.5$
Patch 11- Cascade	$24695 \pm 19621$	$113.8 \pm 38.8$	$69.9 \pm 37.0$
Patch 11- 4 class	$30826 \pm 20973$	$257.1 \pm 42.7$	$85.1 \pm 37.6$
Patch 11 - 3 class	$13190 \pm 11721$	$150.1 \pm 51.8$	$75.2 \pm 38.0$
Patch 11 - 3 class, Cascade	$11981 \pm 10986$	$101.7 \pm 50.4$	$72.7 \pm 31.5$

that was contrary to the MS lesion definition, which caused some "wrong" FN in our results and this might be explained with some special case, a human error or an error in the alignment process of the images.

From our observations, the model seems to capture the hypo-intensity in T1 and hyper-intensity in T2 technically but misses some of the intuitions, domain knowledge or the subjectivity of the human expert. The lesions are detected by the proposed model in hypo-intense regions in T1 and hyper-intense regions in T2 and the borders are determined by T1 hypo-intense region, which is the correct behavior.

Another positive property of the automatic segmentation is that in the majority of the lesions there is some detection on the lesion or very close to the lesion, although the overlapping is far from perfect. For instance, if seen from a cross-section, there is a GT lesion that seems not detected, when we advanced a few voxels up or down along the perpendicular axis of the cross-section, we observe, in most cases, a lesion detected by the model. This could be due to the difficulty in determining the real borders of a lesion.

In Figure 5 we can see that the number of automatically detected lesion voxels increased with the number of GT lesion voxels. This means that the segmentation result of our model is indicative of the real lesion load. This information can be used to see the progression of the lesions in an MS patient.

In terms of computational cost, we observe that

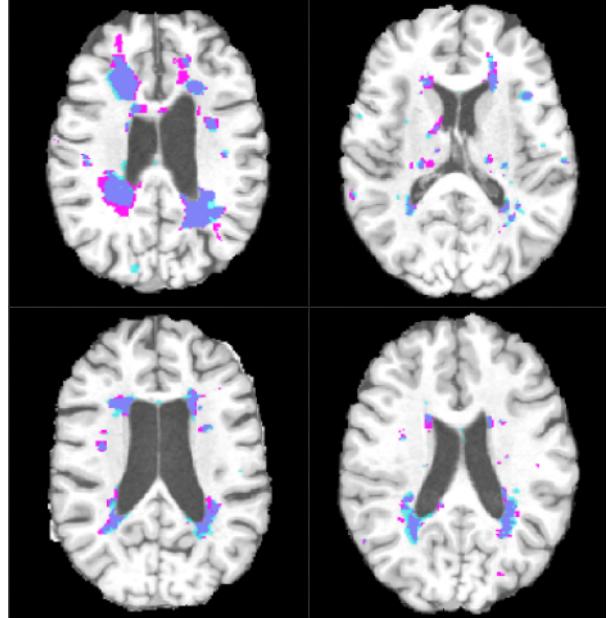


Figure 3: Segmentation result with the best model. TP: Dark Blue, FP: Light Blue, FN: Pink. Better visualize in pdf.

changing the patch size from  $11 \times 11 \times 11$  to  $19 \times 19 \times 19$  increases the computational time more than twice (approximately, 6 hours as opposed to 14 hours in the AWS configuration (Amazon, 2017) we chose), but less than the increase in the number of initial features,

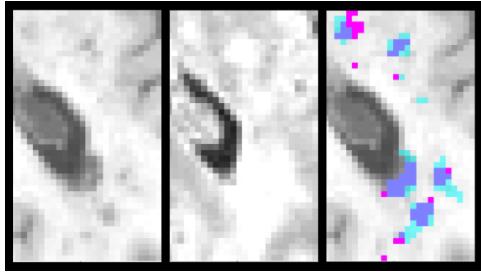


Figure 4: From left to right: T1, T2 and Segmentation result, close-up from a lesion region. Better visualize in pdf.

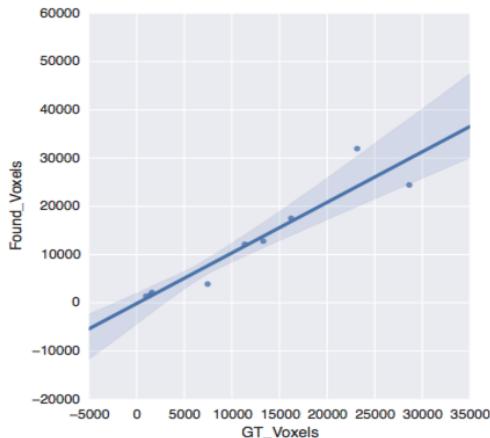


Figure 5: The number of Ground Truth lesions vs. the number of lesions found.

which is:  $(19/11)^3 \approx 5.2$ . The application of the cascade, on the other hand, increases the computational time approximately twice, which is expected since we train the same size CNN with the same number of samples twice. Increasing the class size, however, has less dramatic effect on the computational time causing a small increase.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

In this paper, we have studied several CNN models for the MS lesion segmentation problem. We have started with model definitions from similar approaches in the literature and we have developed our final proposal by adding new design decisions: defining a new subsampling process, including lesion location information in the CNN input, considering a 3-classes classification problem and adding a two-stage cascade. We have shown that these improvements have a positive effect on the final performance. We have shown that using DL with an appropriate design, we can define a method that learns the general rule for MS lesion

segmentation. We have obtained promising results for all the validation measures on a real dataset of 59 patients from Hospital Clínic. Moreover, the results represent significant improvement over the commonly used automatic method of LST. The proposed model have been able to detect the lesion regions, which have different intensity values in MRI with respect to their neighborhood, meaning that it has captured the mathematical relationship between a 3D patch and the class of its center voxel to a certain degree. Although it has captured the general relationship, it has failed to learn some exceptions requiring domain knowledge that are applied by human experts during MS lesion segmentation. This limitation could be due to the fact that there is not enough cases in the training set for such exceptions or that it is necessary to feed more information to the CNN (e.g. more context) for the model to capture these patterns.

As future work we plan to add more information about the context and brain spatial dependencies in order to improve the results. Although we have added the location information to add some context, this may not have been enough since the training set may not be representative of the exceptions. Thus, adding the resulting lesion/non-lesion label information (detected by the model) of the neighboring voxels in the evaluation of a voxel may help achieve better classification. In order to include these spatial dependencies, we can consider Conditional Random Fields as a second stage.

In the literature, Restricted Boltzmann Machines (RBM) or auto-encoders have been used to obtain an initial representation of the data, which could lead to better classifiers. This type of unsupervised methods can also take advantage of unlabeled data. Therefore, it might be a good idea to start with an RBM or auto-encoder and apply our models subsequently.

Finally, another improvement may come from increasing the number of MRI modalities during training. We used T1, T2 but adding more modalities such as FLAIR, fMRI, diffusion MRI could give more information about the nature of a voxel.

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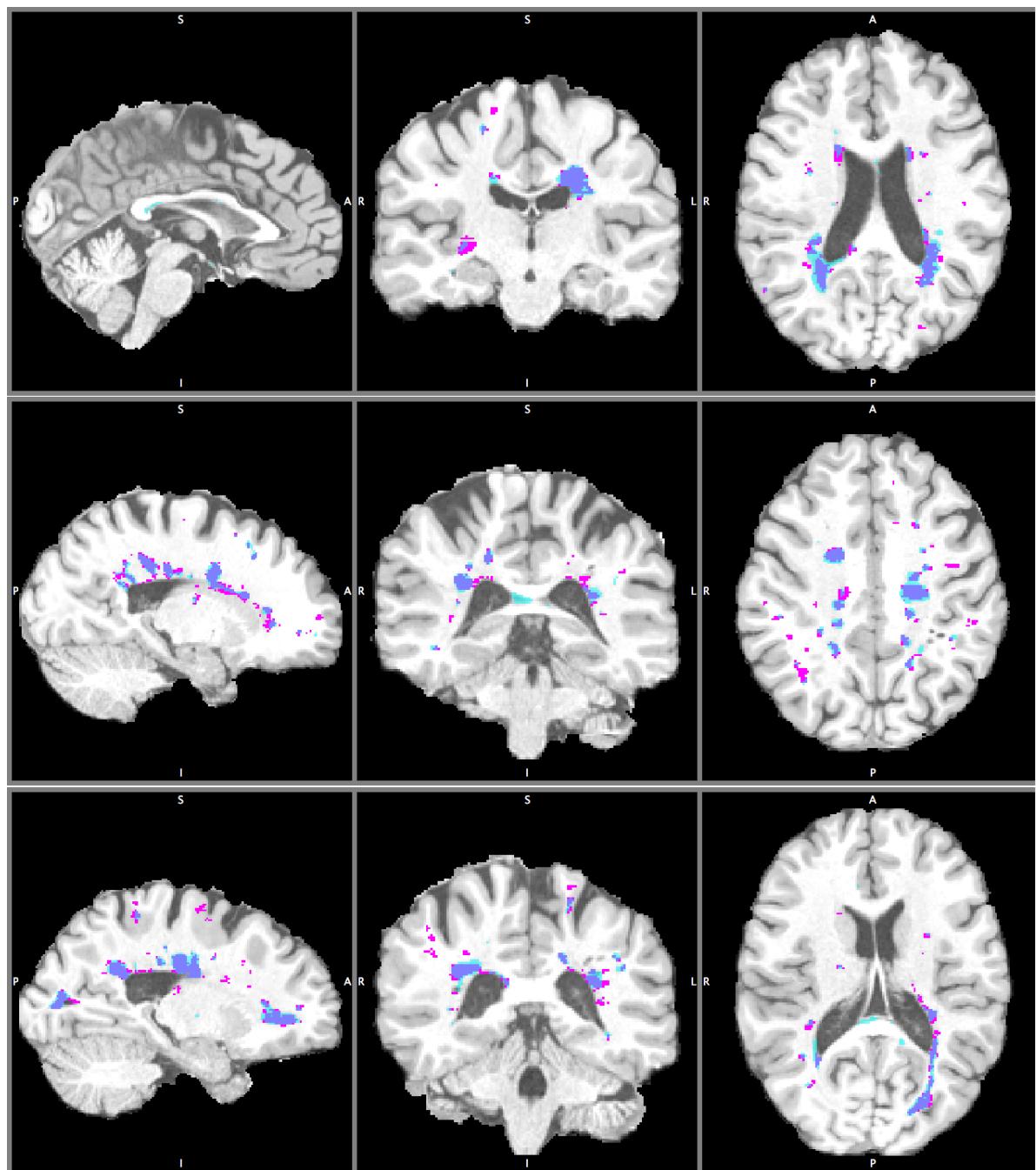


Figure 6: Segmentation results with MRI images from test subjects

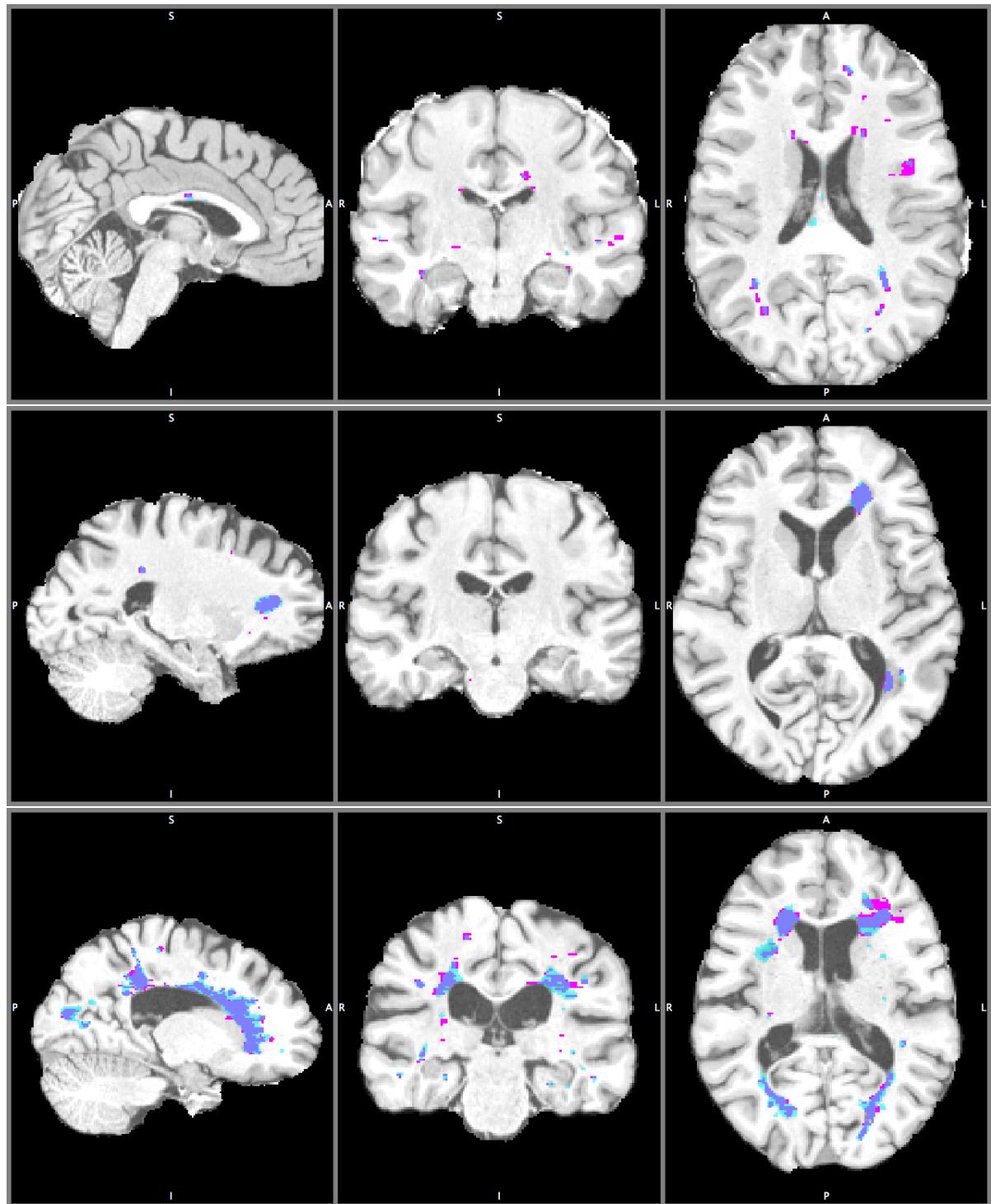


Figure 7: Segmentation results with MRI images from test subjects

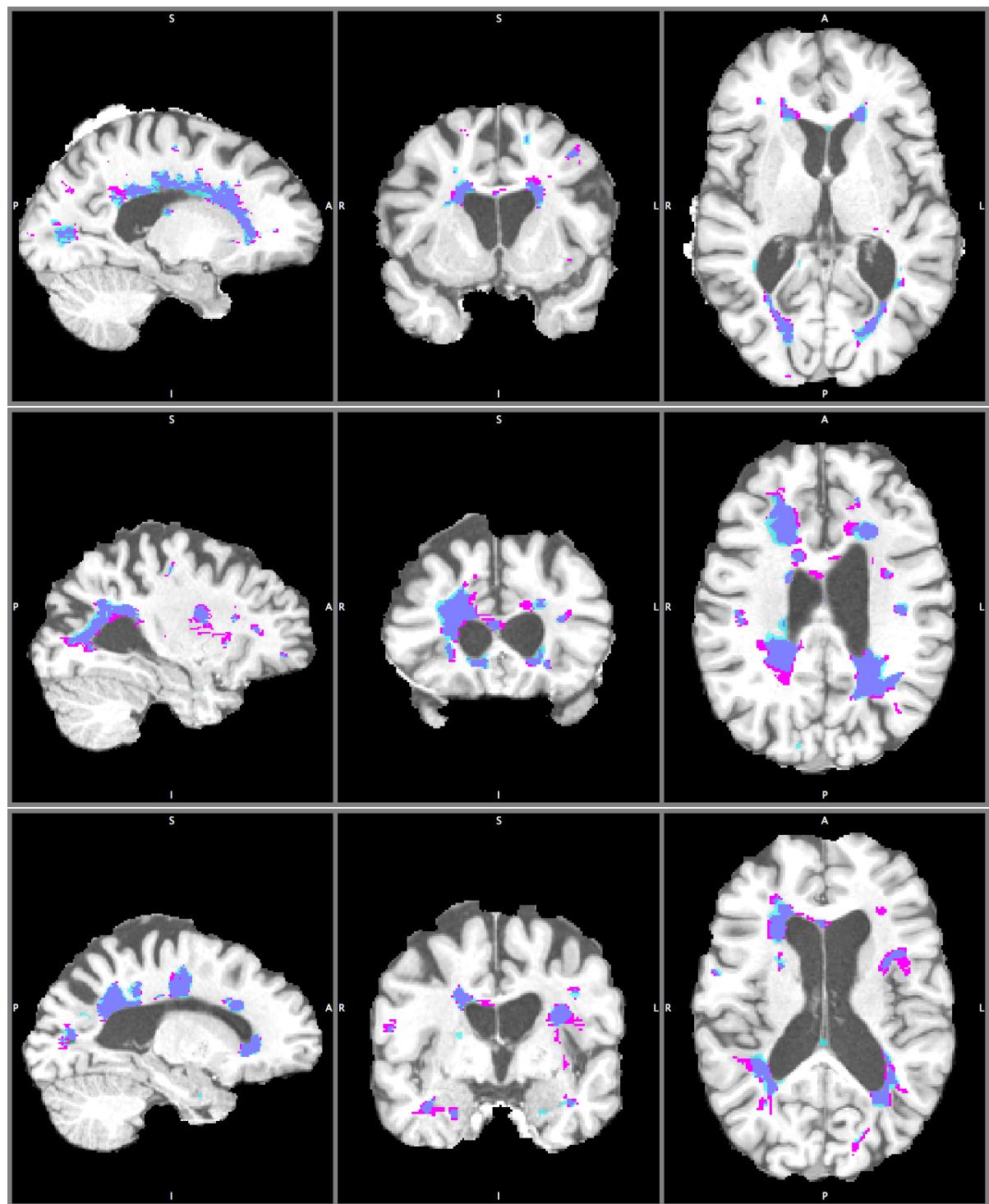


Figure 8: Segmentation results with MRI images from test subjects

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