Methods for Feature Learning and Extraction

Feature learning is widely regarded as a fundamental basis for many modern machine learning algorithms, specifically those classified under unsupervised learning. Its applications span a wide variety of fields, ranging from determining the connectedness of airports to classifying an apartment’s location based solely on a few properties. In particular, researchers have focused on image recognition; they are intrigued that the human brain can easily process and interpret images, yet even extremely powerful computers struggle to do the same. It is only logical then that researchers have turned to the human brain for inspiration and have attempted to mimic the visual cortex’s operations in code. Several methods and algorithms have developed over the years with some remarkable success, despite their drawbacks

In general, these algorithms follow a similar structure in terms of their derivation and operation. The basic equation that they try to solve is

where is the code matrix that represents a decomposed version of the input set and is the weight matrix, which varies based on the output we are trying to derive. From here, the models diverge by placing different constraints on the input, the code matrix, or the weight matrix. In some cases, the constraint is enforced by transforming the input to satisfy it. A reconstruction error is then defined and minimized to determine the best code matrix for the model.

In their paper on sparse coding, Bruno Olshausen and David Field utilize the above steps to recreate the visual cortex’s functionality to improve image recognition. From their perspective, the brain removes redundancy from the information it receives from the photoreceptors and represents the image as “a collection of independent events” (Olshausen 3311). Previous research in sparse coding focused on 2-dimensional redundancy reduction, which completely omits curves and other higher dimensional collections seen in natural images. To increase the accuracy of existing sparse coding algorithms, Olshausen and Field explore the creation of a linear strategy that can reduce higher order redundancy.

They use the following equation to create such a strategy, which is a slight modification of the feature extraction equation described earlier:

where represents the basis vectors that determine the image code and is the collection of amplitudes for each basis vector, which is computed for each image. The goal now is to find a set of basis vectors that can accurately represent the basic image structure of the input. An added constraint that Olshausen and Field make is that the basis functions must be overcomplete, which is when the number of basis vectors exceeds the dimensionality of the input. This will make the model more robust in the face of noise and help create greater flexibility in matching the model to the input since there can be multiple amplitudes that output the same image.

Finding the best set of basis vectors is analogous to create a model with a probability distribution of each image () that matches the probability distribution of images experienced in nature () (3313). The Kullback-Leibler divergence is used to determine the similarity between the two distributions, which is defined as:

where it is equal to 0 if and only if the two distributions are equivalent. Since the probability distribution of nature is fixed, Olshausen and Field focus on the log likelihood instead.