Attention-based similarity

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Abstract

A similarity measure is described that does not require the prior specification of features or the need for training sets of representative data. Instead large numbers of features are generated as part of the similarity calculation and the extent to which features can be found to be common to pairs of patterns determines the measure of their similarity. Emphasis is given to salient image regions in this process and it is shown that the parameters of invariant transforms may be extracted from the statistics of matching features and used to focus the similarity calculation. Some results are shown on MPEG-7 shape data and discussed in the paper.

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1. Introduction

Similarity measures are central to most pattern recognition problems not least in computer vision and the need to access huge volumes of multimedia content now being broadcast and offered on the Internet. These problems have motivated much research into content-based image retrieval [1–4] and many commercial and laboratory systems are described in the literature [5–10].

The notion of similarity is elusive. Quite often having selected a number of appealing features that we believe characterises similarity, we soon discover that new structure in unseen patterns does not contain the desired features despite still apparently possessing a high degree of similarity. By the same token other patterns that do satisfy the similarity criteria seem totally dissimilar to the human eye.

This paper proposes a similarity measure that imposes only very weak assumptions on the nature of the features used in the recognition process. This approach does not make use of a pre-defined distance metric plus feature space in which feature values are extracted from a query image and used to match those from database images, but instead generates features on a trial-and-error basis during the calculation of the similarity measure. This has the significant advantage that features that determine similarity can match whatever image property is important in a particular region whether it be a shape, a texture, a colour or a combination of all three. It means that effort is expended searching for the best feature for the region rather than expecting that a fixed feature set will perform optimally over the whole area of an image and over every image in the database. By generating thousands of random features and applying them on a trial-and-error basis as an integral part of the calculation of the similarity value, it is shown that a consistent measure is obtained that is not dependent upon any one or group of specific pattern measurements or representative training sets. Such a system is emergent rather than cognitivist as it does not rely upon a priori specification or programming, but rather constructs its own representation as it interacts and explores the visual scene [11].

Section 2 outlines a selection of papers describing related research and Section 3 then describes the visual attention model used in this paper. The next section defines the similarity measure and Section 5 reports results obtained on shapes from the MPEG-7 test set. This is followed by a discussion section and some conclusions.
2. Background

A great deal of wide ranging research has been carried out on similarity and shape matching and much of this is covered in survey papers such as Refs. [12,13]. Many approaches involve the use of pre-determined features such as edges, colour, location, texture and functions dependent on pixel values e.g. [14]. Mikolajczyk et al. [15] use edge models to obtain correspondences with similar objects. Hidden markov models derived from shape boundary features are employed by Almageed and Smith [16] to classify silhouettes. Dao et al. [17] obtain measures of similarity between shape boundaries through the use of potential functions borrowed from electrostatics. Thinning algorithms are applied to shapes by Sebastian et al. [18] and Iyer et al. [19] to obtain graphical features that can be more easily transformed between similar shapes.

The selection of features dependent upon the spatial arrangement of sets of points sampled from shapes is a strategy used by several authors to obtain some of the best results to date such as Ref. [20]. However, all the approaches use pre-determined point selection rules and metrics that can limit performance on unseen data. Viola et al. [21] restrict themselves to a specific type of rectangle feature which works well in their face recognition application, but may not perform as well on data that is not suited to this feature.

Increasingly research is turning to models of perception in order to reflect the behaviour of the human visual system in measures of similarity. Mojsilovic et al. [22] use perceptually important colours to construct a feature vector for similarity measurement, and overcome the problem of close colours occupying different quantization bins. Super [23] defines critical points of high curvature on boundaries and normalises the shape for rotation and scale before calculating a distance measure. Law et al. [24] introduce a measure of saliency in their development of a feature selection and clustering algorithm. A feature is deemed irrelevant if its distribution is independent of class labels. Visual attention models by Itti [25] are used by Frintrop et al. [26] to focus computational resource and recognise 3D objects. Shape contours are detected by Grigorescu et al. [27] using a model of human visual surround suppression that identifies perceptually significant edges.

3. Visual attention

Studies in neurobiology [28] are suggesting that human visual attention is enhanced through a process of competing interactions among neurons representing all of the stimuli present in the visual field. The competition results in the selection of a few points of attention and the suppression of irrelevant material. It means that people and animals are able to spot anomalies in a scene no part of which they have seen before and attention is drawn in general to the anomalous object in a scene.

Treisman [29] describes experiments that reveal pre-attentive behaviour in human vision. She points out a “masking effect” that depends upon the presence elsewhere of other elements sharing the local distinctive property. A locally salient feature can be suppressed by more distant structures in the image. Single distinctive features such as colour or orientation promote immediate saliency, but if these properties are cojoined the search for a target is more difficult. Treisman describes several examples of images that exhibit pop out some of which behave asymmetrically. Treisman suggests that there are separate maps for a few properties such as colour, orientation and brightness, but does not offer a mechanism for their implementation.

Tsotsos et al. [30] present a pyramidal processing attention model as a means of reducing the complexity arising from a large number of selected features. A winner takes all strategy is imposed on the processing layers in the pyramid so that the more salient objects are identified by location and features at the top of the pyramid. Provision is made to offset a boundary effect in the pyramidal structure that lays emphasis on central items even if they are less significant than peripheral items. Tsotsos highlights features such as size, luminance, edge contrast and orientation as possible features for defining saliency in static images, but there is little guidance on how these might be selected or combined.

Lindenberg [31] provides a framework for detecting salient blob-like objects without relying on a priori information. He stresses that not all significant image structures are blobs. His research makes the assumption that structures that are significant in scale-space will also be perceptually significant. Although this may be true for some blob configurations it does not apply to all, as for example, no provision is made for the attention suppressing effect of surrounding similar configurations as demonstrated by Treisman [29].

The model of attention [32] used in this paper makes the assumption that an image region is salient if it possesses few features in common with other regions in the image. It follows Lindberg in not making use of a priori information regarding the images, but goes further in not making assumptions about the choice of feature measurements as suggested by Treisman [29]. Tsotsos [30] and Itti [25]. Such assumptions can force the model to emphasise saliency as determined by colour and orientation, for example, but ignore texture if that did not happen to be a measured feature. As attention is concerned with surprise rather than the expected, this issue is of critical importance.

Let a set of measurements $a_i = (a_{x1,1}, a_{x2,1}, a_{x3,1})$ correspond to a pixel $x = (x_1, x_2)$.

Consider a neighbourhood $N$ of $x$ where

$$x' \in N \text{ iff } |x_i - x'_i| < \epsilon_i w_l$$

Select a set of $m$ random pixels $S_k$ in $N$ (which we call a fork) where

$$S_k = \{x'_1, x'_2, x'_3, \ldots, x'_m\}$$

Select another random pixel $y$. 
fork $S_x$ is generated ready for the next comparison. In this way competing forks are selected against in a competitive fashion if they contain little novelty and turn out to represent structure that is common throughout the image. Indeed it is likely that if a mismatching fork is generated, it will re-match again elsewhere in the image, and this fork once found, will accelerate the rise of the visual attention score.

If some of the distinguishing characteristics of anomalous objects are known it would be sensible to constrain or even fix the selection of forks $S_y$ rather than generate them randomly. For example, a horizontal bar against a background of vertical bars would be optimally identified as salient by a + shaped fork: $S_x = \{(-1, 0), (0, -1), (0, 1), (1, 0)\}$ with $m = 4$ and $\epsilon = 1$. A completely filled $3 \times 3$ patch with $m = 8$ would also function well. However, larger values of $m$ lead to higher frequencies of mismatching on more complex images that obscure the most salient objects. This may be offset by introducing a measure of correlation and a threshold to obtain a match, but again there is no guarantee that a particular correlation measure will place the correct weighting on any content that may be encountered within the patch and there is a danger that in general saliency will be masked.

The model described above uses a simple translation to obtain the fork $S_y$ to test for a match or mismatch. This may be generalised to enable invariance to orientation and other attentional properties by mapping the pixels in $S_y$ according to the appropriate transform before testing for a match. In the case of the orientation property, a rotation by a random angle $\theta$ is given by

$$S_y = \{y_1, y_2, y_3, \ldots, y_m\} \quad \text{where} \quad y_i - y_1 = R_\theta [x_i - x_1] \quad \forall i$$

and

$$R_\theta = \begin{bmatrix} \cos \theta & \sin \theta \\ -\sin \theta & \cos \theta \end{bmatrix}.$$ 

The attention score $V(x)$ for each pixel $x$ is computed in the following steps:

1. $k = 0; \quad V(x) = 0$.
2. Generate a fork $S_y$ of maximum radius $\epsilon$.
3. Select a random pixel $y$.
4. $k = k + 1$; if $k > M$ then stop.
5. Transform fork $S_x$ to produce fork $S_y$.
6. If $S_y$ mismatches then $V(x) = V(x) + 1$ and loop to 3 retaining same fork.
7. Loop to 2.

This model possesses many of the characteristics of low-level visual neurons with centre-surround receptive fields where cell responses are affected by surrounding cells simultaneously responding to the same signals. Similarities between stimuli within the receptive field and outside inhibit responses, whereas differences do not have this effect [33]. The fork matching and mismatching procedure described above captures aspects of this mechanism.
This model has been shown to identify saliency as indicated in many of the behavioural examples given by Treisman. Saliency determined by a single feature such as colour or orientation is identified strongly by the model. Targets defined by the conjunction of features are identified less strongly and is dependent on the diversity of the distractors [34]. Treisman [29] reports, for example, that a parallel line pair is salient against a background of single lines of various orientations, but the reverse is not the case. This asymmetry is reproduced in our attention model where the attention scores for the pixels belonging to the parallel lines are much greater than for the surrounding randomly oriented single lines. On the other hand, the attention scores for the target single line are lower than the background parallel pairs indicating no pop out. Figs. 2 and 3 show the high scoring black pixels in both cases.

4. Similarity measure

The model of similarity [35] used in this paper is the dual of that for attention and makes the assumption that two images are similar if they possess many features in common. As before no use is made of a priori information in the choice of features. It is to be expected that many features that are shared will be unique to that pair of images. This means that it is never possible to pre-select features in a way that will reflect all aspects of the relationships between a set of objects or the similarity of pairs of images in a database unless complete knowledge of the database is known beforehand.

As with the measure of attention described above, the similarity measure proposed here generates features on a competitive basis as part of the calculation of the measure. The features take the form of forks and similarity is dependent upon the number of such forks that can be found to match pairs of images.

Consider two images X and Y containing pixels x and y with colour values \( a_x = (a_{x1}, a_{x2}, a_{x3}) \) and \( a_y = (a_{y1}, a_{y2}, a_{y3}) \), respectively.

A fork of \( m \) random points \( S_x \) is defined as a set of any pixel positions in image X where

\[ S_x = \{x_1, x_2, x_3, \ldots, x_m\}. \]

A randomly positioned fork of \( m \) pixels \( S_y \) is defined in image Y where

\[ S_y = \{y_1, y_2, y_3, \ldots, y_m\} \quad \text{and} \quad x_i - x_j = y_i - y_j \quad \forall i, j. \]
In other words pixels \( y_j \) are a randomly translated version of the \( x_j \).

The fork \( S_x \) matches image \( Y \) if \( |a_{xj} - a_{yj}| \leq \delta \) \( \forall j \).

The similarity measure \( R \) of image \( X \) to image \( Y \) is computed in the following steps:

1. \( R_{XY} = 0; \ k = 0 \).
2. Generate a random fork \( S_x \).
3. \( k = k + 1; \) if \( k > M \) then stop.
4. \( p = 0 \).
5. Transform fork \( S_x \) to produce fork \( S_y \).
6. If \( S_y \) matches \( Y \) then \( R_{XY} = R_{XY} + 1 \) and loop to 2.
7. \( p = p + 1; \) if \( p > P \) then go to step 9 (generate new \( S_x \)).
8. Loop to 4 (no match so try another transform).
9. Loop to step 2.
10. Repeat with \( X \) and \( Y \) reversed. Similarity measure \( R = R_{XY} + R_{YX} \).

High similarity scores are obtained when many forks in image \( X \) are found to correspond and match transformed forks in image \( Y \). If all the forks match a maximum score of \( M \) will be obtained.

It is necessary for a high score that forks in image \( Y \) correspond to forks in image \( X \), otherwise, for example, cropped versions of images would be classified as being very similar to the whole, although this may be a requirement in some applications. The similarity score \( R \) is therefore made symmetric by summing the number of matching forks in both directions.

Fig. 4 shows a 3 pixel fork covering one black pixel and two white pixels from image \( X \) matching in a position in image \( Y \). In general, each of the pixels will possess three colour parameters, so \( a(x) = (r, g, b) \) and the fork will fit image \( Y \) if the colour parameters of all \( m \) corresponding pixels have values within \( \delta \) of each other. A series of \( M \) forks from image \( X \) are tested for a match at some position in image \( Y \) and the number of such matches forms the similarity measure of image \( X \) to image \( Y \).

The measure does not necessarily satisfy the triangle inequality and is therefore not a metric. In practice there is no requirement for the triangle inequality to be satisfied in terms of human perception and indeed this may be a damaging constraint on the distance measure. A pattern B may contain features in common with A and C and be similar to both. However, A and C may have no features in common at all, and no conclusion regarding A and C can necessarily be inferred from the similarities of AB and BC (Fig. 5).

### 4.1. Translation, rotation and scale

The similarity algorithm makes up to \( P \) attempts to discover a match in image \( Y \) for each of \( M \) transformed forks that are generated. The distribution of locations of high attention scoring pixels in forks that fit both images gives an indication of the location of those regions in both images that hold the features that largely determine the overall image similarity.

The centroids of pixels in images \( X \) and \( Y \) that are present in the \( M' \) pairs of forks \( S'_x, S'_y, k = 1, \ldots, M' \) that match is given by \( \bar{x} \) and \( \bar{y} \) where

\[
\bar{x} = \sum_{k,x_i \in S'_x} x_i / M', \quad \bar{y} = \sum_{k,y_i \in S'_y} y_i / M', \quad M' > 0.
\]

The extent of the region of similarity around \( \bar{x} \) and \( \bar{y} \) may be estimated by the standard deviation of \( x_i \) and \( y_i \) where

\[
\sigma_x = \sqrt{\frac{1}{M' - 1} \left( \sum_i (x_i - \bar{x})^2 \right)} \quad \text{and} \quad \sigma_y = \sqrt{\frac{1}{M' - 1} \left( \sum_i (y_i - \bar{y})^2 \right)}.
\]

In general an affine relationship between a shape in image \( X \) and image \( Y \) may be identified by allowing the forks \( S_x \) to be randomly rotated between \( \pm \alpha \) and scaled in \( x \) and \( y \) by \( s \) to produce the \( S_y \) and studying the distribution of angles and scales of pixel co-ordinates of forks that fit both images.
In this case the transform applied to pixels in $S_x$ is given by

$$S_y = \{y_1, y_2, y_3, \ldots, y_m\} \quad \text{where}$$

$$y_i - y_1 = s R_\theta[x_i - x_1] \quad \forall i$$

and

$$R_\theta = \begin{bmatrix} \cos \theta & \sin \theta \\ -\sin \theta & \cos \theta \end{bmatrix}.$$ 

As with the attention measure described in Section 3 there is every justification for tailoring the processing as much as possible before further analysis if sufficient is known about the data to be sure that this improves performance and does not destroy information. This applies to the normalization of image data according to position, orientation and scale which will yield good results if the data are well behaved within the rules followed by the normalisation process. However, as before there is no guarantee that this is the case and a particular normalization process may not be appropriate to all items in a data set and may cause information to be lost especially in complex and noisy data. The approach described here makes no assumptions about the properties of the data but rather relies upon evidence in the form of mappings (matching forks) discovered between image pixels to reflect orientation, positional and scale relationships between data items.

### 4.2. Parameter sensitivity

The behaviour of the similarity measure is clearly dependent on the values of two key parameters, $M$ the number of forks generated to produce a score, and $m$ the number of pixels in each fork, $M$ determines the volume of computation and $m$ the precision with which matches are made.

In order to test the stability and the statistical confidence of the similarity measure, a number of repeated calculations...
Fig. 7. Variation in standard deviations of similarity measure against no. forks generated.

Fig. 8. Original (X), shifted (Y1), rotated (Y2) and scaled (Y3) shapes.

Fig. 9. x and y histograms of forks fitting image Y1 (m = 10, M = 2000).
were carried out on the same pair of patterns (Fig. 6) for each of several values of $M$ with $m = 10$. One hundred calculations of the similarity measure were computed for values of $M$ from 50 to 1600 and the results are shown in Table 1 and Fig. 7. The standard deviation decreases with $M$ approximately as the power of $-0.6$ in this range indicating that the precision of the similarity measure increases with increasing computation.

Fig. 8 shows image $X$ transformed by translation ($Y_1$), rotation ($Y_2$) and scale ($Y_3$). Histograms of $x$, $y$ values of the centroids of forks fitting image $Y_1$ are shown in Fig. 9 and reflect the upward movement of the shape by about 27 pixels by a corresponding shift to the left of the peak in the $y$ histogram. In a similar fashion Fig. 10 shows a histogram of the angles of rotation of forks that fit image $Y_2$ with a peak at $+45^\circ$ which is a good indication of the angular displacement in image $Y_2$. Image $Y_3$ is a 20% isotropic reduction of image $X$ which is again reflected in the histogram of scale values of forks that fit $Y_3$ which has a peak at about 0.8 (Fig. 10). Parameter values used were $m = 10$ and $M = 2000$.

The calculations were repeated for several numbers of fork pixels ($m$) on each of the three images with $M = 2000$ to determine the effect on the stability of the results (Tables 2–4). In all cases the standard deviations of the estimates of position, angle and scale decrease as extra pixels are added to the forks. In addition, the peakiness (kurtosis) of the distributions increases with the fork pixel number ($m$).

### Table 2
Variation in $y$ shift estimate against number of fork pixels ($m$), $M = 2000$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>$m$</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>$\sigma$</th>
<th>Kurtosis</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>−27.4</td>
<td>34.93</td>
<td>0.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>−27.2</td>
<td>19.87</td>
<td>4.44</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>−27.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>−26.6</td>
<td>9.50</td>
<td>12.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>−27.1</td>
<td>7.10</td>
<td>20.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>−26.9</td>
<td>5.72</td>
<td>43.91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3
Variation in angle estimate against number of fork pixels ($m$), $M = 2000$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>$m$</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>$\sigma$ (rad)</th>
<th>Kurtosis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>−1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>−0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>−0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.36</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>1.22</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>1.91</td>
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Increased accuracy and precision are achieved at the expense of additional computation which increases with $m$.

The results show that it is possible to extract relationships between patterns without making specific pre-defined measurements. Location, orientation and size can all be measured indirectly without placing a ruler on the object being measured. Structure that is common between pairs of patterns may be identified by observing the statistics of randomly generated transformed forks that have few rules for their production.

5. Similarity tests

In order to test how the triangle inequality might be violated by the similarity measure, the three shapes in Fig. 5 were processed. The similarity scores are shown in Table 5. The composite shape B is rated as similar to A and less so to C with scores 374 and 58, respectively. However, A possesses few features in common with C and is given the much lower score of 10. The higher similarity between A and B than between B and C is due to the length of the lines in common.

The similarity calculation may be repeated on the same pair of images, but with greater constraints placed on the transform parameters so that random selections are made in a range that yields the best results. This means that if, for example, a peak in fork fitting frequency is identified at an orientation of 27°, the calculation is repeated selecting forks within the range of rotations $[27° - \alpha, 27° + \alpha]$ where $\alpha$ is a small angle before being applied to image B. In this way rotations are constrained to lie within a smaller range allowed in the first iteration. In a similar fashion forks may be constrained in location during the second iteration by requiring pixels to lie within a distance $D$ of $(\bar{x}, \bar{y})$ and in

<table>
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<th>Table 4</th>
<th>Variation in scale estimate against number of fork pixels ($m$), $M = 2000$</th>
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<td>$m$</td>
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<th>Table 5</th>
<th>Similarity scores of shapes in Fig. 5</th>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>1388</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>374</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>B</td>
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effect focusing the computation on the region of highest similarity. These strategies have the effect of enhancing the likelihood of finding forks that fit a pair of similar patterns by focusing attention in the vicinity of the correct transform parameter value.

Eighteen distinct binary shapes (200 × 200) were taken from the MPEG-7 set [18] (Fig. 11) and the similarity measure $R$ calculated between all pattern pairs with $m = 10$ and $M = 800$. Forks were allowed to be rotated randomly between $\pm \pi/4$ with $D = 150$. Patterns matched against themselves obtain the highest scores. Pattern pairs showing strong similarity include (3,7), (5,7), (7,18), and (5,18) (Table 6).

To be sure of a successful and rapid search through a database of shapes a hierarchy of such clusters have to be identified in which intra-cluster similarities are much larger than those between different clusters. With this in mind a cluster of very similar shapes to pattern 12 in Fig. 11 shown in Fig. 12 were analysed to determine how well the similarity measure would reflect the tightness of the cluster. Pattern 12 in Fig. 11 is in fact identical to pattern 1 in Fig. 12. Similarity measures were obtained under the same conditions as before and are shown in Table 7. The lowest similarity to pattern 1 with a score of 625 occurs with pattern 11 and significantly exceeds the highest similarity to pattern 12 in Table 6 which took a value of 414 with pattern 9. This means that it would be unlikely for any of the shapes in Fig. 12 and any other unseen variants to be confused with the wrong ‘vantage’ shape in Fig. 11.

The similarity scores for the very similar shapes in Fig. 12 are generally much higher than those for the dissimilar shapes in Fig. 11. This reflects the “tightness” of the cluster of similar shapes in comparison with the significant differences indicated in Table 6 by the wide range of scores.

6. Discussion

The results presented here only refer to black and white shapes, but the mechanisms also apply to colour images. Pixel matching for colour requires that all three colour

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Table 6
Similarity scores of shapes in Fig. 10

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Table 7
Similarity scores of shapes in Fig. 11

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These pre-attentive properties include orientation [38], objects in a scene at a later date. Of course fresh scenes do ground are remembered and help us to recognise important that those features that distinguish foreground from back- mechanism that protects us from danger and gives consid- are inappropriate for a serial machine which is designed to harness parallel architecture.

1.8 GHz machine running in C

The matching of forks can be carried out in parallel as each operation is independent of the next. However, although the computational steps are very simple there are a large number of them and a shape comparison takes about 1 s on a 1.8 GHz machine running in C++. In fact the computations are inappropriate for a serial machine which is designed to carry out fast arithmetic operations with little opportunity to harness parallel architecture.

The human vision system possesses a clever attention mechanism that protects us from danger and gives consid- erable evolutionary advantage. It is tempting to speculate that those features that distinguish foreground from back- ground are remembered and help us to recognise important objects in a scene at a later date. Of course fresh scenes do not appear exactly as they did in the past and it is neces- sary to match new inputs onto stored data in ways that pre- serve the notion of similarity. Desimone and Duncan [42] suggest that this is achieved by favouring inputs competi- tively that match the description of the information currently needed. It is also interesting to suggest that a form of sur- round suppression operates in time and space throughout the brain. Indeed there is no reason to believe that differ- ent parts of the brain including vision use different compu- tational tools [43]. Signals in the cortex that vary may be suppressed locally if they constitute a background that possesses a certain self-similarity. On the other hand, sig- nals that are locally anomalous are not so inhibited. Signals that create peaks of activity by resonating with a stored re- sponse that was retained as a result of earlier anomalous activity will again be anomalous and the activity will be re- inforced by the surround suppression and represent an act of recognition.

7. Conclusions

This paper has described a measure of similarity between patterns that does not require the prior specification of features on which that measure is based. The approach is derived from an attention model that identifies saliency by comparing regions in a single image and recognising differences. Similarity is measured by applying the dual operation to two images and seeking features in common. The similar- ity calculation represents an unsupervised learning process in which pattern clusters are identified without requiring pat- tern class labels or numbers of clusters. Large numbers of features are generated without guidance and their presence in pairs of patterns determines the similarity measure.

More results are needed to prove the effectiveness of the measure for shape indexing and retrieval in a large database. However, the approach has the significant advantages that training sets are not required and problem solutions are not precluded by the a priori selection of features. It is shown that this measure is stable and is not constrained by the tri- angle inequality which can prevent proper discrimination. Greater precision may be obtained with more computation using larger forks or increased numbers of forks. The mea- sure provides a plausible mechanism for comparing shapes and other patterns which focuses computation on optimising transform parameters that expose similarity.

Future work will be directed at larger sets of shapes and natural images where it is proposed that attention-based simi- larity measures can be used in content-based image retrieval and copy detection applications.

Acknowledgements

This research has been conducted with the support of BT Research and Venturing and within the framework of the components independently have values within $\delta_j$ of each other. However, preliminary experiments indicate that the additional discriminatory information in the colour requires that the number of pixels in forks be reduced from 10 to 3 or 4 to facilitate matching. This also reduces processing time.

A symmetry transform used with the attention model above has been successful in extracting reflective symmetry from colour images [36]. This suggests that additional invariance in the similarity measure may be obtained when comparing shapes that are similar with respect to a given operation. Invariance under different illuminations is a further possibility building upon results using a colour transform in a similar fashion to obtain colour constancy in images [37]. Extracting such parameters simultaneously by applying all the transforms to each fork before testing for a fit may require an impractical increase in the number of forks generated ($M$) to obtain statistical significance. On the other hand, extracting the parameters separately is consistent with the understanding that early visual analy- sis results in separate maps for separate properties [29]. These pre-attentive properties include orientation [38], size [39], and colour [40] which do not perform well in conjuction.

The “curse of dimensionality” is avoided in this approach because the similarity measure is not dependent upon vectors derived from a $n$-dimensional feature space. Instead features specific to each pattern pair are extracted as part of the similarity calculation itself and these features may bear no relation to other patterns in the database. On the other hand, conventional approaches are forced to limit the numbers of features either because of constraints on the size of training sets, or because of decreasing performance due to the lack of independence amongst larger feature sets [41].

The approach to measuring similarity is based on a trial- and-error process of generating features (forks) that are present in pairs of patterns. No guidance is given during this process as this would inevitably damage the performance on certain classes of shapes by precluding relevant features from being produced. The negative effects of such guidance cannot be predicted in advance of experiment and would not be discovered until sufficient data are explored.

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Acknowledgements

This research has been conducted with the support of BT Research and Venturing and within the framework of the
European Commission funded Network of Excellence “Multimedia Understanding through Semantics, Computation and Learning” (MUSCLE) [44].

References


About the Author—PROF. FRED STENTIFORD won a scholarship to study mathematics at St Catharine’s College, Cambridge, and obtained a Ph.D. in Pattern Recognition at Southampton University. He first joined the Plessey Company to work on various applications including the recognition of fingerprints and patterns in time-varying magnetic fields. He then joined British Telecom and carried out research on optical character recognition and speech recognition. During this time he led a team developing systems employing pattern recognition methods for the machine translation of text and speech. This work led to the world’s first demonstration of automatic translation of speech between different languages. He is now a professor of telecommunications in the Electrical and Electronic Engineering department of University College London where he leads a team researching multimedia content understanding.