Speech Representations and Phoneme Classification for Preserving the Endangered Language of Ladin

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Abstract

A vast majority of the world’s 7,000 spoken languages are predicted to become extinct within this century, including the endangered language of Ladin from the Italian Alps. Linguists who work to preserve a language’s phonetic and phonological structure can spend hours transcribing each minute of speech from native speakers. To address this problem in the context of Ladin, our paper presents the first analysis of speech representations and machine learning models for classifying 32 phonemes of Ladin. We experimented with a novel dataset of the Fascian dialect of Ladin, collected from native speakers in Italy. We created frame-level and segment-level speech feature extraction approaches and conducted extensive experiments with 8 different classifiers trained on 9 different speech representations. Our speech representations ranged from traditional features (MFCC, LPC) to features learned with deep neural network models (autoencoders, LSTM autoencoders, and WaveNet). Our highest performing classifier, trained on MFCC representations of speech signals, achieved an 86% average accuracy across all Ladin phonemes. We also obtained average accuracies above 77% for all Ladin phoneme subgroups examined. Our findings contribute insights for learning discriminative Ladin phoneme representations and demonstrate the potential for leveraging machine learning and speech signal processing to preserve Ladin and other endangered languages.

Index Terms: speech representations, phoneme classifiers, machine learning, language preservation, speech signal processing

1. Introduction

Linguists estimate that 60% to 90% of the world’s 7,000 spoken languages are likely to become extinct within the next century [1]. The extinction of any language represents an irreversible loss of information for humanity, as unique linguistic, psychological, and sociocultural information are embedded within the phonology, syntax, and semantics of each language [2]. The pressing nature of this problem has motivated linguists to conduct research and community interventions to preserve endangered languages [1], [2]. Linguists begin language preservation efforts by collecting spoken data from native speakers and transcribing phonemes, the fundamental speech sounds and linguistic units of a language [3], [5]. Since each minute of speech can take up to 2 hours for a trained linguist to transcribe [6], and each hour can take around 100 hours to transcribe [7], manual phoneme classification represents a significant bottleneck in endangered language preservation, motivating the development of computational approaches to assist humans in this task.

Advances in machine learning and speech signal processing have demonstrated the effectiveness of deep neural network models for learning discriminative speech representations [3] and classifying phonemes [6], when trained on large speech datasets. However, existing methods for automated phoneme classification have been largely ineffective for endangered languages [6], due to the limited number of speakers and the difficulty in collecting labeled, transcribed training data. Our paper contributes to endangered language preservation efforts in the specific context of Ladin, an endangered language from the Italian Alps. We use a novel dataset of Ladin collected during linguistic field research in Italy with native Ladin speakers. The Ladin people live in multiple valleys around the Sella massif mountain range, and the speakers across valleys exhibit a considerable amount of linguistic variation: this research focuses on classifying phonemes in the Fascian dialect of Ladin, spoken in the Fassa Valley [10].

To the best of our knowledge, this paper presents the first attempt to develop computational models that classify Ladin phonemes: we contribute a novel analysis of speech representations and machine learning models for classifying 32 phonemes of Ladin [10]. Given the extremely small amount of labeled phoneme data available for endangered languages, including Ladin, our research was driven by the following two questions: (1) Will classical machine learning models outperform deep neural networks when classifying the phonemes of Ladin? (2) Should phoneme classifiers for Ladin be trained on traditional speech representations (e.g., MFCC, LPC) or representations learned by deep unsupervised models, such as autoencoders?

To address these questions, we experimented with 7 classical machine learning models and 1 dense neural network trained on 9 different speech representations that were extracted with traditional algorithms (MFCC, LPC) and autoencoder-based approaches (autoencoder, LSTM autoencoder, WaveNet). Our highest performing model (dense neural network with MFCC representations) achieved an 86% accuracy across all phonemes, accuracies above 90% on 6 individual phonemes, and accuracies above 77% across Ladin phoneme subgroups.

For the endangered language of Ladin, this paper makes two major contributions towards computational approaches that assist linguists in endangered language preservation: (1) We present the first automated phoneme classification approach for Ladin. (2) We present an extensive analysis of speech feature extraction algorithms, speech representations, and phoneme classification models for Ladin. Our overall multi-stage research initiative to preserve Ladin is conceptualized in Figure 1.

2. Background

2.1. Endangered language speech research

Phoneme classification has largely relied on classical machine learning models (e.g., Support Vector Machines) trained on acous-
Figure 1: Multi-stage research process to preserve the Ladin language. This paper focuses on the phoneme representation and classification phases.

Figure 2: The 25ms audio window is broken up into four 10ms audio frames, each overlapping by 5ms. For the frame-level approach, features are extracted from each frame. For the segment-level approach, each frame is evaluated by sliding a 2.5ms segment across the frame to calculate the average segment-level features per frame. This sample audio is taken from our dataset, and the line segments are drawn to scale.

3. Methodology

Our approach involved the following steps: (1) collecting data from native Ladin speakers, (2) extracting traditional speech representations, (3) extracting autoencoder speech representations, and (4) experimenting with machine learning models that were trained on both types of representations to classify Ladin phonemes.

3.1. Ladin dataset collection from native speakers

Our Ladin dataset was collected through 3 months of field research with native Ladin speakers in the Fassa Valley of northeastern Italy. Our data consist of 76 audio files that span a total of 5 hours and 38 minutes of conversations with four native speakers of Ladin, (three female, one male). The audio was recorded at 44,100 Hz. Teams of linguists trained in the Ladin language were recruited to transcribe the phonemes of two interviews (one female speaker and one male speaker) with a combined duration of 7 minutes and 55 seconds. There are a total of 2520 labeled phoneme segments across both labeled interviews, with each label belonging to one of 33 phoneme classes: 10 vowel classes (39% of the audio), 22 consonant classes (47% of the audio), and 1 class representing the absence of a phoneme (14% silent segments). Vowels spanned two categories with the following distributions: rounded (8%) and unrounded (31%). Consonants spanned 6 key categories with the following distributions: affricates (2%), approximants (8%), fricatives (8%), nasals (7%), plosives (17%), and trills (6%).

3.2. Traditional speech representations

To represent raw speech, we extracted speech features with the traditional algorithms of MFCC and LPC [27]. Given a window size of 25ms that begins at the start of a phoneme, we experimented with two feature extraction approaches, detailed below, for computing speech representations from this window of audio: (1) frame-level extraction and (2) segment-level extraction. Figure 2 visualizes the relationship between the audio windows, frames, and segments.

3.2.1. Frame-level extraction

The frame-level extraction approach divided the 25ms audio window into 4 smaller frames of size 10ms, each overlapping by 5ms. For the frame-level approach, features are extracted from each frame. For the segment-level approach, each frame is evaluated by sliding a 2.5ms segment across the frame to calculate the average segment-level features per frame. This sample audio is taken from our dataset, and the line segments are drawn to scale.

3.2.2. Segment-level extraction

The segment-level extraction approach used the same 10ms audio frames as the frame-level approach. However, for each 10ms frame, features were calculated using a smaller 2.5ms window size.
Dense NN
0.39
0.59
0.38
0.36
0.35
0.19
0.33
0.46
0.37
0.39
0.19
0.31
0.32
0.33
0.39
0.43
0.16
0.56
0.29
LR (L1)
0.53
LR (ElasticNet)
0.17
0.82
0.34
0.50
DT
0.52
0.35
SVM (rbf)
0.18
SVM (linear)
0.51
RF
0.56
0.18
0.52
0.17
0.47
0.33
0.38
0.18
0.34
0.18
0.15
0.18
0.23
0.17
0.52
0.28
0.34
0.53
0.86*
0.36
0.52
0.35
0.52
0.36
the final layer, which used tanh, since the audio is bounded on
models used the ReLU activation function on all layers except
layers mirror each corresponding encoding layer in size. All
as the previous layer, until the bottleneck layer. The decoding
each subsequent encoding layer having half as many neurons
The initial hidden layer for all models had 2048 neurons, with
tors inputs of length 110 (corresponding to 2.5ms of audio data).
Small LSTM AE
0.35
0.10
0.16
0.33
0.37
0.36
0.33
0.38
Big LSTM AE
0.53
0.28
0.39
0.33
0.37
0.36
0.33
0.38
WaveNet
0.77
0.39
0.59
0.52
0.56
0.54
0.57
0.52
(110 bits) segment that slides across the frame a single bit at
time, creating segments that overlap by 109 bits. Features
for each 2.5ms segment were computed and averaged across
the frame. Then, the average segment-level features for each
frame were concatenated to form the segment-level representa-
tion. Similar to frame-level extraction, 12 coefficients were
extracted for MFCC, and 8 coefficients were extracted for LPC.
This approach was informed by prior research using Restricted
Boltzmann Machines to represent raw speech [29].

3.3. Autoencoder speech representations

Our experiments used traditional autoencoders, LSTM autoen-
coders, and a WaveNet autoencoder to represent raw speech.
To establish a baseline for how the unlabeled audio files
could be leveraged to learn speech representations, we trained
two traditional autoencoders (AEs) on the unlabeled Ladin au-
dio, denoted as Small AE and Big AE with bottleneck layer sizes
of 8 and 16, respectively. To explore the possibility of leverag-
ing temporal information encoded in our data, we also trained
two LSTM autoencoders [29] on the unlabeled Ladin audio, de-
noted as Small LSTM AE and Big LSTM AE with bottleneck
layer sizes of 8 and 16, respectively. All models took audio ten-
sor inputs of length 110 (corresponding to 2.5ms of audio data).
The initial hidden layer for all models had 2048 neurons, with
each subsequent encoding layer having half as many neurons
as the previous layer, until the bottleneck layer. The decoding
layers mirror each corresponding encoding layer in size. All
models used the ReLU activation function on all layers except
the final layer, which used tanh, since the audio is bounded on
[-1, 1]. The bottleneck representations from all autoencoders
were extracted per the segment-level approach in 3.2.2.

The WaveNet extraction approach used a WaveNet autoen-
coder [29] trained on 306,043 sounds of different pitch, timbre,
and envelope, which are common properties of human speech.
Our approach was inspired by prior WaveNet autoencoders that
learned discriminative representations of English, French, and
Mandarin phonemes [13]. The WaveNet autoencoder extracts
16-dimensional encodings from each 512-bit phoneme speech
segment. Phoneme segments shorter than 512 were padded with
zeros to become valid inputs. Phoneme segments longer than
512 bits were divided into 512-bit segments which were fed into
the autoencoder. Encodings were then averaged to obtain the fi-
nal 16-dimensional speech representation.

3.4. Classification experiments
Phoneme transcription was formulated as a multi-class classi-
fication problem to assign each audio segment to one of 33
classes (32 labels for phonemes and 1 label for silent speech
segments). To identify effective combinations of speech rep-
resentations and classification algorithms for Ladin phoneme
transcription, we experimented with 8 machine learning clas-
sifiers trained on 9 different speech representations. We tested
a 2-layer dense neural network (Dense NN, 512 neurons per layer,
dropout of 0.05, adam optimizer, 50 epochs), implemented with
Keras. We also implemented the following classifiers with the
scikit-learn framework: Support Vector Machine (SVM) with a
linear and rbf kernel, Random Forest (RF), Decision Tree (DT),
and Logistic Regression (LR) with L1, L2, and ElasticNet reg-
ularization [30]. Due to the small size of our dataset, all exper-
iments were conducted with 5-fold stratified cross-validation,
and all models were implemented with default scikit-learn pa-
rameters, in order to avoid obtaining overly optimistic model
performances [31]. The cross-validation was conducted with a
stratified approach to account for imbalanced amounts of data
available across phonemes. All features in the training and
testing set of each cross-validation fold were standardized per
the distribution of the training set. Our primary metric was
the phoneme classification accuracy, averaged across folds. A
chance performance baseline of 3% (1/33) was used to com-
pare our models to a random multi-class classifier.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Comparison of Speech Representations
The average classification accuracy computed across all Ladin
phonemes for each of 8 classifiers trained on 9 different speech
representations is reported in Table 1. The highest classifier
accuracy obtained was 86%, achieved by a Dense NN trained
on the segment-level MFCC speech representation. For each
classifier, either the segment-level MFCC or WaveNet speech
representations achieved the highest classification accuracy.
For MFCC, the segment-level feature extraction approach
always yielded a higher classification accuracy than the frame-
level approach. We noted that the efficacy of the frame-level
versus segment-level approach depended on the choice of un-
derlying speech processing algorithm used; for LPC, the frame-
level approach always yielded a higher classification accuracy
than the segment-level approach. The poor performance of the
segment-level LPC representation is likely due to the small size

| Representation | Dense NN | SVM (linear) | SVM (rbf) | RF | DT | LR (L1) | LR (L2) | LR (ElasticNet) |
|----------------|---------|-------------|-----------|----|----|--------|--------|-----------------|
| MFCC Frame     | 0.82    | 0.29        | 0.43      | 0.51| 0.46| 0.46   | 0.46   | 0.47            |
| MFCC Segment   | 0.86*   | 0.36        | 0.52      | 0.58| 0.52| 0.52   | 0.53   | 0.56            |
| LPC Frame      | 0.67    | 0.23        | 0.36      | 0.37| 0.35| 0.35   | 0.35   | 0.35            |
| LPC Segment    | 0.31    | 0.15        | 0.18      | 0.19| 0.18| 0.18   | 0.18   | 0.19            |
| Small AE       | 0.54    | 0.28        | 0.39      | 0.33| 0.37| 0.36   | 0.33   | 0.38            |
| Big AE         | 0.50    | 0.25        | 0.34      | 0.31| 0.34| 0.34   | 0.32   | 0.36            |
| Small LSTM AE  | 0.53    | 0.28        | 0.39      | 0.33| 0.37| 0.36   | 0.33   | 0.38            |
| Big LSTM AE    | 0.35    | 0.10        | 0.16      | 0.18| 0.17| 0.17   | 0.17   | 0.17            |
| WaveNet        | 0.77    | 0.39        | 0.59      | 0.52| 0.56| 0.54   | 0.57   | 0.52            |
of the segments; we observed greater variance within frames for the segment-level LPC coefficients compared to the segment-level MFCC coefficients.

Representations learned from the traditional autoencoders trained on the unlabeled Ladin speech files were outperformed by the segment-level MFCC and WaveNet speech representations. We noted that Big AE always outperformed Big LSTM AE across all classifiers. This is likely due to the limited amount of training data and the larger number of trainable parameters for LSTM networks. Small AE and Small LSTM AE exhibited similar performance across all classifiers. The small autoencoders always outperformed their larger counterparts, indicating that they learned more useful, condensed representations of phonemes in our dataset’s context.

4.2. Comparison of Phoneme Classifiers

We noted that the Dense NN achieved the highest accuracy across all speech representations. These results suggest that deep neural network models for phoneme classification can outperform classical machine learning algorithms, even in low-resource language settings. In contrast, we noted that the linear SVM achieved the lowest accuracy across all speech representations. However, using an RBF kernel substantially increased SVM classification accuracy across all speech representations.

4.3. Phoneme Classification Performances

We evaluated the ability of Dense NN trained on MFCC segment representations to classify individual Ladin phonemes and phoneme subgroups, documented in Table 2. All phonemes and phoneme subgroups had classification accuracies substantially higher than our chance level baseline (3%), demonstrating the potential for leveraging discriminative MFCC segment representations to classify Ladin phonemes.

The average vowel classification accuracy (88%) was higher than that of consonants (83%), and average unrounded vowel classification accuracy (90%) was higher than that of rounded vowels (80%). The performance difference between unrounded and rounded vowels may have been influenced by the impact of rounding on speech formants: rounding lengths the vocal tract, lowering all formants on the spectral envelope [32]. Since MFCC represents spectral envelopes of sounds, features extracted from rounded vowels may have been less discriminative. Within the consonants, fricatives and nasals had the highest average classification accuracy (87%), followed by plosives and trills (82%), affricates (80%) and approximants (77%). Fricatives are more temporally complex sounds, as they combine a fricative and plosive, which may contribute to their lower performance. Approximants form during slight constrictions of the vocal tract that are not as prominent or turbulent as constrictions used to produce fricatives; the complex and subtle nature of approximants may contribute to their lower performance [32].

Our results for Ladin phoneme subgroup classification demonstrate the potential for using MFCC segment-level approaches to learn discriminative representations of individual Ladin speech sounds. Future research includes experimenting with data augmentation [15] to increase the quantity of Ladin training data and developing multilingual models that learn cross-lingual phoneme representations to improve Ladin phoneme classifiers. Ladin shares phonetic and phonological attributes with non-endangered languages (e.g., Italian) [10], indicating that cross-lingual modeling may be a promising research direction for Ladin preservation. Future work also includes integrating our machine learning models into a real-world system to help linguists rapidly transcribe Ladin during field research (Figure 1). Our work contributes insights for the future development and deployment of phoneme classification approaches that can help linguists preserve Ladin and other low-resource endangered languages.

Table 2: Average classification accuracy for each Ladin phoneme subgroup, the 6 phonemes with the highest performance, and the 6 phonemes with the lowest performance, obtained by Dense NN trained on MFCC Segment representations.

| Phonemes | Classification Accuracy |
|----------|-------------------------|
| Phoneme Subgroups | |
| All Vowels | 0.88 |
| Rounded Vowels | 0.80 |
| Unrounded Vowels | 0.90 |
| All Consonants | 0.83 |
| Affricates | 0.80 |
| Approximants | 0.77 |
| Fricatives | 0.87 |
| Nasals | 0.87 |
| Plosives | 0.82 |
| Trills | 0.82 |

Highest Phoneme Performances

| Phonemes | Classification Accuracy |
|----------|-------------------------|
| œ | 0.95 |
| e | 0.93 |
| a | 0.90 |
| s | 0.90 |
| m | 0.90 |

Lowest Phoneme Performances

| Phonemes | Classification Accuracy |
|----------|-------------------------|
| -ts | 0.50 |
| z | 0.62 |
| r | 0.63 |
| b | 0.67 |
| nj | 0.67 |

5. Conclusions

Our paper presents the first analysis of speech representations and machine learning models for classifying 32 phonemes of Ladin. We demonstrate the potential for learning discriminative representations of Ladin phonemes through traditional speech processing algorithms (MFCC in particular) and autoencoder-based approaches. We provide a proof-of-concept to recruit linguists to further transcribe recordings in our novel Ladin dataset.

Future research includes experimenting with data augmentation [15] to increase the quantity of Ladin training data and developing multilingual models that learn cross-lingual phoneme representations to improve Ladin phoneme classifiers. Ladin shares phonetic and phonological attributes with non-endangered languages (e.g., Italian) [10], indicating that cross-lingual modeling may be a promising research direction for Ladin preservation. Future work also includes integrating our machine learning models into a real-world system to help linguists rapidly transcribe Ladin during field research (Figure 1). Our work contributes insights for the future development and deployment of phoneme classification approaches that can help linguists preserve Ladin and other low-resource endangered languages.
6. Acknowledgements
We thank the native speakers of Ladin for their generous participation in this research and contribution of recordings. We thank the Ladin Cultural Institute in Italy and the University of Southern California for supporting this research.

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