Learning Hidden Markov Models for Regression using Path Aggregation

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Abstract

We consider the task of learning mappings from sequential data to real-valued responses. We present and evaluate an approach to learning a type of hidden Markov model (HMM) for regression. The learning process involves inferring the structure and parameters of a conventional HMM, while simultaneously learning a regression model that maps features that characterize paths through the model to continuous responses. Our results, in both synthetic and biological domains, demonstrate the value of jointly learning the two components of our approach.

1 Introduction

A wide array of problems in speech and language processing, biology, vision, and other application domains involve learning models that map sequences of inputs into some type of output. Common types of task include learning models that classify sequences \textit{(e.g., [12])}, segment or parse them \textit{(e.g., [13])}, or map input sequences to output sequences \textit{(e.g., [3])}. Here we consider the task of learning models that map input sequences to real-valued responses. We present an approach to this problem that involves simultaneously learning a hidden Markov model (HMM) and a function that maps paths through this model to real-valued responses. We evaluate our approach using synthetic data sets and a large collection from a yeast genomics study.

The type of task that we consider is illustrated in Figure 1. This is a type of regression task in that the learner must induce a mapping from a given input sequence to a real-valued response. In particular, we assume that the real-valued responses can be represented as a function of the presence and arrangement of particular \textit{motifs} that occur in the sequences. Each of these motifs is a pattern that allows some variability in the subsequences that match it.

We assume that neither these motifs nor their locations in the sequences are given to the learner, but instead must be discovered during the learning process. The learner must also determine the extent to which each motif and its relationships to other motifs contribute to the response variable.

Our research is motivated by a class of problems in computational biology that involve inferring the extent to which particular properties of genomic sequences determine certain responses in a cell. For example, the level at which an individual gene is expressed in a given condition often depends on the presence of particular \textit{activators} that bind to sequence motifs nearby the gene. Moreover, the number of binding motifs, their arrangement in the sequence, and intrinsic properties of the motifs themselves may contribute to the response level of the gene. Thus, in order to explain the expression levels of genes in some condition, a model needs to be able to map these sequence properties into continuous values.

The approach that we present involves simultaneously learning (i) the structure and parameters of a hidden Markov model, and (ii) a function that maps paths through the model to real-valued responses. The hidden Markov model is able to represent the relevant sequence motifs and the regression model is able to represent the mapping from occurrences of these motifs to the response variable.

There are several bodies of related research. First, there is a wide variety of architectures and methods for learning HMMs \textit{[19]}, stochastic context-free grammars \textit{[17]}, and related probabilistic sequence models, such as conditional random fields \textit{[13]}. For some types of problems, these models include continuous random variables. Typically these continuous variables depend only on a few other variables, and the dependencies are encoded at the outset. In our models, in contrast, the
A variety of methods have been developed for discovering motifs in biological sequences [1,14,16], and for identifying arrangements of motifs that are involved in particular biological processes [20,22]. These methods are designed for either unsupervised pattern discovery or supervised classification tasks. They either try to find motifs that are over-represented in a given set of sequences, or they try to find motif arrangements that distinguish two given sets of sequences. Our method, in contrast, is intended for regression tasks. There are also several methods that learn models that characterize gene-expression responses in terms of sequence features. Some of these approaches first group expression values into discrete sets and then frame the problem as a classification task [2,21]. Other methods use a two-phase approach that first identifies candidate motifs without the use of expression data, and then learns a regression model from expression data and these fixed sequence features [5,23]. The key difference between our approach and these methods is that, in our approach, the real-valued response associated with each sequence is a training signal that has a direct influence on the sequence features represented by the model.

2 Approach

The task that we consider is to learn a function which maps a given discrete character sequence $x = \{x_1, x_2, ..., x_L\}$ to a real-valued scalar $y$. In this section we describe the representation we employ and discuss the procedure we use for learning the models.

2.1 Representation

We assume that there are certain features, or motifs, present in each sequence $x$ that determine the associated $y$ value. However, in the tasks that we consider, the learner is given only sequences and their response values, and must discover both the motifs and their locations in the sequences. Thus, our approach involves learning the structure and parameters of a hidden Markov model that represents these motifs. The other key component of our learned model is a regression function that maps from occurrences of the motifs to $y$ values. In particular, we associate certain states in the HMM with motifs, and represent the putative occurrences of motifs in a given sequence by keeping track of the number of times that each of these states is visited. That is, a subset of the states in the HMM...
\{c_1, c_2, ..., c_N\} are designated as “counted” states, and a path through the model defines an integer vector $v = (v_1, v_2, ..., v_N)$, where each $v_k$ is the number of visits to state $c_k$.

More generally, we have uncertainty about the “correct” path through the model, and therefore uncertainty about the number of visits to each state $c_k$. Consider the HMM shown in Figure 2(a). There are two types of motifs, each two characters long. The motif occurrences are assumed to be interspersed with variable-length “background” sequence which is modeled by the BG state\(^1\). In this HMM, we count visits to each motif (i.e., $c_1 = m_{12}$, $c_2 = m_{22}$). Figure 2(b) shows the corresponding graphical model when processing a sequence of length $L$. Each circle represents a random variable in the model, and edges represent direct dependencies. Probabilistic dependencies are shown with solid lines and deterministic dependencies are shown with dashed lines. Figure 2(c) shows the values taken on by the variables in the model for a case in which $x = \text{actacaacttg}$, $y = 9.0$, and we have assumed a particular path through the HMM. This path involves going through the top motif twice and the lower motif once. We discuss each of the random variables in turn.

Each variable $X_i$ represents the $i$th character in the input sequence $x$. The variable $S_i$ represents the HMM state that we are in after explaining the first $i$ characters of $x$. This state depends directly on the previous state, and this dependency is encoded by the HMM transition parameters. The variable $X_i$ depends on the corresponding state variable $S_i$, and this relationship is encoded via the HMM emission parameters. In the problems we consider, these state sequences are hidden during both training and testing.

Each $V_{k,i}$ represents the number of visits to state $c_k$ in the paths through the HMM which explain the first $i$ characters of $x$. These variables are also hidden and depend on the HMM state $S_i$ and the corresponding variable from the previous position, $V_{k,i-1}$. They are updated as follows:

$$P(V_{k,i} = v | s_i, V_{k,i-1}) = \begin{cases} P(V_{k,i-1} = v - 1) & \text{if } s_i = c_k \\ P(V_{k,i-1} = v) & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$

Moreover, as illustrated by the edges between the bottom two nodes in each column of Figure 2(b), we may

\(^1\)As an alternative to a self-transition, our background models include a probability distribution over lengths of subsequence, making these models generalized [4] or hidden semi-Markov models.
represent dependencies among the $V_{k,i}$ variables at the
ith position. Doing this enables us to model an arbitrary
joint distribution characterizing the visits to the
“counted” states.

Finally, the variable $Y$ in Figure 2(b) is the real-valued
response associated with the sequence in question. Its
value depends on the number of visits to all counted
states after explaining the entire sequence. Thus, the
last column of visit count variables in Figure 2(b) de-
termines the response value, $y = f((V_{1L},...,V_{NL}))$.

We represent $Y$ using a linear Gaussian model. Let $V$
denote the vector of variables $(V_{1L},...,V_{NL})$, and let $v$
denote a particular vector of visit counts $(v_{1L},...,v_{NL})$. Given a specific $v$, this model represents the proba-
bility distribution of $Y$ as a Gaussian whose mean is a
linear function of the visit-count vector:

$$p(Y|v) \equiv N(\beta_1 v_{1L} + \beta_2 v_{2L} + ... + \beta_N v_{NL}, \sigma^2)$$  (2)

Here, each $\beta_k$ is an unknown model parameter which
represents the contribution to the response variable of
each occurrence of the motif represented by state $c_k$.
The standard deviation $\sigma$ is also a model parameter
to be learned.

Since the $V$ variables are hidden, we may infer a distri-
bution for $Y$ given a sequence $x$, by marginalizing out
$V$, based on its likelihood given $x$ which is computed
by our hidden Markov model.

$$p(Y|x) = \sum_v p(Y|v)P(v|x).$$  (3)

Note that (3) involves a summation over the possi-
ble values of $v$. In general, the number of possible
values can increase exponentially with the number of
counted states $N$, but in practice, $N$ is a small num-
ber of features. There are tasks in which it is use-
ful to have a larger number of counted states, and in
many such cases, the calculations are still tractable
because the HMM topology and the sequence charac-
ters in $x$ prevent otherwise possible values of $v$ from
having a nonzero probability. If the number of possible
values of $v$ is still prohibitively large, then we may
choose to consider only its most likely values, or we
may instead calculate the expected value of $V$ which
is $\bar{v} = (\bar{v}_1, \bar{v}_2, ..., \bar{v}_N)$, where each $\bar{v}_k = \sum_{\pi} P(\delta(\pi)|x)$, where $\delta(\pi)$ determines a path $\pi$ through
the HMM to the appropriate vector, $\bar{v}$ is computed ef-
ciently using dynamic programming. $p(Y|x)$ is then
estimated as $p(Y|\bar{v})$.

2.2 Parameter Learning

Given an HMM structure, we select parameter values
to maximize the joint probability of the observed input
sequences and their associated response values. Taking
into account uncertainty in the “correct” path for each
given sequence, and the dependencies represented in
the model, we can express the objective function as:

$$\arg \max_{\Theta, \beta, \sigma} \prod_s [P(s : \Theta)P(x|s : \Theta)p(y = \delta(s) : \beta, \sigma)]$$

where $s_i$ is the HMM state we are in at the ith char-
acter of $x$. This product ranges over all of the $(x,y)$
pairs in the training set, $\Theta$ represents the usual set of
HMM state transition and character emission para-
ters, and $\beta$ and $\sigma$ are the parameters of the regression
model described above. Note that, because a given
$s$ maps deterministically onto a particular $v = \delta(s)$,
we do not need to sum over $v$. We train using an ex-
pectation-maximization (EM) approach which is a
slight modification of the standard Baum-Welch algo-
rithm for HMMs [19].

E-step: EM algorithms are already widely used for
training HMM models to represent sequence motifs
(e.g. [1]). The difference between standard Baum-
Welch and our approach is that we calculate the ex-
pected values for our hidden variables taking into ac-
count $y$ as well as $x$. To accomplish this, we calculate
a probability distribution over $V = (V_{1L},V_{2L},...,V_{NL})$
given $x$, $y$ and our model parameters by considering
each possible value for $v$. The probability is given by

$$P(v|x,y : \Theta, \beta, \sigma) = \frac{1}{Z}p(y|v,x : \beta, \sigma)$$  (5)

where $Z$ is a normalization constant. This is the
base-case initialization for the backward calcu-
lations involved in standard E-step of Baum-Welch.
Apart from this, we compute the expected values
for all hidden variables $V_{11}, V_{12}, ..., V_{NL-1}$ and
$S_1, S_2, ..., S_L$ using the standard forward-backward
calculations, which update the probability distribution
over $V_{1L}, V_{2L}, ..., V_{NL}$ accounting for $x$ and $\Theta$.

M-step: Apart from the initialization of the back-
ward calculations described above, the estimation of
our HMM parameters $\Theta$ are calculated using stan-
dard M-step of Baum-Welch. We choose our regres-
sion model parameters $\beta$ and $\sigma$ using standard least-
squares regression, except that the possible values for
$v$ given a training example $i$ are weighted by their like-
lihood given $x_i$ and $y_i$. Thus, we minimize the total
expected squared difference between the observed and
predicted response values in the training set. This is
calculated by marginalizing over the possible values for
$v$, according the their likelihood $P(v|x_i, y_i : \Theta, \beta, \sigma)$,
which is calculated in the E-step:

$$\hat{\beta} = \arg \max_{\beta} \sum_i \sum_v P(v|x_i, y_i : \Theta, \beta, \sigma)(y_i - \beta \cdot v)^2$$  (6)
where $D$ is the training set size. Let $H_k$ be the maximum number of visits to state $c_k$. \footnote{In practice, to make our calculations more efficient, if there is a cycle in the HMM topology that includes state $c_k$, we set $H_k$ to the highest number of visits to state $c_k$ that can reasonably be expected to occur.} $V = \prod_k^N H_k$ is the number of possible values of $v$.  

Equation (6) has the closed-form solution:

$$
\hat{\beta} = (A^T \Gamma A)^{-1} A^T \Gamma b
$$

(7)

where $A$ is a $VD \times N$ matrix of all possible values of $v$ for each training example, $b$ is a $VD \times 1$ vector of the $y$ response values corresponding to each row of $A$, and $\Gamma$ is a $VD \times VD$ diagonal matrix, where each value $\gamma_i$ represents the likelihood of $v$ in row $i$ of $A$, given the appropriate training example, i.e. $\gamma_i = P(v = (0, 0, ..., 0) | x_1, y_1 : \Theta, \beta, \sigma)$.

$$
A = \begin{bmatrix} 0 & 0 & \cdots & 0 \\ \vdots & & & \vdots \\ H_1 & H_2 & \cdots & H_N \\ 0 & 0 & \cdots & 0 \\ \vdots & & & \vdots \\ H_1 & H_2 & \cdots & H_N \end{bmatrix}, \quad b = \begin{bmatrix} y_1 \\ \vdots \\ y_1 \\ y_2 \\ \vdots \\ \vdots \\ \vdots \end{bmatrix}
$$

$$
\Gamma = \begin{bmatrix} \gamma_1 & 0 & 0 & \cdots & 0 \\ 0 & \gamma_2 & 0 & \cdots & 0 \\ \vdots & \ddots & \ddots & \ddots & \vdots \\ 0 & 0 & \cdots & 0 & \gamma_{VD} \end{bmatrix}
$$

(8)

The value for $\sigma$ is estimated from the (minimized) expected difference between our best fit line and the data points.

Again, if the number of possible values of $v$ is prohibitively large, we can sample from the distribution of $v$ or we can use the expected number of visits $\hat{v}_k$ to each $c_k$, and solve $\hat{\beta} = (A^T A)^{-1} A^T b$, where

$$
A = \begin{bmatrix} \hat{v}_1 \\ \hat{v}_2 \\ \vdots \\ \hat{v}_D \end{bmatrix}, \quad b = \begin{bmatrix} y_1 \\ y_2 \\ \vdots \\ y_D \end{bmatrix}
$$

(9)

and $\hat{v}_i$ is the vector of expected visits calculated for the $i$th training sequence, $x_i$.

### 2.3 Structure Learning

Our task includes learning the underlying model structure as well as parameters. This structure refers to the set of states and transitions that define the HMM topology. Although our regression approach applies to arbitrary HMM structures, we are primarily interested in the occurrence and arrangement of motifs. These motifs represent classes of short substrings with character preferences at each position. Whereas Figure 2(a) shows a model that can represent an arbitrary number of occurrences of two very short motifs, more sophisticated arrangements can be encoded in the HMM topology. Consider the structures shown in Figure 3. Here each shaded, rounded shape represents a sequence of states modeling a single motif. This model considers not only the presence of particular motifs, but also their logical arrangement. The counted states (although they may be visited at most once) correspond to each combination of these substrings, and thus the response variable $Y$ is a function of not only the presence of particular sequence characters, but it is also sensitive to whether or not they appear in the preferred order.

Instead of searching through the space of arbitrary HMM topologies by adding and removing individual states and transitions, our search operators are oriented toward the presence and arrangement of motifs. In our experiments, we begin our structure search with a single motif. We learn the parameters for this model and search HMM structure space by introducing additional motifs. We repeat this search process from different initial parameters some fixed number of times, and return the model structure and parameters that perform the best on the training set or a tuning set.

### 3 Results

Our task is to learn the structure and parameters of an HMM, as well as the parameters of our regression function. We hypothesize that an algorithm which uses the real-valued response associated with each input sequence to train HMM parameters is able to learn more accurate models than an approach which does not. To
test this hypothesis, we compare our path-aggregate learning approach to a slightly less sophisticated two-phase version, where we first learn the HMM parameters $\Theta$ (using standard Baum-Welch), and then learn the parameters of our regression model $(\beta, \sigma)$, from $\Theta$ and the observed sequence and response data. The key difference is that the regression model is just learned once in the two-phase approach, rather than iteratively refined as described in the previous section.

Given an input sequence $x$, our models predict a probability density over the response $y$. In order to compare our method to the baseline method, we select a single value $\hat{y}$, by calculating the Viterbi (most likely) path through the HMM and then calculating the corresponding response according to the regression model, i.e., $\hat{y} = \beta \cdot v$, where $v$ is the counted state visits implied by the Viterbi path.

To measure the accuracy of our models, we calculate the average absolute error on held-aside test sequences: $\text{error} = \frac{1}{T} \sum_{i=1}^{T} |y_i - \hat{y}_i|$. We test our learner on both simulated data and real gene expression data from yeast. For the yeast data, we believe the gene expression measurement is a function, in part, of a combination of short DNA motifs in the gene’s promoter region, to which transcription factor proteins may bind to regulate the gene’s expression. For the simulated data, we create such a situation by planting known motifs in simulated DNA sequence data.

For each simulated data experiment, we generate 200-character sequences from the alphabet \{a,c,g,t\}. We then plant 10-character motifs in each sequence. The number of times each motif is planted comes from a Poisson distribution with $\lambda = 1$. Only two of the motifs affect the response value, which is set to $-2 + 7 \times v_1 + 3 \times v_2 + \varepsilon$, where $v_i$ is the number of times motif $i$ was planted in the sequence, and $\varepsilon$ is random noise distributed normally from $N(0,1)$. In our experiments, we vary the number of additional motifs (that do not affect response), and the “mutation rate,” where a rate of $r$ means that $r$ characters in each motif are changed at random before the motif is planted.

The HMM model that we use is similar to the one shown in Figure 2(a), except that it varies in the number of motifs, and they are each 15 characters wide. We explore structures with one or two motifs, restarting 10 times with different initial settings. We keep the model with the highest accuracy on a held-aside tuning set. For each experiment, we generate 128 training sequences, 128 tuning sequences and 256 testing sequences, and we replicate each experiment several times.

Figure 4 shows how the accuracy of our learned models changes as a function of the mutation rate, and as a function of the number of additional planted motifs (apart from the two motifs that affect the response). The error rate using our approach is consistently less than that of the two-phase baseline, and tends to level off even as the number of mutations or additional motifs increases. Also, the recovery rate of the planted motifs is consistently higher using our integrated approach than that of the two-phase baseline. For instance, as we vary mutation rate and motif set size, we find that our approach returns the exact 10-character string of the motifs four times as often than the two-phase baseline. We conjecture that the reason our approach learns more accurate models than the two-phase baseline is because it is able to pick out the motifs that affect the response value instead of over-represented motifs which do not.

To determine whether our approach can aid in the discovery of motifs in real genomic data, we use data from the yeast gene expression analysis of Gasch et al. (2000). In these experiments, yeast cells
are put in a variety of stress conditions, such as heat shock or amino acid starvation, and measurements of gene expression are taken using microarrays to determine which genes’ activity is increased or decreased specifically in these conditions. We choose 15 of these experiments that have the highest degree of differential expression and represent a variety of experimental conditions. From each of these, we select genes which are differentially expressed, and a control group with approximately the same number of genes. For each gene, we obtain 500 base pairs of promoter sequence from the University of California Santa Cruz genome browser [10].

For these data sets, we use models similar to the ones we have previously shown to be well-suited to the task of identifying motifs in promoter data [18]. An example of the HMM structure is shown in Figure 3. These models are able to represent conjunctions of motifs occurring in specific orders. Instead of counting motif occurrences, the regression model considers which combinations of motifs occur in each sequence. We search over the space of possible structures by incrementally adding new motifs to the existing model. Each such addition affects several parts of the HMM topology. We limit this search to a maximum of two motifs, and we find in our experiments that both our approach and the baseline method return a variety of different HMM structures. Since the initial parameter values affect the results of EM training, the motif emission parameters are initialized by sampling from the training sequences.

As one additional baseline, we include a model that always predicts the average training set expression as the predicted response: \( \hat{y} = \frac{1}{D} \sum_{i=1}^{D} y_i \). The results are shown in Figure 5. The top panel in the figure compares our approach to the two-phase baseline. The bottom panel compares against the average-expression baseline. The models learned by our path-aggregate approach are more accurate than the two-phase baseline for 13 of the 15 data sets. Eight of these 13 are statistically significant at a \( p \)-value of 0.05, using a two-tailed, paired \( t \)-test over the ten cross-validation folds. Our models are more accurate than the training set average baseline for 12 of 15 data sets (10 of these are statistically significant).

4 Conclusion

We have presented a novel approach for learning HMM models for sequence-based regression tasks. Our approach involves simultaneously learning the structure and parameters of an HMM, along with a linear regression model that maps occurrences of sequence motifs to the response variable. Our experiments indicate that integrating the processes of learning the HMM and the associated regression model yields more accurate models than a two-phase baseline regression approach which first learns the HMM and then subsequently learns a regression model. We note that this baseline is fairly sophisticated, compared to many methods for sequence-based regression, in that it does not rely on a fixed, pre-defined set of features to represent each sequence being processed.

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