Joint Use of Node Attributes and Proximity for Semi-Supervised Classification on Graphs

Arpit Merchant
arpit.merchant@helsinki.fi
University of Helsinki

Michael Mathioudakis
michael.mathioudakis@helsinki.fi
University of Helsinki

Abstract
The node classification problem is to infer unknown node labels in a graph given its structure and node attributes along with labels for some of the nodes. Approaches for this task typically assume that adjacent nodes have similar attributes and thus, that a node's label can be predicted from the labels of its neighbors. While such homophily is often observed (e.g., for political affiliation in social networks), the assumption may not hold for arbitrary graph datasets and classification tasks. In fact, nodes that share the same label may be adjacent but differ in their attributes; or may not be adjacent but have similar attributes. We aim to develop a node classification approach that can flexibly adapt to a range of settings wherein labels are correlated with graph structure, or node attributes, or both. To this end, we propose JANE (Jointly using Attributes and Node Embeddings): a novel and principled approach based on a generative probabilistic model that weighs the role of node proximity and attribute similarity in predicting labels. Our experiments on a variety of graph datasets and comparison with standard baselines demonstrate that JANE exhibits a superior combination of versatility and competitive performance.

Keywords: node classification, graph embeddings

1 Introduction
Semi-supervised node classification over attributed graphs involves a graph with known structure, where each node is associated with a label (or ‘class’, a categorical variable), as well as other attributes. However, labels are known only for some of the nodes and are unknown for others. Given the graph structure, node attributes, and some node labels, the goal is to predict the labels for the remaining nodes. This task finds application in many domains such as information networks [1], complex systems [2], and protein function identification [3].

Previous Work. Motivated by theories of homophily [4] and social influence [5], a common assumption is that adjacent nodes tend to have similar labels. For instance, in a social network, friends are likely to vote for the same political party. Approaches that rely on this assumption typically enforce homophily by considering node proximity and assigning the same label to nearby nodes. In label propagation, for example, labels diffuse from labeled nodes to their unlabeled neighbors in an iterative manner until convergence [6]. Other methods induce label uniformity within cuts or clusters of the graph [7–9] or consider node proximity in a latent space that preserves graph distances, as in DeepWalk [10] and similar matrix factorization approaches [11].

However, the aforementioned methods ignore other node attributes, which can be detrimental. For example, Hamilton, et. al. [3] show an attribute-based linear classifier outperforms DeepWalk on citation and social graphs. Moreover, while homophily is often observed in some classification tasks, it is not uncommon to find that adjacent nodes do not share a particular label and that, in such cases, other node attributes can serve as better label predictors than graph structure [12,13]. For example, two individuals may be friends (i.e., be connected on a social network) but vote for different political parties (‘label’) – something that could be better predicted by rich, node-level attribute data.

Therefore, it is important to appropriately leverage both the graph structure and node attributes, for label prediction. AANE [14] and DANE [15] combine low-dimensional encodings of node attributes with graph-distance-preserving node embeddings, and use them as input features for label prediction. Given their unsupervised nature, they do not account for known labels, potentially ignoring information that would be useful in predicting the unknown labels. LANE [16] overcomes this limitation, but uses labels to smoothen the joint, latent representations of node attributes and proximity, thereby further enforcing homophily. Also, LANE does not directly optimize the probability of node labels conditioned on node attributes and graph structure, but rather targets their joint distribution. Separately, Graph Convolution Networks (GCNs) [17]
We summarize our main contributions below:

- Define a formal generative framework tailored to node classification, that captures the relationship between graph structure, node attributes, and node labels.
- Develop JANE, an algorithm for semi-supervised node classification, based on maximum likelihood estimate (MLE) of the model parameters.
- Demonstrate shortcomings of existing approaches and versatility of JANE on synthetic datasets.
- Empirically validate JANE’s performance on benchmark, real datasets compared to standard baselines.

2 Problem Setting

Let us consider an undirected and connected graph \( G = (\mathcal{V}, \mathcal{E}) \) of node size \( |\mathcal{V}| = n \). Let its structure be represented by the adjacency matrix \( A = [a_{ij}] \in \mathbb{R}^{n \times n} \). Denote \( D = \text{diag}(d_1, d_2, \ldots, d_n) \) to be the degree matrix where \( d_i = \sum_j a_{ij} \); and \( L = D - A \) as its unnormalized Laplacian matrix. Let \( \lambda_i(L) \) be the \( i \)-th smallest eigenvalue of \( L \) and \( e_i(L) \) its corresponding eigenvector.

Each node in the graph is associated with the following: \( d \) observed attributes \( \mathbf{x} \in \mathbb{R}^d \), \( k \) latent attributes \( \mathbf{u} \in \mathbb{R}^k \), and one \((1)\) possibly unobserved categorical variable \( \mathbf{y} \in \mathcal{M} \) as label from label-set \( \mathcal{M} = \{1,2,\ldots,M\} \). For example, in citation graphs, with nodes corresponding to articles and edges to citations between articles, \( \mathbf{x} \) captures observed quantities such as the bag-of-words representation of the article text; and label \( \mathbf{y} \) denotes the research area of the article (e.g., 'data mining' or 'machine learning'). The latent attributes \( \mathbf{u} \) correspond to properties of the articles that are not captured directly by attributes \( \mathbf{x} \) or label \( \mathbf{y} \), but that could play a role in determining which articles are connected with a citation (as captured by adjacency matrix \( A \)) and what research area \( \mathbf{y} \) an

Figure 1: Node labels may correlate with either graph structure (1b), or node attributes (1c), or both (1a). GCNs would perform well in the case of Fig. 1a, 1b but not in Fig. 1c because they predict the label of a node by enforcing homophily.
article is deemed to belong to. In terms of notation, to refer to the attributes of all nodes, we write \( X = \{ x_i \in \mathbb{R}^d, i \in \{1, \ldots, n\} \} \) to denote the observed node attributes, \( U = \{ u_i \in \mathbb{R}^k, i \in \{1, \ldots, n\} \} \) for the latent node attributes, and \( Y = \{ y_i \in \mathbb{M}, i \in \{1, \ldots, n\} \} \) for the node labels.

Having defined all elements in our setting, we now define the task we address as Problem 1.

**Problem 1 (Node-Classification).** Given adjacency matrix \( A \), node features \( X \), and labels \( Y_L \) for a subset \( L \subseteq V \) of nodes, predict labels \( Y_{V-L} \) for the remaining nodes \( V-L \) in the graph.

### 3 Our Approach

Our approach for Problem 1 is based on a probabilistic generative model (described in Section 3.1) and its analysis (Section 3.2).

#### 3.1 Model

Figure 2 pictorially illustrates our generative framework. First, the adjacency matrix \( A \) of the graph is generated from the latent attributes \( U \). Specifically, the probability that there exists an edge between two nodes \( i \) and \( j \) is given by the inverse exponent of the squares of their distance between their latent attributes \( u_i \) and \( u_j \) scaled by a factor \( \beta^2 \) that is set as a hyperparameter.

\[
(3.1) \quad \Pr \left[ (i,j) \in \mathcal{E} \mid u_i, u_j \right] = p_{ij} = e^{-\|u_i-u_j\|^2}.
\]

This equips our model with the desirable property, common in many types of graph embeddings, that the closer the two nodes are in the Euclidean space of \( U \), the higher the likelihood that they are connected in the graph – and vice versa. Therefore, \( U \) represents a low-dimensional Euclidean embedding of the graph that preserves connectivity in the form of Eq. 3.1. Moreover, since the existence of an edge is independent across pairs of nodes in this model, we have

\[
(3.2) \quad \Pr \left[ A \mid U \right] = \prod_{(i,j) \in \mathcal{E}} p_{ij} \times \prod_{(i,j) \notin \mathcal{E}} (1-p_{ij}).
\]

Second, node labels \( Y \) are generated from \( X \) and \( U \). This assumption provides two benefits: (i) it allows labels to be determined by node attributes \( X \) (directly) as well as graph structure \( A \) (indirectly, via \( U \)); and (ii) it allows us to express and train directly the function of the conditional distribution \( \Pr \left[ Y \mid X, U \right] \), which we then employ for node classification, i.e., to predict unobserved node labels. In this work, we assume that this conditional probability is given by a simple two-layer neural network,

\[
(3.3) \quad \Pr \left[ Y \mid X, U, W \right] = \sigma(\text{ReLU}(XU')W^{(1)})
\]

where \( \sigma \) denotes the softmax function and weight matrices \( W = \{ W^{(0)}, W^{(1)} \} \) are parameters that control the effect of \( X \) and \( U \) on labels \( Y \). The reason for this choice is that we found this model to be sufficiently expressive for our empirical evaluation – and its analysis could easily extend to more complex models (e.g., neural networks with more hidden layers).

#### 3.2 Algorithms

Problem 1 asks for predictions for \( Y_{V-L} \) given the data \( D=(X,A,Y_L) \) that are provided as input. Towards this end, we treat the remaining quantities in the model, i.e., the latent variables \( U \) and the weights of the neural network \( W \), as unobserved parameters \( \theta = (U, W) \) – and use their maximum likelihood values \( \hat{U} \) and \( \hat{W} \) in making the predictions. To summarize, our approach JANE proceeds in two steps: first, a training step from which we learn the maximum likelihood estimates \( \hat{U} \) and \( \hat{W} \); second, a prediction step, in which we use the learned estimates to predict the missing labels.

#### 3.2.1 Training

From the product rule of probability, we have that the likelihood of the data \( D \) for given parameters \( \theta \) is proportional to

\[
(3.4) \quad L = P[D|\theta] = P[X, A, Y_L|U, W] \propto P[Y_L|X, U, W] P[A|U]
\]

Algorithm 1 describes the procedure to identify parameters \( \theta \) that lead to maximum log-likelihood.

\[
(3.5) \quad \hat{\theta} = \arg \max_{\theta} \log L
\]

In summary, Algorithm 1 uses gradient descent on negative log-likelihood \( -\log L \) to alternatingly update
The condition $U : \forall i \in [k], \parallel u_i \parallel = 1, \sum_p u_{ip} = 0$ normalizes the columns of $U$, removes translational invariance, and centers the solution around $0$. This result implies that the minimum value of the first term in Equation \eqref{eq:algo} is the sum of the $k$ smallest eigenvalues of the graph Laplacian. Moreover, this minimum value is achieved when columns of $U$ are the corresponding eigenvectors. Therefore, we set as initial estimate:

$$
\hat{U} = \left[ e_1(L), e_2(L), \ldots, e_k(L) \right].
$$

where $e_i(L)$ is the $i$-th smallest spectral eigenvector.

**Maximum Likelihood Estimation.** During each training epoch, JANE first concatenates the current estimate $\hat{U}$ with $X$ and uses it as input to the neural network (Eq. \ref{eq:jane}). Since $W$ is present only in the first term of Equation \eqref{eq:jane}, the loss function is

$$
C = \log P[Y_L|X; U, W]
$$

and the estimate $\hat{W}$ is updated using stochastic gradient descent and standard backpropagation over it.

Subsequently, Algorithm \ref{alg:jane} treats $\hat{W}$ as fixed and updates its estimate $\hat{U}$ using the gradient of both terms of Equation \eqref{eq:jane}. The gradient of the first term $C$ w.r.t. the current $\hat{U}_l$ ($l$-th latent attribute) is obtained using backpropagation as follows,

$$
\frac{\partial C}{\partial \hat{U}_l} = \sum_{i \in Y_L} \sum_{r=1}^M \left( a^{(1)}_{lr} - Y_{ir} \right) W^{(1)}_{rl} \times \left( \frac{e^{(0)}_{il}}{1 + \exp \left( z^{(0)}_{il} \right)} \right) \times \left( \sum_{p=1}^{d+k} \left[ W_{pi}^{(0)} \right] \right)
$$

where $a^{(0)}, a^{(1)}$ are activations from the hidden and output layers, and $z^{(0)}$ is the weighted sum from the input layer. The index $i$ ranges over all nodes with known labels, and $r$ indexes over the $M$ different classes available for prediction. The gradient of the second term is given by the following equation,
3.2.2 Prediction Given maximum-likelihood estimates $\hat{U}$ and $\hat{W}$, we predict labels $\hat{Y}_{V-L}$ for all nodes in $V - L$ using the softmax function applied row-wise.

$$\hat{Y}_{V-L} = \arg \max_{r \in M} \sigma \left( \text{ReLU} \left( \begin{bmatrix} X \hat{U} \end{bmatrix} \hat{V}^{(0)} \right) \hat{W}^{(1)} \right)_r$$

4 Experiments

In this section, we empirically evaluate the performance of JANE on synthetic and real-world datasets.

Baselines. We evaluate JANE against standard baselines from a variety of different design philosophies.

- **JANE and variants**: JANE-NU wherein we do not update the initial estimate of $\hat{U}$ w.r.t. labels or graph structure during training, and JANE-R where the initial estimate of $U$ is a random matrix.
- **Graph-structure based approaches**: Label Propagation (LP) [6], and DeepWalk (DW) [10] that encodes neighbourhood information via truncated random walks. These do not incorporate node attributes.
- **Deep attributed embeddings**: We evaluate LANE [16] which constructs node embeddings that encode graph structure and node attribute information, in addition to node labels.
- **Graph-convolution based approaches**: GCN [17] and GraphSAGE (mean aggregator) as representatives of graph convolutional networks. We acknowledge that this is extremely active area of research today and there are several approaches that demonstrate improved performance along axes such as training efficiency [23], explainability [20], etc. on various real-world datasets [24]. For economy of space, we empirically compare with two benchmark, representative methods to demonstrate our central point: these approaches sometimes fail because they strictly and inherently enforce homophily and social influence.

We were unable to reproduce the node classification results for AANE [14] based on the available implementation, and we could not find an implementation for DANE [15]. Therefore, we do not report these results.

Experimental Setup. We implement JANE, JANE-NU, and LP in Pytorch. We use out-of-box Pytorch implementations of DeepWalk [10], GCN [17], and GraphSAGE [6]. And, we use a MATLAB implementation [13] of LANE [15]. In all of our experiments, as is standard, all approaches receive only the adjacency matrix of the graph $A$ and the node attributes $X$ as input, along with the same 10% and 20% of the node labels for training and validation, respectively. Wherever available, we use the default hyperparameter configurations as suggested in the original papers. Otherwise, we grid search over the hyperparameter space to find the best setting for all of our baselines. We perform all experiments on a Linux machine with 4 cores and 32GB RAM.

Reproducibility. To aid further research, we make our code publicly available. This also includes an implementation for constructing synthetic datasets as described below. The real-world datasets (cf. Section 4.2) are publicly available.

4.1 Node Classification on Synthetic Data

The goal of these experiments is two-fold – (1) demonstrate fundamental differences between and limitations of existing classification approaches using synthetic datasets wherein labels derive from only $X$, only $U$, or partly from both, and (2) show the strengths and general-purpose nature of JANE vis-à-vis the source of node labels.

Synthetic Datasets. Figure 3 describes representative synthetic datasets generated according to the framework described previously. We set the number of individual node features $|X| = d = 2$ and number of latent features $|U| = k = 2$. We generate these features (gaussian-distributed) for $n = 200$ points, each of which belongs to one of $M = 4$ classes and set the scale $s^2 = 1$. An influence parameter, $\alpha \in [0, 1]$, controls the degree to which node labels derive from $X$ or $U$: $\alpha = 0.0$ signifies that they derive only from $U$ and are independent of $X$; $\alpha = 1.0$ that they derive only from $X$ and are independent of $U$; and $\alpha = 0.5$ that they derive equally from $X$ and $U$ (specifically, without loss of generality, only the first feature from $X$ and $U$ contributes to label assignment). Figure 3a depict an instance of $X$ and $U$ each for $\alpha = \{0.0, 0.5, 1.0\}$, respectively. The colors of points represent classes. We construct the adjacency matrix from $U$ as per Equation 3.2. Figure 3b depicts an instance of the corresponding graphs.

Implementation Details. We generate these datasets using MAKE_CLASSIFICATION from Scikit-Learn [25]. Approaches do not have access to $\alpha$ or $U$. JANE is trained as a two-layer neural network for a maximum of 200 epochs with dropout of 0.2 for each layer, weight decay of $5e^{-2}$, and learning rate of 0.005 using Adam. We set the number of eigenvectors $k = 2$ and choose a scaling factor $s^2 = 0.01$.

Performance. Figure 3c shows performance as a function of increasing training set sizes.

https://github.com/xhuang31/AANE_Python
https://github.com/phanein/deepwalk
https://github.com/tkipf/pygcn
https://github.com/williamleif/graphsage-simple
https://github.com/xhuang31/LANE
https://version.helsinki.fi/ads/jane
Figure 3: Figure 3a depicts 3 synthetically generated datasets X and U with class labels Y influenced only by U ($\alpha = 0.0$), partly by U and partly by X ($\alpha = 0.5$), and only by X ($\alpha = 1.0$). Figure 3b shows an instance of the corresponding graph generated from U according to Equation 3.2. Figure 3c compares the node classification accuracy of JANE and JANE-NU with the baselines averaged over 5 random train-test splits.

- $\alpha = 0.0$: LP and DW infer that labels derive from A (indirectly). GCN converges attribute values of nodes in the same cluster but is not perfectly accurate because X does not correlate with Y. LANE forces the proximity representation to be similar to the attribute representation and then smoothens it using the labels. It does not perform well since there is no correlation between them.
- $\alpha = 0.5$: LP, DW are able to correctly classify nodes belong to 2 out of 4 classes, i.e. precisely those nodes whose labels are influenced by U. Conversely, LANE is able to classify those nodes belong to two classes of nodes that correlate with X. GCN smoothens attribute values of adjacent nodes and thus can correctly infer labels correlated with X.
- $\alpha = 1.0$ LP and DW reduce to random classifiers since adjacent nodes do not have similar labels. GCN reduces to a nearly random classifier because by forcing adjacent nodes with different attribute values to become similar, it destroys the correlation between X and the labels.

In each of the three cases, JANE-NU and JANE achieve perfect accuracy because they flexibly learn during training whether labels correlate with X, A
(indirectly), or partially both. While these datasets are simplistic in nature, this demonstrates how the homophily assumption—requiring nodes with similar proximity and attributes to have the same labels—limits the performance of other approaches.

4.2 Node Classification on Real-World Data
We seek to understand – (1) to what extent JANE can capture more complex network structures and their correlations with node labels, and (2) how well JANE compares with our baselines on these datasets.

Datasets. We show our results on four tasks for a total of 9 graphs. If the original graph is disconnected, we extract node attributes and labels belonging to its largest connected component.

- **Citation Networks**: We use Cora, Citeseer, and Pubmed [1]. Here, nodes represent academic papers, edges denote a citation between two nodes, node features are 0/1-valued sparse bag-of-words vectors and class labels denote the subfield of research that the papers belong to.
- **Social Networks**: We focus on BlogCatalog and Flickr where the task is to predict pre-defined categories of blogs and images, respectively. Nodes are users that post content, edges represent follower relationships, and features are specified by a list of tags reflecting the interests of the users [26].
- **Air-traffic Networks**: Based on flight records from Brazil, Europe, and USA, each node is an airport and an edge indicates a commercial airline route exists between them. Labels denote the level of activity in terms of people and flights passing through an airport [27]. Since no features for the nodes exists, we assign the all-ones vector as the sole attribute.
- **Biological Networks**: We use a processed protein-protein interaction (PPI) dataset [3] where the task is to identify protein roles based on gene ontology sets using positional gene sets, motif gene sets, and immunological signatures as features [28].

Table 1 summarizes the dataset statistics.

| Dataset | Nodes | Edges | Classes | Features |
|---------|-------|-------|---------|----------|
| Cora    | 2708  | 5429  | 7       | 1433     |
| Citeseer| 3327  | 4732  | 6       | 3703     |
| Pubmed  | 19717 | 44325 | 3       | 500      |
| BlogCatalog | 5196 | 171743 | 6     | 8189     |
| Flickr  | 7575  | 239738| 9       | 12047    |
| Brazil  | 131   | 1038  | 4       | NA       |
| Europe  | 399   | 5995  | 4       | NA       |
| USA     | 1190  | 13599 | 4       | NA       |
| PPI     | 2373  | 56952 | 1       | 121      |

Table 1: Summary of dataset statistics.

Experimental Setup. For the citation datasets, we use the same train-validation-test splits as in Yang, et al [29] minus the nodes which do not belong to the largest connected component. These comprise of 20 samples for each class and represent 5% of the entire dataset. We use 500 additional samples as a validation set for hyperparameter optimization as per Kipf, et al [17] to enable fair comparison. For all other tasks, we use 10% and 20% of the dataset for training and validation, respectively. We evaluate the performance of all approaches on the remaining nodes of the graph.

Runtime and Parameter Sensitivity. Figure 4 plots the average time for a single training epoch for JANE-NU, JANE, GCN, and GraphSAGE on various datasets. JANE is comparatively the slowest model while JANE-NU is by far the fastest. This is because JANE-NU is a vanilla neural network model that does not update its estimate of $U$.

A crucial parameter of JANE is the number of eigenvectors used as features during training. Figure 5 values of hyperparameters $k$, the number of eigenvectors of the graph Laplacian, and the scaling factor $s$ are determined empirically so as to minimize Equation 3.7.
We find that test accuracy consistently increases as time and memory requirement for computing the gradient of $A$ w.r.t. $\hat{U}$ (cf. Equation 3.11). As the graph grows, these requirements grow linearly in size. Since the gradient is computed in every training epoch, it may not be viable to fit it into GPU memory. Future work can outline procedures for generating mini-batches and schedules for updating the estimate of $\hat{U}$ using $A$ at regular intervals whilst still gaining the same benefits. It is crucial to note however, that JANE-NU provides orders of magnitude faster than the other methods while also demonstrating strong performance. A single laplacian eigenvector can be computed in $\tilde{O}(|E|)$ (up to log factors) and this is a one-time operation.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, we develop an approach to node classification that flexibly adapts to settings ranging between graphs where labels are predicted by node proximity, on one hand, and graphs where labels are predicted by node attributes, on the other. We propose a generative framework to demonstrate how graph structural information and node attributes both, can influence the labels of nodes. Even simple instances of such situations, as shown in Figure 4 and empirically evaluated in Figure 3(b) severely affect the performance of various embedding methods and standard graph convolutional networks. Our principled approach, JANE, jointly and effectively utilizes Laplacian eigenmaps and individual features for classification leading to strong performance on a variety of datasets. Given its simplicity, interpretability and performance, JANE can serve as a useful starting point in designing models that holistically account for different sources of node labels. As a future direction, we aim to the evaluate the design and performance of advanced graph neural networks that go beyond requiring or enforcing homophily.

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