

Sign Recognition with HMM/SVM Hybrid for the Visually-handicapped in Subway Stations

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Abstract: In this paper, we propose a sign classification system to recognize exit number and arrow signs in natural scene images. The purpose of the sign classification system is to provide assistance to a visually-handicapped person in subway stations. For automatically extracting sign candidate regions, we use Adaboost algorithm, however, our detector not only extracts sign regions, but also non-sign (noise) regions in natural scene images. Thus, we suggest a verification technique to discriminate sign regions from non-sign regions. In addition, we suggest a novel feature extraction algorithm cooperated with Hidden Markov Model. To evaluate the system, we tested a total of 20,177 sign candidate regions including the number of 8,414 non-sign regions on the captured images under several real environments in Daejeon in South Korea. We achieved an exit number and arrow sign recognition rate of each 99.5% and 99.8% and a false positive rate (FPR) of 0.3% to discriminate between sign regions and non-sign regions.

1 INTRODUCTION

The number of visually-handicapped people in South Korea increased up to 249,000 in 2010 compared to 136,000 in 2002, an increase of 83 per cent over the past 8 years. Only approximately the number of ten dogs in South Korea, however, has completed the whole course of training to become a guide dog every year. The shortage of guiding dogs calls for other guiding aids to be developed. As a means of guiding the handicapped, we propose a sign classification system to recognize exit numbers and arrow signs in subway stations.

Several researches on aiding systems for assisting visually impaired individuals have been recently studied. Chen suggested an algorithm for detecting and reading text in natural scenes (Chen et al., 2004). The algorithm intends to help visually-impaired people when they are walking around the city. The main topic of such studies is how to detect text and sign regions correctly.

For this reason, many approaches to the detection of text and sign from natural scene images have been developed. However, most suggested detectors not only extract sign and text regions, but also some of rest, i.e., noise regions. One remedy to

this problem is to employ a recognition verification strategy.

Consequently, in this paper, we suggest a verification technique to discriminate sign regions from non-sign regions. In addition, we suggest a novel feature extraction algorithm cooperated with Hidden Markov Model.

2 SYSTEM OVERVIEW

2.1 Detection and Preprocessing

Sign Sign regions are predicted by the MCT-AdaBoost technique, which is used for face detection (Froba et al., 2004). After our detector extracts sign candidate regions, a preprocessing is done in the next step. It consists of three stages: Binarization, Segmentation and Normalization.

First, we experimented with two different types of binarization methods: Otsu and Niblack (Otsu, 1979; Niblack, 1986). As a result, Otsu algorithm is better in performance for our system as shown in fig. 1(c) compared to in fig. 1(b). Thus, we adopted the Otsu algorithm; however, we have discovered some

binarization errors in fig. 1(e). In order to obtain a better binary image, we add 20 to the threshold of the Otsu's method if the candidate sign is white, otherwise, we minus 7 to the threshold if the candidate sign is black. It achieves good result as shown in fig. 1(f).

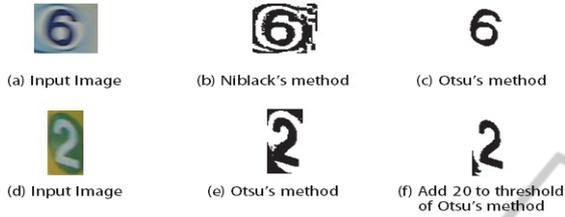


Figure 1: Comparison of the binarizations.

Table 1: The definition of each pixel.

Term	Definition	Abbreviation (Pixel Value)	Feature Value
Foreground Pixel	The pixel represents a skeleton of the image and are denoted by 1s.	'0' (255)	
Background Pixel	The pixel represents a non-skeleton of the image and are denoted by 0s.	'.' (0)	
EndPoint	The point is connected with only one neighbor pixel in a 3×3 window.	'E' (20)	0
Branch Point	The point is connected with more than three neighbor pixels in a 3×3 window.	'B' (10)	9A
Curve Point	The point is connected with two neighbor pixel in a 3×3 window. Also, end points and branch points cannot exist in a 9×9 window.	'C' (30)	XY
Chain-code	The chain-code represents a set of direction vectors.	'Number 1 to 8' (1to8)	Number 1 to 8

At the segmentation stage, we perform the blob analysis (Yoon et al., 2011). This algorithm is simple but useful method to inspect all labeled blobs to exclude non-sign blobs.

In the next stage, we normalized the size of the selected blob by 24×24 pixels, then performed a median filter to make the selected blob more smoothly.

2.2 Feature Extraction and Recognition using SVM

We adopted 8-direction gradient features prosed by Liu (Liu et al., 2008). In the feature extraction, each pixel calculates a weighted vote in a normalized image image using the Sobel operator, which is used to calculate approximations of the horizontal and vertical derivatives. Then, the votes are accumulated into 8 orientation bins over in 0° - 360° . After that, each pixel of the 8 orientation bins merged into $N \times N$ blocks in the image to reduce the dimensionality. Also, we employed library for Support Vector Machines (LIBSVM), and performed multiclass classification using SVM (Chang et al., 2001). In this work, we trained 8,500 sample images including

500 non-sign (noise) images, which are selected randomly from natural scene images in the subway station. Then, we tested 2550 samples with 150 non-sign sample images to check the performance of the trained classifier and gained 99.96% of recognition accuracy.

2.3 Feature Extraction and Recognition using HMM

In this section, we define the term of the important pixels as shown in our previous research in table 1 and explain about how to make our feature vectors (Kim et al., 2011).

In the first step, we adopted Ahmed's thinning algorithms (Ahmed et al., 2002). Because this algorithm preserves the shape of the binary image. Also, it means that the method is rotation invariant. After the thinning algorithm is performed, the skeleton of the binary image is extracted.

In the second step, we easily find the end points and branch points by convolving the image with a 3×3 window. After that, we determine the starting point of the skeleton tracing by the following priority.

- 1) A Top-left End point.
- 2) A Top-Left Branch point.
- 3) A Top-Left foreground pixel.

Next, we have visited all of the foreground pixels from the starting point and store the tracking information into a vector space called Vec at the same time. As a result, we completed a chain code in fig. 2(a). After that, we modify a pixel value of the chain code in order to make it more smoothly like a median filter. (Kim et al., 2011).

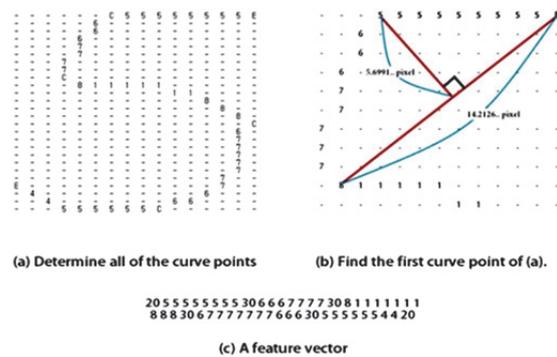


Figure 2: Sequence of feature extraction.

In the third step, we find curve points by the certain condition as mentioned in table 1 and then we delete curve points that are not met the specific

condition in fig. 2(b). The algorithm is as follows:

Algorithm 1 Delete curve points

Begin

A = point (only for Curve Point)

B = point on line CD orthogonal with A

Line CD = A line from Point to Vec[i]

Point = the x and y coordinates of the starting point

Vec = vector space excluding candidate curve points

Vec2 = vector space including candidate curve points

nMinimum = 9 pixel

dThreshold = 4.95 pixel

nIndex = 0

For(i=3 to vec.size -1)

 Line CD = distance from Point to Vec2[i]

 If (Vec2[i] == Branch Point && Vec2[i] == End point)

 Point = Vec2[i+1]

 nIndex = i + 1

 If (line CD > nMinimum)

 For(j=nIndex to i)

 If (Vec2[j] == Curve Point)

 A = Vec2[j]

 nIndex = Find the maximum distance from A to

 B longer Than dThreshold

 If (success to find the curve point)

 Update (Vec)

 i = nIndex

Point = the x, y coordinates of the Vec2[nIndex]

End

Here, to find the maximum distance from A to B, we first calculate the angle θ between Line CD and x-axis, then we rotated the points between Point and Vec2[i] as angle θ in a clockwise direction. The following equation is used:

$$(y') = (x - a) \times \sin \theta + (y - b) \times \cos \theta \quad (1)$$

Where point(x, y) are the coordinates of A and point(a, b) are the coordinates of Point. After that, the absolute value of y' is the distance between A and B.

In the fourth step, we generate our novel feature vector using a set of pixel values as shown in fig. 2 (c). To demonstrate the advantage of this feature extraction algorithm, we trained 8,000 sample images (500 sample images for each class) using HMM and tested 2,400 another sample images. As a result, we achieve an overall accuracy of 98.29% with HMM (Rabiner, 1989).

2.4 Verification

In this section, we propose a verification technique to discriminate sign regions from non-sign regions.

Before the verification technique is applied, we combined the recognition results from two different types of classifiers: SVM and HMM. Because, when we only get a result using SVM, true positive rate (TPR) is low, although the recognition result is reasonable in table 2. For this work, we estimated probabilities for multi-class classification based on Wu's method using the SVM (Wu *et al.*, 2004). After that, if the result is noise, not exit numbers and arrows and the probability is less than a certain threshold, we would select the result from the HMM. Otherwise, the result from the SVM is selected.

In the next step, a verification technique is performed. The decision of acceptance or rejection is taken by comparing with the HMM's log-likelihood to a threshold (Van *et al.*, 2004). To find the optimal threshold, we investigated the number of 40000 images (2500 per each class).

3 EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS

In our research, the code to implement an algorithm was C++ and we achieved the processing time of our system was about 5-15 fps on a 3.4-GHz Pentium IV PC with high resolution images (1280 × 480 pixels).

For evaluating the performance of our proposed system, we went to City Hall subway station where we tested the system in Daejeon. Our detector extracted a total of 20,178 sign-candidate regions including the number of 8,414 non-sign regions for 10 minutes while walking around on the sidewalk for blind people in the subway station. We achieved an exit number and arrow sign recognition rate of each 99.5% and 99.8% in table 2. However, there is none of Down, Down-Left, Down-Right arrow and exit number 9 signs At the City Hall subway station as shown in fig. 3. Then, the true positive rate (TPR) and false positive rate (FPR) are shown in table 2.

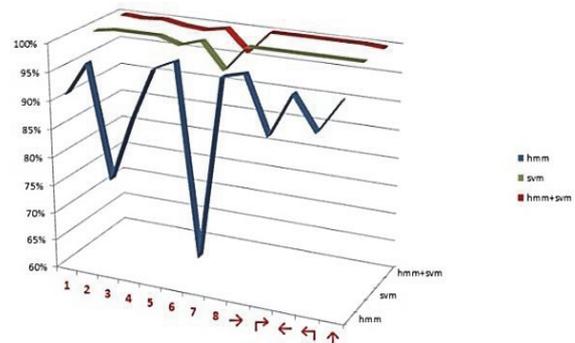


Figure 3: The recognition result of the different combinations.

Finally, we compared three different combinations: our proposal system and our novel feature vector with HMM and other feature vector with SVM. Also, we tested these combinations with verification techniques as shown in table 2. As a result, HMM+SVM with a verification technique is better than the others.

Table 2: Comparison of the different combinations.

	Exit number (accuracy rates: %)	Arrow (accuracy rates: %)	TPR (%)	FPR (%)
Hmm+verification	90.0	95.9	90.7	7.7
Svm	99.3	100	79.7	0.3
Hmm+svm+verification	99.5	99.8	86.1	0.3

4 CONCLUSIONS

We have proposed a sign classification system, focusing on 16 classes of exit number and arrow signs. The main contribution of this paper is that we suggest two methods: a novel feature extraction algorithm and a verification technique. The main advantage of our feature extraction algorithm is that it is robust to various types and styles of signs. Also, a false positive rate of 0.3% has demonstrated that combining the verification technique is a reliable method for discriminating sign regions from non-sign regions.

However, some improvements remain as for the system to be applied in the subway station. First, it is necessary to develop a sign tracking algorithm to verify the sign detection results. This sign tracking algorithm would be a help improve TPR. Secondly, the system must be operated in real time. Currently, in our research, the processing time of our system is about 5-15 fps dependent on how many signs are detected. Thus, these improvements will be the future work.

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