Early Autism Detection Through Vocal Pattern Analysis: A Machine Learning Approach Using Support Vector Machines

Wei Zhang
Tsinghua University

Maria Rodriguez
University of Barcelona

Kenji Tanaka
University of Tokyo

Fatima Al-Jaber
King Saud University

Abstract

This research investigates the efficacy of machine learning algorithms, specifically Support Vector Machines (SVMs), in detecting autism spectrum disorder (ASD) through vocal pattern analysis in young children. We collected and analyzed vocal samples from 250 children aged 2-5 years, including 125 diagnosed with ASD and 125 neurotypical controls. The study employed feature extraction techniques focusing on prosodic elements, spectral characteristics, and temporal patterns. Our SVM model achieved 87.2

Keywords: autism detection, vocal analysis, machine learning, support vector machines, early diagnosis

Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) represents a complex neurodevelopmental condition characterized by challenges in social communication, restricted interests, and repetitive behaviors. Early detection of ASD is crucial for initiating timely interventions that can significantly improve long-term outcomes. However, current diagnostic methods often rely on behavioral observations and standardized assessments that may not be administered until children are 3-4 years old, delaying critical intervention opportunities.

Recent advances in machine learning and computational analysis have opened new avenues for early ASD detection through non-invasive methods. Vocal pattern analysis has emerged as a particularly promising approach, as atypical vocal characteristics have been consistently observed in children with ASD. These include differences in prosody, pitch variation, speech rate, and vocal quality that may serve as early biomarkers.

This study addresses the critical need for objective, scalable screening tools by developing and validating a machine learning framework based on Support Vector Machines (SVMs) for ASD detection through vocal analysis. Our approach leverages the mathematical robustness of SVMs to classify children as either ASD or neurotypical based on extracted vocal features, providing a foundation for automated screening systems that could be deployed in clinical and educational settings.

Literature Review

The intersection of machine learning and autism research has grown substantially in recent years. Early work by researchers such as Wetherby and Prizant (1993) identified vocal characteristics as potential markers for communication disorders, laying the foundation for computational approaches. More recent studies by Oller et al. (2010) demonstrated that vocal production differences could be detected in infants as young as 6 months, suggesting the potential for very early screening.

Machine learning applications in ASD diagnosis have evolved from simple classification algorithms to sophisticated deep learning approaches. Traditional methods including decision trees, k-nearest neighbors, and logistic regression have shown moderate success, with reported accuracies ranging from 70-85

Support Vector Machines have shown particular promise in medical diagnosis applications due to their ability to handle high-dimensional data and their strong theoretical foundations. The kernel trick allows SVMs to create non-linear decision boundaries without explicitly computing transformations in high-dimensional space, making them well-suited for vocal pattern classification where the relationship between features and diagnosis may be complex.

Previous research has primarily focused on either behavioral data or limited vocal features. Our study contributes to this literature by implementing a comprehensive vocal feature extraction framework specifically designed for ASD detection and applying SVM classification with rigorous cross-validation procedures.

Research Questions

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent can Support Vector Machines accurately classify children with ASD versus neurotypical children based on vocal pattern analysis?

2. Which vocal features (prosodic, spectral, or temporal) demonstrate the highest discriminative power for ASD detection?

3. How does the performance of SVM-based classification compare to traditional diagnostic methods in terms of accuracy, sensitivity, and specificity?

4. What is the optimal feature set and kernel function for SVM-based ASD detection through vocal analysis?

Objectives

The primary objectives of this research are:

1. To develop a comprehensive vocal feature extraction framework specifically tailored for ASD detection in young children.

2. To implement and optimize a Support Vector Machine classifier for binary classification of ASD versus neurotypical vocal patterns.

3. To validate the classification performance through rigorous cross-validation and statistical analysis.

4. To identify the most discriminative vocal features for early ASD detection.

5. To establish benchmark performance metrics for machine learning-based ASD screening tools.

Hypotheses to be Tested

Based on existing literature and preliminary observations, we formulated the following hypotheses:

H1: Support Vector Machines will achieve classification accuracy exceeding 80

H2: Prosodic features, particularly pitch variation and speech rate, will demonstrate higher discriminative power than spectral features for ASD classification.

H3: The radial basis function (RBF) kernel will outperform linear and polynomial kernels in SVM classification due to the non-linear nature of vocal pattern differences.

H4: Feature selection will significantly improve classification performance by reducing dimensionality and eliminating redundant features.

Approach/Methodology

Participants and Data Collection

We recruited 250 children aged 2-5 years through collaborating clinical centers and preschools. The ASD group (n=125) consisted of children with confirmed ASD diagnoses based on DSM-IV criteria and ADOS assessments. The control group (n=125) included typically developing children matched for age and gender. Vocal samples were collected during structured play sessions using high-quality digital recorders, with each session lasting approximately 30 minutes.

Feature Extraction

We extracted three categories of vocal features:

Prosodic Features: Fundamental frequency (F0) mean and variation, intensity dynamics, speech rate, and pause patterns.

Spectral Features: Mel-frequency cepstral coefficients (MFCCs), formant frequencies (F1-F4), spectral centroid, and spectral flux.

Temporal Features: Voice activity detection, syllable rate, and articulation rate.

The feature extraction process can be mathematically represented as:

$$F = \{f_1, f_2, ..., f_n\} = \phi(X) \tag{1}$$

where X represents the raw audio signal, ϕ denotes the feature extraction function, and F is the resulting feature vector of dimension n.

SVM Classification

We implemented Support Vector Machines with the following formulation:

$$\min_{w,b} \frac{1}{2}||w||^2 + C\sum_{i=1}^{n} \xi_i \tag{2}$$

subject to:

$$y_i(w^T\phi(x_i) + b) \geq 1 - \xi_i, \quad \xi_i \geq 0 \tag{3}$$

where w is the weight vector, b is the bias term, C is the regularization parameter, and ξ_i are slack variables. We experimented with linear, polynomial, and RBF kernels, with the RBF kernel defined as:

$$K(x_i, x_j) = \exp(-\gamma||x_i - x_j||^2) \tag{4}$$

Experimental Design

We employed 10-fold cross-validation to evaluate model performance. Feature normalization was applied using z-score standardization. Hyperparameter optimization was conducted through grid search with 5-fold cross-validation within the training set.

Results

The SVM classifier demonstrated strong performance across multiple evaluation metrics. The RBF kernel achieved the highest accuracy of 87.2

Table 1: Performance Metrics of SVM Classifier with Different Kernels

Kernel Type	Accuracy	Precision	Recall	F1-Score	AUC
Linear	81.5%	80.2%	82.8%	81.5%	0.892
Polynomial	83.7%	82.9%	84.5%	83.7%	0.915
RBF	87.2%	85.8%	88.4%	87.1%	0.943

Feature analysis indicated that pitch variation (F0 standard deviation) and speech rate showed the highest discriminative power, with effect sizes of Cohen's d = 1.24 and d = 1.18 respectively. The optimal feature set consisted of 28 features selected through recursive feature elimination, achieving a balance between model complexity and performance.

The confusion matrix for the best-performing RBF kernel model showed 109 true positives, 109 true negatives, 16 false positives, and 16 false negatives, indicating balanced performance across both classes.

Discussion

Our results strongly support the research hypotheses and demonstrate the viability of SVM-based vocal analysis for ASD detection. The 87.2

The superior performance of prosodic features aligns with clinical observations of atypical prosody in ASD, including monotonic speech and irregular pitch patterns. This finding suggests that computational analysis of prosody could provide objective measures to complement subjective clinical assessments.

The success of the RBF kernel supports our hypothesis regarding the non-linear nature of vocal pattern differences in ASD. The kernel's ability to create complex decision boundaries appears well-suited to capturing the subtle, multi-dimensional nature of vocal characteristics associated with autism.

Our feature selection results highlight the importance of dimensionality reduction in vocal analysis. The optimal feature set of 28 features represents approximately 35

These findings have important implications for clinical practice. The non-invasive nature of vocal analysis makes it suitable for large-scale screening, potentially reducing the average age of diagnosis and enabling earlier intervention. However, it is crucial to emphasize that such tools should complement, not replace, comprehensive clinical evaluation.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that Support Vector Machines, particularly with RBF kernels, can effectively classify children with ASD based on vocal pattern analysis with 87.2

The identification of prosodic features as primary discriminators provides valuable insights for both computational and clinical approaches to ASD assessment. Future work should focus on validating these findings in larger, more diverse populations and exploring the integration of additional data modalities.

While the results are encouraging, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study population, though carefully selected, represents a specific demographic and may not generalize to all populations. Additionally, the controlled recording environment may not fully represent naturalistic vocal behavior.

Future research directions include developing real-time analysis systems, exploring deep learning approaches for end-to-end feature learning, and investigating longitudinal vocal development patterns in children with ASD. The integration of vocal analysis with other behavioral and physiological measures could further enhance diagnostic accuracy and provide a more comprehensive understanding of ASD characteristics.

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