

Chain Coding and Pre Processing Stages of Handwritten Character Image File

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Abstract – In this paper detailed descriptions of the algorithms used in the pre-processing and feature extraction phases of an offline handwritten character are discussed. In classifying handwritten characters, the stages prior to the classification phase play a role as major as the classification itself. There are many pre-processing functions and methods that can be used and different research works will use different methods. This paper discusses in detail some of the algorithms used in the pre-processing stages of an offline handwritten character image file. This paper serves as part of the whole research work that aims at recognizing handwritten characters. The whole research presents a hybrid approach of HMM and Fuzzy Logic in the field of handwritten character recognition. Fuzzy Logic is used in the classification phase while HMM is used in the process of extracting features for the preparation of linguistic variables of the fuzzy rules. However, only the pre-processing stages as employed by the research are described here. The pre-processing phase starts from reading in the input file, the process of binarization, reference line estimation and thinning of the character image for further use in the next stage of the feature extraction and recognition process. Each of the pre-processing stages and the chain coding process will be described in detail giving improvised algorithms, and examples of the processes on existing samples from the database shown. Where comparing experiments with other methods is done, the experimental results are given.

Keywords – *pre-processing; feature extraction; chain-coding; binarization; thinning; handwritten character*

I. INTRODUCTION

The attempt to imitate the human ability to read and recognize handwritten matter by a machine is the objective of optical character recognition (OCR), or sometimes specifically referred as handwritten character recognition (HCR) research.

Handwriting recognition is the task of producing the symbolic form, from the stored information of the handwriting data. Handwriting data is captured and stored in its digital format either by scanning the writing on paper or by writing with a special pen on an electronic surface such as a digitizer combined with a liquid crystal display. The two approaches are respectively distinguished as off-line and on-line handwriting. On-line systems for handwriting recognition are available in hand-held computers such as PDAs with acceptable performance [1]. Off-line systems are less accurate than on-line systems due to their less

informative data capturing device, which is usually the scanner. However, they are now good enough that they have a significant economic impact in specialized domains such as interpreting handwritten postal addresses on envelopes and reading courtesy amounts on bank cheques [1].

II. HANDWRITTEN CHARACTER RESEARCH

According to Arica and Yarman-Vural in their review of character recognition (CR), the CR systems have evolved in three stages [2]. The early stage is in the period of 1900-1980. The beginning of OCR was said to have started with the objective of developing reading machines for the blind. In these early systems of automatic recognition of characters, area of concentrations are either in machine-printed text or upon small sets of well-distinguished handwritten text or symbols. In the second period of development in the era of the 1980s to 1990s, the explosion of information technology has helped a rapid growth in the area of OCR. The CR research was focused basically on the shape recognition techniques without using any semantic information. Although an upper limit in the recognition rate was achieved, it was not sufficient in many practical applications. The 1990s and onwards are referred as the advancements era, where the real progress in OCR systems has been achieved. In the beginning of this period, image processing and pattern recognition techniques were efficiently combined with artificial intelligence (AI) methodologies. Complex algorithms for character recognition systems were developed. There is, however, still a long way to go in order to reach the ultimate goal of machine simulation of fluent human reading, especially for unconstrained on-line and off-line handwriting [2].

There are numbers of active research areas which can be isolated from the broader field of handwritten character recognition. This is true since the task of recognizing and classifying the characters from an image file, goes through few processes as generally illustrated by Fig. 1. The image file of an offline handwritten character will have to undergo the process of pre-processing, feature extraction and recognition. Each of the phases plays an equally important role in an HCR system. The continuing sections in this paper would concentrate to discuss the pre-processing techniques of this research work.

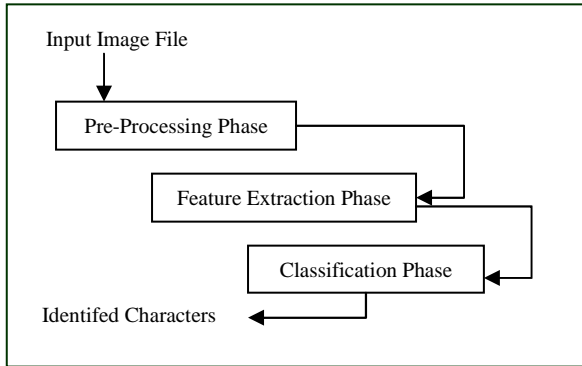


Figure 1. Tasks of a handwritten character classifier

III. THE PROPOSED SYSTEM STRUCTURE

The structure of the whole system is illustrated in Fig. 2. The task of recognizing and classifying the characters from an image file, goes through a few processes as illustrated by the figure. The input image file is preprocessed using minimum preprocessing functions like binarization and thinning. The thinned image will then undergo a feature extraction process of chain-coding. The chain-coded image kept in a file, is then passed through a Hidden Markov Chain. The HMM will be processing the chain-codes and the output produced would be the identified strokes and their associated log-likelihoods. These log-likelihood values are then converted to probabilities and pass through a fuzzification process producing meaningful linguistic terms for the variables. The linguistic variables will then be used by a set of fuzzy rules to classify the character accordingly.

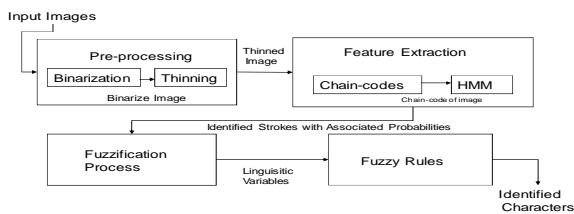


Figure 2. System structure

A. Problem Statement

As the problem of handwritten character recognition deals with lots of variations and complexity of data, most of the time to use a purely statistical method would be too risky. In 1965, Zadeh [2] introduced a modified set theory namely known as fuzzy sets. Fuzzy logic deals with fuzzy sets that classify using unsharp boundaries. Since the data of some of the handwritten characters are sometimes vaguely

distinguishable, a fuzzy inference seems to be a very logical way to deal with the recognition. Fuzzy rule-based systems utilize linguistic variables and changing numerical data of an image into its linguistic form can be very challenging. Furthermore, one of the major drawbacks of fuzzy logic is the lack of learning capabilities, unlike in neural networks and HMM, where its parameters can be trained. There have been efforts in this area where neuro-fuzzy systems are introduced.

HMM has been used in a lot of the handwritten character/word recognition as a classifier of characters/words and as a hybrid approach with other methods [3, 4]. In this research project, HMM will instead be used in the preparation of linguistic variables of a fuzzy rules recognizer.

In the process of being recognized and classified, the raw data of the handwritten character in the form of an image file will be going through 3 stages as previously mentioned and also as illustrated in Fig. 1. As the purpose of this paper is to detail out the pre-processing phase it would be best for the problem statement of this phase to be explained. The main objective of this phase is to prepare the data file for the subsequent phases. Since this research will be using fuzzy rules to classify the handwritten character, a certain requirement has to be met: the fuzzy rules will be needing linguistic variables for the purpose of classifying the character. This would be in the form of strokes and lines that form the character. It was also identified that HMM will instead be used in the preparation of linguistic variables. Since the HMM will be processing the chain-codes of the character, the pre-processing phase will be gearing towards the preparation of the input for the HMM. It would be the objective of this phase to produce a chain-code that would best represent the strokes and lines that made up the character.

IV. PRE-PROCESSING PHASE

The raw data of handwritten characters, no matter how it is acquired, will be subjected to a number of preprocessing steps to make it useable. The preprocessing phase aims to extract the relevant textual parts and prepares them for segmentation and recognition. The main objectives of preprocessing are i) noise reduction, (ii) normalization of data and (iii) compression in the amount of information to be retained. In noise reduction alone there are hundreds of available techniques which can be categorized into three major groups of filtering, morphological operations and noise modeling ([3], [4]). Filters can be designed for smoothing [5], sharpening [6], thresholding [7], removing slightly textured background [8] and contrast adjustment processes [9]. Various morphological operations can be designed to connect broken strokes [10], decompose the connected strokes [11], smooth the contours, prune the wild points, thin the characters [12], and extract boundaries [13].

In this research work a minimal number of preprocessing processes are used. The preprocessing steps are shown in Fig. 3. An image file of handwritten character will first be read and binarized. Then reference lines of upper and lower base line of the character will be estimated. The estimation of the upper and lower base line will be used to classify the characters into its three groups of either ascenders (e.g h, l, t, f, d, b), descenders (e.g. g, p, q, y) or neither (e.g. a, c, e, i, m, n etc.) . The subsequent sections will explain further the pre-processing phase undertaken in this research.

Pre-processing Steps	
Step 1:	Binarize the character image. <u>Input:</u> An image file of the character in .bmp format <u>Results:</u> A matrix of the character image in 0's (for background) and 1's (for the foreground that makes up the character contour).
Step 2:	Estimate reference line to classify the three groups of characters (ascenders, descenders, neither). <u>Input:</u> The character matrix from Step 1. <u>Results:</u> A classification of the character into the 3 groups; to be used as one of the character features in the fuzzy inference system.
Step 3:	Thin the image into edges of one pixel thick. <u>Input:</u> The character matrix from Step 1. <u>Results:</u> A character matrix with all (or at least most of) its edges with one pixel thickness only.

Figure 3. Pre-processing steps

A. Binarization

When an image is captured, it is frequently stored in the form of pixel density value, which means each pixel has a value between 0 and 255 (for a grayscale image). Many researchers choose to work with a binarized image where all the grey values will be thresholded and converted to either '0' for white (background) or '1' for black (foreground). This process is known as *binarization*.

The method used to binarize is known as thresholding. In thresholding, the gray-scale or color images are represented as binary images by picking a threshold value. The two categories of thresholding are global and local thresholding. In global thresholding, one threshold value is used for the entire document image which is often based on an estimation of the background intensity level with that of the image using an intensity histogram [11]. Local or adaptive thresholding use different values for each pixel according to the local area information [14]. Local thresholding is commonly used in works that involve images that are of varying level of intensities, such as pictures from satellites cameras or scanned medical images. For simple images like handwriting, where the characters are written on a white background, using a global threshold would suffice to distinguish the background and the foreground. Fig. 4 displays an image of the character 'e' in its image file format of .bmp and the same character after it had been binarised and saved in a text (.txt) file.

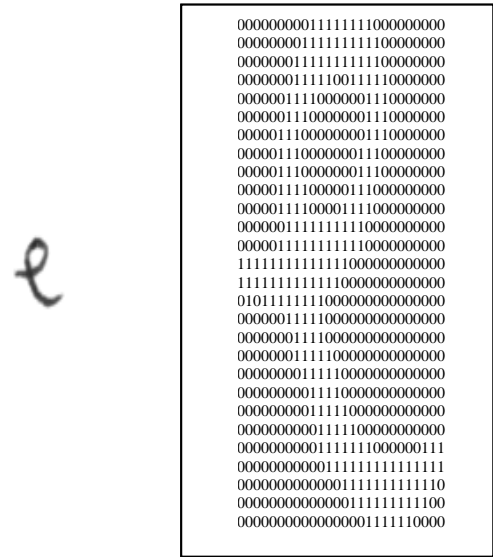


Figure 4. The character "e" in its image file format (.bmp) and in its binarized text file format

B. Reference Line Estimation

One preprocessing technique that has been particularly helpful in determining features in a word is reference line estimation. Bozinovic and Srihari [15] referred to it as the task of locating such lines as the lower line, lower baseline, upper baseline and the upper line. To determine these lines, an approach based on the one proposed by Bozinic and Srihari [15] is considered. The approach, however, was for a word image and in such images the reference lines are more distinguished, as the inputs are larger.

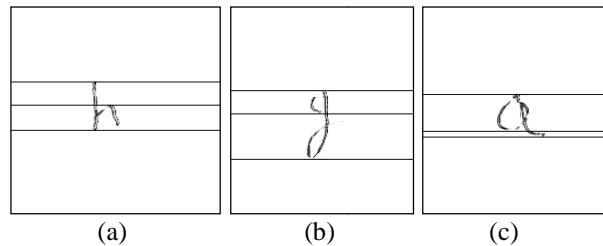


Figure 5. Examples of characters after line referencing (a) an ascender, (b) a descender, and (c) neither an ascender nor descender.

With a little improvisation, a similar approach was implemented for character images. Examples of the line referencing used in this research are shown in Fig. 5. The first step would be to generate a horizontal density histogram for the character image. This was done based on a black pixel count in each row (horizontal direction at each position on the y-axis). From the top, the first row count that has more than a minimum threshold (in this case a pixel count of 2 is used) and an upper line is found. Next, traversing from the bottom of the image or the last row in

the image, the first row count that is more than the minimum threshold would indicate the lower line. Estimating the middle line is slightly more complex. First we have to assess roughly if the image is denser in the lower or the upper zone. This is estimated by first determining the mid line, i.e. the average of upper line and lower line. Then the pixels density of the upper and the lower zones are calculated. If the upper zone is denser then we start traversing from the mid line to the upper line, otherwise we traverse from the mid line to the lower baseline. Taking a threshold T, that is the average density of the character, we scan through the density vector and the first line that has a density value that is lower than T, would be considered as the middle line. The middle line produced was a better option than the mid line gotten from the average of the lower and the upper lines. This estimate of the middle line has proven favorable enough for the next step.

Once the upper, middle and lower lines have been placed, the character will be heuristically categorized into either an ascender, a descender or neither. The algorithm for the heuristic technique used in the research is given in Fig. 6. The grouping of the characters into the 3 groups are utilized directly by the recognition phase, and if grouped correctly it would have scoped down the classification phase from the 26 possibilities (26 alphabets of a .. z) to about a third of the original possibilities.

The heuristic technique was compared to an HMM model created to group the character using the vertical density of the image. Relying on the fact that some of the characters in a certain group would be denser in the upper zone than the lower zone and so on, the result of the grouping using the heuristic method is given in Table 1. The heuristic technique yields a correct grouping rate of 70.35%, while the HMM technique yields a correct grouping rate of 64.3%.

```

Gap1 = upper line – middle line
Gap2 = middle line – lower line

If Gap1 is small or Gap2 is small
    Alphabet is Neither
else
    if density in upper zone > density in lower zone
        Alphabet is Descender
Else
    Alphabet is Ascender
    
```

Figure 6. Algorithm for grouping characters

TABLE I. CONFUSION MATRIX OF THE THREE GROUPS OF CHARACTERS

Actual Group	Classified group			Total
	Neither	Ascenders	Descenders	
Neither	94.39	3.57	2.04	100.0
Ascender	21.43	63.09	15.48	100.0
Descenders	27.38	19.05	53.57	100.0

C. Thinning

There are a number of algorithms available for the thinning process. Thinning algorithms have to satisfy among others the following two constraints:

- Connectivity must be maintained at each iteration. Removal of border pixels must not cause discontinuities.
- The end of the thinned shape limbs must not be shortened.

Since the image of handwritten words are relatively small and less elaborate and less convex than an image of other objects, a slightly simpler version of a thinning algorithm would suffice. The thinning process used in this research is a one pass thinning algorithm that has been slightly modified to ensure connectivity and at the same time to repair any repairable discontinuities. An example of a binarized image of the same character ‘e’ as in Fig. 4, where it is shown before the thinning procedure, is shown again in Fig. 7 after it had been thinned.

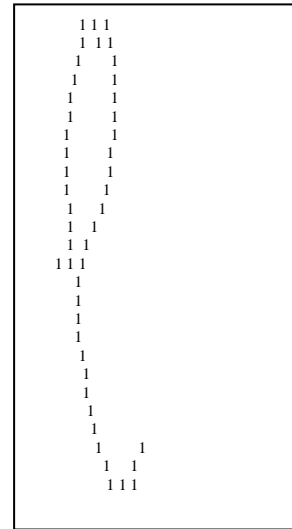


Figure 7. A thinned binarized image of ‘e’

With the process of thinning where pixels are removed, sometimes the image can get broken or disjointed. To cater for such cases, images that had been thinned will be passed through a special function that would check and repair simple disjointed edges caused by thinning. The code and example of a repaired edge are shown in Fig. 8 and Fig. 9.

```

for (j=-1; j <= 1; j++)
    if (image[rw+1][cl+j]== (unsigned char)black) pts1++;
for (j=-1; j <= 1; j++)
    if (image[rw+2][cl+j]== (unsigned char)black) pts2++;
if ((pts1 == 0) && (pts2 > 0))
    image[rw+1][cl] = (unsigned char) black;
    
```

Figure 8. Codes for repairing simple disjointed edge

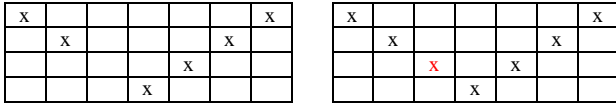


Figure 9. Example of a simple edge repaired

D. Checking for noise and dots

The database used in this research has not undergone any cleaning process. However, only small noises as produced by the writing itself rather than the quality of the scanner can be observed in the data. In order not to create confusion for the next process of chain-coding, the character data will be scanned through and removed of any possible noise.

This process will also unfortunately remove the dots of the characters “i” and “j”. Since the dots will not be taken as distinguishing features in the fuzzy rules to classify these two characters, retaining the dots of these characters will not be of any value, hence the algorithm as proposed is implemented. The algorithm is found to be useful of getting rid of small and other insignificant connected components. The algorithm used to remove the small isolated dots and lines is given in Fig. 10.

```

/* To count the density of the connected components in the image. Keep
track of its starting row, end row and sum up the pixel density of every row
in the connected component. */

i = first line;
j = 0;
do { While horizontal density of the line[i] > 0
      Group[j].start = i;
      Group[j].density += density of line[i]
      i++
    End while
    j++;
    Group[j].stop = i--;
  } while i <= last line in the image;

/* Now check height and density of the connected component and clear all
that have height and density below threshold values */

for i = 0 till j-1
  {
    Height = Group[i].start - Group[i].stop
    If Height < 3 and Group[i].density < 8
      for m = Group[i].start till Group[i].stop
        Clear all black pixel at row m in the image
  }

```

Figure 10. Algorithm for removing small dots or lines (noise)

In summary, the preprocessing tasks that were employed in this research work are mainly binarization, thinning, removing of noise and dots. While in the phase of binarization, the first feature extracted is the grouping of the character into the following categories of: ascender, descender and neither. Now that the handwritten character image has been preprocessed, the next step is to extract as many features needed for the use of classification. The next section will discuss the feature extraction phase in more detail.

V. FEATURE EXTRACTION PHASE

The feature extraction phase in a handwriting recognition system is agreed by many [2][16][17] to hold a very important role. Feature extraction can be defined as the process of extracting distinctive information from the matrices of digitized characters. In OCR applications it is important to extract those features that will enable the system to discriminate between all the character classes that exist. A suggested reading on the survey of feature extraction methods for handwriting recognition would be Oh, Lee and Suen [18].

Geometrical and topological representation is one of the many feature extraction methods used in the OCR research. This method has proven to be the most popular feature extraction method amongst researchers [19]. This type of representation is able to encode some knowledge about the structure of the object, or may provide some knowledge as to what sort of components make up that object. There are hundreds of topological and geometrical representations that can be grouped to a few categories [2].

One popular category in geometrical and topological representation of features is by extracting and counting topological structures. Common primitive structures that are searched from a character or word image, are strokes which may be as simple as lines and arcs or as complex as curves and splines. Characters and words can be successfully represented by extracting and counting many topological features such as the extreme points, maxima and minima, cusps above and below a threshold, openings, cross points (x), branch points (T), line ends, loops and many more [20][21].

Coding is a category where the strokes of the character are mapped into chain-codes. One of the most popular coding schemes is Freeman’s chain code, even though there are many versions of chain coding. Fig. 11 shows a directional guide of a Freeman Code. The following section will discuss the process of chain coding as used in this research work.

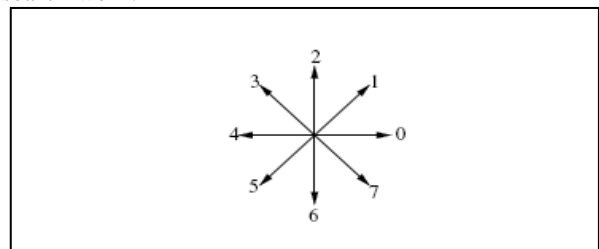


Figure 11. Directional Graph of Freeman Code

A. Chain coding

The one-dimensional model of the image is obtained by tracing the contour edges of the character image and representing the path by Freeman chain codes. The objective of the edge tracing would be to get chain codes that would traverse an image of a handwritten character as naturally as

TABLE II. AMONG THE TYPES OF STROKES IDENTIFIED FROM THE CHARACTER IMAGE.

Types of Strokes Identified	Corresponding Direction Codes
Horizontal lines	4 or 0
Vertical lines	2 or 6
Right Slant	1, 2, 0 or 5, 4, 6
Left Slant	3, 2, 4 or 7, 6, 0
Loop	6, 5, 4, 7, 0, 1, 2, 3
Right Hook	6, 7, 0 1
Left Hook	6, 5, 4, 3
C - curves	7, 6, 4, 5 or 1, 2, 4, 3
D-curves	5, 6, 0, 7 or 3, 2, 0, 1



Figure 14. Visual examples of some of the strokes identified (from left to right : right hook, left hook, C-curve, D-curve, U-curve).

VI. CLASSIFICATION PHASE

A brief mention of the classification phase would be required to give a more meaningful account of the work mentioned in this paper. The classification phase of the system is based on the concept of fuzzy rules developed using Matlab (Version 7.4.0). The fuzzy inference system (FIS) was built using Matlab GUI tools from its Fuzzy Logic Toolbox.

A fuzzy rule has two components, an *if*-part (referred as the antecedent) and a *then*-part (referred to as the consequent). The structure of a fuzzy rule is identical to that of a conventional rule in artificial intelligence. The main difference is the antecedent of a fuzzy rule is described by a linguistic variable and a membership function. A linguistic variable is like a composition of a symbolic variable and a numeric variable. Numeric variables are frequently used in science, engineering, mathematics, medicine and many other disciplines, while symbolic variables play an important role in AI and decision sciences. Using the notion of the linguistic variable to combine these two kinds of variables into a uniform framework is one of the main reasons that fuzzy logic has been successful in offering intelligent approaches in engineering and many other areas that deal with continuous problem domains.

A HMM model is a very useful tool to be incorporated into a fuzzy logic rule based system. It provides an approach that is compatible to the needs of the system. The calculation of probabilities by a statistical model such as HMM provides a solid base for the more syntactical approach of a fuzzy system. HMM yields a more accurate assessment of probabilities for the linguistic variables of a fuzzy system. In the following sub-sections a very brief account of the subsequent components of the whole research work is given.

A. HMM Models of the strokes

Each of the strokes has its own HMM model. The HMM models for the strokes have varied numbers of states from $N = 3$ to $N = 9$. Strokes that need lesser codes to be identified would have lesser states, and strokes with more codes to be identified benefit from having more states. The observation symbol, M , is 8, as the direction codes are from 0,...,7. $K = 7$ to 10, which is the train sample set used to train each of the HMM models.

The HMM model used for all the strokes are the left-right model. The fundamental property of all left-right HMM is that no transitions are allowed to states whose indices are lower than the current state, and the initial state probabilities have the property, $\pi_i = 0$, if $i \neq 1$, $\pi_1 = 1$, if $i = 1$, since the state sequence must begin in state 1 and end in state N . The model also allows jumps of no more than one.

B. Fuzzy Logic Classifier

The features extracted by the HMM yield a very good medium for further conversion of the linguistic variables. The strokes as identified, together with their probabilities will go through the process of fuzzification. The triangular and the trapezoidal membership functions were used to change the probabilities into their linguistic variable forms. The two membership functions were chosen due to their simple formulas and computational efficiencies. Examples of the linguistic variables used are : “*very tall right slant*”, “*very tall vertical line*”, as in *l*'s, or as in some of *d*'s or *b*'s. “*Tall C-curve*” as in *c*'s, “*small C-curve*” as appear in *d*'s, *a*'s and so on. When the HMM models were used with the fuzzy rules to recognize the handwritten characters, a favorable result was achieved.

VII. DISCUSSIONS

This paper presented detailed descriptions of each pre-processing step. The objective was to share the experiences and methods in implementing the steps. Though there are many readily available pre-processing tools that can be used to clean, binarise and thin the image, the later process like chain-coding is not readily available, for example in a Matlab toolkit. In order to chain-code the image, an understanding of the image data file would be advantageous. Furthermore, self-coding the pre-processing phase would also give the flexibility of tailoring the process to the exact requirements of each subsequent phase.

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