Learning an Artificial $F_0$-Contour for ALT Speech

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Abstract

The Artificial Larynx Transducer (ALT) as a possibility to re-obtain audible speech for people who had to undergo a total laryngectomy has been known for decades. Not only the design and underlying technique but also the poor speech quality and intelligibility have not improved until now. In a world where technology rules everyday life, it is necessary to use the known technology to improve the quality of life for handicapped people.

One reason for the lack of naturalness is the constant vibration of the ALT. A method to substantially improve ALT speech is to introduce a varying fundamental frequency ($F_0$) - contour. In this paper we present a new method to automatically learn an artificial $F_0$-contour. The model used is a Gaussian mixture model (GMM) which is trained with a database containing speech of ALT users as well as healthy people. Informal listening tests suggest that this approach is a first step for a subsequent overall enhancement technique for speech produced by an ALT.

Index Terms: alaryngeal speech, Artificial Larynx Transducer (ALT), fundamental frequency, speech enhancement, laryngectomy, GMM

1. Introduction and Related Work

For people who suffer from laryngeal cancer or similar diseases, the last chance is often a total laryngectomy, which means the complete removal of the larynx (see figure 1 – (a) and (b)). According to the source-filter model, the larynx and the containing vocal folds can be seen as the source of sound energy and the vocal tract as the filter. If people lose their larynx they also lose the ability to speak.

There are three alternatives for people to re-obtain their speech. The first method is the esophageal voice. Within this method air is first gulped and then released in a controlled manner. Instead of the vocal folds, the tissue in the pharynx vibrates. The second method is the tracheo-esophageal voice, where a valve is placed between trachea and esophagus. Due to this valve speech can be produced again with the air from the lungs (see figure 1 (c)). The third method is the artificial larynx transducer (ALT). This is a small, hand-held and battery driven device. The device is held against the neck to produce speech. Then energy is brought into the vocal tract which acts as the filter in the same way as in normal speech production.

Method one needs a lot of practice, and even then, some people are not able to learn it. Moreover, a speech valve needs continuous medical care and this cannot be afforded by people in poorer countries. The ALT device is simple and unproblematic to use and it is the best alternative to speak if the other methods fail. It is also the first post-operative possibility. There is one thing all three methods have in common: the inadequate quality of the resulting speech. Due to the fact that the existing layouts of ALTs have been available for almost six decades and that there has been no improvement of intelligibility and naturalness since then, there is an obvious need for a new generation of ALTs.

The approaches for generating an artificial $F_0$-contour which have been proposed so far either require manual interaction to change the fundamental frequency or only provide some predefined $F_0$-contours. There are some commercially available approaches such as using a switch from the standard $F_0$-contour to a different level to mark accentuation. A more flexible approach is to use a pressure sensitive button, which allows a continuous $F_0$-contour to be produced [2]. Another possibility is to create an artificial $F_0$-contour from the speech energy envelope [3]. The energy envelope is one possibility to convey accentuation if no $F_0$ is available. In this paper, the energy contour has been scaled and offset so that the transformed contour matches the average fundamental frequency and the dynamic range of the speaker. This does not produce a linguistically correct intonation,
but it does give a useful $F_0$ which can be influenced by
the speaker by modulating whisper intensity. A similar
approach is to use the expiration air-pressure to control
the $F_0$-contour. Uemi et al. use an air-pressure sensor
that is put on the stoma so that $F_0$ can be controlled by
lung pressure [4]. More recent work was carried out by
Nakamura et al. [5] who also used the air-pressure sensor
to improve $F_0$ estimation before enhancing ALT speech
using a statistical voice conversion technique.

Those approaches require manual control of the $F_0$-
contour and an action by the user, which is hardly done in
practice. Therefore, an automatic procedure for adjusting
an artificial $F_0$-contour is a considerable advantage. In
this paper, an artificial $F_0$-contour for ALT speech is es-
estimated using a machine learning approach. The goal of
this approach is to improve ALT speech in terms of natu-
ralness and intelligibility by introducing variations in the
$F_0$-contour, which means changing the frequency of the
ALT excitation signal. The approach for such a variation
needs to be of low complexity in order to implement it
on a real-time platform. A strong requirement is that the
learning procedure is automatic and that users do not have
to actively change speaking parameters. Therefore, our
intention is to perform an estimation of the $F_0$-contour
using Gaussian mixture models (GMM).

2. Method: GMM and $F_0$ Estimation
Mixture models are probabilistic models. They are useful
to model arbitrary density distributions. A GMM consists
of a linear combination of $K$ multivariate Gaussian prob-
ability density functions given by

$$P(x_i) = \frac{1}{\sqrt{\text{det}(\Sigma)}(2\pi)^{D/2}} e^{(-\frac{1}{2}(x_i-\mu)^T \Sigma ^{-1}(x_i-\mu)).}$$

(1)

The mathematical representation is given by

$$P(x_i|\lambda) = \sum_{m=1}^{K} b_m P_m(x_i).$$

(2)

$K$ is the number of Gaussian components, $x_i$ is an ob-
ervation of a $D$-dimensional random vector, $b_m$ are the
weights for each component and $P_m$ is a single, multi-
ivariate Gaussian distribution. For $b_m$, equation

$$\sum_{m=1}^{K} b_m = 1$$

(3)

holds. With $\lambda = \{(b_m, \mu_m, \Sigma_m); m = 1, 2, \ldots, K\}$, the
whole mixture model is described. The parameters $\lambda$ of a
model are estimated using the expectation-maximization
(EM) algorithm [6].

The estimation of an artificial $F_0$-contour using
GMMs is inspired by Milner et al. [7] who used melf-
frequency cepstral coefficients (MFCCs) for prediction of

$F_0$ and voicing in unconstrained speech. The input for
training the GMM is $y = [x, f]^T$. $x$ contains the MFCCs
for one frame for ALT speech and $f$ the corresponding
$F_0$ for healthy speech. For this approach full covariance
matrices $\Sigma_m$ need to be trained. The mean value vector
$\mu_m$ and $\Sigma_m$ can be seen as a concatenation:

$$\mu_m = [\mu_m^x, \mu_m^f], \Sigma_m = [\Sigma_m^{xx}, \Sigma_m^{xf}, \Sigma_m^{fx}, \Sigma_m^{ff}].$$

In order to estimate $F_0$, the nearest compo-
nent to an unknown $x_{in}$ is calculated: $m^* = \arg\max_{K} \{p(x_{in}|c_m^*)b_m\}$, where $p(x_{in}|c_m^*)$ is the
marginal distribution of the MFCC vector for the $m$th
cluster $c_m^*$. The final result is obtained through

$$\hat{f}_i = \mu_{m^*}^f + \Sigma_{m^*}^{fx}(\Sigma_{m^*}^{xx})^{-1}(x_{in} - \mu_{m^*}^f).$$

(4)

3. Experimental Evaluation

3.1. Speech Database
For experimental evaluation, we built up a database con-
taining speech material from a female as well as a male
speaker. The database was recorded in a sound-treated
chamber. The chosen speech material includes various
types of different sentences including questions, decla-
rations, imperatives and sentences from the newspaper.
The two speakers are healthy subjects. They spoke the
sentences one time with their natural, healthy voice (HE)
and one time with a Servox electronic larynx (ALT). All
in all 97 sentences with an average sentence length of 5
seconds were recorded per speaker. This results in a du-
ration of 8 (for HE) - 12 (for ALT) minutes per speaker.

3.2. Experimental Setup
While the system is intended to be working in real-
time, at the current stage it is implemented in Matlab
by loading wav files which are then processed frame-
by-frame. Due to this analysis-by-synthesis method, re-
sults can be evaluated using informal listening tests. The
pre-processing step, as shown in figure 2, resamples the
data (HE and ALT speech) to a sampling frequency of
$16000$ Hz. A high pass filter (HPF) removes DC
and very low frequency components and the directly ra-
diated noise is removed from the ALT speech using a
modulation filtering technique [8]. In the training step
28 MFCCs (including 0’th order cepstral coefficient, the
log energy and delta coefficients) features are extracted
from the ALT speech using a hanning window with a
frame length of 50 ms (FE). 23 filters in the filterbank
are used. The natural $F_0$ of the HE speech is tracked
by the algorithm provided by the Praat speech software
[9]. The features and the $F_0$ values are time aligned us-
ding Dynamic Time Warping (DTW) [10] because peo-
ples need more time to articulate with an ALT than with
3.3. Results

The best method to evaluate speech enhancement methods is to carry out listening tests. Due to the fact that listening tests are time and cost consuming the results are presented in terms of numerical values. Furthermore, informal perceptual evaluations verified the numerical values and confirmed the improvement of naturalness. Figure 3 shows an example of a male speaker.

\[ \epsilon = \frac{\sum_{n=1}^{N} |F_{0,1} - F_{0,2}|}{N} \]  

For evaluation of the values of the \( F_0 \)-contours are transformed into midi (semitones) values according to

\[ \text{midi} = 69 + 12 \cdot \log_2 \left( \frac{f}{440} \right) \]

For the above sentence, the absolute mean error between the natural and the original ALT \( F_0 \)-contour is \( |\epsilon|_{\text{mid.orig}} = 12.2 \) and decreases to \( |\epsilon|_{\text{mid.est}} = 0.7 \) for the estimated \( F_0 \)-contour.

Furthermore, we used the 4-folds cross validation technique. The training data is randomly split into four sets. Three parts are then used in training and the fourth for validations. Then three others are picked and so on. Following this, results could be obtained separately for the male and the female database. \( r \) and \( |\epsilon| \) were calculated for each sentence and the mean value over all sentences was determined. The results for \( r \) are shown in table 1. Figure 4 shows a Matlab boxplot of \( |\epsilon| \). On each box, the central mark is the median (q2), the edges of the box are the 25th (q1) and 75th (q3) percentiles, the whiskers extend to the most extreme data points and the
outliers are plotted individually. The values are listed in table 2. It can be seen that the enhancement in terms of the absolute mean error is significant.

![Graph showing absolute mean error of 4-folds cross validation for male (a and c) and female (b and d) database: a and b: \( |\epsilon|_{\text{midi,est}} \) – error between natural and estimated \( F_0 \)-contour; c and d: \( |\epsilon|_{\text{midi,orig}} \) – error between natural and original \( F_0 \)-contour.](image)

Figure 4: Absolute mean error of 4-folds cross validation for male (a and c) and female (b and d) database: a and b: \( |\epsilon|_{\text{midi,est}} \) – error between natural and estimated \( F_0 \)-contour; c and d: \( |\epsilon|_{\text{midi,orig}} \) – error between natural and original \( F_0 \)-contour.

Additionally, the ALT speech is manipulated with the estimated \( F_0 \)-contour using the well known PSOLA method [11], which results in an improved listening quality.

### 5. Conclusions

In this paper, a method for automatically learning the \( F_0 \)-contour for speech produced by an artificial larynx transducer is presented. Based on a database consisting of speech material of healthy and ALT speech, spectral features are extracted and a statistical model is trained. While the energy source, the larynx, is removed for laryngectomies, the vocal tract is still (fairly) unimpaired. Therefore, the assumption that spectra carry information about the speech prosody is valid. The results demonstrate that fundamental frequency estimation based on a machine learning procedure is possible and in terms of real-time application preferable.

The final aim is to improve ALT speech in general. Improving the \( F_0 \)-contour is only a first step to reach this aim. Informal perceptual evaluations and earlier offline methods lead to the conclusion that an artificial \( F_0 \)-contour considerably improves the naturalness and the speech quality of ALT speech.

Future research will investigate voiced/unvoiced decision of speech produced by the ALT. Furthermore, there is a strong need to improve the gender variation, which means that women are actually perceived as women. Further work is necessary to improve the sound quality, while preserving the identity of the voice and to give the user an individual voice characteristic.

### 6. References


