

Automatic Pharynx Segmentation from MRI Data for Obstructive Sleep Apnea Analysis

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Keywords: Obstructive Sleep Apnea (OSA), Pharynx Segmentation, Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI).

Abstract: Obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) is a public health problem. Volumetric analysis of the upper airways can help us to understand the pathogenesis of OSA. A reliable pharynx segmentation is the first step in identifying the anatomic risk factors for this sleeping disorder. As manual segmentation is a time-consuming and subjective process, a fully automatic segmentation of pharyngeal structures is required when investigating larger data bases such as in cohort studies. We develop a context-based automatic algorithm for segmenting pharynx from magnetic resonance images (MRI). It consists of a pipeline of steps including pre-processing (thresholding, connected component analysis) to extract coarse 3D objects, classification of the objects (involving object-based image analysis (OBIA), visual feature space analysis, and silhouette coefficient computation) to segregate pharynx from other structures automatically, and post-processing to refine the shape of the identified pharynx (including extraction of the oropharynx and propagating results from neighboring slices to slices that are difficult to delineate). Our technique is fast such that we can apply our algorithm to population-based epidemiological studies that provide a high amount of data. Our method needs no user interaction to extract the pharyngeal structure. The approach is quantitatively evaluated on ten datasets resulting in an average of approximately 90% detected volume fraction and a 90% Dice coefficient, which is in the range of the inter-observer variation within manual segmentation results.

1 INTRODUCTION

Sleeping disorders such as obstructive sleep apnea are public health problems affecting, at least, 2-4% of the middle-aged population (Pack, 2002). Sleep-disordered breathing (SDB) such as obstructive sleep apnea not only causes poor sleep quality and daytime sleepiness, but also has clinical consequences including hypertension and increased risk of cardiovascular disease (CVD) (Shaw et al., 2008). SDB is increasingly considered as a potential therapeutic target for either primary or secondary prevention of cardiovascular disease. Obstructive sleep apnea is defined as a recurrent cessation of respiration associated with an upper airway obstruction during sleep (Lowe and Fleetham, 1991). It is marked by repeated episodes of upper airway collapse, leading to apnea (cessation of airflow for greater or equal to 10 seconds) or hypopnea (decrease in airflow for greater or equal to 10 seconds) (Berry et al., 2012). The clinical syndrome

of sleep apnea is defined as the presence of abnormal breathing in sleep along with daytime symptoms, particularly excessive daytime sleepiness. Obstructive sleep apnea also results in impaired sleep quality leading to deterioration of memory and judgment, altered personality, and reduced concentration (Shi et al., 2006). Patients complain of a range of symptoms and may develop physical complications that include systematic hypertension, right heart failure, and cardiac arrhythmias (Lowe et al., 1986).

While the clinical symptoms of obstructive sleep apnea are well recognized, the understanding of its pathogenesis remains incomplete. It is clear, however, that upper airway anatomy is important in the pathogenesis of obstructive sleep apnea. In order to fully understand upper airway anatomy, we need to examine the volume of the airway and surrounding upper airway structures (Ivanovska et al., 2013). To study upper airway anatomy, it is important to develop a segmentation technique to extract the anatomy from

medical images.

Although, the X-ray computed tomography (CT) is considered to be the gold standard for airways imaging, its employment in an epidemiological cohort or repeated CT scans for research purposes in a single patient are ethically not justified. Here, magnetic resonance imaging as a non-radiation based examination method gains an increasing popularity in the clinical and epidemiological setting. MR imaging offers a good contrast between soft tissue structures and is utilized to analyse throat tissues (Ivanovska et al., 2011). Because MRI involves little or no risk to healthy volunteers, it makes it possible to perform large-scale studies to understand the role of pharynx morphology in sleep apnea.

The first step towards this endeavour is to establish a reliable segmentation of the pharynx from 3D MR images. As manual segmentation is a laborious, observer-dependent, and time-consuming process, full automation of the three-dimensional analysis of the pharynx is required. In this paper, we present a fast and fully automatic segmentation approach for the pharynx from MR images based on a pipeline of steps. We mainly apply a few pre-processing steps to extract coarse segmentation of candidates, extract their properties within a multidimensional feature space, to which we apply a visual analysis approach to find a reliable classification, and refine the shape of the identified pharynx in a post-processing step. The results are analysed and compared against manually established ground truth and the state of the art. We can show that our automatic method achieves results within the range of inter-observer variability.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: We give an overview of related work in Section 2. The material and data used in this study are described in Section 3. Section 4 describes the working of our segmentation method. The results are analyzed and compared against manually established ground truth and state-of-the-art techniques in Section 5 while Section 6 concludes the paper.

2 RELATED WORK

Since the X-ray CT is used more commonly for airways imaging, most of the segmentation methods designed for airways are applied to this imaging modality. Nearly all methods of segmentation and measurement designed for airways published in literature are developed for X-ray computed tomography and cone-beam computed tomography images. However, due to large differences between CT and MR images, those

methods cannot be applied for our purposes.

There are few publications dealing with the specific challenges of pharynx classification and segmentation from MRI data. Schwab et al. (2003) utilized volumetric measurements of upper airways to analyze anatomic alterations. The measurements were performed manually. Liu et al. (2003) performed a study to diagnose upper airway disorders in children by delineating upper airway and surrounding structures with magnetic resonance imaging. They proposed a semi-automatic framework for upper airway segmentation using fuzzy connectedness. Here, T1- and T2-weighted MR images were acquired and an operator specified a volume of interest and seeds in both image volumes manually. The mean processing time is about four minutes including the operator interaction. The method is based on a local fuzzy relation on voxels called affinity, which indicates how the voxels belong together locally within the scene in the object of interest. Finally, a global fuzzy connectedness relation is constructed that decides how the voxels dangle together globally in the scene to form the object. Andrysiak et al. (2001) reported a method for upper airways analysis in patients with obstructive sleep apnea by using MRI and performed measurements based on individual slices such as assessing surfaces of the smallest cross-section of upper airway lingual, thickness of soft palate, and the smallest distance between soft palate and throat wall.

Ivanovska et al. (2013) presented a pipeline for pharynx segmentation with semi-automatic initialization. The automatic part of the approach consists of three steps: smoothing, thresholding, and 2D and 3D connected component analysis. Whereas the two first steps are rather common, the third step provides a set of general rules for extraction of the pharyngeal component. Their method requires less than one minute to extract the pharyngeal structures. The approach is mostly automatic, but uses a small amount of interactions like defining starting and ending slice of oropharynx and marking the parapharyngeal fat pads in them.

In conclusion, over the past years we have seen important advances in upper airway MRI segmentation, prompted by an increase in the quality and availability of MR imagery. There has been a little work towards developing an automatic segmentation technique. Some researchers tried to tackle this problem, but it has not yet been completely solved.

3 MATERIALS

The test datasets were acquired in the frame of the

Study of Health in Pomerania (SHIP) (Völzke et al., 2010), a population-based study conducted in North-east Germany, where more than 2000 participants aged 20 to 89 years were examined. The test datasets are axial T1-weighted isotropic head MR images with spatial resolution of 1mm in each dimension leading to $176 \times 256 \times 176$ voxels. These MR images contain only the upper part of pharyngeal structures. However, the medical experts considered the images to contain the most essential information and to be suitable to study the obstructive sleep apnea syndrome in the frame of an epidemiological study.

We randomly select sixteen individual head MRI datasets for our experiments and tests. To consider the observer variability and error, two medical experts provide manually segmented ground truths for ten datasets under the supervision of an experienced radiologist.

4 PHARYNX SEGMENTATION

The large intensity variations and low contrast in MRI make pharynx segmentation more challenging than in CT images. Also, identifying the pharynx in individual axial MRI slices poses additional challenges because of its irregular shape and diverse appearance as shown in Figure 1, rendering shape-based classification a difficult task.

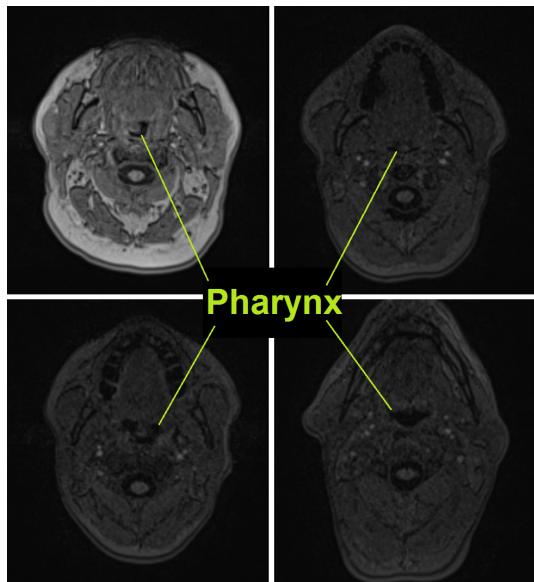


Figure 1: Diverse Appearance of Pharynx in Axial Slices.

State-of-the-art approaches rely on manually placed markers to perform guided 3D image growing on a pixel level. However, when operating exclusively on a voxel level, the spatial relation between the

pharynx and other neighbouring anatomical regions is more difficult to establish. Nevertheless, the local context could provide useful information for identifying our target structure. Thus, we overcome the limitations of voxel-based processing by analyzing atomic image regions (called *objects*) in their local semantic context. Image regions possess many features that are not available on a voxel level such as shape, orientation, intensity statistics, and relative position to other regions. In our approach, we generate a set of 3D image regions by over-segmentation, which are then classified to detect the segments forming the pharynx.

The complete pipeline of our approach is shown in Figure 2. First, the image is partitioned into coarse 3D regions using thresholding and connected component analysis. The features describing the appearance and orientation of each 3D region are then extracted, which form a multidimensional feature space. By visually exploring the feature space we find a combination of settings of pharynx characteristics, which distinguishes it from other candidate objects. A classifier that detects the 3D pharynx samples in the multidimensional feature space is defined. In a post-processing, the pharynx region is slice-wise refined. After removing false surrounding voxels, the segment of the pharynx which is thought to play a key role in sleep apnea analysis is automatically extracted using central differences. Our approach is completely automatic, requiring no user interaction. The results were validated on sixteen datasets using two manual ground truth segmentations. The following subsections provide the details on the individual steps of the pipeline.

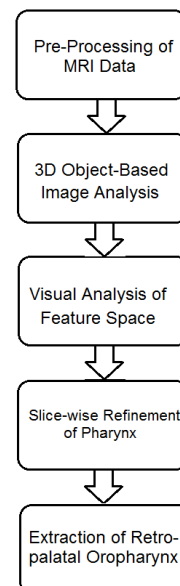


Figure 2: Complete pipeline.

4.1 Pre-processing

In most classification and segmentation problems, pre-processing plays a vital role. In our approach, we perform smoothing with a median and an anisotropic filter followed by clustering using thresholding (Shapiro and Linda, 2002).

First, we apply a median filter of kernel size $3 \times 3 \times 5$ to remove isolated voxels and minimize the salt and pepper noise (Gonzalez and Woods, 2008). After this, we smooth the image using the anisotropic diffusion filter (Perona and Malik, 1990), which can cope with the low intensity contrast and intensity variations in MRI sequences, while preserving the borders intact.

Finally, we apply a coarse intensity clustering to the image volume to reduce the computational complexity, and extract coarse and homogeneous regions in each image slice by selecting half of the mean gray value as threshold value. By thresholding, we select the darkest regions in the image, as we know that the pharyngeal air column is one of the darkest classes in MR images. The thresholding step significantly decreases the number of over-segmented objects in the head MR image volume. Figure 3 shows an axial slice of the MRI dataset, where the dark objects remaining as candidates for the pharynx are highlighted.

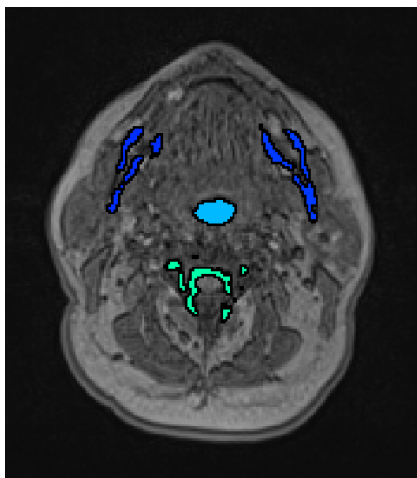


Figure 3: 3D object candidates for the pharynx shown on axial slice.

At the end of the pre-processing step, we are left with dark regions on axial slices of the MRI datasets which includes the pharyngeal air pipe and other dark regions like vertebrae, teeth, and bone structures.

4.2 Object-based Image Analysis

Having dark regions on axial slices, the next task is to

connect them using connected component analysis in order to build 3D objects. During connected component analysis, we use a 26 neighborhood relationship in 3D to connect dark region voxels to build 3D coarse objects in MRI dataset. In the nasopharynx region, we face a region leakage problem due to low intensity contrast, which makes the pharynx shape more irregular and random. Thus, we need to exclude the nasopharynx level from the 3D coarse objects during connected component analysis, such that we are left with a more regular and well-defined shape for the pharynx. We achieve this task by separating the nasopharynx region from the oropharynx where the axial area of the pharynx exceeds a certain limit.

Daniel et al. (2007) mentioned average dimensions of the pharyngeal air column in both genders. We also measure the area of the pharynx on each axial slice for our datasets and find the maximum values which are shown in Table 1. After a complete analysis of the pharynx area on axial slices, we break the linkage between nasopharynx and oropharynx where the pharynx has a physical dimension greater than a threshold value (350 mm^2) on any axial slice. In addition to this, the total volume of the visible pharyngeal part is 2000 mm^3 to 4000 mm^3 on average in our datasets. Therefore, we can discard 3D objects which have a volume less than 400 mm^3 to reduce the number of 3D coarse objects. This additional step further decreases the number of remaining 3D objects. Figure 3 shows that after performing all these tasks, only few 3D objects are left as pharynx candidates in the object-based image analysis step, which makes our algorithm more time efficient.

Table 1: Maximum area of pharynx on any axial slice.

MRI Head Dataset	Maximum Area of Pharynx on Axial Slice in mm^2
1	283
2	198
3	211
4	252
5	192
6	275
7	255
8	169
9	264
10	303
11	223
12	209
13	204
14	210
15	257
16	235

4.3 Visual Analysis of Feature Space

After building 3D objects and eliminating the redundant objects, our task is to classify them with respect to some features. Hence, we obtain the descriptive features of atomic image regions using a generic framework for object-based image analysis introduced by Homeyer et al. (2010). The image regions are described by a set of features regarding their shape and intensity statistics.

The intensity features comprise of standard statistics over the 3D image region, including minimum, maximum, and average values as well as median and upper and lower quartiles.

Regarding the regions shape, there are many descriptors available in literature as shown in the survey by Mingqiang et al. (2008). One of the standard methods to compute shape features is based on central image moments (Burger and Burge, 2009) of the binary mask of a region r , where $r(x, y) = 1$ if the voxel (x, y) belongs to the region and $r(x, y) = 0$ otherwise. The central image moments of the order p, q for a binary image $r(x, y)$ are defined by

$$\mu_{pq}(r) = \sum_x \sum_y (x - \bar{x})^p (y - \bar{y})^q r(x, y)$$

where (\bar{x}, \bar{y}) represents the coordinates of the centroid and the zero-order moment represents the area of a binary image. Furthermore, we perform principal component analysis (Jolliffe, 2005) on the voxel distribution of the region. The principal eigenvectors and corresponding eigenvalues λ_1 and λ_2 can be computed from the covariance matrix of r , which is defined by

$$cov(r) = \begin{bmatrix} \mu_{20}(r) & \mu_{11}(r) \\ \mu_{11}(r) & \mu_{02}(r) \end{bmatrix}$$

The principal eigenvectors define the regions orientation, while the ratio of their corresponding eigenvalues measures the regions eccentricity. Using central moments, we can derive different shape features.

We analysed the histograms of different individual features for pharynx and other 3D objects. It is clear from the histograms in Figure 4 that the chosen single features do not suffice to distinguish the pharynx from other objects. The same holds for other features. Nevertheless, pharynx objects have a narrow range of values for some specific features which can be used in a combination with other features to separate them from other false candidates.

The shape and statistical features form a multi-dimensional feature space for pharynx description. Hence, we generate a set of potentially descriptive

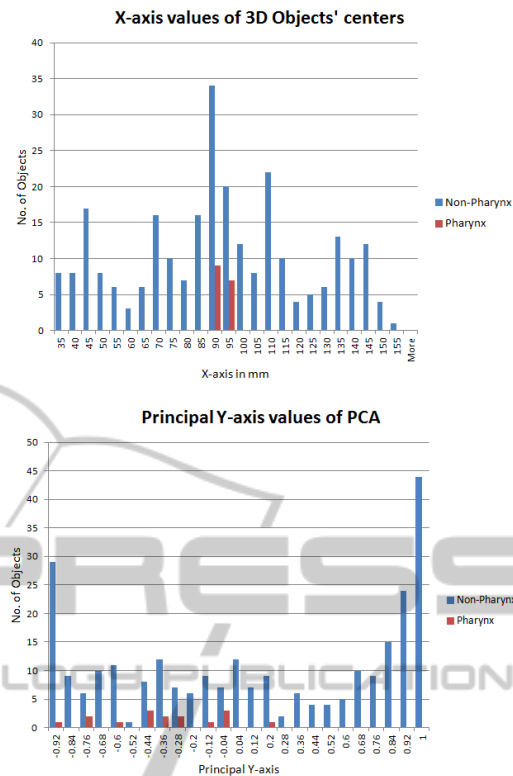


Figure 4: Histograms of individual features. Top: X-axis values of centers of 3D objects. Bottom: Principal Y-axis values of 3D objects.

features for our 3D coarse objects in our MRI head datasets. Our next task is to determine which combination of features best distinguishes the subset of objects that belongs to the pharynx.

After generating a set of possible descriptive features for our 3D coarse objects, we visualize the influence of those features using histograms to find the most relevant features which segregate pharynx samples from remaining samples as shown in Figure 4. It is found that principal eigenvectors and eigenvalues have compactness and few variations for pharynx samples. So, we visually analyse our feature space and find suitable values of our features to separate pharynx from other tissues in MRI dataset.

We use star-coordinates widget (Molchanov and Linsen, 2014) to explore multidimensional feature space. To visually explore the data distribution, we apply the dimensionality reduction method such as linear projection method to map multidimensional data to a 2D space. Linear projection is the most economical method in terms of computational cost and it doesn't introduce too much distortion which makes it most suitable choice for our purpose. The linear projection of our 5-dimensional feature space onto the 2-dimensional visual space is defined by a projection

matrix of size 2×5 . We visualize the columns of our projection matrix as axes of star-coordinates widget. We use a training dataset, where we know the ground truth in the form of manually segmented pharynx regions and find a configuration of the star-coordinates widget such that samples representing these pharynx regions are visually decoupled from other regions as demonstrated in Figure 5. It is very clear that the chosen configuration of the star-coordinates widget creates a projected space that exhibits an area with only red samples representing pharynx. We observe that it suffices to select only five salient features, namely, PCA descriptors (lambda1, lambda2, principal y-axis, and principal z-axis) and x-center values (x-axis values for centers of objects) to create this projected space as shown in Figure 5.

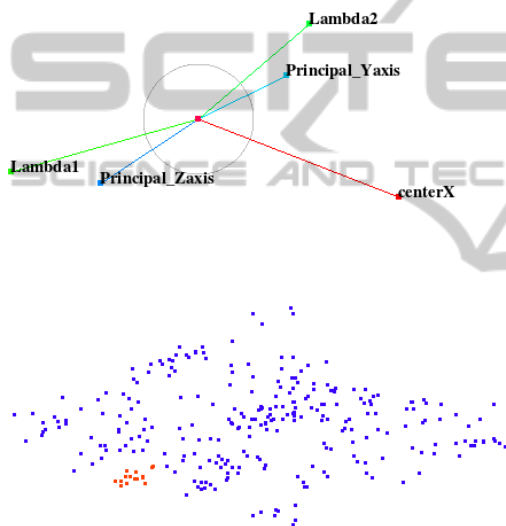


Figure 5: Top: Star-coordinate widget configuration. Bottom: Red and blue samples represent pharynx and non-pharynx clusters, respectively, in projected view.

We store the recorded projection matrix for this projected space from training datasets which serves as a classifier for test datasets. In order to apply the classification to test data, we map the new feature data using the recorded projection matrix. Then, we compute the silhouette coefficient for each candidate of the test dataset considering the pharynx cluster of the training data. The best silhouette coefficient, then, delivers the region that is supposed to represent the pharynx in the test data. The silhouette coefficient (Rousseeuw, 1987) is defined by

$$s(i) = \frac{b(i) - a(i)}{\max\{a(i), b(i)\}}$$

where $s(i)$ is the value of the silhouette coefficient for the i th sample of the test dataset, We use Euclidean distance as a measure of dissimilarity. We then define

$a(i)$ as the average of the Euclidean distances from i th sample to all samples of the pharynx cluster in the training dataset, and $b(i)$ as the average of the Euclidean distances from the i th sample to all samples of the non-pharynx cluster in the training dataset. All pharynx and non-pharynx points of training datasets are shown as red and blue points, respectively, in the projected space of Figure 5.

On average, the total number of 3D segments in each dataset is about 18, where only one segment is classified to represent the pharynx. Detailed information can be found in Table 2. To estimate how accurately our pharynx classifier performs in practice, we use the leave-one-out cross validation technique for the sixteen datasets. In a single round of cross-validation, we use our fifteen datasets as training set and one dataset as testing set. To reduce the variability, multiple rounds of cross-validation are performed using different partitions, and the validation results are averaged over the rounds.

Table 2: Total number of segments and statistics for pharynx classifier.

MRI Head Dataset	Total number of 3D objects
1	11
2	20
3	21
4	15
5	21
6	18
7	20
8	15
9	23
10	12
11	19
12	23
13	15
14	14
15	17
16	19
Average	17.6

The result of the validation was the perfect result of 100% true positive rate and zero false positives for pharynx classification, which serves as the basis for our fully automatic pharynx segmentation algorithm. In addition to it, we do not need any post-processing step to decrease the false positive rate which makes our classifier more efficient and economical in terms of time and computational complexity.

4.4 Slice-wise Refinement of Pharynx

Since coarse intensity clustering was applied to complete MRI dataset in the pre-processing step to reduce the computational complexity, a refinement of the 3D

object representing pharynx is necessary. Due to low contrast and inhomogeneous intensity over the complete MRI volume, but also because of performing the segmentation on a lower intensity resolution, the intermediate results include some false surrounding voxels. This refinement is performed on a slice-wise basis in axial direction.

We start the refinement step from the bottom slice where hypopharynx and oropharynx meet each other. For each slice, we find the center of gravity of the pharynx from the corresponding axial slice of the initial 3D coarse object representing the pharynx. Thereafter, we select a region of radius r (where r is equal to 2.5 times the radius of the oropharynx) around the center of gravity which is still comparatively much smaller than the entire axial slice. We select such a value of r to make sure that our selected area must consist of different intensity clusters (pharyngeal air column, wall, and surrounding tissues) which help MultiOtsu thresholding (Liao et al., 2001) to delineate pharyngeal air column from the surrounding objects perfectly. The darkest class in the center of the slice represents the air column of the pharynx. In few axial slices of retro-palatal region, two or three disjoint regions may represent the pharynx. In these slices, we consider all dark regions lying within the radius of the pharynx from the center of gravity of the adjacent lower axial slice as a part of the pharynx. We also update the center of gravity for the current slice. Thereafter, we perform a morphological closing operation (Soille, 1999) to fill the remaining holes and correct the boundary irregularities. After completing all steps of slice-wise refinement, the 3D pharynx object is readily extracted for the analysis of the key region of oropharynx that is believed to play an essential role in sleep apnea.

4.5 Extraction of Retropalatal Oropharynx

For obstructive sleep apnea syndrome analysis, we need to extract the narrowest part of the oropharynx from the retro-palatal region. Figure 6 shows the complete structure of pharynx in red color for a typical MRI dataset. However, not every acquired MRI volume is identically positioned with respect to the patient, such that the retro-palatal region can be located at a variable position along the pharynx. Therefore, we developed an automatic algorithm to identify and extract the most important segment of the pharynx.

To achieve this task, we compute the central differences of anteroposterior length of the pharyngeal air column and find the axial slice having the maximum value of central difference. Figure 7 shows the

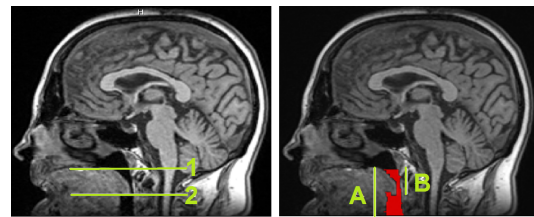


Figure 6: Left: Lines 1 and 2 represent high and low retro-palatal oropharynx region levels respectively. Right: Line segments A and B represent the complete pharynx and the retro-palatal region of oropharynx respectively.

anteroposterior length of the pharyngeal air column.

We notice that the starting low retro-palatal oropharynx axial slice has the maximum central difference value due to the presence of soft palate which is absent in the adjacent lower slice. This fact is clearly shown in Figure 6. Moreover, we also consider the condition that the anteroposterior length of the pharyngeal air column should not be greater than 10mm (Daniel et al., 2007) to confirm that we are operating in the low retro-palatal region.

We can also find a selection criterion for the last slice of high retro-palatal oropharynx region where it meets the nasopharynx region. When observing a sudden change in the area of the pharynx, the nasopharynx region starts. We stop our process of including axial slices as a part of the oropharynx when the central difference of area becomes greater than 50 mm^2 . In addition to this, we also consider the condition that the anteroposterior length of the pharyngeal air column should be greater than 15 mm to confirm that we are operating in the high retro-palatal region. By applying these criteria, we extract the retro-palatal oropharynx region that is relevant to analyze the obstructive sleep apnea syndrome.

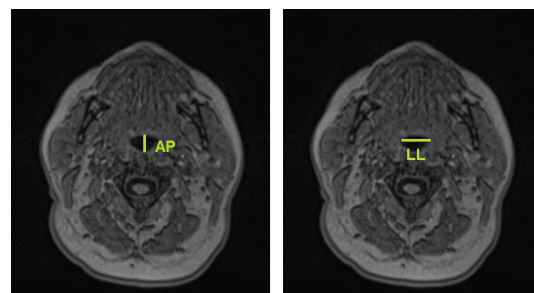


Figure 7: AP and LL line segments represent Anteroposterior and Laterolateral Dimensions of Pharyngeal Air Column respectively.

5 RESULTS AND COMPARISON

The proposed segmentation pipeline has been tested

on ten datasets; each dataset represents a separate subject. The processing for each dataset with a resolution $176 \times 256 \times 176$ takes less than half of a minute on a computer with Intel Core i5 2.67 GHz CPU with 4 GB RAM. The parameter settings have been preselected and no additional parameter tuning is required. The segmentation results are evaluated using four measures: false negative volume fraction (FNVF), false positive volume fraction (FPVF), true positive volume fraction (TPVF), and Dice coefficient (DICE). These metrics are based on voxel ratios. Let C_{auto} and C_{exp} denote the binary masks produced by our pipeline and the expert delineation, correspondingly. Then FNVF, FPVF, TPVF and DICE are defined as follows

$$FNVF = \frac{|C_{exp} - C_{auto}|}{|C_{exp}|}$$

$$TPVF = \frac{|C_{exp} \cap C_{auto}|}{|C_{exp}|}$$

$$FPVF = \frac{|C_{auto} - C_{exp}|}{|C_{exp}|}$$

$$DICE = \frac{2 * |C_{exp} \cap C_{auto}|}{|C_{exp}| + |C_{auto}|}$$

These four metrics are calculated according to the given formulas and presented in Table 3 so that automatic segmented results can be compared to the expert-defined ground truth for ten different datasets. Higher values of DICE and TPVF fraction represent better results, whereas lower values of FPVF and FNVF represent better results. For ideal results, we would have 100% results in terms of DICE and TPVF fractions and 0% in terms of FPVF and FNVF fractions. We compare the results to the semi-automatic pharynx segmentation approach by Ivanovska et al. (2013).

Table 3: Comparison of all masks against expert1s mask in terms of four metrics mean values.

Masks	DICE	TPVF	FNVF	FPVF
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
Expert2	91.6	93.1	6.9	10.1
Ivanovska	89.4	85.8	14.2	6.3
Automatic	89.0	91.9	8.1	14.6

As it can be seen in Table 3, our approach produces results with high TPVF (mean value is around 92%) and low FNVF (mean value is close to 8%). The Dice coefficient is about 89%. However, the false positive rate is about 15%, which can be partially explained by the fact that we observed experts error in delineating pharynx in the expert-defined ground truth. Therefore, we obtained another ground truth by

manual segmentation of a different medical expert for the same subjects, in order to understand the amount and character of variations better. We measure same quality metrics for our segmentation results against the second ground truth and present the values in Table 4.

We also compare both ground truths against each other using these four quality metrics and show the intra-observer variability in Table 3 and Table 4.

Table 4: Comparison of all masks against expert2s mask in terms of four metrics mean values.

Masks	DICE	TPVF	FNVF	FPVF
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
Expert1	91.6	90.4	9.7	6.8
Ivanovska	89.5	86.9	13.1	5.3
Automatic	88.7	93.0	7.0	17.0

The comparison of experts ground truth segmentations to the automatic results reveals the fact that manual extraction of the pharynx is not much more accurate than the automatic segmentation pipeline. The human error is due to the voxels on the boundary of pharyngeal air column which are affected by partial volume. The ambiguous boundary emphasizes the subjectivity of the human experts. In addition to this, pharynx is present only partially in the MRI head volume, i.e., the pharyngeal parts of each subject differs in size, which also might cause the variations in results. The total volume of the visible pharyngeal part is quite low: on average it accounts to about 2,000 to 4,500 voxels, so minor variations such as 20 to 30 voxels per slice produce significant false positive or false negative errors. Moreover, our datasets are subject to strong artefacts in the bottom slices. Furthermore, low contrast and inhomogeneity artefacts of datasets are main cause of high false positive errors.

A comparison with other existing pharynx segmentation algorithms (other than Ivanovska et al.) is difficult due to different imaging modalities (X-ray CT Scan and Cone-beam CT Scans) and inconsistently used quality metrics. For example, Cheng et al. (2007) proposed a pipeline for upper airways extraction from the CT data, but no accuracy measures were reported. Liu et al. (2003) described a semi-automatic framework for MRI data and claimed a higher accuracy for their approach. However, they need more user involvement in the processing and the total processing time is longer. Ivanovska et al. (2013) also presented a semi-automatic pharynx segmentation technique for MRI datasets, in which seed points have to be selected manually. We calculated these qualitative metrics for their technique and values are presented in Table 3 and Table 4. For easier comparison of the results, we also show the graphs in

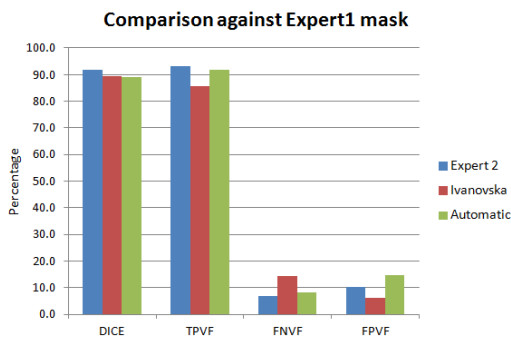


Figure 8: Graph showing results against Expert 1 mask.

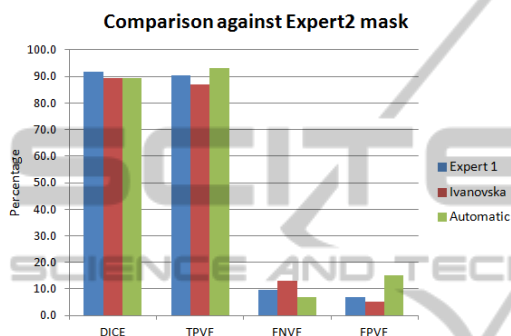


Figure 9: Graph showing results against Expert 2 mask.

Figure 8 and Figure 9.

Our results are comparable in terms of accuracy with the other approach. However, Ivanovskas segmentation technique takes nearly more than one minute on our system, i.e., our proposed technique is about two times faster. Secondly, our technique is fully automatic requiring no user input, while her technique is semi-automatic.

Finally, the results of manual, semi-automatic and fully automatic segmentation algorithms support our argument that we are facing a limitation in practice due to the subjectivity in the manual segmentation of the pharynx. With our fully automatic method we aim to address this problem and ensure accurate and repeatable segmentation results.

6 CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

We presented a fast and fully automatic segmentation technique for pharynx extraction from head MR images. The procedure consists of pre-processing, object-based image analysis, and retro-palatal oropharynx extraction. The method is fast, as the whole processing takes less than half a minute for one dataset. The approach has been tested on ten

random datasets. The proposed approach produces sufficiently reliable and good results and has potential to be applied for the analysis of numerous data in epidemiological studies such as SHIP to describe the pathogenesis of the obstructive sleep apnea syndrome. Our approach could also be easily integrated in clinical practice.

Our complete segmentation technique works well for extracting pharynx and our main idea of segmentation in two steps can be applied in many medical problems especially for segmenting organs. The two-step segmentation method consists of a coarse segmentation using intensity clustering as a first step and refinement on local region using MultiOtsu thresholding as second step after having identified the correct region using a classification in a multidimensional feature space.

As future work, we plan to extend the algorithm for segmentation of other soft tissues in the throat, namely, fat pads. The main priority for future work is to make the procedure as general as possible such that it can be applied to different modalities and images.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the Higher Education Commission (HEC) Pakistan and the University of Engineering and Technology Taxila, Chakwal campus, Pakistan, and the DAAD for providing funding to carry out this research to find the pathogenesis of Obstructive Sleep Apnea public health problem. We are also thankful to the Visualization and Computer Graphics Laboratory (VCGL) research group of Jacobs University, Bremen, Germany, for valuable suggestions and remarks. Finally, we are really grateful to our medical experts team and other members from the University of Greifswald, Germany, for their collaboration in this project.

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