

Applying Deep Learning Algorithms for Speech Recognition in Speech-Impaired Children

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Roll Numbers: 24M11MC030, 24M11MC055, 24M11MC058, 24M11MC087

Abstract - Speech impairment affects millions of children worldwide, creating significant barriers to communication, education, and social development. This paper investigates the application of deep learning algorithms for automatic speech recognition (ASR) specifically adapted to the speech patterns of children with speech-language disorders. We evaluate and compare four deep learning architectures Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs), Long Short-Term Memory networks (LSTMs), Transformer-based models, and hybrid CNN-LSTM frameworks trained and validated on augmented speech corpora drawn from children with articulation disorders, dysarthria, and stuttering. Mel-frequency cepstral coefficients (MFCCs) and spectrogram features serve as primary input representations. Experimental results demonstrate that the hybrid CNN-LSTM model achieves the highest word error rate (WER) reduction, reaching 78.4% recognition accuracy on the test set, outperforming conventional Hidden Markov Model (HMM) baselines by over 31 percentage points. Transfer learning from adult speech corpora, combined with child-specific data augmentation, further improves robustness to irregular phoneme production. The findings confirm that deep learning-based ASR holds substantial promise as an assistive technology for speech-impaired children, with practical implications for therapeutic tools and inclusive educational platforms.

Key Words: *speech recognition, deep learning, speech impairment, children, LSTM, CNN, transformer, assistive technology, MFCC, dysarthria.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication is one of the most foundational human capabilities, and its disruption during childhood has long-term consequences for cognitive development, academic achievement, and social integration. The World Health Organization estimates that approximately 5% of children globally experience some form of speech or language disorder, ranging from mild articulation difficulties to severe conditions such as dysarthria, apraxia of speech, and stuttering [1]. For these children, conventional speech-based interfaces from classroom oral assessments to digital assistants remain largely inaccessible because they are designed and trained on neurotypical adult or child speech.

Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR) technology has transformed human-computer interaction over the past decade, driven primarily by deep learning breakthroughs. Commercial systems such as Google Speech-to-Text and Amazon Transcribe now achieve near-human accuracy on standard benchmarks. However, their performance degrades markedly when applied to atypical speech: word error rates (WERs) that sit below 5% for typical adult speakers can exceed 40-60% for speakers with dysarthria or other motor-speech disorders [2]. Children's speech presents its own challenges even without impairment higher fundamental frequencies, shorter vocal tract length, greater acoustic variability and these challenges compound significantly in the presence of speech disorders.

This paper addresses that gap directly. We design, train, and evaluate deep learning-based ASR pipelines optimized for the speech of children with diagnosed speech-language disorders. The central questions we investigate are: Which deep learning architectures generalize best to atypical child speech? How much does child-specific data augmentation contribute to recognition accuracy? And can transfer learning from large adult speech corpora meaningfully offset the scarcity of labeled impaired-speech data?

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews related work in ASR for atypical and child speech. Section 3 describes the datasets and preprocessing pipeline. Section 4 details the deep learning architectures evaluated. Section 5 presents experimental results and comparative analysis. Section 6 discusses practical applications and limitations, and Section 7 concludes with directions for future research.

2. RELATED WORK

Research on ASR for atypical speech is not new, but the field has undergone a substantial shift since deep learning became the dominant paradigm around 2014. Prior to that, Hidden Markov Model (HMM) systems with Gaussian Mixture Model (GMM) acoustic models were the state of the art. Studies such as Rudzicz et al. [3] demonstrated that HMM-GMM systems trained on dysarthric speech could achieve meaningful accuracy improvements, but their fundamental limitation was the rigidity of hand-crafted feature engineering.

The introduction of deep neural network (DNN) acoustic models marked the first significant jump. Christensen et al. [4] showed that DNN-HMM hybrids substantially outperformed GMM-HMM systems on the TORGO dysarthric speech corpus. Subsequent work by Sehgal and Cunningham [5] extended this to personalized models, demonstrating that speaker-adaptive training even with minimal data could reduce WER by up to 24% relative for individual dysarthric speakers.

Convolutional neural networks applied directly to spectrogram inputs emerged as a powerful alternative. Ko et al. [6] demonstrated that CNNs capture local frequency-time patterns in speech more robustly than purely frame-level acoustic models, an advantage that transfers to atypical speech where phoneme durations and formant trajectories deviate from typical patterns. LSTM and bidirectional LSTM (BiLSTM) models complemented CNNs by modeling long-range temporal dependencies in speech sequences [7].

For child speech specifically, Shivakumar et al. [8] analyzed the challenges of cross-domain adaptation from adult ASR models, finding that vocal tract normalization alone was insufficient for children with speech disorders and that additional acoustic model retraining was necessary. More recently, transformer-based models pre-trained on large corpora particularly wav2vec 2.0 and Whisper have shown strong zero-shot generalization [9], though their performance on impaired child speech has received limited systematic evaluation, which this work addresses.

3. DATASET AND PREPROCESSING

Three speech corpora form the basis of our experiments:

- (i) The TORGO Database [10] contains recordings from speakers with dysarthria resulting from cerebral palsy or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). Though primarily adult, it includes three adolescent speakers whose data we retain for cross-corpus transfer evaluation.
- (ii) The MyST (My Science Tutor) Child Speech Corpus [11] provides spontaneous and read speech from children aged 8-12 in naturalistic tutoring interactions. We use this as our base corpus for typical child speech, against which impaired speech performance is benchmarked.
- (iii) A clinical recording set collected in collaboration with a speech-language pathology clinic, comprising 47 children (ages 6-14) diagnosed with articulation disorders (n=19), childhood apraxia of speech (n=15), and stuttering (n=13). Recordings were made in a quiet clinical environment using a standard USB condenser microphone at 16 kHz, 16-bit PCM. Ethics approval and informed parental consent were obtained for all participants.

Preprocessing followed a standard pipeline. Raw audio was segmented into utterances using voice activity detection (VAD) and normalized to -23 LUFS. For spectral feature extraction, we computed 40-dimensional MFCCs over 25 ms frames with a 10 ms frame shift, appending delta and delta-delta coefficients to produce 120-dimensional feature vectors. Log-Mel spectrograms (128 mel filter banks) were computed in parallel as input to the CNN branch of the hybrid model. Data augmentation applied to the clinical set included time stretching (0.9x-1.1x), pitch shifting (± 2 semitones), additive Gaussian noise, and room impulse response convolution to simulate varied acoustic environments. This increased the effective clinical training set by a factor of six.

Table -1: Dataset Summary

Corpus	Speakers	Hours	Disorder Type	Age Range
TORGO	15	8.5	Dysarthria / ALS	16-49
MyST (typical)	76	21.4	None (baseline)	8-12
Clinical Set	47	6.3	Articulation, CAS, Stutter	6-14

Corpus	Speakers	Hours	Disorder Type	Age Range
Total (augmented)	138	~85	Mixed	6-49

4. DEEP LEARNING ARCHITECTURES

We evaluate four model families:

4.1 Convolutional Neural Network (CNN): The CNN model processes log-Mel spectrograms through four convolutional blocks, each comprising a 3x3 convolution, batch normalization, ReLU activation, and 2x2 max pooling. A global average pooling layer produces a fixed-length representation passed to a fully connected classification head. CNNs excel at capturing local spectro-temporal patterns precisely the phoneme-level distortions common in articulation disorders.

4.2 Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM): A three-layer bidirectional LSTM operates on MFCC sequences, modeling both forward and backward temporal context. The connectionist temporal classification (CTC) loss function enables end-to-end training without requiring forced alignment of phoneme boundaries an important property given the irregular timing in dysarthric and stuttered speech. Dropout ($p=0.3$) is applied between LSTM layers for regularization.

4.3 Transformer-based Model: We fine-tune OpenAI's Whisper-Small model (244M parameters) on our combined dataset. Whisper's encoder-decoder architecture uses multi-head self-attention to capture long-range dependencies across the full utterance, which benefits the recognition of prolongations and repetitions characteristic of stuttering. Fine-tuning uses a learning rate of $1e-5$ with linear warmup over 500 steps.

4.4 Hybrid CNN-LSTM: The hybrid model concatenates CNN-derived spectral features with MFCC sequences processed by the BiLSTM, fusing both streams before the CTC output layer. This combination allows the model to simultaneously exploit local spectral structure (CNN) and temporal sequence modeling (LSTM), which we hypothesize will be particularly effective for the heterogeneous distortions present across different disorder types.

All models are implemented in PyTorch 2.1. Training uses the Adam optimizer with a learning rate of $3e-4$ (except Whisper fine-tuning), batch size of 32, and early stopping with patience of 10 epochs. Transfer learning initializes acoustic model weights from LibriSpeech-960h pre-trained checkpoints for CNN and LSTM models.

5. EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS

Table 2 summarizes word error rates across all models and test conditions. The baseline HMM-GMM system trained on the clinical set alone yields a WER of 61.3% largely unacceptable for practical deployment. DNN-HMM reduces this to 48.7%, consistent with prior literature.

Table -2: Word Error Rate (WER%) Comparison Across Models

Model	Articulation	Dysarthria	Stuttering	Overall WER%
HMM-GMM (baseline)	58.4	66.1	59.4	61.3
DNN-HMM	45.2	54.8	46.1	48.7
CNN	38.6	46.3	40.2	41.7
BiLSTM (CTC)	32.1	39.8	34.7	35.5
Whisper-Small (fine-tuned)	27.4	33.2	29.1	29.9
CNN-LSTM Hybrid (ours)	21.6	26.4	23.8	23.9
CNN-LSTM + Transfer Learning	18.3	22.7	20.5	20.5
CNN-LSTM + TL + Augmentation	16.4	20.1	18.2	18.2

The hybrid CNN-LSTM model without any transfer learning or augmentation already surpasses Whisper-Small fine-tuned on the same data, achieving 23.9% overall WER compared to 29.9%. When transfer learning from LibriSpeech pre-trained weights is added, performance improves to 20.5% WER. The full pipeline hybrid model, transfer learning,

and data augmentation achieves 18.2% WER, equivalent to 78.4% word-level recognition accuracy. Dysarthric speech remains the most challenging condition across all models, consistent with the degree of phonetic distortion involved.

Error analysis reveals that consonant cluster simplification and vowel substitutions account for 63% of all remaining errors in the full pipeline. Phoneme confusions are highest between /r/-/w/ and /s/-/th/ pairs known difficulty pairs in articulation disorders. Stutter-related insertions (repetitions falsely recognized as separate words) constitute 18% of errors in the stuttering subgroup.

6. DISCUSSION

The results demonstrate that deep learning-based ASR can achieve meaningful recognition accuracy for speech-impaired children, but architecture choice and training strategy matter considerably. The superiority of the CNN-LSTM hybrid over either component alone confirms the value of combining spectral and temporal feature learning the CNN branch captures the distorted formant patterns of dysarthric speech while the LSTM branch models irregular timing in stuttering.

Transfer learning contributes a 14% relative WER reduction on top of the hybrid model. This is practically significant given that labeled impaired child speech remains scarce. The implication is that even small clinical datasets our 47-speaker set produced approximately 6.3 hours of raw audio can be made viable through careful augmentation and initialization from large adult pre-trained models.

From an assistive technology perspective, an 18.2% WER corresponds to approximately 4-in-5 words recognized correctly at the word level. Whether this is sufficient depends on the application. For augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices that operate on constrained vocabularies, this accuracy level may already be deployable. For unrestricted conversational interfaces, further improvement is needed, particularly for dysarthric speech.

The study has several limitations. First, the clinical dataset is modest in size and may not represent the full diversity of childhood speech disorders across languages, dialects, and severity levels. Second, all evaluation was conducted on elicited or read speech; spontaneous conversational speech introduces additional noise and disfluency that our models have not been systematically tested against. Third, the models were evaluated in a controlled acoustic environment; real-world deployment in classrooms or homes with background noise would likely increase WER.

7. CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that deep learning-based automatic speech recognition can substantially close the performance gap between neurotypical and speech-impaired child speakers. The hybrid CNN-LSTM architecture, trained with transfer learning and child-specific data augmentation, achieves 78.4% word recognition accuracy on a clinical test set a 31-percentage-point improvement over traditional HMM-GMM baselines.

The findings carry concrete implications for assistive technology design. Speech-to-text tools embedded in educational platforms, AAC devices, and speech therapy applications can be meaningfully improved by incorporating the training strategies described here. Future work will extend evaluation to larger and more diverse clinical datasets, explore real-time inference optimization for edge deployment, investigate cross-lingual transfer for Indian regional languages spoken by the target population, and examine self-supervised pre-training on unlabeled impaired speech as a further data-efficiency strategy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors thank the Department of Computer Applications, Aditya University, for providing computational resources and research support. They are grateful to the speech-language pathology clinic that facilitated access to clinical speech recordings and to the families who consented to participate in the study.

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