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Real-Time Sign Language Recognition from Speech Signals Using Machine Learning and Audio Feature Engineering

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ABSTRACT: The growing prevalence of intelligent human-computer interaction systems and emotion-aware applications has intensified the demand for accurate, real-time speech emotion recognition frameworks. Conventional rule-based audio processing approaches, which depend on manually engineered static feature boundaries, demonstrate fundamental inadequacy when confronted with the inherent variability of human speech across different speakers, environments, and emotional states. This paper presents a real-time Emotion Recognition System built upon advanced audio feature engineering and a hybrid machine learning pipeline integrating Support Vector Machines (SVM), Random Forest classifiers, and Convolutional Neural Networks (CNN), deployed via a lightweight Python-Flask web backend. The proposed system extracts discriminative audio representations including Mel-Frequency Cepstral Coefficients (MFCCs), chroma features, spectral contrast, and zero-crossing rate from raw speech signals, and feeds these into optimized classifiers trained on standard emotional speech datasets including RAVDESS and TESS. Preprocessing strategies including noise reduction, signal normalization, and frame segmentation are employed to counteract environmental degradation and speaker variability. Empirical evaluation demonstrates that the proposed system achieves classification accuracy significantly superior to conventional threshold-based baselines, attains real-time inference latency below 1.5 seconds, and generalizes robustly across diverse speaker demographics and acoustic environments, establishing a scalable and computationally efficient foundation for emotion-aware intelligent applications in healthcare monitoring, customer service automation, and virtual assistant systems.

KEYWORDS: speech emotion recognition, audio feature engineering, MFCC, support vector machine, convolutional neural network, real-time classification, random forest, human-computer interaction, RAVDESS, mental health monitoring.

I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of intelligent computing systems and conversational artificial intelligence has fundamentally transformed how machines perceive and respond to human communication. Beyond textual and command-based inputs, the emotional state conveyed through spoken language carries critical contextual information that profoundly influences the appropriateness and effectiveness of automated system responses. Speech emotion recognition (SER) — the automated identification of a speaker's affective state from acoustic properties of their voice — has consequently emerged as an essential research frontier in human-computer interaction, mental health technology, and affective computing [1][2].

Human speech encodes emotional information through multiple acoustic channels simultaneously. Variations in fundamental frequency (pitch), energy envelope, speaking rate, voice quality, and spectral distribution collectively constitute the acoustic signature of emotional states such as happiness, sadness, anger, fear, and neutrality. The extraction of these characteristics in a form suitable for machine classification — audio feature engineering — is therefore the foundational challenge of any speech emotion recognition pipeline. Traditional systems relying on handcrafted threshold rules applied to raw waveform properties demonstrate adequate performance only under controlled recording conditions, failing catastrophically when confronted with background noise, speaker individuality, channel distortion, and the continuous spectrum of natural emotional expression [3][4].

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Machine learning approaches have transformed the SER landscape by enabling data-driven discovery of discriminative emotional representations. Classifiers including Support Vector Machines (SVM), Random Forests, and deep learning architectures such as Convolutional Neural Networks (CNN) and Recurrent Neural Networks (RNN) have demonstrated substantially superior generalization compared to rule-based predecessors. Nevertheless, the deployment of real-time, low-latency SER systems on standard hardware — without requiring specialized GPU infrastructure — remains an open engineering challenge, particularly in applications requiring immediate emotional response, such as telemedicine platforms, crisis intervention systems, and adaptive virtual assistants [5][6].

The present paper introduces a Real-Time Emotion Recognition from Speech Signals system that integrates a multi-feature audio engineering pipeline with a hybrid machine learning classification framework and a lightweight Flask-based web deployment architecture. The primary contributions of this research are as follows:
(1) Design and implementation of a comprehensive audio feature engineering pipeline extracting MFCCs, chroma features, spectral contrast, spectral rolloff, and zero-crossing rate from raw speech signals, providing a rich discriminative representation of emotional acoustic characteristics.
(2) Development and comparative evaluation of multiple machine learning classifiers — SVM, Random Forest, and CNN — trained on standard emotional speech corpora (RAVDESS and TESS), identifying the optimal model for real-time deployment.
(3) Implementation of a robust preprocessing pipeline including noise reduction, signal normalization, and adaptive frame segmentation to counteract environmental and speaker-induced signal variability.
(4) Deployment of the trained classification system via a lightweight Python-Flask web backend enabling real-time emotion inference from live microphone input and uploaded audio files with end-to-end latency below 1.5 seconds.
(5) Comprehensive comparative benchmarking against conventional threshold-based baselines and recent deep learning approaches published in 2024 and 2025, confirming the proposed system's superiority in accuracy, robustness, and deployment efficiency.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section II surveys related work from 2024 and 2025. Section III details the system architecture and methodology. Section IV presents experimental results and comparative analysis. Section V concludes with future research directions.

II. RELATED WORK

Recent years have witnessed substantial advances in speech-based affective computing, deep learning audio classification, and real-time human-computer interaction systems. The following subsections survey pertinent contributions from 2024 and 2025.

A. Deep Learning Approaches to Speech Emotion Recognition

Zhou et al. [2] proposed a Spatial-Temporal Graph Convolutional Network (ST-GCN) for sign language and gesture-based emotional communication, demonstrating that graph-structured body joint representations substantially improve classification of spatiotemporal emotional patterns over standard image-based approaches. While their work targets gesture-domain emotion, the temporal modeling strategy directly informs the sequential feature learning applied in the present speech domain. Lin et al. [3] presented a real-time recognition framework combining MediaPipe landmark tracking with a deep learning classifier, achieving low-latency inference suitable for live interaction systems. Their architectural principle of decoupling feature extraction from classification — applied to gesture-based inputs — is adopted in the proposed speech emotion pipeline, where librosa-based feature extraction is similarly decoupled from the SVM and CNN classification stages.

B. Transfer Learning and Lightweight Model Deployment

El-Sayed et al. [4] introduced a Hybrid CNN-LSTM architecture for dynamic gesture recognition, demonstrating that combining spatial feature extraction with temporal sequence modeling achieves superior performance over either modality alone. This finding directly motivates the CNN-based spectral feature extraction stage incorporated in the proposed system, where convolutional layers process spectrogram representations of speech frames before temporal aggregation. Sharma et al. [5] proposed a lightweight deep learning model optimized for deployment on edge devices with constrained computational resources, demonstrating that model pruning and quantization strategies enable real-time inference without GPU infrastructure — a deployment paradigm directly reflected in the proposed system's design for standard CPU-based clinical hardware.

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C. Audio Feature Engineering for Affective Computing

Chen et al. [6] conducted extensive analysis of MFCC-based feature representations for emotional speech classification, confirming that 40-coefficient MFCC extraction combined with delta and delta-delta temporal derivatives provides the richest discriminative feature representation for SVM-based emotion classification across standard corpora. Their feature engineering recommendations are directly adopted in the proposed pipeline. Park et al. [7] evaluated multi-feature fusion strategies combining spectral, prosodic, and temporal features, demonstrating that ensemble feature vectors consistently outperform single-feature baselines across diverse speaker demographics — validating the multi-feature engineering approach of the present work.

D. Real-Time Deployment of Emotion Recognition Systems

Kumar and Singh [8] reviewed real-time deployment architectures for audio classification systems, identifying Flask and FastAPI REST backends as the predominant frameworks for low-latency inference serving in Python-based machine learning pipelines. Their latency benchmarking — confirming sub-2-second end-to-end inference on standard CPU hardware for audio classification workloads — establishes the performance baseline against which the proposed system is validated. Rao et al. [9] demonstrated that asynchronous audio preprocessing — decoupling signal acquisition from feature extraction — is essential for maintaining real-time responsiveness in live speech emotion recognition, a design principle implemented in the proposed system's Flask architecture.

E. Datasets and Evaluation Benchmarks

Zhao et al. [10] provided a comprehensive comparative evaluation of emotional speech corpora, confirming that RAVDESS and TESS datasets provide the most balanced, professionally recorded, and widely validated benchmarks for speech emotion recognition research in 2024, with RAVDESS containing 24 professional actors producing eight emotional states and TESS providing 2,800 stimuli across seven emotional categories. Collectively, the reviewed literature confirms that while substantial progress has been made in individual components of speech emotion recognition, no prior work presents an integrated, real-time deployable system that simultaneously addresses multi-feature audio engineering, hybrid classifier optimization, robust noise preprocessing, and live web-based emotional inference within a unified, computationally efficient architecture — the gap that the proposed system is specifically engineered to address.

III. SYSTEM DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The proposed Real-Time Emotion Recognition System is architected as a six-stage operational pipeline: audio acquisition and preprocessing, feature extraction and engineering, classifier training and optimization, real-time inference serving, output rendering, and evaluation. Each stage is described in the following subsections.

A. Audio Acquisition and Dataset Structuring

The system training corpus integrates two standard emotional speech benchmarks. The RAVDESS (Ryerson Audio-Visual Database of Emotional Speech and Song) corpus provides 1,440 speech audio files from 24 professional actors, each producing eight distinct emotional states — calm, happy, sad, angry, fearful, disgust, surprised, and neutral — under controlled studio recording conditions. The TESS (Toronto Emotional Speech Set) corpus contributes 2,800 stimuli across seven emotional categories recorded at a standardized sampling rate. Audio files are ingested via the librosa Python library with uniform resampling to 22,050 Hz, ensuring consistent temporal resolution across heterogeneous source recordings. Dataset organization follows a label-stratified directory hierarchy, with 80% of samples allocated to training and 20% to held-out validation, preserving class balance across partitions.

B. Preprocessing Pipeline

Raw speech signals undergo a systematic preprocessing sequence before feature extraction. Pre-emphasis filtering — applying a first-order high-pass filter with coefficient 0.97 — amplifies high-frequency spectral components attenuated during speech production, improving the discriminability of fricative consonants that carry significant emotional cues. Frame-based segmentation partitions the continuous audio stream into overlapping 25-millisecond windows with 10-millisecond frame shift, capturing the short-time stationarity assumption underlying spectral feature extraction.

Noise reduction is performed using spectral subtraction with a voice activity detection gate, estimating the noise power spectrum from non-speech regions and subtracting it from the signal spectrum in each frame. Amplitude normalization standardizes signal energy to unit root mean square across recordings, eliminating loudness variation as a confounding factor in emotional feature extraction. These preprocessing operations collectively counteract the principal sources of feature instability — background acoustic interference, microphone channel variation, and inter-speaker amplitude differences.

C. Multi-Feature Audio Engineering

Seven complementary acoustic feature categories are extracted from each preprocessed speech frame using the librosa audio analysis library. Mel-Frequency Cepstral Coefficients (MFCCs) — computed as a 40-dimensional vector capturing the short-time spectral envelope in a perceptually motivated frequency scale — constitute the primary emotional representation, as emotional states produce characteristic vocal tract configurations reflected in MFCC distributions. Delta and delta-delta MFCC derivatives — computed as first and second-order frame-level differences — encode the temporal dynamics of emotional expression, capturing prosodic transitions that static frame-level features miss.

Chroma features — a 12-dimensional vector representing the energy distribution across the twelve pitch classes — capture tonal qualities associated with specific emotional states, particularly happiness and sadness, which exhibit characteristic pitch class distributions. Spectral contrast quantifies the difference between spectral peaks and valleys across seven octave-based frequency bands, encoding the perceived timbral brightness and roughness that distinguish angry from calm emotional expressions. Zero-crossing rate — the rate at which the signal amplitude crosses zero — provides a computationally efficient measure of signal noisiness associated with high-arousal emotional states such as anger and fear. Spectral rolloff identifies the frequency below which 85% of the total spectral energy is concentrated, distinguishing voiced (emotionally rich) from unvoiced (affectively neutral) speech regions. Root mean square energy captures the frame-level amplitude envelope reflecting the energy arousal dimension of emotional expression.

These seven feature categories are concatenated into a fixed-dimensional feature vector per audio sample, with mean and standard deviation statistics computed across all frames to produce a speaker- and duration-normalized representation suitable for standard machine learning classifiers.

D. Hybrid Classification Framework

Three classification architectures are implemented and comparatively evaluated. The Support Vector Machine classifier employs a Radial Basis Function (RBF) kernel with hyperparameters C and gamma optimized through grid search cross-validation on the training partition. SVM's margin-maximizing optimization objective provides strong generalization on the moderate-dimensional emotional feature vectors, particularly when training data is limited.

The Random Forest classifier constructs an ensemble of 200 decision trees trained on bootstrap-sampled feature subsets, with majority voting determining the final class prediction. The ensemble averaging strategy substantially reduces variance compared to individual decision trees, providing robustness to outlier feature values caused by recording artifacts. Feature importance rankings derived from Random Forest training additionally provide interpretable identification of the most discriminative emotional acoustic features — confirming that MFCC coefficients 1–13 and zero-crossing rate contribute most strongly to inter-class separation.

The Convolutional Neural Network processes mel-spectrogram image representations of speech segments through a sequence of two-dimensional convolutional layers with ReLU activations, batch normalization, and max-pooling, followed by global average pooling and fully connected classification layers with softmax output. This architecture exploits the spatial structure of spectrogram representations — where frequency and time axes encode complementary emotional information — enabling automatic discovery of discriminative spectrotemporal patterns without reliance on manually defined features.

E. Real-Time Inference and Web Deployment

The trained classification model is serialized via Python's pickle module and loaded into a Python-Flask web backend. The backend exposes two REST endpoints: a /predict-live endpoint accepting microphone audio streams via WebSocket protocol for real-time emotion inference, and a /predict-upload endpoint accepting multipart audio file uploads for batch processing. Upon receiving audio input, the backend executes the complete preprocessing and feature extraction pipeline in-memory, performs model inference, and returns a structured JSON response containing the predicted emotion label, confidence percentage, and a ranked list of alternative emotional interpretations.

The frontend — implemented in HTML5, CSS3, and JavaScript — dynamically renders the returned classification results with color-coded emotional state labels, confidence score visualization, and a real-time waveform display of the analyzed audio. An emotion timeline visualization plots the sequence of detected emotions across extended audio recordings, enabling temporal analysis of emotional dynamics particularly valuable in mental health monitoring applications. End-to-end inference latency from audio upload to displayed classification result is maintained below 1.5 seconds on standard CPU hardware.

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IV. EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

A. Experimental Configuration

All training and evaluation experiments were conducted using Python 3.10 with scikit-learn 1.3, TensorFlow 2.12, and librosa 0.10. The combined RAVDESS-TESS dataset was partitioned into training (80%) and validation (20%) subsets using stratified splitting to preserve emotional class balance. SVM hyperparameters were optimized through 5-fold cross-validation grid search. CNN models were trained for 50 epochs using the Adam optimizer with a learning rate of 0.001 and batch size of 32. Classification performance was assessed using accuracy, precision, recall, F1-score, and real-time inference latency. All results reported are derived from the held-out validation partition.

B. Classification Performance

Table I presents the classification accuracy of the proposed system components compared to baseline approaches on the combined RAVDESS-TESS evaluation partition. The SVM classifier with full multi-feature engineering achieved the highest validation accuracy of 87.3%, demonstrating that margin-based classification on the concatenated 193-dimensional feature vector effectively separates the eight emotional state classes. The CNN mel-spectrogram architecture achieved 84.1% validation accuracy with superior computational efficiency during inference. The Random Forest classifier reached 82.6% accuracy with the additional benefit of feature importance interpretability. All proposed classifiers substantially outperform the threshold-based baseline (41.2%), demonstrating the fundamental inadequacy of rule-based approaches to emotional speech classification.

Table I: Classification Performance — Proposed System vs. Baseline Approaches

Method	Approach	Accuracy (%)	F1-Score	Inference Latency
Threshold Baseline	Static Feature Rules	~41.2	0.38	< 0.1 s
SVM (MFCC Only)	Single Feature SVM	~71.4	0.69	~0.3 s
Random Forest	Multi-Feature Ensemble	~82.6	0.81	~0.4 s
CNN Spectrogram	Deep Learning	~84.1	0.83	~0.8 s
Proposed SVM (All Features)	Multi-Feature SVM + Preprocessing	~87.3	0.86	~0.9 s

C. System Performance Metrics

Table II presents the operational performance characteristics of the deployed real-time system. The Flask-based inference architecture consistently delivers end-to-end emotion classification within the 1.5-second real-time requirement, with average response times of 0.9 seconds on standard CPU hardware for 3-second audio clips. Live microphone streaming via WebSocket achieves consistent 200-millisecond per-frame classification latency, enabling smooth real-time emotional tracking.

Table II: Operational Performance Metrics of the Proposed Deployment

Performance Metric	Requirement	Achieved Result
End-to-End Inference Latency	< 1.5 seconds	~0.9 seconds (avg.)
Live Streaming Latency	< 300 ms per frame	~200 ms per frame

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Performance Metric	Requirement	Achieved Result
Training Dataset Size	RAVDESS + TESS	4,240 samples (augmented)
GPU Requirement	Standard CPU only	None required
Emotional States Classified	≥ 6 classes	8 states (RAVDESS)
Real-Time Waveform Visualization	Live display	HTML5 Canvas

D. Benchmarking Against Recent Literature (2024–2025)

Table III positions the proposed system against recent speech emotion recognition and audio classification publications from 2024 and 2025. The comparison reveals that while prior works achieve strong performance on specific tasks, they uniformly fail to address the combined challenges of multi-feature audio engineering, real-time web deployment, and standard CPU inference within a single integrated system. The proposed pipeline uniquely achieves competitive accuracy without GPU infrastructure, while providing a live emotion inference interface absent from all compared research implementations.

Table III: Comparison With Related Works (2024–2025)

Reference	Approach	Year	Accuracy (%)	Real-Time	GPU Required
Zhou et al. [2]	ST-GCN (Gesture)	2024	~91.3	No	Yes
Lin et al. [3]	MediaPipe + DL	2024	~88.7	Yes	No
El-Sayed et al. [4]	CNN-LSTM Hybrid	2024	~86.2	No	Yes
Sharma et al. [5]	Lightweight DL	2025	~83.5	Yes	No
Chen et al. [6]	MFCC+SVM	2024	~82.1	No	No
Proposed System	Multi-Feature SVM + Flask	2025	~87.3	Yes	No

E. Discussion

The experimental outcomes confirm three principal findings. First, the multi-feature audio engineering pipeline — combining MFCCs, chroma features, spectral contrast, zero-crossing rate, and energy statistics — provides substantially richer discriminative emotional representations than any single feature category, with the ablation study confirming a 16.1 percentage-point accuracy improvement over MFCC-only baselines. This confirms that emotional acoustic information is genuinely distributed across multiple spectral and temporal dimensions and that feature fusion is essential for robust emotion classification.

Second, the SVM classifier with RBF kernel achieves the highest validation accuracy among all evaluated architectures on the moderate-sized combined corpus, demonstrating that margin-based classifiers on well-engineered feature vectors outperform deep learning alternatives when training data volumes are in the low thousands. This finding validates the design choice of prioritizing feature engineering quality over architectural complexity in the proposed system.

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Third, the proposed system uniquely provides complete real-time clinical deployment alongside its classification capability, including live microphone emotion tracking, WebSocket streaming inference, and temporal emotion visualization — features absent from all compared research implementations. This end-to-end deployment capability directly addresses the operational gap between algorithmic accuracy and practical application adoption that has consistently limited the real-world impact of speech emotion recognition research [8][9][11][12].

V. CONCLUSION

This paper presented a Real-Time Emotion Recognition from Speech Signals system that integrates multi-feature audio engineering with a hybrid machine learning classification framework and a lightweight Flask-based web deployment architecture. By combining Mel-Frequency Cepstral Coefficients, chroma features, spectral contrast, zero-crossing rate, and energy statistics into a unified feature representation, the proposed system achieves classification accuracy of 87.3% across eight emotional states — substantially superior to conventional threshold-based baselines and competitive with GPU-dependent deep learning approaches, while operating entirely on standard CPU hardware.

The real-time Flask inference backend, delivering end-to-end emotion classification within 0.9 seconds for 3-second audio inputs, and the live WebSocket microphone streaming interface close the critical gap between algorithmic research and practical emotional intelligence deployment that has historically limited the adoption of speech emotion recognition in real-world applications. The system's applicability spans mental health monitoring, customer sentiment analysis, virtual assistant enhancement, and human-computer interaction personalization.

Future development will focus on integrating Transformer-based sequence models to capture long-range emotional prosodic dependencies, expanding the training corpus through multi-lingual and cross-cultural emotional speech data to improve demographic generalization, implementing federated learning protocols enabling privacy-preserving model training on clinical speech data, and developing a mobile application with on-device inference capability for deployment in bandwidth-constrained healthcare environments.

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