

# Feature selection for automated speech scoring

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## Abstract

Automated scoring systems used for the evaluation of spoken or written responses in language assessments need to balance good empirical performance with the interpretability of the scoring models. We compare several methods of feature selection for such scoring systems and show that the use of shrinkage methods such as Lasso regression makes it possible to rapidly build models that both satisfy the requirements of validity and interpretability, crucial in assessment contexts as well as achieve good empirical performance.

## 1 Introduction

In this paper we compare different methods of selecting the best feature subset for scoring models used in the context of large-scale language assessments, with a particular look at the assessment of spoken responses produced by test-takers.

The basic approach to automatically scoring written or spoken responses is to collect a training corpus of responses that are scored by human raters, use machine learning to estimate a model that maps response features to scores from this corpus, and then use this model to predict scores for unseen responses (Page, 1966; Burstein et al., 1998; Landauer et al., 2003; Eskenazi, 2009; Zechner et al., 2009; Bernstein et al., 2010). While this method is often quite effective in terms of producing scoring models that exhibit good agreement with human raters, it can lend itself to criticism from the educational

measurement community if it fails to address certain basic considerations for assessment design and scoring that are common practice in that field.

For instance, Ramineni and Williamson (2013) argue that automated scoring not only has to be reliable (i.e., exhibiting a good empirical performance as demonstrated, for example, by correlations between predicted and human scores), but also valid. One very important aspect of validity is to what extent the automated scoring model reflects important dimensions of the construct measured by the test (a construct is the set of knowledge, skills, and abilities measured by a test). For example, a speaking proficiency test for non-native speakers may claim that it assesses aspects such as fluency, pronunciation, and content accuracy in a test-taker's spoken response(s). If the features that contribute to the scoring models can be seen as measuring all of these aspects of spoken language well, the model would be considered valid from a construct point of view. However, if certain dimensions of the construct are not represented (well) by the feature set used in the scoring model, and/or features contained in the model address aspects not considered to be relevant for measuring the test construct, the construct validity of the scoring model would not be considered ideal (cf. also Bernstein et al. (2010) and Williamson et al. (2012) who make similar argument).

Furthermore, relative contributions by features to each construct dimension should be easily obtainable from the scoring model. To satisfy this requirement, machine-learning approaches such as support vector machines (SVMs) with non-linear kernels

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may be less ideal than a simple straightforward linear regression model, where the contribution of each feature in the model is immediately obvious.

Finally, the contribution of each feature to the final score should be consistent with the relevant constructs: if all of the features in the model are designed to be positively correlated with human scores, the coefficients of all such features in the final model should be positive as well.

Fulfilling all of these requirements when building automated scoring models is not trivial and has, in the past, typically involved the participation and advice of human content and measurement experts whose role it is to optimize the feature set so that it adheres to the aforementioned criteria as much as possible, while still allowing for good empirical performance of the resulting automated scoring model (Zechner et al., 2009; Cheng et al., 2014). However, there are certain limitations to this manual process of scoring- model building, not the least of which is the aspect of time it takes to build models with iterative evaluations and changes in the feature set composition.

Alternatively, one can compute a large number of potential features and then use automatic feature selection to identify the most suitable subset. This second approach is commonly used in studies that aim to maximize the performance of machine-learning systems (cf. for example, Hönig et al. (2010) among many others), but to our knowledge, it has not yet been applied in the assessment context where model performance needs to be balanced with model validity in terms of construct coverage and other constraints such as feature polarity.

We consider several methods of automatic feature selection commonly applied to linear models (Hastie et al., 2013). These include subset selection methods such as step-wise feature selection as well as shrinkage methods such as Lasso regression (Tibshirani, 1996). We focus on feature selection methods that can be scaled to a large number of features which exclude, for example, the best-subset approach, which becomes unfeasible for more than 30–40 features. We also exclude methods that use derived input such as principal component regression or partial least squares because the contribution of each feature in the final model would be more difficult to interpret. Finally, we consider fea-

ture selection methods which make it possible to restrict the coefficients to positive values. Such restriction is not specific to automated scoring and therefore various algorithms have been developed to address this requirement (see, for example, Lipovetsky (2009) for further discussion). We consider several of such methods including non-negative least squares regression Lawson and Hanson (1981) and a constrained version of Lasso regression (Goeman, 2010).

In this paper we address the following questions: (a) What methods of automatic feature selection can address all or most of the requirements of automated scoring and therefore are most suitable for this purpose? (b) Does more constrained selection affect the performance of such scoring models? (c) How do models based on automated feature selection compare to models based on human expert feature selection in terms of empirical performance and construct coverage?

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 provides a description of the data used in this study, further details about the feature-selection methods, and the parameter setting for these methods. Section 3 presents the comparison between different feature-selection methods in terms of performance, coefficient polarity, and construct coverage of the selected feature subset. Finally, Section 4 summarizes the results of our experiments.

## 2 Data and Methodology

### 2.1 Data

The study is based on spoken responses to an English language proficiency test. During the original test administration, each speaker provided up to six responses. Two of the items required test takers to listen to an audio file and respond to a prompt about the conversation or lecture they heard. For the other two items, the test takers were required to read a short passage and listen to an audio file, and then integrate information from both sources in their responses to that prompt. The remaining two items asked the speakers to discuss a particular topic. All responses consisted of unscripted speech and were no longer than 1 minute each.

Both the training and evaluation sets included responses from about 10,000 speakers. With few ex-

ceptions, the training set included one response from each speaker, for a total of 9,956 responses and 9,312 speakers. The evaluation set included a similar number of speakers (8,101), but we used all available responses for each speaker, for a total of 47,642 responses<sup>1</sup>. There was no overlap of speakers or prompts between the two sets.

All responses were assigned a holistic proficiency score by expert raters. The scores ranged from 1 (low proficiency) to 4 (high proficiency). The raters evaluated the overall intelligibility of responses, grammar, the use of vocabulary, and topic development. About 10% of the responses in the evaluation set and all responses of the training set were scored by two raters. The agreement between the two raters was Pearson’s  $r = 0.63$  for the training set and  $r = 0.62$  for the evaluation set.

## 2.2 Features

For each response, we extracted 75 different features which covered five aspects of language proficiency: fluency, pronunciation accuracy, prosody, grammar, and vocabulary. Some examples of such features include speech rate (fluency), normalized acoustic model score (pronunciation accuracy), language model score (grammar), and average lexical frequency of words used in the response (vocabulary). Several features were closely related: for example, the speech rate was measured in both words per second and syllables per second.

All features are designed to be positively correlated with human proficiency scores. For features that have a negative correlation with a proficiency score (such as the number of disfluencies), the values are multiplied by -1 so that the final correlation is always positive.

The features for the baseline EXPERT model were manually selected by an expert in English language learning to fulfill the criteria described in 1. The expert only had access to the training set while doing the feature selection. The model included 12 features which represented the five dimensions of language proficiency described above. The features were then used as independent variables in an ordinary least squares (OLS) linear regression using the

<sup>1</sup>A small number of responses originally collected from these speakers were not included in the evaluation set due to their low audio quality or other problems.

proficiency score assigned by the first rater as the dependent variable.

We also built scoring models using all 75 features and several methods of automatic feature selection, following (Hastie et al., 2013). These are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: The methods used for automatic feature selection in this study

Name	Description
ALL	No feature selection. This model uses OLS regression and all 75 available features.
STEP	Features were identified by hybrid stepwise selection with search in both directions
NNLS	Features were identified by fitting the non-negative least squares regression model. (Lawson and Hanson (1981) as implemented by Mullen and Van Stokkum (2012))
LASSO	Used features that were assigned non-zero coefficients after fitting a Lasso regression (Tibshirani, 1996). All estimated coefficients were restricted to be non-negative (Goeman, 2010; Goeman et al., 2012). See 2.3 for details about parameter tuning.

We used 10-fold cross-validation on the training set to estimate model performance and tune the parameters for the Lasso regression. The allocation of responses between the folds was the same for all models. In all cases, the feature selection was applied separately to each fold.

The models were evaluated by the correlation between predicted and observed scores, the number of features in the final model, the percentage of features with positive coefficients, and by the number of constructs that were represented in the automatically selected subset model.

## 2.3 Setting parameters for LASSO model

We trained two versions of the LASSO models: LASSO where  $\lambda$  parameter for  $L1$ -regularization was tuned empirically to achieve the best model fit and LASSO\* where  $\lambda$  was set to obtain the smallest pos-

sible set of features without a substantial loss in performance.

To set  $\lambda$  for LASSO\*, we used the algorithm described in Park and Hastie (2007) to identify the values of  $\lambda$  that corresponded approximately to changes in feature sets. This was done separately for each fold.

We then computed the model performance for each feature set and identified the best performing set of each size (in many cases different values of  $\lambda$  produced several different feature sets with the same number of features). Figure 1 shows the performance obtained for models with different numbers of features selected by LASSO across the ten folds.

The figure shows that the number of features (12) in the EXPERT model may be insufficient to include all information covered by the features.<sup>2</sup> The average correlation for models with this number of features was  $r = 0.63$ . The optimal number of features for this dataset appeared to be around 21–25 features. We therefore set  $\lambda$  to  $\sqrt{n * \lg(p)}$ , where  $n$  is the number of cases and  $p$  is the total number of features. For this dataset, this rule-of-thumb value forced a more aggressive feature selection and produced a model with approximately 25 features.

### 3 Results

#### 3.1 Model performance

Figure 2 and Table 2 show that the models with automatic feature selection consistently outperformed the baseline EXPERT model (paired  $t$ -test with Holm’s adjustment for multiple comparisons:  $p < 0.00001$  for all models). Note that all of these models also used a higher number of features than what was included in the EXPERT model.

The models that did not have restrictions on positive coefficients achieved the highest performance. However, half of the coefficients in both STEP and ALL were negative. This is partially due to the fact that many features were highly correlated which resulted in what is known as “multicollinearity distortion of regression coefficients” (cf. also Lipovetsky (2009) for further discussion). Therefore the models created using these feature-selection methods vi-

<sup>2</sup>The figure shows the performance of the best performing set consisting of 12 features as identified by LASSO. These were not the same features as selected by the expert

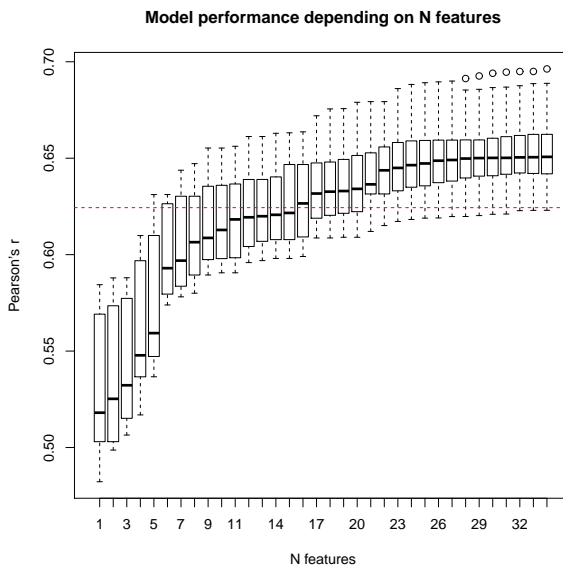


Figure 1: The performance of models based on LASSO feature selection by the number of features. The boxplots show the results across 10 folds of the training set. The horizontal line shows the performance at  $N_{feat} = 12$  ( $r = 0.63$ ), the size of the subset in the EXPERT model.

olated the criterion that the coefficient assigned to each feature must have the same sign as the marginal correlation between that feature and human score.

The methods which restricted feature selection to positive coefficients (NNLS, LASSO and LASSO\*) addressed this problem, but the performance of these models was somewhat lower ( $r = 0.65$  vs.  $r = 0.67$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) which suggests that there is further interaction between different features that are not currently captured by a model restricted to positive coefficients.

There was no significant difference in performance between NNLS, LASSO and LASSO\* but the NNLS and LASSO models included more features than LASSO\* model, making them more difficult to interpret. LASSO\* appeared to reach the best compromise between model complexity and model performance.

Finally, we evaluated the extent to which the performance of LASSO models was due to the different methods of coefficient estimation. We used the feature set selected by LASSO\* to fit an OLS regression and compared the performance of the two models. There was no difference in performance between the

models with coefficients estimated by OLS or penalized coefficients, but the two-step approach resulted in models with small negative coefficients in four out of ten folds. Therefore we used the original LASSO\* with penalized coefficients for final evaluation.

Table 2: Maximum and minimum number of features selected by each model ( $N_{min}$  and  $N_{max}$ ), average ratio of features assigned positive coefficients to the total  $N$  features ( $P/N$ ) and average Pearson’s  $r$  between predicted and observed scores  $r_{resp}$  across 10 folds

	$N_{min}$	$N_{max}$	$P/N$	$r_{resp}$
EXPERT	12	12	1	0.606
ALL	75	75	0.55	0.667
STEP	37	43	0.62	0.667
NNLS	32	37	1.00	0.655
LASSO	32	36	1.00	0.655
LASSO*	22	27	1.00	0.649

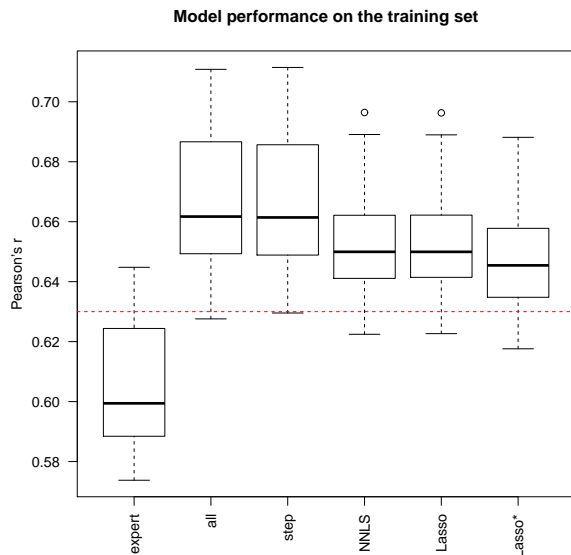


Figure 2: Model performance (Pearson’s  $r$ ) across 10 folds. Feature selection was performed separately at each fold. The horizontal line indicates the agreement between two human raters.

### 3.2 Model performance on unseen data

We then applied these feature selection methods to the whole training set and evaluated their performance on the unseen evaluation set. The results were consistent with the results of the cross-validation and are shown in Table 3.

The LASSO\* model trained on the entire training set included 25 features, all of which had positive coefficients. The correlation between the predicted and observed scores was  $r_{resp} = 0.653$ , which was above the EXPERT baseline ( $r_{resp} = 0.607$ ).

In addition to response-level agreement, we also computed the agreement for scores aggregated by speaker. During the test administration, the scores for all six responses given by each speaker are summed to compute an overall speaking proficiency score. Therefore, speaker-level agreement  $r_{sp}$  was calculated as the correlation coefficient (Pearson’s  $r$ ) between the summed observed scores and the summed predicted scores for each speaker. Following operational practice, this was only done for 7,390 speakers, where scores were available for 5 or more responses.<sup>3</sup> We found that the model created using the LASSO\* feature selection also outperformed the EXPERT model for speaker-level agreement with  $r_{sp}$  increasing from 0.78 to 0.84.

Table 3: Model performance on the unseen evaluation set using different feature-selection methods. The agreement between two human raters for this data is  $r_{resp}=0.62$  for single responses. The human-human agreement for the aggregated speaker-level score,  $r_{sp}$ , was not available for this particular data since only a small subset of responses were scored by two human raters. Based on other data from the same test,  $r_{sp}$  between two human raters is expected to be around 0.9

	$N_{feat}$	$P/N$	$r_{resp}$	$r_{sp}$
EXPERT	12	1	0.61	0.78
ALL	75	0.55	0.67	0.86
STEP	40	0.65	0.67	0.86
NNLS	37	1	0.66	0.85
LASSO	36	1	0.66	0.85
LASSO*	25	1	0.65	0.84

### 3.3 Construct coverage

All methods of automatic feature selection produced feature subsets that represented the five sub-constructs covered by the expert model: fluency, pronunciation accuracy, prosody, grammar, and vocabulary sophistication. In the rest of this section we

<sup>3</sup>If only 5 responses were available for a given speaker, the mean of these scores was added to their sum in order to estimate the overall speaker score.

Table 4: Relative weights of features representing different constructs covered by the scoring models.

Construct	EXPERT	LASSO*
<b>Delivery</b>		
Fluency	0.580	0.527
Pronunciation accuracy	0.098	0.151
Prosody	0.080	0.035
Total for delivery:	0.759	0.712
<b>Language use</b>		
Grammar	0.155	0.103
Vocabulary	0.086	0.183
Total for Language Use:	0.241	0.286

only consider in detail the features included in the LASSO\* model which was selected in 3.1 as the best compromise between model complexity and model performance.

The selected model included 25 features covering all of the constructs currently represented by the expert model. To evaluate the construct coverage of each model we first computed standardized weights for each features. We then scaled the standardized weights for each model so that their sum equaled 1 and refer to them as “relative weights.” Finally, we computed the sum of relative weights of all features representing a given construct or sub-construct. The results are shown in Table 4.

The two models, EXPERT and LASSO\* closely matched in terms of construct coverage: delivery features in both models accounted for about 70-75% of the final score, with most weight given to fluency features, followed by pronunciation accuracy and rhythm. Language-use features accounted for 25% of the final score, but the relative weights of sub-constructs differed between the two models: while the EXPERT model assigned more weight to grammar features, the LASSO\* model assigned more weight to vocabulary features.

## 4 Discussion

Building automated scoring models for constructed responses, such as spoken or written responses in language assessments, is a complex endeavor. Aside from the obvious desire for high empirical performance, as measured in terms of agreement between predicted and human scores, a number of impor-

tant considerations from educational measurement should be taken into account as well. They include, foremost, the validity of the scoring model and, in particular, to what extent features that measure certain aspects of the construct are represented in the model, and features that are not related to the construct are not. Additionally, the relative contribution of each feature to the score based on the model should be transparent to the test taker and score user. Finally, each feature’s contribution to the score must be in the same polarity as its marginal correlation with the criterion score (human score or dependent variable).

Because of this complexity, scoring models for constructed responses were typically built in the past using human experts who selected features based on these criteria in an iterative fashion, training and evaluating scoring models after each feature set was chosen.

In this paper, we applied different methods of feature selection in order to select the best feature set for the automated scoring of spoken responses to an English language proficiency test. We aimed to simultaneously achieve optimal construct coverage, maximal interpretability of the resulting scoring model, and good empirical performance.

For research question (a), what methods of feature selection are most suitable for the automated scoring of spoken responses, we found that a model based on Lasso regression fine-tuned to enforce more aggressive feature selection reaches a good compromise between relatively small number of features and good agreement with human scores. In addition, this model could also satisfy the requirement that all coefficients are positive. Finally, the LASSO\* model represented all constructs included into the EXPERT model.

Our results showed that some of the constraints imposed by the requirements to model interpretability decrease model performance in comparison to unconstrained models (research question b). Thus, the requirement to keep all coefficients positive in line with feature interpretation reduced response-level performance of the model from 0.667 to 0.65. While the difference is relatively small, it is statistically significant. More research is needed to explore whether the information lost due to this constraint may be relevant to the constructs covered by the

model and can be incorporated into a future model by developing new combined features.

Finally, for research question (c), how automatic and expert feature selection compare in terms of empirical performance and construct coverage, we found that in comparison to expert feature selection, computing a large number of features with subsequent automatic selection leads to higher performance (for LASSO\*:  $r = 0.84$  vs.  $r = 0.78$  on the evaluation set for aggregated scores for each test taker) while maintaining construct validity and interpretability of the resulting models. Furthermore, the feature subset produced by LASSO\* closely matched the EXPERT model in terms of the relative contribution of each construct.

To summarize, the application of Lasso regression to feature selection for automated speech scoring made it possible to rapidly build models which both achieved higher performance than the expert baseline and also satisfied the requirements of construct coverage and interpretability of the model posed by the assessment context. In this respect, Lasso regression was superior to other common methods of feature selection such as step-wise selection, which could not satisfy all of these requirements.

In this study, the features selected by LASSO\* showed consistently good construct coverage across 10 folds of the training set. Yet it is possible that for a different dataset the LASSO\* method may lead to a feature subset which is considered sub-optimal by an expert. In this case, the automatically selected feature set can be adjusted by the expert to ensure appropriate construct coverage by adding additional features to the model or removing unwanted features from the original feature set and re-running the model to estimate the coefficients. Of course, such adjustments may lead to a loss in performance, in which case the optimal balance between construct validity and model performance will be determined by other considerations such as the nature of the assessment or the role of the automated scoring system in determining the final score.

## 5 Conclusion

In this paper we compared a range of different methods for the purpose of feature selection for the automated scoring models of spoken language in

the context of language assessment and educational measurement.

Based on a number of criteria as to what constitutes scoring models that have not only high empirical performance, are valid from a construct point of view, and interpretable for the test taker or score user, we demonstrated that in using the LASSO\* method all criteria can be satisfied: the resulting scoring model has construct coverage commensurate to that built by a human expert and its empirical performance is, at the same time, superior.

In future work, we plan to refine the automated feature selection process by using construct constraints directly in the feature selection procedure.

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