HIERARCHICAL MULTI-CHANNEL AUDIO CODING BASED ON TIME-DOMAIN LINEAR PREDICTION

Magnus Schäfer and Peter Vary

Institute of Communication Systems and Data Processing (ind.), RWTH Aachen University
{schaefer,vary}@ind.rwth-aachen.de

ABSTRACT
A novel hierarchical multi-channel coding scheme is proposed which exhibits a significant decrease in decoding complexity compared to earlier proposals.

The new coding scheme is based on a single channel downmixing process followed by predictions of the multi-channel input signals. Symmetries in the prediction filter coefficients and the prediction errors allow for a reduced number of channels which need to be transmitted.

A detailed evaluation of the achievable prediction gain and the impact of quantization on the perceived quality leads to insights into the appropriate choice of system parameters. Besides the attractive feature of being usable as a hierarchic extension to existing single channel communication systems and its very low additional algorithmic delay, the transmission quality of the proposed design also scales very well with the available data rate.

Index Terms—Multi-Channel Coding, Linear Prediction, Hierarchical

1. INTRODUCTION
Efficient coding of stereo or multi-channel signals with low algorithmic delay in a heterogeneous system environment is a topic of growing interest due to the fact that even mobile communication devices nowadays offer multiple microphones and two (when used with a headset) or even multiple loudspeakers. Multiple microphones are so far mostly utilized for signal enhancement, e.g., noise reduction or dereverberation. The possibility of headsets to reproduce spatial information is not exploited by current communication systems.

Predictive coding systems that exploit the temporal and spatial correlations between the individual channels are advantageous for this scenario as they usually have very low algorithmic delay and low computational complexity.

The earliest proposals that can be seen as a simple compressive time-domain predictive encoding scheme for multi-channel signals (i.e., not simply by using multiple single channel systems) date back to the 1950s and 1960s when FM broadcasting was extended to allow for the transmission of stereo signals [1]. This system takes correlation between the two channels into account by means of a fixed preprocessing step which generates one sum channel to ensure backwards compatibility to mono receivers.

An overview on more recent developments in time-domain predictive coding of multi-channel signals can be found in [2]. A different approach for the coding of stereo signals is to tightly integrate the stereo prediction into the codec. One example is the complex-valued stereo prediction as proposed in [3] for the Unified Speech and Audio Coding (USAC) approach.

The developments in the area coding of multi-channel signals for scenarios like storage or streaming (e.g., MPEG Surround [4]) which are not critical with respect to algorithmic delay are summarized in [5]. The algorithms from these approaches were recently reconfigured for low-delay operation and tailored for a combination with the AAC-ELD codec as presented in [6].

One important point for any coding scheme that shall be deployed in the existing telephone as well as in a high-quality audio conferencing network should be to ensure backwards compatibility. For the single channel case, many known codecs achieve this by being structured in a hierarchical manner (e.g., [7] or [8]). In contrast to that, the aforementioned recent approaches for multi-channel coding do not incorporate any possibility for a single channel receiver when combined with codecs that are in use in the telephone network. The presented approach is usable with any mono codec for the main channel ensuring backwards compatibility (an example combination of an earlier version of the proposed coding scheme with the Adaptive Multi-Rate Wideband [9] can be found in [10]).

In the remainder of this paper, the coding system will first be introduced and a comparison of the decoding complexity between the previous and the new system will be given. An evaluation of the performance follows that sheds light on the influence of quantization on the achievable transmission quality.

2. CODING SYSTEM
The proposed multi-channel coding system is a generalization and improvement of the two-channel system proposed in
present in Fig. 1 and the filter length amounts to put channels

e propose to remove the linear phase constraint which allows to filters to exploit amplitude relations between the main channel fully utilize both amplitude and phase relations to increase the

[11]. It consists of low-complexity downmixing of all \(N\) input channels \(x_n(k)\) into one so-called main channel \(x_M(k)\) according to

\[
x_M(k) = \frac{1}{N} \cdot \sum_{n=1}^{N} x_n(k).
\]  

(1)

From this main channel, a prediction of delay compensated versions of the individual input channels is carried out as depicted in Fig. 1. In the original proposal, this prediction was carried out by linear phase finite impulse response (FIR) filters to exploit amplitude relations between the main channel and the input channels. For general multi-channel signals, we propose to remove the linear phase constraint which allows to fully utilize both amplitude and phase relations to increase the prediction gain of the encoding stage. The prediction errors \(e_n\) are then calculated as

\[
e_n(k) = x_n(k - \tau) - \sum_{\lambda=0}^{L-1} h_n(\lambda) \cdot x_M(k - \lambda).
\]  

(2)

Therein, \(\tau\) is the delay of the delay elements that are present in Fig. 1 and the filter length amounts to \(L = 2 \cdot \tau + 1\). This choice for the filter length leads to a symmetric structure: The delayed sample \(x_n(k - \tau)\) in the input channel is predicted from the sample in the main channel with identical delay \(x_M(k - \tau)\) and from both \(\tau\) newer and \(\tau\) older samples. The filter coefficients \(h_n(\lambda)\) are derived by a minimum mean square error (MMSE) criterion

\[
E \{ e_n^2(k) \} \rightarrow \min.
\]  

(3)

The derivation of the expected value of the squared prediction error with respect to the filter coefficients leads to a form that is very similar to the regular normal equations known from single channel linear prediction, e.g., [12]:

\[
X_{MM} \cdot H_n = X_{nM}
\]  

(4)

\[
X_{MM} = \begin{pmatrix}
\varphi_{x_M x_M}(0) & \cdots & \varphi_{x_M x_M}(L-1)
\varphi_{x_M x_M}(1) & \cdots & \varphi_{x_M x_M}(L-2)
\vdots & \ddots & \vdots
\varphi_{x_M x_M}(L-1) & \cdots & \varphi_{x_M x_M}(0)
\end{pmatrix}^T
\]  

(5)

\[
H_n = \begin{pmatrix}
h_n(0) \\
h_n(1) \\
\vdots \\
h_n(L-1)
\end{pmatrix}^T
\]  

(6)

Just like in the single channel case, the matrix \(X_{MM}\) contains the autocorrelation values \(\varphi_{x_M x_M}(\lambda)\) of the main channel in symmetric Toeplitz structure while the column vector \(H_n\) is composed of the filter coefficients \(h_n(\lambda)\):

The difference to the single channel case lies in the column vector \(X_{nM}\). This vector contains the cross correlation values \(\varphi_{x_n x_M}(\lambda)\) between the respective input channel \(n\) and the main channel:

\[
X_{nM} = \begin{pmatrix}
\varphi_{x_n x_M}(\tau) & \varphi_{x_n x_M}(\tau - 1) & \cdots & \varphi_{x_n x_M}(-\tau)
\end{pmatrix}^T
\]  

(7)

When calculating the filter coefficients \(H_n\) according to Eq. (4) and the prediction error signals \(e_n\) for all \(N\) channels and then using Eq. (1), some advantageous symmetries can be found:

- The sum of all vectors of filter coefficients equals a vector with only zeros and a single one in the middle:

\[
\sum_{n=1}^{N} H_n = \begin{pmatrix}
0 & \cdots & 0 & 1 & 0 & \cdots & 0
\end{pmatrix}^T
\]  

(8)

- The sum of all prediction errors equals zero at all times:

\[
\sum_{n=1}^{N} e_n(k) = 0
\]  

(9)
Based on these findings, the sum signal and only \( N - 1 \) prediction errors and \( N - 1 \) sets of filter coefficients have to be calculated and transmitted to the decoder as the missing values can be reconstructed by applying Eqs. (8) and (9). This can be done in an efficient way by a simplified decoding structure compared to [11] which is depicted in Fig. 2 for the case \( N = 2 \).

Therein, the reconstruction of all output channels but one is achieved by an inversion of the prediction process from the encoder:

\[
\hat{x}_n(k - \tau) = \hat{e}_n(k) + \sum_{\lambda=0}^{L-1} \hat{h}_n(\lambda) \cdot \hat{x}_M(k - \lambda). \tag{10}
\]

The signal \( \hat{x}_1 \) (w.l.o.g) is then calculated using

\[
\hat{x}_1(k - \tau) = N \cdot \hat{x}_M(k - \tau) - \sum_{n=2}^{N} \hat{x}_n(k - \tau). \tag{11}
\]

It can directly be seen that this structure allows for a perfect reconstruction of the input signals given that the transmission introduces no errors (i.e., \( \hat{e}_n = e_n \) and \( \hat{H}_n = H_n \)).

An overview of the decoding complexity of the new structure in comparison to the original decoder from [11] is given in Tab. 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Multiplications</th>
<th>Previous decoder</th>
<th>New decoder</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>( (N + 1) \cdot L )</td>
<td>( (N - 1) \cdot L + 1 )</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additions</td>
<td>( (N + 1) \cdot L )</td>
<td>( (N - 1) \cdot (L + 1) )</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Complexity of the previous and new decoding structure

It can be seen that the new decoder requires fewer multiplications as long as there are any filters \( H_i \) in the system, i.e., \( L > 0 \) and it also requires fewer additions as long as the filters are reasonably long in comparison to the number of channels, i.e., \( L > \frac{N-1}{2} \) which is a sensible setup as will be seen later in the evaluation.

For the transmission of stereo signals, i.e., \( N = 2 \) (currently probably the most important practical use-case) with a filter length of \( L = 11 \), the number of multiplications and summations is reduced by 45% and 64%, respectively.

### 3. EXPERIMENTS

Experiments were carried out using the 3GPP audio dataset [13] consisting of approximately ten minutes of clear and noisy speech from various talkers in different languages as well as music signals. All signals are sampled at \( f_s = 48 \) kHz. The number of channels is two for the entire dataset, hence only one set of filter coefficients and one prediction error has to be transmitted besides the main channel.

An overview on the resulting stereo coding system can be found in Fig. 3. The filter coefficients \( H_2 \) are assumed to be transmitted transparently with negligible errors (i.e., \( H_2 = H_2 \)) while the main channel \( x_M \) and the prediction error \( e_2 \) are subject to quantization with the quantizers \( Q_M \) and \( Q_2 \), respectively. A logarithmic scalar quantizer according to the \( \mu \)-law characteristic [12] with \( \mu = 255 \) is used with varying word length \( w \) from 1 to 12 bit. Additionally, the length \( L \) of the prediction filter is varied from 1 to 50 taps to evaluate the impact of these variables on the overall performance of the coding system. Note that the high prediction filter lengths are solely used for illustrative purposes here as they would lead to correspondingly high data rates when used in a practical system.

Two measures will be utilized to quantify the performance of the coding system:

- Average prediction gain between the input signals and the prediction errors (\( K \) represents the total number of samples in the signals):

\[
\overline{\sigma}_p = \frac{1}{2} \sum_{n=1}^{2} 10 \cdot \log_{10} \left( \frac{\sum_{k=1}^{K} e_n(k)^2}{\sum_{k=1}^{K} x_n(k)^2} \right) \tag{12}
\]

This definition of the prediction gain differs slightly from the usually employed formula due to the fact that the prediction here is carried out between two signals instead of within one signal. For a practical implementation, only one prediction has to be carried out due to the symmetries described in Eqs. 8 and 9. For the evaluation, the prediction is done for both channels here.

- Average and minimum Perceptual Evaluation of Audio Quality (PEAQ) [14] values of the entire transmission chain. The two-channel mode of PEAQ is used as a measure for the subjective quality. When used with two-channel signals, PEAQ first calculates all the model output variables of its perceptual model individually for the two channels which quantify the degradation of \( \hat{x}_1 \) and \( \hat{x}_2 \) with respect to \( x_1 \) and \( x_2 \), respectively. These output variables are then averaged linearly and fed into an artificial neural network to calculate the final Objective Difference Grade (ODG) value. The PEAQ scale ranges from 0 (i.e., degradation is imperceptible) to 4 (i.e.,

![Fig. 3. Stereo encoding and decoding system used for the experiments](image-url)
degradation is very annoying) and a value of $-2$ or better is very acceptable for most use cases.

In order to lay the focus of the evaluation on the performance of the predictive coding step, both quantizers $Q_M$ and $Q_2$ are neither specifically trained nor adaptive to the signal in any way. The logarithmic scalar quantizers use the well-known $\mu$ characteristic (e.g., [12]) for companding and a uniform symmetric mid-tread quantizer as their core quantizer. This uniform quantizer utilizes $2^w - 1$ quantization levels (i.e., a word length of 1 bit means that all values are quantized to zero) and it is designed to cover the entire possible range of values of the input data $x_n$ (i.e., $-1$ to 1 for this data set).

4. RESULTS

The relation between the length $L$ of the prediction filters, the achievable prediction gain and the transmission quality is depicted in Fig. 4. It can be seen that even fairly short lengths offer significant prediction gains of more than 11 dB. This gain increases with increasing filter length but the increase in gain starts to get smaller fairly quickly, even a filter length of 50 taps increases the prediction gain only by roughly another 2 dB.

The minimum PEAQ value increases as well for an increasing length of the prediction filter indicating an increased robustness of the transmission system for longer filter lengths. The simulations for this graph were carried out for a perfect transmission of the main channel and with varying word lengths for the quantizer $Q_M$ of 8 and 9 bit and their respective minimum PEAQ values were then averaged. Taking both measures into account, a filter length of about 25 taps appears to be reasonable to ensure a good performance of the coding system. However, this choice would lead to a significantly increased data rate for the transmission of the filter coefficients. As a compromise between a good performance of the system and a low necessary data rate, a value of $L = 11$ is chosen for the other evaluations. This equates to an additional algorithmic delay $\frac{T}{2}$ of about 0.23 ms.

The achievable prediction gain for $L = 11$ is depicted in Fig. 5 over the word length of the quantizer for the main channel. The dashed line represents the prediction gain for the unquantized case as a reference.

![Fig. 5. Average prediction gain for different word lengths of the quantizer $Q_M$ for the main channel.](image)

It can be seen that the performance of the prediction step depends on the chosen quantizer $Q_M$ for the main channel. Word lengths of less than 5 bit lead to a significant performance decrease in this setup compared to the prediction gain for the unquantized case.

The achievable quality for the transmission system of Fig. 3 is illustrated in Fig. 6. The abscissa therein is the word length $w_2$ of the quantizer for the prediction error while the set of curves consists of the different word lengths $w_M$ of the quantizer for the main signal (2, 3, 5, 7 and 10 bit from bottom to top). The impact of the word length of $Q_2$ is obviously bigger than the impact of the word length of $Q_M$ which can be explained by the fact that any quantization error within $\hat{e}_2$ will be present in both $\hat{x}_1$ and $\hat{x}_2$ without any filtering.

![Fig. 6. Average PEAQ values for different word lengths of the quantizers for the main channel $Q_M$ and the prediction error $Q_2$. The set of curves depicts word lengths $w_M$ of 2, 3, 5, 7, and 10 bit from bottom to top.](image)

As a reference, the perceptual quality of a symmetric, independent transmission of $x_1$ and $x_2$ is depicted in Fig. 7. This system uses one logarithmic quantizer for each channel.
that are both set to identical word lengths. It can be seen that
a longer word length leads to a higher quality and that a word
length of 7 bit for each quantizer leads to a PEAQ value of ap-
proximately -2 (which is very acceptable for many use cases).

A comparable quality for the proposed predictive coding
scheme can already be reached for a combination of \( w_1 = 2 \)
bit and \( w_2 = 10 \) bit. Even including an unoptimized and
very precise quantization of the filter coefficients at 16 bit
per coefficient, the overall data rate for the proposed structure
amounts to just 88 percent of the rate that is necessary
for the independent transmission.

The same findings can also be made when using a single
channel codec, e.g., [15], instead of the logarithmic quantizer.
However, the performance evaluation as presented is more
transparent with respect to the understanding of the proposed
audio coding structure.

5. CONCLUSIONS

A generalized version of the linear predictive coding scheme
from [11] was presented which allows to apply the concept to
multi-channel signals while also significantly decreasing the
computational complexity.

The presented encoding structure achieves good predic-
tion gains at reasonably short filter lengths. A detailed eval-
uation of the impact of quantization on the overall system
performance shows that the proposed audio coding system
achieves a very good transmission quality at higher data rates
and that there is a graceful degradation in PEAQ performance
through medium data rates.

From the PEAQ evaluation, it can also be deduced that
the data rate efficiency for the proposed system is significantly
higher than for an independent transmission of the input chan-
nels which uses the same quantizers. More sophisticated cod-
ing techniques can be utilized to further decrease the absolute
data rate.

The additional algorithmic delay that is introduced by the
system is very low which makes it an attractive possibility
for the transmission of multi-channel signals in a backwards
compatible way to existing mono signals.

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