SemanticVector: AI-Powered Semantic Compression for 1000x More Data-Efficient Transportation Intelligence

Sikai (Sky) Chen[a] (Team Lead), Xiaopeng (Shaw) Li[b]

[a] Assistant Professor of Transportation Engineering and Associate Director of Smart Highway Research Center, University of Wisconsin-Madison

[b] Harvey D. Spangler Professor of Transportation Engineering and Executive Director of Smart Highway Research Center, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Current traffic monitoring systems face a critical problem: they require enormous amounts of internet bandwidth and expensive data centers to process video from highway cameras. Each camera in the road network needs as much bandwidth as streaming multiple movies simultaneously, while many videos may show empty roads with no useful information. This makes comprehensive traffic monitoring extremely expensive, creates barriers for large scale analysis, and prevents communities from accessing advanced transportation technologies.

Project Objective

SemanticVector aims to solve this problem by developing a revolutionary AI-powered semantic compression framework that transforms raw sensor data into hyper-efficient, vectorized knowledge, reducing data infrastructure costs by over 1000x while enhancing decision-making capabilities. Instead of sending entire video streams to central facilities, the system uses advanced artificial intelligence deployed at the network edge to comprehend what the cameras see and transmits only essential semantic information like vehicle counts and trajectories, speed data, and safety alerts.

Technical Approach

The core of the system is a novel AI that intelligently perceives and comprehends traffic scenes. This AI, deployed on roadside hardware, watches the traffic, counts vehicles, tracks their movements, and identifies problems like accidents or dangerous weather conditions. Instead of sending massive video files, it generates and sends tiny, vectorized knowledge packets. For example, rather than streaming a 25-megabyte video file every minute, the system sends a 4-byte message saying, "15 cars passed northbound" and store their movement trajectories as vector. This semantic compression approach reduces data transmission by up to 10,000 times while providing better information for traffic management decisions.

Implementation Plan

The project will develop and test the technology over three years, starting with pilot installations on Wisconsin roadways (e.g., the Flex Lane and Park Street connected corridors in the city of Madison). The team will work with state transportation departments to demonstrate cost savings and improved traffic management capabilities. The technology will be designed to work with existing traffic management software and gradually expand to multiple states.

Commercial Impact

SemanticVector will enable transportation agencies to deploy significantly more sensing points within existing budgets. Rural communities that cannot afford expensive fiber optic networks will gain access to intelligent transportation systems. The technology will create new business opportunities for sensor manufacturers and software developers while reducing long-term infrastructure maintenance costs.

Broader Impact

This breakthrough will make intelligent transportation systems accessible to communities nationwide, improving traffic safety and reducing congestion. This approach supports climate resilience by enabling better monitoring of weather-related road conditions and optimizing traffic flow to reduce emissions. By dramatically lowering deployment costs, SemanticVector democratizes access to advanced transportation technologies, ensuring that smaller cities and rural areas can benefit from the same intelligent infrastructure available in major metropolitan areas.