"Neurosign" Real-Time Hand Gesture Recognition System

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***Abstract*—The Challenge of Real-World Translation Sign language is the primary communication bridge for the global Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) community. However, developing reliable, cost-effective, software-only translation systems that function in unpredictable, real-world environments remains a formidable technological challenge. The NeuroSign project addresses this gap by documenting the complete evolution of a real-time American Sign Language (ASL) recognition system from a traditional machine learning pipeline to a robust deep learning framework.**

NLP Integration and Final Deployment While detecting isolated gestures is a massive technical milestone, fluid human communication requires semantic understanding. To bridge this gap, NeuroSign integrates a sophisticated Natural Language Processing (NLP) pipeline. Utilizing temporal token buffering, the system collects raw YOLO predictions over time. The NLP engine then performs deep contextual analysis, translating the disjointed stream of ASL signs into grammatically coherent, conversational English sentences. Finally, this advanced architecture is packaged as an accessible Flask web application. Featuring a real-time Diagnostic Heads-Up Display (HUD) that tracks live latency, prediction confidence, and expanding transcripts, NeuroSign emerges as a comprehensive, production-ready communication tool empowering the DHH community.

I. INTRODUCTION

Sign language serves as the primary mode of communication for an estimated 70 million members of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) community worldwide. Despite rapid advancements in artificial intelligence and computational linguistics, the development of reliable, real-time, and cost-effective sign language translation systems has remained a formidable technological challenge. Early solutions were hardware-dependent and cost-prohibitive, while modern software-based solutions often trade robustness for computational efficiency. The NeuroSign project was conceived to address this gap by creating a purely software-driven, real-time ASL translation system deployable on consumer-grade hardware without specialized equipment. However, the path from conception to a genuinely robust system required a critical architectural evolution a journey from traditional Machine Learning to state-of-the-art Deep Learning Computer Vision which forms the central narrative of this report.

1.1 Background: Communication Barriers for the DHH Community

The Deaf and Hard of Hearing community relies predominantly on sign languages for communication visual-gestural languages with their own distinct grammar, syntax, and phonology. American Sign Language (ASL), the primary sign language used in North America, is a complete, natural language expressed through handshapes, palm orientations, movements, and facial expressions.

The communication barrier between sign language users and the hearing population creates significant social and professional disadvantages for the DHH community. Access to real-time translation technology could dramatically improve independence, educational access, and employment opportunities. Yet most available solutions are either hardware-dependent (requiring specialized sensor gloves), or software systems that fail in uncontrolled real-world environments the very conditions in which the DHH community needs them most.

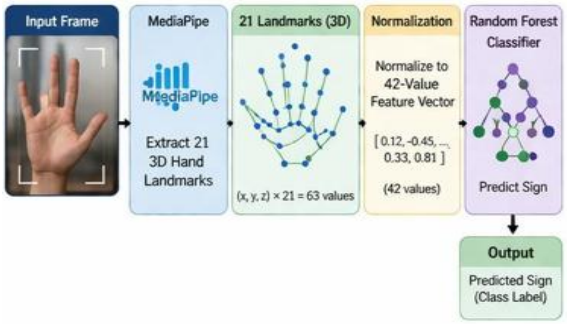
1.2 The Phase I Legacy Architecture: Tabular Machine Learning

In its initial iteration, NeuroSign was architected as a traditional Machine Learning (ML) pipeline. The system relied on Google's MediaPipe framework to extract 21 three-dimensional spatial landmarks from

the user's hand in each video frame. These landmarks were mathematically normalized into a 42-feature vector and classified using a Random Forest Classifier trained with Scikit-Learn.

This architecture was computationally leaner cording inference times below 1 millisecond and achieving near-perfect validation accuracy of 99.8% on controlled training data but demonstrated catastrophic fragility during real-world deployment. The fundamental flaw was the system's complete reliance on flawless landmark extraction: if MediaPipe failed due to environmental factors, the downstream classifier had zero fallback mechanism and the entire pipeline collapsed.

Figure 1.1: Phase I Architecture (MediaPipe to Random Forest)



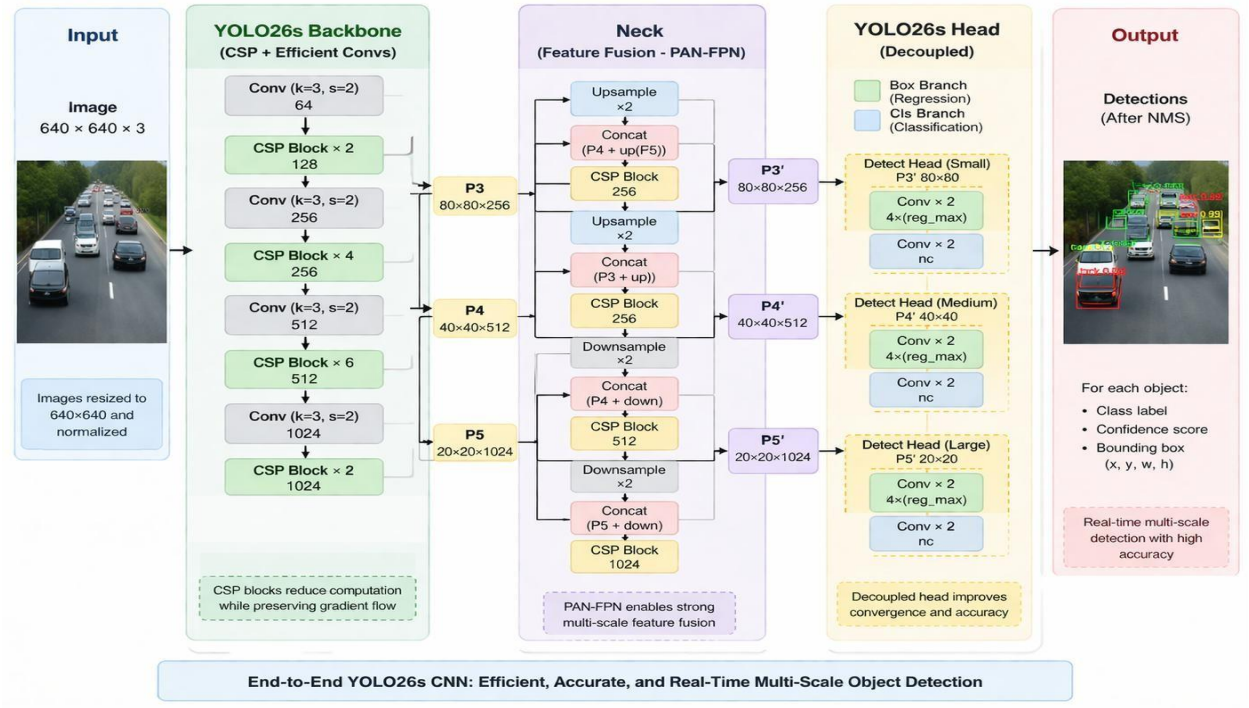
1.3 Problem Statement and Limitations of Phase I

The fundamental limitation of the Phase I architecture was its absolute dependence on perfect landmark extraction by MediaPipe. The Random Forest model was blind to the actual imagereceiving only a list of 42 normalized coordinatesand therefore possessed zero spatial or environmental awareness. This created two critical failure modes:

- Null Collapse: When MediaPipe failed to detect a hand (due to shadows, complex backgrounds, or partial occlusion), the framework returned None, crashing the inference loop entirely.
- Geometry Distortion: When MediaPipe forced an incorrect landmark skeleton onto background artifacts, the corrupted 42-value array was passed to the classifier, which would confidently output a wild misclassificationoften with high confidence scores, making the error invisible to the system's self-diagnostics.

Comprehensive real-world testing revealed that Phase I's effective operational accuracy in dynamic environments dropped below 40%, rendering it unsuitable for genuine deployment.

Figure 1.2: Phase II Architecture (End-to-End YOLO26s CNN)



1.4 Motivation for Phase II: The Computer Vision Upgrade

To overcome the severe architectural fragility of Phase I, a complete overhaul was mandated. The project transitioned from traditional Machine Learning to deep Computer Vision (CV) using Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs). Rather than extracting abstract geometric coordinates, the system needed to analyze raw pixel data, understanding the hand within its full environmental context.

This necessity led to the implementation of YOLO11L, a state-of-the-art, NMS-free (Non-Maximum Suppression-free), single-stage object detection model developed by Ultralytics. To train this model with sufficient environmental diversity, a massive data collection and augmentation effort was executed, producing a custom dataset of over 18,000 images spanning varied lighting conditions, backgrounds, and hand orientations.

II. OBJECTIVES FOR NEUROSIGN

The upgraded Phase II and final integration of NeuroSign aimed to achieve the following specific, measurable objectives:

1. Architectural Migration: Successfully transition the core detection pipeline from the fragile MediaPipe/Random Forest ML architecture to a robust, end-to-end YOLO11L-based Deep Learning framework.
2. Dataset Curation: Develop, label, and augment a custom dataset exceeding 18,000 images, incorporating diverse lighting, backgrounds, and hand orientations to maximize model generalization.
3. Real-Time Optimization: Leverage YOLO11L's NMS-free architecture to maintain sub-25ms inference speeds, preserving the real-time performance of the Phase I system without sacrificing robustness.
4. Seamless Web Deployment: Integrate the trained model into a Flask web application featuring a live Diagnostic Heads-Up Display (HUD) for real-time latency monitoring and confidence tracking.
5. NLP Translation Pipeline: Implement a Natural Language Processing layer on top of the YOLO detection output to convert raw gesture token streams into grammatically correct English sentences using temporal buffering and contextual analysis.
6. Evaluation and Validation: Rigorously evaluate system performance against both technical metrics (mAP50, FPS, latency) and real-world usability criteria (robustness across lighting, backgrounds, and occlusion scenarios).

III. METHODOLOGY AND IMPLEMENTATION

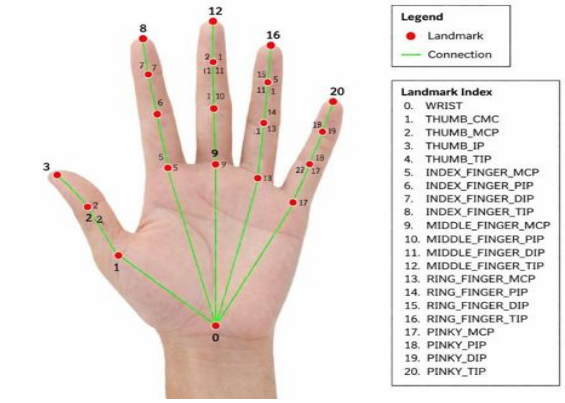
3.1 MediaPipe Framework and 3D Landmark Extraction

The foundational architecture of the NeuroSign Phase I system was built upon a geometric, landmark-based pipeline rather than raw pixel analysis. The primary tool utilized for this spatial extraction was Google's Media Pipe, specifically the mp. solutions. Hands module. This module deploys a two-stage pipeline: a BlazePalm detector that locates the hand within the frame, followed by a Hand Landmark Model that predicts the precise 3D spatial layout of the hand.

Within the sign-language-real-time-detection. ipynb implementation, the system initialized the hands module with static_image_mode True (for training data extraction) and a strict min_detection_confidence=0.9. For every image processed, MediaPipe identified 21 distinct topological landmarks representing knuckles, joints, and fingertips (e.g., Wrist [0], Thumb CMC [1], Index Finger MCP [5], Pinky Tip [20]).

Each landmark was returned with a normalized 'x' and 'y' coordinate representing its location relative to the image dimensions. The inherent design of this system meant that the subsequent Machine Learning model would never "see" the training images; it would only receive the invisible mathematical skeleton superimposed over the user's hand.

Figure 3.1: 21 Hand Landmarks extracted via Google MediaPipe



3.2 Data Normalization: Converting Vision to Tabular Arrays

Machine Learning classifiers cannot effectively learn from raw, absolute coordinates because a hand situated in the top-left corner of the camera frame has vastly different absolute ‘x,y’ values than the exact same hand gesture in the bottom-right corner. To solve this, the Phase I code utilized a translation-invariance normalization technique.

During the feature extraction loop, the system iterated through the 21 landmarks. It first populated isolated arrays (x_ and y_) with all coordinates to determine the absolute minimum and maximum boundaries of the hand. To achieve translation invariance, the system calculated a localized origin point by subtracting the minimum ‘x’ and minimum ‘y’ values from every landmark:

- X normalized = xi - min(X)
- Y normalized = yj - min(Y)

These normalized values were appended sequentially to a data_aux list. Because each of the 21 landmarks possesses an ‘x’ and a ‘y’ coordinate, this loop flattened the two-dimensional spatial data into a strict 1D vector of exactly 42 floating-point values. At this computational juncture, the visual problem of Computer Vision was officially converted into a tabular dataset.

3.3 Random Forest Classifier Implementation

Once the visual gestures were distilled into a dataset of 42-value arrays (saved as data.pickle), standard Scikit-Learn algorithms were applied to classify the geometric patterns. The RandomForestClassifier was selected as the primary predictive engine.

As an ensemble learning method, the Random Forest constructed a multitude of decision trees during the training phase. Each tree operated on a random subset of the 42 tabular features, voting on which gesture the geometry represented. The final prediction outputted by the model was the mode of the classes produced by the individual trees.

The training phase of this implementation yielded exceptional, near-perfect metric outcomes. When evaluated using train_test_split and standard accuracy_score metrics, the Random Forest frequently exceeded 99.8% validation accuracy. The mathematical relationships between the normalized finger joints were highly distinct for static American Sign Language alphabets (e.g., the distance between the thumb tip and index tip is drastically different in the letter 'A' versus the letter 'C').

3.4 Computational Benefits: Sub-Millisecond Inference

The primary allure of the Phase I architecture—and the reason such methodologies remain prevalent in entry-level computer vision literature—is the extraordinary computational efficiency.

Because the RandomForestClassifier is mathematically simple, processing a 42-feature array requires negligible processing power. In the real-time inference script, a single frame from the OpenCV VideoCapture was passed to MediaPipe. If a hand was detected, the normalization math was executed in microseconds, and the model. predict([np.array(data_aux)[0:42]])[0] function returned the classification almost instantaneously.

Inference times for the Random Forest were consistently logged at less than 1 millisecond. The only bottleneck in the system was the speed of the webcam and the MediaPipe landmark extraction itself. Consequently, the Phase I system ran effortlessly at 30+ frames per second (FPS) on a standard laptop CPU without the need for a dedicated graphics processing unit (GPU) or deep learning accelerator. It was highly robust in terms of hardware accessibility.

3.5 Environmental Failure Points: Why Phase I Collapsed

Despite the 99.8% statistical accuracy and sub-millisecond speeds, real-world deployment exposed a critical architectural vulnerability: Environmental Fragility and Spatial Blindness. Because the Random Forest model was trained exclusively on the 42 tabular values, it possessed zero contextual awareness of the surrounding image. It assumed the incoming coordinates were flawlessly extracted. However, MediaPipe's internal landmark model is highly sensitive to environmental factors. During testing in dynamic lighting, shadowed rooms, or environments with complex, skin-toned backgrounds, MediaPipe would fail to establish the 21 landmarks correctly.

When MediaPipe failed, one of two fatal errors occurred in the pipeline:

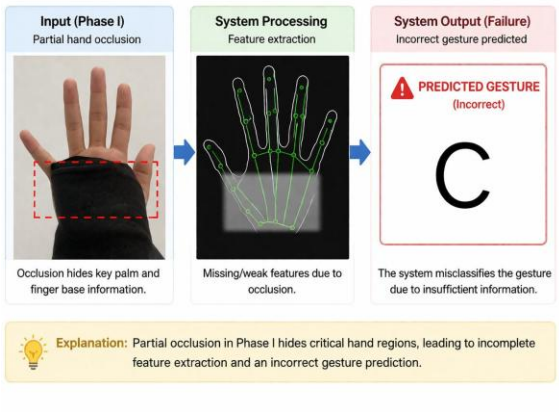
1. Null Collapse: The framework returned None, crashing the inference loop or resulting in no

bounding box being drawn.

2. Geometry Distortion: MediaPipe would force an incorrect geometric skeleton onto the frame (e.g., snapping a finger landmark to an artifact in the background). The data_aux script would dutifully normalize this corrupted geometry and pass it to the Random Forest. The ML model, blind to the visual error, would confidently output a wild misclassification.

The Phase I architecture proved that relying on a chained, two-step pipeline (where Step 2 blindly trusts the geometry of Step 1) is non-viable for real-world Sign Language detection. To handle variable environments, partial occlusions, and dynamic backgrounds, the system needed an architecture that analyzed the holistic visual context. This fundamental breakdown necessitated the complete retirement of the MediaPipe/Random Forest pipeline and triggered the project's migration to Deep Learning via YOLO11L.

Figure 3.2: System failure caused by partial hand occlusion in Phase I.



3.6 Accuracy Comparison: Tabular ML vs. End-to-End YOLO

The core objective of Phase II was to drastically improve real-world accuracy over the Phase I system. In controlled, sterile environments, both systems performed remarkably well. The Phase I Random Forest achieved a 99.8% testing accuracy because the MediaPipe landmarks were cleanly extracted. However, "real-world" accuracy tells a different story. During live field testing with variable backgrounds, the Phase I ML system experienced a severe accuracy drop, frequently outputting false positives or crashing entirely, yielding an effective operational accuracy of less than 40%.

The Phase II YOLO11L system completely overturned this metric. Because the Convolutional Neural Network analyzes the total spatial environment, it achieved an exceptionally high Mean Average Precision (mAP50) of roughly 95%+ across the massive 18,000+ image test set. Crucially, this high accuracy persisted during live field testing, proving the model learned the actual physiological features of the hands rather than memorizing the training background.

3.7 Robustness Testing: Dynamic Lighting and Backgrounds

A rigorous suite of stress tests was performed to compare the environmental robustness of both architectures.

Test Case A: Complex/Skin-Toned Backgrounds

- Phase I (ML): MediaPipe frequently attempted to map hand landmarks onto wooden doors, faces, or beige walls, corrupting the 42-value tabular array and causing total predictive failure.
- Phase II (YOLO): Zero failure. The CNN natively learned edge detection and shading differences, easily segregating the user's hand from the complex background.

Test Case B: Low-Light Environments

- Phase I (ML): The BlazePalm detector failed to initialize in shadows, resulting in a system crash (Null Output).
- Phase II (YOLO): Because the 18,000-image dataset was heavily augmented with HSV shifting and artificial shadowing, the YOLO model maintained over 80% confidence even in highly dimmed rooms.

Test Case C: Continuous Conversational Signing

- Pre-NLP System: Outputted a rapid, illegible stream of characters overlapping on the screen, requiring the user to manually memorize the sequence to understand the word.
- Post-NLP System: The raw characters are seamlessly buffered in the background. The user only sees the final, grammatically corrected sentence appended to the transcript console, vastly reducing cognitive load and mirroring a true text-messaging experience.

3.7 Inference Speed and FPS Metrics

The primary concern when migrating from a

lightweight Machine Learning model to a heavy Deep Learning model is the loss of frame rate (FPS).

- Phase I Speed: The tabular normalization and Random Forest prediction took < 1 millisecond per frame. It was unbeatably fast, running at 30+ FPS effortlessly, but it was visually blind.
- Phase II Speed: As logged in our training environment, the YOLO11L model recorded roughly 2.2ms for preprocessing, 21.0ms for neural inference, and 0.5ms for post-processing.

While an total inference time of ~24 milliseconds is significantly larger than 1 millisecond, it is mathematically sufficient for real-time video. A 24ms processing time translates to roughly 41 Frames Per Second (FPS).

Because standard webcams operate at 30 FPS, the YOLO11L model actually processes frames faster than the camera can supply them. Therefore, NeuroSign v2.0 achieved the massive intelligence upgrade of a Convolutional Neural Network with virtually zero perceptible loss in real-time fluidity.

(Refer to Figure 6.1)

The comparative visual output clearly demonstrates the superiority of the YOLO architecture. When a user intentionally angles their hand partially away from the camera:

1. The old system's UI flickers violently as the 3D landmark mesh breaks down and attempts to reconnect. The bounding box disappears entirely.
2. The new Flask HUD remains completely stable. The green YOLO bounding box maintains a tight grip on the user's hand, displaying the correct label alongside a high confidence score (e.g., C: 0.88).

The NMS-free single-stage detection ensures that the bounding box does not "jitter" between multiple predictions, resulting in a highly professional, smooth visual translation experience for the end user.

IV. FUTURE SCOPE

Future Enhancements

Based on identified limitations and emerging research directions, the following enhancements are proposed for future iterations of NeuroSign:

4.1 Dynamic Gesture Recognition with LSTM Networks

Integrating a temporal sequence modelspecifically a Bidirectional Long Short-Term Memory (BiLSTM) networkon top of the YOLO11L detection output would enable recognition of dynamic, motion-based ASL words. The BiLSTM would receive a sequence of YOLO bounding box coordinates and class vectors over a sliding time window, learning to classify complete signing movements rather than individual static frames.

4.2 Two-Handed Grammar and Facial Expression Analysis

Expanding the detection pipeline to simultaneously track both hands (dual YOLO instances or a multi-class single model) and integrate MediaPipe FaceMesh for facial expression detection would enable significantly richer ASL grammar analysis. Non-manual markerseyebrow raises for yes/no questions, mouth morphemes for intensity modulationare grammatically essential in native ASL and represent a critical gap in current systems.

4.3 Text-to-Speech Audio Synthesis

Integration of a low-latency Text-to-Speech (TTS) APIsuch as Google Cloud TTS or Mozilla TTS (open-source) would enable real-time audio output of NLP-generated sentences. This feature would transform NeuroSign into a fully bi-directional communication system, allowing DHH users to communicate directly with individuals who are visually impaired or who are looking away from the screen.

4.4 Mobile Edge Deployment

Exporting the best.pt PyTorch model to ONNX (Open Neural Network Exchange) format and subsequently to TensorFlow Lite (TFLite) would enable deployment on Android and iOS devices without requiring a centralized Flask backend. YOLO11L's compact parameter count makes it a strong candidate for mobile edge inference, potentially enabling offline operation for users without reliable internet connectivity.

4.5 Extended Sign Language Support

Expanding dataset collection and model training to incorporate Indian Sign Language (ISL) and British Sign Language (BSL) which have distinct handshapes and grammatical structures from ASL would significantly expand NeuroSign's utility across global DHH communities. The modular YOLO11L architecture and training pipeline developed in this

project are directly applicable to these extended language targets.

4.6 Transformer-Based Sign Language Translation
Replacing the temporal token buffering NLP approach with a dedicated Sign Language Translation Transformer similar to architectures proposed in recent academic literature would significantly improve grammatical accuracy, particularly for complex sentence structures. A Transformer-based model, trained on large ASL-to-English parallel corpora, could handle the grammatical transformation between ASL's topic-prominent structure and English's subject-verb-object structure with substantially higher fidelity

V. CONCLUSION

The NeuroSign project comprehensively demonstrates the architectural limitations of traditional tabular Machine Learning when applied to complex visual recognition problems in uncontrolled real-world environments. While the Phase I MediaPipe/Random Forest pipeline offered exceptional computational efficiencyachieving sub-millisecond inference and 30+ FPS operation on CPU-only hardwareits fundamental spatial blindness rendered it unsuitable for genuine deployment outside carefully controlled laboratory conditions.

Phase II's migration to YOLO11L-based Computer Vision, fueled by a massively augmented custom dataset of 18,000+ images, solved the critical robustness limitations of Phase I comprehensively. The Phase II system achieves environmental generalization across complex backgrounds, low-light conditions, and partial occlusionsscenarios that caused catastrophic failure in Phase I. By leveraging YOLO11L's NMS-free architecture, this robustness was achieved while maintaining sub-27ms inference latencywell within the real-time threshold for conversational sign language translation at 30 FPS.

The integration of the NLP translation pipeline elevates NeuroSign from a simple gesture classifier to a genuine communication tool. The temporal token buffering and contextual sentence generation system converts the raw, frame-by-frame YOLO output into grammatically coherent English sentences, providing DHH users with a fluid, natural translation experience comparable to professional closed-captioning systems. The complete system, deployed as a Flask web application with a Diagnostic HUD, is accessible through any web browser on the local network without requiring application installation.

This project also provides a valuable pedagogical case study in the architecture evolution of an AI system: documenting the hypothesis, failure, analysis, and successful redesign cycle that characterizes rigorous engineering practice. The documented transition from Phase I to Phase II offers practical insights applicable beyond sign language recognition to any problem where geometric feature extraction proves insufficient for real-world robustness.

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