

# A Stacking Framework for Multi-Classification of Alzheimer's Disease Using Neuroimaging and Clinical Features

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## Abstract.

**Background:** Alzheimer's disease (AD) is a severe health problem. Challenges still remain in early diagnosis.

**Objective:** The objective of this study was to build a Stacking framework for multi-classification of AD by a combination of neuroimaging and clinical features to improve the performance.

**Methods:** The data we used were from the Alzheimer's Disease Neuroimaging Initiative database with a total of 493 subjects, including 125 normal control (NC), 121 early mild cognitive impairment, 109 late mild cognitive impairment (LMCI), and 138 AD. We selected structural magnetic resonance imaging (sMRI) features by voting strategy. The imaging features, demographic information, Mini-Mental State Examination, and Alzheimer's Disease Assessment Scale-Cognitive Subscale were combined together as classification features. We proposed a two-layer Stacking ensemble framework to classify four types of people. The first layer represented support vector machine, random forests, adaptive boosting, and gradient boosting decision tree; the second layer was a logistic regression classifier. Additionally, we analyzed performance of only sMRI feature and combined features and compared the proposed model with four base classifiers.

**Results:** The Stacking model combined with sMRI and non-imaging features outshined four base classifiers with an average accuracy of 86.96%. Compared with using sMRI data alone, sMRI combined with non-imaging features significantly improved diagnostic accuracy, especially in NC versus LMCI and LMCI versus AD by 14.08%.

**Conclusion:** The Stacking framework we used can improve performance in diagnosis of AD using combined features.

Keywords: Alzheimer's disease, classification, ensemble learning, neuroimaging

## INTRODUCTION

Alzheimer's disease (AD) is a progressive neurodegenerative disease with cognitive decline and physical impairment [1], and millions worldwide continue to suffer from AD [2]. The development of effective treatments remains stalled, under certain situation medical field emphasizes early diagnosis [3]. Mild cognitive impairment (MCI) is a transitional stage between the normal controls (NC) and AD [4]. Individuals with MCI develop to AD with a conversion at an annual rate of 5–25% [5]. In order to define an earlier onset of disease, MCI can be divided into early mild cognitive impairment (EMCI)

<sup>1</sup>Data used in this article were obtained from the Alzheimer's Disease Neuroimaging Initiative (ADNI) database (<http://adni.loni.usc.edu>). As such, the investigators within the ADNI contributed to the design and implementation of ADNI and/or provided data but did not participate in analysis or writing of this report. A complete listing of ADNI investigators can be found at: [http://adni.loni.usc.edu/wpcontent/uploads/how\\_to\\_apply/ADNI\\_Acknowledgement\\_List.pdf](http://adni.loni.usc.edu/wpcontent/uploads/how_to_apply/ADNI_Acknowledgement_List.pdf).

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39 and late mild cognitive impairment (LMCI) accord- 91  
40 ing to Alzheimer's Disease Neuroimaging Initiative 92  
41 (ADNI) database [6]. Some studies have proven that 93  
42 individuals with LMCI are more subjected to convert 94  
43 to AD than individuals with EMCI [7]. MCI versus 95  
44 AD classification itself is a more difficult problem 96  
45 than distinguishing between AD and NC, because 97  
46 MCI diagnosis is stuck at a gray area and can be 98  
47 easily confused with AD or NC [8]. Recently, more 99  
48 research criteria have been proposed for early diag- 100  
49 nosis of AD or MCI [9], which plays a vital role in 101  
50 timely prevention and treatment of AD. 102

51 Current diagnosis standards depend on neuropsy- 103  
52 chological assessments and brain imaging techniques 104  
53 for individuals with AD. Neuropsychological assess- 105  
54 ments are simple and practical, especially in the 106  
55 elderly at the community or in areas with poor med- 107  
56 ical conditions. Among brain imaging techniques, 108  
57 structure magnetic resonance imaging (sMRI) is a 109  
58 safe, non-invasive, and objective technology, which 110  
59 produces high resolution spatial images. Based on 111  
60 cerebral atrophy, sMRI can offer reliable informa- 112  
61 tion about the progression of AD [10]. Region-based 113  
62 analysis methods are employed to examine volume of 114  
63 brain and detect shrinkage of brain tissue for detecting 115  
64 differences in images [11]. The key of region-based 116  
65 analysis methods is the determination of the region 117  
66 of interest (ROI) which can be utilized to identify the 118  
67 anatomical differences to assist diagnosis [12]. 119

68 Though tremendous progress has been made in 120  
69 diagnosis of AD, an imprecise diagnostic environ- 121  
70 ment still exists. On the one hand, most of the existing 122  
71 studies choose only one classifier or compare several 123  
72 classifiers and screen the best one as the final classi- 124  
73 fier. Classifiers boast their own advantages and call 125  
74 for some specific applications. Gray et al. classified 126  
75 AD, MCI, and NC only by random forest (RF) [13].  
76 Ezzati et al. applied six machine learning methods:  
77 decision trees (DT), support vector machines (SVM),  
78 K-nearest neighbor, ensemble linear discriminant,  
79 boosted trees, and RF to classify NC and AD; the  
80 best model was used for predicting clinical outcome  
81 of MCI [14]. Zhe et al. also only selected adaptive  
82 boosting (AdaBoost) to complete the classification  
83 task [15]. On the other hand, multi-classification still  
84 faces lower accuracy. Jin et al. used DT to classify  
85 NC, MCI, and AD with an accuracy of 56.52% [16].  
86 Son et al. classified AD, MCI, and NC using RF and  
87 MRI, and the accuracy was 53.33% [17]. Zhe et al.  
88 adapted AdaBoost to distinguish AD, MCI, and NC  
89 with an accuracy of 75.76% [15]. The existing stud-  
90 ies about multi-classification have the poor diagnostic

performance, which may result in diagnostic errors in 91  
clinical settings. 92

93 It could be helpful to combine several classifiers 94  
95 to enhance diagnostic performance for classification 96  
97 of AD. Stacking, an ensemble method, combines dif- 98  
99 ferent base classifiers into one meta-classifier, which 100  
101 proves simplicity and high performance with com- 102  
103 bined capability of different classifiers [18, 19]. In 104  
105 this study, we designed a Stacking framework to 106  
107 build a multi-classification (NC/EMCI/LMCI/AD) 108  
109 by combining sMRI, neuropsychological assess-  
110 ments, and demographic information as to enhance  
111 performance of the diagnosis. In the first layer, four  
112 base classifiers included SVM, RF, AdaBoost, and  
113 gradient boosting decision tree (GBDT). We chose  
114 logistic regression (LR) in the second layer to fuse  
115 outputs of first layer and get the final result of classi-  
116 fication. 117

## 109 METHODS

### 110 ADNI dataset

111 The data we used were from the ADNI database 112  
113 (<http://adni.loni.usc.edu>). The ADNI, a public- 114  
115 private partnership, was launched in 2003 by Michael 116  
117 W. Weiner, and subjects were recruited from USA and 118  
119 Canada. The primary goal of ADNI is to test whether 120  
121 the serial MRI, PET, other biological markers, and 122  
123 neuropsychological assessments can be combined to 124  
125 measure the progression of MCI and early AD. The 126  
127 identification of sensitive and specific markers of  
128 early AD progression is intended to aid researchers  
129 and clinicians to develop new treatments and monitor  
130 their effectiveness, as well as lessening time and cost  
131 of clinical trials. The research protocol was approved  
132 by each the local ethical committee and the written  
133 informed consent was obtained from each participant.  
134 For more information, see <http://www.adni-info.org>. 135

### 127 Participants

128 There are four stages of ADNI, and the data 129  
130 we used were mainly derived from ADNI-2&GO. 131  
132 There were 493 participants in our study, 125 NC, 133  
134 121 EMCI, 109 LMCI, and 138 AD, respectively, 135  
136 whose baseline MRIs were available. Demographic 137  
138 information comprised age, gender (male/female), 139  
139 years of education, and marital status (mar- 140  
141 ried/single (unmarried, divorced, widowed)). The 142  
143 neuropsychological assessments we used included 144  
145 the Mini-Mental State Examination (MMSE) and 146

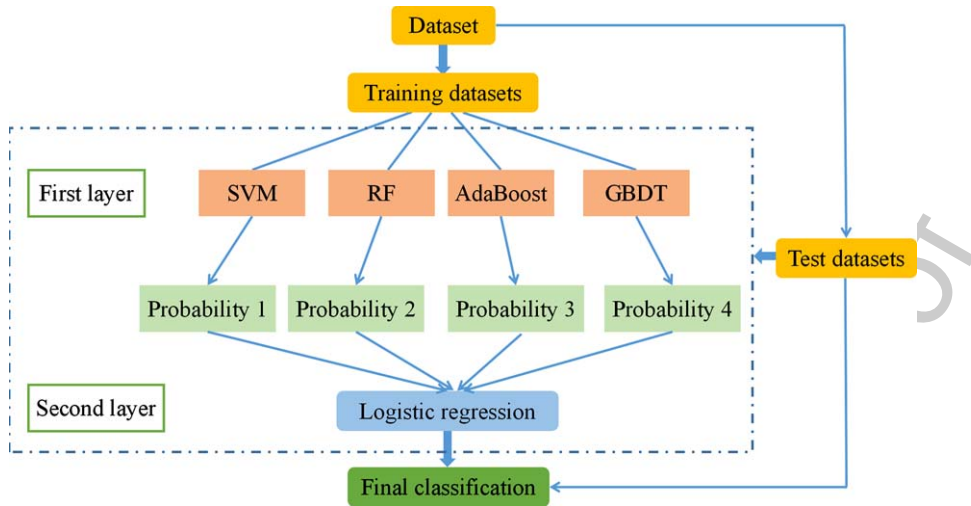


Fig. 1. The Stacking framework design.

the Alzheimer's Disease Assessment Scale (ADAS-Cog11). These non-imaging features, known as risk factors of AD, can be easily obtained by non-AD specialists. We defined the above two part of non-imaging features as clinical information.

#### Image data preprocessing

All subjects were scanned by the 3.0T MR scan and the parameters were defined TR = 2300 ms, TE = 2.98 ms, flip angle = 90°, thickness = 1.2 mm, [FOV] = 240 × 240 mm<sup>2</sup> and matrix size = 256 × 256. We used Statistical Parametric Mapping (SPM12) on MATLAB platform for preprocessing. The original sMRI images were converted from DICOM to NIFTI format. We used the Montreal Neurological Institute space for spatial normalization. sMRI images were segmented into three different tissues. Our work focused on gray matter. The sMRI was divided into 90 brain regions using the automatic anatomical labeling (AAL) template in REST software, and gray matter volume (GMV) was extracted. The corresponding names of AAL brain template subdivisions are shown in Supplementary Table 1, where an odd number indicates the left brain and an even number indicates the right brain.

#### Feature selection

In the neuroimaging community, reduction of features is a critical and essential process before training the model. The main purpose of this process is to select the most relevant features and remove

redundant ones to avoid over-fitting in models. Feature selection methods are divided into the following three ones: filter, wrapper, and embedded [20]. However, previous studies have argued that wrapper and embedded are superior to filter methods in neuroimaging data [21, 22]. In this study, we employed support vector machine recursive feature elimination (SVM-RFE), LR based on L1 regularization, and GBDT to select image features. The final features were selected more than once to ensure better stability and less redundancy.

#### Classification models

We applied six binary classifications to achieve multi-classification. The six binary classification tasks were NC versus EMCI, NC versus LMCI, NC versus AD, EMCI versus LMCI, EMCI versus AD, and LMCI versus AD.

The purpose of ensemble is to combine multiple algorithms to improve performance. Figure 1 illustrates the structure of Stacking procedure. Stacking contains two layers. In the first layer, the individual classification models represented heterogeneity are trained on training sets. The base classifiers in the first layer take two requirements. The first one involves high diversity and the second one emphasizes high accuracy. In this study, we used four base classifiers: SVM, RF, AdaBoost, and GBDT in the first layer, which have different modeling ideas and good performance in cross-validation. The four parallel results of classifiers were calculated. In the second layer, the meta learner should have strong generalization

Table 1  
Demographics of participants

Characteristics	NC	EMCI	LMCI	AD	$\chi^2/F$	<i>p</i>
N	125	121	109	138		
Age (mean $\pm$ SD)/y	73.53 $\pm$ 6.37	70.71 $\pm$ 6.74	71.45 $\pm$ 7.03	74.73 $\pm$ 8.19	8.49	<0.001
Gender (n (%))						
Male	65 (48.00%)	71 (58.68%)	59 (54.13%)	80 (57.97%)	3.67	0.302
Female	60 (52.00%)	50 (41.32%)	50 (45.87%)	58 (42.03%)		
Education (mean $\pm$ SD)/y	16.56 $\pm$ 2.54	16.00 $\pm$ 2.59	16.52 $\pm$ 2.58	15.67 $\pm$ 2.68	3.56	0.014
Marriage status (n (%))						
Married	81 (64.80%)	94 (77.69%)	83 (76.15%)	119 (86.23%)	16.88	<0.001
Single	44 (35.20%)	27 (22.31%)	26 (23.85%)	19 (13.77%)		
MMSE (mean $\pm$ SD)	29.03 $\pm$ 1.24	28.43 $\pm$ 1.54	27.64 $\pm$ 1.79	23.09 $\pm$ 2.13	328.87	<0.001
ADAS-Cog11 (mean $\pm$ SD)	5.94 $\pm$ 3.10	7.46 $\pm$ 3.17	11.70 $\pm$ 3.17	20.93 $\pm$ 7.18	246.33	<0.001

MMSE, Mini-Mental State Examination; ADAS-Cog11, Alzheimer's Disease Assessment Scale contains 11 items; SD, standard deviation.

ability to correct the bias of base learners and avoid over-fitting [23, 24]. Hence, the LR was trained in the second layer to fuse classifying outputs from the first layer. Finally, the classification results were calculated using the test sets, and evaluation indicators were established for classification performance. And we used RF to rank the importance of selected brain regions and clinical features in each classification.

### Performance metrics

We used the Scikit-Learn machine learning library in Python 3.8.5 software to build AD classification diagnostic models. Nested cross-validation was applied in this study. To evaluate the performance of classifiers, the four indicators: accuracy (ACC), recall, F1 score and the area under the ROC curve (AUC) were chosen. DeLong's test was used to verify AUC. The parameters are listed in Supplementary Table 2.

## RESULTS

### Clinical information

Table 1 summarizes participants' clinical characteristics. Among them, 275 (55.78%) were male and 218 (44.22%) were female; the mean age was  $72.71 \pm 7.31$  years, with range from 55 to 90 years old. The mean years of education was  $16.16 \pm 2.60$  years, ranging from 9 to 20 years. As for the marital status, 377 (76.47%) were married, 116 (23.53%) were single (unmarried, divorced, widowed). The mean score of MMSE stood at  $26.92 \pm 2.97$  and ADAS-Cog11 represented  $11.78 \pm 7.81$ . Beyond gender, these features were statistical significance, which were selected into the AD classification model.

### Selected features

The specific results of features extracted by three feature selection methods at each binary classification task are summarized in Supplementary Table 3. The brain regions retained at each binary classification task after feature selections by voting strategy are shown in Table 2. The main brain regions that eventually entered classification models were hippocampus, parahippocampal gyrus, amygdala, superior limbic gyrus, thalamus, middle temporal gyrus, and inferior temporal gyrus. Furthermore, the correlations between these screened brain regions and clinical information showed that the majority of brain regions were associated with age, ADAS-Cog11, and MMSE, see Supplementary Tables 4–9 for specific results.

### Classification results

Our Stacking framework could perform multi-classification of AD using sMRI data and a combination of sMRI and non-imaging features. NC versus AD data were cited as an example to explain the classification results. The output metrics of four base classifiers and Stacking are detailed in Table 3. When sMRI was taken as classification feature only, the result of four base classifiers presented relatively ordinary performance, and ACC, recall, AUC and F1 score were below 88%. However, compared with base classifiers, Stacking boasted a better performance especially in AUC. The similar results were showed in sMRI joined together with non-imaging features. The performance metrics of four base classifiers were all below 98%, while Stacking outperformed base classifiers as it was represented by 0.9999 of AUC particularly.

Compared with only sMRI, the Stacking of sMRI joined together with non-imaging features in NC

Table 2  
The results of feature voting

Stage	Image features
NC versus EMCI	Frontal_Sup_L, Frontal_Sup_Medial_R, Rectus_L, Cingulum_Mid_R, Cingulum_Post_L, Hippocampus_R, Parahippocampal_L, Parahippocampal_R, Calcarine_L, Cuneus_L, Lingual_L, Lingual_R, Occipital_Inf_R, SupraMarginal_L, Paracentral_Lobule_R, Pallidum_L, Thalamus_R, Heschl_R, Temporal_Pole_Mid_L, Temporal_Pole_Mid_R, Temporal_Inf_L
NC versus LMCI	Hippocampus_L, Hippocampus_R, Parahippocampal_R, Amygdala_R, Calcarine_L, Lingual_L, Lingual_R, Occipital_Mid_L, Postcentral_R, Putamen_L, Thalamus_L, Temporal_Inf_R
NC versus AD	Hippocampus_L, Hippocampus_R, Parahippocampal_R, Amygdala_L, Amygdala_R, Calcarine_L, Lingual_L, SupraMarginal_L, Angular_L, Thalamus_L, Temporal_Mid_L, Temporal_Inf_L
EMCI versus LMCI	Frontal_Sup_R, Olfactory_L, Rectus_R, Cingulum_Mid_R, Cingulum_Post_L, Hippocampus_L, Hippocampus_R, Amygdala_L, Amygdala_R, Cuneus_R, Occipital_Mid_L, SupraMarginal_R, Precuneus_L, Thalamus_L, Temporal_Sup_R, Temporal_Mid_L
EMCI versus AD	Cingulum_Mid_R, Cingulum_Post_L, Hippocampus_L, Hippocampus_R, Parahippocampal_R, Amygdala_L, Amygdala_R, Occipital_Sup_L, Occipital_Mid_R, Occipital_Inf_R, Precuneus_L, Thalamus_L, Thalamus_R, Temporal_Mid_L, Temporal_Inf_L
LMCI versus AD	Supp_Motor_Area_L, Frontal_Sup_Medial_L, Hippocampus_L, Parahippocampal_L, Amygdala_L, Amygdala_R, Fusiform_L, Postcentral_R, Parietal_Inf_L, SupraMarginal_L, SupraMarginal_R, Temporal_Mid_L, Temporal_Inf_L

Table 3  
The classification result of NC versus AD

	Classifier	ACC	recall	AUC	F1 score
sMRI	SVM	0.8666	0.8675	0.8629	0.8707
	RF	0.8515	0.8573	0.8466	0.8550
	AdaBoost	0.8171	0.8047	0.8126	0.8215
	GBDT	0.8554	0.8496	0.8503	0.8568
	<b>Stacking</b>	<b>0.8937</b>	<b>0.8768</b>	<b>0.9522</b>	<b>0.8966</b>
sMRI+clinical information	SVM	0.9734	0.9788	0.9748	0.9736
	RF	0.9771	0.9631	0.9766	0.9779
	AdaBoost	0.9657	0.9791	0.9622	0.9704
	GBDT	0.9733	0.9767	0.9699	0.9751
	<b>Stacking</b>	<b>0.9873</b>	<b>0.9836</b>	<b>0.9999</b>	<b>0.9895</b>

versus AD were increased to different degrees, where recall and ACC value increased by 10.68% and 9.36%. The sMRI combined with non-imaging features showed significant advantages, especially in the NC versus LMCI stage with an increase in recall of up to 19.19%. Figure 2 shows the results of Stacking using sMRI data alone and sMRI combined with non-imaging features in each classification. To verify the efficacy of sMRI joined together with non-imaging features, we performed Delong's test for AUC values in the Stacking results, which confirmed statistical significance except NC versus EMCI. Of note, the classification result of features combined with sMRI and non-imaging features outperformed only sMRI feature.

The results of the other five binary classifications showed the same effect, as described in Supplementary Tables 10–14. And the result of first ten importance features are shown in Fig. 3. The results indicated that ADAS-Cog11 plays an important role in all classifications.

## DISCUSSION

In our study, we designed a Stacking framework to improve performance of multi-classification based on the sMRI and combined features, and the result of features with sMRI and clinical information exhibited better classification ability than only sMRI feature.

In general, there is inherent conflict between accuracy and diversity of individual learners, the more diversity, the less accuracy. Actually, it is hoped that different base learners can be "accurate but different". In this study, four base learners were selected as the first layer learner. Among them, SVM is a single classifier, while RF, AdaBoost, and GBDT are three different ensemble models. Comparison of these five models, the experimental results showed that our Stacking framework can achieve strong complementarity between different base learners. The most pronounced result was EMCI versus LMCI classification using combined features, which had the most significant increase in AUC value. However, in

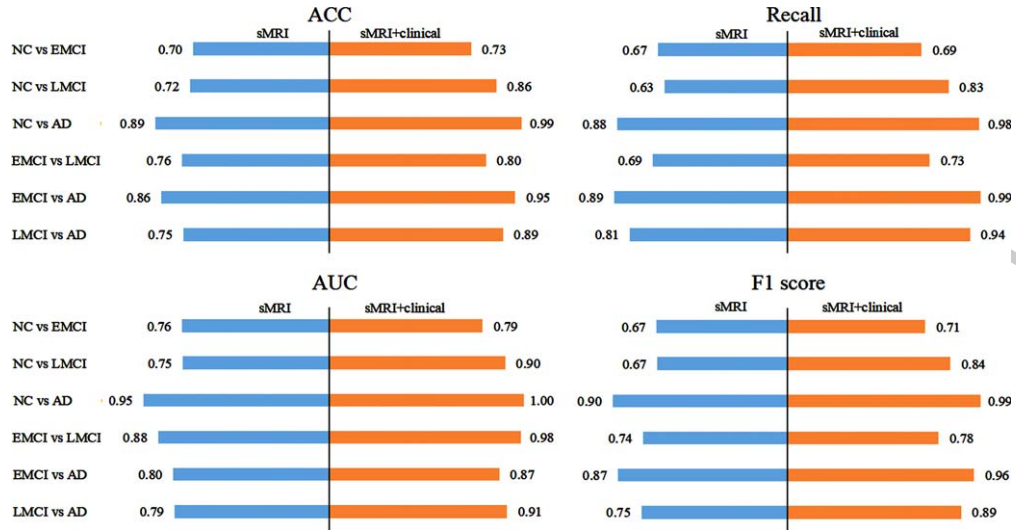


Fig. 2. The results of Stacking classification.

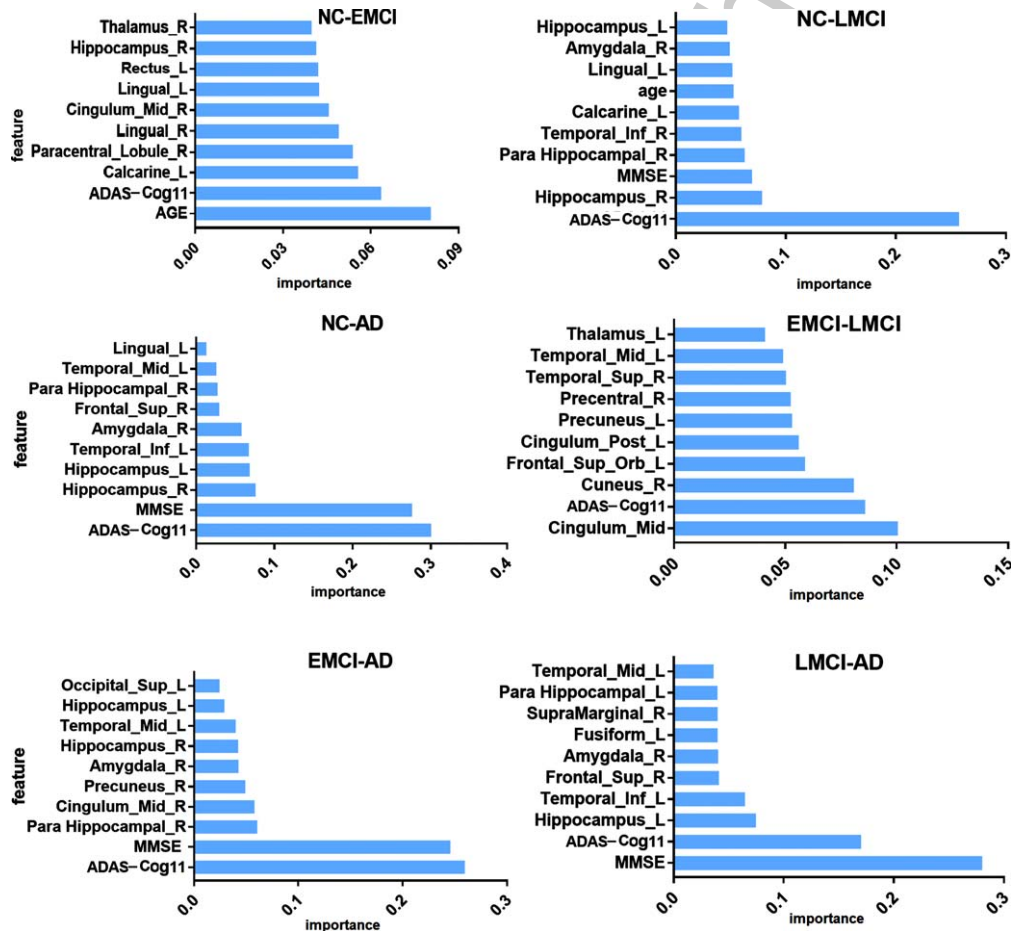


Fig. 3. The feature importance ranking.

Table 4  
Classification performance of existing studies

Study	Subjects	Algorithm	Features	Overall ACC
Ebadi et al. [26]	15AD/15MCI/15CT	Ensemble learning by voting strategy	Diffusion Tensor Imaging	80.00% (AD versus CT) 83.30% (AD versus MCI) 70.00% (MCI versus CT)
Sorensen et al. [27]	100AD/100MCI/ 100cMCI/100NC	Ensemble SVM using linear kernel Ensemble SVM using radial basis function (RBF) kernel	sMRI, age, sex, and MMSE	55.6% 55.0%
Gray et al. [13]	37AD/34sMCI/ 41pMCI/35HC	RF	MRI PDG-PET CSF	89.00% (AD versus HC) 74.60% (MCI versus HC) 58.40% (sMCI versus pMCI)
Our framework	138AD/109LMCI/ 121EMCI/125NC	Stacking	sMRI, neuropsychological assessments and demographic information	72.70% (NC versus EMCI) 85.63% (NC versus LMCI) 98.73% (NC versus AD) 80.29% (EMCI versus LMCI) 95.38% (EMCI versus AD) 89.01% (LMCI versus AD)

CT, healthy subjects; cMCI, converting MCI; sMCI, MCI individuals who have progressed to AD; pMCI, MCI individuals who have so far remained stable; PDG-PET, positron emission tomography imaging with the radiotracer [ $^{18}\text{F}$ ]-fluorodeoxyglucose; CSF, cerebrospinal fluid.

NC versus AD and LMCI versus AD, the Stacking classification results of AUC using combined features provided only a modest boost compared with base classifiers. This is owing to the progression of AD, the brain structure gaps are most evident, which lead to a higher performance of four base classifiers. We integrated the four base classifiers that had achieved high classification performances thus the performance did not improve significantly.

Our study adapted multiple binary classifications for the purpose of multi-classification. Regardless of whether Stacking framework were used, the classification of NC versus AD had the best effect using combined features, and AUC values reached more than 96% in the base classifiers, which can be understood that atrophy of brain structures does differ in the NC and AD. Compared with previous related studies, our work performed with higher accuracy, as shown in Table 4. In our study, each binary classification with combined features showed good discriminative ability and overall ACC of classification was 86.96%.

Our study also found that using combined features can produce more powerful classifiers compared to using sMRI feature alone. Especially in NC versus LMCI classification, the recall of Stacking was increased by 19.19%. Most likely, the cognitive status and clinical information of these two stages are quite different. This prompts us to take early cognitive intervention for LMCI subjects. In EMCI versus LMCI, the performance of these two statuses had more subtle improvement using sMRI combined with non-imaging features and they were subjected to classification difficulties. The possible reason is that

EMCI and LMCI belong to the MCI status, the differences from degree of atrophy in brain and clinical cognition between the two are small making it more difficult to distinguish. Motter et al. also found that there were no statistically significant differences between the EMCI and LMCI groups in terms of lesion volume [25]. In our results, the growth of AUC in NC versus EMCI have no statistical difference in combined features, which likely due to the fact that the total contribution of clinical features was smaller than sMRI. This signals the need for physicians to spend more effort in differentiating between these two statuses. Taken together, combined features could provide more information about the likelihood of cognitive impairment.

The sMRI scans with high analytical accuracy show changes in brain structures monitoring AD process [28], since the typical distribution of gray matter atrophy revealed by sMRI may achieve better diagnostic accuracy [28, 29]. As such, in this study, we mainly focused on GMV changes of sMRI in AD analysis. Our research found the main brain atrophies were located in hippocampus, parahippocampal gyrus, amygdala, and temporal lobe. The behavioral studies have shown that learning and memory storage and retrieval play a critical role in the hippocampus [30, 31]. The parahippocampal gyrus is also associated with memory storage and retrieval. Echavarri used sMRI to distinguish NC, aMCI, and AD finding that the difference in parahippocampal volume atrophy was greater than that in hippocampus [32]. The amygdala is associated with emotion, learning, and memory involving in the processing of

371 long-term memory and consolidating memory stor- 423  
372 age in other parts of the brain [33]. In addition to the 424  
373 brain regions mentioned above, the thalamus, supe- 425  
374 rior limbic gyrus, middle temporal lobes, and inferior 426  
375 temporal lobes were also associated with disease pro- 427  
376 gression by feature selection. The thalamus is the 428  
377 higher center of sensation, and it is also bound up with 429  
378 memory function and emotion regulation. The thalam- 430  
379 us is involved in many different neuronal pathways 431  
380 and its function is closely related to motor behav- 432  
381 ior, emotion, motivation, association, and cognitive 433  
382 ability [34]. The temporal lobe is primarily relevant 434  
383 to hearing, language comprehension, memory, and 435  
384 mental activity. Atrophy of brain tissue is a long 436  
385 process and occurs in the hippocampus and internal 437  
386 olfactory cortex firstly, and then affects the parietal, 438  
387 temporal, and frontal lobes. It has been documented 439  
388 that temporal lobe atrophy is exacerbated in individ- 440  
389 uals with MCI and AD [25, 35]. Besides, there is 441  
390 an association between these brain regions and clin- 442  
391 ical features (age, ADAS-Cog11, and MMSE) and 443  
392 such an association might be considered as a new 444  
393 biomarker or might provide evidence to be considered 445  
394 for future studies. 446

395 The goal of our study is to ultimately create an auto- 447  
396 mated machine learning and find biomarkers to help 448  
397 physicians to make more streamlined and accurate 449  
398 diagnoses. The Stacking framework we designed has 450  
399 significant translational potential in AD, which can 451  
400 help physicians by offering an objective assessment 452  
401 and a second opinion. In addition, our framework 453  
402 can be applied to other diseases, such as Parkinson's 454  
403 disease. The combination of features from different 455  
404 modalities may considerably increase the potential 456  
405 of AD diagnosis. These medical examinations can be 457  
406 easily obtained and used for early screening of AD 458  
407 in the community. This will not only reduce the bur- 459  
408 den on society and families, but also promote early 460  
409 detection of AD achieving a reasonable allocation 461  
410 of social resources. In such cases, our model may 462  
411 aid non-invasive monitoring of AD development. 463  
412 Furthermore, the development of methods which effi- 464  
413 ciently combines multimodal features is a field to be 465  
414 explored by next studies. 466

415 However, some limitations also remain in our 467  
416 study. First, this study extracted GMV from sMRI 468  
417 as morphological characteristics, demographic infor- 469  
418 mation, and neuropsychological assessments. Further 470  
419 studies will focus on incorporating multiple features 471  
420 such as fMRI, DTI, PET, CSF, and genes. Second, 472  
421 other base classifiers, ensemble learning algorithms, 473  
422 and construction strategies could be incorporated to

analyze cognitive decline in the elderly and provide 423  
new references to assist clinical diagnosis. Third, we 424  
reported accuracy of Stacking framework in training 425  
and testing datasets, which showed slight over-fitting, 426  
and specific results are available in Supplementary 427  
Table 15. In addition, we will use external valida- 428  
tion to generalize the stability of performance. These 429  
limitations should be addressed in our future studies. 430

431 In conclusion, we used six binary classification 432  
tasks to achieve the purpose of multi-classification. 433  
The Stacking framework combining SVM, RF, 434  
AdaBoost, and GBDT model was employed to 435  
classify NC/EMCI/LMCI/AD based on sMRI and 436  
non-imaging features. The performance of our Stack- 437  
ing framework was improved significantly, and the 438  
result of combined features outperformed only sMRI 439  
feature. The model we constructed in this study 440  
provides an approach for the future translation of 441  
neuroimaging into AD benefit. 442

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## SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

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