miet: an R package for region of interest analysis from magnetic reasonance images

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Summary

In a medical imaging study, a set of magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) data is generally stored as a hierarchy of folders containing MRI volumes. These volumes may correspond to a variety of e.g. subjects, subject-types, centers, acquisition types that structures the folders naming and hierarchy. Here is an example of such structure:

```
|-- center01
|   |-- healthySubject01
|   |   `-- month0
|   |-- healthySubject02
|   |   `-- month0
|   |-- patient01
|   |   |-- month0
|   |   `-- month12
|   `-- patient02
|       |-- month0
|       `-- month12
`-- center02
    |-- healthySubject01
    |   |-- month0
    |   `-- month12
    |-- healthySubject02
    |   |-- month0
    |   `-- month12
    |-- patient01
    |   |-- month0
    |   `-- month12
    `-- patient02
        |-- month0
        `-- month12
```

Each of the folders at the bottom of the hierarchy (here `month0` or `month12`) contains a set of files with MRI volumes for the given subject (that may be, for example, either a healthy subject or a patient) at the given time of their follow-up, acquired in the given center. These volumes may consist of a set of raw data as well as post-processed data such as segmentation masks, co-registered volumes, etc. that are produced from image processing tools. Obviously, the same dataset could have been structured in many other ways.

Once all this data is produced, the next step generally consists in analyzing them. An ubiquitous analysis in medical imaging is the so-called region-of-interest based analysis that consists in comparing statistics of MR signals over sets of predefined regions (Poldrack, 2007).

Such an analysis needs to iterate over all MR volumes of interest to read them and to extract

the relevant statistics. To the best of our knowledge, there is no dedicated framework to ease such tasks, which may result in lengthy technical analysis codes. `miet` - acronym of medical imaging extraction tools - is an R package attempting to fill that gap. More specifically, `miet` is designed to specify and extract tibbles (Müller & Wickham, 2019), which is an improved `data.frame` structure, ready for data analysis from a specified folder hierarchy and a set of extraction formulas.

A short example

`miet` is based on the following three successive steps:

1. Populate: Given a description of how the folders are structured, build a "population" tibble gathering information about data hierarchy and location.

2. Extract: Build a tibble that contains, for each element from your population, values extracted from the associated MRI volumes.

3. Expand: Gather information from a set of generated tibbles into a single tibble.

At the end of these three stages, we end up with a tibble ready for data analysis.

The four next subsections present an example involving a data set of spinal cord MRI volumes and use it to illustrate the three previous operations. For a reproducible example with publicly available (synthetic) data, see the `miet` readme (https://gitlab.inria.fr/miet/miet).

Setting

Our purpose in this short example is to assess the difference of an MRI measurement called the mean magnetization transfer ratio or MTR (Grossman, Gomori, Ramer, Lexa, & Schnall, 1994) from one scanner to another (also refer to as the scanner-effect). More precisely, we want to assess the difference of MTR measurements on two different scanners in a given anatomical region: voxels corresponding to specific vertebral levels (called C3C6) and assess their correlations with subject body mass index. For this purpose, we dispose from 3D volumes containing MTR values and 3D volumes containing vertebral levels for a set of 10 participants scanned on two different scanners (examples of data are given in Figure 1).

We consider that our data are contained in the following file hierarchy:

```
|-- center01
|   |-- 01
|   |-- 02
|   |---....
|
`-- center02
    |-- 01
    |-- 02
    |---....
```

Moreover, we assume that each of these folders contains (among others) the file `mtr.nii.gz`, the 3D MTR volume and the file `vertebralLevel.nii.gz`, that contains the volume representing the vertebral label of each voxel. We assume that in a given folder, these two volumes have the same geometry.
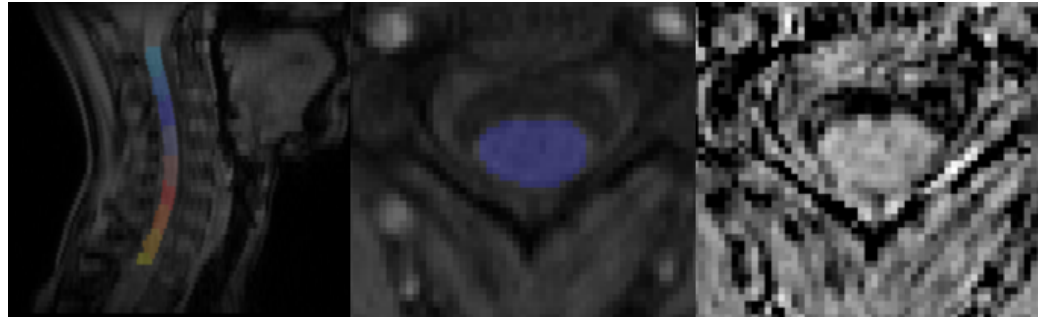
Figure 1: Example of volume data. From left to right: i) Sagital view of vertebral labeling `vertebralLevel.nii.gz` on the corresponding anatomical volume (0 is the background and is not displayed, values 1 to 9 labels respectively levels C1 to T2 and are color-coded). ii) Axial view (C3 level) of vertebral labeling `vertebralLevel.nii.gz` of the spinal cord on the corresponding anatomical volume. iii) Corresponding axial view for the magnetization transfer map `mtr.nii.gz`. Roughly speaking, the darker the pixel the lowest the myelin content.

Populate

First, we are going to parse the overall folder hierarchy to identify each subject and center. This is performed using the function `miet_populate`. This function uses a description of the folder hierarchy, given as regular expressions (an introduction to regular expression in R can be found in the stringr reference manual https://stringr.tidyverse.org/articles/regular-expressions.html), and extracts all suitable candidates:

```r
library(miet)

# this is the folder hierarchy location
ROOT='/home/bcombes/dataExp/'

# this is how the folders are structured
pattern='{{centerId}}/{{subjectId}}'

# this specifies each element of variable 'pattern'
mEnv=new.env()
mEnv$centerId='center\\d{2}' #centerId is coded by "center" plus 2 digits
mEnv$subjectId='\\d{2}' #subjectId is coded by 2 digits

population=miet_populate(ROOT,pattern,mEnv)
print(population)
# A tibble: 20 x 2
#   centerId subjectId
#   <chr>    <chr>
# 1 center01 01
# 2 center01 02
# 3 center01 03
# 4 center01 04
# ...
#[1] "With path variable(s):  {{path}}"
```

The resulting `population` variable is a tibble with one row for each of the final folder and two columns, named `centerId` and `subjectId`.

Extract

Once `population` is defined, for each of its elements, we want to extract the mean of volume `mtr.nii.gz` over the set of voxels of `vertebraeLevel.nii.gz` which equals 3,4,5 or 6. The function `miet_extract` is designed for this purpose:

```r
MTRC3C6=miet_extract(population,
                     formulaLabel='[[vertebraeLevel]] %in% seq(3,6)',
                     valueListName='[[mtr]]',
                     statFunction=mean)
```

The function `miet_extract` iterates over the elements of `population`, extracts all the voxels satisfying a given R expression given as a string and computes a given statistic (here `mean`) over them. To specify such expressions, `miet` uses a special notation for MRI volume, `[[X]]` that can read as "the 3D array corresponding to MRI file X.nii.gz in the current acquisition folder". The previous `miet_extract` call should thus read as:

```
For each acquisitions set in 'population'
    Compute the 'mean' of volume 'mtr.nii.gz' over voxels
    for which 'vertebraeLevel.nii.gz in [3,6]'
```

Looking at the content of the resulting tibble:

```r
print(MTRC3C6)
```

```
# A tibble: 20 x 3
#   metric    uniqueId     value
#   <chr>     <chr>        <dbl>
#1 mean_mtr  center01_01   35.0
#2 mean_mtr  center01_02   34.7
#3 mean_mtr  center01_03   34.5
#4 mean_mtr  center01_04   35.3
#...
```

We obtain a 3-column-tibble. Its first column contains the name of the extracted metric (here it is always `mean_mtr`), the second one is an identifier toward the acquisition session and the last one is the value of the mean MTR on C3C6 for the given acquisition session. Notice that `miet` proposes other more versatile functions (e.g. `miet_apply`) to extract statistics from MRI.

Expand

Now, we want to include the subject body-mass index (that equals subject-weight (in kg)/subject-size^2 (in meter^2)) in our data. This value is typically extracted from e.g., a csv file containing subject characteristics. In our example,

```r
characteristics=read.csv(paste0(ROOT,'/characteristic.csv'),
                         colClasses=c('character','numeric','numeric'))
print(characteristics)
```

```
#    subjectId size weight
#1         01  1.6     68
#2         02  1.7     80
#3         03  1.5     50
#4         04  1.7     62
#...
```

Combès, (2020). miet: an R package for region of interest analysis from magnetic reasonance images. *Journal of Open Source Software*, 5(45), 1862. https://doi.org/10.21105/joss.01862

The next step consists in gathering all the relevant elements (here, mean MTR, subject id and center as well as its corresponding weight and size characteristics) into a single tibble. `miet_expand` is designed for such a purpose and takes as arguments the population and a set of a tibbles to be merged with:

```
expandedDf=miet_expand(population,MTRC3C6,
                       characteristics)
head(expandedDf)

# A tibble: 6 x 9
#   uniqueId    centerId  subjectId  mean_mtr   size   weight
#   <chr>       <chr>     <chr>      <dbl>      <dbl>  <dbl>
#1  center0...  center01         01     36.6    1.6       68
#2  center0...  center01         02     34.8    1.7       80
#3  center0...  center01         03     35.7    1.5       50
#4  center0...  center01         04     37.0    1.7       62
#...
```
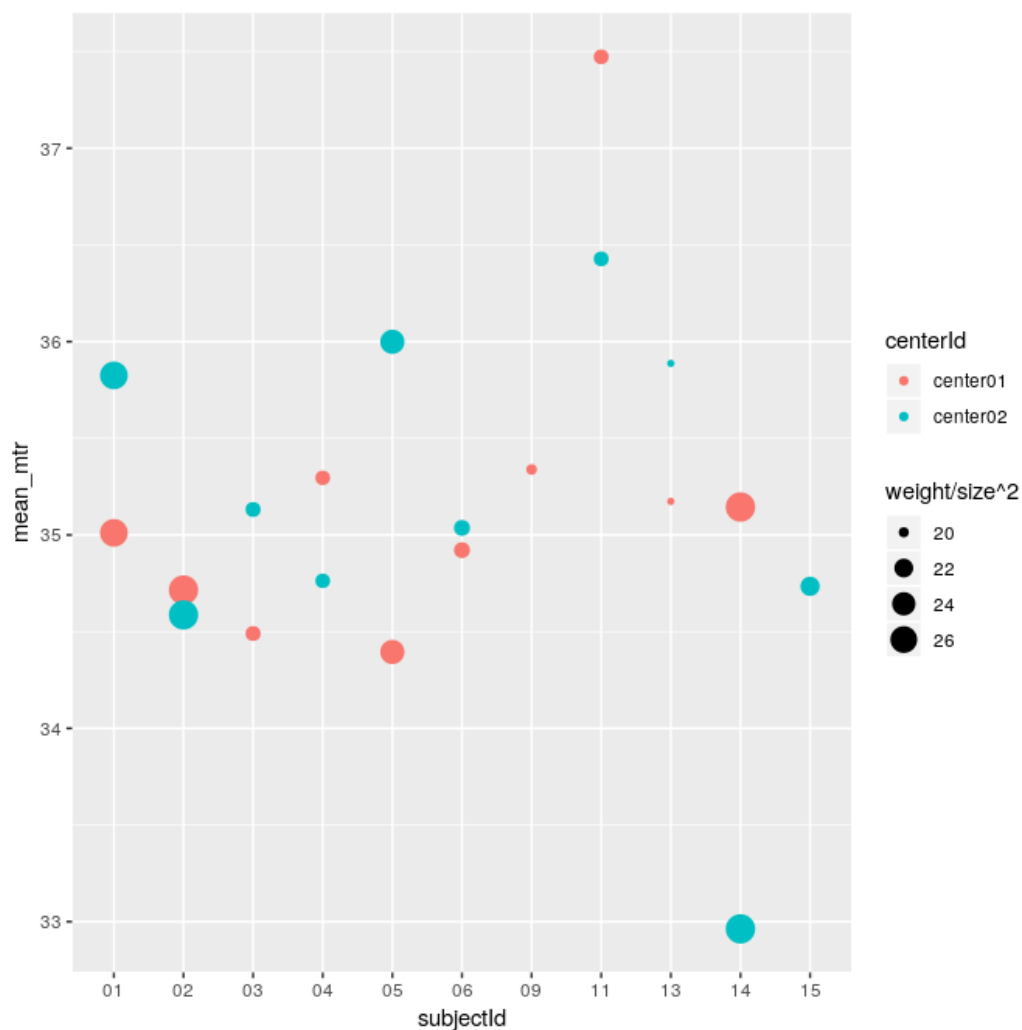
This new tibble gathers all the needed information and is now ready to be visualised and analysed with the appropriate R packages.

While this falls out of the immediate scope of `miet`, we demonstrate that here:

```
library(ggplot2)
library(dplyr)

ggplot(expandedDf,aes(x=subjectId,y=mean_mtr))+
        geom_point(aes(color=centerId,size=weight/size^2))
```

The resulting plot is shown in Figure 2.

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Figure 2: Dispersion of MTR on C3C6

Let's look at the statistics for each center:

```
expandedDf %>% group_by(centerId) %>%
            summarise(mu=mean(mean_mtr),sigma=sd(mean_mtr))


# A tibble: 2 x 3
#   centerId     mu sigma
#   <chr>     <dbl> <dbl>
#1 center01  35.2 0.863
#2 center02  35.1 0.988
```

The difference between the two centers is low, with respect to the data variability. Not surprisingly, there is no evidence against a none-null center effect:

```
summary(lm(data=expandedDf,mean_mtr~centerId+subjectId))


#Call:
#lm(formula = mean_mtr ~ centerId + subjectId, data = expandedDf)
#
#Residuals:
#    Min      1Q  Median      3Q     Max
```

```
#-1.0910 -0.3297  0.0000  0.3297  1.0910
#
#Coefficients:
#                 Estimate Std. Error t value Pr(>|t|)
#(Intercept)      3.542e+01  5.987e-01  59.154 7.41e-12 ***
#centerIdcenter02 6.812e-05  3.787e-01   0.000   0.9999
#...
```
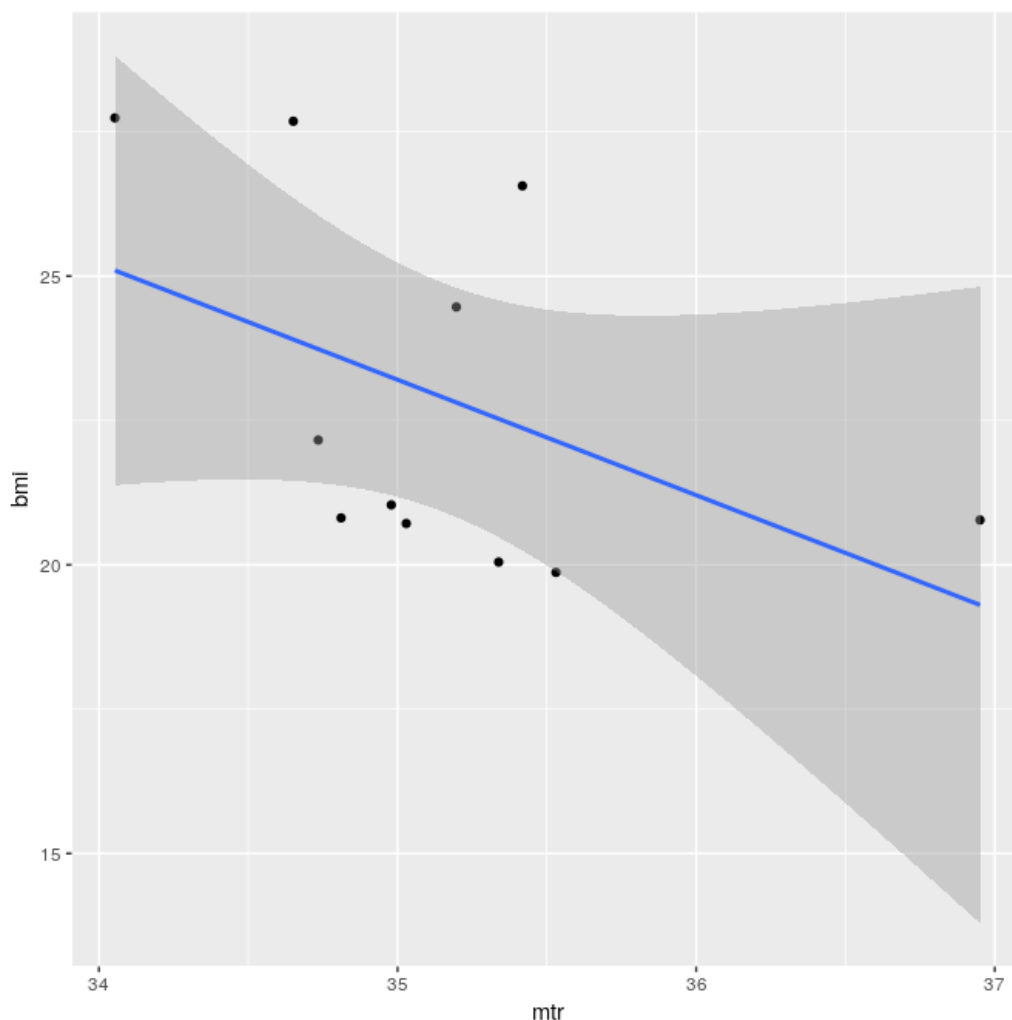
We then choose to pool measurements from `center01` and `center02` to assess relationship to body mass index.

```
pooledDf = expandedDf %>% group_by(subjectId) %>%
           summarize(mtr=mean(mean_mtr),bmi=first(weight)/first(size)^2)
```

```
pooledDf %>% ggplot(aes(x=mtr,y=bmi)) + geom_point() + geom_smooth(method='lm')
```

The resulting plot is given in Figure 3.

Figure 3: BMI as a function of MTR on C3C6

Given this visualization, it is hard to conclude on the relationship between BMI and MTR measurements on the basis of these data.

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To conclude this simple example

To conclude this simple example, we outline that using `miet` avoided us to explicitly:

- write loops over patient/acquisition/…
- deal with MRI files

and thus allows code writing and reviewing to focus on the statistics of interest.

The example developed in this section is intentionally designed to be minimal: all default arguments match well with the situation. `miet` provides ways to deal with a variety of other situations. See the `miet` vignette (available at https://gitlab.inria.fr/miet/miet/blob/master/doc/vignette.pdf) for more details.

Availability

`miet` is an open source software made available under the MIT license. It can be installed from its gitlab repository using the `devtools` package: `devtools::install_git("https://gitlab.inria.fr/miet/miet.git")`.

Acknowledgements

References

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