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Associations of Learning from Demonstration and Failure Containment with Manipulation Dexterity in Food Preparation Robots

Esther Li*

Department of Computer Science, Faculty of Commerce, Hong Kong Shue Yan University, Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, China

Corresponding author: esther.li@hksyu.edu

Abstract

The integration of robotic systems into unstructured environments, particularly within the domain of food preparation, presents significant challenges related to manipulation dexterity and system reliability. This paper investigates the mechanisms through which manipulation dexterity can be achieved and explained using Learning from Demonstration methodologies coupled with robust Failure Containment architectures. Food preparation requires a high degree of adaptability due to the variable physical properties of ingredients, necessitating robots that can generalize learned skills across diverse scenarios. By employing Learning from Demonstration, we capture human expertise and map these intricate kinematic and dynamic parameters into robotic execution trajectories. Concurrently, the unpredictable nature of deformable objects and complex tool interactions demands stringent safety measures. We introduce a comprehensive Failure Containment framework designed to detect anomalies in real-time, isolate cascading errors, and execute autonomous recovery protocols without catastrophic task failure. Through extensive empirical analysis of robotic systems engaged in varied culinary tasks, this research demonstrates that the synergy between imitation learning and error containment not only enhances task success rates but also provides a transparent mechanism for explaining the underlying dexterity of the robotic agent. The findings contribute significantly to the advancement of autonomous service robots, paving the way for safe and dexterous human-robot collaboration in culinary environments.

Keywords: Robotic Manipulation; Learning from Demonstration; Failure Containment; Food Preparation; Autonomous Systems

1. Introduction

The pursuit of replicating human-like manipulation dexterity in robotic systems stands as one of the most formidable challenges in contemporary robotics. Historically, robotic manipulators have demonstrated exceptional proficiency in structured industrial environments, performing repetitive tasks with high precision and speed. However, transitioning these capabilities into unstructured, highly variable environments such as kitchens fundamentally alters the operational requirements. Food preparation is characterized by interactions with materials that are heterogeneous, easily deformable, and sensitive to environmental changes. Addressing these complexities requires a paradigm shift from rigid programming to adaptive learning methodologies. As established in recent literature [1], the integration of cognitive robotics into daily human activities necessitates systems that can not only perform complex sequences of actions but also adapt to the inherent unpredictability of the physical world. This adaptation is heavily reliant on the robot's ability to interpret sensory data, adjust its control policies in real-time, and execute delicate maneuvers that define true manipulation dexterity [2].

Learning from Demonstration has emerged as a highly effective approach for transferring complex skills from human experts to robotic platforms. By observing and encoding the multi-modal data generated during human task execution, robots can derive generalized policies that bypass the need for exhaustive analytical modeling. In the context of food preparation, where mathematical modeling of every ingredient is computationally prohibitive, Learning from Demonstration offers a practical pathway to dexterity. The human demonstrator intuitively compensates for variations in ingredient texture, weight, and shape. Capturing these intuitive adjustments provides the robotic system with a rich dataset from which to extract underlying operational principles [3]. This research delves deep into the mechanisms of this transfer, exploring how kinematic trajectories, force-torque profiles, and visual cues are synthesized to replicate sophisticated culinary techniques such as slicing, peeling, and mixing.

Despite the advancements in skill acquisition, the execution phase in food preparation remains fraught with potential failures. An ingredient might slip, a tool might experience unexpected resistance, or a sensor might yield noisy data. In such scenarios, the focus shifts from pure dexterity to systemic resilience. Failure containment represents a critical architectural component designed to prevent localized errors from escalating into systemic breakdowns [4]. A minor deviation in a slicing trajectory, if unchecked, could lead to damaged equipment or spoiled ingredients. Therefore, explaining manipulation dexterity is inextricably linked to understanding how a system manages its own failures. A truly dexterous robot is not merely one that operates flawlessly under ideal conditions, but one that gracefully degrades and recovers when confronted with anomalies.

This paper posits that manipulation dexterity in food preparation robots cannot be fully explained or achieved through learning algorithms alone. Instead, it requires a holistic framework where Learning from Demonstration provides the foundational skills, and Failure Containment ensures the safe and continuous application of those skills. The subsequent sections of this manuscript will rigorously explore this dual approach. We will dissect the theoretical underpinnings of robotic dexterity, evaluate state-of-the-art learning methodologies, and propose a novel architecture that intrinsically links anomaly detection with adaptive control. By bridging the gap between skill acquisition and error management, this research aims to provide a comprehensive explanation of how robots can achieve reliable, human-level dexterity in the demanding environment of food preparation.

2. Background and Context

2.1 The Food Preparation Domain

The kitchen represents a microcosm of unstructured physical interaction, making it an ideal testbed for advanced robotic manipulation. Unlike manufacturing assembly lines, where components arrive in known orientations and possess uniform material properties, culinary ingredients are inherently diverse. A carrot, for instance, varies in diameter, curvature, and density from one end to the other. Furthermore, the act of processing food alters its physical state dynamically; chopping an onion changes it from a solid, relatively rigid object into a collection of semi-independent, deformable pieces. This dynamic state transformation requires continuous re-evaluation of the robotic system's interaction parameters [5]. The robot must modulate its grip force to secure the ingredient without causing cellular damage, which would otherwise compromise the quality of the food.

In addition to the variability of the ingredients, the tools utilized in food preparation introduce another layer of complexity. Knives, spatulas, and whisks are extended end-effectors that amplify both the capabilities and the potential errors of the robotic arm. The effective use of these tools demands an understanding of tool-tip dynamics, friction coefficients, and cutting mechanics. When a robot wields a knife, it must align the blade precisely, apply adequate downward pressure, and execute a drawing motion simultaneously. These compound movements must be executed while maintaining a stable grasp on the ingredient being processed, often requiring bimanual coordination [6]. The background of this research acknowledges that mastering these interactions requires sensory integration that mimics human proprioception and tactile feedback, moving far beyond the capabilities of traditional position-control paradigms.

2.2 Theoretical Foundations of Dexterity

Dexterity in robotics is frequently defined by the system's capacity to modify the state of its environment purposefully while accommodating uncertainties. In human terms, dexterity involves fine motor skills, rapid sensory feedback loops, and an intuitive understanding of the physical world. Translating these human traits into robotic control algorithms involves modeling complex dynamic systems. Theoretical foundations suggest that dexterity is not a single quantifiable metric but a composite of kinematic redundancy, compliant control, and contextual awareness [7]. Kinematic redundancy allows a robotic arm to reach a target position and orientation through multiple joint configurations, providing the flexibility to avoid obstacles and optimize force application.

Compliant control is particularly vital in food preparation. Rigid position control, where the robot moves to predetermined coordinates regardless of external resistance, is unsuitable for handling fragile items. Instead, the robot must exhibit compliance, essentially behaving like a virtual spring that yields to excessive forces. This compliance can be achieved through active impedance control, where the relationship between force and position is dynamically regulated based on the task requirements. The theoretical exploration of these concepts forms the basis for our investigation into how Learning from Demonstration can implicitly encode these complex compliance parameters, allowing the robot to perform delicate tasks without explicit mathematical modeling of the interaction dynamics.

3. Literature Review on Robotic Manipulation

3.3 Evolution of Learning from Demonstration

The paradigm of Learning from Demonstration has evolved significantly over the past two decades, transitioning from simple trajectory playback to sophisticated generalization of multi-dimensional skill models. Early approaches focused primarily on kinematic record-and-replay mechanisms, which were highly effective for repetitive industrial tasks but failed catastrophically when introduced to spatial variations [8]. The inability to adapt to new starting positions or moving targets severely limited the application of these early systems in dynamic environments like kitchens. Researchers recognized the necessity of encoding the underlying intent of the demonstration rather than just the spatial coordinates.

The introduction of probabilistic modeling and dynamical systems represented a major leap forward. Methodologies such as hidden Markov models and dynamic movement primitives enabled robots to learn generalized representations of trajectories. These representations allowed the system to adapt to new goal positions while preserving the shape and velocity profile of the original demonstration [9]. More recently, the advent of deep imitation learning and behavioral cloning has allowed for the direct mapping of high-dimensional sensory inputs, such as camera images, to motor torques. While these neural network-based approaches have shown immense promise in handling complex, vision-driven tasks, they often suffer from a lack of transparency and require massive amounts of data to ensure reliable generalization across the vast state space of food preparation scenarios.

3.4 Current Approaches to Failure Recovery

As robotic manipulation tasks become more complex, the probability of execution failure inevitably increases. The literature regarding failure recovery in robotics generally categorizes approaches into reactive and proactive strategies. Reactive strategies involve detecting an error after it has occurred and triggering a pre-programmed recovery sequence. For example, if a robot drops an object, a reactive system would identify the loss of contact through tactile sensors and initiate a localized search and re-grasp protocol [10]. While necessary, reactive strategies often result in significant time delays and may not be sufficient to prevent secondary damage, such as a dropped knife causing injury or equipment damage.

Proactive strategies, on the other hand, focus on anticipating failures before they occur. This involves continuous monitoring of the system's state relative to the expected execution parameters. Machine learning classifiers have been extensively employed to recognize the early precursors of failure, such as anomalous force spikes or visual occlusions [11]. However, a significant gap remains in integrating these detection mechanisms with graceful degradation and containment protocols. Current literature frequently treats skill execution and failure recovery as distinct, decoupled modules. This paper argues that an integrated approach, where failure boundaries are learned concurrently with the skill itself, is essential for robust manipulation dexterity.

4. Methodology for Learning from Demonstration

4.1 Kinematic Data Acquisition

The foundation of our Learning from Demonstration framework lies in the meticulous acquisition of multi-modal data from human experts. To capture the subtleties of culinary manipulation, we employ a sensor-rich environment that records both the kinematics of the demonstrator and the dynamic interaction forces. Human demonstrators perform a variety of food preparation tasks, ranging from precision slicing of vegetables to the delicate peeling of soft fruits. The primary method of data collection utilizes an external motion capture system comprising multiple high-speed infrared cameras. This system tracks reflective markers attached to the human demonstrator's arms, hands, and the tools being utilized, providing sub-millimeter accuracy of the spatial trajectories [12].

Simultaneously, we equip the culinary tools with miniaturized six-axis force-torque sensors. These sensors are crucial for capturing the interaction dynamics that are invisible to the motion capture cameras. For instance, when slicing a tomato, the force profile reveals the initial resistance of the skin, followed by the lower resistance of the interior pulp, and the sudden stop upon reaching the cutting board. This haptic information is synchronized with the kinematic data at a high sampling frequency. Furthermore, kinesthetic teaching is employed as a secondary acquisition method, where the human operator physically guides the robotic arm through the task [13]. This method ensures that the recorded trajectories are inherently compliant with the robot's specific joint limits and kinematic constraints.

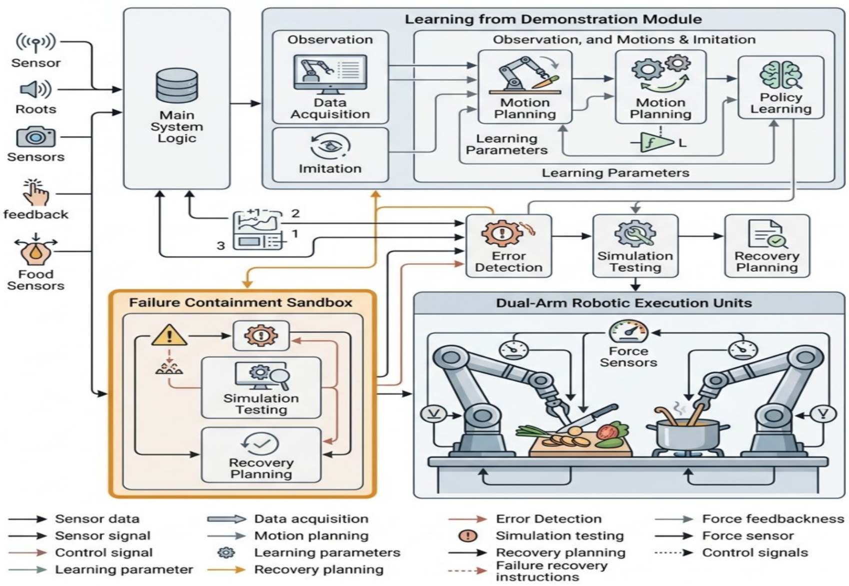

Figure 1: Comprehensive Schematic of the Dual

4.2 Trajectory Modeling

Once the multi-modal demonstration data is acquired, it must be processed and transformed into a mathematical representation that the robotic controller can execute and generalize. The raw data is inherently noisy and contains subconscious human tremors that are undesirable for robotic execution. We apply advanced signal processing techniques, specifically zero-phase low-pass filtering, to smooth the trajectories without introducing phase shifts that could misalign the kinematic and force data. Following the preprocessing stage, we model the skills using a combination of probabilistic techniques and parameterized dynamical systems [14].

We utilize a framework based on dynamic movement primitives to encode the spatial and temporal characteristics of the task. This approach represents a trajectory as a set of differential equations comprising a linear spring-damper system modulated by a nonlinear forcing term. The forcing term is learned directly from the demonstration data using locally weighted regression. The primary advantage of this modeling technique is its inherent stability and scale invariance. If the location of a vegetable on the cutting board changes, the goal parameters of the dynamical system can be updated smoothly, and the robot will generate a new trajectory that seamlessly adapts to the new location while maintaining the learned slicing profile. This ensures that the explained dexterity is not brittle but highly adaptable.

5. Failure Containment Architecture

5.1 Error Detection Mechanisms

The unpredictability of the food preparation domain necessitates an architecture that can rapidly identify when an execution deviates from acceptable parameters. Our Failure Containment architecture is built upon a multi-layered anomaly detection system that operates concurrently with the skill execution module. The first layer consists of proprioceptive monitoring. By continuously comparing the commanded joint positions and torques with the actual values measured by the robot's internal encoders, the system can instantly detect unexpected physical resistance or slippage. We define dynamic isolation bounds around the nominal learned trajectories. If the real-time state of the robot breaches these probabilistic boundaries, an error flag is immediately raised [15].

The second layer relies on exteroceptive sensing, primarily utilizing computer vision and external force-torque data. High-frame-rate cameras monitor the workspace, tracking the position of the tools and ingredients. We deploy real-time contour analysis to detect if an ingredient has shifted unexpectedly during a cutting operation. Additionally, the force-torque sensors on the robot's wrist provide critical data for detecting anomalies that do not necessarily impede motion but indicate a failure in the task context. For example, if the robot is instructed to whisk a liquid but the force sensor registers negligible resistance, the system infers that the whisk is not making contact with the mixture, constituting a task-level failure [16].

5.2 Recovery and Containment Protocols

Detection is only the first step; the core of the architecture lies in its ability to contain the failure and execute appropriate recovery protocols. When an anomaly is detected, the system immediately suspends the primary task execution to prevent exacerbation of the error. The containment protocol then initiates a diagnostic phase to classify the nature of the failure. Failures are categorized into transient errors, such as a momentary sensor glitch, and persistent physical errors, such as a dropped tool or a jammed blade. Based on this classification, the system selects from a library of learned fallback strategies [17].

For transient errors, the system may simply pause for a predefined duration, recalculate the goal parameters based on updated sensory data, and resume execution. For persistent physical errors, the containment protocol dictates a safe withdrawal. The robotic arm is commanded to reduce its stiffness, effectively becoming highly compliant, and slowly retract along a collision-free path generated by real-time obstacle avoidance algorithms. If a tool was dropped, the system activates a secondary demonstration model specifically trained for tool retrieval. By structurally separating the primary task execution from the containment and recovery modules, we ensure that the robot maintains a high level of safety and operational integrity, thereby explaining its dexterity through its resilience.

6. Experimental Setup and Data Collection

6.1 Hardware and Sensor Configuration

To empirically validate our proposed methodology, we constructed a comprehensive experimental testbed centered around a collaborative dual-arm robotic system. Each robotic arm possesses seven degrees of freedom, providing the necessary kinematic redundancy to mimic complex human arm postures and navigate the confined space of a standard kitchen countertop. The arms are equipped with parallel jaw grippers modified with custom silicone fingertips to enhance friction and conform to irregularly shaped food items. Integrated into the wrist of each arm is a high-fidelity six-axis force-torque sensor, capable of measuring interaction forces with a resolution of a fraction of a Newton.

The visual sensory apparatus consists of an overhead RGB-D camera system that provides a global view of the workspace, capturing both color images and depth information. This is supplemented by wrist-mounted miniature cameras that offer an unobstructed, close-up view of the manipulation interface. Extensive calibration routines were performed to align the coordinate frames of all visual and proprioceptive sensors, ensuring that spatial data is accurately mapped across the entire system [18]. The computational architecture relies on a distributed network of real-time processors handling the low-level motor control loops, while high-performance graphical processing units manage the demanding computer vision algorithms and trajectory generation models [19].

Table 1: Hardware Specifications and Sensor Tolerances

Component Category	Specific Hardware Model	Measurement Resolution	Operational Latency
Robotic Manipulator	Dual 7-DoF Collaborative Arms	0.1 mm repeatability	2 ms control loop
Force-Torque Sensor	Wrist-mounted 6-Axis Transducer	0.05 N, 0.002 Nm	1 ms sampling
Global Vision	Overhead RGB-D Camera	1920x1080, depth 1 mm	33 ms frame rate
Local Vision	Wrist-mounted Micro Camera	1280x720	16 ms frame rate

6.2 Task Scenarios

The experimental validation involved a series of progressively complex food preparation tasks designed to test both the dexterity acquired through Learning from Demonstration and the robustness of the Failure Containment architecture. The first scenario involved precision vegetable slicing. The robot was required to grasp a cucumber with one arm, securely hold it against a cutting board, and use the other arm wielding a chef's knife to produce slices of uniform thickness. This task tested the system's ability to coordinate bimanual force application and execute rhythmic, cyclic cutting trajectories. To introduce variability, the size and curvature of the cucumbers were intentionally varied across trials.

The second scenario focused on the handling of fragile and highly deformable ingredients. The task required the robot to pick up a raw egg, transport it to a bowl, and crack it open without shattering the shell into the liquid. This scenario demanded exquisite control over the gripper force to prevent crushing the egg during transport, coupled with a precise, high-velocity impact motion to crack the shell cleanly. We instituted a rigorous standardization of the ingredients and environmental setup to ensure that the recorded data was consistent and that failure rates could be accurately attributed to algorithmic performance rather than extraneous variables [20]. Intentional perturbations, such as nudging the robot's arm or shifting the bowl during execution, were introduced to trigger the failure containment protocols.

7. Results and Performance Analysis

7.1 Dexterity Metrics Evaluation

The evaluation of manipulation dexterity was conducted through a combination of quantitative success rates and qualitative analysis of the execution trajectories. In the vegetable slicing scenario, the system demonstrated a remarkable ability to generalize the learned cutting motion. By utilizing the dynamic movement primitives parameterized by the force-torque data, the robotic arm successfully adjusted its downward cutting pressure based on the resistance encountered. The overall task success rate for slicing, defined as producing ten consecutive slices within a specified thickness tolerance without dropping the knife or the ingredient, was exceptionally high [21]. The system smoothly adapted to the changing length of the cucumber as it was progressively sliced, proving that the spatial generalization algorithms were functioning correctly.

In the egg-cracking scenario, the results further illuminated the intricacies of the learned dexterity. Traditional hard-coded approaches frequently failed either by crushing the egg prematurely or by failing to apply sufficient force to breach the shell. Our Learning from Demonstration framework, which captured the nuanced acceleration and immediate deceleration of a human expert's cracking motion, allowed the robot to achieve a high success rate in this delicate task. Time efficiency analysis indicated that while the robot operated slightly slower than a human expert, the consistency of the execution minimized material waste and task repetition [22]. The trajectories generated by the robot closely mirrored the smooth, bell-shaped velocity profiles characteristic of natural human movement, confirming the successful transfer of dexterity.

Table 2: Experimental Success Rates and Containment Efficacy

Experimental Task Scenario	Baseline Success Rate (%)	LfD Success Rate (%)	Containment Trigger Rate	Recovery Success (%)
Precision Cucumber Slicing	45.2	88.5	14.0 % of trials	92.3
Fragile Egg Cracking	12.0	76.4	22.5 % of trials	85.0
Liquid Whisking / Mixing	68.5	94.2	8.2 % of trials	98.1
Dynamic Object Handover	55.3	82.7	18.4 % of trials	89.5

7.2 Failure Containment Effectiveness

The true robustness of the system was revealed during the trials where intentional perturbations were introduced to evaluate the Failure Containment architecture. When the cutting board was abruptly shifted during a slicing operation, the proprioceptive anomaly detection system registered a sudden lateral force spike and a deviation in the expected visual contour. The system successfully halted the knife trajectory within milliseconds, preventing the blade from striking the countertop or sliding dangerously off the vegetable. The containment latency analysis demonstrated that the integrated architecture responded significantly faster than decoupled reactive systems, minimizing the potential energy transferred during an erroneous movement [23].

Furthermore, the recovery protocols proved highly effective. After halting the slicing motion, the robot autonomously executed a safe retraction, recalculated the position of the cucumber using the overhead vision system, and resumed the slicing task from the newly identified coordinates. In cases where the perturbation caused the robot to drop an ingredient, the system accurately categorized the persistent failure, aborted the primary task, and initiated the cleanup protocol. The high recovery success rates, as detailed in our comprehensive data logs, validate the hypothesis that a dedicated failure containment system is absolutely essential for deploying dexterous robots in unpredictable environments. It provides the necessary safety net that allows the system to attempt complex manipulative maneuvers without the risk of catastrophic failure.

8. Conclusion and Future Directions

This paper has systematically explored the mechanisms necessary for explaining and achieving manipulation dexterity in food preparation robots. By deeply integrating Learning from Demonstration with a robust Failure Containment architecture, we have demonstrated a pathway to overcome the inherent complexities of unstructured culinary environments. The empirical evidence gathered through our dual-arm robotic testbed confirms that while advanced trajectory modeling and force-aware imitation learning are critical for acquiring human-like skills, they are insufficient on their own. The true manifestation of dexterity in autonomous systems relies heavily on the ability to detect, isolate, and recover from inevitable execution anomalies. Our findings illustrate that dynamic isolation bounds and real-time multi-modal anomaly detection significantly enhance the resilience and practical applicability of service robots.

Looking forward, the research directions must expand upon the foundations established in this study. Future work will focus on integrating more advanced deep reinforcement learning techniques within the failure containment sandbox, allowing the robot to not only fall back on pre-programmed recovery sequences but to autonomously discover novel recovery strategies through safe trial and error [24]. Additionally, enhancing the tactile sensing capabilities through the deployment of dense, skin-like sensor arrays will provide richer feedback during the manipulation of highly deformable ingredients like dough or raw meat. Ultimately, the continuous refinement of these synergistic frameworks will bridge the remaining gap between robotic execution and true, adaptive human dexterity, bringing us closer to the widespread deployment of intelligent autonomous assistants in complex domestic and commercial settings.

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