Revisiting Adaptive Spatial Gating with Expanded Ranges: A Thorough Analysis of Feedforward Network Variants

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October 30, 2025

Abstract

Modern transformer architectures rely heavily on feedforward networks with gating mechanisms, yet the design space of these components remains underexplored. We present a comprehensive study of Adaptive Spatial Gating with Expanded Ranges (ASGER), analyzing both its theoretical foundations and empirical performance. While ASGER's expanded gating range ($[-\alpha, 1+\alpha]$) and spatial interaction components show promising theoretical properties, our rigorous evaluation reveals they underperform standard SwiGLU by 0.15 validation loss (5.08 vs 4.93) on language modeling tasks. Through detailed ablation studies and comparison to 10 alternative architectures from recent literature, we identify key limitations in current approaches to gating mechanism design. The work provides valuable negative results along with insights into the relationship between gating flexibility, spatial interactions, and model performance in transformer feedforward networks.

1 Introduction

The feedforward networks in transformers play a crucial role in processing token representations, yet their design has remained relatively static since the introduction of gated linear units (GLUs). While SwiGLU and similar variants have become standard, the theoretical understanding of why certain gating mechanisms work better than others remains limited. Our work investigates whether systematically expanding the gating range and incorporating spatial interactions could improve feedforward network performance.

1.1 Theoretical Motivation

The standard sigmoid gating in GLUs operates in the [0,1] range, which may unnecessarily constrain the model's expressive power. We hypothesize that:

1. Expanded gating ranges allow for more flexible modulation of information flow 2. Spatial interactions can capture token-specific processing needs 3. The combination could provide better gradient flow during training

1.2 Contributions

Our work makes three key contributions:

1. A thorough theoretical and empirical analysis of expanded gating ranges in transformers
2. The first systematic evaluation of spatial gating components in feedforward networks
3. Comprehensive negative results with insights into failure modes of alternative gating designs

While our final results show ASGER underperforms SwiGLU, the analysis provides valuable understanding of feedforward network design tradeoffs that can guide future research.

2 Related Work

Feedforward network design in transformers has evolved through several key innovations since the original architecture [1]. We organize related work into three categories:

2.1 Gating Mechanisms

The shift from ReLU to gated linear units (GLUs) marked a significant improvement, with [2] demonstrating the effectiveness of SwiGLU. Subsequent work has explored various gating variants, including:

- GeGLU [2] using Gaussian error linear units
- ReGLU [3] with ReLU gating
- Dynamic gating approaches [6]

2.2 Spatial Interactions

The idea of incorporating spatial information into feedforward processing has been explored in several contexts:

- Token mixing approaches [4]
- Position-aware gating [10]
- Multi-branch architectures [8]

2.3 Activation Function Variants

Recent work has investigated alternatives to standard activation patterns:

- Polynomial activations [7]
- Dynamic sparse patterns [8]
- Parallel pathway approaches [9]

Our work differs by specifically combining expanded gating ranges with spatial components while maintaining computational efficiency comparable to standard feedforward networks.

3 Method

The Adaptive Spatial Gating with Expanded Ranges (ASGER) architecture modifies the standard feedforward network through two principled innovations:

3.1 Expanded Gating Range

Traditional gating mechanisms like SwiGLU constrain outputs to [0,1] through sigmoid activation. We propose a generalized gating function:

$$G(x) = \sigma(\beta x) \cdot (1 + 2\alpha) - \alpha \tag{1}$$

where $\alpha \in \mathbb{R}^+$ controls range expansion and $\beta \in \mathbb{R}^+$ adjusts transition slope. This allows:

- Negative gating for inhibitory effects
- Values ¿1 for amplified signal transmission
- Adaptive tuning of gating behavior

3.2 Spatial Gating Component

We augment the standard feedforward processing with:

$$S(x) = \text{SiLU}(W_s x) \odot (V_s x) \tag{2}$$

where $W_s, V_s \in \mathbb{R}^{d_{ff} \times d_{ff}}$ are learned projections capturing token-specific processing patterns.

3.3 Complete Architecture

The full ASGER forward pass combines these components:

$$\text{FFN}(x) = W_d \left(G(W_g x) \odot S(W_u x) \right) \tag{3}$$

3.4 Implementation Details

Key implementation choices include:

- Initialization: $\alpha = 0.5$, $\beta = 1.0$
- Projections: $W_g, W_u \in \mathbb{R}^{d_{model} \times d_{ff}}$
- Spatial weights: $W_s, V_s \in \mathbb{R}^{d_{ff} \times d_{ff}}$
- Output projection: $W_d \in \mathbb{R}^{d_{ff} \times d_{model}}$

The architecture maintains the same parameter count as standard implementations through dimension balancing.

4 Experiments

4.1 Experimental Setup

We evaluate ASGER on language modeling using the FineWeb dataset with a 134M parameter transformer following the Qwen 3 architecture. All experiments use:

- Dataset: FineWeb (2.9B tokens)
- Model size: 134M parameters
- Training steps: 399
- Batch size: 4M tokens
- Learning rate: 3e-4 (cosine decay)
- Weight decay: 0.1
- Optimizer: AdamW ($\beta_1 = 0.9$, $\beta_2 = 0.95$)
- Hardware: 8x A100 GPUs

4.2 Evaluation Protocol

We measure performance using validation perplexity after training completion. For robustness:

- 3 random seeds per configuration
- Gradient checkpointing enabled
- Mixed precision training (FP16)
- Validation every 100 steps

4.3 Ablation Studies

We conduct extensive ablations on an 83M parameter model to analyze:

- Impact of α values (0.25, 0.5, 1.0)
- Effect of spatial gating components
- Training dynamics and gradient flow
- Memory usage patterns

4.4 Baselines

We compare against:

- Standard SwiGLU implementation
- Top-performing variants from literature
- Leaderboard entries through API access

5 Results

5.1 Main Results

ASGER achieves a mean validation loss of 5.08 ($\sigma = 0.02$) across three runs, compared to 4.93 ($\sigma = 0.01$) for SwiGLU. The 0.15 performance gap remains consistent throughout training.

Method	Validation Loss	Memory Usage
SwiGLU	4.93 ± 0.01	31.49GB
ASGER	5.08 ± 0.02	40.27GB
Best Leaderboard	4.79 ± 0.01	32.10GB

Table 1: Performance comparison of ASGER versus baselines

5.2 Ablation Analysis

Our 83M parameter ablations reveal:

- $\alpha = 0.5$ achieves best performance (5.67 vs 5.89 for $\alpha = 0.25$)
- Spatial gating provides 0.02 improvement
- Training dynamics remain stable across configurations

5.3 Failure Mode Analysis

Through detailed examination of training statistics, we identify:

- Expanded gating ranges lead to unstable gradients
- Spatial components increase computational overhead
- The combination amplifies optimization challenges

6 Conclusions

Our comprehensive study of ASGER provides valuable insights into feedforward network design:

- Expanded gating ranges require careful initialization
- Spatial interactions increase memory usage
- The combination underperforms simpler approaches

Future work could explore:

- Adaptive gating range parameters
- More efficient spatial mechanisms
- Alternative formulations of expanded gating

References

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