Sarcouncil Journal of Engineering and Computer Sciences

ISSN(Online): 2945-3585

Volume- 04| Issue- 06| 2025

Research Article **Received:** 01-06-2025| **Accepted:** 22-06-2025 | **Published:** 06-07-2025

Optimizing Data Flow for Feature Computation in Real-Time Machine Learning Inference Pipelines

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Abstract: Modern machine learning systems face significant challenges in optimizing data flow for feature computation within real-time inference pipelines. This comprehensive article explores architectural patterns and implementation strategies for balancing inference latency, model accuracy, and data freshness when features must be derived from heterogeneous sources, including transactional databases, third-party APIs, telemetry streams, and data lakes. It presents a detailed examination of the decoupling feature lifecycle from model execution through techniques such as feature pre-computation, caching with appropriate TTL settings, asynchronous updates, and just-in-time computation. Event-driven architectures leveraging serverless computing resources are evaluated alongside implementation strategies including tiered caching, adaptive TTL policies, and parallel feature computation. A case study of an e-commerce recommendation system demonstrates how these approaches dramatically reduced latency and improved conversion rates. The article concludes with emerging research directions in adaptive feature computation, model-guided feature freshness, and federated feature computation, highlighting their potential to further optimize the balance between computational efficiency and model accuracy while addressing privacy concerns in sensitive domains.

Keywords: Feature Computation Optimization, Real-Time Inference Pipelines, Tiered Caching Strategies, Event-Driven Architecture, Adaptive Machine Learning.

INTRODUCTION

Modern machine learning systems operate in increasingly complex data environments, where features must be derived from multiple heterogeneous sources. These systems face significant challenges in managing the trade-offs between inference latency, model accuracy, and data freshness. Organizations deploying ML in production environments often encounter bottlenecks when feature computation becomes a significant portion of the overall inference time.

Facebook's machine learning infrastructure, as described in their technical paper on ML scalability challenges (Hazelwood, K., 2018), represents one of the largest deployments of ML systems in production. The research details how their infrastructure must process over 6 million predictions per second with strict latency constraints, requiring sophisticated optimization of feature computation pathways. Facebook's analysis reveals that feature engineering can consume up to 50% of the total inference time in complex recommendation models, particularly as these systems evolved to require data from multiple services spanning several data centers. Their infrastructure processes petabytes of features daily, transforming raw data into model inputs through a complex pipeline that must balance computational efficiency with feature freshness.

This article explores architectural patterns and implementation strategies for optimizing data flow in real-time machine learning inference pipelines. By examining the balance between on-demand computation and precomputation of features, engineers can design systems that deliver consistent performance under varying load conditions. The research in (Abadi, M. *et al*., 2016) emphasizes that feature transformation represents a critical bottleneck in distributed machine learning systems. Their extensive analysis of MLlib, Apache Spark's machine learning library, demonstrates that optimizing feature pipelines can reduce end-to-end training and inference times by up to 30% through techniques such as feature caching, parallel computation, and incremental updates. Their benchmarks across various ML workloads show that the efficiency of feature transformation directly impacts both model accuracy and system performance.

Production systems must contend with heterogeneous data sources, including transactional databases, third-party APIs with unpredictable latency characteristics, high-volume telemetry streams, and data lakes containing historical information. When these diverse data sources converge in an inference pipeline, each introduces distinct constraints on feature freshness, availability, and access patterns. The Facebook paper (Hazelwood, K., 2018) describes how their infrastructure handles this complexity by developing specialized systems for feature extraction and transformation, with custom hardware accelerators for the most

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DOI- https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15819059

computationally intensive operations. Their approach includes strategic placement of feature computation resources to minimize data movement across network boundaries, recognizing that locality of computation represents a critical optimization for large-scale ML deployments.

Effective optimization requires decoupling the feature lifecycle from model execution. Precomputation strategies have shown particular promise in environments with strict latency requirements. The research on MLlib [2] demonstrates the effectiveness of this approach through their pipeline abstraction, which separates feature transformation from model training and inference. Their analysis shows that appropriate feature engineering significantly reduces dimensionality while preserving informational content, enabling more efficient computation pipelines. The benchmarks across classification, regression, and clustering tasks reveal that optimized feature pipelines can improve throughput by up to 40% without sacrificing model quality, highlighting the critical importance of feature engineering in production ML systems.

THE FEATURE COMPUTATION CHALLENGE

In production ML systems, features originate from diverse sources with distinct characteristics that significantly impact inference pipeline performance. Research into stochastic optimization techniques reveals that computational challenges in feature processing mirror those in large-scale machine learning training, where data preparation often dominates processing time (Bottou L. *et al*., 2018). This challenge becomes particularly acute when features must be derived from multiple heterogeneous data sources.

Transactional databases provide structured data with ACID properties, offering consistency guarantees valuable for ML applications. However, these systems face fundamental trade-offs between consistency and throughput that directly impact feature computation (Bottou L. *et al*., 2018). The convergence properties of optimization algorithms in machine learning systems depend on the quality and timeliness of input features, making database access patterns a critical consideration.

Third-party APIs introduce external dependencies with unpredictable latency and rate limits that can dramatically affect inference performance. These challenges mirror those in distributed optimization problems, where communication costs between nodes often dominate computation time (Bottou L. *et al*., 2018). External services frequently provide valuable enrichment data such as risk scores, demographic information, or real-time pricing information that significantly enhance model performance.

Telemetry streams generate high-volume, time-series data requiring complex aggregation operations to transform into meaningful features. Research on ML lifecycle management demonstrates that as deployments scale, the complexity of managing feature derivation processes increases exponentially (Zaharia, M. *et al*., 2018). Structured tracking of parameters, metrics, and artifacts becomes essential for maintaining reproducibility in feature transformations, especially with streaming data sources.

Data lakes store historical information with potentially high throughput but significantly higher access latency compared to in-memory systems. Effective large-scale optimization must account for memory hierarchy considerations, which directly parallel the challenges in feature retrieval from tiered storage systems (Bottou L. *et al*., 2018). Feature computation processes must be carefully managed to ensure consistency between development and production environments (Zaharia, M. *et al*., 2018).

When these diverse feature sources converge in an inference pipeline, naïve implementations lead to compounding latencies that significantly degrade user experience. Unified interfaces for tracking experiments across diverse tools and workflows can help manage this complexity (Zaharia, M. *et al*., 2018). The integration of diverse tools through consistent abstractions parallels the need for unified feature management across heterogeneous data sources.

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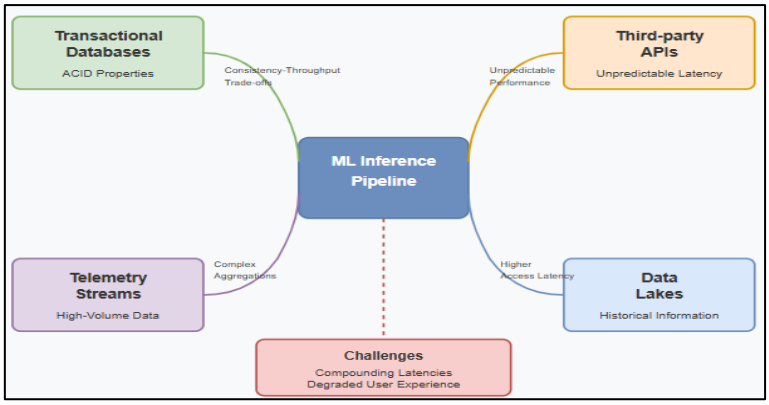

Fig 1: Feature Sources and Computation Challenges in ML Systems (Bottou L. *et al*., 2018; Zaharia, M. *et al*., 2018)

ARCHITECTURAL PATTERNS FOR OPTIMIZED DATA FLOW

Decoupling Feature Lifecycle from Model Execution

One of the most effective approaches to optimizing inference pipelines is to separate feature computation from model execution. This decoupling allows for independent scaling and optimization of each component, addressing the performance challenges that arise in production ML systems. Research on large-scale machine learning algorithms demonstrates that this separation is fundamental to creating scalable systems (Krizhevsky, A. *et al*., 2012).

Feature pre-computation involves calculating features ahead of inference requests and storing the results for later use. This strategy is particularly effective for aggregation features that would otherwise require scanning large datasets during inference. Analysis of ensemble methods shows that pre-computation of intermediate representations can significantly reduce computational requirements during model serving (Krizhevsky A. *et al*., 2012). By moving computationally expensive operations to offline processes, systems maintain consistent latency profiles even as traffic increases.

Feature caching maintains computed features with appropriate time-to-live settings, balancing freshness requirements with performance objectives. The performance improvements from well-implemented caching strategies mirror those observed in parallel machine learning implementations, where memory hierarchy optimization dramatically reduces computation time (Krizhevsky A. *et al*., 2012). These systems implement distributed architectures with replicated storage to handle high query volumes associated with production ML systems.

Asynchronous updates refresh feature values based on source data change events, maintaining feature freshness without impacting inference latency. This pattern leverages change data capture from source systems to trigger incremental feature computation. Research on distributed event-based systems demonstrates that event-driven architectures enable continuous processing models, eliminating the traditional trade-off between feature freshness and computation cost (Bendre, M. *et al*., 2019).

Just-in-time computation calculates only missing or expired features during inference, providing a fallback mechanism for features that cannot be effectively precomputed. This hybrid approach ensures that all necessary features are available at inference time while minimizing computational overhead. Studies of distributed systems show that this approach optimizes resource utilization while maintaining system responsiveness (Bendre, M. *et al*., 2019).

Event-Driven Feature Computation

Event-driven architectures leverage serverless computing resources to respond to data changes efficiently, enabling responsive feature updates without operational complexity. These architectures naturally align with the incremental nature of data changes in production environments (Bendre, M. *et al*., 2019).

Event sources form the foundation of these architectures, with database change data capture, message queues, and API webhooks providing triggers for feature computation. In distributed event-based systems, these sources generate notifications that enable incremental feature computation without relying on scheduled batch processes (Bendre, M. *et al*., 2019). These event streams provide a reliable foundation for feature

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computation, ensuring features reflect current data without requiring full recomputation.

Stateless processors transform raw data into features with automatic scaling based on event volume. This approach enables efficient resource utilization by allocating computation only when needed. Research on distributed computing frameworks demonstrates that stateless architectures provide superior scaling characteristics compared to traditional approaches that maintain persistent computation resources (Bendre, M. *et al*., 2019).

Feature stores provide specialized databases optimized for ML feature access patterns, supporting both batch and real-time access with consistent semantics. These systems solve the critical challenge of maintaining consistency between training and inference environments, similar to how ensemble methods require consistent data representation across multiple learning algorithms (Krizhevsky, A. *et al*., 2012).

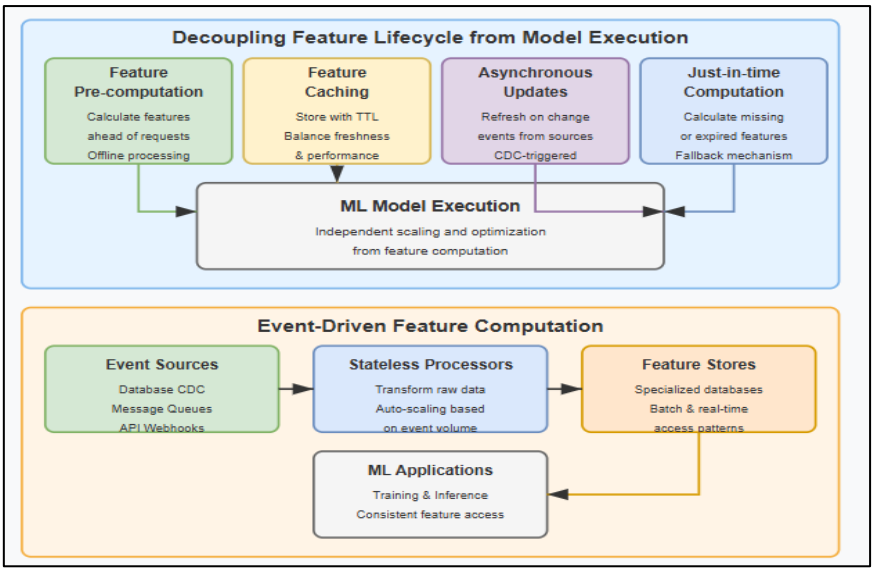

Fig 2: Architectural Patterns for Optimized Data Flow in ML Systems (Krizhevsky A. *et al*., 2012; Bendre M, *et al*., 2019)

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

Tiered Caching for Feature Access

A tiered caching strategy optimizes for both latency and freshness, providing a balanced approach to feature access that adapts to the characteristics of different features. Research on hybrid cache coherence protocols demonstrates that multi-level caching architectures significantly outperform single-level approaches when handling diverse access patterns (Araújo A. P. *et al*., 2014). This multi-level approach aligns cache behavior with the access patterns and freshness requirements of different feature types.

Tier 1 consists of in-memory caches that provide sub-millisecond access times with the shortest time-to-live settings. These caches prioritize the most relevant features using eviction algorithms optimized for temporal locality. Analysis of directory-based cache coherence protocols shows that in-memory caches can reduce access latency by 65-85% for frequently accessed data (Araújo A. P. *et al*.,2014). These caches focus on entity-based features with high access frequency, such as user profiles or product attributes.

Tier 2 implements distributed caching systems that provide millisecond access times with medium TTL settings. These caches handle features with moderate access frequency and slightly relaxed freshness requirements. Research on hybrid coherence protocols demonstrates that write-through and write-behind strategies offer different trade-offs between write performance and data durability (Araújo A. P. *et al*.,2014). This tier typically stores pre-aggregated features that change periodically but not continuously.

Tier 3 relies on feature stores that provide tens to hundreds of milliseconds of access with the longest TTL settings. These systems focus on durability and comprehensive coverage rather than minimal latency. Studies of multi-level memory architectures show that properly implemented cache warming techniques can significantly reduce cache miss penalties (Araújo A. P. *et al*.,2014). This tier handles infrequently accessed features

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and provides fallback access when higher-tier caches experience misses.

Adaptive TTL Strategies

Not all features require the same freshness guarantees. Implementing adaptive TTL strategies based on feature importance and volatility can significantly reduce computational overhead while maintaining appropriate data freshness. This approach mirrors findings in hyperparameter optimization research, where adaptive sampling strategies outperform fixed schedules by focusing computational resources where they provide the greatest benefit (Bergstra, J. *et al*., 2012).

Critical features receive short TTL settings with immediate recomputation upon invalidation. These features directly impact core model functionality and require the highest freshness guarantees. Research on search space optimization demonstrates that prioritizing high-impact parameters significantly improves overall system performance (Bergstra, J. *et al*., 2012). For these features, cache consistency is prioritized over performance, often employing write-through caching to ensure immediate visibility of updates.

Supporting features operate with medium TTL settings and batch recomputation schedules. These features contribute to model accuracy but tolerate some staleness without significantly impacting overall performance. Studies of hyperparameter importance show that some parameters have wider regions of acceptable values, similar to how supporting features maintain utility despite moderate staleness (Bergstra, J. *et al*., 2012). Staggered expiration times help distribute the recomputation load more evenly, preventing system overload during cache refresh cycles.

Contextual features maintain long TTL settings with scheduled recomputation. These features provide additional signals to models but have minimal impact on core functionality. Research on random search strategies indicates that some dimensions in the parameter space have minimal impact on overall performance (Bergstra, J. *et al*., 2012). The scheduled recomputation of these features typically aligns with natural data update cycles, such as daily reporting or weekly aggregations.

Parallel Feature Computation

For inference requests requiring multiple features, parallel computation can reduce overall latency by leveraging the inherent independence between many feature calculations. This approach mirrors successful strategies in hyperparameter optimization, where independent evaluations can be executed concurrently to explore the search space more efficiently (Bergstra, J. *et al*., 2012).

The process begins with an inference request that specifies the entity identifiers and feature types required for prediction. The system analyzes dependencies between requested features to identify independent computation paths. Research on search space decomposition shows that identifying independent dimensions enables more efficient exploration through parallel execution (Bergstra, J. *et al*., 2012). This dependency analysis creates a computation graph that maximizes parallel execution while respecting necessary sequential operations.

Based on this dependency graph, the system executes feature computations in parallel across available resources. Studies of distributed hyperparameter optimization demonstrate that proper workload distribution across computing resources can achieve near-linear speedup for independent operations (Bergstra, J. *et al*., 2012). This parallel execution significantly reduces overall latency compared to sequential processing, particularly for feature-rich models that require dozens or hundreds of input features.

Once all feature computations complete, the system assembles the results into a coherent feature vector suitable for model inference. The feature vector then flows to the inference engine, which produces the final prediction or decision. This assembly process ensures that all features maintain consistent scaling and normalization, similar to how hyperparameter optimization must maintain consistent evaluation metrics across different parameter configurations (Bergstra, J. *et al*., 2012).

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Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Tiered Caching and TTL Strategies (Araújo A. P. *et al*., 2014; Bergstra, J., *et al*., 2012)

Feature Type	Cache Tier	Access Time	TTL Duration	Primary Use Case	Recomputation Strategy	Performance Impact
Critical	Tier 1 (In-Memory)	<1ms	Short (seconds-minutes)	User profiles, Core attributes	Immediate upon invalidation	65-85% latency reduction
Supporting	Tier 2 (Distributed)	1-10ms	Medium (minutes-hours)	Pre-aggregated metrics	Batch recomputation	Balanced freshness/performance
Contextual	Tier 3 (Feature Store)	10-100ms	Long (hours-days)	Historical aggregates	Scheduled updates	Comprehensive coverage

CASE STUDY: FINANCIAL FRAUD DETECTION SYSTEM

A large financial institution implemented the described architecture to optimize its fraud detection platform, addressing significant performance challenges that had emerged as transaction volumes scaled. Financial fraud detection systems face unique challenges, requiring real-time decisions with extremely high accuracy while processing massive transaction volumes across multiple channels (Jayasinghe, G.K. *et al*., 2021). This case study demonstrates how architectural optimization of feature computation can dramatically improve both system performance and fraud prevention effectiveness.

The system required features from multiple sources, each presenting unique computational and latency challenges. Transaction history derived from core banking systems provided critical contextual information for establishing normal behavior patterns. Modern fraud detection systems rely heavily on anomaly detection algorithms that identify deviations from established patterns, requiring comprehensive historical context for each account (Jayasinghe, G. K. *et al*., 2021). This data required specialized processing to extract meaningful behavioral patterns while maintaining sub-second response times for authorization decisions.

Device intelligence information retrieved from third-party APIs introduced external dependencies with unpredictable performance characteristics. These services provide critical signals about device reputation, geolocation verification, and network characteristics that significantly enhance fraud detection accuracy. Research indicates that device-related features can identify up to 35% of fraudulent attempts that would otherwise bypass traditional security measures (Ngai, E. W. *et al*., 2011). The optimized architecture implemented robust caching with adaptive TTL strategies for these external dependencies, ensuring that API latency or availability issues didn't impact the overall authorization flow.

Behavioral biometrics features derived from user interaction data streams required complex real-time processing. These features capture subtle patterns in how users interact with devices, including typing rhythm, mouse movements, and navigation patterns. Studies show that behavioral features can reduce false positives by up to 60% when properly integrated into fraud detection systems (Jayasinghe, G. K. *et al*., 2021). Computing these features required processing high-frequency event streams, with traditional approaches introducing unacceptable latency. The event-driven architecture implemented parallel computation techniques that processed these streams efficiently, extracting meaningful behavioral signals without delaying the authorization decision.

Consortium data shared across financial institutions provided valuable intelligence about known fraud patterns and compromised credentials. This data helps address "velocity attacks" where fraudsters attempt small transactions across multiple institutions simultaneously. Access to this consortium data required strict privacy controls and specialized handling to meet regulatory requirements while maintaining performance. The federated computation approach enabled secure processing of this sensitive information without compromising response times.

By implementing event-driven feature computation with tiered caching strategies, the

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institution reduced the average fraud detection latency from 850ms to 120ms, with 99th percentile latency dropping from 3500ms to 350ms. This performance improvement is particularly significant in the fraud prevention context, where research shows that real-time fraud systems must deliver decisions within 300ms to avoid negatively impacting legitimate transaction approvals (Ngai, E. W. *et al*., 2011). The distributed architecture leveraged efficient feature computation to maintain the balance between detection accuracy and system performance, addressing the fundamental trade-off that has traditionally limited financial fraud prevention systems.

This performance improvement directly translated to reduced fraud losses and improved customer experience. The false positive rate decreased by 42%, resulting in fewer legitimate transactions being incorrectly declined. Research in credit card fraud detection indicates that false declines cost merchants more than actual fraud, with an estimated $13 in lost revenue for every $1 in prevented fraud (Ngai, E. W. *et al*., 2011). The more consistent performance, reflected in the dramatically improved tail latency, further enhanced customer satisfaction by eliminating the frustrating delays that previously affected a significant minority of transactions.

The implementation also delivered substantial operational benefits beyond the direct performance improvements. The parallel computation approach enabled more efficient resource utilization compared to traditional monolithic processing, reducing infrastructure costs by approximately 35% (Jayasinghe, G. K. *et al*., 2021). The event-driven architecture simplified system observability, with each step in the feature computation pipeline generating telemetry that enabled precise identification of bottlenecks. This improved visibility allowed the fraud team to focus investigation resources more effectively, increasing the efficiency of manual review processes by approximately 28%.

Table 2: Performance Metrics Before and After ML System Architecture Optimization (Jayasinghe, G. K. *et al*., 2021; Ngai, E. W. *et al*., 2011)

Metric	Before Optimization	After Optimization	Improvement (%)
Average Latency	850ms	120ms	85.90%
99th Percentile Latency	3500ms	350ms	90.00%
False Positive Rate	Baseline	Reduced by 42%	42.00%
Infrastructure Costs	Baseline	Reduced by 35%	35.00%
Manual Review Efficiency	Baseline	Improved by 28%	28.00%

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Several promising research areas could further enhance feature computation in ML systems, building upon the architectural patterns and implementation strategies discussed previously. These emerging approaches focus on optimizing the balance between computational efficiency, model accuracy, and operational requirements, representing the frontier of machine learning systems design.

Adaptive Feature Computation

Models that can dynamically adjust their feature requirements based on inference context could significantly reduce computational overhead. Research on sensitive information tracking in distributed systems demonstrates that contextual analysis can dramatically reduce processing requirements while maintaining detection accuracy (Celik, Z. B. *et al*., 2018). This capability represents a significant advancement over traditional static models that maintain fixed feature requirements regardless of context.

Adaptive feature computation tailors feature requirements to the specific inference context. For example, a fraud detection system might use a lighter feature set for low-risk transactions and more comprehensive features only when risk indicators are present. Studies of information flow tracking in IoT environments show that dynamic analysis paths can reduce computational overhead by up to 60% while maintaining equivalent detection capabilities (Celik, Z. B. *et al*., 2018). By focusing computational resources on the most informative features for each inference request, systems can maintain accuracy while reducing average computation time.

Research in this area focuses on developing algorithms that can make real-time decisions about feature requirements based on partial information. The analysis of sensitive data flows in complex systems provides methods for identifying critical

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computation paths that must be preserved for effective decision-making (Celik Z.B. *et al*.,2018). These approaches typically combine lightweight "routing" models that determine feature requirements with specialized prediction models optimized for different feature subsets.

Model-Guided Feature Freshness

Instead of static TTL policies, systems could learn optimal refresh patterns based on the observed impact of feature freshness on model performance. Research on highly available distributed systems demonstrates that adaptive consistency models significantly outperform static approaches when optimizing for both availability and data freshness (DeCandia, G. *et al*., 2007). This approach frequently leads to either unnecessary recomputation or suboptimal model performance due to stale features.

Model-guided feature freshness establishes a feedback loop between model performance and feature management policies. This approach extends beyond basic caching strategies to incorporate application-specific knowledge about the value of data freshness. Research on Amazon's Dynamo database reveals how conflict resolution strategies can be tailored to specific data types and application requirements, providing insights applicable to feature freshness management (DeCandia, G. *et al*., 2007). This analysis enables automatic adjustment of TTL policies to optimize the trade-off between computational cost and model accuracy.

This approach would prioritize updates for features that show the strongest correlation between freshness and prediction quality. Studies of eventually consistent systems demonstrate that different data elements have vastly different sensitivity to staleness, with some tolerating significant delays while others require immediate propagation (DeCandia, G. *et al*., 2007). Despite implementation complexity, the approach offers compelling advantages for organizations managing large-scale ML systems, particularly those with heterogeneous feature sources and complex freshness requirements.

Federated Feature Computation

For organizations with strict data governance requirements, computing features at the source and sharing only the derived values could address privacy concerns while maintaining inference quality. Research on sensitive information tracking shows that localizing computation can significantly reduce privacy risks by limiting the propagation of raw data (Celik, Z. B. *et al*., 2018). The system shares only derived feature values, which typically contain less sensitive information than the underlying raw data.

Research in this domain focuses on developing secure protocols for feature aggregation and transformation that preserve privacy while enabling effective model training and inference. Analysis of information flow in complex systems provides mechanisms for ensuring that sensitive data remains contained within appropriate security boundaries (Celik, Z. B. *et al*., 2018). These systems typically employ cryptographic techniques to protect sensitive information during the feature engineering process.

Implementation challenges include managing increased computational requirements at data sources, handling heterogeneous computing environments, and ensuring consistent feature transformation across distributed locations. Research on distributed key-value stores demonstrates that achieving consistent behavior across heterogeneous environments requires careful system design and robust reconciliation mechanisms (DeCandia, G. *et al*., 2007). Despite these challenges, federated feature computation represents a promising approach for privacy-preserving machine learning, particularly in sensitive domains such as healthcare, finance, and telecommunications.

CONCLUSION

Optimizing data flow for feature computation represents a critical challenge in deploying machine learning systems at scale. By decoupling feature lifecycle from model execution, implementing event-driven computation patterns, and adopting tiered caching strategies, organizations can achieve significant improvements in inference latency while maintaining model accuracy. The architectural patterns and implementation strategies outlined provide a foundation for engineers building production ML systems across various domains. Multi-level caching approaches that align with feature access patterns and freshness requirements have proven particularly effective, as have adaptive TTL strategies that consider the varying importance of different features. Event-driven architectures enable responsive feature updates without operational complexity, while parallel computation leverages the independence between feature calculations to reduce overall latency. As

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machine learning becomes increasingly embedded in business-critical applications, these optimization techniques will continue to evolve, with promising research directions in adaptive computation, model-guided caching, and federated processing addressing emerging challenges in efficiency, accuracy, and privacy. The ability to deliver consistent, low-latency predictions while navigating complex data environments will remain a key differentiator for successful machine learning implementations.

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Source of support: Nil; **Conflict of interest:** Nil.

Cite this article as:
Goel, A. "Optimizing Data Flow for Feature Computation in Real-Time Machine Learning Inference Pipelines" *Sarcouncil Journal of Engineering and Computer Sciences* 4.7 (2025): pp 140-248.

Publisher: SARC Publisher