Emotion–Cause Pair Extraction in Conversations via Semantic Decoupling and Graph Alignment

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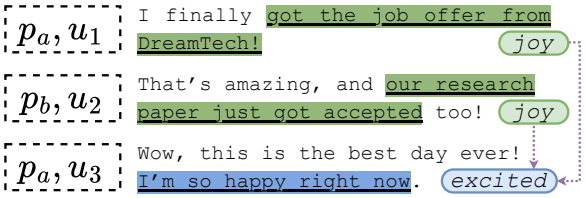
Abstract

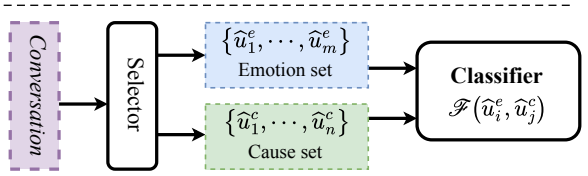
Emotion-Cause Pair Extraction in Conversations (ECPEC) aims to identify the set of causal relations between emotion utterances and their triggering causes within a dialogue. Most existing approaches formulate ECPEC as an independent pairwise classification task, overlooking the distinct semantics of emotion diffusion and cause explanation, and failing to capture globally consistent many-to-many conversational causality. To address these limitations, we revisit ECPEC from a semantic perspective and seek to disentangle emotion-oriented semantics from cause-oriented semantics, mapping them into two complementary representation spaces to better capture their distinct conversational roles. Building on this semantic decoupling, we naturally formulate ECPEC as a global alignment problem between the emotion-side and cause-side representations, and employ optimal transport to enable many-to-many and globally consistent emotion-cause matching. Based on this perspective, we propose a unified framework SCALE that instantiates the above semantic decoupling and alignment principle within a shared conversational structure. Extensive experiments on several benchmark datasets demonstrate that SCALE consistently achieves state-of-the-art performance. [1]

1 Introduction

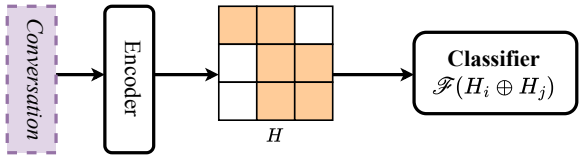
Emotion-Cause Pair Extraction in Conversations (ECPEC) aims to identify the set of causal relations between emotion utterances and their triggering causes within a dialogue, which often exhibit complex and many-to-many dependencies. Figure 1a illustrates a representative example, where the emotion utterance u_3 is jointly triggered by multiple preceding utterances u_1 and u_2. Unlike emotion recognition in conversation (ERC) (Wang et al., 2024b; Fu et al., 2023; Majumder et al., 2019), which focuses on assigning discrete emotion labels to individual utterances (Fu et al., 2021; Hu et al., 2021), ECPEC provides a causal perspective for dialogue understanding, enabling more fine-grained analysis of emotional dynamics. As highlighted by Poria et al. (2021), ECPEC has broad applicability across multiple domains, including dialogue systems (Rashkin et al., 2019; Zhong et al., 2020),



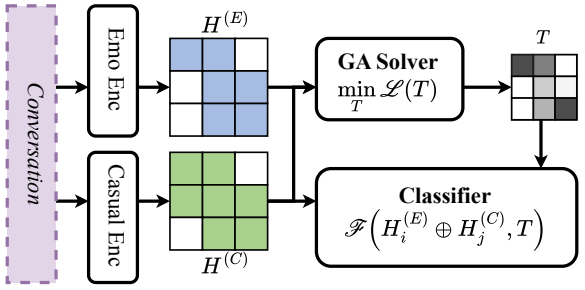
(a) An example of ECPEC task.



(b) *Select-then-pair* paradigm.



(c) *Embed-then-pair* paradigm.



(d) Our proposal.

Figure 1: Comparison between the existing ECPEC paradigm (b-c) and SCALE (d).

[1] The code and data are available at https://anonymous.4open.science/r/r9f3k2/.

conversational recommendation (Liang et al., 2024; Li et al., 2018), mental health analysis (Cambria et al., 2018; Pontiki et al., 2016), and social media opinion mining (Alexander Pak and Patrick Paroubek, 2010; Liu, 2022).

Early studies on ECPEC predominantly followed the *select-then-pair* paradigm (Ding et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2023a), which independently identifies candidate emotion utterances and cause utterances before pairing them through heuristic or classifier-based matching, as shown in 1c. While intuitive and easy to integrate with existing ERC models (Gao et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2024; Ghosal et al., 2019), this pipeline is prone to error propagation during candidate selection and fails to fully exploit contextualized utterance representations. To alleviate these issues, subsequent studies shifted towards the *embed-then-pair* paradigm (An et al., 2023; Li et al., 2023; Jeong and Bak, 2023; Wang et al., 2024a), where utterance embeddings are directly concatenated and classified as emotion-cause pairs in an end-to-end manner. Although this paradigm better leverages utterance-level semantics and avoids explicit candidate construction, it still treats emotion-cause inference as a collection of independent pairwise decisions.

Despite their procedural differences, existing ECPEC approaches share two fundamental ***limitations***. ***L1)*** Most methods encode emotion-related and cause-related information within a unified representation space or interaction structure, implicitly assuming that emotion diffusion and cause explanation follow homogeneous relational patterns. However, in real conversations, emotional states tend to propagate through contextual and speaker-dependent dynamics, whereas causes are grounded in explanatory and often asymmetric dependencies. Conflating these distinct semantics obscures their respective roles in conversational causality. ***L2)*** Existing methods typically formulate ECPEC as independent one-to-one pair classification with binary judgments. Such pairwise formulations are inherently inadequate for modeling globally consistent many-to-many causal structures, where multiple interdependent causes may jointly trigger an emotion and a single cause may influence multiple emotional outcomes.

To address these limitations, we revisit ECPEC from a semantic perspective and argue that emotion diffusion and cause explanation, while grounded in the same conversational structure, should be characterized by different semantic focuses. Rather than duplicating dialogue structures or enforcing task-level separation, we seek to disentangle emotion-oriented and cause-oriented semantics by mapping them into two complementary representation spaces induced from a shared conversation graph. Building on this semantic decoupling, we naturally formulate ECPEC as a global alignment problem between emotion-side and cause-side representations, which enables holistic reasoning over many-to-many emotion–cause relations. Based on this perspective, we propose **SCALE** (**S**emantic **C**ausal **AL**ignment for **E**CPEC), a unified framework that instantiates semantic decoupling and global alignment within conversational contexts. Extensive experiments on multiple benchmark datasets demonstrate that SCALE consistently outperforms existing state-of-the-art approaches. Overall, the main contributions of this work are summarized as follows:

- We revisit ECPEC from a semantic perspective and highlight the necessity of disentangling emotion diffusion and cause explanation while preserving shared conversational structure.
- We propose SCALE, a unified framework that induces emotion-side and cause-side representations from a shared conversation graph and formulates ECPEC as a global alignment problem to support many-to-many and globally consistent inference.
- Extensive experiments on several public ECPEC benchmarks demonstrate that SCALE consistently achieves state-of-the-art performance.

2 Methodology

Formally, given a conversation $\mathcal{C}_i = \{(u_1, p_{\pi(u_1)}), \ldots, (u_N, p_{\pi(u_N)})\}$ consisting of N utterances, each utterance u_j is associated with a speaker $p_{\pi(u_j)}$, where π denotes a mapping from an utterance u_i to the index of its corresponding speaker. In ECPEC, the goal is to identify a set of emotion-cause pairs $\mathcal{P} = \{(u_e, u_c) \mid u_e \text{ is caused by } u_c\}$ that characterizes the underlying conversational causality. To address the limitations of existing approaches, we propose a framework termed SCALE that provides a unified solution for the ECPEC task. An overview of the proposed SCALE is illustrated in Figure 2. Specifically, each conversation is first

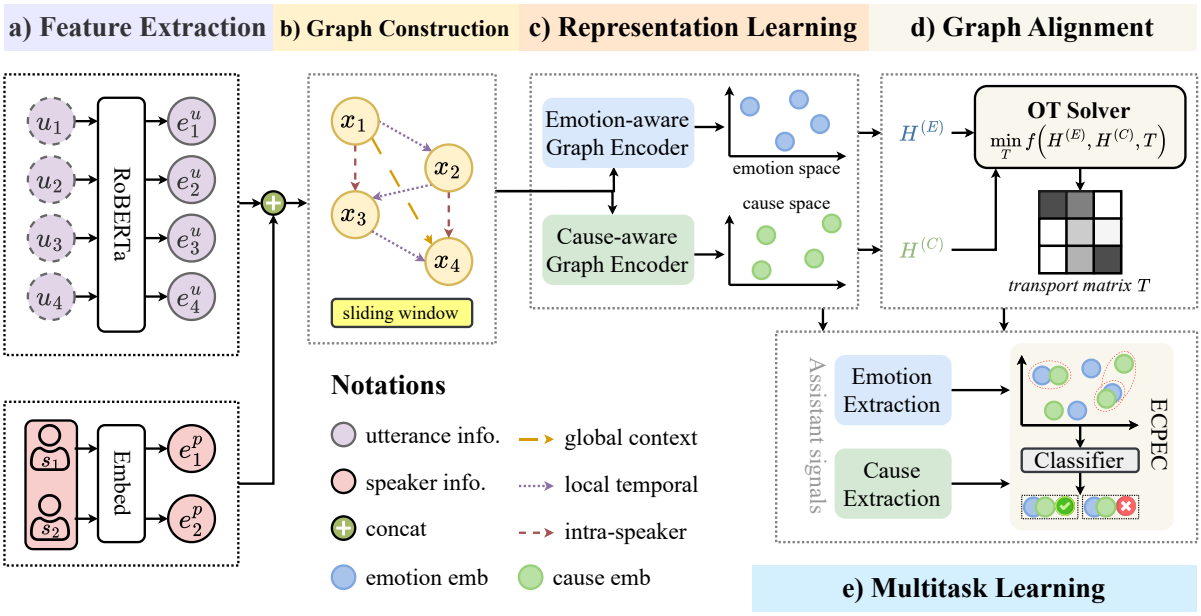


Figure 2: Overall architecture of our SCALE.

encoded into utterance-level representations and organized as a conversation graph (§2.1). Then, SCALE induces two complementary semantic views of the dialogue, namely emotion-oriented and cause-oriented representations, by applying semantic-specific graph encoding mechanisms (§2.2). To explicitly model the correspondence between emotional utterances and their underlying causes, SCALE further formulates emotion-cause inference as a global alignment problem between the emotion-side and cause-side representations, which is solved via an optimal transport framework to enable many-to-many and globally consistent matching (§2.3). All components are optimized under a unified learning objective, where emotion extraction and cause extraction are introduced as auxiliary supervision signals to facilitate representation learning and ultimately improve ECPEC performance (§2.4).

2.1 Encode Conversation as a Graph

To establish relationships between utterances while capturing both inter- and intra-speaker dependencies (Ghosal et al., 2019; Li et al., 2023; Gao et al., 2023), we represent each conversation as a graph $\mathcal{G} = (\mathcal{V}, \mathcal{E}, \boldsymbol{A})$. Each node $v_i \in \mathcal{V}$ corresponds to an utterance u_i, edges $e_{ij} \in \mathcal{E}$ are constructed according to three types of dependencies, and $\boldsymbol{A} \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times N}$ is the adjacency matrix.

Nodes. Each utterance u_i is represented as a node v_i, initialized with a contextual embedding $\boldsymbol{x}_i^u \in \mathbb{R}^{d_u}$ obtained from a pretrained RoBERTa model (Liu et al., 2019). To incorporate speaker information, the corresponding speaker $p_{\pi(u_i)}$ is first represented as a one-hot vector and then projected into a speaker embedding $\boldsymbol{x}^s_{\pi(u_i)} \in \mathbb{R}^{d_s}$ through a learnable embedding layer. The final speaker-aware utterance-level feature is defined as:

$$\boldsymbol{x}_i = \boldsymbol{x}_i^u \oplus \boldsymbol{x}^s_{\pi(u_i)}, \tag{1}$$

where $\boldsymbol{x}_i \in \mathbb{R}^{d_h}$ is the representation of node v_i, $\oplus$ denotes the concatenation operation.

Edges. We establish three types of relationships between utterance nodes to capture both global and local contextual dependencies in the conversation graph $\mathcal{G}$. The global contextual edge (v_i, v_j) captures long-range semantic dependencies between utterance nodes v_i and v_j. Such an edge exists iff $\cos(\boldsymbol{x}_i, \boldsymbol{x}_j) + 1 > \tau_s$, where $\boldsymbol{x}_i$ and $\boldsymbol{x}_j$ denote the node features of v_i and v_j, respectively, and τ_s is a similarity threshold. The local contextual edge models short-range emotional dynamics. An edge (v_i, v_j) exists if $|i - j| \leq W$, where W denotes the size of the sliding temporal window. The intra-speaker edge captures speaker-specific emotional consistency. We connect nodes v_i and v_j iff $\pi(u_i) = \pi(u_j)$ and $i \neq j$.

Edge weights. We initialize edge weights according to the corresponding dependency type. For global contextual edges, we initialize weights based

on utterance-level semantic similarity:

$$e_{ij} = \frac{\cos(\boldsymbol{x}_i, \boldsymbol{x}_j) + 1}{2}. \tag{2}$$

For local temporal edges, weights decay exponentially with conversational distance:

$$e_{ij} = \exp(-|i-j|/\tau_{\mathrm{e}}), \tag{3}$$

where τ_{e} controls temporal sensitivity. For intra-speaker edges, weights reflect speaker-specific emotional consistency across turns:

$$e_{ij} = \frac{\exp(-|i-j|/\tau_{\mathrm{e}}) + 1}{2}. \tag{4}$$

All initialized edge weights are integrated into a single weighted adjacency matrix $\boldsymbol{A}$, which is treated as learnable and jointly optimized with other model parameters.

2.2 Graph Representation Learning

Given the conversation graph $\mathcal{G} = (\mathcal{V}, \mathcal{E}, \boldsymbol{A})$ constructed for emotion-side and cause-side modeling, respectively, along with the same feature matrix $\mathbf{X} = [\mathbf{x}_1, \ldots, \mathbf{x}_N]^\top \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times d_h}$, we employ two independent graph encoders, GNN_E and GNN_C, to learn two sets of node representations in different semantic spaces:

$$\boldsymbol{H}^{(S)} = \mathrm{GNN}_S\left(\mathcal{G}, \boldsymbol{X}\right), \tag{5}$$

where $S \in \{E, C\}$ denotes the emotion or cause semantic space, $\boldsymbol{H}^{(E)} \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times d_h}$ and $\boldsymbol{H}^{(C)} \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times d_h}$ denote the resulting emotion-aware and cause-aware node representations. At each layer in encoder, node representations $\boldsymbol{h}^{(S)} \in \boldsymbol{H}^{(S)}$ are updated via attention-weighted message passing:

$$\begin{aligned} \psi_{ij}^{(S)} &= \phi^{(S)}\left(\boldsymbol{h}_i^{(S)}, \boldsymbol{h}_j^{(S)}\right) A_{ij}, \\ \alpha_{ij}^{(S)} &= \mathrm{softmax}_{j \in \mathcal{N}(i)}\left(\psi_{ij}^{(S)}\right), \\ \boldsymbol{h}_i^{(S)} &= \sum_{j \in \mathcal{N}(i)} \alpha_{ij}^{(S)} \boldsymbol{W}^{(S)} \boldsymbol{h}_j^{(S)}, \end{aligned} \tag{6}$$

where $\mathcal{N}(i)$ denotes the neighborhood of node v_i in $\mathcal{G}$, $\alpha_{ij}^{(S)}$ is the normalized attention coefficient, $\boldsymbol{W}^{(S)} \in \mathbb{R}^{d_h \times d_h}$ is a learnable matrix, and $\phi^{(S)}(\cdot)$ is a learnable scoring function. Importantly, the attention coefficient $\alpha_{ij}^{(S)}$ learned by each encoder can be viewed as a semantic-specific edge weight between v_i and v_j over the shared graph. Specifically, we define a task-specific weighted adjacency matrix $\boldsymbol{A}^{(S)} \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times N}$ as

$$A_{ij}^{(S)} = \alpha_{ij}^{(S)}, \tag{7}$$

which captures the relative importance of edge (v_i, v_j) under semantic space S. As a result, the emotion-aware and cause-aware encoders implicitly induce two refined adjacency structures, denoted as $\boldsymbol{A}^{(E)}$ and $\boldsymbol{A}^{(C)}$, respectively.

2.3 Graph Alignment via Optimal Transport

To capture the many-to-many relations inherent in emotion-cause pair extraction, we formulate ECPEC as a global alignment problem between emotion-aware and cause-aware representations. Formally, given the emotion representations $\boldsymbol{H}^{(E)} = \{\boldsymbol{h}_i^{(E)}\}_{i=1}^N$ and the cause representations $\boldsymbol{H}^{(C)} = \{\boldsymbol{h}_i^{(C)}\}_{i=1}^N$, our goal is to learn a transport plan $\boldsymbol{T} \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times N}$, where each entry $T_{ij} \geq 0$ indicates the soft correspondence strength between the i-th emotion representation $\boldsymbol{h}_i^{(E)}$ and the j-th cause representation $\boldsymbol{h}_j^{(C)}$. Unlike independent pairwise scoring, the alignment is learned globally over the entire matrix $\boldsymbol{T}$, such that multiple causes can be jointly associated with the same emotion and the correspondences across different emotion-cause pairs are mutually constrained.

Alignment objective. We seek to learn the alignment matrix $\boldsymbol{T}$ by minimizing the following objective with respect to $\boldsymbol{T}$:

$$\begin{aligned} \min_{\boldsymbol{T} \geq 0} \mathcal{L}(\boldsymbol{T}) = \alpha \left\langle \boldsymbol{C}_{\text{attr}}, \boldsymbol{T} \right\rangle \\ + (1-\alpha)\mathcal{L}_{\text{struct}}(\boldsymbol{T}) \end{aligned} \tag{8}$$

where $\boldsymbol{C}_{\text{attr}} \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times N}$ denotes the attribute-level cost matrix, $\mathcal{L}_{\text{struct}}(\boldsymbol{T})$ denotes a structure consistency term. $\boldsymbol{C}_{\text{attr}}$ measures semantic compatibility between emotion representation $\boldsymbol{h}_i^{(E)} \in \boldsymbol{H}^{(E)}$ and cause representation $\boldsymbol{h}_j^{(C)} \in \boldsymbol{H}^{(C)}$, with each entry defined as:

$$\boldsymbol{C}_{\text{attr}}(i,j) = 1 - \cos\left(\boldsymbol{h}_i^{(E)}, \boldsymbol{h}_j^{(C)}\right), \tag{9}$$

where smaller values indicate higher semantic affinity. The structure-level term $\mathcal{L}_{\text{struct}}(\boldsymbol{T})$ is defined as a structure consistency loss that measures the discrepancy between relational patterns encoded in the emotion-side and cause-side dialogue graphs. Specifically, it is formulated as:

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{struct}}(\boldsymbol{T}) = \sum_{i,k,j,l} \left| A_{ik}^{(E)} - A_{jl}^{(C)} \right|^2 T_{ij} T_{kl}. \tag{10}$$

Optimization. The resulting objective $\mathcal{L}(\boldsymbol{T})$ is non-linear due to the quadratic structure consistency term $\mathcal{L}_{\text{struct}}(\boldsymbol{T})$. To efficiently minimize it in a differentiable manner, we adopt an entropy-regularized Sinkhorn scheme based on the standard fused Gromov-Wasserstein optimization strategy. Starting from a uniform initialization $\boldsymbol{T}^{(0)}$, we iteratively linearize the structure consistency term around the current solution and solve a sequence of entropic optimal transport subproblems. At iteration t, the linearized approximation of $\mathcal{L}_{\text{struct}}(\boldsymbol{T})$ induces an effective structure-aware cost matrix:

$$\boldsymbol{C}^{(t)}_{\text{struct}}(i,j) = \sum_{k,l} \left| \boldsymbol{A}^{(E)}_{ik} - \boldsymbol{A}^{(C)}_{jl} \right|^2 T^{(t)}_{kl}, \quad (11)$$

which leads to the following cost matrix used to construct a linear surrogate of $\mathcal{L}(\boldsymbol{T})$:

$$\boldsymbol{C}^{(t)} = \alpha \boldsymbol{C}_{\text{attr}} + (1-\alpha)\boldsymbol{C}^{(t)}_{\text{struct}}. \quad (12)$$

The updated alignment matrix $\boldsymbol{T}$ is iteratively updated via Sinkhorn normalization:

$$\boldsymbol{T}^{(t+1)} = \mathcal{S}\left(\exp(-\boldsymbol{C}^{(t)}/\varepsilon)\right), \quad (13)$$

where $\mathcal{S}$ denotes the Sinkhorn operator with standard marginal constraints, and ε is the entropy regularization coefficient controlling the smoothness of the transport plan. After convergence, we apply a row-wise softmax with temperature τ_{r} to emphasize dominant alignments:

$$\widetilde{\boldsymbol{T}} = \text{softmax}(\boldsymbol{T}/\tau_{\text{r}}). \quad (14)$$

The resulting $\widetilde{\boldsymbol{T}}$ can be interpreted as a normalized alignment distribution, which reflects potential many-to-many associations between emotions and causes within each dialogue.

2.4 Multitask Joint Learning

SCALE adopts a multitask joint learning framework, where all task-specific objectives are optimized simultaneously with a shared encoder and task-specific prediction heads.

Emotion-Cause Pair Prediction. Given the row-normalized alignment matrix $\widetilde{\mathbf{T}}$, each entry $\widetilde{T}_{ij}$ represents the global correspondence strength between an emotion utterance u_i and a candidate cause utterance u_j. To incorporate local discriminative evidence, we compute a pairwise matching score by applying a lightweight classifier to the concatenated emotion-aware and cause-aware representations of each utterance pair:

$$s_{ij} = \mathcal{F}_{\text{ECPEC}}\left(\left[\boldsymbol{H}^{(E)}_i, \boldsymbol{H}^{(C)}_j\right]\right), \quad (15)$$

where $\mathcal{F}_{\text{ECPEC}}$ is implemented as a lightweight MLP with a sigmoid output layer. The final prediction score for emotion-cause pairs is obtained by combining global alignment and local evidence:

$$\widehat{y}^{(\text{ECPEC})}_{ij} = \beta \widetilde{T}_{ij} + (1-\beta)\, s_{ij}, \quad (16)$$

where β controls the relative contribution of global correspondence and local evidence.

Emotion and Cause Extraction. We perform utterance-level emotion extraction (EE) and cause extraction (CE) using two parallel lightweight classifiers:

$$\begin{aligned} \widehat{\boldsymbol{Y}}^{(E)} &= \mathcal{F}_{\text{EE}}(\boldsymbol{H}^{(E)}), \\ \widehat{\boldsymbol{Y}}^{(C)} &= \mathcal{F}_{\text{CE}}(\boldsymbol{H}^{(C)}), \end{aligned} \quad (17)$$

where $\mathcal{F}_{\text{EE}}$ and $\mathcal{F}_{\text{CE}}$ are implemented as lightweight MLPs with softmax output layers.

Joint Optimization. The learning of SCALE is performed by minimizing $\mathcal{L}$:

$$\begin{aligned} \mathcal{L} &= \mathcal{L}_{\text{ECPEC}} + \lambda_{EE}\mathcal{L}_{\text{EE}} + \lambda_{CE}\mathcal{L}_{\text{CE}}, \\ \mathcal{L}_{\text{EE}} &= \text{CE}(\widehat{\boldsymbol{Y}}^{(E)}, \boldsymbol{Y}^{(E)}), \\ \mathcal{L}_{\text{CE}} &= \text{CE}(\widehat{\boldsymbol{Y}}^{(C)}, \boldsymbol{Y}^{(C)}), \end{aligned} \quad (18)$$

where $\mathcal{L}_{\text{EE}}$ and $\mathcal{L}_{\text{CE}}$ are cross entropy losses, λ_{EE} and λ_{CE} controlling their contributions. The ECPEC loss $\mathcal{L}_{\text{ECPEC}}$ is defined as:

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{ECPEC}} = \mathcal{L}_{\text{pair}} + \lambda_{\text{OT}}\,\mathcal{L}_{\text{OT}}. \quad (19)$$

The pair-level supervision term is computed with binary cross-entropy over the predicted pair scores:

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{pair}} = \text{BCE}\left(\widehat{y}^{(\text{ECPEC})}, y\right), \quad (20)$$

where $y \in \{0,1\}$ is the ground-truth label for the emotion-cause pair. The OT consistency regularizer encourages the local pair-wise prediction to match the OT-derived alignment score:

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{OT}} = D_{\text{KL}}\Big(\text{Bern}(s_{ij}) \| \text{Bern}(\widetilde{T}_{ij})\Big). \quad (21)$$

Here D_{KL} denotes the Kullback–Leibler divergence, Bern is a Bernoulli distribution, s_{ij} is the local pair-wise prediction score in Equation (15), and $\widetilde{T}_{ij} \in \boldsymbol{T}$ denotes the corresponding OT-derived alignment score.

Dataset	#Dlg.	#Utt.	#Pairs	Partition
RECCON-DD	1,106	11,104	5,861	75/5/20
RECCON-IE	16	665	1154	test only
ECF	1,374	13,619	9,794	70/10/20

Table 1: Dataset statistics.

3 Experiments

To comprehensively evaluate the proposed SCALE, we formulate the following *Research Questions* to guide our experiments:
RQ1: How does SCALE compare with existing state-of-the-art approaches on ECPEC datasets?
RQ2: How robust is SCALE in handling multi-cause scenarios compared to prior methods?
RQ3: How do key components of SCALE contribute to ECPEC performance?
RQ4: Can SCALE provide interpretable emotion–cause alignments and meaningful insights through qualitative analysis?

3.1 Experimental Setups

Datasets. We evaluate our method on three representative datasets: RECCON (Poria et al., 2021), which consists of two subsets, RECCON-DD and RECCON-IE, and ECF (Wang et al., 2023a). The dataset statistics are illustrated in Table 1, further details of these datasets are provided in Appendix B.

Baselines. We compare our method against several representative baselines, including RECCON (Poria et al., 2021) based on RoBERTa, MECPE-2steps (Wang et al., 2023a), PRG-MoE (Jeong and Bak, 2023), Joint-Xatt (Li et al., 2023), Joint-GCN (Li et al., 2023), MRC (Liu et al., 2023), and CENTER (Wang et al., 2024a). Detailed descriptions of these baselines are provided in Appendix C.

Metrics. Following previous work (Xia and Ding, 2019), we adopt F1-score (F1), Precision (P), and Recall (R) as evaluation metrics.

Implementation Details. We derive textual features for each utterance using a pretrained RoBERTa model. Unless otherwise specified, hyperparameters are set as follows: the temporal window size $W = 5$, utterance and speaker embedding dimensions $d_u = 768$ and $d_s = 50$, similarity and decay parameters $\tau_{\mathrm{s}} = 0.5$, $\tau_{\mathrm{e}} = 2.0$, and $\tau_{\mathrm{r}} = 1.0$, and weighting coefficients $\alpha = 0.8$, $\beta = 0.4$, $\varepsilon = 0.5$, $\lambda_{\mathrm{EE}} = 0.2$, $\lambda_{\mathrm{CE}} = 0.4$, and $\lambda_{\mathrm{OT}} = 1.0$. Model training is conducted using the AdamW optimizer (Loshchilov and Hutter, 2017) with a learning rate of 1×10^{-4}. We employ a ReduceLROnPlateau scheduler and early stopping based on validation performance. All experiments are implemented in PyTorch (Paszke et al., 2019) and executed on a single NVIDIA RTX 4090 GPU. For a consistent comparison, all baselines are reimplemented based on their publicly released code or original descriptions, and trained under the same experimental settings.

3.2 Results and Discussion

3.2.1 Overall Performance (RQ1)

We evaluate all methods on the ECPEC task across three benchmarks, namely RECCON-DD, RECCON-IE, and ECF. As reported in Table 2, SCALE consistently achieves the highest recall and F1-score on all three datasets. On RECCON-DD, SCALE attains an F1 score of 58.83, outperforming the strongest baseline in terms of F1, PRG-MoE (57.26), by a relative improvement of $+2.7\%$. On the smaller and cross-domain RECCON-IE dataset, SCALE achieves the best F1 score of 34.69, surpassing the strongest baseline (28.90) by a substantial relative gain of $+20.0\%$, which highlights its strong generalization capability. Similarly, on ECF, SCALE delivers a notable relative improvement of $+9.5\%$ over MECPE-2steps (52.71) in terms of F1-score. We also observe that SCALE does not achieve the highest precision on most datasets. This behavior is consistent with the design of the soft optimal transport alignment, which encourages broader semantic matching between emotion and cause representations and therefore favors higher recall at the potential expense of precision.

3.2.2 Multi-Cause Study (RQ2)

As mentioned above, multi-cause scenarios introduce additional challenges for ECPEC. To evaluate model robustness under such settings, We therefore construct three multi-cause test subsets from RECCON-DD, RECCON-IE, and ECF, by selecting all dialogues in the original test splits where a single target emotion is annotated with two or more distinct causes. We then re-evaluate all models on these subsets to assess their robustness in capturing multiple causal triggers. As shown in Table 3, all models suffer from a notable performance drop, confirming the inherent difficulty of

	RECCON-DD			RECCON-IE			ECF		
	P	R	F1	P	R	F1	P	R	F1
RECCON	49.31	33.19	39.68	51.04	11.00	18.10	30.26	37.58	33.52
MECPE-2steps	49.34	47.37	48.34	27.31	6.30	10.24	**57.64**	48.72	52.71
PRG-MoE	**58.95**	55.67	57.26	51.95	20.02	28.90	47.11	55.27	50.86
Joint-Xatt	28.64	40.43	33.53	28.37	12.30	17.16	42.65	39.19	40.85
Joint-GCN	30.79	36.88	33.56	27.49	16.67	20.75	40.29	42.33	41.28
MRC	52.19	52.86	52.47	**59.59**	16.08	20.96	44.46	57.65	50.20
CENTER	47.39	46.88	47.13	34.92	24.38	28.71	47.90	43.65	44.75
SCALE	56.31	**61.60**	**58.83**	42.54	**29.29**	**34.69**	55.01	**60.67**	**57.70**

Table 2: Comparison results of ECPEC task.

	RECCON-DD	RECCON-IE	ECF
RECCON	28.27	8.76	23.75
MECPE-2steps	33.61	11.48	28.71
PRG-MoE	37.84	21.62	33.71
Joint-Xatt	23.18	4.62	25.15
Joint-GCN	23.73	5.08	26.96
MRC	33.39	3.22	25.64
CENTER	34.09	9.73	28.20
SCALE	**38.33**	**25.33**	**35.55**

Table 3: Comparison of F1-scores on the multi-cause scenario.

	RECCON-DD	RECCON-IE	ECF
Full model	**58.83**	**34.69**	**57.70**
w/o SRL	56.72	31.22	55.77
w/o GA	55.26	29.08	53.82
w/o SRL & GA	53.66	28.18	52.54
w/o EE	58.44	34.43	57.43
w/o CE	57.99	34.07	57.11
w/o CE & EE	57.15	33.57	56.54

Table 4: Ablation study.

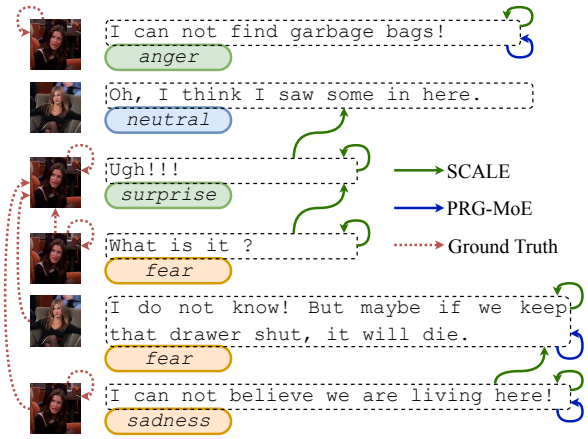
multi-cause prediction. Nevertheless, SCALE consistently achieves the best F1 scores across all three subsets. We attribute these improvements to the global alignment formulation in SCALE, which models emotion–cause relations as soft many-to-many correspondences between emotion-oriented and cause-oriented representations, enabling joint reasoning over dispersed causal evidence for each emotion.

3.2.3 Ablation Study (RQ3)

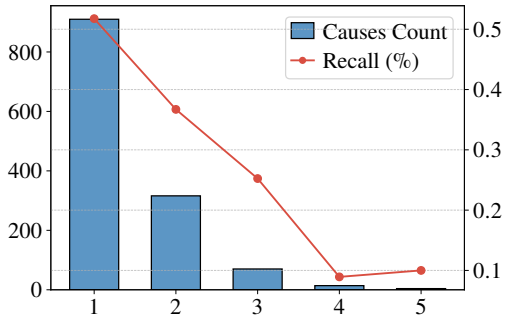
To verify the effectiveness of the key design principles in SCALE, we conduct ablation experiments by removing separated representation learning (SRL; see §2.2), global alignment (GA; see §2.3), and auxiliary supervision (i.e., EE and CE). Specifically, w/o SRL collapses emotion-oriented and cause-oriented encoders into a single graph encoder that learns a shared representation for all utterances, while w/o GA removes the alignment module and performs emotion–cause prediction based solely on independent pairwise scores. As shown in Table 4, removing either SRL or GA consistently degrades ECPEC F1 performance across all datasets, with a more pronounced drop observed when GA is disabled, underscoring the importance of soft many-to-many alignment for modeling complex emotion-cause relations. We further observe that auxiliary supervision is beneficial to ECPEC Removing EE or CE individually leads to mild performance drops, while jointly removing both results in a more noticeable degradation, indicating that EE and CE provide complementary support for representation learning.

3.2.4 Qualitative Analysis (RQ4)

Case Study Figure 3a presents a qualitative comparison between SCALE and the strongest baseline PRG-MoE on a dialogue sampled from the ECF dataset. Among the seven ground-truth emotion–cause pairs, SCALE correctly predicts five, whereas PRG-MoE identifies only two, indicating a clear performance gap. For long-distance dependencies, such as (u_6, u_3) and (u_5, u_3), both models fail to recover the correct relations, suggesting that capturing causal cues separated by large conversational gaps remains challenging. In contrast, for short-distance dependencies, including (u_1, u_1), (u_3, u_3), (u_4, u_4), (u_4, u_3), and (u_5, u_5), SCALE achieves perfect predictions. Regarding multi-cause scenarios, SCALE successfully identifies the dual-cause emotion $[(u_4, u_3), (u_4, u_4)]$, but fails to capture both causes in $[(u_6, u_6), (u_6, u_3)]$. These observations suggest that while the global alignment mechanism enables flexible one-to-many reasoning, modeling long-range causal dependen-



(a) Qualitative comparison.



(b) Cause-number distribution and corresponding recall on ECF.

Figure 3: Qualitative analysis.

cies remains an open challenge.

Error Analysis. To further analyze the behavior of SCALE in multi-cause scenarios, we examine its performance on the ECF dataset. As shown in Figure 3b, most instances involve a single cause, while samples with multiple causes are increasingly scarce. Despite achieving the best overall performance on the multi-cause subset of ECF, SCALE exhibits decreasing recall as the number of causes increases, since recall requires all causes associated with an emotion to be correctly identified, indicating that exhaustive cause retrieval in complex multi-cause settings remains challenging.

3.2.5 Auxiliary Analysis

Performance on EE and CE. To provide additional context on the intermediate subtasks, we evaluate the performance of SCALE on emotion extraction (EE) and cause extraction (CE). As shown in Table 5, SCALE yields reasonable performance on both EE and CE across datasets, without relying on task-specific architectural designs. It is worth noting that SCALE is primarily optimized for the ECPEC objective, while EE and CE are incorporated as auxiliary supervision during training rather than standalone targets.

Method	RECCON-DD		RECCON-IE		ECF	
	EE	CE	EE	CE	EE	CE
MECPE-2steps	71.30	65.81	42.52	44.49	**79.10**	**70.13**
PRG-MoE	73.86	-	57.29	-	71.82	-
Joint-Xatt	58.71	51.93	47.34	40.26	67.75	62.73
Joint-GCN	61.87	51.35	46.58	35.75	68.31	64.05
MRC	**75.49**	-	39.54	-	74.08	-
CENTER	68.32	-	49.61	-	67.07	-
SCALE	73.23	**67.87**	55.57	**54.90**	76.10	61.81

Table 5: Comparative results of EE and CE subtasks (F1-score) across three datasets.

Method	RECCON-DD	ECF
DeepSeek-V3.2	47.11	42.81
GPT-5.1 Instant	55.26	54.76
Gemini-3-pro-preview	56.08	55.42
SCALE	**58.83**	**57.70**

Table 6: Comparison with recent LLMs.

Comparison with recent LLMs. We compare SCALE with three recent LLMs under a 4-shot prompting setting. As shown in Table 6, SCALE achieves higher F1-scores than the best-performing LLM on both datasets. These results suggest that explicit modeling of conversational structure and emotion–cause relations remains advantageous for ECPEC, even in the presence of strong prompt-based LLM baselines.

4 Conclusion

In this paper, we proposed **SCALE**, a semantic alignment framework for emotion–cause pair extraction in conversations. By decoupling emotion-oriented and cause-oriented semantics and modeling their interactions through global alignment, SCALE reformulates ECPEC as a many-to-many reasoning problem over conversational structure. This design enables more holistic modeling of complex causal dependencies beyond independent pairwise prediction. Extensive experiments on three benchmark datasets demonstrate that SCALE consistently outperforms existing approaches, particularly in challenging multi-cause scenarios, validating its effectiveness and robustness.

Limitations

The proposed **SCALE** focuses on textual conversations and does not incorporate other modalities

such as acoustic or visual signals. In real-world scenarios, emotion expression and causal cues may span multiple modalities, which could provide complementary information beyond text alone. While the alignment-based formulation of SCALE is in principle compatible with multimodal representations, extending the framework to fully multimodal ECPEC settings is beyond the scope of this work and remains an interesting direction for future research.

Additionally, emotion-cause relations in conversation are often ambiguous and context-dependent, and models trained on annotated datasets may inherit annotation bias or incomplete causal assumptions. Therefore, the proposed framework should be used as an assistive tool rather than a definitive explanation of emotion causality.

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A Related Work

A.1 Emotion-Cause Pair Extraction.

Research on emotion-cause analysis originated from the Emotion Cause Extraction (ECE) task (Lee et al., 2010; Gui et al., 2016; Li et al., 2018), which aims to identify the cause span corresponding to a given emotion. To overcome the limitation of requiring emotion annotation before cause extraction, Xia and Ding (2019) proposed the Emotion-Cause Pair Extraction (ECPE) task, which jointly extracts emotions and their causes, and inspired a line of subsequent studies (Ding et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2020; Fan et al., 2021). While remarkable progress has been made in ECPE research, the majority of existing approaches (Fan et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2024) are confined to document-level corpora, where emotions and their corresponding causes are expressed within a single, coherent narrative flow. Such clause-level formulations inherently neglect the distinctive characteristics of dialogues, such as speaker role alternation, intertwined emotional events, and long-range conversational dependencies, thereby highlighting the necessity of extending ECPE into conversational contexts.

A.2 Emotion-Cause Pair Extraction in Conversation.

Early efforts on conversational cause analysis began with RECCON (Poria et al., 2021), which focused on cause recognition rather than emotion-cause pair extraction. Li et al. (2023) formally introduced the ECPEC task and released the ConvECPE dataset, along with a two-step framework that explicitly models conversational properties such as context dependence and speaker interactivity. Subsequent works explored more sophisticated modeling, such as pair-relations-guided mixture-of-experts system PRG-MOE (Jeong and Bak, 2023), machine reading comprehension-based method MRC (Liu et al., 2023), global-view speaker-aware frameworks GSESE (An et al., 2023), and event-guided ECPEC frameworks CENTER (Wang et al., 2024a). Beyond text, multimodal ECPEC has been studied with the ECF dataset (Wang et al., 2023a) and improved by cross-modality interaction mechanisms such as HiLo (Li et al., 2024). Despite these advances, existing methods still follow the

pairwise classification paradigm and thus fail to capture global many-to-many alignments between emotions and causes in dialogues, leaving robust causal modeling an open challenge.

A.3 Graph Alignment and Optimal Transport.

Graph alignment aims to identify correspondences between nodes across related graphs (Saxena and Chandra, 2024; Skitsas et al., 2023; Trung et al., 2020), a problem widely studied in network analysis and data integration. As a global matching problem, it can be naturally addressed by Optimal Transport (OT) (Zeng et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2023b; Xu et al., 2019), which computes a global coupling between two sets that minimizes transportation cost and captures many-to-many correspondences under a global optimization objective (Zeng et al., 2023; Maretic and Gheche, 2019). This property makes OT particularly suitable for aligning emotions and causes in dialogues, where multiple candidates may coexist and local decisions can be insufficient. However, OT has not yet been explored in ECPEC, which motivates reformulating our task as a global graph alignment problem through the integration of dual graph learning and OT.

B Datasets

We employ three representative datasets , followed by detailed descriptions below.

RECCON (Poria et al., 2021) is a widely used benchmark that consists of two subsets: **RECCON-DD**, annotated from DailyDialog (Li et al., 2017), serves as the main corpus for model training and evaluation, while **RECCON-IE**, annotated from IEMOCAP (Busso et al., 2008), is a smaller subset used exclusively to test the generalization ability.

ECF (Wang et al., 2023a) is a multimodal benchmark derived from the sitcom *Friends*, providing annotated emotion–cause pairs across text, audio, and visual modalities, with many emotions triggered by multiple utterances.

C Baselines

We compare our method against seven representative baselines, which can be broadly grouped into three categories:

1) Method based on general pre-trained model: Following Poria et al. (2021), we adopt a pretrained RoBERTa (Liu et al., 2019) model with a classification layer to identify emotion–cause pairs, which we refer to as **RECCON**, serving as a benchmark baseline.

2) Methods with sequential modeling: **MECPE-2steps** (Wang et al., 2023a) adopts a two-step pipeline that first extracts candidate emotions and causes sets by a shared BiLSTM and then filters valid pairs with another BiLSTM. **PRG-MoE** (Jeong and Bak, 2023) constructs relational graph with a mixture-of-experts, where a gating network aggregates diverse relational patterns. **Joint-Xatt** (Li et al., 2023) utilize cross-attention to model emotion–cause dependencies.

3) Methods based on graph modeling: **Joint-GCN** (Li et al., 2023) extends Joint-Xatt by replacing cross-attention with graph convolutional network to model inter-utterance relations. **MRC** (Liu et al., 2023) reformulates ECPEC as machine reading comprehension and employs GNNs to encode dialogue structure. **CENTER** (Wang et al., 2024a) builds a center event–aware graph with contrastive objectives for pair-level discrimination.

Text	Audio	Video	F1
+	-	-	57.70
+	+	-	58.13
+	-	+	58.07
+	+	+	**58.63**

Table 7: Multimodal evaluation of SCALE on the ECF dataset.

D Multimodal Extension

Although SCALE is not primarily designed for multimodal modeling, it can be easily extended to handle multimodal inputs. As the ECF dataset provides text, audio, and video modalities, we follow prior work by concatenating unimodal features as a simple fusion strategy, since multimodal fusion is not the main focus of this paper. As shown in Table 7, SCALE achieves consistent improvements over the text-only variant when additional modalities are incorporated, demonstrating its adaptability and robustness across multimodal settings.