The JHU Machine Translation Systems for WMT 2018

Citation for published version:
Koehn, P, Duh, K & Thompson, B 2018, The JHU Machine Translation Systems for WMT 2018. in Proceedings of the Third Conference on Machine Translation: Shared Task Papers. Association for Computational Linguistics, Brussels, Belgium, pp. 438-444, EMNLP 2018 Third Conference on Machine Translation (WMT18), Brussels, Belgium, 31/10/18. https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/W18-6417

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):
10.18653/v1/W18-6417

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:
Proceedings of the Third Conference on Machine Translation: Shared Task Papers

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The JHU Machine Translation Systems for WMT 2018

Anonymous EMNLP submission

Abstract

We report on the efforts of the Johns Hopkins University to develop neural machine translation systems for the shared task for news translation organized around the Conference for Machine Translation (WMT) 2018. We developed systems for German–English, English–German, and Russian–English. Our novel contributions are iterative back-translation and fine-tuning on test sets from previous years.

1 Introduction

We carried out two relatively independent efforts on German–English language directions and Russian–English, using the Marian and Sockeye neural machine translation toolkits, respectively.

The German–English systems outperformed last year’s best result (37.0 vs. 35.1 (+1.9) for German–English, 29.1 vs. 28.3 (+0.8) for English–German), but fell short against this year’s best performing systems (45.3 vs. 48.4 (-3.1) and 43.4 vs. 48.3 (-4.9), respectively)\(^1\). The best models this year used the Transformer model instead of the recurrent neural networks that our models are based on. Our novel contributions are iterative back-translation and fine-tuning on prior test sets.

For Russian–English, we carried out extensive hyperparameter search, with different numbers of layers, embedding and hidden state sizes, and drop-out settings.

2 German–English and English–German

The systems for the German–English language pairs were developed with the Marian toolkit (Junczys-Dowmunt et al., 2018). We developed models with both shallow and deep architectures, based on recurrent neural networks. We ensembled 4 independent runs and reranked with right-to-left models (output in reverse order). We saw improvements with iterative back-translations and fine tuning on test sets from previous years, as well as use of the Paracrawl corpus (unfiltered).

A big challenge for system development are long training times (a month on a single GTX 1080ti GPU) which limited our ability to exploit the Paracrawl corpus. Because of this, we also started system development almost a year ago, using the training data from last year for the most part. All scores reported in this Section are on newstest2017 with case-sensitive BLEU.

2.1 Shallow System Development

We started with shallow systems similar to Edinburgh’s submission two years ago (Sennrich et al., 2016a). It uses byte pair encoding with a vocabulary of 50,000 (Sennrich et al., 2016c) and back-translation of the news2016 monolingual corpus (Sennrich et al., 2016b), about twice the size of the original training data.

For each training run, we compare different ways to obtain a single best model.

- Use the single model that performed best on the dev set (newstest2016).
- Use checkpoint ensembling to obtain the 4 or 8 best models, and decode the test set with an ensemble of these models.
- Merge the models obtained by checkpoint ensembling into a single model.

For German–English, we achieved slightly better results with an ensemble of independent models rather than a merged model (about +0.2 BLEU), while for English–German they perform similarly. Ensemble of either kind clearly outperforms the single best model.

We then built ensembles of the resulting systems for the 4 independent runs. This gives gains

\(^1\)Scores reported at http://matrix.statmt.org/
of about +0.5 over the merged checkpoint ensembles. Notable, the ensemble over the single systems yields essentially the same quality.

The final improvement is right-to-left reranking (Liu et al., 2016) where we built also 4 independent systems on the data sets with the output word order reversed. This gave improvements of +0.5 for German–English and +0.9 for English–German. For detailed results, see Table 1.

### 2.2 Deep System Development

System development for deep models is essentially the same as for shallow models. We used the same data sets, also carried out 4 independent runs for each language direction, carried out checkpoint ensembling for each run, combined the resulting models in an ensemble and performed reranking with right-to-left models.

The models are similar to Edinburgh’s submission from last year (Sennrich et al., 2017). They use 4 alternating encoder layers and 4 decoder layers, LSTM cells, dropout, layer normalization, tied embeddings, and Adam optimization.

Detailed results are also in Table 1. Merging the checkpoint models worked better for German–English, and about the same for English–German, compared to decoding with the multiple models. Ensembling the 4 independent runs yielded solid gains (about +0.5), but reranking helped substantially only for English–German (+0.6).

### 2.3 Iterative Backtranslation

The back-translated data was generated with a single shallow system trained on the parallel data. Since we obtained much better performance by using this back-translated data, employed deep model architecture and ensembled independent runs, we have now a much better system to back-translate data.

Note that this second round of backtranslation uses monolingual data in both languages. Starting with a German–English system (trained on parallel data), we translate monolingual German news text. We then use this synthetic parallel corpus to build an English–German system (in addition to the provided parallel data). We now use this English–German system to translate monolingual English text, yielding again a synthetic parallel corpus to be used in the final system.

We carried out the same system development

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**Table 1:** Shallow and deep systems for German-English with Marian. 4 independent training runs, with checkpoint ensemble, and merging the checkpoint ensemble into a single model (averaging parameters). Ensemble of the runs, with right-to-left reranking (4 independent right-to-left runs).
## 2.4 Use of Paracrawl Corpus

For German–English only, we added the Paracrawl corpus without any filtering to the training data used up to this point (parallel data plus iterative back-translated monolingual data). We only completed one training run, and obtained 36.3 BLEU (ensemble 4 checkpoints) as opposed to 35.6−35.7 for models without Paracrawl.

We trained this model for more than 2 months on a single GTX1080ti GPU. The best dev score (newstest2016) after 2 weeks was 43.0, after 4 weeks 43.3, after 6 weeks 43.7, and after 10 weeks 43.8. So, it seems to be necessary to train such a model for at least a month and a half.

Adding this model to the ensemble gives a score of 36.6. Weighting the Paracrawl model as much as all the 4 models without gives slightly higher score than equal weights (36.5 for equal weights).

## 2.5 Fine Tuning on Prior Test Sets

Finally, we fine tuned the model of one of the four iterative backtranslation runs towards the test sets as for the shallow and deep models. See Table 2 for details. Table 3 shows how the quality of the back-translation impacts the final system’s performance. This table is also reported in our paper on iterative back-translation (Hoang et al., 2018).

| Iterative Deep German–English | single | ensemble | merged |
|-------------------------------|--------|----------|--------|
| run 1                         | 35.5   | 35.6     | 35.6   |
| run 2                         | 35.3   | 35.6     | 35.7   |
| run 3                         | 35.6   | 35.5     | 35.6   |
| run 4                         | 35.1   | 35.5     | 35.6   |
| ensemble                      | 36.1   | 36.1     | 36.1   |
| r2l rerank                    |        |          | 36.5   |

| Iterative Deep English–German | single | ensemble | merged |
|-------------------------------|--------|----------|--------|
| run 1                         | 28.5   | 28.5     | 28.5   |
| run 2                         | 28.1   | 28.2     | 28.3   |
| run 3                         | 27.8   | 28.1     | 28.3   |
| run 4                         | 28.6   | 28.5     | 28.7   |
| ensemble                      | 29.1   | 29.0     | 28.9   |
| r2l rerank                    |        |          | 29.4   |

Table 2: System development with deep models using iterative back-translation.

Note that the back-translation systems run in the opposite direction and are not comparable to the numbers in the same row. The deep ensemble scores reported here match results in Table 2.

| German–English | back | final |
|----------------|------|-------|
| no back-translation | -    | 29.6  |
| 10k iterations     | 10.6 | 29.6 (+0.0) |
| 100k iterations    | 21.0 | 31.1 (+1.5) |
| convergence        | 23.7 | 32.5 (+2.9) |
| re-back-translation | 27.9 | 33.6 (+4.0) |
| + deep ensemble    | 36.1 | 36.1 (+6.2) |

Table 3: Impact of the quality of the back-translation system on the final system performance.

Finally, we fine tuned the model of one of the four iterative back-translation runs towards the test sets from previous years. We trained for 3 epochs with a learning rate of 0.0003. Adding the resulting model to the ensemble gives an additional gain of +0.4, resulting in a final score of 37.0.

| German–English | Setup |
|----------------|-------|
| iterative back runs 1–4 | 35.6–35.7 |
| run with Paracrawl | 36.3 |
| ensemble          | 36.6 |
| + fine-tuned      | 37.0 |

Table 4: Final refinements: a model trained with the unfiltered Paracrawl corpus, an ensemble of the 4 iterative back-translation models, plus the German–English

## 3 Russian–English

### 3.1 Data

We use the provided bitext for training neural machine translation systems (NMT) in a constrained setting. The bitext is first pre-processed via Joshua’s\(^2\) normalize.pl, followed by tokenize.pl and lowercase.pl. The training data is additionally filtered to sentences less than 80 tokens, resulting in

\(^2\)http://joshua.incubator.apache.org/
to 100 checkpoints, which corresponds to 1 to 3 epochs over the training data. We then use the checkpoint with the best validation perplexity as the chosen model for each run. For decoding, we use beam search with the default beam size of 5.

3.3 Hyperparameter Search

We explored over four types of hyperparameters:

- The number of stacked LSTM layers in the encoder and decoder: \texttt{layer} = \{1, 2, 3\}
- The dimension of the word embeddings in source and target: \texttt{embed} = \{500, 1000\}
- The number of hidden units in each LSTM: \texttt{embed} = \{500, 1000\}
- The dropout rate for the embedding layer: \texttt{dropout} = \{0.1, 0.3\}

The goal is to quantify how sensitive the results are to hyperparameter settings, and to find the best model for submission. We train systems for a sample of 9 different hyperparameter settings from the \(3 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 = 24\) total combinations, and summarize their results in Table 5. For convenience of exposition, we label these models with id a-i.

\textbf{Observation 1:} We observe there is a large variance of test-bleu scores among models a-i, ranging from 31.1 for model a (best) to 27.3 for model i (worst). This suggests that hyperparameter search is very important for building strongly performing systems, even for settings that are not too different.

For example, compare the smallest model (e), which has 80M trainable weights, to the second smallest model (a), which has 85M trainable weights: the only difference between the two is one extra layer and 5M extra weights, yet the test-bleu changes from 29.5 (e) to 31.1 (a). Similarly, compare model c (137M weights) to model g (141M weights): they differ only in one extra layer, yet test-bleu varies as much as 30.1 (c) to 27.9 (g). The largest model (f), which has 200M trainable weights, ranks in the middle in terms of test-bleu among the 9 models.

While it may be tempting to extract "suggested hyperparameter settings" from Table 5, we recommend a more robust strategy is to perform hyperparameter search to the extent possible.

\textbf{Observation 2:} We find that perplexity correlates well with bleu when ranking models in hyperparameter search. To a large extent, models a-d, which have the best training perplexities
Table 5: Hyperparameter search results. The model with id=a is a sequence-to-sequence model with 2 layer of LSTMs in both the encoder and decoder, 500-dimensional source and target word embeddings (embed), 500 hidden units in each of the LSTM, and 0.1 dropout rate at the embedding layer. This model achieved 31.1 BLEU (test-bleu) on the test set (newstest2017) and comes from 91th step (or checkpoint) of the training run, which achieved a training set perplexity (train-ppl) of 5.20, a development set perplexity (dev-ppl) of 9.13, and a development BLEU score (dev-bleu) of 27.7. All models with id=a-j are trained on the BPE bitext with 50k merge operations in Russian and 50k merge operations in English, and are ranked in this table in terms of test-bleu. The last two rows represent additional experiments with model a’ and e’, which is similar to model a and e but are trained on BPE bitext with 30k merge operations in Russian and 50k merge operations in English.

(train-ppl) and development perplexities (dev-ppl), also achieve the best BLEU scores (dev-bleu, test-bleu). This suggests that for hyperparameter search purposes, optimizing and validating based on perplexity is a sufficiently good surrogate for BLEU, which is expensive to compute.

Observation 3: The last two rows of Table 5 experiments with a different number of BPE operations for the source side (Russian). Models a’ and e’ are similar to models a and e, except that they use 30k merge operations rather than the 50k we used in all other experiments. The goal is to test the impact of subword units in hyperparameter search. The train-ppl and dev-ppl of these 30k models are better than or on-par with the 50k counterparts, but the BLEU scores appear to be worse. It is somewhat difficult to conclude with only these two datapoints, but we think that perhaps hyperparameter search with different subword units need to be conducted separately. Even on the same dataset, hyperparameters that work well in one version of the BPE data may not necessarily work well in another version of BPE.

Observation 4: It appears that the better models (a-e) seem to have trained longer; their final check-points are chosen at a relative high number of steps. For example, model (a) comes from checkpoint 91, which corresponds to 3 epochs over a 37M sentence dataset. In Figure 1, we plot the development BLEU for each of the training runs over time. Our models train for a maximum of 5 days; this is when the learning rate becomes minuscule and the training process determines convergence. We observe that BLEU continuously improves (while at a slower pace), even towards the end of the training process. This suggests that it might be possible to extract further BLEU gains by adjusting the learning rate and convergence criteria, encouraging the training to continue longer.

3.4 Continued Training

The training bitext comes from multiple domains, while the focus of the test set is news. One may treat this problem as domain adaptation. Here, we experiment with continued training\(^3\) (Luong and Manning, 2015). The idea is:

**Phase 1:** Train a model until convergence on the multi-domain training bitext, as done in Sec 3.3.

**Phase 2:** Use the model weights from Phase 1
to initialize a new training process on adaptation data. This new training process usually only proceeds for a few steps. This is the Continued Training model, and can be used to decode the test set.

In Phase 2, we use newstest2012-2016 as the adaptation training data. Part of it overlaps with the dev data (newstest2016), so the training procedure may constantly improve both train-ppl and dev-ppl, and never decide to converge. We therefore impose a hard-stop to prevent overfitting.

First, we experimented with stopping continued training after 3 epochs over the adaptation data. This corresponds to 350 batch updates (batch size is 128 sentences). ADAM is used as the optimizer, and the learning rate is fixed at a constant 0.0003.

The test-bleu scores are shown in Table 6. We observe that continued training is very effective, improving BLEU scores for all models by 0.6 to 1.9 points. For example, model (a) improves from 31.1 to 31.7, and model (b) improves from 30.3 to 31.5 on the newstest2017 test set. However, if we train on adaptation data for too long, the results degrade. When continued training runs for 9 epochs (1150 batch updates), model (a) degrades to 28.4. The degradation is consistent for all models. This suggests that learning rate and amount of batch updates are important hyperparameters.

### 3.5 Ensembles

Finally, we performed ensemble decoding with the best continued training models obtained in the previous step. Table 7 shows a 6-model ensemble improves 1.93 BLEU over the best single model (a). This reaffirms the effectiveness of ensembles.

### 3.6 Final Russian–English Results

We submitted the 6-model ensemble in Table 7 as our final system in the official evaluation. As shown before, this model achieved 33.63 BLEU via multi-beu.perl on a tokenized and lowercased version of newstest2017. We also computed the official NIST-BLEU with the detokenized versions: it achieves 0.3195 (cased) and 0.3246 (lowercased) on newstest2017.

This result is only slightly improves upon our 2017 Moses SMT submission (Ding et al., 2017), which achieves 0.3129 (cased) and 0.3246 (lowercased) NIST-BLEU. We were interested in exploring the effectiveness of NMT under constrained data conditions (e.g., without backtranslation on large monolingual data) and standard sequence-to-sequence setups (e.g., without reranking with left-to-right features or SMT/NMT hybrids). We imagine that these enhancements are needed if further gains are to be desired; unfortunately we may need to pay the cost of foregoing the simplicity of standard sequence-to-sequence NMT models.
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