Experiments in Cuneiform Language Identification

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Abstract

This paper presents methods to discriminate between languages and dialects written in Cuneiform script, one of the first writing systems in the world. We report the results obtained by the PZ team in the Cuneiform Language Identification (CLI) shared task organized within the scope of the VarDial Evaluation Campaign 2019. The task included two languages, Sumerian and Akkadian. The latter is divided into six dialects: Old Babylonian, Middle Babylonian peripheral, Standard Babylonian, Neo Babylonian, Late Babylonian, and Neo Assyrian. We approach the task using a meta-classifier trained on various SVM models and we show the effectiveness of the system for this task. Our submission achieved 0.738 F1 score in discriminating between the seven languages and dialects and it was ranked fourth in the competition among eight teams.

1 Introduction

As discussed in a recent survey (Jauhiainen et al., 2018), discriminating between similar languages, national language varieties, and dialects is an important challenge faced by state-of-the-art language identification systems. The topic has attracted more and more attention from the CL/NLP community in recent years with publications on similar languages of the Iberian peninsula (Zubiaga et al., 2016), and varieties and dialects of several languages such as Greek (Sababa and Stassopoulou, 2018) and Romanian (Ciobanu and Dinu, 2016) to name a few.

As evidenced in Section 2, the focus of most of these studies is the identification of languages and dialects using contemporary data. A few exceptions include the work by Trieschnigg et al. (2012) who applied language identification methods to historical varieties of Dutch and the work by Jauhiainen et al. (2019) on languages written in cuneiform script: Sumerian and Akkadian. Cuneiform is an ancient writing system invented by the Sumerians for more than three millennia.

In this paper we describe computational approaches to language identification on texts written in cuneiform script. For this purpose we use the dataset made available by Jauhiainen et al. (2019) to participants of the Cuneiform Language Identification (CLI) shared task organized at VarDial 2019 (Zampieri et al., 2019). Our submission, under the team name PZ, is an adaptation of an n-gram-based meta-classifier system which showed very good performance in previous language identification shared tasks (Malmasi and Zampieri, 2017b,a). Furthermore, we compare the performance of the meta-classifier to the submissions to the CLI shared task and, in particular, to a deep learning approach submitted by the team ghpaetzold. It has been shown in previous language identification studies (Medvedeva et al., 2017; Kroon et al., 2018) that deep learning approaches do not outperform n-gram-based methods and we were interested in investigating whether this is also true for the languages and dialects included in CLI.

2 Related Work

Since its first edition in 2014, shared tasks on similar language and dialect identification have been organized together with the VarDial workshop co-located with international conferences such as COLING, EACL, and NAACL. The first and most well-attended of these competitions was the Discriminating between Similar Languages (DSL) shared task which has been organized between 2014 and 2017 (Malmasi et al., 2016b; Zampieri et al., 2014, 2015, 2017). The DSL provided the first benchmark for evaluation of language identification systems developed for similar languages and language varieties using the DSL Corpus Col-
Table 1: Number of texts, lines, and signs in each of the seven languages and dialects in the dataset of Jauhiainen et al. (2019), from which the instances of the CLI datasets were taken.

| Language or Dialect               | Code | Texts | Lines    | Signs    |
|-----------------------------------|------|-------|----------|----------|
| Late Babylonian                   | LTB  | 671   | 31,893   | ca. 260,000 |
| Middle Babylonian peripheral      | MPB  | 365   | 11,015   | ca. 95,000  |
| Neo-Assyrian                      | NE   | 3,570 | 65,932   | ca. 490,000 |
| Neo-Babylonian                    | NEB  | 1,212 | 19,414   | ca. 200,000 |
| Old Babylonian                    | OLB  | 527   | 7,605    | ca. 65,000  |
| Standard Babylonian               | STB  | 1,661 | 35,633   | ca. 390,000 |
| Sumerian                          | SUX  | 5,000 | 107,345  | ca. 400,000 |
| Total                             |      | 13,006| 278,837  | ca. 1,900,000 |

3 Methodology and Data

The dataset used in the CLI shared task is described in detail in Jauhiainen et al. (2019). All of the data included in the dataset was collected from the Open Richly Annotated Cuneiform Corpus (Oracc) which contains transliterated texts. Jauhiainen et al. (2019) created a tool to transform the texts back to the cuneiform script. The dataset features texts from seven languages and dialects amounting to a little over 13,000 texts. The list of languages and dialects is presented in Table 1.

3.1 System Description

Our submission to the CLI shared task is a system based on a meta-classifier trained on several SVM models. Meta-classifiers (Giraud-Carrier et al., 2004) and ensemble learning methods have proved to deliver competitive performance not only in language identification (Malmasi and Zampieri, 2017b,a) but also in many other text classification tasks (Malmasi et al., 2016a; Sulea et al., 2017).

The meta-classifier is an adaptation of previous submissions to VarDial shared tasks described in (Malmasi and Zampieri, 2017a). It is essentially a bagging ensemble trained on the outputs of linear SVM classifiers. As features, the system uses the following character n-gram and character skip-gram features:

- character n-grams of order 1–5;
- 1-skip character bigrams and trigrams;
- 2-skip character bigrams and trigrams;
- 3-skip character bigrams and trigrams.

Each feature class is used to train a single linear SVM classifier using LIBLINEAR (Fan et al., 2008).
The outputs of these SVM classifiers on the training data are then used to train the meta-classifier.

4 Results

Table 2 showcases the results obtained by our team (PZ in bold) and the best submission by each of the eight teams which participating in the CLI shared task. Even though the competition allowed the use of other datasets (open submission), we have used only the dataset provided by the shared task organizers to train our model.

Our submission was ranked 4th in the shared task, only a few percentage points below the top-3 systems: NRC-CNRC, tearsofjoy, and Twist Bytes. The meta-classifier achieved much higher performance at distinguishing between these Mesopotamian languages and dialects than the neural model by ghpaetzold, which ranked 6th in the competition. We present this neural model in more detail comparing its performance to our meta-classifier in Section 4.1.

| System  | F1 (macro) |
|---------|------------|
| NRC-CNRC| 0.769      |
| tearsofjoy| 0.763     |
| Twist Bytes | 0.743    |
| PZ      | **0.738** |
| ghmerti| 0.721      |
| ghpaetzold| 0.556     |
| ekh     | 0.550      |
| situx   | 0.128      |

Table 2: Results for the CLI task obtained by the team PZ (in bold) in comparison to the best entries of each of the eight teams in the shared task. Results reported in terms of F1 (macro).

4.1 Comparison to a Neural Model

We take the opportunity to compare the performance of our system with an entirely different type of model submitted by team ghpaetzold. This comparison was motivated by the lower performance obtained by the neural models in comparison to traditional machine learning models in previous VarDial shared tasks (Zampieri et al., 2018). It was made possible due to the collaboration between the ghpaetzold team and ours.

As demonstrated by Ling et al. (2015), compositional recurrent neural networks can offer very reliable performance on a variety of NLP tasks. Previous language identification and dialect studies (Medvedeva et al., 2017; Kroon et al., 2018; Butnaru and Ionescu, 2019) and the results of the previous shared tasks organized at VarDial (Zampieri et al., 2017, 2018), however, showed that deep learning approaches do not outperform more linear n-gram-based methods so we were interested in comparing the performance of a neural model to the meta-classifier for this dataset.

A compositional network is commonly described as a model that builds numerical representations of words based on the sequence of characters that compose them. They are inherently more time-consuming to train than typical neural models that use traditional word vectors because of the added parameters, but they compensate by being able to handle any conceivable word passed as input with very impressive robustness (Paetzold, 2018, 2019).

The model takes as input a sentence and produces a corresponding label as output. First, the model vectorizes each character of each word in the sentence using a typical character embedding layer. It then passes the sequence of vectors through a set of 2 layers of Gated Recurrent Units (GRUs) and produces a numerical representation for each word as a whole. This set of representations is then passed through another 2-layer set of GRUs to produce a final vector for the sentence as a whole, and then a dense layer is used to produce a softmax distribution over the label set. The model uses 25 dimensions for character embeddings, 30 nodes for each GRU layer and 50% dropout. A version of each model was saved after each epoch so that the team could choose the one with the lowest error on the development set as their submission.

Inspecting the two confusion matrices depicted in Figures 1 and 2, we found that the neural model did not do very well at differentiating between Standard Babylonian and Neo Assyrian, as well as between Neo Babylonian and Neo Assyrian, leading to many misclassifications. These two language pairs were also the most challenging for the meta-classifier, however, the number of misclassified instances by the meta-classifier was much lower.
5 Conclusion and Future Work

In this paper we presented a meta-classifier system submitted by the team PZ to the Cuneiform Language Identification shared task organized at VarDial 2019. Our submission is an adaptation of a sophisticated meta-classifier which achieved high performance in previous language and dialect identification shared tasks at VarDial (Malmasi and Zampieri, 2017a). The meta-classifier combines the output of multiple SVM classifiers trained on character-based features. The meta-classifier ranked 4th in the competition among eight teams only a few percentage points below the top-3 systems in the competition.

Finally, we compared the performance of the meta-classifier with a compositional RNN model that uses only the text from the instance as input trained on the same dataset. The comparison shows that, while the neural model does offer competitive performance against some of the systems submitted to the shared task, the more elaborate features used by the meta-classifier allows it to much more proficiently distinguish between very similar language pairs, such as Neo Babylonian and Neo Assyrian, leading to a performance gain of 18.2% F-score and 2 positions in the shared task rankings. The results obtained by the meta-classifier in comparison to the neural model corroborate the findings of previous studies (Medvedeva et al., 2017) in the last two VarDial evaluation campaigns (Zampieri et al., 2017, 2018).

In the future we would like to analyze the results obtained by the highest performing teams in the CLI shared task. The top team achieved the best performance in the competition using a neural-based method. This is, to the best of our knowledge, the first time in which a deep learning approach outperforms traditional machine learning methods in one of the VarDial shared tasks. The great performance obtained by the NRC-CNRC team might be explained by the use of more suitable deep learning methods such as BERT (Devlin et al., 2018).

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Shervin Malmasi for his valuable suggestions and feedback. We further thank the CLI shared task organizer, Tommi Jauhiainen, for organizing this interesting shared task. We gratefully acknowledge the support of NVIDIA Corporation with the donation of the Titan V GPU used for this research.

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