Neural Machine Transliteration: Preliminary Results

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Abstract

Machine transliteration is the process of automatically transforming the script of a word from a source language to a target language, while preserving pronunciation. Sequence to sequence learning has recently emerged as a new paradigm in supervised learning. In this paper a character-based encoder-decoder model has been proposed that consists of two Recurrent Neural Networks. The encoder is a Bidirectional recurrent neural network that encodes a sequence of symbols into a fixed-length vector representation, and the decoder generates the target sequence using an attention-based recurrent neural network. The encoder, the decoder and the attention mechanism are jointly trained to maximize the conditional probability of a target sequence given a source sequence. Our experiments on different datasets show that the proposed encoder-decoder model is able to achieve significantly higher transliteration quality over traditional statistical models.

1 Introduction

Machine transliteration is defined as phonetic transformation of names across languages (Zhang et al., 2015; Karimi et al., 2011). Transliteration of named entities is the essential part of many multilingual applications, such as machine translation (Koehn, 2010) and cross-language information retrieval (Jadidinejad and Mahmoudi, 2010).

Recent studies pay a great attention to the task of Neural Machine Translation (Cho et al., 2014a; Sutskever et al., 2014). In neural machine translation, a single neural network is responsible for reading a source sentence and generates its translation. From a probabilistic perspective, translation is equivalent to finding a target sentence \(y\) that maximizes the conditional probability of \(y\) given a source sentence \(x\), i.e., \(\arg\max_y p(y \mid x)\). The whole neural network is jointly trained to maximize the conditional probability of a correct translation given a source sentence, using the bilingual corpus.

Transforming a name from spelling to phonetic and then use the constructed phonetic to generate the spelling on the target language is a very complex task (Oh et al., 2006; Finch et al., 2015). Based on successful studies on Neural Machine Translation (Cho et al., 2014a; Sutskever et al., 2014; Hirschberg and Manning, 2015), in this paper, we proposed a character-based encoder-decoder model which learn to transliterate end-to-end. In the opposite side of classical models which contains different components, the proposed model is trained end-to-end, so it able to apply to any language pairs without tuning for a specific one.

2 Proposed Model

Here, we describe briefly the underlying framework, called RNN Encoder–Decoder, proposed by (Cho et al., 2014b) and (Sutskever et al., 2014) upon which we build a machine transliteration model that learns to transliterate end-to-end.

The encoder is a character-based recurrent neural network that learns a highly nonlinear mapping from a spelling to the phonetic of the input sequence. This network reads the source name \(x = (x_1, \ldots, x_T)\) and encodes it into a sequence of hidden states \(h = (h_1, \ldots, h_T)\):

\[
h_t = f(x_t, h_{t-1})
\]  

Each hidden state \(h_i\) is a bidirectional recurrent representation with forward and backward sequence information around the \(i\)th character. The
representation of a forward sequence and a backward sequence of the input character sequence is estimated and concatenated to form a context set $C = \{h_1, h_2, \ldots, h_T\}$ (Dong et al., 2015; Chung et al., 2016). Then, the decoder, another recurrent neural network, computes the conditional distribution over all possible transliteration based on this context set and generates the corresponding transliteration $y = (y_1, \ldots, y_T)$ based on the encoded sequence of hidden states $h$.

The whole model is jointly trained to maximize the conditional log-probability of the correct transliteration given a source sequence with respect to the parameters $\theta$ of the model:

$$\theta^* = \arg \max_{\theta} \sum_{n=1}^{N} \sum_{t=1}^{T_n} \log p(y^n_t | y^n_{<t}, x^n),$$

where $(x^n, y^n)$ is the $n$-th training pair of character sequences, and $T_n$ is the length of the $n$-th target sequence $(y^n)$. For each conditional term in Equation 2, the decoder updates its hidden state by:

$$h_{t+1} = f(y_{t-1}, h_{t-1}, c_t)$$

where $c_t$ is a context vector computed by a soft attention mechanism:

$$c_t = f_a(y_{t-1}, h_{t-1}, C)$$

The soft attention mechanism $f_a$ weights each vector in the context set $C$ according to its relevance given what has been transliterated.

Finally, the hidden state $h_{t+1}$, together with the previous target symbol $y_{t-1}$ and the context vector $c_t$, is fed into a feedforward neural network to result in the conditional distribution described in Equation 2. The whole model, consisting of the encoder, decoder and soft attention mechanism, is trained end-to-end to minimize the negative log-likelihood using stochastic gradient descent.

### 3 Experiments

We conducted a set of experiments to show the effectiveness of RNN Encoder–Decoder model (Cho et al., 2014b; Sutskever et al., 2014) in the task of machine transliteration using standard benchmark datasets provided by NEWS 2015-16 shared task (Banchs et al., 2015). Table 1 shows different datasets in our experiments. Each dataset covers different levels of difficulty and training set size. The proposed model has been applied on each dataset without tuning the algorithm for each specific language pairs. Also, we don’t apply any preprocessing on the source or target language in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed model in a fair situation. ‘TaskID’ is a unique identifier in the following experiments.

We leveraged a character-based encoder–decoder model (Bojanowski et al., 2015; Chung et al., 2016) with soft attention mechanism (Cho et al., 2014b). In this model, input sequences in both source and target languages have been represented as characters. Using characters instead of words leads to longer sequences, so Gated Recurrent Units (Cho et al., 2014a) have been used for the encoder network to model long term dependencies. The encoder has 128 hidden units for each direction (forward and backward), and the decoder has 128 hidden units with soft attention mechanism (Cho et al., 2014b). We train the model using stochastic gradient descent with Adam (Kingma and Ba, 2014). Each update is computed using a minibatch of 128 sequence pairs. The norm of the gradient is clipped with a threshold 1 (Pascual et al., 2013). Also, beamsearch has been used to approximately find the most likely transliteration given a source sequence (Koehn, 2010).

Table 2 shows the effectiveness of the proposed model on different datasets using standard measures (Banchs et al., 2015). The proposed neural machine transliteration model has been compared to the baseline method provided by NEWS 2016 organizers (Banchs et al., 2015). Baseline results are based on a machine translation implementation at the character level using MOSES (Koehn et al., 2007). Experimental results shows that the proposed model is significantly better than the robust baseline using different metrics.

Figure 1 shows the learning curve of the pro-
Table 2: The effectiveness of neural machine transliteration is compared with the robust baseline (Koehn et al., 2007) provided by NEWS 2016 shared task on transliteration of named entities.

| TaskID | Baseline ACC | F-Score | MRR | MAP | Neural Machine Transliteration ACC | F-Score | MRR | MAP |
|--------|--------------|---------|-----|-----|-----------------------------------|---------|-----|-----|
| En-Ch  | 0.1935       | 0.5851  | 0.1935 | 0.1830 | 0.2659                            | 0.6227  | 0.3185 | 0.2549 |
| Ch-En  | 0.0981       | 0.6459  | 0.0981 | 0.0953 | 0.0834                            | 0.6564  | 0.1425 | 0.0830 |
| En-Th  | 0.0680       | 0.7070  | 0.0680 | 0.0680 | 0.1456                            | 0.7514  | 0.2181 | 0.1456 |
| Th-En  | 0.0914       | 0.7397  | 0.0914 | 0.0914 | 0.1286                            | 0.7624  | 0.1966 | 0.1286 |
| En-Hi  | 0.2700       | 0.7992  | 0.2700 | 0.2624 | 0.3480                            | 0.8349  | 0.4745 | 0.3434 |
| En-Ta  | 0.2580       | 0.8117  | 0.2580 | 0.2573 | 0.3240                            | 0.8369  | 0.4461 | 0.3235 |
| En-Ka  | 0.1960       | 0.7833  | 0.1960 | 0.1955 | 0.2860                            | 0.8224  | 0.4019 | 0.2856 |
| En-Ba  | 0.2870       | 0.8360  | 0.2870 | 0.2837 | 0.3460                            | 0.8600  | 0.4737 | 0.3438 |
| En-He  | 0.1091       | 0.7715  | 0.1091 | 0.1077 | 0.1591                            | 0.7976  | 0.2377 | 0.1582 |
| En-Pe  | 0.4818       | 0.9060  | 0.4818 | 0.4482 | 0.5816                            | 0.9267  | 0.7116 | 0.5673 |

Figure 1: Learning curve of the proposed model on different datasets using the validation set. In most cases, the difference between ‘ACC’ and ‘MAP’ is negligible.
posed model on different datasets. It is clear that in most datasets, the trained model is capable of robust transliteration after a few number of iterations. As shown in Table 1, each dataset has different number of training set and also different number of characters in the source and target language. For example, when transliterating from English to Chinese (TaskID=‘En-Ch’) and English to Hebrew, the target names contains 548 and 37 different tokens respectively. Since we leverage a same model for different datasets without tuning the model for each dataset, differences in the learning curves are expectable. For some datasets (such as ‘En-Ch’), it takes more time to fit the model to the training data while for some others (such as ‘En-He’), the model fit to the training data after a few iterations.

4 Conclusion

In this paper we proposed Neural Machine Transliteration based on successful studies in sequence to sequence learning (Sutskever et al., 2014) and Neural Machine Translation (Ling et al., 2015; Costa-Jussà and Fonollosa, 2016; Bahdanau et al., 2015; Cho et al., 2014a). Neural Machine Transliteration typically consists of two components, the first of which encodes a source name sequence $x$ and the second decodes to a target name sequence $y$. Different parts of the proposed model jointly trained using stochastic gradient descent to minimize the log-likelihood. Experiments on different datasets using benchmark measures revealed that the proposed model is able to achieve significantly higher transliteration quality over traditional statistical models (Koehn, 2010).

In this paper we did not concentrate on improving the model for achieving state-of-the-art results, so applying hyperparameter optimization (Bergstra and Bengio, 2012), multi-task sequence to sequence learning (Luong et al., 2015) and multi-way transliteration (Firat et al., 2016; Dong et al., 2015) are quite promising for future works.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the developers of Theano (Theano Development Team, 2016) and DL4MT projects. Also, the author would like to acknowledge the support of Bayan Inc. for research funding and computing support. The author also thank Yasser Souri for valuable comments.

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