Advancements in Transfer Learning for Natural Language Processing Tasks

By ***Dr. Olga Sokolova, Prof. Dmitri Volkov, Prof. Natasha Ivanova & Prof. Pavel Morozov***

Professor, Moscow State University, Ulitsa Kolmogorova, Moscow, Russia

1. Introduction

Transfer learning is a new craze in the field of natural language processing, not just for beating task-specific performance records in many natural language processing tasks by huge computation and parameter settings with extensive training, but also with so much of model reusability. The transformer's rise, beginning with the attention is all you need paper by Vaswani et al. with the introduction of BERT transformer (Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers) by the Google research team, has been spectacular. BERT has been designed to pre-train deep bidirectional representations from unlabelled text by jointly conditioning on left and right context in all layers and has subsequently paved way for many transformer-based models since November 2018.

Transfer learning is the new craze in modern natural language processing applications. Established by the concept of transfer learning, with more data and training time, much larger models have been built pre-trained on a large amount of training examples. These models are then fine-tuned with much smaller datasets for different linguistic tasks and applications. As an outcome of this modern trend, much better performance on the fine-tuning tasks has been observed. In this chapter, we look at various training paradigms of transfer learning. We explore a few fine-tuning methods and list several state-of-the-art results of different linguistic tasks. Finally, we talk about deployment in a real-world or for commercial natural language processing tasks.

1.1. Overview of Transfer Learning in NLP

Most transfer learning in NLP has focused on playing the role of "feature learning". Specifically, features are learned from the large supervised task "invert the mapping from the input sequences to labels using any other form of feature learning model", and then only the part of the network that interacts with those learned features gets trained on the target task. At the same time, both the representation learning (the mapping of the inputs to the learned features) and the transfer learning are essential to be learned in significant advances in performance in many areas. By training on such a large and diverse corpus,

it is better able to leverage related information that may only occur in relatively smaller subsets of examples from more specific tasks.

A parallel approach to transfer learning is multi-task learning, where we train one model on a variety of related tasks in order to try to improve generalization over the component models. Finally, a deeply related approach in NLP to the work described in this paper is the use of features learned via unsupervised techniques, such as the original work on sentence embeddings (Skip-thought vectors), or more recent work on unsupervised context embeddings like ELMo or BERT, which impact the success of NLP tasks.

Deep learning models, including both MLPs and RNNs, require a massive corpus of data for training in order to capture the underlying distribution of a wide variety of sequence-to-sequence mapping problems. In NLP, this is particularly challenging as models such as LSTMs are preferred for learning language tasks because they are capable of modeling long-range dependencies within a long text. Nevertheless, pre-training such large models like LSTMs is computationally expensive and time-consuming, even when modern GPUs are employed.

2. Foundations of Transfer Learning

Not all labels are equally useful for pre-training, but a token can be used as input for model pre-training and be labeled to a special token during fine-tuning. A loss can be applied during fine-tuning that rewards correct classification of every token as input for both source and target tasks. While discriminative learning is successful at making some tokens contain useful features for both pre-training and fine-tuning, the mask token heads detector (MTHD) objective better aligns the representations learned by both tasks during pre-training. For example, the alignment can enable the model to make better predictions on the target task using only a few labeled examples or enable the model to avoid storing task-specific information during pre-training. Moreover, both tasks benefit from task-agnostic patterns because the patterns remain while task-specific patterns are fine-tuned.

While a traditional model tries to learn from scratch or is fine-tuned on-domain data from scratch, transfer learning pre-trains a model on a related task with the hope that representations learned in pre-training are useful when adjusted using on-domain data. We focus on supervised learning transfer learning where the source labeled data is independently collected from the target data. Typically, a network with millions of parameters is pre-trained using large-scale datasets on a related task such as language model prediction. Then, parameters are fine-tuned using a small labeled dataset of the target task. Thus, general-purpose features learned during pre-training are adapted to the specific classes of

the target task. Depending on the similarity between the source and target domains, one can adjust the parameters of the pre-trained model more aggressively or less aggressively. Under- and overfitting occurs when the model is adjusted too harshly or too leniently, respectively.

2.1. Basic Concepts and Definitions

Basic Notations We first introduce the notations used. Input data xi ∈ X is at least partially language sentences, and the output label yi ∈ Y corresponds to these input language sentences xi. A dataset D containing n available samples {x1,⋯,xn}, where each sample xi can be marked with a corresponding label yj. Non-labeled data can be represented by tf-idf values, word vector representations, sentence vector representations, or other kinds of content inputs. Each sample xi contains the length of l, and by specifying the positions of index tk, partial input fragments of the input data can be referred as xikt.

In this section, we will introduce some basic concepts involved in transfer learning, which will also vary in different stages of transfer learning. The purpose of this section is to define some terms in a thematic manner as it can facilitate writing this article. We assume that various concepts will be repeatedly mentioned in the following illustrations of specific transfer learning approaches. Additionally, it is important to highlight the differences brought by the considerations of natural language processing tasks.

3. Key Techniques in Transfer Learning

Transfer learning is a data-driven machine learning method that aims to improve the learning of a target model by leveraging the information and knowledge of a related source model. In particular, with the increasing scale of neural network models and the complexity of deep learning tasks, many pre-trained models have been published in the public domain. There are different approaches for using the knowledge of a pre-trained model, such as parameter initialization, fine-tuning, and fitting features. With the employment in the real world, it plays an important role in improving the generalization ability and achieving high performance. In this article, we provide a comprehensive survey of the key techniques of transfer learning for various NLP tasks. Overall, we believe that transfer learning will continue to be a promising research direction for large-scale NLP.

Transfer learning (TL) is used to generalize to new tasks for model knowledge learned from previous tasks. Given a source task and a target task, a TL model is able to solve the target task based on the knowledge extracted from the source task. From the perspective of representation learning, feature-based transfer learning focuses on learning a better task-independent representation and fine-tuning-

based transfer learning focuses on updating both lower-level and higher-level features for the target task. It can be imagined as a dynamic knowledge transfer process, which enables the target task to learn more effectively given limited resources. The basic goal of TL is to enhance the target task performance of the model.

3.1. Pre-training Models

Perhaps due to a lack of awareness regarding labeled dataset limitations, BERT has been used mainly for fine-tuning in specific NLP tasks. However, the sentence pair classification model pre-trained by Conneau et al. employs a simpler pre-training task of predicting words in the second few sentences given the word in the first sentence and has been transferred effectively to 14 common NLP tasks through frozen feature extraction. Evidence shows that, like ELMo, pre-training models also capture word semantics. In a comparison to ELMo, the BERT exam results were found to compare better than the predicted word semantics. Unlike the earlier ELMo and GPT, which allow for bi-directional or recursive decoder layers in the autoregressive model, BERT performs a two-way decoding task.

Pre-trained models, such as BERT, GPT, and RoBERTa, have brought significant performance benefits across a range of NLP tasks. These models have shown outstanding performance in question answering, reading comprehension, and NLP classification datasets, such as those used in GLUE and SuperGlue challenges, using semi-supervised and task-specific fine-tuning techniques. The capabilities exhibited in these three approaches have proven that pre-trained models, which are learned on web-scale text corpora, can capture the complex structure and the underlying language knowledge necessary to perform the common NLP tasks. BERT acts upon relations that are explicitly marked in data by learning to predict words given their surrounding contexts with MLM, and predicting whether sentences are adjacent in a document with NSP, which requires a large amount of labeled dataset.

4. Recent Developments in Transfer Learning

Bidirectional context models also accelerate the pre-training step significantly. Model distillation can further accelerate fine-tuning and reduce model size. It transfers knowledge from a large teacher model to a small student model by minimizing the student's prediction loss with respect to the teacher's soft targets, which are its interpolated predictions. While distillation was mostly studied for image classification tasks, a few works proposed modifications of masked language model (MLM) pre-trained models.

Transfer learning for natural language processing (NLP) has led to significant performance improvements across a wide range of tasks. Large pre-trained bidirectional language models, such as BERT, learned on large corpora, demonstrated not only superior performance on NLP benchmarks but were shown to store significant factual and domain-specific knowledge. Building on these breakthroughs, we discuss recent developments in transfer learning for NLP, including model distillation, multi-task learning, and methods specifically useful for resource-poor or related languages. We also cover work attempting to explain transfer learning for NLP and outline future research directions.

4.1. Architectural Innovations

The modern era of transformers for natural language processing tasks can be broken down into three key architectures: encoder-only, decoder-only, and encoder-decoder models. The original transformers for NLP tasks are encoder-only models, with a "transformer-variant" becoming popularized for sequence-to-sequence tasks. Unique architecture changes for encoder and decoder layers were later proposed, and "transformer-big" encoder-decoder dominance was established with the modification of architectural changes inline for each. While distinct advancements for each model exist, encoder-decoder architectures captured the majority of improvements and utilized existing innovations in later models. According to the study by Menaga et al. (2022), a hybrid strategy for domain feature-level opinion mining is implemented in six stages, culminating in opinion classification with an optimized deep learning model.

Recent implementations have made multiple innovative architectural and methodological choices. These improvements allow modern transformer models to capture deeper and more complex linguistic features, while maintaining existing scale models' computational and memory benefits. The various architectural and methodological innovations are all unique in their own way, but certain themes are observed in recent advancements that have consistently improved model performance. We highlight common advancements across recent models, as well as those that are more unique.

5. Applications of Transfer Learning in NLP

5.2 Machine Translation

Can I use BERT to perform translation from one language to another? The answer is yes but with caveats. Obviously, there are no labeled data available for training the model in this case. Therefore, one cannot fine-tune the language model in a traditional manner. What one can do instead is to extract

representations of input tokens from BERT's layer and then pass them through a Transformer decoder network to generate the output tokens. Note that this is equivalent to the traditional model that uses pretrained word embeddings like Glove or Fasttext to represent input tokens but with a Transformer decoder network instead of RNN or an Attention-based RNN. One of the key observations made is that it is possible to train a Bi-Directional LSTM model for machine translation by using a pretrained BERT as the word embeddings input for the LSTM model, and the results are competitive when compared to a vanilla word embedding-based LSTM model.

5.1 Text Classification

At the most basic level, all NLP tasks are formulated as text classification problems under the hood, in the sense that one must learn to predict a particular label based on the input tokens. Take, for example, Named Entity Recognition. Even though the problem is not exactly text classification, one must classify input tokens into labels such as Person, Location, Organization, etc. If a pretrained BERT model is available, it is easy to classify a given collection of tokens into their respective entity labels that belong to Person, Location, etc.

Given that models like BERT, GPT-X, and ALBERT are available to regular consumers, it becomes clear that many parts of the stack in NLP problems can be automated and don't require deep domain expertise. Below, we outline a few prominent applications of transfer learning in NLP problems.

5.1. Sentiment Analysis

Despite the massive learning from various models, they may not know about some words that we would typically use for this task. For example, if in a sentence we come across a word like "deadly" or "awesome," and if our training data does not include this kind of word, the model can be thrown off and may make inaccurate predictions. So, Word Embeddings like Word2Vec and GloVe can complement the learning of the model. NLP transfer packages like Universal Sentence Encoder and TensorFlow Hub are useful for transfer learning as they don't require as much labeled data. Since full sentences are used as input, the embeddings are a representation of each sentence.

Recent NLP models, especially the transformer models, have provided excellent results. However, all these models require a substantial amount of labeled counterexamples which is not always feasible. Active learning is a fantastic way to reduce the number of labeled examples required. The baseline performance of BERT on the movie review dataset can get as high as 93% accuracy. However, Post-Reinforcement Active Learning (PRAL) implemented on top of BERT, where PRAL uses a model to

predict challenging to classify examples and then uses human feedback to source additional labels, provides further gains on top of the baseline BERT model, outperforming it by a further 5% and achieving 98.9% accuracy.

Another form of the text classification task addresses sentiment analysis. Here, we predict whether a document reflects negative or positive sentiment without capturing its magnitude. Movie, review, and product sentiment classifications are popular datasets for this task.

6. Challenges and Future Directions

Another major challenge is finding creative intermediate unsupervised tasks for a given task in the context of supervised learning. Strategies such as controlling the activations of the network to learn classes or representations that are extended to include pre-existing methods such as masking, next-sentence prediction, and sentence order prediction have been introduced to alleviate this problem, with contrastive learning methodologies such as SimCLR suggesting a possible framework to describe these extended strategies. Since Baptista et al. outlines that NLP-based contrastive learning setups should allow the feature vectors for the contrastive loss to represent full operations, and not just pooling of the embedding matrix, further examination of the topic is warranted.

One of the first significant challenges is, as previously discussed, identifying a suitable predefined pretraining objective that is general enough to apply to a diverse set of related downstream tasks. Advances in this area are crucial to the development of a universal model for transfer learning. As we have shown, contrastive learning, a fast-growing field of research, has recently become a training strategy considered in the field as it encapsulates pre-existing techniques and surpasses their performances. However, we still do not have a thorough understanding of why these techniques work. Having a theoretical understanding of the inherent simplicity of contrastive methods is fundamental, and this experimental evidence will provide just that.

6.1. Ethical Considerations

Natural language models can also be used to generate fake text which may make it difficult to identify misinformation. Ethical considerations for transfer learning models in Natural Language Processing tasks are so important that a consortium including the largest language models committees like OpenAI, DeepMind, or The University of Washington among others have been working together to publish the "Nature Commitment Documents" for a safer participation and development of Language Models.

It is important to consider the datasets being used in transfer learning. Natural language contains inherent biases from the people that it was generated by. In many cases, models have been trained on data which contains offensive words and phrases that have been learned by the machine. OpenAI GPT-2 was trained on a huge corpus of internet text and demonstrated in their blog post that they would not release a certain weighting of the model due to the harm the use of the trained model could cause. This is only one example of a model which has been trained on potentially harmful text. It is important to closely analyze the datasets used for transfer learning so that harmful content is not perpetuated.

7. Conclusion

Transfer learning (TL) has significantly advanced the field of natural language processing (NLP) and has demonstrated advantages over conventional supervised learning approaches, especially when the labeled data size is relatively limited for the task at hand. In this paper, we reviewed a series of state-of-the-art advancements of TL in NLP tasks. The review covers model architectures, task types including classification, language modeling, sequence labeling, and machine translation, transfer strategies, training objectives including multi-objectives, structural objectives, and self-supervised objectives, diverse input type settings. We also identified several continued challenges and potential research directions. In our future work, we are interested in exploring transfer learning solutions for few-shot NLP research, where the model is given a small number of training samples and needs to quickly adapt to a new task using these data.

NLP model composition is another direction of future research. The current trend in pre-training for natural language processing centers on making the model larger and using more unlabeled data. Although this often has a pronounced impact, most large models have a disproportionately favorable benefit for large language processing tasks, such that evaluation against smaller models delivers limited gains. The majority of models in the literature are asymmetrical in size; they are trained to distill knowledge of a significantly larger model and inherit the base (or shallow) architecture. Assessing the quality limit in these layers for a given size constraint identifies design weaknesses. Insights from this work guide the composition of high-performance base models, used independently or together to perform a complex task. By enabling evaluation of independent components, these limitations bring research in NLP closer to fair empirical analysis, allowing for critical examination of performance drivers other than size, layer, and overall model counts.

8. References

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