Abstract

The objective of this shared task is to produce an inflected form of a word, given its lemma and a set of tags describing the attributes of the desired form. In this paper, we describe a transformer-based model that uses a bidirectional decoder to perform this task, and evaluate its performance on the 90 languages and 18 language families used in this task.

1 Introduction

The world’s languages vary greatly in the richness and complexity of their morphological inflection systems. Indo-European languages such as Latin or German tend to inflect words by adding suffixes to a meaning-bearing root, while Austronesian languages like Malay or Tagalog use circumfixes to change the forms of nouns and verbs. It is important that Natural Language Processing (NLP) systems be able to generate inflected forms for a variety of languages, which can be used in downstream tasks such as language modeling or machine translation.

Task 0 of the SIGMORPHON 2020 Shared Task (Vylomova et al., 2020) encourages the development of morphological transduction models for a variety of the world’s language families. Since the task features such a diverse set of languages, it is important to create a generalized model that is not overly biased toward certain language typologies.

In this paper, we present the University of Illinois submission to the task. We have modified the baseline transformer model (Wu et al., 2020) to use bidirectional decoding, following the work in Zhou et al. (2019). We believe the additional attention provided by the right-to-left decoding direction improves performance on many of the languages in the dataset. Our model outperforms the baseline transformer model on average rank and is among the best performing submissions for this year's task.

2 Task

The objective of Task 0 of the SIGMORPHON 2020 Shared Task (Vylomova et al., 2020) is to build a system that learns to generate morphological inflections. The model takes a lemma and a group of morphosyntactic tags as input and outputs the word inflected in the desired form. The following example comes from the German dataset:

\[
\text{predigen} + \text{V;IMP;SG;2} \quad \downarrow \quad \text{predig}
\]

Here, we want to inflect \text{predigen} in the form specified by the tags \text{V;IMP;SG;2}, a 2nd person singular imperative verb. The desired output is \text{predig}.

2.1 Dataset

The organizers of the task provide datasets for 90 languages in total. 45 languages are treated as development languages — these languages span the Austronesian, Germanic, Niger-Congo, Oto-Manguean, and Uralic families, and were available for several months. The remaining 45 languages were released one week before the test sets and are considered surprise languages — they span 16 families, 13 of which are not represented by the development languages. The late release of these languages encourages the development of models that do not overly favor the development languages.

Each language has training and development files that consist of lemmata, morphosyntactic tags in the Unimorph Schema (Kirov et al., 2018), and inflected forms. A test set was released for each language one week before the deadline that contains only lemmata and morphosyntactic tags. The languages vary widely in the amount of data provided: for example, Finnish has approximately 100,000
training examples, while the Iranian language Tajik has only 53 training examples. This large disparity underscores the need for models that are not biased toward certain datasets or languages.

3 Method

3.1 Motivation

Recent work on morphological inflection has shown that an encoder-decoder framework using transformers produces state-of-the-art results (Wu et al., 2020). In our study, we have modified the baseline transformer model to use bidirectional decoding — that is, the prediction of a character is conditioned not only on the characters preceding it but also on those following it.

This approach is linguistically motivated, because it is common for an inflectional affix to be phonetically conditioned on the phonemes in its environment. For example, the underlying morpheme ă (a long a) marking the Latin present indicative can be expressed as the allomorph a (a short a) when followed by a stop consonant: laudăs (2nd sg.) vs. laudat (3rd sg.). Kazakh exhibits regressive assimilation when adding the third person possessive suffix: the lemma kitap changes to kitabı.

It is standard to use bidirectional encoding to capture context in the source word (Wu and Cotterell, 2019; Wu et al., 2018), but we believe that a bidirectional decoder can better capture phonetic and orthographic dependencies in inflected forms. To our knowledge, no such method has been applied to a morphological transduction task before.

3.2 Previous Work

Neural models for morphological inflection have been studied extensively in previous SIGMORPHON Shared Tasks (Cotterell et al., 2017, 2018; McCarthy et al., 2019). Successful approaches include encoder-decoder frameworks using recurrent neural networks (RNN’s) with attention (Cho et al., 2014; Wu and Cotterell, 2019; Wu et al., 2018). Hard monotonic attention has been particularly successful, due to the relatively rigid copy-like nature of inflection. Recent advances in the transformer architecture (Vaswani et al., 2017) have allowed transformer-based encoder-decoder models to become successful for inflection tasks as well (Wu et al., 2020). Indeed, the organizers provide us with two baselines: an RNN-based model with hard monotonic attention and a transformer baseline.

There has been some work on bidirectional decoding in the machine translation literature; however, we are unaware of any such work in morphological transduction tasks. Zhang et al. (2018) introduce an asynchronous bidirectional decoder based on RNN’s; this approach first predicts the target sequence in reverse and then attends over this result to predict the target sequence left-to-right. Zhou et al. (2019) use a transformer model to predict both directions of the target sequence simultaneously, producing state-of-the-art results on translation tasks.

3.3 Model Architecture

Our model uses the technique of synchronous bidirectional decoding (Zhou et al., 2019). In this approach, the decoder pursues predictions of the inflected form in both the left-to-right (L2R) and right-to-left (R2L) directions simultaneously; that is, the first and last letters of the form are predicted first, then the second and second-to-last letters, and so on. At each step of decoding, each direction attends to the predictions of the other direction, so that an entire L2R prediction has been conditioned not only on itself but also on the R2L prediction. At inference time, the highest probability prediction in either direction is selected; it is reversed in the case that an R2L prediction has the highest probability.

In our implementation, the lemma and morphosyntactic tags are first embedded and encoded using the transformer-based encoder of the baseline. The decoder has been modified from the baseline in two ways. First, the decoder operates on previous L2R and R2L outputs in parallel at each time step. All weight matrices are shared between the two directions, and so this model has the same number of parameters as the baseline. Thus, the decoder makes both an L2R and an R2L prediction at each time step.

The second modification is the replacement of the multi-head intra-attention mechanism with a “Synchronous Bidirectional Attention” (SBAtt) mechanism, which allows each direction to attend to the opposite direction. The SBAtt mechanism is mostly the same as the standard intra-attention mechanism, except that the dot product attention has been replaced with ”Synchronous Bidirectional Dot Product Attention”.

This can be summarized as follows:
We train the model to minimize the negative log-likelihood of the training data, accounting for both L2R and R2L probabilities:

\[
J(\theta) = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^{N} \sum_{j=1}^{M} \left[ \log p\left( \hat{y}_{j}^{(i)} \mid x^{(i)}, \overrightarrow{y}_{<j}^{(i)}, \overleftarrow{y}_{<j}^{(i)} ; \theta \right) + \log p\left( \overleftarrow{y}_{j}^{(i)} \mid x^{(i)}, \overrightarrow{y}_{<j}^{(i)}, \overleftarrow{y}_{<j}^{(i)} ; \theta \right) \right]
\]

We keep most hyperparameters fixed for all languages in the dataset and train a separate model for each language. We use a batch size of 150, dropout of 0.3, embedding dimension of 256, maximum decoding length of 128, and gradient maximum \(\ell_2\) of 1.0. We tune the number of layers, the number of attention heads, the hidden dimension size, the label smoothing parameter \(\lambda_{\text{smooth}}\), and the linear interpolation parameter for the Fusion function \(\lambda_{\text{fusion}}\). The selection of these hyperparameters is described in Section 3.5.

Models were trained for 50,000 steps, or until accuracy on the development set flattened. In some cases, the accuracy curve was still rising, so some languages were trained to around 100,000 steps. We choose the model checkpoint with the highest development set accuracy to be used on the test data.

### 3.5 Hyperparameter Selection

We train a separate model for each language in the dataset and choose the hyperparameters by family. We perform a grid search for two languages in each family and select the best combination of hyperparameters based on accuracy on both of these languages. Where possible, we try to select two languages from different genera within a family, and in some families there is only one language present in the dataset. After selecting the optimal hyperparameters based on these results, we train individual models on each language in the family.

The hyperparameters we consider in our grid search are as follows:

- Num. Layers \(\in\{4, 6\}\)
- Num. Heads \(\in\{4, 8\}\)
- Hidden dimension \(\in\{512, 1024\}\)
- \(\lambda_{\text{smooth}}\in\{0.0, 0.1\}\)
- \(\lambda_{\text{fusion}}\in\{0.1, 0.5\}\)

We chose these hyperparameters because they appeared to cause variation in performance in our initial experiments. After tuning the development languages, it became clear that setting \(\lambda_{\text{fusion}}\) to 0.5 almost always degraded performance, and so this was left out of the hyperparameter search on the surprise languages. Setting \(\lambda_{\text{fusion}} = 0.1\) is consistent with the experimental results in Zhou et al. (2019) on machine translation datasets. Table 3 in Appendix A.1 shows the hyperparameters chosen for each family.

There are some cases in which the languages chosen for hyperparameter tuning achieve better per-
Table 1: Macro-averages of accuracy and edit distance by language family. MONO refers to the hard monotonic baseline, TRM refers to the transformer baseline, and BI-TRM refers to our implementation using a bidirectional decoder.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Accuracy</th>
<th>Edit-Distance</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td>MONO</td>
<td>TRM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TRM</td>
<td>MONO</td>
</tr>
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<td>Algic</td>
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<td>61.40</td>
<td>90.00</td>
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<td>77.66</td>
<td>81.28</td>
</tr>
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<td>Dravidian</td>
<td>86.05</td>
<td>87.10</td>
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<td>Germanic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nilo-Saharan</td>
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<td>Oto-Manguean</td>
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<td>Romance</td>
<td>95.51</td>
<td>99.25</td>
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<td>80.80</td>
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</table>

Table 2: The number of languages (out of 45) on which our model equals or outperforms the baseline.

<table>
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<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
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<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Surprise</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>13</td>
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</table>

It is clear that by either metric, our model equals or outperforms the baseline on more than half of the languages, demonstrating that our model generally does not perform worse than the baseline.

Table 1 shows macro-averages of accuracy and edit distance by language family. For both metrics, our model outperforms the baseline transformer on 9 of the 18 language families and equals it on only one family. Interestingly, the two metrics do not agree on which families our model is best; when considering either metric, our model outperforms the baseline on 12 of the families.

Table 4 in Appendix A.1 presents the hyperparameters used for these languages.

4 Experimental Results

Table 2 shows the number of languages on which our model is equal to or outperforms the baseline.

5 Conclusion & Future Work

The promising results of our experiments demonstrate that some languages may be amenable to bidirectional decoding; however, more investigation is required to fully understand the merits of such an approach. For example, our results show that some languages strongly favor L2R or R2L hypotheses while others are less preferential. We would like to determine if there are particular linguistic features that make one direction more valuable than the other — for example, do inflected forms with suffixes prefer L2R decoding while in-
We propose performing this analysis by exploring correlations with linguistic features in the WALS database (Dryer and Haspelmath, 2013).

We would also like to investigate how often each direction produces the correct form, as well as the percentage of examples on which the two directions agree with each other. A high disagreement could indicate a higher value in one direction with respect to the other for a particular language. It would also be informative to compare the bidirectional decoding approach with a purely R2L transformer baseline, in addition to the L2R baseline provided by the organizers.

We also suspect that the bidirectional beam search algorithm can be improved if the hypotheses in one direction are paired with each of the hypotheses in the opposite direction when fed to the decoder at each time step. Furthermore, once the halfway-point of the target form is passed in the decoding, we should expect lots of overlap between the L2R and R2L forms. We would like to see if this information can be used to join the L2R and R2L predictions to produce a better inflected form.

In initial experiments we noticed that on some languages the bidirectional decoding model converges in considerably fewer epochs than the baseline transformer model, despite the same number of parameters. We want to fully investigate this phenomenon because, if it holds for many languages, it means that the model can gain insight more quickly with both directions than with just one.

Finally, in this work our models were trained from scratch on each individual language. We would like to investigate multilingual approaches by training separate models on individual language families or a single model for every involved language. In these ways, we hope to demonstrate the merits of bidirectional decoding and its implications for a morphological transduction task.

Acknowledgments

This research is part of the Blue Waters sustained-petascale computing project, which is supported by the National Science Foundation (awards OCI-0725070 and ACI-1238993) the State of Illinois, and as of December, 2019, the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency. Blue Waters is a joint effort of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and its National Center for Supercomputing Applications.

References


A. Appendices

A.1 Hyperparameter Selection

In this section we present the hyperparameters used for each language. Tables 3 and 4 contain information about specific hyperparameter configurations for each family and for specific languages.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Languages</th>
<th># Layers</th>
<th>Hidden Size</th>
<th># Heads</th>
<th>$\lambda_{smooth}$</th>
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Table 3: Selected hyperparameters by family. The “Languages” column indicates the languages we used for selecting the hyperparameters. The Dravidian family is not present, since it has exactly two languages; the hyperparameters for these languages can be seen in Table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Languages</th>
<th># Layers</th>
<th>Hidden Size</th>
<th># Heads</th>
<th>$\lambda_{smooth}$</th>
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Table 4: Selected hyperparameters for certain languages on which we performed a grid search. These languages use different hyperparameters than their corresponding families, shown in Table 3, due to the fact that a more optimal configuration was discovered.
## A.2 Complete Results Tables

In this section we show full results on each language.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Accuracy MONO</th>
<th>Accuracy TRM</th>
<th>Accuracy BI-TRM</th>
<th>Edit Distance MONO</th>
<th>Edit Distance TRM</th>
<th>Edit Distance BI-TRM</th>
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Table 5: Results for individual languages in the development language set. MONO refers to the hard monotonic baseline, TRM refers to the transformer baseline, and BI-TRM refers to our implementation using a bidirectional decoder. The L2R column shows the percentage of words in each language for which our model selects a left-to-right hypothesis as its final result. It should be noted that this column really indicates a “forwardness” percentage, as languages with a right-to-left orthography are processed in a right-to-left manner.
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Table 6: Results for individual languages in the surprise language set. MONO refers to the hard monotonic baseline, TRM refers to the transformer baseline, and BI-TRM refers to our implementation using a bidirectional decoder. The L2R column shows the percentage of words in each language for which our model selects a left-to-right hypothesis as its final result. It should be noted that this column really indicates a “forwardness” percentage, as languages with a right-to-left orthography are processed in a right-to-left manner.