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#### Framewise and CTC Training of Neural Networks for Handwriting Recognition

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#### Handwriting Recognition with Hybrid NN/HMM Systems







e.g. in (Bianne-Bernard, 2011; Kozielski et al., 2012, 2014)

Introduction



Doetsch et al., 2014), with 1-2 hidden layer NNs

Introduction



e.g. in (Strauß et al., 2014; Moysset et al., 2014; Pham et al., 2014)

Introduction

#### **Observations**

- We are interested in the hybrid (R)NN/HMM framework where the network predicts HMM states
- Some works in the '90s for integrated NN/HMM training
- Today, mostly framewise training from forced alignments, or CTC with RNNs

#### Questions

 $\longrightarrow$  What are the differences bewteen framewise, CTC, and integrated training ?

 $\rightarrow$  Can we apply CTC to other neural nets than RNNs?

 $\longrightarrow$  Can we use the CTC paradigm with other targets than characters and blank (e.g. HMM states)?

#### **Overview**

Introduction

Neural Network Training for Hybrid NN/HMM

Comparison of Framewise and CTC training of MLPs and RNNs

The Intriguing Blank Symbol in CTC

Conclusion

### **Neural Network Training for Hybrid NN/HMM**

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#### **Integrated NN/HMM training**

- In the hybrid NN/HMM approach, the Gaussian likelihoods  $p_{gmm}(x_t|q_t)$  are replaced by the scaled NN posteriors:  $\frac{p_{nn}(q_t|x_t)}{p(q_t)}$ .
- An HMM is a segmentation-free approach, and training methods like Baum-Welch may be applied to consider all possible segmentations :

$$\begin{aligned} \alpha_t(s) &= \frac{p(q_t=s|x_t)}{p(s)} \times \sum_r \alpha_{t-1}(r) p(q_t = s | q_{t-1} = r) \\ \beta_t(s) &= \sum_r \frac{p(q_{t+1}=r|x_{t+1})}{p(r)} p(q_{t+1} = r | q_t = s) \beta_{t+1}(r) \\ p(q_t = s | \mathbf{x}, \lambda) &= \frac{\alpha_t(s) \beta_t(s)}{\sum_r \alpha_t(r) \beta_t(r)} \end{aligned}$$

- Senior & Robinson (1996); Yan et al. (1997): first with hard alignments, then with forward-backward-computed soft estimates
- Konig et al. (1996); Hennebert et al. (1997): similar formulation.

Integrated training cost function

$$E_{hmm} = -\log \sum_{\mathbf{q}} \prod_{t} \frac{P(q_t|x_t)}{P(q_t)} P(q_t|q_{t-1})$$

• Bengio et al. (1992); Haffner (1993): MMI loss to train the whole system.

#### **Framewise Cross-Entropy Training**

Compute the forced alignments of the frame sequence with the HMM of the correct word sequence

 $\longrightarrow$  labeled dataset of frames  $S = \{(x_t, q_t)\}$ 

**2** Train the network to classify each frame individually

Cross-entropy cost function:

$$E_{xent} = -\sum_{(x_t, q_t) \in S} \log P(q_t | x_t)$$

Evaluation Frame Error Rate (FER%)

# incorrectly classified frames
# of frames

### **Connectionnist Temporal Classification Training (CTC)**

**()** Use the dataset of frame sequence, with character sequence targets  $S = \{(x, c)\}$ 



2 Train to predict the character sequence c directly

- NN outputs = characters + ⊘
- Mapping  $\mathcal{B} : a \ a \oslash \oslash b \ b \oslash b \ a \mapsto abba$

CTC cost function:

$$E_{ctc} = -\sum_{(\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{c}) \in S} \log P(\mathbf{c} | \mathbf{x})$$
$$\sum_{\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{c}, \mathbf{c} \in S} \sum_{\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{c}, \mathbf{c} \in S} \sum_{\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{c}, \mathbf{c} \in S} \sum_{\mathbf{c}, \mathbf{c}, \mathbf{c}, \mathbf{c} \in S} \sum_{\mathbf{c}, \mathbf{c}, \mathbf{c}, \mathbf{c}, \mathbf{c} \in S} \sum_{\mathbf{c}, \mathbf{c}, \mathbf{$$

with

$$P(\mathbf{c}|\mathbf{x}) = \sum_{\mathbf{q} \in \mathcal{B}^{-1}(\mathbf{c})} P(\mathbf{q}|\mathbf{x}) = \sum_{\mathbf{q} \in \mathcal{B}^{-1}(\mathbf{c})} \prod_{t} P(q_t|\mathbf{x})$$

Evaluation

NN - Character Error Rate (NN-CER%)

#### edit distance between reference and recognition

# of reference characters

(Graves et al., 2006)

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### **Summary of NN training strategies**

#### **Training cost**

#### Outputs

HMM states (5-6 / character)

Characters and blank label  $\oslash$ 

#### Framewise

cross-entropy (MLPs)

#### CTC (RNNs)

(Graves et al., 2006)

$$-\log \prod_t P(q_t|x_t)$$

.

 $\mathbf{T}$   $\mathbf{P}$  ( )

$$-\log \sum_{\mathbf{q}} \prod_{t} P(q_t | \mathbf{x})$$

### **Summary of NN training strategies**

#### **Training cost**

 $\Pi_{D(-)}$ 

#### Outputs

HMM states (5-6 / character)

Characters and blank label ⊘

 $-\log \sum \prod \frac{P(q_t|x_t)}{P(q_t)} P(q_t|q_{t-1})$  HMM states (5-6 / character)

#### Framewise

cross-entropy (MLPs)

(Graves et al., 2006)

#### HMM training (NN/HMM)

(Hennebert et al., 1997)

$$-\log \prod_t P(q_t|x_t)$$

.

$$-\log \sum_{\mathbf{q}} \prod_{t} P(q_t | \mathbf{x})$$

## Comparison of Framewise and CTC training of MLPs and RNNs

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### **Training strategies of Hybrid NN/HMM**

**CTC = HMM training**, without transition/prior probabilities (zeroth-order model), and with specific outputs for standalone NN recognition ( $\approx$  one HMM state / char. + blank)  $\Rightarrow$  CTC could be applied with different HMM topologies, to other kinds of NN than RNN (e.g. MLPs)

### **Training strategies of Hybrid NN/HMM**

**CTC = HMM training**, without transition/prior probabilities (zeroth-order model), and with specific outputs for standalone NN recognition ( $\approx$  one HMM state / char. + blank)  $\implies$  CTC could be applied with different HMM topologies, to other kinds of NN than RNN (e.g. MLPs)

## **CTC = Cross-entropy training + forward-backward** to consider all possible segmentations

 $\Longrightarrow$  we can compare the training strategies, see the effect of forward-backward, with different HMM topologies (number of HMM states / char.)

#### **Experimental Setup**

**Goal**: study the differences and dynamics of training methods

- IAM database : 6.5k lines for training, results reported on validation set of 976 lines
- Image pre-processing
  - skew and slant correction (Buse et al., 1997)
  - contrast enhancement
  - height normalization

#### Feature extraction

- Sliding window of 3px scanned left-to-right with no overlap
- Extraction of 56 geometrical and statistical features (Bianne-Bernard, 2011)
- Hybrid NN/HMM systems using scaled NN posteriors  $p(q_t|x_t)/p(q_t)$
- **Trigram language model** with vocabulary of 50k words (trained on LOB, Brown and Wellington corpora), ppl 298, OOV 4.3%
- FST-based decoder of the KALDI toolkit
- Small Neural Nets for fast experiments
  - MLP with 2 sigmoid hidden layers of 1,024 units
  - BLSTM-RNNs with one hidden layer of 100 LSTM units in each direction

**MLPs** 

**RNNs** 



(MLP: 2x1024, ±5 frames - RNN: 1x100)

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**MLPs** 

**RNNs** 



 $\longrightarrow$  Forward-backward aspect does not improve the results, and is worse with too few states

(MLP: 2x1024, ±5 frames - RNN: 1x100)

**MLPs** 

**RNNs** 



 $\longrightarrow$  The blank symbol only helps with a few states for CTC training, ...

(MLP: 2x1024, ±5 frames - RNN: 1x100)

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**MLPs** 

**RNNs** 



 $\longrightarrow$  ... and for framwise training too, although not as much as adding a state to the character models

(MLP: 2x1024, ±5 frames - RNN: 1x100)

**MLPs** 

**RNNs** 



 $\longrightarrow$  Forward-backward with blank does not improve so much the results except with only a few states

(MLP: 2x1024, ±5 frames - RNN: 1x100)

**MLPs** 

**RNNs** 



(MLP: 2x1024,  $\pm 5$  frames - RNN: 1x100)

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### Framewise, CTC and Blank: Summary

Complete systems (with LM; WER%)

MLPs

**RNNs** 



(MLP: 2x1024, ±5 frames - RNN: 1x100)

### The Intriguing Blank Symbol in CTC

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### The Intriguing Blank Symbol in CTC

The blank symbol...

- is necessary for good results with a few states
- from (Graves et al., 2006): required for the mapping of the output to transcription + modelling inter-characters
- ... but otherwise uninformative,
- not helpful with more states
- and has a big impact on what the net's outputs look like! (next slides)

 $\longrightarrow$  so what with this symbol? What is the behaviour of the systems with it, and how can it help?

**nb.** this kind of not-a-character/junk/garbage symbol can be found in other works, e.g. (Tay et al., 2001; Rashid et al., 2012; Elagouni et al., 2012)

#### Framewise vs. CTC Outputs with Blank

- x-axis = time
- y-axis = predicted probability
- gray = blank symbol
- color = characters



### **CTC - Evolution of Outputs during Training**



- x-axis = time
- y-axis = predicted probability
- gray = blank symbol
- color = characters

#### **CTC Training**

$$p(\mathbf{L}|\mathbf{x}) = \sum_{\mathbf{q}} \prod_{t=1}^{T} p_{nn}(q_t|\mathbf{x})$$

$$\alpha_t(l'_s) = p_{nn}(q_t = l'_s | \mathbf{x}) \sum_{n=0}^{\kappa} \alpha_{t-1}(l'_{s-n})$$

1

$$\beta_t(\mathbf{l}'_s) = \sum_{n=0}^k p_{nn}(q_{t+1} = \mathbf{l}'_{s+n} | \mathbf{x}) \beta_{t+1}(\mathbf{l}'_{s+n})$$

( k=1 if  $\mathit{l}'_{\!s}=\oslash$  or  $\mathit{l}'_{\!s}=\mathit{l}'_{\!s-2}$  and 2 otherwise)



$$\frac{\partial E}{\partial a_k^t} = p_{nn}(q_t = k | x_t) - \sum_{s: \mu(s) = k} \frac{\alpha_t(s) \beta_t(s)}{\sum_r \alpha_t(r) \beta_t(r)}$$

#### This behaviour is due to CTC, not RNNs.



#### This behaviour is due to CTC, not RNNs.



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#### CTC - Why Training Results in Peaks of Character Predictions



### **CTC** - What Happens without Blank

(gray is now the whitespace label)



### The Possible Advantage of the Blank Label

#### **For training**

By unbalancing the output distribution towards blanks, it prevents from alignment issues in early stages of training - especially for whitespaces - when the net's outputs are not informative

#### **For decoding**

The blanks are uninformative and shared by all word models. Peaked and localized character predictions make corrections less costly (only one frame has to be changed to correct a substitution/deletion/insertion)

#### = faster / keeps more hypotheses for fixed beam

( Optimal optical scale in decoding was 1 with CTC, and 1/(avg. char. length) for framewise or no-blank training )

# Knowing why blank quickly overwhelms the prediction sequence, what could we do?

- We "waste" some time at the beginning learning only uninformative blanks
- Sometimes we observe a plateau, and it takes some time before the network start predicting actual characters
- Curriculum learning (Louradour & Kermorvant, 2014) or smaller learning rates help sometimes but the problem does not disappear

MAURDOR HWR-FR

MAURDOR HWR-EN



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# Knowing why blank quickly overwhelms the prediction sequence, what could we do?

 Adaptive per-parameter learning rates (ADAGRAD; Duchi et al. (2011)) to progressively give less importance to the error signal coming from the blank label.



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#### MAURDOR HWR-EN















#### Conclusion

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#### Conclusion

We studied the **CTC training** algorithm, its relation to framewise and HMM training, and **the role of the blank symbol** in the CTC.

- CTC training is similar to:
  - framewise training but sums over all possible alignments
  - NN/HMM training but without transition probabilities and state priors
- It is not limited to one state per character + blank in the hybrid NN/HMM framework, but it is only interesting in that setup
- CTC+Blank works especially well with RNNs (because it asks the net to produce peaked and localized character predictions)
- It seems to give advantages for finding alignments during training and for efficient decoding

Future work: add transition probabilities and state priors to CTC training

## Thank you for your attention!

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#### Framewise vs. CTC - Nets alone

Framewise Label Classification Error (frame level)										
	States	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
MLP	No blank		23.8	24.7	25.8	26.2	28.2	29.3		
	Blank	17.1	18.8	20.8	22.0	23.2	25.4	28.5		
RNN	No blank		14.4	15.4	16.3	17.2	19.6	20.7		
	Blank	11.3	12.8	14.2	15.0	16.0	19.0	22.2		
CTC Label Edit Distance (sequence level)										
	States	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
MLP	No blank		77.0	53.8	44.4	39.6	34.8	32.6		
	Blank	18.5	18.9	21.8	26.1	23.9	22.9	24.0		
RNN	No blank		23.6	19.0	17.7	16.6	15.6	15.8		
	Blank	9.2	10.7	11.5	11.6	12.2	13.0	13.0		

#### Framewise vs. CTC - Net+LM

		Without	blank	With blank		
	States	Framewise	СТС	Framewise	СТС	
MLP	1	-	-	19.6 / 9.0	17.6 / 7.4	
	2	17.8 / 8.2	19.1 / 8.5	16.0 / 6.3	16.4 / 6.7	
	3	15.0 / 6.1	15.2 / 6.1	14.4 / 5.5	16.4 / 6.5	
	4	13.6 / 5.3	13.3 / 4.9	14.1 / 5.2	14.9 / 5.6	
	5	13.2 / 4.8	13.0 / 4.5	13.9 / 5.2	14.9 / 5.6	
	6	<b>12.4</b> / 4.6	12.6 / <b>4.3</b>	14.3 / 5.9	16.1 / 6.4	
	7	12.8 / 4.8	12.7 / 4.3	16.0 / 6.7	17.4 / 7.0	
RNN	1	-	-	18.7 / 8.2	13.1/4.9	
	2	17.7 / 7.5	19.3 / 8.0	15.9 / 6.1	13.9 / 5.0	
	3	15.4 / 5.6	16.5 / 6.1	14.4 / 5.8	14.3 / 5.2	
	4	14.2 / 5.4	14.1 / 5.3	13.8 / 5.3	13.9 / 5.1	
	5	14.2 / 5.1	13.7 / 5.0	14.3 / 5.2	14.2 / 5.1	
	6	14.0 / 5.1	14.1 / 4.9	14.6 / 5.8	15.3 / 5.8	
	7	14.6 / 5.2	14.5 / 5.1	15.7 / 6.4	14.2 / 5.4	