
Unifying Vision-and-Language Tasks via Text Generation

Jaemin Cho¹ Jie Lei Hao Tan Mohit Bansal

UNC Chapel Hill

{jmincho, jielei, haotan, mbansal}@cs.unc.edu

Abstract

Existing methods for vision-and-language learning typically require designing task-specific architectures and objectives for each task. For example, a multi-label answer classifier for visual question answering, a region scorer for referring expression comprehension, and a language decoder for image captioning, etc. To alleviate these hassles, in this work, we propose a unified framework that learns different tasks in a single architecture with the same language modeling objective, i.e., multimodal conditional text generation, where our models learn to *generate labels in text* based on the visual and textual inputs. On 7 popular vision-and-language benchmarks, including visual question answering, referring expression comprehension, visual commonsense reasoning, most of which have been previously modeled as discriminative tasks, our generative approach (with a single unified architecture) reaches comparable performance to recent task-specific state-of-the-art vision-and-language models. Moreover, our generative approach shows better generalization ability on questions that have rare answers. Also, we show that our framework allows multi-task learning in a single architecture with a single set of parameters, achieving similar performance to separately optimized single-task models. Our code is publicly available at: <https://github.com/j-min/VL-T5>

1. Introduction

Mirroring the success of the pretraining-finetuning paradigm with transformer language models (Devlin et al., 2019), recent vision-and-language transformers (Tan & Bansal (2019); Lu et al. (2019); Chen et al. (2020); Li et al. (2020b),

¹UNC Chapel Hill. Correspondence to: Jaemin Cho <jmincho@cs.unc.edu>.

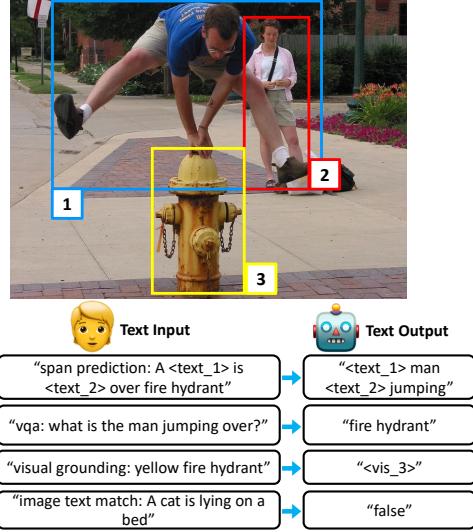


Figure 1. Our unified framework for learning vision-and-language tasks. While existing methods require designing task-specific architectures for different tasks, our framework unifies them together as generating text labels conditioned on multimodal inputs.

inter alia) have also been adopted in a wide range of vision-and-language tasks. These models are firstly pretrained on large image-text corpus (e.g., COCO Caption (Chen et al., 2015)), then finetuned on downstream tasks (e.g., visual question answering (Goyal et al., 2019) and referring expression comprehension (Mao et al., 2016)), which outperformed many previous non-pretraining-finetuning methods.

For each pretraining or downstream task, existing vision-and-language transformers typically require designing task-specific, separately-parameterized architectures on top of the transformer encoder (e.g., multi-label sigmoid classifier for visual question answering, and softmax classifier for referring expression comprehension). However, the reasoning skills required by these tasks overlap significantly. Consider the example in Fig. 1. Both answering the question “What is the man jumping over?” and grounding an image region corresponding to the phrase “yellow fire hydrant” require recognizing the object “fire hydrant”. In addition, the labels for these tasks can be easily expressed in text. For instance, we can assign a region id (e.g., “<vis_3>”, a special text

token) to a specific region in the image, and then the referring expression comprehension task can be expressed as generating the correct region id. For visual question answering, the labels are already in text, although existing approaches (Anderson et al., 2018; Tan & Bansal, 2019; Chen et al., 2020) tackle the task as learning a multi-label classifier over a fixed set of frequent answers (See Fig. 3).

Hence, in order to alleviate these hassles of designing task-specific architectures, we propose a unified framework for vision-and-language learning via *generating labels in text*. Specifically, we extend off-the-shelf pretrained language models T5 (Raffel et al., 2020) and BART (Lewis et al., 2020) with visual understanding ability, named ‘VL-T5’ and ‘VL-BART’. In contrast to existing methods that train different architectures for each pretraining and downstream task, our models tackle all tasks with the same language modeling head. *To learn a new task, we can simply rewrite its input and output in text*, without the need of adding extra parameters or designing new architectures and objectives. In addition, *we can leverage the text generation ability of pretrained language models when making predictions*. This is especially helpful when we answer open-ended questions that require non-trivial answers, where discriminative methods can only answer from a predefined set of frequent candidates, while our models can generate open-ended natural language answers.

To evaluate the effectiveness of our generative modeling approach, we compare our models against recent vision-and-language transformers on a diverse set of 7 downstream benchmarks, including visual question answering on VQA (Goyal et al., 2019) and GQA (Hudson & Manning, 2019), referring expression comprehension on RefCOCOg (Mao et al., 2016), natural language visual reasoning on NLVR² (Suhr et al., 2019), visual commonsense reasoning on VCR (Zellers et al., 2019), image captioning on COCO Caption (Chen et al., 2015), and multimodal machine translation on Multi30K (Elliott et al., 2016). Our unified generative method reaches comparable performance to recent state-of-the-art vision-and-language pretraining methods. This is especially interesting because we use the same unified language modeling architecture with the same maximum likelihood estimation (MLE) objective for all the tasks, while existing approaches use task-specific architectures and objective functions. In addition, we found that our generative models have better generalization ability compared to the discriminative versions in the rare-answer scenario on visual question answering, when ground truth answers for given questions are rarely seen during training. Finally, we also experiment with our unified framework under the multi-task learning setup on all 7 downstream tasks. With a single architecture and a single set of weights, our model achieves similar performance to separately optimized single-task models.

2. Related Works

Vision-and-Language pretraining: Large-scale language pretraining with transformers (Vaswani et al., 2017; Devlin et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2019; Lan et al., 2020; Clark et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2019; Raffel et al., 2020) have achieved remarkable success for many natural language understanding tasks (Rajpurkar et al., 2016; Zellers et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2017). Following this success, image+text pretraining models (Lu et al., 2019; Tan & Bansal, 2019; Chen et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020b; Cho et al., 2020; Radford et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021) and video+text pretraining models (Sun et al., 2019b;a; Li et al., 2020a; Zhu & Yang, 2020; Miech et al., 2020) have also shown to perform better than previous non-pretraining approaches (Yu et al., 2018a; Anderson et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2018; Yu et al., 2018b) in a wide range of discriminative (Goyal et al., 2019; Hudson & Manning, 2019; Lei et al., 2018; Mao et al., 2016; Xu et al., 2016; Zhou et al., 2018) and generative tasks (Chen et al., 2015; Xu et al., 2016; Zhou et al., 2018). In this work, we focus on image+text tasks. While existing image+text models mostly use task-specific architectures and objectives, we seek to design a unified framework across different tasks.

Unified frameworks: One line of work focuses on solving natural language processing tasks in a unified format, such as question answering (McCann et al., 2018), span prediction (Keskar et al., 2019), or text generation (Raffel et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2020; Khashabi et al., 2020). These unified frameworks provide efficient knowledge sharing among different tasks and make it easy to leverage pretrained language models. In relation to these works, we propose to unify previously separately modeled vision-and-language tasks in a single unified format, via text generation, conditioned on multimodal inputs from the image and the textual context.

3. Model

We propose a new framework that unifies vision-and-language problems as multimodal conditional text generation. We introduce VL-T5 and VL-BART based on two pretrained transformer language models: T5_{Base} (Raffel et al., 2020) and BART_{Base} (Lewis et al., 2020). Specifically, we extend their text encoders to multimodal encoders by incorporating image region embeddings as additional input. The overall architecture of our framework is shown in Fig. 2. Since the architecture differences between VL-T5 and VL-BART are minor, we use VL-T5 as an example to illustrate our framework in detail in the rest of this section.

3.1. Visual Embeddings

We represent an input image v with $n=36$ object regions from a Faster R-CNN (Ren et al., 2015) trained on Visual

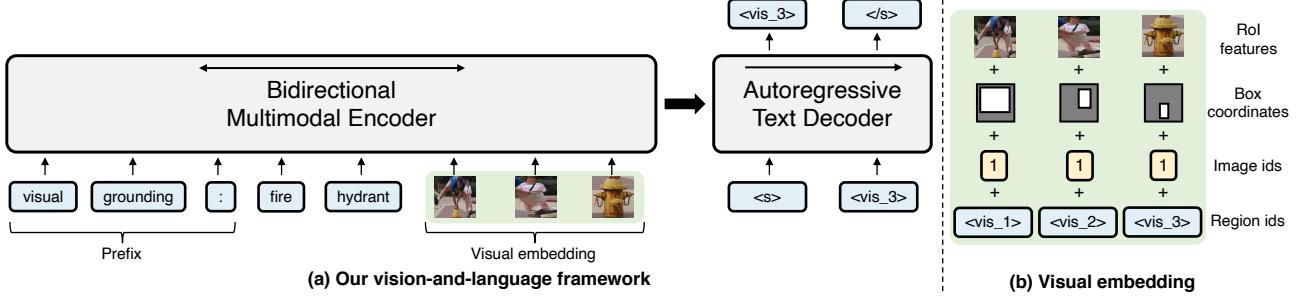


Figure 2. An illustration of our VL-T5 and VL-BART architectures for visual grounding task. Instead of task-specific architectures, our models use text prefixes to adapt to different tasks. The green block in (a) refers to visual embeddings. (b) shows the components of visual embedding. Note that we reuse the text embeddings of visual sentinel tokens (ex. $\langle \text{vis_3} \rangle$) as region id embeddings, which allows our models to tackle many discriminative vision-language tasks as text generation, including visual grounding.

Genome (Krishna et al., 2016) for object and attribute classification (Anderson et al., 2018). As shown in Fig. 2 (b), each image region is encoded as a sum of four types of features: (i) ROI (Region of Interest) object features; (ii) ROI bounding box coordinates; (iii) image ids $\in \{1, 2\}$; and (iv) region ids $\in \{1, \dots, n\}$. ROI features and bounding box coordinates are encoded with a linear layer, while image ids and region ids are encoded with learned embeddings (Devlin et al., 2019). Image ids are used to discriminate regions from different images, and is used when multiple images are given to the model (i.e., in NLVR² (Suhr et al., 2019), models take two input images). The final visual embeddings are denoted as $e^v = \{e_1^v, \dots, e_n^v\}$.

3.2. Text Embeddings

Instead of designing task-specific architectures, we add different prefixes to the original input text to adapt to different tasks, as shown in Table 1.¹ This augmented input text x is then tokenized as $\{x_1, \dots, x_{|x|}\}$ and encoded as learned embedding $e^x = \{e_1^x, \dots, e_{|x|}^x\}$. The embedding parameters are shared by the encoder, decoder, and language modeling head (Press & Wolf, 2017). Since the attention layers are permutation-invariant, BART learns positional embeddings (Vaswani et al., 2017; Devlin et al., 2019) for absolute token positions and adds them to the token embeddings. In contrast, T5 adds relative position bias to each self-attention layer (Shaw et al., 2018). Our models follow the positional embedding configurations of their text backbone models.

In addition to the original vocabulary of T5 and BART, we introduce visual sentinel tokens $\{\langle \text{vis_1} \rangle, \dots, \langle \text{vis_n} \rangle\}$, which corresponds to image regions. As illustrated in Fig. 2, we use the text embeddings of visual sentinel tokens as region id embeddings in Sec. 3.1. The embedding sharing enables our model to build the corre-

¹Note that since we use simple prefixes (e.g., “vqa :” for VQA task), it is likely that engineering in text prompts (Gao et al., 2020) would improve the accuracy of our methods. As this is not the focus of this paper, we leave it as future works.

spondence among query text, label text, and objects, which are useful in the grounding tasks (e.g., visual grounding and grounded captioning pretraining tasks in Sec. 4, referring expression comprehension in Sec. 5.3).

3.3. Encoder-Decoder Architecture

We use transformer encoder-decoder architecture (Vaswani et al., 2017) to encode visual and text inputs and generate label text. Our bidirectional multimodal encoder is a stack of m transformer blocks, consisting of a self-attention layer and a fully-connected layer with residual connections. Our decoder is another stack of m transformer blocks similar to the multimodal encoder, where each block has an additional cross-attention layer. As shown in Fig. 2 (a), the encoder takes the concatenation of text and visual embeddings as input and outputs their contextualized joint representations $h = \{h_1^x, \dots, h_{|x|}^x, h_1^v, \dots, h_n^v\} = \text{Enc}(e^x, e^v)$. Then the decoder iteratively attends to previously generated tokens $y_{<j}$ (via self-attention) and the encoder outputs h (via cross-attention), then predicts the probability of future text tokens $P_\theta(y_j | y_{<j}, x, v) = \text{Dec}(y_{<j}, h)$. We suggest readers to check Raffel et al. (2020); Lewis et al. (2020) for more details of our backbone models. For both pretraining (Sec. 4) and downstream tasks (Sec. 5), we train our model parameters θ by minimizing the negative log-likelihood of label text y tokens given input text x and image v :

$$\mathcal{L}_\theta^{\text{GEN}} = - \sum_{j=1}^{|y|} \log P_\theta(y_j | y_{<j}, x, v) \quad (1)$$

3.4. Task-Specific Methods vs. Our Unified Framework

We compare our unified framework with existing vision-and-language transformers on two popular tasks: visual question answering (Goyal et al., 2019) and referring expression comprehension (Mao et al., 2016).

Visual question answering requires a model to answer a question to a given context image. As shown in Fig. 3 (a), existing methods (Tan & Bansal, 2019; Lu et al.,

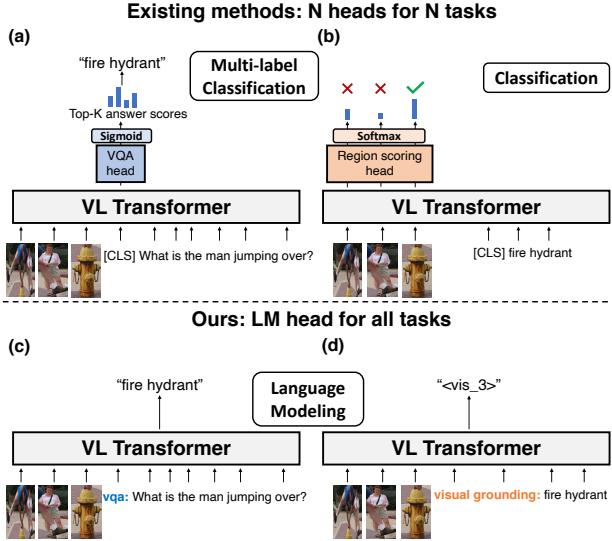


Figure 3. Comparison between existing methods and our framework on visual question answering and referring expression comprehension (visual grounding) tasks. While existing methods use task-specific architectures and objectives, our models use the same language modeling architecture and maximum likelihood estimation on label text for all tasks.

2019; Chen et al., 2020) typically introduce a multi-layer perceptron (MLP) multi-label classifier head on top of $h_{[CLS]}^x$, which is trained together with the transformer backbone through a binary cross-entropy loss, and weighted with VQA score (Goyal et al., 2019)²: $\mathcal{L}_\theta^{\text{VQA}} = - \sum_{k=1}^K \text{score}(a^k, x, v) \log P_\theta^{\text{VQA}}(\text{correct}|a^k, x, v)$.

Referring expression comprehension requires models to localize a target region in an image that is described by a given referring expression. Previous methods tackle this task as multi-class (Chen et al., 2020) or binary (Lu et al., 2019) classification over image regions. For example, UNITER (Chen et al., 2020) introduces an MLP region scoring head on top of the output representations of regions, as shown in Fig. 3(b). This region scoring head is jointly trained with the encoder by minimizing negative log-likelihood of target region r^* : $\mathcal{L}_\theta^{\text{REF}} = - \log P_\theta^{\text{REF}}(r^*|x, v)$.

In contrast to existing methods that develop task-specific architectures and objectives (e.g., the equations above), our unified framework is free from extra model designs for new tasks. As shown in Fig. 3(c,d) and Table 1, we formulate the task labels to corresponding text, and we learn these different tasks by predicting label text with the same language modeling objective (Eq. 1).

4. Pretraining

In this section, we describe how we pretrain our VL-T5 and VL-BART models (Sec. 3). We start with the details

² $\text{score}(a, x, v) = \min((\#\text{humans that gave answer } a) * 0.3, 1)$

of the pretraining data and illustrate how we formulate diverse vision-and-language pretraining tasks as multimodal conditional text generation.

4.1. Pretraining Data

We aggregate pretraining data from MS COCO (Lin et al., 2014; Chen et al., 2015) and Visual Genome (VG; Krishna et al. (2016)) images.³ The captioning data from these two datasets are used in the multimodal language modeling task. The COCO captions are also used in the image-text matching task to learn cross-modal alignment. Besides the captions, we also use three visual question answering datasets (VQA v2.0 (Goyal et al., 2019), GQA balanced version (Hudson & Manning, 2019), and Visual7W (Zhu et al., 2016)) as in Tan & Bansal (2019), but only used them for the visual question answering task. Details of these pretraining tasks are in Sec. 4.2. Overall, our pretraining dataset contains 9.18M image-text pairs on 180K distinct images. We show more details of the pretraining data in appendix.

4.2. Pretraining Tasks

We pretrain our models under a multi-task setup with diverse pretraining tasks, including multimodal language modeling, visual question answering, image-text matching, visual grounding, and grounded captioning. Table 1 shows input and output examples of our pretraining tasks. The training data for each of these tasks are summarized in appendix. In the rest of this section, we explain these tasks in detail.

Multimodal language modeling: We follow Raffel et al. (2020) and Lewis et al. (2020) to construct the language modeling pretraining task. For VL-T5, we mask 15% of input text tokens and replace contiguous text spans with sentinel tokens (e.g., <text_1>). For VL-BART, we mask 30% of input text tokens with <mask> tokens. Then we predict the masked text. See Table 1 for examples.

Visual question answering: We include visual question answering in our pretraining tasks as in Tan & Bansal (2019). While previous methods (Tan & Bansal, 2019; Lu et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2020) tackle the task as classification over predefined answer candidates (illustrated in Fig. 3), we directly generate answers in their original text format.

Image-text matching: In this task, the model needs to verify whether a text corresponds to an image. We consider an image and its captions⁴ as positive pairs. With a probability

³Existing vision-and-language transformers are trained with different datasets and computational budgets, thus their results may not be directly comparable to each other. We show the number of their pretraining images in Table 2.

⁴We only use captions from COCO for this task, since many short captions from VG and visual questions are nondistinctive

Table 1. Input-output formats for pretraining (Sec. 4) and downstream tasks (Sec. 5). ^aWe use different prefixes (“vqa:”, “gqa:”, “visual7w:”) for questions from different datasets. ^bNLVR² takes two images as visual input, for brevity, we only show one here.

Tasks	Input image	Input text	Target text
Pretraining tasks (Sec. 4)			
Multimodal LM (VL-T5)		span prediction: A <text_1> is <text_2> over a fire hydrant.	<text_1> man <text_2> jumping
Multimodal LM (VL-BART)		denoise: A <mask> is <mask> over a fire hydrant.	A man is jumping over a fire hydrant
^a Visual question answering		vqa: what is the color of the man’s shirt?	blue
Image-text matching		image text match: A man with blue shirt is jumping over fire hydrant.	true
Visual grounding		visual grounding: yellow fire hydrant	<vis_3>
Grounded captioning		caption region: <vis_3>	yellow fire hydrant
Downstream tasks (Sec. 5)			
VQA		vqa: [Q]	[A]
GQA		gqa: [Q]	[A]
^b NLVR ²		nlvr: [text] vcr qa: question [Q] answer: [A] vcr qar: question [Q] answer: [A] rationale: [R] visual grounding: [referring expression] caption: caption with tags: [Tag1 Tag2 ...] translate English to German: [English text]	true/false true/false true/false [region id] [caption] [caption] [German text]
VCR Q→A			
VCR QA→R			
RefCOCOg			
COCO captioning			
COCO captioning (w/ object tags)			
Multi30K En-De translation			

of 50%, we randomly sample another training image’s caption to create a negative pair. The model then predicts the correspondence with “true” or “false” as shown in Table 1.

Visual grounding: We develop an object-text matching task to endow the model with grounding ability, which is required in several tasks (e.g., referring expression comprehension and VCR). We give the model a region description and let it predict the id of the related object region. With the help of the visual sentinel token (e.g., <vis_3> in Table 1), this task fits naturally into our text generation objective. We make the region descriptions from the predictions of the object detector that we use for visual embeddings (see Sec. 3.1). Concretely, we sample an object region out of n region predictions. Then we concatenate its object name and attribute (e.g., attribute: “yellow” + object: “fire hydrant” → “yellow fire hydrant”). This approach does not need extra annotation and could be extended to images without dense annotations (e.g., COCO images).

Grounded captioning: To teach the model with object-level information, we also use grounded captioning as an inverse task of visual grounding. As shown in Table 1, given a visual sentinel token (which indicates an image region) as text input, the model is asked to generate a corresponding textual description of the image region.

4.3. Pretraining Implementation Details

For both VL-T5 and VL-BART, it takes 4 days for 30-epoch pretraining with mixed precision training (Narang et al., 2018) on 4 RTX 2080 Ti GPUs. We use batch size 320 and 600 for VL-T5 and VL-BART, respectively. We use AdamW (Loshchilov & Hutter, 2019) with $(\beta^1, \beta^2) = (0.9, 0.999)$ and learning rate $1e-4$ with 5% linear warmup schedule. Our code is based on PyTorch (Paszke et al., 2017) and Huggingface Transformers (Wolf et al., 2019).

descriptions of an image (e.g., ‘what is in the image?’).

5. Downstream Tasks and Results

In this section, we compare our generative architectures VL-T5 and VL-BART on a diverse set of 7 downstream tasks (details in Appendix) with existing vision-and-language pre-trained transformers (Tan & Bansal, 2019; Lu et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020b; Xia et al., 2020). As summarized in Table 2, our unified generative approach (with the input-output format in Table 1) shows performance close to the task-specific models, most of which are discriminative. In the rest of this section, we provide detailed comparisons w.r.t. the baselines.

5.1. Visual Question Answering: VQA and GQA

The visual question answering task requires models to answer a question to a given context image. Table 2 compares our models VL-T5 and VL-BART with existing methods on VQA (Goyal et al., 2019) and GQA (Hudson & Manning, 2019). For both tasks, our models achieve comparable performance to existing approaches.

Generative vs. Discriminative model: Modern approaches (Tan & Bansal, 2019; Lu et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020b) are discriminative models, where they tackle visual question answering tasks as multi-label classification over a predefined set of answer candidates. This strategy achieves strong performance but not generalizes to real-world open-ended scenarios. To quantitatively compare the existing discriminative approaches and our generative approach, we break down VQA questions into in-domain and out-of-domain questions, in terms of whether the best answer a^* for each question is included in the top-K ($K=3, 129$) answer candidates A^{topk} . After this split, the in-domain subset contains 24,722 questions, and the out-of-domain subset contains 1,558 questions. Table 3 shows the performance. For discriminative baselines, we introduce a sigmoid MLP classifier on top of the decoder representation of *start-of-sequence* token <s>, following

Table 2. Single model performance on downstream tasks. Note that the baseline models adopt task-specific objectives and architectures, whereas our models tackle all tasks, including discriminative tasks (e.g., RefCOCOg), as text generation with a single architecture and objective. *See our discussion in Sec. 5.3.

Method	# Pretrain Images	Discriminative tasks						Generative tasks	
		VQA test-std	GQA test-std	NLVR ² test-P	RefCOCOg test ^d	VCR Q→AR test	COCO Cap Karpathy test	Multi30K En-De test 2018	
		Acc	Acc	Acc	Acc	Acc	CIDEr	BLEU	
LXMERT	180K	72.5	60.3	74.5	-	-	-	-	-
ViLBERT	3M	70.9	-	-	-	54.8	-	-	-
UNITER _{Base}	4M	72.9	-	77.9	74.5	58.2	-	-	-
Unified VLP	3M	70.7	-	-	-	-	117.7	-	-
Oscar _{Base}	4M	73.4	61.6	78.4	-	-	123.7	-	-
XGPT	3M	-	-	-	-	-	120.1	-	-
MeMAD	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	38.5	-
VL-T5	180K	70.3	60.8	73.6	71.3	58.9	116.5	38.6	-
VL-BART	180K	71.3	60.5	70.3	22.4*	48.9	116.6	28.1	-

Table 3. VQA Karpathy-test split accuracy using generative and discriminative methods. We break down the questions into two subsets in terms of whether the best-scoring answer a^* for each question is included in the top-K answer candidates A^{topk} . In-domain: $a^* \in A^{topk}$, Out-of-domain: $a^* \notin A^{topk}$.

Method	In-domain	Out-of-domain	Overall
Discriminative			
UNITER _{Base}	74.4	10.0	70.5
VL-T5	70.2	7.1	66.4
VL-BART	69.4	7.0	65.7
Generative			
VL-T5	71.4	13.1	67.9
VL-BART	72.1	13.2	68.6

LXMERT and UNITER. Comparing models with the same backbone, we notice the generative models improve upon the discriminative baselines across all the subsets. This improvement is more significant on the out-of-domain subset, where the generative VL-T5 and VL-BART achieve 6 and 6.2 points improvement over their discriminative counterparts, showing the effectiveness of using generative modeling. Compared to the strong discriminative baseline UNITER_{Base} (pretrained with 4M extra images), our generative models still show comparable overall performance while significantly outperform it on the out-of-domain subset (about 3 points).

Dataset-specific prefixes: As shown in recent works (Gao et al., 2020; Shin et al., 2020; Li & Liang, 2021; Radford et al., 2021), different text prompts could result in different finetuning results. We thus experiment with a single prefix ‘vqa’ for both VQA and GQA in VL-T5 pretraining/finetuning. Interestingly, we found slight performance increases from the original dataset-specific prefix: VQA

Table 4. NLVR² performance comparison under different encoding settings. Note that *Triplet* takes lower computational cost than *Pair* and *Pair-biattn*. See also Fig. 4.

Method	Setting	dev	test-P
UNITER _{Base}	Triplet	73.0	73.9
UNITER _{Base}	Pair	75.9	75.8
UNITER _{Base}	Pair-biattn	77.2	77.9
LXMERT	Pair	74.9	74.5
Oscar _{Base}	Pair	78.1	78.4
VL-T5	Triplet	74.6	73.6
VL-BART	Triplet	71.7	70.3

Karpathy-test ($67.9 \rightarrow 69.3$); GQA test-dev ($60.0 \rightarrow 60.2$). This shows that a single model can successfully handle multiple VQA tasks without dataset-specific prefixes (similar results were observed in text QA (Khashabi et al., 2020)).

5.2. Natural Language Visual Reasoning: NLVR²

The task of NLVR² (Suhr et al., 2019) is to determine whether a natural language statement is true about two images. To apply our model to this task, we concatenate region features from the two images and use different image id embeddings to disambiguate the regions from the two images. Then our model learns to generate text labels “true” and “false”. This is similar to the *Triplet* setting described in UNITER (Chen et al., 2020). In Fig. 4, we illustrate three common encoding settings for NLVR².

Table 4 shows the model results on NLVR² under different encoding settings: (i) *Triplet*: joint encoding of image pairs and text; (ii) *Pair*: the concatenation of individual embedding of each image-text pair; (iii) *Pair-biattn*: bidirec-

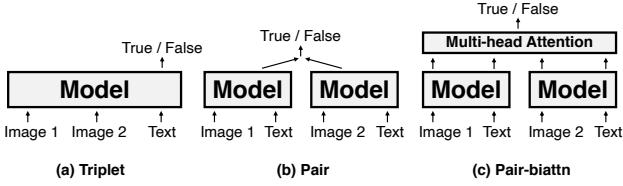


Figure 4. Different encoding settings for NLVR². *Pair* and *Pair-biattn* approximately double the computational cost over *Triplet*, which our models are based on.

tional attention added to *Pair*. UNITER shows that one can improve performance with a more complex encoding setting, i.e., *Pair-biattn* achieves better performance than *Pair*, which is again better than the simplest *Triplet*. Note that both the *Pair* and the *Pair-biattn* settings approximately double the computational cost compared to that of the *Triplet* setting. While there is the gap between our models and baselines in *Pair* and *Pair-biattn* setting, VL-T5 shows comparable performance to UNITER in *Triplet* setting.

5.3. Referring Expression Comprehension: RefCOCOg

Referring expression comprehension requires a model to correctly localize an object described by a given phrase (e.g., ‘the car on the left’). In this work, we evaluate models on the RefCOCOg (Mao et al., 2016) dataset. Similar to the visual grounding pretraining task in Sec. 4, we give our model a referring phrase and candidate region features from the image, the model then generates the visual sentinel token (e.g., <vis_1>) of the region corresponding to the phrase. Following previous works UNITER and MAttNet (Yu et al., 2018a), we use region detections from Mask R-CNN (He et al., 2017) as candidates and mark a selected region to be correct if its intersection over union (IoU) with the ground truth region is greater than 0.5.

Table 2 compares our models with discriminative baselines. With pretraining, VL-T5 significantly outperforms the strong modular model MAttNet, and achieves a reasonable performance compared to the UNITER model that has been pretrained on a much larger corpus. While our method did not achieve state-of-the-art performance, these results suggest that referring expression comprehension can be effectively formulated as a text-generation task, rather than previously (Yu et al., 2018a; Chen et al., 2020) formulated classification task over a set of visual regions, allowing more flexible architecture design. We hope our work would inspire future works in this direction. We also observe that our experiments with VL-BART on RefCOCOg diverges. One reason might be the difference in positional encoding methods of T5 and BART. During training, BART adds learned absolute positional embedding to text token embedding, whereas T5 uses relative position biases in self-attention layers instead. We hypothesize that VL-BART

Table 5. RefCOCOg performance comparison.

Method	V&L PT	val ^d	test ^d
MattNet		66.9	67.3
UNITER _{Base}	✓	74.3	74.5
VL-T5		63.4	62.9
VL-T5	✓	71.2	71.3
VL-BART		21.8	23.0
VL-BART	✓	23.6	22.4

found strong correspondence by memorizing the positions of each training object (we observe high training accuracy, but low validation accuracy).

5.4. Visual Commonsense Reasoning: VCR

Visual Commonsense Reasoning (VCR) (Zellers et al., 2019) is a multiple-choice question answering task that requires commonsense reasoning beyond object or action recognition. Each VCR question (Q) has 4 answers (A) and 4 rationales (R), and it can be decomposed into two multiple choice sub-tasks: question answering (Q→A), and answer justification (QA→R). The overall task (Q→AR) requires a model to not only select the correct answer to the question, but also the correct rationale for choosing the answer. Similar to Nogueira et al. (2020) that leverages language model for document ranking, we concatenate context (image+question) with each candidate choice, and let our models generate “true” for the correct choice and generate “false” otherwise, as shown in Table 1. During inference, we use $\frac{P(\text{true})}{P(\text{true}) + P(\text{false})}$ to rank the choices and select the one with the highest score.

UNITER (Chen et al., 2020) has shown that a second-stage in-domain pretraining (with the same pretraining objectives as generic-domain pretraining) on the VCR dataset would significant improve VCR task performance. This is likely due to the domain difference between VCR and the generic-domain pretraining corpus (e.g., COCO Captions), e.g., the input text (concatenation of multiple sentences: [Q] + [A] + [R]) in VCR is much longer than in generic-domain pretraining. In Table 6, we show the experiment results with second stage pretraining on VCR. On VCR val split, comparing to the base models that do not pretrain, we find that both Stage 1 generic-domain pretraining and Stage 2 in-domain pretraining help improve the VCR task performance, which is consistent with the findings in UNITER. On VCR test split, we notice that our best model VL-T5 achieves a comparable (slightly better) performance to UNITER, while significantly higher performance when compared to ViLBERT.

Table 6. VCR accuracy. *Stage 1* refers to the original generic-domain pretraining and *Stage 2* refers to the in-domain pretraining on VCR.

Method	V&L PT		Q → A	VCR val		VCR test	
	Stage 1	Stage 2		QA → R	Q → AR	Q → A	QA → R
ViLBERT			69.3	71.0	49.5	-	-
ViLBERT	✓		72.4	74.4	54.0	73.3	74.6
UNITER _{Base}			72.4	73.7	53.5	-	-
UNITER _{Base}	✓		72.8	75.3	54.9	-	-
UNITER _{Base}	✓	✓	74.6	77.0	57.8	75.0	77.2
VL-T5			71.1	73.6	52.5	-	-
VL-T5	✓		72.9	75.0	54.7	-	-
VL-T5	✓	✓	74.6	77.0	57.5	75.3	77.8
VL-BART			65.4	68.1	44.6	-	-
VL-BART	✓		67.0	67.4	45.4	-	-
VL-BART	✓	✓	69.2	69.9	48.6	69.8	48.9

Table 7. COCO captioning scores on Karpathy-test split. All models are trained with cross-entropy loss. PT and FT refer to the use of object tags during pretraining and finetuning, respectively.

Method	V&L PT	Object tags	COCO Captioning			
			B	C	M	S
Oscar	✓	PT+FT	36.5	123.7	30.3	23.1
VL-T5	✓	FT	34.5	116.5	28.7	21.9
VL-BART	✓	FT	35.1	116.6	28.7	21.5
Oscar	✓		34.5	115.6	29.1	21.9
Unified VLP	✓		36.5	117.7	28.4	21.3
XGPT	✓		37.2	120.1	28.6	21.8
VL-T5	✓		34.6	116.1	28.8	21.9
VL-BART	✓		34.2	114.1	28.4	21.3
Unified VLP			35.5	114.3	28.2	21.0
XGPT			34.4	113.0	27.8	20.8
BUTD			36.2	113.5	27.0	20.3
VL-T5			32.6	109.4	28.2	21.0
VL-BART			33.8	112.4	28.5	21.4

5.5. Image Captioning: COCO Caption

We evaluate automatic caption generation performance on MS COCO Caption dataset (Chen et al., 2015). We use *Karpathy split* (Karpathy & Fei-Fei, 2015), which re-splits train2014 and val2014 images (Lin et al., 2014) into 113,287 / 5000 / 5000 for train / validation / test. While some methods use reinforcement learning-based optimization on CIDEr, we only compare with methods using cross-entropy loss. Note that image captioning is the only task in our experiments where textual context is not meaningful, which results in a notable difference in pretraining and finetuning w.r.t. the input format. Inspired by Oscar (Li et al., 2020a), we also experiment with using object tags as additional text inputs during finetuning. We use BLEU (Papineni et al., 2002), CIDEr (Vedantam et al., 2015), METEOR (Banerjee & Lavie, 2005), SPICE (Anderson et al., 2016) as evaluation

Table 8. Multi30K En-De multimodal translation BLEU scores. † and * refer to data augmentation and ensemble, respectively. We use gray color for the ensemble model it is not fairly comparable.

Method	V&L PT	test2016	test2017	test2018
MSA		38.7	-	-
MeMAD		38.9	32.0	-
MSA†		39.5	-	-
MeMAD†		45.1	40.8	-
MeMAD†*		45.5	41.8	38.5
T5 (text only)		44.6	41.6	39.0
VL-T5		45.3	42.4	39.5
VL-T5	✓	45.5	40.9	38.6
BART (text only)		41.2	35.4	33.3
VL-BART		41.3	35.9	33.2
VL-BART	✓	37.7	29.7	28.1

metrics using COCOEvalCap.⁵

In Table 7, we compare our models with baselines in different settings: the use of vision-and-language pretraining and the use of object tags as additional text inputs. With and without vision-and-language pretraining, our models show comparable performance to baselines. Since the use of object tags requires significant extra computation, we only use it for finetuning. Using tags gives a comparable or slightly improved performance for both models, and the improvement is significant (2.5) in CIDEr for VL-BART. We expect object tag augmentation during pretraining like Oscar would further boost the performance of our models.

5.6. Multimodal Machine Translation: Multi30K

We evaluate multimodal machine translation performance on Multi30K dataset (Elliott et al., 2016), where a model

⁵<https://github.com/tylin/coco-caption>

Table 9. Single-task vs. Multi-task finetuning results on 7 tasks. With a single set of parameters, our multi-task model achieves similar performance to separately optimized single-task models. We denote the number of parameters of single VL-T5 model as P.

Method	Finetuning tasks	# Params	Discriminative tasks					Generative tasks		
			VQA	GQA	NLVR ²	RefCOCOg	VCR	COCO Caption	Multi30K En-De	
			Karpathy test Acc	test-dev Acc	test-P Acc	test ^d Acc	val Acc	Karpathy test CIDEr	test2018 BLEU	
VL-T5	single task	7P	67.9	60.0	73.6	71.3	57.5	116.1	38.6	
VL-T5	all tasks	P	67.2	58.9	71.6	69.4	55.3	110.8	37.6	

translates English text to German text given context images. We report BLEU score using SacreBLEU (Post, 2018).⁶. We compare our method with state-of-the-art transformer models: Multimodal self-attention (MSA) (Yao & Wan, 2020), MeMAD (Grönroos et al., 2018) Table 8 shows that our T5-based models outperform the baselines that use strong data augmentation (e.g., back-translation) on all three test splits. Our vision-and-language models improve the text-only backbones, although we did not observe improvement with vision-and-language pretraining. This might be because the source text in Multi30K contains sufficient information for translation as discussed in Caglayan et al. (2019)

5.7. Multi-Task Finetuning

Single-task vs. Multi-task Finetuning: While our framework has a unified the architecture for different downstream tasks, the parameters are separately optimized. To see whether we can go further, we finetune a single VL-T5 model for 20 epochs, where it tackles 7 different tasks with the same set of weights. At each finetuning step, we sample a mini-batch of examples from one of the 7 tasks in a round-robin fashion. For a fair comparison, we use single-task baselines without augmentations (e.g., no 2nd stage pretraining for VCR, no object tags for COCO Captioning). Table 9 shows that our multi-task model achieves comparable performance to the separately optimized single-task models on all 7 tasks with a single set of parameters.

Single shared head vs. Task-specific heads: We also experiment with the multi-task finetuning setup of ViLBERT-MT (Lu et al., 2020), where a task-specific head is finetuned for each of the 7 downstream tasks while sharing backbone. The head parameters are initialized from the pre-trained LM head and separately updated during finetuning. The 7 task-specific heads (7H) add $7 \times 32\text{K}(\text{vocab size}) \times 768(\text{embedding size}) = 172\text{M}$ parameters, which is 80% of original VL-T5’s 220M parameters (P), resulting around 400M parameters in total. Since the increased parameters make the training slow, we compare both models by 5th epoch checkpoints. Table 10 shows that VL-T5 with single shared head achieves almost equal performance with task-

Table 10. Multi-task finetuning with single/task-specific heads. While three tasks are included for brevity, the rest of the tasks also show the minimal differences between two setups.

Method	# Params	VQA Karpathy test Acc	GQA test-dev Acc	COCO Caption Karpathy test CIDEr
Single shared head	P	68.3	59.3	110.6
Task-specific heads	P+7H=1.8P	68.5	59.3	110.9

specific heads, while having much fewer total parameters.

6. Conclusion

In this work, we proposed VL-T5 and VL-BART which tackle vision-and-language tasks with a unified text generation objective. Experiments show VL-T5 and VL-BART can achieve comparable performance with state-of-the-art vision-and-language transformers on diverse vision-and-language tasks without hand-crafted architectures and objectives. Especially, we demonstrate our generative approach is better suited for open-ended visual question answering. In addition, we also showed it is possible to train seven different tasks simultaneously using a single architecture with single parameters without not losing much performance. It would be an interesting future work to further explore this direction by adding even more tasks.

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⁶<https://github.com/mjpost/sacrebleu>

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