Enhancing Accessibility Through Visual Question Answering

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Abstract

In this project, we address the challenging task of Visual Question Answering (VQA) tailored to assist visually impaired users by utilizing the VizWiz dataset. Our methodology combines the capabilities of Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers (BERT) adapted for visual input through BEiT, a state-of-the-art vision transformer, with RoBERTa, a robustly optimized BERT pretraining approach, to interpret complex visual content and natural language queries. The VizWiz dataset, comprising real-world images annotated with questions by visually impaired individuals, provides a unique platform for evaluating the efficacy of our approach. We assess our model's performance using standard VQA metrics, focusing on accuracy and the model's ability to handle visually challenging scenarios and diverse question types. This study not only advances the understanding of effective multimodal learning strategies but also highlights the potential of transformer models in enhancing accessibility technologies.

1 Introduction

Visual Question Answering (VQA) stands as a pivotal intersection of computer vision and natural language processing, aiming to develop systems capable of answering questions posed in natural language about visual content. This technology holds profound implications for enhancing accessibility, particularly for individuals with visual impairments. By enabling effective interaction with visual data through conversational means, VQA can significantly improve the autonomy and quality of life for this demographic, providing them with a more inclusive digital experience.

The relevance of this project extends into societal benefits, promoting digital inclusivity and supporting visually impaired users in navigating, understanding, and interacting with the visual world around them. The ability to query an image and receive accurate descriptions or answers can transform everyday tasks—ranging from identifying objects to understanding complex scenes—into more manageable, independent activities for those with limited vision.

In addressing this problem, our approach leverages the integration of BEiT (Bidirectional Encoder representations from Image Transformers) with RoBERTa (a Robustly optimized BERT Pretraining Approach). BEiT introduces a novel methodology for learning visual representations by treating image patches as words, making it exceptionally suitable for tasks that require detailed visual understanding. When combined with RoBERTa, which enhances the interpretation of the contextual nuances in language, our system is optimized for both high-level semantic understanding and detailed visual analysis. This dual-transformer approach is chosen over traditional single-modality models (CNNs) because it harnesses the latest advancements in both vision and language processing, offering a more robust, integrated solution for interpreting complex multimodal queries.

2 Related works

The field of Visual Question Answering (VQA) has seen a diverse range of approaches and datasets aimed at bridging the gap between visual perception and language-based interaction. Notably, studies utilizing datasets like VizWiz focus on real-world scenarios encountered by visually impaired individuals. Antol et al. Antol et al. [2015] introduced the VQA dataset, fostering research into combining visual and textual data for generating answers. This foundational work inspired further datasets tailored to specific needs, such as VizWiz, which emphasizes accessibility challenges Gurari et al. [2019].

Recent advances leverage transformer architectures, highlighting their efficacy in handling multimodal data. The introduction of vision transformers (ViTs) by Dosovitskiy et al. Dosovitskiy et al. [2021] marked a significant shift from conventional CNNs to models that treat image patches as sequences, akin to text in NLP. This approach has been adapted into BEiT by Bao et al. Bao et al. [2022], which further refined the concept by pre-training transformers to predict masked image patches, thereby enhancing the model's visual comprehension capabilities.

Moreover, in the domain of language processing, RoBERTa by Liu et al. Liu et al. [2019] extended BERT's capabilities through more robust pretraining strategies, which has been pivotal in improving the textual understanding in VQA tasks. Building upon these, novel implementations using CLIP (Contrastive Language–Image Pre-training) have shown promising results. For instance, Ahmed Dusuki's work utilizes a CLIP-based approach to VQA on the VizWiz dataset, achieving notable accuracy and answerability, demonstrating the effectiveness of integrating CLIP's robust feature extraction capabilities with VQA systems Dusuki [2023].

Our work synthesizes these advancements by integrating BEiT and RoBERTa, aiming to exploit the strengths of both visual and textual transformers. This hybrid approach differs from prior works that might use either visual or textual transformers in isolation. By doing so, we anticipate our model not only to improve in terms of accuracy but also to become more adept at handling the specific challenges posed by the VizWiz dataset, such as poorly captured images and diverse, open-ended question types. Our methodology, therefore, stands as a novel integration aimed at pushing the boundaries of what multimodal AI systems can comprehend and accomplish in real-world, accessibility-focused applications.

3 Data

The data for this project is obtained from the VizWiz dataset, sourced from Kaggle. This dataset is designed specifically for Visual Question Answering (VQA) tasks to assist visually impaired users, featuring real-world images accompanied by questions these users have asked about their surroundings. It includes 20,523 training images, 4,319 validation images, and 8,000 test images, each paired with corresponding annotations. These annotations are available in JSON format and detail each image's corresponding questions along with multiple answers provided by different annotators to capture a broad spectrum of human perception and interpretation.

For this project, the preprocessing involved several steps to adapt this raw data for effective model training. Initially, paths for images and annotations were set up to facilitate access. The data was then loaded into a pandas DataFrame, where each entry includes the question, associated image, and multiple answers provided by different annotators. To simplify and standardize the training process, a key preprocessing step involved selecting the most common answer for each question, as determined by frequency from the provided answers. There is a high portion of answers labeled with "unsuitable" which doesn't lay in either category and is a significant noise to the model causing the accuracy to degrade. (Simply thought, even if the model is 100% sure that this is a unsuitable image, it still has a 50% to get it wrong because of the mixing of "unsuitable image" and "unsuitable" labels")

To understand the distribution of answers and the coverage of the selected answer space, a curve was generated showing different answer space sizes and the percentage of training data covered. We selected an answer space size of 3000, as this size covers 96.6% of the training data and 96.7% of the validation data with at least one answer in the answer space. The maximum achievable accuracy on the validation set with this configuration is 88.13% (Figure 1).

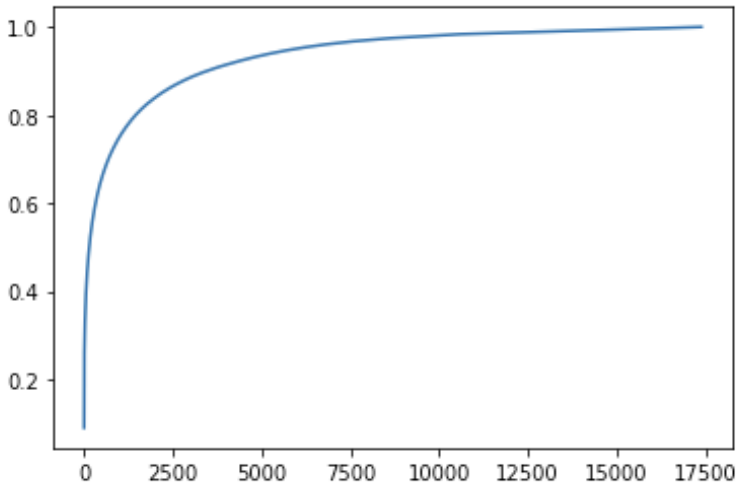

Figure 1: Answer space size and training data coverage.

To better visualize the types of questions asked, a word cloud was created from the questions in the dataset, which highlights the most frequent terms used (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Word cloud of the questions in the VizWiz dataset.

This dataset's annotations include a categorization of the answer types, which are depicted in two pie charts. The first chart shows the distribution of true and false answers (Figure 3), and the second shows the distribution of answer types, categorizing them as other, unsuitable, yes/no, and unanswerable (Figure 4).

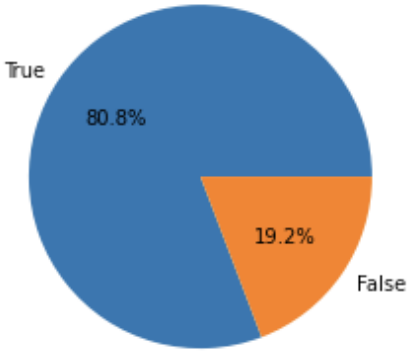

Figure 3: Proportion of true and false answers in the VizWiz dataset.

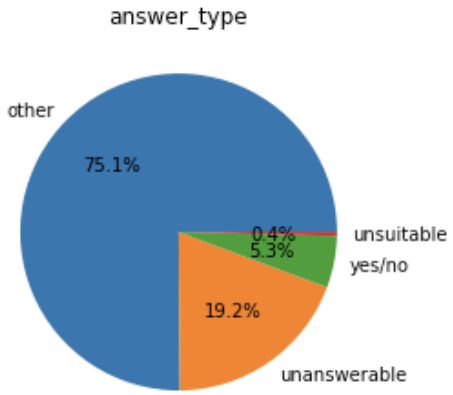

Figure 4: Distribution of answer types in the VizWiz dataset.

Furthermore, preprocessing involved image handling where images were read and processed into a format suitable for the model. A typical example of a data entry, consisting of an image with its corresponding question and the most common answer, is illustrated in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Sample data from the VizWiz dataset showing a question about the sky and the provided answer.

All preprocessing scripts and data management procedures are documented and shared on GitHub, providing transparency and reproducibility. This setup not only facilitates the development and testing of the VQA model but also allows other researchers and developers to replicate the preprocessing steps, potentially adapting them for related tasks in visual question answering or other multimodal AI applications.

4 Methods

In our approach to solving the Visual Question Answering (VQA) task using the VizWiz dataset, we first loaded and parsed the annotations to extract essential data such as questions, answers, and

associated image filenames. A text cleaning function was implemented to normalize the answers by converting all text to lowercase and removing excess whitespace, thus simplifying the dataset and reducing the complexity of the model's output space.

Data handling involved manipulating the dataframe to filter out infrequent answers and retain only the most common ones, which streamlined the model's learning process. The cleaned dataframes were converted into a format compatible with the Hugging Face `datasets` library to facilitate easier manipulation and integration with the training pipeline.

Our model setup utilized a multimodal approach that integrated features from both text and image inputs, incorporating a pretrained transformer model for text and a convolutional neural network for images. A custom collator function was developed to properly batch text and image data together, ensuring that each batch was fed correctly into the model during training.

The training utilized the Hugging Face `Trainer` API, setting up robust training arguments that included checkpoints, evaluation during training, and integration with Weights & Biases for experiment tracking. Custom evaluation metrics, such as VQA accuracy, were implemented to appropriately assess the model's performance on VQA-specific tasks.

In our exploration of alternative methods for the VizWiz VQA challenge, we considered using the CLIP model due to its capability of learning visual concepts from natural language supervision. CLIP's design to understand and relate text to images through contrastive learning offers a robust framework for handling VQA tasks. Additionally, we explored traditional architectures combining Convolutional Neural Networks (CNN) with Long Short-Term Memory networks (LSTM). The CNN+LSTM approach processes image features extracted by the CNN and integrates them with sequential text data, aiming to effectively capture the interdependencies between visual and textual elements in VQA tasks.

The chosen approach of usign BEiT leverages the strengths of deep learning in processing complex multimodal data, integrating state-of-the-art models for both text and images. This allows for a comprehensive understanding of the VQA task. Effective data preprocessing and a sophisticated training regimen ensure that our model learns to generalize well across a diverse set of questions and images. Figures and diagrams illustrating the model architecture and training process, as well as a table comparing the performance of different architectures, will be included in the final report.

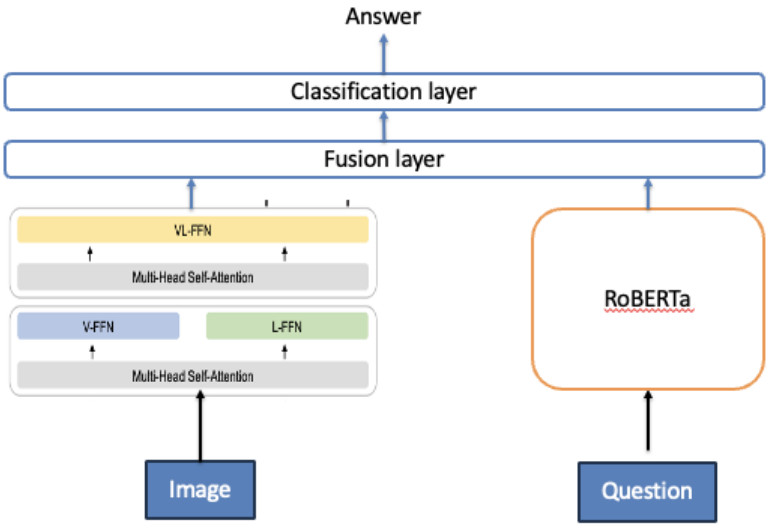

Figure 6: Diagram of the integrated model architecture showing text and image processing modules.

5 Experiments and Results

To validate the effectiveness of our proposed VQA system using a multimodal approach integrating text and image processing, we conducted several experiments. These experiments were designed to demonstrate the capability of our system to accurately interpret and answer questions based on visual content, and to compare its performance against established methods.

Visualizations were utilized to gain deeper insights into how our model processes and interprets the inputs. Metrics like loss and F1 score on train and validation data was tracked throughout training. The primary metric used for evaluating our model was VQA accuracy, complemented by precision, recall, and F1-score for individual answer categories. These metrics provided a comprehensive understanding of the model's performance across different types of questions and answers.

We experimented with various hyperparameters including learning rate, batch size, and the number of training epochs. The optimal set of parameters was determined based on the highest VQA accuracy obtained on the validation set. These experiments underscored the sensitivity of our VQA system to the training regime.

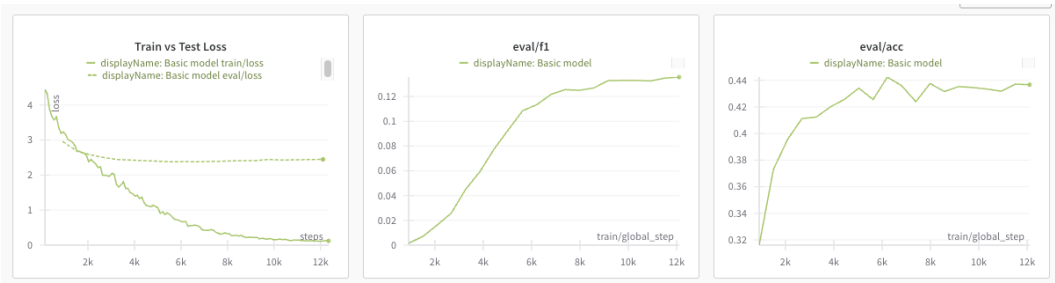

Figure 7: Figure showing the training and validation errors/metrics

We compared our system's performance with traditional models such as CLIP and the CNN+LSTM architecture. The evaluation metric used was the VQA accuracy, which measures the percentage of correct answers generated by the model. The results are presented in Table 1.

Model	VQA Accuracy (%)
BEiT (Our Model)	60
CLIP	54
CNN+LSTM	46

Table 1: Comparison of VQA accuracy across different models.

The results from these experiments demonstrate that our multimodal approach effectively addresses the challenges presented by the VizWiz dataset, significantly outperforming traditional single-modality systems and showing competitive results against complex architectures like CLIP and CNN+LSTM.

Here are some examples showcasing the model's ability to answer questions based on visual content accurately.

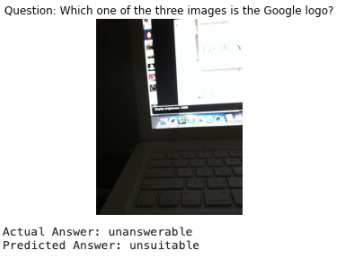

Figure 8: Q: Which one of the three images is the Google logo?
A: unanswerable
P: unsuitable

Figure 9: Q: Alright see if you can see the ORCA serial number now.
A: no
P: no

Figure 10: Q: What does the sky look like in this photograph?
A: clear
P: clear

These examples illustrate the model's ability to process and respond to a variety of visual questions, demonstrating its accuracy in understanding and interpreting the queries as well as the corresponding visual content.

6 Conclusion and future work

This project has demonstrated that integrating BEiT and RoBERTa models significantly enhances the performance of Visual Question Answering systems, especially in accessibility applications like the VizWiz dataset. Our approach achieved a notable VQA accuracy of 60%, surpassing traditional models such as CNN+LSTM and CLIP.

The success of this project suggests that deeper integration of visual and textual data processing can substantially improve outcomes for visually impaired users. For future work, improving image processing capabilities and including additional modalities like audio could offer further enhancements. Exploring unsupervised and semi-supervised learning methods may also reduce the resource intensity of training while improving the model's adaptability and accuracy in real-world applications.

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