

Transfer of Status Report

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Abstract—Abstract goes here.

I. INTRODUCTION

We spend our lives roaming through the space-time continuum. Our senses have evolved to make use of the temporal dependencies omnipresent in real-world data. And yet the majority of machine learning (ML) algorithms either do not use temporal dependencies at all or rely on features extracted by models which do not take them into account. I am interested in and will focus on using neural networks for probabilistic time-series modelling, with the emphasis on unsupervised and self-supervised learning and the connection between learning and interacting with the environment. I am going to argue that time dependencies in data and the interaction of an agent with its environment are enough to create a powerful signal for self-supervised learning. My work as a PhD student at Oxford started with the problem of single object tracking in videos, which resulted in a successful NIPS 2017 submission (Kosiorek, Bewley, and Posner, 2017). This project gave me an opportunity to explore learning in the presence of temporal dependencies and to explore the concept of self-supervision: how to make the system learn better without using any additional external (e.g., ground-truth) information? The rest of this paper is structured as follows: Section II covers prior work related to the areas in question. Specifically, I summarise the tasks of sequence prediction, predictive coding, variants of unsupervised learning and present a number of relevant approaches. In the section III, I describe the work on object tracking and how it ties with my interests and the planned future work on structured unsupervised learning for videos, predictive coding and model-based reinforcement learning. Section IV describes my future research plans, related risks and expected outcomes. Section V concludes this work.

II. RELATED WORK

A. Unsupervised Learning via Generative Modelling

While data in general is abundant and cheap, data for supervised learning is often expensive and time-consuming to gather. The majority of ML algorithms require relatively large amounts of labelled training data. One of the explanation states that they start learning without any prior knowledge of the world. This is in stark contrast to humans, who not only have a vast amount of knowledge about the world, but also expand it continuously and without any supervision (Friston, 2009). One alternative is to perform generative modelling of the probability distribution $p(\mathbf{x}) = \int p(\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{z}) d\mathbf{z}$

of observations \mathbf{x} in terms of some latent variables \mathbf{z} . The latent variables *explain* the observations and can make the joint distribution $p(\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{z})$ tractable even in the case of an intractable marginal distribution. The latent encoding can be used in upstream tasks e.g., for transfer or semi-supervised learning (Pan and Yang, 2010). Hinton, Osindero, and Teh, 2006 introduced Deep Belief Networks (DBN) which explain the observations in terms of Bernoulli latent variables. Alternatively, we can approximate the true data distribution by deriving the evidence lower bound (ELBO) on the log probability of the data, which results in variational autoencoders (VAE) (Kingma and Welling, 2013; Rezende, Mohamed, and Wierstra, 2014). VAEs are much more flexible than DBNs as they allow latent variables from arbitrary probability distribution functions (pdf) and can be trained end-to-end with off-the-shelf gradient-based methods. These approaches are primarily suited to modelling datasets of independent and identically distributed (*i.i.d.*) points.

B. Sequence Modelling

Traditional approaches to sequence modelling often consider inference of latent variables, e.g., linear dynamical systems or hidden markov models, that explain the data (Bishop, 2006). They often require dynamics of the system to be known and often have too little capacity to model complex and high-dimensional real-world data. Neural networks, on the other hand, can learn both features and state dynamics from data and they can approximate functions of arbitrary complexity with arbitrary precision. Even early works on the topic demonstrated how useful neural networks are for prediction of chaotic time-series (Lapedes and Farber, 1988). Since then, neural networks have been successfully applied for sequence classification and prediction in different domains: written natural language, speech and audio, motion capture data or brain waves (Långkvist, Karlsson, and Loutfi, 2014). Unsupervised learning can be also done as sequence prediction, where the task is to predict the observation at time $t + 1$ given a sequence of observations $\mathbf{x}_{1:t}$ up to time t . This task is flexible in that it admits many different model types, including Gaussian processes, support vector machines or feed-forward neural networks, although models which can explicitly use temporal structure of data such as Gaussian process dynamic models (GPDM; Wang, Fleet, and Hertzmann, 2008) or recurrent neural networks (RNN) tend to perform better. Recently, sequential counterparts of VAEs have been proposed, which allow efficient generative modelling of sequences (Fabius and Amersfoort, 2015; Bayer and Osendorfer, 2015; Karl et al., 2017).

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C. Predictive Coding

Modern sequential predictive models tend to update its hidden state at every time-step. It can be argued, however, that if a model is able to predict the world perfectly, it should not update its state. On the contrary, if a perfect prediction is available, the model should be capable of evolving its hidden state so as to reflect the change of the world w.r.t. the prediction. Predictive coding formalises this behaviour by using only the prediction errors to update the hidden state. The idea dates back at least to the Kalman filter (Kalman, 1960). Recent advances in neural networks allow to frame it as an auto-regressive neural network (Lotter, Kreiman, and Cox, 2016; Canziani and Culurciello, 2017), which uses the difference between the prediction and the input at the following time step to update the hidden state. As there are many futures possible, this approach leads to an ill-posed problem. The prediction, which is a maximum-likelihood estimate of what might happen, is only a single instantiation thereof. It would be theoretically more sound to normalise prediction errors by the covariance matrix of errors, an approach adopted by Kalman filtering. Friston, 2009 argues that the human brain might also follow this approach, whereby the computational architecture of the brain forms a hierarchical system, whose every layer constantly tries to predict the output of the lower levels of the hierarchy in a fully Bayesian fashion. The normalised predictive error in this setup gives rise to surprise, which is the negative log-likelihood of the inputs under the predictive distribution of the model and where the normalisation can be understood as attention.

D. Learning of Abstract Ideas

The utility of sequence prediction as an unsupervised learning approach can be intuitively explained by the fact that predicting the future, if it is to be done well, requires very good understanding of the present. If, for example, a model can learn an idea of an object and the laws of physics, it should be able to constrain its prediction to those where the car follows some trajectory and does not dissolve into thin air. The majority of neural networks are over-parametrised (Denil et al., 2013) and it is difficult to expect learning any abstract notions from data without imposing any structure. Eslami et al., 2016 introduce AIR, a VAE with a variable-length latent encoding for image reconstruction. This model imposes a geometric prior on the encoding length which encourages sparse solutions, therefore learning to decompose the scene into a number of independent parts — the objects. It is worth noting that, along the main model, the authors introduce difference-AIR, which exploits the specific structure of the problem and adheres to the predictive coding paradigm, thereby achieving better performance. In the extension of this work, Rezende, Eslami, et al., 2016 learn to reconstruct three-dimensional (3D) structure of an object from even a single two-dimensional (2D) view by imposing 3D latent representation and structuring the decoder as a projection of the latent space into the 2D output space; they show that it is able to infer the idea of an object from data. Häusser,

Mordvintsev, and Cremers, 2017 learn the idea of an object and its class by learning to associate similar objects with each other in the embedding space, which is very much like a child learning about its identity by comparing itself with others (Decety and Chaminade, 2003). In case of reinforcement learning, a complex environment might itself be a cue which leads to learning abstract ideas. Heess et al., 2017 shows that articulated agents can learn real-world motion patterns by interacting with the environment. Specifically, they learn to crouch, jump, turn and run while maximising a very simple reward function based on forward progress. Using a specific model structure as a method of learning abstract ideas was also demonstrated by Battaglia et al., 2016. The authors propose an interaction network, a highly complex model that operates on a graph of objects and relations between them and acts as a physics simulator. The particular model structure enables learning invariants (e.g., energy conservation) and inferring latent variables describing the system as a whole (e.g., potential energy).

In the following we put these ideas together.

III. HIERARCHICAL ATTENTIVE RECURRENT TRACKING

During my first year as a PhD student at Oxford I developed the Hierarchical Attentive Recurrent Tracking (HART) framework. This RNN-based model learns to track objects in videos by focusing on small image regions, usually not much bigger than the tracked objects. It does so by using a differentiable attention mechanism, which can effectively crop a part of the image, thereby quickly removing irrelevant parts of the input. Upscaling HART to a challenging real-world dataset proved difficult, as end-to-end training on a randomly initialised neural network was very unstable and converged to poor results. To address this issue, I resorted to transfer learning (Pan and Yang, 2010). Using AlexNet (A. Krizhevsky, I. Sutskever, and Hinton, 2012) as a feature extractor has stabilised the training and improved performance.

Feature extractors pre-trained on static image analysis tasks are often used for processing video sequences (see e.g., Ning et al., 2016). This approach, while effective, has little justification in neuroscience. In contrary, there is a growing body of evidence indicating the importance of temporal connections in the human visual cortex (Kastner and Ungerleider, 2000), which suggests that the temporal integration of information is vital for building up high resolution representation of the world.

Modern single-object-tracking approaches are based on either metric learning or bounding box regression. Not only do they need to rely on heuristics (non-differentiable image cropping, explicit scale search) to achieve computational efficiency and accuracy, but they are also fully dependent on labelled training data. **HART, on the other hand, uses self-supervision in the form of object masks computed as foreground-background segmentation of extracted attention glimpses. is that even true?** Computing the object mask serves several purposes. (a) it forces the model to store object appearance information in the hidden state, (b) it encourages

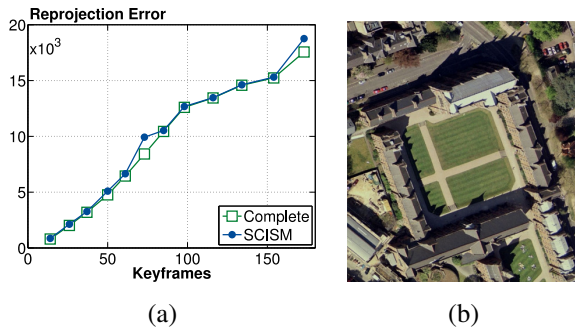


Fig. 1: Two figures wrapped in a table: (a) a graph and (b) a college.

better spatial attention prediction, as computing the object mask is easier (lower relative penalty for mistake) if the object covers a bigger part of the attention glimpse and (c) since the ground-truth object mask is computed on the fly, it serves as data-augmentation, in the sense that the errors and the learning signal is dependent on the model parameters and is different in every iteration of training even if the input data is the same

Despite being trained under full supervision, HART was a test bench I used to learn about learning in the presence of temporal dependencies and to experiment with different structures of the objective function so as to maximise learning from a limited amount of data.

IV. RESEARCH PROPOSAL

Things to write about:

- Predictive Coding: next-frame prediction with VAEs, it's normalisation behaviour, inner feedback loop for corrections
- Model-based RL: sample efficiency, using a policy to improve learning speed of the perception module, learn a policy in the absence of a goal
- Unsupervised object tracking & detection

V. CONCLUSIONS

Conclusions go here.

APPENDIX

General theme: Representation learning for sequential data.

I'm interested in:

- timeseries
- unsupervised learning
- predictive coding
- learning abstract concept and ideas

What I'd like to do is:

I'd like to leverage unsupervised learning for time-series to learn abstract concepts that describe the world, and more importantly, its evolution. I would like to be able to:

- predict how the world evolves

- find out whether doing so in a probabilistic way has any benefits over deterministic approaches, e.g. is multi-modality of a probabilistic solution helpful
- see how imposing structure on the predictions affects representation learning, e.g. air-style unsupervised object tracking; using a policy to either minimise or maximise surprise to improve learning speed, predictive accuracy or both

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