

Variational Autoencoders

CPSC 540 - Advanced Machine Learning
University of British Columbia

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Motivation

Ordinary autoencoders

- Convolutional layers reduce input data x into **latent vector** representation z .
- Generate new data: pick a point z in **latent space**, push through **decoder**.
- **Potential for overfitting**.
- Nearby points in latent space can **produce completely different results** when passed through the decoder.

Motivation

Variational Autoencoders (VAEs)

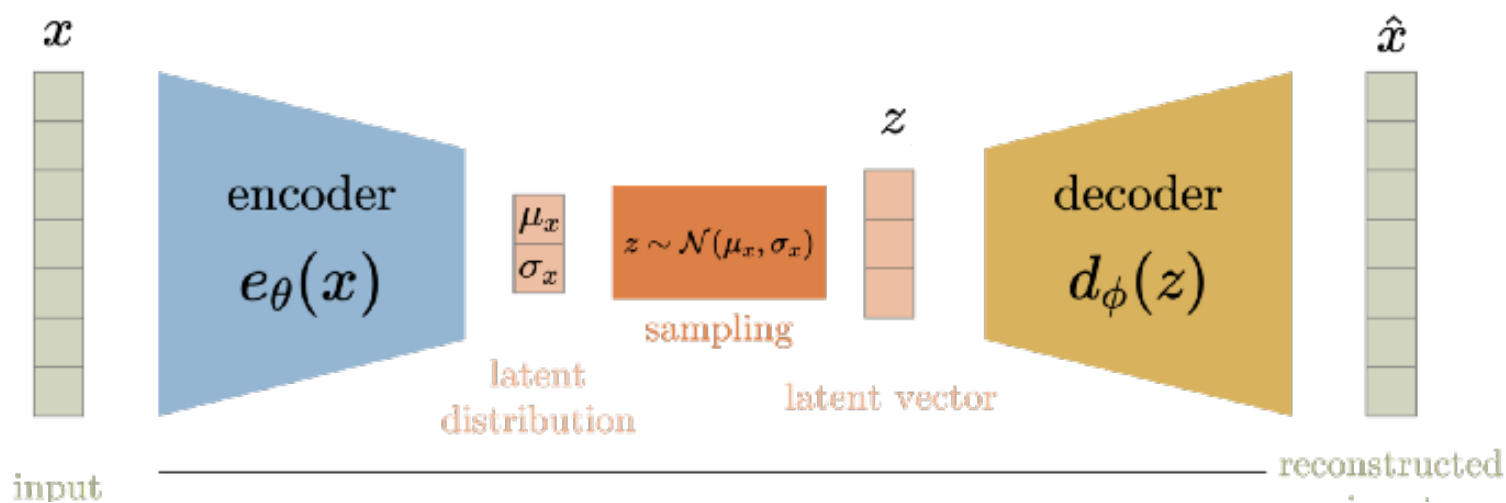
- Represent the latent variable z as a *distribution*

$$z \sim p(z \mid x)$$

- Draw a random sample z , then push it through the decoder.
- Nearby points in latent space **produce similar data** when pushed through decoder.

Model Definition

- Similar to autoencoders, VAEs have an **encoder**, **decoder**, and **bottleneck layer**.
- Instead of learning latent vector z directly, **learn parameters of the distribution** we pull z from.



General framework

- VAEs are **deep generative models**.
- Use evidence maximization, i.e. maximizing $p(x)$.
- Evidence can be calculated with

$$p(x) = \int p(x | z)p(z) dz$$

where the integral is over the possible values of z in the latent space.

- Main Problem: **Exponential time to calculate $p(x)$** (must evaluate all configurations of latent variables).

General framework

Simplifying Assumptions:

- Decoder (likelihood):

$$p_{\theta}(x \mid z) = \mathcal{N}(f(z, \theta), \sigma^2 I)$$

Function f to be learned by decoder network weights/biases θ . σ is hyper-parameter.

- Encoder: $p(z \mid X)$ can be approximated by

$$q_{\phi}(z \mid x) = \mathcal{N}(\mu(x, \phi), \Sigma(x, \phi))$$

Weights/biases ϕ are learned by encoder network.

- Latent Prior: $p(z) = \mathcal{N}(0, 1)$.

General framework

Q: How can we force $p(z \mid x) \approx q_\phi(z \mid x)$?

A: The **Kullback-Leibler** (KL) - divergence **measures how different** two distributions p_1 and p_2 are:

$$\mathcal{KL}(p_1 \parallel p_2) := E_{x \sim p_1}(\log(p_1(x)) - \log(p_2(x)))$$

We will try to force $p(z \mid x) \approx q_\phi(z \mid x)$ by minimizing the KL-divergence between them.

Loss Function

Want to learn best μ and Σ for the encoder distribution $q_\phi(z | x^i) = \mathcal{N}(\mu(x^i, \phi), \Sigma(x^i, \phi))$:

$$q_\phi^*(z | x) = \operatorname{argmin}_\phi \mathcal{KL}(q_\phi(z | x) || p(z | x))$$

After some manipulation (to be done on the assignment):

$$\mathcal{KL}(q_\phi(z | x) || p(z | x)) = E_{z \sim q_\phi(z | x)} [\log(q_\phi(z | x)) - \log(p(x, y))] + \log(p(x))$$

The log-evidence to be maximized is therefore

$$\log(p(x)) = E_{z \sim q_\phi(z | x)} [\log(p(x, z)) - \log(q_\phi(z | x))] + \mathcal{KL}(q_\phi(z | x) || p(z | x))$$

Loss Function

(Continued) Log-evidence to be **maximized**:

$$\log(p(x)) = E_{z \sim q_\phi(z | x)}[\log(p(x, z)) - \log(q_\phi(z | x))] + \mathcal{KL}(q_\phi(z | x) || p(z | x))$$

- Expectation on RHS is called “**ELBO**” function.
- Issue: $p(z | x)$ still appears! (Hard to calculate).

- “Evidence Lower Bound” - Satisfies $\text{ELBO}(x) \leq \log(p(x))$.
- Instead of maximizing $\log(p(x))$ directly like in MLE, we maximize its lower bound ELBO.
- Can be viewed as *modified* or *approximate* “MLE”.

Interpretation of the Loss Function

Loss function:

$$-\text{ELBO}_i(\theta, \phi) = -E_{z \sim q_\phi(z \mid x^i)}[\log(p_\theta(x^i \mid z))] + \mathcal{KL}(q_\phi(z \mid x^i) \parallel p(z))$$

Interpretation:

- First term: **reconstruction error** (minimize NLL expected under our distribution q_ϕ).
- Second term: **regularization** (minimize KL-divergence).

The Role of Regularization

Regularization is provided by the $\mathcal{KL}(q_\phi(z \mid x^i) \parallel p(z))$ term.

- KL-divergence penalizes $q_\phi(z \mid x)$ for getting too far from $p(z) = \mathcal{N}(0, 1)$.
- Without KL regularization, model learns Gaussians $q_\phi(z \mid x)$ with very low variance
- Low variance Gaussian is just a “spike” at a particular point in latent space.
- This makes it practically deterministic, like an ordinary autoencoder.
- This regularization is how VAEs prevent this overfitting.

The Role of Regularization



Figure: Latent distributions. Left: no regularization. Right: regularization. Source: <https://towardsdatascience.com/understanding-variational-autoencoders-vaes-f70510919f73>

- Each x^i gets its own Gaussian distribution $q_\phi(z | x^i)$.
- On left: learned Gaussians are sharp and far apart from each other.
- Overfitting - Nonsense data generated from latent vectors between distributions.
- On right: broader distributions. Keeps the distributions close together.
- Latent vectors between distributions produce more realistic data.

Training

Loss function:

$$-\text{ELBO}_i(\theta, \phi) = -E_{z \sim q_\phi(z \mid x^i)}[\log(p_\theta(x^i \mid z))] + \mathcal{KL}(q_\phi(z \mid x^i) \parallel p(z))$$

How do we train? Remember our simplifying assumptions:

- $q_\phi(z \mid x^i) = \mathcal{N}(\mu(x^i, \phi), \sigma^2(x^i, \phi))$
- $p_\theta(x^i \mid z) = \mathcal{N}(f(z, \phi), \sigma^2)$
- $p(z) = \mathcal{N}(0, 1)$

Training

Loss function:

$$-\text{ELBO}_i(\theta, \phi) = -E_{z \sim q_\phi(z \mid x^i)}[\log(p_\theta(x^i \mid z))] + \mathcal{KL}(q_\phi(z \mid x^i) \parallel p(z))$$

Computing first term:

- Draw a few (or sometimes just one) samples

$$z \sim q_\phi(z \mid x^i)$$

- Approximate the expectation using Monte Carlo.

Training

Loss function:

$$-\text{ELBO}_i(\theta, \phi) = -E_{z \sim q_\phi(z | x^i)}[\log(p_\theta(x^i | z))] + \mathcal{KL}(q_\phi(z | x^i) || p(z))$$

Computing second term:

- **Just the KL-divergence** between two Gaussians.
- Has a closed form:

$$\begin{aligned} \mathcal{KL}(\mathcal{N}(\mu_1, \Sigma_1) || \mathcal{N}(\mu_2, \Sigma_2)) \\ = \frac{1}{2} \left(\text{Tr}(\Sigma_2^{-1} \Sigma_1) + (\mu_2 - \mu_1)^T \Sigma_2^{-1} (\mu_2 - \mu_1) - k + \log \left(\frac{|\Sigma_2|}{|\Sigma_1|} \right) \right) \end{aligned}$$

Training

Loss function:

$$-\text{ELBO}_i(\theta, \phi) = -E_{z \sim q_\phi(z \mid x^i)}[\log(p_\theta(x^i \mid z))] + \mathcal{KL}(q_\phi(z \mid x^i) \parallel p(z))$$

Problem:

- Drawing samples $z \sim q_\phi(z \mid x^i)$ to estimate the expectation on RHS.
- This is **not a differentiable step**.
- **Can't backpropagate error** for SGD!

Reparametrization Trick

Solution: Use the reparametrization trick:

- Draw a sample $\varepsilon \sim \mathcal{N}(0, 1)$.
- $z = A\varepsilon + \mu$ will be distributed as $\mathcal{N}(\mu, A^T A)$.
- Use Cholesky decomposition $\Sigma = A^T A$ to get the desired A .
- This is a **differentiable step**! All the randomness comes from ε .
- $A(x^i, \phi)$ and $\mu(x^i, \phi)$ depend on network parameters.

Reparametrization Trick

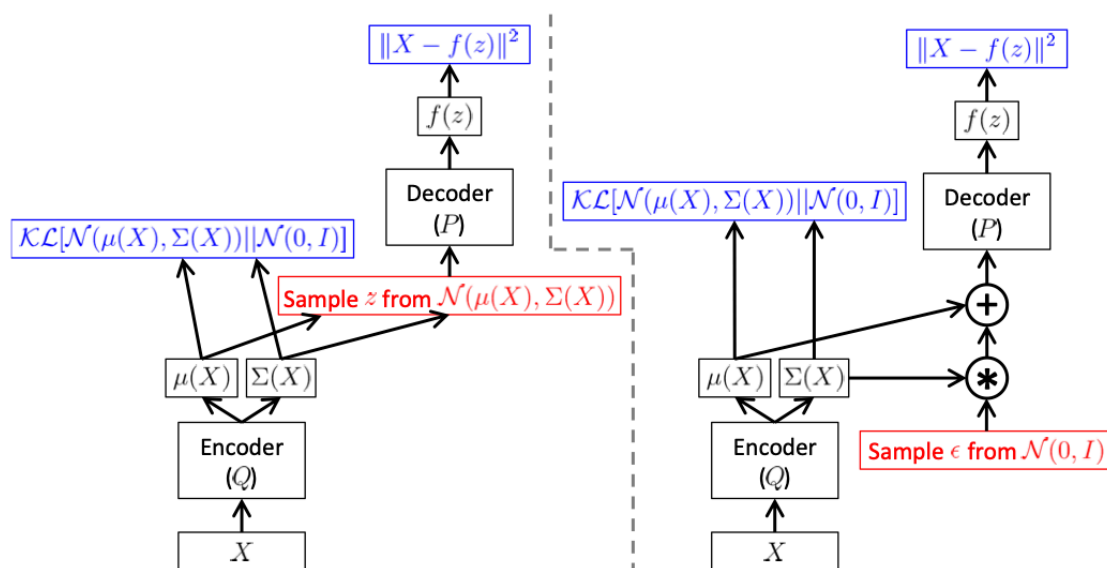


Figure: Left: Without reparametrization trick. Right: with reparametrization trick. Source: <https://arxiv.org/pdf/1606.05908.pdf>

Inference: Generating New Samples

- Latent space can be used to **generate new samples**.
- Goal is to generate data that looks like training, but is different.
- Simply sample a random z and push it through the decoder.
- Hopefully look like new samples thanks regularization term $\mathcal{KL}(q_\phi(z | x) || p(z))$.

Inference: Generating New MNIST Samples



Figure: MNIST digits created with a VAE. Source: <https://arxiv.org/pdf/1312.6114.pdf>

- Look like **slightly blurry digits**. This is a drawback of VAEs.
- The noise from sampling z tends to produce blurry images compared to GANs.

Inference: Generating New Chemical Samples

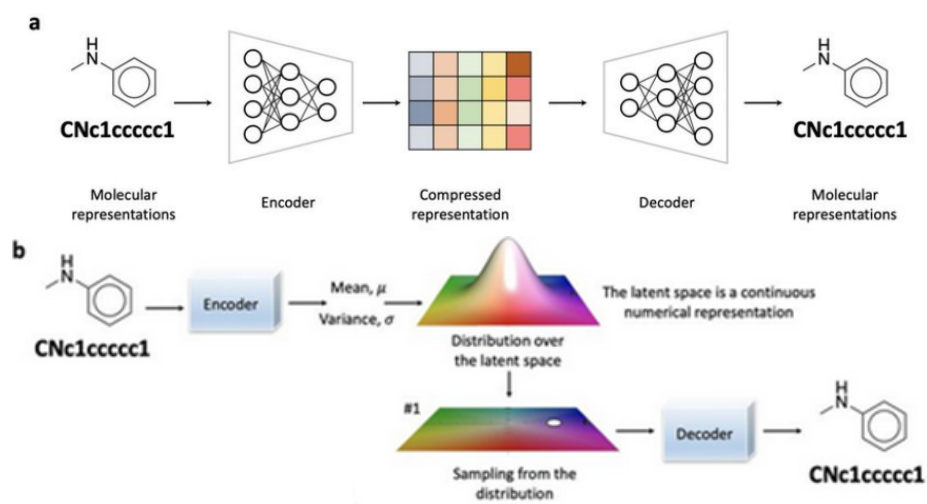


Figure: Creating new molecules similar to a given molecule. a) normal autoencoder. b) variational autoencoder. Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-autoencoder-and-the-variational-autoencoder-a-An-autoencoder-encodes-input_fig3_43786548

Application: Retina Disease

retina-VAE: Variationally Decoding the Spectrum of Macular Disease

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- Uses VAE to gain insights into macular disease.
- Generated 3,000 “patient profile vector” samples x^i using simulated clinical data based on known statistics.
- Trained a VAE with 3-dimensional latent space.
- Found 14 well-defined clusters when plotting the latent vectors.
- Classified clusters using k -means.
- Different clusters might respond better to different treatments.

Application: Retina Disease



Figure: Left: normal retina. Right: macular degeneration. Source: <https://arxiv.org/pdf/1907.05195.pdf>

Application: Retina Disease

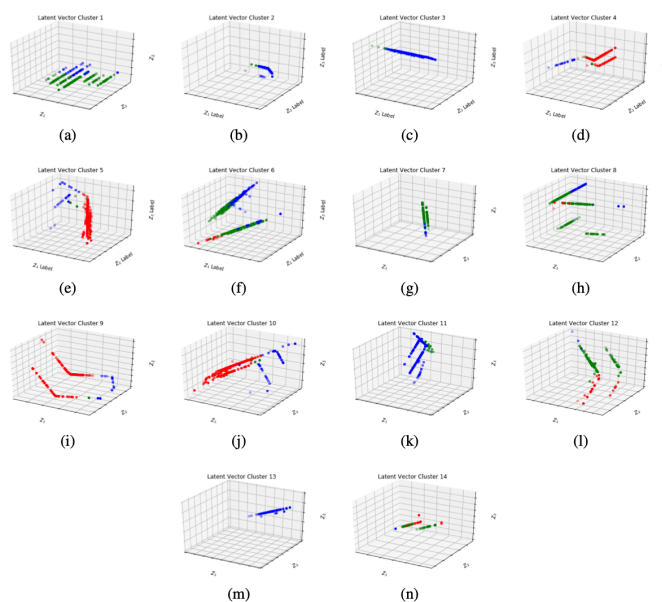


Figure: 14 clusters of the 3d latent vectors sampled from $q_{\phi}(z | x)$. Source: <https://arxiv.org/pdf/1907.05195.pdf>

Bayesian Variational Autoencoders

- BVAEs place a prior $p(\theta)$ over the network parameters.
- Estimate the posterior

$$p(\theta \mid x) \propto \int \int p_{\theta}(x \mid z)p(z)p(\theta \mid x) dz d\theta$$

- There are various tricks for learning BVAEs. See e.g. <https://arxiv.org/pdf/1912.05651.pdf>.
- Can perform better on out-of-distribution detection tasks.

Modification: β -VAEs

- β -VAEs are a generalized version of VAEs.
- Hyperparameter β controls regularization strength:

$$\text{Loss} = -E_{z \sim q_\phi(z | x^i)}[\log(p_\theta(x^i | z))] + \beta \mathcal{KL}(q_\phi(z | x^i) || p(z))$$

- β -VAEs allow for training with a special emphasis on *disentanglement*.

Disentanglement

- **Disentanglement**, a phenomenon where latent vector components are highly interpretable.
- Changing one component of a latent vector only affects one part of output data.
- Well-chosen β values (typically $\beta > 1$) lead to increased disentanglement.

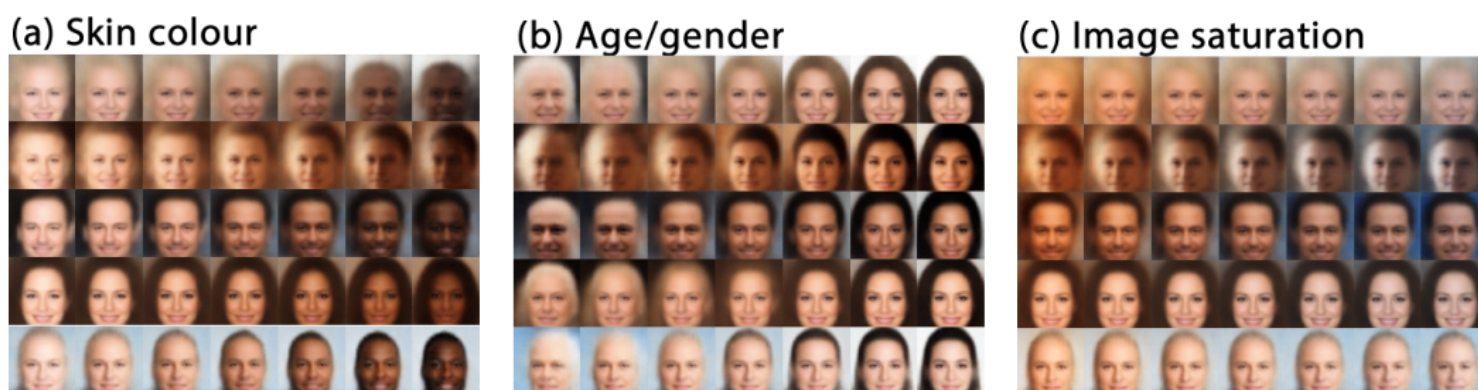


Figure: Changes to one component of the latent vector z produce interpretable changes in the output data.

Supervised Variational Autoencoders

- In supervised learning, the decoder is not used.
- Given new data \hat{x} , we **encode it as a latent distribution** $q_\phi(z \mid \hat{x})$.
- We can then use an output layer of our choosing.
- For example, could use a categorical estimator in final layer

$$p(y \mid x) = \text{Categorical}(y \mid \pi_c(\mu(\hat{x}, \phi), \Sigma(\hat{x}, \phi)))$$

where π_c is a probability vector.

Supervised Variational Autoencoders



(a) Row collision.



(b) Untraversable obstacle.



(c) Traversable obstacle.

Figure: Supervised VAE used in a self-driving toy car trained to classify terrain types. Source: <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2012.08637.pdf>

Summary

- VAEs are **deep generative models**.
- Same architecture are autoencoders, but uses **latent distribution**.
- Regularization from **KL-divergence** allows for more realistic sampling.
- Use the **reparametrization** trick so that all steps are differentiable.
- With some effort, can achieve interpretability through **disentanglement**.
- Downside: the random nature of the latent vectors **tends to lead to “blurrier” samples** compared to GANs.