

LING3401 Linguistics and Information Technology

Tutorial: Probability, n -gram, and perplexity

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Acknowledgment

- Some of the tutorial materials are based on: Dan Jurafsky and James H. Martin. *Speech and Language Processing* (3rd ed. draft). 2024.
- I owe my gratitude to my former advisor at the University of Washington. The way I deliver materials is heavily influenced by her approach.
- GPT-4o helped me write more than half of today's codes. Thanks GPT!

About Google Colaboratory (Colab)



- Google Colaboratory is a research tool for machine learning education and research. It's a Jupyter notebook environment that requires no setup to use.
- ...which means that you don't have to worry about setting up the Python environment on your device (at least for now)
- Today's Colab notebook has been posted



Probability: an introduction

- We are not introducing probability theory in a way like those in a math department
- If you are interested in knowing more, here's a very good textbook written by my undergraduate math advisor and his colleagues
 - David F. Anderson, Timo Seppäläinen, Benedek Valkó. *Introduction to Probability*. Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- Or, you can always ask me or GPT!



Basic concepts of probability

- The sample space Ω is the set of all possible outcomes.
 - For instance, $\Omega = \{aaa, aab, aba, abb, baa, bab, bba, bbb\}$ is a sample space consisting of all the possible strings when we have only two alphabets $\Sigma = \{a, b\}$, and the length of the string is strictly 3.
- A subset of the sample space is an event.
 - For instance, $A = \{\text{the string contains only one } a\} = \{abb, bab, bba\}$ is an event which means that the string contains only one a (i.e., abb, bab, bba).



Basic concepts of probability

- $P(A)$ is the probability that event A occurs.
 - For instance, $P(A) = \frac{3}{8}$ means the probability that the string contains only one a is $\frac{3}{8} = 37.5\%$
 - Note that this is a probability, and it doesn't mean that if you randomly generate your strings 8 times, you'll for sure have 3 such strings containing only one a
 - Instead, if you randomly generate your string 1 time, you will expect a 37.5% chance that the string you get has only one a
 - For each event A , we have $0 \leq P(A) \leq 1$. $P(A) = 0$ means A is never going to happen, and $P(A) = 1$ means A is always going to happen.



Basic concepts of probability

- Two more concepts before we embark!
- $P(AB)$ is the joint probability for events A and B , i.e. the probability that A and B happen at the same time.
 - For instance, A is the event that the string contains only one a , B is the event that the string ends with an a , then $P(AB)$ is the probability that you randomly generate your 3-letter string and found that the string contains exactly one a and ends with an a
- $P(A | B)$ is the conditional probability of A given B , i.e. the probability that A happens given that B happens.
 - For instance, A is the event that the string contains only one a , B is the event that the string ends with an a , then $P(A | B)$ is the probability that you randomly generate your 3-letter string but force that the last letter of the string is an a , and found that this a at the end is the only a in the string



Calculating probabilities: a demo

- This is optional which I will not cover in class
- If you have time back home, take a look at Part 1 of today's Colab notebook which includes codes that calculate the probabilities mentioned in the above 3 slides
 - You don't have to if you are not interested



About n -gram LM

- Then we can talk about n -gram and statistical modeling!
- An n -gram is a sequence of n adjacent symbols in particular order
 - i.e. a sequence of n words (or tokens) that appear next to each other in a text
 - $n \geq 1$ and is an integer
- For example:
 - A 1-gram (unigram) is a single word: "the", "cat", "sat"
 - A 2-gram (bigram) is a pair of consecutive words: "The cat", "cat sat"
 - A 3-gram (trigram) is a sequence of three consecutive words: "The cat sat"



Why do we need n -gram?

- Given previous tokens/words in a sequence/sentence, we want to predict the next word
- For instance, what is the next word if we have the sequence:
Natural language processing is a subfield of computer science and artificial
 - Suppose we have a large English corpus a statistical LM can learn from
 - If we want to determine the next word of this sequence, we must search for the occurrence of this sequence + a possible next token, namely "*Natural language processing is a subfield of computer science and artificial [token]*"
 - That's a mouthful, isn't it? I really doubt an English corpus has exactly the same string that we look for
 - Then the model doesn't know what's the next token since this sequence is not in the corpus! What can we do?



Why do we need n -gram?

- For instance, what is the next word if we have the sequence:
Natural language processing is a subfield of computer science and artificial
 - But if we don't have this super long string in the corpus, can we at least look for part of it?
 - Like, n tokens including the previous $n - 1$ tokens from the sequence and a new [token]?
 - So let's use 4 previous tokens from the sequence!
 - i.e., *computer science and artificial* + [token]
 - This means $n - 1 = 4$ and $n = 5$. And it's a 5-gram model!
 - There should be a lot of mentions of "computer science and artificial intelligence" in our corpus! Then why don't take the token intelligence to end the sentence?
 - i.e. $P(\text{intelligence} \mid \text{computer science and artificial})$ is large



Why do we need n -gram?

- For instance, what is the next word if we have the sequence:
Natural language processing is a subfield of computer science and artificial
 - Or, if we set $n = 2$ (bigram) and only rely on the previous single token, there should be a lot of mentions of “artificial intelligence” in our corpus as well!
 - i.e., The probability of having “intelligence” after “artificial”
 $P(\text{intelligence} \mid \text{artificial})$ is large
- Therefore, the next word/token predicted by the 2-gram LM (or the 5-gram LM) is “intelligence”
- And the sentence continues in this way:
Natural language processing is a subfield of computer science and artificial intelligence



Why n -gram works?

- Why are we confident that considering only the previous $n - 1$ tokens is safe?
- The Markov assumption

$$\begin{aligned} P(X_n = x_n \mid X_{n-1} = x_{n-1}, \dots, X_0 = x_0) \\ = P(X_n = x_n \mid X_{n-1} = x_{n-1}) \end{aligned}$$

The future state (next word) depends only on the present state (previous $(n - 1)$ words).

- An n -gram model is a $(n - 1)$ -order Markov model.
- e.g. “the bus came”
 - Bigram: $P(\text{came} \mid \text{bus})$
 - Trigram: $P(\text{came} \mid \text{the, bus})$



Why n -gram works?

- However, one limitation of using a small n value is that the model struggles to capture long-range context or dependencies.
 - Think about this: which token is a 2-gram model more likely to produce after “Taking two classes”, “is” or “are”?
 - For a more extreme case:

The book that the professor who won the prestigious award last year wrote during her sabbatical is on the table. What is on the table?



Have a try!

- Take a look at Part 2 of today's Colab notebook, and see how to train/learn an n -gram language model from a text!
 - The sample text we are using is the book *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll
 - ...which means the language model we trained will closely reflect the style and characteristics of the book!
 - You can manipulate the size of n to adjust the context window your model takes into account!
 - Then, you can try inputting a string yourself and see what's the most possible next word as predicted by your model



Have a try!

- Congratulations! You have trained your first language model!
 - ...but this LM is quite small and incapable of handling complicated cases



Have a try!

- Then, take a look at Part 3 of today's Colab notebook, where we will ask GPT-2 to predict the next tokens!
 - Try to see how different the predicted next tokens are given the same text!



About perplexity

- Non-NLP sense of perplexity: the state of feeling confused and anxious because you do not understand something
- For NLP: a measure of uncertainty or “confusion” in predictions
 - A “perplexed” person is unsure what to say next
 - A language model with high perplexity struggles to predict the next word accurately
 - i.e., the higher a LM’s perplexity is, the worse it performs
- Therefore, perplexity is a commonly used metric to evaluate the performance of a generative language model
- We will skip the math. Just remember that for perplexity, the lower, the better



Have a try!

- Take a look at Part 4 of today's Colab notebook, and see how one can calculate perplexity for a given model and text!
- We are using the n -gram model you have just trained and GPT-2 from Hugging Face
- Importantly, perplexity scores are model-dependent and should be interpreted within the context of each model



Miscellaneous

- **No class next week (Lunar New Year)**
- Please do not hesitate to ask questions
- We enjoy feedback from you, so please let us know if you feel there's anything we could have done better
- It would be great if you'd bring your laptop to the class every week