Title: BERT (language model)

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Bidirectional encoder representations from transformers (BERT) is a language model introduced in October 2018 by researchers at Google . [1][2] It learns to represent text as a sequence of vectors using self-supervised learning . It uses the encoder-only transformer architecture. BERT dramatically improved the state of the art for large language models . As of 2020 [update], BERT is a ubiquitous baseline in natural language processing (NLP) experiments. [3]

BERT is trained by masked token prediction and next sentence prediction. With this training, BERT learns contextual, latent representations of tokens in their context, similar to ELMo and GPT-2 . [4] It found applications for many natural language processing tasks, such as coreference resolution and polysemy resolution. [5] It improved on ELMo and spawned the study of "BERTology", which attempts to interpret what is learned by BERT. [3]

BERT was originally implemented in the English language at two model sizes, BERT BASE (110 million parameters) and BERT LARGE (340 million parameters). Both were trained on the Toronto BookCorpus [6] (800M words) and English Wikipedia (2,500M words). [1] : 5 The weights were released on GitHub . [7] On March 11, 2020, 24 smaller models were released, the smallest being BERT TINY with just 4 million parameters. [7]

Architecture

BERT is an "encoder-only" transformer architecture. At a high level, BERT consists of 4 modules:

Tokenizer: This module converts a piece of English text into a sequence of integers ("tokens").

Embedding: This module converts the sequence of tokens into an array of real-valued vectors representing the tokens. It represents the conversion of discrete token types into a lower-dimensional Euclidean space.

Encoder: a stack of Transformer blocks with self-attention, but without causal masking.

Task head: This module converts the final representation vectors into one-hot encoded tokens again by producing a predicted probability distribution over the token types. It can be viewed as a simple decoder, decoding the latent representation into token types, or as an "un-embedding layer".

The task head is necessary for pre-training, but it is often unnecessary for so-called "downstream tasks," such as question answering or sentiment classification . Instead, one removes the task head and replaces it with a newly initialized module suited for the task, and finetune the new module. The latent vector representation of the model is directly fed into this new module, allowing for sample-efficient transfer learning . [1] [8]

Embedding

This section describes the embedding used by BERT BASE . The other one, BERT LARGE , is similar, just larger.

The tokenizer of BERT is WordPiece, which is a sub-word strategy like byte-pair encoding . Its vocabulary size is 30,000, and any token not appearing in its vocabulary is replaced by [UNK] ("unknown").

The first layer is the embedding layer, which contains three components: token type embeddings, position embeddings, and segment type embeddings.

Token type: The token type is a standard embedding layer, translating a one-hot vector into a dense vector based on its token type.

Position: The position embeddings are based on a token's position in the sequence. BERT uses absolute position embeddings, where each position in a sequence is mapped to a real-valued vector. Each dimension of the vector consists of a sinusoidal function that takes the position in the sequence as input.

Segment type: Using a vocabulary of just 0 or 1, this embedding layer produces a dense vector based on whether the token belongs to the first or second text segment in that input. In other words, type-1 tokens are all tokens that appear after the [SEP] special token. All prior tokens are type-0.

The three embedding vectors are added together representing the initial token representation as a function of these three pieces of information. After embedding, the vector representation is normalized using a LayerNorm operation, outputting a 768-dimensional vector for each input token. After this, the representation vectors are passed forward through 12 Transformer encoder blocks, and are decoded back to 30,000-dimensional vocabulary space using a basic affine transformation layer.

Architectural family

The encoder stack of BERT has 2 free parameters: L $\{\text{displaystyle L}\}\$, the number of layers, and H $\{\text{displaystyle H}\}\$, the hidden size . There are always H / 64 $\{\text{displaystyle H/64}\}\$ self-attention heads, and the feed-forward/filter size is always 4 H $\{\text{displaystyle 4H}\}\$. By varying these two numbers, one obtains an entire family of BERT models. [9]

For BERT:

the feed-forward size and filter size are synonymous. Both of them denote the number of dimensions in the middle layer of the feed-forward network.

the hidden size and embedding size are synonymous. Both of them denote the number of real numbers used to represent a token.

The notation for encoder stack is written as L/H. For example, BERT BASE is written as 12L/768H, BERT LARGE as 24L/1024H, and BERT TINY as 2L/128H.

Training

Pre-training

BERT was pre-trained simultaneously on two tasks: [10]

Masked language modeling (MLM): In this task, BERT ingests a sequence of words, where one word may be randomly changed ("masked"), and BERT tries to predict the original words that had been changed. For example, in the sentence "The cat sat on the [MASK]," BERT would need to predict "mat." This helps BERT learn bidirectional context, meaning it understands the relationships between words not just from left to right or right to left but from both directions at the same time.

Next sentence prediction (NSP): In this task, BERT is trained to predict whether one sentence logically follows another. For example, given two sentences, "The cat sat on the mat" and "It was a sunny day", BERT has to decide if the second sentence is a valid continuation of the first one. This helps BERT understand relationships between sentences, which is important for tasks like question answering or document classification.

Masked language modeling

In masked language modeling, 15% of tokens would be randomly selected for masked-prediction task, and the training objective was to predict the masked token given its context. In more detail, the selected token is:

replaced with a [MASK] token with probability 80%,

replaced with a random word token with probability 10%,

not replaced with probability 10%.

The reason not all selected tokens are masked is to avoid the dataset shift problem. The dataset shift problem arises when the distribution of inputs seen during training differs significantly from the distribution encountered during inference. A trained BERT model might be applied to word representation (like Word2Vec), where it would be run over sentences not containing any [MASK] tokens. It is later found that more diverse training objectives are generally better. [11]

As an illustrative example, consider the sentence "my dog is cute". It would first be divided into tokens like "my 1 dog 2 is 3 cute 4 ". Then a random token in the sentence would be picked. Let it be the 4th one "cute 4 ". Next, there would be three possibilities:

with probability 80%, the chosen token is masked, resulting in "my 1 dog 2 is 3 [MASK] 4 ";

with probability 10%, the chosen token is replaced by a uniformly sampled random token, such as "happy", resulting in "my 1 dog 2 is 3 happy 4 ";

with probability 10%, nothing is done, resulting in "my 1 dog 2 is 3 cute 4 ".

After processing the input text, the model's 4th output vector is passed to its decoder layer, which outputs a probability distribution over its 30,000-dimensional vocabulary space.

Next sentence prediction

Given two sentences, the model predicts if they appear sequentially in the training corpus, outputting either [IsNext] or [NotNext] . During training, the algorithm sometimes samples two sentences from a single continuous span in the training corpus, while at other times, it samples two sentences from two discontinuous spans.

The first sentence starts with a special token, [CLS] (for "classify"). The two sentences are separated by another special token, [SEP] (for "separate"). After processing the two sentences, the final vector for the [CLS] token is passed to a linear layer for binary classification into [IsNext] and [NotNext].

For example:

Given " [CLS] my dog is cute [SEP] he likes playing [SEP] ", the model should predict [IsNext] .

Given " [CLS] my dog is cute [SEP] how do magnets work [SEP] ", the model should predict [NotNext] .

Fine-tuning

Sentiment classification

Sentence classification

Answering multiple-choice questions

Part-of-speech tagging

BERT is meant as a general pretrained model for various applications in natural language processing. That is, after pre-training, BERT can be fine-tuned with fewer resources on smaller datasets to optimize its performance on specific tasks such as natural language inference and text classification, and sequence-to-sequence-based language generation tasks such as question answering and conversational response generation. [12]

The original BERT paper published results demonstrating that a small amount of finetuning (for BERT LARGE, 1 hour on 1 Cloud TPU) allowed it to achieved state-of-the-art performance on a number of natural language understanding tasks: [1]

GLUE (General Language Understanding Evaluation) task set (consisting of 9 tasks);

SQuAD (Stanford Question Answering Dataset [13]) v1.1 and v2.0;

SWAG (Situations With Adversarial Generations [14]).

In the original paper, all parameters of BERT are fine-tuned, and recommended that, for downstream applications that are text classifications, the output token at the [CLS] input token is fed into a linear-softmax layer to produce the label outputs. [1]

The original code base defined the final linear layer as a "pooler layer", in analogy with global pooling in computer vision, even though it simply discards all output tokens except the one corresponding to [CLS]. [15]

Cost

BERT was trained on the BookCorpus (800M words) and a filtered version of English Wikipedia (2,500M words) without lists, tables, and headers.

Training BERT BASE on 4 cloud TPU (16 TPU chips total) took 4 days, at an estimated cost of 500 USD. [7] Training BERT LARGE on 16 cloud TPU (64 TPU chips total) took 4 days. [1]

Interpretation

Language models like ELMo, GPT-2, and BERT, spawned the study of "BERTology", which attempts to interpret what is learned by these models. Their performance on these natural language understanding tasks are not yet well understood. [3][16][17] Several research publications in 2018 and 2019 focused on investigating the relationship behind BERT's output as a result of carefully chosen input sequences, [18][19] analysis of internal vector representations through probing classifiers, [20][21] and the relationships represented by attention weights. [16][17]

The high performance of the BERT model could also be attributed to the fact that it is bidirectionally trained. [22] This means that BERT, based on the Transformer model architecture, applies its self-attention mechanism to learn information from a text from the left and right side during training, and consequently gains a deep understanding of the context. For example, the word fine can have two different meanings depending on the context (I feel fine today, She has fine blond hair). BERT considers the words surrounding the target word fine from the left and right side.

However it comes at a cost: due to encoder-only architecture lacking a decoder, BERT can't be prompted and can't generate text , while bidirectional models in general do not work effectively without the right side, thus being difficult to prompt. As an illustrative example, if one wishes to use BERT to continue a sentence fragment "Today, I went to", then naively one would mask out all the tokens as "Today, I went to [MASK] [MASK] [MASK] ... [MASK] .." where the number of [MASK] is the length of the sentence one wishes to extend to. However, this constitutes a dataset shift, as during training, BERT has never seen sentences with that many tokens masked out. Consequently, its performance degrades. More sophisticated techniques allow text generation, but at a high computational cost. [23]

History

BERT was originally published by Google researchers Jacob Devlin, Ming-Wei Chang, Kenton Lee, and Kristina Toutanova. The design has its origins from pre-training contextual representations, including semi-supervised sequence learning, [24] generative pre-training, ELMo, [25] and ULMFit. [26] Unlike previous models, BERT is a deeply bidirectional, unsupervised language representation, pre-trained using only a plain text corpus. Context-free models such as word2vec or GloVe generate a single word embedding representation for each word in the vocabulary, whereas BERT takes into account the context for each occurrence of a given word. For instance, whereas the vector for "running" will have the same word2vec vector representation for both of its occurrences in the sentences "He is running a company" and "He is running a marathon", BERT will provide a contextualized embedding that will be different according to the sentence. [4]

On October 25, 2019, Google announced that they had started applying BERT models to English-language search queries on Google Search within the US. [27] On December 9, 2019, it was reported that BERT had been adopted by Google Search for over 70 languages. [28] [29] In October 2020, almost every single English-based query was processed by a BERT model. [30]

Variants

The BERT models were influential and inspired many variants.

RoBERTa (2019) [31] was an engineering improvement. It preserves BERT's architecture (slightly larger, at 355M parameters), but improves its training, changing key hyperparameters, removing the next-sentence prediction task, and using much larger mini-batch sizes.

XLM-RoBERTa (2019) [32] was a multilingual RoBERTa model. It was one of the first works on multilingual language modeling at scale.

DistilBERT (2019) distills BERT BASE to a model with just 60% of its parameters (66M), while preserving 95% of its benchmark scores. [33] [34] Similarly, TinyBERT (2019) [35] is a distilled model with just 28% of its parameters.

ALBERT (2019) [36] used shared-parameter across layers, and experimented with independently varying the hidden size and the word-embedding layer's output size as two hyperparameters. They also replaced the next sentence prediction task with the sentence-order prediction (SOP) task, where the model must distinguish the correct order of two consecutive text segments from their reversed order.

ELECTRA (2020) [37] applied the idea of generative adversarial networks to the MLM task. Instead of masking out tokens, a small language model generates random plausible substitutions, and a larger network identify these replaced tokens. The small model aims to fool the large model.

DeBERTa (2020) [38] is a significant architectural variant, with disentangled attention . Its key idea is to treat the positional and token encodings separately throughout the attention mechanism. Instead of combining the positional encoding (x p o s i t i o n {\displaystyle x_{\mathrm {position} }}) and token encoding (x t o k e n {\displaystyle x_{\mathrm {token} }}) into a single input vector (x i n p u t = x p o s i t i o n + x t o k e n {\displaystyle x_{\mathrm {input} }=x_{\mathrm {token} }}), DeBERTa keeps them separate as a tuple: (x p o s i t i o n , x t o k e n) {\displaystyle (x_{\mathrm {position} }), x_{\mathrm {token} })} . Then, at each self-attention layer, DeBERTa computes three distinct attention matrices, rather than the single attention matrix used in BERT: [note 1]

The three attention matrices are added together element-wise, then passed through a softmax layer and multiplied by a projection matrix.

Absolute position encoding is included in the final self-attention layer as additional input.

Notes

References

Further reading

Rogers, Anna; Kovaleva, Olga; Rumshisky, Anna (2020). "A Primer in BERTology: What we know about how BERT works". arXiv: 2002.12327 [cs.CL].

External links

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Google

Google Brain

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AlphaGo Zero (2017)

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MuZero (2019)

Fan Hui (2015)

Lee Sedol (2016) Ke Jie (2017) AlphaGo (2017) The MANIAC (2023) AlphaFold (2018) AlphaStar (2019) AlphaDev (2023) AlphaGeometry (2024) AlphaGenome (2025) Inception (2014) WaveNet (2016) MobileNet (2017) Transformer (2017) EfficientNet (2019) Gato (2022) Quantum Artificial Intelligence Lab TensorFlow Tensor Processing Unit Assistant (2016) **Sparrow** (2022) Gemini (2023) BERT (2018) XLNet (2019) T5 (2019) LaMDA (2021) Chinchilla (2022) PaLM (2022) Imagen (2023) Gemini (2023) VideoPoet (2024) Gemma (2024) Veo (2024) DreamBooth (2022) NotebookLM (2023) Vids (2024) Gemini Robotics (2025) " Attention Is All You Need "

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Project Iris
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Sycamore processor

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Viacom International, Inc. v. YouTube, Inc. (2010)
Lenz v. Universal Music Corp. (2015)
Authors Guild, Inc. v. Google, Inc. (2015)
Field v. Google, Inc. (2016)
Google LLC v. Oracle America, Inc. (2021)
Smartphone patent wars
Rocky Mountain Bank v. Google, Inc. (2009)
Hibnick v. Google, Inc. (2010)
United States v. Google Inc. (2012)
Judgement of the German Federal Court of Justice on Google's autocomplete function (2013)
Joffe v. Google, Inc. (2013)
Mosley v SARL Google (2013)
Google Spain v AEPD and Mario Costeja González (2014)
Frank v. Gaos (2019)
Garcia v. Google, Inc. (2015)
Google LLC v Defteros (2020)
Epic Games v. Google (2021)
Gonzalez v. Google LLC (2022)
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Beauty YouTuber

BookTube
BreadTube
" Don't be evil "
Gayglers
Google as a verb
Google bombing 2004 U.S. presidential election
2004 U.S. presidential election
Google effect
Googlefight
Google hacking
Googleshare
Google tax
Googlewhack
Googlization
Illegal flower tribute
Objectives and key results
Rooting
Search engine manipulation effect
Side project time
Sitelink
Site reliability engineering
StudyTube
VTuber
YouTube Poop
YouTuber list
list
Booting process
Custom distributions
Features
Recovery mode
Software development
Africa
Antarctica
Asia Israel
Israel
Europe
North America Canada United States
Canada

United States
United States
Oceania South America Argentina Chila Calembia
South America Argentina Chile Colombia
Argentina
Chile
Colombia
Copyright strike
Education
Features
Moderation
Most-disliked videos
Most-liked videos
Most-subscribed channels
Most-viewed channels
Most-viewed videos Arabic music videos Chinese music videos French music videos Indian videos Pakistani videos
Arabic music videos
Chinese music videos
French music videos
Indian videos
Pakistani videos
Official channel
Social impact
YouTube Premium original programming
Gmail interface
Maps pin
Most downloaded Google Play applications
Stadia games
AlphaGo
Google: Behind the Screen
Google Maps Road Trip
Google and the World Brain
The Creepy Line
Google Hacks
The Google Story
Googled: The End of the World as We Know It
How Google Works
I'm Feeling Lucky

In the Plex

The MANIAC

Google Feud

Google Me (film)

- " Google Me " (Kim Zolciak song)
- " Google Me " (Teyana Taylor song)

Is Google Making Us Stupid?

Proceratium google

Matt Nathanson: Live at Google

The Billion Dollar Code

The Internship

Where on Google Earth is Carmen Sandiego?

" Attention Is All You Need "

elgooG

Generative pre-trained transformer

" Me at the zoo "

Predictions of the end

Relationship with Wikipedia

" Reunion "

Robot Constitution

Category

Outline

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ι

е

Al-complete

Bag-of-words

n -gram Bigram Trigram

Bigram

Trigram

Computational linguistics

Natural language understanding

Stop words

Text processing

Argument mining

Collocation extraction

Concept mining

Coreference resolution

Deep linguistic processing Distant reading Information extraction Named-entity recognition Ontology learning Parsing Semantic parsing Syntactic parsing Semantic parsing Syntactic parsing Part-of-speech tagging Semantic analysis Semantic role labeling Semantic decomposition Semantic similarity Sentiment analysis Terminology extraction Text mining Textual entailment Truecasing Word-sense disambiguation Word-sense induction Compound-term processing Lemmatisation Lexical analysis Text chunking Stemming Sentence segmentation Word segmentation Multi-document summarization Sentence extraction Text simplification Computer-assisted Example-based Rule-based Statistical Transfer-based Neural **BERT**

Document-term matrix

Explicit semantic analysis fastText GloVe Language model (large) Latent semantic analysis Seq2seq Word embedding Word2vec Corpus linguistics Lexical resource Linguistic Linked Open Data Machine-readable dictionary Parallel text PropBank Semantic network Simple Knowledge Organization System Speech corpus Text corpus Thesaurus (information retrieval) Treebank **Universal Dependencies** BabelNet Bank of English **DBpedia** FrameNet Google Ngram Viewer **UBY** WordNet Wikidata Speech recognition Speech segmentation Speech synthesis Natural language generation Optical character recognition Document classification Latent Dirichlet allocation Pachinko allocation Automated essay scoring

Concordancer
Grammar checker
Predictive text
Pronunciation assessment
Spell checker
Chatbot
Interactive fiction
Question answering
Virtual assistant
Voice user interface
Formal semantics
Hallucination
Natural Language Toolkit
spaCy
v
t
e
History timeline
timeline
Companies
Projects
Parameter Hyperparameter
Hyperparameter
Loss functions
Regression Bias-variance tradeoff Double descent Overfitting
Bias-variance tradeoff
Double descent
Overfitting
Clustering
Gradient descent SGD Quasi-Newton method Conjugate gradient method
SGD
Quasi-Newton method
Conjugate gradient method
Backpropagation
Attention
Convolution
Normalization Batchnorm
Batchnorm

Activation Softmax Sigmoid Rectifier
Softmax
Sigmoid
Rectifier
Gating
Weight initialization
Regularization
Datasets Augmentation
Augmentation
Prompt engineering
Reinforcement learning Q-learning SARSA Imitation Policy gradient
Q-learning
SARSA
Imitation
Policy gradient
Diffusion
Latent diffusion model
Autoregression
Adversary
RAG
Uncanny valley
RLHF
Self-supervised learning
Reflection
Recursive self-improvement
Hallucination
Word embedding
Vibe coding
Machine learning In-context learning
In-context learning
•
In-context learning
In-context learning Artificial neural network Deep learning
In-context learning Artificial neural network Deep learning Deep learning
In-context learning Artificial neural network Deep learning Deep learning Language model Large language model NMT
In-context learning Artificial neural network Deep learning Deep learning Language model Large language model NMT Large language model
In-context learning Artificial neural network Deep learning Deep learning Language model Large language model NMT Large language model NMT

Artificial human companion
Humanity's Last Exam
Artificial general intelligence (AGI)
AlexNet
WaveNet
Human image synthesis
HWR
OCR
Computer vision
Speech synthesis 15.ai ElevenLabs
15.ai
ElevenLabs
Speech recognition Whisper
Whisper
Facial recognition
AlphaFold
Text-to-image models Aurora DALL-E Firefly Flux Ideogram Imagen Midjourney Recraft Stable Diffusion
Aurora
DALL-E
Firefly
Flux
Ideogram
Imagen
Midjourney
Recraft
Stable Diffusion
Text-to-video models Dream Machine Runway Gen Hailuo Al Kling Sora Veo
Dream Machine
Runway Gen
Hailuo Al
Kling
Sora
Veo
Music generation Riffusion Suno Al Udio
Riffusion
Suno Al
Udio

Word2vec
Seq2seq
GloVe
BERT
T5
Llama
Chinchilla Al
PaLM
GPT 1 2 3 J ChatGPT 4 4o o1 o3 4.5 4.1 o4-mini 5
1
2
3
J
ChatGPT
4
40
01
03
4.5
4.1
o4-mini
5
Claude
Gemini Gemini (language model) Gemma
Gemini (language model)
Gemma
Grok
LaMDA
BLOOM
DBRX
Project Debater
IBM Watson
IBM Watsonx
Granite
$PanGu-\Sigma$
DeepSeek
Qwen
AlphaGo

AlphaZero OpenAl Five Self-driving car MuZero **AutoGPT**

Action selection AutoGPT

Robot control

Alan Turing

Warren Sturgis McCulloch

Walter Pitts

John von Neumann

Claude Shannon

Shun'ichi Amari

Kunihiko Fukushima

Takeo Kanade

Marvin Minsky

John McCarthy

Nathaniel Rochester

Allen Newell

Cliff Shaw

Herbert A. Simon

Oliver Selfridge

Frank Rosenblatt

Bernard Widrow

Joseph Weizenbaum

Seymour Papert

Seppo Linnainmaa

Paul Werbos

Geoffrey Hinton

John Hopfield

Jürgen Schmidhuber

Yann LeCun

Yoshua Bengio

Lotfi A. Zadeh

Stephen Grossberg

Alex Graves

James Goodnight

Andrew Ng

Fei-Fei Li

Alex Krizhevsky

Ilya Sutskever

Oriol Vinyals

Quoc V. Le

Ian Goodfellow

Demis Hassabis

David Silver

Andrej Karpathy

Ashish Vaswani

Noam Shazeer

Aidan Gomez

John Schulman

Mustafa Suleyman

Jan Leike

Daniel Kokotajlo

François Chollet

Neural Turing machine

Differentiable neural computer

Transformer Vision transformer (ViT)

Vision transformer (ViT)

Recurrent neural network (RNN)

Long short-term memory (LSTM)

Gated recurrent unit (GRU)

Echo state network

Multilayer perceptron (MLP)

Convolutional neural network (CNN)

Residual neural network (RNN)

Highway network

Mamba

Autoencoder

Variational autoencoder (VAE)

Generative adversarial network (GAN)

Graph neural network (GNN)

Category