AN ALTERNATIVE SCHEME FOR PERPLEXITY ESTIMATION

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ABSTRACT

Language models are usually evaluated on test texts using the perplexity derived directly from the model likelihood function. In order to use this measure in the framework of a comparative evaluation campaign, we have developed an alternative scheme for perplexity estimation. The method is derived from the Shannon game and based on a gambling approach on the next word to come in a truncated sentence. We also use entropy bounds proposed by Shannon and based on the rank of the correct answer, in order to estimate a perplexity interval for non-probabilistic language models. The relevance of the approach is assessed on an example.

1. INTRODUCTION

Comparative evaluation campaigns for speech recognition systems have been initiated a few years ago under ARPA’s impulse and have proven to be a very efficient way to boost scientific progress by stimulating laboratories to compare methods on identical data and under a common protocol. A similar set of concerted research actions has been set up by AUPELF-UREF 1, an agency in charge of the promotion of the French language in post-graduate education and research. One of these actions is devoted to speech recognition systems, and includes a specific activity on the evaluation of language models.

Perplexity is a canonical figure for describing the prediction capabilities of a language model 2. However, perplexity is usually derived from the likelihood of the model on a test corpus, but this approach is not appropriate for a comparative evaluation campaign. In practice, it would require either that each site computes itself the perplexity figure or that the software of each participant be re-implemented within the site in charge of organizing the evaluation.

In this paper, we propose to estimate the perplexity of a language model via its ability to solve a particular task. We adapt the Shannon game to this purpose, and we describe a gambling scheme that permits an alternative estimation of the perplexity for any probabilistic language model. Under this approach, a set of truncated sentences are provided to every participant. For each sentence, the participants must distribute a capital of 1.0 between each word of the vocabulary, that is they must bet on the word coming just after the truncation. The perplexity is then evaluated outside of the participant’s site as the inverse of the geometric mean of the bets placed on the correct words.

We indicate how to choose the bets from the likelihood values yielded by the model. We describe a way to set constraints on the bets in order to remain in a tractable probabilistic framework in the realistic case of an open vocabulary. We illustrate the validity of the new scheme by a few experiments. We also report on preliminary experiments for generalizing the approach to non-probabilistic language models.

2. THE SHANNON GAME

In [1], Shannon describes a method for estimating the entropy of a language: a person is asked to guess the first letter of a text by proposing successively some candidates within 27 possibilities (the 26 letters of the alphabet plus the space), until success. Once the first letter has been found by the subject, he is asked to guess the second one, and so on.

Shannon relates the statistics of the number of trials required to find the right answer (namely the frequency distribution of the rank of the correct answer), to upper and lower bounds of the language entropy. Cover and King [2] show that the Shannon game can be generalized into a gambling approach, where the person is asked to place a certain fraction of a capital on each possible letter. Jelinek [3] describes variants of the Shannon game for comparing a language model and a human being. O’Boyle et al. [4] use the Shannon game for assessing a model from the number of times it predicts the correct word below a given rank.

We adapt these principles to the comparison of probabilistic (and, to a certain extent, non-probabilistic) language models in the framework of an evaluation campaign.

3. THE GAMBLING SCHEME

The estimation of the perplexity of a language model in the gambling scheme can be formalized as follows: consider the successive sentence fragments, obtained by discovering progressively each word of the n-word sentence W:

\[ W = w_1 w_2 \ldots w_k \ldots w_n > \]

1) \[ W_0^0 = w_1 \]

2) \[ W_0^1 = w_1 \]

\[ \ldots \]

k) \[ W_0^{k-1} = w_1 w_2 \ldots w_{k-1} \]

\[ \ldots \]

n) \[ W_0^{n-1} = w_1 w_2 \ldots w_{k-1} w_k \ldots w_{n-1} \]

Let \( V = \{ v_j \}_{j=1}^{m} \) the vocabulary from which the words of \( W \) are drawn.

The evaluation of the perplexity via the gambling scheme proceeds in the following way: for each truncated sentence

\[ < w_1 w_2 \ldots w_k w_{k+1} \ldots w_n > \]

\[ \leq \prod_{j=1}^{k} \prod_{v_j \in V} \frac{1}{|V_j|} \]

1^1Association des Universités Partiellement ou Entièrement de Langue Française - Université des Réseaux d'Expression Française.

2^2even though other evaluations may be more meaningful to predict the behaviour of a model for speech recognition purposes.

3^3with < and > marking the beginning and end of the sentence.
4.3. Limitation of the list of candidates

In order to control the volume of data that has to be handled for the evaluation, the number of candidates for each truncated sentence can be set to a maximum \( \ell \leq m \). In the case \( \ell < m \), the sum \( A_k \) of the bets put on the limited list must be such that:

\[
A_k = \sum_{r=1}^{\ell} \beta_k (w_r) < 1
\]

(5)

where \( w_r \) denotes the \( r \)th candidate, after ordering them in decreasing bet. Then, if the correct word \( w_k \) is not in the ordered list of candidates \( U = \{ w_r \}_{1 \leq r \leq \ell} \), the corresponding term in equation (3) can be set to a floor value:

\[
\beta^*_k = \frac{1 - A_k}{m - \ell}
\]

(6)

This approach assumes a uniform repartition of the unsigned fraction of the bets \((1 - A_k)\) over all non-candidate words (i.e. the \( m - \ell \) words ranked beyond \( \ell \)). It can easily be shown that, if the \( \ell \) candidates in \( U \) correspond indeed to the \( \ell \) best hypotheses yielded by the model (in terms of conditional probabilities), then \( \beta_k^* \) must be smaller than \( \beta_k (w_k) \). In other words, the floor value is always smaller than the smallest bet in \( U \). Conversely, a systematic test of the condition \( 0 < 1 - A_k \leq (m - \ell) \cdot \beta_k (w_r) \) signals, if not satisfied, an erroneous answer from a participant. Experimental results on the impact of this rank limitation on the perplexity estimation are given in the next section.

5. EXPERIMENTS AND RESULTS

In order to validate the scheme on a real case, we compare the perplexity value obtained with a particular language model when computed from the test set likelihood on the one hand, and from the gambling scheme on the other hand. We investigate on the impact of several variants of the gambling scheme : exhaustive versus randomized truncations and full list versus rank limitation.

For all the experiments, the language model is a bi-gram model, for which the conditional probability \( p(v_j|v_i) \) is estimated as:

\[
p(v_j|v_i) = \frac{\max \{ C(v_i, v_j) - \alpha \cdot 0 \} + \alpha D(v_i, *, v_j)}{C(v_i)}
\]

(7)

where \( C(v_i, v_j) \) and \( C(v_i, *) \) denote respectively the number of occurrences of the word \( v_i \) and of the bigram \( v_i, v_j \), \( D(v_i, *, v_j) \) and \( D(*, v_j) \) the number of distinct bigrams respectively starting by \( v_i \) and finishing by \( v_j \), \( D \) the total number of distinct bigrams, and \( \alpha \) a smoothing parameter between 0 and 1. All parameters are estimated on the training set, except \( \alpha \) which is optimized a posteriori so as to minimize the perplexity on the test set (\( \alpha = 0.7 \)).

The conditional probabilities are learned on the articles from the newspaper Le Monde covering years 1987 and 1988 (41 257 584 words). The vocabulary \( V \) is composed of the 20 000 most frequent words in the training corpus, the OOV-word, plus 2 symbols indicating the beginning and the end of sentences, which yields \( m = 20 \, 003 \). The punctuation is removed from the data.

The evaluation corpus is composed of \( n = 1 \, 707 \, 527 \) words (267 000 sentences) corresponding to excerpts of Le Monde sampled over the years 1989 and 1990 (the texts of the BREF speech database). Among these, 105 263 occurrences are not covered by the vocabulary \( V \) (i.e. 6.16% of the total test corpus). On these test data, the perplexity obtained in the conventional way, i.e using the likelihood function of the model, is equal to 159.77.
In a first series of experiments we compute estimates of the likelihood using the original Shannon game (i.e. exhaustive truncations) under a gambling scheme with bets obtained as in equation (1). We consider 20 draws of \( n_t \) consecutive words in the corpus from which we compute 20 distinct estimations of the entropy \( Q = \log PP \). From their average \( \bar{Q} \) and their standard deviation \( \sigma \), we compute \( PP = \bar{Q}^2 \) and:

\[
PP_{95} = PP^9 e^{-1.96\sigma} \quad PP_{99.5} = PP^9 e^{1.96\sigma}
\]  

As can be seen in Table 1, the exhaustive Shannon game yields, in the average, an estimation of the perplexity which is comparable to the likelihood-based perplexity computed on the entire test set (159.77).

In a second set of experiments, we use a random selection of truncated sentences obtained as follows: we draw one word every \( s \) words in the test corpus, we extract the corresponding sentence, and we truncate it just before the selected word. Provided that \( s \) is larger than the length of the longest sentence, this process produces \( n_t = n/s \) randomized truncations on distinct sentences. If different positions for the first word are chosen, several sets of identical \( n_t \) can be generated.

The results obtained for various numbers of truncated sentences and reported in the second half of Table 1 illustrate the accuracy of the estimation as a function of \( n_t \). It can be seen from this table that all average values \( PP \) approximate consistently the likelihood-based perplexity, but that the confidence interval for one draw is much narrower with the randomized method as the test corpus is sampled in a more uniform manner.

In a third set of experiments, we vary the parameter \( \ell \), i.e. the rank beyond which we assume a uniform distribution of the bets that have not been allocated to the \( \ell \) first candidates. We compute the perplexity with these approximate bets using the Shannon game on exhaustive truncations \( n_t = n \). Table 2 illustrates the effect of the rank limitation in our experiments: beyond \( \ell = 5,000 \), the perplexity \( PP \) estimated from the limited list becomes very close to the actual perplexity. On the opposite, when \( \ell \) is too small, \( PP \) overestimates the actual perplexity (see, for an illustration, Figure 1).

6. NON-PROBABILISTIC MODELS

For non-probabilistic language models, there is no simple way to choose the bets in the gambling scheme. However, we can assume that the model is able, in the framework of the Shannon game, to rank the words in decreasing order.

It is shown in [1] that entropy bounds can be obtained from the distribution of the rank at which the correct word is predicted by the model. In other words, an ordered list of candidates for each truncated sentence is sufficient to compute an interval in which the perplexity of the non-probabilistic language model falls.

With \( \rho_k \) denoting the rank at which the model outputs the (correct) word \( w_k \) for the truncated sentence \( W_{n+1} \), and \( q_r \), the frequency with which the model outputs the proper word at rank \( r \) \( (q_{r+1} = 0) \), Shannon shows that the entropy \( Q \) of the language model is bounded by:

\[
\sum_{r=1}^{r=m} r (q_r - q_{r+1}) \log r \leq Q \leq -\sum_{r=1}^{r=m} q_r \log q_r
\]  

In case the values of \( q_r \) are available only as far as rank \( \ell \) (limited list), a uniform distribution for the ranks beyond \( \ell \) can be assumed. If we denote:

\[
S_t = \sum_{r=1}^{\ell} q_r \quad \text{and} \quad t_t = \frac{1 - S_t}{m - \ell}
\]  

the bounds in equation (9) become:

\[
\hat{Q}_{inf} = \sum_{r=1}^{\ell}(q_r - q_{r+1})\log r + \ell(t_t - t_{t+1})\log \ell + mt_t\log m
\]  

\[
\hat{Q}_{sup} = -\sum_{r=1}^{\ell} q_r \log q_r - (m - \ell)t_t \log t_t
\]  

The set \( \{q_r\}_{r \geq \ell} \) can also be estimated from the extrapolation of a Zipf law [5], \( q_r = \lambda/r \), the parameter \( \lambda \) being calculated in order to fit the beginning of the distribution \( \{q_r\}_{1 \leq r \leq \ell} \). In our experiments, this approach is quite consistent with the observed shape of the rank histogram (see Figure 2).

With the same bigram model as the one used in our previous experiments, we have estimated the lower and upper perplexity bounds from Shannon's equations, as well as the approximations with several values of \( \ell \), with both the uniform tail model and the Zipf extrapolation. The results are given in Table 2.

With no truncation of the rank histogram, the lower bound lies very far below the real perplexity, and it may happen, in a real evaluation, that the interval is so large that it does not yield any conclusion in the comparison between two models. However, if the upper perplexity bound for a non-probabilistic language model was to fall under the perplexity of a probabilistic language model, some meaningful conclusion could be drawn from this observation. With rank truncation, the Zipf extrapolation seems much more robust than the uniform extrapolation.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Our adaptation of the Shannon game to the evaluation of language models within a comparative test campaign offers a fair way to estimate perplexity in a single site, yet without requiring a software re-implementation for each tested model. Beyond this primary advantage, the use of the gambling approach provides additional diagnostic possibilities, such as evaluating the discordance between models, scoring the model for particular classes of words or contexts or being able to better predict the performance of the model within a speech recognition system (given an acoustic confusion matrix). Our work also underlines the possibility to compare probabilistic and non-probabilistic language models in terms of perplexity but additional efforts are required to increase the efficiency of the estimation.

References

Figure 1. An illustration of perplexity estimation via the gambling scheme, for the French sentence: une société d'économie mixte sera créée fin janvier. Exhaustive truncations, list limitation to $\ell = 10$. For this sentence, the perplexity estimate is obtained as the inverse of the geometric mean of the number in italics, namely yielding 5094 (see section 4.3). Here, as $\ell \ll m$, this figure overestimates considerably the true perplexity (174).

<table>
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<tr>
<th>$w_k$</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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<tr>
<td>$\beta_k$ ($u_1$)</td>
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<table>
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Table 1. Geometric mean ($P_{\text{err}}^+\overline{\tilde{\eta}}$) and 95% confidence bounds ($P_{\text{err}}^-\overline{\tilde{\eta}}$) computed from 20 perplexity estimations, using the Shanon game (gambling scheme) for various set sizes ($n_t$). Top: exhaustive truncations. Bottom: randomized truncations. These figures illustrate the validity of the proposed alternative scheme for perplexity estimation: both estimates converge towards the conventional perplexity value (159.77). The second estimate is more accurate as the randomized truncations are more representative of the entire corpus.

Table 2. Comparison various perplexity estimates with several rank truncations ($\ell$). Top: Shanon game - gambling scheme. Center: Shanon game, lower and upper bounds - uniform model. Bottom: Shanon game, lower and upper bounds - Zipf model. For this experiment, beyond a list size of 5 000, the estimated perplexity by the gambling scheme becomes very close to the exact perplexity. For the Shanon game without gambling, the lower bound falls far under the actual perplexity. The Zipf model seems to be more robust to truncation than the uniform model.