BERT-Assisted Semantic Annotation Correction for Emotion-Related Questions

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Abstract—Annotated data have traditionally been used to provide the input for training a supervised machine learning (ML) model. However, current pre-trained ML models for natural language processing (NLP) contain embedded linguistic information that can be used to inform the annotation process. We use the BERT neural language model to feed information back into an annotation task that involves semantic labelling of dialog behavior in a question-asking game called Emotion Twenty Questions (EMO20Q). First we describe the background of BERT, the EMO20Q data, and assisted annotation tasks. Then we describe the methods for fine-tuning BERT for the purpose of checking the annotated labels. To do this, we use the paraphrase task as a way to check that all utterances with the same annotation label are classified as paraphrases of each other. We show this method to be an effective way to assess and revise annotations of textual user data with complex, utterance-level semantic labels.

Index Terms—annotations, NLP, BERT, emotions, dialog, question-answering, human-computer interaction, EMO20Q

I. Introduction

When annotating data for ML tasks, is not ideal to use only a single annotator, especially for annotation tasks that involve complex or subjective data. However, for reasons of expediency or cost, sometimes using a single annotator is inevitable. This paper looks at an instance of such cases. The basic contribution of this paper is to use the predictions of a ML model on a test set as a way to assist annotation by correcting annotation errors.

When an annotated test set is used to evaluate a trained model, the errors will be either due to the ML model's performance or the annotator's performance. In less performant models, more error is due to the model, while in more performant models, more error can be attributed to the annotator(s).

In scenarios where there are multiple annotators, one can assess and model the agreement among annotators [1], [2], which minimizes the effect of annotator uncertainty, inconsistency, and other sources of errors like data or label ambiguity. In these cases, we can be reasonably certain about the ground truth of the annotation or at least the margin of inter-annotator agreement. In these cases, error in the performance of the model is due to the model itself (including being trained with insufficient data) or the limitations of the task (e.g. task ambiguity or lack of annotator training).

In single annotator cases, there are usually constraints to the amount of annotations available due to the limitations of a single individual's time and effort. Recently though, using small data sets to train modern ML models has become feasible and performant by using fine-tuning. This paper demonstrates the high performance of modern ML models with the BERT neural ML model. However, we focus on an orthogonal issue, how the model predictions can inform the annotation task.

The inspiration for looking at the use of machine learning to assist the annotation task comes from observing the remarkable performance of modern ML models. Applying BERT to our single-annotator project showed 99.97% accuracy (98.65% precision and 98.46% recall). Upon inspection of the errors, some of the errors turned out to be annotation and anonymization errors, not classification errors. In essence, the machine-learned model helped to correct human annotation errors and faulty data preprocessing errors.

Our main motivation for using machine learned models to assist the annotation process is that current state-of-theart neural language models have demonstrated near human performance on a number of tasks [3], [4]. If human-level performance is reached, the remaining error in learning from annotations should be due to ambiguity in the annotation task and inconsistency in performing the task, i.e. human error.

Another reason for attempting machine assistance of annotation is for difficult annotation tasks. The task we describe in this paper has 700 unique sentence-level annotations. The annotations are an expressive domain language for the data they describe. Moreover, new data can be uniquely different than existing data, which can necessitate creating new annotation labels. Annotations taks like this can benefit from standardization from automated assistance.

One final reason for considering machine assistance of annotation is for tasks where it is difficult to find annotators. Researchers of resource-limited languages and applications developed by single researchers often do not have the ability to recruit annotators to establish agreement and coverage. Machine-assisted annotation promises a way to bootstrap annotation of low resource languages and enable smaller teams to make progress on new tasks.

In this paper we describe this experiment that helped correct annotations errors in our data in Sections III and IV. Background information about BERT, EMO20Q, and complex annotation tasks is given in Sections II-A, II-B, and II-C, respectively.

II. BACKGROUND

A. BERT

Recent ML models for natural language processing [5] rely on pre-training, which takes large quantities of text to form a language model. The data used for pre-training simply contain language information, not labels. There is no annotation involved in this pre-training process, but the process is usually called *self-supervised* rather than *unsupervised* because the language data itself is the data used for training. The sequence of words themselves provide the supervision through masking and next sentence prediction tasks. In the masking task, words are randomly excluded and then predicted. In the next sentence task, one sentence is given and the next sentence in a document is predicted. In this way the resultant ML model can be termed self-supervised rather than unsupervised.

Due to the self-supervised nature of neural language models like BERT, these model come to learn general information about the language that can be leveraged in subsequent supervised *fine-tuning* steps. The language model training procedures of masking and next sentence prediction aim to capture word occurrence statistics. However, the vector representations and attention components that underlie these models contain latent syntactic and semantic information [6]. It is this latent information that enables these models to obtain state of the art performance on many tasks.

While the self-supervised pre-training phase of building these neural language models does not include annotations, the next step, fine-tuning, usually does. In the fine-tuning step, ML models like classifiers or taggers can be trained from data and annotation labels. Traditional ML models would take the input data and labels to learn a model. Newer neural deep learning models use the pre-trained models [7] to encode the input, converting the input data to a vector. This encoding step embeds much information about the target data and allows a larger, unannotated dataset used during the pre-training step to inform the supervised fine-tuning step. Although the traditional and modern approaches differ, in both the traditional approach (data + annotation \rightarrow model) and the modern approach ((data \rightarrow encoder) + annotations \rightarrow model), information flows from data and annotations to the machine-learned models.

In this paper we propose a method for reversing this flow of information, so that information from the model's predictions flows back to the annotator, as illustrated in Fig. 1. In this proposed method, we do train a model from annotations, but we use the trained model to check and re-label the input data. Thus, instead of having a directed acyclic graph (DAG) proceeding from annotation to model training, we have a cycle where the annotations can be revised due to the model output.

B. EMO20Q

We consider an annotation task from the author's prior work: designing a dialog agent to play the Emotion Twenty Questions game (EMO20Q) [8]. EMO20Q is a game like twenty questions where the players are limited to emotion words. The game is a vehicle to collect natural language descriptions

TABLE I
EXAMPLE DIALOG FROM THE EMO20Q QUESTIONER AGENT. THE
HUMAN INTERLOCUTOR HAS CHOSEN "RELAXATION" [8].

Speaker/Event	Utterance/Content
Agent	Let me know when you are ready
User	ok
Agent	Is it very intense?
User	no
Agent	is it positive?
User	yes
Agent	is it an emotion that just pops up spontaneously
	(vs being triggered by something)?
User	depends
Agent	is it caused by something in particular?
User	well, yes, you do need the right conditions
Agent	Is it relaxation?
User	Yes
Agent	so did I get it right?
User	Yes, you got it
Agent	Awesome! Would you like to play again?
User	No, thanks.
Agent	Thank you for playing

TABLE II EXAMPLE SEMANTIC ANNOTATIONS OF EMO20Q QUESTIONS [8].

Semantic Annotation	Examples
cause(emptySet,e)	can you feel the emotion without any external events that cause it?
	is it an emotion that just pops up sponta- neously (vs being triggered by something)?
cause(otherPerson,e)	is it caused by the person that it's directed at?
	Do you need someone to pull this emotion out of you or evoke it? if so, who is it?
e.valence==negative	is it considered a negative thing to feel? 2) is it a negative emotion?
situation(e,birthday)	would you feel this if it was your birthday? is it a socially acceptable emotion, say, at a
	birthday party?
e==frustration	oh, is it frustrated?
	frustration?

of emotion, which are then used to train a dialog agent to play EMO20Q. The transcripts from the games provide rich descriptions of human emotions, behaviors, and social situations. The data collected from 25 participants in human-human EMO20Q games were used to create artificial dialog agents that play the game and in turn acquire more data. In the human-computer games, the 116 human participants picked the emotion words and the computer asked the questions. An example of the game is shown in Table I.

Example annotations of the EMO20Q data is shown in Fig. II. The annotations provide a domain language for an open-ended set of emotion description questions. Some questions, like "is it positive?" are seen many times, while some are rare or only occur once. Similary, many emotions, like "happy" and "sad" were seen many times while other emotions like "maudlin" were seen only once. The questions together with the answers (yes, no, or other type of answers including hedges [9]) form descriptions of emotions. The annotations we describe are ways to represent these questions from the EMO20Q game.

The annotations of EMO20Q are based on a logical way of representing questions about emotions. The emotion being

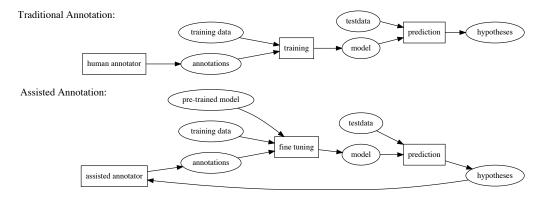


Fig. 1. Flow chart illustrating the traditional approach, where annotations provide information used for ML training (top), and the proposed approach, where the ML model provides information back to the annotation process.

asked about in the EMO20Q game is represented as a variable e, and the questions are represented as predicates involving that emotion. The question is represented as a declarative statement which the answerer can agree to by answering 'yes' or disagree with by answering 'no'. In practice, answers may contain hedges and answers that span between yes and no. Since the annotations are a type of predicate logic, there could be different ways of expressing the same proposition, so there could be ambiguity. This ambiguity poses a problem in how the annotations are currently used. The actual predicate logic statements are not decomposed, parsed, and reasoned about, but instead they are treated as a single, unitary propositional label for the question, which is then used as a feature by the sequential Bayes ML model used by the dialog agent. Thus, the feature vector used by the dialog agent represents each emotion word as a set of (proposition, answer) pairs, where the proposition is the string value of the predicate label. For a more detailed description of the data collection and annotation process see [8, Section 6.2.3].

The annotation was done by a single annotator, so it is likely that there is some errors or inconsistencies. The twenty question game format and the sequential Bayes algorithm we used made the agent tolerant to annotation mistakes. In fact, tolerance of errors in agents is a design principle inspired by human communication: sequential human-human interactions in dialog format has many error correcting behaviors.

Although the existing annotations successfully allowed for an EMO20Q question asking agent to be created and trained on new human-computer dialogs [10], the annotations were not explicitly assessed. The annotations were created by a single annotator so they have not been assessed for annotator agreement and they may have errors or inconsistencies due to the lack of assessment. By using the existing annotations and observing the classification performance on a paraphrase task, we aim to assess and correct the annotations of the single annotator.

C. Complex Annotation Tasks and Automation

Annotations can range from a fixed set of categorical labels that are associated 1-to-1 with data items, to sequential labels

that may have order constraints, to complex, multifaceted structure [1], [2], [11], [12]. More recently, captioning tasks involve associating unstructured descriptions as annotations of data. This work fits somewhat between a complex, structured annotation and a free form description. The annotation has a logical structure like a domain language. However, the syntax is not checked and the phenomenon that the annotation seeks to describe, dialog questions about emotions, can be ambiguous and have tricky edge cases. There should be a single annotation per user turn, as opposed to the captioning task annotations, where one image may have multiple labels.

Since annotation is a bottleneck for ML tasks, it has been the focus of process optimization [13], [14], especially automation. Automation approaches range from *pre-annotation*, i.e. annotating the data with automation first and then having annotators verify it [15] often using *transfer learning* to apply models from another task to explore a new corpus [16], *incremental learning* incrementally adjusting models as more annotations are observed [17], to *active learning*, where automated processes select the most informative data instances to present to annotators [18], [19]. These cases focus on speeding up the annotation process but they do not inherently assess annotator accuracy because this is usually determined by having multiple annotators. In our case, the annotation assistance is after-the-fact and we focus on detecting annotator errors.

Another trend aspect of annotation research is a spectrum between controlled environments like pervasive computing and internet-of-things [20] to more controlled environments like medical image annotation [21]. In less controlled environments, annotators may not be trained, whereas in more controlled environments, like medical domains, the annotators are usually highly trained. In the case of the EMO20Q data, the human-human games are a minimally controlled observational study (natural experiment), but the human-computer games have more ability to implement experimental controls. The annotation task itself in EMO20Q theoretically motivated, but because there is only one annotator, it is similar to less controlled annotation tasks.

III. METHODOLOGY

The paraphrase task in ML seeks to predict whether two sentences are paraphrases of each other or not. Abstractly speaking, it is a binary classification task with two sentences as inputs. If the two sentences are paraphrases, then the prediction is 1, else 0. First we will describe the creation of the training set from the annotated dialog data. Then we will describe the mapping of the training set into the format that BERT requires and the fine-tuning of this model.

A. Data

The annotated human-human dialog data was converted into the input for the ML paraphrase task using the intuition that sentences with the same annotation should be paraphrases of each other. By carefully following an annotation standard, we could be sure that string equality of annotations would test whether two questions in the dialog were paraphrases or not.

There were 110 EMO20Q dialog games from 25 participants with a total of 1223 annotated question turns, with 700 unique annotations. Most (553 of 700) of the unique annotations were hapaxes (i.e. annotations with a single occurence). These hapaxes were excluded from the ML training because it would not be possible to evalutate them. With the hapaxes excluded, there were 543 questions with 147 unique annotations. Data and code for EMO20Q are available on Github [22].

Although the data left over after removing the hapaxes seems to be quite small for NLP tasks, the creation of input to the paraphrase tasks takes advantage of the combinatorial expansion of the data into pairs. Because the input to the paraphrase task is sentence pairs and the order of sentences in pairs will result in unique inputs, the resulting number of data instances for the paraphrase task is an n-choose-k permutation:

$$P(n,k) = \frac{n!}{(n-k)!} = \frac{543!}{(543-2)!} = 543 * 542 = 294306$$

which is actually more data than the Microsoft Research Paraphrases (MSRP) dataset [23]. There are many more negative examples (sentence pairs that are not paraphrases) than positive ones: the 4588 positive examples account for only approximately 1.5% of the total paraphrase instances. If we had tried to balance positive and negative instances by downsampling the negative instances, then the size of the data would have been comparable to the MSRP. As we show in Section IV, the imbalance of positive and negative training samples does not adversely affect performance.

These 294306 paraphrase instances were randomly split into training, validation, and test set partitions: $200,000 \ (\sim 68\%)$ were in the training set, $14,306 \ (\sim 5\%)$ in the validation set, and $80,000 \ (\sim 27\%)$ in the test set. Each partition had approximately the same ratio of positive and negative examples.

B. Model

The BERT model was fine-tuned from the training data using the Tensorflow library [24] and official models, version 2.4.0 [25]. The specific model used was the uncased English

model trained on Wikipedia and the BookCorpus, with 12 hidden layers of size 768, with 12 attention heads [26], [27].

The text data was tokenized using the default BERT tokenizer with vocabulary size 30522. The sentence pairs were encoded into inputs by concatenating the class token ("[CLS]"), sentence 1's tokens, the separator token ("[SEP]"), and then sentence 2's tokens.

The BERT model was then fine-tuned with default configurations in batch sizes of 32 for 2 epochs using the Adam optimizer, with 6250 steps per epoch, a learning rate of 2e-5, and 1250 warmup steps. Each epoch took approximately 25 minutes on a Colab notebook with a GPU backend.¹

IV. RESULTS

The models trained using the described methodology achieved 99.9725% accuracy. Because the negative instances greatly outnumber the positive examples, the majority baseline classifier would achieve an already high accuracy of 98.44. In terms of error, the model's error of 0.0275% represents less than one fiftieth of the majority class baseline error of 1.56%. The model achieves 98.46% recall, 99.65% precision, and F1 score of 99.03%.

It is important to remember that these results represent unverified annotations. Thus, some of the errors are not true errors due to misclassifications, but rather annotation errors. Despite having 80,000 test instances, the high accuracy resulted in only 22 instances where the predicted labels differed from the annotated labels. Therefore, it was feasible for to manually examine each case where the predicted label differed from the annotated label.

Table III gives a listing of the 22 errors and a classification of whether they were true model prediction errors (*pred.*), annotation errors (*ann.*), or data preparation errors (*prep.*). For example, in error #1 in the table, hypothetically the model failed to learn that the phrase "Do you feel like this when someone close to you dies?" is a paraphrase of "do you feel it when someone dear has passed away?", so this would be a model prediction error. Similarly in example #2, the model failed to understand the user's spelling error, "jealosy". This is asking a lot of a model to understand spelling mistakes, but users do make typing mistakes and a human would still understand the variation in spelling, so we consider this a model error as well.

In example #3 of Table III, the two sentences have different annotations ("associated(e,disappointment)" vs. "similar(e,disappointment)"), so it was not considered a paraphrase based on annotations. However, the model predicted it to be a paraphrase and it is in fact indicative of ambiguity in the annotations and associated annotator variation, so we consider it an annotation error. Similarly, examples #13 and #19 show errors that are due to a similar annotation errors ("similar(e,depression)" vs. "associated(e,depression)" and "associated(e,otherPeople)" vs. "associated(e,otherPerson)").

¹For more details, the code used to replicate this experiment can be found at https://colab.research.google.com/drive/1sXqTT2DoJ1hFBR02iM8W4GKZe5OxCYJy

Examples #4 and #22 Table III show data preparation errors. In these cases, a script that was used to anonymize the data by removing user names accidentally replaced instances of the string "test" because there was a user that chose that is his/her username. This shows that the use of performant ML models can be used to find other issues in data preparation besides annotation.

V. DISCUSSION

This paper demonstrated using the BERT neural LM model to provide feedback to a complex semantic annotation task by identifying annotation errors. This work specifically used the paraphrase task and data from the EMO20Q project. We speculate that this method could be used in other labelling tasks, including simpler, lower-cardinality label sets. The paraphrase task could also allow enable non-labelling annotation tasks, such as same vs. different meaning annotations.

As described in Section II-C, there are a number of other annotation automation techniques. Using this approach together with others could help to further optimize the annotation process. While the other annotation automation techniques we saw involve pre-annotation or active learning, this work focused on after-the-fact assessment, so the approaches could be complimentary. Integration of this work with active learning, pre-annotation, and determining how much data is sufficient is an open question we hope to address in future work.

One limitation is that this approach left out hapax annotation labels and required at least two instances of each annotation label. One way to deal with this could be to use the neural networks to generate artifical data instances to show the user. In this case, the hapax labels could be used to generate new, artifical paraphrases and verify whether the user would use the same label for the artifical instance.

This approach can assist the annotator by showing potential annotation errors. However, it still requires human intervention to fix the annotations. Automating the correction or providing suggestions (e.g. merge two labels into one or separate one label into two or more) is another direction for future work. There has been recent work in dealing with bias in annotation [2]. Having an automated assistant to ensure consistent annotations could be a way to avoid bias.

Finally, this method was made possible by the high performance of modern ML models like BERT. It is an open question as to further optimization of the default BERT settings. Also it is an open question about using traditional ML models in a similar approach. A similar approach using less performant models could be achieved by looking at performance errors on the training or validation sets.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates that the high performance of the BERT neural ML models makes it possible for the model to give feedback to a complex semantic annotation task. This feedback made it feasible to perform annotation by a single annotator and use the machine-learned model to find annotation errors.

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TABLE III
ERROR ANALYSIS: PREDICTION ERRORS (PRED.) VS. ANNOTATION ERRORS (ANN.) VS. DATA PPREPARATION ERRORS (PREP.).

		T		Г
#	Sentence 1 Sentence 2	Annotated	Predicted	Error Type
1	Do you feel like this when someone close to you dies? do you feel it when someone dear has passed away?		0	pred.
2	jealosy?	1	0	pred.
3	haha, jealousy? id it related to sth disappointing? *is		1	ann.
	similar to disappointed? would you feel it if you had an exam the next day?			aiii.
4	would you feel it if you had a user13 the next day?		0	prep.
5	stronger thanoverwhelmed? is it more intense than overwhelmed?		0	pred.
6	do you feel it when someone dear has passed away?		0	pred.
7	would you feel it if someone close to you had died? 7 is it melancholic?		0	pred.
0	is it less severe that depressed, sth like melancholic is it like misery?	1	0	_
8	misery?	1	0	pred.
9	is it like being optimistic? is it kinda like being optmistic?	1	0	pred.
10	is it kinda like being optimistic? is it like being optimistic?	1	0	pred.
11	id it related to sth disappointing? *is	0	1	ann.
12	is it close to being disappointed Jealousy?	1	0	pred.
	jealosy?			produ
13	so would this be an emotion that might be assimilated to depression	0	1	ann.
14	is it shy? is it like being shy?	1	0	pred.
15	do you feel it when someone dear has passed away? Do you feel like this when someone close to you dies?	1	0	pred.
16	so more like plain happy?	1	0	pred.
17	is it similar to happy? is it associated with being aggravated?	1	0	pred.
18	how about with aggravation? would you most likely feel this towards someone you don't know?	1	0	
16	thanks, do you feel the emotion towards strangers?	1	0	pred.
19	is there another person involved? does it relate to how you feel about other people?	0	1	ann.
20	does it relate to how you feel about other people? is this emotion always related to another persons influence?	1	0	pred.
21	felt during betrayal?	0	1	pred.
22	would you feel it if you had a user13 the next day?	1	0	prep.
	would you feel it if you had an exam the next day?			

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