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Improved subword modeling for WFST-based speech recognition

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Abstract
Because in agglutinative languages the number of observed word forms is very high, subword units are often utilized in speech recognition. However, the proper use of subword units requires careful consideration of details such as silence modeling, position-dependent phones, and combination of the units. In this paper, we implement subword modeling in the Kaldi toolkit by creating modified lexicon by finite-state transducers to represent the subword units correctly. We experiment with multiple types of word boundary markers and achieve the best results by adding a marker to the left or right side of a subword unit whenever it is not preceded or followed by a word boundary, respectively. We also compare three different toolkits that provide data-driven subword segmentations. In our experiments on a variety of Finnish and Estonian datasets, the best subword models do outperform word-based models and naive subword implementations. The largest relative reduction in WER is a 23% over word-based models for a Finnish read speech dataset. The results are also better than any previously published ones for the same datasets, and the improvement on all datasets is more than 5%.

Index Terms: speech recognition, Kaldi, subword modeling, Finnish, Estonian

1. Introduction
In most large-vocabulary continuous speech recognition (LVCSR) systems for western languages, words are the basic units in building a lexicon and language models. However, in agglutinative languages such as Finnish or Estonian, the inflection, derivation and compounding is so frequent, that the language is hard to cover sufficiently without utilizing subword units [1]. Besides decreasing the out-of-vocabulary rate, the subword-based systems have the advantage that a smaller vocabulary reduces the model complexity significantly. While it has become possible to build n-gram language models to cover millions of words [2], it still requires special solutions for the state-of-the-art neural network language models [3] to train an output layer that has a vast number of possible output symbols. Thus, decreasing the vocabulary size is an important way to improve the efficiency of the models.

This work describes our research group’s latest efforts to improve and implement subword models for a weighted finite state transducer (WFST) decoder in LVCSR. The contributions of the paper provided in the next sections include: techniques to model subwords effectively in a WFST decoder and evaluation of subword segmentation algorithms and ways to mark the word boundaries in subword sequences. Additionally, we report our latest performance status in the most commonly used Finnish and Estonian datasets. The new methods are provided1 for the Kaldi speech recognition toolkit [4], but the general principles for lexicon modification are applicable to any WFST-based speech recognizer.

2. Subword modeling
For many parts of a speech processing pipeline there is no difference between subword and word systems. For example, whether the units are words, letters, or subwords, the n-gram modeling toolkits create a model that predicts the next token on based on the previous token; only the length of the n-grams may need to be increased. This section investigates the parts that do need to be changed in a speech recognition pipeline.

2.1. Boundary markers
The first step for a subword system is to define the subword unit. There are many choices for this; three segmentation methods are described in Section 4 and evaluated in Section 5.3. Regardless of the chosen units, it is important to be able to reconstruct words from the subwords to produce readable text. In previous work for Finnish [1], this was done by introducing a word boundary tag (<w>), which separated words, and normal spaces were used to separate subwords. There are however alternatives, as shown in Table 1. All these markings satisfy the requirement that the word text can be reconstructed in a trivial manner. The actual boundary tag or character can be changed without any loss of generalization.

Table 1: Four methods of marking subword units so that the original word sequence ‘two slippers’ can be reconstructed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Style (abbreviation)</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>boundary tag (&lt;w&gt;)</td>
<td>&lt;w&gt; two &lt;w&gt; slipp er s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>left-marked (+m)</td>
<td>two slipp +er +s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>right-marked (m+)</td>
<td>two slipp +er +s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>left+right-marked (+m+)</td>
<td>two slipp + +er +s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The other three styles beside <w> mark the subwords to indicate their location in a word. In left-marked style (+m), a subword is prefixed with a character to indicate that there was no word boundary directly preceding the subword. This style has been used for Turkish [5] and Hungarian [6, 7]. In [7], it was shown to outperform word boundary tags. In right-marked style (m+), a suffix marker is added to a subword if there is no word boundary after it. Finally, left+right-marked style (+m+) applies markers on both sides of the subwords.

A choice of the marking style is not just a matter of taste, because it affects the efficiency of the LVCSR system. For example, using <w> tags increases the number of tokens in a sen-

1The code belonging to this work will be published at http://github.com/aalto-speech/subword-kaldi

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tence and requires a higher n-gram order in language modeling. The other style tags increase the vocabulary when compared to the <w> tags, but have less tokens in the segmented sentences. The different marking styles are compared in an end-to-end experiment in Section 5.2.

2.2. Lexicon generation

When a word is segmented into subwords, its pronunciation must be segmented as well. In many languages (e.g. English), this requires special attention. However, Finnish and Estonian have almost one-to-one letter-to-sound mapping. Thus, in this paper we have simply used the graphemes as phonemes.

2.3. Phone modeling

In some speech recognition systems subword phone modeling would be easy and straightforward, but in Kaldi systems there are two common phone modeling improvements that complicate the implementation of subword models.

First, silence is often modeled in such a way that it is optionally allowed on word boundaries, but not in the middle of words. Therefore, a correct subword implementation needs to be able to indicate what transitions between tokens are actual word boundaries, or otherwise silences might be recognized on the wrong locations.

A second improvement is to use position-dependent-phones. Four separate phones are generated from every original phone, each labeled with its location in the word. This results in labels for the begin, end, internal and single phones, the last for words with a transcription of only one phone. If there is enough data for each of the labeled phones, they are modeled separately, otherwise they will be clustered together during the creation of the decision tree. In informal experiments this has shown to give good recognition improvements. For position-dependent-phones it has to be known if a subword is preceded or succeeded by a word-boundary, information which is not available at the moment the plain-text lexicon is created. It can however be encoded in the lexicon FST level as is described in Section 3.

2.4. Enforcing subword restrictions

With all different style subword markings there are restrictions on the possible output sequences the recognizer can generate. For the boundary tag style each sentence must start and end with a <w> tag. The +m and m+ style markings also have a restriction on the sentence boundaries; the sentence cannot start or end with a marked subword, respectively. The +m+ style marking has the highest degree of restriction. The first subword should be a starting subword and the last one an ending subword. Also each transition between subwords should be marked on both subwords the same as either in-word or between-word.

Systems that do not apply this restrictions will not be able to make an unambiguous decision how to reconstruct words from the subword sequence. In practice this does not have to be a problem, but the performance will likely be better if the correct restrictions are in place.

3. Subword lexicon modeling in a WFST

In WFST-based speech recognition, the search network for a decoder is composed out of four separate FSTs that each provide one part of the mapping from sounds to words [8]. The hidden Markov model FST (H) maps emission distributions to context-dependent-phones. After that the context FST (C) maps these context-dependent-phones to context independent phones. The third part is the lexicon FST (L) which maps phone sequences to words and inserts appropriate silences on word boundaries. The last FST is actually more like an acceptor; the grammar FST (G) gives appropriate probabilities to the word sequences.

To accommodate the desired properties of the subword recognition model, specifically the considerations regarding phone modeling and subword restrictions, the following modifications have been made to L-FST.

3.1. Original word lexicon FST

A standard prototype L-FST for a word based lexicon is shown in Figure 1. All standard arcs are marked with their input and output label. Weights have been omitted for brevity without a loss of generalization; in this and all later described FSTs both optional silences and word pronunciations can be weighted. Also self-loops are not shown; these loops allow to stay in the same state for multiple observations. Self-loops are the reason for the special disambiguation symbols (starting with #), these are necessary to keep the FST determinizable. On the end of the decoding process these symbols are mapped to ε meaning that they do not consume any actual input symbols.

The arc marked as Scomplete is special. It is replaced with a linear FST that represents the actual lexicon. An example of this lexicon is given in Figure 2.

3.2. Proposed subword lexicon FST

Figure 3 shows a prototype L for subword recognition. Instead of only a single replacement it needs to be combined with four linear FSTs that represent the subwords that can appear on different locations in a word: begin, end, middle or complete. In the case of word boundary tags (<w>), all subwords can appear in any location, so they will added to each set of linear FSTs. Even though all subwords will appear in all sets of linear FSTs, the sets will not be the same because of position-dependent phones. In the ‘prefix’ set, each transcription will start with a B (begin) phone and all other phones will be I (internal) phones. Similar, for the ‘suffix’ set each transcription
will end with an _E (end) phone and in the ‘infix’ set there will be only _I phones. The ‘complete’ set will start with _B phones and end with _E phones, unless it is a single phone transcription, then it will be marked _S (single).

4. Segmentation methods

The performance of the speech recognizer depends on the type of the subword units. In the Section 5.3, we compare three data-driven segmentation methods in our WFST-based system: Morfessor, greedy unigram, and byte-pair encoding.

4.1. Morfessor

Morfessor [9, 10] is family of statistical methods and tools for segmenting words based on the Minimum Description Length principle. Its primary goal is to find those units of language that resemble the surface forms of morphemes, the smallest information-bearing units of a language. However, the level of segmentation can be adjusted by changing the weight between information-bearing units of a language. However, the level of segmentation can be adjusted by changing the weight between information-bearing units of a language. The exact configuration of the sub-FSTs depends on the marking. For a +m style model, the subwords that are not marked will appear in ‘suffix’ and ‘complete’, while the marked ones will be in ‘suffix’ and ‘internal’. Similarly for the m+ style model, the unmarked subwords will be in ‘suffix’ and ‘complete’ and the marked ones in ‘prefix’ and ‘complete’. In the +m+ style model, the subwords are completely marked and only appear once in their appropriate category.

4.2. Greedy Unigram

The Greedy Unigram (GIG) segmentation [14] was proposed as an alternative segmentation method specifically designed with speech recognition for agglutinative languages in mind. GIG encodes the corpus with high unigram likelihood via multigram expectation-maximization training and greedy likelihood-based pruning. We use the implementation from Factor Toolkit [15].

4.3. Byte pair encoding

Byte pair encoding (BPE) [16] is an algorithm that was designed for data compression and which was recently popularized for segmenting text in other natural language processing domains such as machine translation [17].

In BPE, iteratively the most frequent pair of symbols (initially characters) in a word list is replaced with a new symbol, representing a character n-gram, until a desired number of symbols is reached. We use the implementation provided with [17]. The implementation extends each word internally with an end-of-word character that signals a word break. We replace this by the different styles of marking used in this paper after segmentation.

5. Experiments

5.1. Setup

The experiments were done on five Finnish and Estonian LVCSR tasks. Table 2 describes the type of data and the available amount of audio for each set. The "News" data are authentic radio and television news programs. The "Read" data are selected sentences from a large text corpus read aloud by various volunteers, recorded either by a fixed telephone line or a lapel microphone in relatively quiet environments. All datasets have independent training, development and evaluation sets that do not overlap in speakers. For both languages a newspaper corpus is available for language modeling. The Finnish corpus is a subset of the Finnish Text Collection [18] and has 144 million words. For Estonian the corpus contains 83 million words.

Table 2: Source and hours of data for each dataset. fi-news has no training set, therefore the fi-read training data is used

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>train</th>
<th>dev</th>
<th>eval</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>et-bn-ak</td>
<td>[19] News (TV)</td>
<td>1642</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>et-bn-er</td>
<td>[19] News (Radio)</td>
<td>1642</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fi-news</td>
<td>News (Radio)</td>
<td>fi-read</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fi-phone</td>
<td>[20] Read (Phone)</td>
<td>218.8</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fi-read</td>
<td>[21] Read</td>
<td>148.6</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The acoustic models are all sequence-trained deep neural network models [23] trained with the Kaldi toolkit [4]. This particular type of discriminative training uses a phone language model, hence the actual units used during decoding time was irrelevant for the acoustic model training. Recognitions were done in a single pass using Minimum Bayes Risk decoding [24].

Language models are all n-gram models trained with the VariKN toolkit [25]. This toolkit was chosen as it has specific support for high-order n-gram contexts, which are beneficial when subword units are used. Specifically, when subword units are used a higher-order n-gram is needed to model the same amount of context as an equivalent word model. The size of the language models were tuned so that all models had approximately the same amount of n-gram contexts, 40 million, for all experiments in this paper.

5.2. Boundary marker comparison

To compare our subword implementation to word-based models we trained Morfessor segmentations for each dataset and evaluated them on the development sets. The Morfessor models are trained without any removal of low frequency words. The α parameter (which controls the vocabulary size) and the dampa-
5.3. Subword type and segmentation comparison

We compare the effect of the segmentation type for the fi-news and fi-phone datasets. For each segmentation method we keep the default parameters, only optimizing the frequency threshold for words included in the training of the segmentation.

Table 4 shows that for both datasets the Morfessor segmentation works the best, but the differences are very small. Even the BPE method, which to our knowledge has not been used in speech recognition before, works relatively well and outperforms word-based recognition. We tried to extend the subword lexicon size above 15,000 words for all segmentation methods, but no better results were obtained.

Table 4: Comparison of segmentation algorithms and segmentation vocabulary sizes. WER (%) on development sets.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Set</th>
<th>fi-news</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>fi-phone</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Word</td>
<td>Subword</td>
<td>Previous best</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>WER/LER</td>
<td>WER/LER</td>
<td>WER/LER</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>et-bn-ak</td>
<td>17.48/9.56</td>
<td>18.28/9.36</td>
<td>–/–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>et-bn-er</td>
<td>8.36/1.77</td>
<td>7.70/1.70</td>
<td>8.2/26/ –</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fi-phone</td>
<td>14.07/2.73</td>
<td>12.79/2.47</td>
<td>21.88/14/7.18/14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fi-read</td>
<td>11.11/1.68</td>
<td>9.44/1.44</td>
<td>13.3/26/2.81/28</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.4. Comparison with previous state-of-the-art

For all datasets, we selected the best models that performed best on the development data, and ran the recognition on the evaluation data. In Table 5, the accuracies for word and subword models are compared to the best previous results collected from literature. On all datasets we were able to outperform previous results by large margins.

Word-based model yields the best WER for the first Estonian dataset, but the subword model outperforms it in Letter Error Rate (LER). On all other datasets subword results outperform word based systems both in WER and LER.

Table 5: Word Error Rates (WER) and Letter Error Rates (LER) on evaluation sets.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Set</th>
<th>Word (WER/LER)</th>
<th>Subword (WER/LER)</th>
<th>Previous best (WER/LER)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>fi-news</td>
<td>22.79/13.13</td>
<td>13.04/13.17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fi-phone</td>
<td>23.02/13.19</td>
<td>13.11/13.17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fi-read</td>
<td>23.17/13.15</td>
<td>13.30/13.37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Conclusions

We have implemented techniques to use subword modeling in the WFST-based framework in such way that silence modeling and position-dependent phonemes can be utilized in the same manner as in word-based models. On a variety of Finnish and Estonian datasets we have shown that subword models created with the proposed techniques outperform both word-based models and ‘naive’ subword modeling.

When comparing the different styles of subword boundary marking styles we have found that the +m+ style markings give the best performance for this setup.

Also we have compared three different segmentation toolkits, finding that the Morfessor toolkit works optimal for the tested datasets, but that the performances are in general close.