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Vision-Language Pre-Training: Basics, Recent Advances, and Future Trends

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Contents

1	Introduction	3
1.1	Who Should Read this Monograph?	4
1.2	Vision-and-Language: What Kinds of Problems?	7
1.3	The Transition From Task-Specific Methods to Large-Scale Pre-training	10
1.4	What is a Good VLP Model From an Overall Perspective?	11
1.5	Related Materials: Slide Decks and Pre-recorded Talks	12
2	Tasks, Benchmarks, and Early Models	15
2.1	Tasks and Benchmarks	16
2.2	Task-Specific VL Models	19
2.3	Additional Topics	32
3	VLP for Image-Text Tasks	37
3.1	Overview of VLP Models	38
3.2	Model Architectures	42
3.3	Pre-Training Objectives	48
3.4	Pre-Training Datasets	54
3.5	Advanced Topics	59
3.6	Text-to-Image Generation	74

4 VLP for Core Vision Tasks	78
4.1 Overview	79
4.2 VLP for Image Classification	80
4.3 VLP for Object Detection	87
4.4 VLP for Segmentation	91
4.5 Trends: From Close-Set to Open-Set, to in-the-Wild	93
4.6 Advanced Topics	96
5 VLP for Video-Text Tasks	99
5.1 Video-Text Tasks	100
5.2 Model Architectures	103
5.3 Pre-Training Tasks	108
5.4 Pre-Training Datasets	115
5.5 Advanced Topics	121
6 VL Systems in Industry	128
6.1 VL in Commercial Systems	128
6.2 Issues in VL Model Deployment	134
7 Conclusions and Research Trends	137
7.1 Summary and Conclusions	137
7.2 Towards Building General-Purpose Multimodal Foundation Models	139
Acknowledgments	144
References	145

Vision-Language Pre-Training: Basics, Recent Advances, and Future Trends

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ABSTRACT

This monograph surveys vision-language pre-training (VLP) methods for multimodal intelligence that have been developed in the last few years. We group these approaches into three categories: (i) VLP for image-text tasks, such as image captioning, image-text retrieval, visual question answering, and visual grounding; (ii) VLP for core computer vision tasks, such as (open-set) image classification, object detection, and segmentation; and (iii) VLP for video-text tasks, such as video captioning, video-text retrieval, and video question answering. For each category, we present a comprehensive review of state-of-the-art methods, and discuss the progress that has been made and challenges still being faced, using specific systems and models as case studies. In

Zhe Gan and Jianfeng Gao initiated the project. Zhe Gan and Linjie Li took lead in the writing of Section 1. Linjie Li and Jianfeng Gao took lead in the writing of Section 2. Zhe Gan further took lead in the writing of Sections 3 and 7. Chunyuan Li took lead in the writing of Section 4. Linjie Li further took lead in the writing of Section 5. Lijuan Wang and Zicheng Liu took lead in the writing of Section 6. All the authors provided project advice, and contributed to editing and proofreading.

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addition, for each category, we discuss advanced topics being actively explored in the research community, such as big foundation models, unified modeling, in-context few-shot learning, knowledge, robustness, and computer vision in the wild, to name a few.

1

Introduction

Humans perceive the world through many channels, such as images viewed by the eyes, or voices heard by the ears. Though any individual channel might be incomplete or noisy, humans can naturally align and fuse information collected from multiple channels in order to grasp the key concepts needed for a better understanding of the world.

One of the core aspirations in AI is to develop algorithms that endow computers with an ability to effectively learn from multimodal (or, multi-channel) data. This data is similar to sights and sounds attained from *vision* and *language* that help humans make sense of the world around us. For example, computers could mimic this ability by searching the most relevant images to a text query (or vice versa), and by describing the content of an image using natural language.

Vision-and-Language (VL), a popular research area that sits at the nexus of Computer Vision and Natural Language Processing (NLP), aims to achieve this goal. Inspired by the great success of language model pre-training in NLP (*e.g.*, BERT [74], RoBERTa [262], T5 [327], and GPT-3 [33]), Vision-Language Pre-training (VLP) has recently attracted rapidly growing attention from both communities. With the promise to learn universal transferable visual and vision-language representations,

VLP has become an increasingly central training paradigm for modern VL research.

Recently, there are some related papers on VLP. For example, [501] focused on task-specific VL methods before the era of pre-training, and provided a concise discussion of VLP models. [85] and [231] focused on VLP, but mainly on image-text tasks, without touch on video-text tasks. [343] focused on VLP for video-text tasks. In [47], the authors reviewed VLP methods for image-text and video-text tasks. However, the discussion is not in depth. The contributions of this monograph are summarized as follows.

- We provide a comprehensive survey on modern VLP, not only covering its successful applications to traditional image-text and video-text tasks (*e.g.*, image/video captioning, retrieval, and question answering), but also showing its great potential for core computer vision tasks (*e.g.*, image classification, object detection and segmentation).
- We provide in-depth discussions on advanced topics at the frontier of VLP, ranging from big foundation models, unified modeling, in-context few-shot learning, knowledge-enhanced VLP, multilingual VLP, model robustness, model compression, to computer vision in the wild.
- We picture the landscape of VL systems developed in research communities and released to the public, demonstrating via case studies the progress we have made and the challenges we are facing.

1.1 Who Should Read this Monograph?

This monograph is based on our CVPR 2022 tutorial,¹ with researchers in the computer vision and NLP communities as our primary target audience. It provides a detailed presentation of the important ideas and insights needed to understand modern VLP methods, and serves as a valuable resource for students, researchers, engineers, and practitioners

¹<https://vlp-tutorial.github.io/>.

1.1. Who Should Read this Monograph?

5

that are interested in large-scale pre-training for VL representation learning and its applications in computer vision and multimodal tasks. The monograph is structured as follows.

- Section 1 introduces the landscape of VL research, and presents a historical view on the transition of VL research from task-specific methods to large-scale pre-training.
- Section 2 introduces early task-specific VL methods for visual question answering, image captioning, and image-text retrieval, which serve as the foundation to understand modern VLP methods.
- Section 3 describes VLP methods for image-text tasks, such as image captioning, image-text retrieval, visual question answering, and visual grounding.
- Section 4 describes VLP methods for core computer vision tasks, including (open-vocabulary) image classification, object detection and segmentation.
- Section 5 describes VLP methods for video-text tasks, such as video captioning, video-text retrieval, and video question answering.
- Section 6 briefly reviews VL systems developed in industry and the challenges to deploy these VL systems in real-world settings.
- Section 7 concludes the monograph and discusses research trends.

Relations between core sections. Sections 2–5 are the core sections of this monograph. An overview of these sections is provided in Figure 1.1. As the wave of VLP starts with image-text tasks, we first provide a comprehensive review on the transition from early task-specific methods (Section 2) to the most recent VLP methods (Section 3) with image-text inputs. In Section 4, we discuss how core computer vision tasks can be viewed as image-text tasks with open-vocabulary predictions, when powered by contrastively pre-trained image-text models (such as CLIP [326]), and further enable computer vision in the wild [229].

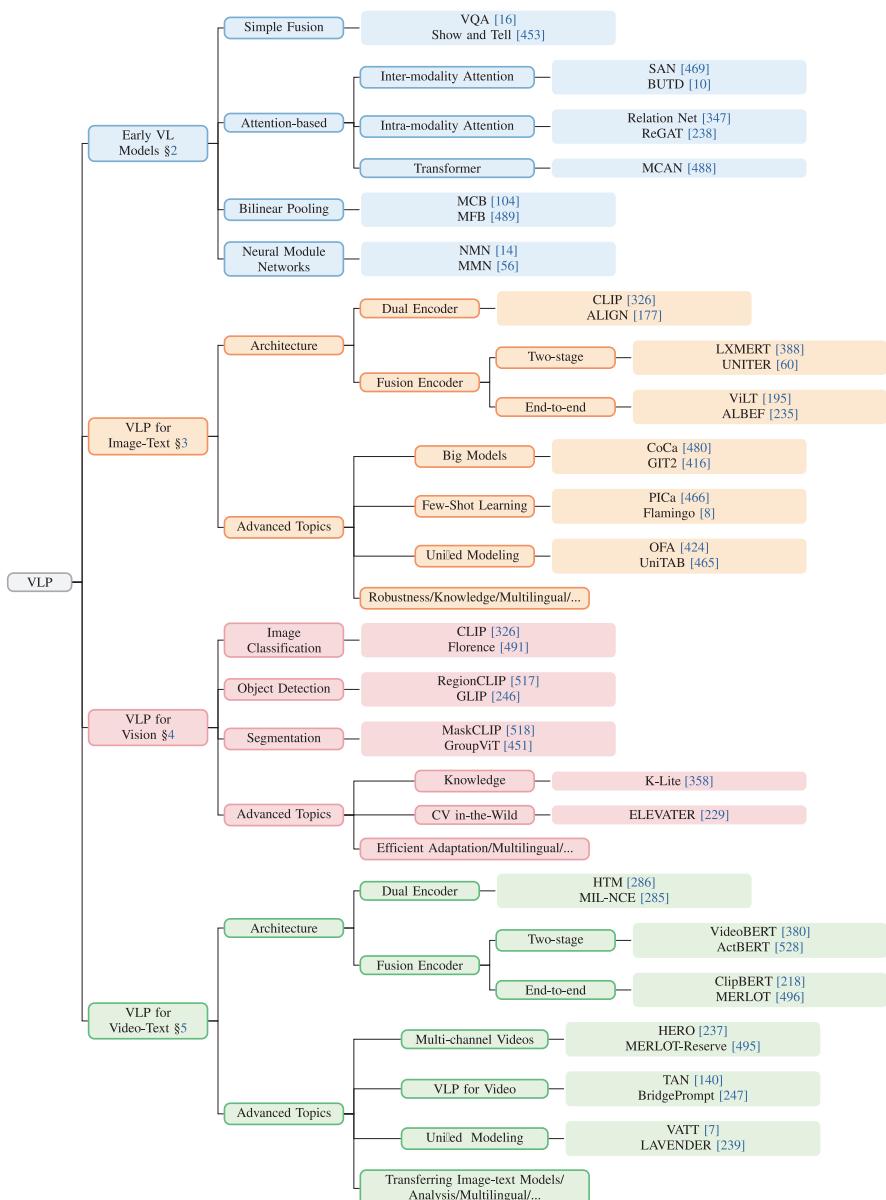


Figure 1.1: Overview of the monograph structure, detailing Sections 2–5.

1.2. Vision-and-Language: What Kinds of Problems?

7

Extending image-text tasks to more modalities, we present how VLP methods can serve more applications with video-text inputs in Section 5.

How to read the monograph. Readers with different backgrounds may have different purposes for reading this monograph. Below, we provide some guidance.

- Each section is mostly self-contained. If you have a clear goal and a clear research direction that you want to focus on, then just jump to the corresponding section. For example, if you are interested in video-language pre-training, then you can directly jump to Section 5.
- If you are a beginner in the VLP field, and are interested in getting a glimpse of the cutting-edge research of VLP, it is also highly suggested to read the whole monograph section by section, as it provides a comprehensive literature review that helps you understand the VLP landscape.
- If you already have rich experience in VLP and are very familiar with the literature, feel free to jump to specific sections you want to read. In particular, we include in each section a dedicated part in which we discuss advanced topics. For example, in Section 3.5, we discuss big foundation models, unified image-text modeling, in-context few-shot learning, knowledge, robustness and probing analysis, etc.

1.2 Vision-and-Language: What Kinds of Problems?

We live in a multimodal world, and our brains naturally learn to process multi-sense signals received from the environment to help us make sense of the world around us. More specifically, *vision* is a large portion of how humans perceive, while *language* is a large portion of how humans communicate. A multimodal AI system, by its definition, should have the ability to process such multimodal signals effectively and efficiently. Among the ever-growing literature on VL research, in this monograph, we group VL problems into three categories, as detailed below.

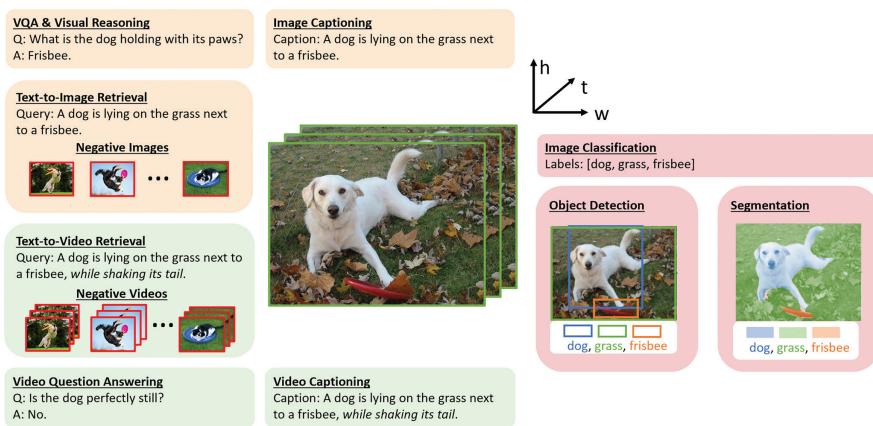


Figure 1.2: Illustration of representative tasks from three categories of VL problems covered in this monograph: image-text tasks , vision tasks as VL problems , and video-text tasks .

- **Image-Text Tasks.** Arguably, the most important and well-studied tasks in VL research are image-text retrieval, image captioning [408], and visual question answering (VQA) [16] (highlighted with orange in Figure 1.2). Centered around these tasks, many related tasks have been proposed and studied.
 - **VQA and visual reasoning.** As extensions to visual question answering, researchers have developed datasets for visual reasoning [170], [378], visual commonsense reasoning [493], visual dialog [70], knowledge-based VQA [283], scene-text-based VQA [370], etc. The answers required in these tasks can be open-ended free-form texts, or selected from multiple choices.
 - **Image captioning.** In addition to the setting where short single-sentence generation is required [254], researchers have also developed datasets for image paragraph captioning [200], scene-text-based image captioning [366], visual storytelling [164], and so on.
 - **Image-text retrieval.** Popular image-text retrieval datasets are based on image captioning datasets [58], [321]. AI models

are required to retrieve the most relevant text (or image) from a large corpus, given the image (or text) query.

- **Visual grounding.** Instead of text outputs, referring expression comprehension and phrase grounding [321], [483] requires bounding box outputs, where the model needs to predict the bounding box corresponding to the input text query.
- **Text-to-image generation.** It can be considered as the dual task of image captioning, where the system is required to create a high-fidelity image based on the text input. A brief discussion on this task is provided in Section 3.6.
- **Computer Vision Tasks as VL Problems.** Image classification, object detection, and segmentation (highlighted with pink in Figure 1.2) are core visual recognition tasks in computer vision. Traditionally, these tasks are considered as pure vision problems. With the advent of CLIP [326] and ALIGN [177], researchers have realized that language supervision can play an important role in computer vision tasks. First, the use of noisy image-text data crawled from the web allows large-scale pre-training of vision encoders from scratch. Second, instead of treating the supervision signals (*e.g.*, class labels) as one-hot vectors, we take the semantic meaning behind the labels into consideration and cast these computer vision tasks as VL problems. This perspective generalizes the traditional close-set classification or detection models to recognizing unseen concepts in real-world applications, such as open-vocabulary object detection.
- **Video-Text Tasks.** Besides static images, videos are another important type of visual modality. Naturally, all aforementioned image-text tasks have their video-text counterparts, such as video captioning, retrieval, and question answering (highlighted with green in Figure 1.2). The uniqueness of video inputs, in comparison to images, requires an AI system to not only capture spatial information within a single video frame, but also capture the inherent temporal dependencies among video frames.

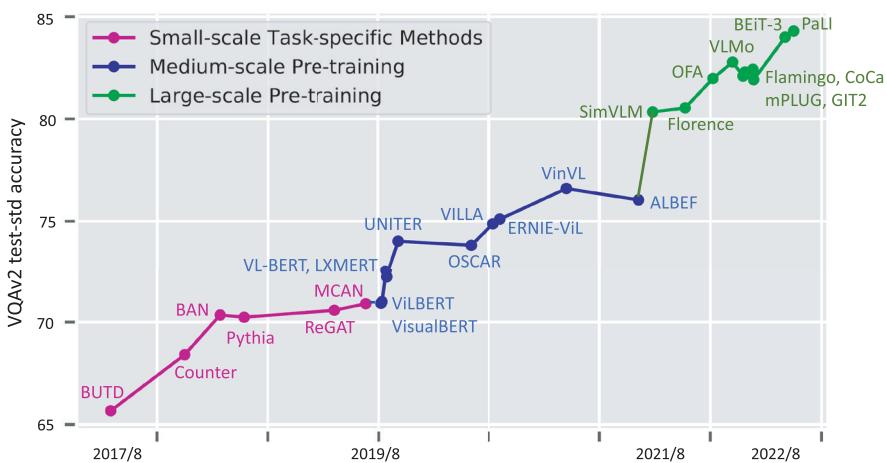


Figure 1.3: The transition from task-specific methods to large-scale pre-training, using the VQA task as a case study. Every time when there was a transition, we observe a big performance lift, *e.g.*, from MCAN [487] to UNITER [60], and from ALBEF [235] to SimVLM [433]. Methods before August 2017 were not drawn; only some representative VLP works are shown to avoid the figure to be too crowded.

While this monograph provides a comprehensive survey of VLP, some of the important VL topics are not discussed. For example, Vision-Language Navigation (VLN) [12], another emerging topic at the intersection of VL research and embodied AI, is not covered in this monograph.

1.3 The Transition From Task-Specific Methods to Large-Scale Pre-training

From a historical perspective, the progress of VL research can be divided into three stages. In Figure 1.3, we use the performance of the popular VQA task to illustrate the research transition from task-specific methods to medium-scale and large-scale pre-training.

- **Small-scale task-specific method design (2014/11–2019/8).** At this stage, many task-specific methods have been developed for image captioning and VQA. For example, an important line of work is to design various attention mechanisms based on pre-extracted visual features (*e.g.*, ResNet [143], Faster RCNN [338],

1.4. *What is a Good VLP Model From an Overall Perspective?*

11

C3D [402]), pre-trained word embeddings (*e.g.*, GLoVe [316], word2vec [288]), and LSTM [152], as we will review in Section 2. These attention method designs have been used to capture multi-modal alignment, perform object relational reasoning, and model multi-step reasoning.

- **Medium-scale pre-training (2019/8–2021/8).** Inspired by the great success of BERT [74] in NLP, the VL field has gradually shifted to using Transformer-based multimodal fusion models that are pre-trained in medium-scale settings, *e.g.*, using image-text datasets up to 4 M images (roughly 10 M image-text pairs in total), with model sizes ranging from 110 M (BERT-base) to 340 M (BERT-large). Typical examples of medium-scale VLP models include UNITER [60] and OSCAR [250], as will be described in Section 3.
- **Large-scale pre-training (2021/8–now).** With the advent of CLIP [326] and ALIGN [177] that aim to train image-text dual encoders from noisy image-text pairs crawled from the web, large-scale VLP shows great promise and is becoming the foundation of VL research. We have witnessed a boom of big multimodal foundation models, *e.g.*, SimVLM [433], Florence [490], Flamingo [8], CoCa [479] and GIT [415]. The high computational cost of VLP can be amortized via adapting the pre-trained models to a wide range of downstream tasks. The number of image-text pairs used for pre-training has increased to over 12B, with model sizes growing to 5B, as in GIT [415]. We provide some detailed discussion on big models in Section 3.5.1.

1.4 What is a Good VLP Model From an Overall Perspective?

While VLP is an emerging field with many new exciting papers appearing, it remains less clear what is the north star we are pursuing as a community. We provide our perspective on the direction. We believe a good VLP model should:

- **Achieve good performance on a wide range of downstream tasks.** The task coverage can be considered in a two-level

granularity. First, the problem types are broad, for example, one model can perform on image-text tasks such as VQA, image captioning and text-to-image generation in Section 3, core computer vision tasks such as image classification, object detection and segmentation in Section 4, video-text tasks such as video QA and captioning in Section 5. Second, for each problem type, there is a broad coverage of datasets that represent different use scenarios. For example, in [229] the authors present 20 image classification datasets and 35 object detection datasets to illustrate various scenarios in the wild.

- **Adapt to new tasks with minimal cost.** The adaptation cost needs to be low when deploying a VLP model to a new task. Various efficiency metrics can be considered to measure the adaptation cost, including inference speed, GPU usage for further model weight update, the number of training samples, and the number of trainable parameters. This is an area not well defined yet, and there has been some early effort. For example, in [229] the authors provide a definition by decomposing the adaptation cost into sample-efficiency and parameter-efficiency.

To summarize, the north star of a good VLP model is a single unified model with fixed model weights (or, with inexpensive finetuning) that performs well on all the tasks above. This is an ambitious goal that the community is collectively working towards. Developing a central benchmark is itself an open research problem. We advocate for considering the following factors when benchmarking VLP models: the coverage of tasks, the performance on these tasks, and the cost of adaptation.

1.5 Related Materials: Slide Decks and Pre-recorded Talks

This monograph extends what we present in CVPR tutorials by covering the most recent advances in the field. Below, we provide a list of slide decks and pre-recorded talks that relate to the topics in each section, for references.

- **Section 2:**

- CVPR 2020 Tutorial: VQA and visual reasoning ([Youtube](#), [Bilibili](#))
- CVPR 2020 Tutorial: Image captioning ([Youtube](#), [Bilibili](#))

- **Section 3:**

- CVPR 2022 Tutorial: Overview of Image-Text Pre-training ([YouTube](#), [Bilibili](#))
- CVPR 2022 Tutorial: Unified Image-Text Modeling ([YouTube](#), [Bilibili](#))
- CVPR 2022 Tutorial: Advanced Topics in Image-Text Pre-training ([YouTube](#), [Bilibili](#))
- CVPR 2021 Tutorial: Representations and Training Strategies for VLP ([YouTube](#))
- CVPR 2021 Tutorial: Robustness, Efficiency and Extensions for VLP ([YouTube](#))
- CVPR 2020 Tutorial: Self-supervised Image-Text Learning ([YouTube](#), [Bilibili](#))

- **Section 4:**

- CVPR 2022 Tutorial: VLP for Image Classification ([Youtube](#), [Bilibili](#))
- CVPR 2022 Tutorial: VLP for Object Detection ([Youtube](#), [Bilibili](#))
- CVPR 2022 Tutorial: Benchmarks for Computer Vision in the Wild ([YouTube](#), [Bilibili](#))

- **Section 5:**

- CVPR 2022 Tutorial: Overview of Video-Text Pre-training ([YouTube](#), [Bilibili](#))
- CVPR 2022 Tutorial: Learning from Multi-channel Videos: Methods and Benchmarks ([YouTube](#), [Bilibili](#))

- CVPR 2022 Tutorial: Advanced Topics in Video-Text Pre-training (YouTube, Bilibili)
- CVPR 2021 Tutorial: Video-and-Language Pre-training (Youtube)

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