VINE-GATR: SCALING GEOMETRIC ALGEBRA TRANSFORMERS WITH VIRTUAL NODE EMBEDDINGS

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ABSTRACT

Equivariant neural networks can effectively model physical systems by naturally handling the underlying geometric quantities and preserving their symmetries, but scaling them to large geometric data remains challenging. Naive downsampling typically disrupts features' transformation laws, limiting their applicability in large scale settings. In this work, we propose a scalable equivariant transformer that efficiently processes geometric data in a coarse-grained latent space while preserving $\mathrm{E}(3)$ symmetries of the problem. In particular, by building on the Geometric Algebra Transformer (GATr) and PerceiverIO architectures, our method learns equivariant latent tokens which allow us to decouple the processing complexity from the input data representation while maintaining global equivariance.

1 INTRODUCTION

Machine learning approaches that adhere to the laws of physics have become an important tool in analyzing data in natural sciences (Raissi et al., 2019). Equivariant neural network architectures (Cohen & Welling, 2016; Weiler et al., 2021; Bronstein et al., 2021) are a prime example of such approaches, as they guarantee that the network output transforms with the input according to the symmetries of the underlying physics. The design principle of equivariant models is to incorporate the prior knowledge about the geometry and the symmetries of the problem directly into the architecture, such that the model does not need to learn them from data during training. As a result, the equivariant design can improve the model's reliability and is especially effective in data-scarce regimes, for example when gathering or even simulating abundant data is too expensive or prohibitive. This is a common scenario in many disciplines in science, where it is crucial to analyze large quantities of geometric data - typically in the form of graphs, meshes or point clouds - with very little training data available. Equivarant models are particularly useful where point clouds cannot be canonically aligned without additional modeling assumptions (for example in cortical surface analysis). Other examples include weather prediction and climate modeling (Andrychowicz et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2023; Lam et al., 2022), material design for high-temperature superconductivity (Choudhary & Garrity, 2022; Chen et al., 2024) or fusion power plants (Spangher et al., 2024), analyzing Large Hadron Collider (LHC) data (Plehn et al., 2022; Brehmer et al., 2024), catalyst design (Goldsmith et al., 2018) and even large scale medical data analysis (Arzani et al., 2022; Suk et al., 2024; Dahan et al., 2024). While practitioners in each discipline developed powerful deep learning solutions, leveraging also domain knowledge, these are often tailored to the underlying domain and data representation, and scalability remains a major challenge in many applications. A general strategy to handle large-scale geometric input data, which proved to be effective across many scenarios, is to transition from the fine-grained data space to a coarse-grained latent one, which is more practical for performing computations. Ideally, the coarser latent structure allows computational resources to focus on the most informative parts of the high-resolution data, avoiding the excessive costs associated with modeling the fine patterns at full resolution and, therefore, improving scalability. Similar ideas underpin many successful solutions, but it is not straightforward to implement this within an equivariant design. Indeed, the strict constraints enforced by equivariance require the ex-

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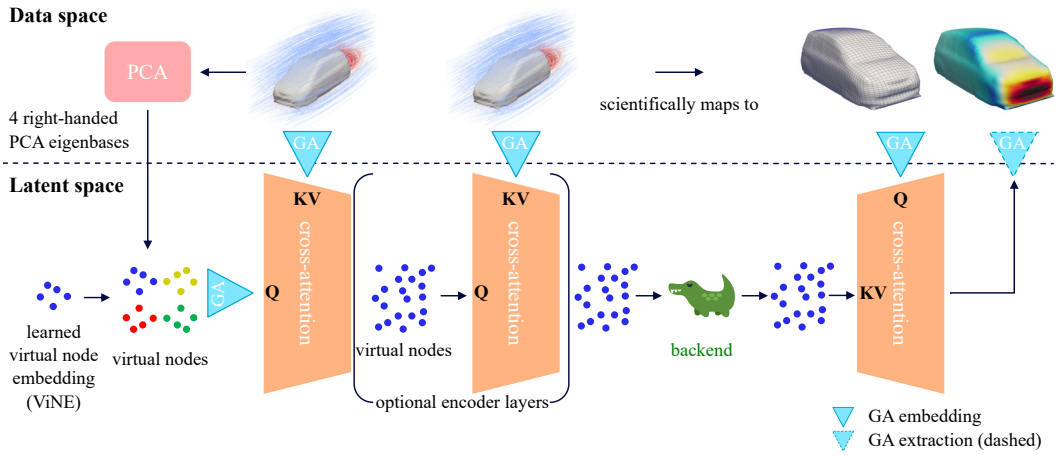

Figure 1: **ViNE-GATr:** input tokens in *data space* are processed into geometric features via PCA. These augment $V/4$ invariant coordinates to construct V virtual nodes (*latent space*). The encoder includes one (or more) cross-attention modules, allowing virtual nodes to query the high-resolution inputs. The resulting latent features are processed by a standard GATr backend. Finally, an output neural field is generated via cross-attention by querying virtual nodes at each output token (or spatial location).

act conservation of the data's transformation law and naive approaches to downsampling are known to be problematic (Zhang, 2019). Preserving the right geometric structure and the input symmetries during down-sampling poses non-trivial challenges, which are subject of many previous works such as (Xu et al., 2021; Chaman & Dokmanic, 2021; Rojas-Gomez et al., 2022; Rahman & Yeh, 2025).

Alkin et al. (2024) proposed a flexible framework addressing similar problems by elegantly decoupling the modeling of dynamics within latent tokens from the input data representation, substantially improving scalability. The method builds on PerceiverIO (Jaegle et al.) to construct a hourglass architecture that learns an independent set of latent query tokens to process the input data efficiently in three stages: first, the latent query tokens extract relevant features from the input via cross-attention, second, the latent tokens are processed by a transformer architecture and, finally, an output conditional neural field is reconstructed at the output tokens, which aggregate features via cross-attention on the latent space. Unfortunately, incorporating equivariance in this framework is still not straightforward since latent query tokens are inherently invariant, preventing them from capturing geometric information from the input keys equivariantly through the simple inner products in cross-attention layers. Hence, in an equivariant design, it is desirable for the latent tokens to transform equivariantly too; see Sec. 3. In this paper, building on the Geometric Algebra Transformer (GATr) framework from Brehmer et al. (2023), we introduce ViNE-GATr, a scalable transformer architecture that preserves the $\mathrm{E}(3)$-symmetries in the data space while efficiently processing it in a latent token space.

2 Background: Geometric Algebra Transformers

Geometric Algebra Transformers (GATr) (Brehmer et al., 2023) is a recent architecture which achieves equivariance to the group $\mathrm{E}(3)$ of isometries of the 3-dimensional Euclidean space, i.e. translations, rotations and mirroring. GATr leverages the *projective geometric algebra* (or *Clifford algebra*) (PGA) $\boldsymbol{G}(3,0,1)$ to represent its input, output and intermediate activations as (multiple) 16-dimensional feature vectors - the so-called *multivectors* - which encode geometric objects such as scalars, points, lines or planes as well as certain geometric operators like rotations or translations.

To better understand how PGA is used to represent 3D geometry, note that by including a 4-th homogeneous coordinate e_0 to the standard basis (e_1, e_2, e_3) of $\mathbb{R}^3$, one can model translations as linear operations too. Then, by introducing a certain associative, non-commutative *geometric product*

between these vectors[1], one generates the 16-dimensional vector space of multivectors:

$$x = (\underbrace{x_s}_{\text{scalar}}, \underbrace{x_0, x_1, x_2, x_3}_{\text{vectors}}, \underbrace{x_{01}, x_{02}, x_{03}, x_{12}, x_{13}, x_{23}}_{\text{bi-vectors}}, \underbrace{x_{012}, x_{013}, x_{023}, x_{123}}_{\text{tri-vectors}}, \underbrace{x_{0123}}_{\text{pseudo-scalar}}) \in \boldsymbol{G}(3, 0, 1)$$

The geometric product is a bilinear operator which generalizes well known operations like the inner product or the cross product between vectors, but also implements other geometric transformations (e.g. combine two multivectors representing a translation and a point to obtain the translated point, expressed as another multivector). This motivates the use of the geometric algebra as a principled and practical tool for geometrical reasoning. We refer to Brehmer et al. (2023) for more details and their Tab. 1 for mapping of geometric objects and operators to multivectors.

Like typical equivariant networks, multivector features carry an action of the equivariance group $\mathrm{E}(3)$ and GATr includes layers which map between these features in an equivariant way, in particular: linear layers, bilinear layers (which, loosely speaking, encode the geometric product between multivectors) and the attention layer, as well as other non-linear layers. Finally, GATr has already been applied to a wide range of scientific domains (Suk et al., 2024; Hehn et al., 2025; Brehmer et al., 2024). We believe its versatility makes GATr a good architecture for our problem.

3 E(3)-EQUIVARIANT VIRTUAL NODES EMBEDDINGS (VINE)

In an equivariant scenario, we assume the input tokens jointly transform according to a certain group G (e.g $\mathrm{E}(3)$) which models the symmetries of the task. The typical cross-attention mechanism leverages the inner product between key and query vectors. As a result, the invariant latent query

$$\langle \boldsymbol{q}(v_i), \boldsymbol{k}(g.n_j) \rangle = \langle \boldsymbol{q}(v_i), \rho(g)\boldsymbol{k}(n_j) \rangle \qquad \neq \langle \boldsymbol{q}(v_i), \boldsymbol{k}(n_j) \rangle \qquad \forall g \in G \tag{1}$$

In geometric algebra transformers, $\boldsymbol{q}$ and $\boldsymbol{k}$ consist of equivariant primitives, v_i and n_j are represented by multivectors and $\langle \cdot, \cdot \rangle$ is the inner product of the algebra. The equality would hold only for a trivial representation $\rho(g) = 1$, that is, the latent queries can attend to invariant keys, missing a lot of geometric information in the input data. Conversely, if we equip the latent tokens with some geometric feature f which transforms equivariantly to the input data, we can construct equivariant query vectors too, which enable expressive attention[2]:

$$\langle \boldsymbol{q}(v_i, g.f), \boldsymbol{k}(g.n_j) \rangle = \langle \rho(g)\boldsymbol{q}(v_i, f), \rho(g)\boldsymbol{k}(n_j) \rangle \qquad = \langle \boldsymbol{q}(v_i, f), \boldsymbol{k}(n_j) \rangle \qquad \forall g \in G \tag{2}$$

Inspired by recent works on Virtual Nodes for equivariant graph convolution (Sestak et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024), we propose to augment the latent tokens with simple global geometric features carrying the equivariance property of the input to allow for more expressive queries.

ViNE via PCA features A efficient but effective choice is given by the Principal Component Analysis (PCA) of the input tokens, which provides a center-of-mass vector and 3 orthogonal eigenvectors (weighted by their eigenvalues). Note that the center-of-mass $\boldsymbol{c} \in \mathbb{R}^3$ is a quantity transforming like a *point* (translates and rotates when the input does), while eigenvectors $W = (\boldsymbol{w}_1, \boldsymbol{w}_2, \boldsymbol{w}_3) \in \mathbb{R}^{3\times 3}$ rotate but are translation-invariant. As such, they can be encoded respectively as a point and translation operators multivectors[3], see (Brehmer et al., 2023, Tab. 1). The global geometric feature $f = (\boldsymbol{c}, \boldsymbol{w}_1, \boldsymbol{w}_2, \boldsymbol{w}_3)$ comprising these 4 multivectors is concatenated to the invariant query tokens to build our **Virtual Node Embeddings** (**ViNE**). We argue this simple PCA features are effective for our purpose, while still being extremely efficient to compute. Indeed, in Apx. A, we show that ViNE allows the model to learn a *canonicalized* virtual point cloud, which can effectively leverage the distance-aware attention. In Apx. A, we also discuss the analogy with *canonicalization* methods.

[1] Assuming the orthonormal basis $\{e_i\}_{i=0}^3$, the geometric product is defined such that $e_0 e_0 = 0$ and $e_i e_i = 1$ for $i = 1, 2, 3$ and $e_i e_j = -e_j e_i$ for $i \neq j$.

[2] Here we assumed orthogonal ρ, which is not typically faithful to the whole $\mathrm{E}(3)$ group. This is the case also in GATr, which only uses the translation invariant coefficients to compute the attention weights, but introduces positional bias via a separate component.

[3] For minor improved expressivity, due to the structure of the equivariant linear maps, in practice we prefer encoding eigenvectors as vectors, which can be mapped to translations via a single linear map.

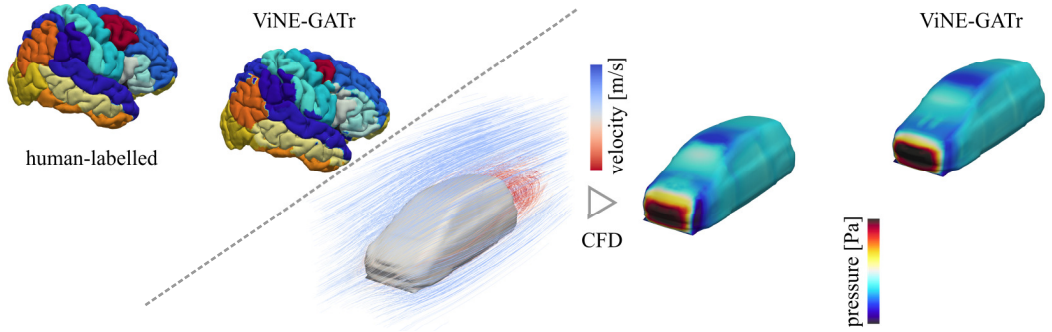

Figure 2: We apply ViNE-GATr to cortical surface parcellation (left) in the Mindboggle-101 dataset and estimation of surface pressure caused by airflow around car bodies (right) (ShapeNet-Car).

Table 1: **Comparison of inference time and accuracy** between LaB-GATr, ViNE-GATr and (†) LaB-GATr using random instead of farthest point sampling. Times are averaged over 101 cortical surface meshes (ca. 300K vertices each) from the Mindboggle-101 dataset. We report in brackets ($*$) the percentage that is due to pre-processing of the inputs. For the accuracy, we report mean $\pm$ standard deviation across the test split.

Model	**Inference [ms]** ($*$)	**Accuracy** $\uparrow$ **[%]**
LaB-GATr	2076.5 (86.2 %)	**79.4** $\pm$ 1.8
ViNE-GATr	390.1 (1.8 %)	77.3 $\pm$ 2.7
LaB-GATr†	**386.1** (0.0 %)	66.6 $\pm$ 2.2

Table 2: **ShapeNet-Car** benchmark comparison to baselines (values from (Alkin et al., 2024)).

Model	**Error** $\times$1e2 $\downarrow$
GINO	**2.14**
UPT	2.24
FNO	3.26
ViNE-GATr	3.85

Sign-Ambiguity of eigenvectors A problem with the PCA features is that eigenvectors are only defined up to a sign ambiguity. To handle this artificial symmetry, we compute 4 different global features $\{f_j\}_j^4$, one for each matrix with positive determinant among the 2^3 obtained by flipping the signs of the columns of W. This strategy amounts to collecting all possible redundancies and then discarding as many as possible in a canonical way that generalizes across point clouds. We only learn $V/4$ invariant embeddings but combine them with each of these global features to obtain V ViNE tokens. In practice, in some experiments, we found beneficial for improved performance and stable convergence to ignore this artifact and simply use all sign-flipped eigenvectors in a single global feature $f = (\boldsymbol{c}, W, -W)$ for all virtual nodes.

4 Experiments

We evaluate ViNE-GATr on two tasks, see Fig. 2: cortical surface parcellation, i.e. the segmentation of functional brain regions (Mindboggle-101 (Klein et al., 2016)) and estimation of pressure exerted by airflow on the body of cars (ShapeNet-Car (Umetani & Bickel, 2018)).

Inference time study on large-scale cortical surface data We investigate the trade-off between inference time and accuracy using the Mindboggle-101 dataset. We create an ablation of LaB-GATr (Suk et al., 2024) ("large-scale biomedical GATr") which uses random subsampling of mesh vertices instead of farthest point sampling (FPS) which is the inference bottleneck in LaB-GATr.[4] Results are presented in Tab. 1. We choose the best-performing configuration of LaB- and ViNE-GATr which used (approximately) 1K hidden tokens and $V = 750$ virtual nodes, respectively. LaB-GATr achieves the highest accuracy albeit for the highest inference cost due to FPS. Ablating FPS for random sampling incurs an accuracy drop of 12.8% but greatly increases inference speed. ViNE-GATr presents a favorable accuracy trade-off by 2.1% under negligible increase in inference time.

[4]FPS is a iterative algorithm that requires distances to all points in each step ($\mathcal{O}(NV)$) and – due to its sequential nature – is challenging to parallelize.

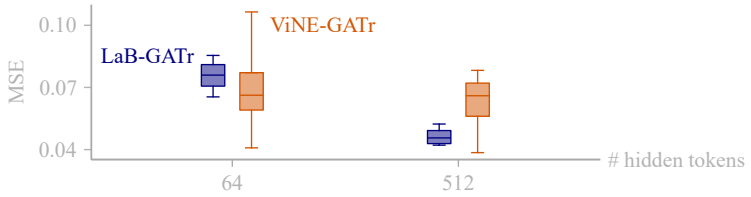

Figure 3: **MSE ↓ over allocated token budget** of LaB-GATr (blue) and ViNE-GATr (orange). Shown are mean, std, min. and max. error over 4 runs per budget.

Ablation on number of virtual nodes in cars airflow data We present preliminary results in which we train LaB- and ViNE-GATr with varying latent token budget and compare its influence on accuracy, see Fig. 3. We follow the setup of Alkin et al. (2024) and estimate car body pressure. Flow direction is encoded at every vertex in the mesh by oriented planes in $\mathbf{G}(3, 0, 1)$; the surface normal of the car body is also encoded as planes. We find that increased token budgets benefit both LaB- and ViNE-GATr while the scaling of ViNE-GATr is more moderate. However, ViNE-GATr performs better at the very small budget of $V = 64$. Tab. 2 shows how ViNE-GATr ($V = 512$) compares to the three models in Alkin et al. (2024), where we observe competitive performance. We did not perform any hyperparameter optimisation for ViNE-GATr in this study.

5 Discussion

Our preliminary results are a promising prospect for the utility of ViNE-GATr in the context of scientific problems on intricate geometric shapes. Compared to baselines, ViNE-GATr affords additional inference compute which could be spent e.g. on uncertainty quantification. ViNE-GATr also decouples the task from its geometry and generates predictions based on a latent space of virtual nodes, independently of the input spatial resolution (in contrast to LaB-GATr). We find that increased numbers of virtual nodes improve the accuracy on the ShapeNet-Car dataset, which hints at decoupling of model expressivity and computational cost due to the input size. See limitations in Apx. C. In future work, we aim to compare ViNE-GATr to different methods of achieving $\mathrm{E}(3)$ equivariance, for example frame averaging (Puny et al., 2022)) and non-equivariant baselines, such as UPT (Alkin et al., 2024).

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A On the effectiveness of PCA features and the relation with canonicalization methods

Let $X \in \mathbb{R}^{3\times N}$ be the coordinates of the input N tokens and let $S \in \mathbb{R}^{3\times V}$ be three invariant scalars learned by each of the V virtual tokens; then, $\hat{S}(X) = W(X)S + \boldsymbol{c}(X) \in \mathbb{R}^{3\times V}$ represents

the *canonicalized* coordinates of the virtual point cloud S - where we emphasized the dependency of the PCA features on the input X. Coincidentally, this computation is achieved by i) a weighted combination of the three translations $W = (\boldsymbol{w}_1, \boldsymbol{w}_2, \boldsymbol{w}_3)$ by the scalars in S followed by ii) the application of this translation on the point $\boldsymbol{c}$, which can be performed by a sequence of two linear and bilinear layers in GATr. In other words, this construction allows the model to learn a *canonicalized* virtual point cloud, which can effectively leverage the distance-aware attention mechanism.

Comparison with canonicalization methods Previous works studied canonicalization methods, e.g. Kaba et al. (2023), but we emphasize some important differences. First, the canonicalized coordinates enrich the latent queries, but the virtual nodes still attend to the input tokens, which contain the full geometry and pose information; hence, the canonicalization of the virtual scalars is not a bottleneck in passing pose-information to the rest of the model. Second, we still process the latent data with an equivariant architecture, which helps preserving not only the global but also the local isometry equivariance. Additionally, each virtual node (and each attention head) can learn to weight the canonicalized features differently.

We finally draw an analogy with the work of Wessels et al. (2024), which particularly resembles the decoder of our model, although the work focuses more on the equivariant neural field aspect of it.

B Computational complexity

Assume N input tokens and a fixed set of V Virtual Nodes, independent of the input. The initial cross-attention has cost $\mathcal{O}(NV)$. The majority of transformer layers operate on virtual tokens in the latent with $\mathcal{O}(V^2)$ complexity. Finally, the model decodes information from virtual tokens to the output tokens of interest (usually, the input tokens) with another cross-attention. The overall $\mathcal{O}(V^2 + NV)$ complexity highlights that cost scales linearly with input tokens N, while we note that the computational capacity depends on number of virtual tokens V, which is now disentangled from the input data discretization.

C Limitations

In our experiments we found ViNE-GATr training convergence to be somewhat sensitive to virtual node initialisation, which we are currently investigating. Furthermore, ViNE-GATr achieved peak performance on Mindboggle-101 by breaking the permutation symmetry among PCA eigenvectors. To address these issues, we aim to look into soft (training-time) regularisation of virtual node position to better follow the topology of the input data.

D Additional experimental details

The cortical surface meshes are heterogeneous and have around 300K vertices, while the airflow domain and cars are represented by volume and surface meshes of ca. 33k vertices. We train all our models under L^1 loss with a batch size of four using Adam with an initial learning rate of $3\mathrm{e}-4$ and exponential decay until we observe convergence on a held-out validation split. All trainings were run on NVIDIA Tesla V100 (32 GB) GPUs and we used gradient accumulation in the case of the large-scale cortical surface data. ViNE-GATr had 360k - 400k trainable parameters, dependent on the specific hyperparameters.

In the large-scale cortical surface data experiment, all models encoded the surface normal as oriented planes and mesh vertices as points in $\mathbf{G}(3, 0, 1)$. LaB-GATr followed the same layout as ViNE-GATr but uses learned interpolation instead of cross-attention in the decoding step. In these experiment, note that we achieved the presented accuracy of ViNE-GATr by breaking sign-flip symmetry and concatenating all PCA eigenvectors along the channels dimension.