

Topology in Neural Machine Translation: A Topological Study of Transformers through Attention

Yuwei (Johnny) Meng

23 Dec 2025

Abstract

1. Introduction

2. Background

2.1. Algebraic Topology

Topology is a branch of mathematics that characterizes shapes, spaces, and sets by their connectivity (Guss & Salakhutdinov, 2018). Algebraic topology, more sophisticatedly, is a subfield of topology that attributes algebraic properties such as groups and chains to topological spaces in order to make explanations and interpretations more expressive. Formally, let X be a compact metric space. We can define a p -simplex to be a collection of points $\{x_0, \dots, x_n\} \subseteq X$ in p -dimension. Depending on the value of p , these simplices bear different names:

- $p = 0$: point
- $p = 1$: line
- $p = 2$: triangle
- $p = 3$: tetrahedron
- ...

Now consider a collection of such p -simplices, called \mathcal{K} . Then \mathcal{K} is called a *simplicial* complex if it satisfies these conditions:

1. If $\sigma \in \mathcal{K}$ and τ is a face of σ , then $\tau \in \mathcal{K}$;
2. If $\sigma_1, \sigma_2 \in \mathcal{K}$, then $\sigma_1 \cap \sigma_2 = \emptyset$ or $\sigma_1 \cap \sigma_2 \in \mathcal{K}$.

Given a simplicial complex \mathcal{K} in the compact metric space X , one method that is frequently used to study \mathcal{K} is homology. The core idea of homology is to construct chains, cycles, and boundaries from the simplices in \mathcal{K} and analyze their relationships. Given a dimension n , the n th homology group

of the compact metric space X is defined as $H_n(X) = \mathbb{Z}^{\beta_n}$, where β_n is called the *nth Betti number*. For $n \geq 1$, the *nth Betti number* β_n measures the number of n -dimensional holes in the simplicial complex \mathcal{K} , while β_0 measures the number of connected components in \mathcal{K} . For example, a torus is a 3-dimensional object with 1 connected component, 2 1-dimensional holes, and 1 2-dimensional void. Therefore, the homology groups of the torus are $H_0(X) = \mathbb{Z}^1$, $H_1(X) = \mathbb{Z}^2$, and $H_2(X) = \mathbb{Z}^1$.

2.2. Persistent Homology

Realistically, given a collection of n -dimensional points in \mathbb{R}^n , we would like to extract meaningful topological information that characterizes these points. Persistent homology is thus one method that computes topological characteristics of this collection of points. Given a collection of points P , we first construct a simplicial complex \mathcal{K} known as the Vietoris-Rips (VR) complex. The vertices in \mathcal{K} are just the points in P . To build the edges that connect the points, we consider an increasing sequence of radii. For each radius r in the sequence, we superimpose a circle of radius r on each point in P . If for some radius r_1 the circle at point x_1 starts to cover another point x_2 , then we connect x_1 and x_2 by an edge at r_1 .

Notice that as the radius r increases, more and more edges would be connected, leading to emergence and disappearance of topological features. We thus can characterize these topological features by their emergence time and disappearance time, or birth time and death time using standard topology terminology. For instance, recall our previous example concerning points x_1 and x_2 . If a 1-dimensional hole α emerges because of the addition of the edge between them at r_1 , then we would say that α has a birth time of r_1 . Similarly, if at some later radius $r_2 > r_1$ that α disappears because of adding another edge in the simplicial complex, then we would denote r_2 as the death time of α .

Figure 1 below shows a visualization of computing persistent homology using the method described above on a set of points in \mathbb{R}^2 . The left figure shows the sequence of radii increasing from 0 to 6.15, along which edges are added to the simplicial complex. Note that at $r = 5.6$, the addition of the edge between p_1 and p_3 make the simplicial complex into a quadrilateral, which results in a 1-dimensional hole. Subsequently, at $r = 6.15$, the quadrilateral is destroyed by the edge between p_1 and p_4 , causing the 1-dimensional hole to disappear. The simplicial complex constructed by increasing the radius r is called a *filtration*. On the other hand, the right figure shows the persistence diagram of this filtration. Note that the 1-dimensional feature described previously corresponds to the orange point at $(5.6, 6.15)$ in the persistence diagram.

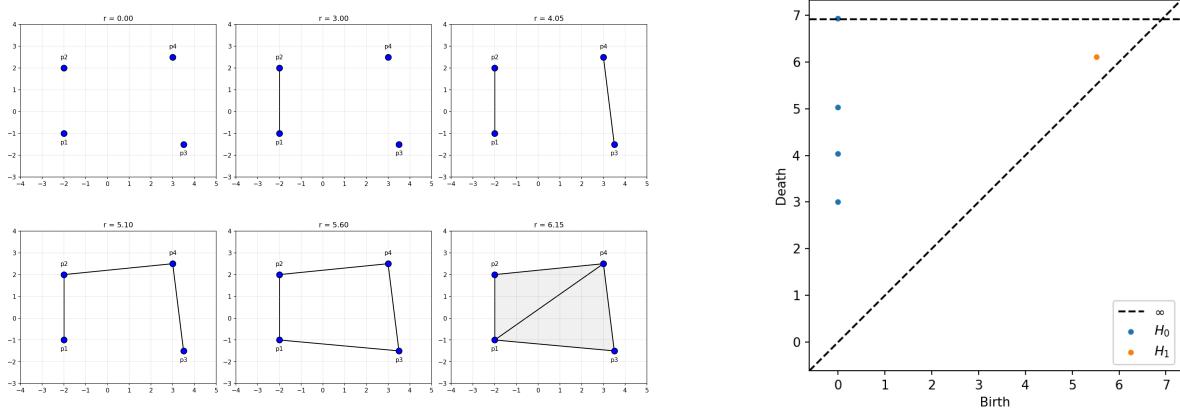


Figure 1: Visualization of Vietoris-Rips filtration on a set of points in \mathbb{R}^2 .

Now given two sets of points, we can compute separately their persistence diagrams using persistent homology, but we need a metric to compare the two persistence diagrams. *Wasserstein distance* is the most common metric for this task. Given persistence diagrams D_1 and D_2 , Wasserstein distance finds the best bijection between points in D_1 and D_2 and computes the sum of distances between matched points. Formally, let p be a fixed dimension. The p -Wasserstein distance between D_1 and D_2 is defined as:

$$W_p(D_1, D_2) = \inf_{\phi: D_1 \rightarrow D_2} \left(\sum_{x \in D_1} \|x - \phi(x)\|^p \right)^{1/p}.$$

The Wasserstein distance between D_1 and D_2 is thus:

$$W(D_1, D_2) = \sum_{n=0}^{\infty} W_n(D_1, D_2).$$

3. Related Work

There are numerous past studies that focused on using algebraic topology to analyze neural networks. For example, the paper by Bianchini & Scarselli (2014) is a pioneer study that leveraged topological tools to compare the expressivity of shallow and deep neural networks. They discovered that for deep neural networks, the sum of the Betti numbers, as a metric that measures the topological complexity that the network can express, can grow exponentially with the number of hidden units. Later, Guss & Salakhutdinov (2018) extended this work by empirically applying Betti numbers to measure the topological complexity of real-world datasets and characterize the expressivity of fully-connected neural networks. These studies laid a solid foundation for using topological tools to study neural

networks, but the generalization of such techniques to more complex neural structures still remains limited.

In addition to studying neural networks using topology, there are also attempts to apply topological techniques on language modeling. Fitz (2022) introduces the notion of a *word manifold*, which turns n -gram models on raw texts of various languages into simplicial complexes, allowing for topological analysis. This study differs from my proposed study in that the method is applied to raw texts with no neural models associated with it. More recently, Draganov & Skiena (2024) makes an effort to study word embeddings generated by large language models by considering the d -dimensional space that these embeddings are located in as a topological space. Then, they applied persistent homology to extract topological patterns from the embedding spaces formed by 81 languages. Their study suggested statistically significant results that word embeddings carry meaningful linguistic information, but there was no analysis of the underlying neural models.

Perhaps the most closely related study to my proposed topic is the one by Meirom & Bobrowski (2022). In this study, they also looked at embeddings as Draganov & Skiena (2024) did, but they argue that certain semantics are inherent to the real world and are not language dependent. For example, *dog* and *cat* are both common pets so they often appear in the same context regardless of the language. Under this assumption, they claimed that the embedding spaces of different languages should be isomorphic to each other at the sentence level, and their results supported this. An interesting question therefore arose from this study: since the embedding spaces of different languages at the sentence level are isomorphic, and an NMT system transforms a sentence from the source language to the target language, how does the NMT system preserve such isomorphism during translation? This question is thus the main motivation of my proposed research.

Now, is looking at attention feasible? Previous studies said yes. Ravishankar et al. (2021) studied fully using the attention of multilingual BERT to decode syntactic dependency trees of 18 languages, including English and French, and their results showed that solely using attention can achieve competitive accuracy in dependency parsing, suggesting that attention does encode meaningful syntactic information, which could be helpful in translation as well. Furthermore, Kushnareva et al. (2021) studied the attention mechanism with topology. In the study, they first built weighted graphs from attention maps by treating tokens as nodes and attention weights as edges, followed by applying persistent homology on the graph to construct a filtration. Their topic was on detecting artificially generated texts which is different from mine, but this process is inspiring that I will adopt in my study.

To conclude this section, Uchendu & Le (2025) in their paper of a survey on using TDA to approach NLP problems stated that:

One glaring application is on multi-lingual tasks... Due to the benefits of TDA which include performing robustly on heterogeneous, imbalanced, and noisy data, its application on multi-lingual tasks is necessary.

Hence, the current study of applying TDA on NMT systems is motivated.

4. Methodology

4.1. Model

This study revolves around studying the attention mechanisms of NMT systems. Therefore, an NMT system must be selected so that we can extract the attention maps to analyze. In this study, the NLLB (No Language Left Behind) model developed by Meta was chosen (Team et al., 2022). This model offers translation between 200 languages, including English, French and Chinese, and is open-sourced. The NLLB models are available on Hugging Face ranging from 600M to 54B parameters. The distilled NLLB with 1.3B parameters was selected for its balance between performance and computational cost. This model has 24 encoder layers and 24 decoder layers, each layer containing 16 attention heads.

4.2. Datasets

The selected model must be run on a corpus to generate the attention maps. I picked the evaluation datasets curated by the *Workshop on Machine Translation (WMT)*. WMT is a well-known NMT benchmark that hosts annual MT competitions, each year with a different combination of source and target languages. In this study, the 2014 WMT (WMT14) benchmark is chosen for the French-English analysis and the 2017 WMT (WMT17) benchmark is chosen for the Chinese-English analysis due to their popularity. Vaswani et al. (2017) also used WMT14 to evaluate their transformer model.

The WMT14 French-English benchmark contains 3,000 validation sentence pairs, while the WMT17 Chinese-English benchmark contains only 2,000 validation sentence pairs. To ensure a fair comparison between languages, I selected only the first 2,000 sentence pairs from the WMT14 French-English validation dataset, and all 2,000 sentence pairs from the WMT17 Chinese-English validation dataset to conduct the experiment.

4.3. Experiment

We would like to analyze whether the attention maps generated by the NMT model are different for each language. Therefore, for each French-English sentence pair in the datasets, the model is run on the English sentence to generate the French translation, as well as on the French sentence to generate the English translation. This way, the encoder of NLLB would process the same sentence twice but in two different languages, and so we can extract the encoder attention map for both the English and French sentences. The experiment is repeated for the Chinese-English sentence pairs. Upon generating the translations, only the attention maps in the last layer of the encoder are extracted for analysis, since the last layer is expected to contain the most refined attention information. The attention weights across the 16 heads are mean-aggregated to form a single attention map for each sentence.

After the attention maps for all the sentence pairs are generated and extracted, we apply topological methods to analyze these attention maps. For each attention map, we build a weighted graph by treating the words in the sentence as nodes and adapting the attention weights as edges, following Kushnareva et al. (2021). The weight of each edge has the value of $1 - \alpha$, where α is the attention weight between two words. This way, a higher attention weight would correspond to a smaller edge weight, resembling a shorter distance between two nodes. This method allows a more intuitive interpretation of the Vietoris-Rips complex constructed later.

Upon building the weighted graph for each attention map, we run the filtration process described in *Section 2.2* to compute the persistence diagram using persistent homology. Consequently, for each sentence pair, this step results in two persistence diagrams, one for the English sentence and one for the sentence in the other language (French or Chinese). In this study, only zeroth-order and first-order topological features are considered for two reasons. First, the French-English dataset has mean sentence lengths of 17.9 tokens for English and 19.4 tokens for French, while the means for the Chinese-English dataset are 26.0 for English and 43.9 for Chinese. These numbers indicate that the VR complexes for the sentence pairs are relatively small, making higher-order topological features less likely to appear. Second, zeroth-order and first-order features are easier to interpret in the context of attention maps than higher-order features, which may not have clear meanings in this setting.

The corresponding computed persistence diagrams for each sentence pair permit the calculation of the Wasserstein distance between the two diagrams. From the Wasserstein distance, we learn how NMT systems attend to different languages differently at a topological level. In this context, a smaller Wasserstein distance indicates that the attention maps for the two languages are topologically similar,

which shows that the NMT system processes the two languages in a similar manner. Conversely, a larger Wasserstein distance indicates that the attention maps are topologically different, suggesting that the NMT system treats the two languages differently.

Lastly, we would like to see if topological differences in attention maps can be an indication of translation quality. Therefore, given the translation generated in a previous step of the experiment, we compute the BLEU score by comparing the translation to the reference sentence in the dataset. For each language direction, we aggregate the BLEU score information and conduct correlation analysis with the Wasserstein distances computed previously. For this step, we hypothesize a strong negative correlation between BLEU scores and Wasserstein distances, as it is intuitive that better translations should correspond to more similar attention maps between the two languages.

5. Results & Discussion

6. Conclusion

Bibliography

- [1] W. H. Guss and R. Salakhutdinov, “On Characterizing the Capacity of Neural Networks using Algebraic Topology,” *CoRR*, 2018.
- [2] M. Bianchini and F. Scarselli, “On the Complexity of Neural Network Classifiers: A Comparison Between Shallow and Deep Architectures,” *IEEE Transactions on Neural Networks and Learning Systems*, vol. 25, no. 8, pp. 1553–1565, 2014.
- [3] S. Fitz, “The Shape of Words - topological structure in natural language data ,” in *Proceedings of Topological, Algebraic, and Geometric Learning Workshops 2022*, in Proceedings of Machine Learning Research, vol. 196. PMLR, 2022, pp. 116–123.
- [4] O. Draganov and S. Skiena, “The Shape of Word Embeddings: Quantifying Non-Isometry with Topological Data Analysis,” in *Findings of the Association for Computational Linguistics: EMNLP 2024*, Miami, Florida, USA: Association for Computational Linguistics, Nov. 2024, pp. 12080–12099.
- [5] S. H. Meirom and O. Bobrowski, “Unsupervised Geometric and Topological Approaches for Cross-Lingual Sentence Representation and Comparison,” in *Proceedings of the 7th Workshop on Representation Learning for NLP*, Dublin, Ireland: Association for Computational Linguistics, May 2022, pp. 173–183.
- [6] V. Ravishankar, A. Kulmizev, M. Abdou, A. Søgaard, and J. Nivre, “Attention Can Reflect Syntactic Structure (If You Let It),” in *Proceedings of the 16th Conference of the European Chapter of the Association for Computational Linguistics: Main Volume*, Online: Association for Computational Linguistics, Apr. 2021, pp. 3031–3045.
- [7] L. Kushnareva *et al.*, “Artificial Text Detection via Examining the Topology of Attention Maps,” in *Proceedings of the 2021 Conference on Empirical Methods in Natural Language Processing*, Online and Punta Cana, Dominican Republic: Association for Computational Linguistics, Nov. 2021, pp. 635–649.
- [8] A. Uchendu and T. Le, “Unveiling Topological Structures from Language: A Comprehensive Survey of Topological Data Analysis Applications in NLP.” 2025.
- [9] N. Team *et al.*, “No Language Left Behind: Scaling Human-Centered Machine Translation .” 2022.

- [10] A. Vaswani *et al.*, “Attention is All you Need,” in *Advances in Neural Information Processing Systems*, Curran Associates, Inc., 2017.