

# FEW-SHOT TEXT CLASSIFICATION WITH DISTRIBUTIONAL SIGNATURES

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we explore meta-learning for few-shot text classification. Meta-learning has shown strong performance in computer vision, where low-level patterns are transferable across learning tasks. However, directly applying this approach to text is challenging—words highly informative for one task may have little significance for another. Thus, rather than learning solely from words, our model also leverages their distributional signatures, which encode pertinent word occurrence patterns. Our model is trained within a meta-learning framework to map these signatures into attention scores, which are then used to weight the lexical representations of words. We demonstrate that our model consistently outperforms prototypical networks (Snell et al., 2017) in both few-shot text classification and relation classification by a significant margin across six benchmark datasets (19.96% on average in 1-shot classification).<sup>1</sup>

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In computer vision, meta-learning has emerged as a promising methodology for learning in a low-resource regime. Specifically, the goal is to enable an algorithm to expand to new classes for which only a few training instances are available. These models learn to generalize in these low-resource conditions by recreating such training episodes from the data available. Even in the most extreme low-resource scenario—a single training example per class—this approach yields 99.6% accuracy on the character recognition task (Sung et al., 2018).

Given this strong empirical performance, we are interested in employing meta-learning frameworks in NLP. The challenge, however, is the degree of transferability of the underlying representation learned across different classes. In computer vision, low-level patterns (such as edges) and their corresponding representations can be shared across tasks. However, the situation is different for language data where most tasks operate at the lexical level. Words that are highly informative for one task may not be relevant for other tasks. Consider, for example, the corpus of HuffPost headlines, categorized into 41 classes. Figure 1 shows that words highly salient for one class do not play a significant role in classifying others. Not surprisingly, when meta-learning is applied directly on lexical inputs, its performance drops below a simple nearest neighbor classifier. The inability of a traditional meta-learner to zoom-in on important features is further illustrated in Figure 2: when considering the target class *fifty*, the standard prototypical network (Snell et al., 2017) attends to uninformative words like “date,” while downplaying highly predictive words such as “grandma.”

In this paper we demonstrate that despite these variations, we can effectively transfer representations across classes and thereby enable learning in a low-resource regime. Instead of directly considering words, our method utilizes their *distributional signatures*, characteristics of the underlying word distributions, which exhibit consistent behaviour across classification tasks. Within the meta-learning framework, these signatures enable us to transfer attention across tasks, which can consequently be used to weight the lexical representations of words. One broadly used example of such distributional signatures is tf-idf weighting, which explicitly specifies word importance in terms of its frequency in a document collection, and its skewness within a specific document.

\*Equal contribution.

<sup>1</sup> Our code is available at <https://github.com/YujiaBao/Distributional-Signatures>.

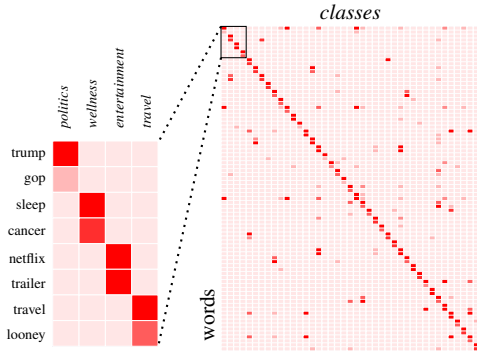


Figure 1: Different classes exhibit different word distributions in HuffPost headlines. We compute the local mutual information (LMI) (Evert, 2005) between words and classes. For each class, we include its top 2 LMI-ranked words. Darker colors indicate higher LMI.

Prototypical network (seen class)

this gorgeous **grandma** proves beauty has no expiration date

Prototypical network (unseen class)

this gorgeous grandma proves **beauty** has no expiration **date**

Our model (unseen class)

this **gorgeous** **grandma** proves **beauty** has no expiration date

Figure 2: Visualization of word importance on example from class *fifty* in HuffPost headlines. Top: *fifty* is seen during meta-training; prototypical network (Snell et al., 2017) finds important words. Middle: *fifty* is unavailable during meta-training; it fails to generalize. Bottom: Our model identifies key words for unseen classes.

Building on this idea, we would like to learn to utilize distributional signatures in the context of cross-class transfer. In addition to word frequency, we assess word importance with respect to a specific class. This latter relation cannot be reliably estimated of the target class due to the scarcity of labeled data. However, we can obtain a noisy estimate of this indicator by utilizing the few provided training examples for the target class, and then further refine this approximation within the meta-learning framework.

Our model consists of two components. The first is an *attention generator*, which translates distributional signatures into attention scores that reflect word importance for classification. Informed by the attention generator’s output, our second component, a *ridge regressor*, quickly learns to make predictions after seeing only a few training examples. The attention generator is shared across all episodes, while the ridge regressor is trained from scratch for each individual episode. The latter’s prediction loss provides supervision for the attention generator. We note that while the representational power of distributional signatures is weaker than their lexical counterparts, meta knowledge built on distributional signatures are better able to generalize.

We evaluate our model on five text classification datasets and one relation classification dataset. Experimental results demonstrate that our model delivers significant performance gains over all baselines. For instance, our model outperforms prototypical networks by 20.49% on average in one-shot text classification and 17.32% in one-shot relation classification. In addition, both qualitative and quantitative analyses confirm that our model generates high-quality attention for unseen classes.

## 2 RELATED WORK

**Meta-learning** Meta-learning has been shown to be highly effective in computer vision, where low-level features are transferable across classes. Existing approaches include learning a metric space over input features (Koch, 2015; Vinyals et al., 2016; Snell et al., 2017; Sung et al., 2018), developing a prior over the optimization procedure (Ravi & Larochelle, 2016; Finn et al., 2017; Nichol & Schulman, 2018; Antoniou et al., 2018), and exploiting the relations between classes (Garcia & Bruna, 2017). These methods have been adapted with some success to specific applications in NLP, including machine translation (Gu et al., 2018), text classification (Yu et al., 2018; Guo et al., 2018; Jiang et al., 2019) and relation classification (Han et al., 2018). Such models primarily build meta-knowledge on lexical representations. However, as our experiments show, there exist innate differences in transferable knowledge between image data and language data, and lexicon-aware meta-learners fail to generalize on standard multi-class classification datasets.

In this work, we observe that even though salient features in text may not be transferable, their *distributional* behaviors are alike. Thus, we focus on learning the connection between word importance

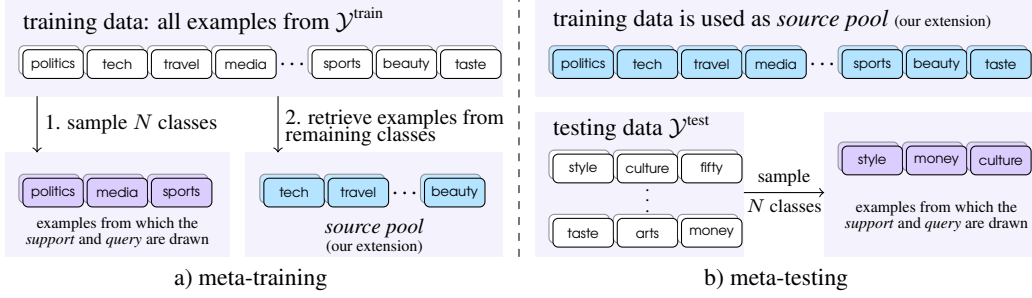


Figure 3: Episode generation. a) Meta-training: First, sample  $N$  classes from  $\mathcal{Y}^{\text{train}}$ . Then, sample the support set and the query set from the  $N$  classes. We use examples from the remaining classes to form the source pool. b) Meta-testing: Select  $N$  new classes from  $\mathcal{Y}^{\text{test}}$  and sample the support set and the query set from these  $N$  classes. We use all examples from  $\mathcal{Y}^{\text{train}}$  to form the source pool.

and distributional signatures. As a result, our model can reliably identify important features from novel classes.

**Transfer learning** Our work is also closely related to transfer learning: we assume access to a large number of labeled examples from *source* classes, and we would like to identify word importance for the *target* classification task. Current approaches transfer knowledge from the source to the target by either fine-tuning a pre-trained encoder (Howard & Ruder, 2018; Peters et al., 2018; Radford et al., 2018; Bertinetto et al., 2019), or multi-task learning with a shared encoder (Collobert & Weston, 2008; Liu et al., 2015; Luong et al., 2015; Strubell et al., 2018). Recently, Bao et al. (2018) also successfully transferred task-specific attention through human rationales.

In contrast to these methods, where the transfer mechanism is pre-designed, we learn to transfer based on the performance of downstream tasks. Specifically, we utilize distributional statistics to transfer attention across tasks. We note that while Wei et al. (2017) and Sun et al. (2018) also learn transfer mechanisms for image recognition, their methods do not directly apply to NLP.

### 3 BACKGROUND

In this section, we first summarize the standard meta-learning framework and describe the terminology (Vinyals et al., 2016). Next, we introduce our extensions to the framework. Figure 3 and 4 graphically illustrate our framework.

**Problem statement** Suppose we are given labeled examples from a set of classes  $\mathcal{Y}^{\text{train}}$ . Our goal is to develop a model that acquires knowledge from these training data, so that we can make predictions over new (but related) classes, for which we only have a few annotations. These new classes belong to a set of classes  $\mathcal{Y}^{\text{test}}$ , disjoint from  $\mathcal{Y}^{\text{train}}$ .

**Meta-training** In meta-learning, we emulate the above testing scenario during meta-training so our model learns to quickly learn from a few annotations. To create a single *training episode*, we first sample  $N$  classes from  $\mathcal{Y}^{\text{train}}$ . For each of these  $N$  classes, we sample  $K$  examples as our training data and  $L$  examples as our testing data. We update our model based on loss over these testing data. Figure 4a shows an example of an episode. We repeat this procedure to increase the number of training episodes, each of which is constructed over its own set of  $N$  classes. In literature, the training data of one episode is commonly denoted as the *support set*, while the corresponding testing data is known as the *query set*. Given the support set, we refer to the task of making predictions over the query set as  *$N$ -way  $K$ -shot classification*.

**Meta-testing** After we have finished meta-training, we apply the same episode-based mechanism to test whether our model can indeed adapt quickly to new classes. To create a *testing episode*, we first sample  $N$  new classes from  $\mathcal{Y}^{\text{test}}$ . Then we sample the support set and the query set from the  $N$  classes. We evaluate the average performance on the query set across all testing episodes.

**Our extension** We observe that even though all examples from  $\mathcal{Y}^{\text{train}}$  are accessible throughout meta-training, the standard meta-learning framework (Vinyals et al., 2016) only learns from small

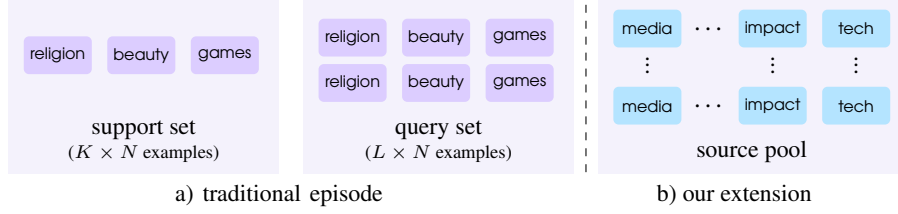


Figure 4: Single episode with  $N = 3$ ,  $K = 1$ ,  $L = 2$ . Rectangles denote input examples. The text inside corresponds to their labels. An episode contains a support set, a query set, and a source pool.

subsets of these data per training episode. In contrast, our model leverages distributional statistics over all training examples for more robust inference. To accommodate this adjustment, we augment each episode with a *source pool* (Figure 4b). During meta-training (Figure 3a), this source pool includes all examples from training classes not selected for the particular episode. During meta-testing (Figure 3b), this source pool includes all training examples.

## 4 METHOD

**Overview** Our goal is to improve few-shot classification performance by learning high-quality attention from the distributional signatures of the inputs. Given a particular episode, we extract relevant statistics from the source pool and the support set. Since these statistics only roughly approximate word importance for classification, we utilize an *attention generator* to translate them into high-quality attention that operates over words. This generated attention provides guidance for the downstream predictor, a *ridge regressor*, to quickly learn from a few labeled examples.

We note that the attention generator is optimized over all training episodes, while the ridge regressor is trained from scratch for each episode.

**Model architecture** Figure 5 illustrates the two components of our model.

- **Attention generator:** This module generates class-specific attention by combining the distributional statistics of the source pool and the support set (Figure 5a). The generated attention provides the ridge regressor an inductive bias on the word importance. We train this module based on feedback from the ridge regressor (Section 4.1).
- **Ridge regressor:** For each episode, this module constructs lexical representations using the attention derived from distributional signatures (Figure 5b). The goal of this module is to make predictions over the query set, after learning from the support set (Figure 5c and 5d). Its prediction loss is end-to-end differentiable with respect to the attention generator which leads to efficient training (Section 4.2).

### 4.1 ATTENTION GENERATOR

The goal of the attention generator is to assess word importance from the distributional signatures of each input example. We utilize the large source pool to inform the model of *general* word importance and leverage the small support set to estimate *class-specific* word importance. The generated attention will be used later to construct the input representation for downstream classification.

It is well-documented in literature that words which appear frequently are unlikely to be informative (Sparck Jones, 1972). Thus, we would like to downweigh frequent words and upweight rare words. Among many possible weighting schemes, we select the approach by Arora et al. (2016) to measure *general word importance*:

$$s(x_i) := \frac{\varepsilon}{\varepsilon + P(x_i)}$$

where  $\varepsilon = 10^{-3}$ ,  $x_i$  is the  $i^{\text{th}}$  word of input example  $x$ , and  $P(x_i)$  is the unigram likelihood of  $x_i$  over the source pool.

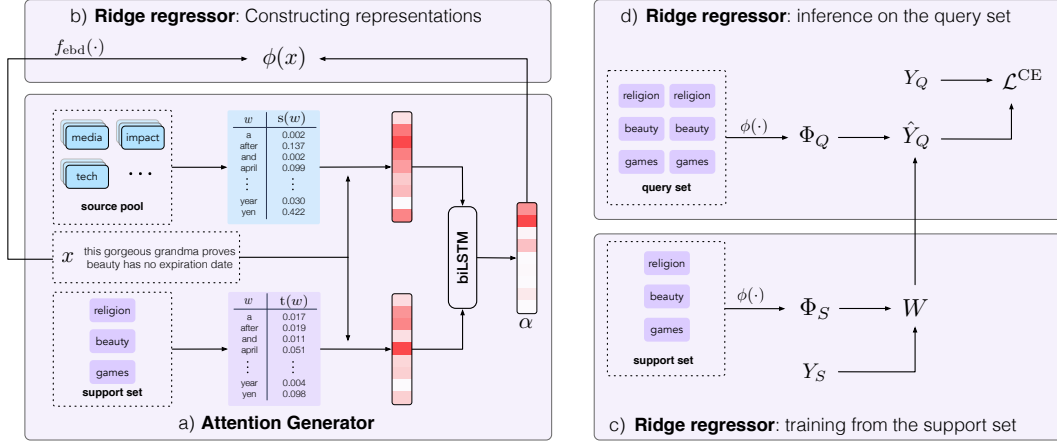


Figure 5: Illustration of our model for an episode with  $N = 3$ ,  $K = 1$ ,  $L = 2$ . The attention generator translates the distributional signatures from the source pool and the support set into an attention  $\alpha$  for each input example  $x$  (5a). The ridge regressor utilizes the generated attention to weight the lexical representations (5b). It then learns from the support set (5c) and makes predictions over the query set (5d).

On the other hand, words that are discriminative in the support set are likely to be discriminative in the query set. Thus, we define the following statistic to reflect *class-specific word importance*:

$$t(x_i) := \mathcal{H}(\mathcal{P}(y | x_i))^{-1}$$

where the conditional likelihood  $\mathcal{P}(y | x_i)$  is estimated over the support set using a regularized linear classifier<sup>2</sup> and  $\mathcal{H}(\cdot)$  is the entropy operator. We note that  $t(\cdot)$  measures the uncertainty of the class label  $y$ , given the word. Thus, words that exhibit a skewed distribution will be highly weighted.

Directly applying these statistics may not result in good performance for two reasons: 1) the two statistics contain complementary information, and it is unclear how to combine them; and 2) these statistics are noisy approximations to word importance for classification. To bridge this gap, we concatenate these signatures and employ a bi-directional LSTM (Hochreiter & Schmidhuber, 1997) to fuse the information across the input:  $h = \text{biLSTM}([s(x); t(x)])$ . Finally, we use dot-product attention to predict the attention score  $\alpha_i$  of word  $x_i$ :

$$\alpha_i := \frac{\exp(v^T h_i)}{\sum_j \exp(v^T h_j)}$$

where  $h_i$  is the output of the biLSTM at position  $i$  and  $v$  is a learnable vector.

## 4.2 RIDGE REGRESSOR

Informed by the attention generator, the ridge regressor quickly learns to make predictions after seeing a few examples. First, for each example in a given episode, we construct a lexical representation that focuses on important words, as indicated by attention scores. Next, given these lexical representations, we train the ridge regressor on the support set from scratch. Finally, we make predictions over the query set and use the loss to teach the attention generator to produce better attention.

**Constructing representations** Given that different words exhibit varying levels of importance towards classification, we construct lexical representations that favor pertinent words. Specifically, we define the representation of example  $x$  as

$$\phi(x) := \sum_i \alpha_i \cdot f_{\text{ebd}}(x_i)$$

where  $f_{\text{ebd}}(\cdot)$  is a pre-trained embedding function that maps a word into  $\mathbb{R}^E$ .

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix A.1 for details.

**Training from the support set** Given an  $N$ -way  $K$ -shot classification task, let  $\Phi_S \in \mathbb{R}^{NK \times E}$  be the representation of the support set, obtained from  $\phi(\cdot)$ , and  $Y_S \in \mathbb{R}^{NK \times N}$  be the one-hot labels. We adopt ridge regression (Bertinetto et al., 2019) to fit the labeled support set for the following reasons: 1) ridge regression admits a closed-form solution that enables end-to-end differentiation through the model, and 2) with proper regularization, ridge regression reduces over-fitting on the small support set. Specifically, we minimize regularized squared loss

$$\mathcal{L}^{RR}(W) := \|\Phi_S W - Y_S\|_F^2 + \lambda \|W\|_F^2 \quad (1)$$

over the weight matrix  $W \in \mathbb{R}^{E \times N}$ . Here  $\|\cdot\|_F$  denotes the Frobenius norm, and  $\lambda > 0$  controls the conditioning of the learned transformation  $W$ . The closed-form solution can be obtained as

$$W = \Phi_S^T (\Phi_S \Phi_S^T + \lambda I)^{-1} Y_S$$

where  $I$  is the identity matrix.

**Inference on the query set** Let  $\Phi_Q$  denote the representation of the query set. Although we optimized for a regression objective in Eq equation 1, the learned transformation has been shown to work well in few-shot classification after a calibration step (Bertinetto et al., 2019), as

$$\hat{Y}_Q = a \Phi_Q W + b$$

where  $a \in \mathbb{R}^+$  and  $b \in \mathbb{R}$  are meta-parameters learned through meta-training. Finally, we apply a softmax over  $\hat{Y}_Q$  to obtain the predicted probabilities  $\hat{P}_Q$ . Note that this calibration only adjusts the temperature and scale of the softmax; its mode remains unchanged. During meta-training, we compute the cross-entropy loss  $\mathcal{L}^{CE}$  between  $\hat{P}_Q$  and the labels over the query set. Since both  $\Phi_S$  and  $\Phi_Q$  depend on  $\phi(\cdot)$ ,  $\mathcal{L}^{CE}$  provides supervision for the attention generator.

## 5 EXPERIMENTAL SETUP

### 5.1 DATASETS

We evaluate our approach on five text classification datasets and one relation classification dataset.<sup>3</sup> (See Appendix A.2 for more details.)

**20 Newsgroups** is comprised of informal discourse from news discussion forums (Lang, 1995). Documents are organized under 20 topics.

**RCV1** is a collection of Reuters newswire articles from 1996 to 1997 (Lewis et al., 2004). These articles are written in formal speech and labeled with a set of topic codes. We consider 71 second-level topics as our total class set and discard articles that belong to more than one class.

**Reuters-21578** is a collection of shorter Reuters articles from 1987 (Lewis, 1997). We use the standard ApteMod version of the dataset. We discard articles with more than one label and consider 31 classes that have at least 20 articles.

**Amazon product data** contains customer reviews from 24 product categories (He & McAuley, 2016). Our goal is to classify reviews into their respective product categories. Since the original dataset is notoriously large (142.8 million reviews), we select a more tractable subset by sampling 1000 reviews from each category.

**HuffPost headlines** consists of news headlines published on HuffPost between 2012 and 2018 (Misra, 2018). These headlines split among 41 classes. They are shorter and less grammatical than formal sentences.

**FewRel** is a relation classification dataset developed for few-shot learning (Han et al., 2018). Each example is a single sentence, annotated with a head entity, a tail entity, and their relation. The goal is to predict the correct relation between the head and tail. The public dataset contains 80 relation types.

<sup>3</sup>All processed datasets along with their splits will be made available.

Method		20 News		Amazon		HuffPost		RCV1		Reuters		FewRel	
Rep.	Alg.	1 shot	5 shot	1 shot	5 shot	1 shot	5 shot	1 shot	5 shot	1 shot	5 shot	1 shot	5 shot
AVG	NN	33.95	45.87	46.76	60.36	31.45	41.55	43.76	60.84	55.97	79.61	47.58	60.67
IDF	NN	38.88	51.94	51.43	67.15	31.53	42.35	41.96	58.27	57.69	82.85	46.84	60.62
CNN	FT	33.00	47.17	45.71	63.91	32.45	44.13	40.33	62.34	74.15	92.69	54.08	71.19
AVG	PROTO	36.25	45.42	37.26	51.99	35.68	41.67	28.48	31.22	59.09	68.17	44.04	46.55
IDF	PROTO	37.86	46.53	41.91	59.24	34.88	50.24	32.14	35.63	63.24	76.29	43.09	61.99
CNN	PROTO	29.67	35.09	34.02	44.49	33.49	44.21	28.43	29.33	64.74	72.60	49.78	65.16
AVG	MAML	33.74	43.92	39.35	47.22	36.14	49.69	39.98	50.69	48.64	55.13	43.83	57.87
IDF	MAML	37.26	48.62	43.63	62.45	38.95	53.70	42.58	54.14	54.86	62.89	48.22	65.80
CNN	MAML	28.98	36.79	35.30	43.70	34.12	45.89	39.03	51.15	64.16	81.23	51.73	66.90
AVG	RR	37.60	57.24	50.25	72.78	36.33	54.86	48.17	72.62	62.88	89.47	53.25	72.22
IDF	RR	44.83	64.35	60.27	79.78	37.68	59.56	48.65	72.85	69.45	92.67	55.65	75.30
CNN	RR	32.25	44.32	37.30	53.89	37.32	49.96	41.81	59.47	72.39	88.48	56.83	71.81
<b>OUR</b>		<b>52.17</b>	<b>68.33</b>	<b>62.66</b>	<b>81.16</b>	<b>43.09</b>	<b>63.51</b>	<b>54.15</b>	<b>75.38</b>	<b>80.80</b>	<b>95.67</b>	<b>67.10</b>	<b>83.53</b>
OUR w/o $t(\cdot)$		50.15	67.59	61.77	80.58	42.09	60.86	51.51	75.12	77.94	93.77	66.93	83.20
OUR w/o $s(\cdot)$		41.99	60.77	51.12	75.37	40.16	60.29	48.59	72.84	72.96	93.02	65.83	82.62
OUR w/o biLSTM		50.35	66.99	61.95	80.90	42.22	63.04	51.88	74.19	77.52	95.56	66.42	82.90

Table 1: Results of 5-way 1-shot and 5-way 5-shot classification on six datasets. The bottom three rows present our ablation study. For complete results with standard deviations, see Table 4 and 5 in Appendix A.5.

## 5.2 BASELINES

We compare our model (denoted as OUR) to different combinations of representations and learning algorithms. Details of the baselines may be found in Appendix A.3.

**Representations** We evaluate three representations. AVG represents each example as the mean of its embeddings. IDF represents each example as the weighted average of its word embeddings, with weights given by inverse document frequency over all training examples. CNN applies 1D convolution over the input words and obtains the representation by max-over-time pooling (Kim, 2014).

**Learning algorithms** In addition to the ridge regressor (RR) (Bertinetto et al., 2019), we evaluate two standard supervised learning algorithms and two meta-learning algorithms. NN is a 1-nearest-neighbor classifier under Euclidean distance. FT pre-trains a classifier over all training examples, then finetunes the network using the support set (Chen et al., 2019). MAML meta-learns a prior over model parameters, so that the model can quickly adapt to new classes (Finn et al., 2017). Prototypical network (PROTO) meta-learns a metric space for few-shot classification by minimizing the Euclidean distance between the centroid of each class and its constituent examples (Snell et al., 2017).

## 5.3 IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS

We use pre-trained fastText embeddings (Joulin et al., 2016) for our model and all baselines. For sentence-level datasets (HuffPost, FewRel), we also experiment with pre-trained BERT embeddings (Devlin et al., 2018) using HuggingFaces codebase.<sup>4</sup> For relation classification (FewRel), we augment the input of our attention generator with positional embeddings (Zhang et al., 2017).<sup>5</sup>

In the attention generator, we use a biLSTM with 50 hidden units and apply dropout of 0.1 on the output (Srivastava et al., 2014). In the ridge regressor, we optimize meta-parameters  $\lambda$  and  $a$  in the log space to maintain the positivity constraint. All parameters are optimized using Adam with a learning rate of 0.001 (Kingma & Ba, 2014).

<sup>4</sup><https://github.com/huggingface/pytorch-transformers>

<sup>5</sup>We also provide the same positional embeddings to the baseline CNN.

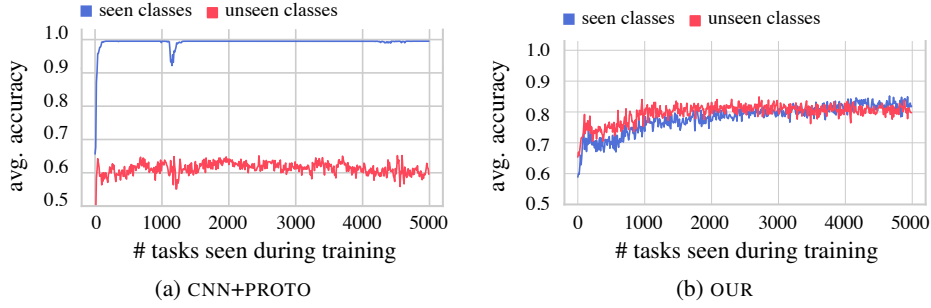


Figure 7: Learning curve of CNN+PROTO (left) v.s. OUR (right) on the Reuters dataset. We plot average 5-way 1-shot accuracy over 50 episodes sampled from seen classes (blue) and unseen classes (red). While OUR has weaker representational power, it generalizes better to unseen classes.

Method		HuffPost		FewRel	
Rep.	Alg.	1 shot	5 shot	1 shot	5 shot
AVG	NN	23.23 $\pm$ 0.20	34.22 $\pm$ 0.28	52.37 $\pm$ 0.27	64.85 $\pm$ 0.25
IDF	NN	33.49 $\pm$ 0.18	45.71 $\pm$ 0.17	48.65 $\pm$ 0.18	62.35 $\pm$ 0.18
CNN	FT	37.30 $\pm$ 1.08	51.56 $\pm$ 1.28	61.10 $\pm$ 2.54	80.04 $\pm$ 0.69
AVG	PROTO	34.21 $\pm$ 0.56	49.77 $\pm$ 1.90	50.27 $\pm$ 0.98	66.24 $\pm$ 2.01
IDF	PROTO	36.06 $\pm$ 0.84	54.58 $\pm$ 0.99	48.23 $\pm$ 0.58	67.82 $\pm$ 0.72
CNN	PROTO	36.17 $\pm$ 1.00	50.55 $\pm$ 0.96	57.08 $\pm$ 5.52	75.01 $\pm$ 2.21
AVG	MAML	38.58 $\pm$ 1.56	55.32 $\pm$ 1.42	47.18 $\pm$ 3.49	64.50 $\pm$ 2.72
IDF	MAML	34.22 $\pm$ 0.74	56.50 $\pm$ 1.50	50.06 $\pm$ 2.88	68.43 $\pm$ 2.50
CNN	MAML	38.39 $\pm$ 1.68	53.86 $\pm$ 0.76	47.68 $\pm$ 1.66	71.56 $\pm$ 4.75
AVG	RR	25.34 $\pm$ 0.14	51.52 $\pm$ 0.14	55.65 $\pm$ 0.27	73.91 $\pm$ 0.77
IDF	RR	40.38 $\pm$ 0.11	61.72 $\pm$ 1.03	54.48 $\pm$ 0.26	73.48 $\pm$ 0.72
CNN	RR	41.37 $\pm$ 0.54	53.10 $\pm$ 0.76	65.65 $\pm$ 5.70	78.65 $\pm$ 4.24
OUR		<b>42.12 <math>\pm</math> 0.15</b>	<b>62.97 <math>\pm</math> 0.67</b>	<b>70.08 <math>\pm</math> 0.56</b>	<b>88.07 <math>\pm</math> 0.27</b>

Table 2: 5-way 1-shot and 5-way 5-shot classification on HuffPost and FewRel using BERT.

During meta-training, we sample 100 training episodes per epoch. We apply early stopping when the validation loss fails to improve for 20 epochs. We evaluate test performance based on 1000 testing episodes and report the average accuracy over 5 different random seeds.

## 6 RESULTS

We evaluated our model in both 5-way 1-shot and 5-way 5-shot settings. These results are reported in Table 1. Our model consistently achieves the best performance across all datasets. On average, our model improves 5-way 1-shot accuracy by 6.26% and 5-way 5-shot accuracy by 3.84%, against the best baseline for each dataset. When comparing against CNN+PROTO, our model improves by 19.96% on average in 1-shot classification. The empirical results clearly demonstrate that meta-learners privy to lexical information consistently fail, while our model is able to generalize past class-specific vocabulary. Furthermore, Figure 7 illustrates that a lexicon-aware meta-learner (CNN+PROTO) is able to overfit the training data faster than our model, but our model more readily generalizes to unseen classes.

**Ablation study** We perform ablation studies on the attention generator. These results are shown at the bottom of Table 1. We observe that both statistics  $s(\cdot)$  and  $t(\cdot)$  contribute to the performance, though the former has a larger impact. We also note that instead of computing word importance independently for each word, fusing information across the input with an biLSTM improves performance slightly.

**Contextualized representations** For sentence-level datasets (FewRel, HuffPost), we also experiment with contextualized representations, given by BERT (Devlin et al., 2018). These results are



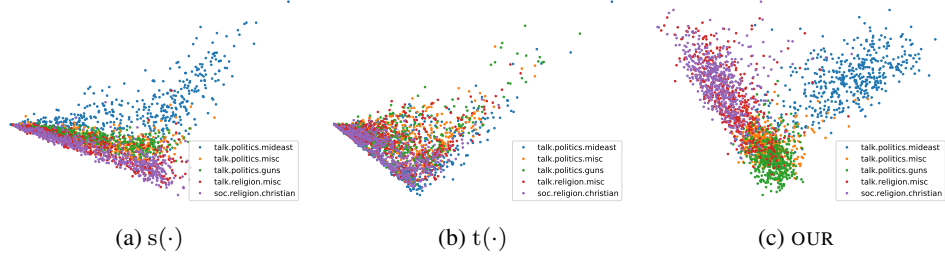


Figure 8: PCA visualization of the input representation for the query set of a testing episode ( $N = 5$ ,  $K = 5$ ,  $L = 500$ ) sampled from 20 Newsgroups. Weighted averages of word embeddings given by (a)  $s(\cdot)$ , (b)  $t(\cdot)$ , and (c) the attention generator meta-trained on a disjoint set of training classes.

	Fine-grained classification	Coarse-grained classification
$s(x)$	finnish <b>unemployment</b> was 6.7 pct in december last year compared with 6.8 pct in november and 6.1 pct in december 1985 , the central <b>statistical</b> office said	finnish <b>unemployment</b> was 6.7 pct in december last year compared with 6.8 pct in november and 6.1 pct in december 1985 , the central <b>statistical</b> office said
$t(x)$	finnish <b>unemployment</b> was 6.7 pct in december last year compared with 6.8 pct in november and 6.1 pct in december 1985 , the central statistical office said	finnish <b>unemployment</b> was 6.7 <b>pct</b> in december last year compared with 6.8 <b>pct</b> in november and 6.1 <b>pct</b> in december 1985 , the central <b>statistical</b> office said
OURS	finnish <b>unemployment</b> was 6.7 pct in december last year compared with 6.8 pct in november and 6.1 pct in december 1985 , the central <b>statistical</b> office said	finnish <b>unemployment</b> was 6.7 pct in december last year compared with 6.8 pct in november and 6.1 pct in december 1985 , the central <b>statistical</b> office said

Figure 9: Attention weights generated by our model are specific to task. We visualize our model’s inputs  $s(x)$  (top),  $t(x)$  (middle), and output (bottom) for one query example from class *jobs* in Reuters dataset. Word “statistical” is downweighed for *jobs* when compared to other economics classes (left), but it becomes important when considering dissimilar classes (right). Fine-grained classes: *jobs*, *retail*, *industrial production index*, *wholesale production index*, *consumer production index*. Coarse-grained classes: *jobs*, *cocoa*, *aluminum*, *copper*, *reserves*.

shown in Table 2. While BERT significantly improves classification performance on FewRel, we observe no performance boost on HuffPost. We postulate that this discrepancy arises because relation classification is highly contextual, while news classification is mostly keyword-based.

**Analysis** We visualize our attention-weighted representation  $\phi(x)$  in Figure 8. Compared to directly using the statistics  $s(x)$  or  $t(x)$ , our method produces better separation, which enables effective learning from a few examples.

Figure 9 visualizes the model’s input and output on the same query example in two testing episodes. The example belongs to the class *jobs* in the Reuters dataset. First, we observe that our model generates meaningful attention from noisy distributional signatures. Furthermore, the generated attention is *task-specific*: in the depicted example, if the episode contains other economics-related classes, the word “statistical” is downweighed by our model. Conversely, “statistical” is upweighed when we compare *jobs* to other distant classes.

## 7 CONCLUSION

In this paper, we propose a novel meta-learning approach that capitalizes on the connection between word importance and distributional signatures to improve few-shot classification. Specifically, we learn an attention generator that translates distributional statistics into high-quality attention. This generated attention then provides guidance for fast adaptation to new classification tasks. Experimental results on both text and relation classification validate that our model identifies important words for new classes. The effectiveness of our approach demonstrates the promise of meta learning with distributional signatures.

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## A SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

### A.1 REGULARIZED LINEAR CLASSIFIER

Given an  $N$ -way  $K$ -shot classification task, the goal of the regularized linear classifier is to approximate task-specific word importance using the support set.

Let  $x = \{x_1, \dots, x_T\}$  be an input example, and let  $f_{\text{ebd}}(\cdot)$  be an embedding function that maps each word  $x_i$  into  $\mathbb{R}^E$ . We compute the representation of  $x$  by the average of its embeddings:

$$\psi(x) := \frac{1}{T} \sum_i f_{\text{ebd}}(x_i).$$

Since the support set only contains a few examples, we adopt a simple linear classifier to reduce overfitting:

$$\hat{p} := \text{softmax}(W\psi(x))$$

where  $W \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times E}$  is the weight matrix to learn. We minimize the cross entropy loss between the prediction  $\hat{p}$  and the ground truth label while penalizing the Frobenius norm of  $W$ . We stop training once the gradient norm is less than 0.1. Finally, given a word  $x_i$ , we estimate its conditional probability via  $\text{softmax}(W\psi(x_i))$ .

**Time efficiency** Since the support set is very small (less than 25 examples) and the loss function is strongly convex, this linear classifier converges very fast in practice.<sup>6</sup> Note that for larger problems, we can speed up computation by formulating this procedure as a regression problem and solving for its closed-form solution (as in Section 4.2).

### A.2 DATASETS

To reliably test our model’s ability to generalize across classes, we consider two data splitting mechanisms in our experiments: 1) *easy split*: we randomly permute all classes and split them into train/val/test; 2) *hard split*: we select train/val/test based on the class hierarchy such that train classes are distant to val and test. We applied the easy split to one sentence-level dataset (HuffPost) and one document-level dataset (Reuters-21578). Hard split is used for the other four datasets (details below).

**20 Newsgroups** Each class in 20 Newsgroups belongs to one of six top-level categories, which roughly correspond to computers, recreation, science, politics, religion, and for-sale. We partition the set of labels so that no top-level category spans two splits. Train contains “sci” and “rec,” val contains “comp,” and test contains all other labels.

**Amazon** The Amazon dataset does not come with predefined top-level categories. To generate a hard split, we first apply spectral clustering to classes based on their word distributions. Then we select train/val/test from different clusters.

**RCV1** We apply the same approach as above.

**FewRel** While FewRel does not provide higher-level categories, we observe that most relations occur between named entities of similar types. Thus, we extract the named entity type of the head and tail for each example using a pretrained spaCy parser.<sup>7</sup> For each class, we determine the most common head and tail entity types. Test contains all classes for which the most common head entity type is WORK\_OF\_ART. Train and validation were arbitrarily split to contain the remaining relations.

### A.3 IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS

We now detail the implementations of our baselines.<sup>8</sup>

**CNN** For 1D convolution, we use filter windows of 3, 4, 5 with 50 feature maps each. We applied ReLU after max-over-time pooling.

<sup>6</sup>less than 1 second on a single GeForce GTX TITAN X

<sup>7</sup><https://spacy.io/>

<sup>8</sup> The code of our baselines (including hyper-parameters) is available in the package.

Dataset	tokens per inst.	vocab size	inst. per class	num classes		
				train	val	test
20 News.	340	32137	941	8	5	7
RCV1*	372	7304	20	37	10	24
Reuters*	168	2234	20	15	5	11
Amazon*	140	17062	1000	10	5	9
HuffPost*	11	8218	900	20	5	16
FewRel	24	16045	700	65	5	10

Table 3: Dataset statistics. \* indicates that we use a subset of the entire dataset.

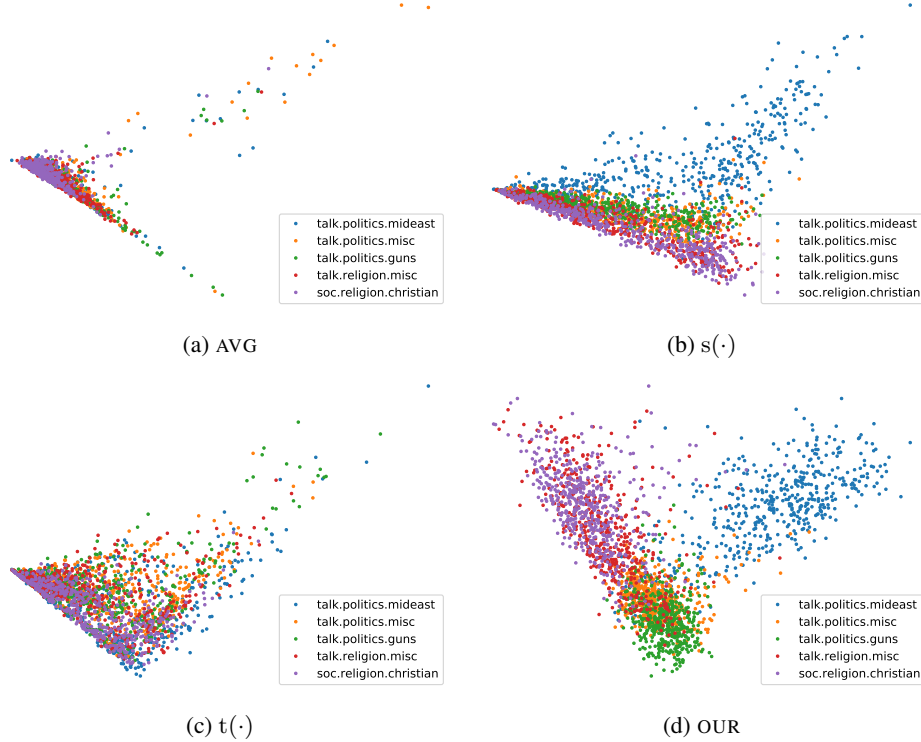


Figure 10: PCA visualization of the input representation for a testing episode in 20 Newsgroups with  $N = 5$ ,  $K = 5$ ,  $L = 500$  (the query set has 500 examples per class). AVG: average word embeddings.  $s(\cdot)$ : weighted average of word embeddings with weights given by  $s(\cdot)$ .  $t(\cdot)$ : weighted average of word embeddings with weights given by  $t(\cdot)$ . OUR: weighted average of word embeddings with weights given by the attention generator meta-trained on a disjoint set of training classes.

**Prototypical Network** Prototypical network meta-learns a multi-layer perceptron to transform the input representation into an embedding space that is suitable for few-shot classification. If the input representation is learnable (e.g., CNN), the parameters for the input representation are also updated using meta-training. In the experiments, we use a MLP with one hidden layer and ReLU activation. The dimensions of both the hidden layer and the output layer are 300. We apply dropout with rate 0.1 to the hidden layer.

**MAML** MAML meta-learns an initialization such that the model can quickly adapt to new tasks after a few gradient steps. For prediction on the input representation, we use a MLP with one hidden layer of 300 ReLU units. We apply dropout with rate 0.1 to the hidden layer. During the MAML inner loop (adaptation stage), we perform ten updates with step size 0.1 (we empirically found this outperform one-step MAML). We backpropagate higher order gradients throughout meta-training.

**Finetune** Chen et al. (2019) recently showed that fine-tuning a properly pre-trained classifier can achieve competitive performance when compared with the state-of-the-art meta-learning. Following

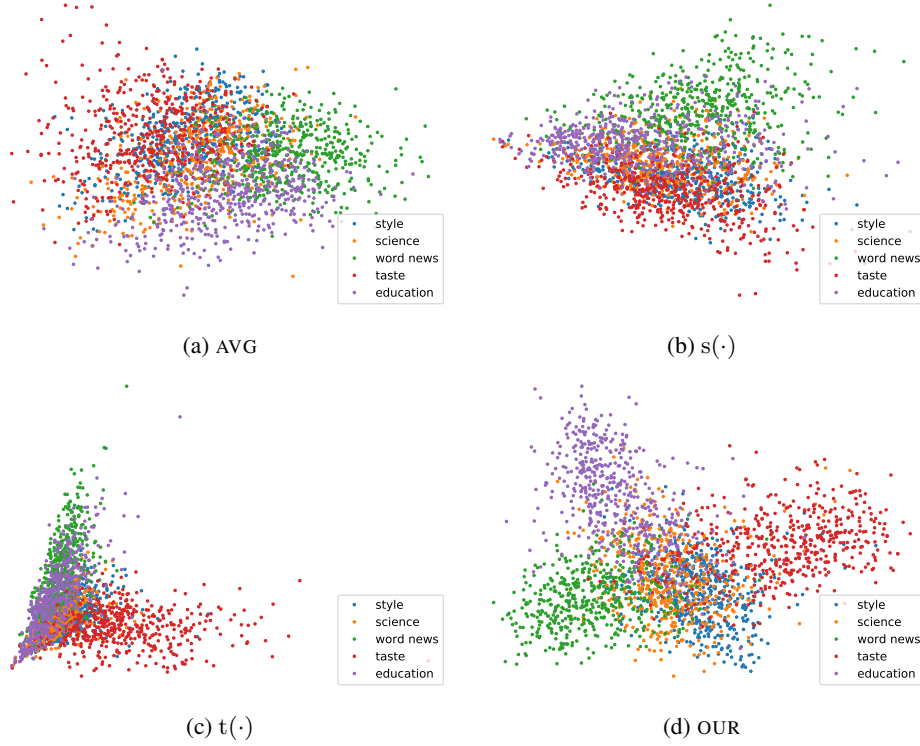


Figure 11: PCA visualization of the input representation for a testing episode in HuffPost Headlines with  $N = 5$ ,  $K = 5$ ,  $L = 500$ . AVG: average word embeddings.  $s(\cdot)$ : weighted average of word embeddings with weights given by  $s(\cdot)$ .  $t(\cdot)$ : weighted average of word embeddings with weights given by  $t(\cdot)$ . OUR: weighted average of word embeddings with weights given by the attention generator meta-trained on a disjoint set of training classes.

their work, we explicitly reduce the intra-class variation during the pre-training stage. Similar to MAML, we use a MLP with one hidden layer (300 ReLU units) to make predictions from the input representation (e.g., CNN). During finetuning stage, we re-train the MLP from scratch and fine-tune the learnable parameters of the input representation. We stop fine-tuning once the gradient norm is less than  $10^{-3}$ .

#### A.4 ANALYSIS

To further understand the rationale behind our performance boost, we provide a more detailed analysis on our model’s empirical behavior.

**Visualizing the embedding space** We visualize our attention-weighted representation  $\phi(x)$  in 20 Newsgroups (Figure 10) and HuffPost (Figure 11). We observe that our model produces better separation than the unweighted average AVG and directly using the distributional statistics,  $s(x)$  or  $t(x)$ . For instance, in 20 Newsgroups, our model recognizes three clusters:  $\{talk.religion.misc, soc.religion.christian\}$ ,  $\{talk.politics.mideast\}$  and  $\{talk.politics.misc, talk.politics.guns\}$ ,

**Cosine similarity to oracle word importance** We also quantitatively analyze the generated attention in 20 Newsgroups and HuffPost (Figure 12).

To obtain a more reliable estimate of word importance, we train an *oracle* model over all examples from the  $N$  target classes. This oracle model uses a biLSTM to encode each example from its word embeddings. It then generates an attention score based on this encoding. In order to estimate the importance of individual unigram, we use this attention score to weight the “original” word embeddings (not the output of the biLSTM). A MLP with one hidden layer is used to perform  $N$ -way classification from the attention-weighted representation.

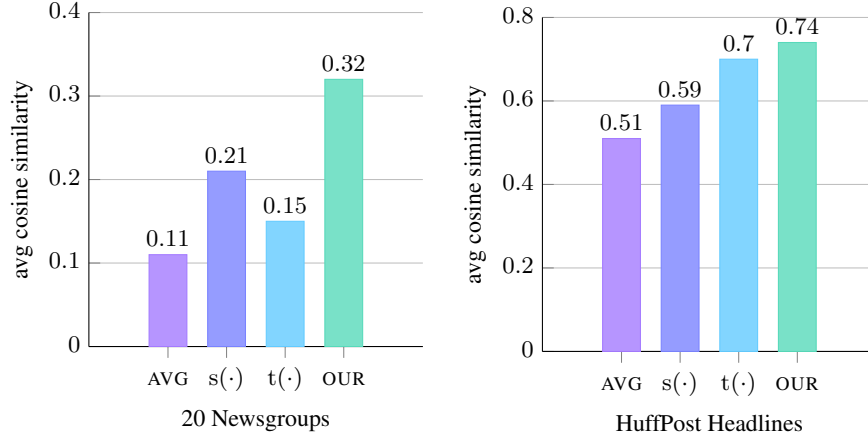


Figure 12: Average cosine similarity to the *oracle* word importance over the query set of a testing episode with  $N = 5$ ,  $K = 5$ ,  $L = 500$ . This oracle is estimated using all labeled examples from the  $N$  classes. Since examples in HuffPost Headlines are 30 times shorter, the cosine similarities are higher in this corpora. AVG: uniform distribution over the words.  $s(\cdot)$ : word importance estimated directly by  $s(\cdot)$ .  $t(\cdot)$ : word importance estimated directly by  $t(\cdot)$ . OUR: word importance estimated by the meta-learned attention generator.

class	input example
taste	you wo n't even miss the meat with these delicious vegetarian sandwiches
taste	these cookies are spot - on copies of the oscars dresses
word news	prime minister saad hariri 's return to lebanon : a moment of truth
word news	new zealand just became the 11th country to send a rocket into orbit
style	beyonce dressed like the queen she is at the grammys
style	tilda swinton , is that a jacket or a dress ?
science	the world of science has a lot to look forward to in 2016
science	dione crosses saturn 's disk in spectacular new image
education	the global search for education : just imagine secretary hargreaves
education	thinking at harvard : what is the future of learning ?

Figure 13: Visualization of the attention generated by our model on 10 query examples from a 5-way 5-shot testing episode in Huffpost Headlines.

Compared to both  $s(\cdot)$  and  $t(\cdot)$ , the attention generated by our model is much closer to the oracle's, which explains our model's large performance gains. Note that the attention generator does not see any examples from the target classes during meta-training.

**Visualizing the generated attention** Figure 13 visualizes the generated attention for a testing episode in HuffPost. We observe that our model identifies meaningful keywords from the sentence.

## A.5 RESULTS

This section contains full experimental results.



Rep. Alg.	20 News	Amazon	HuffPost	RCV1	Reuters	FewRel
AVG NN	33.95 $\pm$ 0.33	46.76 $\pm$ 0.14	31.45 $\pm$ 0.18	43.76 $\pm$ 0.14	55.97 $\pm$ 0.42	47.58 $\pm$ 0.38
IDF NN	38.88 $\pm$ 0.33	51.43 $\pm$ 0.15	31.53 $\pm$ 0.18	41.96 $\pm$ 0.22	57.69 $\pm$ 0.31	46.84 $\pm$ 0.31
CNN FT	33.00 $\pm$ 0.74	45.71 $\pm$ 0.86	32.45 $\pm$ 0.54	40.33 $\pm$ 1.47	74.15 $\pm$ 1.44	54.08 $\pm$ 0.33
AVG PROTO	36.25 $\pm$ 0.33	37.26 $\pm$ 1.85	35.68 $\pm$ 1.25	28.48 $\pm$ 0.96	59.09 $\pm$ 0.83	44.04 $\pm$ 0.80
IDF PROTO	37.86 $\pm$ 1.13	41.91 $\pm$ 1.17	34.88 $\pm$ 0.73	32.14 $\pm$ 0.51	63.24 $\pm$ 0.83	43.09 $\pm$ 1.15
CNN PROTO	29.67 $\pm$ 1.02	34.02 $\pm$ 1.48	33.49 $\pm$ 0.79	28.43 $\pm$ 0.68	64.74 $\pm$ 1.83	49.78 $\pm$ 0.22
AVG MAML	33.74 $\pm$ 0.32	39.35 $\pm$ 1.38	36.14 $\pm$ 1.23	39.98 $\pm$ 1.83	48.64 $\pm$ 2.16	43.83 $\pm$ 2.04
IDF MAML	37.26 $\pm$ 1.62	43.63 $\pm$ 2.42	38.95 $\pm$ 0.48	42.58 $\pm$ 0.77	54.86 $\pm$ 1.54	48.22 $\pm$ 1.20
CNN MAML	28.98 $\pm$ 1.62	35.30 $\pm$ 1.04	34.12 $\pm$ 0.86	39.03 $\pm$ 0.97	64.16 $\pm$ 1.69	51.73 $\pm$ 3.98
AVG RR	37.60 $\pm$ 0.10	50.25 $\pm$ 0.23	36.33 $\pm$ 0.36	48.17 $\pm$ 0.17	62.88 $\pm$ 0.51	53.25 $\pm$ 1.01
IDF RR	44.83 $\pm$ 1.07	60.27 $\pm$ 1.33	37.68 $\pm$ 0.96	48.65 $\pm$ 0.57	69.45 $\pm$ 1.52	55.65 $\pm$ 1.08
CNN RR	32.25 $\pm$ 1.62	37.30 $\pm$ 0.80	37.32 $\pm$ 1.15	41.81 $\pm$ 1.49	72.39 $\pm$ 1.45	56.83 $\pm$ 2.30
OUR	<b>52.17</b> $\pm$ 0.65	<b>62.66</b> $\pm$ 0.67	<b>43.09</b> $\pm$ 0.16	<b>54.15</b> $\pm$ 1.06	<b>80.80</b> $\pm$ 0.57	<b>67.10</b> $\pm$ 0.93
OUR w/o t( $\cdot$ )	50.15 $\pm$ 1.62	61.77 $\pm$ 0.73	42.09 $\pm$ 0.37	51.51 $\pm$ 0.75	77.94 $\pm$ 0.38	66.93 $\pm$ 0.46
OUR w/o s( $\cdot$ )	41.99 $\pm$ 0.69	51.12 $\pm$ 0.88	40.16 $\pm$ 0.23	48.59 $\pm$ 0.62	72.96 $\pm$ 0.66	65.83 $\pm$ 0.33
OUR w/o biLSTM	50.35 $\pm$ 0.73	61.95 $\pm$ 0.40	42.22 $\pm$ 0.66	51.88 $\pm$ 0.84	77.52 $\pm$ 0.42	66.42 $\pm$ 0.35

Table 4: 5-way 1-shot classification. The bottom three rows present our ablation study.

Rep. Alg.	20 News	Amazon	HuffPost	RCV1	Reuters	FewRel
AVG NN	45.87 $\pm$ 0.39	60.36 $\pm$ 0.20	41.55 $\pm$ 0.23	60.84 $\pm$ 0.19	79.61 $\pm$ 0.09	60.67 $\pm$ 0.30
IDF NN	51.94 $\pm$ 0.20	67.15 $\pm$ 0.21	42.35 $\pm$ 0.15	58.27 $\pm$ 0.23	82.85 $\pm$ 0.08	60.62 $\pm$ 0.41
CNN FT	47.17 $\pm$ 0.98	63.91 $\pm$ 1.20	44.13 $\pm$ 0.70	62.34 $\pm$ 0.56	92.69 $\pm$ 1.53	71.19 $\pm$ 0.57
AVG PROTO	45.42 $\pm$ 1.36	51.99 $\pm$ 2.72	41.67 $\pm$ 1.13	31.22 $\pm$ 1.53	68.17 $\pm$ 0.88	46.55 $\pm$ 1.58
IDF PROTO	46.53 $\pm$ 1.44	59.24 $\pm$ 1.10	50.24 $\pm$ 0.94	35.63 $\pm$ 0.83	76.29 $\pm$ 0.56	61.99 $\pm$ 1.82
CNN PROTO	35.09 $\pm$ 0.71	44.49 $\pm$ 1.53	44.21 $\pm$ 0.58	29.33 $\pm$ 0.81	72.60 $\pm$ 3.81	65.16 $\pm$ 0.99
AVG MAML	43.92 $\pm$ 1.07	47.22 $\pm$ 1.99	49.69 $\pm$ 0.54	50.69 $\pm$ 1.03	55.13 $\pm$ 1.16	57.87 $\pm$ 1.86
IDF MAML	48.62 $\pm$ 1.31	62.45 $\pm$ 1.33	53.70 $\pm$ 0.29	54.14 $\pm$ 0.72	62.89 $\pm$ 2.20	65.80 $\pm$ 1.19
CNN MAML	36.79 $\pm$ 0.78	43.70 $\pm$ 1.38	45.89 $\pm$ 0.53	51.15 $\pm$ 0.39	81.23 $\pm$ 1.12	66.90 $\pm$ 3.23
AVG RR	57.24 $\pm$ 0.19	72.78 $\pm$ 0.23	54.86 $\pm$ 0.21	72.62 $\pm$ 0.17	89.47 $\pm$ 0.14	72.22 $\pm$ 0.16
IDF RR	64.35 $\pm$ 0.54	79.78 $\pm$ 0.28	59.56 $\pm$ 1.78	72.85 $\pm$ 0.21	92.67 $\pm$ 0.12	75.30 $\pm$ 0.34
CNN RR	44.32 $\pm$ 0.44	53.89 $\pm$ 1.54	49.96 $\pm$ 0.20	59.47 $\pm$ 0.58	88.48 $\pm$ 0.35	71.81 $\pm$ 1.25
OUR	<b>68.33</b> $\pm$ 0.17	<b>81.16</b> $\pm$ 0.31	<b>63.51</b> $\pm$ 0.10	<b>75.38</b> $\pm$ 1.12	<b>95.67</b> $\pm$ 0.13	<b>83.53</b> $\pm$ 0.27
OUR w/o t( $\cdot$ )	67.59 $\pm$ 0.57	80.58 $\pm$ 0.19	60.86 $\pm$ 0.19	75.12 $\pm$ 0.90	93.77 $\pm$ 0.14	83.20 $\pm$ 0.39
OUR w/o s( $\cdot$ )	60.77 $\pm$ 0.52	75.37 $\pm$ 0.27	60.29 $\pm$ 0.35	72.84 $\pm$ 0.23	93.02 $\pm$ 0.24	82.62 $\pm$ 0.20
OUR w/o biLSTM	66.99 $\pm$ 0.32	80.90 $\pm$ 0.36	63.04 $\pm$ 0.20	74.19 $\pm$ 0.22	95.56 $\pm$ 0.12	82.90 $\pm$ 0.21

Table 5: 5-way 5-shot classification. The bottom three rows present our ablation study.

<i>talk.politics.mideast</i>	<i>sci.space</i>	<i>misc.forsale</i>	<i>talk.politics.misc</i>	<i>comp.graphics</i>
israel	space	sale	president	image
armenian	nasa	00	cramer	graphics
turkish	launch	shipping	mr	jpeg
armenians	orbit	offer	stephanopoulos	images
israeli	shuttle	condition	people	gif
jews	moon	1st	government	format
armenia	henry	price	optilink	file
arab	earth	forsale	myers	3d
people	mission	asking	clayton	ftp
jewish	solar	comics	gay	color
<i>sci.crypt</i>	<i>comp.windows.x</i>	<i>comp.os.ms-windows.misc</i>	<i>talk.politics.guns</i>	<i>talk.religion.misc</i>
key	window	ax	gun	god
clipper	xx	max	guns	jesus
encryption	motif	windows	fbi	sandvik
chip	server	g9v	firearms	christian
keys	widget	b8f	atf	bible
security	file	a86	batf	jehovah
privacy	xterm	145	weapons	christ
government	x11	pl	people	lord
escrow	entry	ld9	waco	kent
des	dos	34u	cdt	brian
<i>rec.autos</i>	<i>sci.med</i>	<i>comp.sys.mac.hardware</i>	<i>sci.electronics</i>	<i>rec.sport.hockey</i>
car	medical	mac	circuit	hockey
cars	disease	apple	wire	game
engine	msg	centris	ground	team
ford	cancer	quadra	wiring	nhl
oil	health	lc	voltage	play
dealer	patients	monitor	battery	season
callison	doctor	duo	copy	games
mustang	hiv	nubus	amp	25
com	food	drive	electronics	ca
autos	diet	simms	audio	pit
<i>alt.atheism</i>	<i>rec.motorcycles</i>	<i>comp.sys.ibm.pc.hardware</i>	<i>rec.sport.baseball</i>	<i>soc.religion.christian</i>
god	bike	scsi	baseball	god
atheism	dod	drive	game	church
atheists	ride	ide	year	jesus
keith	bmw	controller	team	christ
livesey	com	card	players	sin
morality	riding	bus	games	christians
religion	bikes	drives	hit	christian
moral	motorcycle	bios	braves	rutgers
islamic	dog	disk	runs	bible
say	rider	pc	pitcher	faith

Table 6: Top 10 LMI-ranked words for each class in 20 Newsgroup. Class names are shown in italic. Different class exhibit different salient features.