Can Tool-Based Reasoning Systems Outperform Deterministic Text-to-SQL Engines in Production?

An Empirical Study on Reliability, Safety, and Maintainability

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Abstract

Text-to-SQL systems have traditionally relied on deterministic pipelines composed of schema parsing, rule-based validation, and constrained query generation. Recent advances in large language models (LLMs) have enabled tool-mediated reasoning systems, where SQL generation is orchestrated through explicit tools, validators, and bounded execution graphs.

This paper empirically evaluates whether tool-based reasoning architectures provide measurable advantages over fully deterministic Text-to-SQL pipelines under production constraints. Rather than optimizing for benchmark accuracy, we evaluate both paradigms across production-critical dimensions including safety, determinism, failure isolation, debuggability, and long-term maintainability.

Using a real-world Text-to-SQL codebase implemented in two architectural variants—(1) a deterministic pipeline and (2) a strictly constrained, tool-based reasoning system—we analyze system behavior under adversarial inputs, schema ambiguity, and execution failures. Our findings suggest that tool-based systems can outperform deterministic engines in production robustness and adaptability, provided that strict architectural guardrails are enforced.

1 Introduction

Text-to-SQL is a core problem in natural language interfaces to structured data. While much prior work emphasizes execution accuracy on curated benchmarks, production deployments impose stricter requirements: safety guarantees, predictable failure behavior, debuggability, and long-term maintainability.

Deterministic Text-to-SQL engines have historically been favored in production due to their repeatability and explicit control flow. Recent advances in large language models have introduced a new paradigm: tool-mediated reasoning systems, where an LLM operates as a constrained orchestrator rather than a direct executor.

This work evaluates whether such tool-based systems can outperform deterministic pipelines when assessed through a production-first lens.

2 Problem Definition

A production Text-to-SQL system must satisfy requirements beyond syntactic correctness:

- Accurate schema grounding

- Enforcement of SQL safety invariants
- Deterministic execution behavior
- Bounded and observable failure modes
- Separation between reasoning and side effects

This paper evaluates architectural choices against these criteria.

3 System Architectures

3.1 Deterministic Engine

The deterministic system follows a fixed pipeline:

1. Schema analysis
2. Rule-based SQL generation
3. Static validation
4. Database execution
5. Result formatting

Failures are explicit and non-recoverable without external intervention.

3.2 Tool-Based Reasoning System

The tool-based system introduces an LLM constrained by explicit tools:

- Schema grounding tools
- SQL generation tools
- Validation tools
- Bounded retry policies
- Result interpretation tools

The LLM never executes SQL directly.

4 Execution Graph and Tool Boundaries

4.1 Execution Graph

4.2 Tool Boundary

5 Comparison of Architectures

6 Methods and Experiments

We evaluate systems using deterministic regression tests, semantic equivalence checks, and failure injection rather than benchmark datasets.

Test categories include:

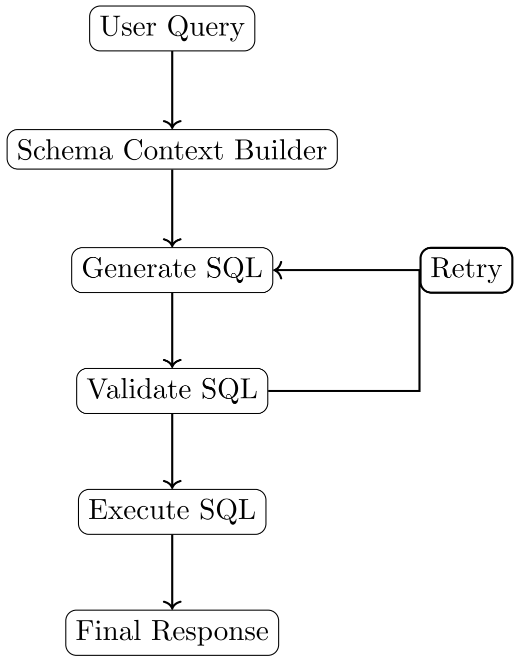

Figure 1: Bounded execution graph with explicit retry paths.

Dimension	**Deterministic**	**Tool-Based**
Repeatability	Perfect	Bounded
Failure Recovery	None	Adaptive
Schema Drift Handling	Manual	Assisted
Safety Guarantees	Strong	Strong (guarded)
Debuggability	High	Medium–High
Extensibility	Rigid	Flexible
Operational Complexity	Low	Higher
Production Resilience	Medium	High

Table 1: Production-oriented comparison of architectures.

- Schema grounding
- SQL invariant enforcement
- Semantic equivalence
- Retry boundedness
- Failure isolation

7 Related Work

Prior Text-to-SQL research has explored semantic parsing, neural decoding, schema linking, and execution-guided inference. Parallel work on tool-augmented language models investigates structured reasoning through external function calls.

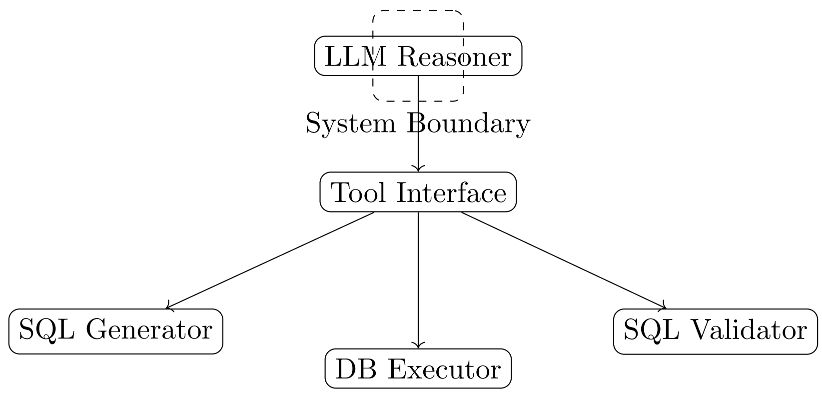

Figure 2: Strict separation between reasoning and side effects.

This work differs by focusing on architectural discipline, safety, and production evaluation rather than model-level improvements.

8 Threats to Validity

Limitations include evaluation on a single codebase, dependency on LLM behavior, and absence of large-scale concurrency testing. Nonetheless, architectural principles generalize across deployments.

9 Conclusion

Tool-based systems can outperform deterministic Text-to-SQL engines in production robustness when—and only when—strict architectural guardrails are enforced. LLMs are most effective as constrained reasoning components rather than autonomous agents.

A Appendix A: Test-to-Architecture Mapping

Test Category	**Architectural Component**
Schema grounding tests	Schema Context Builder
SQL invariant tests	SQL Validator
Semantic equivalence tests	Retry + Rewrite Logic
Execution safety tests	DB Executor
Determinism tests	Execution Graph

Table 2: Mapping of test suites to architectural components.

B Appendix B: System Invariants

The following invariants are enforced across both systems:

- The system must never execute destructive SQL statements.

- All referenced tables and columns must exist in the schema.
- SQL must pass static validation before execution.
- Retry attempts must be strictly bounded.
- The LLM must not directly access the database.

Violations of any invariant result in immediate termination.

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