Getting in touch with Ovid's feminine side

… except with statistics

Ben Nagy, ASCS 2026

Is there stylometric evidence to support the argument that Ovid has a distinct female poetic style?

No.

Recusatio

Methodology

- Praeceptor of the Ars as “male persona”
- Heroides 1–15 as “female personas”
- Train statistical models
- Predict the speaker gender

Preprocessing

Haec tua Penelope lento tibi mittit, Ulixe
nil mihi rescribas attinet: ipse veni!

haec tua PROPN ADJ tibi VERB PROPN (EOL)

nil mihi VERB VERB ipse VERB (EOL) (EOS)

haec tua PROPN ADJ tibi VERB PROPN (EOL)

nil mihi VERB VERB ipse VERB (EOL) (EOS)

hic tuus PROPN lentus tu mitto PROPN (EOL)

nihil ego rescribo attineo ipse venio (EOL) (EOS)

haec tua PROPN ADJ tibi VERB PROPN (EOL)

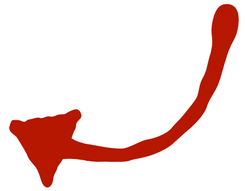
nil mihi VERB VERB ipse VERB (EOL) (EOS)

hic tuus PROPN lentus tu mitto PROPN (EOL)

nihil ego rescribo attineo ipse venio (EOL) (EOS)

Case=Acc Gender=Neut Number=Plur
PronType=Dem Case=Nom Gender=Fem
Number=Sing Number(psor)=Sing Person(psor)=2
Poss=Yes PronType=Prs Case=Nom Gender=Fem
Number=Sing Case=Dat ...

Grammatical Features



	(EOL) (EOS)	(EOL) ADJ	(EOL) ADJ ADJ	(EOL) ADJ NOUN	(EOL) ADJ PROPN	(EOL) ADJ VERB	(EOL) ADJ et	A
0	-0.431931	-0.251067	-0.087868	-0.112664	-0.051457	-0.091602	-0.052038	-0.1
1	-0.581653	-0.251067	-0.087868	-0.112664	-0.051457	-0.091602	-0.052038	-0.1
2	-0.612764	-0.251067	-0.087868	-0.112664	-0.051457	-0.091602	-0.052038	-0.1
3	0.673158	-0.251067	-0.087868	-0.112664	-0.051457	-0.091602	-0.052038	-0.1
4	-0.403103	-0.251067	-0.087868	-0.112664	-0.051457	-0.091602	-0.052038	-0.1
...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	
2843	-0.299320	-0.251067	-0.087868	-0.112664	-0.051457	-0.091602	-0.052038	-0.1
2844	0.231123	-0.251067	-0.087868	-0.112664	-0.051457	-0.091602	-0.052038	-0.1
2845	0.496344	-0.251067	-0.087868	-0.112664	-0.051457	-0.091602	-0.052038	-0.1
2846	-1.094984	-0.251067	-0.087868	-0.112664	-0.051457	-0.091602	-0.052038	-0.1
2847	0.894176	-0.251067	-0.087868	-0.112664	-0.051457	-0.091602	-0.052038	-0.1

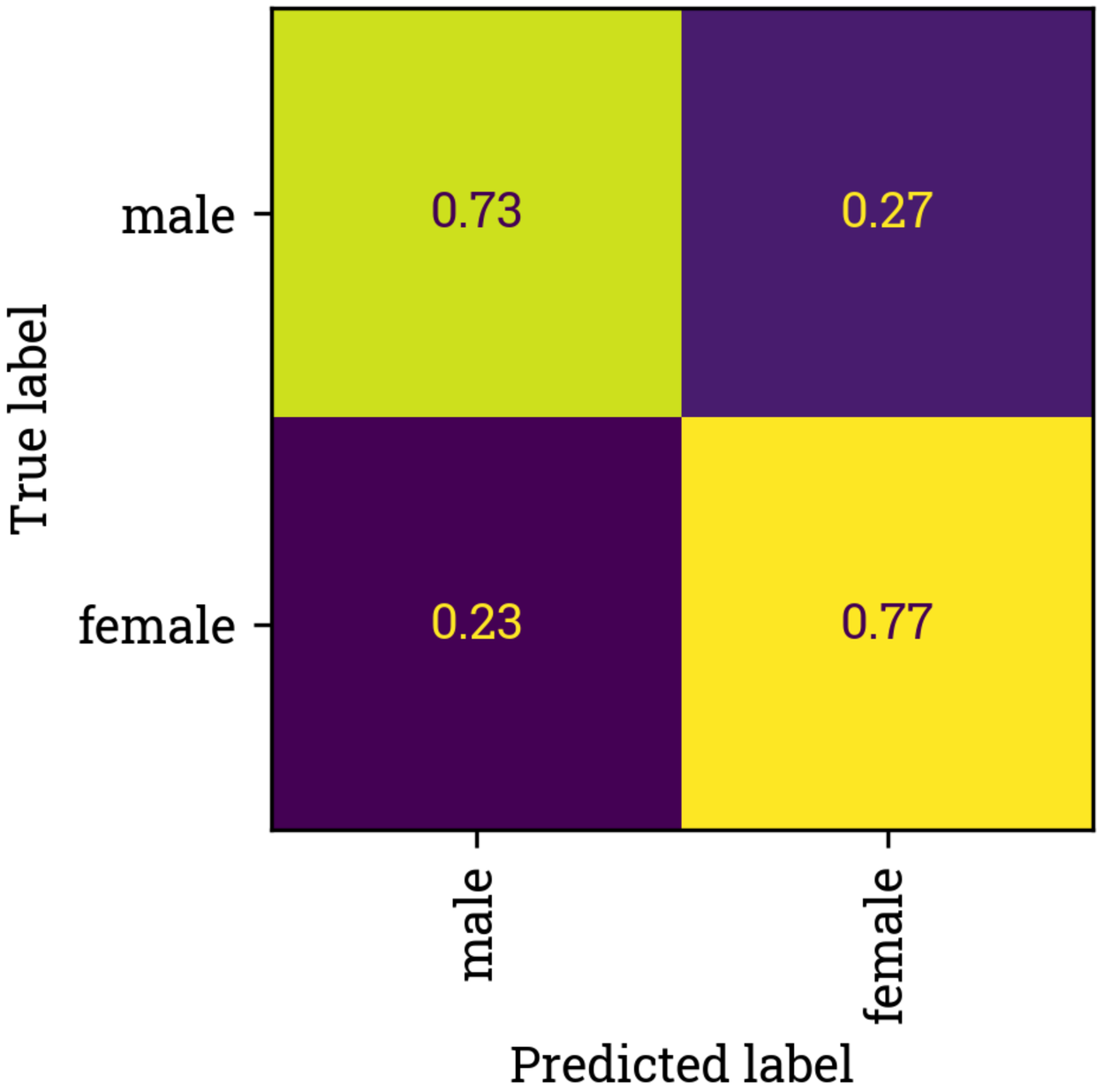
2848 rows × 1070 columns

Evaluation

Model Performance

1 sentence, Ars vs Heroides

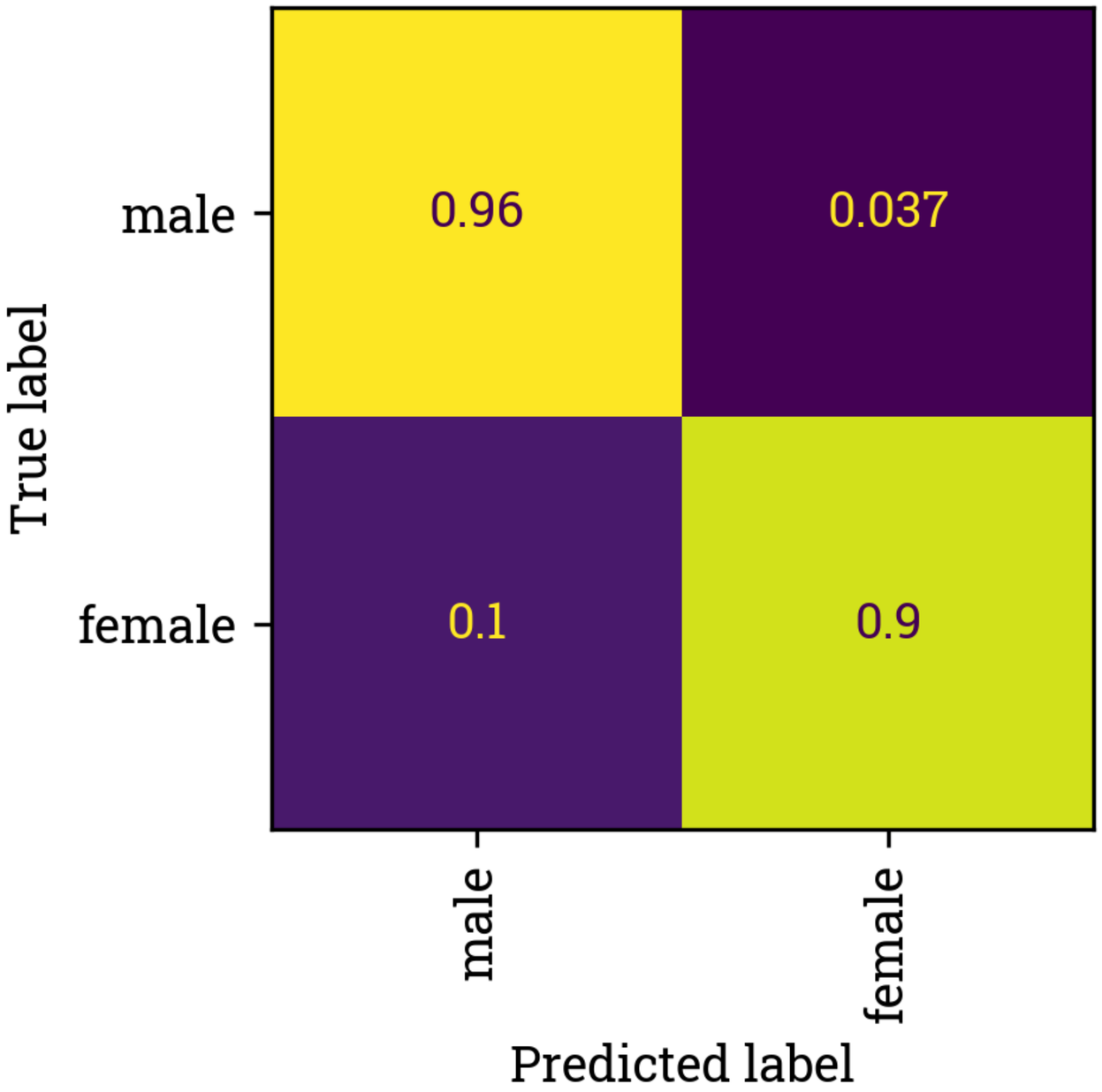
- Performance is excellent?
- Mean sentence length:
  - Ars: 10.79
  - Heroides: 8.78



Model Performance

25 sentences, Ars vs Heroides

- Ars speaker more distinctive
- Still only ~250 words!

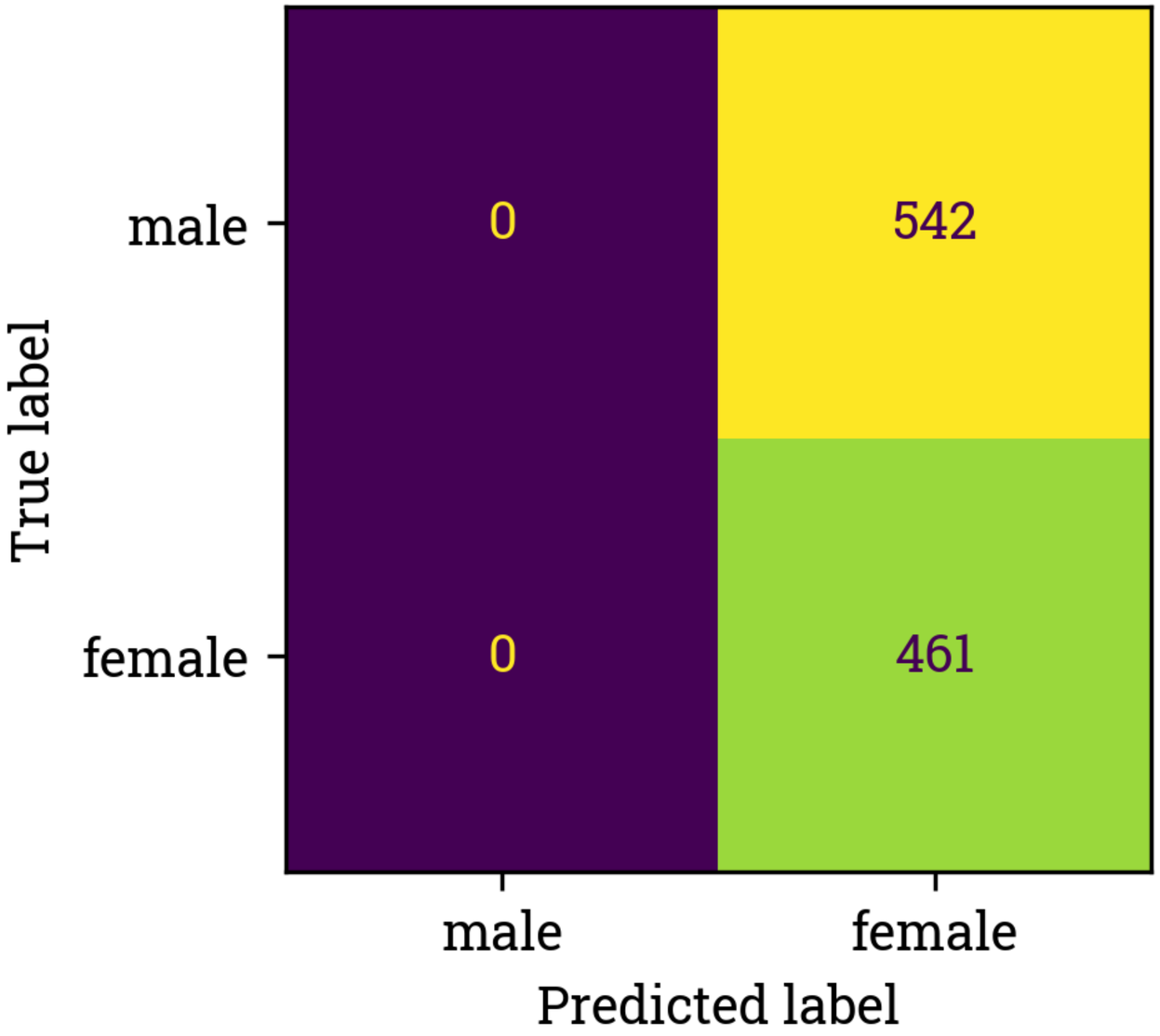


Seems good, right?

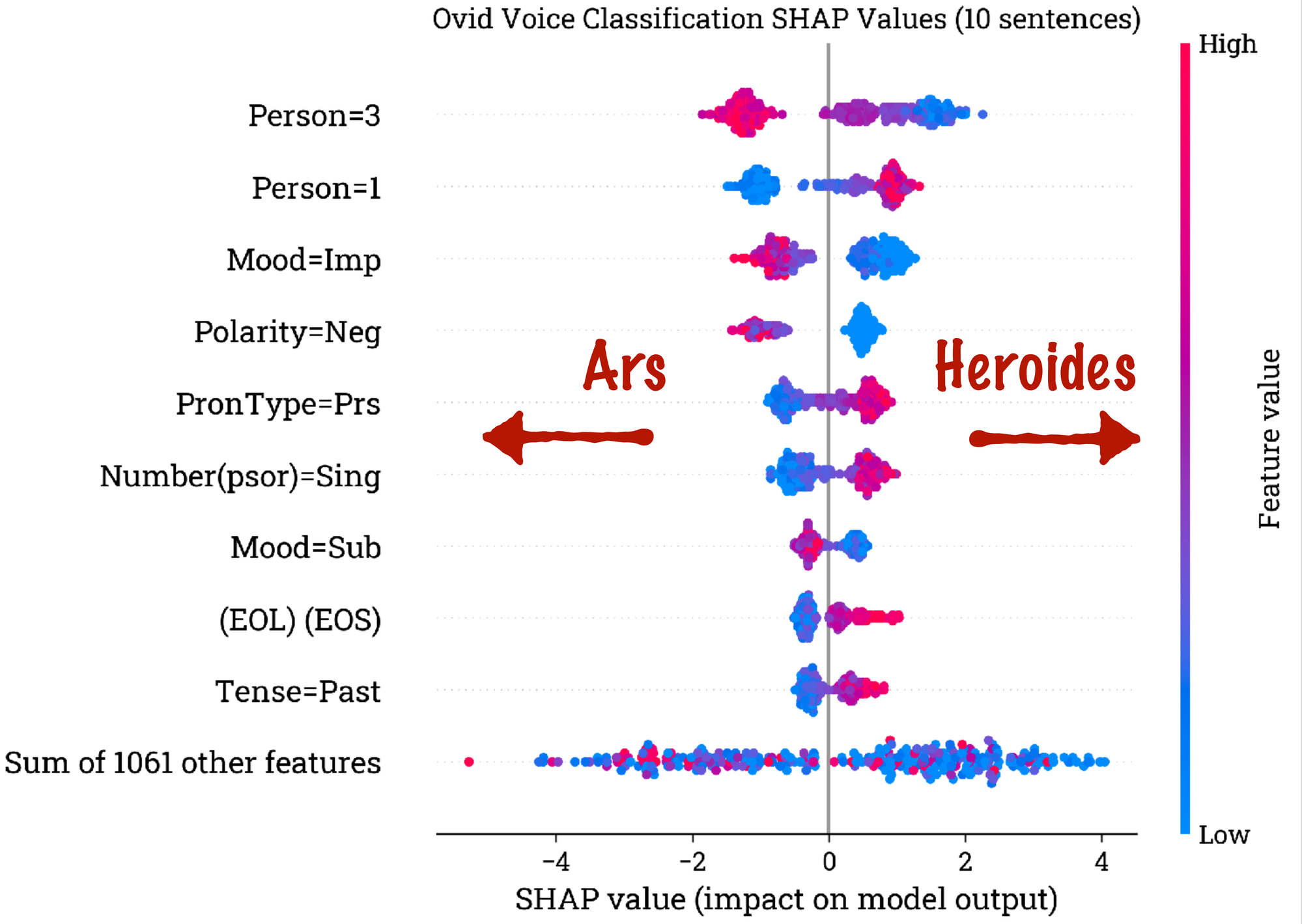
Model Performance

1 sentence, Double Heroides

- I made a Heroides detector :(

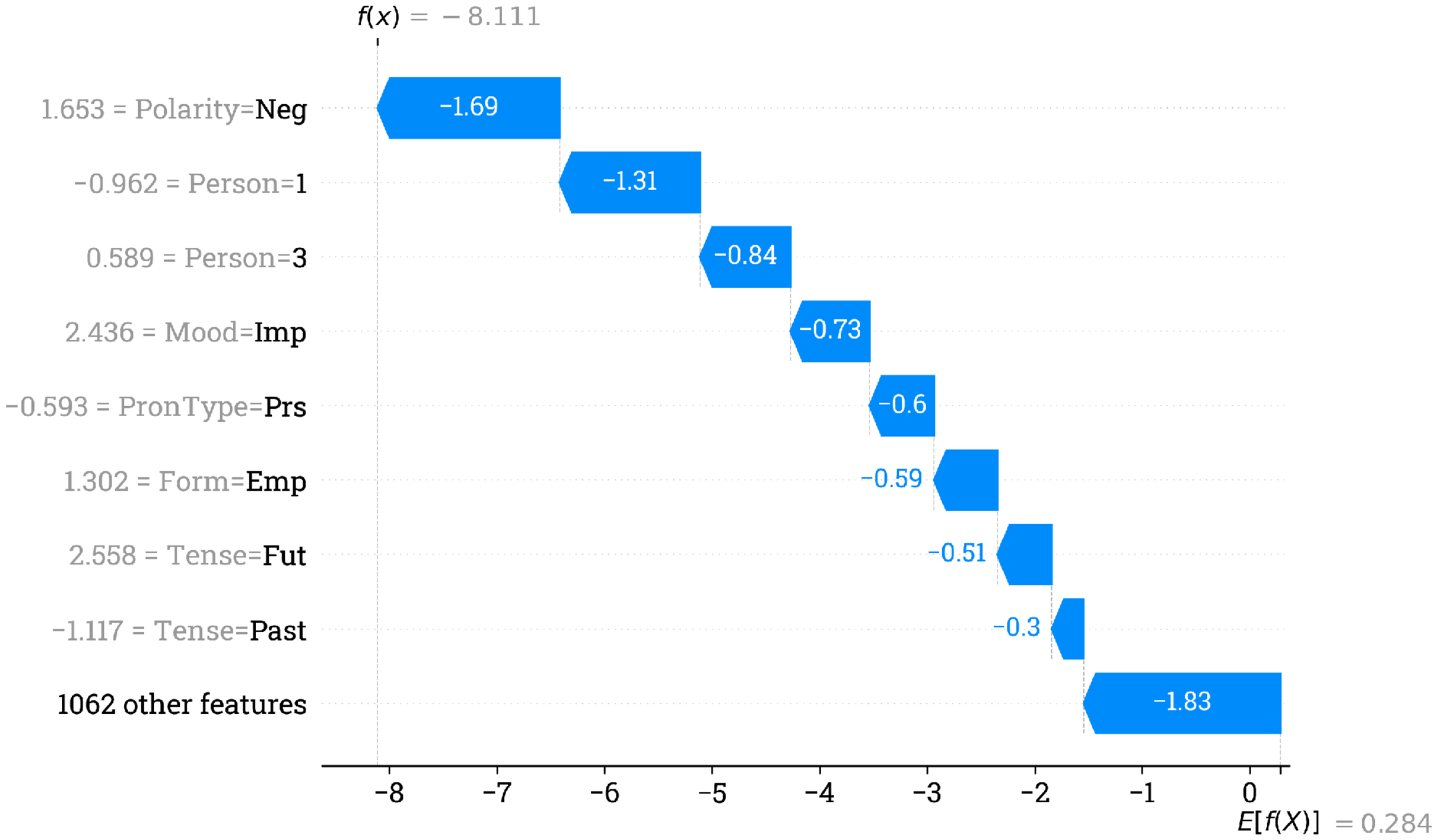


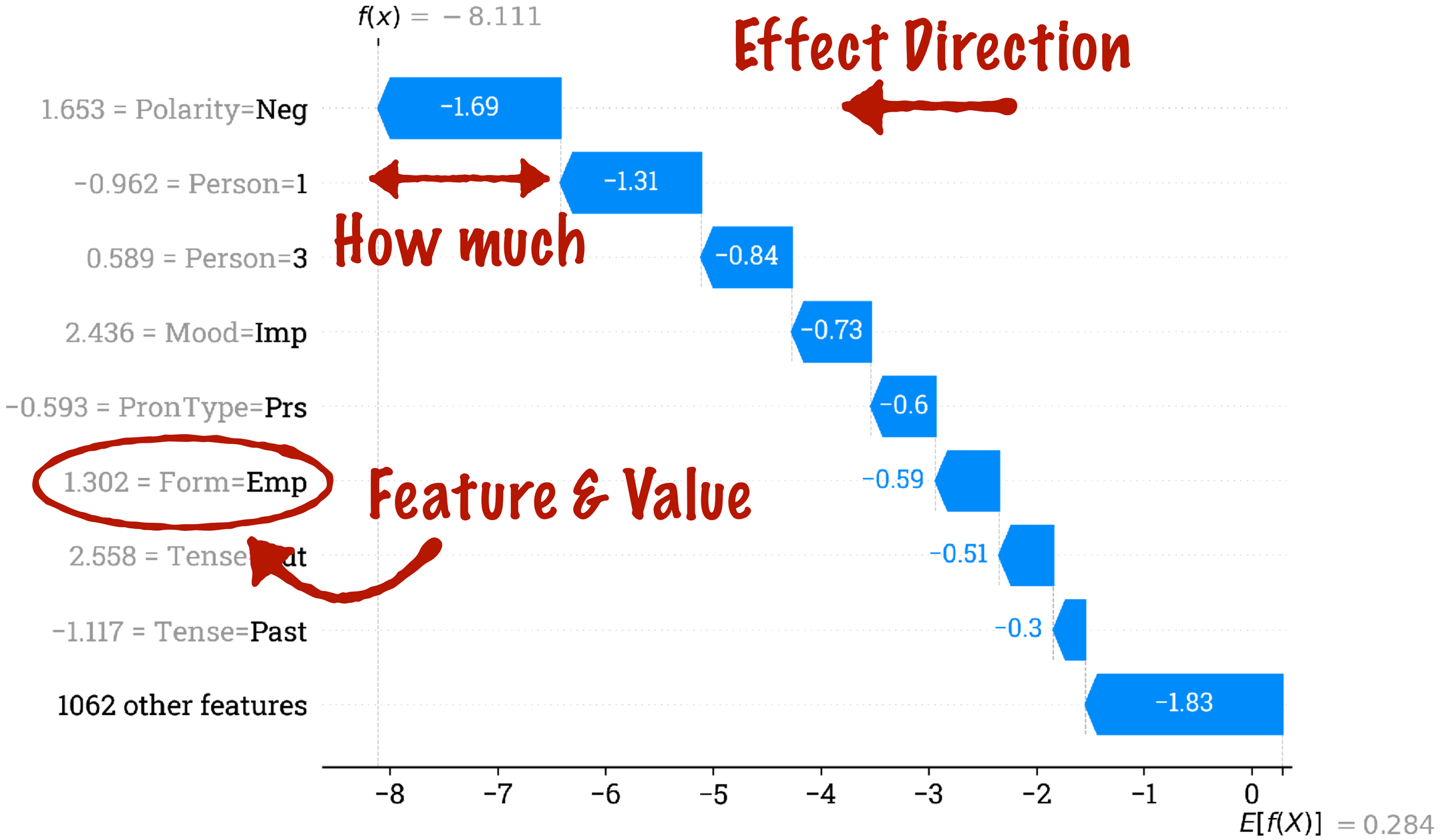
Model Interpretation


Ovid Voice Classification SHAP Values (10 sentences)
Person=3
Person=1
Mood=Imp
Polarity=Neg
PronType=Prs
Number(psor)=Sing
Mood=Sub
(EOL) (EOS)
Tense=Past
Sum of 1061 other features
Ars
Heroides
High
Feature value
Low
−4
−2
0
2
4
SHAP value (impact on model output)

Ars Amatoria 1: (speaker: male, prediction: 99.97%)

Hic tibi quaeratur socii sermonis origo,
Et moveant primos publica verba sonos.
Cujus equi veniant, facito, studiose, requiras:
Nec mora, quisquis erit, cui favet illa, fave.
At cum pompa frequens caelestibus ibit eburnis,
Tu Veneri dominae plaude favente manu;
Utque fit, in gremium pulvis si forte puellae
Deciderit, digitis excutiendus erit:
Etsi nullus erit pulvis, tamen excute nullum:
Quaelibet officio causa sit apta tuo.
Pallia si terra nimium demissa jacebunt,
Collige, et inmunda sedulus effer humo;


f(x) = −8.111
1.653 = Polarity=Neg
−0.962 = Person=1
0.589 = Person=3
2.436 = Mood=Imp
−0.593 = PronType=Prs
1.302 = Form=Emp
2.558 = Tense=Fut
−1.117 = Tense=Past
1062 other features
−1.69
−1.31
−0.84
−0.73
−0.6
−0.59
−0.51
−0.3
−1.83
−8
−7
−6
−5
−4
−3
−2
−1
0
E[f(X)] = 0.284

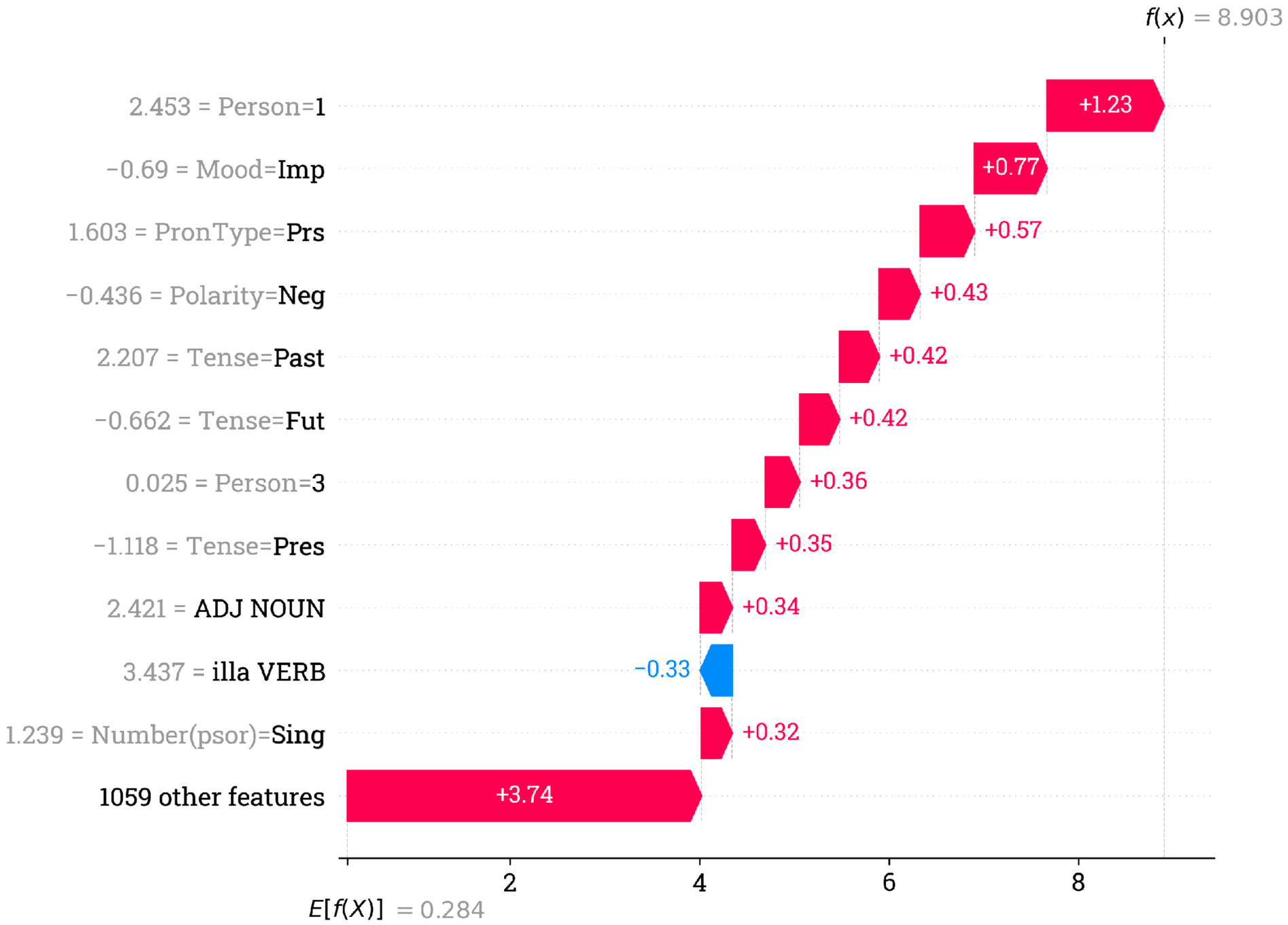

f(x) = −8.111
Effect Direction
How much
Feature & Value
1.653 = Polarity=Neg
−0.962 = Person=1
0.589 = Person=3
2.436 = Mood=Imp
−0.593 = PronType=Prs
1.302 = Form=Emp
2.558 = Tense
−1.117 = Tense=Past
1062 other features
−1.69
−1.31
−0.84
−0.73
−0.6
−0.59
−0.51
−0.3
−1.83
−8
−7
−6
−5
−4
−3
−2
−1
0
E[f(X)] = 0.284

Hic tibi **quaeratur** socii sermonis origo,
Et **moveant** primos publica verba sonos.
Cujus equi **veniant**, **facito**, studiose, requiras:
Nec mora, quisquis **erit**, cui favet illa, **fave**.
At cum pompa frequens caelestibus **ibit** eburnis,
Tu Veneri dominae **plaude** favente manu;
Utque **fit**, in gremium pulvis **si** forte puellae
Deciderit, digitis **excutiendus erit**:
Etsi **nullus erit** pulvis, tamen **excute nullum**:
Quaelibet officio causa sit apta tuo.
Pallia **si** terra nimium demissa **jacebunt**,
Collige, et inmunda sedulus **effer** humo;

Now look for some excuse for friendly conversation, and start out with general chat. Make sure you ask whose horses are whose, and whichever one she likes, like that one. But, when the procession arrives with the ivory gods, loudly applaud Venus, your mistress. If by chance a bit of dirt should fall in the girl's lap, it must be brushed off with your fingers. Even if there is no dirt, brush off nothing. Take any excuse to pay attention to her. If her skirt is too low and trailing in the dust, gather it up and carefully lift it from the dirty ground...

Heroides 5: (speaker: female, prediction: 99.99%)

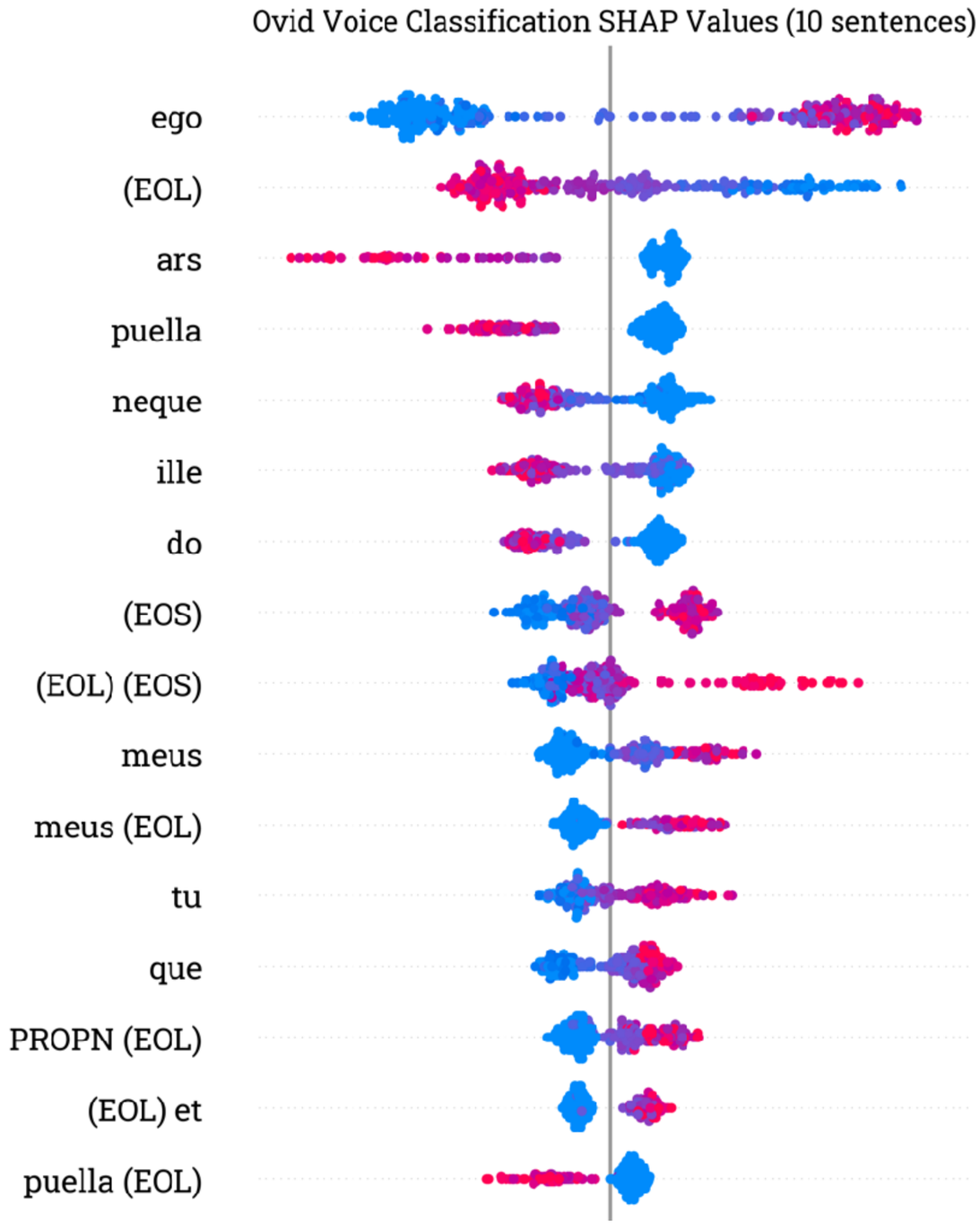
ei mihi, pro dira paelice blanda fui!
Adspicit immensum moles nativa profundum
(mons fuit), aequoreis illa resistit aquis;
hinc ego vela tuae cognovi prima carinae
et mihi per fluctus impetus ire fuit.
dum moror, in summa fulsit mihi purpura prora.
pertimui: cultus non erat ille tuus.

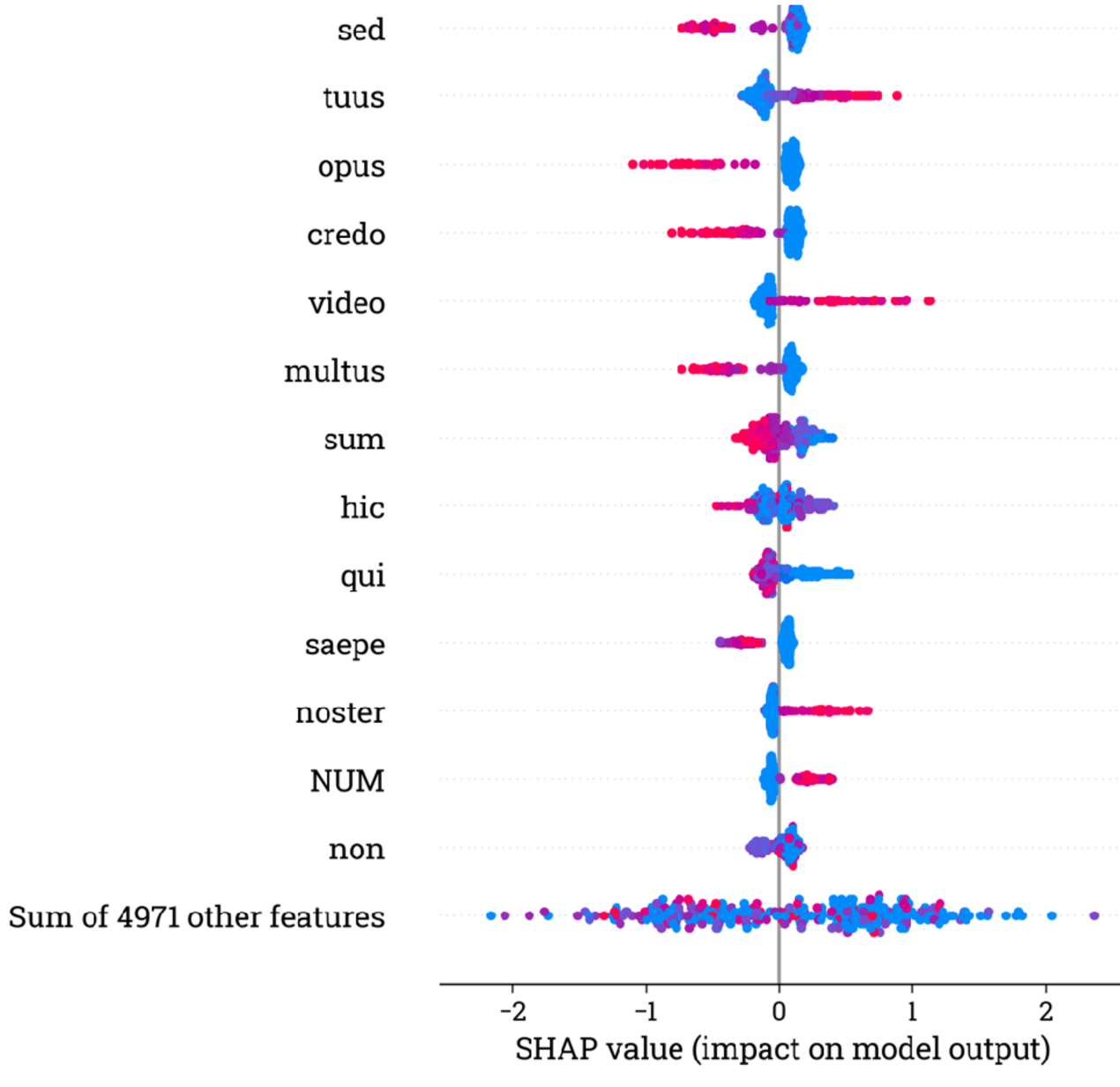

f(x) = 8.903
2.453 = Person=1
−0.69 = Mood=Imp
1.603 = PronType=Prs
−0.436 = Polarity=Neg
2.207 = Tense=Past
−0.662 = Tense=Fut
0.025 = Person=3
−1.118 = Tense=Pres
2.421 = ADJ NOUN
3.437 = illa VERB
1.239 = Number(psor)=Sing
1059 other features
+1.23
+0.77
+0.57
+0.43
+0.42
+0.42
+0.36
+0.35
+0.34
−0.33
+0.32
+3.74
2
4
6
8
E[f(X)] = 0.284

ei **mihi**, pro dira paelice blanda **fui**!
Adspicit immensum moles nativa profundum
(mons **fuit**), aequoreis **illa resistit** aquis;
hinc **ego** vela tuae **cognovi** prima carinae
et **mihi** per fluctus impetus ire **fuit**.
dum **moror**, in summa **fulsit mihi** purpura prora.
pertimui: cultus non **erat** ille tuus.

Alas, I was asking favours for the benefit of a detestable strumpet! There is a natural crag (it used to be a mountain) looking over the vast deep, standing against the flowing waters. From here I first recognised the sails of your ship, and felt the urge to rush into the waves. While I hesitated, a glint of purple clothing shone from the tip of the prow. I was terrified: there was no way you would wear that kind of thing...

Lexical Differences


Ovid Voice Classification SHAP Values (10 sentences)
ego
(EOL)
ars
puella
neque
ille
do
(EOS)
(EOL) (EOS)
meus
meus (EOL)
tu
que
PROPN (EOL)
(EOL) et
puella (EOL)


sed
tuus
opus
credo
video
multus
sum
hic
qui
saepe
noster
NUM
non
Sum of 4971 other features
-2
-1
0
1
2
SHAP value (impact on model output)

Synthesis

Did we learn about how Ovid thinks women write poetry?

- **No “female poetic voice”**
- **Ovid’s technical style is Ovid**
- **“gender” vs “genre”**

Thank you!

Corpus and Code: https://github.com/bnagy/ovid-voice