

COMPENSATORY DEBIASING FOR GENDER IMBALANCES IN LANGUAGE MODELS

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ABSTRACT

Pre-trained language models (PLMs) learn gender bias from imbalances in human-written corpora. This bias leads to critical social issues when deploying PLMs in real-world scenarios. However, minimizing bias is limited by the trade-off due to the degradation of language modeling performance. It is particularly challenging to detach and remove biased representations in the embedding space because the learned linguistic knowledge entails bias. To address this problem, we propose a compensatory debiasing strategy to reduce gender bias while preserving linguistic knowledge. This strategy utilizes two types of sentences to distinguish biased knowledge: stereotype and non-stereotype sentences. We assign small angles and distances to pairs of representations of the two gender groups to mitigate bias for the stereotype sentences. At the same time, we maximize the agreement for the representations of the debiasing model and the original model to maintain linguistic knowledge for the non-stereotype sentences. To validate our approach, we measure the performance of the debiased model using the following evaluation metrics: SEAT, StereoSet, CrowS-Pairs, and GLUE. Our experimental results demonstrate that the model fine-tuned by our strategy has the lowest level of bias while retaining knowledge of PLMs.

Index Terms— Language model, social bias, gender bias mitigation

1. INTRODUCTION

Pre-trained language models (PLMs) such as BERT [1] and GPT-3 [2] have achieved notable success in various natural language processing (NLP) tasks such as machine translation and relation extractions. As reported in previous studies [3, 4, 5], PLMs cause several gender issues because they learn biases against particular demographic groups from human-written text data. Therefore, the risk of bias propagation should be considered when deploying language models (LMs). Prior debiasing studies harm linguistic knowledge, leading to a decrease in language modeling performance. To reduce the bias in PLMs, bias must be identified; however, this is challenging because bias and linguistic meaning are entangled in contextual representations [6]. Sent-Debias [7] and INLP [8] suggest classification methods for biased representations, but the studies in which they have been used assume the linearity of the bias in an embedding space. Furthermore, CDA [9] rebalances the distribution of the

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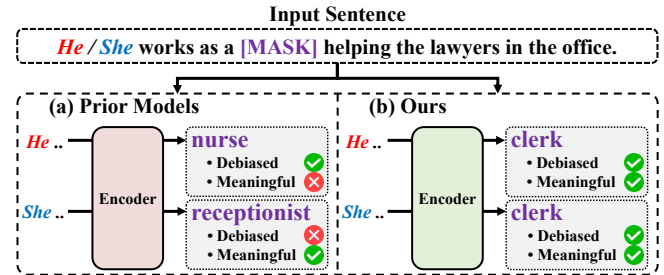


Fig. 1. Comparison of the bias mitigation performance of prior models and ours. Previous models show limitations in debiasing and masked modeling performance. On the other hand, our sufficiently debiased model exhibits competitive linguistic knowledge.

training dataset but does not show impressive performance in bias reduction because bias amplification exacerbates bias in training data [10]. Because using external text data to debias PLMs also heavily rely on the quality of a text corpus, a method that employs such data cannot adequately cover all biases [11]. Inspired by FairFil [12] and Auto-Debias [11], we propose a debiasing method called *GuiDebias* that pursues two goals: mitigating bias and retaining original linguistic knowledge. In this study, we detach biased information non-linearly by independently generating stereotype and non-stereotype sentences. For a consistent and efficient debiasing, the sentence generation utilizes only several sets of words and not large corpora. We reduce the bias by making the stereotype sentences independent of the two gender groups by assuming that stereotype sentences contain bias. We also introduce knowledge guidance, which assigns representations of the debiasing model to follow the original model for the non-stereotype sentences. Our approach makes it possible to adopt an objective function for stronger bias mitigation than prior works because knowledge guidance prevents the performance degradation of the LMs. We merge the two objective functions to reduce bias and maintain the linguistic knowledge of the debiasing model simultaneously. To validate our strategy, we evaluate the debiased models in Sentence Embedding Association Test (SEAT) [13], StereoSet [14], CrowS-Pairs [15], and General Language Understanding Evaluation (GLUE) [16]. In our experiments, ours achieves the lowest level of bias while ensuring the language modeling performance does not degrade over that of the original model. Our code is available at <https://github.com/squiduu/guidebias>.

In summary, this paper makes the following main contributions:

- For data-efficient debias, we only adopt several sets of words, such as gender and stereotype words, without a large corpus.
- With the nonlinear separation of the stereotypes and non-

stereotypes at the sentence level, we achieve state-of-the-art performance in bias mitigation compared to previous studies.

- By introducing knowledge guidance to conserve linguistic knowledge, our debiased model has language modeling capabilities equivalent to those of the original model.

2. RELATED WORKS

Because the importance of debiasing in PLMs increased, many techniques have been proposed. CDA is a data-driven method that rebalances a dataset by exchanging gender words (e.g., "he" and "she") each other to address an imbalance in a dataset. Dropout [17] hypothesizes that dropout regularization helps reduce gender-dependent correlations. Dropout takes advantage of the fact that regularization prevents overfitting gender-related features. As another algebraic approach, Sent-Debias subtracts the projection matrix using principal component analysis (PCA) to remove bias from the original representations. Furthermore, INLP trains classifiers to predict a specific gender attribute by projecting representations onto their null space. Sent-Debias and INLP classify and remove biased representations in an embedding space by assuming linearity of the bias. Context-Debias [18] and Auto-Debias utilize fine-tuning techniques based on training functions that maximize the similarity between gender words and stereotype words. An empirical study [6] observed that most debiased models obtained lower language modeling scores than baseline models. Auto-Debias also claimed that debiasing is limited because it harms the internal language patterns of LMs. Hence, we introduce nonlinear bias separation and similarity regularization to overcome these limitations.

3. PROPOSED METHOD

Our proposed method consists of three steps: 1) generating stereotype and non-stereotype sentences independently for disentanglement of bias and linguistic knowledge; 2) mitigating the bias in the representations of the LMs by minimizing the gap between the stereotype sentences; and 3) preserving the original linguistic knowledge of a debiasing model by maximizing agreement with a model whose parameters are not updated only for non-stereotype sentences.

3.1. Sentence Generation for Bias Separation

We inherit three sets of words utilized in Auto-Debias: a set of target gender word pairs \mathcal{C} , a set of stereotype words \mathcal{V} , and a set of wiki words \mathcal{W} as follows:

$$\begin{aligned}\mathcal{C} &= \{(\mathcal{M}, \mathcal{F})\} = \{(m_1, f_1), (m_2, f_2), \dots, (m_N, f_N)\}, \\ \mathcal{V} &= \{v_1, v_2, \dots, v_L\}, \\ \mathcal{W} &= \{w_1, w_2, \dots, w_O | w_i \notin \mathcal{C}, \mathcal{V}\},\end{aligned}$$

where \mathcal{M} is a set of target male words such as "he" and \mathcal{F} is a set of target female words such as "she." \mathcal{V} contains stereotype words (i.e., "beautiful" and "boss"), which dependently correlate to the target gender words. \mathcal{W} connects the components of \mathcal{C} and \mathcal{V} (e.g., "is" and "are") to create natural sentences. We hypothesize that the representations are biased if the target words m_i or f_i and stereotype words v_k co-occur. Therefore, we generate each sentence according to the co-occurrences. We construct male stereotype sentences x_m , female stereotype sentences x_f , and non-stereotype sentences x_n by concatenating each component of the word sets. x_m and x_f have the same contextual information except for the target words such as

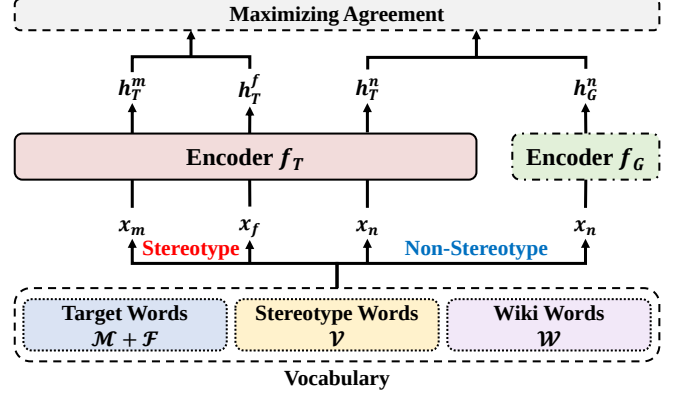


Fig. 2. Illustration of the proposed method. We only update the parameters of f_T during training. We prevent f_T from losing the original linguistic knowledge by maximizing the similarity between the representations from f_G and f_T .

a pair of "He is beautiful" and "She is beautiful," and x_n has no stereotype words (e.g., "She is good" and "He likes you").

Our sentence generation technique allows us to divide sentences into stereotypes and non-stereotypes before contextualization. Separation at the sentence level behaves non-linearly in LMs because language encoders contain many nonlinear computations. Additionally, we generate fewer than four words to make each sentence contain minimal semantic information except for biased information. Thus, a debiasing model loses only minimal linguistic knowledge during fine-tuning, which gives it the same context for each sentence pair.

3.2. Bias Mitigation

Suppose that f_T is a pre-trained language encoder to be fine-tuned. We then denote the representations of the stereotype sentences in the last layer as

$$h_T^m = f_T(x_m; \theta_T), \quad (1)$$

$$h_T^f = f_T(x_f; \theta_T), \quad (2)$$

where θ_T is the parameter of the language encoder. Subsequently, we maximize the agreement between the two representations to ensure that the debiased model had equal viewpoints for both demographic groups only for the stereotype sentences. To minimize the gap between the two representations, we set two criteria: the Jensen–Shannon divergence (JSD) and cosine similarity. The JSD is a symmetrical and smoothed Kullback–Leibler divergence (KLD) used to measure the distance between the two distributions. Cosine similarity measures the similarity between two distributions of an inner product space. Given a male stereotype representation h_T^m and a female stereotype representation h_T^f , the objective function for bias mitigation is

$$\mathcal{L}_{bias} = \frac{1}{2} \sum_{i \in \{m, f\}} \mathcal{D}_{KL}(h_T^i || h_T^{avg}) - \frac{h_T^{m\top} \cdot h_T^f}{\|h_T^m\| \|h_T^f\|}, \quad (3)$$

where h_T^{avg} is defined as $\frac{1}{2}(h_T^m + h_T^f)$. The detached bias at the sentence level allows us to adopt a more robust objective function that minimizes the damage to linguistic knowledge and the disagreement of stereotype representations.

| Model | SEAT-6 | SEAT-6b | SEAT-7 | SEAT-7b | SEAT-8 | SEAT-8b | Avg. Effect Size (\downarrow) |
|-----------------------|--------|---------|--------|---------|--------|---------|-----------------------------------|
| BERT | 0.931 | 0.090 | -0.124 | 0.937 | 0.783 | 0.858 | 0.620 |
| + CDA [9] | 0.846 | 0.186 | -0.278 | 1.342 | 0.831 | 0.849 | 0.722 (+0.102) |
| + Dropout [17] | 1.136 | 0.317 | 0.138 | 1.179 | 0.879 | 0.939 | 0.765 (+0.145) |
| + Sent-Debias [7] | 0.350 | -0.298 | -0.626 | 0.458 | 0.413 | 0.462 | 0.434 (+0.186) |
| + INLP [8] | 0.317 | -0.354 | -0.258 | 0.105 | 0.187 | -0.004 | <u>0.204 (-0.416)</u> |
| + Context-Debias [18] | 0.409 | 0.159 | -0.222 | 0.848 | 0.537 | 0.176 | 0.392 (-0.228) |
| + Auto-Debias [11] | 0.344 | 0.016 | 0.173 | 1.123 | 0.734 | 0.783 | 0.529 (-0.028) |
| + Ours | -0.023 | -0.249 | -0.405 | 0.144 | -0.353 | -0.001 | 0.196 (-0.424) |

Table 1. Effect sizes for debiased models on SEAT. The effect size indicates the debiasing performance of the intrinsic bias. Absolute effect size values closer to 0 refer to models with a lower bias level.

3.3. Knowledge Guidance by Distillation

We leverage another language encoder to compensate for the damage to internal linguistic knowledge in the bias mitigation process. Let f_G be a pre-trained language encoder completely identical to the f_T . It is not necessary to employ the non-stereotype sentences written by humans that have rich semantic information because the knowledge guidance aims to preserve the non-stereotype knowledge, unrelated to the bias, not to learn new linguistic knowledge. In addition, data efficiency is also improved by utilizing sentence generation instead of the existing data augmentation method using extra text data. The number of stereotype and non-stereotype sentences is set to be the same to balance two objectives: mitigating bias and preserving linguistic knowledge. The representations for the non-stereotype sentences in the last layer are

$$h_G^n = f_G(x_n; \theta_G), \quad (4)$$

$$h_T^n = f_T(x_n; \theta_T), \quad (5)$$

where θ_G is the parameter of the language encoder f_G , which is fixed during training. We do not update the parameters of the f_G to utilize f_G as the ground truth for linguistic knowledge, which guides the f_T to preserve linguistic knowledge. We set two criteria similar to those used in the bias-mitigation process: KLD and cosine similarity. In this step, we define the following objective function for language modeling:

$$\mathcal{L}_{lm} = \mathcal{D}_{KL}(h_G^n \| h_T^n) - \frac{h_G^{n\top} \cdot h_T^n}{\|h_G^n\| \|h_T^n\|}. \quad (6)$$

We join the two training objectives to mitigate bias for the stereotype sentences and maintain the original knowledge of the non-stereotype sentences. Consequently, the final loss term is

$$\mathcal{L} = \lambda \cdot \mathcal{L}_{bias} + (1 - \lambda) \cdot \mathcal{L}_{lm}, \quad (7)$$

where λ is a hyper-parameter determines the debiasing weight of the objective function. The combined objective function converges to -1 because KLD has a lower bound of 0 and cosine similarity has an upper bound of 1.

4. EXPERIMENTS

4.1. Benchmarks

We evaluate the following benchmarks: SEAT, StereoSet, CrowS-Pairs, and GLUE. SEAT measures the intrinsic bias, which refers to a geometrical bias in an embedding space. We report the average effect size to compare with previous studies. StereoSet and

| Model | LMS (% , \uparrow) | SS (% , \downarrow) | ICAT (\uparrow) |
|------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|----------------------|
| BERT | 84.17 | 60.28 | 66.86 |
| + CDA | 83.08 | 59.61 | 67.11 (+0.25) |
| + Dropout | 83.04 | 60.66 | 65.34 (-1.52) |
| + Sent-Debias | 84.20 | 59.37 | 68.42 (+1.56) |
| + INLP | 80.63 | 57.25 | 68.94 (+2.08) |
| + Context-Debias | 85.34 | 59.21 | <u>69.62 (+2.76)</u> |
| + Auto-Debias | 74.09 | 53.11 | 69.48 (+2.62) |
| + Ours | 83.83 | 55.36 | 74.84 (+7.98) |

Table 2. Performance of masked language modeling and debiasing for debiased models on StereoSet. The ideally unbiased models achieve an ICAT score of 100.

CrowS-Pairs evaluate extrinsic bias, which indicates a bias in the predictions of PLMs. First, StereoSet evaluates the given model’s Language Modeling Score (LMS) and Stereotype Score (SS). StereoSet also introduces an idealized context association test (ICAT) as a composite indicator, a criterion for practitioners to select a model for deployment because a high ICAT means that SS is low compared to LMS. Next, CrowS-Pairs proposes a metric that computes the percentage of examples for which a given model favors Stereotyped Sentences (SS) or Anti-Stereotyped Sentences (AntiSS) using masked language modeling (MLM). Finally, GLUE is a representative natural language understanding (NLU) benchmark for various downstream tasks.

4.2. Experimental Settings

We evaluate BERT, which is the most popular masked language model. The pre-trained `bert-base-uncased` is implemented using the HuggingFace Transformers library [19]. We train our debiasing model for an epoch with a learning rate of $2e-5$ and AdamW [20] as an optimizer. It shows the best overall performance when λ equals 0.99 in our experiments.

4.3. Results

Table 1 reports the results of the debiased models on SEAT. Our strategy achieves the lowest level compared with other strategies, which indicates that our strategy is effective for the intrinsic bias reduction existing in the word embedding space. As shown in Table 2, our debiased model also achieves the highest ICAT score compared to previous models, indicating that our model has a competitive LMS and relatively low SS compared to the vanilla model. Although Sent-Debias and Context-Debias achieve better LMS than

| Model | CoLA | MNLI | MRPC | QNLI | QQP | RTE | SST-2 | STS-B | WNLI | Avg. (↑) |
|------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|----------------------|
| BERT | 55.64 | 84.12 | 82.19 | 91.31 | 89.23 | 61.73 | 92.32 | 87.75 | 36.15 | 75.60 |
| + CDA | 55.31 | 84.56 | 82.76 | 91.16 | 90.18 | 65.46 | 92.54 | 88.03 | 32.86 | 75.87 (+0.27) |
| + Dropout | 50.90 | 84.37 | 80.64 | 91.20 | 89.94 | 63.18 | 92.58 | 87.42 | 39.91 | 75.57 (-0.03) |
| + Sent-Debias | 48.55 | 84.26 | 81.86 | 91.43 | 90.78 | 61.37 | 92.35 | 87.74 | 34.74 | 74.79 (-0.81) |
| + INLP | 55.91 | 84.09 | 84.10 | 91.17 | 89.15 | 62.22 | 92.39 | 87.83 | 34.74 | 75.73 (+0.13) |
| + Context-Debias | 53.91 | 84.28 | 82.98 | 91.43 | 89.18 | 61.48 | 92.24 | 87.00 | 36.15 | 75.41 (-0.19) |
| + Auto-Debias | 55.89 | 84.25 | 84.20 | 91.57 | 89.21 | 62.58 | 92.51 | 87.68 | 39.44 | <u>76.37</u> (+0.77) |
| + Ours | 56.15 | 84.16 | 86.17 | 91.26 | 89.19 | 62.34 | 92.39 | 87.78 | 39.44 | 76.54 (+0.94) |

Table 3. Natural language understanding evaluation results for debiased models on the GLUE validation set. We report the Matthew’s correlation for CoLA, the combined score for MRPC, QQP, and STS-B. We report the accuracy for all other tasks. All the results are averaged over three training times with different seeds.

| Model | SS (%) | AntiSS (%) | Avg. Score (↓) |
|------------------|--------|------------|---------------------|
| BERT | 57.86 | 56.31 | 7.09 |
| + CDA | 54.09 | 60.19 | 7.14 (+0.05) |
| + Dropout | 57.23 | 55.34 | 6.29 (-0.80) |
| + Sent-Debias | 37.74 | 74.76 | 18.51 (+11.42) |
| + INLP | 42.77 | 63.11 | 10.17 (+3.62) |
| + Context-Debias | 61.01 | 51.46 | 6.24 (-0.85) |
| + Auto-Debias | 48.43 | 59.22 | <u>5.40</u> (-1.69) |
| + Ours | 55.35 | 54.37 | 4.86 (-2.23) |

Table 4. Evaluation results for debiased models on CrowS-Pairs. SS and AntiSS closer to 50% denote that the models have a lower bias. The combined score is the average of the differences from the ideally unbiased LMs.

our method, their SS values reveal that they do not remove the bias well. In contrast, Auto-Debias is inappropriate for deployment because it significantly harms the MLM performance despite having the lowest SS. It is necessary to review the performance on downstream tasks since StereoSet only measures the MLM performance. Table 3 shows that our method retains sufficient language knowledge for downstream tasks. Table 4 demonstrates the better effectiveness, on average, of extrinsic bias compared to other studies. In particular, our results are the most balanced results for SS and AntiSS. Finally, we qualitatively inspect the techniques. Figure 3 illustrates the word importance to a decision of whether two sentences are entailed by utilizing layer-wise relevance propagation (LRP) [21]. The upper and lower sentences contain the same contextual information, except for gender words. Thus, ideally debiased models should determine that all sentences are entailed. However, as shown in the illustration, our debiased model attends to contextual information, whereas BERT and Auto-Debias focus on gender words.

4.4. Ablation Study

We investigate the effects of several options: adopting knowledge guidance ($-f_G$), utilizing either cosine similarity ($-D_{KL}$) or KLD ($-S_C$), and employing Euclidean distance ($+D_{EU}$) instead of both KLD and cosine similarity for the objective function. The results in the second row of Table 5 demonstrate that the f_G is mandatory for linguistic knowledge. In particular, it has lower scores on StereoSet because of the damage to linguistic knowledge. On the other hand, excluding the cosine similarity results in higher intrinsic and extrinsic biases, which indicates that cosine similarity is essential for reducing bias. Finally, an objective function with Euclidean distance

| Model | SEAT (↓) | StereoSet (↑) | GLUE (↑) | CrowS-Pairs (↓) |
|------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------|
| Ours | <u>0.196</u> | 74.84 | <u>76.50</u> | 4.86 |
| - f_G | 0.123 | 71.94 | 75.68 | 5.34 |
| - D_{KL} | 0.198 | <u>74.60</u> | 76.47 | 4.94 |
| - S_C | 0.227 | 74.55 | 76.37 | 5.76 |
| + D_{EU} | 0.231 | 73.36 | 77.39 | 6.71 |

Table 5. Ablation of our compensatory debiasing strategy on all benchmarks.

| | | Legend: ■ Not entailment □ Neutral ■ Entailment | | |
|-------------|---|---|--|--|
| BERT | [CLS] A nurse works in medical center of california . [SEP] He works in california . [SEP] | | | |
| | [CLS] A nurse works in medical center of california . [SEP] She works in california . [SEP] | | | |
| Auto-Debias | [CLS] A nurse works in medical center of california . [SEP] He works in california . [SEP] | | | |
| | [CLS] A nurse works in medical center of california . [SEP] She works in california . [SEP] | | | |
| Ours | [CLS] A nurse works in medical center of california . [SEP] He works in california . [SEP] | | | |
| | [CLS] A nurse works in medical center of california . [SEP] She works in california . [SEP] | | | |

Fig. 3. Visualization of relevance for an intuitive example. The green and red colors represent positive and negative relevance, respectively. The upper and lower sentences have the same semantics except “He” and “She.”

5. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORKS

We propose a compensatory debiasing strategy to mitigate gender imbalances in PLMs that leverages nonlinear bias separation and knowledge guidance. First, the stereotype and non-stereotype sentences are independently generated without a large corpus and divided at the sentence level. Second, we adopt a pre-trained model whose parameters are not updated, which guides the debiasing model to conserve linguistic knowledge by maximizing the agreement between the representations from the two models. In our experiments, our approach achieves the best performance in bias reduction while having a competitive language modeling performance compared to the original model. Moreover, we confirm that a fine-tuned model with a ground-truth set of stereotype words exhibits better performance than other models. This means that the debiasing task can be improved by updating existing stereotype words. Consequently, we plan to create an optimized set of stereotype words for a better generalization of debiasing in the future.

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