

1 Microscopic Foundation: Neural Dynamics

Before deriving the macroscopic plasticity rules, we must first establish the microscopic dynamics of the individual neurons comprising the network. We employ the Leaky Integrate-and-Fire (LIF) model, a standard reduction of the Hodgkin-Huxley formalism that captures the essential sub-threshold integration and thresholding behavior of cortical neurons [1].

1.1 Membrane Potential Dynamics

The state of a postsynaptic neuron i is described by its membrane potential $V_i(t)$. In the absence of input, the membrane potential relaxes to a resting potential E_L . The evolution of $V_i(t)$ is governed by the conservation of current across the cell membrane, modeled as an RC circuit consisting of a leakage resistor R_m and a membrane capacitor C_m in parallel [2]:

$$\tau_m \frac{dV_i(t)}{dt} = -(V_i(t) - E_L) + R_m I_{syn,i}(t) + R_m I_{ext,i}(t), \quad (1)$$

where $\tau_m = R_m C_m$ represents the membrane time constant. In cortical pyramidal neurons, τ_m typically lies in the range of 10–20 ms [2]. The term $I_{syn,i}(t)$ represents the total synaptic current received from presynaptic neurons, and $I_{ext,i}(t)$ accounts for any external background currents or noise.

1.2 Synaptic Interaction

The synaptic current $I_{syn,i}(t)$ is determined by the activity of the presynaptic population. Let the spike train of a presynaptic neuron j be denoted by a sum of Dirac delta functions, $\rho_j(t) = \sum_k \delta(t - t_j^k)$. The specific mechanism for generating these spike times is defined in Section 1.3.

The arrival of a spike from neuron j induces a transient change in the input to neuron i . We utilize the *current-based* approximation, which assumes that synaptic currents are independent of the postsynaptic membrane potential (unlike conductance-based models where $I \propto g(t)(V - E_{syn})$). This approximation is standard for analyzing network-level learning dynamics [1]. The total synaptic current is the linear sum of filtered presynaptic spikes:

$$I_{syn,i}(t) = \sum_j w_{ij} \int_{-\infty}^t \alpha(t-s) \rho_j(s) ds, \quad (2)$$

where $\alpha(t)$ is the postsynaptic current (PSC) kernel. Following Dayan and Abbott [2], this is modeled as an exponential decay function $\alpha(t) = \frac{1}{\tau_s} e^{-t/\tau_s} \Theta(t)$, where $\Theta(t)$ is the Heaviside step function and τ_s is the synaptic time constant (typically 2–10 ms for AMPA/GABA receptors).

1.3 Spike Generation Mechanism

The continuous voltage dynamics defined above give rise to discrete events. A spike is generated at time t_i^k when the membrane potential crosses a fixed threshold ϑ from below:

$$t_i^k : V_i(t_i^k) = \vartheta \quad \text{and} \quad \left. \frac{dV_i}{dt} \right|_{t=t_i^k} > 0. \quad (3)$$

Immediately following a spike, the potential is reset to a value $V_{reset} < \vartheta$ and held constant for a refractory period τ_{ref} (typically 2–5 ms), simulating the temporary inactivation of Na^+ .

channels. This reset ensures that the crossing condition in (3) is sufficient to uniquely define spike times.

This mechanism defines the postsynaptic spike train $\rho_i(t) = \sum_k \delta(t - t_i^k)$, which serves as the input to the plasticity equations in the following section.

2 Mathematical Formulation of the Three-Factor Plasticity Model

Having defined the generation of spike times via the LIF dynamics, we now analyze the evolution of the synaptic weights w_{ij} . We focus on a plasticity rule belonging to the class of *three-factor learning rules*, as reviewed by Frémaux and Gerstner [3]. In this framework, synaptic updates are gated by a global neuromodulatory signal (factor three) rather than relying solely on the pairwise correlation of presynaptic and postsynaptic activity.

2.1 Neural Activity and Notation

Following the framework established in the previous section, the neural response functions are formally treated as sums of Dirac distributions:

$$\rho_j(t) = \sum_{k=1}^{N_j} \delta(t - t_j^k) \quad \text{and} \quad \rho_i(t) = \sum_{k=1}^{N_i} \delta(t - t_i^k). \quad (4)$$

Here, N_j and N_i denote the total number of spikes fired by each neuron over the interval $t \in [0, T]$. These counts are determined by the dynamics in (1) and (3). Note that while the equations are deterministic, the spike trains often exhibit Poisson-like variability due to stochastic external currents $I_{ext}(t)$ [2].

To prevent unbounded growth, we constrain the weight to a closed interval $w_{ij} \in [0, w_{\max}]$. The parameter w_{\max} represents the physiological saturation limit of synaptic efficacy. In computational studies, w_{\max} is often normalized (e.g., $w_{\max} = 1$) or set relative to the threshold ϑ to control the network's excitability [3].

2.2 Local Dynamics: The Eligibility Trace

A central feature of this model is that the coincidence of spikes creates a temporary memory trace, $E_{ij}(t)$, known as the *eligibility trace* [3]. This trace allows the synapse to bridge the temporal delay between millisecond-scale neural activity and delayed reward signals. The eligibility trace evolves according to:

$$\tau_e \frac{dE_{ij}(t)}{dt} = -E_{ij}(t) + S_{ij}(t), \quad (5)$$

where τ_e is the decay time constant. For reinforcement learning tasks, τ_e is typically on the order of hundreds of milliseconds to seconds (e.g., 0.1–1.0 s), significantly longer than the membrane time constant τ_m [1].

The driving term $S_{ij}(t)$ represents the instantaneous induction of Spike-Timing-Dependent Plasticity (STDP). To define $S_{ij}(t)$, we use variables $x_j(t)$ and $y_i(t)$ that track the recent history

of presynaptic and postsynaptic activity:

$$\tau_+ \frac{dx_j(t)}{dt} = -x_j(t) + \rho_j(t), \quad (6)$$

$$\tau_- \frac{dy_i(t)}{dt} = -y_i(t) + \rho_i(t), \quad (7)$$

where τ_+ and τ_- are the time constants for the potentiation and depression windows. Experimental measurements suggest these values are typically in the range of 20–40 ms [4].

The STDP induction term $S_{ij}(t)$ combines Long-Term Potentiation (LTP) and Long-Term Depression (LTD):

$$S_{ij}(t) = \underbrace{A_+(w_{ij})x_j(t)\rho_i(t)}_{\text{LTP contribution}} - \underbrace{A_-(w_{ij})y_i(t)\rho_j(t)}_{\text{LTD contribution}}. \quad (8)$$

2.3 Weight Dependence and Stability

To ensure the weight w_{ij} stays within the bounds $[0, w_{\max}]$, the scaling functions include "soft bound" dependencies:

$$A_+(w_{ij}) = \eta_+(w_{\max} - w_{ij}) \quad \text{and} \quad A_-(w_{ij}) = \eta_- w_{ij}, \quad (9)$$

where η_+, η_- are the learning rates. This linear dependence on the distance to the bound is a standard method to enforce constraints without hard clipping, as discussed in Gerstner et al. [1]. Typical learning rates are small ($\eta \ll 1$) to ensure weights evolve slowly relative to spiking dynamics.

2.4 Global Dynamics: Neuromodulated Update

The actual change in synaptic weight is governed by a global neuromodulatory signal $M(t)$:

$$\frac{dw_{ij}(t)}{dt} = M(t)E_{ij}(t). \quad (10)$$

The signal $M(t)$ is modeled as a Reward Prediction Error (RPE), calculated as the difference between the instantaneous reward $R(t)$ and a baseline expectation $\bar{R}(t)$:

$$M(t) = R(t) - \bar{R}(t). \quad (11)$$

Here, $\bar{R}(t)$ serves as a reference point, allowing for bidirectional regulation of synaptic weights [3].

References

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