Evaluating the fairness of task-adaptive pretraining on unlabeled test data before few-shot text classification

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Abstract

Few-shot learning benchmarks are critical for evaluating modern NLP techniques. It is possible, however, that benchmarks favor methods which easily make use of unlabeled text, because researchers can use unlabeled text from the test set to pretrain their models. Given the dearth of research on this potential problem, we run experiments to quantify the bias caused by pretraining on unlabeled test set text instead of on unlabeled, independently drawn text. Controlled few-shot and zero-shot experiments on 25 classification tasks and 3 language models—BERT, GPT-2, and Mistral 7B—do not find evidence of overoptimism. Furthermore, we demonstrate the importance of repeated subsampling when studying few-shot text classification, and recommend that few-shot learning benchmarks include multiple training folds. Code and data are available here: https://github.com/kddubey/pretrain-on-test/.

1 Introduction

It is common for NLP benchmarks to release text from the test set, as researchers can submit a file of predictions instead of submitting code. A potential concern is that researchers can use this text during training. Consider the Real-world Annotated Few-shot Tasks (RAFT) benchmark (Alex et al., 2021), which contains "few-shot" text classification tasks—tasks where the training set contains a relatively small number of labeled examples. Below is an excerpt from the RAFT paper (emphasis added):

> For each task, we release a public training set with 50 examples and a larger unlabeled test set. *We encourage unsupervised pre-training on the unlabelled examples* and open-domain information retrieval.

In the RAFT competition, a model is evaluated by scoring its predictions on the same set of unlabeled text which the model may have been trained on (using an unsupervised training procedure).

It is wrong to train a model on test set features with their labels and then evaluate on the test set when one needs to estimate performance on out-of-sample data. Test set performance would be overoptimistic (Hastie et al., 2009). This fact is widely known. But what if, as encouraged by Alex et al. (2021), a model is trained on test set features *without* test set labels? This paper studies this question for the domain of few-shot text classification.

2 Motivation

NLP benchmarks for few-shot learning are prevalent, as having only a handful of labeled examples is more realistic. One consideration when designing these benchmarks is that some few-shot approaches can—at least theoretically—use unlabeled text from the test set. With Pattern-Exploiting Training (Schick and Schütze, 2021), for example, one can train the final classifier on test set text with soft labels predicted by an ensemble of supervised models. With Pre-trained Prompt Tuning (Gu et al., 2022), one can pretrain the language model (LM) on unlabeled test set text before prompt-tuning on the labeled training set. A more classical approach would be to train a word2vec model (Mikolov et al., 2013) on unlabeled test set text, run this model on training text to get embeddings, and finally train a classifier on these embeddings with labels from the training set.

For other few-shot approaches, such as SetFit (Tunstall et al., 2022) and in-context learning with LLMs (as popularized by Brown et al., 2020), it is more common to only use labeled text.

While the ability to exploit unlabeled text is useful, applying this ability to test set text could be substantively different than applying it to text which is statistically independent of the test set. This difference in methodology may be more concerning in

the few-shot setting than in the many-shot setting. It is conceivable that differences between few-shot methods are due just as much to how unlabeled text is used as they are to how the few, labeled examples are used. This raises the question: does pretraining a model on a benchmark's unlabeled test set text inflate the model's performance on that benchmark?

3 Related work

As indicated by the quote in §1, the RAFT benchmark implicitly assumes that the answer is no. The validity of using test set features is not a fringe opinion. The popular textbook by Hastie et al. (2009) contains the following passage without a reference or evidence (emphasis added):

> There is one qualification: *initial unsupervised screening steps can be done before samples are left out.* For example, we could select the 1000 predictors with highest variance across all 50 samples, before starting cross-validation. *Since this filtering does not involve the class labels, it does not give the predictors an unfair advantage.*

The opposite opinion—that exploiting unlabeled test set features is unfair—may align more closely with best practices. For example, Gururangan et al. (2020) contains the following criticism of another study when comparing performances on a text classification task:

> Thongtan and Phienthrakul (2019) report a higher number (97.42) on IMDB, but they train their word vectors on the test set.

Jacovi et al. (2023) argue that benchmarks which release unlabeled test set text can be compromised, but do not discuss potential problems with using unlabeled test set text by itself.

Moscovich and Rosset (2022) contains experiments and theory for unsupervised methods which are common to tasks involving tabular data. They find that estimators of out-of-sample performance which were subject to these methods may be biased positively or negatively, depending on the parameters of the problem. They recommend further research on this bias in more domains, particularly when dealing with small sample sizes and high-dimensional data.

4 Experimental design

We study whether pretraining on unlabeled test set text biases test set performance for 25 diverse text classification tasks and two types of LMs: BERT (Devlin et al., 2019) and GPT-2 (Radford et al., 2019). Appendix A describes each task.

The goal of the experiment is to first establish that pretraining is beneficial, in line with Gururangan et al. (2020). Second, given that pretraining has a detectable effect, the experiment measures the accuracy difference between using test set text for the pretraining stage—an arguably unfair methodology—and using text which is independent of the test set—an inarguably fair methodology.

In more detail, the experiment starts by subsampling three separate sets of data from the full sample of data for a given text classification task:

- `extra`: n (either $50, 100, 200$ or 500) unlabeled texts which are optionally used for pretraining
- `train`: m (either 50 or 100) labeled texts for classification training
- `test`: n labeled texts to report accuracy.

Next, three accuracy estimators are computed. Procedures used to obtain them are described below.

4.1 $\text{acc}_{\text{extra}}$

1. Train a freshly loaded, pretrained LM on the n unlabeled texts in `extra` using the LM's pretraining objective—masked language modeling loss for BERT, or causal language modeling loss for GPT-2. Texts are passed independently, and padded to form batches.
2. Add a linear layer to this model and finetune all of the LM's weights to minimize classification cross entropy loss on `train`.
3. Compute the classification accuracy of this model on `test`.

Step 1 is task-adaptive pretraining—a procedure broadly recommended by Gururangan et al. (2020). Step 2 is a canonical way to train a transformer-based LM for a classification task, according to Section 2 of Zhang et al. (2021).

$\text{acc}_{\text{extra}}$ is clearly an unbiased estimator of out-of-sample accuracy because it never trains on `test`. In other words, the expected value of $\text{acc}_{\text{extra}}$ is the accuracy one would observe on independent, identically distributed data.

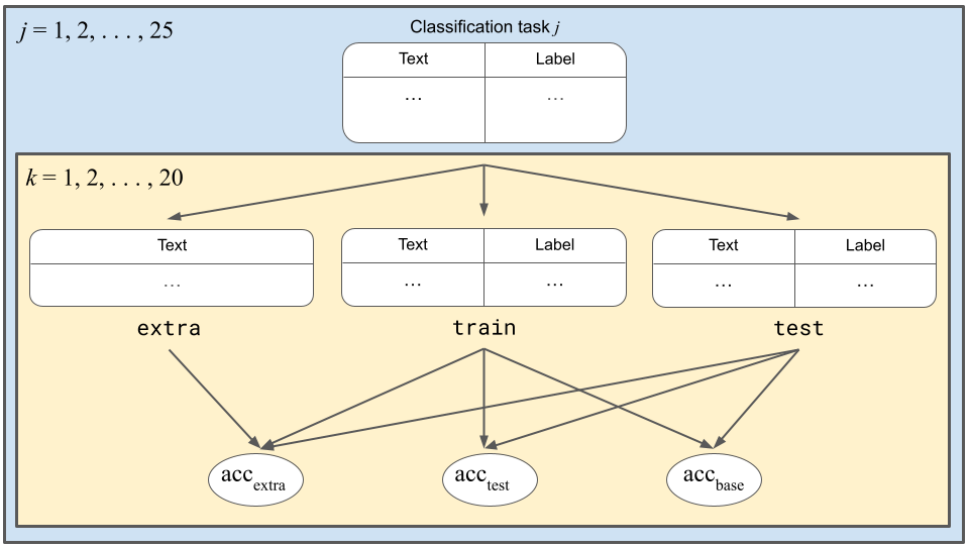

Figure 1: Graphical representation of the experimental design (§4) for $n = 500$ as an example.

```
acc_extra = (
    language_model  # freshly loaded
    .pretrain(extra["texts"])
    .train(train["texts"], train["labels"])
    .evaluate(test["texts"], test["labels"])
)
```

```
acc_test = (
    language_model  # freshly loaded
    .pretrain(test["texts"])
    .train(train["texts"], train["labels"])
    .evaluate(test["texts"], test["labels"])
)
```

```
acc_base = (
    language_model  # freshly loaded
    # no further pretraining
    .train(train["texts"], train["labels"])
    .evaluate(test["texts"], test["labels"])
)
```

Figure 2: Pseudocode for the accuracy estimators defined in §4.

4.2 acc_{test}

acc_{test} is identical to $\text{acc}_{\text{extra}}$, except that task-adaptive pretraining is done on unlabeled text from `test` instead of `extra` in step 1.

acc_{test} represents what one might see in a competition like RAFT, where pretraining on unlabeled text from `test` is encouraged. It is unclear whether this accuracy estimator is unbiased, because it involved pretraining and evaluating on the same set of test set text. A reasonable hypothesis is that it is overoptimistic, i.e., $\text{E}[\text{acc}_{\text{test}}] > \text{E}[\text{acc}_{\text{extra}}]$.

4.3 acc_{base}

acc_{base} does not do task-adaptive pretraining; it does not make any use of unlabeled text. It trains a pretrained LM on `train` to do classification, and then computes this model's accuracy on `test`.

This score provides a sanity check. If there is no boost from acc_{base} to $\text{acc}_{\text{extra}}$, then it may not be surprising to observe no difference between $\text{acc}_{\text{extra}}$ and acc_{test}. A boost from acc_{base} to $\text{acc}_{\text{extra}}$ would rule out undertraining as the cause of a null difference between $\text{acc}_{\text{extra}}$ and acc_{test} due to insufficient pretraining epochs or too low a learning rate.

4.4 Repeated subsampling

The accuracy estimators are paired, because their classification training and test data are identical. The only difference is the source of unlabeled text for pretraining. For $\text{acc}_{\text{extra}}$, the source is independent of test data. For acc_{test}, the test set text is used. For acc_{base}, no unlabeled text is used.

A potentially important source of variation in this experiment is the particular subsamples, i.e., the particular realizations of `extra`, `train`, and `test` for a given classification task. To expose this variation, the experiment procedure is repeated tens of times for each task.[1] For example, for $n = 500$, and for each of the 25 tasks, 20 ($\text{acc}_{\text{extra}}$, acc_{test}, acc_{base}) triples are computed.

Appendix B explains more experiment choices.

5 Results

Appendix D.2 visualizes the distributions of $\text{acc}_{\text{extra}} - \text{acc}_{\text{base}}$ and $\text{acc}_{\text{test}} - \text{acc}_{\text{extra}}$. $\text{acc}_{\text{extra}} - \text{acc}_{\text{base}}$ is a control: it is the accuracy boost from pretraining

[1] For $n = 50$ and $n = 100$, the experiment is repeated 100 times. For $n = 200$, the experiment is repeated 50 times. For $n = 500$, the experiment is repeated 20 times. In total, 81,000 finetuned BERT and GPT-2 models were evaluated.

on unlabeled independent text versus not pretraining at all. $\text{acc}_{\text{test}} - \text{acc}_{\text{extra}}$ is the main quantity of interest: it is the evaluation bias from pretraining on unlabeled test set text instead of on unlabeled independent text.

Table 1 contains means of these differences for each configuration of the experiment. It roughly suggests that while pretraining is consistently beneficial, pretraining on unlabeled test set text does not bias test set performance one way or the other.

	BERT	GPT-2
$n = 50$	4.1% / 0.19%	3.8% / 0.18%
$n = 100$	3.9% / 0.18%	4.1% / 0.11%
$n = 200$	3.9% / -0.39%	4.4% / -0.05%
$n = 500$	3.5% / 0.48%	4.6% / -0.08%

(a) $m = 50$

	BERT	GPT-2
$n = 50$	6.2% / -0.08%	2.2% / -0.05%
$n = 100$	6.1% / -0.37%	2.5% / 0.03%
$n = 200$	4.1% / 0.33%	6.3% / -0.01%
$n = 500$	6.1% / -0.16%	3.9% / -0.21%

(b) $m = 100$

Table 1: Means of accuracy differences taken across all subsamples of all 25 classification tasks. For each cell, the upper-left of the diagonal corresponds to the sample mean of $\text{acc}_{\text{extra}} - \text{acc}_{\text{base}}$, and the lower-right corresponds to the sample mean of $\text{acc}_{\text{test}} - \text{acc}_{\text{extra}}$.

6 Analysis

Reporting means is not enough, especially when studying few-shot learning. Appendix D.2 demonstrates that there is considerable variance, despite pairing the accuracy estimators.[2] While these visualizations tell us about how raw accuracy differences vary, they do not tell us how the mean accuracy difference varies. We seek a neat answer to the core questions: on this benchmark of 25 classification tasks, how much does the overall accuracy differ between two modeling techniques, and how much does this difference vary?

[2]One source of variance is intentionally introduced: the subsample splits, as explained in §4.4. The other source of variance is inherent: the added linear layer to perform classification is initialized with random weights.

One way to communicate the variance is to estimate the standard error of the mean difference across classification tasks. But the standard error statistic can be difficult to interpret (Morey et al., 2016). Furthermore, its computation is not completely trivial due to the data's hierarchical dependency structure: each triple, ($\text{acc}_{\text{extra}}$, acc_{test}, acc_{base}), is drawn from (`train`, `test`), which is itself drawn from the given classification dataset.

6.1 Model

This analysis does not aim to estimate standard errors. Instead, a hierarchical model is fit. Specifically, for each LM type (indexed by $i = 1, 2$ for BERT and GPT-2), each classification task (indexed by $j = 1, 2, \ldots, 25$), each of their subsamples (indexed by $k = 1, 2, \ldots, 20$ for $n = 500$, for example), and a control and treatment (indexed by $l = 0, 1$), the number of correct predictions is modeled ($*$ is short for $ijkl$):

$$Y_* \sim \text{Binomial}(n, \lambda_*) \quad (1)$$

$$\text{logit}(\lambda_*) = \mu + \alpha z_i + U_j + V_{jk} + W_{jl} + \beta x_l \quad (2)$$

$$\mu \sim \text{Normal}(0, 1) \quad (3)$$

$$\alpha \sim \text{Normal}(0, 5) \quad (4)$$

$$U_j \sim \text{Normal}(0, \sigma_U) \quad (5)$$

$$V_{jk} \sim \text{Normal}(0, \sigma_V) \quad (6)$$

$$W_{jl} \sim \text{Normal}(0, \sigma_W) \quad (7)$$

$$\beta \sim \text{Normal}(0, 1) \quad (8)$$

$$\sigma_U, \sigma_V \sim \text{HalfNormal}(0, 1) \quad (9)$$

$$\sigma_W \sim \text{HalfNormal}(0, 3.5355) \quad (10)$$

(1) number of correct predictions

(2) logit link for accuracy rate, additive effects

(3) prior for the global intercept

(4) prior for the effect of the type of LM (BERT or GPT-2)—a control variable

(5) prior for the effect of the classification task (partial-pooled to reduce overfitting)

(6) prior for the nested effect of the task's subsampled dataset

(7) prior for the interaction effect of the task and the intervention (to reduce underfitting)

(8) prior for the effect of the intervention

(9) prior for standard deviations

(10) prior for standard deviation.

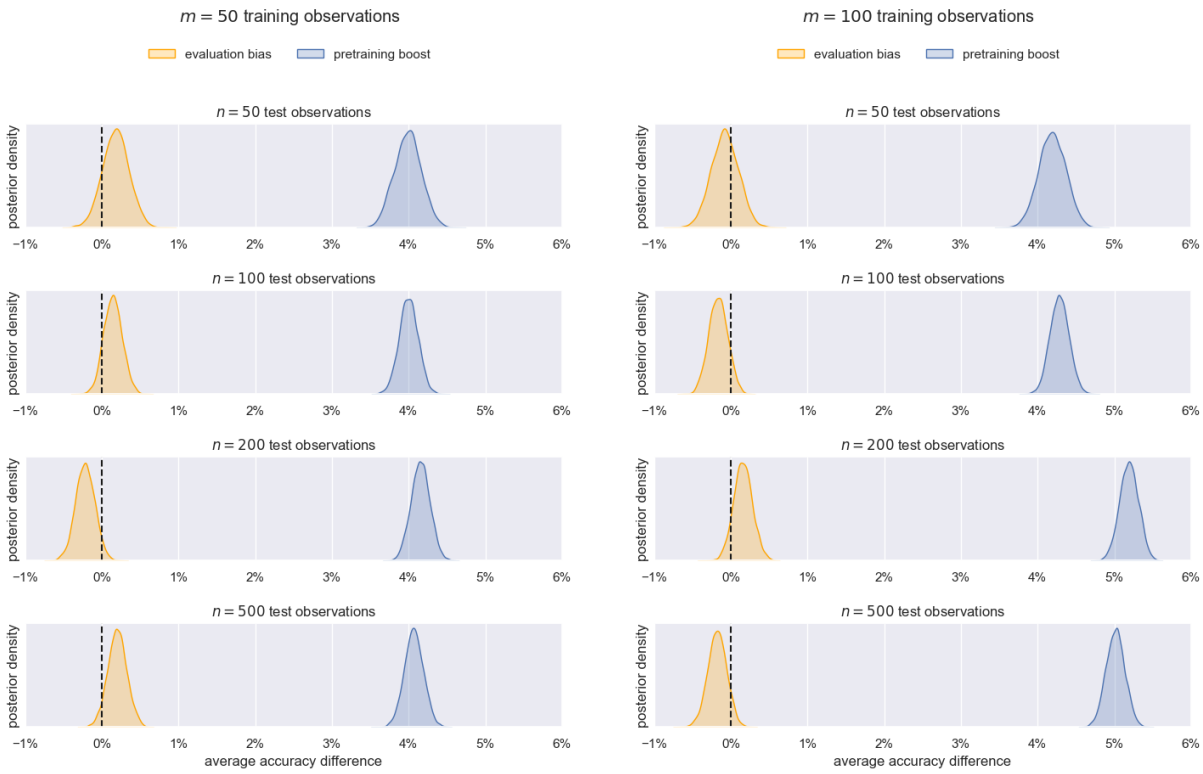

Figure 3: Distributions of average accuracy differences (11). The evaluation bias is akin to $\text{acc}_{\text{test}} - \text{acc}_{\text{extra}}$. The pretraining boost is akin to $\text{acc}_{\text{extra}} - \text{acc}_{\text{base}}$.

The model is fit using Markov Chain Monte Carlo, using the interface provided by the `bambi` package (Capretto et al., 2022).

To analyze the pretraining boost, the control, Y_{ijk0}, is $n \cdot \text{acc}_{\text{base}}$, and the treatment, Y_{ijk1}, is $n \cdot \text{acc}_{\text{extra}}$. Here, the intervention refers to pretraining on unlabeled independent text versus not pretraining at all.

To analyze the evaluation bias, the control, Y_{ijk0}, is $n \cdot \text{acc}_{\text{extra}}$, and the treatment, Y_{ijk1}, is $n \cdot \text{acc}_{\text{test}}$. Here, the intervention refers to pretraining on unlabeled text from the test set instead of on unlabeled independent text.

4,000 samples from the posterior predictive, $\hat{Y}_{ijkl}$, are drawn. Appendix E.1 includes a simulation demonstrating the model's ability to correctly recover null and non-null effects.

6.2 Overall effects

Benchmarks assess methods by taking their average performance across tasks. To place the results in this context, samples from the posterior predictive distribution of $Y_{ijk1} - Y_{ijk0}$ (6.1) are taken, then averaged across i (the 2 LM types—BERT and GPT-2), j (the 25 classification tasks), and k (their subsamples), and divided by n to obtain the distribution of the average accuracy difference (expressed in dot notation, where dots are used as placeholders for indices that have been averaged over):

$$\frac{\bar{\hat{Y}}_{\cdot\cdot\cdot 1} - \bar{\hat{Y}}_{\cdot\cdot\cdot 0}}{n}. \tag{11}$$

Each distribution is that of the marginal effect of the modeling intervention: pretraining versus not pretraining (the pretraining boost), or pretraining on unlabeled test set text instead of on unlabeled independent text (the evaluation bias).

6.3 Task-level effects

While taking an average across tasks provides a concise summary, it cannot be used to rule out the existence of an evaluation bias. If the direction of the bias depends on latent properties of the task, averaging may cancel out real, positive biases with real, negative ones. Alternatively, it may dilute the few real, positive biases with many null ones.

Jin et al. (2021) argue and demonstrate that the benefit of task-adaptive pretraining depends on the task's causal direction. If the principle of independent causal mechanisms is also relevant to the

fairness of pretraining on test set features, then our accuracy data may contain (for the sake of argument) positive evaluation biases for anti-causal tasks, and null biases for causal tasks.[3]

One way to analyze tasks is to sample from the posterior predictive distribution of the accuracy difference, and only average across subsamples:

$$\frac{\bar{\hat{Y}}_{ij\cdot 1} - \bar{\hat{Y}}_{ij\cdot 0}}{n}. \tag{12}$$

A more concise way is to perform a hypothesis test for each setting of m, n, and the LM type:

$$H_0 : \mathrm{E}[\mathrm{acc}_{\mathrm{test}} - \mathrm{acc}_{\mathrm{extra}}] = 0 \tag{13}$$
$$H_1 : \mathrm{E}[\mathrm{acc}_{\mathrm{test}} - \mathrm{acc}_{\mathrm{extra}}] > 0. \tag{14}$$

The p-value is estimated via permutation testing. It is then adjusted to control the false discovery rate (Benjamini and Hochberg, 1995).

7 Discussion

Figure 3 demonstrates that the average pretraining boost is significant in every configuration of the experiment. This finding replicates that from Gururangan et al. (2020). After averaging across settings for m, n, and the 2 LM types, only two of the 25 classification tasks had a pretraining boost less than 0, and both were greater than -1%. [4] Task-adaptive pretraining had the intended effect.

As shown in Figure 3, the evaluation bias bounces inconsistently and insignificantly around 0. After averaging, 12 of the 25 classification tasks had a positive evaluation bias, 13 had a negative evaluation bias, and all tasks had an average evaluation bias less than 1% in absolute value.

To avoid excessive averaging, we lemon-picked tasks which reported a bias of at least +3% in any experiment configuration. All tasks matching this criterion were from experiments with BERT, as BERT had greater training variance. If there were a task-dependent evaluation bias, one could expect that the bias is consistent across m or n within a task, or there is a consistent pattern with how the bias changes with m or n across tasks. Figure 4 does not clearly support either of these hypotheses.

Moscovich and Rosset (2022) found that the evaluation bias caused by unsupervised methods for tabular data converges to 0 as n increases. This finding is not confirmed by this experiment. Figure 3 shows that within $m = 50$ and $m = 100$, distributions of the evaluation bias hover around 0 across n. Figure 4 also does not support a relationship between n and the evaluation bias for lemon-picked tasks. But far more experiments varying n are needed to thoroughly assess this insensitivity.

8 Overtraining

§7 rules out undertraining on unlabeled text as the cause of a null evaluation bias. What if we overtrain? Overtraining on labeled test data trivially increases test set performance. Perhaps overtraining on unlabeled test set text has a similar effect. To test this hypothesis for text classification, GPT-2 is intentionally overtrained on unlabeled text for 2 epochs instead of 1.

For each of the 25 classification tasks and their subsamples, pretraining for 2 epochs instead of 1 resulted in a lower pretraining loss. The final pretraining loss is 20% lower on average, and the pretraining boost is negative, which indicates overfitting, as intended. Figure 5 demonstrates that, despite overtraining, the evaluation bias hovers around 0. All 50 p-values from the test in (13) are greater than 0.5.[5] Overtraining on unlabeled test set text causes test set performance to degrade to the same degree that overfitting on unlabeled independent text does.

9 Zero-shot text classification

Prompting an LLM is a popular choice for solving NLP problems. These prompts can be pretrained on. For example, Gemma 2 (Team et al., 2024) is intentionally pretrained on prompts from the LMSYS benchmark (Zheng et al., 2023).

To study a more modern prompting approach, the experiment in §4 is repeated with two modifications. First, task-adaptive pretraining is done on prompts—unlabeled texts with instructions for solving the task. Second, classification training is not performed; `train` is unused. The further-pretrained LLM is immediately prompted to do the task on `test`.

More specifically, pretraining is performed by adding a QLoRA adapter layer (Dettmers et al.,

[3] We will not assess any particular hypothesis about the role of causality. We are only motivating task-level analysis.

[4] The tasks were `blog_authorship_corpus` and `movie_rationales`.

[5] Note that all p-values from the test in (13) are adjusted to control the false discovery rate.

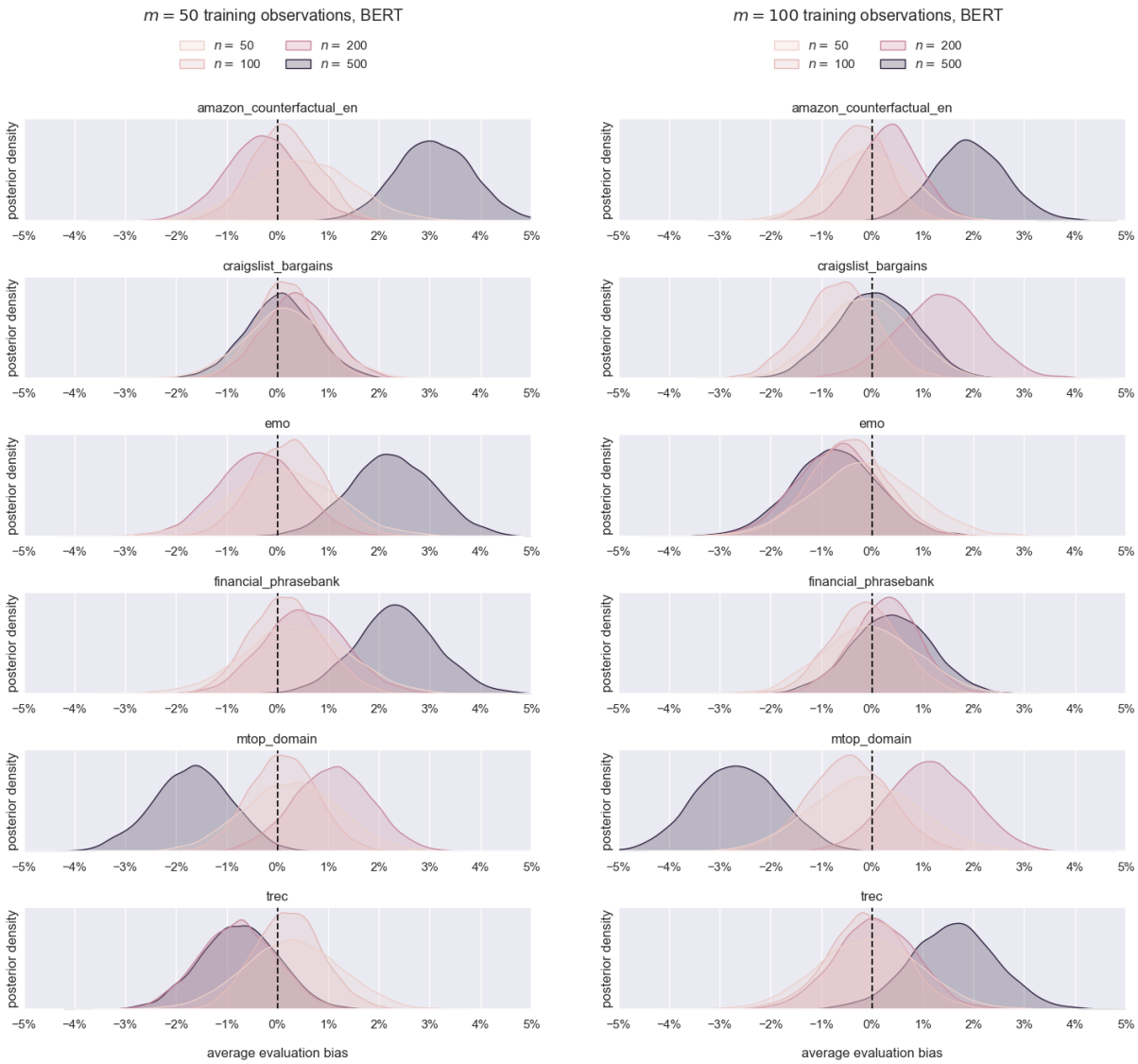

Figure 4: Distributions of average evaluation biases (12) for the subset of tasks which reported an average evaluation bias of at least +3% accuracy in any configuration of the experiment.

2024) to every linear layer in Mistral 7B (Jiang et al., 2023). Perhaps notably, instructions mention the set of possible answers—the class names.

Figure 6 (left) shows that, while pretraining on prompts improves accuracy, pretraining on test set prompts does not increase test set accuracy compared to pretraining on independently drawn prompts. 12 of the 25 tasks had a positive evaluation bias and 13 had a negative evaluation bias. All 25 p-values from (13) are greater than 0.5; there is no evidence of a task-level evaluation bias.

A limitation of this experiment is that it does not account for contamination. If Mistral 7B's pretraining data included labeled or unlabeled parts of the datasets used here, the pretraining boost and evaluation bias may be diluted.

9.1 Packing instead of padding

Experiments so far passed pretraining texts independently, adding and masking pad tokens to enable batching. Packing instead combines texts into a single sequence of tokens whose length is the model's context length. Packing is often used during the initial pretraining of an LLM, where the model is trained on continuous streams of text to increase throughput (Brown et al., 2020).

Does packing impact evaluation bias differently than padding? One hypothesis is that, without special handling of the attention mask, packing causes the model to attend to previous texts, so the transformer has greater flexibility in modeling unlabeled text. To study the effects of packing, the zero-shot experiment in §9 is repeated with packing instead

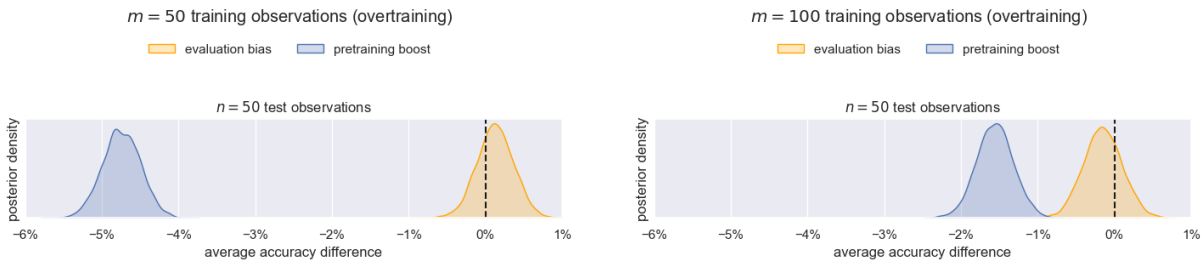

Figure 5: Average accuracy differences (11) after pretraining GPT-2 for 2 epochs instead of 1 (§8).

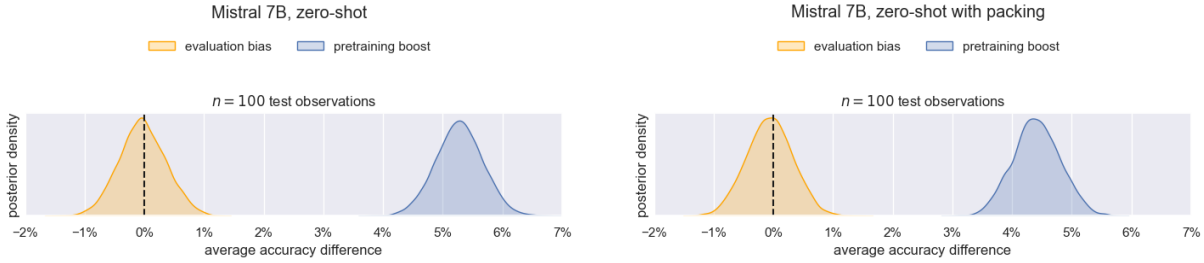

Figure 6: Average accuracy differences (11) for zero-shot classification (§9) with padding (left) and packing (right). For each of the 25 classification tasks, 20 subsamples were taken.

of padding. Figure 6 (right) shows that there is a pretraining boost, but no evaluation bias. All 25 p-values from (13) are greater than 0.5.

9.2 On testing test set contamination

Contamination detectors aim to flag overoptimistic LLM evaluations. An LLM is contaminated if it was pretrained and evaluated on the same set of labeled data, as this procedure results in an evaluation bias. In contrast, the result from §9.1 implies that contamination of *unlabeled* test set text does not result in an evaluation bias. Do contamination detectors pick up this nuance?

The experiment in §9.1 is run for the `ag_news` task and $n = 500$. Next, text-label pairs from `test` are passed to the contamination hypothesis test in Oren et al. (2024). The p-value for the model pretrained on unlabeled text from `extra` is 0.33. The p-value for the model pretrained on unlabeled text from `test` is 0.015, which indicates contamination. However, the observed evaluation bias for this task is statistically indistinguishable from 0.

Detectors need to be able to differentiate the contamination of labeled text from the contamination of unlabeled text. For those that do not, contamination flags should be interpreted with care. Even if such a detector never raises false flags, a contamination flag may not indicate an overoptimistic evaluation.

10 Meta-analysis

§4.4 briefly argues for subsampling multiple datasets from the full classification dataset. To assess this argument, the analysis was repeated on 500 random slices of the $m = 100, n = 500$ dataset of accuracies such that exactly 1 ($\text{acc}_{\text{extra}}$, acc_{test}, acc_{base}) triple per classification task (instead of 20 triples) is included. This de-replicated data is often all one gets from benchmarks.

Figure 7 (left) displays the cumulative distribution of the posterior mean of the evaluation bias for $m = 100, n = 500$ under this de-replicated experimental design. The distribution is quite variant. There is a 47% chance that the posterior mean of β—the average increase in the log-odds of a correct prediction by pretraining on unlabeled test set text instead of on unlabeled independent text—is outside the interval $(-0.04, 0.04)$, which would indicate a significant negative or positive bias.[6] For the zero-shot experiment in §9, there is a 50% chance that that the posterior mean of β is outside $(-0.08, 0.08)$. Without repeated subsampling, one may as well flip a coin to decide whether pretraining on unlabeled test set text is fair.

[6]For 0.04, the odds ratio is $e^{0.04} \approx 1.04$. For context, the average odds ratio between adjacent submissions in the RAFT leaderboard is 1.03. For posterior means outside $(-0.04, 0.04)$, all of their 89% credible intervals exclude 0, which evidences a non-null effect.

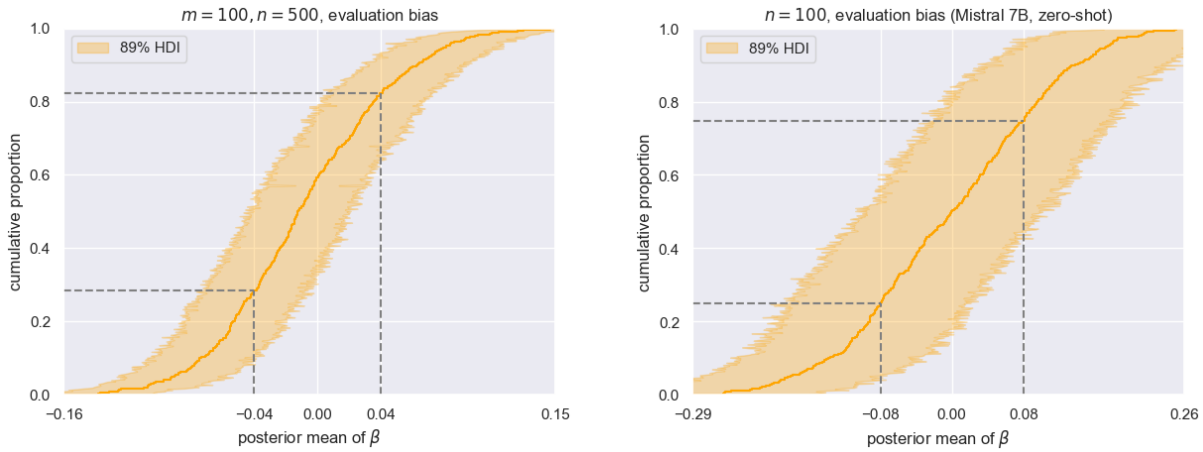

Figure 7: Distributions of conclusions had there been no technical replication (§10).

11 Conclusion

Task-adaptive pretraining on unlabeled test set text—instead of on unlabeled independent text—did not result in a consistent or significant evaluation bias. This appears to be the case when pretraining helps, when it hurts, and when pretraining is done on texts with instructions.

For benchmarks which release unlabeled text from the test set, this finding does not completely absolve LLM evaluations from scrutiny. The reason is that the boost from pretraining on unlabeled text—which is often significant—could be viewed as a type of evaluation bias, depending on how LLMs generalize. More concretely, suppose there is a benchmark and two LLMs, A and B. A was *not* pretrained on the benchmark's unlabeled test set text, while B was. With the perspective that LLM benchmarks supply scores which are correlates of performance on real-world tasks—instead of indicators of performance solely on the benchmark's tasks—then B scoring higher on the benchmark than A may be a misleading signal. If pretraining on the benchmark's unlabeled text causes B to generalize better only *within* the distribution of the benchmark, then B's edge on this benchmark does not signal an edge in real-world tasks. Knowing whether an LLM was pretrained on unlabeled test set text is still important.

One recommendation for designing few-shot benchmarks, which expands on the principle about robustness from Bragg et al. (2021), is based on the meta-analysis in §10: empirical studies of few-shot learning should consider including multiple, independent subsamples of training data. While a single training set combined with a large test set is sufficient for precise, unbiased estimation of out-of-sample performance, this estimator is conditional on the training set. In few-shot learning, the training set is, by definition, minimal. The estimator hides two sources of variance—that from the randomly drawn training set, and that from randomness inherent in the training procedure. Figure 7 shows that this variance is large-enough to turn a methodology into a coin flip for two different training procedures. In-context learning with LLMs is also sensitive to the selection of few-shot examples (Lu et al., 2022, Alzahrani et al., 2024). Benchmarks which require training on multiple, independent subsamples would expose training variance.

Limitations

This paper does not study semi-supervised methods like Pattern-Exploiting Training, or hand-inspecting the test set text and targeting interventions accordingly. We also do not study the effect of including unlabeled test set texts in the initial pretraining stage of an LLM.

The results are empirical. There may be tasks where an evaluation bias exists, and these were not part of the 25 classification tasks we collected. The results do not theoretically or universally establish that pretraining on unlabeled test set text is fair.

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A Classification tasks

The experiment was ran on 25 publicly available text classification tasks found in `https://huggingface.co/datasets`. Inclusion criteria:

1. All text is in English.
2. The number of classes is not greater than 25, because only 50 or 100 observations are used for training the classifier.
3. The task is to classify one text, not a pair as in, e.g., textual entailment tasks.
4. Texts are not so long that too much useful signal is dropped when text is truncated to fit in BERT/GPT-2's context window, which is set to 256 tokens.
5. Based on our best judgment, it is likely that BERT/GPT-2 can do better than guessing.

Table 2 lists the exact tasks.

B Other experiment choices

This section expands on §4.

First, we clarify how classification training is performed. For BERT, the linear layer transforms

Hugging Face dataset	Author(s)	Number of classes	Text length (25, 75) percentiles
ag_news	Zhang et al. (2015)	4	(196, 266)
SetFit/amazon_counterfactual_en	O'Neill et al. (2021)	2	(60, 125)
app_reviews	Grano et al. (2017)	5	(10, 77)
blog_authorship_corpus	Schler et al. (2006)	2	(92, 556)
christinacdl/clickbait_notclickbait_dataset		2	(46, 69)
climate_fever	Diggelmann et al. (2020)	4	(80, 156)
aladar/craigslist_bargains	He et al. (2018)	6	(346, 713)
disaster_response_messages		3	(74, 178)
emo	Chatterjee et al. (2019)	4	(44, 83)
dair-ai/emotion	Saravia et al. (2018)	6	(53, 129)
SetFit/enron_spam	Metsis et al. (2006)	2	(342, 1553)
financial_phrasebank	Malo et al. (2014)	3	(79, 157)
classla/FRENK-hate-en	Ljubešić et al. (2019)	2	(34, 160)
hyperpartisan_news_detection	Kiesel et al. (2019)	2	(39, 63)
limit	Manotas et al. (2020)	2	(53, 123)
AmazonScience/massive	FitzGerald et al. (2023)	18	(24, 44)
movie_rationales	DeYoung et al. (2020)	2	(2721, 4659)
mteb/mtop_domain	Muennighoff et al. (2023)	11	(26, 44)
ccdv/patent-classification	Sharma et al. (2019)	9	(441, 775)
rotten_tomatoes	Pang and Lee (2005)	2	(76, 149)
silicone	Chapuis et al. (2020)	4	(29, 75)
trec	Wang et al. (2007)	6	(36, 61)
tweets_hate_speech_detection	Sharma (2019)	2	(62, 107)
yahoo_answers_topics	Huangzhao (2018)	10	(58, 213)
yelp_review_full	Zhang et al. (2015)	5	(287, 957)

Table 2: Brief descriptions of the 25 classification tasks used in this experiment. Click the link in the cell to be taken to the dataset homepage in https://huggingface.co/datasets. The dataset subset (or config) and the chosen prediction task are specified in code in src/pretrain_on_test/data.py.

the [CLS] token embedding. For GPT-2, the linear layer transforms the last token's embedding. The output dimension of the linear layer is the number of classes in the classification task. This layer, along with the rest of the weights in the LM, are finetuned to minimize classification cross entropy loss on train.

The BERT model used here is bert-base-uncased. The GPT-2 model used here is gpt2 (small), with 124M parameters.

train is stratify-sampled by the class to ensure every class is represented, and to reduce the variance of accuracy estimators. test is not stratify-sampled. We are only interested in the *difference* between accuracies, which is a function of the difference between model likelihoods because the priors are uniform. So even if accuracies are worse than the majority vote, differences are still meaningful for the purposes of this experiment.

train text is not included during pretraining to eliminate the overlap of pretraining data between $\text{acc}_{\text{extra}}$ and acc_{test}. This choice was made in an effort to widen any gap between them.

train contains $m = 50$ or $m = 100$ observations. $m = 50$ is inspired by the RAFT benchmark. $m = 100$ stretches the intention of "few" in few-shot learning, but was tested in an attempt to make lower-variance comparisons. BERT is quite sensitive—see Appendix D.2.

C Hyperparameters and reproducibility

This paper's experiment and analysis code, and data, is available here: https://github.com/kddubey/pretrain-on-test.

experiment.sh lists hyperparameters used for each classification task and experiment configuration. For the experiment in §4, BERT was pretrained for 2 epochs, and GPT-2 was pretrained for 1 epoch. Classification hyperparameters were pre-specified based on Zhang et al. (2021), with batch sizes set to avoid out-of-memory errors. Run the script on a GPU with at least 15 GB RAM to reproduce results in §5. It takes about 5 days on a T4 GPU. Training is performed using the transformers package (Wolf et al., 2020).

D Results

D.1 Individual analysis

The notebook analysis/dataset.ipynb can be run to (1) produce visualizations of the distributions of $\text{acc}_{\text{extra}}$, acc_{test}, and acc_{base} (for each classification task and experiment configuration), and (2) compute p-values for the hypothesis test specified in (13). For all settings of m and n, no p-values were statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

In Figure 4, amazon_counterfactual_en and mtop_domain have a consistent evaluation bias across m for $n = 500$ and $n = 200$, respectively. But these tasks did not result in an evaluation bias in any other experiment configuration, including those with GPT-2 and Mistral 7B.

Care has to be taken when attempting to analyze or interpret $\text{acc}_{\text{extra}} - \text{acc}_{\text{base}}$ and $\text{acc}_{\text{test}} - \text{acc}_{\text{extra}}$ *together*. That's because these differences are not independent: if $\text{acc}_{\text{extra}}$ is high, then $\text{acc}_{\text{extra}} - \text{acc}_{\text{base}}$ increases and $\text{acc}_{\text{test}} - \text{acc}_{\text{extra}}$ decreases. This paper does not analyze the scores together, per se. We care about $\text{acc}_{\text{test}} - \text{acc}_{\text{extra}}$. $\text{acc}_{\text{extra}} - \text{acc}_{\text{base}}$ only exists to sanity check that the pretraining code works; there may be an effect to detect.

D.2 Difference distributions

Figures 13 - 20 visualize the distributions of the paired differences—$\text{acc}_{\text{extra}} - \text{acc}_{\text{base}}$ and $\text{acc}_{\text{test}} - \text{acc}_{\text{extra}}$–for each configuration of the experiment.

E Analysis

The analysis in §6 can be reproduced by running all of the notebooks in analysis/fit_posteriors/. Figure 3 can be reproduced by running the notebook analysis/results/posterior_pred.ipynb. Figure 4 can be reproduced by running the notebook analysis/results/posterior_pred_conditional.ipynb. Changing the threshold for the bias to +2% accuracy instead of +3% did not change conclusions.

Posterior samples of β (which were used to draw posterior predictive samples) were taken from four chains with 1,000 draws each, after 500 steps of tuning.

E.1 Hierarchical model checks

Hierarchical models require some basic checks to have faith in their results (McElreath, 2018).

For each of the 24 hierarchical models (16 in §7, 4 in §8, and 4 in §9), no divergences were observed during the fitting procedure. All trace plots were healthy.

Figure 11 contains prior predictive distributions for $m = 100, n = 200$, demonstrating that priors

are not unreasonable. Using default priors from the `bambi` package (Capretto et al., 2022), while scientifically unreasonable (because they result in wide, basin-like accuracy distributions), did not change the conclusions of this paper.

Figure 12 contains posterior distributions of β for $m = 100, n = 200$, demonstrating the hierarchical model's ability to recover both null and non-null effects. This test can be reproduced by running the notebook `analysis/test.ipynb`.

Figure 9 checks that posterior predictions for the average task accuracies are calibrated. Figure 10 demonstrates the importance of including the W_{jl} term. These figures can be reproduced by running the notebook `analysis/results/posterior_pred_conditional.ipynb`.

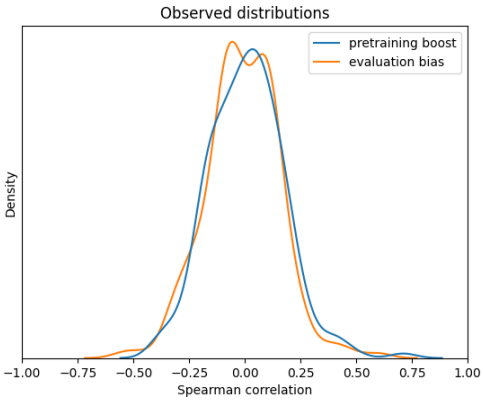
F Meta-analysis

The meta-analysis in §10 can be reproduced by running the script, `analysis/meta/meta.py`, and then the notebook `analysis/meta/meta.ipynb`. No divergences were observed.

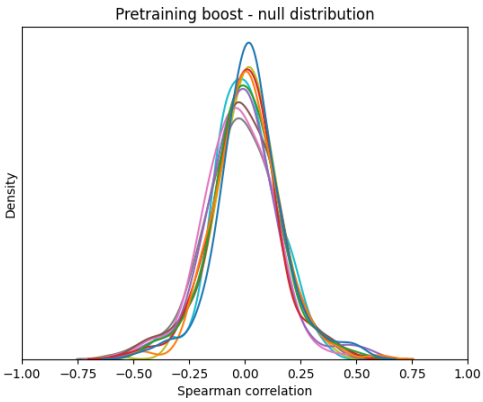
Another question is whether the subsample causes a consistent evaluation bias. §10 establishes that picking a single subsample causes the comparison between acc_{test} and $\text{acc}_{\text{extra}}$ to be a coin flip. But is the result of the coin flip explained by the specific subsample that was drawn? If so, comparing models using a single subsample may not be so noisy, because the effect of pretraining on unlabeled test set text would be consistent across models.

One way to answer this question is to measure the correlation between the evaluation bias of BERT and GPT-2 for each setting of m and n, and each of the 25 tasks. A positive correlation suggests that the subsample causes the evaluation bias. Spearman's rank correlation coefficient is used because we are only interested in the consistency of the relationship, not its linearity.

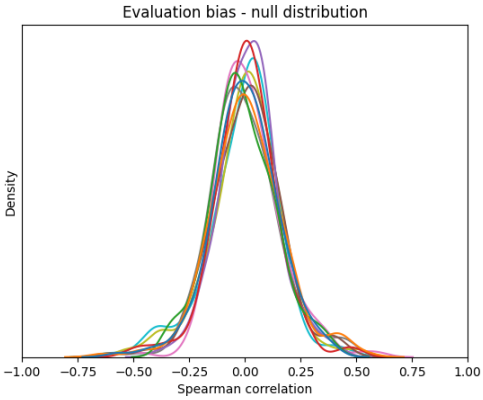
The observed distributions of correlations across m, n, and the tasks are plotted in Figure 8 (a). For context, 10 distributions of randomly permuted pairs of subsample-level biases are plotted in Figure 8 (b) and (c). These correlations are theoretically 0, and are positive or negative by chance alone. The observed distributions are qualitatively indistinguishable from the null ones. Notably, the variance is consistent. A deeper dive into the correlations did not find any consistently positive (or negative) correlations at the task level. This result further evidences the importance of repeated subsampling. Taking a single subsample does not result in a consistent pretraining boost or evaluation bias between BERT and GPT-2. This analysis can be reproduced by running the notebook `analysis/dataset_level.ipynb`.



(a) Observed



(b) Randomly permuted



(c) Randomly permuted

Figure 8: Distribution of correlation between BERT and GPT-2 across all m, n, and the 25 classification tasks.

G Zero-shot text classification

Here is an example of a prompt for the `ag_news` task (Zhang et al., 2015):

```
Your task is to classify a given text as
one of these categories:
World
Sports
Business
Sci/Tech

The text is a news article. Answer with its topic.

### Text: Bombardier CEO Quits, Shares
Dive Paul Tellier stepped down on Monday
as president and chief executive of
Bombardier Inc. (BBDsvb.TO: Quote,
Profile, Research) (BBDb.
 ### Answer:
```

For packing (§9.1), the prompts at inference are in the same format as above. For training, 8 texts were packed. Here is an example of an input sequence for ag_news, where 4 texts are packed:

```
Your task is to classify a given text as
one of these categories:
World
Sports
Business
Sci/Tech

The text is a news article. Answer with its topic.

### Text: US Electoral College withstands critics
 ... so far (AFP) AFP - Lambasted as antiquated
and anti-democratic, the Electoral College that
 decides the US presidency has survived for
 centuries as an unmovable albeit creaky pillar
 of the American political system.


 ### Text: Voters in Hungary decide referenda
 Voters in Hungary went to the polls Sunday to
 decide a double referendum on citizenship
 rights and their nation #39;s health care
 system.


### Text: White House: Trying to Confirm Terror
 Group #39;s Allegiance to bin
&lt;b&gt;...&lt;/b&gt; The Bush administration
 says it #39;s trying to confirm the latest
declaration from the most feared militant group
 in Iraq. In a statement posted on a Web site
 Sunday, the group led by terror mastermind Abu
 Musab


 ### Text: Fans rush to create mods for
long-awaited  #39;Doom 3 #39; Activision #39;s
 Doom 3, which launched earlier this month,
 wasn #39;t on store shelves for three days
 before players started creating their own
 modifications - known as mods -o the game.
```

The zero-shot experiment files are in cloud_scripts/gcp/experiments/zero_shot/ and cloud_scripts/gcp/experiments/zero_shot_packing/. Batch sizes are set to run on a GPU with at least 20 GB RAM. The GPU must support the data types needed for QLoRA, e.g., an L4 GPU. Figure 6 can be reproduced by running the notebooks in analysis/fit_posteriors/zero_shot and analysis/fit_posteriors/zero_shot_packing and then the notebook, analysis/results/posterior_pred.ipynb.

The Mistral 7B model is Mistral-7B-v0.3, the non-instruction-trained model.

We only study $n = 100$ in an initial effort to provide evidence of an evaluation bias (due to the relatively small test set), and take 20 repeated subsamples instead of 50. While $n = 100$ is quite small, benchmarks such as LegalBench (Guha et al., 2024) have test data in this range. And the analysis transparently exposes variance.

QLoRA hyperparameters were pre-specified: every adapter has rank 16 with $\alpha = 32$ (LoRA scaling factor), a 0.05 dropout rate, and no bias parameters. The adapter layers introduce $41,943,040$ new, trainable parameters to Mistral 7B, whose parameters are frozen. Pretraining was done for 1 epoch.

To increase the power of the contamination hypothesis test run in §9.2, shards were formed to be similar to the sequences passed in during pretraining. Here is an example of what the first 2 text-label pairs in the dataset passed to the contamination test looks like:

```
### Text: Customers bemoan changes in Quicken
2005 The new version of the personal finance
program drops support for a widely used file
format.
 ### Answer: Sci/Tech

### Text: Blair gives partial Iraq apology Tony
 Blair has offered his Labour party a partial
apology for waging war in Iraq, striving to pull
angry supporters behind him ahead of an election
 next year.
 ### Answer: World
```

The 2 p-values in §9.2 can be obtained by running the notebook analysis/contamination/test.ipynb on an L4 GPU.

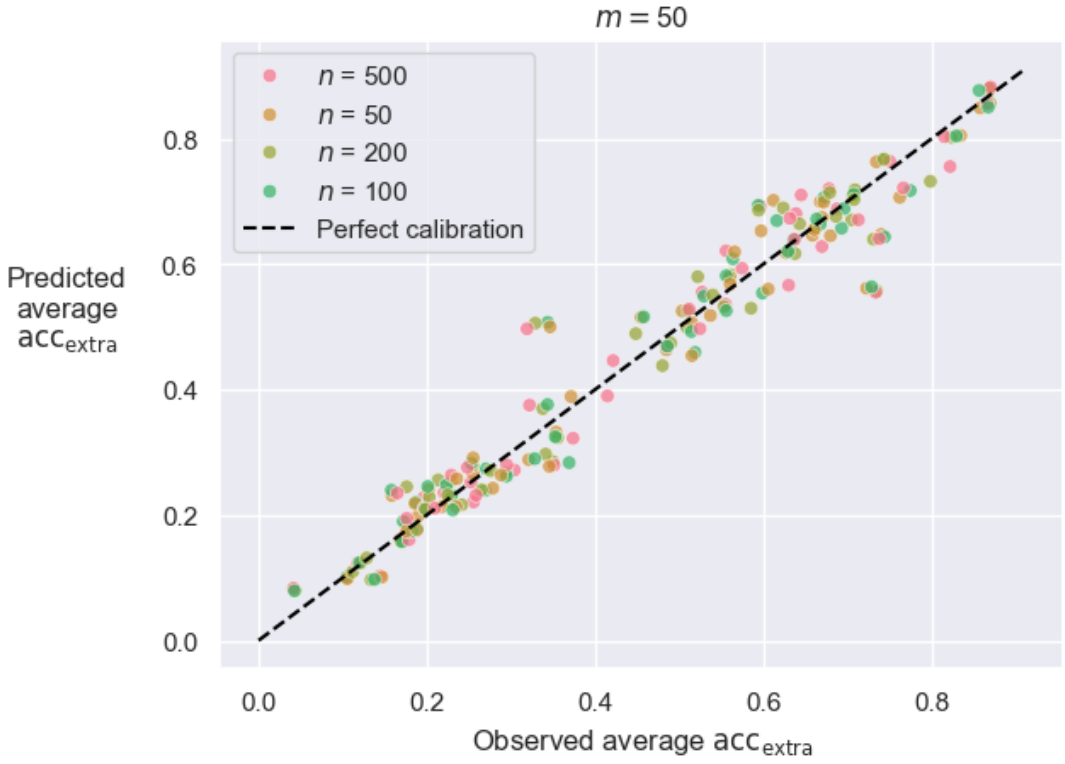


Figure 9: Each of the points represents a task and an LM type (BERT or GPT-2).

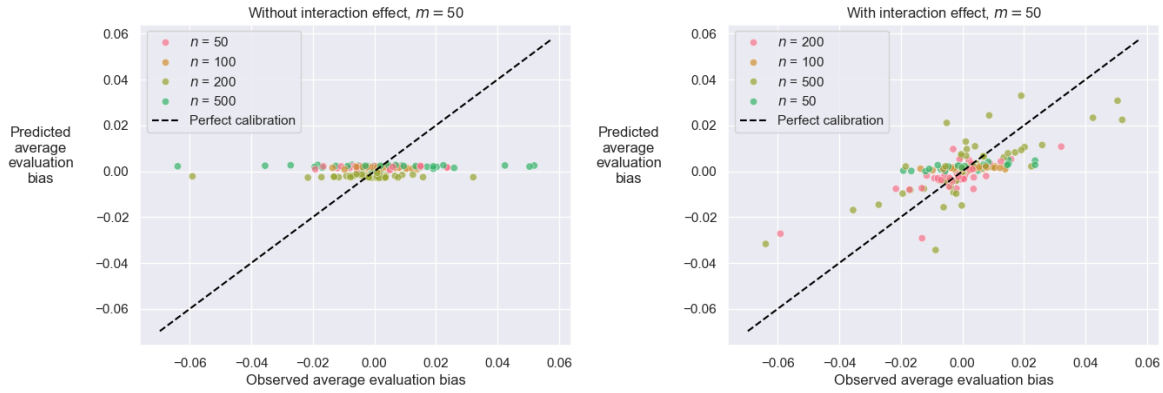
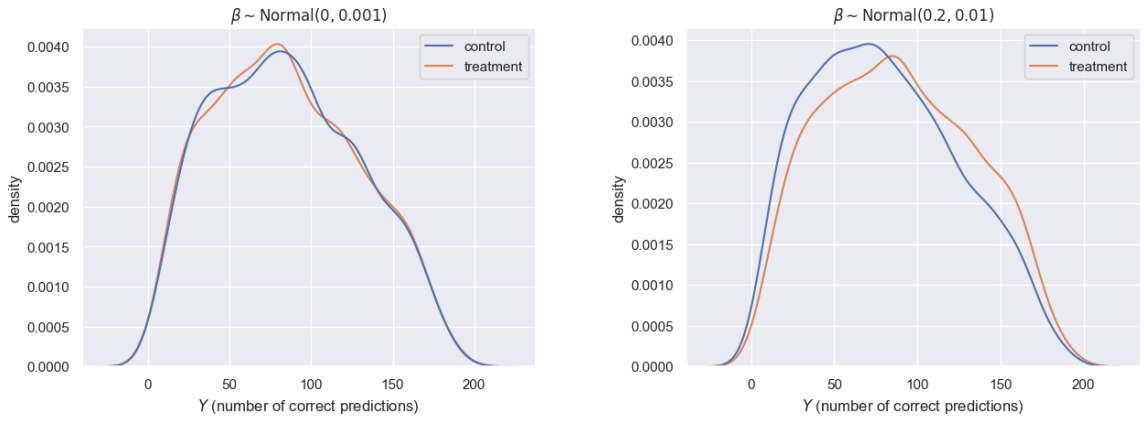


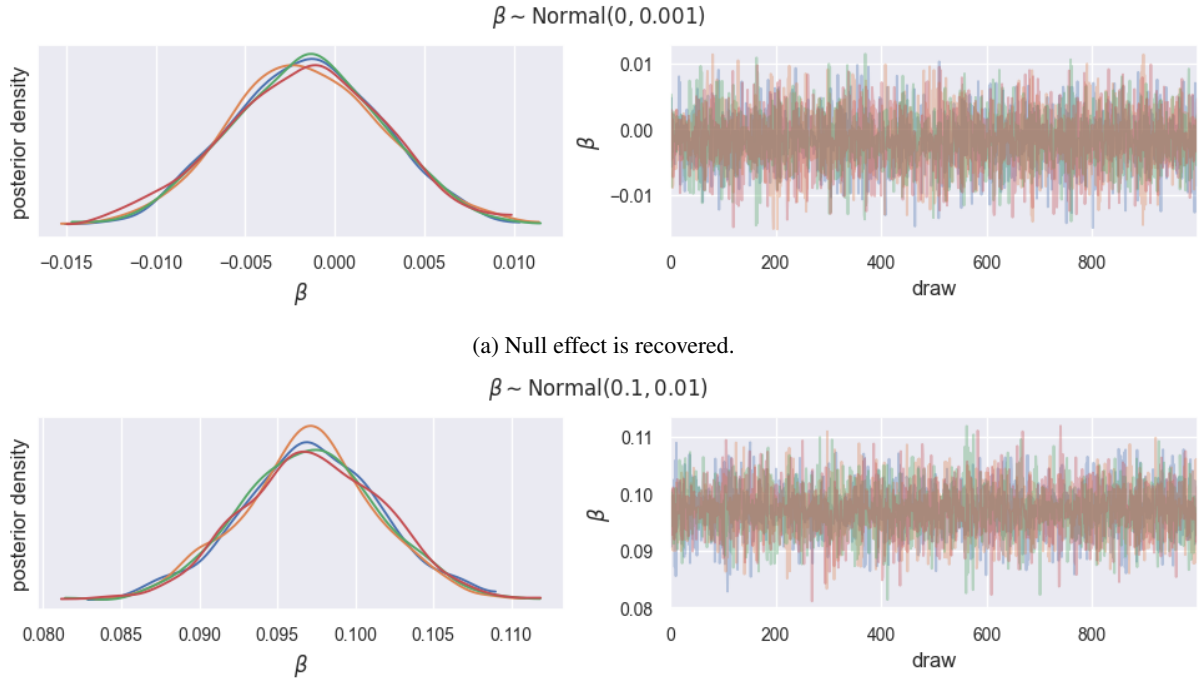
Figure 10: Omitting the interaction effect causes underfitting. Note that the prior causes effects to shrink towards 0. Each of the points represents a task and an LM type (BERT or GPT-2).



(a) Null effect

(b) Non-null, positive effect

Figure 11: Prior predictive distributions for $m = 100, n = 200$ from two different priors for β—the expected increase in the log-odds of a correct prediction resulting from an intervention/treatment.



(a) Null effect is recovered.

(b) Non-null, positive effect is recovered.

Figure 12: Posterior distributions and trace plots for null and non-null effects **from simulated data** where $m = 100, n = 200$, approximated by four chains with 1,000 draws each, after 500 steps of tuning. For each model, no divergences were observed during the fitting procedure. Visualizations were produced by the `arviz` package (Kumar et al., 2019).

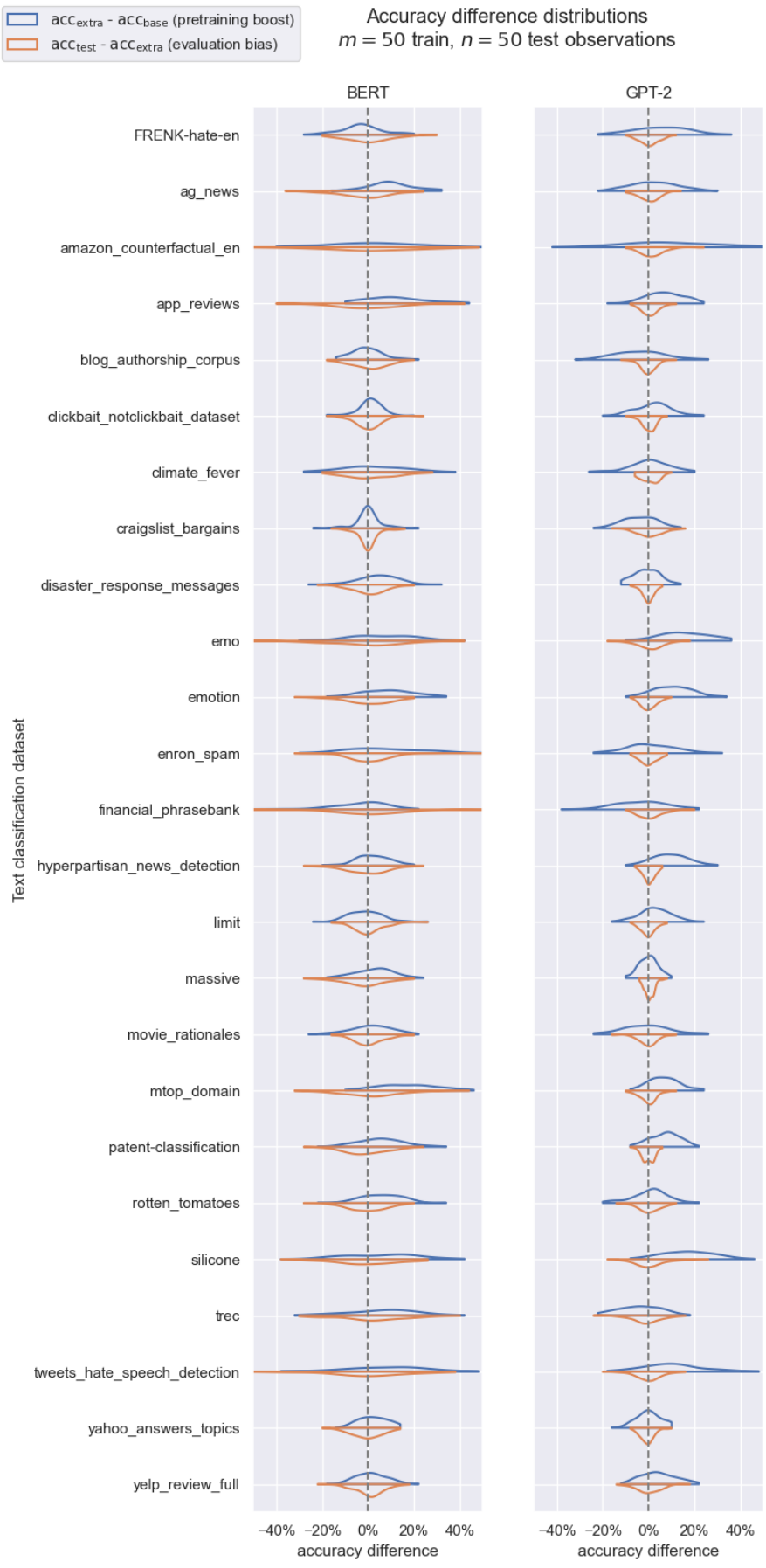
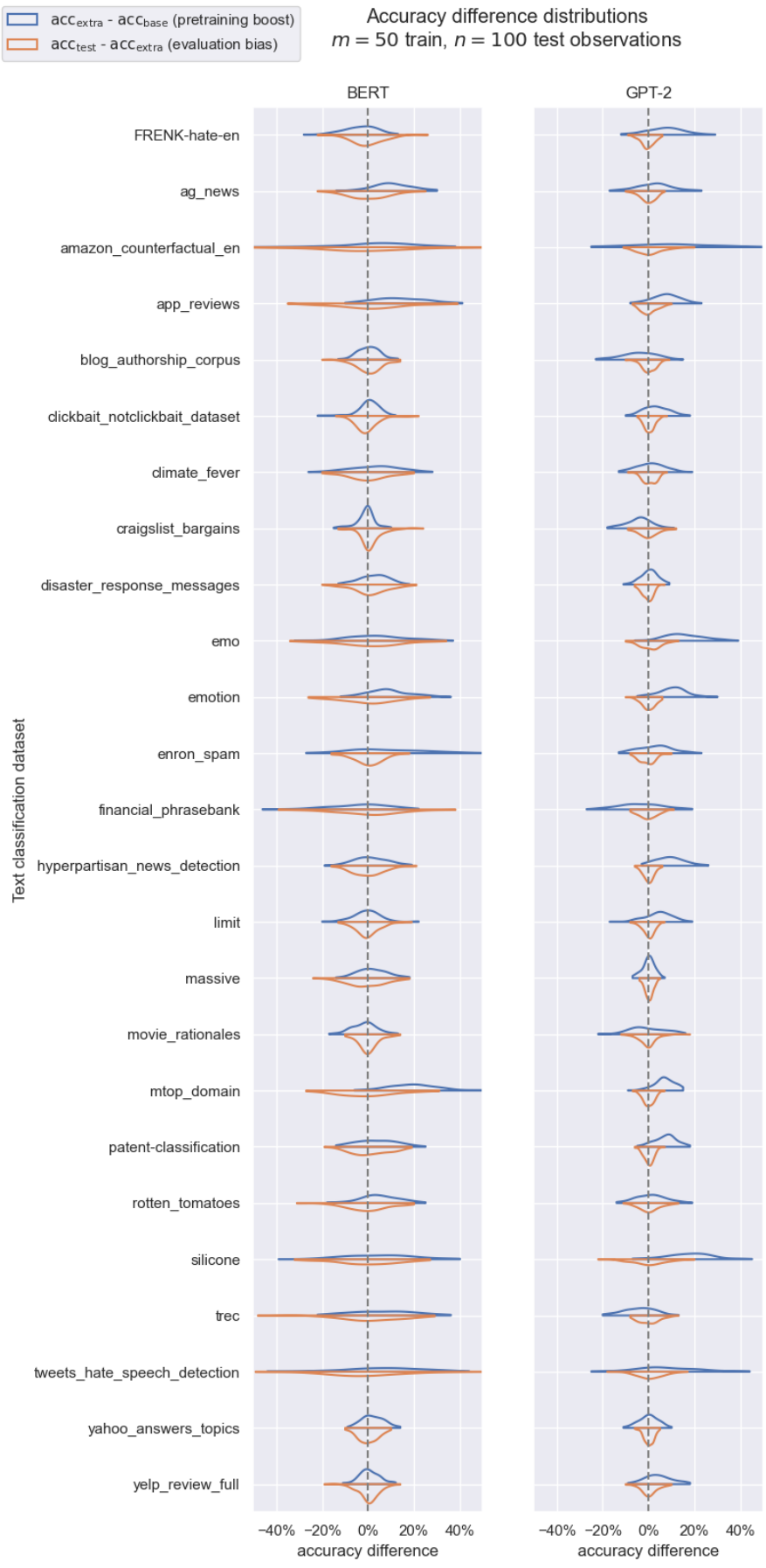

acc_extra - acc_base (pretraining boost)
acc_test - acc_extra (evaluation bias)
Accuracy difference distributions
m = 50 train, n = 50 test observations
BERT
GPT-2
FRENK-hate-en
ag_news
amazon_counterfactual_en
app_reviews
blog_authorship_corpus
clickbait_notclickbait_dataset
climate_fever
craigslist_bargains
disaster_response_messages
emo
emotion
enron_spam
financial_phrasebank
hyperpartisan_news_detection
limit
massive
movie_rationales
mtop_domain
patent-classification
rotten_tomatoes
silicone
trec
tweets_hate_speech_detection
yahoo_answers_topics
yelp_review_full
Text classification dataset
−40% −20% 0% 20% 40%
accuracy difference
−40% −20% 0% 20% 40%
accuracy difference

Figure 13


acc_extra - acc_base (pretraining boost)
acc_test - acc_extra (evaluation bias)
Accuracy difference distributions
m = 50 train, n = 100 test observations
BERT
GPT-2
FRENK-hate-en
ag_news
amazon_counterfactual_en
app_reviews
blog_authorship_corpus
clickbait_notclickbait_dataset
climate_fever
craigslist_bargains
disaster_response_messages
emo
emotion
enron_spam
financial_phrasebank
hyperpartisan_news_detection
limit
massive
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patent-classification
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yahoo_answers_topics
yelp_review_full
Text classification dataset
−40% −20% 0% 20% 40%
accuracy difference
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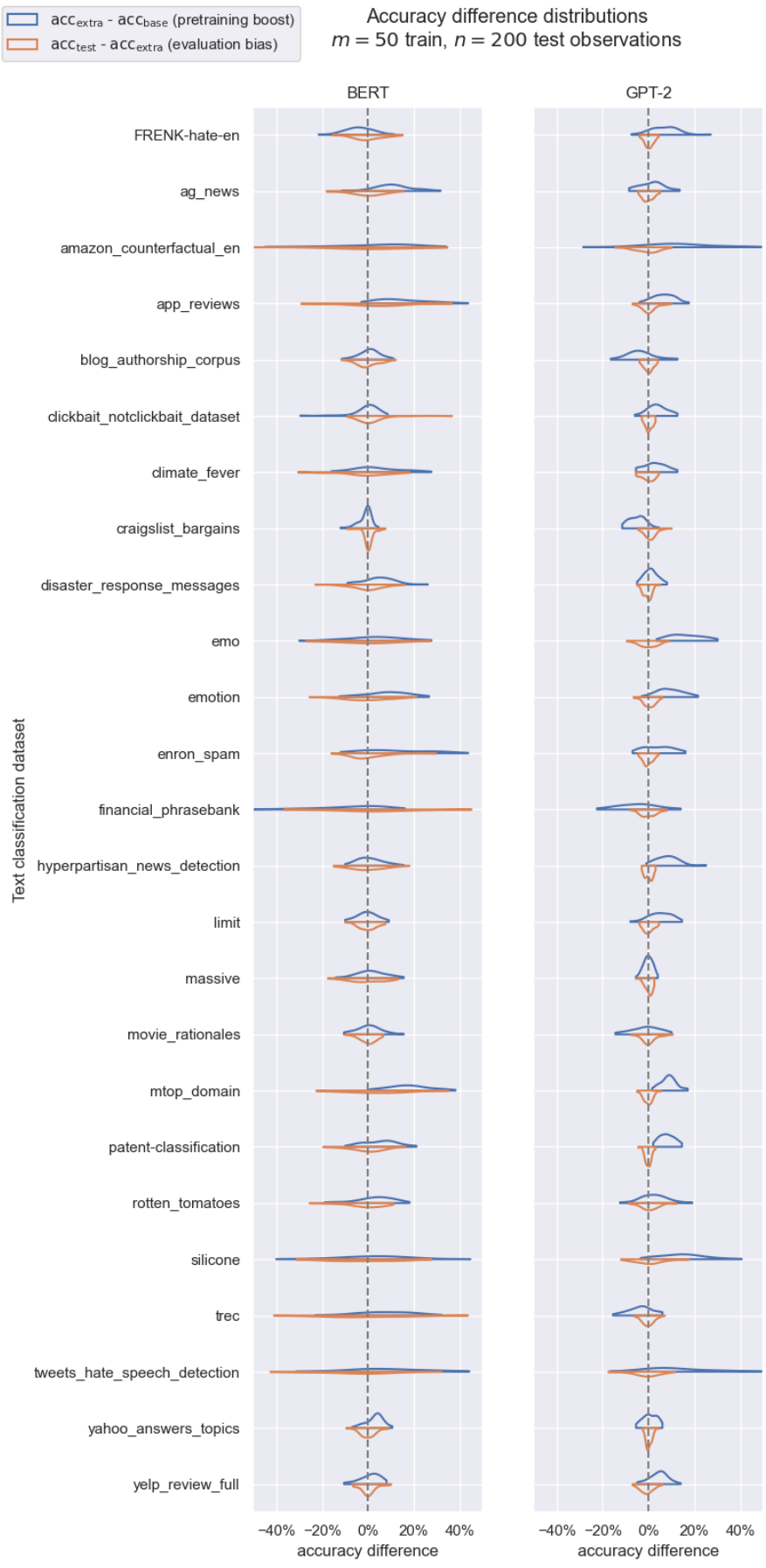
accuracy difference

Figure 14


acc_extra - acc_base (pretraining boost)
acc_test - acc_extra (evaluation bias)
Accuracy difference distributions
m = 50 train, n = 200 test observations
BERT
GPT-2
FRENK-hate-en
ag_news
amazon_counterfactual_en
app_reviews
blog_authorship_corpus
clickbait_notclickbait_dataset
climate_fever
craigslist_bargains
disaster_response_messages
emo
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yahoo_answers_topics
yelp_review_full
Text classification dataset
−40% −20% 0% 20% 40%
accuracy difference
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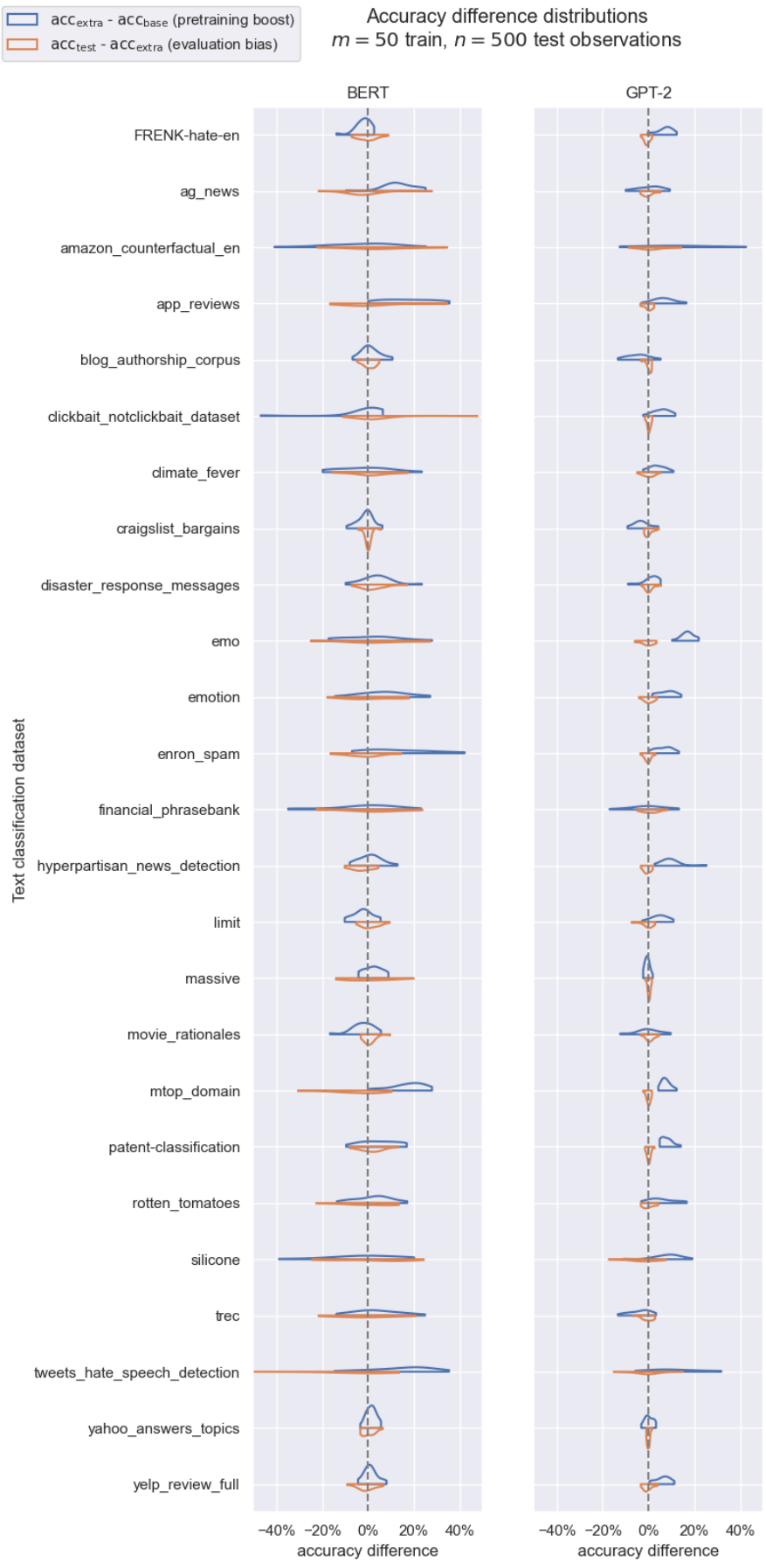
accuracy difference

Figure 15


acc_extra - acc_base (pretraining boost)
acc_test - acc_extra (evaluation bias)
Accuracy difference distributions
m = 50 train, n = 500 test observations
BERT
GPT-2
FRENK-hate-en
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app_reviews
blog_authorship_corpus
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yelp_review_full
Text classification dataset
−40% −20% 0% 20% 40%
accuracy difference
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accuracy difference

Figure 16

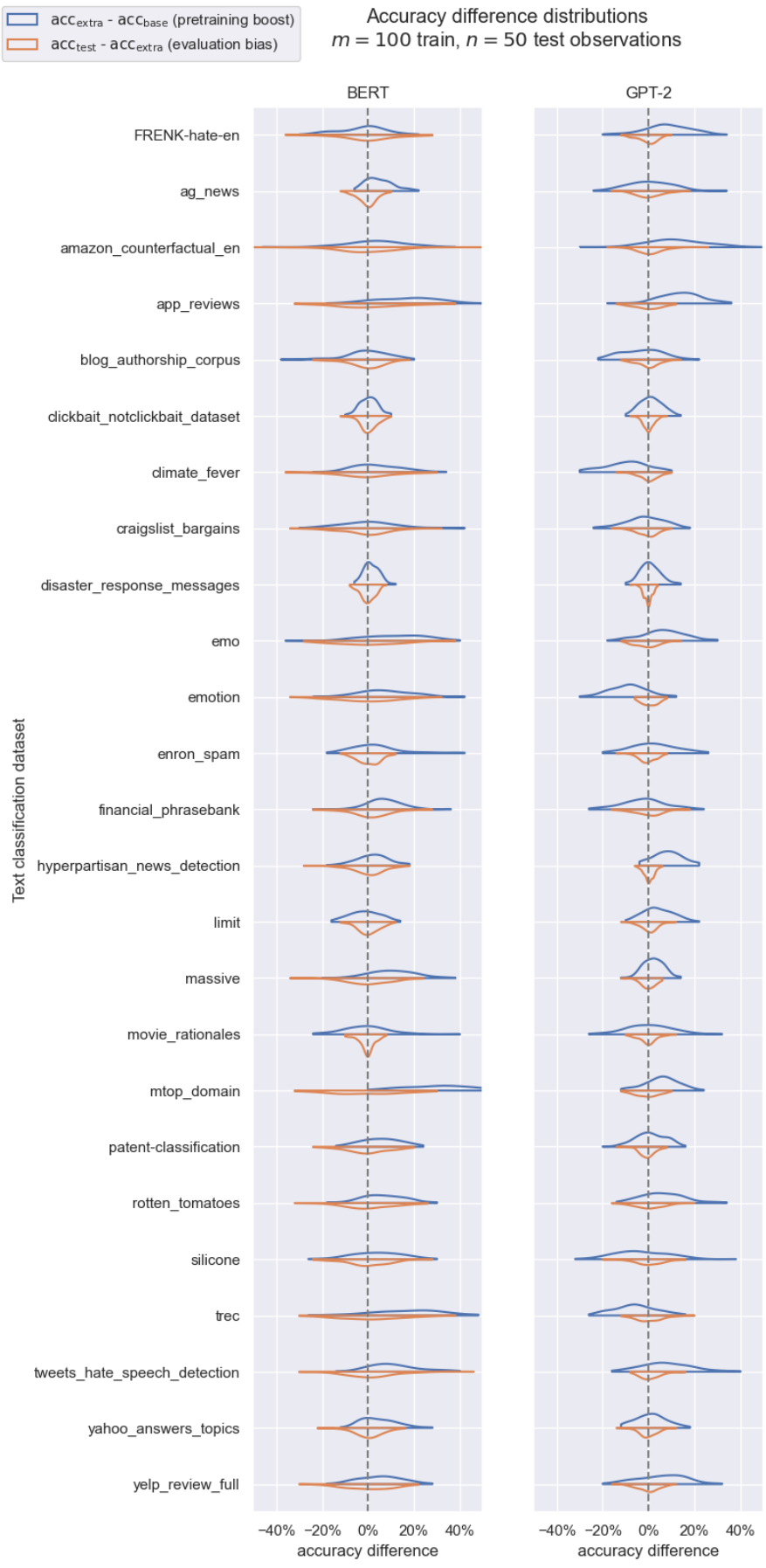
acc_extra - acc_base (pretraining boost)
acc_test - acc_extra (evaluation bias)
Accuracy difference distributions
m = 100 train, n = 50 test observations
BERT
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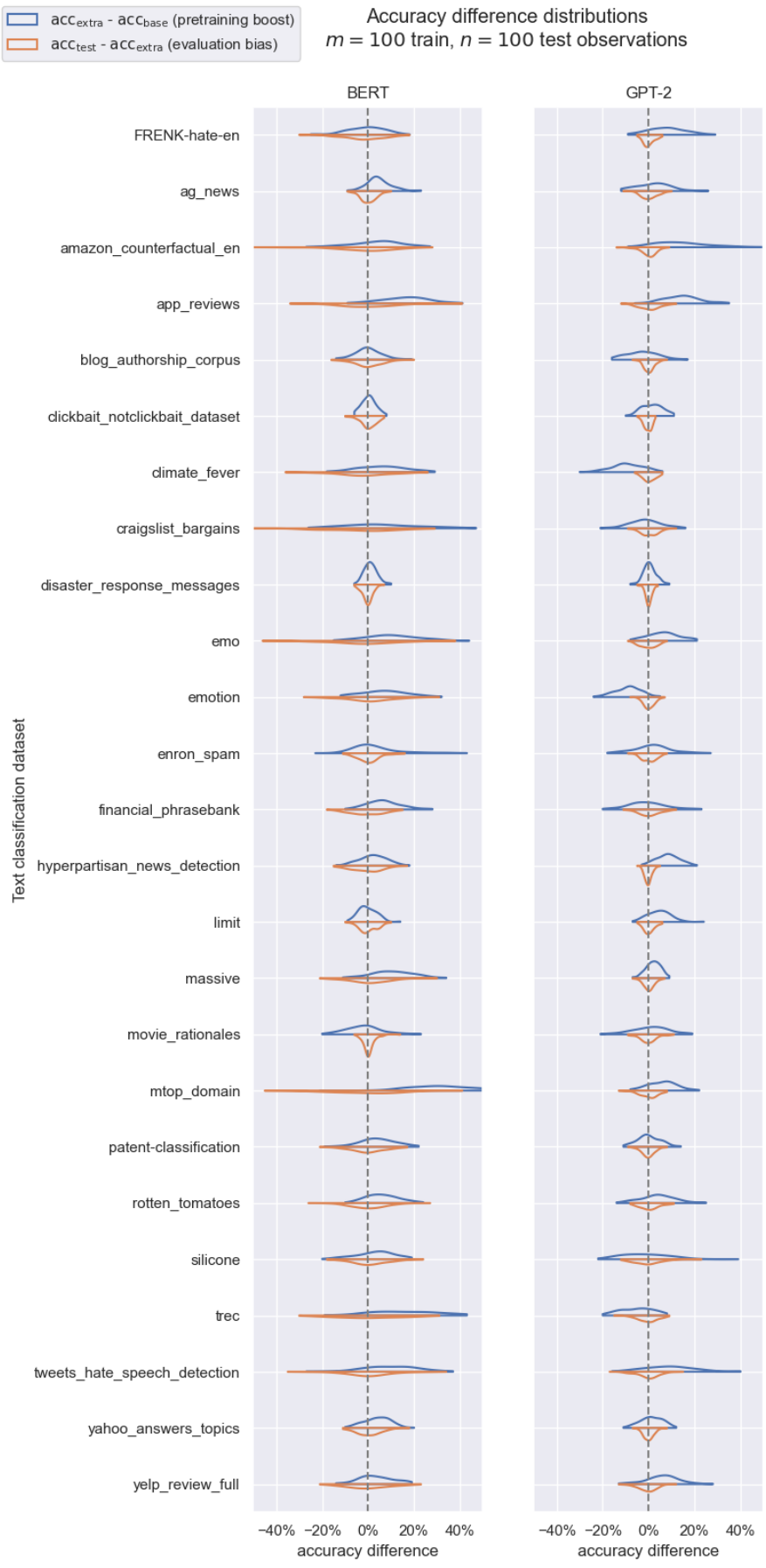
Figure 17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Text classification dataset
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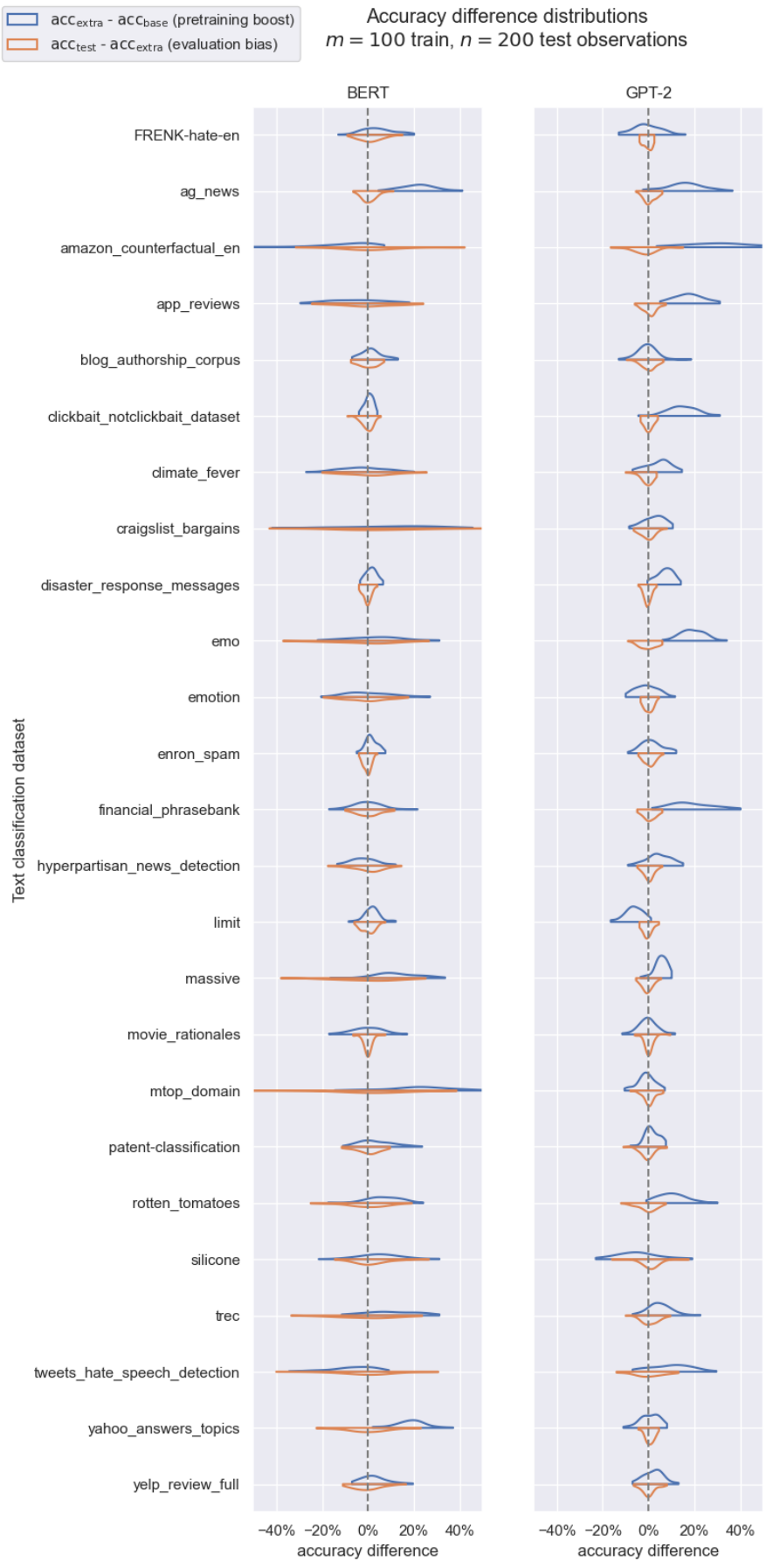
Figure 18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Text classification dataset
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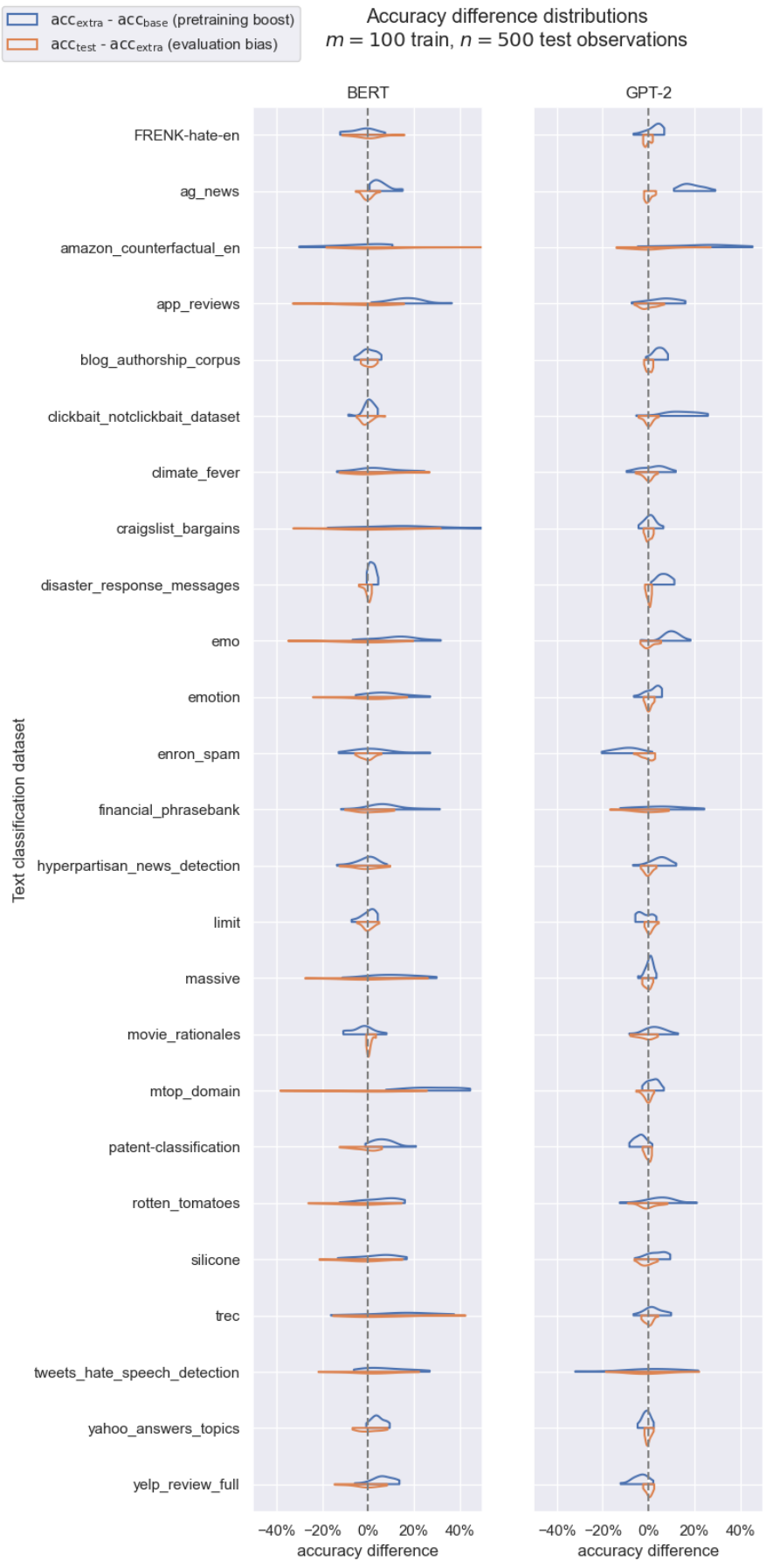
accuracy difference

Figure 19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accuracy difference

Figure 20