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Reliable Natural Language Interfaces using LLMs, Self-Correction  
and Incremental Schema Analysis

Bachelor Thesis

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the integration of large language models (LLMs) into PostgreSQL database systems in order to make the database accessible via natural language instead of the postgres SQL dialect. The research focuses on implementation strategies, performance optimization, and practical applications of this concept.

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## List of Abbreviations

GPT	Generative Pretrained Transformer
SQL	Structured Query Language
API	Application Programming Interface
LLM	Large Language Model
DBMS	Database Management System
NL2SQL	Natural Language to SQL

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Problem Statement and Motivation

Database systems represent a backbone of modern computer science, allowing for rapid advancements whilst shielding us from the problem categories that come along with managing and querying large amounts of, usually structured, data efficiently. However, most Database Management Systems (DBMS) have traditionally required specialized knowledge, usually of the Structured Query Language (SQL), in order to become useable. Whilst this barrier may be perceived differently across diverse usergroups it represents a fundamental misalignment between end-user goals (e.g. analysts, researchers, domain experts etc.) and the underlying DBMS, thus often requiring software engineering efforts in order to reduce this friction.

This barrier is the reason entire classes of software projects exists (for example, admin / support panels), data analytics tools etc. which therefore introduce significant churn and delay between the implementation of a database system and reaching the desired end user impact. Often these projects span multiple years, require costly staffing and yield little to no novel technical value.

Emerging technologies such as Large Language Models (LLMs) have proven themselves as a sensible tool for bridging fuzzy user provided input into discrete, machine readable formats. Prominent models in this field have demonstrated outstanding capabilities that enable computer scientists to tackle new problem classes, that used to be challenging / yielded unsatisfying results with logical programming approaches.

This thesis is exploring ways to overcome the above outlined barrier using natural language queries, so that domain experts, business owners, support staff etc. are able to seamlessly interact with their data, essentially eliminating the requirement of learning SQL (and its pitfalls). By translating natural language to SQL using Large Language Models this translation becomes very robust (e.g. against different kinds of phrasing) and enables novel applications in how businesses, researchers and professionals interact with their data — it represents a fundamental shift (ie. moving away from SQL) towards a more inclusive and data driven world.

## 1.2 Objectives of the Thesis

This thesis aims to address the aforementioned challenges when it comes to database accessibility. The following objectives are the core research area of this thesis:

1. Develop a database extension that can translate natural language queries into semantically accurate SQL queries using Large Language Models.
2. To evaluate the effectiveness and feasibility of different Models aswell as prompt engineering techniques in order to improve the performance of the system.
3. Identify and address issues when it comes to handling ambiguous, complex and domain specific user input.
4. Benchmark the performance of the implementation against common natural language to SQL (NL2SQL) benchmarks.
5. Identify potential use cases for real world scenarios that could deliver a noticeable upside to users.
6. Analyze the shortcomings and limitations of this approach and propose potential solutions to overcome them.

### 1.3 Research Questions

#### RQ1 — Are natural language database interfaces feasible for real world application?

The primary research questions when it comes to natural language database interfaces evolve around their semantic accuracy and reliability, therefore questioning their feasibility for real world usage. LLMs have notoriously been known for their ability to hallucinate / produce false, but promising outputs. This behaviour can be especially dangerous when opting for data driven decisions that rely on false data due to a mistranslation from natural language to SQL. LLMs could cause hard to understand and debug behaviour, like false computation of distributions when the intermediate format is not being shown to the user. This thesis tries to determine whether such hallucinations could be reasonably prevented and whether the associated performance and hardware requirements are suitable for a real world deployment, outside of research situations.

Specifically the two big underlying questions are:

1. Is the semantic accuracy of natural language database interfaces high enough to yield a noticable benefit to users?
2. Is it possible to run such an interface on reasonable, mass available hardware (e.g. excluding high end research GPUs).

#### RQ2 — What approaches are most effective in resolving ambiguity when translating natural language queries into SQL?

To provide semantically correct results ambiguity in the user-provided natural language queries must be adequately addressed. This thesis investigates various approaches to ambiguity management and resolution. Natural language queries can demonstrate ambiguity even at low levels of complexity — e.g. there are two different types of "sales" in a database schema, and the user asks to retireve "all sales".

Such situations present the second major challenge associated with the practical implementation of natural language database interfaces. The success of this concept will significantly depend on whether suitable designs and mitigation techniques can be implemented without creating problems with regards to the aforementioned performance and hardware requirements. The research focus lies on both preventative measures through optimized pre-processing stages and prompt engineering techniques as well as reactive strategies that post process LLM output, either on the basis of further user input or context inference.

#### RQ3 — Which strategies are increasing semantic accuracy of queries?

In order to enhance the semantic accuracy a series of improvements may be applied to the pipeline. Potential optimizations include supplying (parts of) the schema during LLM prompting, implementation of interactive contextual reasoning through a conversational interface which would allow for user refinement, the implementation of a robust SQL parsing and validation mechanism and a hybrid approach partly relying on traditional NLP preprocessing techniques. This research will quantify semantic accuracy using popular NL2SQL benchmarks and empirically evaluate the impact each approach has on the benchmark performance. Furthermore this research will take a look at the optimal combination of the aforementioned solutions in order to develop a system that strikes the right balance between accuracy and performance.

## 1.4 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is following a research and development methodology in order to implement a natural language interface for databases, in particular postgres is used.

1. **Literature Review** — An analysis of the existing research in the fields of natural language interfaces (NLI) for databases, GPU integration for acceleration of database operations, and LLM/AI Model integration within database systems. This phase establishes the theoretical foundation for this research and identifies current state-of-the-art approaches, their benefits and shortcomings.
2. **Decomposition & Requirements** — Decomposing the problem statement into its fundamentals and deriving system requirements for the design phase from it. The goal of this section is to arrive at a list of functional and non-functional requirements that must be taken into account and fulfilled by the design and implementation phases respectively.
3. **System Design** — Design of a system architecture that can utilize GPU acceleration for LLM integration from within postgres. The primary goals of the system design phase are to arrive at an architecture that yields low latency natural language processing, schema-aware SQL query generation, ambiguity detection and resolution whilst maintaining a high semantic accuracy.
4. **Implementation** — The implementation of a PostgreSQL extension according to the above system design that relies on `rust` and `pgrx`. This extension will provide a GPU accelerated framework for executing LLMs, implement a natural language to query generation pipeline that relies on the SQL schema and create database functions and operators for both query generation and execution.
5. **Evaluation and Benchmarking** — An assesment framework and benchmark that introspects the implementations performance in multiple dimensions. Namely the most relevant dimensions for this thesis are:
  - (a) Semantic Accuracy — Measuring the overall accuracy of results delivered for a given natural language input.
  - (b) Ambiguity Resolution Capabilities — How well the system performs when confronted with ambiguous natural language input and database schemas.
  - (c) Performance Metrics — Measuring the latency, throughput and resource utilization of the implementation.
6. **Discussion** — Analysis and interpretation of the evaluation phase results against the research goals of this thesis. Evaluating the performance and accuracy results recorded during the benchmarks against the question whether real world deployments of NILs are feasible. Furthermore the effectiveness of ambiguity resolution capabilities and semantic accuracy enhancement strategies are showing a statistically significant effect.
7. **Summary and Outlook** — Summarizes the contributions, addresses limitations of this thesis and the implementation, and proposes directions for future research alongside possible applications. Primary future research topics include advanced GPU optimization techniques (e.g. further quantization), accuracy and performance impact of model fine tuning, techniques, scalability of such a system in enterprise scenarios and the evaluation of security and privacy considerations (e.g. managing access control).

## 2 Literature Review

In this section a comprehensive literature review is performed to assess the research landscape on NL2SQL (sometimes also referred to as Text-to-SQL or T2SQL) and NLIDBs. From the time their development accelerated in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Androutsopoulos, Ritchie, & Thanisch, 1995; Popescu, Etzioni, & Kautz, 2003; Tang & Mooney, 2001; Zelle & Mooney, 1996) until now, observing multiple larger paradigm shifts happening over time (Deng et al., 2020; F. Li & Jagadish, 2014; Yaghmazadeh, Wang, Dillig, & Dillig, 2017; Yu et al., 2020; Zhong, Xiong, & Socher, 2017). In particular this research focuses on the recent advancements when it comes to language models and how they can be harnessed for effective NL2SQL systems (D. Gao et al., 2023; Lei et al., 2025; J. Li, Hui, Qu, et al., 2023; Rahaman, Zheng, Milani, Chiang, & Pottinger, 2024; Rajkumar, Li, & Bahdanau, 2022; B. Zhang et al., 2024).

This literature review is covering the foundational concepts, challenges, key advancements and research gaps associated with using natural language instead of SQL. It lays the foundation for this thesis and helps to set the research questions introduced in the previous chapter in context.

### 2.1 Foundations of Natural Language Interfaces to Databases

Earlier papers in the research landscape on Natural Language Database Interfaces (NLIDBs) date over half a century back, into the early 1970s. Two decades after the first major research systems were developed in this domain, Androutsopoulos, Ritchie, and Thanisch have published an introduction and an overview over NLIDBs where an overview of state-of-the-art approaches were provided. (Androutsopoulos et al., 1995) Their work outlined multiple key issues and challenges associated with NLIDBs, and compared them against existing / competing solutions like formal query languages, form-based interfaces and graphical interfaces. These challenges (like unobvious limits, linguistic ambiguities, semantic inaccuracy, tedious configuration etc.) have shaped this field of research and are still considered relevant metrics today.

Early NLIDBs primarily relied on traditional natural language processing (NLP) techniques in order to achieve natural language understanding capabilities. With CHILL an inductive logic programming (ILP) approach was first introduced for NL2SQL systems, marking one of the key events when it comes to machine learning usage. (Zelle & Mooney, 1996) In 2001 Tang and Mooney have extended the approach of ILP parsing for natural language database queries with multi clause construction, yielding promising results in the field of NLIDBs. (Tang & Mooney, 2001)

Building on the systematic overview of Androutsopoulos, Ritchie, and Thanisch and the first machine learning approaches from Zelle and Mooney as well as Tang and Mooney, Popescu et al. have proposed a novel approach for implementing NLIDBs and outperformed at the time state-of-the-art solutions from Zelle and Mooney (1996) Tang and Mooney (2001) — achieving 80% semantic accuracy. (Popescu et al., 2003) The novelty of the PERCISE system lies in its natural language processing approach, specifically its lexical mapping strategy, allowing PERCISE to identify questions it can, and can’t answer (introducing the concept of *semantically tractable questions*) which therefore results in a better and interactive end user experience. Their experiments also showed that this approach is *transferrable* and *unbiased* — it is possible to feed in new, unknown questions into the system and maintain performance characteristics, whereas it was shown that Zelle and Mooney (1996) were suffering from a distribution drift of the questions asked. (Popescu et al., 2003)

The theoretical foundations and research questions highlighted by the aforementioned works, shaped the research field and highlighted the following, ongoing research:



1. The trade-off characteristics derived from choosing a machine learning vs. traditional NLP approach (e.g. CHILL versus PERCISE). E.g. coverage versus correctness. (Popescu et al., 2003; Zelle & Mooney, 1996)
2. The linguistic challenges associated with bringing NLIDBs into use (e.g. semantic inaccuracy, linguistic ambiguity, unclear language coverage etc.) (Androutsopoulos et al., 1995)
3. The value of systems and approaches which double down on reliability and semantic accuracy rather than giving promising but incorrect answers. (Androutsopoulos et al., 1995; Popescu et al., 2003)

Fundamentally this highlights the tension and mismatch between the characteristics of natural language, which is able to be ambiguous, *semantically untractable* or able to be incomplete in meaning and formal languages like SQL which always have on deterministic and *semantically tractable* meaning they convey in each statement. As Schneiderman and Norman have pointed out according to Popescu, Etzioni, and Kautz, users are “unwilling to trade reliable and predictable user interfaces for intelligent but unreliable ones” which induces performance expectations on NLIDB implementations to be highly certain about the questions it can, and can’t answer, whilst maintaining as high as possible natural language coverage. (Popescu et al., 2003)

## 2.2 Traditional NL2SQL Approaches

Prior to the wide-spread dominance of machine learning approaches for natural language processing a variety of traditional, rather discrete approaches have been explored in the field of NL2SQL / NLIDBs. These logical programming approaches have laid the foundations for transitioning towards the application of machine learning techniques for NL2SQL.

### 2.2.1 Rule-based and Grammar-based Systems

Foundational research of NL2SQL system mostly focused around applying rule engines that were tedious to set up and expensive to maintain / transfer across database systems. These rule engines mostly relied on the systematic identification of linguistic patterns / were trying to template SQL from information that was derived from processing the natural language query. (Codd, 1974; Hendrix, Sacerdoti, Sagalowicz, & Slocum, 1978; Woods, Kaplan, & Nash-Webber, 1972) These approaches mostly tried to formalize natural language queries into formal grammars which could then be deterministically mapped into a valid SQL query. (Woods et al., 1972) These approaches have strong downsides when it comes to the variety of natural language constructs they can process, as well as runtime adoption of new / unknown databases, query constructs etc. A potential upside of this class of NL2SQL systems is that they can confidently and reproducibly identify questions they can, and can’t answer — thus leading to very reliable and predictable user interfaces.

### 2.2.2 Semantic Parsing using String-Kernels

A significant milestone in parsing techniques of natural language queries was reached by Kate and Mooney in 2006. The introduction of string kernels for semantic parsing represented a novel achievement, when it comes to fusing logical programming approaches using a formal grammar like LSNLIS developed by Woods et al. (1972) and learning / training approaches to understand unseen language patterns / unknown natural language query structures. This allowed for more flexible pattern recognition when compared to traditional rule-based systems.

The core innovative characteristic of this approach lies in its capability to understand similarities between natural language expressions based on subsequence patterns rather than relying on exact matches. This made KRISP, the research NLIDB system developed by Kate and Mooney (2006) much more robust to language variations in phrasing and noise (e.g. spelling mistakes) in the input. As the Kate and Mooney demonstrated through experiments on real-world datasets, this approach compared favorably to existing systems of the time like CHILL, especially in handling noisy inputs — a frequent challenge rigid rule-based systems faced in real world scenarios (Kate & Mooney, 2006; Zelle & Mooney, 1996).

### 2.2.3 Graph Matching Methods

Reddy, Lapata, and Steedman (2014) brought together several research threads and reapplied emerging graph matching research models to natural language processing, specifically to natural language queries. Graph matching was applied once the natural language query was parsed using a Combinatory Categorical Grammar (CCG) approach into a semantic graph which denotes the relationship between semantic entities in it. This graph could then be matched against the actual graph derived from the database, since they share topological traits that can be used for matching (Reddy et al., 2014). This approach allowed to apply querying systems without having any question-answer pairs or manual annotations for training the system, which implies easier scalability / transferability across domains, since the system does not require any additional tweaks.

Even though this approach was novel and showed improved the performance over existing state-of-the-art approaches, it was showing that graph matching quickly reaches its limitations. This approach relied heavily on the CCG parser’s accuracy, with parsing errors accounting for 10-25% (depending on the dataset) of system failures (Reddy et al., 2014). Furthermore it struggled with both ambiguous language constructs and potential mismatches between natural language representation of relationships and database layouts — more complicated database designs, which may not match the users intuitive understanding resulted in a different topology and hence could not be matched (Reddy et al., 2014, p. 387).

### 2.2.4 Interactive Systems

In 2014 F. Li and Jagadish identified that perfect translation of natural language into SQL was challenging due to natural language not being made for query expressions as it heavily relies on contextual information and clarifying questions in order to disambiguate conversations (F. Li & Jagadish, 2014). These learnings relate to early prior art from Montgomery and Codd which also made this observation — “natural language is not a natural query language.” (Montgomery, 1972). The solution introduced by NaLIR further emphasized how important an interactive, conversational usage model is, when offering a natural language interface (F. Li & Jagadish, 2014).

NaLIR could accept logically complex English language sentences as input and translate them into SQL queries with various complexities, including aggregation, nesting, and different types of joins etc. The key innovative characteristic of NaLIR lies in its interactive communication mechanism (much like RENDEZVOUS) that could detect potential misinterpretations and engage users to resolve ambiguities present in their natural language query without forcing them to entirely rephrase their query F. Li and Jagadish (2014). This approach, while showing awareness for its limitations (with regards to entirely automating / deriving SQL generation from potentially ambiguous or faulty user input) showed that it was possible to overcome these limitations through choosing the right interaction model — “In our system, we generate multiple possible interpretations for a natural language query and translate all of them in natural language for

the user to choose from” —, rather than optimizing the generation part of the system F. Li and Jagadish (2014).

### 2.2.5 Query Synthesis

Yaghmazadeh et al. (2017) introduced SQLizer, which synthesizes SQL queries from natural language (Yaghmazadeh et al., 2017). This paper presents a novel approach when it comes to NL2SQL as it is merging prevalent semantic parsing techniques (outlined above) with an program synthesis (or query synthesis) approach. SQLizer makes use of a three stage processing model for natural language models: first generating a sketch of the query using semantic parsing, then using type-directed synthesis to complete the sketch and finally using automated repair, if required.

Yaghmazadeh, Wang, Dillig, and Dillig show that alternating between repairing and synthesis yields results that beat state-of-the-art NL2SQL approaches like NaLIR. SQLizer is fully automated and database-agnostic, requiring no knowledge of the underlying schema. The authors evaluated SQLizer on 455 queries across three databases, where it ranked the correct query in the top 5 results for roughly 90% of the queries. This represents a significant improvement over NaLIR (F. Li & Jagadish, 2014), the previous state-of-the-art system (Yaghmazadeh et al., 2017).

Potential short commings of this approach include queries which yield empty results, dealing with language variations as SQLizer is still using semantic parsing, and domain-specific terminology, all while still requiring users to select from multiple query options which reduces the overall usability of the system (Yaghmazadeh et al., 2017, p.22-23).

### 2.2.6 Limitations of Traditional Approaches to NL2SQL

Despite being innovative and achieving state-of-the-art results, many of the above outlined approaches face severe challenges when moving outside of an research environment. Many of these systems performed comparatively good on research benchmarks that were often composed of controlled question types and limited data variety. Ultimatively no standard benchmark existed for NL2SQL in this era, hence comparing different NL2SQL systems against each other is a problem on its own. Despite not having a standard benchmark that all approaches could be unifiably evaluated against, several fundamental challenges emerged / remained with these approaches:

1. **Limited linguistic coverage** — Prevalent rule-based and semantic-parsing based systems were only able to process the a small subset of the natural language they were programmed for. This severely limited their ability to handle different phrasings of the same end-user goal (Hendrix et al., 1978; Kate & Mooney, 2006; Montgomery, 1972; Woods et al., 1972).
2. **Transferability** — Traditional approaches typically required extensive manual configuration or at least a training phase / adaption for each database they were deployed for, hindering cross domain usage through being expensive and time-consuming to adapt (Androutsopoulos et al., 1995; Woods et al., 1972).
3. **Brittleness** — Many of the systems introduced in this subchapter did not handle synonyms, paraphrasing, or spelling errors well. Manual adaption / handling was needed in order to becomes resilient against each class of problems (Kate & Mooney, 2006; Yaghmazadeh et al., 2017).
4. **Poor scalability** — With potentially more complex underlying databases, traditional solutions often showed to perform worse. Reddy, Lapata, and Steedman found, that with increasing schema complexity more compute was required to resolve the natural language query to a suitable query candidate making them less transferable and scalable than initially

anticipated (Reddy et al., 2014) — “Evaluating on all domains in Freebase would generate a very large number of queries for which denotations would have to be computed ... Our system loads Freebase using Virtuoso and queries it with SPARQL. Virtuoso is slow in dealing with millions of queries indexed on the entire Freebase, and is the only reason we did not work with the complete Freebase.” which indicates underlying system design issues with runtime complexity.

These flaws of traditional NL2SQL approaches made it apparent, that a different class of approaches is needed, which increase transferability and reduce the brittleness since users are “unwilling to trade reliable and predictable user interfaces for intelligent but unreliable ones” according to Popescu et al. (2003). Whilst many approaches outlined tractable ways to increase user satisfaction and accuracy (like Codd did in 1974 with a conversational approach), NLIDBs were and are not considered to be a solved problem.

## 2.3 Neural NL2SQL Approaches

The previously outlined limitations of traditional approaches to solving NL2SQL / implementing NLIDBs pushed the research branch around neural network application forward to step in and propose new solutions which address the brittleness, transferability and scalability concerns addressed with logical programming approaches. Neural approaches showed to yield significant improvements in terms of transferability and overall accuracy which led to a paradigm shift in this research field.

### 2.3.1 Early Neural Approaches

In 2017 Zhong, Xiong, and Socher released Seq2SQL which represents a significant breakthrough and leap in NLIDB research. Seq2SQL was an early research system that in the field of neural network application and as one of the first papers to frame the implementation of NLIDBs / NL2SQL Systems as a reinforcement learning problem. The system utilized iterative query execution in the reward function to improve its accuracy (Zhong et al., 2017). In the same paper Zhong, Xiong, and Socher introduced WikiSQL, a training dataset, which enables large scale (in 2017) model training.

SQLNet (Xu, Liu, & Song, 2017) addressed primarily the order-sensitivity trait of Seq2SQL (Zhong et al., 2017) that was prevalent due to being a derivative approach from sequence-to-sequence approaches. SQLNet diverges from sequence-to-sequence and joins multiple research threads, employing a sketch-based query generation. SQLNet breaks down complex queries into smaller (hence more manageable) sub-queries which can then be individually sketched and refined, yielding a system that outperformed state-of-the-art by 9% to 13% (Xu et al., 2017).

Yu, Li, Zhang, Zhang, and Radev have introduced TYPESQL, a variation of the SQLNet-approach, in 2018. TYPESQL’s primary difference to SQLNet is the encoding of type information for SQL generation. The approach scanned for entity references and values in natural language and was able to improve performance by 5.5% over SOTA-Models like SQLNet whilst requiring significantly less training time, indicating that type information was a useful information for deriving accurate SQL queries from user input (Yu, Li, et al., 2018).

### 2.3.2 Intermediate Neural Developments

Later in 2018 Yu, Yasunaga, et al. released SyntaxSQLNet, a followup research to TYPESQL, which represented a slight change in approach and research focus. In direct comparison SyntaxSQLNet focused primarily around complex query generation using a syntax tree decoder,

allowing for longer and more cohesive query generation (Yu, Yasunaga, et al., 2018). This advancement over TYPESQL allowed more complex queries to be reliably generated, enabling multiple clauses as well as nested queries. SyntaxSQLNet was one of the earlier research efforts which utilized Spider instead of WikiSQL (introduced by Zhong et al. (2017)), a large-scale NL2SQL dataset, incorporating 10.181 hand annotated natural language question and alongside 5.693 unique SQL examples that spread across 138 different domains (Yu, Zhang, et al., 2018). This research led the transition of comparatively simple, research-grade, neural systems for NLIDBs towards systems which are feasible in the real world.

Building on the above approaches, Guo et al. have introduced IRNet, a neural network approach using intermediate representation as a bridge between natural language and SQL in which semantic queries could be expressed. The intermediate format SemQL (or semantic query language) was utilized to transform and synthesize queries on the actual database schema more accurately than Seq2SQL. IRNet followed a three phase approach: schema linking between the natural language query and database layout, synthesis of SemQL as intermediate representation and deterministic conversion of SemQL to SQL. This approach allowed IRNet to outperform state-of-the-art approaches on the SPIDER benchmark by 19.5%, placing IRNet at an overall accuracy of 46.7% (Guo et al., 2019).

Following IRNet, graph neural networks (GNN) have been explored as alternative architecture by Bogin, Berant, and Gardner (2019), representing the database schema as a graph and using message passing to model relationships between tables, columns and natural language input. This approach demonstrated the capability to improve reasoning and query generation capability. Bogin et al. showed that when evaluating against the SPIDER benchmark GNN outperforms both SyntaxSQLNet (and therefore SQLNET and TYPESQL). Although presenting a significant advancement over previous state-of-the-art approaches, GNN falls behind in performance against IRNet by 6% (Bogin et al., 2019; Guo et al., 2019).

### 2.3.3 Relation-Aware Transformer Approaches

The release of RAT-SQL (Relation-Aware Transformer for SQL) Wang, Shin, Liu, Polozov, and Richardson (2020) represents the most significant leap in research of neural NL2SQL approaches. RAT-SQL diverged from earlier research through emphasizing the relationship between natural language and the database schema elements using relation-aware self-attention representing a novel approach for solving *schema linking* (Wang et al., 2020).

RAT-SQL’s primary innovations was the ability to infer, understand and utilize the relationship between individual tokens in the natural language query and link it to the database schema. Thus allowing for reasoning capabilities on the actual database schema while generating the query.

This architecture yielded a 57.2% in exact match accuracy when being evaluated on the SPIDER benchmark, substantially outperforming comparative approaches like GNN, IRNet and IRNet V2 by 10.5%, 9.8% and 8.7% respectively. Although overall accuracy improved across all approaches when being paired with BERT (Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers, a popular pre-trained language model from Google) the  $\delta$  between the individual approaches remained relatively steady, leaving RAT-SQL outperforming state-of-the-art approaches by 5% to 12.2% further demonstrating the capability advancement yielded by this system (Wang et al., 2020).

### 2.3.4 Comparative Analysis of Neural Approaches

The evolution from early neural approaches to RAT-SQL emphasized the rapid advancements that happened in the research field of neural NL2SQL approaches in different dimensions:

1. **Model Complexity** — Given the research progression from early sequence to sequence translation approaches (SEQ2SQL) towards sketch based and type augmented and graph based approaches (TYPESQL, SQLNET, GNN) and syntax tree decoding emphasized by SYNTAXSQLNET, neural approaches continuously advanced in the complexity of approaches that is required to beat state-of-the-art approaches in contemporary benchmarks like SPIDER. RAT-SQL presents one of the late and most complex advancements in the field of neural NL2SQL approaches with its adapted self attention mechanism (Bogin et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2020; Yu, Li, et al., 2018; Yu, Yasunaga, et al., 2018; Zhong et al., 2017).
2. **Transferability** — Each of the approaches introduced above represents a succession in terms of their transferability. The field of neural NL2SQL approaches significantly improved the ability for NLDBs to generalize over the underlying database schemas. RAT-SQL showed the strongest cross-domain accuracy (that is benchmarked by the SPIDER benchmark). With standard benchmarks emerging it became easier to verify and quantify which approach had the highest transferability as SPIDER specifically had independent development and test datasets, preventing approaches from over-optimizing on training data (Wang et al., 2020).
3. **Robustness** — As research systems advanced in complexity and shifted from raw input to output translation (Seq2SQL) their robustness steadily increased. Through more approaches like SYNTAXSQLNET which utilized structured decoding, IRNET which relied on an intermediate representation and RAT-SQL the challenges around *schema linking* outlined by Wang et al. (2020) have increasingly led to more robust systems that can handle rephrasings, spelling mistakes and variations in natural language usage far beyond what traditional NL2SQL approaches could accomplish Guo et al. (2019); Wang et al. (2020); Yu, Yasunaga, et al. (2018).
4. **Query Complexity** — The performance on complex queries involving multiple tables, relying on complex aggregations, nested structures and joins dramatically improved over the course of the research that happened in this field. Whilst IRNET represents one of the first significant advancements when it comes to the ability of neural approaches to handle complex queries, RAT-SQL still showed to outperform the intermediate representation approach introduced by IRNET by up to 10.5% (Guo et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2020).
5. **Schema Understanding** — Whilst early approaches like Seq2SQL primarily applied reinforcement learning for end to end query generation (Zhong et al., 2017), later approaches like TYPESQL, GNN and specifically RAT-SQL showed novel and state-of-the-art *schema understanding* / *schema linking* capabilities, yielding the ability to accurately reason about user intent and traverse the database schema while generating queries (Bogin et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2020; Yu, Li, et al., 2018).

### 2.3.5 Limitations of Neural Approaches

Despite the dramatic *accuracy*, *transferability* and *robustness* improvements that could be observed with late neural approaches (Guo et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2020), neural approaches still suffered from serious shortcomings / unsolved challenges:

1. **Training Data** — Utilizing neural networks these approaches required substantially more training data (ie. natural language paired with output SQL queries) than traditional systems which required serious efforts of data collection (Yu, Zhang, et al., 2018).

2. **Correctness** — The inherent mismatch between neural networks and formal languages yielded cases where models produced invalid SQL code. Approaches like SYNTAXSQLNET improved the tried to solve this circumstance by utilizing syntax trees during decoding but nonetheless syntactic correctness remained a challenge across future iterations of neural systems. (Yu, Yasunaga, et al., 2018)
3. **Domain Language** — Despite increased *transferability* characteristics neural approaches still suffered from a limited vocabulary and inter-domain understanding of terminology and relation between concepts which made highly domain specific natural language queries challenging.
4. **Observability** — The black-box nature of neural networks made approaches relying on them, particularly the ones with complex architectures, hard to understand / explain in case when neural systems yielded undesirable output.

The introduction and advancement of early neural NL2SQL approaches led to significant advancements in the research and feasibility of NLIDBs. The research shift started in this era established the foundations for further and more advanced machine learning approaches (specifically language model oriented approaches) being researched. Neural approaches showed to significant improvements in performance when being paired with pre-trained language models (Wang et al., 2020) which led to further research on their applicability.

## 2.4 Pre-trained Language Models

The advantages of combining specialized neural networks with general-purpose pre-trained language models led to a pivotal point in the NL2SQL research field towards focusing increasingly on the application of pre-trained language models for NLIDBs. Models like BERT or T5 offer noticeable performance improvements (especially when it comes to language understanding) over specialized NL2SQL networks due to training happening on unrestrained amounts of natural language data, instead of pure NL2SQL datasets which are often fairly limited in size and therefore natural language use — SPIDER2.0 which is a contemporary NL2SQL benchmark consists of just 632 real-world questions (Lei et al., 2025). Thus PLM-based (or at least augmented) NL2SQL systems can observe dramatic performance improvements through the language models’s ability to understand patterns and identify semantic relationships of natural language query elements.

### 2.4.1 Early Pre-trained Language Model Adaptations

The above outlined benefits have led to concrete research efforts focusing on the question whether the sole application of pre-trained language models could outperform neural state-of-the-art approaches — which often implicitly require a far more sophisticated architecture when it comes to natural language analysis.

In the time of emerging PLM application GRAPPA was introduced by Yu et al. in 2020 — a novel grammar-augmented pre-training approach built on RoBERTa<sub>LARGE</sub> (a derivative model from BERT). It generates synthetic training data (ie. natural language and sql pairs) using a synchronous context-free grammar (SCFG) which analyses and identifies patterns in natural language queries that can be used as templates for synthesizing training data. The specialized pre-training helps GRAPPA to establish a robust connection between natural-language and database schema elements, showing significant improvements on existing approaches on multiple contemporary benchmarks like SPIDER and WIKISQL (Yu et al., 2020).

Several NL2SQL approaches in this era focused on *schema understanding* and *schema linking* — the generalizability of PLMs required advanced techniques on ensuring that models both

understand the semantic intent of users when querying and correctly identify database schema elements in natural language queries. Thus improving semantic accuracy of generated SQL queries. STRUG (Structure-Grounded-Pretraining) was introduced in 2020 by Deng et al. and presented a novel pretraining approach that improves model abilities when it comes to *schema linking*, it separates the problem in three facets: column grounding, value grounding and column-value mapping. In direct comparison with GRAPPA, STRUG achieves similar performance while being significantly cheaper to train (Deng et al., 2020).

In parallel, Zhong, Lewis, Wang, and Zettlemoyer released GAZP (Grounded Adaptation for Zero-shot Executable Semantic Parsing) in 2020. Zhong, Lewis, Wang, and Zettlemoyer specifically addressed the challenge of adapting semantic parsers across databases / domains which was a apparent problem with neural approaches which had a strong tendency to overfit on benchmark datasets. Its novel contribution was the combination of forward semantic parsing with a backward utterance generator which allowed for data synthesis in unseen environments which could then be used to adapt the semantic parser (Zhong et al., 2020). This approach enables a improvement in robustness and accuracy in situations where training and inference environments differ without requiring manually annotated examples (Zhong et al., 2020).

#### 2.4.2 Advanced Pre-trained Language Model Approaches

Building on earlier foundational research on PLM application for NL2SQL tasks, researchers have developed increasingly complex systems that leveraged pre-trained language models whilst addressing their limitations when it comes to generating valid SQL.

Choi, Shin, Kim, and Shin introduced RYANSQL (Recursively Yielding Annotation Network for SQL) in 2020, which implements a sketch-based approach for decomposing complex SQL generation into multiple smaller problems. RYANSQL transformed nested statements into a set of top-level statements using the Statement Position Code (SPC) technique. This flattening of structure allowed RYANSQL to limit the complexity of the query generation problem whilst maintaining its ability to answer complex questions by recomposing complex queries from their parts. This approach allowed RYANSQL to achieve 58.2% accuracy on the SPIDER benchmark, representing a 3.2% improvement over contemporary state-of-the-art approaches at the time (Choi et al., 2020). The sketch-based approach makes RYANSQL a PLM-augmented successor of SQLNET which was a early neural approach to employ sketch-based query generation (Choi et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2017).

A significant advancement in terms of execution accuracy was reached with the application of T5-Models for NL2SQL tasks. T5 (Text-to-Text Transfer Transformer) Models have proven themselves as well-suited for for query generation — T5-3B for NL2SQL yielded 71.4% execution accuracy and thus presented a breakthrough in this domain of research (Rajkumar et al., 2022). This established a new baseline for PLM-based approaches and demonstrated that general-purpose language models could not only compete but outperform specialized architectures by far when properly fine-tuned (Rajkumar et al., 2022).

Following the advancements through T5, J. Li, Hui, Cheng, et al. introduced GRAPHIX-T5 in 2023, which combined the T5 PLMs with a further graph-aware layers for NL2SQL tasks. This architecture could leverage both pre-trained knowledge of T5 models aswell as the database schema structure during inference. GRAPHIX-T5 constructs a schema graph where nodes represent tables and columns and edges represent relationships between them, such as foreign keys or columns association. This architecture allows the model to deeply understand relationships and the layout of the database schema (J. Li, Hui, Cheng, et al., 2023). GRAPHIX-T5 outperformed standard T5 models significantly, with GRAPHIX-T5<sub>LARGE</sub> showing 6.6% increase in execution accuracy over T5<sub>LARGE</sub>. When both GRAPHIX and the baseline T5 models were combined with



PICARD (a novel constrained decoding mechanism) absolute  $\delta$  between them jumped to 7.6% (81.0% in absolute numbers), evaluated on SPIDER-DEV (J. Li, Hui, Cheng, et al., 2023).

In parallel, H. Li, Zhang, Li, and Chen proposed RESDSQL in 2023, which proposed to decouple *schema linking* and *skeleton parsing*. This addressed the typical challenges sequence-to-sequence models faced when simultaneously trying to link both schema elements and generate the query skeleton (e.g. `SELECT <columns> FROM <table>`). RESDSQL further employed a ranking approach to filter schema elements before passing them to the model for query generation, which reduced noise (when working with large database schemas) and enabled passing only the most relevant parts. This twofold approach allowed RESDSQL to achieve state-of-the-art performance when being evaluated on SPIDER, outperforming GRAPHIX-T5<sub>3B</sub>-PICARD by 0.8% in execution accuracy. When combined with NATSQL (a contemporary intermediate representation approach introduced by Gan et al. (2021)) absolute improvement over GRAPHIX-T5<sub>3B</sub>-PICARD jumped to 3.1% emphasizing the robustness gain decoupled architectures have over model-oriented approaches.

These advancement showed rapid improvements over earlier methods — far surpassing neural approaches — through advanced mechanisms when it comes to schema understanding and query generation. The wide language understanding inherited from PLM-basemodels further strengthens robustness and shows effectiveness through a large gain on the SPIDER benchmark. Collectively these approaches represent a leap in NL2SQL research, emphasizing their usability potential and real-world feasibility. This era primed the research field for the transition towards large language model adoption.

### 2.4.3 Constrained Decoding and Ranking Techniques

A major challenge in NL2SQL research is making sure that model generated queries are not just semantically accurate but also syntactically valid queries and thus executable. To address this issue Scholak, Schucher, and Bahdanau released PICARD (Parsing Incrementally for Constrained Auto-Regressive Decoding) in 2021, a constrained decoding mechanism for language models which utilizes the SQL grammar and constrained decoding mechanisms to incrementally parse the generate SQL, rejecting invalid tokens based on the grammar. PICARD showed to significantly improve the performance of pre-trained language models (like T5 or BERT) when it comes to NL2SQL tasks, lifting them from mid-level to state-of-the-art solutions on the SPIDER benchmark (Scholak et al., 2021).

PICARD operates as a incremental parser during model output decoding of pre-trained language models and continuously evaluates the probability of each token. Instead of just passing model outputs to a database for execution PICARD incrementally parses and validates the generated SQL, rejecting tokens if needed thus significantly improving the valid output accuracy (sometimes referred to as VA) of language models. This approach is addressing a significant issue associated with pre-trained language models — while they outperform in natural language understanding and reasoning, they often lack SQL grammar knowledge and tend to generate queries that are not executable due to their unconstrained output space (Scholak et al., 2021).

The above introduces RESDSQL built ontop of PICARD’s foundations and used a ranking-enhanced framework for input encoding. These two approaches represent a unique class of approaches that utilize input and output constraining in order to increase the performance characteristics of pre-trained language models (H. Li et al., 2023).

### 2.4.4 Advantages of PLM Approaches

PLM approaches to NL2SQL tasks have yielded significant performance improvements for the NL2SQL domain and represent a leap in NLIDB-research. They primed the research field towards

using language models which led to a transition towards large language models in the following years. Namely PLM approaches brought a series of upsides with them:

1. **Compute Efficiency** — PLMs like RESDSQL achieve high accuracy (up to 84.1% on SPIDER depending on variants) whilst using far fewer parameters than contemporary LLMs, making them significantly more efficient and therefore reduce hardware requirements for their deployment (H. Li et al., 2023).
2. **Transferability** — Approaches like GRAPPA and STRUG can incorporate domain-specific understanding of natural language, table structures and SQL syntax during pre-training which addressed one of the primary issues with neural approaches (Deng et al., 2020; Yu et al., 2020).
3. **Vocabulary** — PLMs offer a larger vocabulary due to the vast amounts of training data available. This enables them to handle a wide variety of natural language patterns which addresses the benchmark-overfitting tendency of neural approaches which primarily trained on the development sets of contemporary benchmarks.

#### 2.4.5 Limitations of PLM Approaches

Although representing the state-of-the-art at the time, PLMs introduce a class of problems which are associated with their non-NL2SQL associated nature. There have been an array of approaches to mitigate these shortcomings but nonetheless they must be considered when using a PLM-based approach to NL2SQL:

1. **Fine-tuning Requirements** — Most PLMs require substantial domain-specific, or at least NL2SQL specific, fine-tuning, limiting a straight forward adaptation to new domains or databases. Although being significantly more efficient than LLM-based approaches the potential need for initial fine-tuning represent a significant computational resource burden. Furthermore when not using synthetic data generation (e.g. GRAPPA) annotated datasets of training data are needed to achieve appropriate performance characteristics (Yu et al., 2020).
2. **Wide Input & Output Space** — Due to the general nature of PLMs their input and output space is often far larger than needed NL2SQL tasks. “Large pre-trained language models for textual data have an unconstrained output space; at each decoding step, they can produce any of 10,000s of sub-word tokens” (Scholak et al., 2021). This applies to both the input and output token space, therefore multiple approaches have been researched which focus on constraining these to the subset needed for NL2SQL tasks. Namely GRAPHIX-T5 and PICARD have proposed potential (and promising) solutions to this issue (J. Li, Hui, Cheng, et al., 2023; Scholak et al., 2021).
3. **Limited Schema Awareness** — Due to being general purpose, and non-NL2SQL optimized, PLMs tend to incorporate limited amounts of schema awareness when being applied out of the box for NL2SQL tasks. Multiple research efforts focused on improving this situation, most notably RESDSQL and GRAPHIX-T5 tried to improve the schema linking & awareness of PLMs (H. Li et al., 2023; J. Li, Hui, Cheng, et al., 2023), nonetheless the non-specialized nature of PLMs prevents NL2SQL being part of the fundamental model architecture.

These characteristics positioned PLMs as powerful but comparatively resource-intensive solutions for NL2SQL (especially in direct comparison with neural approaches), ultimately yielding the research domain to transition toward exploring Large Language Model approaches that

promise even greater flexibility in adaptation and potentially superior handling of complex queries through advanced in-context learning approaches.

#### 2.4.6 Comparison with Large Language Models

The research on applying pre-trained language models for NL2SQL tasks primed the field for the transition towards LLM usage. While PLMs like T5 and BERT range from millions to a few billion parameters, prevalent LLMs such as GPT-3 and GPT-4 operate at significantly larger scales, ranging from a few billions to hundred of billions parameters. The scale of LLMs enables in-context learning techniques that enable significantly easier and cheaper transferability of NL2SQL systems across domains (D. Gao et al., 2023). The  $\delta$  of deployment, inference and training requirements of these two approaches are significant due to the size difference in models, which transfer to hardware requirements and therefore cost. While PLMs can require extensive fine-tuning on domain-specific data which may aswell be resource intensive (Deng et al., 2020; H. Li et al., 2023; J. Li, Hui, Cheng, et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2020), LLMs transfer the cost to the inference environment, where model modificants are less impactful, due to the extensive pre-training that took place. Approaches like DINSQL show that with the application of LLMs the engineering challenges around model instruction gained relevance while model training became less of a central problem to solve (Pourreza & Rafiei, 2023).

### 2.5 Large Language Models

The emergence of LLMs such as GPT-3, GPT-4, and Claude fundamentally transformed the landscape of NL2SQL research. Early experiments with LLMs for NL2SQL tasks showed state-of-the-art capabilities in comparsion with contemporary PLM approaches (D. Gao et al., 2023). Rajkumar et al. (2022) demonstrated that CODEX (a contemporary model based on GPT-3), without any fine-tuning efforts, could achieve competitive performance on SPIDER, outperforming many state-of-the-art approaches that required extensive training. This breakthrough challenged the contemporary assumption that further specialization of model architectures would yield increases in NL2SQL performance (e.g. GRAPHIX-T5) (J. Li, Hui, Cheng, et al., 2023).

#### 2.5.1 In-Context Learning

In-Context Learning (ICL) is a foundational approach for leveraging the ability of LLMs to utilize larger context windows for inference than traditional PLMs. Typical context windows of state-of-the-art LLMs can reach up to hundred thousands of tokens. This characteristic of LLMs enabled researchers to utilize this context window to provide examples of accurate NL2SQL translation instead of applying parameter updates. This paradigm shift has made developing NL2SQL systems significantly more accessible.

The fundamental principle of few-shot learning for NL2SQL involves providing the LLM with a small number of example pairs of natural language and their corresponding SQL representation. These examples can benefit the model’s understanding of mapping between natural language and SQL syntax. This essentially builds on top of prior research like GRAPPA and STRUG, but applying these examples at inference time, rather than training time. Although this increases the inference cost of such a system, the upsides lie primarily in the flexibility of such an approach — database content / prior usage of the system can be dynamically utilized, rather than requiring retraining.

Example selection strategies showed to have a considerable impact on ICL performance. D. Gao et al. (2023) evaluated various example selection methods like *Random*, *Question Similarity Selection (QTS)*, *Masked Question Similarity Selection (MQS)*, and *Query Similarity*

*Selection (QRS)*. D. Gao et al. propose a novel strategy to select, organize and present ICL examples to LLMs. DAIL-SQL utilizes both question and query similarity, masking domain-specific words and prioritizing examples that exceed a similarity threshold of  $\tau$  (D. Gao et al., 2023, p. 5). DAIL-SQL encodes examples as question-SQL-pairs without the respective schema to improve token efficiency. Using a Code Representation Prompt (CR) for question and schema encoding yielded DAIL-SQL to achieve state-of-the-art 86.6% execution accuracy on SPIDER.

The comparison between zero-shot and few-shot performance reveals the accuracy gain potential through supplying examples to models in the inference context. While contemporary LLMs (such as GPT-4) have demonstrate impressive zero-shot performance (achieving 72.3% execution accuracy on benchmarks like SPIDER) (D. Gao et al., 2023, Table 1, p. 8), few-shot learning still shows to substantially improve model performance. D. Gao et al. (2023) shows that even one-shot learning boosts GPT-4’s execution accuracy to 80.2%, representing a 7.9% increase, while five-shot learning reaches 82.4% (?, Table 2, p. 8).

Especially with complex queries which can involve multiple tables, nested queries and complex joins, zero-shot approaches often dramatically underperform  $k$ -shot ones. NL2SQL approaches that dont supply examples to the model during inference time fail more frequently to generate semantically accurate SQL queries (D. Gao et al., 2023). Notable is the leap in exact match ratio measured by the SPIDER benchmark — jumping from 22.1% for GPT-4 using zero-shot to 71.9% with five-shot. The results presented by D. Gao et al. (2023) show significant correlation between  $k$  and the execution accuracy of  $k$ -shot approaches.

This effectiveness has established ICL approaches as a standard technique applied in LLM-based NL2SQL approaches. Contemporary approaches like XIYAN-SQL, CHASE-SQL AND DIN-SQL all utilize variations of ICL to achieve state-of-the-art results (Y. Gao et al., 2025; Pourreza et al., 2024; Pourreza & Rafiei, 2023).

### 2.5.2 Self-Correction and Iterative Refinement

Pourreza and Rafiei (2023) proposed DIN-SQL as an innovative approach to NLIDBs that rely on LLMs. DIN-SQL decomposes complex queries into sub-parts and utilizes in-context-learning and self-correction during the generation phase. Compared to DAIL-SQL which relies on example selection during the in-context-learning phase, DIN-SQL focuses on a refinement loop that allows the model to self- correct errors it made during the initial generation phase — thus the model can repair schema linking, syntactic or semantic errors. By explicitly instructing the LLM to review its work against a specific schema, the user input and potential database errors, DIN-SQL achieves a high execution accuracy on SPIDER with 85.3%. Therefore DIN-SQL outperforms contemporary approaches but is surpassed by DAIL-SQL by 1.3% (D. Gao et al., 2023; Pourreza & Rafiei, 2023). Furthermore DIN-SQL makes observations on the impact that the self-correction prompt can steer results significantly — Pourreza and Rafiei found that using *generic self-correction* (ie. assuming the query contains errors) lowers the execution accuracy by 4.2% on SPIDER compared to *gentle self-correction* (ie. assuming nothing about the validity of the query). It was noted that the impact of the self-correction mechanism relies on the model size, with smaller models performing better with *generic self-correction* and larger models performing better with *gentle self-correction* (Pourreza & Rafiei, 2023). The self-correcting nature of DIN-SQL represents a diversion from DAIL-SQL’s emphasis on input optimization towards output refinement. Pourreza and Rafiei demonstrate how structured introspection can play a significant role in enhancing LLM performance for formal language generation tasks.

Building upon DIN-SQL’s self-correction module, Askari, Poelitz, and Tang (2024) proposed MAGIC (Multi-Agent Guideline for In-Context Text-to-SQL), which further advances the self-correction mechanism through harnessing a set of specialized agents to automate the

self-correction prompt engineering (Askari et al., 2024). MAGIC consists of a manager agent, a correction agent and a feedback agent that collaboratively refine LLM instructions during the refinement loop. Further MAGIC derives common failure patterns of the initial query generation phase from training data, allowing it to efficiently spot the most common mistakes that the model makes at generation time. This approach represents a further advancement on Pourreza and Rafiei’s DIN-SQL, effectively supersetting the *generic* and *gentle* correction mechanisms through an intelligent, self-adapting one (Askari et al., 2024). The autogenerated guidelines from MAGIC yield 85.6% execution accuracy on the SPIDER development set — representing a 5.31% improvement over DIN-SQL’s human written correction guidelines. These results emphasize that optimized self-correction mechanisms have the ability to significantly drive up overall system performance of NLIDBs (Askari et al., 2024).

While DIN-SQL and MAGIC focus on automated self-correction in single-turn settings, H. Zhang, Cao, Xu, Chen, and Yu (2024) introduced the concept of Chain-of-Editions (CoE-SQL), which addresses the unique challenges of multi-turn conversational NLIDBs. Conversational interfaces for NL2SQL systems enable human-in-the-loop refinement. Interactive information seeking from the user has shown to be an effective way to drive overall accuracy of the system and improve user satisfaction (F. Li & Jagadish, 2014). Rather than approaching each query independently, CoE-SQL recognizes that in a conversational context, successive SQL queries usually require only small and incremental modifications of the previous queries. Interactive user input is an effective measure for dealing with ambiguous natural language queries (F. Li & Jagadish, 2014; Montgomery, 1972; H. Zhang et al., 2024).

### 2.5.3 Candidate Selection Frameworks

Contemporary NL2SQL approaches have increasingly emphasized on the generation of query candidates and their selection as a promising architecture. Candidate selection strategies have shown significant performance improvements on challenging benchmarks. These approaches acknowledge the inherent difficulty of generating perfect SQL queries in one attempt / using one generation mechanism, even with capable LLMs and modern self-correction mechanisms.

Pourreza et al. (2024) introduced CHASE-SQL in 2024, a framework that leverages multiple reasoning paths to generate multiple query candidates. After the initial generation phase CHASE selects the most promising solution to the natural query input. CHASE-SQL harnesses three different generation strategies: A divide-and-conquer approach which breaks down complex natural language queries into multiple sub tasks that can be individually tackled, a chain-of-thought based generation approach which inspects execution plans of SQL queries and a schema-aware generation of synthetic examples that can be used for in-context learning (Pourreza et al., 2024). These different generation mechanisms produce a set of query candidates that each have different characteristics. For candidate selection CHASE harnesses a fine-tuned LLM that can do binary selection of candidates. Pourreza et al. have demonstrated that their query selection approach is more robust than apparent alternatives and yields state-of-the-art performance with 73% execution accuracy on BIRD and 87.6% on SPIDER (Pourreza et al., 2024).

Conceptually similar work has been done by Y. Gao et al. with XIYAN-SQL which is architected as multi-generation ensemble strategy with better schema representation. XIYAN-SQL integrated in-context learning alongside supervised fine-tuning approaches to generate query candidates (Y. Gao et al., 2025). A key contribution of Y. Gao et al. (2025) is their M-Schema representation of database schemas, which improves the models schema awareness and reduces frequent schema linking errors. XIYAN-SQL enhances accuracy by utilizing multiple different strategies that have complementary characteristics during query generation to enhance the robustness of the overall system. The query generation stage utilizes both a fine-tuned SQL

generation model as well as ICL strategies to achieve a breadth of candidate coverage. Following to the query generation stage a self-correction stage (referred to as *refinement* stage by Y. Gao et al.) is utilized to correct common errors. Lastly a selection model is used to choose the most accurate candidate that was produced during the generation stage (Y. Gao et al., 2025). Through this sophisticated and diverse architecture XiYAN-SQL was able to achieve impressive results across contemporary NL2SQL benchmarks — achieving 89.65% execution accuracy on SPIDER and 73.34% on BIRD, which renders XiYAN-SQL state-of-the-art (Y. Gao et al., 2025).

Both CHASE and XiYAN-SQL show that diversifying candidate generation and training specialized models for candidate selection yield state-of-the-art execution accuracy which significantly outperforms single-path generation approaches. The success of these two approaches indicates that for increasingly complex NL2SQL tasks (such as SPIDER2.0), the capability to generate multiple valid interpretations of the natural language query is an important stepping stone to achieving meaningful execution accuracy. Both CHASE and XiYAN-SQL rely on specialized candidate selection models which renders these approaches to combine the strengths of LLMs when it comes to language understanding and transferability with the robustness of specialized model architectures for candidate ranking and selection.

#### 2.5.4 Retrieval-Augmented Generation

Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG) has emerged as a powerful paradigm for enhancing NL2SQL systems by integrating external knowledge retrieval with the generative capabilities of LLMs. This technique is seen in all above introduced papers in varying forms (Askari et al., 2024; D. Gao et al., 2023; Y. Gao et al., 2025; Pourreza et al., 2024; Pourreza & Rafiei, 2023; H. Zhang et al., 2024). The most prevalent form of RAG in NL2SQL is the encoding of the database schema into the LLM prompt for in-context-learning. This allows LLMs to be aware of the table structures and names, foreign key relationships, primary keys etc. Y. Gao et al. (2025) proposed the serialization of database schemas in the M-SCHEMA format, a semi structured, text-based schema description. D. Gao et al. (2023) proposed to encode the schema using a Code Representation Prompt (CR) which refers to the encoding of the raw SQL statements need to construct the schema. Y. Gao et al. (2025) provided an ablation study for the M-Schema which yielded questionable results on the optimization of this approach. While the M-Schema format yielded best results when XiYAN-SQL was combined with GPT-4o or Claude 3.5 Sonnet, it performed worse than alternatives on DeepSeek and Gemini models (Y. Gao et al., 2025).

A relevant optimization technique for RAG is the selection of a schema subset before encoding the schema for the model. RESDSQL was one of the earlier approaches to explore subset-encoding of database schemas with Shen et al. (2024) building on top of this (H. Li et al., 2023; Shen et al., 2024). Shen et al. (2024) introduced ASTRES which dynamically retrieves database schemas and uses abstract syntax trees (ASTs) to select optimal few-shot examples for ICL. By pruning the ASTs down to the most relevant subset, ASTRES achieved the highest at-the-time (2024) execution accuracy on SPIDER with 86.6% indicating that subset-encoding is a sensible optimization mechanism. ASTRES was combined with GRAPHIX-T5 in order to achieve this result (Shen et al., 2024).

The impact of RAG when NL2SQL systems face large and complex database schemas has been particularly significant. Traditional approaches struggle when database schemas contain hundreds or thousands of tables and columns, as the complete schema may not fit within model context windows depending on their size. RAG-based systems address this by dynamically retrieving only the most relevant portions of the schema based on the natural language query. The technique of subset-encoding becomes especially relevant in enterprise environments where database schemas can be extremely large and complex. Recent benchmarks like SPIDER2.0 em-

phasize enterprise environments and show that existing solutions underperform in those scenarios, often reaching single digit execution accuracy.

The work of Shen et al. indicates that prefiltering of the environment of language models is an effective and promising technique that has the ability to reduce computational requirements of contemporary NL2SQL systems. As introduced above, recent state-of-the-art systems often utilize closed-source models like Gemini, GPT-4(o), Claude 3.5/3.7 Sonnet etc which often come with massive parameter sizes (reaching hundreds of billions of parameters). ASTRES demonstrated that efficient schema retrieval mechanisms enable smaller models (e.g. GRAPHIX-T5) to achieve state-of-the-art performance against LLM based approaches like DAIL-SQL (D. Gao et al., 2023; Shen et al., 2024).

### 2.5.5 Specialized LLMs and Fine-tuning

While general-purpose LLMs demonstrated state-of-the-art natural language understanding capabilities, the research domain of NLIDBs increasingly explored the potential of fine-tuned LLMs for NL2SQL tasks, which offer a promising tradeoff between natural language understanding (ie. breadth of the model) and concrete SQL generation capabilities (ie. depth of the model). Multiple research works have been done on the fine-tuning of language models which yielded a series of dedicated models for optimized SQL generation.

A significant limitation of many LLM-based NL2SQL solutions is their dependency on proprietary and closed-source LLMs like GPT-4(o), Claude and Gemini. Whilst they are useful for initially proving the potential of LLMs on contemporary benchmarks, this dependency introduces significant concerns related to data-privacy, high-side use (e.g. in classified environments), transparency of data-flow and deployment costs. To address these challenges H. Li et al. (2024) have introduced CODES in 2024, a series of open-source language models dedicated for NL2SQL tasks with parameter sizes ranging from 1B to 15B. The CODES models were evaluated against contemporary benchmarks like SPIDER and BIRD and showed promising inference results when compared to their closed-source counterparts. H. Li et al. (2024) showed that CODES 7B achieves 85.4% execution accuracy on the SPIDER development set, outperforming both fine-tuning approaches like RESDSQL and GRAPHIX-T5-PICARD as well as prompting based methods DIN-SQL+GPT-4 and DAIL-SQL+GPT-4 (H. Li et al., 2024). The same tendency was observed on BIRD with CODES-15B achieving 60.37% execution accuracy, compared to 57.41% for DAIL-SQL+GPT-4 and 55.90% for DIN-SQL+GPT4 (H. Li et al., 2024). This marks a significant advancement in the open-source language model research area, with CODES reaching new state-of-the-art performance in 2024. While more recent approaches like XIYAN-SQL and CHASE both outperform CODES, CHASE relies on proprietary models and XIYAN-SQL doesn't provide any information on what base models were used.

H. Li et al. (2024) addressed several critical research challenges in the NL2SQL domain and proved that open-source models could perform competitively with proprietary models whilst maintaining a significantly smaller parameter footprint (ie. 7B and 15B) compared to GPT-4 which is a multi-hundred-billion parameter model. This makes it feasible to deploy CODES locally, instead of relying on an enterprise API like OpenAI's one (H. Li et al., 2024), therefore making it highly practical for real-world deployments where computation resource are constrained.

H. Li et al. published a follow-up paper in 2025 which introduced the next-generation OMNI-SQL models with 7B, 14B and 32B sizes, trained using synthetic data generation. OMNI-SQL achieves state-of-the-art performance when compared to alternative LLMs - including both open-source and closed-source competitors. The models achieve significant execution accuracy improvements on both SPIDER and BIRD, the 7B model reaches 88.9% on SPIDER and 66.1%

execution accuracy on BIRD which represents a significant (5%+) improvement over comparable alternatives (H. Li et al., 2025). These results were achieved without combining OMNISQL with advanced in-context-learning, self-correction, retrieval-augmented-generation or candidate-selection techniques, which indicates that even higher accuracy scores are possible.

### 2.5.6 Limitations and Challenges

Despite the impressive advancements of LLM-based approaches for NL2SQL, several significant limitations and challenges are apparent that impact their practical implementation and real-world deployability.

1. **Hallucination and Accuracy Concerns** — Since LLMs demonstrate a tendency to hallucinate, LLM-based NL2SQL systems face the challenge of detecting when LLMs generate plausible but incorrect SQL queries. The breadth of possible errors ranges from detectable errors like invalid table or columns references, invalid SQL syntax etc. to undetectable, slight errors in semantics, like reversing the order of aggregations or using the wrong aggregation method. Contrary to traditional approaches which fail visibly with unknown structures, LLM-based approaches might produce semantically flawed queries that execute without errors and yet return semantically incorrect data. As noted by Floratou et al., “achieving Enterprise-Grade NL2SQL is still far from being resolved” even with state-of-the-art models, particularly when handling complex real-world database schemas and ambiguous queries (Floratou et al., 2024; Lei et al., 2025).
2. **Computational Resource Requirements** — The resource intensity of LLM-based systems presents barriers to widespread adoption. High-performance state-of-the-art models require substantial computational resources during inference, making them expensive to deploy at scale. While smaller models exist, they typically show reduced performance on complex queries, creating a challenging trade-off between accuracy and resource efficiency. Studies like DAIL-SQL demonstrate a direct correlation between model size and performance, where the most accurate systems are also the most challenging to deploy economically (D. Gao et al., 2023). Even state-of-the-art specialized LLMs like OMNISQL degrade in performance as parameter sizes shrink, although they maintain a significantly higher parameter efficiency, outperforming enterprise-level closed-source competitors.
3. **Data Privacy and Security Implications** — Using LLMs particularly through proprietary APIs brings along considerable concerns with regards to data privacy and security as sensitive data may be transferred to respective model vendors. Potential sensitive data as well as database schemas alongside user questions needs to be communicated to external parties in order to form a usable system if closed source models are used. Recent open-source model developments like CODES and OMNISQL seem to mitigate this problem partially, but as mentioned above using local inference with LLMs brings along stark computational requirements.
4. **Ambiguity Handling in Complex Scenarios** — Following previous paradigms LLMs also continue to struggle with effective ambiguity resolution in natural language queries over complex database schemas. These challenges are particularly prominent in large scale enterprise environments where similar column names exist across multiple tables, or domain-specific terminology has multiple potential interpretations that can result in different queries. Though approaches like multi-path reasoning and candidate selection show promising improvements in execution accuracy, they often increase inference time



and complexity as they run multiple parallel inference steps and rank their results (Y. Gao et al., 2025; Pourreza et al., 2024).

5. **Competitive PLM Approaches** — Prevalent PLM-based approaches like RESDSQL and GRAPHIX-T5 achieved impressive execution accuracy while using significantly fewer parameters than LLMs, making them more computationally efficient (H. Li et al., 2023). Despite reducing inference-time requirements, these approaches typically utilize re-training and domain specific fine-tuning which both limits their flexibility and introduces training costs. Yet for certain scenarios PLM-based approaches offer an interesting tradeoffs: Front-loading the computational effort can be interesting in compute-constrained environments and help to reduce ongoing costs. LLMs don't require the upfront cost of fine-tuning and adaption but require significantly more resource for their deployment. This indicates that certain systems and environments might benefit more from PLM approaches than LLM ones. Contemporary research, which typically focuses around state-of-the-art-performance on benchmarks, shifted primarily towards LLMs due to their transferability and natural language coverage.

## 2.6 Benchmarking

In order to evaluate NL2SQL systems standardized benchmarks like SPIDER and BIRD have emerged. These benchmarks can measure performance across different approaches and models, enable meaningful ablation studies and are a useful indicator for the state of the research field. In the past decade significant advancements have been made with SPIDER being released in 2018 the first major, widely adopted, benchmark emerged in this field (Yu, Zhang, et al., 2018).

### 2.6.1 Spider

SPIDER, introduced by Yu, Zhang, et al. in 2018, has become the de facto standard benchmark for evaluating complex and cross-domain Text-to-SQL systems. It consists of 10,181 questions and 5,693 unique SQL queries spanning 200 databases across 138 domains. Previous benchmarks like lacked complexity and cross-domain distribution of datapoints which prevented the *transferability* of approaches or models to be accounted for in benchmarks. With SPIDER the capability to be database agnostic was required to achieve meaningful accuracy scores. Furthermore SPIDER was split in training and test sets which contain different database in order to prevent overfitting models from succeeding. This design specifically tests a model's ability to handle schema linking and generalization challenges rather than memorizing specific database patterns. SPIDER evaluates both *exact matching accuracy* and *execution accuracy*, with contemporary state-of-the-art systems achieving approximately 85-90% *execution accuracy* (as of 2025) (Y. Gao et al., 2025; H. Li et al., 2025; Pourreza et al., 2024; Yu, Zhang, et al., 2018).

### 2.6.2 Bird

The BIRD benchmark (BIG bench for large-scale database gRounded Text-to-SQLs), released in 2023, and addresses the gap between academic benchmarks and real-world applications by focusing on large-scale databases with actual data content (J. Li, Hui, Qu, et al., 2023). BIRD contains 12,751 text-to-SQL pairs and 95 databases with a total size of 33.4 GB across 37 professional domains. Unlike SPIDER, which primarily evaluates against database schemas with minimal content, BIRD emphasizes challenges related to dirty database contents, external knowledge between natural language questions and database values, and SQL efficiency in massive databases. This places BIRD as a relevant benchmark for real world feasibility of approaches and models. Even state-of-the-art LLMs like GPT-4 achieve only 54.89% execution accuracy on BIRD, compared

to human performance of 92.96%, highlighting the significant challenges posed by real-world database scenarios on NLIDBs (J. Li, Hui, Qu, et al., 2023).

### 2.6.3 Spider 2.0

SPIDER 2.0 which was introduced by Lei et al. in 2025 represents the most recent advancements of benchmarks for NL2SQL systems. It represents a significant evolution in NL2SQL benchmarking and focuses primarily on enterprise level database challenges. SPIDER 2.0 is much smaller with only 632 real-world problems which were derived from enterprise database usecases, but yet represents a meaningful indicator for the complexity of databases that approaches and models can handle. SPIDER 2.0 goes beyond simple query generation tasks and moves towards testing the deep understanding of the database, requiring models to understand metadata, SQL dialect documentation and project-level codebases (Lei et al., 2025). The tasks contained in SPIDER 2.0 often demand multiple complex SQL queries often exceeding the 100-line mark and require incorporating a diverse set of database operation from transformation to analytics. Lei et al. further highlights the gap between academic research and enterprise-level environments with even advanced approaches achieving only 21.3% on SPIDER2.0 compared to 91.2% on SPIDER 1.0 (Lei et al., 2025; Yu, Zhang, et al., 2018).

## 2.7 Research Gaps

This literature review highlights that significant progress was made in the development of real world feasible NL2SQL systems and that the research domain has undergone multiple large paradigm shifts from rule-based to neural-network-based to PLM-based and most recently to LLM-based approaches. Despite these advancement several critical research gaps remained open or emerged which limit the practical deployment of NL2SQL systems and their widespread adoption as natural language database interfaces in real world scenarios.

### 2.7.1 Advanced Open-Source Approaches

While recent research papers have made remarkable progress on both open-source model development (CODES and OMNISQL) aswell as advanced architecture development like CHASE and XIYAN-SQL (which utilize multi-path generation and candidate selection, self-correction and RAG), a significant research gap evolved around state-of-the-art approaches that dont rely on proprietary LLMs and only utilize open-source models. Most contemporary research proposes solutions which (partially) rely on the baseline proprietary LLM in order to achieve state-of-the-art results. Whilst these efforts give meaningful signal to the effect that specific prompt engineering techniques, self-correction mechanisms and candidate selection models have, they are not yet feasible for real world scenarios due to the cost and data privacy concerns they introduce.

1. **Limited Exploration of Technique Synergies** — Contemporary research primarily focuses on techniques like candidate selection, RAG, and self-correction in isolation or with specific closed-source LLMs. A gap remains in understanding how these techniques can be optimally combined, especially with emerging open-source models. For instance, the potential of synergy of specialized open-source LLM like OMNISQL with candidate-selection, advanced self-correction and subset-encoding of database schemas has yet to be researched.
2. **Efficiency-Accuracy Tradeoffs** — Whilst recent research efforts focus primarily on achieving a new state-of-the-art execution accuracy metric on prevalent benchmarks, the

relationship of computational requirements and performance gains achieved remains unclear. Some research papers present ablation studies indicating the relevance of certain architecture components but the overall relationship between state-of-the-art performance and cost is still underexplored.

3. **Cross-Technique Optimization** — There is limited research on how to optimize the interplay between the various NL2SQL techniques. For example, it is yet unclear how subset-encoding of database schemas might impact the effectiveness of multi-path generation and candidate selection, or whether synthetic example generation for in-context-learning is effective when working with specialized models versus general-purpose LLMs.

### 2.7.2 Deployment and Performance Gaps

Despite impressive academic results, significant gaps remain in transitioning NL2SQL systems from research environments to real-world, enterprise-feasible, deployments:

1. **Database Integration** — While existing research has often focused on standalone systems, little attention has been given to the integration complexities between NL2SQL capabilities and database management systems like PostgreSQL. Having two standalone systems imposes a significant data transfer need between the two systems when in fact, natural language queries can be treated as an extension to most existing databases. This implementation gap prevents seamless adoption into existing databases as it requires additional software layers which in turn increase the overall complexity and cost.
2. **Hardware Requirement Optimization** — As mentioned above, current LLM-based approaches often require significant compute resources in order to achieve state-of-the-art results. There is limited research available on performance optimization of NLIDBs in order to achieve practical and industry-viable hardware constraints.
3. **Real-time Performance Considerations** — Most research papers evaluate models based on their accuracy metrics alone without factoring in the latency and throughput characteristics of their solutions. This imposes a possibly significant  $\delta$  between academic research and production environments. Responsiveness is an important metric for user experience and should therefore play a role in NLIDB research when it comes to evaluating different NL2SQL architectures.
4. **Privacy and Security** — While open-source models address some privacy concerns by enabling a local deployment of LLMs, research gaps remain in ensuring that NL2SQL systems respect database access controls and security policies. This is especially important for enterprise and government environments where data access is strictly regulated.

### 2.7.3 Ambiguity Resolution and Semantic Accuracy

Despite the long existence of the research field, fundamental questions remain open with regards to handling ambiguity effectively in natural language queries. Current, especially language model based, systems struggle to correctly identify when natural language queries contain ambiguities that they can't confidently resolve. Although some approaches like multi-path generation and candidate selection are a promising way to work around ambiguous language, early systems like NALIR showed that the most effective way to deal with inherently ambiguous language is asking clarifying questions, instead of trying to interpret the query best-effort (F. Li & Jagadish, 2014). Ambiguous language is an inherent source of inaccuracy and therefore a cause for misleading

query results. Contemporary research and benchmarks don't focus ambiguity detection and strategies resolution which therefore leaves open questions to be further researched.

#### 2.7.4 Evaluation and Benchmarking Gaps

1. **Enterprise-grade Evaluation** — As highlighted by SPIDER 2.0, there is a gap between academic benchmarks and enterprise realities. Further research is needed to create evaluation frameworks that better represent real-world enterprise environments with thousands of tables and complex relationships. Lei et al. (2025) is a promising first step in this direction.
2. **Performance Metrics** — As mentioned above, current benchmarks often don't capture latency or throughput of NL2SQL systems at all, allowing for solutions to achieve state-of-the-art scores that require significantly more resources than their predecessors. Having meaningful performance metrics and benchmarking would allow to further analyze the proposed solutions for their real world feasibility.
3. **User Experience Metrics** — Contemporary benchmarks focus on execution accuracy without assessing potential user satisfaction, trust, and overall experience. Metrics that capture these aspects are necessary for understanding the actual utility of NL2SQL systems in practice. Although execution accuracy is a big factor for the trustworthiness of a NLIDB, it is not the only component as indicated by F. Li and Jagadish in 2014.

#### 2.7.5 Thesis Placement

This thesis addresses several of the above outlined research gaps. The primary focus of this work is the integration of open-source NL2SQL models with advanced techniques like candidate selection, subset-encoding of database schemas, and synthetic example generation for in-context learning. Through the implementation of a PostgreSQL extension this work will bridge multiple critical gaps between theoretical advancements and their practical deployability into real world systems whilst exploring performance characteristics.

### 3 Theoretical Foundations

This section serves as an introduction to the theoretical concepts utilized in this thesis. It is meant to establish a baseline of understanding for the design, implementation and evaluation phases. It briefly covers relational database theory (incl. SQL), machine learning fundamentals and their subsequent application for large language models.

#### 3.1 Relational Database Theory

The relational database theory provides a mathematical framework for formalizing data layout in database management systems (DBMS), enabling efficient storage and retrieval mechanisms. This theory helps to understand the way in which natural language queries need to be translated into database operations and what challenges arise during this translation.

##### 3.1.1 Relational Model Fundamentals

The relational model was introduced by Codd in 1970 and essentially forms the theoretical foundation for most modern database systems (Codd, 1970, 1974). A relational database organizes data in relations (ie. tables), where each relation consists of tuples (ie. rows) containing attributes (ie. columns) of specific domains (ie. data types and constraints). The mathematical origins of this model root in set theory and first-order predicate logic (Codd, 1970; Date, 2003).

Furthermore the relational model abstracts data storage and respective physical implementation details by design, allowing interactions with data through respective logical structures (relations, tuples, attributes etc.) rather than exposing the underlying storage mechanism. This abstraction is fundamental for NL2SQL systems, as natural language queries can be mapped into queries on these structures regardless of underlying physical storage implementation, allowing for better transferability of NL2SQL systems (e.g. across different database deployments).

##### 3.1.2 Core Concepts

The core concepts of the relational model that are relevant for this thesis include:

- **Relations** — Mathematical sets of tuples representing entities (e.g. employees, products) or relationships (e.g. enrollment, purchases). Each relation has a fixed structure.
- **Tuples** — Tuples represent rows of data, by grouping a several attributes into one logical unit (e.g. one specific purchase, containing the amount, date and shop). All tuples in the same relation share the same structure.
- **Attributes** — Attributes are frequently referred to as columns, representing a specific dimension of a tuple (e.g. customers have names). Attributes are represented in a fixed domain.
- **Domains** — Domains are sets of allowed values for attributes, including mathematically formalizing data types and constraints.
- **Schemas** — Structural definitions specifying relations, their attribute names, domains, and integrity constraints.
- **Primary Keys** — Attributes that uniquely identify tuples within a relation. These ensure entity integrity and ensure referential relationships.

- **Foreign Keys** — Attributes referencing primary keys in other relations, allowing databases to maintain referential integrity and enabling semantically correct complex queries across multiple tables through joins.

These concepts form the semantic foundation that natural language interfaces must navigate when translating user queries into formal database operations. As shown in the literature review *schema-linking* is a crucial problem of NLDBs — establishing an understanding of which relations a natural language query refers to is the first step of formalizing a database operation for retrieval.

### 3.1.3 SQL as a Declarative Query Language

Structured Query Language (SQL) is a defacto standard for interfacing with relational databases. It is a declarative language to describe database operations like selection, insertion, updating and deletion of database contents. SQL's design is strongly influenced by relational algebra and tuple relational calculus. It enables complex data retrieval through a readable query syntax incorporating relational algebra operations like:

- **Selection** ( $\sigma$ ) — Filtering tuples based on specified conditions
- **Projection** ( $\pi$ ) — Extracting specific attributes from relations
- **Joins** ( $\bowtie$ ) — Combining data from multiple relations based on common attributes
- **Aggregation** — Computing summary statistics over groups of tuples

The basic syntax of SQL queries follows a logical pattern that reflects these theoretical operations:

```
SELECT attributes      -- Project attributes
FROM relations        -- Specify relations to use
WHERE conditions       -- Selection of tuples
GROUP BY attributes   -- Grouping for aggregation
HAVING conditions     -- Group-level filtering
ORDER BY attributes    -- Ordering of results
```

There are further operations like various types of JOINS, OFFSET, LIMIT, WITH that are heavily used in SQL which are excluded for readability and simplicity.

The nature of SQL creates a fundamental challenge for NL2SQL systems; natural language queries express (often fuzzy) user intent in terms of desired output (e.g., “Give me 5 great movies”) while SQL formalizes an explicit and discrete way of how to retrieve this information from the database:

```
SELECT m.title, AVG(r.score) as rating
FROM movies m
JOIN ratings r ON m.movie_id = r.movie_id
GROUP BY m.movie_id, m.title
HAVING AVG(r.score) >= 8
ORDER BY rating DESC
LIMIT 5
```

This semantic gap between natural language and formal queries represents the core challenge that this thesis addresses.

Furthermore, SQL’s compositional nature allows complex queries to be built from simpler components through nesting and combination of operations. NL2SQL systems must therefore not only fill in the individual query components but also how to compose these to semantically accurate and syntactically correct query statements. This is particularly important when dealing with complex natural language queries that may require multi-clause SQL statements involving subqueries, multiple joins, and aggregation functions to answer.

### 3.1.4 Normalization and Schema Design

Database schemas typically follow normalization principles to eliminate redundancy and maintain data integrity. The normal forms (1NF, 2NF, 3NF, BCNF) provide a set of design guidelines and rules for relational database design to reduce duplication, inconsistencies and anomalies (Date, 2003). Understanding normalization forms is crucial for NL2SQL systems to handle:

- **Schema complexity** — Normalized schemas often distribute logically related information across multiple tables, requiring natural language interfaces to understand implicit relationships and generate appropriate joins.
- **Semantic mapping** — Humans typically think about data in denormalized, conceptual terms, while relational databases store data in its normalized form. NL2SQL systems must overcome this layout difference (e.g. there is no 1:1 mapping of concepts to tables).
- **Query complexity** — Retrieving simple information from relational databases may require multiple joins in normalized schemas, challenging NL2SQL systems to generate potentially complex SQL statements from simple user requests.

The tension between normalized database design and intuitive natural language use represents a key challenge that influences the architecture and design decisions explored in subsequent sections of this thesis.

## 3.2 Machine Learning Fundamentals

Machine learning represents the algorithmic foundation for state-of-the-art NL2SQL systems, enabling systems to learn how natural language queries translate into SQL. Understanding these foundations is essential for implementing and optimizing large language model-based NL2SQL approaches.

### 3.2.1 Neural Network Architecture

Neural networks are the computational concept behind contemporary NL2SQL approaches, representing complex capabilities through compositions of simpler operations. A neural network consists of interconnected computational units (called neurons) organized in layers, where each connection has an associated (and learnable) weight and bias parameters.

The fundamental computation paradigm of neural network outputs is called forward propagation, which is applying the respective weights ( $W$ ) and biases ( $b$ ) to the input parameter ( $a$ ) and transforming it using a (non-linear) activation function  $f$ :

$$a^{l+1} = f(Wa^l + b) \tag{1}$$

where  $W \in \mathbb{R}^{m \times n}$  is the weight matrix,  $a \in \mathbb{R}^n$  is the input vector,  $b \in \mathbb{R}^m$  is the bias vector, and  $f$  is an activation function (e.g. ReLU, sigmoid, or tanh). Using this function repeatedly, propagates information through the neural network.

The most important architectural components for language processing models include:

- **Feedforward Networks** — Which can process fixed-size inputs through successive linear transformations and activations, this architecture is particularly suitable for classification and regression problems within NL2SQL systems.
- **Recurrent Networks (RNNs/LSTMs)** — Which can handle sequential data of variable-length by maintaining hidden states that capture dependencies, enabling processing of natural language sequences of arbitrary length.
- **Embedding Layers** — Which map discrete tokens (e.g. words, characters, or subwords) to a dense vector representation, thus providing the foundation for subsequent neural language processing.

The ability of neural networks to learn hierarchical representations through multiple layers makes them particularly well-suited for the complex translation required in NL2SQL systems.

### 3.2.2 Sequence-to-Sequence Models

Sequence-to-sequence (Seq2Seq) models established the foundational architecture for neural NL2SQL approaches (Xu et al., 2017; Zhong et al., 2017). These models which rely on RNNs and LSTMs addressed the fundamental challenge of mapping variable-length input sequences (natural language queries) to variable-length output sequences (SQL statements).

The Seq2Seq model architecture is composed out of three essential components:

1. **Encoder** — Process the input natural language sequence  $x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n$  into a sequence of hidden representations  $h_1, h_2, \dots, h_n$ , capturing the semantic content of the query.
2. **Decoder** — Generates the output SQL sequence  $y_1, y_2, \dots, y_m$  autoregressively, where each token is predicted based on previous outputs and encoder representations.
3. **Attention** — Allows the decoder to selectively focus on relevant portions of the input sequence, addressing the information bottleneck of fixed-size context vectors.



## 4 System Design

This chapter describes the design of NATURAL, the proposed NL2SQL system, addressing limitations and research gaps identified in the literature review. The design follows a modular architecture that leverages both traditional computer science algorithms and machine learning models to achieve robust, portable and extensible natural language to SQL translation capabilities.

### 4.1 Overview

The NATURAL system implements a multi-stage pipeline that transforms natural language questions into executable SQL queries through example selection, schema subsetting, and iterative refinement. The proposed architecture consists of five core components:

1. **Example Selection**  $\sigma$  – Identifies semantically and structurally similar examples using cosine similarity and schema distance.
2. **Schema Subsetting**  $\phi$  – Reducing schema complexity by subsetting the schema to the relevant subset of tables and relationships.
3. **Query Projection**  $\pi$  – Few-shot learning with a finetuned model to project natural language queries to SQL statements.
4. **Self Refinement**  $\rho$  – Self refinement of generated SQL statements through execution feedback and error analysis.
5. **Voting**  $\nu$  – Self consensus voting mechanism to choose the most likely result from multiple generation attempts.

The system processes queries through the following pipeline:

```

Natural Language Query
→ Sketch Generation
→ Example Selection
→ k-times [
    → Schema Subsetting
    → Few-Shot Generation
    → Self-Correction
]
→ Consensus Voting
→ SQL Query

```

This design largely builds upon in context learning concepts from DAIL-SQL (D. Gao et al., 2023) and OmniSQL (H. Li et al., 2025) but incorporates novel contributions in schema-aware example selection by harnessing a graph-based structural similarity metric.

### 4.2 Initialization

Before the NATURAL system can process queries, it requires initialization with historical data to construct a specific embedding space  $v \in \mathcal{V}$  and schema distance index  $d \in \mathcal{D}$ . This phase analyzes and samples existing datasets and previous user interactions to build advanced example selection.

#### 4.2.1 Embedding

Building upon DAIL-SQL’s masked example selection, NATURAL utilizes cosine similarity in an embedding space  $v$  to search for examples based on the masked natural language query  $q'$  and the respective masked SQL query  $\omega'$ . This allows  $\sigma$  to use cosine distance to search through historically observed question answer pairs; eg, from previous user interactions or prevalent training datasets like SPIDER, BIRD or SYNSQL-2.5M.

We therefore embed a set of masked samples  $\mathcal{S}$  into an embedding space  $v_{\mathcal{S}}$ , where  $\mathcal{S} = \{(q_1, s_1), \dots, (q_i, s_i)\}$ ,  $q$  is the natural language question and  $s$  is the corresponding SQL query.

The embedding space  $v_{\mathcal{S}}$  can be defined as:

$$v_{\mathcal{S}} = \{ (q, \iota(\text{mask}(q)), s, \iota(\text{mask}(s))) \mid (q, s) \in \mathcal{S} \}$$

Where the masking function  $\text{mask}$  is defined as described in the sections 4.2.1.1 and 4.2.1.2 and the embedding function is defined as  $\iota$ .

##### 4.2.1.1 Natural Language Masking

Masking of natural language is the process of replacing all words which are not deemed *structurally relevant* with the `<mask>` token. All words  $w$  in a constant whitelist  $\mathcal{W}$  are determined structurally relevant. Estimating a constant  $\mathcal{W}$  is described in section 5.3.

Working with masked language enables the system to capture semantic patterns independently of domain terminology, improving the generalizability across domains.

Given  $\mathcal{W} = \{\text{list, show, all, the, with}\}$  the natural language questions:

```
Show all customers with the firstname John
List all products with the name iPhone
```

Will get masked into the same sentence, such that the semantic words are maintained, but domain specific terminology is discarded:

```
Show all <mask> with the <mask> <mask>
```

##### 4.2.1.2 SQL Masking

Masking SQL queries refers to transforming all identifiers contained in a SQL query to `<mask>` and all value literals to `<value>`.

Thus, the queries:

```
SELECT * FROM customers WHERE firstname = 'John'
SELECT * FROM products WHERE name = 'iPhone'
```

get masked to:

```
SELECT * FROM <mask> WHERE <mask> = <value>
```

#### 4.2.2 Schema Indexing

To choose the most relevant subset of samples for few-shot learning, it is important that the SQL queries we choose as examples are written for structurally similar database schemas in order to minimize the structural difference between the selected samples and the ground truth query for a given natural language question.

```
CREATE TABLE users (
  id TEXT PRIMARY KEY
);
```

```
CREATE TABLE contacts (
  user_id TEXT NOT NULL,
  name TEXT NOT NULL,
  FOREIGN KEY (user_id)
    REFERENCES users(id),
  PRIMARY KEY (user_id, name)
);
```

Figure 1: Normalized schema

```
CREATE TABLE users (
  id TEXT PRIMARY KEY,
  contacts TEXT[] NOT NULL
);
```

Figure 2: Denormalized schema

For example  $\omega_{ground}$  the question “Give me all contacts for the user with the id 10” might look different depending on the database schema at hand, thus only selecting samples based on the similarity of the natural language question will yield inferior sample quality.

Given the database schemas in figures 1 and 2 respective definitions of  $\omega_{ground}$  would be 3 and 4.

```
SELECT contacts.name
FROM users
JOIN contacts
  ON contacts.user_id = users.id
WHERE users.id = 10;
```

Figure 3: SQL JOIN selection

```
SELECT contacts
FROM users
WHERE id = 10;
```

Figure 4: SQL Array selection

As shown in the figures 3 and 4 the structural similarity of the underlying database schema is a crucial component of the relevance of an example.

#### 4.2.2.1 Graph Representation

To determine structural similarity of database schemas systematically, we propose using graph representation of database schemas as a data definition language (DDL) independent representation of the database structure. Choosing a graph representation allows us to leverage established methods for measuring graph similarity such as Wasserstein-Weisfeiler-Lehman graph kernels (Togninalli, Ghisu, Llinares-López, Rieck, & Borgwardt, 2019).

Given a database schema  $s$ , the corresponding graph  $G_s = (V, E, \ell, w)$  is defined as:

1.  $V = V_t \cup V_c$  where  $V_t$  represents table nodes and  $V_c$  represents column nodes
2.  $E = E_{tc} \cup E_{fk} \cup E_{ref}$  where:

- $E_{tc}$  are table-column edges
  - $E_{fk}$  are foreign key relationship edges between tables
  - $E_{ref}$  are reference edges between foreign key columns
3. Each node  $v \in V$  has a semantic label  $\ell(v) \in \{1, 2, \dots, 9\}$  where:
- $\ell(v) = 1$  for table nodes
  - $\ell(v) = 2$  for generic column nodes
  - $\ell(v) = 3$  for primary key columns
  - $\ell(v) = 4$  for foreign key columns
  - $\ell(v) = 5$  for text columns
  - $\ell(v) = 6$  for numeric columns
  - $\ell(v) = 7$  for datetime columns
  - $\ell(v) = 8$  for boolean columns
  - $\ell(v) = 9$  for other/unknown data types
4. Each edge  $e \in E$  has a weight  $w(e) \in \{0.5, 0.9, 1.0\}$  reflecting structural importance:
- $w(e) = 1.0$  for foreign key relationships (highest importance)
  - $w(e) = 0.9$  for column foreign key reference edges
  - $w(e) = 0.5$  for table-column edges

We define the structural similarity of two databases as the topological distance of the respective graphs. The graph representation captures essential schema structure through semantic node labeling that prioritizes constraints over data types: primary key columns receive label 3 regardless of their underlying data type, foreign key columns receive label 4, and only then are remaining columns categorized by data type (text=5, numeric=6, datetime=7, boolean=8, other=9). This hierarchical labeling ensures that structural relationships take precedence over semantic content, while omitting table names, column names and domain terminology to achieve schema-agnostic comparison.

The graph representation of the database schemas introduced in 1 and 2 are therefore:

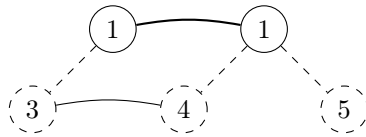


Figure 5: Normalized graph repr.

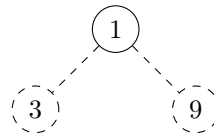


Figure 6: Denormalized graph repr.

**Legend:** ○ table ◌ column - foreign key - reference - - table-column

The  $\delta$  of the order of the graphs 5 and 6 further highlight the structural difference between the two schemas.

#### 4.2.2.2 Distance Measurement

To measure the distance between the graphs displayed in 5 and 6, we employ the Wasserstein Weisfeiler-Lehman (WWL) graph kernel method (Togninalli et al., 2019).

WWL kernels compute structural similarity by combining discrete Weisfeiler-Lehman graph features with continuous optimal transport theory. The method first extracts WL features from the labeled graph structure, then computes the Wasserstein distance between the resulting feature distributions. For two graphs  $G$  and  $G'$  with semantic node labels, the distance is computed as:

$$D_W^f(G, G') = W_1(f(G), f(G')) \quad (2)$$

as introduced by Togninalli et al. in 2019.

For the database schemas above, the normalized schema (5 nodes, 5 edges) and denormalized schema (3 nodes, 2 edges) show significant topological differences. The WWL distance captures both the reduction in graph complexity (fewer nodes and edges) and the loss of relational structure (elimination of foreign key relationships), resulting in a substantial distance value reflecting their structural dissimilarity despite representing equivalent logical data with  $D_W^f(G_{norm}, G_{denorm}) \approx 0.78$ .

#### 4.2.2.3 Distance Index

The distance index  $d$  maintains precomputed distances between all observed database schemas, enabling efficient retrieval of structurally similar databases during sample selection. This index is constructed as a set of schema-distance tuples  $\{(sm_1, di_1), \dots, (sm_i, di_i)\}$  where  $sm_i$  is a database schema name and  $di_i$  denotes its WWL distance to the current schema.

### 4.3 Functions

The following sets are subsequently used to introduce the functions  $nq$ ,  $\sigma$ ,  $\phi$ ,  $\pi$ ,  $\rho$  and  $\nu$ .

1.  $\mathcal{Q}$  – The set of all possible natural language queries.
2.  $\mathcal{S}$  – The set of all possible database schemas.
3.  $\mathcal{E}$  – The set of all possible execution functions for SQL validation.
4.  $\mathcal{V}$  – The set of all possible embedding spaces.
5.  $\mathcal{D}$  – The set of all possible distance indices over historically observed databases.
6.  $\mathcal{C}$  – The set of all possible candidate sets  $\mathcal{C}'$ .
7.  $\mathcal{Q}_S$  – The set of all valid queries over the database schema  $S$ .

#### 4.3.1 Query – $nq$

We define the query function  $nq$  as collapsing a natural language question  $q$ , the database schema  $s$  and a indices over historically observed examples and databases  $v$  and  $d$  into one SQL query candidate  $\omega$ .

$$nq : \mathcal{Q} \times \mathcal{S} \times \mathcal{E} \times \mathcal{V} \times \mathcal{D} \rightarrow \Omega_S$$

For a specific input instance, we write:

$$nq(q, s, e, v, d) = \omega$$

where  $q \in \mathcal{Q}$  is the input natural language query,  $s \in \mathcal{S}$  is the database schema,  $e \in \mathcal{E}$  is the execution function for validation,  $v \in \mathcal{V}$  is the embedding space,  $d \in \mathcal{D}$  is the distance index, and  $\omega \in \Omega_{\mathcal{S}}$  is the generated SQL query. The function is comprised out of the subsequently defined function and follows the algorithm described in Algorithm ??.

#### 4.3.2 Example Selection – $\sigma$

The selection function  $\sigma$  retrieves the most relevant examples from the historical embedding space  $v$  based on semantic similarity to the input query. This function implements the core example selection mechanism that subsequently enables few-shot learning for SQL generation.

$$\sigma : \mathcal{Q} \times \Omega_{\mathcal{S}} \times \mathcal{S} \times \mathcal{V} \times \mathcal{D} \rightarrow \mathcal{C}'$$

For a specific input instance, we write:

$$\sigma(q, z, s, v, d) = \{(q_1, s_1, \omega_1, d_1), \dots, (q_k, s_k, \omega_k, d_k)\}$$

where  $q \in \mathcal{Q}$  is the input natural language query,  $z \in \Omega_{\mathcal{S}}$  is the zero-shot inference result,  $s \in \mathcal{S}$  is the database schema,  $v \in \mathcal{V}$  is the embedding space,  $d \in \mathcal{D}$  is the distance index, and the result is a candidate set  $\mathcal{C}' \in \mathcal{C}$  containing  $k$  tuples of natural language queries, schemas, corresponding SQL queries and their combined distance.

The function utilizes cosine similarity in the embedding space to identify examples that are semantically closest to the input query  $q$ , considering both masked natural language representations and schema distance as described in Section 4.2.1. This approach ensures that examples are weighted by the following properties:

1. **Question similarity** – Semantic similarity between the masked input query and historically observed natural language queries in the embedding space  $v$ , measured using cosine distance between their respective embeddings.
2. **SQL similarity** – Structural similarity between the zero-shot inference result  $z$  and candidate SQL queries using masked SQL representations, enabling pattern recognition across different database domains.
3. **Database similarity** – Schema compatibility measured through the distance index  $d$ , ensuring selected examples operate on analogous database structures with similar table relationships and column types.

The exact weighting of these can be adjusted through three constants,  $w_q$ ,  $w_s$ , and  $w_d$ .

#### 4.3.3 Schema Subsetting – $\phi$

The subsetting function  $\phi$  reduces the database schema to only include tables, columns, and relationships that are relevant to the current set of candidates  $\mathcal{C}$ . This schema pruning mechanism reduces the complexity of the SQL generation task and token efficiency by focusing on the most relevant schema elements.

$$\phi : \mathcal{C}' \times \mathcal{S} \rightarrow \mathcal{S}'$$

For a specific input instance, we write:

$$\phi(c, s) = s'$$

where  $c \in \mathcal{C}'$  is a candidate set containing selected examples,  $s \in \mathcal{S}$  is the full database schema, and  $s' \subseteq s$  is the reduced schema subset containing only relevant tables and columns.

The function analyzes the selected examples in  $c$  to identify which schema elements (tables, columns, foreign key relationships) are commonly referenced in similar queries. This analysis enables the system to steer the model’s attention on the most relevant portions of potentially large and complex database schemas, thereby improving both accuracy and computational efficiency and prevents exceeding limited context windows.

#### 4.3.4 Query Projection – $\pi$

The projection function  $\pi$  represents the core translation mechanism that converts natural language queries into SQL statements using the selected examples and database schema. This function encapsulates the inference using LLMs that generates candidate SQL queries based on the provided context.

$$\pi : \mathcal{Q} \times \mathcal{S} \times \mathcal{C}' \rightarrow \Omega_{\mathcal{S}}$$

For a specific input instance, we write:

$$\pi(q, s, c) = \omega$$

where  $q \in \mathcal{Q}$  is the input natural language query,  $s \in \mathcal{S}$  is the database schema,  $c \in \mathcal{C}'$  is the set of selected examples, and  $\omega \in \Omega_{\mathcal{S}}$  is the generated SQL query.

The function operates by constructing a prompt that combines the natural language query, the relevant schema information, and the selected examples in a format optimized for large language model inference. The model then generates a SQL query that attempts to capture the semantic intent of the natural language input while adhering to the constraints imposed by the database schema.

#### 4.3.5 Self Refinement – $\rho$

The refinement function  $\rho$  implements a self-correction mechanism that iteratively improves generated SQL queries by identifying and correcting syntax errors, semantic inconsistencies, and execution failures. This function enables the system to learn from its mistakes and produce higher-quality outputs through automated feedback loops.

$$\rho : \mathcal{Q} \times \mathcal{S} \times \mathcal{E} \times \Omega_{\mathcal{S}} \rightarrow \Omega_{\mathcal{S}}$$

For a specific input instance, we write:

$$\rho(q, s, e, \omega_{raw}) = \omega_{refined}$$

where  $q \in \mathcal{Q}$  is the original natural language query,  $s \in \mathcal{S}$  is the database schema,  $e \in \mathcal{E}$  is the execution function for validation,  $\omega_{raw} \in \Omega_{\mathcal{S}}$  is the previously generated SQL query and  $\omega_{refined} \in \Omega_{\mathcal{S}}$  is the improved SQL query.

The function operates by executing the candidate query against the database, analyzing any errors or unexpected results, and then prompting the language model to generate an improved

version based on the identified issues. This iterative refinement process continues until a valid, executable query is produced or a maximum number of refinement attempts is reached.

#### 4.3.6 Voting – $\nu$

The voting function  $\nu$  implements a consensus mechanism that selects the most reliable SQL query from multiple candidate solutions generated through the pipeline. This function enhances robustness by leveraging the result distribution of multiple generation attempts to identify the most likely correct answer.

$$\nu : \mathcal{C} \times \mathcal{E} \rightarrow \Omega_{\mathcal{S}}$$

For a specific input instance, we write:

$$\nu(C, e) = \omega_{consensus}$$

where  $C \in \mathcal{C}$  is a set of candidate SQL queries,  $e \in \mathcal{E}$  is the execution function for validation, and  $\omega_{consensus} \in \Omega_{\mathcal{S}}$  is the selected consensus query.

The voting function  $\nu$  implements a majority voting algorithm similar to that described by OmniSQL (H. Li et al., 2025), where the result that appears most frequently across multiple generation attempts is deemed to be the most likely correct answer. The function applies frequency-based selection among the valid candidates. In cases where no clear majority exists, the function may apply additional heuristics such as query complexity or execution performance to determine the final proposed query candidate  $\omega_{consensus}$ .

## 5 Implementation

### 5.1 Development Environment and Tools

### 5.2 Integration of the Model

### 5.3 Whitelisting

### 5.4 Optimization



## **6 Evaluation**

### **6.1 Test Environment and Methodology**

### **6.2 Performance Tests**

#### **6.2.1 Latency**

#### **6.2.2 Throughput**

#### **6.2.3 Scalability**

### **6.3 Use Cases**

#### **6.3.1 Natural Language Queries**

#### **6.3.2 Text Generation Within the Database**

#### **6.3.3 Semantic Search and Text Classification**

### **6.4 Ablation Study**

### **6.5 Comparison with Alternative Approaches**

## **7 Discussion**

### **7.1 Interpretation of Results**

### **7.2 Limitations of the Implementation**

### **7.3 Ethical and Data Privacy Considerations**

### **7.4 Potential Future Developments**

## **8 Summary and Outlook**

### **8.1 Summary of Results**

### **8.2 Addressing the Research Questions**

### **8.3 Outlook for Future Research and Development**

## Appendix

### Installation Guide

### API Documentation

### Code Examples

### Test Data and Results

### References

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