

# Language Models as Models of Language

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## Abstract

This chapter critically examines the potential contributions of modern language models to theoretical linguistics. Despite their focus on engineering goals, these models' ability to acquire sophisticated linguistic knowledge from mere exposure to data warrants a careful reassessment of their relevance to linguistic theory. I review a growing body of empirical evidence suggesting that language models can learn hierarchical syntactic structure and exhibit sensitivity to various linguistic phenomena, even when trained on developmentally plausible amounts of data. While the competence/performance distinction has been invoked to dismiss the relevance of such models to linguistic theory, I argue that this assessment may be premature. By carefully controlling learning conditions and making use of causal intervention methods, experiments with language models can potentially constrain hypotheses about language acquisition and competence. I conclude that closer collaboration between theoretical linguists and computational researchers could yield valuable insights, particularly in advancing debates about linguistic nativism.

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# 1 Introduction

The recent success of artificial neural networks in natural language processing has sparked renewed interest in their potential to elucidate longstanding questions in linguistics. Modern neural networks based on deep learning architectures and trained on linguistic data, called *language models*, now match or exceed human performance on many language tasks once thought intractable for machines. Historically, connectionist models were critiqued as merely statistical approximations of linguistic behaviour, fundamentally unable to capture the underlying competence of human language users. While the remarkable progress of modern language models has been largely driven by engineering efforts rather than research goals, it nonetheless warrants a careful re-examination of the relevance of neural networks for linguistics as a scientific field.

This chapter aims to critically examine what language models may contribute – if anything – to theoretical linguistics. In particular, it considers whether we should take language models seriously *as models of language*; or, more precisely, as models of human language acquisition and competence. Section 2 provides a brief historical overview of statistical language modelling in natural language processing research, from early experiments inspired by information theory to modern language models based on the Transformer architecture. Section 3 turns to the rich body of work in computational linguistics investigating the linguistic knowledge of modern language models, with a particular focus on syntax. This line of research involves probing the sensitivity of language models to syntactic features through linguistically-informed experiments. The implications of these empirical findings for theoretical linguistics are discussed in Section 4. This section examines three potential interpretations of language models: as models of linguistic performance, competence, and acquisition. It is often assumed language models merely capture patterns of usage rather than the abstract linguistic competence underlying language. However, insights from computational linguistics increasingly suggest that language models trained in plausible learning scenarios and tested in carefully controlled conditions may serve as fruitful testbeds for evaluating linguistic hypotheses. In particular, language models show promise as idealized model learners to test or constrain theories of language acquisition and make headway on ongoing debates about linguistic nativism. Available evidence remains tentative, however; fully realizing the potential of language models to inform linguistic theory will likely require embracing open-minded collaboration between computational and theoretical linguists.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>This chapter is designed to accommodate readers with varying levels of background knowledge and interests.

## 2 A brief history of statistical language modelling

### 2.1 Early efforts

Natural language processing (NLP) traces its origins to the late 1940s and early 1950s, with early attempts to develop computer programs capable of processing and understanding human language. This research programme was inspired by the advent of the first programmable digital computers, raising hopes that complex linguistic tasks, such as language translation, could potentially be replicated algorithmically. From the beginning, the history of NLP was marked by a tension between two competing approaches: a stochastic approach influenced by information theory, and a symbolic approach influenced by theoretical linguistics.

In 1948, Claude Shannon proposed a probabilistic model of communication, expressing the information content of a message in terms of its probability (Shannon, 1948). Although Shannon’s work focused primarily on telecommunication, his methods of measuring information entropy found applicability in understanding linguistic phenomena. In fact, the first application of statistical methods to NLP is credited to Shannon himself, who experimented with different techniques for predicting the next letter in a sequence of English text based on the preceding letters (Shannon, 1951). Shannon’s theory also inspired other researchers to tackle challenging problems in NLP through statistical methods. In a memorandum published in 1949, for example, Warren Weaver proposed to use information theory as a framework for machine translation (Weaver, 1955). By determining the statistical regularities between two languages, Weaver postulated that one could find an optimal mapping between them to enable translation.

Despite these early efforts, NLP research was initially dominated by symbolic rather than statistical methods, as linguistic theory inspired efforts to explicitly encode linguistic rules for machines. Noam Chomsky’s work was particularly influential on this development (Chomsky, 1957, 1965). Rather than seeing language as a set of learned habits or responses to stimuli, Chomsky argued that our ability to generate and understand an infinite number of sentences suggests that language use must involve the algorithmic manipulation of hierarchical symbolic structures according to unconscious grammatical rules. On his view, these unconscious rules were acquired by language learners through reliance on a posited innate language faculty, dubbed “universal grammar”, which constrained the space of possible human languages. The idea that linguistic knowledge could be viewed as an abstract deductive system inspired precise formalisms that could be translated into symbolic rules for computers.

Many NLP projects adopted this linguistics-driven approach in the 1960s and 1970s, hand-engineering complex symbolic rule systems to parse input and generate responses using limited vocabularies. Terry Winograd’s SHRDLU, for instance, used a form of syntactic parsing to break down English sentences into subject-verb-object chunks and translate them into action commands in a simplified “blocks world” (Winograd, 1971). Other systems explicitly incorporated insights from Chomskyan linguistics. LUNAR, for example, was designed to be a natural language interface that could answer questions about Apollo 11 moon rock samples for NASA (Woods, 1973). Inputs were processed using an “augmented transition network” inspired by Chomsky’s transformational grammar, that could recursively apply transformation rules to parse English questions into a deep

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Readers already familiar with the history of statistical language modeling may wish to skip Section 2. Readers who are already well-acquainted in recent empirical work on language models’ linguistic abilities may also wish to skip Section 3 and proceed directly to Section 4, which explores the theoretical and philosophical implications of this research for linguistics. Those primarily interested in the debate surrounding language models as scientific models of language may find that section most relevant.

structural representation.

While the symbolic approach was initially fruitful, it also showed significant limitations that proved difficult to overcome. Rule-based NLP algorithms were labour-intensive to create, often brittle in the face of linguistic variability, and struggled with the ambiguity inherent in natural language. Although they could represent complex linguistic structures, their reliance on hand-crafted rules made them less flexible and adaptable to different languages and domains, and they often failed to adequately model the complexities of semantic and pragmatic context that are integral to human language understanding.

Another influential idea emerged in parallel from structural linguistics, which aimed to uncover the rules and patterns that govern language as a system of interrelated symbols. In contrast with Chomsky’s generative linguistics, structuralism focused on describing language as it is used rather than specifying abstract rules of grammar. In this context, Zellig Harris suggested that words appearing in similar contexts are likely to have related or overlapping meaning (Harris, 1954). This claim, which came to be known as the *distributional hypothesis*, was aptly summarized by J. R. Firth with the slogan “You shall know a word by the company it keeps” (Firth, 1957). Firth explicitly acknowledged the influence of Wittgenstein’s conception of meaning as use, according to which the meaning of a word is derived from its use in language, rather than from the object it refers to or the mental representation it is associated with. Building on this intuition, the distributional hypothesis states that the contextual meaning of words emerges from their place in linguistic environments and habitual associations with other words. Firth also emphasized the importance of analysing large samples of authentic language use to understand meaning, idiom, and lexicology – anticipating later developments in statistical approaches to NLP.

These ideas reached fuller fruition through the development of quantitative methods to model relationships between words. The work of Charles Osgood in psychology was a notable precursor in this area (Osgood, 1952). Osgood hypothesized that by quantifying allocation of concepts along a standardized set of dimensions, one could measure their meaning. His “semantic differential” method involved presenting subjects with a concept (e.g., “dictator”) and a scale between two opposites (e.g., “kind-cruel”). The subject would then rate where the concept falls on the scale. Repeating this for many concepts on many scales located the concepts in a semantic space. A factor analysis subsequently identified three main dimensions accounting most of the variance in ratings: *evaluation* (e.g. good-bad), *potency* (e.g. strong-weak), and *activity* (e.g. active-passive).

Osgood’s “semantic differential” experiments introduced the important idea that meaning could be represented geometrically in a multidimensional vector space, although it relied on explicit participant ratings rather than distributional properties of words in a linguistic corpus. However, subsequent research combined vector-based representations with a data-driven approach. Much of this work was done to improve information retrieval: by representing documents as vectors whose dimensions correspond to words weighted by frequency, one could search and retrieve documents from the similarities between their vectors (Salton et al., 1975). The idea of representing documents or words as vectors in high-dimensional vector spaces, and using distance between vectors as proxy for semantic similarity, would become a key principle of statistical approaches to language modelling building on the distributional hypothesis.

Latent semantic analysis (LSA) emerged in the late 1980s as a more sophisticated method to uncover latent semantic structure from text corpora (Deerwester et al., 1990). LSA represents documents as vectors of weighted word frequencies, then applies a technique called singular value decomposition to *reduce* the dimensionality of the resulting vector space, while preserving important semantic information. Importantly, the relationships between words captured by the similarity

between their corresponding vectors in LSA reflect deeper semantic similarity rather than just surface co-occurrence statistics. Indeed, the similarity between word vectors should not be confused with the frequency or likelihood of words appearing together in the corpus. Rather, the distance between vectors captures the similarity in the effects the words have on the meaning of the passages in which they occur. Words that do not directly co-occur in the text can still have highly similar vectors if they affect passage meanings in similar ways. This allows LSA to detect semantic relationships between words without relying solely on co-occurrence counts – including synonymy, antonymy, hypernymy, and meronymy.

Interestingly, the success of LSA was not merely seen as an engineering achievement, but thought to have implications for our understanding of human cognition. Thomas Landauer and Susan Dumais, two of the creators of LSA, took it to challenge nativist theories of language acquisition, arguing that it provides an existence proof that a general statistical learning mechanism over large corpora can rapidly acquire semantic knowledge on the scale of children’s vocabulary growth (Landauer and Dumais, 1997). Specifically, they argued the high-dimensional vector representations learned by LSA provide a potential computational mechanism to explain how learners can acquire so much knowledge from limited linguistic input, by allowing small adjustments to the representation of each word during new exposures to propagate across the lexicon, explaining rapid accumulation of vocabulary. As we shall see, similar claims about language acquisition have been bolstered by the success of modern language models.

## 2.2 Word embeddings models

Research on distributional semantics reached maturity with the development of word vector models based on artificial neural networks (Bengio et al., 2000; Mikolov et al., 2013). The key insight behind such models is that the distributional properties of words can be learned by training a neural network to *predict* a word’s context given the word itself, or vice versa. Unlike previous statistical methods, these neural models encode words into dense, low-dimensional vector representations also known as *word embeddings*. The resulting vector space drastically reduces the dimensionality of linguistic data while preserving information about meaningful linguistic relationships better than LSA. Word embedding models demonstrate the ability of statistical methods inspired by the distributional hypothesis to learn rich representations of lexical knowledge from unlabelled text. As the neural network trains on large amounts of text, words with similar meanings and syntactic roles converge to similar embedding locations that support predicting their shared contexts.

A particularly influential technique known as Word2Vec demonstrated the power of word embedding models to capture both semantic and syntactic regularities from their training data (Mikolov et al., 2013). One of the key insights from Word2Vec is that analogical relationships between words could be captured by simple arithmetic operations on their vector representations in the vector space of the trained model. For example, subtracting the vector for “man” from the vector for “king” then adding the vector for “woman” would result in a vector closest to the vector for “queen” in the space – implicitly capturing the idea that “man” is to “king” what “woman” is to “queen”. The vector space of Word2Vec models also exhibits morphological relationships between word forms. For example, the vector offsets between “walk” and “walked” versus “swim” and “swam” are parallel in the vector space, suggesting it can capture regular rules of inflectional morphology (e.g., “walk” is to “walked” what “swim” is to “swam”). Relationships between derivationally related words can also be captured. For example, even though morphemes like “-er” don’t occur as standalone units in text, Word2Vec models appear to represent them implicitly, mirroring derivational morphology: vector offsets akin to

“walk” - “walker” + “swim” result in a vector closest to “swimmer”.

This ability of word embeddings models to represent nuanced lexical relationships points to their potential to inform linguistic theory (Lenci, 2018). Classical approaches to lexical semantics often treat word meaning as a combination of binary semantic features; for example, the word “bachelor” carries the features [+human], [+male], [+unmarried] (Katz and Fodor, 1963). But modelling word meaning in this way seems intractable in practice, as the lexicon of any natural language contains a dizzyingly large number of distinct word meanings (Baroni et al., 2014). Word embedding models can automatically acquire meaning representations from corpus data, scaling up to large lexicons in a way not feasible for manually created representations. They provide an empirically motivated way to model meaning that captures gradience and flexibility; for example, they naturally represent vagueness through graded similarities (Erk, 2022).

Word embedding models can be used in exploratory ways to uncover patterns in large-scale distributional data like word similarities and nearest neighbours (Boleda, 2020). Specific linguistic phenomena can be investigated by looking at distributional representations. For example, word embeddings in models trained on linguistic data from different time periods can provide useful insights about semantic change over time (Kim et al., 2014; Hamilton et al., 2016). Furthermore, word embedding models can be used to evaluate linguistic hypotheses by translating them into distributional terms and testing their predictions (Boleda, 2020). For example, Boleda et al. (2013) tested the hypothesis that adjectives expressing modality (e.g., “alleged” or “possible”) are harder to model compositionally than non-modal adjectives, by looking at distances between corresponding vectors. Instead of confirming their hypothesis, they found that typicality of the adjective-noun pairing was more predictive of compositionality, leading them to propose that composition relies jointly on conceptual typicality and referential context (McNally and Boleda, 2017).

This line of research inspired ongoing efforts to combine insights from distributional semantics with formal semantics (Erk, 2013; Boleda and Herbelot, 2016; Venhuizen et al., 2022). Formal semantics excels at modelling phenomena like quantification, negation, modality, and logical inference but struggles with lexical semantics and descriptive content. Distributional semantics has complementary strengths – it captures lexical and conceptual meaning very well through the statistical analysis of large corpora, but cannot easily handle function words or logical entailments. This creates an incentive to combine both approaches into an integrative semantic framework called “Formal Distributional Semantics”. However, this is challenging due to the fundamentally different theoretical foundations of each approach. One strategy consists in enhancing formal semantics with distributional information that acts as a supplementary layer over logical form (Beltagy et al., 2013). An alternative strategy starts instead from distributional semantics, and aims to reformulate logical phenomena like quantification directly in terms of operations over distributional vectors, without relying on an existing logic (Herbelot and Vecchi, 2015). Each strategy faces distinct challenges: the former struggles to integrate distributional lexical knowledge into existing formal logics in a coherent way, reconcile vector similarities with formal inference, and retain cognitive plausibility; the latter has difficulty recovering logical phenomena like quantification directly from distributional spaces and lacks a clear notion of reference. Nonetheless, Formal Distributional Semantics is a promising avenue of research that vividly illustrates the relevance of distributional models to theoretical linguistics.

## 2.3 Language models

Despite their success in modelling salient aspects of lexical relationships, word embedding models have several significant limitations. Firstly, they assign a single “static” vector representation to each

word type, which prevents them from modelling variations in word meaning based on context or disambiguating homonyms. Secondly, they rely on “shallow” neural network architectures (typically with a single hidden layer), which may limit their ability to capture complex hierarchical relationships between words. Finally, these models fundamentally treat language as a mere “bag of words,” disregarding information about word order. Being designed to model language at the level of individual words, they are ill-suited to represent complex linguistic expressions. While it is possible to compute a vector representation for a complex expression by averaging the vectors of the words it contains, this fails to capture information about compositional structure.

These shortcomings are addressed by modern language models based on deep neural networks.<sup>2</sup> By contrast with shallow models, these neural networks have many hidden layers, affording them greater representational flexibility (LeCun et al., 2015; Buckner, 2019). Unlike word embedding models, they model the meaning of individual words in context, and can process complex whole sentences or paragraphs while preserving information about word order and syntactic structure. In recent years, these models have taken over virtually every corner of NLP, demonstrating unprecedented performance on a wide array of linguistic tasks that were previously challenging even for task-specific models (Brown et al., 2020; OpenAI, 2023).

Virtually all modern language models use a deep neural network architecture called the Transformer (Vaswani et al., 2017). The most common variant of the Transformer (known as “decoder-only” or “autoregressive” Transformer) learns from *next-word prediction*: given a sequence of words  $w_1, w_2, \dots, w_i$  passed as input to the model, it attempts to predict the subsequent word  $w_{i+1}$ .<sup>3</sup> These models are trained on a large amount of data, by sampling fixed-length sequences for next-word prediction over and over again. When training begins, the model is no better than chance at predicting the next word. Each time a prediction is made, however, it is compared to the word that *actually* follows the input sequence in the training data. The difference – or “error” – between the model’s prediction and the ground truth is then used to adjust the model’s internal parameters. These adjustments are calculated such that they would decrease the prediction error if the same context were encountered again. Through exposure to vast amounts of text, the model incrementally refines its performance, learning to predict the next word in any context occurring in the training data.

The fundamental building block of the Transformer architecture is a remarkably versatile mechanism known as *self-attention*. In essence, self-attention allows the model to weigh the relative importance of different words in the input sequence when predicting a new word. When a word is processed through the self-attention mechanism, the model “attends” to all the preceding words, gathering relevant information that might be spread out across the sequence. The mechanism assigns a weight (called “attention score”) to each of these words, determining how much each should contribute to the current prediction. For instance, when predicting the verb in a sentence, the model might give a high attention score to the verb’s subject, even if it is far back in the sequence. Conversely, less relevant tokens – such as a distant conjunction or adverb – might receive lower attention scores. Importantly, the allocation of these scores is not static; it is adjusted dynamically based on the current prediction task. In practical terms, these attention scores are used to create a weighted combination of the word vectors in the sequence, and this combination is then used to

<sup>2</sup>See [Millière and Buckner \(2024\)](#) for an introduction to neural language models.

<sup>3</sup>This description is slightly simplified for the sake of exposition. To be precise, autoregressive Transformer models process “tokens” rather than words. The input sequence is divided into these tokens through a process called *tokenization*, aimed at maintaining a balance between computational efficiency and the capacity to represent diverse words, including complex and less common ones. While many tokens do map onto whole words, others map onto sub-word units that may or may not carve words at their morphologically meaningful joints. For instance, in GPT-3, the word “linguistics” is tokenized into three separate units: “ling”, “u”, and “istics”.



predict the next word. This mechanism ensures that more important words have a larger influence on the prediction, while less important words have a lesser influence.

Each self-attention module in a Transformer-based language model is called an “attention head”. Language models do not contain a single attention head, but may have thousands of them.<sup>4</sup> Each of these attention heads has trainable parameters, which means that they may specialize during training to attend to specific kinds of dependencies between words. This mechanism allows language models to avoid some issues that plagued previous techniques, like the inability to deal with long-range dependencies or the difficulty in capturing ambiguity or context-sensitive influences on meaning. By directly modelling relationships between all words in a sequence, regardless of their distance from each other, Transformer-based language models are, in principle, particularly well-suited to induce syntactic structure. Importantly, while attention heads themselves process all words in parallel (i.e., they are “permutation equivariant”), information about word order is preserved through a mechanism known as positional encoding.

Transformer-based language models have shown impressive capabilities with a very broad range of tasks. They can generate fluent and grammatically well-formed text in natural language on virtually every topic. Beyond free-form text generation, they achieve good performance at summarization, paraphrasing, translation, information retrieval, sentiment analysis, and question answering, among other classic NLP tasks. Importantly, they can do so just from being pre-trained on a vast corpus of text with a next-word prediction learning objective, without task-specific fine-tuning (Brown et al., 2020).

These results have inspired several research programmes in computer science, computational linguistics and adjacent fields. A first set of issues relates to the systematic assessment of the capacities and limitations of language models. In the linguistic domain, in particular, there are ongoing efforts to investigate what kind of linguistic knowledge and competence, if any, can be meaningfully ascribed to language models. A distinct but related set of issues concerns the potential implications that experiments with language models may have for theoretical linguistics and developmental psycholinguistics. One particularly controversial issue is whether the apparent success of language models in learning the syntax of natural languages without built-in syntactic knowledge may challenge or constrain theories of language acquisition.

In what follows, I will consider each set of issues in turn. While discussing the putative linguistic competence of language models raises fascinating questions about semantic competence (see e.g. Bender and Koller, 2020; Søgaard, 2022; Piantadosi and Hill, 2022; Mollo and Millière, 2023), I will focus more closely on issues related to syntactic knowledge that have more straightforward implications for linguistics.

### 3 What do language models know about syntax?

Large language models like GPT-3 and GPT-4 hardly ever make grammatical mistakes. In fact, these models can reliably generate whole paragraphs of syntactically coherent text adapted to the style, tone, and language of the input. On the face of it, this seems to imply that they have effectively learned the underlying rules and structure of natural language syntax from the linguistic data they were trained on. This could be taken as preliminary evidence that, given sufficient parameters and training examples, neural networks can acquire sophisticated knowledge about core aspects of

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<sup>4</sup>GPT-3, for example, has 9,216 attention heads: 96 heads in each of 96 layers (Brown et al., 2020). State-of-the-art models like GPT-4 plausibly have more, although this information is not publicly available (OpenAI, 2023).



human language like hierarchical phrase structure and compositionality purely through exposure, without explicit supervision. However, the mere fact that language models can generate grammatical sentences, impressive as it may be, does not straightforwardly tell us whether they have genuinely acquired structured knowledge about syntax. We ought to consider the possibility that they simply rely on recognizing shallow statistical patterns observed in their enormous training data (Millière and Buckner, 2024). These models are undoubtedly powerful statistical learners; but their capacity for memorization and pattern matching could in principle explain their ability to apply common grammatical constructions without assuming that they acquire a deeper syntactic competence.

An increasingly large body of work in computational linguistics investigates this question using complementary strategies. We can distinguish three main methodological approaches: *behavioural studies* focus on models’ responses to specific inputs (Figure 1 A); *probing studies* attempt to decode information from models’ internal activations (Figure 1 B); and *interventional studies* attempt to manipulate models’ internal states to determine how they causally influence behaviour (Figure 1 C). These experimental strategies are largely inspired from cognitive science – particularly linguistics, psychology and neuroscience – but adapted to meet the specific challenges and opportunities of studying computational artifacts rather than human subjects (Frank, 2023a; Millière, 2024).

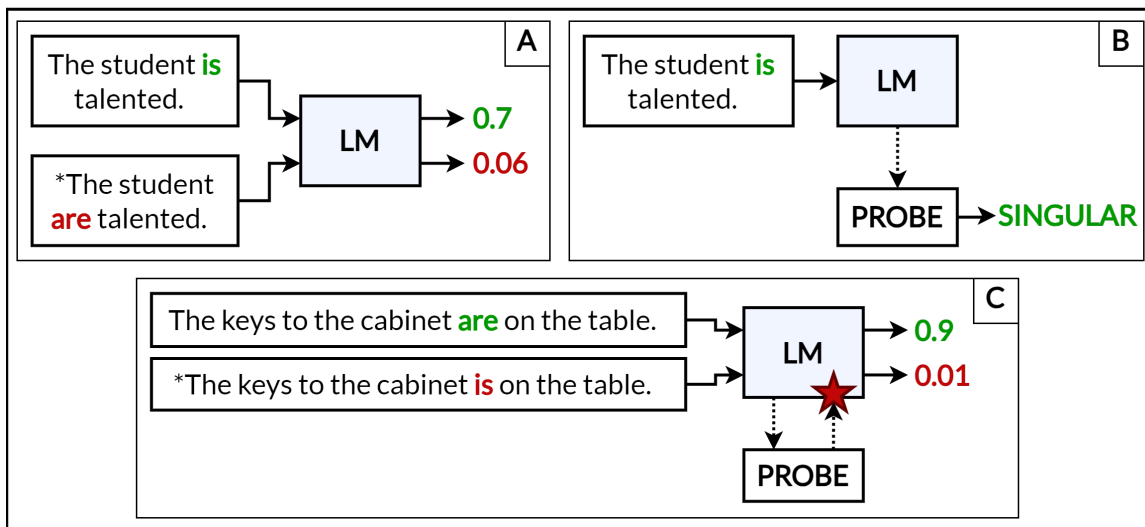


Figure 1: Three methodological approaches to assess syntactic knowledge in language models

### 3.1 Behavioural studies

Behavioural studies focus on evaluating the linguistic abilities of language models in controlled tasks targeting specific syntactic phenomena. The goal of these studies is to assess which linguistic features models are sensitive to, and whether their behaviour aligns with human behaviour. This line of research takes a psycholinguistic perspective, evaluating the implicit knowledge of neural networks through experiments informed by human research – what we might call “linguistically oriented deep net analysis” (Baroni, 2022).

### 3.1.1 Targeted syntactic tasks

A common approach to behavioural experiments consists in selecting or designing stimuli carefully chosen to exhibit a target linguistic feature, and evaluating whether the target system is sensitive to that feature. Linguists routinely use acceptability judgments to support inferences about the grammaticality of particular constructions, under the hypothesis that grammatical sentences tend to be judged as more acceptable than ungrammatical ones (Schütze, 2011; Sprouse, 2018). Accordingly, one may present sentences to a language model and assess whether its behaviour aligns with human acceptability judgments. If the model can reliably detect acceptable sentences in a given category, this may be taken as evidence that it is sensitive to the corresponding grammatical distinction.

Prompting language models to produce explicit grammaticality judgments has yielded mixed results. Dentella et al. (2023) tested three variants of the language model GPT-3 on grammaticality judgment tasks across eight linguistic phenomena, asking them directly whether sentences were grammatically correct; they found above-chance but low overall accuracy, greater accuracy for grammatical than ungrammatical sentences, high response instability within items, and a yes-response bias – in contrast to human controls. On the other hand, Ambridge and Blything (2024) prompted GPT-3 to rate the grammatical acceptability of sentences on a 5-point scale, finding very high correlation between the model’s explicit acceptability ratings and those of human adults for English causative sentences.

However, most behavioural studies do not prompt language models to elicit explicit metalinguistic judgments, as this approach has been shown to be unreliable and may lead to underestimating their actual syntactic competence (Hu and Levy, 2023). For example, answering a yes/no question about the grammaticality of a given sentence requires not just grammatical competence, but also metalinguistic knowledge of what grammaticality means, and the ability to verbalize internal sensitivity to syntactic features. As such, this approach imposes strong auxiliary task demands on language models that complicate the interpretation of performance errors (Hu and Frank, 2024).

Instead, most behavioural experiments focus on minimal pairs of sentences that only differ with respect to a specific syntactic phenomenon – such that one sentence is deemed grammatically acceptable while the other is not – and directly decode the probability assigned by language models to a key word that differs across the pairs. Using this methodology, Hu et al. (2024) show that Dentella et al. (2023)’s negative results should be strongly qualified: language models evaluated on the same sentences in minimal pairs achieve at- or near-ceiling performance on most linguistic phenomena tested, except for centre embedding, where humans also perform near chance; furthermore, minimal-pair surprisal differences strongly predict human grammaticality judgments.<sup>5</sup>

A good example of this strategy is the assessment of sensitivity to subject-verb agreement, the phenomenon in which the form of a verb must be congruent with the number and person of the subject in a sentence. Subject-verb agreement in English arguably provides evidence for hierarchical structure in syntactic processing, because the verb must agree with the head of the subject phrase rather than the linearly closest noun. Since language models process language sequentially without built-in hierarchical representations of syntactic structure, assessing their sensitivity to subject-verb

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<sup>5</sup>Leivada et al. (2024) and Dentella et al. (2024) object to the use of direct probability measurements on the grounds that it does not allow for fair comparisons with human performance on acceptability judgment tasks. Indeed, we cannot obtain equivalent probability measurements from human subjects, and grammaticality for humans is – on their view – not a matter of relative comparison between sentences or of degree, but an absolute judgment about whether a sentence violates grammatical rules or not. However, comparing relative probabilities assigned to minimally different sentences does provide insight into models’ sensitivity to specific syntactic features. While grammaticality may not be a matter of degree for individual sentences, the strength of preference between alternatives in a minimal pair can reveal graded aspects of linguistic knowledge that align with human judgments (as shown by Hu et al. (2024)).

agreement is an interesting test of their general ability to learn syntactic rules. To rule out alternative explanations of good model performance based on shallow heuristics, such as mere sensitivity to linear order, it is common to make minimal-pair tasks more challenging by including *attractors* in the stimuli. Attractors are chosen to have misleading features that interfere with the surface properties of the sentence without actually influencing its grammaticality (at least for idealized language users).

In a pioneering study, [Linzen et al. \(2016\)](#) tested subject-verb agreement in an early language model based on a Long short-term memory (LSTM) architecture rather than the Transformer. They selected naturally occurring present-tense English sentences from Wikipedia, including some sentences containing agreement attractors – intervening nouns with a different number from the head subject noun. For example, in the sentence “The keys to the cabinet are on the table,” the plural noun phrase (“The keys”) governs the agreement with the plural verb (“are”). However, the intervening singular noun phrase (“the cabinet”) acts as an attractor; while syntactically integrated into the subject within a prepositional phrase, it creates a potential locality effect where the verb’s proximity to a singular noun might lead to confusion about subject-verb agreement. Linzen and colleagues fed the selected sentences word-by-word into an LSTM language model, comparing the probabilities assigned by the model to the two forms of the focus verb (singular and plural). The verb form that the model assigned the higher probability was selected as a proxy for grammaticality judgments.

While supervised models trained with an explicit grammatical target (e.g., number prediction or grammaticality judgments) achieved near-perfect accuracy on simple cases with no attractors, the unsupervised language models trained purely on next word prediction fared worse (6.78% error rate). The gap between supervised and unsupervised models widened with the introduction of an increasing number of attractors. Performance slowly degraded for supervised models, only reaching an error rate of 17.6% with four attractors; meanwhile, the language model did much worse than chance in this most challenging setup. Importantly, these initial results do not straightforwardly translate to more modern architectures for language modelling. Indeed, even small Transformer-based language models like BERT ([Devlin et al., 2018](#)) tested in another study performed near-perfectly on the same task, with no noticeable performance degradation on stimuli containing multiple attractors ([Goldberg, 2019](#)).

A follow-up study by [Gulordava et al. \(2018\)](#) set out to control whether models might leverage semantic and frequency-based cues rather than genuinely syntactic ones to achieve good performance on tests of sensitivity to long-distance number agreement. In addition to selecting a set of long-distance agreement constructions from treebanks in several languages, they also created “nonce” versions of these test sentences by replacing all content words with random words that have matching morphological features (inspired by [Chomsky \(1957\)](#)’s famous example “Colorless green ideas sleep furiously”). This results in grammatical but meaningless sentences that remove potentially helpful semantic and frequency cues from the task. The results show that language models based on a recurrent neural networks (RNN) architecture achieve high accuracy on both original and nonce sentences, with only a small reduction in accuracy for the latter. Their success on the nonce sentences supports the conclusion that RNNs are acquiring useful syntactic knowledge from language modelling, not just memorizing word co-occurrence statistics. Additionally, the RNNs that perform best at their language modelling objective (measured in terms of their performance on next word prediction) also perform best on the agreement task, providing further evidence of the relationship between language modelling and syntactic knowledge. Once again, Transformer models like BERT were found to perform better than RNNs on this task, including in the nonce sentence condition ([Goldberg, 2019](#)).

[Marvin and Linzen \(2018\)](#) further tested LSTM language models on a broader range of syntactic

phenomena, including subject-verb agreement, reflexive anaphora, and negative polarity items. Crucially, they constructed minimal pairs of stimuli for each phenomenon using templates instead of selecting naturally occurring sentences, allowing them to achieve greater coverage and finer control of potential confounds. They found that while LSTM models performed near-perfectly on local subject-verb agreement dependencies, their performance degraded substantially on non-local dependencies such as long VP coordination (e.g., “The manager writes in a journal every day and likes/\*like to watch television shows”) or agreement across a prepositional phrase (e.g., “The farmer near the parents smiles/\*smile”). Likewise, performance on reflexive anaphora (e.g. “The manager that the architects like doubted himself/\*themselves”) and negative polarity items (e.g. “No/\*Most students have ever lived here”) was mixed across conditions, with models performing significantly worse than humans overall. However, [Goldberg \(2019\)](#) also found that Transformers performed much better, achieving near or above human performance on these tasks.

[Wilcox et al. \(2018\)](#) evaluated models on filler-gap dependencies. Filler-gap dependencies describe a syntactic construction where a word or phrase (the filler), often a *wh*-word like “what” or “who,” is moved to a different position in a sentence, leaving behind an empty position (the gap), with both elements retaining their semantic relationship within the sentence’s structure. For example, “Who did you see \_\_\_ at the library?” has a filler (*who*) moved to the front of the sentence, leaving a gap (marked with underscores) after the verb. Without the filler, as in “\*You did see \_\_\_ at the park”, the sentence becomes incomplete and incorrect. Filler-gap dependencies are subject to complex island constraints: specific syntactic environments where the usual relationship between the filler and the gap is blocked, rendering certain configurations ungrammatical ([Ross, 1967](#)). These constraints delineate the boundaries within which the filler-gap dependencies operate, such as prohibiting gaps within complex noun phrases or in doubly nested clauses headed by *wh*-words, thus placing restrictions on where gaps can occur in a sentence. Wilcox and colleagues found that LSTM language models are sensitive to filler-gap dependencies and to some of the island constraints on them, in which cases their expectation of a gap is attenuated. Whether these results actually demonstrate model sensitivity to island constraints as opposed to non-grammatical factors is debated ([Chowdhury and Zamparelli, 2018](#)), and additional research suggests that RNNs are insensitive at least to some island constraints ([Chaves, 2020](#)).

Ruling out confounds from surface heuristics in targeted behavioural studies is challenging, despite the use of experimental controls like attractors. [Lee and Schuster \(2022\)](#) investigated whether language models could correctly predict agreement patterns between reflexive pronouns (e.g. “himself”) and their referent noun phrase in English control constructions, which lack clear surface cues like subject-verb agreement. They tested the Transformer-based language model GPT-2 ([Radford et al., 2019](#)) on transitive control constructions containing both a subject and object, with and without an intervening noun phrase between the reflexive pronoun and its subject controller. They found that GPT-2 performed at chance levels on subject control constructions with an intervening noun, incorrectly relying on agreeing with the closest noun phrase. However, the model performed at ceiling on object control and on constructions without an intervening noun between the reflexive and subject. Overall, the results suggests that GPT-2’s sensitivity to reflexive anaphor agreement patterns in control constructions is limited, despite its strengths on other syntactic tasks.

[Futrell et al. \(2019\)](#) further asked whether the behaviour of language models provides evidence that they can incrementally represent syntactic state, in the way a symbolic grammar-based model does using a stack-based parse. Through carefully designed psycholinguistic experiments probing phenomena like garden path effects and interpretation of subordinators, they showed that LSTMs can implicitly capture aspects of hierarchical syntactic state from language modelling objectives

alone. However, they also suggest that fully encoding the syntactic requirements of constructions may require explicit syntactic supervision during training.

Beyond targeted behavioural studies, general benchmarks or “challenge sets” covering a wide range of syntactic phenomena have been designed to evaluate the performance of language models more holistically. One such resource is BLiMP (Benchmark of Linguistic Minimal Pairs), a large-scale benchmark testing 67 minimal pair types in English, each comprising 1,000 pairs, organised into 12 broad categories spanning morphological, syntactic, and semantic phenomena (Warstadt et al., 2020). GPT-2 was found to perform best overall (81.5% accuracy), although it still fell short of human performance (88.6% estimated individual human agreement based on ratings on a forced-choice task). Another Transformer-based language model, RoBERTa<sub>BASE</sub> (Liu et al., 2019b), was found to achieve near-human performance (within 2% points of the human baseline or better) on 6 out of 12 BLiMP categories (Zhang et al., 2020). SyntaxGym is another holistic evaluation pipeline that streamlines the evaluation of language models on standardized test suites targeting a broad range of syntactic phenomena (Gauthier et al., 2020). The larger version of GPT-2 (GPT-2-XL) achieved 89.97% accuracy on test suites from SyntaxGym (Hu et al., 2020).

Taken together, this body of evidence suggests that modern neural networks trained on a language modelling objective, and especially those based on the Transformer architecture, are sensitive to hierarchical syntactic structure beyond surface heuristics. Indeed, their performance on targeted behavioural tests appears to generalize fairly well to previously unseen instances of many syntactic phenomena, including in challenging cases involving attractors and long-range dependencies. In many cases, model behaviour is in line with human performance on grammaticality judgements. While the majority of the reviewed experiments focus on the English language, this general trend appears to hold across languages (Ravfogel et al., 2018; Mueller et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021; de-Dios-Flores and Garcia, 2022). The significance of these results should not be understated, as the structure-dependent generalization exhibited by language models has traditionally been assumed to require the kind of systematic compositional rules found in symbolic parsers.

### 3.1.2 Compositionality and recursion

Despite the apparent success of language models on a wide array of behavioural experiments, there is an ongoing debate about whether their performance is robust enough to warrant ascriptions of human-like syntactic competence. In linguistics, the principle of compositionality states that the meaning of a complex expression is determined by the meanings of its constituent parts and the way in which they are syntactically combined (Partee, 1981). Compositionality is not just a property of linguistic expressions, but also often considered an essential aspect of linguistic competence, where it refers to the ability to systematically construct and comprehend novel expressions by combining known meaningful elements according to grammatical rules. This productive capacity for rule-based combination is meant to explain how humans can generalize the production and comprehension of an infinite number of sentences from a finite set of words and rules, beyond memorized associations.

A longstanding critique of connectionist models is that they fail to exhibit this ability, unlike their symbolic counterparts (Fodor and Pylyshyn, 1988; Quilty-Dunn et al., 2023). The proficiency of modern language models in processing and generating seemingly novel sequences unseen in their training data has prompted an effort to systematically evaluate their compositional aptitude (see Pavlick, 2022; Donatelli and Koller, 2023, for reviews). However, these models are typically trained on massive corpora containing a huge variety of linguistic constructions. This makes it difficult to discern whether they have truly learned the underlying computational principles needed for systematic

generalization, or whether they are relying on having memorized a large inventory of constructions during training (Kim et al., 2022).

To better assess models’ compositional abilities, research in computational linguistics has turned to synthetic datasets specifically designed to test compositional generalization in a controlled setting. These datasets intentionally limit the constructions present during training, and construct test sets requiring the composition of seen components in new ways. For instance, the SCAN dataset contains a set of natural language commands (e.g., “jump twice”) mapped to sequences of actions (e.g., JUMP JUMP), with the test set containing longer commands requiring systematic composition (Lake and Baroni, 2018). Other prominent examples are the CFQ dataset, which maps natural language questions to logical forms (Keysers et al., 2019), and the COGS dataset, which tests generalization to unseen syntactic structures (Kim and Linzen, 2020). By training models on synthetic data, the aim is to evaluate whether they can productively combine known units based on a representation of their underlying structure, rather than relying solely on memorized patterns. This method is reminiscent of “control rearing” studies in animal cognition research, which also involve manipulating the learning environment of a subject to evaluate its influence of a target behaviour (Frank, 2023a).

Initial results of testing deep neural networks on synthetic datasets for compositional generalization generally showed a performance gap between the training and test sets. This was suggestive of a limited ability to properly generalize across challenging distribution shifts that require productive combination of known elements in novel ways. However, since then, many Transformer-based models have achieved strong accuracy on compositional generalization datasets. This progress has been enabled by various strategies, including modifications to the standard Transformer architecture to provide more effective inductive biases for compositionality (Csordás et al., 2021; Ontanon et al., 2022), and data augmentation techniques to expose models to a greater diversity of training examples (Andreas, 2020; Akyürek et al., 2020; Akyurek and Andreas, 2023; Qiu et al., 2022).

Another promising strategy that has shown excellent results without requiring architectural changes is *meta-learning*, or learning to learn better by generalizing from exposure to many related learning tasks (Lake, 2019; Conklin et al., 2021; Lake and Baroni, 2023). Standard supervised learning relies on the assumption that training and test data come from the same distribution, which can lead models to overfit on the peculiarities of the training set. Meta-learning exposes models to a distribution of related tasks, rather than a single task, to promote learning of generalizable knowledge that transfers better. This makes models less prone to memorizing training data, and better able to productively combine known elements in new ways when faced with novel combinations unseen during training. There is also evidence that generalization accuracy on syntactically novel items from the out-distribution test sets improves long after in-domain validation accuracy on the training distribution plateaus; this suggests that halting training too early based on in-domain validation accuracy leads to greatly underestimating the ability of Transformer models to generalize (Murty et al., 2023).

Another core tenet of theoretical linguistics holds that human linguistic competence is linked to the ability for recursive processing. Humans can construct and compute over hierarchically nested syntactic representations by recursively applying functions to their own outputs, with clauses embedded within other clauses in complex tree structures. The processing of such recursive embeddings is taken to be a hallmark of the human language faculty in the Chomskyan tradition, allowing for the generation of syntactic structures with potentially unlimited complexity from finite means (Chomsky, 1957; Hauser et al., 2002). Accordingly, assessing whether language models’ ability to handle recursion is deeply relevant to the discussion of their putative syntactic competence beyond shallow pattern



recognition.<sup>6</sup>

RNNs – and their LSTM variants – process data recurrently by applying the same weights to sequential elements, maintaining a hidden state that carries information across steps. In a classic study, Elman (1991) showed that simple RNNs trained on sentences containing multiply-embedded relative clauses could encode information about their recursive structure, inspiring research on connectionist models of recursive processing in humans (Christiansen and Chater, 1999). By contrast with RNNs, modern Transformers do not have built-in recurrent processing; their self-attention mechanism endows them with distinct inductive biases that lead them to process recursive constructions differently, but may in fact give them an advantage in handling hierarchical structure, as evidenced by their superior performance across a broad range of complex syntactic tasks.

Recent research sheds light on the strengths and weaknesses of different language models architectures when it comes to processing recursion. Lakretz et al. (2021) found that while LSTM-based language models can track information about local and long-distance number agreement, they have a limited capacity to handle nested recursive structures, seen in their failure to track agreement in some long-range embedded dependencies. In a follow-up study, Lakretz et al. (2022) investigated whether the newer Transformer architecture shows improvements in processing dependencies in nested constructions and can approximate human recursive competence. They found that Transformer models like GPT-2-XL could process short-range recursion in nested object-relative clauses nearly perfectly, vastly exceeding LSTMs. However, their performance sharply dropped below chance after adding a three-word prepositional phrase to make the embedded dependency longer (e.g., “The keys that the man **near the cabinet** holds are...”).<sup>7</sup> They conclude that Transformer-based models are fundamentally limited in their capacity to handle long-range recursive nesting, and thus fail to model a core aspect of human linguistic competence.

However, a closer look at the methodology of these studies suggests that initial results should be interpreted with caution. Indeed, human subjects tested by Lakretz et al. (2021) on subject-verb agreement in nested sentences with centre embedding received substantial training with examples, instructions, and feedback. By contrast, neural networks were tested in a zero-shot setting, without examples or task context. To assess the influence of this discrepancy, Lampinen (2023) tested the Transformer-based language model Chinchilla (Hoffmann et al., 2022) on the same task, providing it with context analogous to human training. When prompted with several example sentences before each test case, Chinchilla performed *better* than humans even on the most challenging conditions. Furthermore, upon reanalysing the human results of Lakretz et al. (2021) on the task, Lampinen found that human subjects, even after training, seem to perform near chance the first few times they encounter difficult syntactic structures. These results suggest that Transformer-based language models can in fact handle complex nested syntactic dependencies as well as humans, given just a few prompting examples, and that humans may also need some experience on the task before performing well on the most complex cases.

More generally, this work highlights the difficulty of establishing fair and meaningful behavioural comparisons between the behaviour of humans and language models in an experimental context. Differences in task framing can obscure real similarities or differences in the capabilities being studied. When neural networks appear to exhibit performance failures compared to humans, care should be

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<sup>6</sup>It is worth noting that the assumption that recursion is a necessary property of all human languages has been challenged. For examples, languages like Riau Indonesian provide some evidence that linear grammars without recursion may be possible (Gil, 1999; Nefdt, 2024).

<sup>7</sup>The much larger model GPT-3 (Brown et al., 2020) also failed to perform above chance in the same condition, tested in the `subject_verb_agreement` subtask of the BIG-Bench benchmark (Srivastava et al., 2023).



taken to ensure that experimental conditions are well-matched and take into account contingent constraints on performance for all tested subjects or systems (Firestone, 2020). This methodological concern is familiar from comparative and developmental psychology, where infants and non-human animals are known to exhibit specific performance constraints like limited memory or motor control that can prevent them from demonstrating full competence through behaviour on a task (Frank, 2023a). The discrepancy between language models’ performance on explicit grammaticality judgment tasks and direct probability assessments is indicative of an analogous effect of auxiliary factors related to the strength of task demands (Hu and Frank, 2024; Millière and Rathkopf, 2024). This point cuts both ways, however; the mere fact that language models achieve high accuracy on a syntactic task or benchmark does not straightforwardly entail that they possess the corresponding competence, if potential confounds such as shallow heuristics are not adequately controlled.

## 3.2 Probing studies

While behavioural experiments can provide evidence regarding the sensitivity of model predictions to syntactic phenomena in carefully controlled conditions, they generally do not warrant stronger inferences about how models represent this information internally. Probing studies aim to go beyond mere behavioural data to determine what kind of linguistic information can be extracted from the internal representations of language models tested on specific tasks (Alain and Bengio, 2018; Adi et al., 2016; Shi et al., 2016; Hupkes et al., 2018).

### 3.2.1 Diagnostic probing

The typical methodology of probing studies involves training a separate supervised classifier, also called a *diagnostic probe*, to predict linguistic properties like part-of-speech tags or dependency relations directly from the model’s internal activations.<sup>8</sup> This generally involves collecting a set of samples labelled with the target linguistic property, feeding these samples as input to the model, and capturing the model’s activations in a given layer in response to each input. The resulting dataset of activations-label pairs can be used to train the probing classifier to predict each sample’s label from the corresponding model activations. If the probe can predict the target linguistic properties with high accuracy on held-out examples, it suggests that information about those properties is encoded in the model’s learned representations. For example, given a corpus of sentences labelled with part-of-speech tags for each word, a linear classifier could be trained to map a model’s word embeddings to the correct part-of-speech tag. After training, the probe’s performance at assigning the correct part-of-speech tag to new unseen words would be evaluated. High accuracy on the test set suggests the model’s word embeddings encode information relevant for part-of-speech disambiguation.

Probing classifiers have been widely applied to study many model architectures and linguistic phenomena (see Belinkov, 2022, for a review). Early examples include probing a neural machine translation model to predict morphological properties (Shi et al., 2016), probing an LSTM tested on a subject-verb agreement task to decode information about the subject’s number (Giulianelli et al., 2018), and probing sentence embeddings to examine which syntactic properties such as parse tree depth are encoded (Conneau et al., 2018). More recent work has scaled up probing to analyse larger

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<sup>8</sup>While behavioural studies are inspired by psycholinguistics, probing studies are inspired by decoding methods in neuroscience (Ivanova et al., 2021). By training classifiers on known patterns of brain activity associated with specific stimuli or tasks, neuroscientists can then use these classifiers to predict or decode the stimuli or task from new patterns of brain activity. Probing an artificial neural network offers much more granular and direct access to internal states than available with current neuroimaging techniques.

pre-trained Transformer language models, with a particular focus on BERT due to its wide availability. This research program, informally known as “BERTology” (Rogers et al., 2020), yielded converging evidence that a broad range of syntactic information is decodable from the internal activations of language models. This includes evidence that BERT encodes hierarchical rather than merely linear structure (Lin et al., 2019; Warstadt and Bowman, 2020); evidence that BERT’s contextual word embeddings encode information about part-of-speech tags, syntactic chunks, dependencies, semantic roles and coreferents hierarchically organized across layers (Tenney et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2019a; Jawahar et al., 2019; although see Niu et al., 2022, for a critical discussion of the relationship between layer depth and decodable information); and even evidence that syntactic parse trees can be recovered from BERT and its variants (Vilares et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2019; Rosa and Mareček, 2019; Arps et al., 2022).

### 3.2.2 Methodological challenges

Standard probing studies using diagnostic classifiers have raised methodological concerns (Belinkov, 2022). The main concern is that probing is fundamentally correlational – the presence of decodable information does not conclusively demonstrate it plays a causal role in the model’s outputs. When a probe achieves high accuracy on the prediction of a linguistic feature from a model’s activations, this may not straightforwardly entail that the model actually represent the relevant feature without adequate control. Two primary alternative explanations of probe accuracy must be ruled out to support claims about linguistic competence.

The first possibility is that, while the probed linguistic feature is decodable from the model’s activations, the model does not in fact utilize this information when making predictions. In other words, the classifier’s high accuracy in predicting a feature from the model’s activations may indicate that while the latter genuinely encodes the relevant information, it is not causally efficacious in model behaviour on the task. There is empirical evidence that this concern is not always unfounded. For example, Elazar et al. (2021) used a technique called adversarial probing to explicitly remove information about specific linguistic features (e.g., part-of-speech information) from a model’s activations. By measuring the subsequent impact on the model’s core task performance, they demonstrated that high decoding accuracy does not always demonstrate a major causal effect of decoded information.

The second possibility is that the relevant linguistic knowledge is not even encoded in the model’s learned representations; rather, the probing classifier might be powerful enough to recover the property from surface patterns, memorization, or other cues (Hewitt and Liang, 2019). This is because probes are trained in a supervised manner on task data labelled for the linguistic property of interest. As a result, the probe has access to explicit supervision teaching it to recognize patterns related to the property in model activations, and may learn from irrelevant correlations. For instance, nonlinear classifiers may be able to predict syntactic properties by memorizing the training set instead of extracting syntactic features from the representation. This risks wrongly ascribing complex linguistic capabilities to the model when probing does not convincingly demonstrate such knowledge was already present before introducing the explicit probing dataset.

Control tasks and metrics such as selectivity can help distinguish between genuine extraction of linguistic structure and reconstruction from spurious cues. For example, Hewitt and Liang (2019) designed control tasks where the labels were randomly shuffled, so the probe could only succeed by memorizing spurious cues rather than extracting linguistic knowledge. They defined selectivity as the gap between probing accuracy on the real task versus the control task. High selectivity suggests

that the probe is genuinely extracting linguistic properties from the model’s activations, while low selectivity suggests it may be latching onto spuriously predictive cues.

There is an ongoing debate about whether simple linear probes should be used to minimize the risk of learning to reconstruct linguistic features from spurious cues. Linear probes have been advocated under the assumption they have lower expressive power compared to nonlinear probes. As such, they are more likely to rely solely on features explicitly encoded in the model’s activations, while more complex probes are more likely to capture additional signals that are not actually used by the model itself. However, the potential trade-off between probe complexity and accuracy may warrant the use of complex probes if proper controls are in place. In particular, more complex probes may provide a less constrained estimate of the total discriminative information about a property encoded in the model’s activations (Pimentel et al., 2020).

### 3.2.3 Parameter-free probing

Parameter-free approaches constitute an interesting alternative to using supervised classifiers. The goal of parameter-free probing is to extract information about a model’s encoding of a linguistic feature by directly analysing its representations without introducing additional learned parameters that may confound the results. One such strategy consists in analysing the self-attention weights of Transformer-based language models to recover syntactic information. Attention heads were found to track dependencies (e.g. objects of verbs, determiners of nouns, prepositional objects, and coreference) with high accuracy (Raganato and Tiedemann, 2018; Clark et al., 2019; Mareček and Rosa, 2019), with some attention heads specializing in tracking individual dependency types (Htut et al., 2019). Cherniavskii et al. (2022) used topological data analysis to extract graph-based features from Transformer attention maps. They showed topological properties of the attention graph improve acceptability classification and minimal pair detection without additional parameters, revealing interpretable correlations between attention patterns and specific grammatical phenomena.

Representational similarity analysis (RSA) is an alternative parameter-free method from computational neuroscience (Kriegeskorte et al., 2008) that involves measuring the similarity of model representations to prototypical representations constructed to instantiate specific linguistic hypotheses. Using RSA, Lepori and McCoy (2020) found that the representational geometry of BERT’s contextual word embeddings reflects specific syntactic dependencies (e.g. pronoun coreference and verb subject-sensitivity) better than random controls. Similarly, Chrupala and Alishahi (2019) used RSA to find a significant correspondence between the representational geometry of various language models and a reference model based on gold syntax trees.

Wu et al. (2020) proposed another parameter-free technique called perturbed masking, which masks different words and analyses impact on model predictions. They derived a word impact matrix from which they extracted unlabelled dependency trees with high accuracy; furthermore, the induced dependency trees improved model performance on downstream tasks (e.g., sentiment analysis) despite differences from human-designed parsers.

Finally, Murty et al. (2022) recently introduced an interesting parameter-free method called *tree projection* to probe the intrinsic compositionality of Transformer models. Tree projection measures the “tree-structuredness” of the model’s internal computations on an input, by scoring how well they can be approximated by explicitly tree-structured models. The authors found that Transformers trained on compositional generalization datasets become increasingly tree-like over the course of training, with tree projections progressively matching ground truth syntax. Tree-structuredness also positively correlates with compositional generalization. The emergence of tree-like computation and

alignment with syntactic formalisms provides evidence that Transformers can learn to implicitly encode hierarchical syntactic knowledge, despite lacking explicit architectural constraints for tree-like structures.

### 3.3 Interventional studies

While parameter-free probing avoids potential confounds introduced by training an additional supervised classifier on top of the model’s representations, it remains, like diagnostic probing, fundamentally correlational. Demonstrating that a linguistic feature can be decoded through attention weights, similarities to prototypes, or tree projections does not guarantee that information plays a causal role in model predictions. As such, mere probing provides an upper bound on relevant information that the model could use. By contrast, interventional studies aim to demonstrate causal efficacy by actively interfering with the model’s internal states to assess their impact on behaviour.

#### 3.3.1 Counterfactual interventions

[Giulianelli et al. \(2018\)](#) offer a classic example of this interventional approach. After training a diagnostic probe to predict number agreement from the activations of an LSTM language model, the authors actively intervened on the activation pattern identified by the probe to influence the behaviour of the model. Specifically, in cases where the model failed on [Gulordava et al. \(2018\)](#)’s subject-verb agreement prediction task, they modified the relevant activation pattern in the model such that the diagnostic classifier’s agreement prediction would move slightly closer to the ground truth. This causal intervention successfully improved the accuracy of the model on the task, providing evidence that the model’s encoding of subject-verb number agreement information is causally efficacious.

[Ravfogel et al. \(2021\)](#) introduced a novel causal probing method called AlterRep that involves generating counterfactual representations by manipulating the model’s encoding of specific linguistic features. They applied it to assess whether BERT leverages relative clause boundary information encoded in its activations correctly when predicting subject-verb number agreement in English. By manipulating the model’s encoding of whether words are inside or outside relative clauses, they found that BERT’s agreement predictions changed systematically in alignment with proper relative clause usage. This suggests that BERT does use relative clause boundary information in a causal, generalizable way for grammatically correct number agreement, consistently with the rules of English grammar.

[Lasri et al. \(2022\)](#) took a usage-based approach to probing how linguistic properties are functionally encoded in language models. As a case study, they focused on grammatical number and its role in subject-verb number agreement. After confirming that number is encoded in BERT’s embeddings, they performed causal interventions to erase number information at different layers and analyse impacts on agreement accuracy. This approach builds on amnesic probing ([Elazar et al., 2021](#)), but is tailored to linguistic behavioural tasks requiring the erased information ([Linzen et al., 2016](#)). The precise alignment between lost number information and degraded agreement performance provides strong evidence that BERT relies on the erased encodings to perform number agreement. Further experiments revealed that BERT employs distinct subspaces for encoding number in nouns versus verbs, with information transferred indirectly across intermediate layers. Using counterfactual interventions, [Hao and Linzen \(2023\)](#) also show that BERT’s ability to conjugate verbs is determined by linear encodings of subject number that are distributed across token positions in middle layers and concentrated in the subject position in early layers and verb position in later layers.

These causal interventions go a long way towards establishing the claim that language models do represent syntactic features. In accordance with prominent philosophical theories of representation, for a pattern of activation  $A$  in a model to represent a given feature  $F$  in the context of a given task, it must not only be the case that  $A$  bears correlational information about  $F$ , but also that the system uses the relevant information to succeed at the task, *and* that it can misrepresent  $F$  with some inputs (Shea, 2018). The existence of a probe that successfully predicts  $F$  from  $A$  provides evidence for the first condition (correlational information); task performance degradation following a causal intervention to reduce information about  $F$  in the model provides evidence for the second condition (usage of information); finally, task performance improvement following a causal interventions to shift probe prediction closer to the true labels provides evidence for the third condition (misrepresentation) (see Harding, 2023, for a detailed discussion). Accordingly, causal probing studies do provide preliminary evidence for representational claims about syntactic features in language models.

### 3.3.2 Mechanistic interpretability

While causal probing provides targeted evidence about the encoding of linguistic features, the nascent field of mechanistic interpretability takes a more comprehensive approach to reverse engineering models’ internal computations (Elhage et al., 2021, @millierePhilosophicalIntroductionLanguage2024a). This research programme builds on a loose analogy between neural networks and traditional computer programs, proposing that we might rigorously “reverse engineer” neural networks to recover human-interpretable descriptions of how they process information, akin to decompiling software. At the core of this paradigm is the notion that neural networks represent information in terms of interpretable features connected through learned “circuits” or subnetworks implementing meaningful computations (Olah et al., 2020). For example, a circuit might route semantic information between embeddings across different layers based on syntactic relationships. By formally characterizing such circuits in terms of weights and activations, mechanistic interpretability aims to provide complete functional explanations of model behaviour.

To make progress towards this reverse-engineering goal, mechanistic interpretability researchers use interventions analogous to causal probing techniques, which involve deleting or replacing pieces of a model to identify components critical for certain computations. For example, Wang et al. (2022) discovered a circuit for indirect object identification in GPT-2-small using a combination of interpretability approaches relying on causal interventions. More sophisticated approaches can also be used to investigate the representation of syntactic knowledge at a finer level. A promising recent development involves training sparse autoencoders (SAEs) to identify interpretable features within the model’s hidden states in an unsupervised manner without relying on ad hoc probes. For example, Marks et al. (2024) trained SAEs on the activations of a small language model (Pythia-70M) and used integrated gradients to compute approximate indirect effects of SAE features on the model’s output for contrastive pairs of sentences. This process allows for the discovery of “sparse feature circuits” that reveal the model’s internal mechanisms for performing linguistic tasks. They found that small feature circuits of fewer than 100 nodes can explain a large proportion of the model’s behaviour in subject-verb agreement tasks. Specifically, they identified an interpretable algorithm that detects the main subject’s grammatical number in early layers, identifies distractors like the start of a relative clause or prepositional phrase, and moves the subject number information to the end of the distractor clause, such that it can be used in the model’s final layers to promote matching verb forms. Notably, the circuits for handling simple agreement and different intervening clauses showed substantial overlap, suggesting that this small model had developed a relatively abstract and

general mechanism for subject-verb agreement.

Going beyond the investigation of grammatical rules, [Yamakoshi et al. \(2023\)](#) used causal interventions to analyse how language models process Winograd Schema Challenge sentences, which require commonsense reasoning to resolve ambiguous pronouns. They found distinct circuits within the model responsible for integrating contextual information, suggesting that language models may construct implicit “situation models” to resolve ambiguities.

These techniques can also be used to study the learning dynamics of neural networks. Studying a small Transformer model trained on a modular addition task through the lens of mechanistic interpretability, [Nanda et al. \(2022\)](#) found evidence of three distinct learning phases: an initial phase in which the model relies on brute memorization, an intermediate phase in which it forms a dedicated circuit implementing a general algorithm for modular addition, and a cleanup phase in which the memorization components are removed. This raises the intriguing possibility that a similar learning process could occur for the acquisition of syntactic rules when a model is trained on natural language data: over the course of training, language models might be forced to learn syntax to improve their performance on next-word prediction, after an initially relying on memorizing constructions ([Murty et al., 2023](#)). In fact, [Chen et al. \(2023\)](#) identified a syntax acquisition phase in the training of masked language models, characterized by sudden drops in loss and rapid improvements in syntactic capabilities. They observed two distinct phase transitions: a “structure onset” marked by a spike in unlabelled dependency parsing accuracy, followed by a “capabilities onset” where the model shows an abrupt increase in performance on the BLiMP grammatical acceptability benchmark.

While there isn’t much overlap yet between research on causal probing in computational linguistics and research on mechanistic interpretability, the latter could help answer questions about whether and how language models implement syntactic rules at a much finer level of granularity. Having reviewed empirical evidence for syntactic knowledge in language models, I will now consider the implications of these findings for theoretical linguistics and ongoing debates about language acquisition.

## 4 Language models and theoretical linguistics

Experimental research on language models is almost completely ignored in theoretical linguistics (see [Baroni, 2022](#), for a quantitative analysis of the literature). The reverse is not true, as many of these experiments in computational linguistics are explicitly informed by linguistic theory. This asymmetry calls for an explanation. It could be that most theoretical linguists are not well-acquainted with the experimental literature on language models; or, on a more charitable view, they might think this literature is irrelevant to their own theoretical projects. The latter explanation is certainly true of some vocal critics of language models: Noam Chomsky, for example, has prominently argued that there is nothing *whatsoever* they could contribute to linguistics even in principle ([Chomsky et al., 2023](#); see also [Norvig, 2017](#)).<sup>9</sup> If this were true, then the whole body of research discussed in the previous section would have nothing to tell us about human language use and acquisition, and could be seen as a mere exercise in studying engineering artifacts.

If we take language models seriously as *models*, rather than mere engineering artifacts, what are they models *of*? The answer to this question informs the relevance of language models to linguistics. In what follows, I will discuss three modelling targets for language models: *linguistic performance*, *linguistic competence*, and *language acquisition*. These possibilities are not mutually

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<sup>9</sup>“In principle, they [language models] can tell us nothing about language, language acquisition, human cognition, anything” (Chomsky, personal communication).



exclusive. Language models may differ in various ways, including architecture, parameter size, and training data; these differences are relevant to what a given model can reasonably be taken to be modelling. Furthermore, it is conceivable that the same language model might be used to investigate aspects of linguistic performance, competence, and acquisition, depending on the pragmatic goals of researchers in particular experimental contexts. This still leaves open the question whether language models could, *in principle*, be treated as models of performance, competence, or acquisition. If the answer is negative, particularly when it comes to modelling linguistic competence and acquisition, then the relevance of language models to theoretical linguistics ought to remain very limited. If the answer is positive, however, then these models might be very useful tools, in the right experimental context, to test linguistic hypotheses and constrain linguistic theorizing.

## 4.1 Performance and competence

In mainstream generative linguistic theory, a key distinction is made between a speaker’s linguistic *competence* – their idealized knowledge of a language’s grammar – and their *performance* – the constrained manifestation of this competence in actual language use (Chomsky, 1965). On this view, publicly observable utterances result from unobservable internal structures, but also involve many additional psychological processes beyond core competence. Linguistic performance can be affected by external factors like memory limitations, distractions, slips of the tongue, etc. that may obscure the full extent of the underlying competence.

What would it mean for a language model to be a model of human linguistic performance, as opposed to competence? An obvious proposal is that this is merely a matter of behaviour: if the language model *behaves* similarly enough to humans in a broad range of linguistic scenarios – for example by matching human response patterns on sophisticated benchmarks probing various aspects of linguistic performance –, then it is *ipso facto* a predictive model of human linguistic performance.<sup>10</sup> Given that language models are trained on human-generated text corpora with a next-word prediction objective, all sufficiently trained language models can be treated as models of linguistic performance in this sense. In fact, language models trained on a large amount of data do excel at mimicking the (written) outputs of human language users, which is why it has become particularly challenging or even impossible to automatically detect machine-generated text (Sadasivan et al., 2023). This does not entail, however, that all language models are equally *good* models of performance. Larger language models like GPT-4 perform better than smaller models at next-word prediction (measured by *perplexity*, a metric that quantifies how well the probability distribution predicted by the model aligns with the actual distribution of the words in the text). But they also hardly ever make grammatical mistakes – unlike humans. In that respect, it is unclear that they should be treated as the *best* models of human performance, compared to less grammatically proficient models.

Furthermore, linguistic performance does not merely encompass language production, but also language comprehension. Expectation-based theories of sentence processing posit that processing difficulty is driven by the predictability or surprisal of upcoming words based on the context (Levy, 2008). In psycholinguistics, reading times are routinely used as a proxy measure for the predictability of upcoming words, as reflected in the subjective probabilistic expectations humans form during language processing. Interestingly, language models’ performance on next-word prediction (perplexity) appears to be correlated to their ability to predict human reading times up to a certain point (Wilcox et al., 2020). However, Shain et al. (2022) found that GPT-2-small significantly outperformed larger

<sup>10</sup>In Section 4.4, I will come back to the notion of scientific model in philosophy of science, and the extent to which it applies to language models depending on what they are intended to be modeling.



models, like GPT-3, in predicting human reading times across a number of different datasets – despite the fact that larger models are better at next-word prediction (see also [Oh and Schuler, 2023](#)). This suggests that there is a threshold beyond which next-word prediction performance no longer reflects human subjective word probabilities. This is noteworthy given that smaller models like GPT-2-small are trained on a more realistic quantity of linguistic data, compared to the linguistic input of humans (see Section 4.3 below).

The question whether (some) language models might be treated as models of linguistic *competence* is more difficult, and crucially hinges on controversial theoretical assumptions. If performance closely reflects competence, then modelling performance with a language model trained on linguistic utterances could in principle provide insight into human competence. This assumes that the effects of performance are merely due to noise in the externalization of competence through behaviour, and do not systematically prevent inference of the full underlying competence structure. However, generative linguists deny this assumption, pointing to para-linguistic performance effects like interjections and hypothetical complex transformations undergone by linguistic structures in the process of externalization. To get at these hypotheses about competence, theoretical linguistics draws on various sources of evidence, including evolutionary theory and developmental psychology, rather than merely modelling the surface forms of language.

[Dupre \(2021b\)](#) argues that if there is indeed a substantial gap between human linguistic competence and performance, then training a language model to mimic linguistic performance through next-word prediction may tell us little about the competence that theoretical linguists aim to describe. This would entail that computational linguistics research on language models is mostly irrelevant to theoretical linguistics, particularly to discriminate between competing theories of linguistic competence. Even if a model achieves human-like performance on a syntactic task, and even if we manage to infer the computations underlying such behaviour through causal interventions, we cannot directly infer that human performance on same task is underlain by the same computations.

Note that this argument does not entail that language models have nothing to tell us about language acquisition. As we will see in what follows, experiments with language models may be very relevant not only to theoretical learnability claims, but also to weaker developmental claims. In addition, Dupre doesn't deny that neural network models may constrain linguistic theories at least indirectly, by offering some evidence about the developmental or neurobiological plausibility of some proposed competences compared to others ([Dupre, 2021b](#), 619-20). Finally, he concedes that language models *could*, in principle, acquire human-like competence rules merely from being trained on performance data; however, he suggests that this would be surprising given the systematic gaps between competence and performance, and the diverging goals of theoretical linguistics and language modelling (explanation vs. prediction).<sup>11</sup>

Dupre's argument is ultimately conditional: to the extent that mainstream generative linguistics is correct in assuming that the performance-competence gap is substantial, then we should not expect language models trained on performance data to acquire human-like competence and reveal the nature of human competence. Importantly, the antecedent assumption is highly controversial; many linguistic theories do not postulate the existence of an insurmountable discrepancy between the surface structure of language and the structures that subserve language acquisition and use (e.g.,

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<sup>11</sup>An alternative suggestion is that language models should be viewed as implementation-level models of linguistic competence, representing a mechanistic abstraction of neural processes that implement linguistic computations ([Blank, 2023](#)). This interpretation is supported by studies mapping the activations of language models to brain signals and by findings that language models can predict neural responses to language across various neuroimaging modalities (see [Tuckute et al., 2024](#), for a review). I will leave that suggestion aside here to focus on the direct relevance of language models to linguistic theory.

Culicover and Jackendoff, 2005; Pinker and Jackendoff, 2005; Tomasello, 2009; Christiansen and Chater, 2016). While proponents of these theories may not deny that some performance constraints on behaviour can be dissociated from linguistic competence, they do not assume that the latter is a radically different and minimal set of rule systems that cannot be induced from performance data. If that is the case, then studying language models under the lens of behavioural tasks, diagnostic probes, and causal interventions might give insights not only into human performance, but also into human competence (Linzen, 2019; Linzen and Baroni, 2021).

The principled stance against the relevance of language models to theoretical linguistics can also be turned on its head. The sharp competence/performance distinction postulated by mainstream generative grammar is justified, at least in part, by negative claims about the learnability of language from mere exposure to data. As we shall see in Section 4.2, language models may challenge those claims, by providing a potential existence proof for the success of statistical learning without innate grammatical constraints (Contreras Kallens et al., 2023; Piantadosi, 2023). In turn, this might weaken the motivation for an absolute performance/competence gap, and correspondingly increase the relevance of language models to linguistic theory.

There is a further question about whether it makes sense to apply the performance/competence distinction to language models themselves, and if so, how the distinction manifests (Firestone, 2020; Katzir, 2023). For humans, we can attribute many performance failures to temporary recoverable factors and experimentally control these variables to reveal competence. While model performance may be underestimated by inadequate decoding methods (Hu and Levy, 2023) and mismatched experimental conditions (Lampinen, 2023; Cowley et al., 2022; Frank, 2023c), this is not directly equivalent to the competence/performance distinction, at least as the distinction is framed by generative linguists. A closer analogue might be found in (a) cases of misrepresentation of syntactic features revealed by causal interventions on probed activations (Giulianelli et al., 2018; Harding, 2023), and (b) cases in which multiple circuits are competing for influence on model behaviour (Zhong et al., 2023; Millière and Rathkopf, 2024). Such cases may provide evidence that a model has the capacity to represent a given feature or perform a given computation, even though this capacity is not *always* reflected in its observable behaviour.

If there is a meaningful distinction between performance and competence when it comes to language models, we might wonder whether it is always appropriate to discount performance errors as irrelevant to the assessment of competence in the case of humans, but not in the case of models. This relates to the comparative bias that Buckner (2013) termed “anthropofabulation”: the tendency to assess nonhuman performance against an inflated conception of human competence (see also Buckner, 2021, and Millière and Rathkopf (2024)). In the context of the evaluation of language models on syntactic tasks, anthropofabulation might manifest itself through the expectation that neural networks should achieve perfect or near-perfect performance accuracy to be ascribed human-like competence in the domain, while performance mistakes are ignored in the evaluation of human competence. If there are contingent limitations on the externalization of syntactic competence in language models (e.g., interference from competing circuits in some circumstances), then it might be reasonable to downplay some of their performance errors in human-machine comparisons. Alternatively, if the gap between human performance and competence is narrower than typically assumed by generative linguistics, then human performance errors in appropriately matched experimental conditions ought to be taken into account.

## 4.2 In-principle claims about competence and learnability

A traditional charge against connectionist models is that they have fundamental and insurmountable limitations that make them inadequate as models of cognition or linguistic competence, unless they merely implement classical symbolic structures (Fodor and Pylyshyn, 1988; Pinker and Prince, 1988; Marcus, 1998). Generative linguists, in particular, hold that statistical and usage-based approaches to language modelling face systematic limitations, because their reliance on linear string order cannot account for the hierarchical structure dependence of syntactic rules (Everaert et al., 2015).

These theoretical claims have inspired research on in-principle capabilities and limitations of language models architectures. On the one hand, Hahn (2020) found that the self-attention mechanism in Transformers cannot model periodic finite-state languages or hierarchical structure unless the number of layers or heads increases with input length. Deletang et al. (2022) also tested various neural networks architectures on a battery of sequence prediction tasks designed to span the Chomsky hierarchy of formal grammars (Chomsky, 1959). They found that contemporary language models architectures like LSTMs and Transformers do not neatly fit into the hierarchy. LSTMs can solve some simple context-sensitive tasks but fail on most, while Transformers fail on many regular tasks. On the other hand, Yao et al. (2021) showed that Transformers can process bounded hierarchical formal languages that adequately capture the bounded hierarchical structure of natural language better than their unbounded counterparts, and that they have a memory advantage over RNNs despite lacking a built-in recursive mechanism. Related work found that Transformers can effectively learn “shortcut” solutions that replicate the computations of recurrent models in a single pass (Liu et al., 2022), and that they have an inherent simplicity bias that shapes their generalization capabilities beyond what classical theory predicts, allowing success on tasks they should theoretically fail at (Bhattamishra et al., 2023).

In practice, there is converging empirical evidence that Transformer-based language models are capable of processing bounded hierarchical phrase structure and recursion in a naturalistic context (Mueller et al., 2022; Lampinen, 2023; Allen-Zhu and Li, 2023; Beguš et al., 2023; Dąbkowski and Beguš, 2023; Zhao et al., 2023). As discussed in Section 3, a wealth of experiments show that language models are sensitive to, and encode information about, many morphological and syntactic features – including number agreement, constituency, long-distance dependencies, coreference and anaphora, among others. Together with their resounding success on traditional NLP tasks and fluent natural language generation, these results have prompted a reappraisal of learnability claims in theoretical linguistics.

Gold (1967) was highly influential in framing the problem of language acquisition as one of grammatical inference. Gold’s theorem formally shows that for many common classes of languages, no learner can be guaranteed to eventually converge on the correct grammar for the target language based only on positive example sentences. Importantly, this theorem only shows limitations of a specific formal model of learning based solely on positive example sentences; it does not directly model real-world language acquisition, where its strong assumptions are very unlikely to hold. Nonetheless, it has been widely (mis)interpreted as demonstrating that language acquisition is only possible if the learner’s hypothesis space is heavily constrained by innate knowledge (Clark and Lappin, 2010).

This strong nativist claim about the in-principle learnability of grammar on the basis of mere exposure to data has endured in generative linguistics (e.g., Carnie, 2021, 17-20).<sup>12</sup> Aside from being

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<sup>12</sup>Somewhat confusingly, the defence of this claim on the basis of formal learnability results such as Gold’s theorem is sometimes referred to as the “poverty of the stimulus” (PoS) argument, although the canonical – and less implausible – version of the PoS argument, as we shall see, rests on empirical evidence from developmental psycholinguistics (see Pearl, 2022, for a thorough discussion).

unwarranted by formal learnability results under plausible learning assumptions, this strong negative claim has come under pressure from positive evidence of effective statistical learning. In this context, neural network models can provide an existence proof of learnability that undermines in-principle claims; as [Elman et al. \(1996\)](#) put it, “connectionist simulations of language learning can be viewed as empirical tests of learnability claims” (p. 385). While simple recurrent neural networks of the 1990s did not quite live up to that promise, the successes of modern language models have been put forward as conclusive evidence against strong learnability claims (see also [Baroni, 2022](#), for a review of similar claims from computational linguists):

“The rise and success of large language models undermines virtually every strong claim for the innateness of language that has been proposed by generative linguistics.” ([Piantadosi, 2023](#), 1)

“[Language] models provide an existence proof that the ability to produce grammatical language can be learned from exposure alone without language-specific computations or representations.” ([Contreras Kallens et al., 2023](#), 6)

“The best present-day LLMs [large language models] clearly have substantial competence. . . [They] induce the causal structure of language from purely distributional training.” ([Potts, 2023](#), 19).

Insofar as they can learn structure from strings, modern language models do plausibly undermine strong in-principle learnability claims. This does not entail, however, that they actually learn language like humans do, or even that they could do so in a learning environment comparable to those children are immersed in. For language models to constrain hypotheses about human language acquisition and challenge linguistic nativism beyond strong learnability claims, we need additional evidence from experiments that carefully control learning parameters based on developmental considerations.

### 4.3 Language models as model learners

There are two major criticisms of the viability of language models as models of language acquisition. The first has to do with the hypothesis that as statistical models with weak inductive biases, language models can learn and process both natural and “impossible” languages with equal proficiency ([Moro et al., 2023](#); [Chomsky et al., 2023](#)). Impossible languages, in this context, refer to linguistic structures that allegedly violate fundamental principles of human language, such as hierarchical organization and recursion – properties believed to be innate to the human language faculty by generative linguists ([Moro, 2016](#)). [Mitchell and Bowers \(2020\)](#) showed that RNNs could successfully learn and perform well on subject-verb agreement tasks in impossible languages, including those with reversed word order, repeated tokens, and even randomly shuffled sentences. These findings suggest that neural language models can indeed acquire and process linguistic structures that are considered impossible for human learners. This ability to handle both possible and impossible linguistic structures without distinction is seen by generative linguists as evidence that language models lack the intrinsic constraints that shape human linguistic competence and guide natural language acquisition.

However, recent work by [Kallini et al. \(2024\)](#) challenges this criticism. Their experiments with GPT-2 models on a spectrum of impossible languages showed that these models do not learn impossible languages as efficiently as natural ones. They found clear distinctions in model perplexities, with models trained on nondeterministic sentence shuffles performing worst, followed by deterministic

shuffles and local shuffles. By contrast, models trained on unshuffled English consistently achieved the lowest perplexities. Furthermore, their analysis showed that GPT-2 models preferred natural grammar rules and developed human-like solutions even for non-human patterns. This suggests that Transformer-based language models may in fact have inductive biases that favour natural language structures, and that we should not rule out their relevance to debates on language acquisition on the grounds that they learn impossible languages with equal facility.

The other major criticism of the relevance of language models to theories of language acquisition is the discrepancy that typically exists between their learning conditions and those of actual children. Most strikingly, state-of-the-art language models like GPT-3 and GPT-4 learn from an inordinate amount of data – hundred of billions to trillions of words, representing a gap of four to five orders of magnitude with the estimated language input of human children (Frank, 2023b; Wilcox et al., 2024). This seriously undermines the relevance of large language models to debates about human language acquisition.

One of the main empirical arguments in favour of linguistic nativism is the so-called “poverty of the stimulus” (PoS) argument (Chomsky, 1965; Berwick et al., 2011; Pearl, 2022). At the heart of PoS is an induction problem: linguistic input data available to children seem insufficient, on their own, to allow them to acquire the correct linguistic generalization about the underlying structures within a large hypothesis space. Yet developmental evidence suggests that children make constrained generalizations to the correct hypotheses quickly and uniformly across languages. This has led generative linguists to conclude that children must have some innate knowledge that allows them to bridge the gap between their limited input data and linguistic generalizations.

The extent to which children’s linguistic stimulus is as impoverished as PoS assumes is debated (Pullum and Scholz, 2002; Clark and Lappin, 2010; Chater et al., 2015). There is also some notable variance in the quantity and quality of input received by children in different cultural and socioeconomic environments (Huttenlocher et al., 2002; Huang et al., 2017; Bergelson et al., 2019; Cristia et al., 2019). Estimates of infant speech exposure range from as little as one hour to as much as 3,300 hours of speech per year, which reflects uncertainties about what constitutes meaningful input, cultural variations in child-directed speech, and the impact of factors like background noise (Coffey et al., 2024). Nonetheless, one thing is certain: in order to challenge the claim that innate knowledge is required to solve the induction problem of language learning, artificial model learners need to be trained on a realistic amount of data.

It should be noted that the input data and learning process of large language models differ from those of children in several ways beyond mere data quantity. Firstly, while children learn primarily through speech in interactive social contexts, language models typically learn from static text corpora.<sup>13</sup> In particular, children receive immediate feedback and corrections during their language learning process, allowing them to adjust their understanding based on communicative goals. Secondly, children learn within a rich multimodal environment, where language is grounded in sensorimotor experiences, perception, and social interaction; most language models, by contrast, learn from text cues alone. Thirdly, the content and structure of the linguistic data differ significantly. Child-directed speech, often simplified and contextualized, contrasts sharply with the diverse and complex datasets language models are trained on, which include sources such as Wikipedia, books, web pages. In addition, state-of-the-art language models are trained not just on natural language, but also on substantial amounts of computer code, which has no equivalent in a child’s linguistic experience.

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<sup>13</sup>It should be noted that speech language models are increasingly prevalent, suggesting that deep neural networks can effectively learn syntax from speech rather than tokenized written text (Lakhotia et al., 2021; Beguš et al., 2024).

Carefully controlling these variables to select and train better model learners could in principle constrain hypotheses regarding the necessary and sufficient conditions for language learning in humans (Warstadt and Bowman, 2022; Pearl, 2023; Connell and Lynott, 2024). Results obtained from models whose learning scenarios more closely match hypotheses about human learning are more likely to generalize to real human learners. That said, not all discrepancies in learning conditions are problematic, particularly in cases where artificial learners are at a disadvantage compared to humans (e.g., by lacking access to multimodal input). If models can still learn the target linguistic knowledge in spite of the disadvantage, then *a fortiori* humans should be able to learn it without the disadvantage. It is far harder to establish negative results: just because a language model fails to learn some target knowledge does not mean that humans cannot either.

A growing number of studies set out to test language models in more human-like conditions, mainly by limiting the amount of data they are trained on to a developmentally plausible quantity, and making their content more similar to child-directed speech. Table 1 summarizes the main findings from recent studies investigating the learnability of various linguistic phenomena in language models trained on developmentally plausible data.

Linguistic phenomena tested	Implication	Reference
Various syntactic and semantic features	Moderately positive	Zhang et al. (2020)
Syntactic categories, semantic categories, determiner-noun agreement, verb argument structure	Moderately positive	Wang et al. (2023)
Filler-gap dependencies and island constraints	Positive	Wilcox et al. (2023)
General linguistic knowledge	Positive	Samuel et al. (2023)
Generation of coherent and grammatically correct text	Positive	Eldan and Li (2023)
Question formation and passivisation	Moderately positive	Mueller and Linzen (2023)
Subject-verb agreement, wh-questions, relative clauses	Moderately positive	Evanson et al. (2023)
Formation of yes/no questions	Negative	Yedetore et al. (2023)
Article+Adjective+Numeral+Noun construction	Positive	Misra and Mahowald (2024)
Exceptions to passivisation	Moderately positive	Leong and Linzen (2024)

Table 1: Overview of studies investigating the learnability of various linguistic phenomena in small language models trained on a developmentally plausible amount of data. The “Implication” column indicates whether each paper’s findings generally support the learnability of the corresponding phenomenon.

Zhang et al. (2020) investigated how much pretraining data is needed for language models to acquire linguistic knowledge by probing RoBERTa models trained on varying amounts of data (1M to 30B words). Using multiple probing methods including classifier probing, minimum description length probing, and unsupervised grammaticality judgments on BLiMP, they found that most syntactic and semantic features can be learned with only 10-100M words of pretraining data. However, performance on downstream natural language understanding tasks continued to improve with billions of words,



suggesting that skills beyond basic linguistic knowledge are required for these tasks and take much more data to acquire.

In the same vein, [Samuel et al. \(2023\)](#) trained BERT-like models on the 100-million-word British National Corpus and evaluated them using a variety of linguistic probing tasks, downstream NLP benchmarks, and BLiMP. Their models outperformed the original BERT trained on 3.3 billion words, suggesting that carefully curated smaller datasets can be more effective than larger web-crawled corpora. They also found that models trained on the British National Corpus substantially outperformed those trained on a random 100-million-word subset of Wikipedia and books, confirming the importance of data quality over quantity.

[Wang et al. \(2023\)](#) trained models on a subset of linguistic input from a single child’s first two years, using transcripts of child-directed speech from a head-mounted camera. Even with this limited data, networks learned to differentiate syntactic categories (e.g., nouns vs. verbs) and semantic categories (e.g., animals vs. clothing), and showed some sensitivity to linguistic phenomena like determiner-noun agreement. However, the networks struggled with more complex phenomena requiring longer-distance dependencies, such as subject-verb agreement. Adding visual information provided only incremental improvements in word prediction, especially concrete nouns, without fundamentally altering the linguistic representations. In follow-up work, [Qin et al. \(2024\)](#) trained six different neural network architectures (including LSTMs and Transformers) on five datasets, including three single-child linguistic input corpora and two baseline corpora. They evaluated the models using linguistic acceptability tests, visualizations of word embeddings, and cloze tests, finding that models trained on single-child datasets consistently learned to distinguish syntactic and semantic categories and showed sensitivity to certain linguistic phenomena, performing similarly to models trained on larger aggregated datasets.

[Mueller and Linzen \(2023\)](#) assessed how pre-training data and model architecture affect the emergence of syntactic inductive biases in Transformer language models. They fine-tuned models on syntactic transformation tasks (question formation and passivisation) and evaluated out-of-distribution generalization to test for hierarchical vs. linear rule learning. They found that model depth was more important than width or total parameter count for acquiring hierarchical biases. Additionally, they showed that pre-training on simpler language like child-directed speech (5M words) induced stronger syntactic biases than pre-training on much larger amounts (up to 1B words) of more complex text like Wikipedia or web crawl data.

[Wilcox et al. \(2023\)](#) tested whether language models – including RNNs and Transformers – could learn English filler-gap dependencies and island constraints. They found that models trained on corpora as small as 90 million words could acquire not only basic filler-gap dependencies, but also their hierarchical restrictions, unboundedness, and most island constraints.

[Eldan and Li \(2023\)](#) generated a dataset of short children stories containing only words that a typical three to four year-old child would understand. After training very small language models (under 10 million parameters) on this dataset, they found that these models could produce fluent, consistent, and diverse stories with good grammar and some reasoning ability.

Looking at learning dynamics across model learners and humans can also yield some insights. [Evanson et al. \(2023\)](#) trained 48 GPT-2 models from scratch on a small dataset of Wikipedia articles and evaluated their linguistic abilities using 96 probes from established benchmarks at regular intervals during training. They found that the models learned linguistic skills in a consistent order across random seeds, with learning occurring in parallel but at different rates for different skills. Comparing a subset of syntactic probes to data from 54 children aged 18 months to 6 years, they observed that the order of acquisition for simple sentences, wh-questions, and relative clauses was the



same in the models as in children, though the models relied more on heuristics than true syntactic understanding for the most complex structures.

Ongoing efforts such as the BabyLM Challenge (Warstadt et al., 2023, 2024) are bringing more evidence to bear on whether language models trained on child-directed speech can learn syntax as efficiently as actual human children without built-in syntactic knowledge. The BabyLM Challenge was explicitly designed to incentivize research on sample-efficient language model pretraining using developmentally plausible data. Participants were tasked with training language models on a corpus constructed to mimic the linguistic input available to a child by early adolescence. The first challenge included three tracks: *Strict* and *Strict-Small*, which required using only the provided dataset of 100M and 10M words respectively, and *Loose*, which allowed additional non-linguistic data. The training corpus was carefully curated to include child-directed speech, transcribed dialogues, children’s books, and other age-appropriate texts. Models were evaluated on a range of tasks including syntactic judgment (BLiMP), natural language understanding (GLUE), and generalization ability (MSGS).

The top-performing submissions to first BabyLM challenge achieved results comparable to much larger language models on certain tasks (Wilcox et al., 2024). For instance, the best-performing model in the *Strict* track, achieved scores on the BLiMP syntactic judgment task that were only about 3% below human-level performance and comparable to models trained on orders of magnitude more data (Charpentier and Samuel, 2023). In terms of strategy, architectural tweaks proved to be more impactful, with models based on the LTG-BERT architecture from Samuel et al. (2023) performing particularly well. Interestingly, curriculum learning – learning in a specific order – generally showed only marginal improvements over baselines, challenging common assumptions about the benefits of structured learning for language models in limited data scenarios.

Beyond training language models on more developmentally plausible data, Warstadt and Bowman (2022) suggest that specific features of the model’s learning conditions could be purposefully removed (or “ablated”) to test whether they are really needed for learning. For example, one could remove all triply nested sentences from the training data, to test if this input is necessary for the model to acquire knowledge of subject-verb number agreement in deeply embedded clauses. If the model succeeds in acquiring the target knowledge despite lacking the ablated advantage, it provides an existence proof that the knowledge is learnable without it. By manipulating model assumptions and training data, we can test which conditions are actually required for human-like learning of linguistic rules and generalizations. We can also analyse the internal representations that evolve to support model behaviour in plausible learning scenarios through causal interventions, to constrain hypotheses about representations subserving linguistic competence in humans.

Leong and Linzen (2024) provide a good illustration of this strategy. Using targeted interventions on the training data of small language models, they test specific hypotheses about the sources of evidence learners might use to learn exceptions to passivisation (e.g. “The meeting lasted one hour” vs “\*One hour was lasted by the meeting”). By manipulating factors like the frequency of verbs in passive constructions or the semantic contexts in which verbs appear, they were able to isolate and test the causal role of different types of indirect evidence in the learning process. This methodology addresses a major limitation of naturalistic studies of language acquisition, where it is extremely difficult to control or measure a child’s exact linguistic input. Their findings suggest that the relative frequency of verbs in active versus passive constructions plays a significant role in how language models learn passive exceptions, while manipulations of lexical semantics had less consistent effects. Importantly, they found that frequency alone could not fully account for the models’ judgments, indicating that other sources of evidence are likely involved. Their findings also show how language models can learn to make graded acceptability judgments that correlate well with human intuitions,

even for subtle linguistic phenomena.

Similarly, [Patil et al. \(2024\)](#) trained language models on corpora with specific linguistic constructions filtered out to test generalization from indirect evidence. They applied this method to both LSTM and Transformer models across a wide range of linguistic phenomena evaluated by the BLiMP benchmark. Their results showed that while Transformers achieved lower perplexity, both model types performed equally well on linguistic generalization measures, with relatively small impacts from filtering in most cases. This provides further evidence that language models are capable of forming sophisticated linguistic generalizations even without direct exposure to certain constructions during training.

[Misra and Mahowald \(2024\)](#) used a similar strategy to investigate whether language models trained on a 100-million-word corpus could learn the rare Article-Adjective-Numeral-Noun (AANN) construction in English. They systematically manipulated the training corpus by removing AANNs and related constructions, then evaluated models on novel AANN instances. They found that models could generalize to unseen AANNs even without exposure to any during training, likely by leveraging related frequent constructions. Additionally, they showed that models exposed to more diverse AANN instances during training showed better generalization, highlighting the importance of input variability in learning rare phenomena.

While these results mostly point to challenges for nativist views, some experiments with model learners in plausible learning scenarios found less positive results. For example, [Yedetore et al. \(2023\)](#) trained LSTM and Transformer models on child-directed speech from the CHILDES corpus (9.6 million words) to test whether they could learn the hierarchical structure of English yes/no questions. They evaluated the models using forced-choice acceptability judgments and a question formation task, finding that both model types failed to acquire the correct hierarchical rule. Instead, the models tended to generalize based on linear order or lexical specificity, even when pre-trained on next-word prediction. These results suggest that stronger constraints might be needed to induce hierarchical syntax from the realistic input children receive.

To shed further light on this question, [McCoy and Griffiths \(2023\)](#) used a technique called inductive bias distillation to endow a neural network with the strong inductive biases of a Bayesian model. The resulting network exhibited data efficiency comparable to the Bayesian model in learning new formal languages from few examples, but was also able to effectively learn aspects of English syntax from a naturalistic corpus of child-directed speech. Notably, it outperformed standard neural networks on targeted evaluations of syntactic phenomena like dependencies, agreement, and reflexives. Thus, neural networks can learn meaningful generalizations given suitable inductive biases, although the biases of vanilla architectures might not be sufficient to model language acquisition adequately.

This does not entail that good model learners should be endowed with the kind of *language-specific* inductive biases that generative linguists deem necessary for language acquisition. In fact, it is not clear that such strong biases would lead to better learning. An interesting study by [Papadimitriou and Jurafsky \(2023\)](#) investigated which structural biases allow Transformers to achieve excellent performance on natural language modelling without explicit syntactic supervision. By pretraining Transformers on artificial languages exhibiting specific structures like recursion or context-sensitivity before fine-tuning on English text, they were able to manipulate the models' inductive biases in a controlled fashion. They found that both recursive and non-recursive structural biases improve English learning over a random baseline, with context-sensitivity providing the best inductive bias over constituency recursion. These results show that Transformers can acquire languages beyond finite-state regular grammars given appropriate inductive biases, without restrictions to only context-free or context-sensitive languages. While not directly confirming claims about human

language acquisition, the finding that non-recursive dependencies aid learning better than recursion challenges theories positing recursion as the core syntactic bias.

It is also worth emphasizing that modern deep neural network architectures are not *tabulae rasae*, but have distinct inductive biases (Baroni, 2022). Models with different architectures trained on the same data may generalize (or fail to generalize) in different ways. While vanilla LSTMs and Transformers lack *language-specific* innate knowledge, they have more domain-general biases that go a long way towards explaining their success (and limitations) on language modelling tasks. Their ability to learn language in plausible learning scenarios may undermine linguistic nativist accounts of PoS, but it does not necessarily undermine the idea that nontrivial inductive biases are required for language to be acquired. As such, it is quite natural for moderate nativists and moderate empiricists to meet somewhere in the middle.<sup>14</sup>

Overall, the work reviewed in this section lends plausibility to the claim that language models trained in more realistic learning scenario could in principle constrain theorizing about language acquisition, and particularly PoS-style arguments for particular syntactic phenomena. While there certainly remains significant differences between the mechanisms and conditions in which language models learn compared to human children, the cognitive plausibility of model learners should be viewed as a graded concept, evaluated comparatively across several dimensions, rather than as a binary property that models either possess or lack (Beinborn and Hollenstein, 2024). For now, however, the claim that language models refute Chomsky’s approach to language (Piantadosi, 2023) remains somewhat premature. Strong learnability claims do not hold up very well to scrutiny, but evidence from model learners against weaker nativist claims is still tentative.

## 4.4 Language models as scientific models

Deep neural networks are increasingly treated as promising computational models of human cognition in various domains, including vision science (Cichy and Kaiser, 2019; Doerig et al., 2023). However, the status of neural networks as scientific models is controversial. One common view is that predictive performance on benchmarks is insufficient for neural networks to be scientifically adequate explanations of a target cognitive phenomenon (Wichmann and Geirhos, 2023). Theoretical linguistics, particularly in the generative tradition, tends to favour explanation over prediction. On this view, linguistic explanation aims to provide deep, abstract accounts of linguistic phenomena, often focusing on competence rather than performance. Prediction, on the other hand, involves using models to forecast linguistic behaviour or patterns, often based on statistical approaches.

There are reasons to question this sharp dichotomy. As Egré (2015) emphasizes, prediction is equally applicable in linguistics as in other empirical sciences, and any non-trivial descriptive generalization in linguistics will be predictive if testable on new cases. Nefdt (2024) goes further, arguing that prediction is essential for scientific explanation in linguistics, and that computational approaches focused on prediction can offer valuable insights into theoretical questions. He suggests that the neglect of prediction stems partly from historical reactions against logical positivism and partly from the “Galilean style” in generative linguistics that emphasizes abstract explanation

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<sup>14</sup>Many proponents of universal grammar agree that innate knowledge is not sufficient to explain language acquisition. Statistical learning is an important component of “innately guided learning”, where universal grammar may constrain which statistical cues the learner should attend to (Yang, 2004; Pearl, 2021; Dupre, 2021a). One key disagreement, however, is whether the innate component of language learning (i.e., inductive biases) should be domain-general or language-specific (Clark, 2015; Chater et al., 2015). Insofar as vanilla language model architectures do not have language-specific inductive biases, their tentative success in realistic learning scenarios may count as evidence against a strongly modular language faculty as postulated by Chomsky.

over empirical adequacy. The integration of predictive models, such as deep neural networks, into theoretical linguistics is a way to bridge this divide.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, some have argued that language models should not only be treated as *bona fide* linguistic theories, but as the best ones we have (Piantadosi, 2023; Ambridge and Blything, 2024). For example, Baroni (2022) argues that language models can be viewed as algorithmic theories making linguistic predictions. Specifically, he proposes to view an untrained language model as equivalent to a theory defining a *space of possible grammars*; that space will look quite different depending on model architecture (e.g., LSTMs vs. Transformers) and parameter count. After training on language-specific data, the model can be viewed as a *grammar* – a system that can predict whether any sequence is acceptable to an idealised speaker of the language. For this framing to be viable, however, Baroni emphasises that the selection of model architecture in experiments must be linguistically-motivated, and that a greater mechanistic understanding of trained models is needed. Ultimately, the field could move beyond testing language models on well-known patterns such as subject-verb number agreement, to using them to make prediction about previously unexplored patterns. In particular, they seem apt to model fuzzy and probabilistic aspects of language better than elegantly concise linguistic theories focused on algebraic recursion.

One key issue with this proposal is whether the notorious opacity of neural networks, including language models, should be seen as a fundamental impediment to their ability to generate scientific explanations. Explanatory models in cognitive science often take the form of mathematical or computational models that encode theoretical constructs and hypotheses about mechanisms (Forstmann and Wagenmakers, 2015). From this perspective, the lack of simplicity, transparency, and theoretical grounding of deep neural networks appears to undermine them as explanatory models. In the linguistic domain, language models do not compare favourably with respect to these particular criteria to the kind of minimal and interpretable models provided by generative grammar.

However, this view rests on controversial assumptions in the philosophy of science about desiderata for explanatory models. For example, Sullivan (2022) argues that implementational opacity need not be an impediment for neural networks to provide understanding of real-world phenomena. One does not need to fully understand the model itself in order to use it to understand its target. Rather, it is uncertainty about whether models accurately represent real systems – called *link uncertainty* – that prominently hinders understanding. Links between models and target phenomena can be strengthened through rigorous scientific validation providing empirical evidence that opaque model mechanisms reflect real causal dependencies. One can see ongoing research on language models in computational linguistics as progressing in that direction.

Whether reducing link uncertainty between opaque neural network models and target phenomena is sufficient to provide genuine explanatory understanding is debated. A more stringent requirement would include some understanding of the model itself – that is, reducing model opacity in addition to link uncertainty (Răz and Beisbart, 2022). A common motivation for this requirement is the suspicion that deep neural networks might rely on spurious correlations even if they appear to capture genuine dependencies in their explanatory target. However, research using causal methods and mechanistic interpretability techniques (Section 3.3) is making headway in understanding how language models learn and represent linguistic features.

Another important aspect of scientific models is that they allow for *surrogate reasoning* about their explanatory targets; that is, studying the model itself allows researchers to draw inferences about the target system (Nguyen and Frigg, 2022). Surrogate reasoning is what allows scientists to gain knowledge about real-world systems by investigating simplified or idealized model systems. The use of language models as model learners (Section 4.3) is an example of surrogate reasoning; it

allows computational linguists to draw inferences about the relative importance of various inductive biases and properties of the learning environment for human language acquisition.

These considerations provide tentative support against a merely instrumentalist view of language models, on which they should only be as viewed tools for prediction rather than models for explanation (Katzir, 2023). The case for viewing language models as explanatory models is perhaps strongest for the study of language acquisition with artificial learners, where the models’ parameters and environment are carefully controlled and informed by developmental psycholinguistics. The case for language models as scientific models of adult linguistic competence is perhaps more controversial, as it depends on aforementioned assumptions about the performance-competence gap (Dupre, 2021b). However, these two projects are not orthogonal; if experiments with artificial model learners undermine linguistic nativism, this might in turn weaken the case for a wide gap between performance and competence, and correspondingly increase the relevance of language models to arbitrate hypotheses about linguistic competence.

At the very least, language models designed and trained with cognitive and developmental plausibility in mind could in principle furnish *how-possibly* explanations of aspects of language acquisition or linguistic competence. How-possibly explanations are possible explanations of a phenomenon under certain plausibility constraints (Bokulich, 2014). Scientific models can provide evidence for how-possibly explanations by supporting judgments about the possibility of explanatory relationships (Verreault-Julien, 2019). Importantly, this allows highly idealized models to still contribute to how-possibly explanations about real-world possibilities. The extent to which language models can support such explanations of language acquisition or linguistic competence arguably depends both on their cognitive plausibility and on their interpretability. Ongoing efforts to develop more cognitively plausible language models and interpret their computational structure through causal interventions show promise in fulfilling that vision. Unlike just-so stories, how-possibly explanations can provide a path to scientific understanding through further investigation. For example, some how-possibly explanations of the learnability of specific syntactic features provided by language models in controlled learning scenarios could in principle be put to the test in developmental psycholinguistics – or at least be evaluated against available cross-cultural evidence. Conversely, nativist claims about the learnability of specific constructions from sparse stimulus can be challenged by how-possibly explanations derived from experiments with language models.

While principled research on language models might weaken or constrain some PoS arguments, it’s important to note that it doesn’t necessarily undermine all motivations for traditional linguistic theories. Generative approaches like Minimalist syntax are not solely justified by learnability considerations, but also by their ability to provide elegant explanations for specific linguistic phenomena across languages. For instance, the presence of expletive subjects in English sentences like “It’s raining” or “There is a cat in the garden” has been accounted for through principles of case theory and the Extended Projection Principle (EPP) (Chomsky, 1995).<sup>15</sup> Case theory explains why expletives are necessary in certain constructions to satisfy case requirements, while the EPP stipulates that all clauses must have subjects. While a language model trained on English text might correctly produce such sentences, this alone doesn’t explain why English requires expletive subjects in these contexts in the same way that traditional linguistic theories do. This highlights a crucial distinction between prediction and explanation in linguistics. For language models to truly challenge or replace traditional linguistic theories, they would need to offer comparably insightful explanations for the cross-linguistic patterns and constraints that motivate these theories. This presents an important challenge and opportunity for researchers working on language models: to develop methods for

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<sup>15</sup>I am grateful to Gabe Dupre for suggesting that example.

extracting explanatory principles from these models that can account for linguistic phenomena in ways that rival or surpass traditional theoretical approaches. Such efforts could significantly enrich debates about the nature of linguistic explanation and potentially bridge the gap between computational and theoretical linguistics.

## 5 Conclusion

Artificial neural networks have come a long way since the much-maligned connectionist models of yore. In the linguistic domain, modern language models based on deep neural network architectures have achieved vastly more success on virtually any natural language processing task than symbolic models ever did. This progress calls for an honest reappraisal of the relevance of artificial neural networks to linguistics. Given their predictive learning objective, it is often assumed that language models are limited to capturing human linguistic performance. There are, however, good reasons to think they can be used to model key aspects of language competence and acquisition. This requires careful experiments where every variable – from model choice to task design – is informed by linguistic theory.

Ongoing research on language models in computational linguistics has frayed a path forward, providing a wealth of empirical evidence about the linguistic abilities of neural networks, including those trained on a realistic amount of linguistic input. These results suggest that language models do acquire sophisticated linguistic knowledge and are sensitive to hierarchical syntactic structure beyond surface heuristics. Although this line of research has been largely ignored in mainstream theoretical linguistics, it is increasingly plausible that it could yield insights about linguistic competence and language acquisition that could constrain hypotheses about the human case. This calls for a closer collaboration between linguists and neural network researchers that does not merely cater to engineering goals.<sup>16</sup>

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