Mariya Toneva

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Positions Held

Max Planck Institute for Software Systems
Tenure-track Faculty (W2)   since 2022
Visiting Researcher   2021–2022

Max Planck School of Cognition
Adjunct Faculty   since 2023

Princeton University
C.V. Starr Fellow   2021–2022
Mentors: Ken Norman, Uri Hasson

Education

Carnegie Mellon University
Ph.D. in Machine Learning and Neural Computation   2014–2021
Thesis title: Bridging Language in Machines with Language in the Brain
Advisors: Tom Mitchell, Leila Wehbe

Carnegie Mellon University
Masters of Science in Machine Learning   2018

Yale University
Bachelor of Science in Computer Science, Cognitive Science   2014

Publications in Journals and Conference Proceedings

1. Improving semantic understanding in speech language models via brain-tuning   2025
   O. Moussa, D. Klakow, and **M. Toneva**
   (ICLR 2025) *International Conference on Learning Representations* [pdf]

2. Large language models can segment narrative events similarly to humans   2025
   S. Michelmann, M. Kumar, K.A. Norman, and **M. Toneva**
   Behavioral Research Methods [pdf]

3. Hints help finding and fixing bugs differently in python and text-based   2025
   program representations
   R. Rawal, V. Padurean, S. Apel, A. Singla, and **M. Toneva**
   (ICSE 2025) *International Conference on Software Engineering* [pdf]

4. Language models and brains align due to more than next-word prediction and   2024
   word-level information
   G. Merlin and **M. Toneva**
   (EMNLP 2024) *Empirical Methods in Natural Language Processing* [pdf]

5. Speech language models lack important brain-relevant semantics   2024
   S.R. Oota, E. Çelik, F. Deniz, and **M. Toneva**
   (ACL 2024) *Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics* [pdf]

6. Perturbed examples reveal invariances shared by language models   2024
   R. Rawal and **M. Toneva**
   (ACL Findings 2024) *Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics* [pdf]

7. Joint processing of linguistic properties in brains and language models   2023
   S.R. Oota, M. Gupta, and **M. Toneva**
   (NeurIPS 2023) *Neural Information Processing Systems* [pdf]

8. What happens during finetuning of vision Transformers: an invariance based investigation   2023
   G. Merlin, V. Nanda, R. Rawal, and **M. Toneva**
   (CoLLAs 2023) *Conference on Lifelong Learning Agents* [pdf]

9. Training language models for deeper understanding improves brain alignment   2023
   K.L. Aw and **M. Toneva**
   (ICLR 2023) *International Conference on Learning Representations* [pdf]
   [top 25% notable paper (Spotlight)]

10. A Roadmap to reverse engineering real-world generalization by combining naturalistic   2023
    paradigms, deep sampling, and predictive computational models
    P. Herholz, E. Fortier, **M. Toneva** , N. Farrugia, L. Wehbe, V. Borghesani
    Neurons, Behavior, Data Science, and Theory [pdf]

11. Combining computational controls with natural text reveals aspects of   2022
    meaning composition
    M. Toneva, T. Mitchell, and L. Wehbe
    Nature Computational Science [pdf]

12. Same cause; different effects in the brain   2022
    M. Toneva*, and J. Williams*, A. Bollu, C. Dann, and L. Wehbe
    (CLeaR 2022) *Causal Learning and Reasoning* [pdf]

13. Single-trial MEG data can be denoised through cross-subject predictive modeling   2021
    S. Ravishankar, **M. Toneva**, and L. Wehbe
    Frontiers in Computational Neuroscience 2021 [pdf]

14. Modeling task effects on meaning representation in the brain   2020
    via Zero-Shot MEG Prediction
    M. Toneva*, O. Stretcu*, B. Poczos, L. Wehbe, and T. Mitchell
    (NeurIPS 2020) *Neural Information Processing Systems* [pdf]

15. Interpreting and improving natural-language processing (in machines) with   2019
    natural language-processing (in the brain)
    M. Toneva and L. Wehbe
    (NeurIPS 2019) *Neural Information Processing Systems* [pdf]

16. Inducing brain-relevant bias in natural language processing Models   2019
    D. Schwartz, **M. Toneva**, and L. Wehbe
    (NeurIPS 2019) *Neural Information Processing Systems* [pdf]

17. An empirical study of example forgetting during deep neural network learning   2019
    M. Toneva*, A. Sordoni*, R. Tachet des Combes*, A. Trischler, Y. Bengio, and G. Gordon
    (ICLR 2019) *International Conference on Learning Representations* [pdf]

18. Applying artificial vision models to human scene understanding   2015
    E. M. Aminoff, **M. Toneva**, A. Shrivastava, X. Chen, I. Misra, A. Gupta, and M. J. Tarr
    Frontiers in Computational Neuroscience 2015 [pdf]

19. Exploration of social grouping: effects of behavioral mimicry, appearance, and eye gaze 2014
    A. Nawroj, **M. Toneva**, H. Admoni, B. Scassellati
    (CogSci 2014) *Conference of the Cognitive Science Society* [with Oral presentation] [pdf]

20. The physical presence of a robot tutor increases cognitive learning gains   2012
    D. Leyzberg, S. Spaulding, **M. Toneva**, and B. Scassellati
    (CogSci 2012) *Conference of the Cognitive Science Society* [pdf]

21. Robot gaze does not reflexively cue human attention   2011
    H. Admoni, C. Bank, J. Tan, **M. Toneva**, and B. Scassellati
    (CogSci 2011) *Conference of the Cognitive Science Society* [pdf]

Preprints and Non-Proceeding Publications

- Position: episodic memory is the missing piece for long-term LLM agents   2025
  M. Pink, Q. Wu, V. Vo, J. Turek, J. Mu, A. Huth, and **M. Toneva**
  (arXiv 2025) [pdf]

- Assessing episodic memory in LLMs with sequence order recall tasks   2024
  M. Pink, V. Vo, ... and **M. Toneva**
  (arXiv 2024) [pdf]

- Vision-language integration in multimodal video transformers (partially) aligns with the brain 2023
  D. Dong and **M. Toneva**
  (arXiv 2023) [pdf]

- Getting aligned on representational alignment   2023
  I. Sucholutsky, L. Muttenthaler, ..., **M. Toneva**, T. Griffiths
  (arXiv 2023) [pdf]

- Pointwise representational similarity   2023
  C. Kolling, T. Speicher, V. Nanda, **M. Toneva**, and K.P. Gummadi
  (arXiv 2023) [pdf]

- Interpreting multimodal video Transformers using brain recordings   2023
  D. Dong and **M. Toneva**
  (ICLR 2023 Workshop on Multimodal Representation Learning: Perks and Pitfalls) [pdf]

- Memory for long narratives   2022
  M. Toneva, V. Vo, J. Turek, S. Jain, S. Michelmann, M. Capotă, A. Huth, U. Hasson, and K. Norman
  (CEMS 2022) *Context and Episodic Memory Symposium*

- The Courtois Neuromod project: a deep, multi-domain fMRI dataset to build individual   2022
  brain models
  J. Boyle*, B. Pinsard*, ... **M. Toneva**, ... and P. Bellec
  (HBM 2022) *Human Brain Mapping* [with Oral presentation]

- Does injecting linguistic structure into language models lead to better alignment   2021
  with brain recordings?
  M. Abdou, A.V. González, **M. Toneva**, D. Hershcovich, and A. Søgaard
  (arXiv 2021) [pdf]

- Investigating different alignment methods between natural and artificial neural networks 2020
  for language processing
  A. Bollu, **M. Toneva**, and L. Wehbe
  (SNL 2020) *Society for the Neurobiology of Language*

- Investigating task effects on brain activity during stimulus presentation in MEG   2019
  M. Toneva*, O.Stretcu*, B. Poczos, and T. Mitchell
  (HBM 2019) *Human Brain Mapping*

- Word length processing in left lateraloccipital through region-to-region connectivity: 2018
  an MEG Study
  M. Toneva, and T. Mitchell
  (HBM 2018) *Human Brain Mapping*

- MEG representational similarity analysis implicates hierarchical integration   2018
  in sentence processing
  N. Rafidi*, D. Schwartz*, **M. Toneva***, S. Jat, and T. Mitchell
  (HBM 2018) *Human Brain Mapping*

- Scene-space encoding within the functional scene-selective network   2015
  E. M. Aminoff, **M. Toneva**, A. Gupta, and M. J. Tarr
  (VSS 2015) *Vision Sciences Society*

- Towards a model for mid-level feature representation of scenes   2014
  M. Toneva, E. M. Aminoff, A. Gupta, and M. Tarr
  (VSS 2014) *Vision Sciences Society*

Grants and Fellowships

DFG Graduate School RTG 2853
Neuroexplicit Models of Language, Vision & Action   2023-2028

DFG Research Unit 5368 KI-FOR
Abstract Representations in Neural Architectures   2023-2027
Project: Bridging Levels of Abstraction in Brains and Natural Language Processing Machines

National Institutes of Health T32 Training Grant
Funded one year of postdoctoral research in Quantitative and Computational Neuroscience   2021-2022

C.V. Starr Fellowship
Funded one year of postdoctoral research in computational neuroscience at Princeton University   2021-2022

National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship
Funded three years of interdisciplinary graduate research in machine learning and neuroscience   2016–2019

Grace Hopper Celebration Scholarship
Funded attendance at the 2014 Grace Hopper Celebration of Women in Computing   2014

Mellon Forum Undergraduate Research Grant
Funded submission and attendance at the 2014 Vision Sciences Society conference   2014

Robin Berlin Fellowship
Funded neural modeling research at Laboratory of Computational Neuroscience, EPFL   2013

Awards and Distinctions

Japanese-American-German Frontiers of Science (JAGFOS) Symposium Invitee
Alexander von Humboldt Foundation   2023
Selected to represent Germany as one of 24 researchers from all disciplines of science and engineering

Appointed as Member
ELLIS (European Laboratory for Learning and Intelligent Systems)   2023

Appointed as Adjunct Fellow
Max Planck School of Cognition   2023

Ph.D. Dissertation Award, Honorable Mention
Society for the Neurobiology of Language   2021

Machine Learning Student Leadership Award
Awarded for exemplary efforts and their significant impact on life in the Machine Learning Department   2020

Top Reviewer
NeurIPS 2022, ICLR 2022, ICML 2022, NeurIPS 2018   2018-2022

Citadel Datathon Runner-up
Analyzed a genomics dataset to predict age-related differences in disease-related gene expression   2017

Machine Learning Teaching Assistant Award
Awarded for outstanding performance as a TA in 10-725 Convex Optimization   2017

BrainHub Neurohackathon Winner
Reduced need for human supervision by classifying diffusion MRI tracks into anatomical bundles   2016

Invited and Contributed Talks

Conferences and Workshops

- **Keynote Speaker**, CALCULUS Symposium, KU Leuven   2024
- Invited Speaker, Brain Prize Webinar "LLMs and Human Language Processing"   2024
- **Keynote Speaker**, AAAI Workshop "AI for Brain Encoding and Decoding"   2024
- Invited Speaker, ICLR Workshop "Representational Alignment"   2024
- Invited Speaker, CogSci Symposium "Is DL the Answer for Understanding Cog. Dynamics"   2024
- Invited Speaker, German Academy of Science Symposium "Brain Science and LLMs"   2024
- Invited Speaker, NeuroAI Symposium   2024
- **Keynote Speaker**, Neuro-AI Talks (NEAT)   2023
- Invited Speaker, Workshop on Philosophy of Science Meets ML, University of Tübingen   2023
- Invited Symposium Speaker, European Society for Philosophy and Psychology Conference   2023
- Invited Speaker, Neuro-AI Educational Session, Human Brain Mapping Conference   2023
- Invited Speaker, Workshop on Code, Brains, and LLMs, Saarland University   2023
- Invited Speaker, Workshop on ML, Abstract Thought, and the Expanding Reach of AI   2022
- Contributed Talk, Neuromatch Conference   2020
- Invited Speaker, CCN Workshop on Nonlinear Models for Scientific Discovery   2020
- Contributed Talk, NeurIPS Workshop Women in Machine Learning   2014
- Contributed Talk, CogSci Oral Presentation for Accepted Paper   2014

University Seminars

- Institute Colloquium, Gatsby Computational Neuroscience Unit   2025
- Institute Colloquium, Ernst Strüngmann Institut   2024
- Math Machine Learning Seminar, Max Planck Institute for Mathematics and UCLA   2024
- Institute Colloquium, MPI for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences   2024
- Campus Lecture, Saarbrücken Informatics Campus   2023
- Cog. Comp. Neuro. Colloquium, MPI for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences   2023
- Psychology Department Colloquium, University of Saarland   2023
- Institute Colloquium, Institute for Basic Science, South Korea   2023
- Institute Colloquium, CIMeC, University of Trento   2022
- Distinguished Speakers in Language Science Colloquium, Saarland University   2022
- Department of Statistics and Data Science, Yale University   2021
- Faculty of Computing and Data Science, Boston University   2021
- Department of Computer Science, University of Southern California   2021
- Department of Computer Science, University of Utah   2021
- Institute Colloquium, Max Planck Institute for Software Systems   2021
- Department of Computer Science, Aarhus University   2021
- Institute Colloquium, Toyota Technological Institute at Chicago   2021
- Institute Colloquium, IST Austria   2021
- Department of Statistics, University of Chicago   2021
- Department of Computer Science, University of Notre Dame   2021
- Department of Computer Science, University of Liverpool   2020
- SFB-TRR 161 Lecture Series, U. of Stuttgart, U. of Konstanz, Ulm University, and LMU   2020

Summer Schools and Group Meetings

- Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf, Host: Milica Gasic   2024
- Goethe University Frankfurt, Host: Christian Fiebach   2024
- Bernstein Center for Computational Neuroscience Retreat   2024
- Max Planck School of Cognition Academy   2023
- Summer School in Philosophy and Computer Science, University of Bayreuth   2023
- Department of Computer Vision and Machine Learning, MPI for Informatics   2023
- TALEP group, Aix-Marseille University   2022
- CMMRS Summer School, MPI for Software Systems   2022
- IMPRS NeuroCom Summer School at the MPI for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences   2022
- MIT, Host: Evelina Fedorenko   2022
- MIT, Host: Roger Levy   2021
- Computational Neuroscience Symposium, CMU   2021
- Courtois NeuroMod Group, University of Montreal   2021
- Princeton Neuroscience Institute, Hosts: Ken Norman and Uri Hasson   2021
- brAIn seminar, CMU   2020
- UT Austin, Host: Alexander Huth   2020

Industry Internships

Microsoft Research, Montreal

Research Intern   2018

Investigated the learning dynamics of neural networks as they train on single classification tasks, finding that certain examples are forgotten with high frequency, and some not at all, and that, based on these forgetting dynamics, a significant fraction of examples can be omitted from the training data set while still maintaining state-of-the-art generalization performance

Cognitive Computing Center, Thomson Reuters

Research Intern   2017

Investigated the use of a recurrent neural network encoder for unsupervised word-order sensitive hashing as a step towards improving ranking results

Research Visits

Carnegie Mellon University

Research Assistant; Advisor: Michael Tarr   2013–2014

Investigated mid-level scene representation in humans using computer vision techniques

École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL)

Summer Intern; Advisor: Wulfram Gerstner   2013

Worked towards improving the state-of-the-art calcium-based model of spike-timing dependent plasticity

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Technical Trainee; Advisor: John Gabrieli   2012

Examined links between working memory capacity and various brain metrics through the analysis of resting state functional connectivity fMRI data

Mentorship and Supervision

Omer Moussa
PhD at University of Saarland
2024–

Camila Kolling
PhD at University of Saarland
co-advised by Krishna Gummadi
2024–

Mathis Pink
PhD at University of Saarland
co-advised by Isabel Valera
2024–

Emin Çelik
Postdoctoral Researcher
2023-

Blerta Veseli
PhD at University of Saarland
co-advised by Alexander Koller
2023-

Cameron Braunstein
PhD at University of Saarland
co-advised by Eddy Ilg
2023-

Gabriele Merlin
PhD at CS@MaxPlanck Graduate Program
2022-

Alan Sun
Research Intern; now Masters student at CMU
2024

Khai Loong Aw; now PhD student at Stanford University
Research Intern
2022

Ruchit Rawal
Research Intern; now PhD student at University of Maryland
2022-2024

Subba Reddy Oota
Research Intern; now postdoc at TU Berlin
2022

Tianai (Dota) Dong
Masters Student; now PhD student at the MPI for Psycholinguistics
2021-2022

Teaching

Bridging Language in Machines and Language in the Brain, University of Saarland
Instructor
Seminar course
2023

3370 Mathematical Neuroscience, University of Pittsburgh
Teaching Assistant
2018

10-725 Convex Optimization, CMU
Teaching Assistant
Awarded Machine Learning TA award
2016

Machine Learning for Neuroscience, Multimodal Neuroimaging Training Program
Instructor
Created curriculum and instructed 4-week course; video recordings can be found on personal webpage
2016

Service

Organizer

Deep Learning for Brain Encoding and Decoding   2023
Tutorial, IJCAI

Memory in Artificial and Real Intelligence   2022
Workshop, NeurIPS

Deep Learning for Brain Encoding and Decoding   2022
Tutorial, Cognitive Sciences Society

What can NLP systems teach us about language in the brain?   2021
Symposium, Society for the Neurobiology of Language

How can findings about the brain improve AI systems?   2021
Workshop, ICLR

Program Committee

Program Chair: *CogSci* 2024
Senior Program Committee Member: *ACL Rolling Review* (2023–present), *NeurIPS* (2024–present),
ICML (2025–present), *CCN* (2025-present), *CCN* Technical Program Committee (2022–2024)
Program Committee Member: ML: *NeurIPS* 2016-2023(Top 30% Reviewer in 2018);
ICML 2019-2023 (Top 10% Reviewer in 2022); *AAAI* 2020-2021, *CoLLAs* 2022,
ICLR 2022-2024 (Highlighted Reviewer in 2023); **NLP:** *ACL* 2019-2021; *NAACL* 2019-2021;
EMNLP 2020-2021; *CoNLL* 2020-2021; *AACL-IJCNLP* 2020; *EACL* 2021
Journal Reviewer: *TMLR*, *Nature Human Behavior*, *Nature Communications*; *Communications Biology*;
TICS, *Communications of the ACM*, *Frontiers in Computational Neuroscience*

Thesis Committee Member

Viktor Kewenig (UCL, 2025); Till Speicher (MPI Software Systems, 2025); Carina Kauf (MIT, 2024); RJ
Antonello (UT Austin, 2024); Julien Dirani (NYU, 2024); Bernhard Schäfl (Johannes Kepler University,
2024); Damián Pascual (ETH Zurich, 2022);

ML@CMU Blog

Chief Editor and Co-founder   2018–2020
Oversaw more than 30 research posts featuring recent ML research across 6 departments in the School of Computer
Science as well as other CMU schools and departments, and more than 10 educational posts

University Leadership Student Advisory Council

Member   2015–2017
Advising senior leadership at Carnegie Mellon University on the strategic priorities of the university

Graduate Student Assembly

Representative for the Program of Neural Computation   2015–2018
Advocating for the needs of graduate students

Yale Review of Undergraduate Research in Psychology

Chief Editor   2013–2014
Reviewed 50 submissions from 31 universities, and edited 9 submissions for publication

Personal

Languages	Bulgarian (Native), English (Fluent), German (Intermediate)
Citizenship	United States, Bulgaria
Github profile	http://github.com/mtoneva
Google Scholar profile	https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=a61sk-4AAAAJ