SemEval-2020 Task 3: Graded Word Similarity in Context by Composing Pre-trained Embeddings

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1 Introduction

In his *Foundations of Arithmetic*, Frege promises "never to ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, but only in the context of a proposition" (1960, p. xvii). This 'context principle' is intuitive: words are frequently polysemous, or assume different connotations and emphasis within different expressions (Armendariz, Purver, Pollak, et al. 2020, pp. 2–3). Historically, however, context-dependence has been a problem for distributional meaning representations. Founded on the distributional hypothesis (e.g., Turney and Pantel 2010, pp. 142–143), both count-based and predictive models of word meaning[1] originally produced a single representation for each word in the model's vocabulary. One of these *static* embeddings must, therefore, encode all of a word's senses and connotations, which may obstruct its use in modelling context-dependent phenomena.

Prior to the widespread availability of pre-trained language models, this problem was generally addressed by one of two approaches: firstly, by producing a representation for each sense of a target word and disambiguating between them in the given context (word-sense disambiguation); or secondly, by composing the representation of the target word with the representations of the words in its context (contextualization). These approaches have been largely overshadowed by the advent of model architectures that take sequences as inputs and naturally produce *contextual* representations of the items in the sequence, such as Transformers (Vaswani et al. 2017). To my knowledge, however, there has been scant direct comparison of the performance of these contextual embeddings with the application of prior methods of contextualization to static embeddings.

SemEval-2020 Task 3, "Graded Word Similarity in Context" (Armendariz, Purver, Ulčar, et al. 2020), presents an opportunity to make such a comparison. Briefly, the task is to predict the human judgment of similarity of the same pair of words in two different contexts. I elected to focus on the first sub-task, which is to predict the *change* in similarity, rather than the absolute similarity in each context. Specifically, I evaluated the results obtained by computing the cosine similarity between the different kinds of embeddings for a variety of pre-trained language models, and their composition with the embeddings within a fixed-size context window.[2]

2 Task definition

The first sub-task of SemEval-2020 Task 3 is to predict the direction and magnitude of the change in the human judgment of similarity of the same pair of target words in two different contexts. The task is unsupervised: the submissions were evaluated on the CoSimLex dataset (Armendariz, Purver, Pollak, et al. 2020, pp. 39–42) but only a minimal 'practice kit' of fewer than ten instances was provided in

[1] This terminological distinction is due to Baroni et al. (2014).

[2] The code that produced these results is available at tslwn/graded-similarity.

advance. CoSimLex is an extension of SimLex-999 (Hill et al. 2015) that consists of pairs of target words and their contexts in four languages: English (n = 340), Finnish (n = 24), Croatian (n = 112), and Slovene (n = 111). The score for the first sub-task was computed by the 'uncentered' (zero-mean) Pearson correlation coefficient between the predicted changes in similarity and the human judgments represented in the CoSimLex dataset (Armendariz, Purver, Pollak, et al. 2020, p. 42). This metric is equivalent to the cosine similarity between the two vectors of results:

$$\text{score}(\vec{\hat{y}}, \vec{y}) = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n} \hat{y}_i y_i}{\left(\sum_{i=1}^{n} \hat{y}_i^2\right)\left(\sum_{i=1}^{n} y_i^2\right)} = \frac{\vec{\hat{y}} \cdot \vec{y}}{\|\vec{\hat{y}}\|\|\vec{y}\|} \tag{1}$$

3 Related work

3.1 Composition and contextualization

Many context-based approaches to composition and contextualization have been proposed since the advent of count-based models of word meaning. With reference to Latent Semantic Analysis (Deerwester et al. 1990), for example, Landauer and Dumais argued that taking the average of the high-dimensional representation of a word and the representations of the words in its context may suffice to determine the word's contextual meaning (1997, pp. 229–230). Thus, the contextualization of representations of word meanings is intimately related to their composition to form representations of more complex expressions. This relationship is evident, for example, in the work of Kintsch (2001), who proposed a procedure to contextualize the representation of a predicate according to its argument, and in the adaptation of this demonstration by Mitchell and Lapata (2008) to evaluate alternative composition operations. Vector addition and averaging continue to be 'surprisingly effective' means to compose word embeddings (Boleda 2020, p. 10), and addition produces plausible results for the word-analogy task (Mikolov, Chen, et al. 2013, p. 9; Mikolov, Sutskever, et al. 2013, p. 7). Recent reviews of distributional semantic models are given by Lenci (2018) and Boleda (2020).

3.2 Costs and benefits of contextual models

Contextual language models have achieved widespread success on benchmark tasks (Bommasani, Hudson, et al. 2022, pp. 22–27). There is, however, cause to criticize the suitability of typical benchmarks for characterizing the capabilities of language models (Srivastava et al. 2023, pp. 5–6). Furthermore, the social and environmental costs of deploying a large model may not be justifiable, and the necessary computational resources may be prohibitive to an organization or in a resource-constrained environment (Bommasani, Hudson, et al. 2022, pp. 142–145, 154). In the case of systems based on contextual embeddings, for instance, Arora et al. (2020) have shown that static and even *random* embeddings can achieve similar performance, given sufficient data and linguistically simple tasks. Relatedly, Gupta et al. (2019, pp. 5244–5246) and Bommasani, Davis, et al. (2020, pp. 4760–4762) have compared different kinds of embeddings for word-similarity tasks and found that static embeddings can be obtained from contextual models that outperform their contextual counterparts while reducing the cost of inference. Surveys of contextual and static embeddings are given by Liu et al. (2020) and Torregrossa et al. (2021), and further analyses of contextual language models by Reif et al. (2019) and Brunner et al. (2019), for example. The costs and benefits of contextual models in this context are discussed in section 5.2.

3.3 Word similarity

Batchkarov et al. (2016) critically analyse word similarity as an evaluation methodology for distributional semantic models. In particular, the notion of 'similarity' manifested by these models is ambiguous (Elekes et al. 2020) and encompasses a broad range of semantic relations (Padó and Lapata 2003, p. 2), with the consequence that performance on an intrinsic word-similarity task does not necessarily

Model name	English	Finnish	Croatian	Slovene
`EMBEDDIA/crosloengual-bert`[1]	✓	✓	✓	✓
`TurkuNLP/bert-base-finnish-cased-v1`[2]		✓		
`TurkuNLP/bert-base-finnish-uncased-v1`[2]		✓		
`TurkuNLP/bert-large-finnish-cased-v1`[2]		✓		
`bert-base-cased`	✓			
`bert-base-multilingual-cased`	✓	✓	✓	✓
`bert-base-multilingual-uncased`	✓	✓	✓	✓
`bert-base-uncased`	✓			
`bert-large-cased`	✓			
`bert-large-cased-whole-word-masking`	✓			
`bert-large-uncased`	✓			
`bert-large-uncased-whole-word-masking`	✓			
`classla-bcms-bertic`[3]			✓	

Table 1: The pre-trained models from the HuggingFace *Transformers* library (Wolf et al. 2020) that I evaluated for each language. The corresponding references are [1]Ulčar and Robnik-Šikonja (2020a), [2]Virtanen et al. (2019), [3]Ljubešić and Lauc (2021), and Devlin et al. (2019) otherwise.

translate to extrinsic downstream tasks (Batchkarov et al. 2016, pp. 7–8). Moreover, inter-annotator agreement is generally poor for word-similarity in comparison to more specific tasks (Batchkarov et al. 2016, pp. 8–9). In this case, Armendariz, Purver, Pollak, et al. (2020, p. 8) and Armendariz, Purver, Ulčar, et al. (2020, p. 42) reported similar inter-annotator correlations between the different languages and to those of the SimLex-999 dataset (Hill et al. 2015, pp. 678–680). In the present context, we are explicitly concerned with the ability of pre-trained embeddings to capture context-dependent similarity judgments. However, the interpretation of distributional semantic models as explanatory theories of human linguistic processing is subject to debate (Günther et al. 2019), and it may be that less data-intensive models are more appropriate for a specific task of this kind (De Deyne et al. 2016).

4 Methodology

4.1 Embedding models

I undertook this task to investigate the relative performance of pre-trained static and contextual embeddings for a context-dependent word-similarity task. The baseline models for the task were the multilingual BERT model (Devlin et al. 2019) and ELMo models (Peters et al. 2018) trained on Finnish, Croatian, and Slovene datasets (Ulčar and Robnik-Šikonja 2020b),[3] and the vast majority of the task submissions were based on Transformers (Armendariz, Purver, Ulčar, et al. 2020, pp. 36, 42–45), so I chose to evaluate a variety of pre-trained Transformer models. Because both static and contextual embeddings can be obtained from a Transformer model, this approach facilitated a direct comparison between them. The models that I evaluated were accessed via the HuggingFace *Transformers* library (Wolf et al. 2020) and are listed in table 1.

[3]I did not directly reproduce the baseline models because the first requires the `bert-embedding` Python package, which has been deprecated since 2020 and is incompatible with Apple's ARM-based processors (Lai 2023). However, it is notionally equivalent to the contextual embeddings of the `bert-base-multilingual-cased` model with a window size of zero.

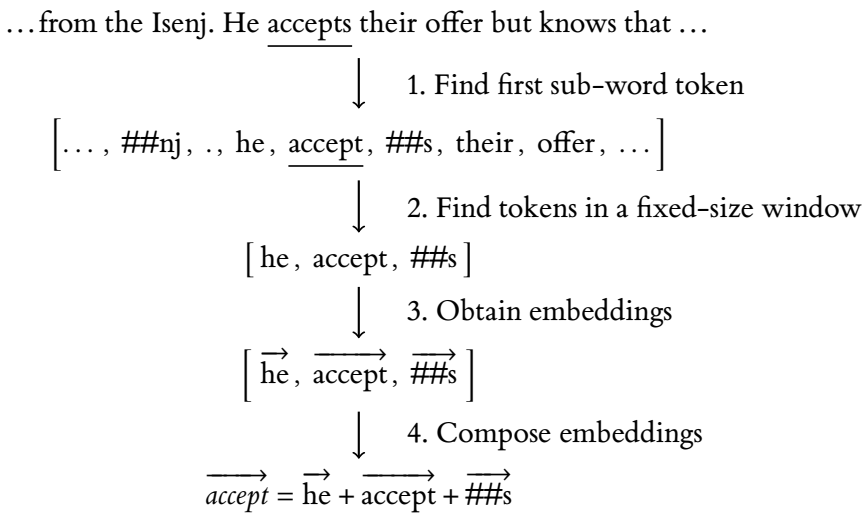

Figure 1: A schematic of the procedure used to obtain a contextualized representation of a target word from pre-trained embeddings. In this example, the target word is "accept", the window size is one (either side of the target word), and the composition operation is addition.

The primary comparison that I made was between the static input and contextual output representations of these models. Several of the task submissions used a combination of a Transformer's hidden-states (e.g. Gamallo 2020, p. 276; Costella Pessutto et al. 2020, p. 61; Hettiarachchi and Ranasinghe 2020, p. 145). This choice is supported by the analysis of Ethayarajh (2019), who found that the upper layers of Transformer models produce more context-dependent representations. Hence, I also evaluated an example of pooling hidden-states – a thorough comparison of its variants is, however, beyond the scope of this paper. Hereafter, I refer to the kinds of embeddings that I evaluated as:

- *static*, the model's input embeddings;
- *contextual*, the model's output embeddings; and
- *pooled*, the sum of the model's last four hidden-states.

4.2 Composition operations

The basic procedure that I employed is described in fig. 1. For each pair of target words and each of the two contexts in which they appear, I obtained a contextualized representation of a target word by:

1. finding the index of the target word's first sub-word token within the tokens of its context;
2. finding the tokens within a fixed-size window around its first token;
3. obtaining the embeddings of the tokens in the window; and
4. composing the embeddings to produce a single representation.

Notably, the use of a sub-word vocabulary by the models in question (e.g., Devlin et al. 2019, p. 4174) dictates that a target word may be represented by a different number of tokens in each context. As a result, the similarity between the representations of a pair of target words may be different in each context, even if the representations are individual static embeddings. This is the cause of the non-zero scores obtained by models of this kind, particularly for the Finnish language (section 5.3).

Inspired by Landauer and Dumais (1997), Kintsch (2001), and Mitchell and Lapata (2008), I primarily investigated element-wise addition and multiplication as composition operations to contextualize embeddings. The cosine similarity between two vectors is invariant with respect to the multiplication

of the vectors by scalars, so the results of composing the embeddings within a fixed-size context window by addition or the arithmetic mean are equal. Hence, I did not also investigate the arithmetic mean. Preliminary experiments indicated that multiplication performed poorly across all languages, models, and window sizes, so it was discarded before the final analysis on the evaluation dataset. Initially, I also investigated the concatenation ('stacking') of embeddings. In the case that the number of embeddings was fewer than that expected from the window size, i.e., the target word was too close to the beginning or end of its context, I right-padded the concatenated embeddings with zeros to obtain representations of equal length. This approach was also generally inferior to addition, as discussed in section 5.1.

4.3 Window size

Due to the computational expense of exhaustively searching the possible window sizes, I applied heuristics to constrain the search space. A naïve estimation of the average number of words in each context of the evaluation dataset, i.e., segmenting on whitespace, gave between 40 and 60 for the different languages. Therefore, for the static-embedding models, I chose 50 as an upper bound on the window size on either side of the target word. The motivation to choose a smaller maximum window size for contextual-embedding models was economical, due to their greater computational expense (section 5.2). However, as the window size approaches the length of the sequence, I expected a combination of token representations to be superseded by the sequence-level representation of the model, e.g., the special `CLS` token of BERT models (Devlin et al. 2019, p. 4174). These heuristics were largely vindicated by the results on the evaluation dataset, which showed that the scores decrease as the window size approaches the maximum.

5 Results

5.1 Hyperparameter search

In sections 5.2 to 5.4, I present the results of different models on the *evaluation* dataset. However, by comparing them, I have effectively performed hyperparameter search, which would not have been possible or legitimate as a task submission. Therefore, I also carried out this procedure on the 'practice kit' dataset (section 2) to select a candidate model for each language and kind of embedding. This data was not provided for Finnish, so it was excluded from the analysis. As discussed in section 4.2, multiplication and concatenation performed poorly in comparison to addition. This is shown by the variability of the score with respect to the window size in figs. 2 to 4. Hence, I excluded the other composition operations to select candidate models. The candidate models and their scores on the 'practice kit' and evaluation datasets are given in table 2.

5.2 Cost-benefit analysis of contextual embeddings

In the main, greater scores were achieved with contextual and pooled embeddings than with static embeddings (tables 2 and 3). However, static embeddings make up a small fraction of the size of a contextual language model. For example, BERT's vocabulary size is approximately 30000, the dimensions of the `bert-base` and `bert-large` variants' hidden-states are 768 and 1024, and their total parameters are 110M and 340M respectively (Devlin et al. 2019, pp. 4173–4174). Static embeddings thus make up approximately 23M and 31M or 21% and 9% of the total parameters. It is also much faster to compute a contextualized representation from static embeddings than to run inference on a language model. For a naïve implementation of the procedure described in section 4, the approximate time taken to compute the change in similarity between two words in context is notably greater for contextual embeddings than static embeddings. This is shown in fig. 6, where the right-most cluster is due to the `large` model variants.

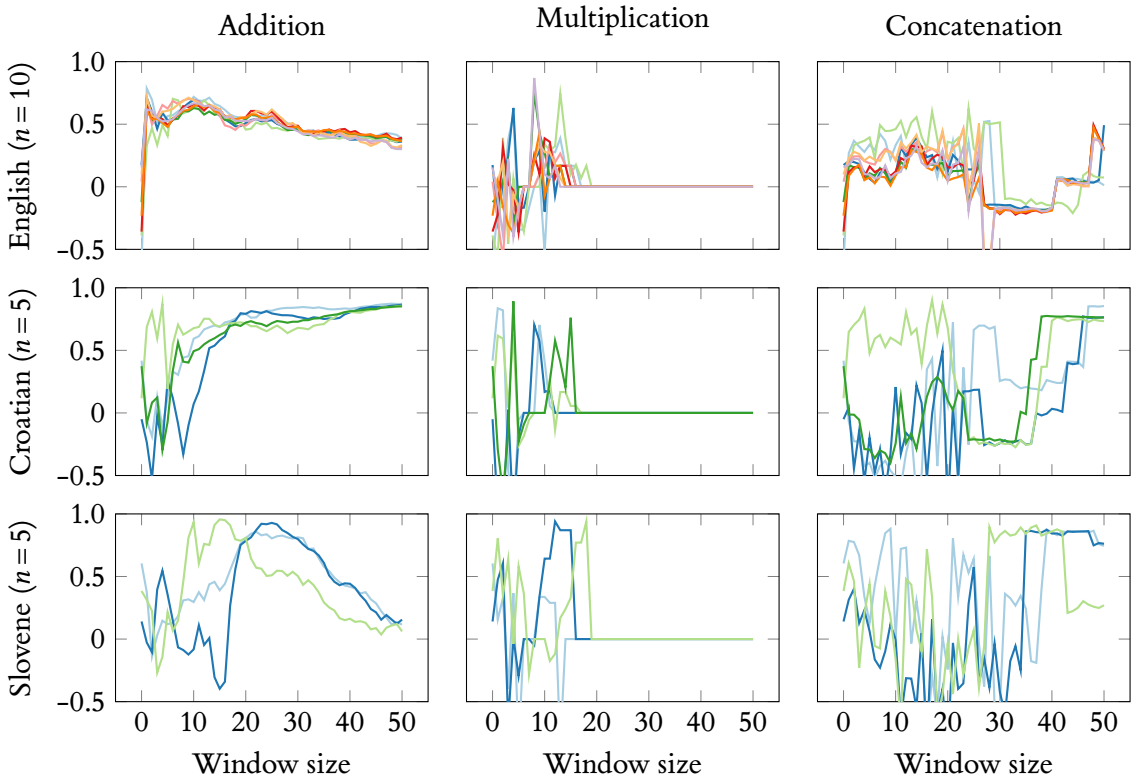

Figure 2: The score on the 'practice kit' dataset against window size for *static* embedding models. The model-name legends are omitted for brevity but match fig. 7.

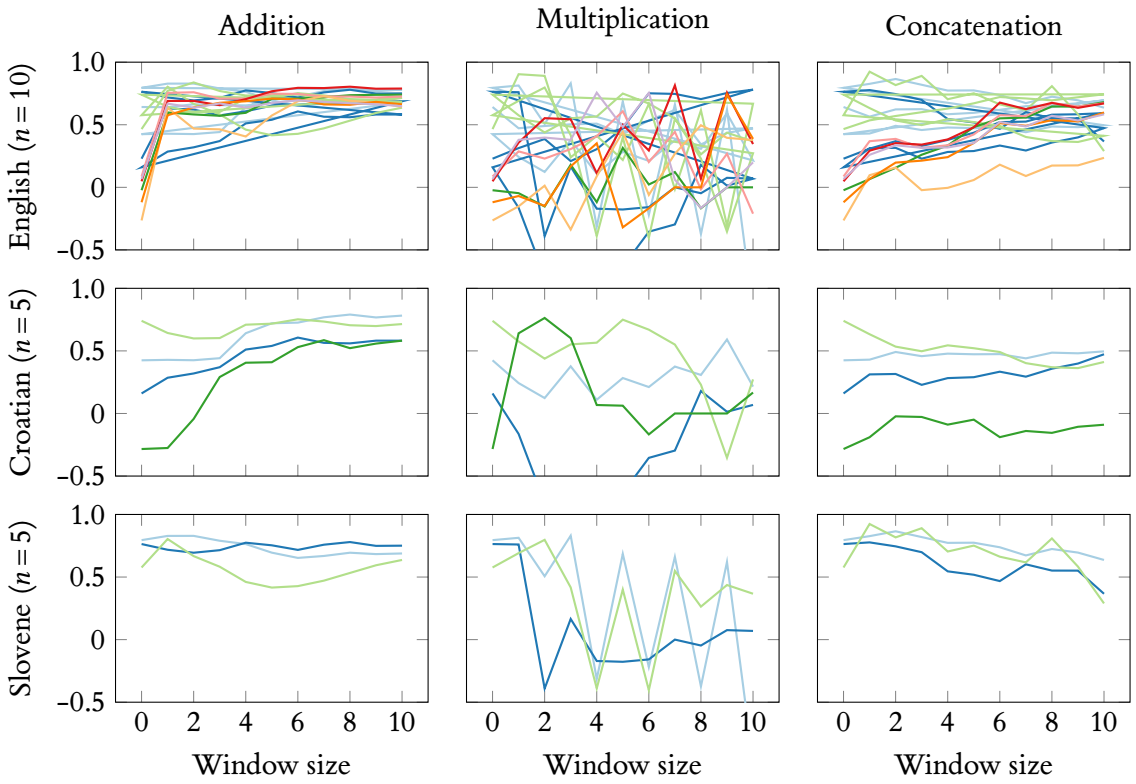

Figure 3: The score on the 'practice kit' dataset against window size for *contextual* embedding models. The model-name legends are omitted for brevity but match fig. 8.

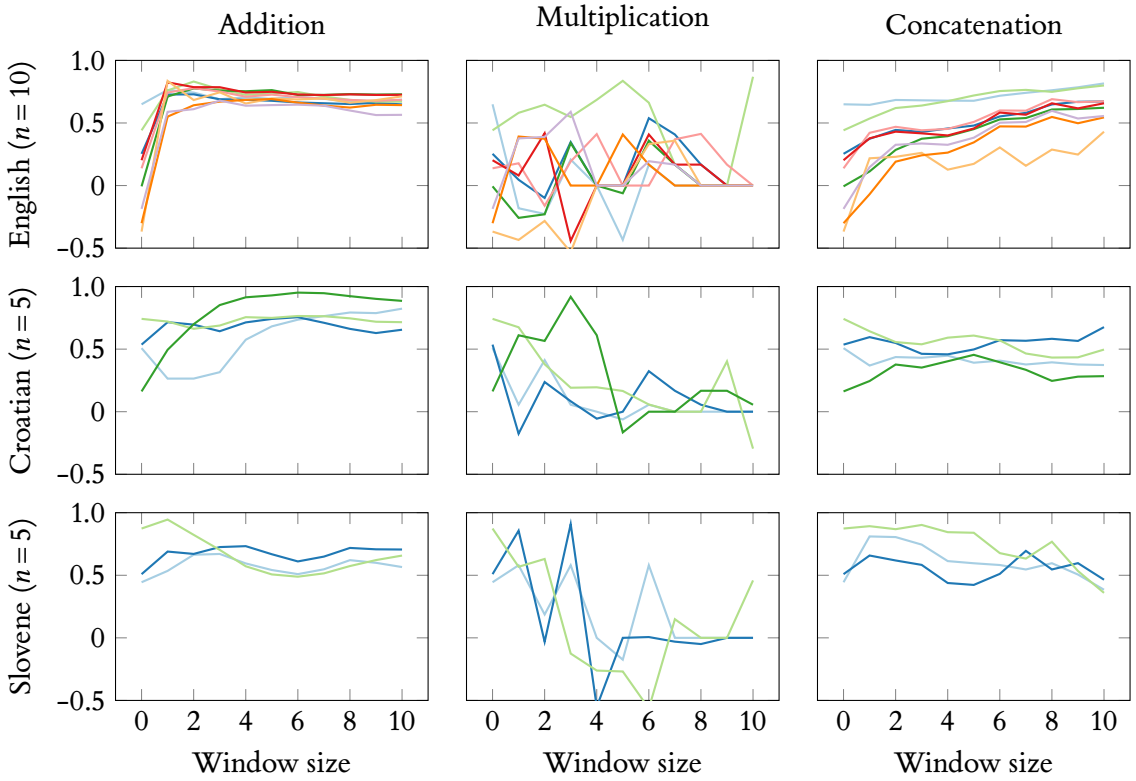

Figure 4: The score on the 'practice kit' dataset against window size for *pooled* embedding models. The model-name legends are omitted for brevity but match fig. 9.

Language	Model name	Window size	Practice	Evaluation
en	bert-base-multilingual-cased	1	0.785	0.352
hr	bert-base-multilingual-cased	48	0.873	0.492
sl	EMBEDDIA/crosloengual-bert	15	0.956	0.327

(a) Static

Language	Model name	Window size	Practice	Evaluation
en	EMBEDDIA/crosloengual-bert	2	0.838	0.602
hr	bert-base-multilingual-cased	8	0.790	0.591
sl	bert-base-multilingual-cased	2	0.829	0.564

(b) Contextual

Language	Model name	Window size	Practice	Evaluation
en	bert-large-uncased	1	0.836	0.619
hr	classla/bcms-bertic	6	0.952	0.604
sl	EMBEDDIA/crosloengual-bert	1	0.945	0.539

(c) Pooled

Table 2: The best scores on the *'practice kit'* dataset for each kind of embedding, and the corresponding scores on the evaluation dataset. The results were limited to the composition operation of addition due to the variability of the scores with multiplication and concatenation (figs. 2 to 4).

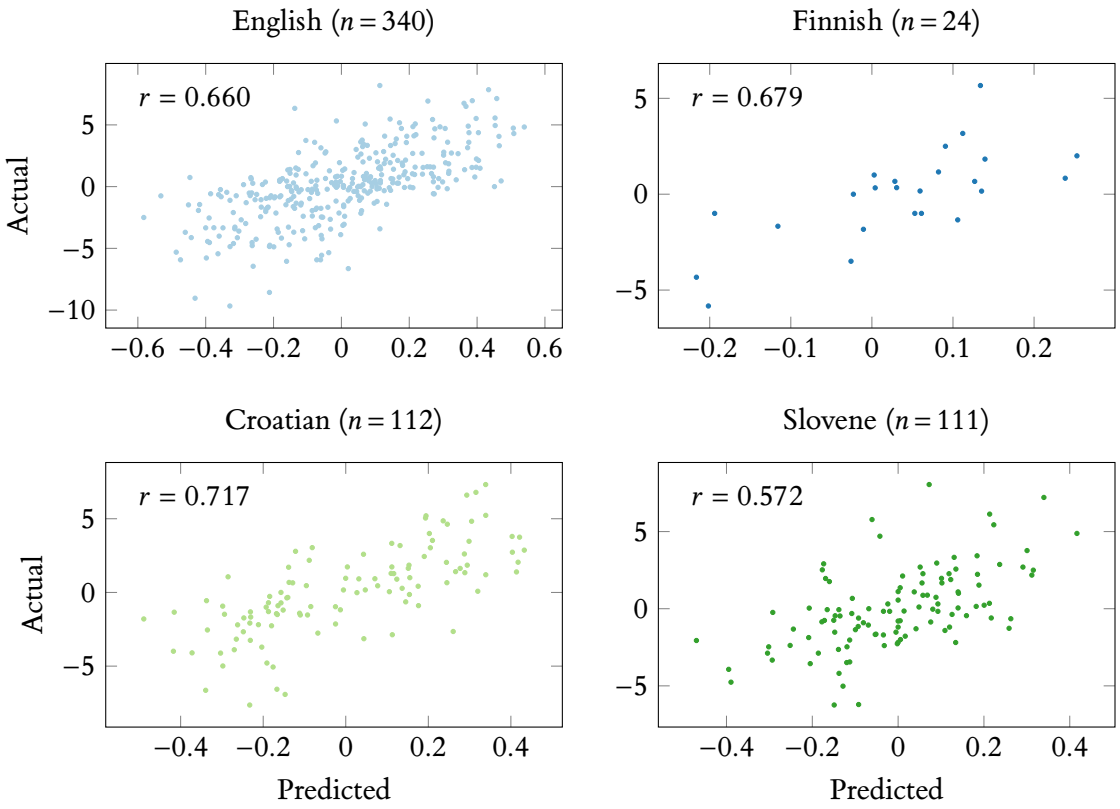

Figure 5: The predicted and actual human judgments of the change in similarity of the best models for each language on the evaluation dataset. The best models are highlighted in table 3. The zero-mean Pearson correlation coefficient, i.e., the score, is given in the top-left corner of each plot (section 2).

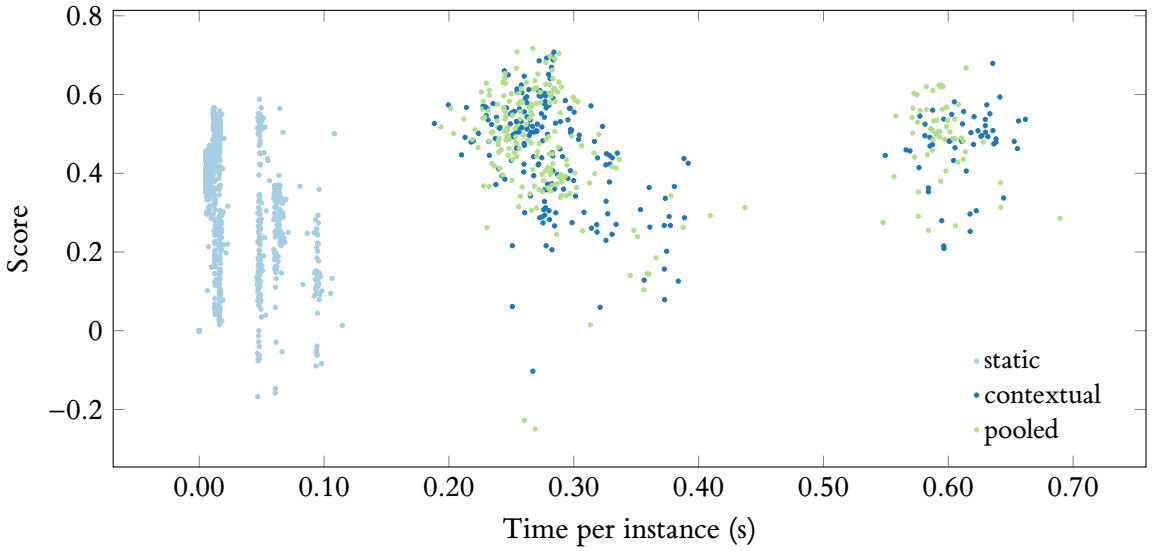

Figure 6: The scores on the evaluation dataset against the approximate time per instance, i.e., the total time divided by the number of instances, with the composition operation of addition.

Language	Model name	Window size	Score
en	bert-large-uncased-whole-word-masking	16	0.471
fi	EMBEDDIA/crosloengual-bert	21	0.588
hr	classla/bcms-bertic	31	0.567
sl	EMBEDDIA/crosloengual-bert	11	0.383

(a) Static

Language	Model name	Window size	Score
en	bert-base-uncased	1	0.660
fi	TurkuNLP/bert-large-finnish-cased-v1	1	0.679
hr	EMBEDDIA/crosloengual-bert	3	0.708
sl	bert-base-multilingual-cased	3	0.572

(b) Contextual

Language	Model name	Window size	Score
en	bert-base-uncased	1	0.653
fi	TurkuNLP/bert-large-finnish-cased-v1	1	0.668
hr	EMBEDDIA/crosloengual-bert	3	0.717
sl	EMBEDDIA/crosloengual-bert	2	0.544

(c) Pooled

Table 3: The best scores on the *evaluation* dataset for each kind of embedding. The best overall score for each language is underlined – in all cases, the best score was obtained with the composition operation of addition. The predicted and actual human judgments of the change in similarity for these models are shown in fig. 5.

5.3 Language-specificity of window-size effects

Generally, I found that the scores obtained by all three types of embeddings were maximized by a non-zero context-window size. The influence of the window size is intuitive in the case of static embeddings. Without a context window, the representations of a target word only differ between expressions if the word is represented by different sub-word tokens in the different expressions. A similar argument applies to contextual embeddings, in that a target word may be represented by multiple sub-word tokens. For the composition operation of addition, the scores against window size for each language and model are given in figs. 7 to 9.

Virtanen et al. (2019, p. 3) noted that, for a random sample of 1% of the relevant Wikipedia dataset, the number of sub-word tokens used to represent a word by a multilingual BERT model is greater for Finnish (1.97) than for English (1.16). This is attributed to the morphological complexity of Finnish and its comparatively small fraction of the multilingual model's vocabulary. Accordingly, I found that Finnish-specific models generally outperformed multilingual ones and that the score varied more widely with window size for Finnish than the other languages.

5.4 Significance tests

Finally, to quantify the significance of the differences between the scores obtained with different kinds of embeddings, I conducted paired t-tests of the scores of the best models in each class over ten random samples of 90% of the evaluation dataset. For each pair of model classes, the null hypothesis is that the two sets of scores have the same mean, i.e., there is no significant difference between the mean scores.

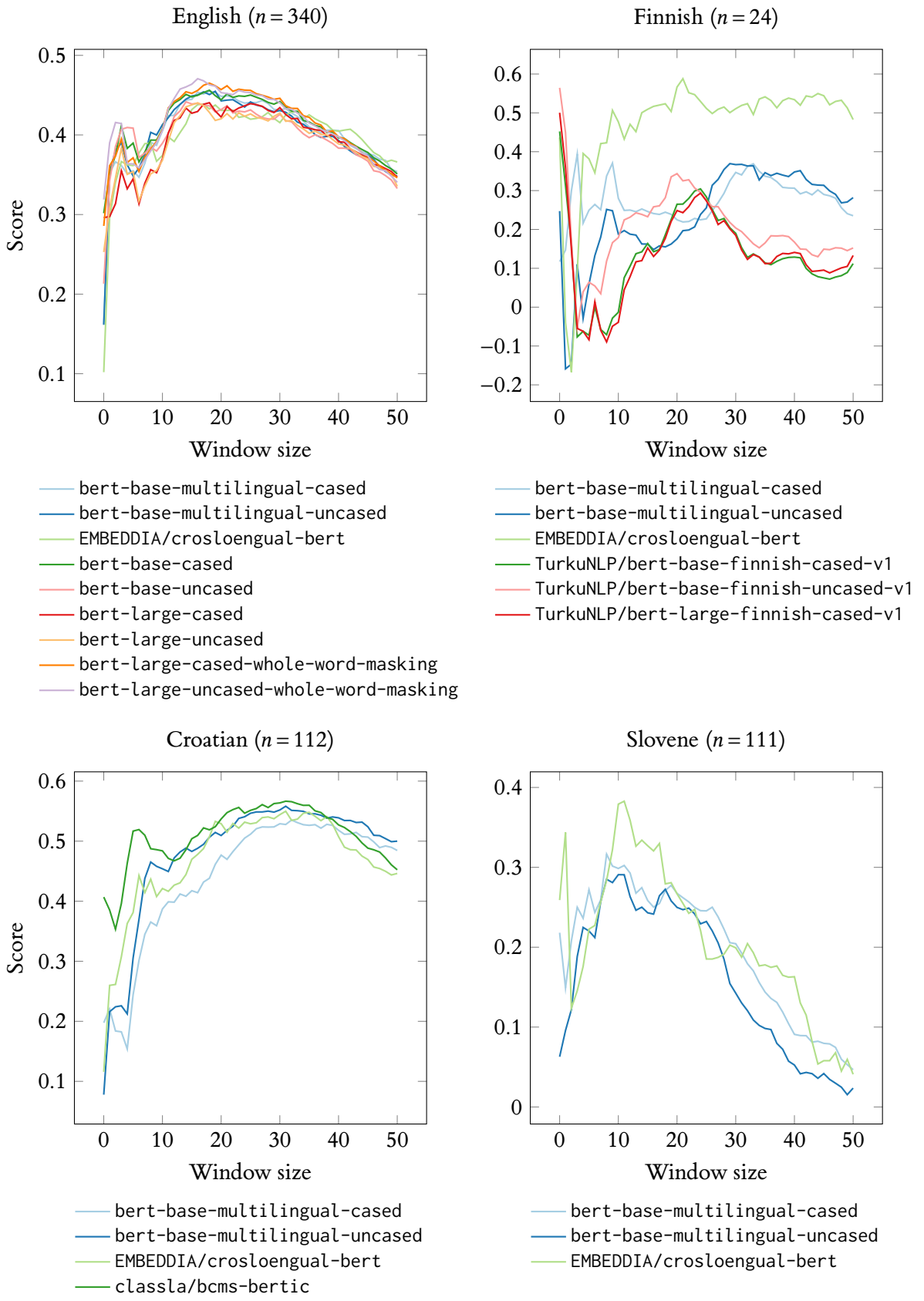

Figure 7: The scores on the evaluation dataset against window size for *static* embedding models with the composition operation of addition.

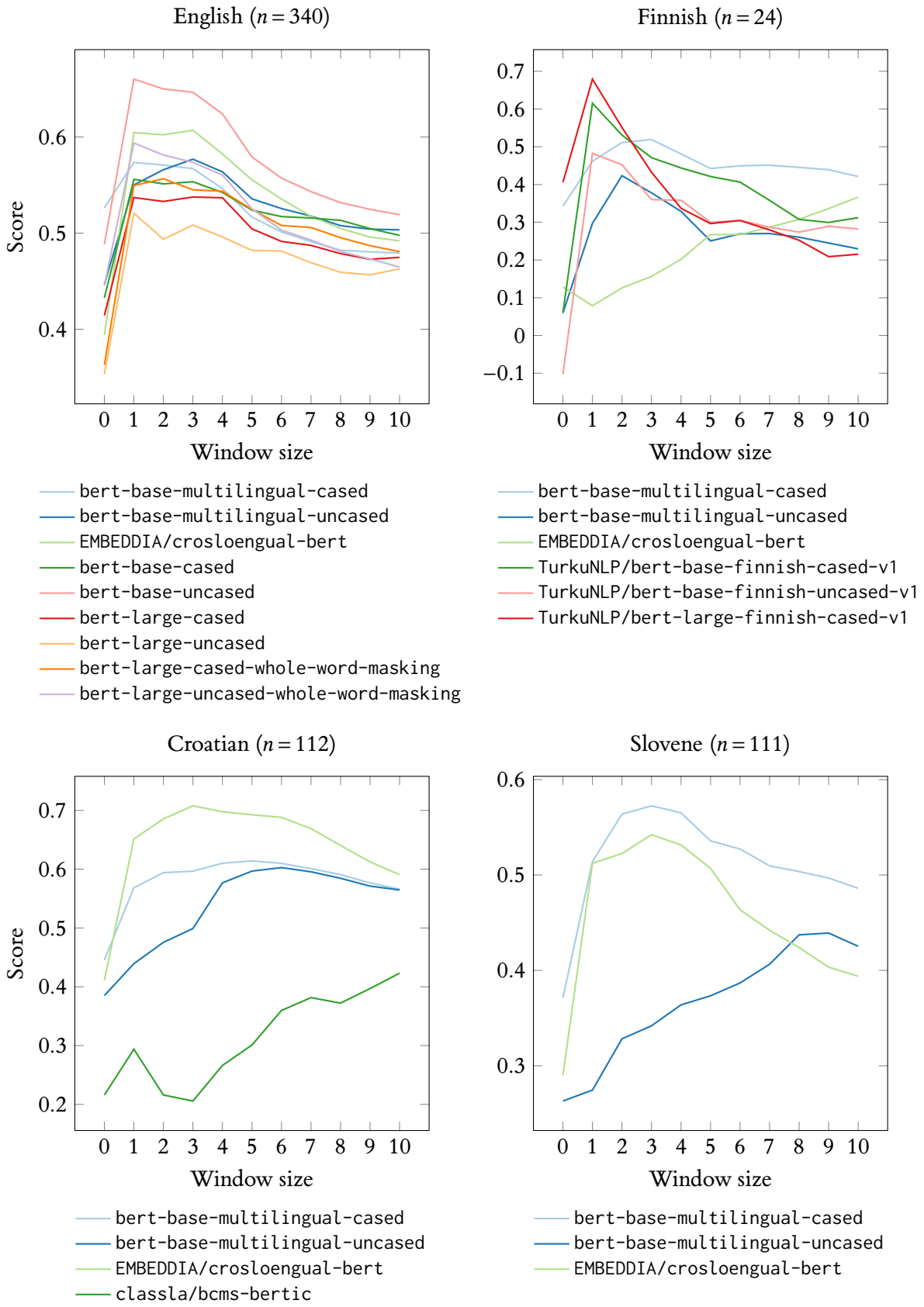

Figure 8: The scores on the evaluation dataset against window size for *contextual* embedding models with the composition operation of addition.

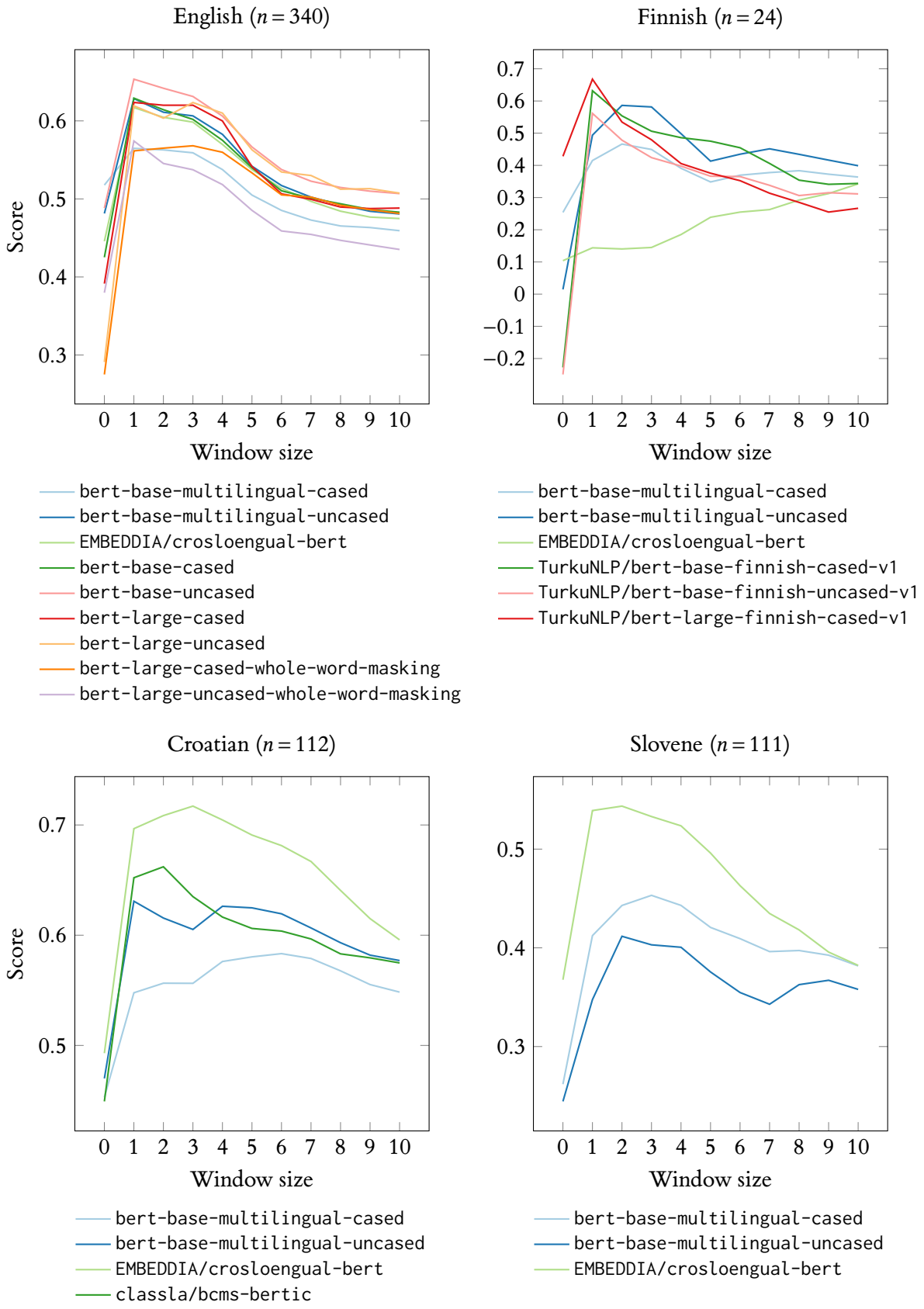

Figure 9: The scores on the evaluation dataset against window size for *pooled* embedding models with the composition operation of addition.

2: Add significance test results.

6 Conclusion

In this paper, I have presented the results of a hypothetical submission to SemEval-2020 Task 3, "Graded Word Similarity in Context". The purpose of this investigation was to compare the performance of static and contextual embeddings, and their composition within a fixed-size context window, on the task of predicting the change in the human judgment of similarity of a pair of words in two different contexts. I found that contextual embeddings generally outperformed static embeddings but at a significant computational cost (section 5.2). Composition benefited both static and contextual embeddings of sub-word tokens, with a language-dependent optimal window size (section 5.3).

These results must be interpreted in context: the original submission authors did not have access to the evaluation dataset prior to submitting their results, only the 'practice kit' of very few instances, so had limited opportunity to optimize parameters such as the window size prior to submission (section 5.1). The models that I used were also not necessarily available to the authors (section 4.1). With these caveats, I achieved several notable results (table 3):

- The pooled embeddings of `EMBEDDIA/crosloengual-bert` with a window size of three would have placed second among the Croatian submissions, with a score of 0.717.
- The contextual embeddings of `TurkuNLP/bert-base-finnish-uncased-v1` with a window size of zero would have placed fourth among the Finnish submissions, with a score of 0.679.
- The static embeddings of `TurkuNLP/bert-base-finnish-uncased-v1` with a window size of zero outperform several of the Finnish submissions, including the baseline, with a score of 0.564.

Given the significant expense of applying contextual language models, the last of these results highlights the importance of analysing the task at hand and considering the possibility that a simpler model produces adequate results.

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