

Deep Generative Models: Recurrent Neural Networks

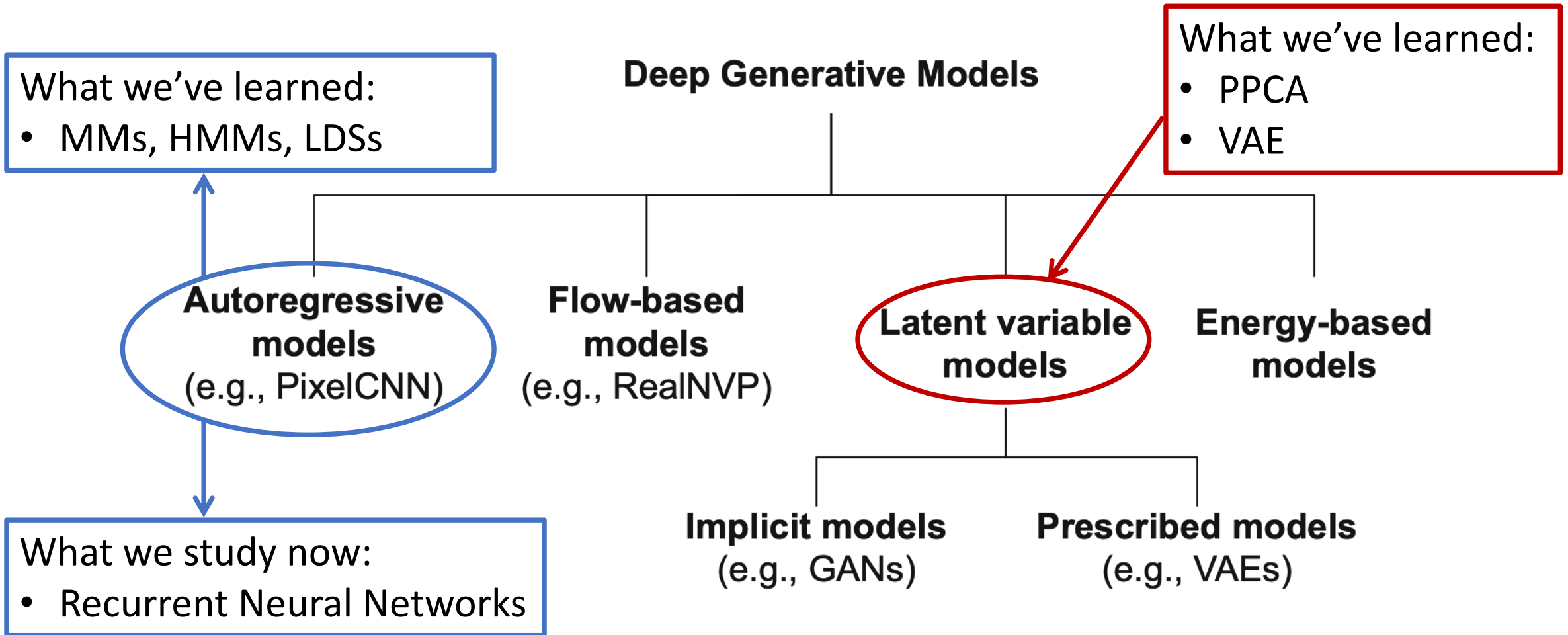
Fall Semester 2025

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Amazon Scholar & Chief Scientist at NORCE



Taxonomy of Generative Models

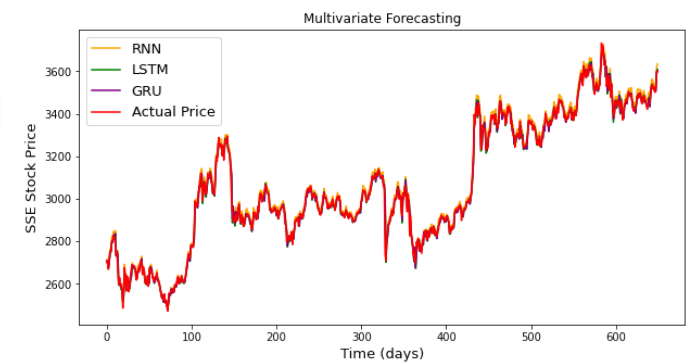
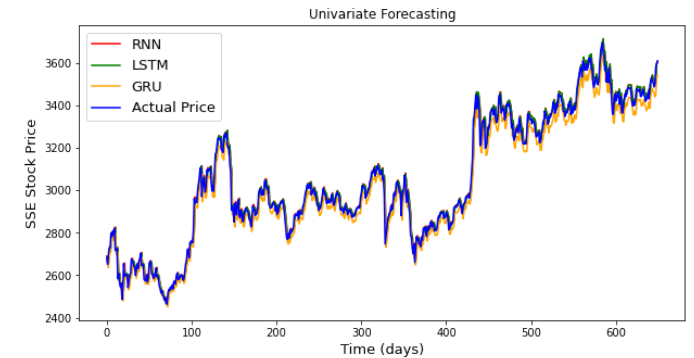
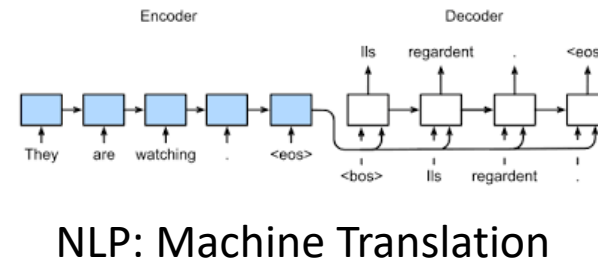
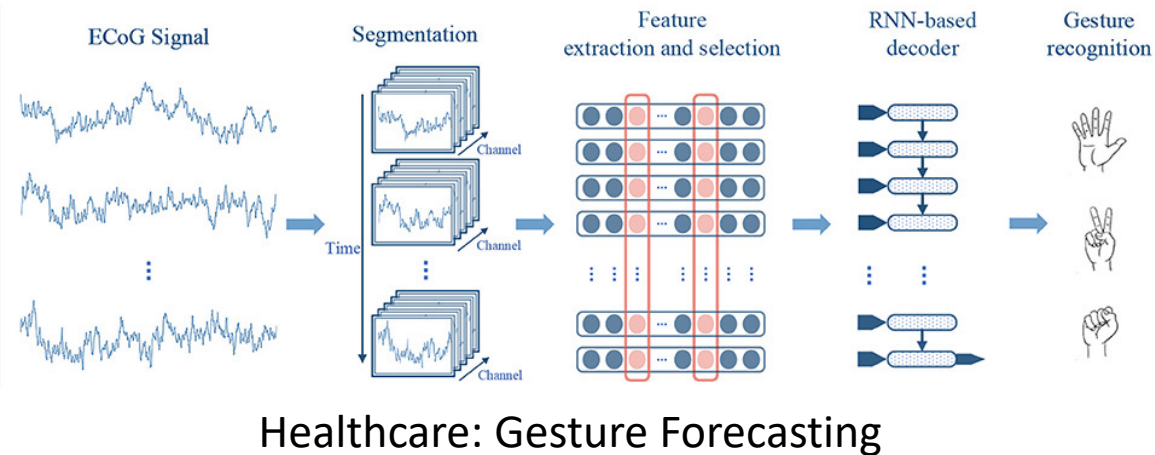


Autoregressive Models

- Many kinds of models
 - Markov Chains
 - Hidden Markov Models
 - Markov Random Fields
 - Linear Dynamical Systems
 - **Recurrent Neural Networks**
 - Transformers
- This lecture: we focus on **Recurrent Neural Networks**
 - Vanilla RNNs
 - Basic applications for Language Modeling
 - Training and Issues with RNNs
 - LSTMs and GRUs

Applications of RNNs

- NLP: Machine Translation, Text Classification, POS Tagging
- Healthcare: Gesture Forecasting, EGG
- Computer Vision: Self-driving, Image/Texture Classification
- Finance: Stock Price Forecasting
- Many, many more



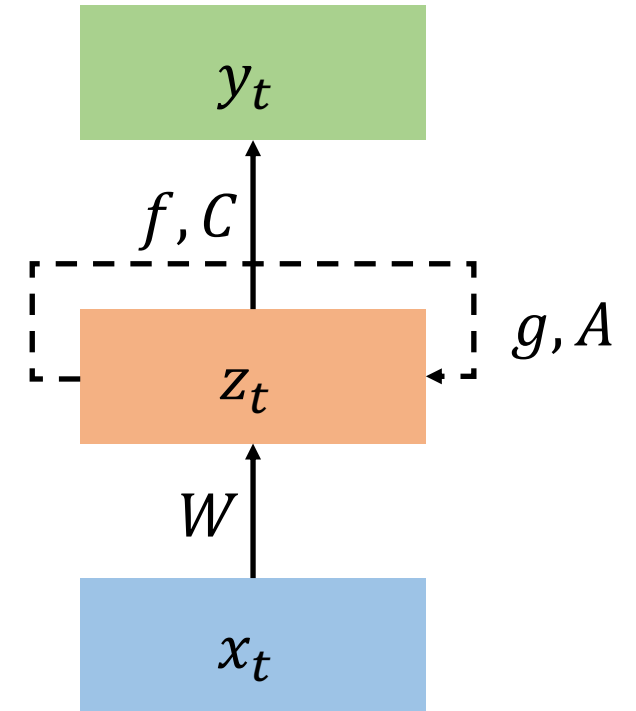
Finance: Stock Forecasting

Recurrent Neural Network (RNNs)

- Recurrent Neural Networks (RNNs) are **non-linear dynamical systems** described by

$$z_t = g(Az_{t-1} + Wx_t) + w_t$$
$$y_t = f(Cz_t) + v_t$$

- Here
 - $x_1, \dots, x_T \in \mathbb{R}^D$ denote the **inputs**
 - $y_0, \dots, y_T \in \mathbb{R}^m$ denote the **outputs**
 - $z_0, \dots, z_T \in \mathbb{R}^d$ denote the **hidden states**, with z_0 the initial state
 - $A \in \mathbb{R}^{d \times d}, W \in \mathbb{R}^{d \times D}, C \in \mathbb{R}^{m \times d}$ are **weight matrices**
 - f and g are nonlinear functions (e.g. f can be a Softmax function for soft classification)
 - No noise w_t, v_t when RNN used for prediction instead of generation.



RNNs vs LDSs

- Linear Dynamic Systems

$$\begin{aligned}z_t &= Az_{t-1} + Bx_t + w_t, & w_t &\sim \mathcal{N}(0, Q) \\ y_t &= Cz_t + v_t, & v_t &\sim \mathcal{N}(0, R)\end{aligned}$$

- Everything is linear
- Can be deterministic or stochastic
- Distributions of z_t and y_t has closed-form due the Gaussian assumption
- Exact inference via **Kalman filter**
- Parameter learning via **EM algorithm**

- Recurrent Neural Networks

$$\begin{aligned}z_t &= g(Az_{t-1} + Wx_t) + w_t, & w_t &\sim \mathcal{N}(0, Q) \\ y_t &= f(Cz_t) + v_t, & v_t &\sim \mathcal{N}(0, R)\end{aligned}$$

- Has nonlinearity from f and g
- Can be deterministic or stochastic
- Distributions of z_t and y_t does not necessarily admit a closed form
- Approximate inference via extended Kalman filter, **particle filter**, etc.
- Parameter learning via **Backpropagation Through Time**

Extended Kalman Filters for RNNs

- Let us consider an RNN with no inputs and with noise added to the state and output.

$$\begin{aligned}z_t &= g(Az_{t-1}) + w_t \\ y_t &= f(Cz_t) + v_t\end{aligned}$$
- Can we use EM and the Kalman filter for learning and inference with RNNs?
- On the one hand, we can write a probabilistic model with Gaussian conditionals

$$\begin{aligned}p(z_t \mid z_{t-1}) &= \mathcal{N}(g(Az_{t-1}), Q) \\ p(y_t \mid z_t) &= \mathcal{N}(f(Cz_t), R)\end{aligned}$$
- On the other hand, even if z_0 is Gaussian, $z_1 = g(Az_0) + w_t$ may not!
 - **Reason:** a linear transformation of a Gaussian is Gaussian, but the non-linearity breaks that.
- Why is this a problem?
 - A Gaussian is uniquely determined by its mean and covariance (μ, Σ)
 - The Kalman filter tracks the evolution of the mean and covariance of $z_t \mid y_{1:t-1}$. If this is not Gaussian, then we cannot track that anymore.

$$\begin{aligned}K_t &= \hat{\Sigma}_{t|t-1} C^\top (C \hat{\Sigma}_{t|t-1} C^\top + R)^{-1} \\ \hat{z}_{t+1|t} &= A \hat{z}_{t|t-1} + A K_t (y_t - C \hat{z}_{t|t-1}) \\ \hat{\Sigma}_{t+1|t} &= A (\hat{\Sigma}_{t|t-1} - K_t C \hat{\Sigma}_{t|t-1}) A^\top + Q\end{aligned}$$

Extended Kalman Filters for RNNs

- How do we apply the Kalman filter to RNNs?

- We linearize f and g around current estimate of mean and covariance using first-order Taylor expansion
- We run a Kalman filtering step using the Jacobians J_f, J_g of f and g .

$$\begin{aligned} z_t &= g(Az_{t-1}) + w_t \\ y_t &= f(Cz_t) + v_t \end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned} \tilde{z}_t &= \tilde{A}_t \tilde{z}_{t-1} + w_t \\ y_t &= \tilde{C}_t \tilde{z}_t + v_t \end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned} \tilde{A}_t &:= J_g(A\hat{z}_{t-1|t-1})A \\ \tilde{C}_t &:= J_f(C\hat{z}_{t|t-1})C \end{aligned}$$

- Prediction

$$\begin{aligned} \hat{z}_{t+1|t} &= A\hat{z}_{t|t} \\ \hat{\Sigma}_{t+1|t} &= A\hat{\Sigma}_{t|t}A^\top + Q \end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned} \hat{z}_{t+1|t} &= g(A\hat{z}_{t|t}) \\ \hat{\Sigma}_{t+1|t} &= \tilde{A}_t \hat{\Sigma}_{t|t} \tilde{A}_t^\top + Q \end{aligned}$$

- We do not have any optimality guarantees.

Update

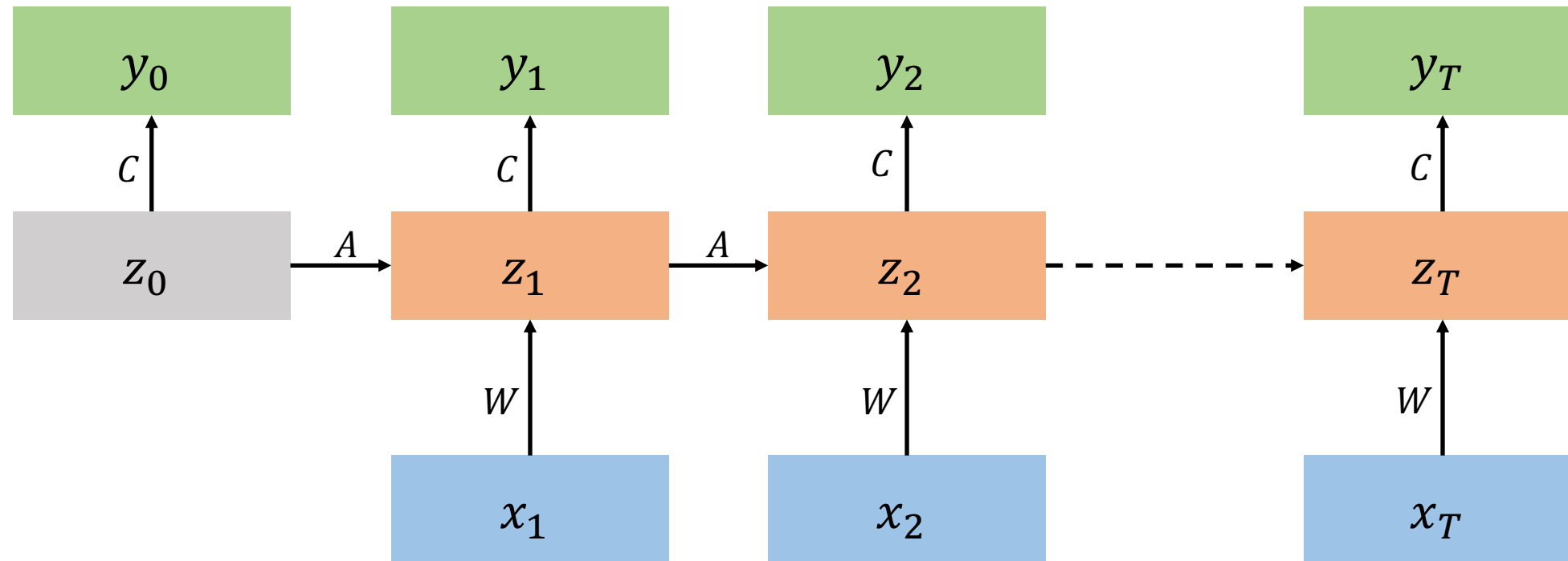
$$\begin{aligned} K_t &= \hat{\Sigma}_{t|t-1} C^\top (C \hat{\Sigma}_{t|t-1} C^\top + R)^{-1} \\ \hat{z}_{t|t} &= \hat{z}_{t|t-1} + K_t (y_t - C \hat{z}_{t|t-1}) \\ \hat{\Sigma}_{t|t} &= \hat{\Sigma}_{t|t-1} - K_t C \hat{\Sigma}_{t|t-1} \end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned} K_t &= \hat{\Sigma}_{t|t-1} \tilde{C}_t^\top (\tilde{C}_t \hat{\Sigma}_{t|t-1} \tilde{C}_t^\top + R)^{-1} \\ \hat{z}_{t|t} &= \hat{z}_{t|t-1} + K_t (y_t - f(C \hat{z}_{t|t-1})) \\ \hat{\Sigma}_{t|t} &= \hat{\Sigma}_{t|t-1} - K_t \tilde{C}_t \hat{\Sigma}_{t|t-1} \end{aligned}$$

Unrolling and Parameter Tying

$$\begin{aligned}z_t &= g(Az_{t-1} + Wx_t) \\ y_t &= f(Cz_t)\end{aligned}$$

- Rather than treating an RNN as a neural network with recurrent inputs and outputs, we can *unroll* the network such that it becomes a feed-forward network



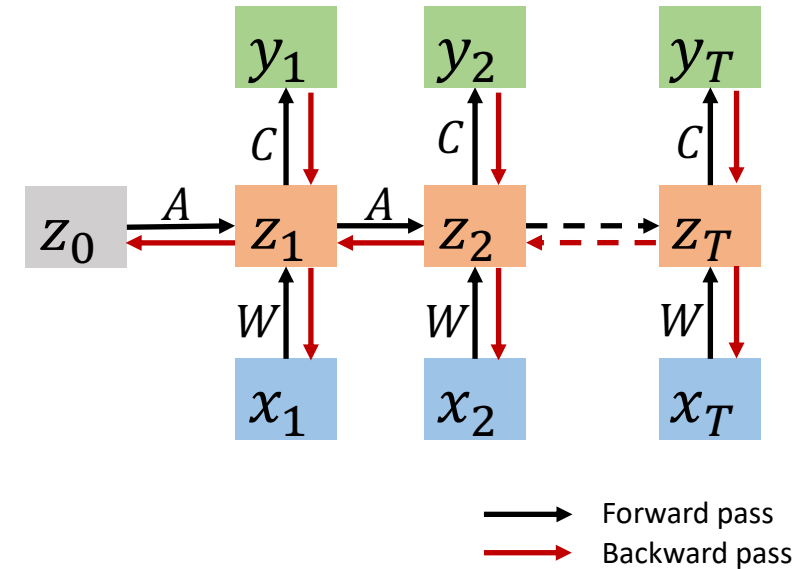
- Here A, C, W are the same matrices for all timestep, known as **Parameter Tying**

Note: Here we omit the noise terms w_t and v_t for simplicity.

→ Apply matrix multiplication & function

Backpropagation Through Time (BPTT)

- The unrolled graph is a well-formed **computation graph** (which is a directed acyclic graph), so we can run backpropagation on it
- Parameters are tied across time, derivatives are aggregated across all time steps
- This is known as **Backpropagation Through Time**
- **Question:** Why do we want to tie the parameters?
 - Reduce the number of parameters to be learned
 - Deal with arbitrarily long sequences
- What if we always have short sequences?
 - We may **untie** the parameters, then we would simply have a **standard feedforward neural network** instead



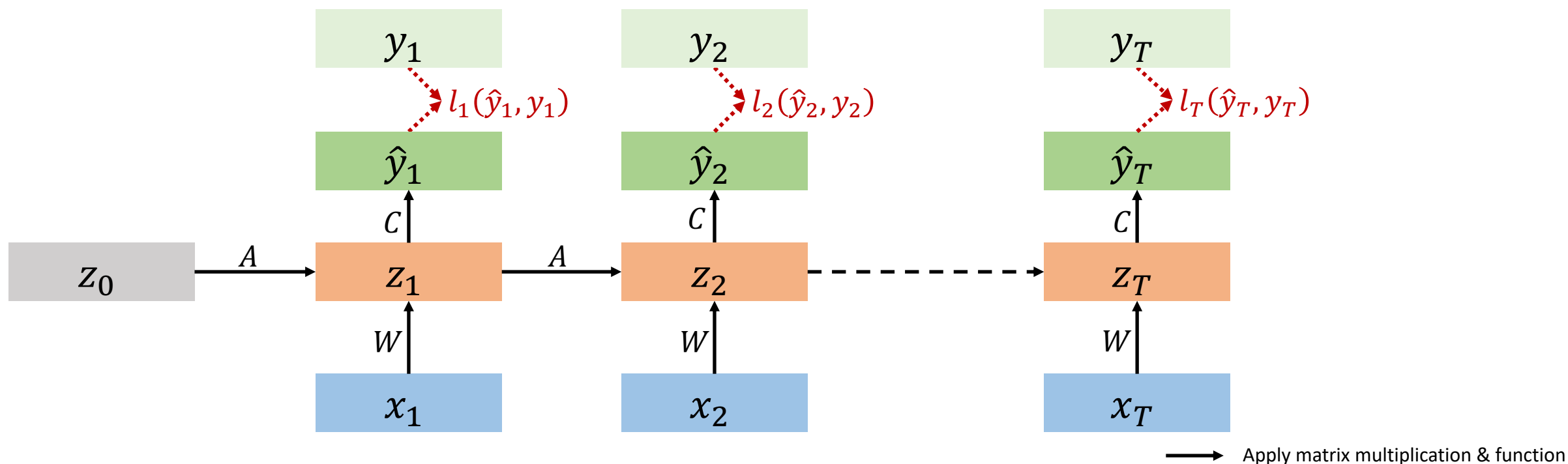
Loss Computation in Time

$$\begin{aligned} z_t &= g(Az_{t-1} + Wx_t) \\ y_t &= f(Cz_t) \end{aligned}$$

- Given (\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y}) , with $\mathbf{x} = \{x_t\}_{t=1}^T$ and $\mathbf{y} = \{y_t\}_{t=1}^T$, we can define different losses
- For a task that requires prediction at each time step \hat{y}_t , we can compute the loss $l_t(\hat{y}_t, y_t)$ for each timestep and sum over all timesteps

$$\mathcal{L}(\hat{\mathbf{y}}, \mathbf{y}) = \sum_{t=1}^T l_t(\hat{y}_t, y_t)$$

- For a task that needs a single prediction, we can compute the final loss $\mathcal{L}(\hat{\mathbf{y}}, y_T)$



Application of RNNs: Next Word Prediction

- Let us consider using an RNN for a **language modeling task**. Given some preceding **context**, we want the language model to predict the **next word**:

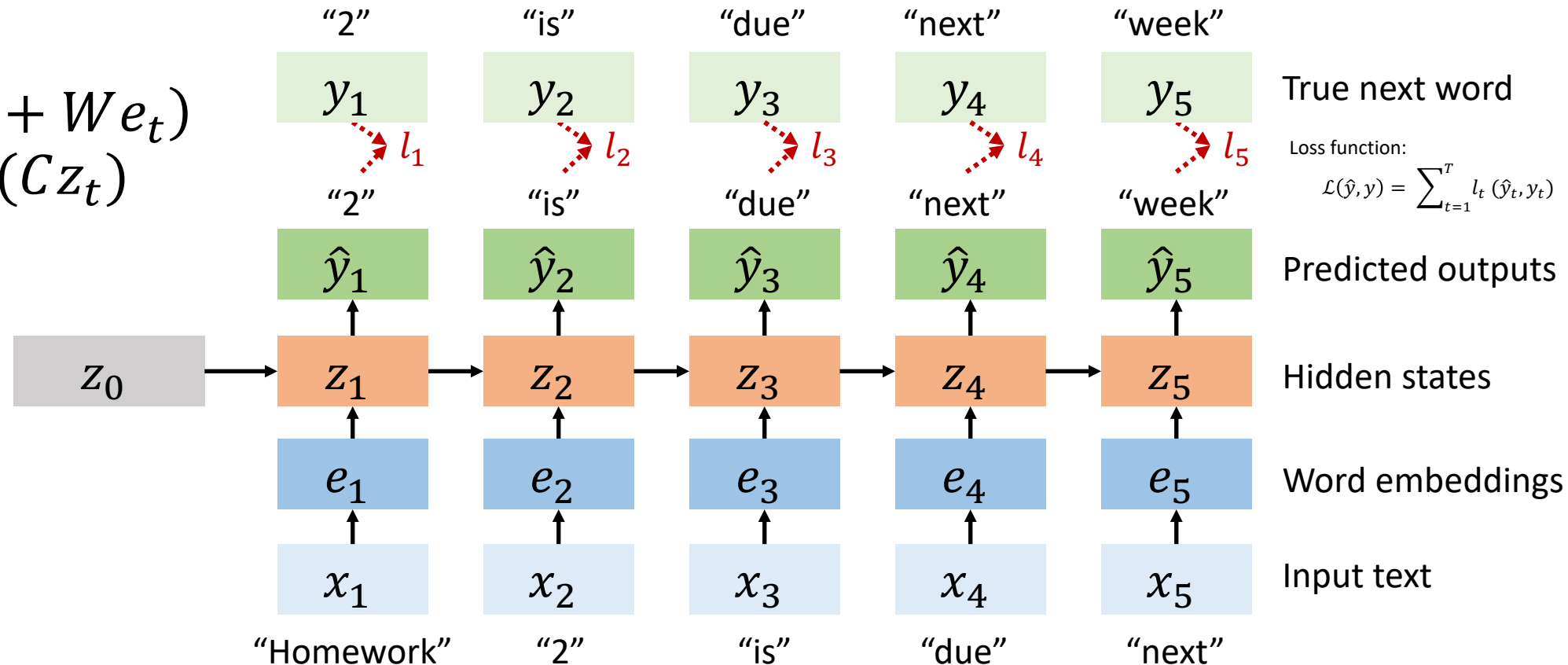
$$P(y_t = \underbrace{\text{“week”}}_{\text{Next word}} \mid y_{0:t-1} = \underbrace{\text{“Homework 2 is due next”}}_{\text{Context}})$$

- Suppose we have a set of N sentences $\{x^{(i)}\}_{i=1}^N$, where $x^{(i)} = [x_1, \dots, x_{T_i}]$ is a sentence of length T_i
- If V is the set of **all possible words**, then we can represent each word using a one-hot vector with size $|V| \times 1$
- Then using a **word embedding matrix** $E \in \mathbb{R}^{D \times |V|}$, we can retrieve the word embedding associated to the current word
- This provides a way for us to go from a word to its **mathematical representation**

Application of RNNs: Next Word Prediction

- We want each time step of the RNN to select the next word y_t from our vocabulary, which is a discrete choice. In this case, we can use the Softmax function for modeling the distribution $P(y_t | z_t)$
- Using BPTT, we apply cross-entropy loss on the prediction of each timestep

$$\begin{aligned}e_t &= E x_t \\z_t &= g(Az_{t-1} + W e_t) \\y_t &= \text{Softmax}(C z_t)\end{aligned}$$

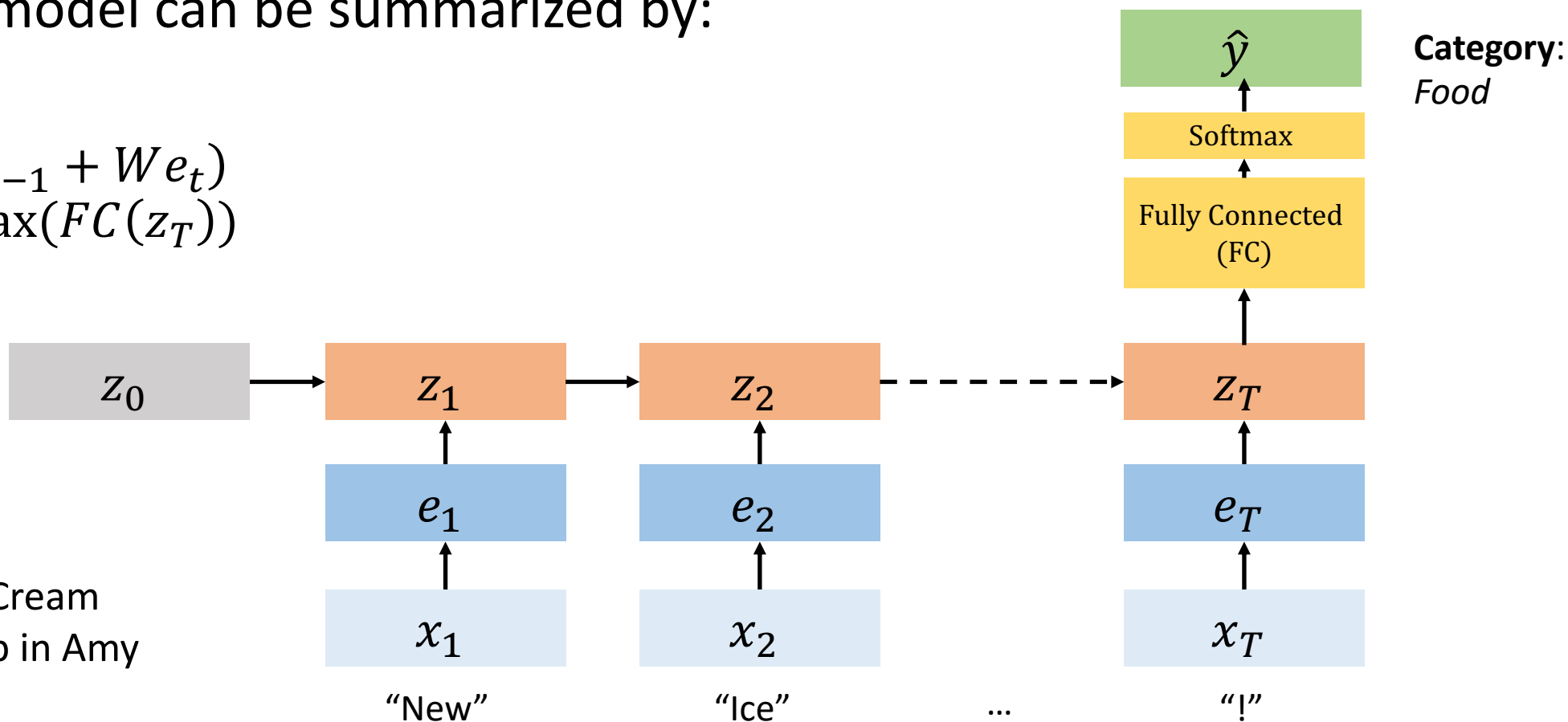


Application of RNNs: Text Classification

- Another application of RNNs is to summarize the whole sequence into a single category.
- For example, given the title of a news article, predict the news category
- The entire model can be summarized by:

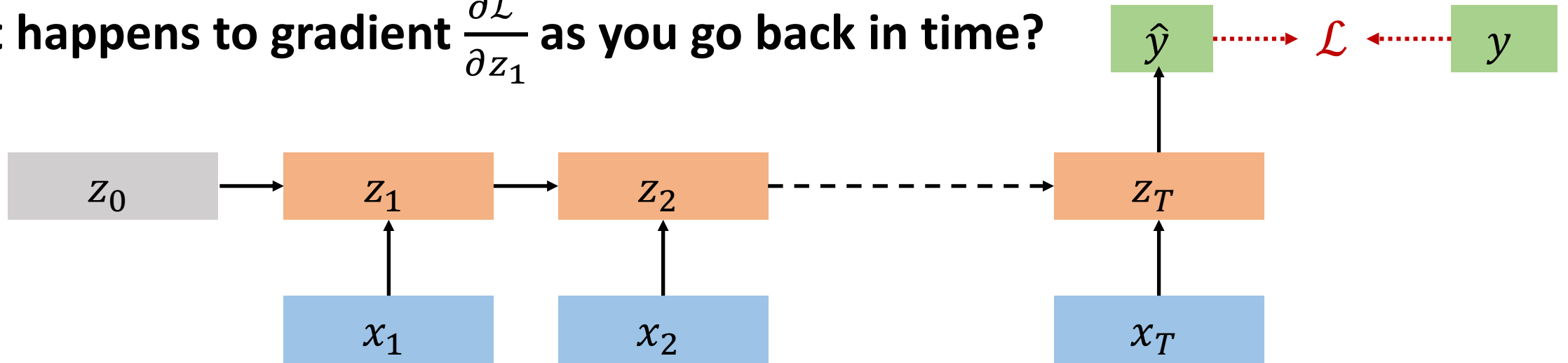
$$\begin{aligned}e_t &= Ex_t \\z_t &= g(Az_{t-1} + We_t) \\\hat{y} &= \text{Softmax}(FC(z_T))\end{aligned}$$

Title: “New Ice Cream truck showed up in Amy Gutmann Hall!”



Issues with RNN: Exploding/Vanishing Gradients

- While RNNs can capture long-term dependencies, training can be challenging
- Consider a simple RNN model with output at the last iteration:
$$z_t = g(Az_{t-1} + Wx_t)$$
$$y = Cz_T$$
- **What happens to gradient $\frac{\partial \mathcal{L}}{\partial z_1}$ as you go back in time?**



$$\frac{\partial \mathcal{L}}{\partial z_1} = \frac{\partial z_2}{\partial z_1} \cdot \frac{\partial z_3}{\partial z_2} \cdots \frac{\partial \hat{y}}{\partial z_T} \cdot \frac{\partial \mathcal{L}}{\partial \hat{y}} = A^\top A^\top A^\top \cdots C^\top \frac{\partial \mathcal{L}}{\partial \hat{y}} = (CA^{T-1})^\top \frac{\partial \mathcal{L}}{\partial \hat{y}}$$

↑

Assuming $g = \text{identity}$

If the eigenvalues of A are less than 1, **gradients vanish**;
If greater than 1, **gradients explode**.

Exploding/Vanishing Gradients: LDS case

- More generally,

$$\frac{\partial \mathcal{L}}{\partial z_t} = (CA^{T-t})^\top \frac{\partial \mathcal{L}}{\partial \hat{y}} \Rightarrow \frac{\partial \mathcal{L}}{\partial A} = \sum_t \frac{\partial z_t}{\partial A} \cdot \frac{\partial \mathcal{L}}{\partial z_t} = \sum_t \frac{\partial z_t}{\partial A} \cdot (CA^{T-t})^\top \frac{\partial \mathcal{L}}{\partial \hat{y}}$$

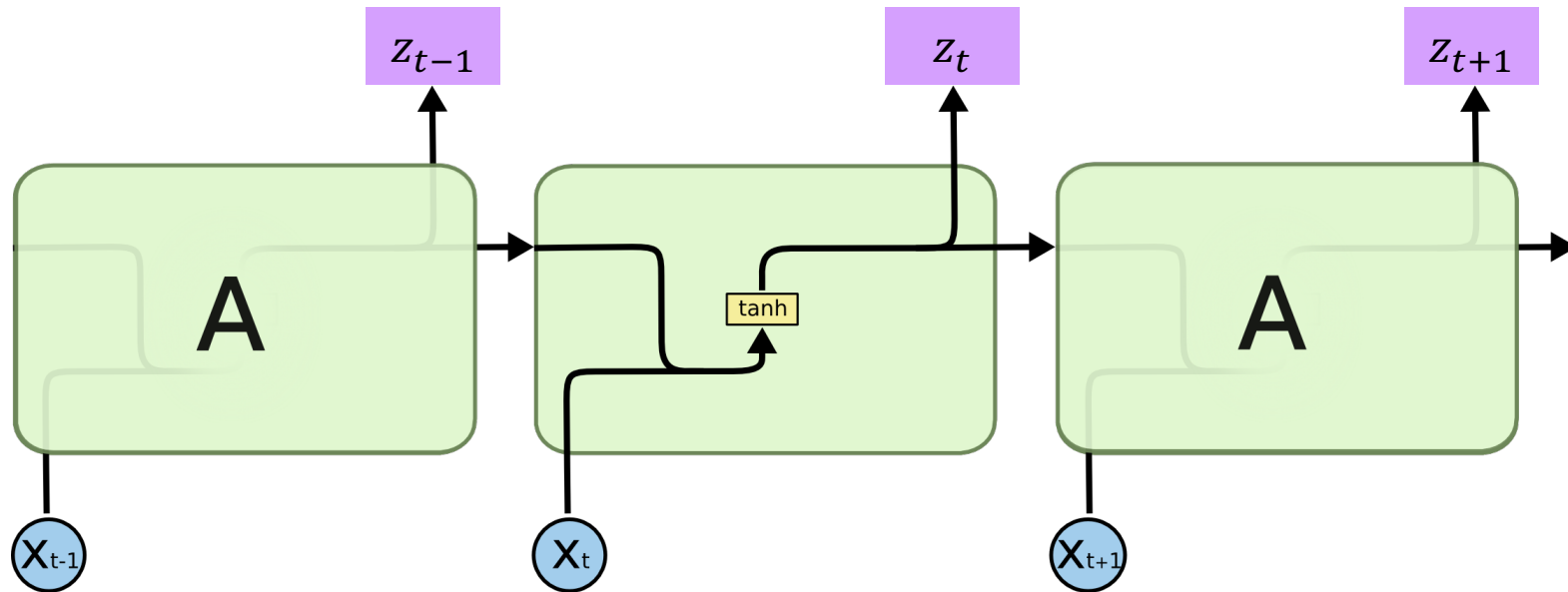
- Let $\lambda_1(A)$ be the maximum eigenvalue of A .
- For any initial condition z_0 and a large $T \rightarrow \infty$
 - **Exploding**: If $|\lambda_1(A)| > 1$, A^T will grow to infinity
 - **Vanishing**: If $|\lambda_1(A)| < 1$, A^T will diminish to zero
- Hence, the gradient involving A^T terms will also either **explode** or **vanish**.

Issues with RNN: Vanishing Gradients

- We have to **backpropagate through many gradient terms** to reach the **first time step**
- This means **long-range dependencies are difficult to learn** (although in theory they are learnable)
- **Solutions:**
 - **Better optimizers** (e.g., second order or approximate second order methods)
 - **Normalization** (at each layer to keep gradient norms stable)
 - **Clever initializations** (e.g., start with random orthonormal matrices to prevent gradients from vanishing)
- **Alternative parameterization: LSTMs and GRUs**

Introduction to Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM)

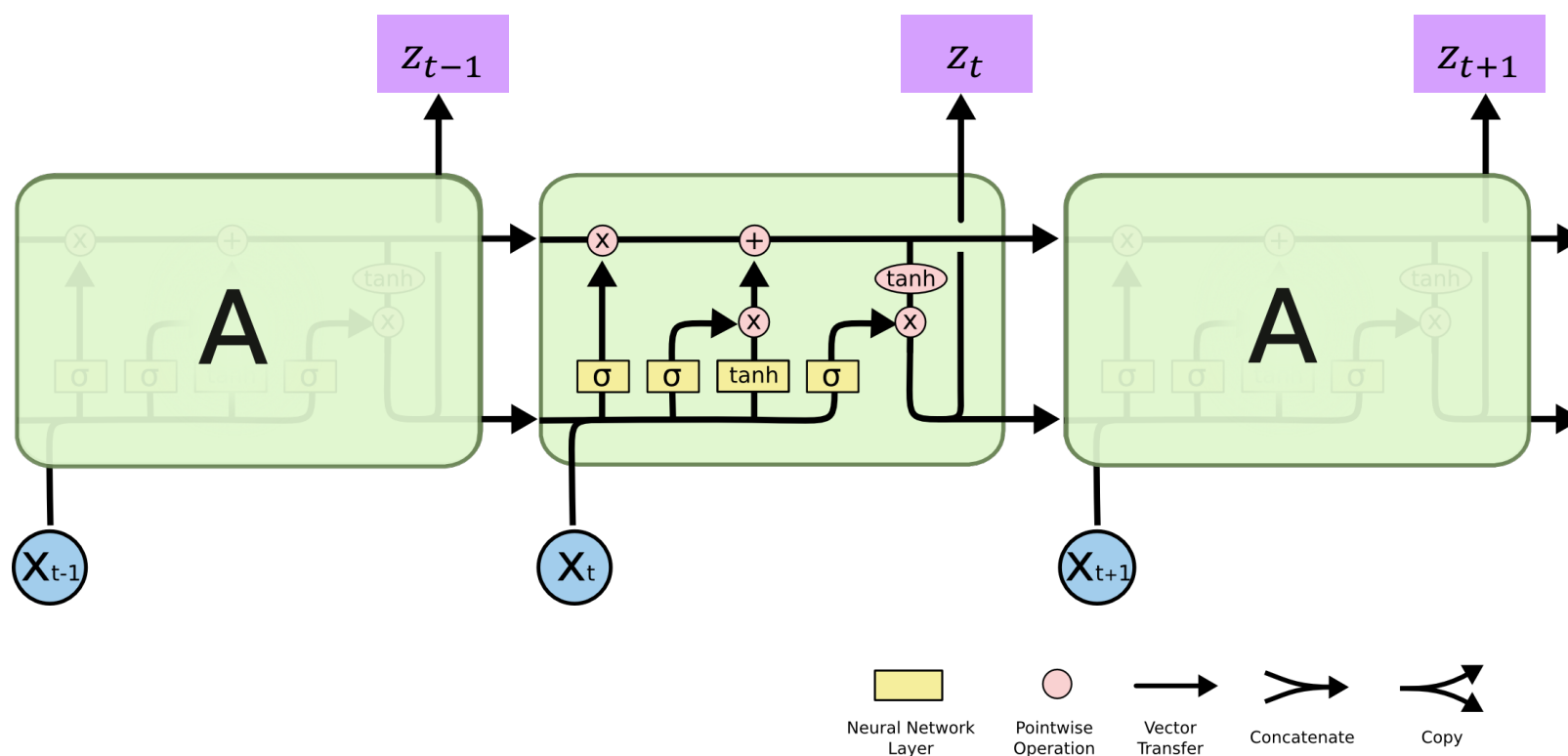
- Recap of RNN: chain of repeating modules of neural network
 - In standard RNN, the repeating network is just a single tanh layer



- **Motivation:** Vanishing gradients happen because **we multiply many gradients across time**, and we want some ways to prevent that

Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM)

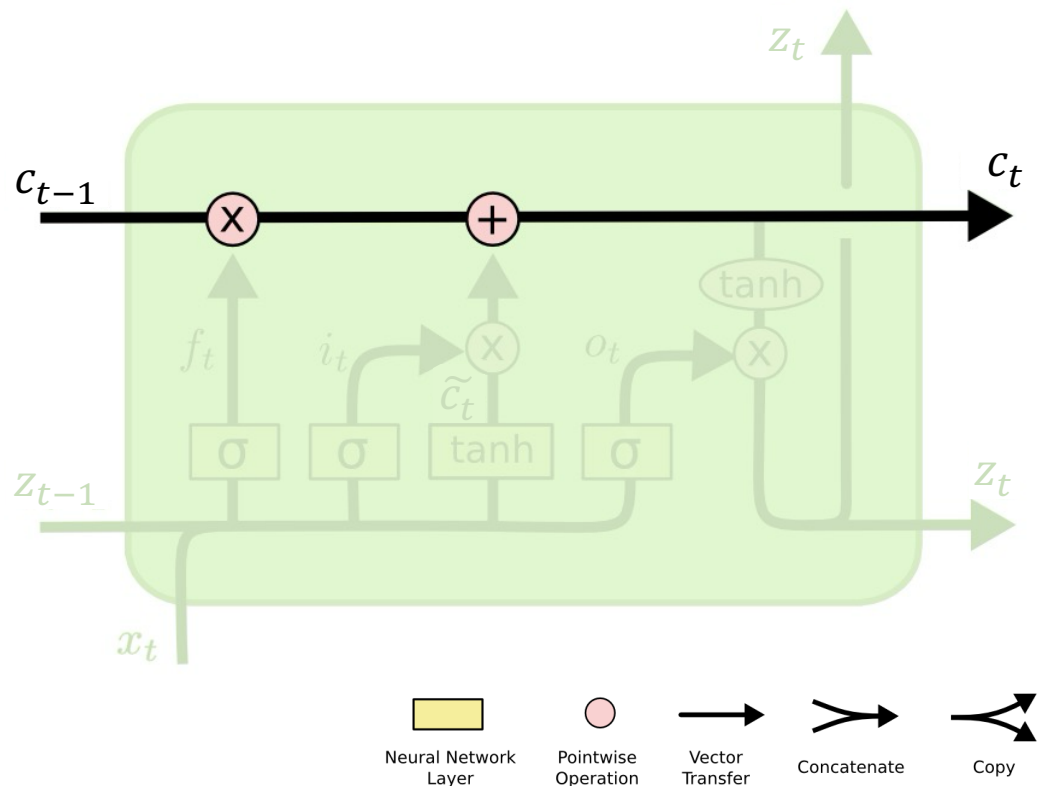
- LSTM introduces **cell states** c_t
 - Each repeating module has **three gates** to update and control the cell state: **forget gate**, **input gate**, and **output gate**



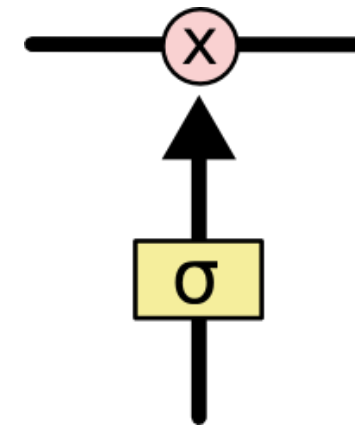
$$\begin{aligned}f_t &= \sigma(W_f[z_{t-1}, x_t]) \\i_t &= \sigma(W_i[z_{t-1}, x_t]) \\ \tilde{c}_t &= \tanh(W_c[z_{t-1}, x_t]) \\c_t &= f_t * c_{t-1} + i_t * \tilde{c}_t \\o_t &= \sigma(W_o[z_{t-1}, x_t]) \\z_t &= o_t * \tanh(c_t)\end{aligned}$$

LSTM: Cell State

- **Cell states** c_t
 - Runs straight down the entire chain, with only some linear interactions
 - In this way, information can flow through time without gradients vanishing



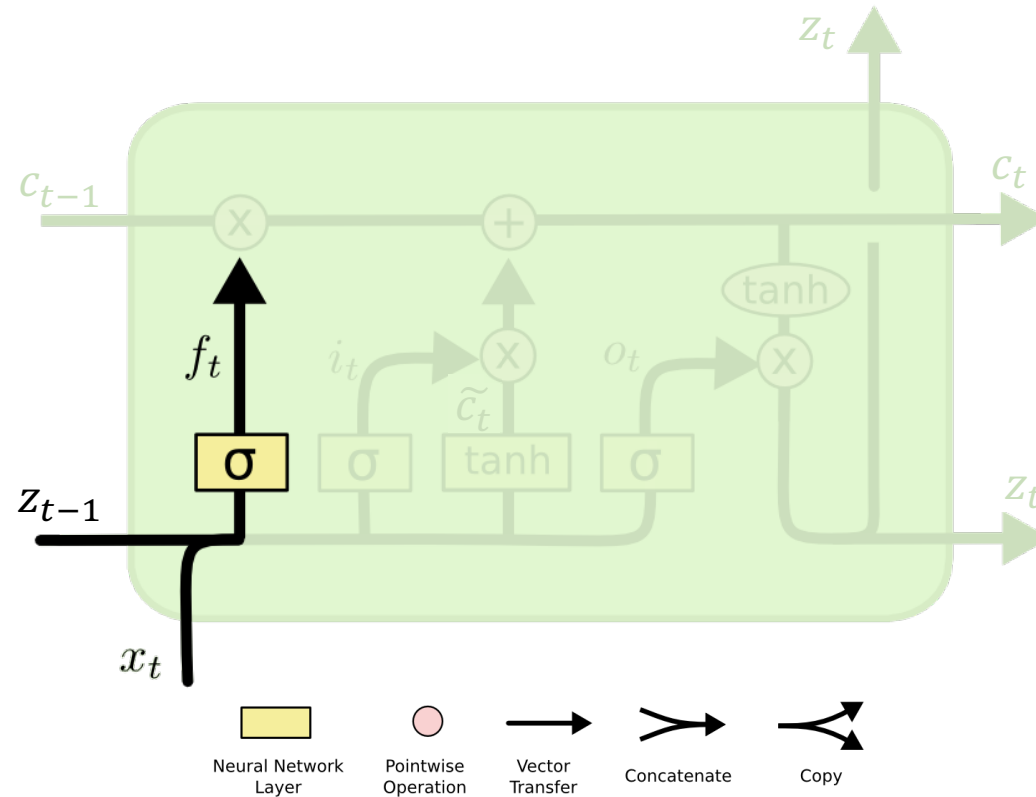
- To update and control the cell states, LSTM introduced **gates**:
 - A sigmoid neural network and a pointwise multiplication operation
 - The **sigmoid layer** outputs numbers between 0 and 1, controlling **how much information could go through**



LSTM: Forget Gate

- Forget gate controls how much information to forget from the previous cell state c_{t-1}

$$f_t = \sigma(W_f[z_{t-1}, x_t])$$

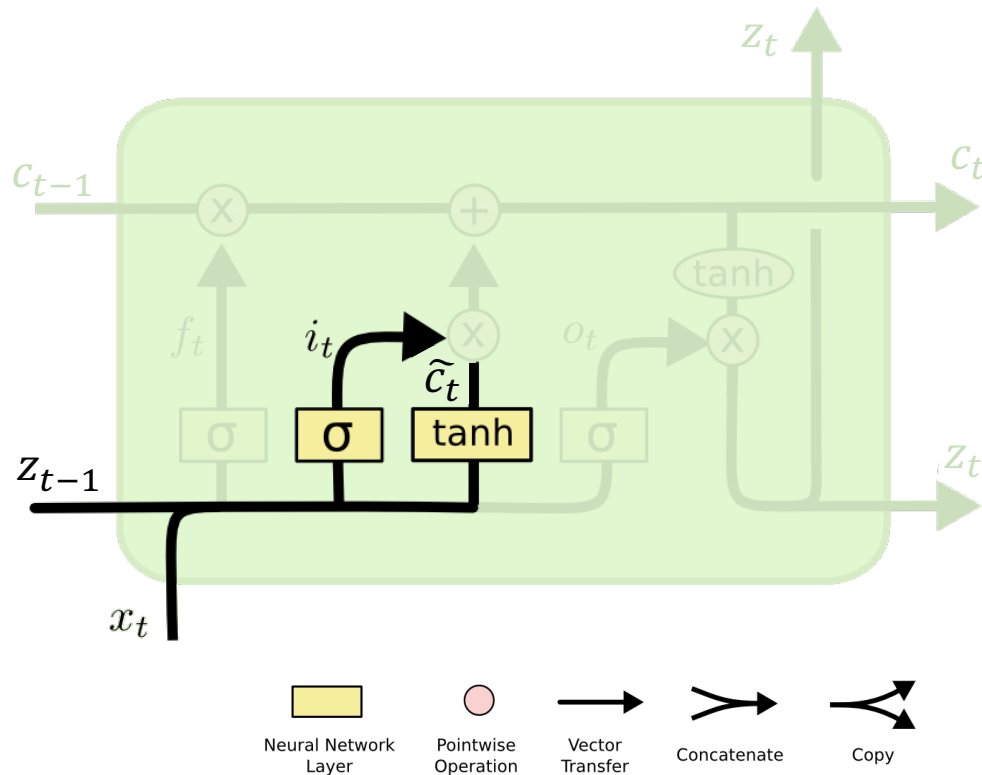


LSTM: Input Gate

- Input gate decides which new information to store in the cell state

$$i_t = \sigma(W_i[z_{t-1}, x_t])$$
$$\tilde{c}_t = \tanh(W_c[z_{t-1}, x_t])$$

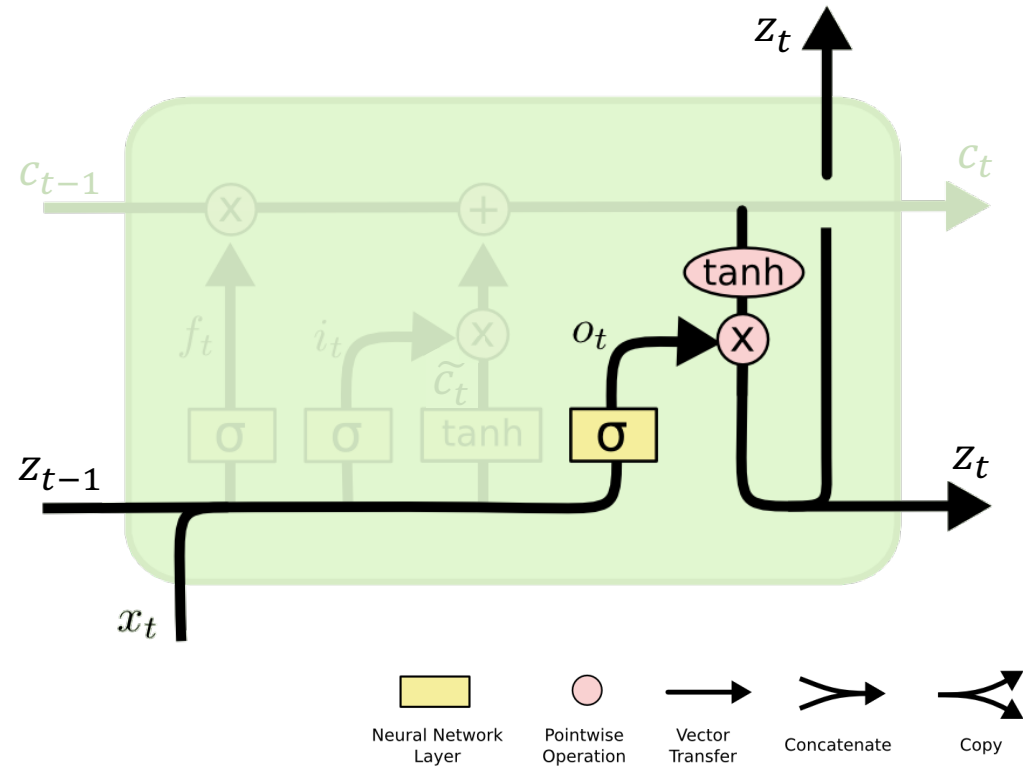
Then update cell state by

$$c_t = f_t * c_{t-1} + i_t * \tilde{c}_t$$


LSTM: Output Gate

- Output gate decides what to output

$$o_t = \sigma(W_o[z_{t-1}, x_t])$$
$$z_t = o_t * \tanh(c_t)$$



Why LSTMs work

- **Forget gate** f_t : decides what to forget from the previous cell state
- **Input gate** i_t : decides what new information to add
- **Output gate** o_t : decides what to output to the next layer
- Constant path through **cell states** c_t helps prevent vanishing gradients

$$f_t = \sigma(W_f[z_{t-1}, x_t])$$

Forget gate

$$i_t = \sigma(W_i[z_{t-1}, x_t])$$

Input gate

$$\tilde{c}_t = \tanh(W_c[z_{t-1}, x_t])$$

$$c_t = f_t * c_{t-1} + i_t * \tilde{c}_t$$

Update cell state

$$o_t = \sigma(W_o[z_{t-1}, x_t])$$

Output gate

$$z_t = o_t * \tanh(c_t)$$

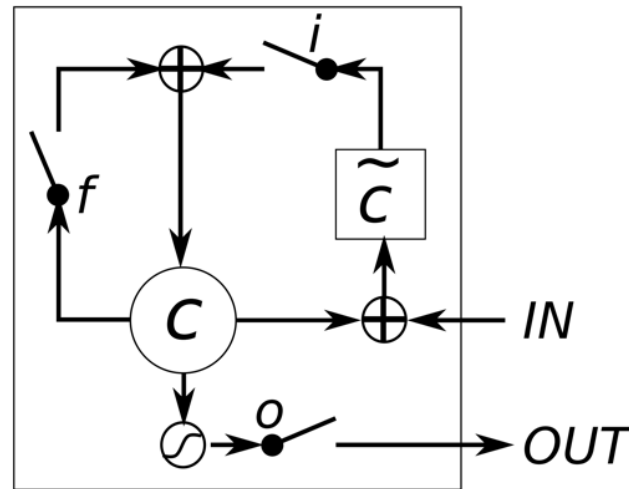
Other Variants: Gated Recurrent Neural Networks

- Another famous variant of the vanilla RNNs is **Gated Recurrent Neural Network**
 - Instead of a memory cell, it uses what's known as a **Gated Recurrent Unit (GRU)**
- On a high level, rather than using forget, input and output gates like LSTM
- GRU uses a weighted sum of two hidden states

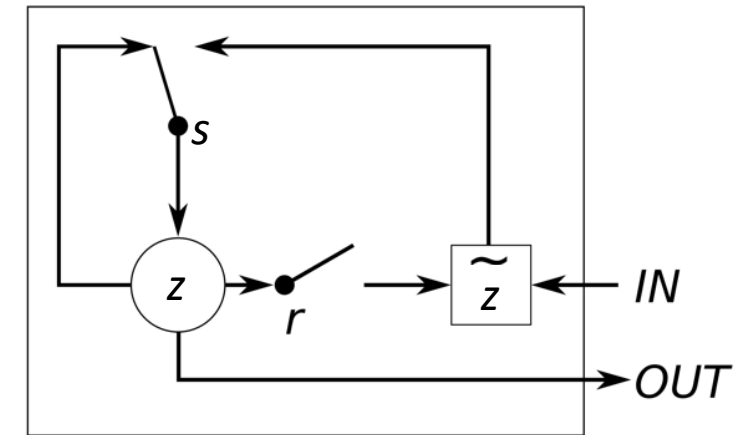
$$z_t = (1 - s_t) \odot z_{t-1} + s_t \odot \tilde{z}_t, \quad \tilde{z}_t = \tanh(W[x_t ; r_t \odot z_{t-1}])$$

where s_t denotes the update gate

- Empirically, GRUs perform just as well as LSTMs, but much **more efficient** because they have **fewer gates**



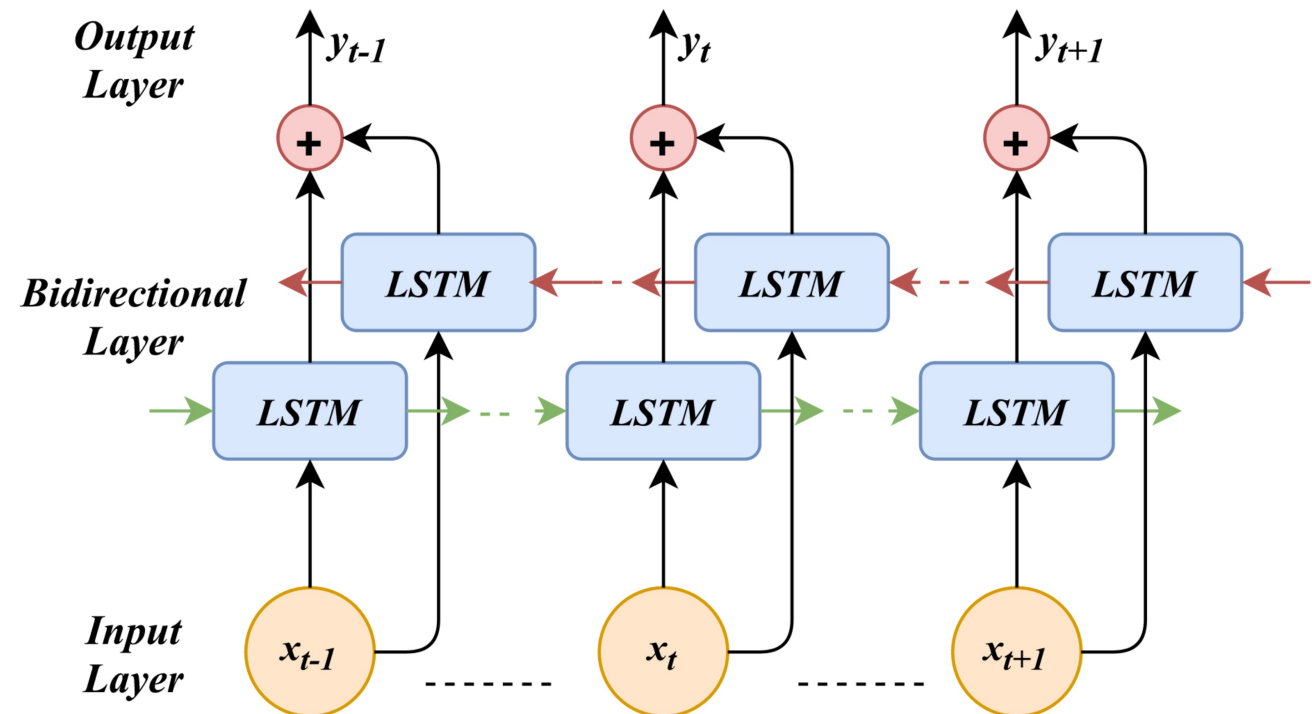
(a) Long Short-Term Memory



(b) Gated Recurrent Unit

Other Variants: Bidirectional-RNNs

- Vanilla RNNs/LSTMs only go forward in time $t = 1, 2, \dots, T$
 - This makes it hard trajectories with long histories, i.e., when T is large
- Proposed Modification: To have **another trajectory that goes backward in time**
 - And the output $P(y_t \mid h_{\text{forward}}, h_{\text{backward}})$ depends on forward and backward hidden states
- Intuition from **NLP**: knowing a word means knowing what comes before and after the word
- Experiments show this reduces the vanishing gradient problem



*Figure source: Ihianle et al. "A Deep Learning Approach for Human Activities Recognition From Multimodal Sensing Devices." (2020).

Other Variants

- Conclusion: Once you know what the building blocks are, you can create different variants that are suitable for your task
- This is also not limited to RNNs. As we will see in next lecture, for example, we can combine RNNs with VAEs for more complicated tasks