

LMDIFF: A Visual Diff Tool to Compare Language Models

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Abstract

While different language models are ubiquitous in NLP, it is hard to contrast their outputs and identify which contexts one can handle better than the other. To address this question, we introduce LMDIFF, a tool that visually compares probability distributions of two models that differ, e.g., through finetuning, distillation, or simply training with different parameter sizes. LMDIFF allows the generation of hypotheses about model behavior by investigating text instances token by token and further assists in choosing these interesting text instances by identifying the most interesting phrases from large corpora. We showcase the applicability of LMDIFF for hypothesis generation across multiple case studies. A demo is available at <http://lmdiff.net>.

1 Introduction

Interactive tools play an important role when analyzing language models and other machine learning models in natural language processing (NLP) as they enable the qualitative examination of examples and help assemble anecdotal evidence that a model exhibits a particular behavior in certain contexts. This anecdotal evidence informs hypotheses that are then rigorously studied (e.g., Tenney et al., 2019; Belinkov and Glass, 2019; Rogers et al., 2020). Many such tools exist, for example to inspect attention mechanisms (Hoover et al., 2020; Vig, 2019), explain translations through nearest neighbors (Strobelt et al., 2018), investigate neuron values (Dalvi et al., 2019; Strobelt et al., 2017), and many more that focus on the outputs of models (e.g., Cabrera et al., 2019). There also exist multiple frameworks that aggregate methods employed in the initial tools to enable others to extend

or combine them (Pruksachatkun et al., 2020; Wallace et al., 2019; Tenney et al., 2020).

However, notably absent from the range of available tools are those that aim to *compare* distributions produced by different models. While comparisons according to performance numbers are common practice in benchmarks (Wang et al., 2018; Hu et al., 2020; Gehrmann et al., 2021), there exists only rudimentary support in existing tools for inspecting how model outputs compare for specific tasks or documents. Yet, this problem motivates many current studies, including questions about how models handle gendered words, whether domain transfer is easy between models, what happens during finetuning, where differences lie between models of different sizes, or how multilingual and monolingual models differ.

To fill this gap, we introduce LMDIFF: an interactive tool for comparing language models by qualitatively comparing per-token likelihoods. Our design provides a *global* and a *local* view: In the global step, we operate on an entire corpus of texts, provide aggregate statistics across thousands of data points, and help users identify the most interesting examples. An interesting example can then be further analyzed in the local view. Fine-grained information about the model outputs for the chosen example is visualized, including the probability of each token and the difference in rank within each model’s distribution. Similar to other visual tools, LMDIFF helps form hypotheses that can then be tested through rigorous statistical analyses. Across six case studies, we demonstrate how it enables an effective exploration of model differences and motivates future research. A deployed version of LMDIFF with six corpora and nine models is available at <http://lmdiff.net/> and

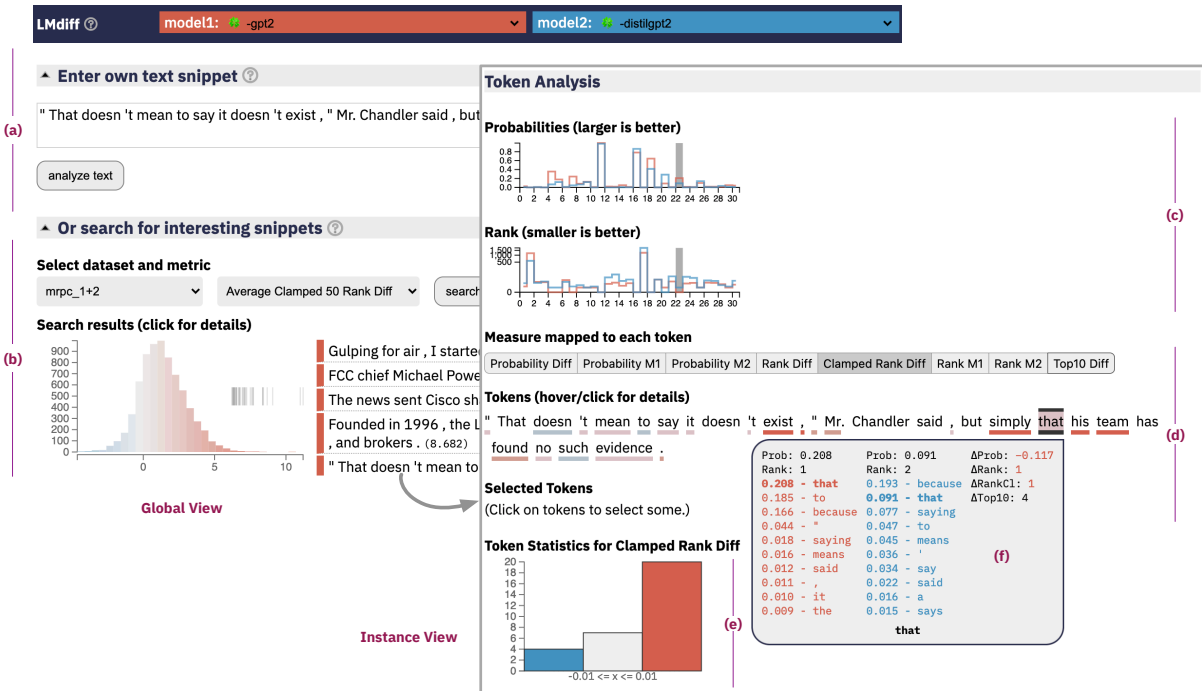


Figure 1: LMDIFF interface. The Global View (a,b) allows finding interesting examples which are then selected for in-depth investigation in the Instance View (c-f).

its code is released at <https://github.com/HendrikStrobel/LMdiff> (Apache 2.0 license) with support to easily add additional models, corpora, or evaluation metrics.

2 Methods

LMDIFF compares two models $m_{\{1,2\}}$ by analyzing their probability distributions at the position of each token $\hat{X}_{1:N}$ in a specific text. A correct token’s probability distribution $p_{m_j}(X_i = \hat{X}_i | X_{1:i-1})$ is easily influenced the scaling factor β in the function $p = \text{softmax}(\beta x)$ used to convert logits x into probabilities p (though two distributions are still comparable if both use the same β). For this reason, we also include the correct token’s rank in $p_{m_j}(X_i | X_{1:i-1})$. From the probabilities and ranks, we derive eight measures of global difference (comparison over a corpus) and eight measures of local difference (comparison over an example). The global measures are the (1) difference in rank of each token, (2) the difference in rank after clamping a rank to a maximum of 50, (3) the difference in probability of each token, and (4) the number of different tokens within the top-10 predicted tokens.¹ For each measure, we allow filtering by its average or maximum in a sequence.

¹Other metrics like the KL-Divergence were omitted from the final interface since the numbers were too hard to interpret.

To compare two models on a single example, we either directly visualize $p_{m_1}(X_i = \hat{X}_i)$, $p_{m_2}(X_i = \hat{X}_i)$, $p_{m_1}(X_i = \hat{X}_i) - p_{m_2}(X_i = \hat{X}_i)$, or the equivalent measures but focusing on the rank instead of the probability. As for the global measures, we present rank differences in both an unclamped and a clamped version. The clamped version surfaces more interesting examples; e.g., the difference between a token of rank 1 and 5 is more important than the rank difference between 44 and 60. The visual interface maps the difference to a blue-red scale (see Figure 1d) and visualizations of a single model to a gray scale.

2.1 Visual Interface

Figure 1 shows the LMDIFF interface. The user starts their investigation by specifying the two models m_1 and m_2 and a target text d . This target may either be entered into the free-text field (1a) or chosen from the list of suggested interesting text snippets (1b, see Section 2.2). Upon selection of the text, the likelihoods, ranks, and difference metrics for m_1 and m_2 for each token of d are computed.

Users can compare results using the instance view, which leverages multiple visual idioms to show aspects of the models’ performance. The step plots (Figure 1c) show the absolute values for likelihoods and ranks, with color indicating the model.

Dataset	Description
WinoBias (Zhao et al., 2018)	Collection of 3,160 sentences using different resolution systems to understand gender bias issues. We include two versions: (a) just sentence, (b) sentence with addendum (e.g., “he refers to doctor”)
CommonsenseQA (Talmor et al., 2019)	Collection of 12,102 questions with one correct answer and four distractor answers. For our use cases, we concatenate the question and the correct answer to one single string.
MRPC (Dolan et al., 2004)	Collection of 5,801 sentence pairs collected from newswire articles.
GPT2-GEN (Radford et al., 2019a)	Collection of generated sentences from GPT-2 models. For each model the dataset contains 250K random samples (temperature 1, no truncation) and 250K samples generated with Top-K 40 truncation. We use the subset GPT-2-762M k40.
Short Jokes (Moudgil, 2017)	Collection of 231,657 short jokes provided as Kaggle challenge for humor understanding.
BioLang (Liechti et al., 2017)	Collection of 12 million abstracts and captions from open access Europe PubMedCentral processed by the EMBO SourceData project
Model	
GPT-2 (Radford et al., 2019b)	The decoder of a Transformer trained on OpenWebText
DistilGPT-2	A smaller Transformer trained to replicate GPT-2 output
GPT-2-ArXiv	GPT-2 finetuned on a large arxiv dataset
GPT-2-ArXiv-NLP	GPT-2 finetuned only on arxiv NLP papers
BERT-base-uncased (Devlin et al., 2018)	Masked language model with case-insensitive tokenization.
DistilBERT (Sanh et al., 2019)	A smaller Transformer trained to replicate BERT output
DistilBERT-SST-2	distilBERT finetuned on the SST-2 (Socher et al., 2013) dataset
GPT-2-German	GPT-2 trained on various German texts
GPT-2-German-Faust	The German GPT-2 model finetuned on Faust I & II

Table 1: The default corpora and models found in the deployed version of LMDIFF. All models were taken from Huggingface’s [model hub](#). Horizontal lines group tokenization-compatible models.

Upon selecting a distance metric, it is mapped onto the text (1d) using a red-white-blue diverging color scheme: white for no or minimal distance, red/blue for values in favor of a corresponding model. For instance, a token is colored blue if the rank of that token under model m_2 is lower than under m_1 or its likelihood higher. The highlighting on hover between both plots (1c+d) is synchronized, to help spot examples where the measures diverge.

The histogram (1e) indicates the distribution of measures for the text. If the centroid of the histogram leans decidedly to one side, it indicates that one model is better at reproducing the given text (observe the shift for red in Figure 1e). The token detail view (1f), shows all difference measures for a selected token and allows for a direct comparison of the top-k predictions for each model at the token position. E.g., in Figure 1f, the token “that” has rank 1 in model m_1 but rank 2 in m_2 . Clicking tokens makes the detail view for those tokens stick to the bottom of the page to enable investigations of multiple tokens in the same sequence.

2.2 Finding Interesting Candidates

To facilitate searching for interesting texts, we extract examples from a large corpus of texts for which the two models differ the most. The corpus is prepared via an offline preprocessing step in which the differences between the models are scored according to the methods outlined above. Each example is compared using different aggregation methods, like averaging, finding the median, the upper quartile, or the top-k of differences in likelihoods, ranks, and clamped ranks. The 50 highest-ranking text snippets for each measure are considered as interesting. The interface (Figure 1b) shows a histogram of the distribution of a measure over the entire corpus and indicates through black stripes where interesting outlier samples are located fall on the histogram. That way, users can get an overview of how the two models compare across the corpus while also being able to view the most interesting samples.

3 Supported Data and Models

The deployed version of LMDIFF currently supports six datasets and nine models, detailed in Table 1. All pretrained models were taken from Hug-

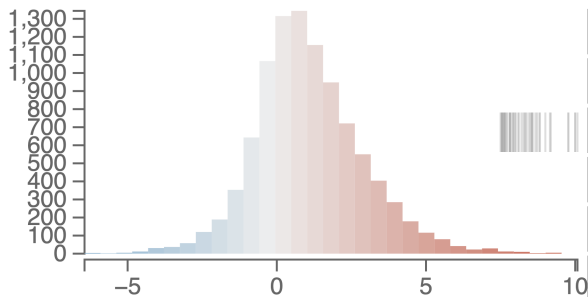


Figure 2: The global view on the CommonsenseQA dataset when comparing GPT-2 and DistilGPT-2. The histogram depicts the distribution of a specific measure (Average Clamped 50 Rank) over the reference corpus. The short black lines depict the values of the 20 highest values.

gingface’s model hub². Section 5 explains how to use LMDIFF with many more custom models and datasets.

4 Case Studies

As discussed above, this tool aims to generate hypotheses by discovering anecdotal evidence for certain model behavior. It will not be able to give definite proofs for discovered hypotheses, which should instead be explored more in-depth in follow-up studies. As such, in this section, we provide examples of new kinds of questions that LMDIFF helps investigate and explore further questions inspired by past findings.

4.1 Which model is better at commonsense reasoning?

Prompt-based approaches have become a popular way to test whether a model can perform a task (Brown et al., 2020). A relevant question to this is whether models can perform tasks that require memorization of commonsense knowledge (e.g., the name of the company that develops Windows, or the colors of the US flag) (Jiang et al., 2020). For our case study, we format the CommonsenseQA (Talmor et al., 2019) dataset to follow a “Question? Answer” schema, such that we can compare the probability of the answer under different models. Comparing GPT-2 (red) and its distilled variant DistilGPT-2 (blue), we can observe in Figure 2 that overall, GPT-2 performs much better on the task, commonly ranking the correct answer between 1 and 5 ranks higher in its distribution. An interesting example shown in Figure 3 paints a par-

²<https://huggingface.co/models>

With enough helium a balloon can rise and rise high into the what? atmosphere

Selected Tokens

index 14		
Prob: 0.037	Prob: 0.000	ΔProb: -0.036
Rank: 3	Rank: 466	ΔRank: 463
0.209 - sky	0.157 -	ΔRankCl: 48
0.063 - s	0.048 - That	ΔTop10: 8
0.037 - atmosphere	0.046 - The	
0.030 - skies	0.025 - And	
0.026 -	0.023 - It	
0.022 - The	0.017 - <endofxt>	
0.018 - of	0.016 - A	
0.010 - air	0.015 - This	
0.009 - heavens	0.014 - Well	
0.008 - t	0.013 - What	

atmosphere

Figure 3: A commonsenseQA example in which GPT-2 performs much better than DistilGPT-2. Showing Clamped Rank difference.

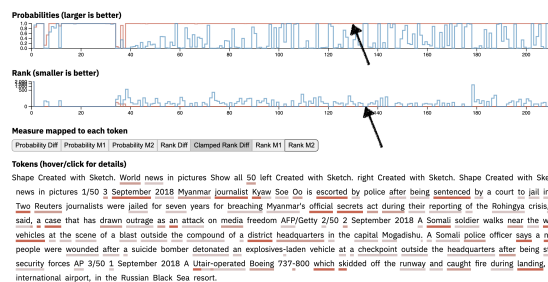


Figure 4: Comparing GPT-2 vs DistilGPT-2 on GPT-2 generated text shows that it is easy to spot which model produced it.

ticularly grim picture for DistilGPT-2 — while the standard model ranks the correct answer third, the distilled variant ranks it 466th. This leads to the questions of why this bit of knowledge (and those of other outliers) was squashed in the distillation process, whether there is commonality between the forgotten knowledge, and it motivates the development of methods that prevent this from happening.

4.2 Which model produced a text?

Prior work has investigated different ways to detect whether a text was generated by a model or written by a human, either by training classifiers on samples from a model (Zellers et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2020) or directly using a models probability distribution (Gehrmann et al., 2019). A core insight from these works was that search algorithms (beam search, top-k sampling, etc.) tend to sample from the head of a models’ distribution. That means that it is visually easy to detect if a model generated a text. With LMDIFF, we extend upon this insight to point to which model generated a text — if a model generated a text, the text should be consistently more likely under that model than under other similar models. While our tool does not allow us to test this hypothesis at scale, we can

The salesperson paid the tailor and thanked him for a job well done.
 him refers to the tailor

Selected Tokens

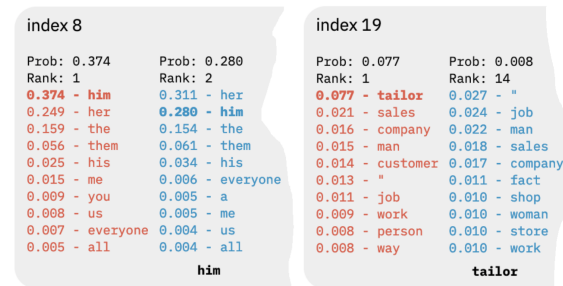


Figure 5: Winobias example with addendum for GPT-2 vs DistilGPT-2 showing Clamped Rank difference. Interesting since him/her probability rank switches between models and only distil fails at the addendum task.

find clear anecdotal evidence shown in Figure 4. In the figure, we compare the probabilities of GPT-2 and DistilGPT-2 on a sample of GPT-2 generated text. We observe the consistent pattern that GPT-2 assigns an equal or higher likelihood to almost every token in the text.

4.3 Which model is more prone to be overconfident in coreference?

We next investigate whether one model has learned spurious correlations in coreference tasks, using our augmented version of the WinoBias dataset (Zhao et al., 2018). Since we are comparing language models, we modified the text to add the string “[pronoun] refers to the [profession]”. We can then use the detail view to look at the probabilities of the pronoun in the original sentence and the probability of the disambiguating mention of the profession. In our example (Figure 5), we again compare GPT-2 (red) and DistilGPT-2 (blue). Curiously, the distillation process flipped the order of the predicted pronouns “him” and “her”. Moreover, DistilGPT-2 fails to complete the second sentence while GPT-2 successfully predicts “Tailor” as the most probable continuation, indicating that DistilGPT-2 did not strongly associate the pronoun with the profession. This case study motivates further investigation of cases where distillation does not maintain the expected ranking of continuations. A similar effect has previously been detected in distillation processes for computer vision models (Hooker et al., 2020).

4.4 What predictions are affected the most by finetuning?

Other, more open-ended, qualitative comparisons that are enabled through LMDIFF aim to understand how a model changes when it is finetuned on a specific task or documents from a specific domain. The finetuning process can impact prediction both in the downstream domain and in not anticipated, unrelated other domains.

The dominant sequence transduction models are based on complex recurrent or convolutional neural networks in an encoder-decoder configuration. The best performing models also connect the encoder and decoder through an attention mechanism. We propose a new simple network architecture, the Transformer, based solely on attention mechanisms, dispensing with recurrence and convolutions entirely. Experiments on two machine translation tasks show these models to be superior in quality while being more parallelizable and requiring significantly less time to train. Our model achieves 28.4 BLEU on the WMT 2014 English-to-German translation task, improving over the existing best results, including ensembles by over 2 BLEU. On the WMT 2014 English-to-French translation task, our model establishes a new single-model state-of-the-art BLEU score of 41.8 after training for 3.5 days on eight GPUs, a small fraction of the training costs of the best models from the literature. We show that the Transformer generalizes well to other tasks by applying it successfully to English constituency parsing both with large and limited training data.

Figure 6: GPT-2 vs GPT-Arxiv-nlp on an abstract of an NLP paper.

Du sehr verachtet Baurenstand, Bist doch der beste in dem Land. Kein Mann dich gnugsam p reisen kann, Wann er dich nur recht siehet an. Es ist fast alles unter dir, Ja was die Erde bringt herfür. Wovon ernähret wird das Land, Geht dir anfänglich durch die Hand. Der Kaiser, den uns Gott gegeben. Uns zu beschützen, muß doch leben. Von deiner Hand, auch der Soldat, Der dir doch zufügt manchen Schad. Die Erde wär ganz wild durchaus. Wann du auf ihr nicht hieltest Haus. Ganz traurig auf der Welt es stünd, Wann man kein Bauersmann mehr fünd. Vom bitterb ösen Podagram Hört man nicht, daß an Bauren kam, Das doch den Adel bringt in Not Und manchen Reichen gar in Tod. Der Hoffart bist du sehr gefeit, Absonderlich zu dieser Zeit. Und daß sie auch nicht sei dein Herr, So gibt dir Gott des Kreuzes mehr. Ja der Soldaten böser Brauch Dient gleichwohl dir zum Besten auch, Daß Hochmut dich nicht nehme ein Sagt er: dein Hab und Gut ist mein.

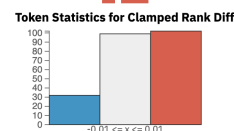


Figure 7: GPT2-German vs GPT2-German-Faust on a snippet from the 1668 book “Simplicius Simplicissimus” using the Clamped Rank difference.

In Domain In Figure 6, we show a comparison between GPT-2 and GPT-2-ArXiv-NLP on an abstract of an NLP paper, highlighting the probability difference. As expected, NLP-specific terms (WMT BLEU, model, attention, etc.) tend to be more likely under the finetuned model. But, interestingly, the name of languages and Transformer are both more likely under the original model. This finding may warrant a deeper investigation for possible causes and whether this phenomenon persists across other contexts.

Out of Domain Out-of-domain tests can be useful for checking whether the finetuning process led to some transfer learning, or to test for catastrophic forgetting. In our case study, we compare GPT-2-German before and after finetuning on Goethe’s

Faust part I (1808) and II (1832). We hypothesized that the contemporary model would not be able to handle other works of literature from a similar time-period as well as the Faust-model, and thus tested on various snippets from books of the years 1200 to 1900. Our sample from the book *Simplicius Simplicissimus* (1668) (Figure 7) is representative of the consistent finding that GPT-2-German performs better than the Faust variant. This could have many reasons — the model may have overfit on the Faust-style of writing, the investigated periods of literature may differ too much, or they may differ too little from contemporary German.

4.5 Finding dataset errors

While not the original goal of LMDIFF, we observed that in some cases the outlier detection method could also be used to find outlier *data* instead of examples where models differ significantly. One such example occurred when comparing GPT-ArXiv to GPT-2 on the BioLang dataset. It appears that GPT-2 is much better at modeling repetitive, nonsensical character sequences which were thus surfaced through the algorithm (see Appendix A).

5 System Description

All comparisons in LMDIFF begin with three provided arguments: a dataset containing the interesting phases to analyze, and two comparable Transformer models. LMDIFF wraps Huggingface Transformers (Wolf et al., 2020) and can use any of their pretrained autoregressive or masked language models from their model hub³ or a local directory. Two models are comparable if they use the same tokenization scheme and vocabulary. This is required such that a phrase passed to either of them will have an identical encoding, with special tokens added in the same locations.

LMDIFF then does the work of recording each model’s predictions across the dataset into an *AnalysisCache*. Each token in each phrase of the dataset is analyzed for its “rank” and “probability”. We define a token’s rank as the affinity of the LM to predict the token relative to all other tokens, where a rank of 1 indicates it is the most favorable token, and the probability is computed from a direct softmax of the token’s logit. Other useful information is also stored, such as the top-10 tokens (and their probabilities) that would have been predicted in that token’s spot. This information can

³<https://huggingface.co/models>

then be compared to other caches and explored in the visual interface. The interface can also be used independently of cache files to compare models on individual inputs.

The modular design separating *datasets*, *models*, and their *caches* makes it easy to compare the differences between many different models on distinct datasets. Once a cache has been made of a (model, dataset_D) pair, it can be compared to any other cache of a (comparable_model, dataset_D) pair within seconds. More information is provided in Appendix B.

Adding models and datasets It is easy to load additional models and datasets. First, ensure that the model can be loaded through the Huggingface `AutoModelWithLMHead` and `AutoTokenizer` function `from_pretrained(...)` which supports loading from a local directory. The following script prepares two models and a dataset for comparison:

```
python scripts/preprocess.py all \
  [OPTIONS] M1 M2 DATASET \
  --output-dir OUT
- M1 = Path (or name) of HF model 1
- M2 = Path (or name) of HF model 2
- DATASET = Path to dataset.txt
- OUT = Where to store outputs
```

The output configuration directory `OUT` can be passed directly to the LMDIFF server and interface which will automatically load the new data:

```
python backend/server/main.py \
  --config DIR
- DIR = Contains preprocessed outputs
```

The interface works equally well to compare two models on individual examples without a preprocessed cache:

```
python backend/server/main.py \
  --m1 MODEL1 --m2 MODEL2
```

6 Discussion and Conclusion

We presented LMDIFF, a tool to visually inspect qualitative differences between language models based on output distributions. We show in several use cases how finding specific text snippets and analyzing them token-by-token can lead to interesting hypotheses.

We emphasize that LMDIFF by itself does not provide any definite answers to these hypotheses by itself – it cannot, for example, show which model

is generally better at a given task. To answer these kind of questions, statistical analysis is required.

A design limitation of LMDIFF is that it relies on compatible models. Because the tool is based on per-token model outputs and apples-to-apples comparisons of distributions, only models that use the same tokenization scheme and vocabulary can be compared in the instance view. In future work, we will work toward extending the compatibility by introducing additional tokenization-independent measures and visualizations.

Another extension of LMDIFF may probe for memorized training examples and personal information using methods proposed by Carlini et al. (2020). As shown in Sections 4.2 and 4.5, we can already identify text that was generated by a model and leverage patterns that a model has learned. Adding support to filter a corpus by measures in addition to finding outliers may help with the analysis of potentially memorized examples.

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A Additional Case Studies

A.1 Masked LMs break when fine-tuning on different tasks

When finetuning an autoregressive language model, the output representations are preserved since downstream tasks often make use of the language modeling objective. This is different for masked language models like BERT. Typically, the contextual embeddings are combined with a new untrained head and thus, the language modeling is

characterizing and understanding different phases of matter in equilibrium is usually associated with the process of thermalization, where the system equilibrates; recent efforts probing nonequilibrium systems have revealed that periodic driving of the system can suppress the natural tendency for equilibration yet still form new, nonequilibrium phases; kyrianiadis et al. used a quantum simulator composed of 25 trapped ion qubits and spins to observe such a nonequilibrium phase of matter: the disorder-free prethermal discrete time crystal; the flexibility and tunability of their quantum simulator provide a powerful platform with which to study the exotic phases of matter.

Figure 8: [DistilBERT-SST](#) vs [DistilBERT](#) on a scientific abstract.

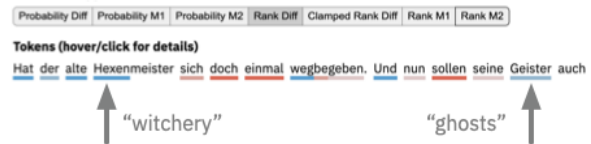


Figure 9: Magic characters more likely under GPT2-German-Faust

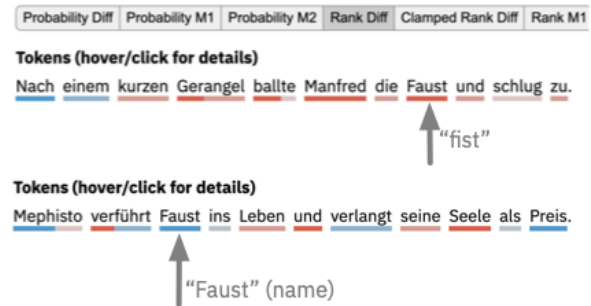


Figure 10: Tokens can be more likely under different models depending on contexts.

ignored during finetuning. We demonstrate this in Figure 8 where we compare DistilBERT (blue) and DistilBERT-SST (red) on a recent abstract published in Science. DistilBERT performs much better, having a significantly higher probability for almost every token in the text. Since the finetuned model started with the same parameters, this is a particular instance of catastrophic forgetting (McCloskey and Cohen, 1989). While this case is somewhat obvious, LMDIFF can help identify domains that are potentially more affected by this phenomenon even for cases in which the language modeling objective is not abandoned.

A.2 Data Outliers

We show one example of a data outlier, described in Section 4.5, in Figure 11. The top-ranked examples in the corpus all have severe encoding errors and those examples should be removed from the corpus.

A.3 Language specific to finetuned model

The comparison of GPT2-German and GPT2-German-Faust (see Section 4.4) also revealed more patterns that indicate that the fine-tuning of the model might have been successful. Figure 9 shows an example where tokens related to the core text of the Faust text are more likely under the fine-tuned model than the wild-type GPT2-German. Tokens like “Hexe” (witch) or “Geister” (ghosts) are core characters in the Faust text.

Another interesting observation is that even the

