

Evaluating the Impact of Model Scale for Compositional Generalization in Semantic Parsing

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Abstract

Despite their strong performance on many tasks, pre-trained language models have been shown to struggle on out-of-distribution compositional generalization. Meanwhile, recent work has shown considerable improvements on many NLP tasks from model scaling. Can scaling up model size also improve compositional generalization in semantic parsing? We evaluate encoder-decoder models up to 11B parameters and decoder-only models up to 540B parameters, and compare model scaling curves for three different methods for applying a pre-trained language model to a new task: fine-tuning all parameters, prompt tuning, and in-context learning. We observe that fine-tuning generally has flat or negative scaling curves on out-of-distribution compositional generalization in semantic parsing evaluations. In-context learning has positive scaling curves, but is generally outperformed by much smaller fine-tuned models. Prompt-tuning can outperform fine-tuning, suggesting further potential improvements from scaling as it exhibits a more positive scaling curve. Additionally, we identify several error trends that vary with model scale. For example, larger models are generally better at modeling the syntax of the output space, but are also more prone to certain types of overfitting. Overall, our study highlights limitations of current techniques for effectively leveraging model scale for compositional generalization, while our analysis also suggests promising directions for future work.

1 Introduction

Compositional generalization is the ability to generalize to novel combinations of previously observed elements. For example, we may ask a model to interpret “she loves the dog” when “she”, “loves”, and “the dog” were seen separately but not in combination with each other during training. Improving compositional generalization is believed to be

important for approaching human-like language understanding (Lake et al., 2017; Battaglia et al., 2018). In addition, models that are deployed for real-world applications often need to generalize to new compositions of elements not well-represented in static and often biased annotated training sets (Herzig and Berant, 2019; Yin et al., 2021). In this paper we focus on compositional generalization for semantic parsing, the task of mapping utterances to logical forms with precisely defined semantics.

Despite their strong performance on many tasks, pre-trained language models¹ (LMs) such as T5 (Raffel et al., 2020) have been shown to struggle on compositional generalization (Lake and Baroni, 2018; Furrer et al., 2020; Shaw et al., 2021). However, recent work has shown considerable improvements across a range of NLP tasks from scaling up model size (Brown et al., 2020; Chowdhery et al., 2022). *Can scaling up the number of parameters of pre-trained language models also improve compositional generalization in semantic parsing?*

Understanding the relationship between model size and compositional generalization ability has important implications for future work. If increasing model size does not improve compositional generalization in semantic parsing, this would run counter to many scaling trends in NLP, and highlight a potential limitation of advances that could be expected from scaling alone. On the other hand, if gains from scale are very strong, larger models pre-trained on more and higher quality unlabeled data would point to a successful (albeit expensive) alternative to current work that has focused on developing specialized architectures and other novel methods (see §2 for a brief survey).

This naturally raises a second question: *Does*

¹We use the term “language model” (LM) broadly to refer to models based on generic encoder-decoder or decoder-only architectures that are pre-trained primarily using masked or autoregressive language modeling objectives, such as T5 (Raffel et al., 2020), BART (Lewis et al., 2020), GPT-3 (Brown et al., 2020), and PaLM (Chowdhery et al., 2022).

*Work done as part of the Google AI Residency program.

scaling behavior for compositional generalization in semantic parsing depend on the method of applying pre-trained language models? Full fine-tuning of model parameters is a standard approach for applying LMs to end tasks, and T5 performance with fine-tuning has been measured for compositional generalization up to the scale of 11 billion parameters (Shaw et al., 2021; Furrer et al., 2020). More recently, variants of prompting with or without some parameter tuning have become commonly used as well (Liu et al. (2021a) provides a comprehensive survey). Although there are studies on large models for semantic parsing with such methods, e.g. with in-context learning using GPT-3 (Brown et al., 2020; Shin et al., 2021; Shin and Durme, 2021; Rubin et al., 2021; Rajkumar et al., 2022), they do not focus on compositional generalization.

In this paper, we offer the first systematic study of scaling curves measuring compositional generalization in semantic parsing versus model size for LMs under multiple task adaptation techniques.² We focus on a set of compositional semantic parsing challenges and evaluate model sizes up to 540 billion parameters. We compare scaling curves for an encoder-decoder model (T5) (Raffel et al., 2020) and a decoder-only model (PaLM) (Chowdhery et al., 2022). We measure the impact of scale for three different task adaptation methods, representing the spectrum of tuning all of the model’s parameters for the end task (full fine-tuning) to none of the parameters (in-context learning). In addition to these two ends of the spectrum, we choose prompt tuning (Lester et al., 2021) as a representative of parameter-efficient task adaptation methods (He et al., 2022).

We identify several error trends that change as a function of model size and task adaptation technique. Additionally, we analyze how different types of errors, distribution shift, output representations, and different retrievers for constructing prompts for in-context learning affect scaling trends. The key observations of our study can be summarized as follows:

- When fine-tuning LMs, we generally observe flat or negative scaling curves for compositional generalization in semantic parsing.
- Prompt tuning can outperform standard fine-tuning for larger models, as it exhibits a more

positive scaling curve. This suggests the potential for further improvements from scaling combined with prompt-tuning or potentially other parameter-efficient methods for task transfer.

- We observe positive scaling curves for in-context learning, but performance for the largest model size is generally worse than fine-tuning performance for much smaller models.
- We observe both positive and negative trends for different types of errors as a function of model size and task adaptation technique. For example, larger models perform better at modeling the syntax of the output space, but can also be more prone to certain types of overfitting, especially when fine-tuned.

2 Related Work

Compositional Generalization Many approaches have been proposed to improve compositional generalization in semantic parsing, including compositional data augmentation (Jia and Liang, 2016; Andreas, 2020; Akyürek et al., 2021; Oren et al., 2021; Qiu et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2022), specialized architectures (Li et al., 2019; Russin et al., 2019; Gordon et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Nye et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2020; Zheng and Lapata, 2021; Oren et al., 2020; Herzig and Berant, 2021; Ruiz et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021), ensemble models (Shaw et al., 2021), different Transformer variations (Csordás et al., 2021; Ontanón et al., 2021), intermediate representations (Herzig et al., 2021; Shin et al., 2021), meta-learning (Lake, 2019; Conklin et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2021), and auxiliary objectives to bias attention in encoder-decoder models (Yin et al., 2021; Jiang and Bansal, 2021). Furrer et al. (2020) compare pre-trained models with specialized architectures, but they focus on evaluating the impact of pre-training and only fine-tune encoder-decoder models up to 11B. Tsarkov et al. (2021) evaluate the impact of training size, but keep the computational cost fixed.

Scaling Many existing studies investigate the scaling of neural networks to better understand scaling laws and optimize training budget (Hestness et al., 2017; Kaplan et al., 2020; Bornschein et al., 2020; Ghorbani et al., 2021; Bahri et al., 2021; Tay et al., 2021; Rae et al., 2021; Hoffmann

²In this paper we use “task adaptation” to refer to application of a pre-trained LM to a downstream task.

et al., 2022; Ivgi et al., 2022). The scaling behavior of many tasks have been shown to be predictable and generalization error generally decreases with scale (Geiger et al., 2019; Rosenfeld et al., 2020; Henighan et al., 2020), with some exceptions showing the limits of large scale pre-training (Abnar et al., 2021). Hernandez et al. (2021) study scaling laws for transfer and find benefits of pre-training.

Task Adaptation With the advances in capabilities of pre-trained LMs, a large set of techniques for transferring or adapting these models to end tasks of interest have been developed (Wang et al., 2022). *Fine-tuning* all or most model parameters for each end task has been the standard approach for encoder-only models of the size of BERT (Devlin et al., 2019) and RoBERTa (Liu et al., 2019) and encoder-decoder models like T5 (Raffel et al., 2020). Recently, variants of prompting, which uses a language model to directly make end-task predictions, have become a popular paradigm to adapt models to new tasks (Liu et al., 2021a). *In-context learning* shows the ability of LMs to learn to perform a novel task only by a small number of demonstrations during inference (Brown et al., 2020). *Prompt tuning* (Lester et al., 2021; Li and Liang, 2021; Liu et al., 2021b) learns a small number of parameters conditioning on frozen LMs. Many of these approaches can be seen as variants of parameter-efficient task transfer (He et al., 2022) and our selection of task adaptation methods covers representatives from the full spectrum of tuning none to all of a model’s parameters for the end tasks. Schucher et al. (2022) investigate prompt tuning for semantic parsing. Wortsman et al. (2021) and Kumar et al. (2022) study task adaptation techniques to improve out-of-distribution generalization on other tasks, but not semantic parsing. Xie et al. (2022) propose the UnifiedSKG framework to leverage LMs for new structured knowledge grounding tasks including semantic parsing, but do not focus on compositional generalization.

3 Experimental Setup

3.1 Datasets

We evaluate exact match accuracy on semantic parsing tasks where natural language utterances are mapped to meaning representations. We use both synthetic (COGS and CFQ) and non-synthetic datasets (GeoQuery and SMCaFlow-CS). More details on all datasets and splits are in Appendix A.

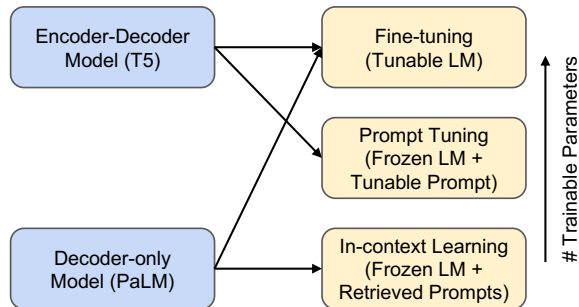


Figure 1: Our experimental setup.

COGS The COGS dataset (Kim and Linzen, 2020) contains sentences paired with logical forms. We use the in-distribution test set and generalization test set that tests generalization to novel linguistic structures. We evaluate on a small subset with 50 examples from each test category (1050 examples total) due to computational constraints. The main experiments convert the original lambda calculus outputs to equivalent variable-free forms (Qiu et al., 2022). (§4.3.2 discusses how the output format affects the model.)

CFQ The CFQ dataset (Keyzers et al., 2020) contains questions paired with SPARQL queries. We use the random split and three Maximum Compound Divergence (MCD) splits from the original source. We evaluate on a subset with randomly sampled 1000 examples for each split.

GeoQuery GeoQuery (Zelle and Mooney, 1996; Tang and Mooney, 2001) contains human-authored questions paired with meaning representations. We report results on the standard data split as well as three compositional splits based on those introduced in Shaw et al. (2021): (1) the *template* split, where abstract output templates in training and test data are disjoint (Finegan-Dollak et al., 2018); (2) the *TMCD* split, which makes the distributions of compounds in training and test data as divergent as possible; and (3) the *length* split.

SMCaFlow-CS SMCaFlow-CS is a *compositional skills* split of SMCaFlow (Andreas et al., 2020) proposed by Yin et al. (2021). It contains single-turn sentences involving skills related to event creation and organization structure. We use LISPRESS (Platanios et al., 2021), which is a LISP-like serialization format, for programs.³ The single-domain (S) test set has examples from a single do-

³Since the original SMCaFlow-CS release uses LISP format, which is extensively verbose and less suitable for neural seq2seq model, we re-ran the data genera-

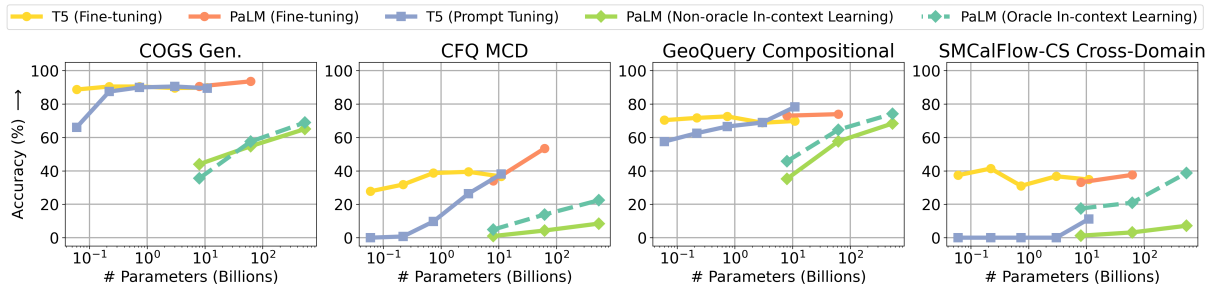


Figure 2: Aggregated scaling curves for compositional splits of different datasets. Note that in-context learning with an oracle retriever (dashed) cannot be compared directly with other methods as it has access to the gold output.

main, while the cross-domain (C) test set evaluates on examples that feature compositional skills (e.g., “create an event with my manager”). The evaluation considers a few-shot compositional learning scenario, where only a small number of cross-domain examples (8, 16, or 32) are seen during training. Additionally, we create a length split by using the longest 720 single-domain examples for evaluation and the rest single-domain examples for training.

3.2 Models

We study representatives of two classes of models: the encoder-decoder model T5 (Raffel et al., 2020) and the decoder-only model PaLM (Chowdhery et al., 2022). We consider five T5 models with sizes ranging from 60M to 11B parameters, and three PaLM models with sizes ranging from 8B to 540B parameters.

We show our setup in Figure 1. We evaluate three task adaptation techniques ranging from full to zero parameter updates: fine-tuning, prompt tuning, and in-context learning. We use T5 models (small to 11B) and PaLM models (8B and 62B) for fine-tuning. We perform prompt tuning with T5 models (small to 11B) following Lester et al. (2021), but not PaLM as prompt tuning with decoder-only models has not been widely explored.⁴ We follow Brown et al. (2020) and use the decoder-only model PaLM (8B, 62B, and 540B) for in-context learning.⁵ Further details on experiments are in Appendix B.

tion pipeline to create new SMCaFlow-CS splits with LISPRESS format using <https://github.com/microsoft/compositional-generalization-span-level-attention>.

⁴We leave evaluating decoder-only models with other parameter-efficient tuning methods such as prefix tuning (Li and Liang, 2021) as future work.

⁵We did not use T5 models for in-context learning as they are trained using span corruption objectives. We also conducted preliminary in-context learning experiments using LM-adapted T5 models (Lester et al., 2021), but found the performance was much worse than using PaLM.

3.3 Retrievers

For in-context learning, we retrieve a small number of exemplars to construct prompts. We consider various formulations for unsupervised non-oracle retrievers (that have access to the input query only) and oracle retrievers (that have access to both the input and target output). We include oracle retrievers to approximate an upper bound on in-context learning performance. We include more retriever analysis in §4.4 and Appendix C.1.

Non-oracle We use the classical retrieval method BM25 (Robertson and Zaragoza, 2009) to retrieve the most similar exemplars for each test query. We also consider a BERT retriever that uses BERT-base (Devlin et al., 2019) to encode the query and retrieve exemplars based on the cosine similarity of the [CLS] embeddings.

Oracle We use BM25 similarity to the gold output instead of the input query following Rubin et al. (2021). We also consider target overlap retriever which retrieves exemplars based on the Jaccard similarity between *compounds* in the gold output and those of the outputs in the training examples. We define compounds as combinations of parent and child symbols in the output, similarly to Shaw et al. (2021). Additionally, we ensure exemplars contain all component symbols of the gold output, if they exist in the training set.

4 Results & Analysis

4.1 Main Results

We show the aggregated scaling curves for different splits and datasets in Figure 2 (see Appendix C.2 for results on individual splits). We report the best in-context learning results of non-oracle and oracle retrievers using the maximum number of exemplars. We include ablations of retrievers in Appendix C.1 and other experiment details in Appendix B.

First, we generally observe flat or negative scaling curves when fine-tuning LMs except on the CFQ dataset, suggesting scaling with full fine-tuning is unlikely to be an effective solution for compositional generalization in semantic parsing as observed in [Shaw et al. \(2021\)](#), [Herzig et al. \(2021\)](#), and [Furrer et al. \(2020\)](#).

Second, scaling consistently improves in-context learning, but its performance is worse than that of a smaller fine-tuned model on the majority of the splits. The in-context learning performance is also highly dependent on the retriever, especially for splits with large training sets.

Finally, the scaling curves for prompt tuning are more positive than the ones for fine-tuning, and prompt tuning sometimes outperforms fine-tuning for the same model size. This suggests scaling up models with parameter-efficient tuning methods could potentially further improve the compositional generalization ability of LMs.

4.2 Error Analysis

In this section we analyze what types of errors models are making when they generate incorrect predictions, and how error trends change as a function of task adaptation technique and model size. We focus on non-synthetic datasets as they better represent the open problem of approaching human-like language understanding in practical scenarios.

Syntax Errors As we use unconstrained greedy decoding during inference, the generated prediction is not guaranteed to be syntactically valid. We measure the percentage of predictions that have unbalanced parentheses as an approximation to the overall rate of syntax errors. We aggregate the results from the different compositional splits for GeoQuery and SMCaFlow-CS (see Appendix C.2 for error trends of individual splits). The results are shown in Figure 3. For the majority of splits and task adaptation methods, the number of syntax errors generally decreases when model scale grows, as observed in [Austin et al. \(2021\)](#). However, a large number of predictions are still syntactically incorrect, especially on SMCaFlow-CS, suggesting using constrained decoding to prevent generating invalid outputs can be an effective solution to improve performance in semantic parsing tasks ([Shin et al., 2021](#); [Shin and Durme, 2021](#); [Scholak et al., 2021](#)).

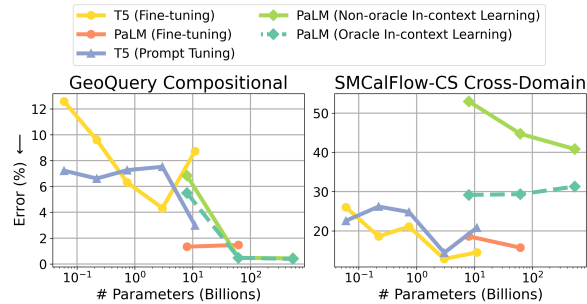


Figure 3: Percentage of predictions that contain unbalanced parentheses, as an estimate of syntax errors.

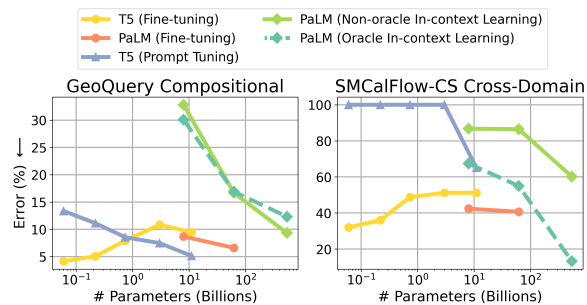


Figure 4: Percentage of predictions where the output exactly matches an output seen in the training set on GeoQuery compositional splits (left). Percentage of predictions where the output only contains functions from a single domain on SMCaFlow-CS cross-domain splits (right).

Compositional Errors To evaluate the models’ ability to recombine seen elements, we consider two measures. For GeoQuery compositional splits, since the entity names are anonymized, we measure the percentage of predictions where an output exactly matches an output seen in the training set and therefore does not include any recombination, leading to an error. For SMCaFlow-CS cross-domain splits, we investigate the errors involving the failure to recombine knowledge from the two domains. Specifically, we compute the percentage of predictions that only include functions from a single domain and are therefore incorrect. Figure 4 shows the results. With fine-tuning, larger models are more likely to overfit to the training distribution and fail to recombine correctly. In SMCaFlow-CS for example, larger models tend to generate single-domain predictions, while the information from the other domain is parsed as string literals; e.g., with input “Please schedule Tuesday morning meeting with my team”, T5-small correctly predicts “(Event.attendees_? (AttendeeListHasPeople (FindTeamOf (toRecipient (CurrentUser)))))” for

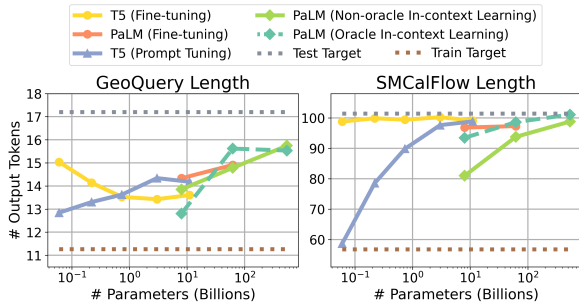


Figure 5: Average number of tokens in the prediction. The dotted brown and black lines show the average target lengths in the training and test set, respectively.

the cross-domain part “with my team”, while T5-11B tries to fit the information into the calendar event domain and outputs “(Event.subject_? (?= "Team Meeting"))”. However, we do not observe similar error trends for prompt tuning and in-context learning where limited or no parameters are updated.

Length Extrapolation We compute the mean length of predictions for two length splits and show the results in Figure 5. The average length trends strongly correlate with the model performance trends. Model predictions are on average shorter than the gold outputs in the test set, suggesting all models have difficulty generating sequences longer than those seen during training (Newman et al., 2020). When using fine-tuning, the average length of T5 predictions decreases when the model becomes larger for the GeoQuery length split, but is roughly flat for the SMCaFlow length split. However, the average length of predictions increases when scaling up the PaLM model for in-context learning. Scaling also increases the average length when using prompt tuning as opposed to fine-tuning for the T5 model, showing the potential of improving length extrapolation with methods like prompt tuning.

Overfitting to Prior Output Distribution Related to the compositional errors discussed above, one hypothesis is that fine-tuned language models overfit to and rely excessively on correlations present in the prior, input-independent distribution over outputs in the training data. For example, T5-11B fine-tuned on the GeoQuery TMCD1 split predicts “answer (intersection (river , loc_2 (m0)))” instead of “answer (intersection (river , traverse_2 (m0)))” for the input “what river flows through m0”. We found that the trigram

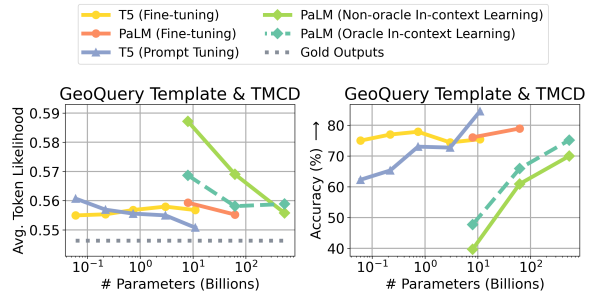


Figure 6: Average token likelihood of trigram LM (left) and scaling curves (right) on development set of GeoQuery template and TMCD splits.

“river , loc_2” occurs 51 times in the training data while “river , traverse_2” occurs only 4 times. This is a common pattern: for 72% of the errors from the fine-tuned T5-11B model on this split, the predicted trigram occurs more frequently in the training data than the correct trigram.

To measure this tendency, we fit a simple count-based trigram language model (with add-1 smoothing) over outputs in the training data. We then measure the average token likelihood according to this trigram LM for the predictions compared to the gold outputs. As length extrapolation errors have been explored above, we focus on the template and TMCD splits of GeoQuery. The results are shown in Figure 6. We observe that when these models make mistakes, the incorrect predictions tend to be biased towards predictions that are more likely according to the trigram LM. This suggests that such models are overfitting to these shallow statistical features to some degree. For fine-tuning, larger model scales do not necessarily alleviate this tendency. However, prompt tuning shows a more positive trend with scale. Notably, some models have lower accuracy with prompt tuning but also lower agreement with the trigram LM, suggesting that a lower proportion of the errors for prompt tuning are related to this particular type of overfitting than for fine-tuning. This overfitting issue is also reduced when increasing model size for in-context learning.

4.3 Task Analysis

In this section, we identify aspects of semantic parsing tasks that might contribute to scaling behaviors and analyze their impact.

4.3.1 Distribution Shift

We first study whether the distribution shift between training and testing affects scaling behav-

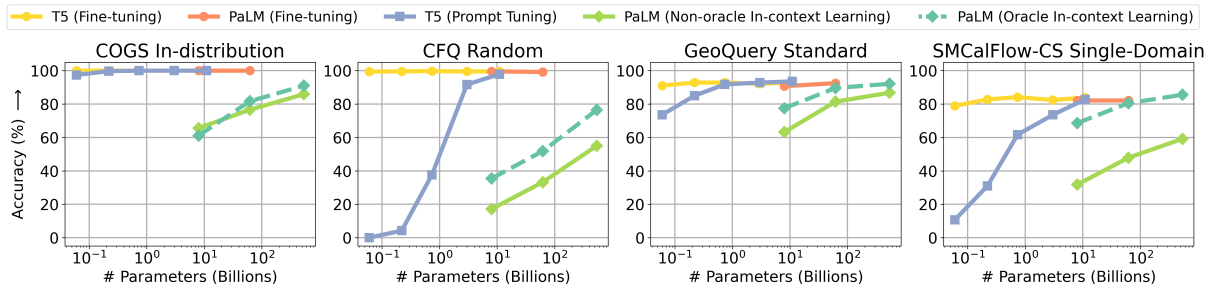


Figure 7: Scaling curves for in-distribution splits of different datasets. Note that in-context learning with an oracle retriever (dashed) cannot be compared directly with other methods as it has access to the gold output.

ior. We evaluate the model performance on in-distribution splits and show results in Figure 7. We observe similar flat scaling curves when fine-tuning LMs, but the overall performance on in-distribution splits is much better than that on compositional splits. We hypothesize that fine-tuning performance on in-distribution splits does not benefit from scaling due to limited headroom (which we will investigate below). Additionally, prompt tuning is able to close the gap and matches the fine-tuning performance when model size increases. In-context learning with an oracle retriever achieves similar performance as fine-tuning and prompt tuning for non-synthetic datasets, but performs worse on synthetic datasets. In-context learning with a non-oracle retriever still lags behind both fine-tuning and prompt tuning.

Headroom Analysis We investigate whether the flat scaling curves for in-distribution evaluations are due to performance saturation as opposed to the types of error trends observed on compositional splits. For synthetic datasets, even the smallest size fine-tuned models achieve 100% accuracy. For non-synthetic datasets, we manually sample up to 20 test examples where all models output incorrect predictions. Similar to what was observed in Qiu et al. (2022), we estimate that 30% of the errors on the GeoQuery in-distribution split and 70% of the errors on the SMCaFlow-CS single-domain split are related to ambiguous and inconsistent annotations or unseen output symbols, suggesting limited headroom of scaling for improving performance on in-distribution splits. However, for compositional evaluations, a large number of errors are related to the error types discussed in §4.2 and only around 15% of the errors on the GeoQuery compositional split and 10% of the errors on the SMCaFlow-CS cross-domain split are due to the dataset issues mentioned above.

As another indication of headroom, prior work shows that extra techniques such as data augmentation could significantly boost the performance of fine-tuned LMs on compositional splits (Oren et al., 2021; Qiu et al., 2022), meaning the performance of our models on compositional splits is not yet saturated.

To study the scaling behaviors on splits that are less saturated, we create smaller CFQ splits by randomly sampling 1000 examples from the original training sets. The resulting training splits can cover the required symbols in test examples with only 1–2 exceptions. From the results in Figure 8, the performance for all models and task adaption techniques drops when reducing the number of training examples, similar to the findings from Tsarkov et al. (2021). However, the magnitude of the difference varies across different splits and techniques. Fine-tuning performance drops significantly for both in-distribution and compositional splits. Notably, the T5 fine-tuning curve on unsaturated in-distribution split is still negative, which indicates that saturation might not be the only factor contributing to flat fine-tuning curves and more investigation is needed to provide a comprehensive explanation. In addition, prompt tuning is less sensitive to the amount of training data, demonstrating its strength when the number of training examples is limited.

4.3.2 Output Space

Large LMs have shown impressive performance on generating natural language, but our study requires them to generate task-specific meaning representations that are unlikely to exist in the pre-training data. Prior work has shown the potential of leveraging alternative output representations to improve semantic parsers (Herzig et al., 2021; Shin et al., 2021). We evaluate the impact of the output space using different output formats for the COGS and CFQ dataset. For COGS, we compare the original

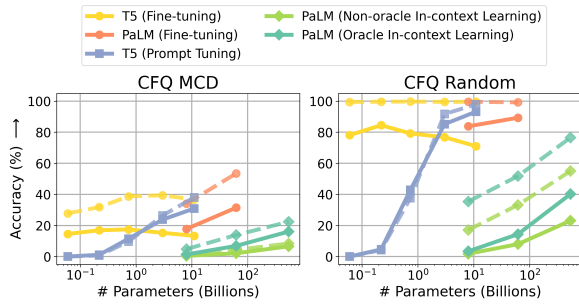


Figure 8: Results on CFQ using different amount of training data. Dashed lines use the original split with around 90K training examples. Solid lines use the down-sampled split with around 1K training examples.

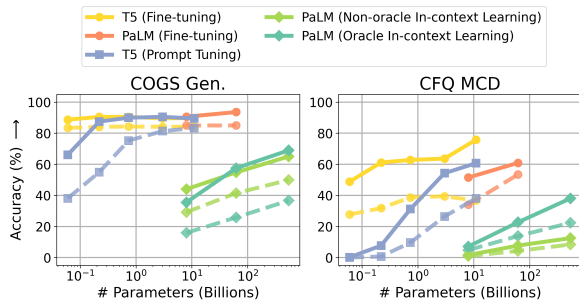


Figure 9: We compare the performance using original output formats (dashed) and intermediate representations (solid). The original formats perform worse but the scaling trends are similar.

format that contains logical variables and its equivalent variable-free form. For CFQ, we compare the original format and the reversible intermediate representation from [Herzig et al. \(2021\)](#). Details of these intermediate representation can be found in [Appendix A.2](#). We show results⁶ in [Figure 9](#). We observe similar scaling trends for the two formats, and using the more complex original format hurts performance in all cases.

Error Analysis For COGS, when fine-tuning and prompt tuning, models struggle most on deeper recursion such as nested prepositional phrases. For in-context learning, in addition to deep recursion, a large number of errors are related to subtle nuances of the meaning representation. For example, the output has three types of entities (“a boy”, “the boy”, “James”) with different semantic forms. While fine-tuned models successfully distinguish these, in-context learning struggles even when the exemplars include many examples of each entity

⁶For in-context learning we use the same exemplars for both the original format and the intermediate representation for fair comparison. However, the exact number of exemplars might be different as the original format is much longer.

type, leading to 29% absolute accuracy loss. The accuracy is even lower when using the original output format, which requires associating each entity with its token index.

For CFQ, more than 60% of the errors of fine-tuning and prompt tuning are related to missing conjuncts. This issue is largely mitigated by using the intermediate representation that groups conjuncts and reduces the mismatch between utterances and programs ([Herzig et al., 2021](#)). However, for in-context learning, the model generates many incorrect predictions that contain conjuncts not in the ground-truth conjuncts. This reiterates the challenge of in-context learning when the output space is complex and not well represented in the pre-training data ([Min et al., 2022](#); [Reynolds and McDonell, 2021](#)).

4.4 Retriever Analysis

We observe that model performance when using in-context learning is strongly dependent on the method used to retrieve relevant exemplars, similar to findings from previous studies ([Rubin et al., 2021](#); [Lu et al., 2021](#)). Here we aim to better understand the differences in performance between different retrievers, which can inform future work towards improving in-context learning performance.

Prediction Accuracy We evaluate end-to-end model performance with the different retrievers and show results in [Table 1](#). We find that BM25 outperforms BERT-based retriever similarly to prior work ([Rubin et al., 2021](#)) and that the target overlap oracle generally outperforms the BM25 oracle. The difference between using a non-oracle retriever compared to using an oracle retriever is less significant for datasets that have a smaller set of examples to select from, such as GeoQuery, than for datasets with a larger number of training examples such as SMCaFlow-CS.

Number of Exemplars We also study how accuracy is impacted by the number of exemplars included in prompts. We use the 540B PaLM model and show results in [Figure 10](#). For both the oracle and non-oracle retrievers, performance can be improved by adding more exemplars up to a certain number; afterwards, we see that performance no longer improves on most splits. This number is greater for the non-oracle retriever than for the oracle retriever, suggesting that a smaller number of exemplars may be sufficient if the retriever is

	COGS		CFQ		GEOQUERY			SMCALFLOW-CS			
	In-dist.	Gen.	Random	MCD	Std.	Templ.	TMCD	Len.	Single	Cross	Len.
BERT	85.9	65.0	57.5	7.8	86.4	69.7	63.9	49.1	56.8	1.4	9.4
BM25	77.1	58.8	54.8	8.0	86.8	73.6	66.4	52.7	60.1	9.5	16.1
BM25 Oracle	77.0	58.0	58.0	14.8	90.7	72.4	67.9	55.5	73.4	30.0	34.7
Target Overlap Oracle	91.0	69.0	74.6	21.7	92.1	74.8	75.5	56.4	85.6	43.5	46.4

Table 1: We compare the in-context learning accuracy on development set using PaLM-540B model with different types of retrievers. We consider both non-oracle retrievers (top) and oracle retrievers (bottom).

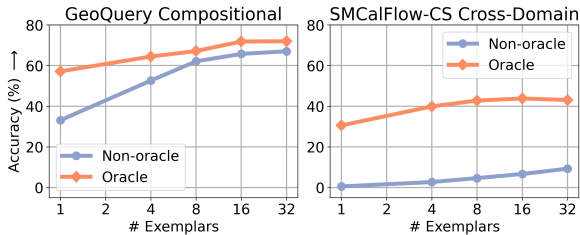


Figure 10: Comparing model accuracy based on the number of exemplars with the best non-oracle retriever and oracle retriever on the development set.

able to select the most informative examples from the training set.

Retriever Discussion For compositional generalization, retrieving the closest exemplars based on standard notions of sentence-level similarity might not be optimal. For instance, for the query “Schedule a meeting with my manager” in the SMCALFLOW-CS cross-domain evaluation, the highest similarity training example “Schedule a meeting with Alex” might be less useful than the less similar example “Who is my manager”, as the former example lacks important cross-domain knowledge about querying an org chart. Therefore, considering alternative ways to construct prompts that balance both atom coverage and structural diversity can be an important future direction to improve compositional generalization in semantic parsing. We also noticed high variance among permutations of a given set of exemplars, as also noted in [Lu et al. \(2021\)](#); [Zhao et al. \(2021\)](#), suggesting the importance of improving the robustness and reducing the order sensitivity of prompts. We believe tailored retrieval methods and prompt design would be fruitful avenues for future research.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, we study the impact of model scale on compositional generalization in semantic parsing. We evaluate encoder-decoder models up to 11B

parameters and decoder-only models up to 540B parameters. We select fine-tuning, prompt tuning, and in-context learning as representative task adaptation methods for pre-trained models, covering the range of updating all to none of the model parameters for the end task.

We find that full fine-tuning generally has flat or negative scaling curves for compositional generalization evaluations, and the flat curves are not likely due to performance saturation. In-context learning can achieve performance gains with scaling, but the performance is usually worse than that of smaller fine-tuned models and highly dependent on the retriever. Prompt tuning exhibits more positive scaling curves for compositional generalization in semantic parsing and can sometimes outperform fine-tuning.

We further conduct error analysis and identify divergent error trends. We find that larger models are better at modeling the output syntax, but can also suffer from overfitting, especially when fine-tuned. Using parameter-efficient task adaptation techniques such as prompt tuning could potentially improve compositional generalization with scale. Our experiments also suggest the possibility of better leveraging scale to improve compositional generalization by designing better retrievers for in-context learning, using alternative output formats, and implementing constrained decoding to prevent invalid outputs.

6 Limitations

Models Since we are studying scaling curves, we need access to models that were pre-trained in the same way but have different sizes and can be adapted to end tasks in multiple ways. This rules out models such as GPT-3 ([Brown et al., 2020](#)) which does not have public model weights. We did not use OPT models ([Zhang et al., 2022](#)) as they were not available until recently.

Tasks Prior works have evaluated on text-to-SQL semantic parsing tasks using LMs (Rajkumar et al., 2022; Cheng et al., 2022). We did not evaluate on this task as it has a different task definition than the other tasks we studied. SQL generation requires conditioning on and reasoning over a database schema given as input in order to reach competitive performance. It also involves the challenge of schema matching, which could complicate the results.

Runs We did not perform multiple runs for each split due to computation costs. We aggregate results by dataset to reduce variance.

Task Adaptation Techniques For the family of methods that partially update the parameters, we choose prompt tuning as a representative. We leave exploring other parameter-efficient transfer learning methods for future work.

Retrievers Our results demonstrate that a better retriever maintains the scaling curve trends but improves the absolute metrics. However, designing a good retriever is outside the scope of this paper. Our oracle retrievers are also not a true upper bound, which would require an intractable search over all possible sets of exemplars for each test query.

Prompt Construction For in-context learning, we use a fixed prompt format described in Appendix B.1, chosen based on recommended best practices and preliminary experiments. We leave exploring other prompt constructions such as providing instructions and explanations in the prompts for future work.

Computation Cost Benefits of scaling up models are offset by computation costs and environmental impacts. The scaling curves with computation cost taken into account (e.g., accuracy per unit of electricity) would be an interesting direction to explore.

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Appendix

The appendix is organized into three sections: dataset details (Appendix A), experiment details (Appendix B), and additional results and analysis (Appendix C).

A Dataset Details

A.1 Dataset Sizes

We follow prior work (Qiu et al., 2022) and use the same splits for GeoQuery. We evaluate on the small subset of COGS (Kim and Linzen, 2020) and CFQ (Keysers et al., 2020). We use the newer version of SMCaFlow and re-ran the data generation pipeline from Yin et al. (2021) to create SMCaFlow-CS. Dataset sizes are shown in Table 2.

Dataset	Split	Train	Dev	Test
COGS	In-dist.	24K	1000	1000
	Gen.	24K	1050	1050
CFQ	Random	95743	1000	1000
	MCD1	95743	1000	1000
	MCD2	95743	1000	1000
	MCD3	95743	1000	1000
GeoQuery	Standard	600	—	280
	Template1	438	110	332
	Template2	439	110	331
	Template3	440	110	330
	TMCD1	440	110	330
	TMCD2	440	110	330
	TMCD3	440	110	330
	Length	440	110	330
SMCaFlow-CS	8-shot	20965	360	360
	16-shot	20973	360	360
	32-shot	20989	360	360
	Length	20237	360	360

Table 2: Sizes of all datasets and splits.

A.2 Intermediate Representation

We consider different output formats for COGS and CFQ. For COGS, we choose the variable-free form used in Qiu et al. (2022) as intermediate representation. For CFQ, we use the reversible intermediate representation in Herzig et al. (2021). Table 3 shows examples of input-output pairs.

B Experiment Details

B.1 Experimental Setup

Training For fine-tuning, we use learning rate of $1e^{-4}$ for GeoQuery and COGS and $1e^{-3}$ for

CFQ and SMCaFlow-CS. We select learning rate from $[1e^{-3}, 1e^{-4}, 1e^{-5}]$ based on validation accuracy. For prompt tuning, we use learning rate of 0.3 for GeoQuery and COGS and 1.0 for CFQ and SMCaFlow-CS. The learning rate is selected from $[0.3, 1, 3]$. We use a tunable prompt length of 100 for all prompt tuning experiments. In-context learning does not require any training. We only tune hyperparameters using smaller models (T5-base and PaLM-8B for fine-tuning, T5-3B for prompt tuning) to optimize computational resources. Tuning hyperparameters for each model scale could potentially further improve performance, but is not the focus of our study. We train all models on Cloud TPU. The training time varies across different datasets and model sizes. The shortest training takes around 1 hour and the longest training takes around 5 days.

Inference For fine-tuning and prompt tuning, we only use the test query as input. For in-context learning, we retrieve K exemplars from the training set and concatenate each exemplar to the query. We add special prefixes “In: ” and “Out: ” for retrieved input-output pairs and separate exemplars with break lines. We sort exemplars based on their similarities to the query in ascending order. Empirically, we find putting the most similar exemplar close to the query works better than the reverse. We use the maximum number of exemplars up to 1,920 tokens. We use greedy decoding for all models.

B.2 Number of Exemplars

We use the maximum number of exemplars up to 1,920 tokens for all in-context learning experiments. We show the mean and standard deviation of number of exemplars for each split in Table 4.

C Additional Results

C.1 Additional Retriever Analysis

Token Coverage and Precision We compute the coverage (fraction of examples where the exemplars and test query contain all tokens of gold target) and precision (fraction of examples with a correct prediction among ones where the example is covered) of different retrievers. Note that the actual accuracy can be higher than the product of coverage and precision, as models can generate correct outputs even without full coverage of tokens.

The results are shown in Table 5. For intra-class comparison, the non-oracle retriever BM25 has

<i>x</i> :	Camila gave a cake in a storage to Emma .
<i>y</i> :	give . agent (x_1 , Camila) AND give . theme (x_1 , x_3) AND give . recipient (x_1 , Emma) AND cake (x_3) AND cake . nmod . in (x_3 , x_6) AND storage (x_6)
<i>y'</i> :	give (agent = Camila , theme = cake (nmod . in = storage , recipient = Emma)
<i>x</i> :	Did a film 's editor executive produce , write , and direct M0 , M1 , and M2
<i>y</i> :	SELECT count(*) WHERE { ?x0 ns:film.director.film M0 . ?x0 ns:film.director.film M1 . ?x0 ns:film.director.film M2 . ?x0 ns:film.editor.film ?x1 . ?x0 ns:film.producer.films_executive_produced M0 . ?x0 ns:film.producer.films_executive_produced M1 . ?x0 ns:film.producer.films_executive_produced M2 . ?x0 ns:film.writer.film M0 . ?x0 ns:film.writer.film M1 . ?x0 ns:film.writer.film M2 . ?x1 a ns:film.film }
<i>y'</i> :	SELECT count(*) WHERE { (?x0 (film.director.film , film.producer.films_executive_produced , film.writer.film) (M0 , M1 , M2)) . (?x0 (film.editor.film) (?x1)) . (?x1 a film.film) }

Table 3: An example input *x*, output *y*, and intermediate representation *y'* from COGS (top) and CFQ (bottom).

Dataset	Split	Non-oracle		Oracle	
		Mean	Stdev.	Mean	Stdev.
COGS	In-dist.	58.1	7.2	59.1	6.1
	Gen.	54.1	8.8	57.1	7.7
CFQ	Random	12.1	3.3	12.8	4.7
	MCD1	12.4	4.0	16.2	4.8
	MCD2	12.4	4.2	14.9	4.7
	MCD3	15.1	5.1	15.5	4.7
GeoQuery	Std.	44.1	4.0	48.8	8.2
	Template1	43.7	2.8	47.5	8.5
	Template2	42.8	3.3	42.7	5.5
	Template3	43.8	3.8	47.3	7.6
	TMCD1	44.1	3.4	41.9	4.7
	TMCD2	46.6	2.9	49.9	6.8
	TMCD3	43.7	3.5	49.5	7.8
	Length	59.3	3.3	53.3	3.1
SMCalFlow-CS	8-S	24.0	5.6	26.2	9.7
	8-C	22.9	6.5	22.3	10.0
	16-S	24.0	5.6	26.2	9.7
	16-C	22.8	6.3	22.2	9.6
	32-S	23.9	5.6	26.2	9.7
	32-C	22.2	6.2	22.0	8.9
	Length	19.3	3.9	16.7	5.3

Table 4: The mean and standard deviation of number of exemplars for in-context learning.

higher coverage but lower precision compared to BERT, as the TF-IDF based score allows retrieving exemplars containing symbols with lower frequency. This is more desirable for compositional splits, leading to larger performance improvement using BM25 than BERT on most splits, except for COGS. For oracle retrievers, retrieving exemplars based on the overlap of target compounds outperforms using BM25 on the target itself. This suggests the importance of considering larger output structures as opposed to single tokens. Note that

the target overlap oracle does not consider the order of sub-structures. Modeling this could potentially lead to further improvements.

For inter-class comparison, the oracle retrievers generally have better accuracy and coverage than their non-oracle counterparts. They also have better precision within examples that are covered, suggesting atom coverage is not the only factor to consider when designing retrievers. For non-synthetic splits with large training sets like SMCalFlow-CS, we observe significant performance gain when switching from a non-oracle retriever to an oracle retriever, which suggests that improving retrieval for in-context learning is an important direction for future work.

C.2 Results on Individual Splits

We show full fine-tuning results in Table 6 and full prompt tuning and in-context learning results in Table 7. We include scaling curves of individual splits in Figure 11. We also show error trends of individual non-synthetic splits in Figure 12 and Figure 13.

C.3 Example Prediction Errors

We show example prediction errors of fine-tuned T5 models in Table 8.

	COGS		CFQ		GEOQUERY				SMCALFLOW-CS		
	In-dist.	Gen.	Random	MCD	Std.	Templ.	TMCD	Len.	Single	Cross	Len.
BERT Coverage	97.8	67.0	85.6	65.0	99.3	94.2	88.5	90.9	75.8	7.3	36.1
BERT Precision	86.6	65.3	65.9	11.6	87.1	73.2	69.8	54.0	67.2	18.3	16.2
BM25 Coverage	100.0	97.3	93.4	76.9	99.6	96.1	96.4	94.5	92.2	57.7	68.3
BM25 Precision	77.1	60.3	58.0	10.5	87.1	76.3	68.7	55.8	64.5	16.3	22.4
BM25 Oracle Coverage	100.0	100.0	99.8	99.8	99.6	97.9	100.0	96.4	99.7	100.0	96.9
BM25 Oracle Precision	77.0	58.0	58.1	14.8	91.0	73.7	67.9	57.5	73.6	30.0	35.5
Target Overlap Coverage	100.0	100.0	100.0	99.9	99.6	97.6	100.0	94.5	98.1	99.7	91.4
Target Overlap Precision	91.0	69.0	74.6	21.7	92.5	76.4	75.5	59.6	87.3	43.6	49.8

Table 5: We compare the coverage and precision of different types of retrievers on development set using PaLM-540B model. We show results of non-oracle retrievers (top) and oracle retrievers (bottom).

Dataset	Split	T5 (FT)					PaLM (FT)	
		Small	Base	Large	3B	11B	8B	62B
COGS	In-dist.	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
	Gen.	88.7	90.5	90.5	89.6	89.8	90.6	93.6
CFQ	Random	99.4	99.6	99.7	99.5	99.6	99.6	99.2
	MCD1	55.9	61.1	61.1	58.7	55.5	62.0	79.2
	MCD2	14.0	19.2	26.9	24.5	24.7	21.0	39.7
	MCD3	13.4	15.1	28.1	35.1	29.8	19.1	41.4
GeoQuery	Std.	91.1	92.9	92.9	92.1	92.9	90.7	92.5
	Template1	85.8	87.7	88.0	82.2	86.1	89.2	86.1
	Template2	82.8	86.1	87.6	87.3	87.0	90.6	90.0
	Template3	78.8	80.6	82.7	71.8	74.5	79.1	79.1
	TMCD1	66.1	65.8	68.8	67.0	62.4	76.4	71.8
	TMCD2	64.8	66.4	65.5	60.6	60.9	51.2	66.4
	TMCD3	73.9	75.5	79.1	73.3	79.4	81.2	80.0
	Length	40.3	40.0	36.7	39.4	38.5	43.6	44.2
SMCalFlow-CS	8-S	79.2	82.8	83.3	83.6	83.9	82.2	82.2
	8-C	15.8	21.7	6.9	9.2	11.4	17.5	26.9
	16-S	78.9	82.5	84.4	80.8	83.1	82.5	82.8
	16-C	37.8	43.6	29.2	39.4	33.9	35.6	34.7
	32-S	78.6	83.1	84.7	82.8	84.7	81.9	81.7
	32-C	58.6	58.9	56.9	61.7	59.2	46.4	51.1
	Length	50.6	54.4	56.7	53.6	56.7	59.4	57.5

Table 6: Fine-tuning (FT) results on all datasets and splits.

Dataset	Split	T5 (PT)					PaLM (Non-oracle ICL)			PaLM (Oracle ICL)		
		Small	Base	Large	3B	11B	8B	62B	540B	8B	62B	540B
COGS	In-dist.	97.4	99.7	100.0	100.0	100.0	44.8	63.2	77.1	61.1	81.7	91.0
	Gen.	66.1	87.5	90.0	90.5	89.5	32.1	44.8	58.8	35.5	57.5	69.0
CFQ	Random	0.0	4.2	37.6	91.7	97.9	15.3	33.2	55.0	35.4	51.8	76.5
	MCD1	0.0	2.1	14.6	42.9	66.9	1.0	4.3	10.5	8.6	16.8	29.4
	MCD2	0.0	0.0	2.0	21.4	27.8	0.6	2.8	5.3	1.7	9.6	15.1
	MCD3	0.0	0.0	12.4	14.9	19.6	1.3	5.7	9.5	4.2	15.1	22.7
GeoQuery	Std.	73.6	85.0	91.8	92.9	93.6	63.2	81.4	86.8	77.5	89.6	92.1
	Template1	72.6	80.4	78.3	85.8	89.5	25.9	64.5	74.1	50.6	71.1	83.7
	Template2	73.1	79.5	85.5	90.0	91.2	37.5	69.2	81.6	54.1	68.9	68.0
	Template3	60.0	68.5	74.2	79.4	82.4	26.7	58.5	74.2	41.5	73.6	82.1
	TMCD1	57.9	59.7	66.4	67.3	83.3	39.1	51.2	60.9	46.7	57.3	67.0
	TMCD2	48.8	60.6	61.5	65.2	73.6	44.5	49.1	60.0	36.7	61.8	73.9
	TMCD3	58.2	58.5	66.4	54.5	86.7	43.9	57.6	70.0	59.1	67.3	80.6
	Length	32.1	30.9	33.6	40.3	41.5	28.8	40.6	57.9	31.5	52.4	63.9
SMCalFlow-CS	8-S	9.4	31.9	58.9	73.9	83.1	31.7	47.5	58.3	68.6	80.6	85.6
	8-C	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.8	4.7	9.7	10.8	33.9
	16-S	7.8	30.6	62.5	72.8	82.8	31.1	47.8	60.0	68.6	80.6	85.6
	16-C	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	10.0	1.1	2.2	5.0	15.8	19.4	36.7
	32-S	15.0	30.3	63.6	73.9	82.5	32.5	48.3	59.2	68.6	80.6	85.6
	32-C	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	23.6	2.5	6.4	11.7	26.9	32.5	45.6
		Length	1.7	4.4	29.4	38.1	59.4	3.3	8.1	13.9	22.5	39.4

Table 7: Prompt tuning (PT) and in-context learning (ICL) results on all datasets and splits.

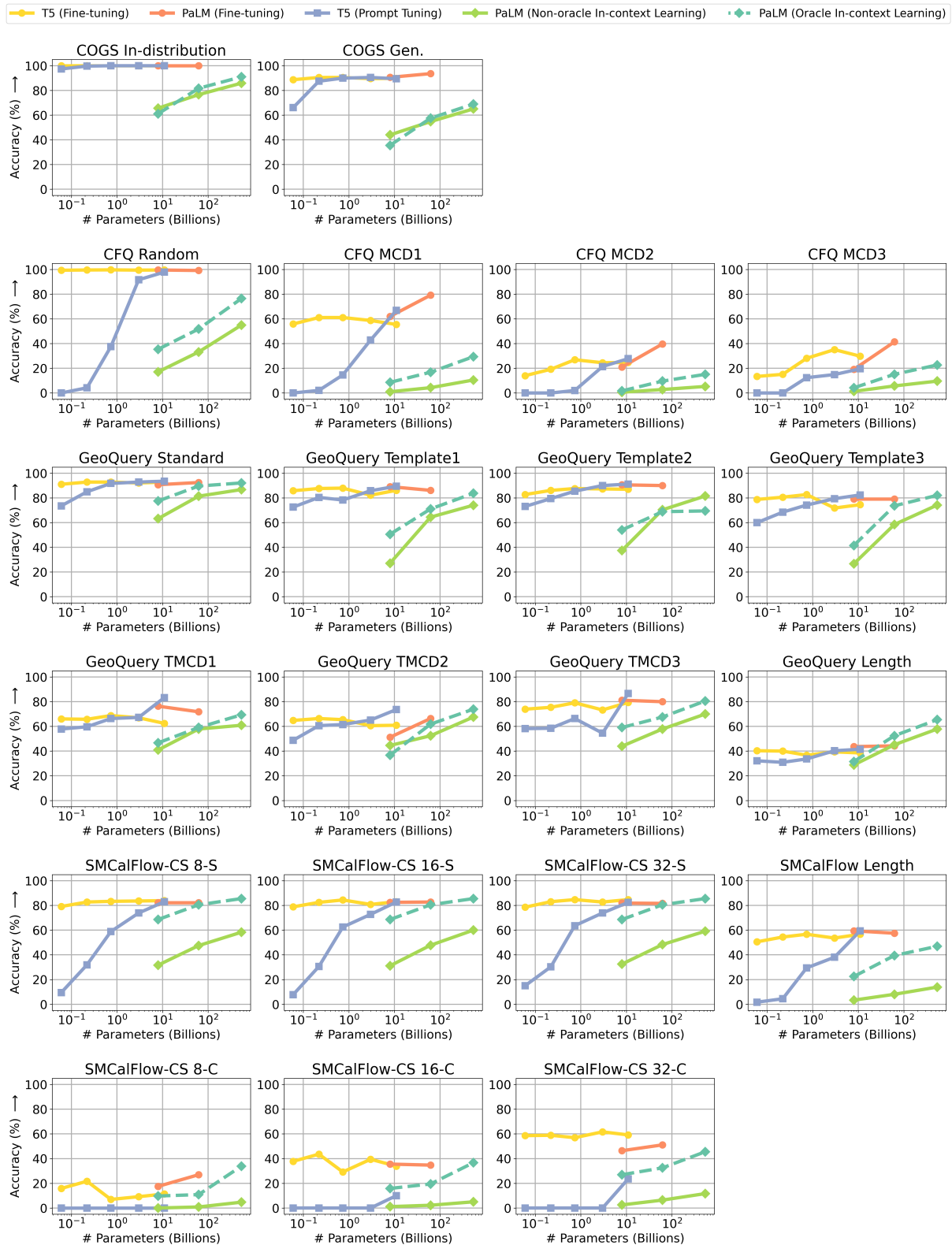


Figure 11: Scaling curves for individual split of different datasets. Note that the in-context learning with an oracle retriever (dashed) cannot be compared directly with other methods as it has access to the gold output.



Figure 12: Percentage of predictions that contain unbalanced parentheses, as an estimate of syntax errors.

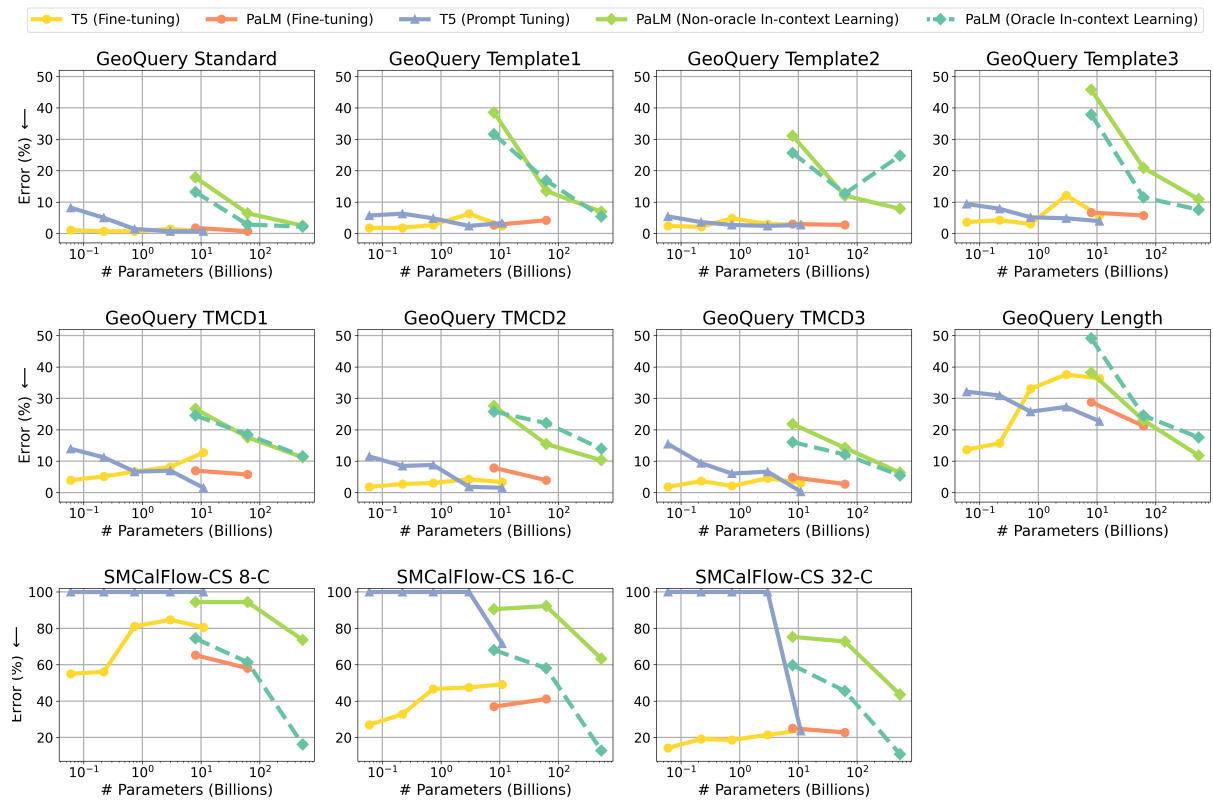


Figure 13: Percentage of incorrect predictions where the output exactly matches an output seen in the training set on GeoQuery splits (top two rows). Percentage of errors where the prediction does not contain cross-domain predicates on SMCaFlow-CS cross-domain splits (bottom).

Source:	how long is the longest river in the m0
Target:	answer (len (longest (intersection (river , loc_2 (m0))))))
T5-small Prediction:	answer (longest (intersection (river , loc_2 (m0)))))
T5-base Prediction:	answer (longest (intersection (river , loc_2 (m0))))
T5-large Prediction:	answer (len (longest (intersection (river , loc_2 (m0)))))
T5-3B Prediction:	answer (len (longest (intersection (river , loc_2 (m0)))))
T5-11B Prediction:	answer (len (longest (intersection (river , loc_2 (m0)))))
Source:	make an event with my manager
Target:	(Yield (CreateCommitEventWrapper (CreatePreflightEventWrapper (Event.attendees_? (AttendeeListHasRecipient (FindManager (toRecipient (CurrentUser))))))))
T5-small Prediction:	(Yield (CreateCommitEventWrapper (CreatePreflightEventWrapper (Event.attendees_? (AttendeeListHasRecipient (FindManager (toRecipient (CurrentUser)))))))
T5-base Prediction:	(Yield (CreateCommitEventWrapper (CreatePreflightEventWrapper (Event.attendees_? (AttendeeListHasRecipient (FindManager (toRecipient (CurrentUser)))))))
T5-large Prediction:	(Yield (CreateCommitEventWrapper (CreatePreflightEventWrapper (Event.attendees_? (AttendeeListHasRecipient (FindManager (toRecipient (CurrentUser)))))))
T5-3B Prediction:	(Yield (CreateCommitEventWrapper (CreatePreflightEventWrapper (Event.subject_? (?= "event with my manager")))))
T5-11B Prediction:	(Yield (CreateCommitEventWrapper (CreatePreflightEventWrapper (Event.attendees_? (AttendeeListHasRecipient (FindManager (toRecipient (CurrentUser)))))))
Source:	which states have cities named m0
Target:	answer (intersection (state , loc_1 (intersection (city , m0)))))
T5-small Prediction:	answer (intersection (state , loc_1 (intersection (city , m0)))))
T5-base Prediction:	answer (intersection (state , loc_1 (intersection (city , loc_2 (m0))))))
T5-large Prediction:	answer (intersection (state , loc_2 (m0))))
T5-3B Prediction:	answer (intersection (state , loc_1 (m0))))
T5-11B Prediction:	answer (intersection (state , loc_2 (m0))))
Source:	Make me an event for 3 pm tomorrow with my team
Target:	(Yield (CreateCommitEventWrapper (CreatePreflightEventWrapper (& (Event.start_? (?= (DateAtTimeWithDefaults (Tomorrow) (NumberPM 3L)))) (Event.attendees_? (AttendeeListHasPeople (FindTeamOf (toRecipient (CurrentUser))))))))
T5-small Prediction:	(Yield (CreateCommitEventWrapper (CreatePreflightEventWrapper (& (Event.start_? (?= (DateAtTimeWithDefaults (Tomorrow) (NumberPM 3L)))) (Event.attendees_? (AttendeeListHasPeople (FindTeamOf (toRecipient (CurrentUser))))))))
T5-base Prediction:	(Yield (CreateCommitEventWrapper (CreatePreflightEventWrapper (& (Event.start_? (?= (DateAtTimeWithDefaults (Tomorrow) (NumberPM 3L)))) (Event.attendees_? (AttendeeListHasPeople (FindTeamOf (toRecipient (CurrentUser))))))))
T5-large Prediction:	(Yield (CreateCommitEventWrapper (CreatePreflightEventWrapper (& (Event.subject_? (?= "event with my team")) (Event.start_? (?= (DateAtTimeWithDefaults (Tomorrow) (NumberPM 3L))))))))
T5-3B Prediction:	(Yield (CreateCommitEventWrapper (CreatePreflightEventWrapper (& (Event.subject_? (?= "my team")) (Event.start_? (?= (DateAtTimeWithDefaults (Tomorrow) (NumberPM 3L))))))))
T5-11B Prediction:	(Yield (CreateCommitEventWrapper (CreatePreflightEventWrapper (& (Event.subject_? (?= "my team")) (Event.start_? (?= (DateAtTimeWithDefaults (Tomorrow) (NumberPM 3L))))))))

Table 8: Example predictions of fine-tuned T5 models on the development set of GeoQuery and SMCaFlow-CS dataset where the errors are corrected (top) and caused (bottom) by model scale.