

Cross-lingual Transfer or Machine Translation? On Data Augmentation for Monolingual Semantic Textual Similarity

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Abstract

Learning better sentence embeddings leads to improved performance for natural language understanding tasks including semantic textual similarity (STS) and natural language inference (NLI). As prior studies leverage large-scale labeled NLI datasets for fine-tuning masked language models to yield sentence embeddings, task performance for languages other than English is often left behind. In this study, we directly compared two data augmentation techniques as potential solutions for monolingual STS: (a) *cross-lingual transfer* that exploits English resources alone as training data to yield non-English sentence embeddings as zero-shot inference, and (b) *machine translation* that converts English data into pseudo non-English training data in advance. In our experiments on monolingual STS in Japanese and Korean, we find that the two data techniques yield performance on par. Rather, we find a superiority of the Wikipedia domain over the NLI domain for these languages, in contrast to prior studies that focused on NLI as training data. Combining our findings, we demonstrate that the cross-lingual transfer of Wikipedia data exhibits improved performance, and that native Wikipedia data can further improve performance for monolingual STS.

Keywords: sentence embeddings, cross-lingual transfer, machine translation

1. Introduction

Monolingual semantic textual similarity (STS; Agirre et al., 2016) has been used as a progress milestone for the learning of sentence embeddings (Reimers and Gurevych, 2019; Gao et al., 2021). Given two sentences in a target language, our task was to predict the similarity between the two sentences. Monolingual STS is a core part of natural language understanding tasks (Wang et al., 2018) and is related to natural language inference (NLI; Dagan et al., 2005) where the task was to predict whether one sentence entails another. NLI data have been used for unsupervised STS without using any STS-specific data and are therefore considered to be suitable training data for monolingual STS.

Because such a quantity of training data is not always available in languages other than English, data augmentation techniques including (a) *cross-lingual transfer* (Conneau et al., 2018; Gogoulou et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022) and (b) *machine translation* (Conneau et al., 2018; Ham et al., 2020; Yanaka and Mineshima, 2022) have been extensively applied. However, aside from the monumental prior study on NLI (Conneau et al., 2018), there have been few to no comprehensive studies that directly compared the two different data augmentation techniques particularly on monolingual STS, which differs from multilingual STS (Cer et al., 2017) in that the given two sentences are in the same language. Therefore, we investigated the following research questions to search for the most suitable data augmentation technique for monolingual STS, which would have the greatest need for monolin-

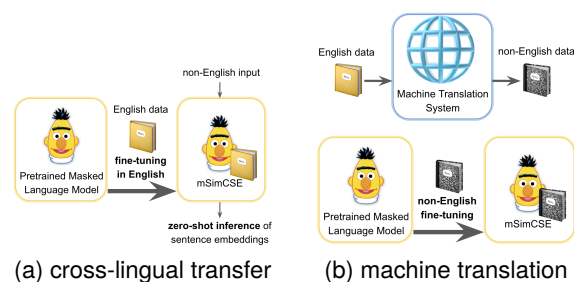


Figure 1: Illustration of the two different data augmentation techniques applied from English to non-English.

gual data: **RQ1** *Between cross-lingual transfer or machine translation, which is better?* **RQ2** *Do these approaches yield performance on par with that of a state-of-the-art multilingual model?*

In this study, we empirically evaluated the two different data augmentation techniques using Japanese and Korean, which can be seen as relatively low-resourced and linguistically dissimilar languages when compared with English, and thus are challenging for the two techniques. We used unsupervised multilingual SimCSE (mSimCSE; Wang et al., 2022) as our test bed, which is a multilingual extension of unsupervised SimCSE (Gao et al., 2021) that uses sentence-pair contrastive learning for self-supervised learning of unlabeled data.

Specifically, we trained mSimCSE models in two ways, each corresponding to the two data augmentation techniques: (a) by using English training data alone as cross-lingual transfer, and (b) by using

machine-translated data from English into Korean and Japanese. We also compared trained mSimCSE models with LaBSE (Feng et al., 2022), a state-of-the-art multilingual model.

In our experiments on monolingual STS, we demonstrate that cross-lingual transfer achieves performance on par with that of machine translation (RQ1). We further demonstrate that the combination of cross-lingual transfer and Wikipedia domain data exhibits the best performance outperforming or comparable to that of LaBSE (RQ2). In contrast to prior studies, we also observed that Wikipedia domain data can be used as an alternative drop-in replacement for NLI domain data when used as unlabeled training data for monolingual STS.

Since Wikipedia domain data is easier to obtain than NLI domain data, our results suggest a recipe for training better sentence embeddings using a large-scale multilingual Wikipedia dataset. As such a pilot study, we actually report improved results using a Japanese portion of the Wikipedia data.

2. Data Augmentation Techniques

Data augmentation (Feng et al., 2021) is a generic strategy to deal with relatively low-resourced situations in a target language to increase the number of training examples (Figure 1). We explain two different data augmentation techniques as follows.

Cross-lingual transfer leverages training data in other languages but not in the target language. We conduct fine-tuning of pretrained masked language models using the available data, without leveraging target language resources.¹ After that, we use the trained model to perform zero-shot inference in the target language. This cost-effective approach has virtually no cost for obtaining data. Conneau et al. (2018) studied the performance of such cross-lingual transfer from English to other languages using a multilingual NLI dataset (XNLI).

Machine translation leverages the same data, but this time by using a machine translation system to translate it from other languages into the target language. We then perform fine-tuning of pretrained masked language models using the machine-translated data. After that, we use the trained model to perform normal inference in the target language, unlike cross-lingual transfer. This pay-as-you-go approach has two variations. Conneau et al. (2018) created the training portion of the XNLI dataset using a neural machine translation system (TRANSLATE TRAIN). They also attained comparable results by translating test data only at runtime (TRANSLATE TEST).

¹In this context, the pretrained models must be capable of processing a target language and its vocabulary, unlike cross-lingual transfer to unseen languages (Artetxe et al., 2020).

Hyperparameter	Values
# Epochs	1
Learning rate	5e-5
Warmup rate	10%
Batch size	{32, 64, 128}

Table 1: Hyperparameters.

3. Experiments

We compared the performance of cross-lingual transfer and machine translation on unsupervised learning for monolingual STS (Agirre et al., 2016). Given two sentences in a target language, our task was to predict the similarity between the two sentences using unlabeled training data. This task differs from supervised learning that exploits labeled data, because our focus is on the relatively low-resourced situations in Japanese and Korean. The task also differs from multilingual STS in that the given two sentences are in the same language.

3.1. Setup

More specifically, we investigated the performance of sentence embeddings obtained as a result of unsupervised learning for monolingual STS. Following mSimCSE (Wang et al., 2022), we fine-tuned multilingual pretrained masked language models by feeding various training data as different data augmentation techniques. Since XLM-R (Conneau et al., 2020) is used as a common baseline in the relevant literature, we used XLM-R as the multilingual base model and performed fine-tuning using unsupervised SimCSE (Gao et al., 2021). We compared our models with LaBSE (Feng et al., 2022) without fine-tuning as a strong fully supervised baseline.

We used random hardware available at Google Colaboratory² and Sentence-Transformers 2.2.0 (Reimers and Gurevych, 2019) for our implementation.³ We followed the hyperparameters used in Sentence-Transformers as best practices, unless listed in Table 1.

3.2. Datasets

Training Table 2 summarizes various datasets in English, Japanese, and Korean that are primarily used as our training data. Following prior studies on monolingual STS (Reimers and Gurevych, 2019; Gao et al., 2021), we used NLI datasets that contain premises, hypotheses, and their relationship labels such as entailment, contradiction, and neutral (Dagan et al., 2005). Specifically, we used premises

²<https://colab.research.google.com/>

³The details of our implementation are described in the Appendix A, followed by the replication study of unsupervised SimCSE reported in the Appendix D.

Name	Size	Domain	Lang.	Sources
SNLI	0.5M	NLI	en	
MNLI	0.5M	NLI	en	
JSNLI	0.5M	NLI	MT _{ja}	SNLI
KorNLI	1.0M	NLI	MT _{ko}	SNLI, MNLI
Wiki	1.0M	Wikipedia	en	
Wiki-40B	1.0M	Wikipedia	ja	

Table 2: The statistics of the various training datasets we used. The size column reports the approximate number of training examples. MT denotes pseudo data machine-translated from the corresponding resources shown in the last column.

and hypotheses as training examples of unsupervised learning, while simply discarding NLI labels. We also used English and Japanese Wikipedia.⁴

For fine-tuning in English, we used the Stanford Natural Language Inference corpus (SNLI; Bowman et al., 2015) and the Multi-Genre Natural Language Inference corpus (MNLI; Williams et al., 2018) as well as English Wikipedia (Wiki; Gao et al., 2021). To match the data size of NLI datasets with its Wikipedia counterpart (1 million sentences), we used them in two ways⁵: (i) only the premises portions of SNLI and MNLI (**NLI**; 942,854 sentences), and (ii) both the premise and hypothesis portions of SNLI (**SNLI**; 1,100,304 sentences).

For fine-tuning in Japanese and Korean, machine-translated English datasets are used instead. For instance, the JSNLI dataset (Yoshikoshi et al., 2020) contains machine-translated SNLI and the KorNLI dataset (Ham et al., 2020) contains machine-translated SNLI and MNLI, respectively. We also used Japanese Wikipedia data created from multilingual Wikipedia (Wiki-40B; Guo et al., 2020).

Evaluation We used the following labeled STS datasets as our evaluation data: STS-B (Cer et al., 2017) for English; JSICK-STS (Yanaka and Mineshima, 2022), a human-translated SICK (Marelli et al., 2014), and JGLUE-JSTS (Kurihara et al., 2022) for Japanese; and KorSTS (Ham et al., 2020), a human-translated STS-B (Cer et al., 2017), and KLUE-STS (Park et al., 2021) for Korean.

3.3. Evaluation Protocol

Following Gao et al. (2021), we evaluate sentence embeddings by measuring the correlation between the human labels $[0, 5]$ and the cosine distance between two given sentences, using Spearman’s rank

⁴The details of data preprocessing are described in the Appendix B.

⁵An ablation study with different data sizes is reported in the Appendix E.

Models	Japanese		Korean	
	JSICK-STS	JGLUE-JSTS	KorSTS	KLUE-STS
<i>Cross-lingual transfer</i>				
mSimCSE _{en}				
+ NLI	79.55	74.12	74.68	72.87
+ SNLI	80.31	74.73	75.21	65.83
<i>Machine translation</i>				
mSimCSE _{MT_{ja}}				
+ JSNLI	78.41	75.55		
mSimCSE _{MT_{kr}}				
+ KorNLI			75.43	74.45

Table 3: Comparisons of cross-lingual transfer and machine translation as data augmentation. We report Spearman’s correlation [%]. Higher is better.

English		English	
Models	STS-B	Models	STS-B
<i>Unsupervised</i>			
RoBERTa _{large}	56.29	XLm-R _{large}	43.54
SimCSE		mSimCSE _{en}	
+ Wiki	85.95	+ Wiki	83.54
		+ NLI	76.98

(a) Monolingual models.

(b) Multilingual models.

Table 4: Comparisons of different data domains.

correlation coefficient (Spearman, 1904). However, instead of using test portions of the labeled STS datasets, we used development portions as our evaluation data to avoid the unnecessary overfitting to English development data (Keung et al., 2020), which would be caused by applying the standard evaluation protocol to cross-lingual transfer experiments.

3.4. Results

Table 3 summarizes the comparisons of the two data augmentation techniques under a controlled setting within the same NLI domain. In this fair setting, machine translation (mSimCSE_{MT}) slightly outperformed cross-lingual transfer (mSimCSE_{en}). Specifically, in the case of Korean, mSimCSE_{MT_{kr}} almost outperformed mSimCSE_{en}. Similarly, in the case of Japanese, mSimCSE_{MT_{ja}} outperformed mSimCSE_{en} with the exception on JSICK-STS.

However, we are yet to conclude that machine translation is better than cross-lingual transfer. Table 4 summarizes the comparisons between NLI and Wikipedia domains in English. Unlike prior studies focusing on NLI as training data, surprisingly, we obtained different results in this domain-aware setting. Specifically, the mSimCSE_{en} model trained using Wikipedia data outperformed its counterpart using NLI data, suggesting a superiority of

Models	Japanese		Korean	
	JSICK-STS	JGLUE-JSTS	KorSTS	KLUE-STS
<i>Unsupervised</i>				
XLM-R _{large}	61.87	54.19	49.26	20.13
mSimCSE _{en}				
+ Wiki	81.02	77.62	80.38	81.42
+ SNLI	80.31	74.73	75.21	65.83
<i>Fully supervised</i>				
LaBSE	76.77	76.12	73.01	82.81

Table 5: Comparisons of the best-performing cross-lingual transfer of Wikipedia data and LaBSE.

Wikipedia as unlabeled training data.

These new results led us to the combination of our findings, namely the cross-lingual transfer of Wikipedia domain data. Table 5 summarizes the comparisons involving both the Wikipedia and NLI domains. In this best-performing setting following Gao et al. (2021), the cross-lingual transfer of Wikipedia outperformed the machine translation of NLI, resulting in performance almost outperforming that of LaBSE. Specifically, the mSimCSE_{en} model trained using Wikipedia data outperformed LaBSE with the only exception on KLUE-STS.⁶

4. Discussion

Between cross-lingual transfer or machine translation, which is better? It depends. On one hand, machine translation can outperform cross-lingual transfer if we used the same NLI domain as training data. On the other hand, the cross-lingual transfer of Wikipedia domain data outperformed the machine-translated NLI domain data. These results rather suggest the effectiveness of Wikipedia as unlabeled training data.

Do these approaches yield performance on par with that of a state-of-the-art multilingual model? Yes, we found that the cross-lingual transfer of Wikipedia data can outperform LaBSE. This posed us a few more questions: Should we pursue the direction of English as training data proxy, similar to mSimCSE? Are there some benefit from using native multilingual data, if we could create it without using machine translation, similar to LaBSE?

Table 6 summarizes additional results using native Japanese Wikipedia data. This pilot study suggests that using native data can indeed improve performance over cross-lingual transfer of English

⁶We also performed an analysis of the obtained sentence embeddings using KLUE-STS, which is reported in the Appendix C

Models	English	Japanese	
	STS-B	JSICK-STS	JGLUE-JSTS
<i>Cross-lingual transfer</i>			
mSimCSE _{en}			
+ Wiki	83.54	81.02	77.62
<i>Native data</i>			
mSimCSE _{ja}			
+ Wiki-40B	81.89	81.05	78.71

Table 6: Comparisons of English Wikipedia data cross-lingual transfer and native Japanese data.

data. However, we are yet to answer the ultimate question of English as training data proxy.

5. Related Work

Learning Sentence Embeddings Sentence embeddings are learned representations of sentences within a single dense matrix, unlike word embeddings, which are represented in multiple dense matrices. Several methods for fine-tuning pretrained masked language models have been proposed, including (a) SBERT (Reimers and Gurevych, 2019) using sentence-pair regression for supervised learning of labeled STS data, and (b) unsupervised SimCSE (Gao et al., 2021) using sentence-pair contrastive learning for self-supervised learning of unlabeled data. Both methods yield good sentence embeddings in terms of cosine distance in STS.

Cross-lingual Transferability of Multilingual Models Artetxe and Schwenk (2019) proposed LASER, language-agnostic representations of sentence embeddings learned from dedicated parallel data. They studied cross-lingual transferability of LASER on XNLI (Conneau et al., 2018) and found improved performance in various languages. Feng et al. (2022) proposed LaBSE, which outperformed LASER in downstream tasks by using additional monolingual data with parallel data. Wang et al. (2022) proposed mSimCSE, a multilingual extension of SimCSE, which is perhaps the most related work. They investigated cross-lingual transferability of mSimCSE by using various tasks including multilingual STS.

Cross-lingual Transferability of Monolingual Models Artetxe et al. (2020) studied cross-lingual transferability from one language to unseen languages. They showed that the transfer learning of monolingual BERT (Devlin et al., 2019) at the lexical level outperformed multilingual BERT on XQuAD. Reimers and Gurevych (2020) studied transfer learning of SBERT at the sentence

level, using multilingual knowledge distillation in English and Korean as monolingual and multilingual STS. They observed performance better than that of monolingual fine-tuning in Korean. Gogoulou et al. (2022) studied cross-lingual transferability from non-English languages into English by using various GLUE tasks (Wang et al., 2018) including monolingual STS.

6. Conclusion

In this study, we empirically compared cross-lingual transfer and machine translation in terms of monolingual STS performance. We chose Japanese and Korean as our test bed, because these languages are relatively low-resourced and linguistically dissimilar compared with English, and thus are challenging for the two data augmentation techniques. We found that the cross-lingual transfer exhibits performance comparable to that of the machine translation depending on data domain. We also found that, in contrast to prior studies, cross-lingual transfer of Wikipedia data achieved the best performance, outperforming or comparable to that of the state-of-the-art LaBSE. Our future work will include fine-grained analysis of which types of data are better suitable for monolingual STS.

Limitations

Our study focuses primarily on Japanese and Korean, which are often considered high-resource or mid-resource languages, but, at the same time, are relatively low-resourced with respect to STS training data and therefore suitable for data augmentation. For this reason, our results are not directly applicable to other low-resource and regional languages, as even human-labeled STS evaluation data are lacking. In addition, we did not conduct experiments using Wikipedia data machine-translated from English into Japanese and Korean, which will be part of our future work.

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A. Implementation Details

In this study, we reimplemented the unsupervised SimCSE (Gao et al., 2021) instead of utilizing the original implementation provided by the authors⁷. We used Sentence-Transformers 2.2.0 (Reimers and Gurevych, 2019), Hugging Face Transformers 4.18.0 (Wolf et al., 2020), and SentencePiece 0.1.96 (Kudo and Richardson, 2018). We also used the publicly available models of XLM-R⁸, LaBSE⁹, RoBERTa¹⁰, KLUE-RoBERTa¹¹, and SBERT¹², as well as the unsupervised SimCSE models distributed by the original authors¹³. We report results obtained in a single run with the random seed fixed, while freezing hyperparameters for the sake of reproducibility (Keung et al., 2020).

B. Data Preprocessing

Here, we describe the details of our data preprocessing to make the data used in this study reproducible. We have removed empty lines from our NLI and Wikipedia datasets and applied additional preprocessing as follows.

NLI datasets For JSNLI, we roughly detokenized the already-tokenized dataset by applying NFKC normalization and eliminating white spaces. For JSICK-STIS, we used its test portion to make it comparable with the other datasets.

Wikipedia datasets For English Wikipedia, we used the data¹⁴ distributed with the original implementation of SimCSE (Gao et al., 2021), which contains exactly 1 million sentences but the authors did not report its details.

Therefore, we created our own Japanese Wikipedia data from the multilingual Wiki-40B dataset¹⁵ (Guo et al., 2020) as a replication study. Specifically, we extracted Japanese paragraphs

⁷<https://github.com/princeton-nlp/SimCSE>

⁸<https://huggingface.co/xlm-roberta-large>

⁹<https://huggingface.co/sentence-transformers/LaBSE>

¹⁰<https://huggingface.co/roberta-large>

¹¹<https://huggingface.co/klue/roberta-large>

¹²<https://huggingface.co/sentence-transformers/roberta-large-nli-mean-tokens>

¹³<https://huggingface.co/princeton-nlp/unsup-simcse-roberta-large>

¹⁴<https://huggingface.co/datasets/princeton-nlp/datasets-for-simcse>

¹⁵<https://huggingface.co/datasets/wiki40b>

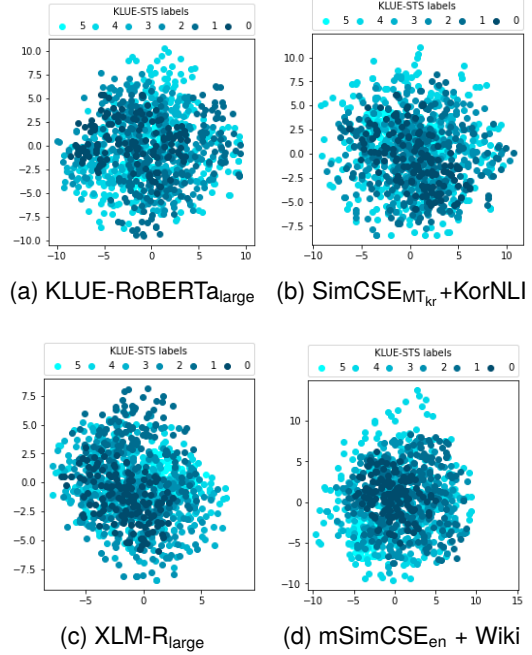


Figure 2: 2D visualization of sentence embeddings on KLUE-STIS. Different scales are used to better illustrate the isotropic nature of SimCSE fine-tuning.

from Wiki-40B and applied sentence splitting using new line symbols and Japanese period markers. To match the data size of the Japanese Wikipedia data with its English counterpart, we used only the first 1 million sentences.

C. Analysis of Sentence Embeddings

We performed an analysis of the obtained sentence embeddings using visualization and metrics.

Visualization Figure 2 provides a visualization of the sentence embeddings on KLUE-STIS, which were obtained by applying t-distributed stochastic neighbor embedding (t-SNE; van der Maaten and Hinton, 2008) for two-dimensional reduction. We compared cross-lingual transfer (2d) with a Korean model (2b), which was fine-tuned using KLUE-RoBERTa (Liu et al., 2019; Park et al., 2021), unsupervised SimCSE (Gao et al., 2021), and KorNLI. We observe that cross-lingual transfer can maintain the isotropic nature of SimCSE fine-tuning.

Alignment and Uniformity We further confirmed the aforementioned trend by using alignment and uniformity metrics (Wang and Isola, 2020) to quantify the isotropic nature of SimCSE fine-tuning. The monolingual model (2b) scored $\ell_{\text{align}} = 0.3540$ and $\ell_{\text{uniform}} = -3.3486$, while cross-lingual transfer (2d) scored similar values of $\ell_{\text{align}} = 0.2684$ and $\ell_{\text{uniform}} = -3.2484$.

Models	English STS-B
<i>Unsupervised</i>	
RoBERTa _{base}	64.70
SimCSE _{orig}	
+ Wiki	84.26
SimCSE _{repro}	
+ Wiki	83.90
RoBERTa _{large}	56.29
SimCSE _{orig}	
+ Wiki	85.52
SimCSE _{repro}	
+ Wiki	85.95
<i>English NLI Supervised</i>	
SBERT _{base}	
+ NLI	80.73
SBERT _{large}	
+ NLI	82.51

(a) Monolingual models.

Models	English STS-B
<i>Unsupervised</i>	
XLM-R _{base}	53.62
mSimCSE _{en}	
+ Wiki	76.44
+ NLI	75.79
XLM-R _{large}	43.54
mSimCSE _{en}	
+ Wiki	83.54
+ NLI	76.98
<i>Fully supervised</i>	
LaBSE	74.13

(b) Multilingual models.

(8a) outperformed that using both the premise and hypothesis (8b). This result is convincing, as the hypothesis portion is artificially created from the premise portion (Dagan et al., 2005) and there is not much variation in the relation between them.

Table 7: Comparison of unsupervised SimCSE in English on different training data and base models. SimCSE_{orig} denotes the models distributed by the original authors, whereas SimCSE_{repro} and mSimCSE denote our implementation used in this study.

D. Replication Study

We conducted a replication study of unsupervised SimCSE in English (Gao et al., 2021) by using various training data that have been extensively used in the relevant literature but not directly compared in the unsupervised SimCSE setup. We used RoBERTa (Liu et al., 2019) as the monolingual base model and performed monolingual fine-tuning using unsupervised SimCSE.

As summarized in Table 7, our implementation (SimCSE_{repro} and mSimCSE) exhibited performance comparable to that of the models distributed by the original authors (SimCSE_{orig}).

E. Ablation Study

We conducted an ablation study on different sizes of training data in English, Japanese, and Korean. In this comparison, we used NLI datasets, combining them in two ways: (a) only the premise portion, and (b) both the premise and hypothesis portions. As a result, our data sizes varied from roughly 0.5M examples to up to 2.0M examples.

Table 8 summarizes the results of the ablation study. Our findings are twofold. (i) There was a minimum practical size of 1.0M examples. All models trained using lower sizes suffered serious performance degradation. (ii) We also observed that when the data size was already close to 1.0M examples, the case using the premise portion alone

Models	Size	English STS-B	Japanese JGLUE- JSTS	Korean KorSTS	KLUE- STS
<i>Unsupervised</i>					
XLM-R _{base}		53.62	59.28	57.98	30.69
mSimCSE _{en}					
+ SNLI	0.5M	72.61	71.56	69.52	52.13
+ NLI	1.0M	75.79	71.83	73.61	60.66
mSimCSE _{MT_{ja}}					
+ JSNLI	0.5M	72.87	71.16	73.48	63.69
mSimCSE _{MT_{kr}}					
+ KorNLI	1.0M	75.39	73.02	73.34	67.13
XLM-R _{large}		43.54	54.19	49.26	20.13
mSimCSE _{en}					
+ NLI	1.0M	78.66	74.12	74.68	72.87
mSimCSE _{MT_{kr}}					
+ KorNLI	1.0M	80.29	74.93	75.43	74.45

(a) The premise alone.

Models	Size	English STS-B	Japanese JGLUE- JSTS	Korean KorSTS	KLUE- STS
<i>Unsupervised</i>					
XLM-R _{base}		53.62	59.28	57.98	30.69
mSimCSE _{en}					
+ SNLI	1.0M	75.03	72.69	73.71	58.75
+ NLI	2.0M	75.83	73.12	74.18	61.75
mSimCSE _{MT_{ja}}					
+ JSNLI	1.0M	75.26	71.69	74.20	65.39
XLM-R _{large}		43.54	54.19	49.26	20.13
mSimCSE _{en}					
+ SNLI	1.0M	75.36	74.73	75.21	65.83
+ NLI	2.0M	76.87	75.19	74.19	70.60
mSimCSE _{MT_{ja}}					
+ JSNLI	1.0M	79.40	75.55	75.21	73.97

(b) Both the premise and hypothesis.

Table 8: Ablation study on different data sizes, data combinations, and base models. **Boldface** only highlights the best performance values over the two combinations of the premise alone and both the premise and hypothesis.