

Probing for experience-driven critical period effects in a large language model

Dyana Muller

UC Berkeley, Berkeley, California, United States

Koquiun Li Lin

University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

Charles Kemp

University of Melbourne, Melbourne, VIC, Australia

Francis Mollica

University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

Abstract

Critical period effects (CPEs), wherein learning during childhood is easier, are often considered to be maturationally-driven. However, recent findings of CPEs in artificial, non-maturing models suggest they can be driven by experience alone. We investigate to what extent experience can drive CPEs in second language (L2) grammar acquisition by probing for CPEs in a large language model (LLM). Constantinescu et al. (2024) report no evidence for experience-driven L2 CPEs in LLMs, but do not discuss the fine-grained grammatical rules used in prior behavioral studies of CPEs. We document that LLM learning patterns vary across these rules, but mostly find no evidence for human-like CPEs. Our results therefore support previous conclusions that CPEs in L2 grammar acquisition are not driven by experience alone.