

Catastrophic Forgetting in Connectionist Networks: Causes, Consequences and Solutions

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Abstract

All natural cognitive systems, and, in particular, our own, gradually forget previously learned information. Consequently, plausible models of human cognition should exhibit similar patterns of gradual forgetting old information as new information is acquired. Only rarely (see Box 3) does new learning in natural cognitive systems *completely* disrupt or erase previously learned information. In other words, natural cognitive systems do not, in general, forget *catastrophically*. Unfortunately, however, this is precisely what occurs under certain circumstances in distributed connectionist networks. It turns out that the very features that give these networks their much-touted abilities to generalize, to function in the presence of degraded input, etc., are the root cause of catastrophic forgetting. The challenge is how to keep the advantages of distributed connectionist networks while avoiding the problem of catastrophic forgetting. In this article, we examine the causes, consequences and numerous solutions to the problem of catastrophic forgetting in neural networks. We consider how the brain might have overcome this problem and explore the consequences of this solution.

Introduction

By the end of the 1980's many of the early problems with connectionist networks, such as their difficulties with sequence-learning and the profoundly stimulus-response nature of supervised learning algorithms such as error backpropagation had been largely solved. However, as these problems were being solved, another was discovered by McCloskey and Cohen¹ and Ratcliff². They suggested that there might be a *fundamental* limitation to this type of distributed architecture, in the same way that Minsky and Papert³ had shown twenty years before that there were certain fundamental limitations to what a perceptron^{4,5} could do. They observed that under certain conditions, the process of learning a new set of patterns suddenly and completely erased a network's knowledge of what it had already learned. They referred to this phenomenon as catastrophic interference (or catastrophic forgetting) and suggested that the underlying reason for this difficulty was the very thing — a single set of shared weights — that gave the networks their remarkable abilities to generalize and degrade gracefully.

Catastrophic interference is a radical manifestation of a more general problem for connectionist models of memory — in fact, for *any* model of memory —, the so-called “stability-plasticity” problem.^{6,7} The problem is how to design a system that is simultaneously sensitive to, but not radically disrupted by, new input.

In this article we will focus primarily on a particular, widely used class of distributed neural network architectures — namely, those with a single set of shared (or partially shared) multiplicative weights. While this defines a very broad class of networks, this definition is certainly not exhaustive. In the remainder of this article we will discuss the numerous attempts over the last decade to solve this problem within the context of this type of network.

Catastrophic interference versus gradual interference

First, we need to make clear the distinction between what McCloskey & Cohen¹ call “the mere occurrence of interference” and “catastrophic interference.” Barnes and Underwood⁸ conducted a series of experiments that measured the extent of retroactive interference in human learning. They first had subjects first learn a set of paired associates (A-B) consisting of a nonsense syllable and an adjective (e.g. *dax* with *regal*, etc.) and then asked them to learn a new set of paired associates (A-C) consisting of the same nonsense syllables associated with a new set of adjectives. They were able to determine that the forgetting curve for the A-B associate pairs produced by interference from the learning of the new A-C pairs was relatively gradual. By contrast, McCloskey and Cohen¹ showed that, at least under certain circumstances, forgetting in a standard backpropagation network was anything but gradual. In one set of experiments, a standard backpropagation network⁹ thoroughly learned a set of “one’s addition facts” (i.e., the 17 sums 1+1 through 9+1 and 1+2 through 1+9). Then the network learned the 17 “two’s addition facts” (i.e., 2+1 through 2+9 and 1+2 through 9+2). Recall performance on the originally learned one’s facts plummeted as soon as the network began learning the new two’s addition facts. Within 1-5 two’s learning trials, the number of correct responses on the one’s facts had dropped from 100% to 20%. In five more learning trials, the one’s knowledge was at 1%, by 15 trials, no correct answers from the previous one’s problems could be produced by the network. The network had “catastrophically” forgotten its one’s sums. In a subsequent experiment that attempted to more closely match the original Barnes and Underwood paradigm, they again found the same catastrophic, rather than gradual, forgetting in the neural network they tested.

Ratcliff² tested a series of error-backpropagation models on a number of similar tasks, for vectors of different sizes and for networks of various types, and also found that well-learned information can be catastrophically forgotten by new learning.

These two papers are generally given credit for bringing the problem of catastrophic interference to the attention of the connectionist community. One might wonder why, if the problem of catastrophic interference was as serious as these authors claimed, it had taken more than five years to come to light. McCloskey and Cohen¹ answered this as follows: “Disruption of old knowledge by new learning is a recognized feature of connectionist models with distributed representations. (e.g., [2, 10, 11, 12, 13]). However, the interference is sometimes described as if it were mild and/or readily avoided (see, e.g., [11], pp. 81-82). Perhaps for this reason, the interference phenomenon has received surprisingly little attention...”

The conclusions of these two papers raised a number of important theoretical as well as practical concerns — namely: Is this problem inherent in *all* distributed architectures? Can distributed architectures be designed that avoid the problem? If human brains are anything like connectionist models, why is there no evidence of this kind of forgetting in humans? Can this kind of forgetting be observed in animals with a less highly evolved brain organization? And finally will distributed connectionist networks remain unable to perform true sequential learning?¹⁴ In other words, humans tend to learn one pattern, then another, then another, etc., and even though some of the earlier patterns may be seen again, this is not necessary for them to be retained in memory. As new patterns are learned, forgetting of old, unrepeated patterns occurs gradually over time. However, for any network subject to catastrophic interference, learning *cannot* occur in this manner, since the new learning will effectively erase previous learning.

Measuring catastrophic interference

The two initial studies on catastrophic interference^{1, 2} relied on an “exact recognition” measure of forgetting. In other words, after the network had learned a set of binary patterns

and then was trained on a second set of patterns, its recognition performance on the first set was tested by presenting each old input pattern to the network and seeing how close it came to its originally learned associate. If all of the output nodes were not within 0.5 of the original associate (i.e., could not correctly generalize to the original associate), then the network was said to have “forgotten” the original pattern. Hetherington and Seidenberg¹⁵ introduced a “savings” measure of forgetting based on a relearning measure first proposed by Ebbinghaus¹⁶. To measure how completely the network had lost the original associations, they measured the amount of time it required to relearn the original data. They showed that it was often the case that a network that seems, on the basis of exact-recognition criterion, to have completely forgotten its originally learned associations, can be retrained very quickly to recall those associations. Unfortunately, later work showed that not all catastrophic forgetting is of this “shallow” sort. Most discussions of catastrophic forgetting now include both of these measures.

Early attempts to solve the problem

As early as 1990, various solutions were suggested to the problem. Kortge¹⁷ claimed that the problem was not one inherent in distributed connectionist architectures, but rather was due to the backpropagation learning rule. He developed a variation of the backpropagation algorithm using what he called “novelty vectors” that produced a decrease in catastrophic interference. The idea is that “when the network makes an error, we would like to blame just those active units which were ‘responsible’ for the error — blaming any others leads to excess interference with other patterns’ output.” When a new pattern was to be learned by his auto-associative network, it was fed through the network, which produced some pattern on output. The difference between this pattern and the intended output (i.e., the pattern itself, since the task of the network was to produce on output what it had seen on input) was what he called a novelty vector (the bigger the differences, the more “novel” the pattern). His new weight-change algorithm weighted the standard backpropagation delta parameter based on activation values from this novelty vector. The bigger the novelty activation, the bigger the corresponding weight change.

The effect of Kortge’s learning rule was to reduce the amount of overlap between input representations of the new patterns to be learned and previously learned patterns. French^{18, 19} suggested that, in general, catastrophic forgetting was largely a consequence of the overlap of *internal* distributed representations and that reducing this overlap would reduce catastrophic interference. He argued for the necessity of “semi-distributed” representations that would remain distributed enough to retain many of the advantages of fully distributed representations, but were not so fully distributed as to overlap with all other representations and cause catastrophic interference. Explicitly decreasing representational overlap by creating “sparse vectors” (i.e., internal representations in which only a few nodes were active, and most were not active) served as the basis for French’s activation sharpening algorithm.^{18, 19} An extra step is added to the standard backpropagation learning algorithm in which activations patterns at the hidden layer are “sharpened,” i.e., the activation level of the most active hidden node(s) is increased slightly for each pattern, while the other nodes’ activations are decreased. This technique had the effect of “sparsifying” the hidden-layer representations and significantly reduced catastrophic forgetting as long as there were not too many patterns to be learned.

Brousse and Smolensky²⁰ acknowledged that catastrophic interference was, indeed, a problem, but they attempted to show that in combinatorially structured domains, such as language and fact learning, neural networks are able to largely overcome the problem. McRae & Hetherington²¹ came to a similar conclusion and demonstrated that for domains in which patterns have a high degree of internal structure, when a network is pre-trained on random samples from that domain, catastrophic interference disappears from future learning. The

intuitive interpretation of this is that when a domain is quite regular, learning a random sample of exemplars from that domain will be enough to “capture” the regularities of the domain. Subsequently, when new exemplars are presented to the network, they will tend to be very much like previously-learned exemplars and will not interfere with them. It has also been shown (Brander, R., 1998. Unpublished Master’s thesis, University of Queensland, Australia) that in combinatorial domains, especially when sparse internal coding was achieved, there is a significant reduction of catastrophic interference. However, the price paid for the sparse coding in these domains is poorer generalization to new exemplars and poorer overall ability to discriminate.^{22, 23, 24}

Reducing representational overlap

In one way or another, almost all of the early techniques relied on reducing representational overlap. Some attempted to use orthogonal recoding of inputs.^{17, 25, 26} These techniques used bi-polar feature coding (i.e., -1/1 on each feature input instead of the most standard 0/1 encoding), which made orthogonalization at the input layer easier. One problem with these techniques remains how to determine, in general, how this orthogonal coding on input can be done.

Alternately, internal representational overlap was reduced by attempting to orthogonalize the hidden-layer activation patterns.^{18, 24, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31} It turned out that internal orthogonalization of representations could be made to emerge automatically by pre-training.²¹ These models all develop, in one way or another, semi-distributed (i.e., not fully distributed) internal representations within a single network. Because these representations overlap with one another less than fully distributed representations, catastrophic interference is reduced. In some cases, for example, in Sloman & Rumelhart³¹, what amount to localist representations emerge directly from the architecture to avoid the problem. Predictably, in all cases, this reduces catastrophic interference.

Arguably, the two most interesting examples in this latter group are CALM²⁸ and ALCOVE^{29, 30}. CALM²⁸ is an explicitly modular connectionist architecture. A CALM network is made up of three distinct type of competing nodes, excitatory (R-nodes), inhibitory (V-nodes) and arousal nodes (A-nodes). When new input arrives, the system is so designed as to trigger “an elaborative search among nodes that mostly have not yet been committed to other representations.”²⁸ This is reminiscent of the ART family of architectures^{32, 7} in which a similar notion of representational assignment of new patterns is used. In ART, as in CALM, new input does not, in general, interfere with old input because it is “recognized” as being new and is “assigned” to a new node or set of nodes. In other words, a series of “top-down” connections ensure that only similar patterns are directed to the same node. Once again, new, unfamiliar input is separated from old, familiar patterns, thus allowing catastrophic interference to be avoided. One of the central claims of this line of research is that the key to solving catastrophic forgetting lies with the type of synaptic transfer function used by the model.³³ In this view, the problem of catastrophic forgetting arises from the use of multiplicative path-weights, a very widely accepted part of neural network design. For a more complete discussion of the role of synaptic transfer functions in catastrophic forgetting in the ART family of networks, see [33].

ALCOVE^{29, 30} is a three-layer feed-forward network in which the activation of a node in the hidden layer depends (according to an inverse exponential function) on that node’s distance from the input stimulus. The hidden layer can be regarded as a “covering” of the input layer. The inverse exponential activation function has the effect of producing a localized receptive field around each hidden node, causing it to respond only to a limited part of the input field. This kind of topological localization does not exist in standard backpropagation networks. The architecture of ALCOVE is such that the representation of new inputs, especially of new inputs that are not close to already-learned patterns, will not

overlap significantly with old representations. This means that the set of weights that produced the old representations will remain largely unaffected by new input.

Representations in ALCOVE, depending on how finely the inverse-distance activation function is tuned, can vary from being somewhat distributed to highly local. When they are semi-distributed, this confers on the system its ability to generalize. When the width of the receptive fields at each node is increased, thereby making each representation more distributed and causing greater overlap among representations, the amount of interference among representations does increase. In other words, if the receptive field of the an input becomes restricted enough, the ALCOVE network becomes, for all intents and purposes, a localist network, thereby avoiding catastrophic interference from new input.

Distributed models that are sensitive and stable in the presence of new information

Certain models that rely on distributed, overlapping representations do not seem to forget catastrophically in the presence of new information. In particular, the class of convolution-correlation models, such as CHARM³⁴ and TODAM³⁵, and Sparse Distributed Memory (SDM)³⁶ can learn new information in a sequential manner and can, in addition, generalize on new input. The performance of these models on previously learned information declines gradually, rather than falling off abruptly, when learning new patterns. While, strictly speaking, convolution-correlation models and SDM are not “connectionist” models, the former are readily shown to be isomorphic to sigma-pi connectionist models and SDM is isomorphic to a Hopfield network.³⁷ While there are critical storage limits to this type of memory (and therefore, in Hopfield networks as well) beyond which memory retrieval becomes abruptly impossible, below this limit SDM’s internal representations precisely fit the bill of being semi-distributed. Their sparseness ensures a low degree of overlap, while their distributedness ensures that generalization will be maintained. In CHARM and TODAM, the input vectors consist of a large number of features that are bi-modally coded, with an expected mean over all features of 0. This coding is critical and ensures a significant degree of orthogonality on input, which as we have seen²⁶, in general, decreases catastrophic forgetting.

Rehearsal of prior learning

Connectionist learning, especially in feedforward backpropagation networks, is a very contrived kind of learning. All of the patterns to be learned must be presented concurrently and repeatedly until the weights of the network gradually converge to an appropriate set of values. Real human learning, on the other hand, is largely sequential, even if it is true that many old items are refreshed continually in memory (“rehearsed”) because we encounter them over and over. A number of authors^{2, 15, 28, 38} have studied various “rehearsal” schemes to alleviate catastrophic interference.. In this paradigm, learning is not truly sequential, rather, a number of the previously learned items are explicitly mixed in (“rehearsed”) along with the new patterns to be learned. Numerous methods of choosing which of the previously learned items are to be mixed with the new patterns were studied and, as expected, all were found to decrease the severity of catastrophic forgetting.

In 1995, Robins³⁸ made a significant contribution to the field by introducing his “pseudopattern” technique (see Box 2) for doing rehearsal when none of the original patterns were available. This technique, combined with the notion of separate processing areas in the brain³⁹ led to the development of dual-network models discussed below^{40, 41}.

Separating new learning from old learning

French^{18, 19} suggested that to alleviate catastrophic forgetting in distributed networks dynamical separation of their internal representations during learning was necessary.

McClelland, McNaughton, & O'Reilly³⁹ went even further and suggested that nature's way of implementing this obligatory separation was the evolution of two separate areas of the brain, the hippocampus and the neocortex. They justified the brain's bi-modal architecture as follows:

"The sequential acquisition of new data is incompatible with the gradual discovery of structure and can lead to *catastrophic interference* with what has previously been learned. In light of these observations, we suggest that the neocortex may be optimized for the gradual discovery of the shared structure of events and experiences, and that the hippocampal system is there to provide a mechanism for rapid acquisition of new information without interference with previously discovered regularities. After this initial acquisition, the hippocampal system serves as a teacher to the neocortex..."

The earliest attempt at implementing a dual-net architecture in order to decrease catastrophic interference was a model called Jumpnet⁴². This model consisted of a standard connectionist network (the "processing" network) coupled with a "control" network that modulated the weights of the processing network. While this type of dual network was shown to reduce catastrophic interference in certain cases, it was not clear that it could effectively handle the type of problem most likely to cause catastrophic forgetting — namely, learning new patterns whose inputs are very similar to that of previously learned patterns, but whose outputs are quite different.

French⁴⁰ and Ans & Roussett⁴¹ independently developed dual-network architectures based on the principle of two separate pattern-processing areas, one for early-processing, the other for long-term storage. In both models, the early-processing and storage areas are in continual communication, transferring information back and forth by means of pseudopatterns³⁸. Both models exhibit gradual forgetting and, consequently, plausible sequence learning. In French's pseudo-recurrent network⁴⁰, the pseudopattern transfer mechanism leads to a gradual "compression" (i.e., fewer active nodes) of internal representations in the long-term storage area. It has been shown⁴³ that the representational compression inherent in this kind of dual-network system, designed to reduce catastrophic interference, would produce certain patterns of category-specific deficits actually observed in amnesiacs. It has been shown that in human list-learning, adding new items to the list decreases recall of earlier items in the list.^{44, 45} By contrast, strengthening of particular items, (for example, by repeating them) does not produce decreased recall of the unstrengthened items (i.e., there is no so-called list-strength effect).⁴⁶ The pseudo-recurrent architecture, like humans, exhibits a plausible list-length effect and the absence of a list-strength effect, a dissociation that gives many current connectionist models problems.

Other techniques for alleviating catastrophic forgetting in neural networks

A number of other techniques have been developed to address the problem of catastrophic interference. Notably, Chappell & Humphreys⁴⁷ combined an auto-associative architecture with sparse representations to successfully reduce the level of catastrophic interference. Like the dual-network architectures, their architecture also exhibits a list-length and no list-strength effect. Hinton & Plaut¹² were able to reduce interference in new learning by using two different kinds of weights instead of one. One set changed rapidly, but decayed to zero rapidly ("fast" weights); the other was hard to change, but decayed only slowly back to zero ("slow" weights). The weight used in the learning algorithm was a combination of slow and fast weights. This technique, although frequently cited, has not yet been thoroughly explored, although it is likely that there are storage capacity limitations to this type of solution. In other words, while it can be used to mitigate the influence of one or two new patterns on previously learned patterns, is the technique sufficiently powerful to permit true sequential learning

similar to that in dual-network architectures? Another more recent dual-weight architectures⁴⁸ employs two sets of independent weights and taxonomically falls somewhere between dual-network models^{40, 41} and single-network, dual-weight architectures¹². Cascade-correlation⁴⁹ has also been tried as a means of alleviating catastrophic interference with some success⁵⁰.

Conclusion

For nearly a decade researchers have been studying the problem of catastrophic interference in connectionist networks. Modeling true sequential learning of the kind that we humans do requires appropriate solutions of this problem to be found. Recent research seems to indicate that one possible solution to the problem is two separate, permanently interacting processing areas, one for new information, the other for long-term storage of previously learning information. Even though it is far from obvious that this is the only way to handle the problem of catastrophic forgetting, certain authors have argued that this is how the human brain evolved to deal with the problem.

Outstanding questions

Do all models that exhibit gradual forgetting rather than catastrophic forgetting necessarily rely on some form of representational separation?

Are dual-network systems really necessary for the brain to overcome the problem of catastrophic forgetting?

How does episodic memory fit into this picture?

Does the pseudopattern mechanism proposed by Robins really have a neural correlate? If so, are neural pseudopatterns produced, say, during REM sleep? And are they really as random as the pseudopatterns used in present dual-network connectionist models or has the brain evolved a better way of doing “rehearsal” in the absence of real input from the environment?

How close can we get to the ideal of good generalization, good discrimination, immunity to catastrophic interference and good episodic memory in a single, distributed system?

What types of animals are subject to catastrophic interference and under what circumstances? Are there circumstances under which humans do experience catastrophic forgetting?

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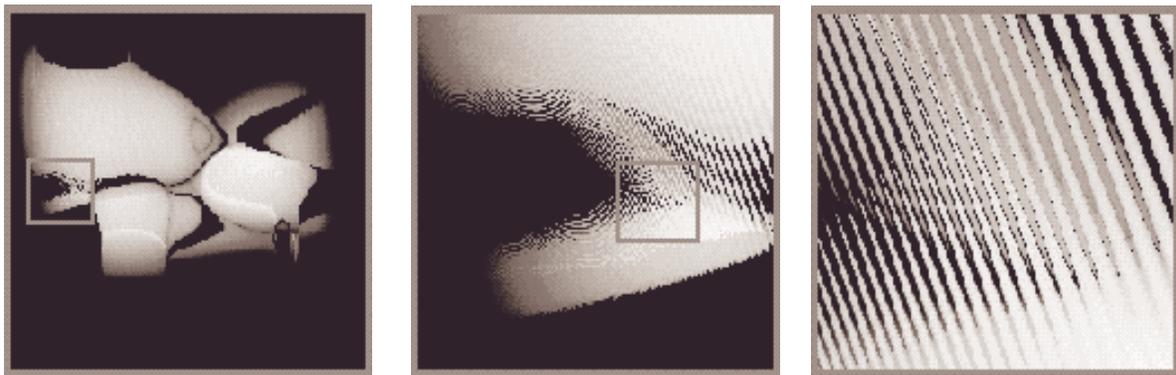
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Box 1. Why the problem of catastrophic interference is so hard

When a distributed network has learned to recognize an initial set of patterns, this means that it has found a point in weight-space, W_{initial} , for which the network can recognize all of the patterns it has seen. If the network now learns a new set of patterns, even if the new set is small, it will move to a new solution point in weight-space, W_{new} , corresponding to a set of weights that allows the network to recognize the new patterns. Catastrophic forgetting^{a,b} occurs when the new weight vector is completely inappropriate as a solution for the originally learned patterns.

Now, if the “topography” of weight-space were predictable and varied smoothly from one point to the next, catastrophic forgetting would not be a problem. In fact, as McCloskey and Cohen^a point out, from the outset everyone working with distributed networks knew that new information would adversely affect already-learned information, but no one realized just how bad it would be.

It turns out that weight-space is not exactly a network-friendly place. The very existence of catastrophic forgetting suggested the presence of “weight cliffs,” i.e., areas where moving even small distances over the weight-landscape would radically disrupt prior learning. A paper by Kolen & Pollack^c clearly confirmed these intuitions. They showed that even extremely small changes in the initial weights of a network could have immense effects on convergence times, even for an extremely simple network (2-2-1) and an extremely simple problem (XOR). It is immediately obvious why this would imply that a move from W_{initial} to W_{new} could have catastrophic effects on the previously learned knowledge, both in terms of the exact-recognition and retraining-time criteria for forgetting.



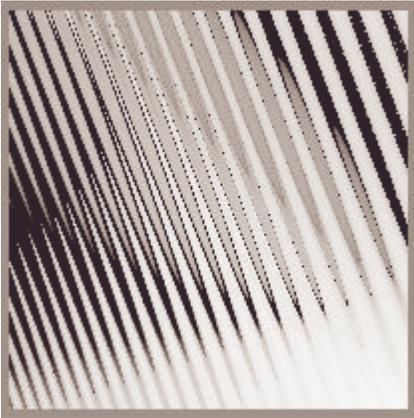
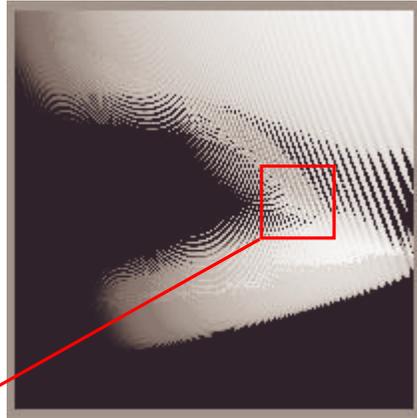
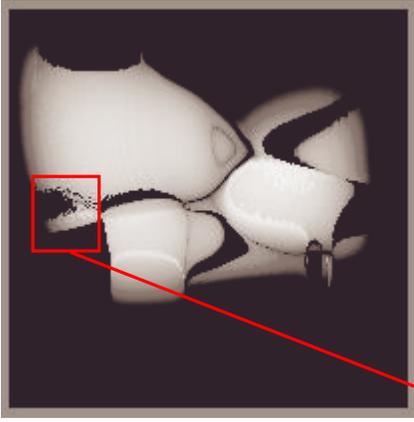
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These three figures show variations in convergence times for a 2-2-1 feedforward backpropagation network learning XOR. Two of the nine weights (i.e., six connection weights and three bias weights) are varied, one along the x-axis, the other along the y-axis. In the leftmost figure, the increments are of size 0.1 and the weights range from -10 to 10 . In other words, 40,000 initial weight combinations were examined. The second and third figures also examine 40,000 combinations of the two weights, but “zoom in” on the area in the square from the previous figure. White indicates the fastest convergence; black indicates no convergence within 200 epochs.

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Box 2. Approximating reality with "pseudopatterns"

Mixing previously learned items ("rehearsal") with the new items to be learned has been shown to be an effective way to transform catastrophic forgetting into everyday gradual forgetting^{a,b,c,d}. But what if the old patterns are unavailable for rehearsal? Robins^d developed a technique that significantly decreased catastrophic interference, even in cases where the previously learned patterns were not available for re-presentation to the network. Robins' idea was as simple as it was effective.

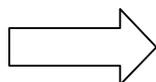
After a network has learned a series of patterns, its weights encode a function, f , defined by those patterns. Now, if the original patterns are no longer available, how can we discover what f might have looked like, even approximately? Robins' solution was to "bombard" the network inputs with random patterns ("pseudo-inputs") and observe the outputs generated by these random inputs. Each random input \hat{i} that was fed through the network produced an output \hat{o} . The association (\hat{i}, \hat{o}) formed what Robins called a "pseudopattern" (designated below by ψ) because, of course, the network had never previously actually seen the input \hat{i} . These pseudopatterns approximate the originally learned function, f , and *can be interleaved with the new patterns to be learned to prevent catastrophic forgetting of the original patterns*. So, just as rehearsing on previously learned patterns prevents a network from forgetting those patterns, rehearsing on pseudopatterns that approximate the function defined by the originally learned patterns also prevents catastrophic forgetting of the original patterns (although, of course, it doesn't work as well as rehearsing on the original patterns). Frean & Robins^e have developed some of the mathematics underlying the use of pseudopatterns to alleviate forgetting. The pseudopattern technique has also been successfully extended to Hopfield networks^f. Robins^g explored the possibility of pseudopatterns as a means by which memory consolidation occurs. This technique has also been used successfully as the means of information transfer between storage areas in dual-network memory models^{h,i}.

One important question in this area is how best to optimize the pseudopatterns used to recover information. Are there ways to improve "quality" of the pseudopatterns so that they better reflect the originally learned regularities in the environment?

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Original Patterns

P₁: I₁ → O₁
P₂: I₂ → O₂
P₃: I₃ → O₃
P₄: I₄ → O₄
...
P_N: I_N → O_N



A neural network **N**
learns all of the
patterns (i.e., learns
to correctly associate
all input/output
pairs I_i and O_i

This set of inputs
and outputs defines
a function f

This network has
now learned f

We now want the network to learn a set of New Patterns, without forgetting the previously learned information. BUT we discover that the Original Patterns are no longer available, and therefore cannot be interleaved with the New Patterns to be learned.

Question: Can we create Substitute Patterns to replace the Original Patterns?

Answer: Yes, by generating a series of random input patterns, \hat{I}_i , each of which is fed through the network to produce an output \hat{O}_i , as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} \psi_1: \hat{I}_1 &\longrightarrow \hat{O}_1 \\ \psi_2: \hat{I}_2 &\longrightarrow \hat{O}_2 \\ \psi_3: \hat{I}_3 &\longrightarrow \hat{O}_3 \\ \psi_4: \hat{I}_4 &\longrightarrow \hat{O}_4 \\ &\dots \\ \psi_M: \hat{I}_M &\longrightarrow \hat{O}_M \end{aligned}$$

This set of pseudopatterns^d $\{\psi_1, \psi_2, \dots, \psi_M\}$ approximates the originally learned function f .

These pseudopatterns will be interleaved with the New Patterns and the network will learn the whole set of pseudopatterns along with the New Patterns, thereby significantly reducing catastrophic forgetting of the originally learned information.

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Box 3. Catastrophic interference in animals

In humans, new learning interferes with old, but the old information is forgotten gradually, rather than catastrophically.^a McClelland, McNaughton, O'Reilly^b suggest that this may be due to our hippocampal-neocortical separation. But does catastrophic interference affect other animals and under what conditions? One likely candidate seems to be the learning — and catastrophic forgetting — of information related to time in the rat.

In their natural environment, animals are very capable predictors of important events like periodical food availability, which plausibly involves an ability to represent time. In the laboratory, researchers have developed several techniques to study timing processes. In the peak procedure^c rats learn to press a lever to receive food after a certain fixed duration. During each trial, the rate of lever-presses per second is recorded. The moment of maximum lever-pressing is called the peak time and reflects the moment at which the animal maximally expects the food.

The observation of steady-state behavior following training has long been used to understand the mechanisms underlying timing abilities^{d,e,f}. Recently it has also been used to study the acquisition of a new temporal representation^{g,h,i}.

We will compare two scenarios. In the first sequential learning experiment, the animal will first learn a 40-second duration and then an 8-second duration (transition 40-8 (1)). Once the new 8-second duration is learned, the criterion is switched back to the original 40-second duration (transition 8-40 (2)). In both cases, the learning of the new duration can be described in terms of a moving peak time. Crucially, the second transition is no faster than the first. In short, there is no evidence of savings from the initial 40-second learning. One reasonable interpretation of this result is that new 8-second learning completely (catastrophically) wiped out the original 40-second learning.

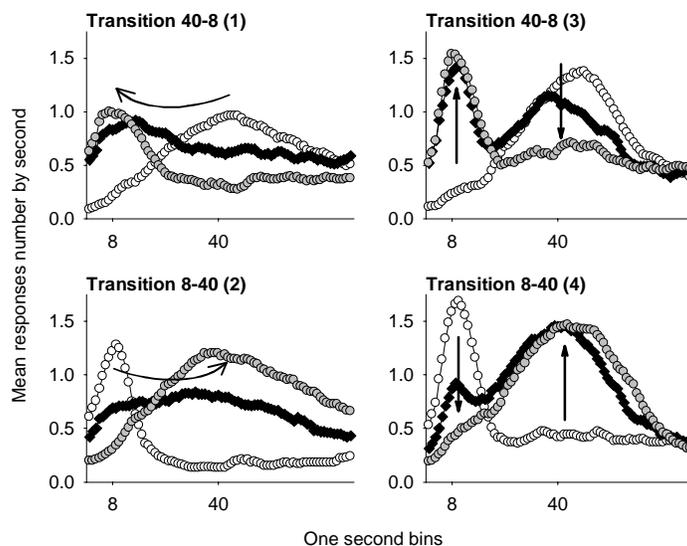


Figure 0. Response rate functions for the reference session (white curve), the transition session (black curve) and the next (gray curve).

However, things are very different in the concurrent-learning scenario in which the animal learns a 40-second and an 8-second duration concurrently. Sometimes food is presented 8 seconds after the start of the trial, sometimes after 40-seconds. The animal is then switched to a 40-second-only reinforcement schedule, which is continued until the animal consistently produces a single peak time of 40 seconds. The reinforcement duration is then switched to 8 seconds (transition 40-8 (3)) and then switched back to 40 seconds again (transition 8-40 (4)). Unlike the previous case in which there was no savings from its

previous learning, the animal, having learned the two durations concurrently, can now rapidly shift back to the correct 8-second duration and, later, to the correct 40-second duration. In this case, while there is forgetting, there is no catastrophic forgetting of the originally learned 8-second duration. This would imply that the representations developed by the rat during concurrent learning are significantly different than those developed during sequential time-duration learning.

This is almost precisely what would occur if a simple feedforward backpropagation network were used to model these time-learning data.

McClelland, McNaughton, and O'Reilly (1995) suggest that catastrophic forgetting may be avoided in higher mammals because of their development of a hippocampal-neocortical separation. It is an open question whether lower animals in which this separation is absent would suffer from catastrophic interference produced by the sequential learning of patterns likely to interfere with one another, as the sequential learning of a 40-second duration seemed to interfere with the prior learning of an 8-second duration in the rat.

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Box 4. Catastrophic "remembering"

One of the most complete analyses of the problem of catastrophic interference appeared in Sharkey & Sharkey^a. In this paper they carefully analyzed the underlying reasons for this type of interference and, significantly, introduced the notion of catastrophic remembering. Unlike catastrophic forgetting, catastrophic remembering is not caused by learning new data after having already learned an initial set of patterns, but rather is caused by the network learning a function, in some sense, "too well."

To understand the notion of catastrophic remembering, consider a network that learns to auto-associate a large number of patterns. The way in which the network "knows" whether or not it has seen a particular pattern before is by comparing the pattern on input and the result of its having passed through the network. If there is very little difference, it concludes that it already auto-associated that particular pattern. In other words, it had already seen it. On the other hand, a large input-output difference means that it has encountered a new pattern. But now, consider what happens if the network has learned so many patterns that it has effectively learned the identity function. Once the network can reliably produce on output what it received on input for a large enough set of patterns, it will generalize correctly but it will "remember" virtually any pattern, whether or not it has actually ever seen it before. The fundamental difficulty is that the network has then lost its ability to discriminate previously seen input from new input, even though it is generalizing the new input correctly. The problem is that the ability to generalize to the identity function will necessarily mean that there will be a loss of discrimination.

The problem of catastrophic remembering remains an important one and one for which current auto-associative connectionist memory models have no immediate answer.

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