



## An Adaptive Resonance Theory account of the implicit learning of orthographic word forms

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### ABSTRACT

An Adaptive Resonance Theory (ART) network was trained to identify unique orthographic word forms. Each word input to the model was represented as an unordered set of ordered letter pairs (open bigrams) that implement a flexible prelexical orthographic code. The network learned to map this prelexical orthographic code onto unique word representations (orthographic word forms). The network was trained on a realistic corpus of reading textbooks used in French primary schools. The amount of training was strictly identical to children's exposure to reading material from grade 1 to grade 5. Network performance was examined at each grade level. Adjustment of the learning and vigilance parameters of the network allowed us to reproduce the developmental growth of word identification performance seen in children. The network exhibited a word frequency effect and was found to be sensitive to the order of presentation of word inputs, particularly with low frequency words. These words were better learned with a randomized presentation order compared with the order of presentation in the school books. These results open up interesting perspectives for the application of ART networks in the study of the dynamics of learning to read.

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### 1. Introduction

Skilled reading involves the ultra-fast and highly efficient mapping of low-level visual information about written words onto high-level semantic and syntactic representations. One central component among the multiple operations involved in the reading process is the parallel mapping of abstract letter identities onto whole-word orthographic representations (Rayner and Pollatsek, 1989; Grainger, 2008). It is this specific mapping process, and how it is learned, that is the focus of the present study.

Once the child has learned to map visual features onto abstract letter identities (see Grainger, Rey, and Dufau, 2008), one of the major challenges for the beginning reader is the processing of several letters in parallel. This processing of letters and letter combinations is thought to serve two purposes. Firstly, it enables the mapping of groups of letters (e.g., graphemes) onto phonology (e.g., phonemes), hence allowing the beginning reader to recover known phonological word forms and their associated meanings. This process is considered to be a key component in learning to

read (Ziegler and Goswami, 2006). Secondly, given the clear information concerning word boundaries in printed text, it can be hypothesized that parallel processing of letter identities also provides a more direct, and therefore faster, route from visual information to semantics. This forms the basis of a generic dual-route approach to visual word recognition that has received much support in recent investigations of skilled reading (Coltheart, Rastle, Perry, Langdon, and Ziegler, 2001; Diependaele, Ziegler, and Grainger, in press; Perry, Ziegler, and Zorzi, 2007; Ziegler, Perry and Coltheart, 2003; Zorzi, Houghton, and Butterworth, 1998).

In the present study, we choose to focus on the unsupervised learning of orthographic word forms, which is at the heart of the direct route from visual information to semantics. The learning of orthographic word forms has largely been ignored up until now in computational investigations of the reading process. Many current computational models of visual word recognition are hard-wired and therefore choose to ignore issues of learning in order to focus on issues of performance. Furthermore, most models that have chosen to deal with issues of learning have opted for the back-propagation algorithm (Harm and Seidenberg, 1999, 2004; Plaut et al., 1996; Seidenberg and McClelland, 1989). However, back-propagation is developmentally implausible because a significant part of the learning-to-read process proceeds without supervision (Share, 1995). Moreover, many studies observed that

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After having chosen open bigram coding, we further included plausible visual constraints on our coding. Here we apply the empirical results of a study investigating variations in letter visibility in five and seven letter words (Stevens and Grainger, 2003). These authors found that recognition probability of a letter depends on its position in a word. The values obtained for 5- and 7-letter strings were extrapolated in order to obtain values for all word lengths processed in our model. These coefficients were used to modulate the binary values of the input vector, as a function of the position-in-word of each individual letter of an input bigram. The activation value of a bigram is equal to the average recognition probability of its component letters.

In sum, an input for a word is a 1681-element vector of recognition probabilities of corresponding bigrams which both take into account their presence or absence, and also how their recognition probability is modulated by visual processing. One of the main properties of these input vectors are their low density; for example, a 10-letter word has only 27 non-zero elements. As we will see, this characteristic of inputs influences the choice of ART2 parameters.

2.2. ART implementation

The ART2 architecture consists of a superposition of two layers of representations, F1 the bigram level (i.e., a prelexical orthographic code), and F2 the lexical level (i.e., orthographic word forms), as represented in Fig. 1.

2.3. The learning (L) and vigilance (V) ART parameters

When ART is presented with a new data pattern, it can do one of two things: recognize it as a member of a category it already knows, or learn it as a new category if it is sufficiently different from anything seen so far. Each category is associated with a neuron. Thus in ART, recognizing a new category is synonymous to adding a new neuron. A parameter called vigilance (V) controls how different an incoming pattern must be in order to be considered as belonging to a new, unseen category. If vigilance is low, different input patterns tend to be grouped together using only a few (maybe even only one) very broad categories. At the other end of the spectrum, if vigilance is very high, incoming data patterns are always considered as coming from a different category, and thus all individual patterns are memorized, resulting in poor generalization. Intermediate values allow similar items to be classified as belonging together, while maintaining the ability to create new categories for items that are sufficiently different.

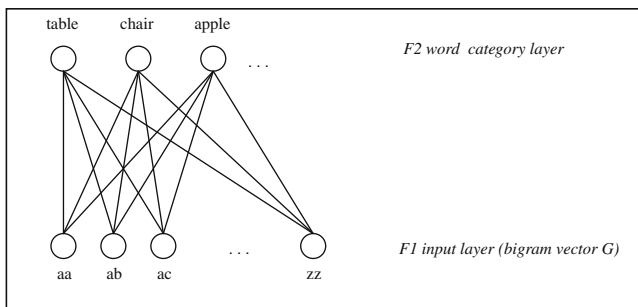


Fig. 1. Representation of the information stored in F1 and F2. Each unit in F1 is associated, by bottom-up and top-down connections with one open bigram. French has 41 distinct letters when including letters with accents, giving rise to 1681 (41 × 41) open bigrams. A word such as TABLE activates nine units in F1. In F2, each unit is associated with one or many word(s).

When a data pattern is recognized as belonging to a certain category, the weights of the associated category are modified by a certain amount in the direction of the newly presented data. These weights can be conceptualized as representing a prototype of the category. The amount by which weights associated with a given category are modified is controlled by a second ART parameter called learning (L). This is akin to the concept of learning rate in other models. A high value of the learning parameter can result in possibly fast learning, but might also be potentially unstable and non-converging. Lower values of the learning parameter improve convergence and stability, at the cost of a slower learning process.

2.4. The ART algorithm

The ART learning algorithm, with its topology represented in Fig. 2, is summarized below (more details can be found in Grossberg, Boardman and Cohen (1997)). The main connections are the bottom-up connections  $b_{ij}$ , from cells  $G_i$  to cells  $C_j$ , and the respective top-down connections  $t_{ji}$ .

Here is a summary of the ART algorithm:

- Step 1. Initialization: all connections  $b_{ij}$  and  $t_{ji}$ , and F2 activations and  $d$  are set to zero.
- Step 2. Get the current data sample, i.e., the bigram representation of the current word is the input vector pattern  $G$  in F1, with  $\text{norm}(G) = 1$ .
- Step 3. If F2 is empty then create a category (step 5), otherwise activate the categories for  $G$  in F2 through bottom-up connections by:  $y_j = b_{ij} \cdot G_i$ , for all  $j$  in F2.
- Step 4. Winner-takes-all competition: the candidate unit (called  $J$ ), in order to learn the input pattern  $G$ , is the one that maximizes  $y_j$ . Its activation is  $d = \max(y_j)$ . If  $d > V$  (the vigilance parameter), go to step 5, otherwise go to step 6.
- Step 5. Update weights for the candidate unit  $y_j$ :  $t_{ji} = L \cdot G_i + (1 - L) \cdot t_{ji}$ , and  $b_{ij} = L \cdot G_i + (1 - L) \cdot b_{ij}$ , for all  $i$ , where  $L$  is the learning rate.
- Step 6. Repeat from step 2 for all input patterns.

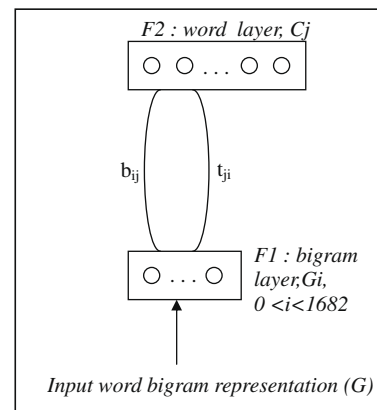


Fig. 2. The ART architecture with open bigrams (F1) and words (F2). Activities in F1 are the result of activities  $G_i$  of the word inputs, according to a winner-take-all competition and update of bottom-up and top-down connections. The number of recruited categories  $C_j$  in F2 varies from one to the number of presented inputs.

We process this algorithm only once, from the first to the last word instance of the sequence. Each word instance has an index position in the sequence, from 1 to the length  $T$  of the sequence. Thus for one grade level, we present  $T$  inputs to the network. After training, the learned categories are memorized with their activities in the F2 layer. The number of learned categories ( $C$ ) can vary between 1 and  $T$ . A perfect learning is achieved if  $C$  equals the number of different words in the sequence. After training, we consider that a word is learned (or correctly activated), if its last instance in the sequence has not been recruited by another word. Thus, we can compute the percent of Correct Word Identification (CWI) for different sequences.

### 3. Results

The ART network model was trained using the same school books that children are exposed to in French primary schools. The mean percentage correct response for the model was given as the percentage of presented words that were correctly activated for their last presentation at each grade. We then analyzed the average percentage correct scores at each grade level for different  $V$  and  $L$  parameters.

#### 3.1. Comparison with empirical children behavioral data

The trained network was evaluated against the data of an empirical study investigating the development of word identification accuracy from grade 1 to grade 5 in French primary school children. These children learned to read using the same textbooks that were used to train the model. The results of the behavioral

**Table 1**

Behavioral results. Mean correct response percentages on words from grade 1 (L1 or “CP”) through grade 5 (L5 or “CM2”).

Grade level	HF–HN	HF–LN	LF–HN	LF–LN
L1 (CP)	84 (13)	79 (15)	54 (18)	46 (17)
L2 (CE1)	91 (7)	89 (13)	70 (16)	62 (17)
L3 (CE2)	96 (7)	94 (9)	78 (11)	74 (14)
L4 (CM1)	94 (7)	94 (7)	81 (10)	82 (12)
L5 (CM2)	99 (4)	98 (5)	84 (12)	85 (12)

Standard deviations in parentheses; HF, high frequency; LF, low frequency; HN, high neighborhood; LN, low neighborhood.

study are taken from Dufau et al. (in press) and reported in Table 1. The study manipulated word frequency and word similarity. Word similarity is expressed in terms of orthographic neighborhood (words that differ from another by one letter).

These behavioral scores are also shown in Fig. 3, along with the model’s performance for a given combination of  $V$  and  $L$  parameters that allowed the model to reproduce the empirical learning curve. Given these satisfactory fits, we felt no need to overfit  $V$  and  $L$  parameters using LMS criteria. We get similar ART results in the ranges  $0.85 < V < 0.92$  and  $0.35 < L < 0.45$ .

#### 3.2. Testing ART’s sensitivity to word order

In this section, we compare network performance following training with words presented in the order they appear in textbooks (this initial sequence is called the “SEQ” sequence in the following sections), versus training on the same word set but presented in random order (“RAND” sequence), or sorted sequences (“SORT” as defined in Section 3.4).

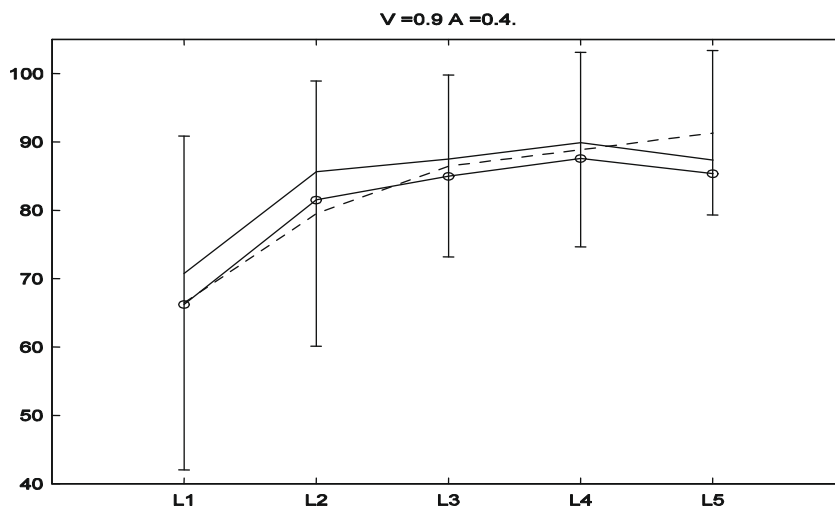
The random sequences were simply built as follows. We randomized, at each grade level, the order of words extracted from the corpus. Five random sequences were created for each level. The results are given in Fig. 4 for different  $L$  and  $V$  parameter settings. Comparing the SEQ and RAND word recognition performance over 12 networks for all the words, we see that RAND sequences significantly outperform SEQ and SORT sequences.

#### 3.3. High frequency word learning is less sensitive to word order

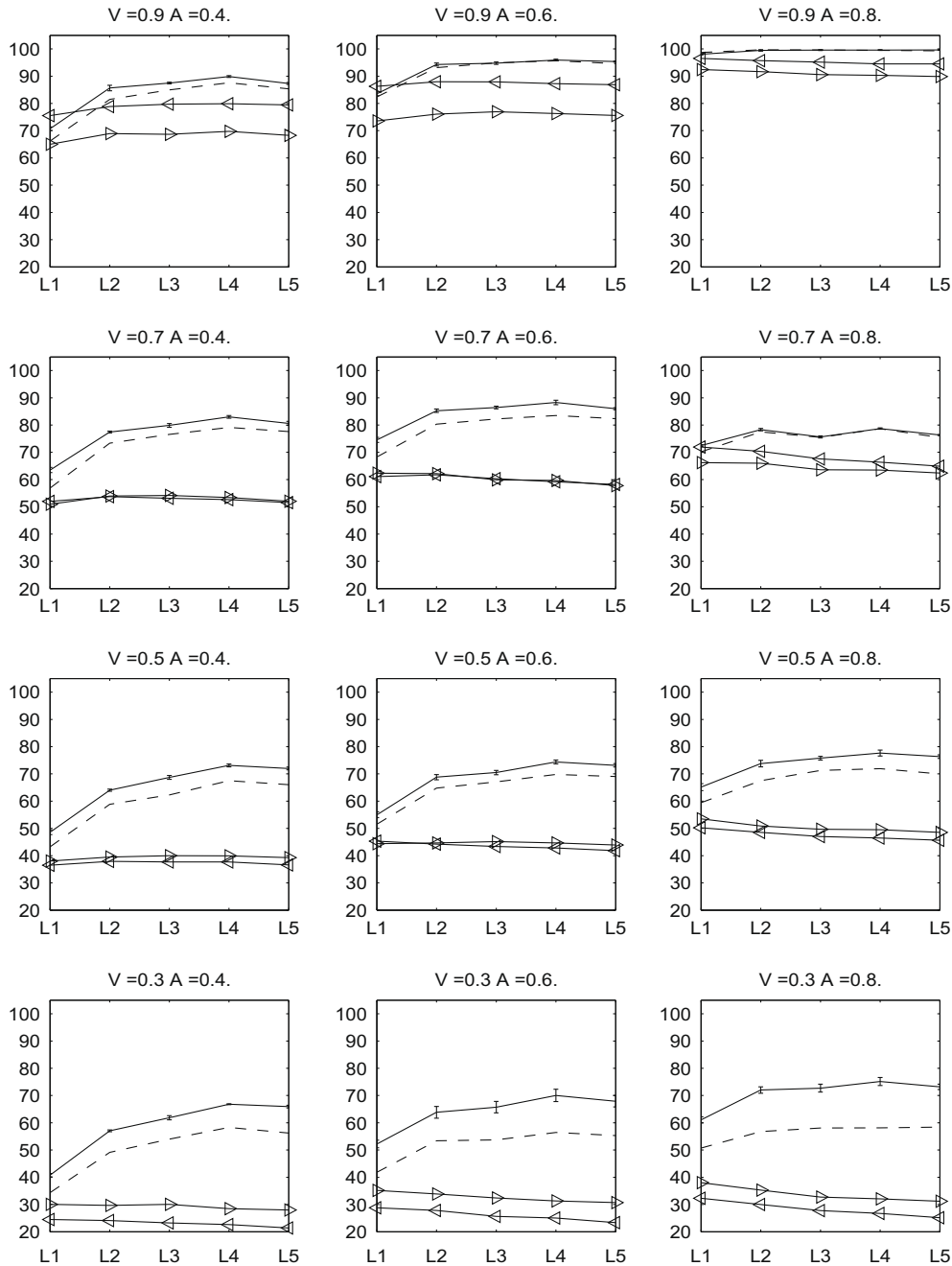
A test was performed separately for different word frequency intervals. Ten intervals were computed, from word frequencies of  $-4$  to  $-2$  (in log10 scale). Fig. 5 shows the distribution of word frequency values and the corresponding Correct Word Identification rates of the model on SEQ and RAND sequences, averaging across all grade levels. This analysis demonstrates that word order has the biggest impact on network performance with low frequency words.

#### 3.4. Learning on sorted word instances

The previous section has demonstrated an effect of word order on network learning by comparing randomized sequences with the



**Fig. 3.** ART simulation (at  $L = 0.4$  and  $V = 0.9$ ) results as percent of Correct Word Identification (CWI), over the five grade levels L1 to L5 (French primary education), resulting in performance matched to that observed in children that are also represented here in dashed ‘- -’ with their std. ART trained on initial sequence ‘SEQ’ is represented by ‘o-’, and ART on RAND sequences by ‘\_’.



**Fig. 4.** Percent of Correct Word Identification (CWI) of ART model, from level L1 to L5, and for different  $L$  and  $V$  parameters, trained on the original sequence SEQ ('- -'), or on the five random sequences (average values '—' with std.), or on sorted SORT ('- > -') versus SORT REVERSE ('- < -') sequences. The upper left subplot is detailed in Fig. 3.

sequences found in school books. As a further investigation of the effects of word order, we trained the model with even more orderly sequences than found in the school book corpus. We chose to study the two extreme sequences. The first, that we call the sequence «SORT», involves presenting each word instance in only one shot.<sup>1</sup> The repeated word sequences are ordered from the shortest to the longest (i.e., from the lowest to the highest frequency), so we have: SORT = [  $W_{1,1}$   $W_{2,1}$   $W_{3,1}$   $W_{3,2}$   $W_{3,3}$   $W_{4,1}$   $W_{4,2}$   $W_{4,3}$   $W_{4,4}$   $W_{5,1}$   $W_{5,2}$   $W_{5,3}$   $W_{5,4}$  ... ], where  $W_{p,q}$  is the  $q$ th instance (or sample) of the word  $W_p$ .

The second sequence is called «SORT-REVERSE». It is the same as the SORT sequence, but in reverse order, with high frequency words appearing before low-frequency words, so we have:

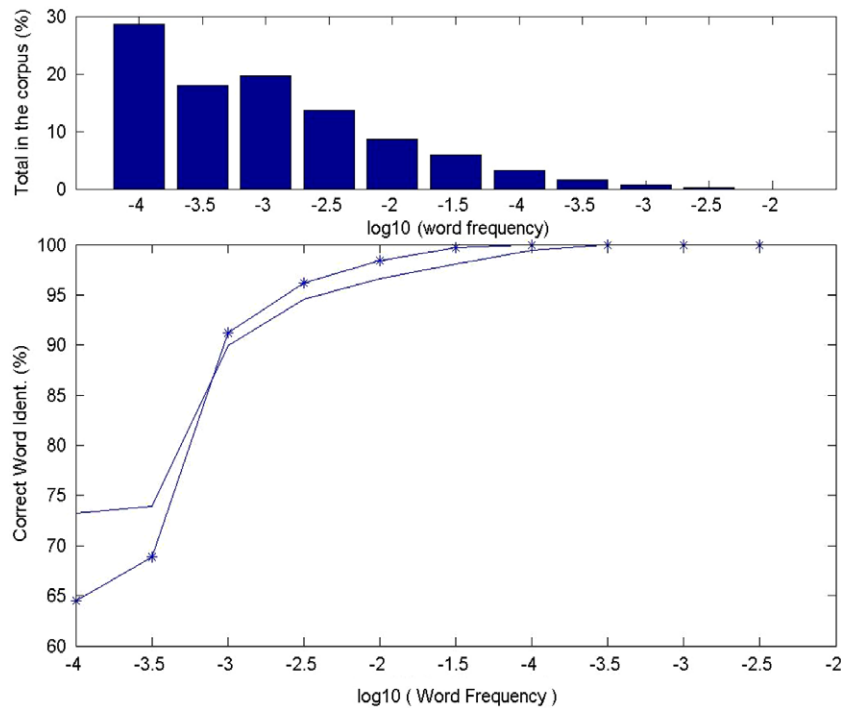
SORT\_REVERSE = [ ...  $W_{5,4}$   $W_{5,3}$   $W_{5,2}$   $W_{5,1}$ ,  $W_{4,4}$   $W_{4,3}$   $W_{4,2}$   $W_{4,1}$   $W_{3,3}$   $W_{3,2}$   $W_{3,1}$   $W_{2,1}$   $W_{1,1}$  ].

We see in Fig. 4 that the sequences SORT and SORT\_REVERSE have nearly the same scores, with SORT better than SORT\_REVERSE for low  $V$  (and vice versa). Except for high  $V$ , the network performs worse with all of these higher order sequences compared with the RAND and SEQ orders.

#### 4. Discussion

In the present study we have shown that Adaptive Resonance Theory (ART) provides a viable framework for modeling the implicit learning of orthographic word forms. Our implementation of ART demonstrated rapid learning of orthographic word forms from

<sup>1</sup> We call a «shot» a continuous repeated presentation of all the instances of a word.



**Fig. 5.** Top global word frequency distribution across all grade levels and respective percent of Correct Word Identification (CWI) of ART model ( $V = 0.9$ ,  $L = 0.4$ ), on the original sequence SEQ ('-\*-'), or one random RAND sequences ('\_'). Most of the word categories are infrequent. The CWI is higher for RAND than for SEQ for these infrequent words. Thus ART trained on RAND has in average a higher CWI than when trained on SEQ.

an approximate, flexible, prelexical orthographic input code (open bigrams – Grainger and van Heuven, 2003). Most important, the results of training the network on a realistic training regime (i.e., reading textbooks used in primary education) revealed a developmental pattern that mimicked that seen with children (Dufau et al., in press). Not surprisingly, the model showed two other key properties – a sensitivity to word frequency and a sensitivity to order.

The simulations show that ART reproduces the classic word frequency effect – the fact that words that occur more frequently in a given language are processed more rapidly and more accurately than words that occur less frequently (e.g., Balota and Chumbley, 1984; Rubenstein, Garfield and Millikan, 1970). More interesting, perhaps, is that in our ART network, speed and success of learning not only depended on frequency of presentation to the network, but also on the order of presentation.

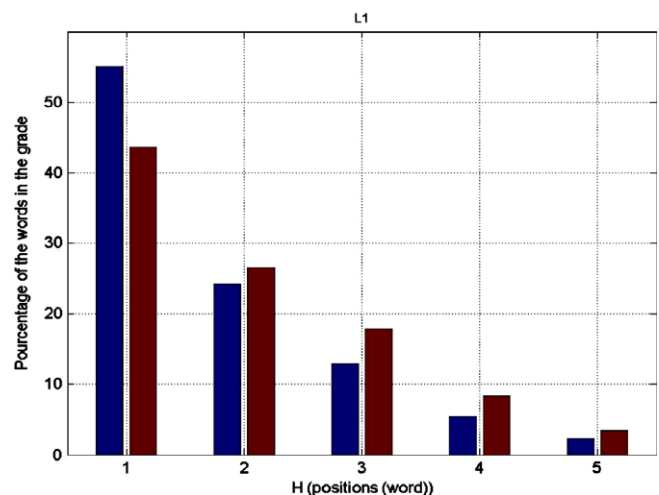
Learning low frequency words was more successful when these words were presented to the network in a randomized presentation compared with the order they appear in the school textbooks. In fact, simulation results suggest ART performs best when words are regularly repeated instead of being presented in a grouped fashion. This effect is reminiscent of catastrophic interference where unseen items tend to be forgotten. Uniform random distributions tend to make words repeat regularly, and thus less likely to be forgotten. It is important to note however, that ART still retains some knowledge of words even in the extreme conditions (SORT and REVERSE SORT), and thus is still somewhat resistant to catastrophic interference.

#### 4.1. Word dispersion analyses

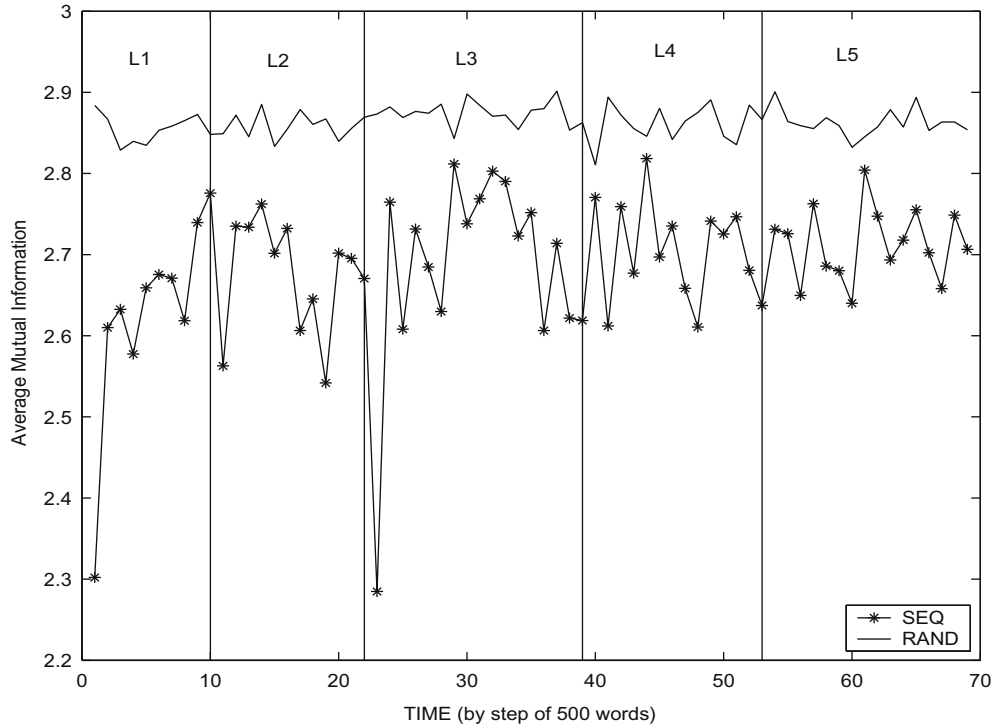
In order to quantify the distribution of word instances, we analyzed, for each word, the entropy of the positions of its occurrences. A word position is its index in the sequence: an integer

between 1 and the length of the sequence. The entropy is computed over 32 bins, thus  $H \leq 5 = \log_2(32)$  bits. The results are given for each bit interval in Fig. 6, for sequences SEQ and RAND, in grade level L1. We see that  $H \leq 1$  for 55% of the words of the SEQ sequence, compared to 43% for the RAND condition, with identical word frequencies. Respectively, RAND sequences have more words than SEQ with  $H > 1$ .

Similar results are obtained on other levels. They reveal that some word instances tend to be grouped together in the school



**Fig. 6.** Histograms of the entropy  $H$  of the positions of each instance of each word in the sequence SEQ (left blue bars), and in the five RAND sequences (right red bars), on grade L1. This entropy is computed considering the positions of all the instances of a given word over 32 bins, thus  $H \leq 5$  (see details in Section 4.1). (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)



**Fig. 7.** Average Mutual Information AMI (S, time) for the sequence SEQ ('\*') and for one of the RAND sequence ('-') measured in bits. Vertical lines represent the end of each grade level. We see  $AMI(SEQ) < AMI(RAND)$  consistently and  $AMI(SEQ)$  is much more variable than  $AMI(RAND)$ .

book corpus (SEQ), significantly more so than would occur by chance, such that repetition lag can be very large in certain conditions.

#### 4.2. Sequence structure analysis by local mutual information

In this section, we investigate sentence structure using local mutual information. For each word  $W$ , the input vector  $G$  is the recognition probabilities of corresponding bigrams. In a window of  $n$  consecutive samples  $[W_1, \dots, W_n]$  of a sequence  $S$ , we can approximate local mutual information at position  $p$  as follows:

$$MI_{[Sp, Sp+n]}(W; G) = H(G_{(Sp, Sp+n)}) - H(G_{(Sp, Sp+n)} | W_{(Sp, Sp+n)})$$

We compute MI over windows of eight consecutive samples (for higher contrast), shifted of one. Then we average this local MI measure over 500 consecutive samples, yielding an Average Mutual Information (AMI) measure for the position  $t$  in the sequence:

$$AMI(S, t) = 1/500 \sum_{p=1, \dots, 500} (IM[S(t+p), S(t+p+8)](W; G))$$

Note that, for large  $n$ , two sequences having the same word frequencies have similar local MI. We represent in Fig. 7 AMI for the school book sequence SEQ, and for one of the RAND sequences. We see that  $AMI(RAND, t)$  is nearly constant. In contrast,  $AMI(SEQ, t)$  varies and its strongest variations are observed at times  $t = 1, 21$ , corresponding in the book sequence to some grouped word repetitions.

Interestingly, the ranks of the AMI and of the CWI are the same, we have:  $AMI(SORT) < AMI(SEQ) < AMI(RAND)$ , and  $CWI(SORT) < CWI(SEQ) < CWI(RAND)$ .

This suggests that the local mutual information criterion correlates well with word identification: words are better identified in a sequence that maximizes the mutual information of local stimuli. Further research will be conducted on this effect of sequence structure.

#### 4.3. ART parameters and sequence order

Furthermore, our simulations revealed an interaction between the values of the learning parameters and presentation order on performance scores. When presentation order was based on order in the corpus, performance varied depending on  $V$  and  $L$ . In contrast, when presentation order was randomized, learning of infrequent words was improved.

These results suggest (1) that order of presentation is important especially for learning low frequency words, and (2) that  $L$  and  $V$  may mediate or control how ART can capitalize on this effect of order. We can further speculate on what parameters  $L$  and  $V$  might correspond to in children, but clearly they are interesting candidates to explain some of the variability observed in empirical data. Differences in these parameters could reflect individual differences and/or intra-individual variations in vigilance (arousal and attention) and readiness for learning. Future work could formally investigate these possibilities. This future research should also investigate to what extent the sensitivity of ART to order of presentation might be a good candidate for capturing empirical effects related to the age at which words are first learned (Age-of-Acquisition).

### 5. Conclusion

The ART network was shown to accurately reproduce the developmental pattern of word identification performance seen in children, for a specific combination of the learning and vigilance parameters in the model. The network reproduced the standard word frequency effect, and revealed a sensitivity to order of presentation of word stimuli. Word learning, particularly for low frequency words, was much improved when words were presented uniformly compared with the order in which they occur in reading textbooks. An analysis of the distribution of words in the reading

corpus revealed a systematic grouping of low frequency words, having a smaller dispersion than high frequency words.

This raises the interesting possibility that order of presentation of words in current textbooks is suboptimal. From this point of view, ART might prove useful as a tool for evaluating school textbooks, by searching for optimal orders of presentation that would provide a benchmark for such evaluation. Finally, more attention will be dedicated to curriculum learning (Bengio et al., 2009) in the near future.

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