

What's the 'language' in Large Language Model?
Computational semantic change and evolutionary theory

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In this talk I review recent advances in computational approaches to lexical semantic change and use that work to consider a null model of semantic change. There is substantial work on language evolution from both the phylogenetic (language split) perspective and the meaning and instantiation of social variation. Linguistics also has a great deal of work on the "whats" of language change: what changes, why some aspects of language are more stable than others, and how change is influenced by language contact. Work on semantic change has traditionally focused on the types of changes that are attested, the role (and obligatoriness) of polysemy in change, and where new lexical items come from. Large language models create possibilities for studying change in new ways. However, taking an evolutionary perspective requires us to think explicitly about concepts such as "language", "population", "generation" and "change". In this talk I discuss these concepts and suggest directions towards a neutral model for semantic change.