

# GENERALIZATION ABILITY OF MOS PREDICTION NETWORKS

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## ABSTRACT

Automatic methods to predict listener opinions of synthesized speech remain elusive since listeners, systems being evaluated, characteristics of the speech, and even the instructions given and the rating scale all vary from test to test. While automatic predictors for metrics such as mean opinion score (MOS) can achieve high prediction accuracy on samples from the same test, they typically fail to generalize well to new listening test contexts. In this paper, using a variety of networks for MOS prediction including MOSNet and self-supervised speech models such as wav2vec2, we investigate their performance on data from different listening tests in both zero-shot and fine-tuned settings. We find that wav2vec2 models fine-tuned for MOS prediction have good generalization capability to out-of-domain data even for the most challenging case of utterance-level predictions in the zero-shot setting, and that fine-tuning to in-domain data can improve predictions. We also observe that unseen systems are especially challenging for MOS prediction models.

*Index Terms*— Speech synthesis, mean opinion score, speech naturalness assessment, MOS prediction

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Listening tests with human subjects are the gold standard for evaluating synthesized speech, but these tests can take a long time and become cost-prohibitive as the number of systems to evaluate increases. Automatic mean opinion score (MOS) prediction would enable faster experimental iteration as well as larger-scale experiments, but this technology has a long way to go. Every set of systems or samples in a listening test comprises a unique context, with different listeners, ranges of systems being evaluated, and even instructions. Thus, predicting MOS using a model pretrained on one listening test typically does not generalize well to others. Can we design MOS prediction models that have better generalization abilities? Can generalizable MOS prediction models be utilized on a new listening test context in a zero-shot manner, or is fine-tuning necessary?

In an initial step towards answering these questions, we use a dataset of diverse synthesized speech samples and their MOS ratings that we have previously collected in a large-scale listening test for this purpose [1]. In this work, we design training, development, and test set splits for this data such that the development and test sets contain unseen speakers, systems, listeners, and texts, in order to stress-test MOS prediction networks with challenging cases, and to investigate which of these factors affect MOS prediction performance. We also gather additional “out-of-domain” datasets to study the generalization ability of MOS predictors. We explore several different model types and configurations, including original MOSNet [2] and finetuning large-scale self-supervised speech models [3, 4].

## 2. RELATED WORK

Automatic MOS prediction using neural networks has become a research topic of interest. One such investigation is MOSNet [2], which uses a CNN-BLSTM architecture to predict naturalness ratings of voice conversion samples from their magnitude spectrograms. An extension of this work in [5] investigated different input feature representations such as speech embeddings. Considering the large variations in listener preferences, one popular approach is to explicitly model the listener dependencies of MOS scores, as in MBNet [6], which uses listener labels during training as input to a listener-bias branch of the model, and [7], which learns a listener bias during the fine-tuning of large-scale self-supervised speech models for the MOS prediction task. One common theme in these works is that utterance-level ratings are more difficult to predict than system-level ones. Another theme in these papers is that these models tend not to generalize well to data from other listening tests. In this work, we investigate different types of networks for MOS prediction, and aim to better understand their generalization capability and the conditions in which they can be successful at predicting MOS for unseen data and different listening test contexts.

## 3. DATASETS

We make use of one main training dataset based on a listening test that we previously conducted on combined samples from many different systems from past years going back to 2008, as well as three additional “out-of-domain” datasets from past listening tests. In constructing training, development, and test sets, we aimed to match the distributions of the averaged MOS of the samples in each set to the overall distribution, and furthermore, to match the distributions of *standard deviations* of ratings per utterance, since we found in our prior work that some systems were more “controversial” than others, with a wide distribution of scores. We also required that both development and test sets should have unseen speakers, systems, listeners, and texts, wherever possible.

To create one candidate training/development/test split, we chose without replacement some unseen speakers, systems, texts, and listeners for each of the development and test sets. Unseen categories in the development set are unseen with respect to the training set, and unseen categories in the test set are unseen with respect to *both* the training and development sets. The target number of audio samples per set is then filled by randomly selecting from the remaining utterances. We evaluated a candidate split by earth-mover’s distance (EMD) between the distribution of the total data and each subset: the evaluation metric was the sum of EMD for individual scores for the training, development, and test set, plus the EMD for *standard deviations* of each set, as compared to the full data. We iterated this random sampling to create candidate splits 1000 times with different random seeds, and picked the one with the lowest sum of EMDs (a lower EMD value indicates that the distribution of each

subset is close to the distribution of the overall data, and that therefore the split is well-balanced). All audio files were downsampled to 16kHz to match the lowest sampling rate.

Descriptions of each dataset follow; a summary is in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Datasets: audio samples, ratings per sample, speakers, and systems, and unseen categories per development and test set.

Name	samp	ratings per samp	spk	sys	unseen spk	unseen sys	unseen listeners	unseen texts
BVCC	7106	8	27	187	1	6	8	5
ASV2019	18079	1-26	67	14	4	2	10	-
BC2019	1352	10-17	1	26	-	2	70	2
COM2018	4760	1-9	1	10	-	1	5	5

### 3.1. In-domain data

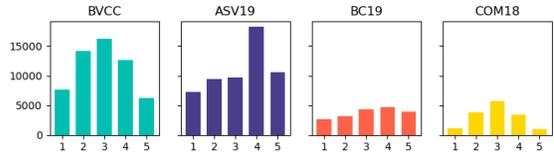
**BVCC** We conducted a large-scale listening test on samples from past speech synthesis challenges and open-source implementations, the results of which we published in [1]; we name this dataset BVCC since most samples are from the **B**lizzard Challenge for TTS and the **V**oice **C**onversion **C**hallenge. We focused on English-language synthesis and the main Hub tasks for each year. The Blizzard Challenges that we included were [8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13], as well as all Voice Conversion Challenge years [14, 15, 16, 17, 18]. We also included publicly-available samples from systems implemented in ES-Pnet [19], a popular open-source toolkit for end-to-end speech technologies [20]. We re-evaluated all of these samples in one listening test in order to create one unified listening test context for this large variety of samples – otherwise, samples from different tests are not directly comparable, since they come from different contexts. We created a training/development/test split of 70%/15%/15%.<sup>1</sup>

### 3.2. Out-of-domain data

For out-of-domain data, we made use of various archives of past listening tests and their original ratings; no new listening tests were conducted. We consider these datasets to be out-of-domain because they come from different listening tests with different ranges of sample quality, listeners, and instructions. We looked at the ASVSpooF 2019 Logical Access (LA) samples and their listening test ratings [21, 22], the Blizzard Challenge 2019 listening test data [23], and a listening test from 2018 comparing various combinations of acoustic models and vocoders [24]. We created fine-tuning/development/test splits of 33%/33%/33% for each of these databases; we choose a smaller fine-tuning proportion because this data is intended to fine-tune models which have already seen the larger BVCC training data, and is meant to represent a condition where a small amount of data from a target listening test context is available. This out-of-domain data will only be used for fine-tuning models that have already been trained (or fine-tuned) on BVCC, and for testing.

**ASV2019** English synthesized audio samples from a variety of state-of-the-art speech synthesis and voice conversion systems prepared for the ASVSpooF Challenge in 2019, in which participants submit systems to detect spoofed vs. bona fide audio. In the listening test, listeners judged whether a sample was produced by a machine or a human on a scale from 1-10, where 1 is definitely machine generated and 10 is definitely human; we linearly adjusted these scores to our standard scale of 1-5. Most audio samples only have one rating, and natural audio is over-sampled and has up to 26 ratings because the aim of this listening test was to measure human performance on spoofing detection as compared to automatic detection, rather than to evaluate the quality of different synthesis methods.

<sup>1</sup>We plan to publicly release this dataset and its splits in the near future.



**Fig. 1:** Distributions of scores for each dataset

The different target task of this listening test creates a challenging domain mismatch. We did not include standard deviations in the EMD sum metric since most samples only had one rating.

**BC2019** Chinese TTS samples submitted to the 2019 Blizzard Challenge, rated by native speakers of Chinese. Since all of the BVCC samples are English, data in a different language is a challenging domain-mismatched condition which will allow us to study whether MOS predictors can generalize well across languages.

**COM2018** This listening test was a comparison of 9 different combinations of four acoustic models and four vocoders, plus natural speech, using data from the Japanese female speaker “F009” from the XIMERA database [25], as another cross-language condition.

### 3.3. Data distributions

Each dataset has a different distribution of scores due to the differing nature and context of each listening test, as illustrated in Figure 1, which shows the number of ratings for each score. Adjusted ASV2019 scores were rounded to the nearest integer for clarity.

## 4. EXPERIMENTS AND RESULTS

We conduct experiments using original MOSNet [2], as well as various self-supervised-learning-based (SSL) speech models from the Fairseq<sup>2</sup> project, which have shown to be useful via fine-tuning for diverse speech tasks, such as phoneme recognition, speaker identification, spoken language understanding, and emotion recognition [26]. A summary of the publicly-available Fairseq models (wav2vec2 [3] and HuBERT [4]) that we investigated is in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Information about Fairseq pretrained base models

Name	Training data	# params	Out dim.
wav2vec2			
w2v_small	Librispeech [27]	95m	768
libri960_big	Librispeech	317m	1024
w2v_vox_new	Libri-Light [28]	317m	1024
w2v_large	Libri-Light, CommonVoice [29], Switchboard [30], Fisher [31]	317m	1024
xlsr	MLS [32], CommonVoice, BABEL [33]	317m	1024
HuBERT			
hubert_base_ls960	Librispeech	95m	768
hubert_large_ll60k	Libri-Light	316m	1024

In addition to mean squared error (MSE), we also consider various correlation metrics since it is also important for the relative orderings of the scores to be predicted correctly. We thus also report Linear Correlation Coefficient (LCC) as a basic correlation measure, Spearman Rank Correlation Coefficient (SRCC) which is non-parametric and measures correlation of ranking order, and Kendall Tau Rank Correlation (KTAU), another type of rank correlation which tends to be more robust to errors.

<sup>2</sup><https://github.com/pytorch/fairseq>

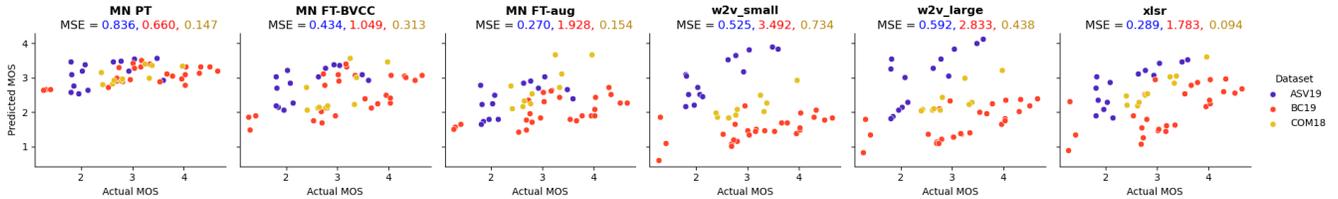


Fig. 2: Scatter plot of system-level zero-shot prediction results for each system.

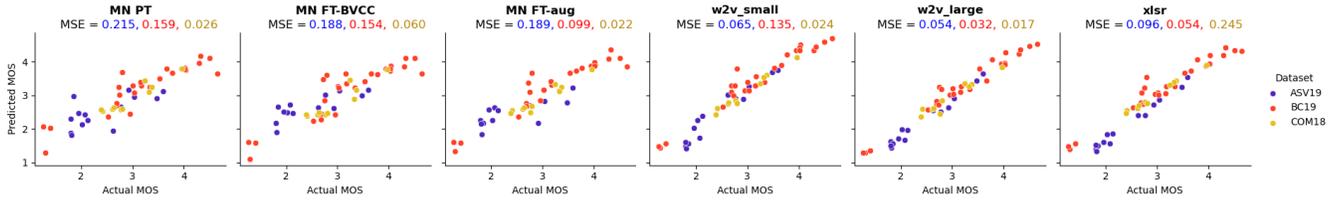


Fig. 3: Scatter plot of system-level fine-tune prediction results for each system.

#### 4.1. MOSNet

We first investigate the original MOSNet [2] CNN-BLSTM architecture trained from scratch on BVCC. We also try fine-tuning the pretrained model provided by the authors. We also explore two data augmentation strategies: perturbing the audio speed by a randomly-chosen factor between 0.95 and 1.05, and trimming or adding silence by a small random value. We run speedup, slowdown, trimming, and adding silence on the entire dataset, resulting in a total of 5 times the original data when all augmentations are used. We also evaluated the pretrained MOSNet in a zero-shot manner without any fine-tuning. Since the pretrained model was trained on VCC2018, samples from this challenge are not unseen, so we exclude these from our development and test sets for all experiments. Test set results are in Table 3; best results for each evaluation metric are in bold.

Table 3: MOSNet BVCC results

Model	Utterance level				System level			
	MSE	LCC	SRCC	KTAU	MSE	LCC	SRCC	KTAU
Pretrained [2]	0.831	0.374	0.393	0.275	0.541	0.354	0.352	0.243
From scratch	0.777	0.304	0.261	0.178	0.504	0.239	0.181	0.117
Fine-tuned	0.417	0.715	0.711	0.529	0.162	0.852	0.862	0.663
FT+sil.aug	0.428	0.713	0.709	0.528	0.153	0.854	0.861	0.665
FT+speed aug	0.421	0.716	0.707	0.526	0.176	0.857	0.867	0.672
FT+both aug	<b>0.305</b>	<b>0.796</b>	<b>0.791</b>	<b>0.604</b>	<b>0.096</b>	<b>0.905</b>	<b>0.912</b>	<b>0.737</b>

Surprisingly, we found that training from scratch on BVCC was worse than simply using the pretrained model. This may be because although our BVCC listening test was large in scale and covered a large variety of systems, the number of audio files in the training data is much smaller (4974, as compared to 13580 in the VCC2018 training set); even though our dataset has more ratings per sample, the *averaged* ratings are used for training and evaluation. Our dataset may simply not contain enough examples to train MOSNet from scratch. Fortunately, we find that fine-tuning the pretrained model on BVCC gives a large jump in performance, and furthermore, fine-tuning on all types of augmented data gives further improvements.

#### 4.2. Fairseq

The strong performance of fine-tuned speech SSL models on diverse tasks motivates us to try this approach for MOS prediction. We fine-tune various wav2vec2 and HuBERT pretrained SSL models by mean-pooling the model’s output embeddings, adding a linear output layer, and training with L1 loss.<sup>3</sup> This is a similar approach

<sup>3</sup>Implementation: <https://github.com/nii-yamagishilab/mos-finetune-ssl>

to [7], who also fine-tuned SSL models for the MOS prediction task, but our aims are different: while the authors modeled listener differences, our purpose is to investigate the generalization capabilities of different base models using very simple fine-tuning. We found in preliminary experiments that including augmented data during fine-tuning did not improve the MOS prediction results of SSL models. Results of fine-tuning each base model on the training set of BVCC, and evaluating on the BVCC test set, can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4: Fine-tuned Fairseq BVCC results

Base model	Test set							
	Utterance level				System level			
	MSE	LCC	SRCC	KTAU	MSE	LCC	SRCC	KTAU
w2v_small	0.227	<b>0.868</b>	<b>0.866</b>	<b>0.690</b>	0.121	0.938	0.942	0.790
libri960_big	0.342	0.823	0.820	0.635	0.136	0.901	0.901	0.730
w2v_vox_new	0.342	0.767	0.753	0.570	0.112	0.903	0.900	0.721
w2v_large	<b>0.220</b>	<b>0.868</b>	0.865	<b>0.690</b>	<b>0.059</b>	<b>0.948</b>	<b>0.944</b>	<b>0.803</b>
xlsr_53_56k	0.281	0.821	0.816	0.633	0.107	0.902	0.894	0.730
hubert_base_ls960	0.318	0.842	0.837	0.655	0.213	0.919	0.915	0.745
hubert_large_ll160k	0.444	0.696	0.687	0.507	0.184	0.812	0.805	0.620

We observe that the best results are consistently from the (relatively) small wav2vec2 model and the large wav2vec2 model trained on a variety of different speech corpora. The wav2vec2 model trained on multilingual data also had the third-best performance on the development set.

#### 4.3. Out-of-domain data experiments

We picked the best and most interesting models from the previous two experiments and tried both zero-shot MOS prediction on our three different out-of-domain datasets, and also fine-tuning on each dataset, in order to study generalization ability. We consider the MOSNet pretrained on VCC2018 (MN PT), the pretrained MOSNet fine-tuned to our BVCC data (MN FT-BVCC), the fine-tuned MOSNet including all augmented data (MN FT+aug), and the best three wav2vec2 models, which also happen to cover an interesting variety of these models: a (relatively) small English-trained model, a large English model, and a large multilingual model. We hypothesize that the multilingual model may generalize better to different languages such as Chinese and Japanese.

For the zero-shot condition, we simply use our existing models to make predictions on each of the out-of-domain test sets. For the fine-tuning condition, we fine-tune each model using the fine-tuning portion of one dataset, and evaluate on that same dataset’s test portion. The fine-tuning condition represents a scenario where a small amount of listening test data is available or can be collected for a

particular listening test context. Note that some models will have been fine-tuned twice, first on the BVCC data and then on one out-of-domain set. Zero-shot and fine-tuning results on each test set at the utterance level can be found in Table 5; system-level results are shown in the scatter plots in Figure 2 and Figure 3.

**Table 5:** Out-of-domain utterance-level results

Model	Zero-shot				Fine-tune			
	MSE	LCC	SRCC	KTAU	MSE	LCC	SRCC	KTAU
<b>ASV2019</b>								
MN PT	1.912	0.142	0.159	0.112	1.217	0.379	0.386	0.273
MN FT-BVCC	1.641	0.218	0.219	0.154	1.249	0.386	0.401	0.286
MN FT+aug	1.617	0.199	0.218	0.153	1.240	0.368	0.377	0.268
w2v_small	1.498	<b>0.470</b>	<b>0.491</b>	<b>0.352</b>	1.073	0.541	<b>0.558</b>	<b>0.405</b>
w2v_large	1.589	0.453	0.478	0.344	<b>1.065</b>	<b>0.548</b>	0.557	0.404
xlsr	<b>1.371</b>	0.409	0.423	0.301	1.192	0.518	0.525	0.377
<b>BC2019</b>								
MN PT	<b>0.823</b>	0.432	0.402	0.276	0.443	0.738	0.690	0.514
MN FT-BVCC	1.328	0.444	0.470	0.321	0.444	0.743	0.692	0.517
MN FT+aug	2.202	0.407	0.488	0.334	0.406	0.770	0.705	0.526
w2v_small	3.672	0.553	0.559	0.409	0.356	0.878	0.840	0.651
w2v_large	3.023	0.575	<b>0.618</b>	<b>0.440</b>	<b>0.235</b>	<b>0.879</b>	<b>0.841</b>	<b>0.653</b>
xlsr	1.924	<b>0.576</b>	0.596	0.414	0.274	0.858	0.812	0.621
<b>COM2018</b>								
MN PT	<b>0.510</b>	0.398	0.383	0.269	0.404	0.574	0.533	0.386
MN FT-BVCC	0.768	0.420	0.391	0.276	0.458	0.558	0.535	0.387
MN FT+aug	0.797	0.375	0.357	0.251	0.433	0.550	0.522	0.376
w2v_small	1.200	0.476	0.423	0.297	<b>0.352</b>	<b>0.674</b>	<b>0.667</b>	<b>0.497</b>
w2v_large	0.951	0.425	0.380	0.268	0.436	0.559	0.535	0.387
xlsr	0.558	<b>0.501</b>	<b>0.480</b>	<b>0.341</b>	1.383	0.369	0.379	0.268

As expected, the zero-shot condition is more challenging than fine-tuning. We also observe the effect of number of ratings per utterance – for ASV2019, for which many utterances have only one rating, we observe overall worse performance, even in the fine-tuning condition, reflecting the unpredictability of listener differences. We also observe that the best-correlated model for the Japanese data for the zero-shot condition was the multilingual ‘xlsr’ model, however this was not the case for the Chinese data. For all datasets, wav2vec2 models demonstrated good generalizability, even in the challenging zero-shot scenario. Although interestingly MOSNet models sometimes had the lowest MSE, wav2vec2 models consistently outperformed them in correlations. In fact, despite the challenging nature of zero-shot prediction of utterance-level scores as compared to the fine-tuning setting or system-level predictions, wav2vec2 models are able to reach moderate correlations for this task.

Scatter plots of the system-level zero-shot results can be found in Figure 2. We observe that original pretrained MOSNet tends to restrict predictions to a narrow range, fine-tuning with additional BVCC data improves on that slightly, and Fairseq models improve further; these tend to under-predict scores for BC2018 and over-predict ASV2019, but less so in the case of multilingual xlsr.

Fine-tuning on a small amount of in-domain data reduces error rates and improves correlations, both at the utterance level (Table 5) and at the system level, as shown in the scatter plots in Figure 3. Fine-tuning appears to mitigate MOSNet’s tendency to predict only within a certain range, but the wav2vec2 models appear to benefit even more from fine-tuning. The multilingual xlsr model no longer has an advantage when fine-tuned, with the small or large English-trained wav2vec models having the best performance in all cases.

Since we held out unseen speakers, systems, listeners, and texts, we further analyzed the fine-tuned systems to learn which unseen categories are most challenging. For each of the utterance-level predicted results, we measured its squared error with respect to the actual MOS. Then, we checked whether the utterance is from a seen

or unseen category, and gathered the squared errors accordingly, i.e. one list of squared errors for seen speakers of the ASV2019 dataset, and one for unseen speakers. Then, we conducted a two-sided t-test to determine whether the distributions of errors were significantly different at a level of  $p \leq 0.05$ . When the unseen category’s mean squared error is higher and the difference is significant, this indicates that the unseen category is more challenging to predict. Since a given utterance may be rated by a mix of both seen and unseen listeners, we consider unseen listeners only for ASV2019, for which most utterances only had one rater. Results are in Table 6.

**Table 6:** Analysis of unseen categories. Mean and standard deviations of squared errors for the unseen categories are shown. Unseen categories whose mean squared error is significantly higher than their seen counterparts are shown in bold.

Data	MN PT	MN FT	MN FT+aug	w2v_sm	w2v_lg	xlsr
<b>Unseen speakers</b>						
ASV19	<b>1.33±1.65</b>	1.28±1.52	1.23±1.48	1.02±1.72	1.04±1.77	1.18±2.04
<b>Unseen systems</b>						
ASV19	<b>1.36±1.45</b>	<b>1.43±1.51</b>	<b>1.43±1.54</b>	<b>1.23±1.58</b>	<b>1.26±1.82</b>	<b>1.43±2.15</b>
BC19	<b>0.77±1.11</b>	<b>0.67±1.04</b>	<b>0.76±1.10</b>	<b>0.87±0.98</b>	<b>0.41±0.61</b>	<b>0.56±0.78</b>
COM18	0.42±0.61	0.50±0.71	0.47±0.68	0.33±0.48	<b>0.52±0.74</b>	0.35±0.51
<b>Unseen listeners</b>						
ASV19	0.76±1.13	0.70±1.19	<b>0.71±1.25</b>	<b>0.58±1.46</b>	0.55±1.55	0.57±1.62
<b>Unseen texts</b>						
BC19	0.30±0.31	0.26±0.36	0.35±0.52	0.26±0.43	0.13±0.16	0.23±0.40
COM19	0.43±0.69	0.51±0.82	0.48±0.76	<b>0.47±0.71</b>	0.49±0.75	<b>0.51±0.78</b>

For ASV2019 and BC2019, unseen systems were always significantly different; for COM2018 they were usually not – this is likely because a “system” for COM2018 is a combination of acoustic model and vocoder, both of which have been seen in other combinations during training. For unseen texts, most differences are not significant, except for the COM2018 dataset with two of the Fairseq models. These models were originally developed for ASR, so they may be learning something about the text content of the utterances.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

We have shown that fine-tuning SSL models can enable MOS prediction for a new listening test context using a smaller amount of human-labeled MOS data, which is costly to obtain, than training a model for this purpose from scratch. We found that MOSNets need a large amount of data for training from scratch, whereas fine-tuning is an effective way to make use of smaller datasets. Large SSL models can be successfully used for the MOS prediction task, and they demonstrate good performance. This is especially the case when target listening test data is available for fine-tuning, but these models can surprisingly do moderately well in even the very challenging case of zero-shot utterance-level prediction. SSL models trained on multilingual data or on a mix of different datasets especially show good generalization ability.

We have also identified the difficult cases for MOS prediction, which indicate the most interesting directions for future work. Although prediction on unseen systems is a likely real-world use case for MOS predictors, this category remains the most challenging to predict.

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