



From Shortcuts to Reasoning: Robust Post-Training of Theory of Mind

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About Me

- Assistant Professor @ **National Taiwan University**
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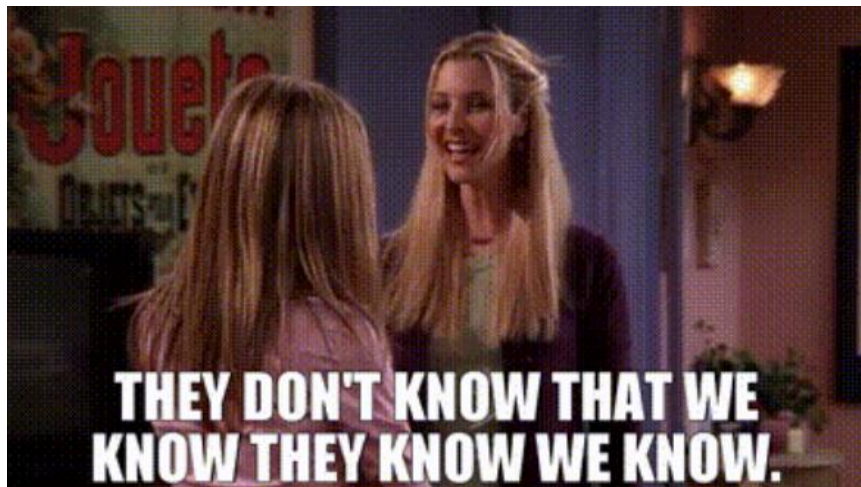
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Outline

- What is Theory of Mind (ToM)?
- What is shortcut learning?
- Shortcut learning in ToM
- ToM post-training

What is Theory of Mind?

- ToM is the ability to **understand other people's mental states**, such as thoughts, emotions, intentions, and beliefs
- **Machine ToM** aims to replicate this human's innate ability in AI agents



[He et al. EMNLP-Findings'23]



ToM Can Improve Human–AI Collaboration

- Infer user's mental states, such as thoughts, intentions, and beliefs
 - Track perspectives (what the human knows vs. doesn't know)
 - Predict next actions and anticipate needs
-
- → More aligned assistance
 - → Fewer misunderstandings
 - → Safer interactions



What is Shortcut Learning?

- A model achieves high accuracy by **exploiting easy, spurious patterns** in the data instead of learning the **true underlying concepts**
- E.g., a wolf–fox classifier may just learn “snow = wolf” if all the wolf training images include snow

Training data



Shortcut
learning

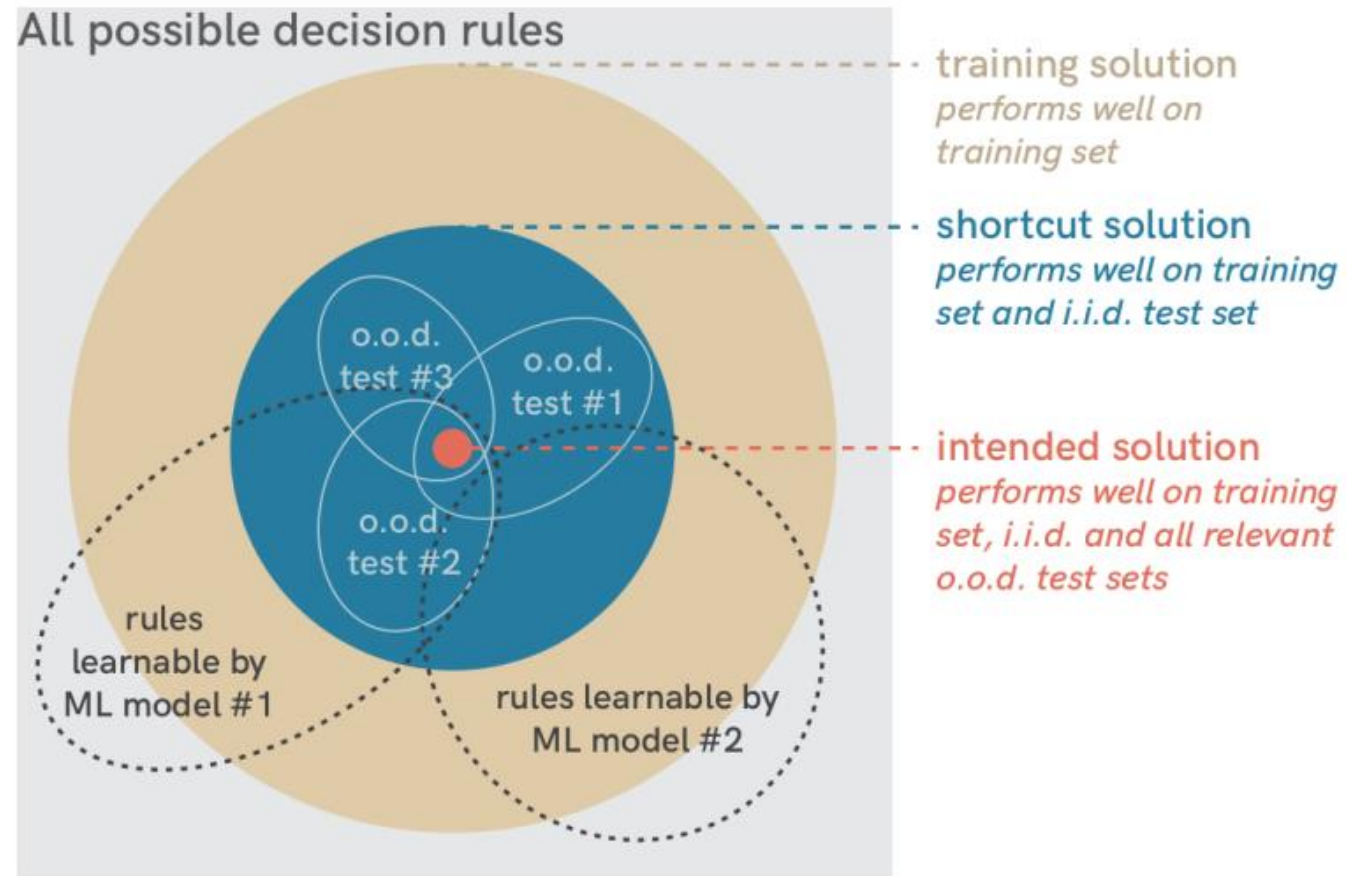
Test data



Wolf

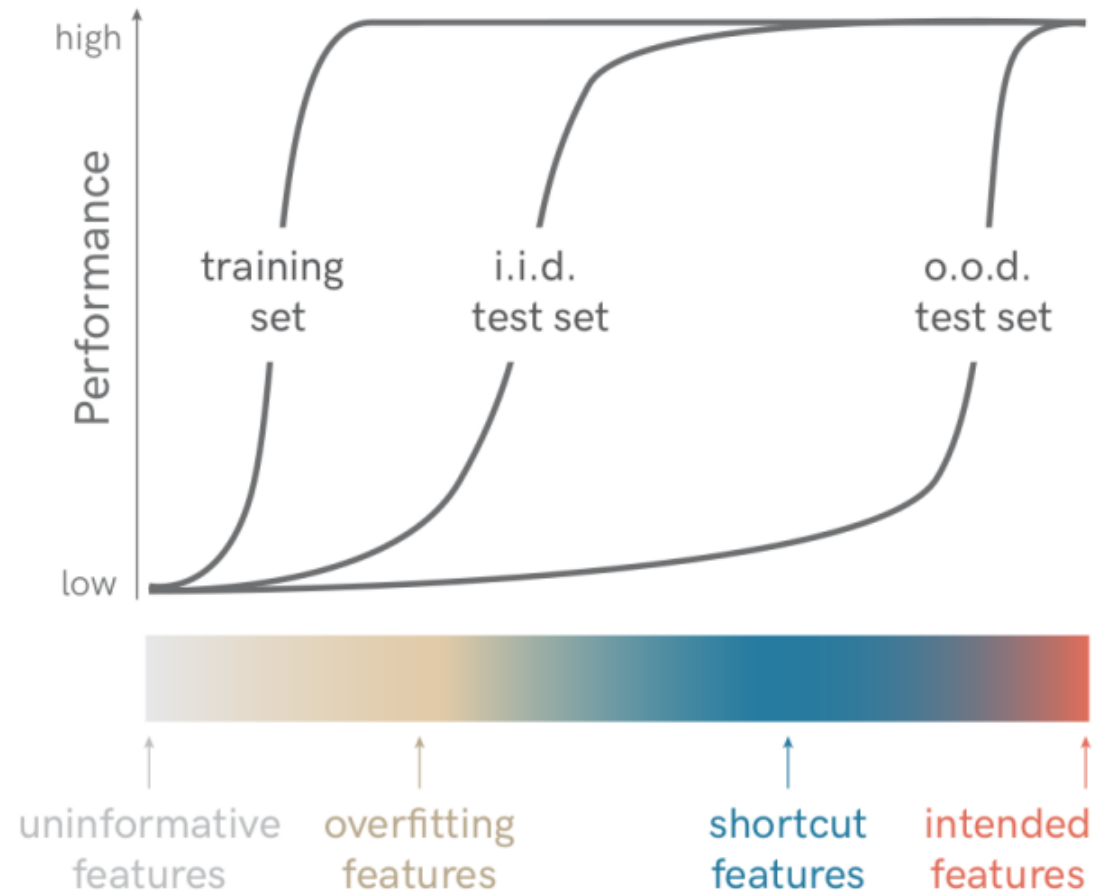
What is Shortcut Learning?

- Some solutions fit the training data; fewer generalize to i.i.d. tests
- Among those, shortcut solutions fail under OOD shifts, while only the intended solutions truly generalize



What is Shortcut Learning?

- How a model relying on different types of features performs across different test sets



What We Observed in ToM?

- State-of-the-art LLMs do not perform well on ToM tasks (around 70% accuracy)

Model	4th-order ToM	Hi-ToM	ToMi	ExploreToM (Raw)	ExploreToM (Infilled)
GPT-4o	46.17%	69.00%	61.96%	67.35%	62.48%
GPT-4o-mini	30.50%	58.50%	70.64%	69.32%	66.04%
DeepSeek-v3	58.67%	70.17%	57.17%	65.01%	64.73%

- ToM's property: long, complicated, contains causal relationships
- Intuition: use **reasoning**
- → Can we improve LLMs' ToM via **RL post-training**?

What We Observed in ToM?

- A new study on **ToM post-training** appeared on arXiv in **May 2025**
- **Their key takeaway:** SFT achieves competitive performance with RL on current ToM benchmarks for ToM post-training

Do Theory of Mind Benchmarks Need Explicit Human-like Reasoning in Language Models?

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arXiv, May 2025

What We Observed in ToM?

- **Their key takeaway:** SFT achieves competitive performance with RL on current ToM benchmarks for ToM post-training
- Interesting

But...

(1st, 2nd, 3rd-order)

Model	4th-order ToM	Hi-ToM
GPT-4o	46.17%	69.00%
GPT-4o-mini	30.50%	58.50%
DeepSeek-v3	58.67%	70.17%
Qwen2.5-0.5B-Instruct	23.83%	30.33%
Qwen2.5-1.5B-Instruct	25.17%	40.67%
Qwen2.5-3B-Instruct	27.50%	39.17%
Qwen2.5-7B-Instruct	28.83%	52.17%
Qwen2.5-7B-Instruct-1M	17.83%	40.67%
Qwen2.5-0.5B-Instruct (RL)	85.83%	70.83%
Qwen2.5-1.5B-Instruct (RL)	89.33%	79.17%
Qwen2.5-3B-Instruct (RL)	88.17%	81.17%
Qwen2.5-7B-Instruct (RL)	82.83%	83.33%
Qwen2.5-7B-Instruct-1M (RL)	94.50%	84.50%
Qwen2.5-0.5B-Instruct (SFT)	88.17%	81.00%
Qwen2.5-1.5B-Instruct (SFT)	86.17%	80.50%
Qwen2.5-3B-Instruct (SFT)	92.67%	87.00%
Qwen2.5-7B-Instruct (SFT)	94.00%	87.33%
Qwen2.5-7B-Instruct-1M (SFT)	93.67%	86.50%

What We Observed in ToM?

- **Our key takeaway:** Why do all ToM **post-trained models** perform better on 4th-order ToM than on lower orders, while all **non-post-trained models** do not?

- Higher-order

- 1st Where does Sally think the milk is?
- 2nd Where does Alex think Sally thinks the milk is?
- 3rd Where does Alex think Sally thinks Anne thinks the milk is?

We reproduced, same results!

Model	(1st, 2nd, 3rd-order)	
	4th-order ToM	Hi-ToM
GPT-4o	46.17%	69.00%
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Qwen2.5-3B-Instruct (SFT)	85.83%	70.83%
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We found Shortcuts in ToM Benchmarks

- In the Hi-ToM dataset, a **shortcut** can solve **99%** of the 3rd and 4th order questions
- The ground-truth answer is always the object's location when the outermost agent leaves, regardless of what happens afterward.

(1st, 2nd, 3rd-order)

- 1st** Where does Anne think the milk is?
- 2nd** Where does Sally think Anne thinks the milk is?
- 3rd** Where does Alex think Sally thinks Anne thinks the milk is?

Model	4th-order ToM	Hi-ToM
GPT-4o	46.17%	69.00%
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We Found Shortcuts in ToM Benchmarks

- We conduct **the first systematic examination** of shortcuts for existing ToM datasets
- **(1) LLM-guided rules:** Simply asking an advanced LLM to discover potential shortcuts, which works well
- **(2) Lexical associations:** Check spurious lexical associations

We Found Shortcuts in ToM Benchmarks

- We audit 8 widely used ToM datasets with different question types
- Narrative vs. Conversational
- State tracking vs. Intention
- Language Only vs. Vision & Language

Examples of ToM Datasets

- Hi-ToM: narrative, tracking, language only

Hi-ToM One-Chapter Story

- 1 Emma, Charlotte, Benjamin, Aiden and Isabella entered the workshop.
 - 2 The pear is in the red_treasure_chest.
 - 3 Emma moved the pear to the blue_suitcase.
 - 4 Emma exited the workshop.
 - 5 Charlotte exited the workshop.
 - 6 Benjamin lost his watch.
 - 7 Benjamin exited the workshop.
 - 8 Aiden moved the pear to the blue_crate.
 - 9 Aiden exited the workshop.
 - 10 Isabella moved the pear to the red_treasure_chest.
 - 11 Isabella likes the red_box.
 - 12 Isabella exited the workshop.
 - 13 Aiden publicly claimed that the pear is in the blue_drawer now.
 - 14 Emma privately told Isabella that the radish is in the red_suitcase now.
-

Order

Question

0th Where is *O* really?

1st Where does *A1* think *O* is?

2nd Where does *A2* think *A1* thinks *O* is?

3rd Where does *A3* think *A2* thinks *A1* thinks *O* is?

4th Where does *A4* think *A3* thinks *A2* thinks *A1* thinks *O* is?

Examples of ToM Datasets

- ToMATO:
conversational,
intention,
language only

Conversation

Liam Johnson: “Ethan, I’ve noticed you’ve been a bit distant lately, is everything okay?”

Ethan Johnson: “Yeah, everything’s fine, just been really busy with the restaurant and some personal stuff, you know how it is.”

Liam Johnson: “Come on, Ethan, we’ve been friends for years, I can tell when something’s bothering you. What’s really going on?”

Ethan Johnson: “Alright, alright... to be honest, I’ve been having some trouble making ends meet, the restaurant’s been slow and I’m falling behind on some bills, but I’ll figure it out, I always do.”

Liam Johnson: “Ethan, you’re not going to ‘figure it out’ on your own, you need a plan and some guidance. Let me take a look at your finances and we can go over some options together, okay?”

Ethan Johnson: “Man, I appreciate that, Liam, but I don’t want to be a burden, I can handle it, I just need to get my head out of my... okay, fine, yeah, maybe a fresh set of eyes would help, thanks.” ...

Question (for second-order belief about emotion)

How does Ethan think that Liam feels when he says “Man, I appreciate that, Liam, but I don’t want to be a burden, ...”?

Options

A: He thinks that he feels concerned and genuinely wants to help, but also might be a bit worried about getting involved in his problems

B: He thinks that he feels a sense of determination and seriousness, like he’s taking charge of the situation and wants him to focus on getting back on track

C: He thinks that he feels a mix of concern and annoyance, like he’s seen this coming and is a bit exasperated that he didn’t come to him sooner

D: He thinks that he feels a sense of warmth and friendship, like he’s happy to be able to help him out and is trying to make him feel better about the situation

Answer: C

Examples of ToM Datasets

- MMToM: narrative, both tracking & intention, vision & language

VIDEO INPUT



TEXT INPUT

What's inside the apartment: ... The kitchen is equipped with a microwave, eight cabinets, ... Inside the microwave, there is a cupcake. There is a wine glass and an apple on one of the kitchen tables. There are water glasses, a bottle wine, a condiment bottle, and a bag of chips in inside the cabinets. ...

Actions taken by Emily: Emily is initially in the bathroom. She then walks to the kitchen, goes to the sixth cabinet, opens it, subsequently closes it, and then goes towards the fourth cabinet.

QUESTION

Which one of the following statements is more likely to be true?

- (a) Emily has been trying to get a cupcake. ✓ (b) Emily has been trying to get a wine glass. ✗

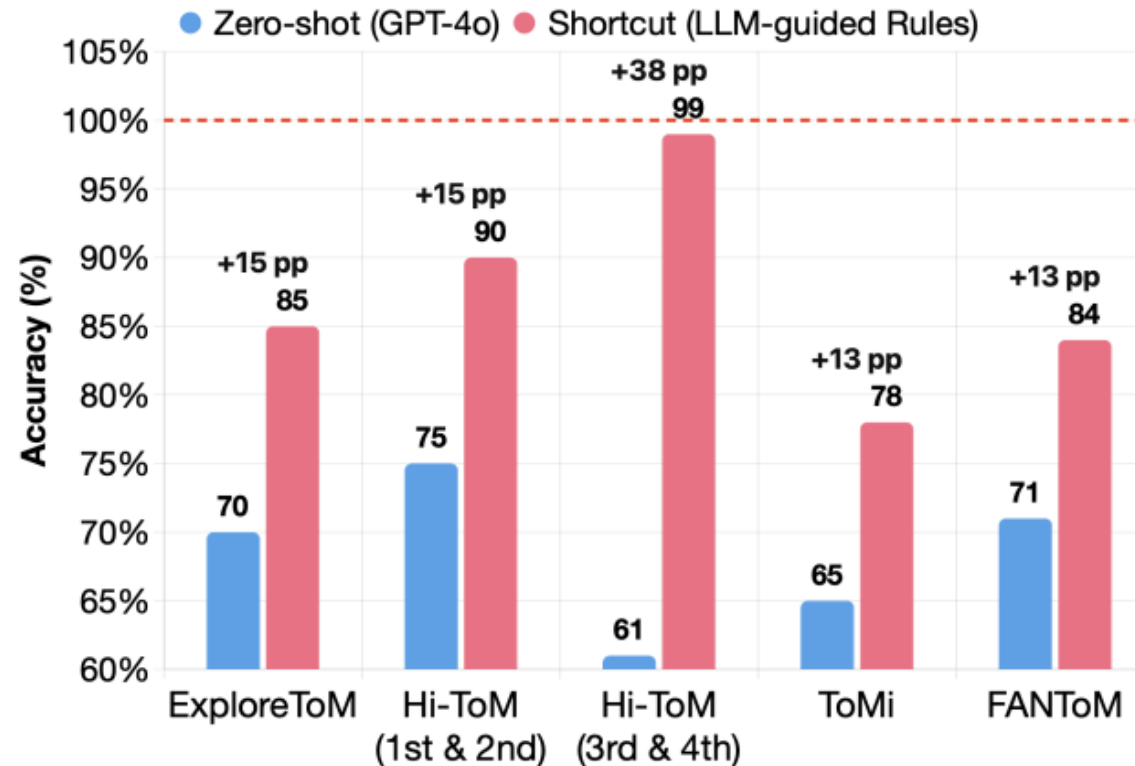
We Found Shortcuts in ToM Benchmarks

- We provide a comprehensive investigation of 8 ToM datasets
- We found that **state tracking problems** are highly shortcut-prone, while **intention problems** require real ToM reasoning

ToM Datasets	Format	Vision	Tracking	Intention	SC (Causal)	SC (Lexical)
ExploreToM	narrative		✓		✓	
FANToM	conversational		✓			✓
ToMi	narrative		✓		✓	✓
Hi-ToM	narrative		✓		✓	✓
OpenToM	narrative		✓	✓		
ToMATO	conversational			✓		
MMToM	narrative	✓	✓	✓		
MuMA-ToM	narrative	✓	✓	✓		

We Found Shortcuts in ToM Benchmarks

- The shortcut issue is serious in 4 out of 8 audited benchmarks
- The **shortcut solution** largely outperforms the **state-of-the-art LLM**



Shortcut Learning Gives a False Sense of ToM

- All the datasets used in [Lu et al. 2025] are shortcut-prone datasets
- → Their findings may not be true

Model	4th-order ToM	Hi-ToM	ToMi	ExploreToM (Raw)	ExploreToM (Infilled)
GPT-4o	46.17%	69.00%	61.96%	67.35%	62.48%
GPT-4o-mini	30.50%	58.50%	70.64%	69.32%	66.04%
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Qwen2.5-0.5B-Instruct	23.83%	30.33%	29.38%	60.51%	54.97%
Qwen2.5-1.5B-Instruct	25.17%	40.67%	54.12%	54.78%	43.53%
Qwen2.5-3B-Instruct	27.50%	39.17%	47.78%	47.37%	49.81%
Qwen2.5-7B-Instruct	28.83%	52.17%	54.65%	59.38%	45.40%
Qwen2.5-7B-Instruct-1M	17.83%	40.67%	54.85%	37.34%	41.46%
Qwen2.5-0.5B-Instruct (RL)	85.83%	70.83%	54.25%	93.34%	72.61%
Qwen2.5-1.5B-Instruct (RL)	89.33%	79.17%	75.89%	90.06%	70.73%
Qwen2.5-3B-Instruct (RL)	88.17%	81.17%	80.18%	93.43%	78.14%
Qwen2.5-7B-Instruct (RL)	82.83%	83.33%	73.99%	91.65%	74.77%
Qwen2.5-7B-Instruct-1M (RL)	94.50%	84.50%	81.08%	92.31%	77.20%
Qwen2.5-0.5B-Instruct (SFT)	88.17%	81.00%	77.79%	89.68%	69.89%
Qwen2.5-1.5B-Instruct (SFT)	86.17%	80.50%	76.33%	93.53%	74.67%
Qwen2.5-3B-Instruct (SFT)	92.67%	87.00%	79.55%	95.78%	74.95%
Qwen2.5-7B-Instruct (SFT)	94.00%	87.33%	80.85%	95.97%	77.95%
Qwen2.5-7B-Instruct-1M (SFT)	93.67%	86.50%	81.10%	95.12%	75.61%

Robust Evaluation of ToM Post-Training

- We experiment with the 4 **shortcut-free datasets** that cover different scenarios: OpenToM (narrative), ToMATO (conversational), and MMTOM / MuMA-ToM (vision & language)
- **Thinking RFT** > SFT > No-Thinking RFT > Zero-shot

OpenToM (narrative)

Method	Loc (Cg)		Loc (Fg)		MH		Att.	Avg(1 st /2 st /overall Δ vs. SFT)
	First	Second	First	Second	First	Second		
Qwen-2.5-3B Models								
Zero-shot	51.00	50.00	28.00	15.00	53.00	48.00	39.00	44.00 / 37.67 / 40.57 \downarrow 39.90
SFT	100.00	81.00	92.00	56.00	88.00	76.00	49.00	93.33 / 71.00 / 77.43
No-Thinking RFT	81.00	50.00	81.00	63.00	56.00	55.00	35.00	72.67 / 56.00 / 60.14 \downarrow 17.29
Thinking RFT	99.00	88.00	94.00	67.00	91.00	85.00	57.00	94.67 / 80.00 / 83.00 \uparrow 5.57

Robust Evaluation of ToM Post-Training

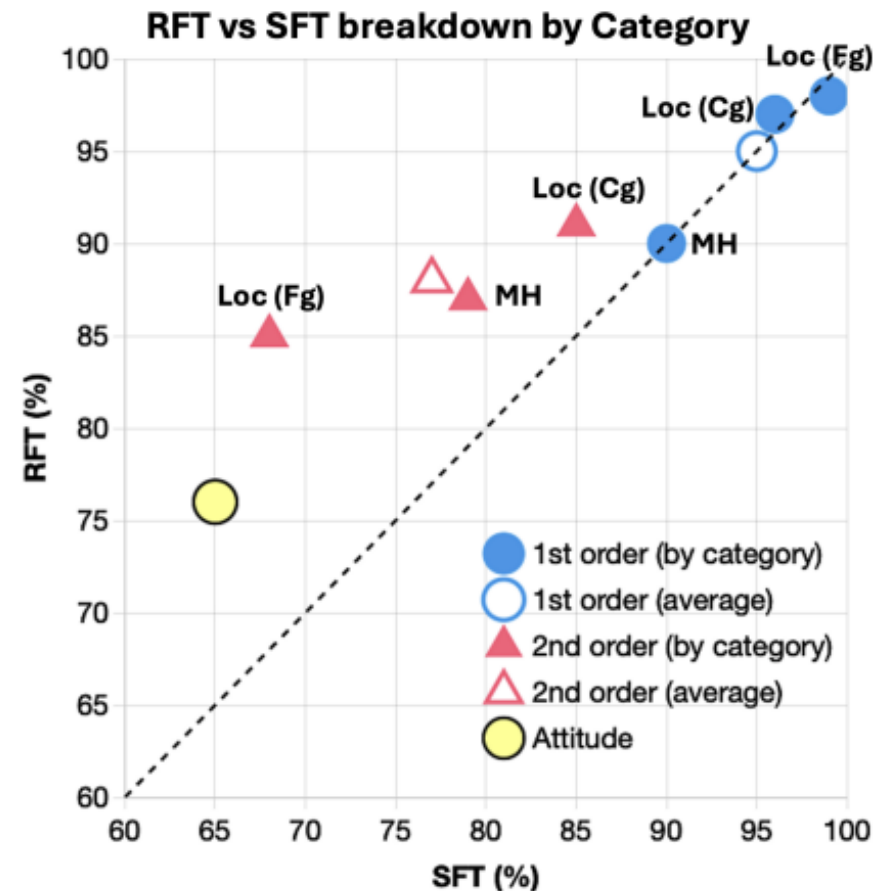
- RFT enables larger gains on mind-state related questions (e.g., desire and intention)

ToMATO (conversational)

Method	Belief	Desire	Emotion	Intention	Knowledge	Avg Δ vs. SFT
Zero-shot	65.71	71.63	67.88	65.77	66.51	67.50 \downarrow 20.42
SFT	87.17	89.07	90.05	86.94	87.05	87.92
No-Thinking RFT	85.18	89.53	84.91	87.61	88.21	87.09 \downarrow 0.83
Thinking RFT	88.50	92.33	88.81	90.54	89.86	90.00 \uparrow 2.08

Robust Evaluation of ToM Post-Training

- RFT excels in complex scenarios such as mind-state related questions (attitude) and higher-order reasoning
- Entries above the diagonal line denote where RFT performs better than SFT:



Robust Evaluation of ToM Post-Training

- RFT excels in complex scenarios such as multimodal inputs

MMToM & MuMA-ToM (conversational)

Method	Train Modality	MMToM	MuMA-ToM	Avg Δ vs. SFT
Zero-shot	Lan.	39.4	–	–
Zero-shot	Lan.+Vis.	45.00	43.30	44.15 \downarrow 30.60
SFT	Lan.	73.02	–	–
SFT	Lan.+Vis.	74.30	75.20	74.75
Thinking-RFT	Lan.	78.50	–	–
Thinking-RFT	Lan.+Vis.	83.30	81.10	82.20 \uparrow 7.45

Robust Evaluation of ToM Post-Training

- RFT has better **generalization** from lower- to higher-order ToM compared to SFT

Method	First Order (<i>Seen</i>)		\hookrightarrow Second Order (<i>Unseen</i>)	
	OpenToM	ToMATO	OpenToM	ToMATO
Zero-shot	50.67	72.96	45.67	62.22
SFT	93.00	88.08	65.33 \downarrow 27.67	81.74 \downarrow 6.34
RFT	95.00	89.32	74.33 \downarrow 20.67	84.78 \downarrow 4.54

Attention Visualization

- **RFT** model aligns more closely with key information
- In contrast, the **zero-shot+CoT** model exhibits unfocused attention



Summary

- We find that ToM explicitly benefits from reasoning-based RL:
Thinking RFT > SFT > No-Thinking RFT > Zero-shot
- Our findings help prevent future ToM research from heading in the wrong direction
- We hope these findings serve as guidelines for designing future ToM benchmarks