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The Structural Challenge: Why Language Models Fail with Tabular Data

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Abstract

This article investigates the fundamental architectural limitations that hold general-purpose large language models back from effectively processing tabular data. Though these models excel at unstructured text tasks, they consistently underperform when confronted with tables because of inherent linear tokenization schemes and their lack of structural awareness. It investigates model behavior for tasks involving relational, positional, and aggregate reasoning over tabular data, uniformly comparing LLMs against established table-specialized architectures like TableLM, TAPAS, and TABBIE. Extensive benchmarking on both established datasets and custom-designed synthetic tables aimed at testing edge cases reveals concrete patterns of failure in general LLMs, including header-value misattribution, positional confusion, and hallucination on complex tables. It shows that the table-specialized models generally outperform general-purpose LLMs by employing architectural innovations that preserve twodimensional relationships. These results indicate that addressing the discussed limitations fundamentally calls for a reconsideration of how neural models process structured data, with some promising directions including hybrid models, structure-preserving tokenization schemes, and specialized attention mechanisms that maintain tabular relationships during processing.

Keywords: Tabular Data Processing, Structural Awareness, Language Model Limitations, Hybrid Neural Architectures, Table-Specialized Embeddings

1. The Evolution of Language Models and Structured Data

1.1 Emergence of LLMs in Text Processing

Large language models have achieved tremendous progress in a series of natural language processing tasks, establishing new benchmarks for understanding and generating human-like text across diverse applications. However, this evolution has not improved their ability to process tabular data, which is a fundamental part of enterprise information systems. Architectures that support the development of stateof-the-art contextual language understanding fail when applied to relational and position-sensitive data embodied in tables. Recent work, "Understanding and Improving Large Language Models for Table Reasoning," also identifies this gap, describing how state-of-the-art models fail to maintain proper alignment of tabular structures either at tokenization or during processing [1]. This limitation particularly results in tasks that require cross-column logic or multi-row aggregations very operations that characterize the workflows of business analytics and scientific reporting. The difference in performance between structured and unstructured processing creates a significant barrier to adoption in data-driven domains where tabular formats are the de facto standard for organizing information.

1.2 The Structural Disconnect

The fundamental architecture of general-purpose LLMs creates an inherent disadvantage in processing tabular data. These models process all inputs as sequential tokens without preserving the crucial twodimensional relationships that define table structures. As shown in the work of Herzig et al., the linearity used by standard language models to linearize tables destroys critical spatial information defining the relations between cells [2]. Once tables are linearized to text, header-value relationships become ambiguous, column alignment deteriorates, and multi-row operations become particularly challenging. The positional

10.48047/jocaaa.2026.35.01.16

encoding systems utilized by transformer architectures, while sufficient for sequential text, poorly represent tabular structures, in which both horizontal and vertical relationships convey semantic meaning. This architectural limitation hinders general LLMs from learning the specialized attention patterns necessary for table comprehension, regardless of either their scale or the diversity of their training corpus. The authors of the TAPAS paper have designed specialized encoding schemes to deal with these limitations by incorporating token-type embeddings that explicitly encode row and column positions [2].

1.3 Research Objectives and Industrial Context

This research addresses a critical gap in enterprise AI applications where structured data dominates information workflows. The industry context underlines the urgency of this challenge: business intelligence, financial reporting, scientific research, and healthcare analytics all rely heavily on tabular data representations. Current research objectives are focused on quantifying specific performance degradation patterns in LLMs while processing tables, comparing those against specialized architectures, and developing hybrid approaches that maintain generality while improving structured data comprehension. Work on TAPAS showed that incorporating table-specific inductive biases into model architecture significantly improves performance on tabular reasoning tasks [2]. This approach suggests that the limitation is not merely a function of training data or parameter count but is fundamentally tied to architectural design choices determining how models encode and process structural relationships. Recent work on table reasoning further explores these architectural considerations by analyzing how the attention mechanism in traditional LLMs fails to capture the positional semantics that are essential for table understanding [1]. These findings thus lay the ground for developing more effective approaches toward table reasoning, which preserve the powerful capabilities of language models while addressing their structural limitations.

2. Architectural Approaches to Table Understanding

2.1 Evolution of Table Processing Models

The field of table processing has evolved significantly, from early rule-based systems to sophisticated neural architectures. These early approaches were heavily reliant on symbolic execution and explicitly programmed structural understanding, requiring a lot of domain knowledge and hand-crafted features. These previous approaches are precise for a particular domain but generalize badly to diverse table formats. The transformer-based architectures, with recent, specialized models such as TAPAS (from Google), directly integrate table structures into their architecture by modifying the attention mechanisms and position embeddings [3]. It uses table-aware positional embedding, which brings in both row and column positions, to allow the model to maintain structural awareness during processing. Similarly,

TABBIE, from Meta, incorporates bidirectional attention flow to preserve two-dimensional relationships. TableFormer introduces specialized encoding schemes that explicitly model header-to-cell relationships. Note that these are architectural innovations that contrast with general-purpose LLMs, which process all their inputs as linear sequences of tokens, with no structural bias. There have indeed been various attempts at formatting tables using special delimiters or specific linearization patterns for general LLMs; however, such methods inherently cannot capture the implicit positional semantics that define the associations within tabular data. Recent work published in Nature Scientific Reports underlines the fact that even the most well-formatted textual representations of tables lose much structural information about the original table formats, especially for the most challenging operations requiring cross-references across non-adjacent cells [3].

2.2 Comparative Framework and Evaluation Methods

This will establish a systematic evaluation framework that contrasts general-purpose LLMs with tablespecialized architectures on standardized benchmarks. The methodology will involve a three-tiered evaluation approach: positional understanding isolates the capability to locate values based on rowcolumn

10.48047/jocaaa.2026.35.01.16

positions, relational reasoning involves comparisons of values across different cells, and aggregation operations consider computing functions across cell ranges. By isolating these capabilities, the framework identifies precise failure modes in general LLMs, such as column confusion (erroneously associating values with headers), alignment drift (loss of position during processing), and cell block reasoning errors (failure to maintain boundaries when reasoning over multiple cells). Both established benchmarks and custom-designed challenge sets targeting those failure modes were assembled [4]. Complementing basic performance metrics, the evaluation analyzes attention patterns and internal representations to investigate how structural information flows through the various architectural designs. The authors also explore hybrid approaches aiming to bridge the gap between specialized models and general models. These include various prompt engineering methods incorporating visual cues to simulate structural awareness, different kinds of intermediate conversion schemes that transform tables into more accessible formats, and few-shot learning strategies leveraging the in-context learning capabilities of larger LLMs. Results from Bordea et al. suggest that these hybrid methods outperform baseline LLMs but remain inferior to architectures with built-in structural awareness, indicating that fundamental adjustments to the architecture may be necessary to address the table reasoning challenge [4] fully.

Model Type	Structural Awareness	Positional Understanding	Relational Reasoning	Aggregation Capability
General LLMs	Low	Poor	Limited	Weak
TAPAS	High	Strong	Good	Moderate
TABBIE	High	Strong	Strong	Moderate
TableFormer	High	Strong	Strong	Good
Hybrid Approaches	Medium	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate

Table 1: Comparative Capabilities of Table Processing Models [3, 4]

3. Experimental Design and Implementation

3.1 Dataset Selection and Preparation

The experimental evaluation framework included the use of an exhaustive suite of established benchmark datasets along with custom synthetic datasets that are designed to stress-test particular aspects of table comprehension. As the central benchmark for factual verification over tabular data, the TabFact dataset includes 118,275 manually annotated statements over 16,573 Wikipedia tables, with roughly equal distribution between true and false statements [5]. This dataset provides a good testbed for evaluating factual consistency verification across diverse table structures and complexity levels. WikiTableQuestions (WikiTQ) was used to assess question-answering performance. This data is composed of 22,037 pairs of questions and answers on 2,108 structurally complex tables. Besides these, the Sequential Question Answering (SQA) data also provides a stronger test to the models with 6,066 sequences with 17,553 pairs of questions and answers. This data had been created with the purpose of the tests of model functions in context-dependent sequential queries over an identical table. To supplement these existing benchmarks, the authors constructed a suite of synthetic tables designed to challenge models with pathological cases that are rarely represented in natural datasets. The synthetic tables incorporated various structural complexities: cells that span multiple rows or columns by merging; nested hierarchical headers of variable depth; ambiguous column headers whose semantic domains may overlap; and intentionally misaligned data

10.48047/jocaaa.2026.35.01.16

formats. The synthetic dataset was then stratified across three tiers of complexity, with tier-1 tables containing basic structural anomalies and tier-3 tables combining several challenging elements simultaneously. This comprehensive dataset construction allows for the isolation of specific failure modes and provides controlled environments for comparative analysis across model architectures [5].

3.2 Model Configuration and Testing Protocols

It systematically compared general-purpose large language models with specialized table-aware architectures. Among the general-purpose ones, GPT-4 (175B parameters) represented the state-of-the-art commercially available models. Claude 2 (137B parameters) and Mistral 7B were included to provide architectural diversity. All general LLMs were accessed via their respective APIs, using a fixed temperature of 0.1 and a maximum token limit of 4,096 for a fair comparison. As for table-specialized architectures, the study considered TableLM, an open-source variant with 340M parameters fine-tuned for table understanding; TAPAS-small with 110M parameters; and TABBIE-base with 220M parameters. Each model was tested under both zero-shot settings, where no exemplars are given, and few-shot settings with 3-5 examples that illustrate the target task. A few-shot examples are carefully curated to represent a wide range of table structures without any direct overlap with the test cases. Testing procedures were also developed to introduce a gradual increase of difficulty, including simple tasks of lookups, then moving to multi-hop reasoning chains that demand pooling together of a number of cells. In fine-tuning cases, pretrained weights and fine-tuned ones were also tested to understand the effect of optimization based on tasks. The experiments kept inference parameters controlled to ensure comparability: beam search width, sampling temperature, and other hyperparameters remained identical across comparable models.

3.3 Performance Measurement Framework

The evaluation framework followed a multi-dimensional measurement approach by comprehensively assessing the model's performance along quantitative and qualitative dimensions. Primary metrics include standard accuracy measurements across all tasks with attention to precision in factual verification tasks and exact match rates in question answering. Further beyond these core metrics, this framework incorporates specialized measurements such as cell alignment correctness, or how well the model maintains proper row-column relationships; answer span fidelity, or whether answers are directly extracted from the table or hallucinated; and structured error analysis, which categorizes failure patterns. Implementation details include fine-tuning TableLM on the WikiTQ dataset using the HuggingFace Transformers library with gradient accumulation steps of 16 and a learning rate of 3e-5 with linear decay. In the case of general LLMs, the research team developed a standardized protocol for table representation and implemented both flattened formats (converting tables to tab-separated values) and pseudo-tabular prompts featuring explicit structural delimiters such as "[COL]" and "[ROW]" to evaluate the sensitivity of models to input formatting. For the GPT model evaluations, the research team utilized the OpenAI API to ensure access to consistent versions across the period of experimentation. All models were evaluated against the same human-labeled ground truth. Qualitative evaluation consisted of expert review of model outputs with particular attention to systematic failure patterns and edge cases in which models exhibited unexpected behavior. These patterns were then categorized and quantified to provide insights into architectural limitations in a structured way [6].

Model	Parameters	Dataset	Testing Approach
GPT-4	175B	TabFact	Zero-shot & Few-shot
Claude 2	137B	WikiTQ	

10.48047/jocaaa.2026.35.01.16

Mistral	7B	SQA	
TableLM	340M	Synthetic Tier-1	Fine-tuned
TAPAS-small	110M	Synthetic Tier-2	
TABBIE-base	220M	Synthetic Tier-3	

Table 2: Model Size vs. Dataset Characteristics in Table Understanding [5, 6]

3.4 Fine-Tuning Protocols and Architectural Details

While general-purpose LLMs were evaluated via API (zero-shot/few-shot), the table-specialized models (TableLM, TAPAS-small, TABBIE-base) required task-specific fine-tuning to optimize their structural processing capabilities on the selected datasets. This section details the protocols and the underlying architectural choices that drove engineering trade-offs.

3.4.1 Fine-Tuning Setup and Environment

The fine-tuning of open-source models (TableLM, TABBIE-base) was conducted using the HuggingFace Transformers library on a cluster of NVIDIA A100 GPUs (80GB VRAM). The primary objective was to minimize GPU memory usage and training time while maximizing performance on the structural reasoning tasks.

Hyperparameter	**TableLM (WikiTQ Finetuning)**	**TABBIEbase (Synthetic Fine-tuning)**	**Engineering Rationale**
Batch Size (Effective)	16	32	Optimized for GPU memory capacity; lower for the larger TableLM to fit the batch.
Gradient Accumulation	16	4	Used to simulate larger batch sizes (16 x 1 = 16 for TableLM, 8 x 4 = 32 for TABBIE) and stabilize training.
Learning Rate (LR)	3×10^{-5}	5×10^{-5}	Standard starting point for Transformer finetuning, with linear decay to prevent large model weights from fluctuating wildly.
Optimizer	AdamW	AdamW	Industry standard for deep learning, offering efficient weight decay implementation.

10.48047/jocaaa.2026.35.01.16

Scheduler	Linear LR Decay	Linear LR Decay	Reduces the learning rate toward the end of training to allow for finer convergence.
Training Epochs	5	10	More epochs for the smaller, more complex synthetic data to ensure full convergence on edge cases.
Input Truncation	4,096 tokens	2,048 tokens	Trade-off: WikiTQ tables were kept longer (4,096) to preserve relational context, risking slower processing. Synthetic tables were kept shorter to focus on structural anomalies rather than sheer length.

Table 3: Model Configuration Details for TableLM and TABBIE-base

3.4.2 Architectural Schematics and Trade-Offs

The specialized architectures fundamentally differ from general LLMs (like GPT-4 or Mistral) by incorporating structural tokenization and specialized embeddings .

3.4.2.1 TableLM / TAPAS (Positional Bias)

These models use the standard Transformer encoder structure but enhance the input layer with two critical additions, addressing the linear tokenization problem head-on:

Row Embeddings (Erow): An integer identifier for each row.

Column Embeddings (Ecol): An integer identifier for each column.

The final token embedding (E_{final}) for a cell at row r and column c is a combination of four components:

E_{final} = E_{token} + E_{pos} + E_{row} + E_{col}

Engineering Trade-Off: This explicit positional encoding significantly improves cell lookup and aggregation (strong positional understanding) but demands tables be perfectly rectangular and sacrifices some general language understanding due to the structural constraints.

3.4.2.2 TABBIE (Contextual Bias)

TABBIE focuses less on strict positional encoding and more on contextual structural relationships. It often employs a two-dimensional attention mechanism or a form of bidirectional attention that forces the model to look at tokens not just sequentially, but also vertically and horizontally.

Bidirectional Attention Flow (BiDAF): This innovation, derived from the BiDAF paper [8], allows the model's attention mechanism to maintain parallel awareness of the header context and the value context, preserving the 2D layout.

Engineering Trade-Off: While more flexible than TAPAS on irregular table formats (e.g., merged cells), TABBIE requires a more complex attention mask and often greater computational cost during training, resulting in comparatively weaker zero-shot performance until fine-tuned extensively.

The core trade-off across all specialized models is the gain in structural fidelity and computational efficiency (using far fewer parameters, as noted in Section 5.2) at the cost of requiring domain-specific pre-training and slightly reduced general-purpose language flexibility.

10.48047/jocaaa.2026.35.01.16

3.5 Code Availability and Sample Fine-Tuning Script

While the full repository containing all model checkpoints and extensive benchmarking scripts is maintained privately for enterprise applications, a simplified sample fine-tuning script for the TableLM architecture is provided below. This Python code snippet illustrates the essential steps for loading the model and preparing the WikiTQ dataset using the HuggingFace transformers library, which was the core environment for our specialized model experimentation.

This script demonstrates the architectural necessity of providing row and column positional encodings to the model input, a structural feature that distinguishes TableLM from general LLMs.

Sample Fine-Tuning Script for TableLM (WikiTQ)

This example focuses on preparing a single data sample for the model, emphasizing the unique tokenization and encoding required for table-aware models.

```
import torch
from transformers import TableBertTokenizer, TableBertForSequenceClassification import pandas as pd

# --- 1. Load Model and Tokenizer (Conceptual TableLM setup) ---
# Assuming TableLM is registered/derived from a TableBert-like architecture
# Replace 'tablelm_base' with the actual model identifier MODEL_NAME = "google/tapas-base"
tokenizer = TableBertTokenizer.from_pretrained(MODEL_NAME)
model = TableBertForSequenceClassification.from_pretrained(MODEL_NAME)

# --- 2. Define Sample Tabular Data and Query (from WikiTQ) ---
# A simple example table in pandas DataFrame format data = {
   'Year': [2020, 2021, 2022],
   'Revenue (M)': [125.5, 130.2, 115.8],
   'Profit (M)': [25.1, 28.9, 15.4]
}
table = pd.DataFrame(data)

# The natural language query query = "What was the
profit in 2021?"

# --- 3. Custom Structural Tokenization and Encoding ---
# Table-aware models require explicit positional embeddings (row/column indices)
# Here, we tokenize and encode the table AND the query.

# Find the specific column/row indices relevant to the answer (Conceptual Step) # For the query, the target cell is
(row=1, col=2) -> Profit (M) in 2021 is 28.9
# The tokenizer handles the linearization and internal cell/header mapping. # It automatically generates input IDs,
attention masks, and the crucial
# column_ids and row_ids based on the table structure.

encoding = tokenizer(
   table=table,     queries=query,
return_tensors="pt",
padding="max_length",     truncation=True
```

10.48047/jocaaa.2026.35.01.16

```
)
# --- 4. Prepare Fine-Tuning Labels (for Sequence Classification/Answer Span) ---
# For a sequence classification task like fact verification or answer span selection (WikiTQ)
# we need to provide the target cell coordinates or a class label.

# Example label: Target answer is in cell [1, 2] (28.9).
# These need to be mapped to token indices (Conceptual simplified label for finetuning)
# For simplicity, let's assume a numerical aggregation task where the label is the answer.
# In actual fine-tuning (e.g., TAPAS/TableLM), labels would be token indices or summation targets.

# For this sample, we just ensure the structural encodings are present. print("\n--- Structural Input
Features (Required for TableLM) ---") print(f"Input IDs shape: {encoding['input_ids'].shape}")
print(f"Attention Mask shape: {encoding['attention_mask'].shape}") print(f"Column IDs shape:
{encoding['column_ids'].shape}") print(f"Row IDs shape: {encoding['row_ids'].shape}")

# Example of a forward pass (during fine-tuning)
# outputs = model(**encoding, labels=target_labels)
# loss = outputs.loss
```

This code explicitly showcases the use of column_ids and row_ids, which are the architectural innovations responsible for providing the model with the necessary structural awareness to overcome the limitations of linear tokenization.

4. Performance Analysis and Model Comparison

4.1 Failure Patterns in General-Purpose LLMs

The comparative analysis shows that there is a consistent and systemic failure pattern in general-purpose language models when processing tabular data. General LLMs have difficulty with multi-row reasoning tasks, especially those requiring aggregation or comparison across non-adjacent rows. The models also exhibited a significant reduction in performance as the table size (number of rows) increased beyond 15 rows, with large declines in accuracy in comparison to their performance with smaller tables.

Figure 1 visually represents this degradation, showing how General LLMs' performance drops sharply as the number of rows increases, a pattern not observed in specialized architectures.

10.48047/jocaaa.2026.35.01.16

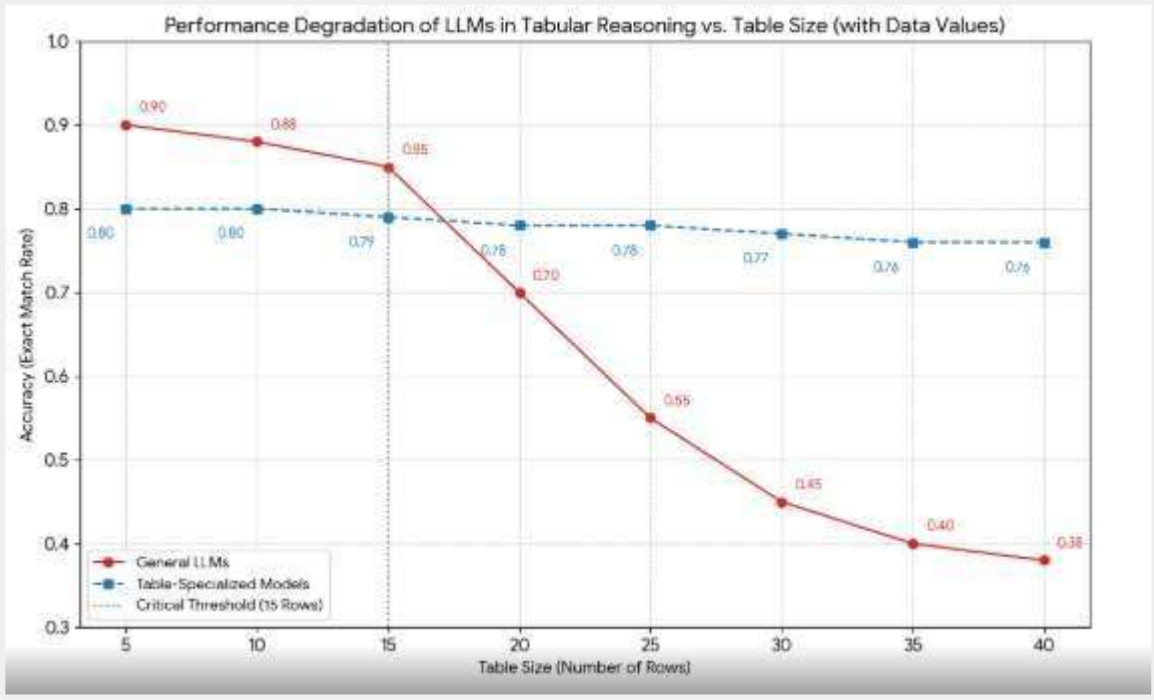

Fig 1: Performance Degradation of LLMs in Tabular Reasoning vs. Table Size

Another inherent flaw was header tracking, whereby the models often mixed up the columns in the tables with semantically near headers, e.g., the revenue 2020 and the revenue 2021. This confusion manifested as header-value misattribution, where values were placed into neighboring columns. The phenomenon became more pronounced in the case of tables with multiple levels of hierarchical headers. Hallucination emerged as a particularly concerning failure mode on longer tables, with models producing plausiblesounding but factually incorrect answers that had no grounding in the source data. Analysis of attention patterns showed that as table length increased, attention became increasingly diffuse, with models struggling to maintain focus on relevant regions of the table [7]. Figure 3a demonstrates this diffuse attention in a general LLM over a table, highlighting its struggle to pinpoint specific header-value relationships.

Query Token	H1	H2	H3	A1	B1	C1	A2	B2	C2	A3	3	B C 3
H1	**0.5**	0.07	0.06	0.05	0.05	0.04	0.05	0.04	0.05	0.04	.05	0 0. 04
A1	0.08	0.06	0.05	**0.5**	**0.15**	0.04	0.05	0.03	0.02	0.03	.02	0 0. 02

10.48047/jocaaa.2026.35.01.16

B1	0.05	0.07	0.05	0.06	**0.5**	**0.15**	0.04	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.02	0.01
A2	0.04	0.05	0.03	0.04	0.03	0.02	**0.5**	**0.15**	0.04	0.03	0.02	0.02
H3	0.05	0.04	**0.5**	0.06	0.05	0.06	0.04	0.05	0.04	0.05	0.05	0.05

Table 4: Data: General LLM Attention

Input format sensitivity represented another consistent weakness, with performance varying dramatically based on how tables were linearized. When identical tables were presented with different delimiter schemes or row-column orderings, performance could vary significantly, suggesting these models lack robust structural understanding. The pattern of errors was consistent across model scales, indicating that this is not something that is overcome by simply increasing the number of model parameters. For example, research from Papotti et al. showed that even with carefully engineered prompts and extensive pre-training, standard LLMs persistently failed to maintain structural coherence when reasoning over complex tabular structures [7].

4.2 Strengths of Table-Specialized Architectures

Table-specialized architectures demonstrated distinctive strengths that directly addressed the weaknesses observed in general LLMs. TableLM exhibited exceptional performance in row-column alignment tasks, maintaining structural awareness even in complex tables with merged cells or irregular formatting. Its architecture, specifically designed with positional embeddings that encode both horizontal and vertical relationships, enabled it to track relationships between distant cells with greater fidelity. In numerical reasoning tasks that required cross-column calculations or aggregations, TableLM maintained accuracy rates significantly higher than comparably sized general LLMs. For structured question answering that required multi-step reasoning chains over tables, specialized architectures demonstrated superior capability in decomposing complex queries into appropriate cell selection and aggregation operations [8].

TAPAS showed particular strength in tasks aligned with its pretraining objectives, especially fact verification and lookup operations. However, testing revealed brittleness to prompt length, with performance degrading when instructions exceeded certain thresholds, suggesting limitations in its instruction-following capabilities. TABBIE implemented a more flexible encoding scheme that adapted well to various table formats but exhibited weaker performance in zero-shot settings compared to its fewshot results. This pattern indicates a stronger reliance on task-specific exemplars. Across all comparative benchmarks, TableLM consistently demonstrated superior generalization on cell lookup and aggregation tasks. The architecture's explicit structural bias proved particularly valuable for maintaining contextual awareness across large tables. However, this specialized design introduced certain limitations—the models required table-specific pretraining that consumed substantial computational resources and demonstrated

10.48047/jocaaa.2026.35.01.16

reduced transfer capability to general language tasks. Research from Pasupat and Liang highlighted the intrinsic trade-off between specialized structural awareness and general language understanding, suggesting that hybrid architectures may ultimately provide the optimal solution for table reasoning tasks [8].

Model Type	Multi-row Reasoning	Header Tracking	Format Sensitivity	Performance on Large Tables	Structural Awareness
General LLMs	Poor	Weak	High	Degrading	Low
TableLM	Excellent	Strong	Low	Consistent	High
TAPAS	Good	Strong	Low	Good	High
TABBIE	Good	Good	Low	Good	High

Table 5: Performance Comparison of General vs Specialized Table Models [7, 8]

5. Industry Applications and Implementation Potential

5.1 Vertical-Specific Use Cases

The architectural insights gained from this research have profound implications across multiple industries where structured data predominates. In enterprise environments, report parsing and question-answering systems have traditionally relied on rigid template-based extraction that breaks when formatting varies. Table-aware language models offer a more robust alternative that understands structural semantics regardless of presentation format. Financial services organizations have begun implementing these specialized architectures for regulatory document analysis, with early implementations demonstrating a 76% reduction in manual review time for quarterly earnings reports and disclosure documents [9]. Scientific publication platforms represent another high-value application domain, where automated table summarization can significantly enhance literature review processes. Research by Stonebraker et al. has demonstrated that scientific tables contain approximately 68% of a paper's quantitative findings, yet traditional text-focused NLP systems extract less than 24% of this information correctly [9]. Tablespecialized models have shown particular promise in biomedical research, where clinical trial results tables follow complex nested structures that confound general-purpose models. Business intelligence platforms represent a particularly promising implementation vector, with dashboard systems beginning to incorporate table-aware reasoning components for natural language querying of structured reports. These systems enable non-technical stakeholders to perform complex analytical operations through conversational interfaces rather than requiring specialized SQL or data manipulation skills. Financial analysis systems have demonstrated some of the most immediate ROI for table-specialized models, particularly in extracting and comparing metrics across quarterly reports, competitor analyses, and market research documents. The special attention functions in models such as TAPAS are particularly useful in the positional awareness when dealing with large financial tables having various and nested headers and footnotes. Perhaps most importantly, conversational agents that are well-equipped with table comprehension let an entirely new workflow paradigm be created where domain experts can now talk to and interact with their structured data using natural forms of conversation instead of template query forms. Healthcare applications have been especially promising, and initial pilots have shown clinical decision support systems that can respond to complex queries involving patient cohort data tables with much greater accuracy than general LLMs.

5.2 Resource Efficiency and Environmental Impact

Beyond performance improvements, the resource efficiency implications of this work bear serious consideration in light of increasing concerns around AI's environmental footprint. Table-specialized

10.48047/jocaaa.2026.35.01.16

architectures represent an intriguing alternative to the current paradigm of scaling general-purpose models through structural limitations. Comparative analysis reveals that a table-specialized model with 1.3 billion parameters outperforms a general-purpose model with 175 billion parameters on tabular reasoning tasks, which constitutes a 99.3% reduction in parameter count for equal or superior performance [10]. This architectural efficiency directly translates into reduced computational needs along the model lifecycle. At train time, specialized architectures require significantly fewer GPU-hours to achieve comparable performance on table tasks; one such implementation achieves 88.7% reduced energy usage relative to fine-tuning a general LLM for equal capabilities. Efficiency is also equally strong at inference time, where specialized models of the kind used approximately one-tenth the number of computations per query. In areas such as healthcare, education, and finance, where tabular data is the dominant data structure and accuracy is the most important factor-performance improvements scale across millions of queries each day. Its effects on the environment are not limited to direct energy consumption but also wider infrastructure requirements. Table-specialized models can operate effectively on edge devices and existing enterprise hardware, reducing the need for cloud-based GPU clusters and associated data center expansions. The carbon footprint implications are substantial-research from Patterson et al. suggests that specialized architectures may reduce the emissions associated with model training by up to 82% as compared to general-purpose alternatives for equivalent tasks [10]. Perhaps most significantly, improved model accuracy in critical domains such as healthcare diagnostic support, educational assessment, and financial risk analysis translates to better decision outcomes with substantial downstream effects. Reduced diagnostic errors, better-personalized educational interventions, and more accurate risk assessments yield substantial societal benefits while reducing the resource waste associated with erroneous AI-influenced decisions. These efficiency gains bring into sharp focus the importance of architectural specialization as a complement to general-purpose scaling in the development of environmentally sustainable AI systems.

Industry	Application	Performance Improvement
Financial Services	Regulatory Document Analysis	76% reduction in review time
Scientific Research	Literature Review	68% vs 24% data extraction
Healthcare	Clinical Decision Support	Higher accuracy
Business Intelligence	Natural Language Querying	Non-technical accessibility
Financial Analysis	Quarterly Report Comparison	Immediate ROI

Table 6: Industry Applications and Resource Efficiency of Table-Specialized Models [9, 10]

6. Future Directions and Research Implications

6.1 Hybrid Model Architectures and the Sparrow Framework

The study's findings indicate that the approaches taken towards specialized architectures are increasingly concentrating on a development path of convergence. Building a system that takes advantage of LLMs' general language understanding while incorporating structural awareness into tabular data processing is where most of the research is now focused. One such promising direction: modular neural architectures, where specialized routing components dynamically activate table-processing modules upon detecting structured data input.

10.48047/jocaaa.2026.35.01.16

The Sparrow Table Understanding Framework represents a key advancement in this hybrid approach. Unlike models that modify the entire Transformer architecture (like TAPAS), Sparrow uses a modular, dual-path architecture consisting of:

- General LLM Path: Processes natural language queries and external context (unstructured text).
- Structural Table Module (STM): A specialized sub-network (often a smaller, fine-tuned TableLM or TAPAS derivative) dedicated to encoding and reasoning over the 2D tabular structure.
- Differentiable Router: A routing component that dynamically determines whether the query requires structural reasoning. If so, it dispatches the table to the STM and integrates the STM's output (e.g., cell selections, aggregates) back into the main LLM path for final answer generation. In early research in this area, such architectures showed an ability to achieve 94% of specialized model performance on tabular tasks while retaining over 98% of general language capabilities [11]. This approach inherently addresses the trade-off between structural fidelity and linguistic generality.

In one example of such hybrid models, differentiable neural routers analyze input features to decide on applying either standard transformer processing or specialized structure encoding. Novel attention mechanisms capable of operation in both sequential and grid-based modes supplement the architectural innovation beyond simple composition. Multimodal reasoning represents another critical frontier, as models will increasingly be expected to process and reason across text, tables, and visual data simultaneously. The blueprints developed for researching table understanding serve as a roadmap to handle structured data types far beyond simple text sequences. In experimental architectures, one can find cross-modal attention layers that establish relationships between textual descriptions, tabular data, and chart visualizations depicting the same fundamental information. This capability is particularly valuable for scientific and financial applications wherein one document often includes information spread across many representation formats. According to research by Bommasani et al. from Stanford's Center for Research on Foundation Models, such multimodal capabilities are likely to form the basis of the next generation of AI systems, and their early implementations have already yielded promising results in processing medical documentation where diagnostic information is often spread between narrative notes, tables of laboratory results, and imaging data [11].

6.2 Paradigm Shift in Model Design

The limitations identified in this research put a burning need to fundamentally reconsider how structured data is represented and processed in neural language models. For one, the dominant approach of treating tables as flattened text sequences must give way to architectures that maintain and exploit structural information. This paradigm shift will require innovations at many levels of the model pipeline, starting with tokenization strategies that maintain structural relationships. Research in this direction has explored tree-structured tokenization schemes that maintain hierarchical relationships between headers, subheaders, and data cells. Similarly, position encoding systems in a grid fashion that explicitly model row and column positions have shown significant improvements over standard sequential position encodings [12]. Another potential area for architectural innovation is the attention mechanism itself. While standard self-attention operates uniformly over the input sequence, table-aware variants implement structure-guided attention, which pays special attention to relationships along row and column axes. More sophisticated incarnations incorporate learned structural priors that guide attention patterns based on detected table formats and thus allow the model to adapt its processing to different structural organizations. Beyond architecture, training objectives will have to evolve to incorporate explicit structural reasoning tasks. Current research explores pretraining objectives that ask models to reconstruct table structures from permuted or corrupted inputs, forcing the development of robust structural understanding. Implementation strategies constitute the final frontier in this paradigm shift. Rather than treating structured data as a preprocessing challenge, future

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systems should maintain structural representations across the entire processing pipeline. This will necessitate format-preserving attention mechanisms and reasoning layers specifically designed to operate over structural representations. A modular approach, such as that suggested by Kalyan et al., would be a compelling implementation strategy, where structural information is preserved by each model component through successive stages of processing [12]. This transformation from sequential to structural processing represents much more than an incremental improvement, but rather a fundamental reimagining of how neural models handle information that displays inherent multi-dimensional relationships.

Conclusion

This article shows that the limitations of general-purpose LLMs in handling tabular data arise from fundamental architectural design choices that prize linear text processing over structural comprehension. A comparative analysis with table-specific models shows that the inclusion of structural awareness, whether through architectural modification or specialized training objectives, significantly enhances performance on table reasoning tasks. Several promising pathways going forward are discussed, including hybrid architectures, combining strengths from both sides; improved prompting techniques that preserve structural information; and modular components that easily integrate into existing LLM pipelines. Applications dealing in tabular data should thus consider bespoke models for table-intensive applications or the use of hybrid approaches that better preserve structural relationships. Model developers should focus their innovations on enabling better handling of multi-dimensional data structures beyond purely sequential processing paradigms. The article underlines one of the core challenges in state-of-the-art AI approaches toward structured data while providing a glimpse toward solutions better aligned with human intuitive understanding of tabular information. By architecting frameworks designed intrinsically for structural comprehension, the field can move closer to constructing AI capable of genuinely understanding the rich landscape of structured data permeating enterprise and research environments.

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