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Anonymous authors

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ABSTRACT

While protein language models (PLMs) are one of the most promising avenues of research for future *de novo* protein design, the way in which they transform sequences to hidden representations, as well as the information encoded in such representations is yet to be fully understood. Several works have attempted to propose interpretability tools for PLMs, but they have focused on understanding how individual sequences are transformed by such models. Therefore, the way in which PLMs transform the whole space of sequences along with their relations is still unknown. In this work we attempt to understand this transformed space of sequences by identifying protein structure and representation with square-root velocity (SRV) representations and graph filtrations. Both approaches naturally lead to a metric space in which pairs of proteins or protein representations can be compared with each other.

We analyze different types of proteins from the SCOP dataset and show that the Karcher mean and effective dimension of the SRV shape space follow a non-linear pattern as a function of the layers in ESM2 models of different sizes. Furthermore, we use graph filtrations as a tool to study the context lengths at which models encode the structural features of proteins. We find that PLMs preferentially encode immediate as well as local relations between residues, but start to degrade for larger context lengths. The most structurally faithful encoding tends to occur close to, but before the last layer of the models, indicating that training a folding model ontop of these layers might lead to improved folding performance.

1 INTRODUCTION

Protein language models (PLMs) are a novel and powerful approach for the modeling and design of new proteins with desired structural or functional features (Ferruz & Höcker, 2022). Using PLMs one can predict the folding of proteins in 3D space (Lin et al., 2023), generate new candidate sequences for viral vectors (Lyu et al., 2024), enzymes (Madani et al., 2023), biosensors (Hayes et al., 2025) and functional binders (Chen et al., 2025; Bryant & Eloffson, 2023). A particular setting in which PLMs have been found to be useful is in finding high-dimensional representations of protein sequences that are thought to reflect the physical, evolutionary or functional properties of a protein. This is especially useful since it allows one to efficiently evaluate and compare newly generated proteins without the need for expensive modeling or experiments. One of the most widespread models of this type are the Evolutionary Scale Modeling (ESM) models (Lin et al., 2023; Hayes et al., 2025), which we will analyze in this work.

It is empirically understood that the representations in these models form a good initialization for folding models (Lin et al., 2023) and can also be used as a reward function to guide other generative approaches (Wang et al., 2025). However, the precise features that these representations encode are still not fully understood. In a previous work by Zhang et al. (2024), the authors develop a categorical Jacobian approach to suggest that PLMs encode the pairwise statistics of coevolving residues. In another work by Simon & Zou (2024), the authors use sparse autoencoders to suggest that PLMs encode human-interpretable features such as binding, structural motifs and functional domains. In yet another work that leverages the power of sparse autoencoders (Gujral et al., 2025), the authors show that PLMs and the individual neurons in them also encode features related to biologically relevant terms within the Gene Ontology hierarchy (Aleksander et al., 2023).

054 What all of these works study is the transformation of individual sequences to high-dimensional
 055 latent representations. However, such approaches ignore how different proteins or their representations
 056 relate to each other in the latent space of a PLM. If structure determines function, then it is
 057 reasonable to assume that similar structure determines similar function. Furthermore, if protein
 058 representations in PLMs characterize structural, evolutionary and functional features, then one might
 059 expect that similar representations share such features. In addition, the representation of a protein
 060 in a PLM is a tensor of shape *amino acids* \times *model dimension*, however for many applications it is
 061 standard to take the average over the first dimension, which ignores the shape of the representation,
 062 thereby missing the full richness of the information present in PLM representations.

063 To state our motivation more formally, it is important to understand how the metric space of proteins
 064 compares to the metric space of complete shape representations in PLMs. Metric space approaches
 065 for the structural analysis of proteins have previously been considered within the rich field of shape
 066 analysis (Liu et al., 2010). The essential realization of these approaches is that two proteins can
 067 be structurally compared by finding the optimal way to superimpose them, allowing different types
 068 of transformations. This is the backbone for many standard tools in the field of rigid and flexible
 069 structural alignment such as root mean square deviation (RMSD), TM score (Zhang & Skolnick,
 070 2004) and FATCAT (Li et al., 2020) among others. Despite their popularity, to our knowledge, such
 071 methods have yet to be applied to study the hidden representations of PLMs.

072 In this work, we adapt and extend the shape-analysis framework to study the layerwise metric rep-
 073 resentation spaces of eight different classes in the SCOP (Chandonia et al., 2022) dataset pushed
 074 through several ESM2 models. We consider different features such as the Fréchet radius and the
 075 effective dimensionality of these spaces and show that they follow a peculiar pattern as a function of
 076 layer, which is especially prominent for larger models. Furthermore, we introduce a graph-filtration
 077 method that allows us to separate and study the scale at which PLMs best maintain the structure of
 078 proteins. Using this analysis, we show that while structure is always encoded better than chance in
 079 deep PLM representations, it is optimally encoded at very short context lengths of 2 or at slightly
 080 longer context lengths at ~ 8 amino-acid neighbors.

081 2 BACKGROUND

082 In this section, we fix our notation and introduce the mathematical machinery necessary for com-
 083 paring proteins and their corresponding representations in protein language models. We define two
 084 different ways to compare proteins with PLM representations. In the first one, each protein is a
 085 point in a high-dimensional (sometimes infinite-dimensional) space, and we define a metric that can
 086 be consistently applied to proteins made up of different numbers of amino acids. In the second ap-
 087 proach, we define a filtration of metric spaces that only allows us to compare proteins of the same
 088 size. As we will argue, this is useful for understanding the context length that current PLMs are
 089 sensitive to, as well as the degree to which protein structure is encoded in PLMs.

090 We start by outlining several ways to mathematically formulate what proteins are. For each such
 091 definition of a "protein" we also propose a metric space in which such proteins can be sensibly
 092 embedded in.

- 093 1. *Proteins as sequences:* In this case, we define a protein P by its amino acid sequence. So,
 094 a protein of length L will live in a space \mathcal{A}^L , where \mathcal{A} is an alphabet of the 20 canonical
 095 amino acids. Given that we want to compare proteins with different numbers of amino
 096 acids, we can define the space of all possible amino acid sequences as $\mathcal{A}^* = \bigcup_{L=0}^{\infty} \mathcal{A}^L$. An
 097 edit distance, such as the Levenshtein distance for example, can be used to define a metric
 098 on this space. Thus, the metric space defined by amino acid sequences will be the pair
 099 (\mathcal{A}^*, d_{lev}) .
- 100 2. *Proteins as three dimensional point clouds:* If we consider the actual physical structure of a
 101 protein, we can define a protein as an ordered point cloud of size L in \mathbb{R}^3 equipped with the
 102 Euclidean metric. However, \mathbb{R}^3 contains points rather than point clouds, so point clouds
 103 of arbitrary sizes live in a different space, namely $\mathcal{P}_3^* = \bigcup_{n=0}^{\infty} (\mathbb{R}^3)^n$. While it is possible to
 104 define a metric on this space, such metrics (for example, Hausdorff or Wasserstein) often

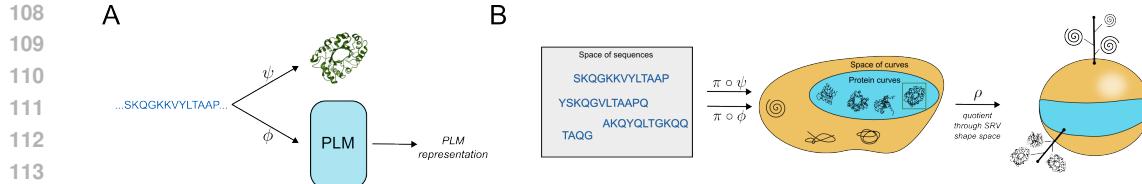


Figure 1: **A)** Depiction of a single sequence (1kr1) mapped to a 3d structure and a PLM representation. **B)** Illustration of how the space of sequences is first transformed into a space of curves and afterwards into a shape space. The lines sticking out of the sphere show the fibers of the map ρ .

ignore the ordering of the point cloud, which matters when studying proteins. Note that each protein can be described through a map $\psi : \mathcal{A}^* \rightarrow \mathcal{P}_3^*$ from the sequence space to L points in \mathbb{R}^3 .

3. *Proteins as curves*: Instead, we can study structure by identifying proteins with curves in \mathbb{R}^3 . This is done by identifying the space of proteins with the space of continuous curves $\Gamma_3 = \{\gamma : \gamma : [0, 1] \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^3\}$. We further require that for every protein of length L and coordinates $\psi_l(P) \in \mathbb{R}^3$ we have $\gamma(tL) = \psi_l(P)$ if $l = tL \in \mathbb{N}$. As we will discuss later, this definition of a protein treats proteins of any length as the same object and makes it easier to define a metric that compares them.
4. *Proteins as graphs*: Finally, proteins can also often be thought of as graphs. This usually requires a contact map, which is a binary matrix that encodes whether two residues are closer than a specified threshold (6-12 Å being a standard choice). We define this approach more rigorously in subsection 2.2.

Notice that while we have defined different ways to think of proteins, the second and third definitions can also be generalized to any ordered point cloud. Therefore, we can use them to study 3d protein structure as well as the embeddings of sequences in protein language models. We will denote the map from an amino acid sequence to the embedding space of a language model by the function $\phi : \mathcal{A}^* \rightarrow \mathcal{P}_m^*$, where $m \gg 3$ is the embedding dimension of the model. Thus, our approach can be summarized by Figure 1 and the following diagram,

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \mathcal{A}^* & \xrightarrow{\phi} & \mathcal{P}_m^* \\ \psi \downarrow & & \downarrow \pi \\ \mathcal{P}_3^* & \xrightarrow{\pi} & \Gamma_m \end{array} \quad (1)$$

where π is a map that sends point clouds in different spaces to a shared metric space of curves in \mathbb{R}^m . Practically, one can think of π as a choice of how to interpolate ordered point clouds so that they become curves in \mathbb{R}^m .

2.1 SHAPE SPACES AND THE SQUARE-ROOT VELOCITY REPRESENTATION

A fundamental feature of protein structure is invariance to rotations and translations. What this implies is that protein structure is invariant under isometries of \mathbb{R}^3 or the special Euclidean group $SE(3)$. This is the principle behind models such as the $SE(3)$ -transformer (Fuchs et al., 2020), which is equivariant to transformations from this group and is thought to play an important role in the success in folding models such as AlphaFold2 (Jumper et al., 2021) and RoseTTAFold (Baek et al., 2021).

In the present work we use the square-root velocity (SRV) framework introduced in (Srivastava et al., 2010) to enforce invariance to translation. For any ordered point cloud, we interpolate the points with quadratic splines, thereby generating a curve γ which has the same length independently of the number of amino-acids in a protein sequence. Following the interpolation step, the SRV representation is defined as,

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$$q(t) = \dot{\gamma}(t) / \sqrt{\|\dot{\gamma}(t)\|}. \quad (2)$$

165 From the norm in the denominator one can see that this approach projects curves to an infinite-
166 dimensional sphere S^∞ , which makes computing geodesics, and thereby measuring distances,
167 straightforward. Since translations are already accounted for, we quotient out the remaining ac-
168 tions of the $SE(m)$ group, namely the rotations generated by $SO(m)$. This is done using SVD to
169 solve the optimization problem for any two SRV curves q_1 and q_2 ,

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$$\hat{R} = \arg \min_{R \in SO(n)} \|q_1 - Rq_2\|. \quad (3)$$

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Given this, the distance between any two curves is defined in terms of the L2 norm as $d(q_1, q_2) = \|q_1 - \hat{R}q_2\|_2$. It is often the case that one also removes different reparameterizations of curves, but we have avoided that step given that interpolating between residues forms a consistent way of parameterizing proteins, and this additional step is not worth the computational cost.

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In summary, we map sequences to their 3d structure and to their representations in a PLM. These form point clouds which we interpolate to map to curves that are then transformed to their SRV representation. Finally, we quotient out rotations to form the shape space, which inherits a Riemannian structure and allows for the efficient computation of distances. We denote this procedure by a quotient map $\rho : \Gamma_m \rightarrow \Gamma_m/SE(m)$. Notice that the space of protein curves under this map form a submanifold of the quotient space $H = S^\infty/SO(m)$ as illustrated in panel **B** of Figure 1. All curves that are the same up to actions of $SE(m)$ end up at a single point y on this submanifold. The set of these curves is called a fiber and is defined by $\rho^{-1}(y) = \{\gamma | \rho(\gamma) = y\}$.

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2.2 GRAPH FILTRATIONS

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When making predictions, language models have to consider the context within which a token exists. The context length to which a model is sensitive is unknown apriori. Furthermore, while using a contact map with a threshold of 6-12Å makes sense in real 3d protein structure, it is less clear how to choose such a threshold in PLM representations where such a unit is not defined. For this reason, one needs to work with methods that are capable of considering many possible context lengths. One such example is the concept of a filtration, which is fundamental in the topological data analysis literature (Edelsbrunner & Harer, 2010) and has been extended to graphs within the field of graph learning (Hofer et al., 2020; O’Bray et al., 2021).

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In a filtration, one defines a parameter t and a family of objects $S_t \subset S_{t'}$ whenever $t < t'$. In this specific case, we consider filtrations of graphs composed of a set of vertices $V = \{v_1, v_2, \dots, v_N\}$ with coordinates $v_i \in \mathbb{R}^m$ and edges whenever $d_2(v_i, v_j) < t$, with d_2 being the Euclidean metric enforced by the ambient space. This induces a filtration on their adjacency matrices A^t , since $A_{i,j}^t \leq A_{i,j}^{t'}$ for all i, j when $t < t'$.

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Comparing the coordinates of real proteins in \mathbb{R}^3 to those of a PLM in \mathbb{R}^m is not a well-defined procedure. However, for the same protein P of length L , both adjacency matrices live in $\{0, 1\}^{L \times L}$. This allows us to compare the structure of a protein with the structure of its embedding in a PLM. A natural choice of a metric in this space is the entry-wise 1-norm of the difference between the two adjacency matrices or $d_A(\psi(P), \phi(P)) = \|\psi(A^t) - \phi(A^t)\|_1$, where by abuse of notation $\psi(A^t)$ and $\phi(A^t)$ respectively indicate the flattened adjacency matrix of the three-dimensional structure and the PLM representation at the t -th filtration value.

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For our analysis we construct the k nearest neighbor graphs of the true protein structure and PLM representation as shown in Figure 2. For small k , the graphs can only differ at a few locations, and the distance between their adjacency matrices is small. On the other hand, as one increases the number of neighbors, the graphs converge to cliques, and therefore this distance converges to 0. In general, these distances tend to follow a hypergeometric distribution over k . To counteract this, we normalize the distance by the empirical distribution of distances between real proteins and random point clouds $R_i \subset \mathbb{R}^m$. Therefore, for a family of proteins $\mathbf{P} = \{P_1, P_2, \dots, P_N\}$, we get a filtration of distance histograms $\{d_A(P_i, \phi(P_i))\}_i^k$. At each level of the filtration we study the normalized first moment, which we will refer to as the *graph filtration moment*. It is given by the equation

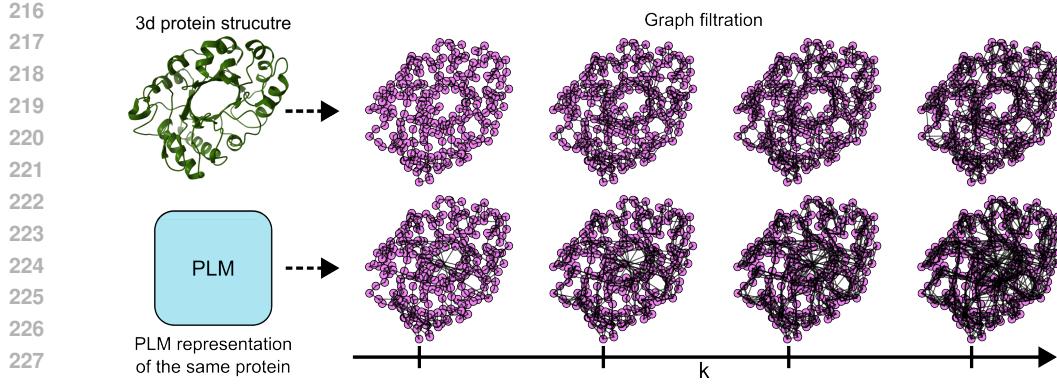


Figure 2: Illustration of how each protein or PLM representation is transformed to a filtration of graphs with a different number of neighbors. The connectivity in the PLM representation is superimposed over the 3d protein graph for clarity.

$$\mathbb{E}_{P_i \in \mathbf{P}} [d(P_i, \phi(P_i))]_{norm} = \frac{\mathbb{E}_{P_i \in \mathbf{P}} [d_A(P_i, \phi(P_i))]_{norm}}{\mathbb{E}_{P_i \in \mathbf{P}, R_i \in \mathbf{R}} [d_A(P_i, R_i)]}. \quad (4)$$

3 RESULTS

All of the following analysis is based on 1098 randomly sampled protein structures from the SCOP dataset (Chandonia et al., 2022). We sampled up to 200 proteins (some proteins were excluded due to missing a pdb file) from each of the following protein classes – [Alpha, Beta, Alpha/Beta, Alpha+Beta, Alpha and Beta, Membrane and cell surface proteins and peptides, Small proteins and Designed proteins]. More information about these protein classes can be found on the SCOP website <https://scop.berkeley.edu/> or in Chandonia et al. (2022).

3.1 GEOMETRY OF PLM SHAPE SPACES

In section 2.1 we defined a notion of a shape space which inherits a Riemannian structure that allows us to compute distances and also carry out computations in the tangent space of each fiber. With this in hand, we can define and estimate statistics of curves on the shape space as well as make use of tools such as tangent PCA. We therefore track two measures of PLM shape space geometry, namely effective dimension and Fréchet radius. For all computations we use the Geomstats package (Miolane et al., 2020).

For a set of proteins $\mathbf{P} = \{P_1, P_2, \dots, P_N\}$, we first interpolate them at 1000 equally spaced points with quadratic splines and then project them to the SRV shape space giving us the set $\mathbf{Y} = \{y_1, y_2, \dots, y_N\}$. There is no a priori correct choice of spline order, but quadratic splines are the simplest option that is still differentiable as required by the SRV framework. Very high order splines are expected to add a lot of additional structure to the PLM point clouds and could thus bias the results. For an evaluation of the robustness of our results to spline order and interpolation samples see Figure 6. We compute the Fréchet radius by finding the Fréchet mean $p_F = \arg \min_{x \in H} \sum d(x, y_i)$ through gradient descent after which the Fréchet radius is defined as,

$$r_F = \mathbb{E}_{y_i \in \mathbf{Y}} [d(y_i, p_F)]. \quad (5)$$

An intuitive way to think of this object is as a measure for how spread out PLM representations are with respect to each other on the shape space. Therefore, a small value indicates that different proteins are represented by similar shapes, whereas a larger value indicates the opposite. As one can see in Figure 3 the Fréchet radius tends to decrease with depth and is much smaller for PLM representations than for real 3d protein structures. Surprisingly enough, it does not seem to vary with model size, indicating that the variability among shapes is low for all models.

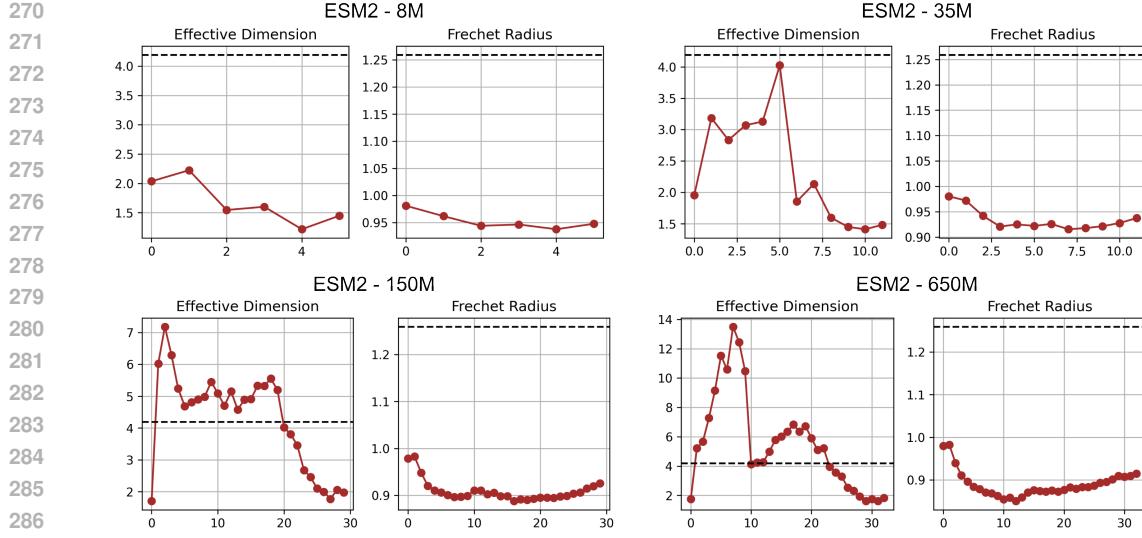


Figure 3: Effective dimension and Fréchet radius for each of the four models as a function of the layers. The black line indicates the value of each metric for the 3d protein structure. As one can see larger models exhibit dimension expansion in the initial layers and contraction later on.

Another measure describing the geometry of shape spaces in PLMs is the dimension of the submanifold on which they live. In Euclidean data this is usually measured by the effective dimension defined through the eigenvalues $\{\lambda_1, \lambda_2, \dots\}$ of the covariance matrix of the data or

$$\lambda_{eff} = \frac{(\sum \lambda_k)^2}{\sum \lambda_k^2}. \quad (6)$$

This procedure can be extended to curved data through tangent PCA (Abboud et al., 2020) where one first uses the log map to project all data to the tangent space of the Fréchet mean by $z_i = \log_{p_F}(y_i) = \frac{d(y_i, p_F)}{\sin[d(y_i, p_F)]}(y_i - \cos[d(y_i, p_F)]p_F)$ and afterwards applies PCA in this tangent space. A large effective dimension implies that PLM representations explore many different variations in shape, whereas a small effective dimension implies that a few specific variations are enough to describe the differences in PLM representation shapes. Judging by Figure 3, it seems like PLMs go through two regimes – a dimension expansion in the first layers followed by dimension contraction towards the end. Larger models expand the dimension more than the 3d structure baseline, whereas the smaller models stay below it. The largest models even show a second peak in dimension expansion.

It is also worth pointing out that, especially in later layers, this dimensionality is very low and severely different from the dimensionality found through standard PCA on the flattened PLM representation (see Figure 5 in the Appendix). We interpret this to mean that while shapes are encoded in a high-dimensional ambient space, the differences in shapes of PLM representations can be described by just a few shape descriptors. In other words, PLMs encode proteins by similar shapes while spanning many different directions within their ambient space. To see if this trend only occurs in the ESM2 models, we also ran the same analysis on the general purpose Ankh model Elnaggar et al. (2023). As one can see in Figure 7, a similar pattern, though with a more extreme initial dimension expansion phase, can be seen in that model.

3.2 CONTEXT LENGTH SENSITIVITY OF PLMs

While it is interesting to understand the global geometric features of PLM representation shape spaces, language models are known to encode contextual features of text which are hard to relate to the aforementioned measures. In order to better understand how structural context is encoded in PLMs, we use the graph filtration moment defined in Equation 4. This measure indicates how

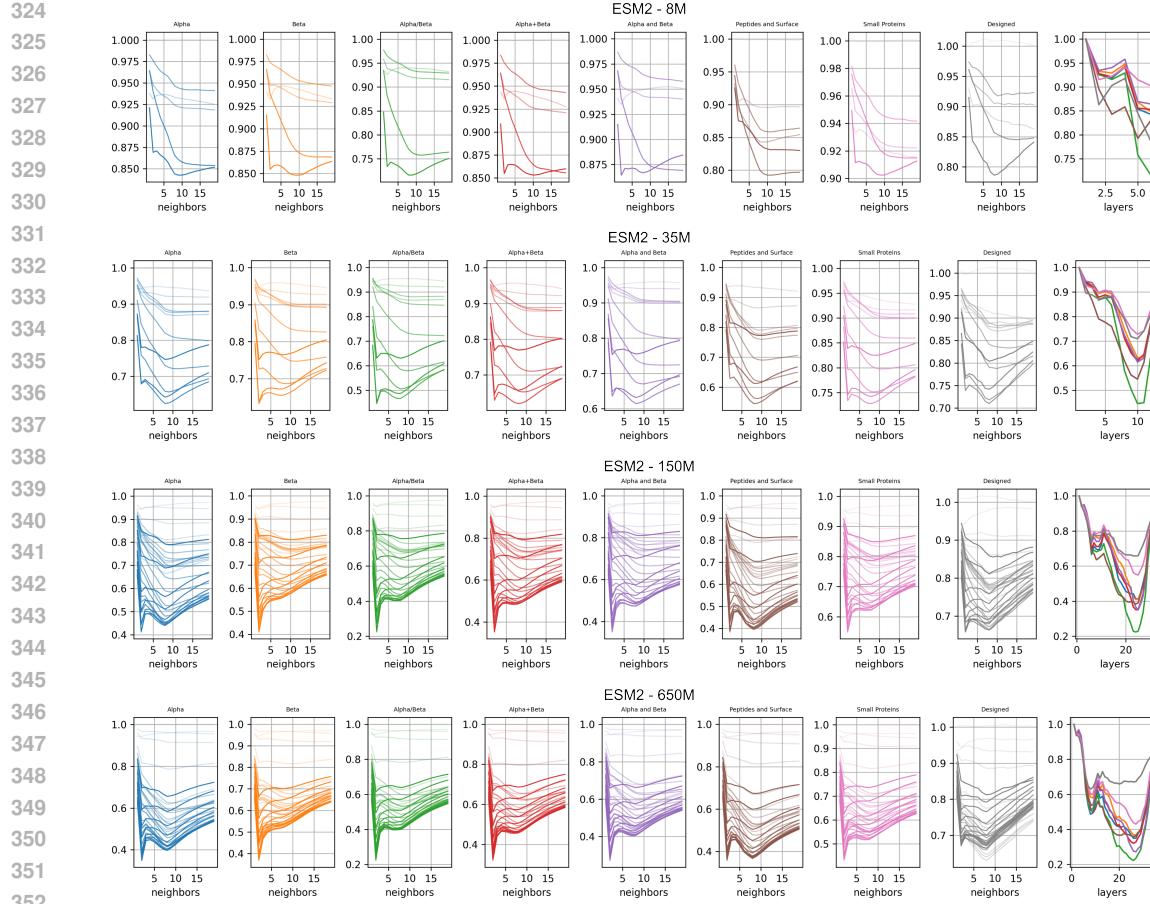


Figure 4: Graph filtration moments for all models and all layers evaluated on different protein classes from the SCOP database. Curves increase in transparency with increasing layer number. The rightmost plots show the minimal value of the filtration as a function of the layer. Each curve is color-coded for protein class in correspondence with the other plots.

similar the shapes of PLM representations are to their 3d protein structure counterparts. A value of 1 or above means that the PLM arranges all residues in a random point cloud, whereas lower values imply that 3d protein structure is encoded in the PLM representation.

In Figure 4 we show the graph filtration moments across all layers of the different ESM2 models on the SCOP protein classes. The curves for shallow layers are more transparent than deep layers and the rightmost plot shows the minimum value across the filtration as a function of depth. Several peculiar patterns arise throughout the filtration. The first thing to note is that larger models have a better similarity to 3d protein structure in their intermediate layers, but model size seems to have less of an impact at the last layer. This implies that while encoding protein structure emerges as an important intermediate processing step for unmasking, it is not as important at the last classification step.

The second striking observation is that in all models many of the curves have a bimodal shape throughout the filtration. This implies that PLM representations encode 3d protein structure at both a very local level, at about 2 neighborhoods, as well as at a slightly less local level, at about 8 neighborhoods. The improved encoding at 2 neighborhoods has a simple interpretation as PLM representations having similar immediate neighborhoods to 3d protein structure. However, the second valley at around 8 neighborhoods is harder to interpret. Given the fact that it is less pronounced in the Beta class, one might speculate that it might be related to representations of Alpha helices, but more work is needed to understand the precise meaning of this feature.

378 Finally, it is also clear that certain protein classes like Alpha/Beta are represented by shapes that
 379 are much more structurally similar to their 3d structure compared to other classes such as small and
 380 designed proteins. Furthermore, while initial layers showed a correlation between protein length
 381 and the minimum graph filtration moment, later layers did not show such a pattern (see Figure 9).
 382 This indicates that local context structure is represented independently of protein length. The results
 383 for the Ankh model show a similar pattern as can be seen in Figure 8.

384 4 DISCUSSION

385 We have applied two approaches in order to better understand the geometry of shape spaces gen-
 386 erated by PLM representations. The first uses SRV representations and quotients out rotations to
 387 create a space with Riemannian structure, which allows us to define a metric and generalize statisti-
 388 cal methods such as PCA to shapes. The second uses graph filtrations to study how protein structure
 389 is encoded in the layers of a PLM at as many levels of resolution as one desires. Given the abstract
 390 nature of our results, here we provide a discussion of how they can be understood more intuitively
 391 and propose several future directions that would be exciting to pursue.

392 4.1 EXPANSION AND CONTRACTION IN PLM REPRESENTATION SHAPE SPACES

393 As shown in Figure 3, the initial layers in PLMs exhibit an expansion in effective dimensionality,
 394 whereas later layers contract the shape space to a very low dimensional subspace. Previous work
 395 on traditional language models has used the notion of intrinsic dimensionality (Li et al., 2018) and
 396 has shown that language models have a remarkably low intrinsic dimensionality relative to model
 397 size (Aghajanyan et al., 2020). Similar measures of dimensionality are also thought to relate to task
 398 performance (Marbut et al., 2024), training convergence and generalization (Rupnik et al., 2025).

399 The specific expansion-contraction pattern observed in our estimate of dimensionality is very similar
 400 to the behavior seen in Cheng et al. (2024) and Valeriani et al. (2023). The universal appearance of
 401 this pattern is thought to correspond to a general high-abstraction regime in the dimension-expansion
 402 phase and a specific semantically rich regime in the contraction phase. These properties of language
 403 model layers can be effectively used to solve any task.

404 Our approach looks at the dimensionality of the data within the shape space manifold rather than
 405 directly looking at all residue representations in the embedding space. This leads to an arguably
 406 more clear interpretation, the initial layers of a PLM represent proteins by shapes that can be flex-
 407 ibly deformed to each other by combining many different non-linear shape transformations. The
 408 higher the dimensionality, the more such transformations there are. Therefore, the sharp reduction
 409 in dimensionality in later layers means that there are remarkably few transformations (less than in
 410 the space of 3d protein shapes) that are needed to efficiently navigate PLM representation shape
 411 spaces. Understanding the precise nature of these transformations would be an exciting direction for
 412 future work.

413 4.2 STRUCTURAL ENCODING IN PLM REPRESENTATIONS

414 In addition to studying the geometry of PLM representation shape spaces, we also looked at how 3d
 415 protein structure is encoded in the layers of a PLM by using graph filtrations. We observe a bimodal
 416 pattern in which protein structure is optimally encoded at the resolution of very short context lengths
 417 of about 2 residues as well as at slightly longer context lengths of around 8 residues. The PLM
 418 representations of Alpha/Beta proteins showed by far the highest similarity to their 3d structure,
 419 whereas small and designed proteins were represented by more distinct shapes. While outside of the
 420 scope of this work, understanding what features of these protein classes determine how much of the
 421 structure is encoded by PLMs is an exciting direction for future research.

422 The finding that PLMs encode 3d protein structure at all is surprising given that PLMs are given
 423 masked sequences and are then trained to predict the most likely missing amino acids. There is no
 424 point at which PLM representations are incentivized to encode protein structure. Therefore, either
 425 learning protein structure is beneficial for the unmasking process or the function learned during
 426 unmasking shares some properties (one might say "correlates") with the function used in the folding
 427 of a sequence to its 3d structure.

432 Finally, our findings further explain why folding models such as ESMFold benefit from starting with
 433 a pretrained PLM that has already partially learned protein structure. Our observation that structure
 434 is not optimally encoded in the last layer, but rather in the layers that immediately precede it, can be
 435 used to improve initializations for protein models. Given our results, we expect that better folding
 436 performance can be achieved if one uses the layers with the optimal structural PLM representation
 437 rather than the whole model. Initial attempts to show this with linear models or small networks
 438 failed to generalize (data not shown) and verifying this hypothesis would require training and testing
 439 larger models. The way in which layerwise representations can be used for folding, along with other
 440 functional tasks, is another avenue of future research that would be exciting to explore.

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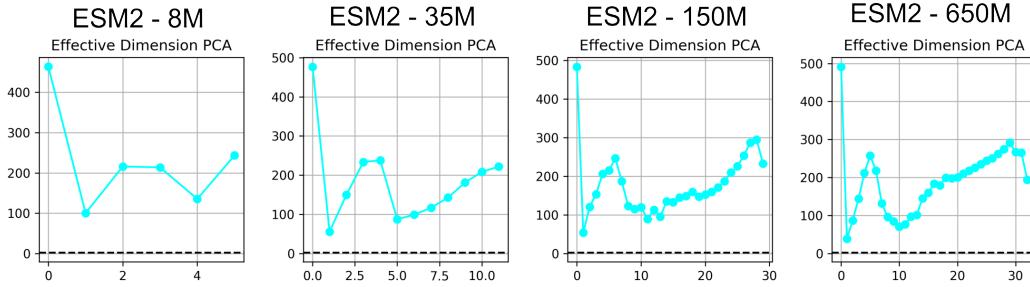
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A APPENDIX596
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A.1 ADDITIONAL FIGURES

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Figure 5: Effective dimension esimated using PCA directly on PLM representations. Each PLM
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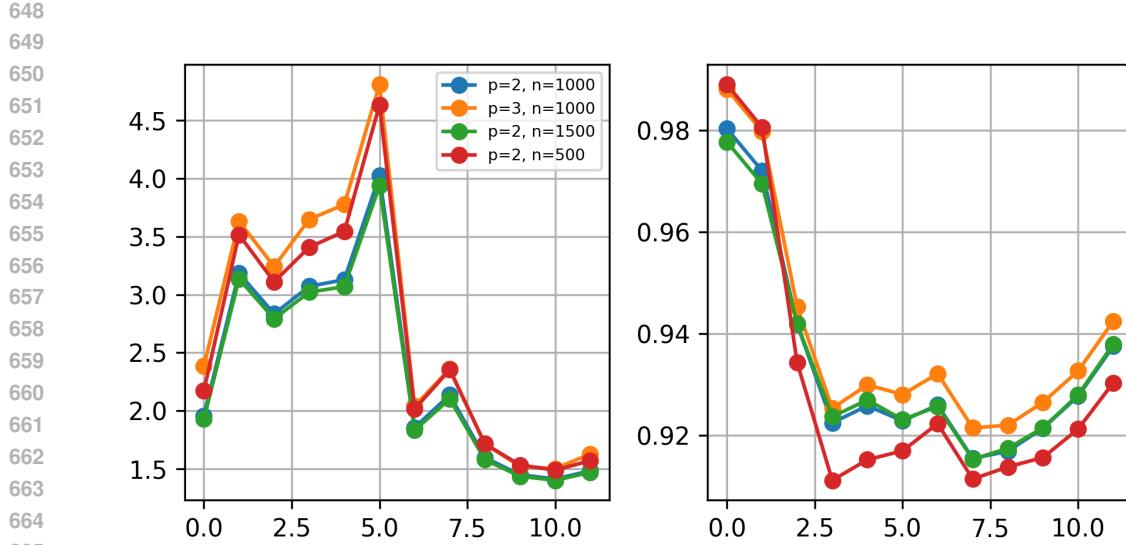


Figure 6: Robustness with respect to interpolation order (indicated by p) and number of sampled points (indicated by n) evaluated on the ESM2 - 35M model.

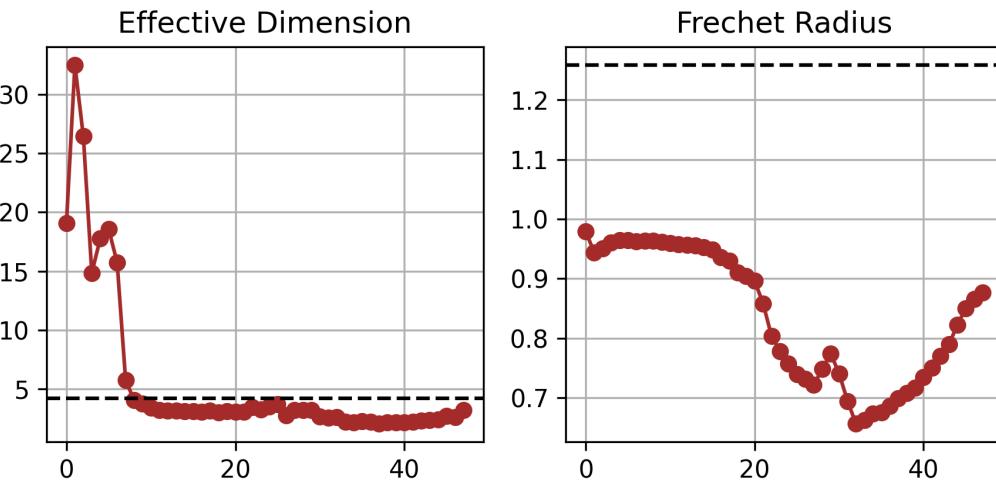


Figure 7: Effective dimension and Fréchet radius for the base Ankh model as a function of the layers.

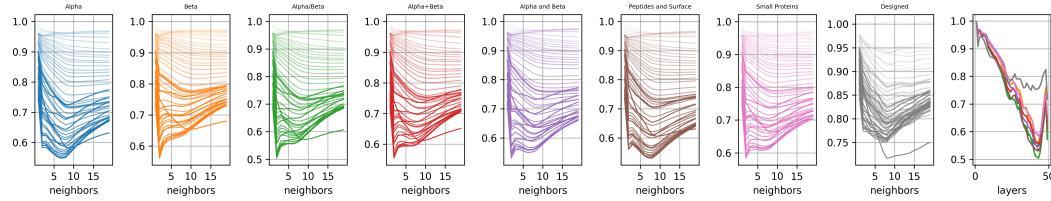


Figure 8: Graph filtration moments for the base Ankh model.

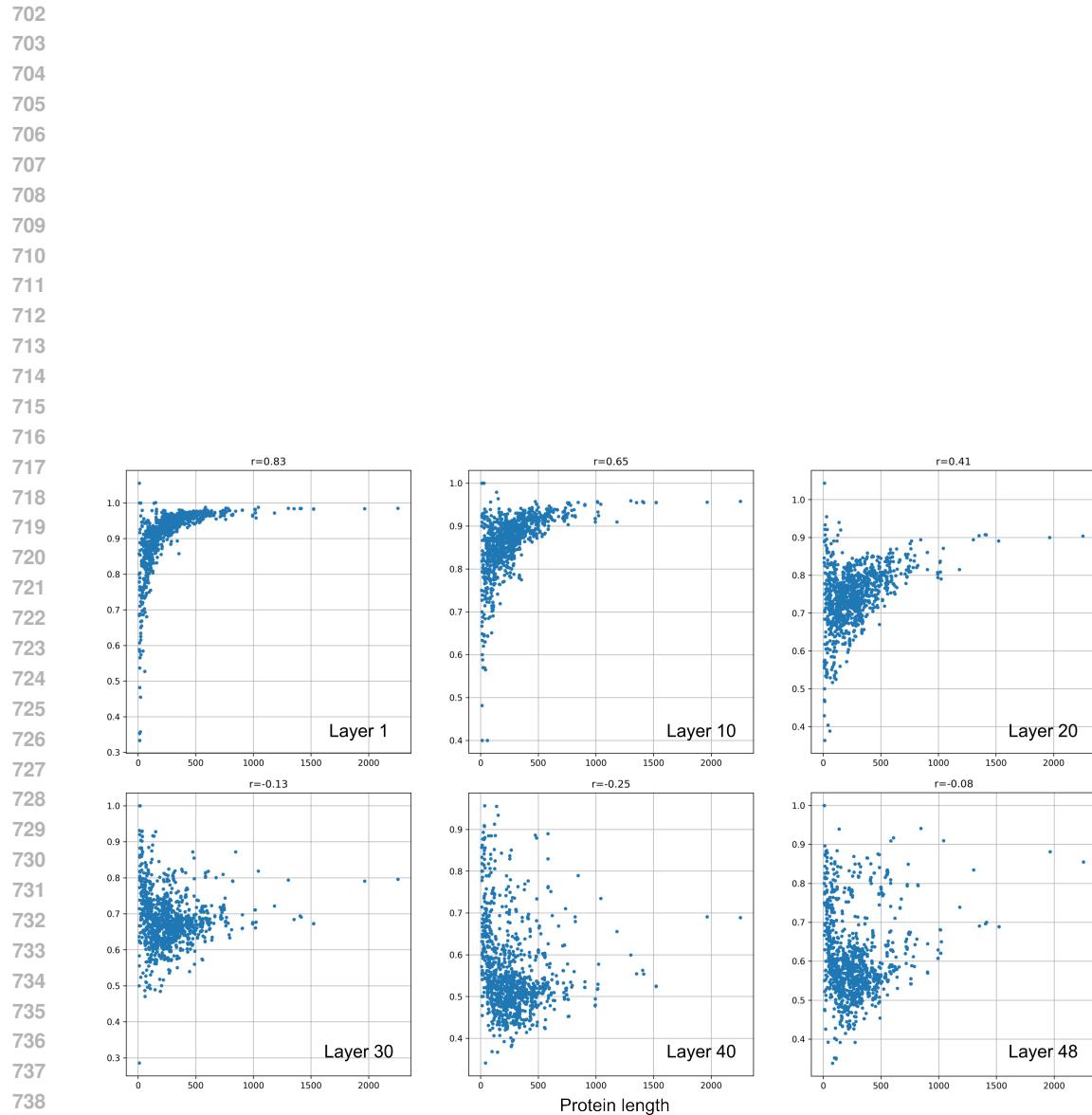


Figure 9: Protein length vs minimum graph filtration moment for several layers of the Ankh model. Values above the plots indicate the Spearman correlation values.