# Mildly Context-Sensitive Grammar Formalisms:

# Natural Languages are not Context-Free

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**Overview**

1. CFG and Natural Languages
2. Cross-serial Dependencies
3. Swiss German is not Context-Free
4. LCFRS and Cross-serial Dependencies



**CFG and Natural Languages**

- For a long time there has been a debate about whether CFGs are sufficiently powerful to describe natural languages. Several approaches have used CFGs, oftentimes enriched with some additional mechanism of transformation (Chomsky, 1956) or with features (Gazdar et al., 1985) for natural languages.
- In the 80's Stuart Shieber was able to prove in (Shieber, 1985) that there are natural languages that cannot be generated by a CFG. Before that, (Bresnan et al., 1982) made already a similar argument but their proof is based on the tree structures obtained with CFGs while Shieber argues on the basis of weak generative capacity, i.e., of the string languages.
- The phenomena considered in both papers are *cross-serial dependencies*.





**Cross-serial Dependencies (1)**

Cross-serial dependencies in Dutch (Bresnan et al., 1982):

(1) ... dat Jan de kinderen zag zwemmen
... that Jan the children saw swim
'... that Jan saw the children swim'

The colours mark the dependencies between the two verbs and the two NPs: *the children* is an argument of *swim* while *Jan* is an argument of *saw*. The dependency links are in a crossing configuration.

### Cross-serial Dependencies (2)

This phenomenon can be iterated:

(2) ... dat Jan Piet de kinderen zag helpen zwemmen
... that Jan Piet the children saw help swim
'... that Jan saw Piet help the children swim'

(3) ... dat Jan Piet Marie de kinderen zag helpen leren zwemmen
... that Jan Piet Marie the children saw help teach swim
'... that Jan saw Piet help Marie teach the children to swim'





### Cross-serial Dependencies (3)

- In principle, an unbounded number of crossed dependencies is possible.
- However, except for the first and last verb any permutation of the NPs and the verbs is grammatical as well (even though with a completely different dependency structure since the dependencies are always cross-serial).
- Therefore, the dependencies are not visible on the strings and the string language of Dutch cross-serial dependencies amounts roughly to $\{n^k v^k \mid k > 0\}$ which is a context-free language.

This is different for Swiss German because Swiss German has case marking.



### Cross-serial Dependencies (4)

Cross-serial dependencies in Swiss German (Shieber, 1985):

(4) ... das mer em Hans es huus hälfed aastriiche
... that we $\text{Hans}_{Dat}$ $\text{house}_{Acc}$ helped paint
'... that we helped Hans paint the house'

(5) ... das mer d'chind em Hans es huus lönd hälfe aastriiche
... that we $\text{the children}_{Acc}$ $\text{Hans}_{Dat}$ $\text{house}_{Acc}$ let help paint
'... that we let the children help Hans paint the house'

Swiss German

- uses case marking
- and displays cross-serial dependencies.





### Swiss German is not Context-Free (1)

**Proposition 1** *The language $L$ of Swiss German is not context-free (Shieber, 1985).*

The argumentation of the proof goes as follows:

- We assume that $L$ is context-free.
- Then the intersection of a regular language with the image of $L$ under a homomorphism must be context-free as well.
- We find a particular homomorphism and a regular language such that the result obtained in this way is a non context-free language.
- This is a contradiction to our assumption and, consequently, the assumption does not hold.

**Swiss German is not Context-Free (2)**

Consider sentences of the following form:

(6) ... das mer d'chind em Hans es huus haend
... that we the children-ACC Hans-DAT house-ACC have

wele laa hälfe aastriiche
wanted let help paint
'... that we have wanted to let the children help Hans paint the house'

The NP verb pairs *d'chind laa* and *em Hans hälfe* both can be iterated.





**Swiss German is not Context-Free (3)**

With an additional embedding under *Jan säit* ('Jan says') we obtain constructions of the form

(7) Jan säit das mer (d'chind)$^{i_1}$ (em Hans)$^{j_1}$ (d'chind)$^{i_2}$ (em Hans)$^{j_2}$ ... es huus haend wele (laa)$^{i_1}$ (hälfe)$^{j_1}$ (laa)$^{i_2}$ (hälfe)$^{j_2}$ ... aastriiche

where

- the number of accusative NPs *d'chind* must equal the number of verbs (here *laa*) selecting for an accusative,
- the number of dative NPs *em Hans* must equal the number of verbs (here *hälfe*) selecting for a dative object, and
- the order of NPs and verbs must be the same in the sense that if all accusative NPs precede all dative NPs, then all verbs selecting an accusative must precede all verbs selecting a dative.



**Swiss German is not Context-Free (4)**

The following homomorphism $f$ separates the iterated noun phrases and verbs in these examples from the surrounding material:

$$\begin{aligned} f(\text{“d'chind”}) &= a \\ f(\text{“em Hans”}) &= b \\ f(\text{“laa”}) &= c \\ f(\text{“hälfe”}) &= d \\ f(\text{“Jan säit das mer”}) &= w \\ f(\text{“es huus haend wele”}) &= x \\ f(\text{“aastriiche”}) &= y \\ f(s) &= z \quad \text{otherwise} \end{aligned}$$





**Swiss German is not Context-Free (5)**

The images of the constructions we are interested in under $f$ are of the form $wv_1xv_2y$ where $v_1$ contains $a$s and $b$s and $v_2$ contains $c$s and $d$s and if the $k$th element in $v_1$ is an $a$ (a $b$ resp.), then the $k$the element in $v_2$ is a $c$ (a $d$ resp.). All other sentences have a $z$ somewhere in their image under $f$.

To make sure we concentrate only on the constructions of the described form and only on constructions where the accusative NPs precede the dative NPs, we intersect $f(L)$ with the regular language $wa^*b^*xc^*d^*y$.

$$L' = f(L) \cap wa^*b^*xc^*d^*y = \{wa^ib^jxc^id^jy \mid i, j \geq 0\}$$

**Swiss German is not Context-Free (6)**

If $L$ is context-free, then $L'$ must be context-free as well.

- Then the image of $L'$ under a homomorphism $f'$ with $f'(w) = f'(x) = f'(y) = \varepsilon$, $f'(a) = a$, $f'(b) = b$, $f'(c) = c$, $f'(d) = d$ is also context-free. This image is

$$f'(L') = L'' = \{a^i b^j c^i d^j \mid i, j \geq 0\}$$

- Consequently, $L''$ satisfies the pumping lemma for context-free languages. Inspecting the word $a^k b^k c^k d^k$ where $k$ is the constant from the pumping lemma, this can be shown to lead to a contradiction.

Consequently, $L''$ is not context-free, and neither are $L'$ and $L$.





**LCFRS and Cross-serial Dependencies**

LCFRS for Dutch cross-serial dependencies:

$$\begin{aligned}
\text{S}(X\ Y\ zag\ Z) &\rightarrow \text{NP}(X)\ \text{VP}(Y, Z)\\
\text{VP}(X\ Y, leren\ Z) &\rightarrow \text{NP}(X)\ \text{VP}(Y, Z)\\
\text{VP}(X\ Y, helpen\ Z) &\rightarrow \text{NP}(X)\ \text{VP}(Y, Z)\\
\text{VP}(X, zwemmen) &\rightarrow \text{NP}(X)\\
\text{NP}(Jan) &\rightarrow \varepsilon\\
\text{NP}(Marie) &\rightarrow \varepsilon\\
\text{NP}(Piet) &\rightarrow \varepsilon\\
\text{NP}(de\ kinderen) &\rightarrow \varepsilon
\end{aligned}$$



## References

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