Parsing Beyond Context-Free Grammars:
Natural Languages are not Context-Free

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Overview

[Kal10]

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 [Cho56] or with features [GKPS85] for natural languages.

- In the 80's Stuart Shieber was able to prove in [Shi85] that there are natural languages that cannot be generated by a CFG. Before that, [BKPZ82] 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 [BKPZ82]:

(1)   ... dat Jan   de   kinderen zag zwemmen
         ... that Wim Jan Marie   the children   saw help teach swim
         ' ... that Wim saw Jan help Marie teach the children to 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   teach   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 [Shi85]:

(4) ... das mer em Hans es huus   hälfed aastriiche
     ... that we Hans_{Dat} house_{Acc} helped paint
     ' ... that we helped Hans paint the house'

(5) ... das mer d'chind   em Hans es huus lönd hälfe
     ... that we the children$_{Acc}$ Hans$_{Dat}$ house$_{Acc}$ let   help
     aastriiche
     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 [Shi85].

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 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 as and bs and v_2 contains cs and ds and if the kth 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:

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

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