Algorithms for NLP (11-711)  
Fall 2020  

Formal Language Theory  
In one lecture  

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Now for Something Completely Different

• We will look at languages and grammars from a “mathematical” point of view
• But Discrete Math (logic)
  – No real numbers
  – Symbolic discrete structures, proofs
• Interested in complexity/power of different formal models of computation
  – Related to asymptotic complexity theory
• This is the source of many common CS algorithms/models
Two main classes of models

• Automata
  – Machines, like Finite-State Automata

• Grammars
  – Rule sets, like we have been using to parse

• We will look at each class of model, going from simpler to more complex/powerful
• We can formally prove complexity-class relations between these formal models
Simplest level: FSA/Regular sets
Finite-State **Automata** (FSAs)

- Simplest formal automata
- We’ve seen these with numbers on them as HMMs, etc.

(from Wikipedia)
Formal definition of automata

• A finite set of states, \( Q \)
• A finite alphabet of input symbols, \( \Sigma \)
• An initial (start) state, \( Q_0 \in Q \)
• A set of final states, \( F_i \in Q \)
• A transition function, \( \delta: Q \times \Sigma \rightarrow Q \)

• This rigorously defines the FSAs we usually just draw as circles and arrows
  – The language “L”
DFSAs, NDFSAs

• Deterministic or Non-deterministic
  – Is $\delta$ function ambiguous or not?
  – For FSAs, weakly equivalent
Intersecting, etc., FSAs

• We can investigate what happens after performing different operations on FSAs:
  – Union: \( L = L_1 \cup L_2 \)
  – Intersection
  – Negation
  – Concatenation
  – other operations: determinizing or minimizing FSAs
Regular Expressions

• For these “regular languages”, there’s a simpler way to write expressions: regular expressions:
  Terminal symbols
  (r + s)
  (r • s)
  r*
  ε

• For example: (aa+bbb)*
Regular **Grammars**

- Left-linear or right-linear grammars
- Left-linear rule template:
  \[ A \rightarrow Bw \text{ or } A \rightarrow w \]
- Right-linear rule template:
  \[ A \rightarrow wB \text{ or } A \rightarrow w \]
  (where \( w \) is a sequence of terminals)

- Example:
  \[ S \rightarrow aA | bB | \varepsilon, \ A \rightarrow aS, \ B \rightarrow bbS \]
Formal Definition of a Grammar

- Vocabulary of terminal symbols, $\Sigma$ (e.g., $a$)
- Set of nonterminal symbols, $N$ (e.g., $A$)
- Special start symbol, $S \in N$
- Production rules, such as $A \rightarrow aB$
  - Restrictions on the rules determine what kind of grammar you have

- A formal grammar $G$ defines a **formal language**, $L(G)$, the set of strings it generates
Amazing fact #1: FSAs are equivalent to RGs

• Proof: two constructive proofs:
  – 1: given an arbitrary FSA, construct the corresponding Regular Grammar
  – 2: given an arbitrary Regular Grammar, construct the corresponding FSA
Construct an FSA from a Regular Grammar

• Create a state for each nonterminal in grammar
• For each rule “A → wB” construct a sequence of states accepting \( w \) from A to B
• For each rule “A → w” construct a sequence of states accepting \( w \), from A to a final state

• This shows right linear case; use \( L^R \) for left linear
Construct a Regular Grammar from a FSA

• Generate rules from edges
• For each edge from $Q_i$ to $Q_j$ accepting $a$:
  \[ Q_i \rightarrow a Q_j \]
• For each $\epsilon$ transition from $Q_i$ to $Q_j$:
  \[ Q_i \rightarrow Q_j \]
• For each final state $Q_f$:
  \[ Q_f \rightarrow \epsilon \]
Proving a language is *not* regular

• So, what kinds of languages are *not* regular?

• Informally, a FSA can only *remember* a finite number of *specific* things. So a language requiring an unbounded memory won’t be regular.
Proving a language is *not* regular

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• How about $a^n b^n$? “equal count of a’s and b’s”
Pumping Lemma: argument:

• Consider a machine with **N states**

• Now consider an input of length N; since we started in $Q_0$, we will end in the **(N+1)st state** visited

• **There must be a loop**: we had to visit at least 1 state twice; let $x$ be the string up to the loop, $y$ the part in the loop, and $z$ after the loop

• So it must be okay to also have $M$ copies of $y$ for any $M$ (including 0 copies)
Pumping Lemma: formally:

• If L is an infinite regular language, then there are strings x, y, and z such that \( y \neq \varepsilon \) and \( xy^nz \in L \), for all \( n \geq 0 \).

• \( xyz \) being in the language requires also:
  • \( xz, xyyz, xyyyyz, xyyyyyz, \ldots, xyyyyyyyyyyyyz, \ldots \)
Pumping Lemma: figure:
Example proof that a L is not regular

• What about $a^n b^n$?
  
  $ab$
  $aabb$
  $aaabbb$
  $aaaabbbb$
  $aaaaabbbbb$
  ...

• Where do you draw the $xy^n z$ boundaries?
Example proof that a L is not regular

• What about $a^n b^n$? Where do you draw the lines?

• **Three** cases:
  – *y is only a’s*: then $xy^n z$ will have too many $a$’s
  – *y is only b’s*: then $xy^n z$ will have too many $b$’s
  – *y is a mix*: then there will be interspersed $a$’s and $b$’s

• So $a^n b^n$ cannot be regular, since it cannot be pumped
Next level:
PDA/CFG
Push-Down Automata (PDAs)

- Let’s add some unbounded memory, but in a limited fashion.
- So, add a stack:
  - Allows you to handle some non-regular languages, but not everything.
Formal definition of PDA

• A finite set of states, $Q$
• A finite alphabet of input symbols, $\Sigma$
• A finite alphabet of stack symbols, $\Gamma$
• An initial (start) state, $Q_0 \in Q$
• An initial (start) stack symbol $Z_0 \in \Gamma$
• A set of final states, $F_i \in Q$
• A transition function, $\delta: Q \times \Sigma \times \Gamma \rightarrow Q \times \Gamma^*$
What about $a^n b^n$?

• With a stack, easy!
What about $a^n b^n$?

- Easy!
- Put $n$ symbols on the stack while reading $a$s
- Pop symbols off while reading $b$s
- If stack empty when you finish last $b$, yes!
Context-Free Grammars

• **Context-free** rule template:
  
  \[ A \rightarrow \gamma \]

  where \( \gamma \) is any sequence of terminals/non-terminals

• Example: \( S \rightarrow a \ S \ b \ | \ \varepsilon \)

• We use these a lot in NLP
  
  – Expressive enough, not too complex to parse.
    
    • We often add hacks to allow non-CF information flow.
  
  – It just really feels like the right level of analysis.
    
    • (More on this later.)
Amazing Fact #2: PDAs and CFGs are equivalent

• Same kind of proof as for FSAs and RGs, but more complicated

• Are there non-CF languages? How about $a^n b^n c^n$?
Highest level: TMs/Unrestricted grammars
Turing Machines

• Just let the machine move and write on the tape:

• This simple change produces general-purpose computer
TM made of LEGOos
Unrestricted **Grammars**

- $\alpha \rightarrow \beta$, where each can be *any* sequence ($\alpha$ not empty)

- Thus, there can be *context* in the rules:
  - $aAb \rightarrow aab$
  - $bAb \rightarrow bbb$

- Not too surprising at this point: equivalent to **TMs**
  - Church-Turing **Hypothesis**
Even more amazing facts: Chomsky hierarchy

- Provable that each of these four classes is a proper subset of the next one:

  Type 0: TM
  Type 1: CSG
  Type 2: CFG
  Type 3: RE
Noam Chomsky, very famous person

Most cited living author:
- Linguist
- CS theoretician
- Leftist politics

*Might not *always* be right.*

1970s version
Type 1: Linear-Bounded Automata/Context-Sensitive Grammars

• TM that uses space linear in the input
• $\alpha A \beta \rightarrow \alpha \gamma \beta$ ($\gamma$ not empty)

• We mostly ignore these; they get no respect
• LBA/CSG correspond to each other
• Limited compared to full-blown TM
  – But complexity can already be undecidable
Chomsky Hierarchy: proofs

• Form of hierarchy proofs:
  – For each class, you can prove there are languages not in the class, similar to Pumping Lemma proof
  – You can easily prove that the larger class really does contain all the ones in the smaller class
Intersecting, etc., Ls

• We can again investigate what happens with Ls in these various classes under different operations on Ls:
  – Union
  – Intersection
  – Concatenation
  – Negation
  – other operations
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Common Name</th>
<th>Rule Skeleton</th>
<th>Linguistic Example</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Turing Equivalent</td>
<td>( \alpha \rightarrow \beta ), s.t. ( \alpha \neq \epsilon )</td>
<td>HPSG, LFG, Minimalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Context Sensitive</td>
<td>( \alpha \Lambda \beta \rightarrow \alpha \gamma \beta ), s.t. ( \gamma \neq \epsilon )</td>
<td>TAG, CCG</td>
</tr>
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<td>–</td>
<td>Mildly Context Sensitive</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Context Free</td>
<td>( A \rightarrow \gamma )</td>
<td>Phrase-Structure Grammars</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Regular</td>
<td>( A \rightarrow xB ) or ( A \rightarrow x )</td>
<td>Finite-State Automata</td>
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Mildly Context-Sensitive Grammars

• We really like CFGs, but are they in fact expressive enough to capture all human grammar?
• Many approaches start with a “CF backbone”, and add registers, equations, etc., that are not CF.
• Several non-hack extensions (CCG, TAG, etc.) turn out to be weakly equivalent!
  – “Mildly context sensitive”
    • So CSFs get even less respect…
    • And so much for the Chomsky Hierarchy being such a big deal
Trying to prove human languages are not CF

- Certainly true of semantics. But NL syntax?
- Cross-serial dependencies seem like a good target:
  - Mary, Jane, and Jim like red, green, and blue, respectively.
  - But is this syntactic?
- Surprisingly hard to prove
Swiss German dialect!

dative-NP  accusative-NP  dative-taking-VP  accusative-taking-VP

Jan säit das mer em Hans es huus hälfd aastriiche
Jan says that we (the) Hans the house helped paint
“Jan says that we helped Hans paint the house”

Jan säit das mer d’chind em Hans es huus haend wele laa hälfe aastriiche
Jan says that we the children (the) Hans the house have wanted to let help paint
“Jan says that we have wanted to let the children help Hans paint the house”

(A little like “The cat the dog the mouse scared chased likes tuna fish”)

Similarly hard English examples

(Center Embedding)

The cat likes tuna fish
The cat the dog chased likes tuna fish
The cat the dog the mouse scared chased likes tuna fish
The cat the dog the mouse the elephant squashed scared chased likes tuna fish
The cat the dog the mouse the elephant the flea bit squashed scared chased likes tuna fish
The cat the dog the mouse the elephant the flea the virus infected bit squashed scared chased likes tuna fish
Is Swiss German Context-Free?

Shieber’s complex argument…

L1 =
Jan säit das mer (d’chind)* (em Hans)* es huus haend wele (laa)* (hälfe)* aastriiche

L2 = Swiss German

L1 ∩ L2 =
Jan säit das mer (d’chind)^n (em Hans)^m es huus haend wele (laa)^n (hälfe)^m aastriiche
Why do we care? (1)

• Math is fun?

• Complexity:
  – If you can use a RE, don’t use a CFG.
  – Be careful with anything fancier than a CFG.

• Safety: harder to write correct systems on a Turing Machine.

• Being able to use a weaker formalism may have explanatory power?
Why do we care? (2)

• Probably a source for future new algorithms
• Probably *not* how humans actually process NL
• Might not matter as much for NLP now that we know about real numbers?
  – But we don’t want your friends making fun of you (or us)
And now for something completely different