

Context-sensitive languages

Informatics 2A: Lecture 28

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Recap: context-sensitivity in natural language

Examples of **context sensitivity** in natural language were presented in Lecture 25.

- Agreement phenomena in many languages (e.g., verb-subject agreement).
- Crossing dependencies in Swiss German (and Dutch).

There are other similar phenomena.

Such phenomena take natural languages outside the **context-free** level of the Chomsky hierarchy.

It is believed that natural languages naturally live (comfortably) within the **context-sensitive** level of the Chomsky hierarchy.

In today's lecture . . .

. . . we look at what lies beyond context-free languages from a formal language viewpoint.

- How to show that a language is not context free.
- Defining the notion of **context-sensitive language** using **context-sensitive grammars**.
- An alternative characterisation of **context-sensitive languages** using **noncontracting grammars**.
- The notion of **unrestricted grammar**, and the associated **recursively-enumerable languages**.

Non-context-free languages

We saw in Lecture 8 that the **pumping lemma** can be used to show a language isn't regular.

There's also a context-free version of this lemma, which can be used to show that a language isn't even context-free:

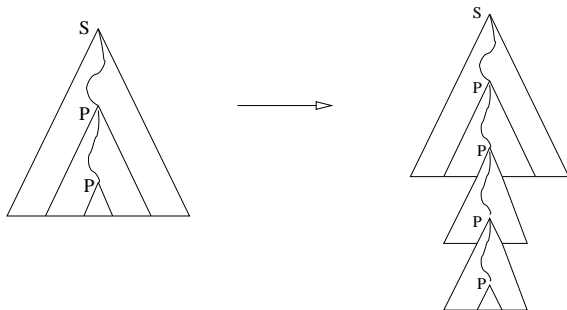
Pumping Lemma for context-free languages. Suppose L is a context-free language. Then L has the following property.

(P) There exists $k \geq 0$ such that every $z \in L$ with $|z| \geq k$ can be broken up into five substrings, $z = uvwxy$, such that $|vx| \geq 1$, $|vwx| \leq k$ and $uv^iwx^iy \in L$ for all $i \geq 0$.

Context-free pumping lemma: the idea

In the regular case, the key point is that any sufficiently long string will **visit the same state twice**.

In the context-free case, we note that any sufficiently large syntax tree will have a downward path that **visits the same non-terminal twice**. We can then 'pump in' extra copies of the relevant subtree and remain within the language:



Context-free pumping lemma: continued

More precisely, suppose L has a CFG in CNF with m non-terminals.

Then take k so large that every syntax tree for a string of length $\geq k$ contains a path of length $> m + 1$.

Such a path (even with the root node removed, which means the remaining path has length $> m$) is guaranteed to visit the same nonterminal twice.

To show that a language L is **not** context free, we just need to prove that it satisfies the negation ($\neg P$) of the property (P):

($\neg P$) For every $k \geq 0$, there exists $z \in L$ with $|z| \geq k$ such that, for every decomposition $z = uvwxy$ with $|vx| \geq 1$ and $|vwx| \leq k$, there exists $i \geq 0$ such that $uv^iwx^iy \notin L$.

Standard example 1

The language $L = \{a^n b^n c^n \mid n \geq 0\}$ isn't context-free!

We prove that $(\neg P)$ holds for L :

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Since $|vwx| \leq k$, the string vwx contains at most two different letters. So there must be some letter $d \in \{a, b, c\}$ that does not occur in vwx .

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We have shown that $(\neg P)$ holds with $i = 0$.

Standard example 2

The language $L = \{ss \mid s \in \{a, b\}^*\}$ isn't context-free!

We prove that $(\neg P)$ holds for L :

Suppose $k \geq 0$.

We choose $z = a^k b a^k b a^k b a^k b$. Then indeed $z \in L$ and $|z| \geq k$.

Suppose we have a decomposition $z = uvwxy$ with $|vx| \geq 1$ and $|vwx| \leq k$. Since $|vwx| \leq k$, the string vwx contains at most one b .

There are two main cases:

- vx contains b , in which case uwv contains exactly 3 b 's.
- Otherwise uwv has the form $z = a^g b a^h b a^i b a^j b$ where either:
 - exactly two adjacent numbers from g, h, i, j are $< k$ (this happens if w contains b and $|v| \geq 1 \leq |x|$), or
 - exactly one of g, h, i, j is $< k$ (this happens if w contains b and one of v, x is empty, or if vwx does not contain b).

In each case, we have $uwv \notin L$. So $(\neg P)$ holds with $i = 0$.

Complementation

Consider the language L' defined by:

$$\{a, b\}^* - \{ss \mid s \in \{a, b\}^*\}$$

This **is** context free.

The complement of L' is

$$\begin{aligned}\{a, b\}^* - L' &= \{a, b\}^* - (\{a, b\}^* - \{ss \mid s \in \{a, b\}^*\}) \\ &= \{ss \mid s \in \{a, b\}^*\}\end{aligned}$$

Thus the complement of a context-free language is not necessarily context free.

Context-free languages are not closed under complementation.

Self-evaluation question

What method would you use to show that the language

$$\{a, b\}^* - \{ss \mid s \in \{a, b\}^*\}$$

is context free?

- 1 Construct an NFA for it.
- 2 Find a regular expression for it.
- 3 Build a CFG for it.
- 4 Construct a PDA for it.
- 5 Apply the context-free pumping lemma.

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For a CFG for the language, see Kozen p. 155!

Context sensitive grammars

A **Context Sensitive Grammar** has productions of the form

$$\alpha X \gamma \rightarrow \alpha \beta \gamma$$

where X is a nonterminal, and α, β, γ are sequences of terminals and nonterminals (i.e., $\alpha, \beta, \gamma \in (N \cup \Sigma)^*$) with the requirement that β is **nonempty**.

So the rules for expanding X can be **sensitive to the context** in which the X occurs (contrasts with **context free**).

Minor wrinkle: The nonempty restriction on β disallows rules with right-hand side ϵ . To remedy this, we also permit the special rule

$$S \rightarrow \epsilon$$

where S is the start symbol, and with the restriction that this rule is only allowed to occur if the nonterminal S does not appear on the right-hand-side of any productions.

Context sensitive languages

A language is **context sensitive** if it can be generated by a context sensitive grammar.

The non-context-free languages:

$$\{a^n b^n c^n \mid n \geq 0\}$$
$$\{ss \mid s \in \{a, b\}^*\}$$

are both context sensitive.

In practice, it can be quite an effort to produce context sensitive grammars, according to the definition above.

It is often more convenient to work with a more liberal notion of grammar for generating context-sensitive languages.

General and noncontracting grammars

In a **general** or **unrestricted grammar**, we allow productions of the form

$$\alpha \rightarrow \beta$$

where α, β are sequences of terminals and nonterminals, i.e., $\alpha, \beta \in (N \cup \Sigma)^*$, with α containing at least one nonterminal.

In a **noncontracting grammar**, we restrict productions to the form

$$\alpha \rightarrow \beta$$

with α, β as above, subject to the additional requirement that $|\alpha| \leq |\beta|$ (i.e., the sequence β is at least as long as α).

In a noncontracting grammar also permit the special production

$$S \rightarrow \epsilon$$

where S is the start symbol, as long as S does not appear on the right-hand-side of any productions.

Example noncontracting grammar

Consider the noncontracting grammar with start symbol S :

$$\begin{aligned} S &\rightarrow abc \\ S &\rightarrow aSBc \\ cB &\rightarrow Bc \\ bB &\rightarrow bb \end{aligned}$$

Example derivation (underlining the sequence to be expanded):

$$\underline{S} \Rightarrow a\underline{S}Bc \Rightarrow aabc\underline{B}c \Rightarrow aab\underline{B}cc \Rightarrow aabbcc$$

Exercise: Convince yourself that this grammar generates exactly the strings $a^n b^n c^n$ where $n > 0$.

(N.B. With noncontracting grammars and CSGs, need to think in terms of **derivations**, not **syntax trees**.)

Noncontracting = Context sensitive

Theorem. A language is context sensitive if and only if it can be generated by a noncontracting grammar.

That every context-sensitive language can be generated by a noncontracting grammar is immediate, since context-sensitive grammars are, by definition, noncontracting.

The proof that every noncontracting grammar can be turned into a context sensitive one is intricate, and beyond the scope of the course.

Sometimes (e.g., in Kozen) noncontracting grammars are called context sensitive grammars; but this terminology is not faithful to Chomsky's original definition.

The Chomsky Hierarchy

At this point, we have a fairly complete understanding of the machinery associated with the different levels of the Chomsky hierarchy.

- **Regular languages:** DFAs, NFAs, regular expressions, regular grammars.
- **Context-free languages:** context-free grammars, nondeterministic pushdown automata.
- **Context-sensitive languages:** context-sensitive grammars, noncontracting grammars.
- **Recursively enumerable languages:** unrestricted grammars.

Context-sensitivity in programming languages

Some aspects of typical programming languages can't be captured by context-free grammars, e.g.

- Typing rules
- Scoping rules (e.g. variables can only be used in contexts where they have been 'declared')
- Access constraints (e.g. use of `public` vs. `private` methods in Java).

The usual approach is to give a CFG that's a bit 'too generous', and then **separately** describe these additional rules.

(E.g. typechecking done as a separate stage after parsing.)

In principle, though, all the above features fall within what can be captured by **context-sensitive** grammars. In fact, **no** programming language known to humankind contains anything that can't.

Scoping constraints aren't context-free

Consider the simple language L_1 given by

$$S \rightarrow \epsilon \mid \text{declare } v; S \mid \text{use } v; S$$

where v stands for a lexical class of variables. Let L_2 be the language consisting of strings of L_1 in which variables must be **declared before use**.

Assuming there are infinitely many possible variables, it can be shown that L_2 is **not context-free**, but **is context-sensitive**.

(If there are just n possible variables, we could in theory give a CFG for L_2 with around 2^n nonterminals — but that's obviously silly...)

Summary

- Context-sensitive languages are a big step up from context-free languages in terms of their power and generality.
- Natural languages have features that can't be captured conveniently (or at all) by context-free grammars. However, it appears that NLs are only **mildly context-sensitive** — they only exploit the low end of the power offered by CSGs.
- Programming languages contain non-context-free features (**typing**, **scoping** etc.), but all these fall comfortably within the realm of context-sensitive languages.
- **Next time:** what kinds of **machines** are needed to recognize context-sensitive languages?