

Finite Automata

Informatics 2A: Lecture 3

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Languages and alphabets

Throughout this course, languages will consist of finite sequences of symbols drawn from some given **alphabet**.

An **alphabet** Σ is simply some finite set of *letters* or *symbols* which we treat as 'primitive'. These might be ...

- English letters: $\Sigma = \{a, b, \dots, z\}$
- Decimal digits: $\Sigma = \{0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9\}$
- ASCII characters: $\Sigma = \{0, 1, \dots, a, b, \dots, ?, !, \dots\}$
- Programming language 'tokens': $\Sigma = \{\text{if, while, x, ==, \dots}\}$
- Words in (some fragment of) a natural language.
- 'Primitive' actions performable by a machine or system, e.g.
 $\Sigma = \{\text{insert50p, pressButton1, \dots}\}$

In toy examples, we'll use simple alphabets like $\{0, 1\}$ or $\{a, b, c\}$.

What is a 'language'?

A language over an alphabet Σ will consist of finite sequences (**strings**) of elements of Σ . E.g. the following are strings over the alphabet $\Sigma = \{a, b, c\}$:

a b ab cab bacca ccccccc

There's also the **empty string** , which we usually write as ϵ .

A **language** over Σ is simply a (finite or infinite) set of strings over Σ . A string s is **legal** in the language L if and only if $s \in L$.

We write Σ^* for the set of *all* possible strings over Σ . So a language L is simply a subset of Σ^* . ($L \subseteq \Sigma^*$)

(N.B. This is just a technical definition — any *real* language is obviously much more than this!)

Ways to define a language

There are many ways in which we might formally define a language:

- Direct mathematical definition, e.g.

$$L_1 = \{a, aa, ab, abbc\}$$

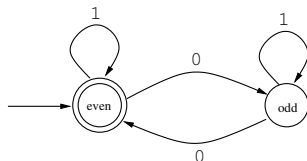
$$L_2 = \{axb \mid x \in \Sigma^*\}$$

$$L_3 = \{a^n b^n \mid n \geq 0\}$$

- Regular expressions (see Lecture 5).
- Formal grammars (see Lecture 8 onwards).
- Specify some **machine** for testing whether a string is legal or not.

The more complex the language, the more complex the machine might need to be. As we shall see, each level in the **Chomsky hierarchy** is correlated with a certain class of machines.

Finite automata (a.k.a. finite state machines)



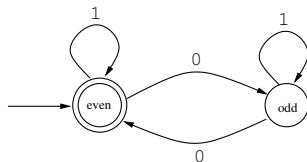
This is an example of a **finite automaton** over $\Sigma = \{0, 1\}$.

At any moment, the machine is in one of 2 **states**. From any state, each symbol in Σ determines a 'destination' state we can jump to.

The state marked with the in-arrow is picked out as the **starting state**. So any string in Σ^* gives rise to a sequence of states.

Certain states (with double circles) are designated as **accepting**. We call a string 'legal' if it takes us from the start state to some accepting state. In this way, the machine defines a language $L \subseteq \Sigma^*$: the language L is the **set of all legal strings**.

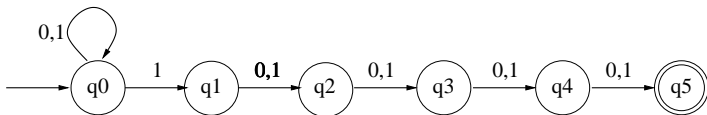
Self-assessment question



For the finite state machine shown here, which of the following strings are legal (i.e. accepted)?

- 1 ϵ
- 2 11
- 3 1010
- 4 1101

More generally, for any current state and any symbol, there may be **zero, one or many** new states we can jump to.



Here there are two transitions for '1' from q0, and none from q5.

The language associated with the machine is defined to consist of all strings that are accepted under **some** possible execution run.

The language associated with the example machine above is

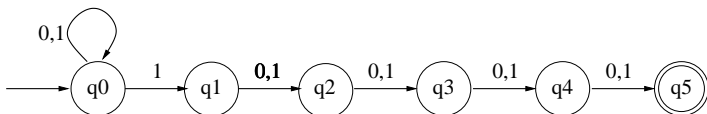
$$\{x \in \Sigma^* \mid \text{the fifth symbol from the end of } x \text{ is } 1\}$$

Formal definition of finite automaton

Formally, a **finite automaton** with alphabet Σ consists of:

- A finite set Q of **states**,
- A **transition relation** $\Delta \subseteq Q \times \Sigma \times Q$,
- A set $S \subseteq Q$ of possible **starting states**.
- A set $F \subseteq Q$ of **accepting states**.

Example formal definition



$$Q = \{q_0, q_1, q_2, q_3, q_4, q_5\}$$

$$\Delta = \{(q_0, 0, q_0), (q_0, 1, q_0), (q_0, 1, q_1), (q_1, 0, q_2), \\ (q_1, 1, q_2), (q_2, 0, q_3), (q_2, 1, q_3), (q_3, 0, q_4), \\ (q_3, 1, q_4), (q_4, 0, q_5), (q_4, 1, q_5)\}$$

$$S = \{q_0\}$$

$$F = \{q_5\}$$

Regular language

Suppose $M = (Q, \Delta, S, F)$ is a finite automaton with alphabet Σ .

We say that a string $x \in \Sigma^*$ is **accepted** if there exists a path through the set of states Q , starting at some state $s \in S$, ending at some state $f \in F$, with each step taken from the Δ relation, and with the path as a whole spelling out the string x .

This enables us to define the **language accepted by M** :

$$\mathcal{L}(M) = \{x \in \Sigma^* \mid x \text{ is accepted by } M\}$$

We call a language $L \subseteq \Sigma^*$ **regular** if $L = \mathcal{L}(M)$ for **some** finite automaton M .

Regular languages are the subject of lectures 4–7 of the course.

DFAs and NFAs

A finite automaton with alphabet Σ is **deterministic** if:

- It has exactly one starting state.
- For every state $q \in Q$ and symbol $a \in \Sigma$ there is exactly one state q' for which there exists a transition $q \xrightarrow{a} q'$ in Δ .

The first condition says that S is a **singleton** set.

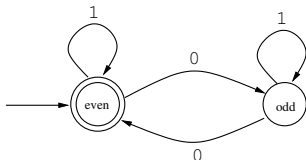
The second condition says that Δ specifies a **function** $Q \times \Sigma \rightarrow Q$.

Deterministic finite automata are usually abbreviated **DFAs**.

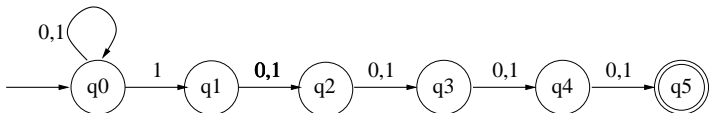
General finite automata are usually called **nondeterministic**, by way of contrast, and abbreviated **NFAs**.

Note that every DFA is an NFA.

Example



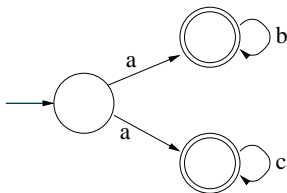
This is a DFA (and hence an NFA).



This is an NFA but not a DFA.

Challenge question

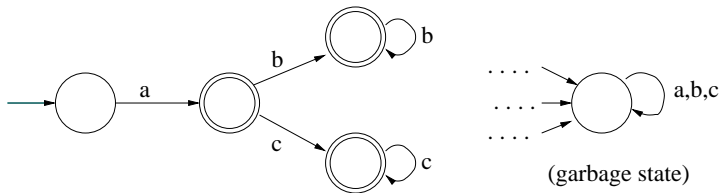
Consider the following NFA over $\{a, b, c\}$:



What is the *minimum* number of states of an equivalent DFA?

Solution

An equivalent DFA must have at least **5 states!**



Specifying a DFA

Clearly, a **DFA** with alphabet Σ can equivalently be given by:

- A finite set Q of states,
- A transition **function** $\delta : Q \times \Sigma \rightarrow Q$,
- A **single designated** starting state $s \in Q$,
- A set $F \subseteq Q$ of accepting states.

Example:

$$Q = \{\text{even}, \text{odd}\}$$

		0	1
δ	:	even	odd
		odd	even

$$s = \text{even}$$
$$F = \{\text{even}\}$$

Running a finite automaton

DFA's are dead easy to implement and efficient to run. We don't need much more than a two-dimensional array for the transition function δ . Given an input string x it is easy to follow the unique path determined by x and so determine whether or not the DFA accepts x .

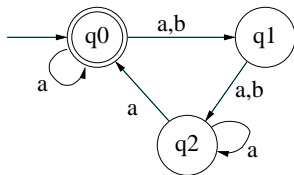
It is by no means so obvious how to run an NFA over an input string x . How do we prevent ourselves from making incorrect nondeterministic choices?

Solution: At each stage in processing the string, keep track of **all** the states the machine **might possibly** be in.

Executing an NFA: example

Given an NFA N over Σ and a string $x \in \Sigma^*$, how can we *in practice* decide whether $x \in \mathcal{L}(N)$?

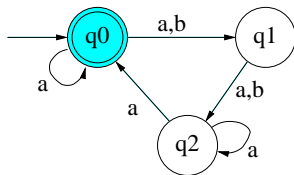
We illustrate with the running example below.



String to process: aba

Stage 0: initial state

At the start, the NFA *can only be* in the initial state q_0 .



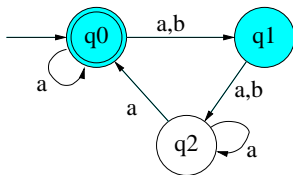
String to process: aba

Processed so far: ϵ

Next symbol: a

Stage 1: after processing 'a'

The NFA could now be in either q_0 or q_1 .



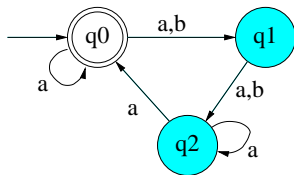
String to process: aba

Processed so far: a

Next symbol: b

Stage 2: after processing 'ab'

The NFA could now be in either q1 or q2.



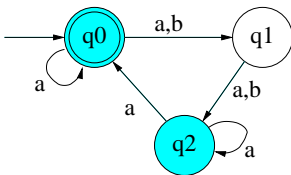
String to process: aba

Processed so far: ab

Next symbol: a

Stage 3: final state

The NFA could now be in q_2 or q_0 . (It could have got to q_2 in two different ways, though we don't need to keep track of this.)



String to process: aba

Processed so far: aba

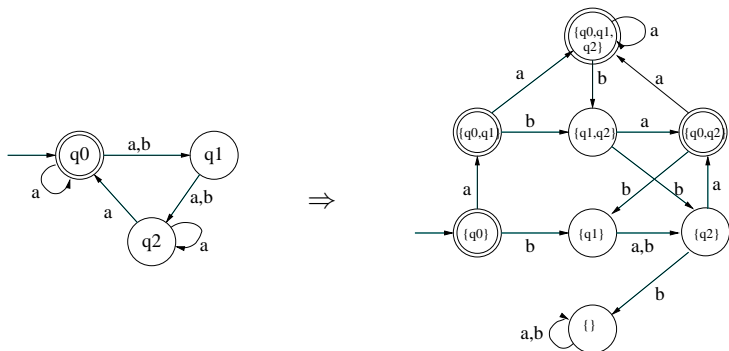
Since we've reached the end of the input string, and the set of possible states includes the accepting state q_0 , we can say that the string *aba* is accepted by this NFA.

The key insight

- The process we've just described is a completely **deterministic** process! Given any current set of 'coloured' states, and any input symbol in Σ , there's only one right answer to the question: 'What should the new set of coloured states be?'
- What's more, it's a **finite state** process. A 'state' is simply a choice of 'coloured' states in the original NFA N . If N has n states, there are 2^n such choices.
- This suggests how an NFA with n states can be converted into an equivalent DFA with 2^n states.

The subset construction: example

Our 3-state NFA gives rise to a DFA with $2^3 = 8$ states. The states of this DFA are **subsets** of $\{q_0, q_1, q_2\}$.



The accepting states of this DFA are exactly those that *contain* an accepting state of the original NFA.

The subset construction in general

Given an NFA $N = (Q, \Delta, S, F)$, we can define an equivalent DFA $M = (Q', \delta', s', F')$ (over the same alphabet Σ) like this:

- Q' is 2^Q , the set of all subsets of Q . (Also written $\mathcal{P}(Q)$.)
- $\delta'(A, u) = \{q' \in Q \mid \exists q \in A. (q, u, q') \in \Delta\}$. (Set of all states reachable via u from *some* state in A .)
- $s' = S$.
- $F' = \{A \subseteq Q \mid \exists q \in A. q \in F\}$.

It's then not hard to prove mathematically that $\mathcal{L}(M) = \mathcal{L}(N)$.
(See Kozen for details.)

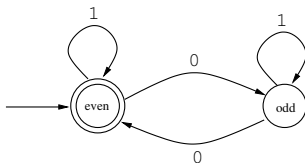
This process is called **determinization**.

Summary

- We've shown that for any NFA N , we can construct a DFA M with the same associated language.
- Since every DFA is also an NFA, the classes of languages recognised by DFAs and by NFAs coincide — these are the **regular languages**.
- Often a language can be specified more concisely by an NFA than by a DFA.
- We can automatically convert an NFA to a DFA, at the risk of an exponential blow-up in the number of states.
- To determine whether a string x is accepted by an NFA we do not need to construct the entire DFA, but instead we efficiently simulate the execution of the DFA on x on a step-by-step basis. (This is called **just-in-time** simulation.)

End-of-lecture question 1

Let M be the DFA shown earlier:



Give a concise mathematical definition of the language $\mathcal{L}(M)$.

Answer:

$$\mathcal{L}(M) = \{x \in \Sigma^* \mid x \text{ contains an even number of 0's}\}$$

End-of-lecture question 2

Which of these three languages are regular?

$$L_1 = \{a, aa, ab, abbc\}$$

$$L_2 = \{axb \mid x \in \Sigma^*\}$$

$$L_3 = \{a^n b^n \mid n \geq 0\}$$

If regular, can you design an NFA that shows this? What about a DFA?

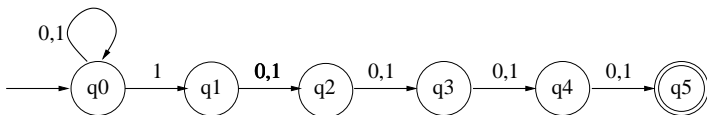
If not regular, can you explain why not?

Answer: L_1 and L_2 are regular. (NFAs and DFAs left as exercises.)

L_3 is not regular. We shall see why in lecture 7.

End-of-lecture challenge question 3

Consider our first example NFA over $\{0, 1\}$:



What is the number of states of the smallest DFA that recognises the same language?

Answer given in Lecture 4.

Reference material

- Kozen chapters 3, 5 and 6.
- J & M section 2.2 (rather brief).