LEARNING A SEMANTIC PARSER FROM SPOKEN UTTERANCES

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ABSTRACT

Semantic parsers map natural language input into semantic representations. In this paper, we present an approach that learns a semantic parser in the form of a lexicon and an inventory of syntactic patterns from ambiguous training data which is applicable to spoken utterances. We only assume the availability of a task-independent phoneme recognizer, making it easy to adapt to other tasks and yielding no a priori restriction concerning the vocabulary that the parser can process. In spite of these low requirements, we show that our approach can be successfully applied to both spoken and written data.

Index Terms— Spoken Language Understanding, Semantic Parsing, Lexical Acquisition, Syntactic Acquisition

1. INTRODUCTION

Semantic parsers transform natural language (NL) utterances into formal meaning representations (MR) and are typically learned from examples consisting of NLs annotated with their correct MR (e.g., [1][2]). Because such annotations are time-consuming and costly to produce, research has also focused on learning parsers using ambiguous context representations instead of annotations (e.g., [3][4][5][6]) as a step towards building machines which can learn language – analogous to children – through exposure to language in some environment [5]. These parsers are, however, learned from written input. While a word-based automatic speech recognizer (ASR) may be applied in order to handle spoken utterances as typically done in spoken dialogue systems, in this paper we explore how a semantic parser applicable to spoken utterances can be learned directly from spoken utterances coupled with ambiguous semantic annotation without assuming any pre-defined linguistic knowledge bases other than a task-independent phoneme recognizer. Besides the low computational costs for training, this makes it easy to adapt to novel tasks and allows the acquisition of a potentially unrestricted vocabulary by the parser. Furthermore, during parsing the meaning of an utterance can be determined at the whole-sentence level without an a priori restriction regarding possible words – and thus meanings – by the ASR. Yet, as a segmentation task must be tackled additionally, learning a parser is much more challenging when compared to learning from text. Our system performs the segmentation on the basis of unsegmented data, noise and semantic ambiguity by inducing alignments between NLs and ambiguous context representations. A parser, represented in the form of a lexicon and an inventory containing syntactic constructions, is then estimated based on co-occurrence frequencies, which are often utilized to establish mappings between form – typically words – and meaning (e.g., [7][8][9]). Alignments are computed both bottom-up by first determining structures of rather low complexity and top-down by including syntactic information; learning linguistic structures of rather low complexity from speech has been addressed previously, e.g., learning (novel) words (e.g., [10][8][11]) or semantically meaningful sequences, so-called acoustic morphemes (e.g., [12][13][14]).

2. LEARNING PROBLEM

The input to our system consists of two (temporally paired) channels: a speech channel and a channel with information about the visual context that the learner observes. In particular, the input consists of a set of spoken language utterances, each coupled with a symbolic description of the semantic/visual context by way of predicate logic. All utterances are transcribed by a phoneme recognizer, yielding the input utterances (NL) to the learning algorithm. Each NL is coupled with a set of actions describing the visual context (MR). Each action \( MR_i \in MR \) consists of a predicate \( \xi \) along with a list of arguments \( \arg_1, \ldots, \arg_n \), and NL corresponds to at most one of the actions. However, direct correspondences are not given, but must be learned by the system instead.\(^1\) We define the underlying vocabulary of the MR portion of the data \( V_{MR} \) as containing all semantic entities – actions, actors, etc. – that a learner observes visually, i.e. all \( \xi \) and \( \arg_i \) that occur. We define the vocabulary of the NL portion of the data \( V_{NL} \) as containing all observed phoneme sequences of length 5 to 13. While this may be rather arbitrary, it reduces computational costs, and we assume that sequences of such length already

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\(^1\)In what follows we use examples from the Robocup dataset [5] to illustrate the problem (see Section 4 for details).
cover most “good” candidates for acoustic morphemes.

Given a set of input examples, the goal is to estimate a parser \( P \) in the form of a lexicon \( V_P \) and an inventory of syntactic constructions \( C_P \), both comprising a meaning for each entry (cf. form-meaning pairings (constructions) [15]). The lexicon \( V_P \) consists of acoustic morphemes \( a_i \in V_{NL} \) along with their mapping to semantic referents. Each syntactic construction in \( C_P \) comprises a syntactic pattern which can contain variable elements (slots), i.e. positions where a \( v \in V_P \) may be inserted. The meaning is represented by exactly one semantic frame. If the syntactic pattern contains variable elements, the argument slots in the semantic frame are associated with them by a one-to-one mapping \( \phi \). An example of an input pair is given by Example 1; desired entries for \( V_P \) are “p r= p l EI t” \( \rightarrow \) purple8 and “p r= p l s @ m @ n t” \( \rightarrow \) purple7, while the desired syntactic construction is presented in Example 2.

$$\text{(1)}$$

| NL: \( p r= p l k I k s t @ m @ n t \) | \( m_r 1 \): playmode(play_on) | \( m_r 2 \): pass(purple8,purple7) | \( m_r 3 \): pass(purple2,purple5) |

| Syntactic pattern | \( X_1 k I k s t @ X_3 \) |
| Semantic frame | pass(ARG1,ARG2) |
| Mapping (\( \phi \)) | \( X_1 \rightarrow \text{ARG1},X_2 \rightarrow \text{ARG2} \)

3. ALGORITHM

The algorithm’s work flow is illustrated in Fig. 1. It is roughly divided into four steps: 1) Acquisition of an initial lexicon, 2) bottom-up computation of alignments using the initial lexicon, 3) estimation of a parser based on co-occurrence statistics, and 4) top-down re-estimation of alignments using the learned parser, i.e. lexicon and syntactic patterns, and re-estimation of the parser. Steps 3 and 4 are then repeated until some criterion is met. In order to restrict possible segmentations and computational costs, we apply an unsupervised algorithm, i.e. Bootstrap Voting Experts (BVE)[16], to pre-

2We utilized the Java implementation available online at http://code.google.com/p/voting-experts/ with parameter optimization via minimum description length.

| NL: \( X_1 k I k s t @ m @ n t \) | \( m_r 1 \): playmode(play_on) | \( m_r 2 \): pass(purple8,purple7) | \( m_r 3 \): pass(purple2,purple5) |

Given a list of alignments, a parser is estimated by computing co-occurrence statistics. In particular, we compute association scores at three levels:

1. **Lexical L:** \( nl \rightarrow ref \): between all \( v_{nl} \in V_{NL} \) (e.g. “p r= p l EI t”) and \( v_{mr} \in V_{MR} \) (e.g. purple8) appearing in alignments.

2. **Pattern P:** \( NL \rightarrow mr \): between all patterns \( (P_{NL}, e.g. X_1 k I k s t @ X_2) \) and semantic frames \( (P_{MR}, e.g. \text{pass(ARG1,ARG2)}) \) appearing in alignments.

3. **Mapping M:** \( \phi \): between all variable positions \( (M_{NL}, e.g. X_1) \) and argument slots \( (M_{MR}, e.g. \text{ARG1}) \) for each pattern and semantic frame.

Then, \( nl \rightarrow ref \) yields \( V_P \), while \( NL \rightarrow mr \), each coupled with its individual \( \phi \), yields \( C_P \). The association score \( \text{assoc}(z_{nl},z_{mr}) \) between a \( z_{nl} \in Z_{NL} \) and a \( z_{mr} \in Z_{MR} \), \( Z \in \{L,P,M\} \) is computed as follows: Let \( \text{freq}(z_y) \) be the number of observations \( z_y \) appears in (at least once). Then

$$\text{assoc}(z_{nl},z_{mr}) = P(z_{nl}|z_{mr}) \times P(z_{mr}|z_{nl}), \quad (4)$$

$$P(z_{nl}|z_{mr}) = \frac{\text{freq}(z_{nl} z_{mr})}{\text{freq}(z_{mr})}, \quad P(z_{mr}|z_{nl}) = \frac{\text{freq}(z_{nl} z_{mr})}{\text{freq}(z_{nl})}.$$  

A \( z_{mr} \in Z_{MR} \) is said to be a meaning of \( z_{nl} \in Z_{NL} \) and \( z_{nl} \) expresses \( z_{mr} \) if \( P(z_{nl}|z_{mr}) = \argmax_{z_{nl} \in Z_{NL}} \text{assoc}(z_{nl},z_{mr}) \).

Due to different pronunciations and recognition errors, an algorithm for approximate matching is needed in order to map different phoneme sequences onto each other. We compute the similarity between phoneme strings following Yu et al. (see [17][8]) by first transforming phonemes into vectors of (articulatory) distinctive features and subsequently determining the similarity between two strings based on a modification of the Dynamic Time Warping (DTW) algorithm, where a positive reward is given to matching phonemes and negative scores are assigned otherwise, depending on the number of differing features. In the following, we call the phonetic similarity between two phoneme strings \( sp_1 \) and \( sp_2 \) \( \text{sim}(sp_1,sp_2) \), and only strings having at least a certain number of phonemes in common are considered as (potentially) similar, i.e. we set a threshold by multiplying the maximal sequence length with a fraction of the reward set for matching phonemes. In the following, the four learning steps of the algorithm will be explained in more detail.
3.1. Acquisition of an initial lexicon

We assume that at least some sequences appear frequently enough to establish form-meaning mappings. Thus, we compute association scores between all \( v_m \in V_{NL} \) and \( v_{mr} \in V_{MR} \). For each semantic referent \( v_{mr} \in V_{MR} \), we then select a number of sequences having highest association score(s) with \( v_{mr} \) as acoustic morphemes for the initial lexicon.

3.2. Bottom-up creation of alignments

Given an example \((NL,MR)\), an alignment is created and scored for each \( mr_i \in MR \). The parser is then only trained on alignments with maximal score. Given an \((NL,mr)\) pair, possible alignments are created by segmenting \( NL \) such that segments express semantic referents observed in \( mr \) according to the initial lexicon. The meaning of a segment \( s \) is computed as the meaning \( mr_s \) of an entry which has maximal similarity score with \( s \) (if existent) \( e_{NL,i}^{s,mr} \) in the initial lexicon \( L_i \). The alignment score between \( s \) and \( mr_s \) is computed as

\[
\text{align}_{L_i}(s,mr_s) = \frac{\text{sim}(s,e_{NL,i}^{s,mr})}{\text{MAXSIM}_{mr_s}} \ast \text{assoc}(e_{NL,i}, mr_s),
\]

where \( \text{MAXSIM}_{mr_s} \) is the maximal similarity which has been obtained for any segment \( s_i \) with meaning \( mr_s \) and lexicon entry \( e_{NL,i}^{s} \) in one of the segmentations inspected for \((NL,mr)\).

Thus, an alignment is measured by inspecting whether i) a sequence (e.g., “p r= p l s E v @ n”) likely corresponds to a lexicon entry (e.g., “p r= p l s E v @ n”) and ii) whether this entry is a good expression for an observed argument (e.g., “kick”).

The alignment score for a complete alignment \( \text{align}(NL,mr) \) is then computed as the sum of the alignment scores for segments expressing the arguments, i.e.

\[
\text{align}_{arg}(NL,mr) = \sum_{arg \in ARGs(mr)} \text{align}_{L_i}(s,arg).
\]

Notice that only those segmentations are considered in which all arguments in \( mr \) are indeed expressed by individual segments. Hence, lexical knowledge is also utilized to directly rule out \( mr \) which the \( NL \) does not correspond to.

3.3. Creating a parser

As described previously, given a list of alignments, association scores are computed at the three levels (Lexical, Pattern, Mapping) as defined by equation 4.

3.4. Top-down creation of alignments

If a sequence co-occurs with a referent \( n \)-times, then all of its subsequences do so at least \( n \)-times and may thus yield better candidates for acoustic morphemes and subsequent segmentation errors. For instance, a sequence “p r= p l I l @ v @ n k I k s” might be incorrectly segmented as “p r= p l X_1 k I k s” because “ll @ v @ n” is a better expression for \textit{purple}11 than “p r= p l I l @ v @ n”. We thus apply a top-down step in order to refine alignments based on syntactic knowledge, e.g., once the system has learned that “X_1 k I k s” is a likely expression for \textit{kick}(ARG_1) while “p r= p l X_1 k I k s” is not, it can use this information to correct the errors described previously. In this step, alignments are computed as in step 2 but in addition a score for segments expressing the predicate is added. Thus, in addition to a lexicon containing acoustic morphemes, a lexicon containing syntactic constructions is utilized; both are extracted from the parser. As in case of creating the initial lexicon, they are created by taking a number of “good candidates” according to the association score, i.e., a number of acoustic morphemes and syntactic constructions are selected for all semantic referents referring to arguments and predicates/syntactic frames and stored in lexicon \( L_a \) and \( L_p \), respectively. Given an \((NL,mr)\), the alignment score is computed as defined in equation 6 as \( \text{align}_{arg}(NL,mr) \). For each semantic referent \( sp \) instantiating the pattern \( \text{align}_{L_p}(sp,mr) \) is computed as defined in equation 5 if the predicate of the lexicon entry for \( sp \) matches the observed predicate and summed up with \( \text{align}_{arg}(NL,mr) \). The parser is then induced again on the re-estimated alignments (step 3). Steps 3 and 4 are then repeated as long as the cumulative alignment scores increase.

3.5. Parsing

An \( NL \) is parsed by finding a pattern \( p \in C_P \) with acoustic morphemes \( a_i \in V_P \) at variable positions for which the sum of the similarity scores with the acoustic morpheme and pattern entries is maximal. If no such match exists, \( NL \) cannot be parsed. Otherwise, the meaning is the semantic frame associated with \( p \) in which the meanings of acoustic morphemes at variable positions are retrieved from \( V_P \) and inserted into argument slots according to the mapping \( \phi \).

4. EVALUATION

The task of learning a semantic parser using ambiguous context information has been previously investigated with respect to learning from written text, not speech, mainly on the RoboCup soccer corpus [5]. In order to compare the employed learning mechanisms to the state-of-the-art, we therefore first evaluate our system on written text, and subsequently present results with respect to application to speech.

4.1. Application to written text

We use the RoboCup soccer corpus [5] for evaluation, which contains four RoboCup games. Game events are represented by predicate logic formulas, yielding the \( mrs \). The games were commented by humans, yielding the written \( NL \) utterances. For example, \textit{pass}(\textit{purple}10,\textit{purple}7) represents an \( mr \) for a passing event which might be commented as “\textit{purple}10
kicks to purple7”. In the corpus, each NL comment is paired
with a set of possible mr, ∈ MR. These correspond to all ac-
tions observed five or less seconds prior to the comment. The
data is ambiguous in that it is unknown which of the actions
in the set – if any – is described by the utterance. The cor-
pus also contains a gold standard comprising NLs annotated
with their correct mrs. We evaluated our approach in line with
Chen et al. [3] by performing 4-fold cross-validation. Train-
ing was done on the ambiguous training data, while the gold
standard for a fourth game was used for testing. Results are
presented by means of the F1 score. Precision and recall were
computed as the percentage of mrs produced by the system
that were correct and the percentage of mrs that the system
produced correctly, respectively. A parse was considered as
correct if it matched the gold standard exactly [3].
To our knowledge, the best performing system so far has been
proposed by Börsschinger et al. [4], who tackled the task by
inducing a Probabilistic Context Free Grammar, achieving an
F1 of 86%. When applied to text, using our proposed learn-
ing mechanisms a parser can be build straightforwardly. We
computed an initial lexicon by taking all uni- and bigrams
as the vocabulary VNL and computed alignments only once
by applying a single bottom-up step. Approximate matching,
while not needed when computing alignments, was applied
during parsing of NLs for which no pattern could be found
otherwise. In that case the system searched for i) a match
with a Levenshtein distance of 1, (e.g. “Pink1 makes a cross
pass” can be matched with “Pink1 passes to Pink2 near
midfield” can be matched with “X1 passes to “X2”). Re-
results are presented in Table 1, indicating that when applied
to written text the algorithm yields state-of-the-art performance,
slightly outperforming Börsschinger et al. [4].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Results</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Input</td>
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<tr>
<td>Written text</td>
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<tr>
<td>Written text</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grapheme-to-phoneme</td>
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<td>Grapheme-to-phoneme</td>
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<td>ASR phoneme</td>
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4.2. Application to speech

Allowing to explore learning from spoken utterances, all NL
utterances in the RoboCup training data were read by a native
American speaker. Out of these examples, 23 were excluded
due to an error made by the speaker, yielding 1849 examples.
All spoken utterances were then transcribed using a phoneme
recognizer.3 Furthermore, we applied grapheme-to-phoneme
conversion to the written text using MaryTTS [19] for evalu-
ating the algorithm without recognition errors. By comparing
the ASR transcribed to the converted data, a phoneme error
rate (PER) of 34.2% averaged over all games was obtained.
In order to evaluate the amount of language learned by our
system, as a baseline we computed the F1 score that would
be achieved if the system would have performed “rote learn-
ing” of input examples. In particular, an NL in the test data
was parsed – if it had also been observed in the training data
– by choosing one of the mrs observed with it randomly.4

Results are presented in Table 1. In case of unsegmented
phoneme sequences without recognition errors (grapheme-to-
phomeme) still a high F1 of 82.8% is obtained, indicating
that the proposed segmentation mechanisms are appropriate.5
It must be noted that while expectedly performance degrades
when working with the ASR transcriptions, this would be the
case – at least to some extent – when applying a word-based
ASR as well. Yet, the results are promising, showing that
in spite of noise and contextual ambiguity, it is still possi-
ble to learn a parser which can be utilized to understand sev-
eral unseen utterances, as indicated by the large increase in
F1 when compared to the baseline. It must be noted that
the RoboCup corpus may be complicated in that several se-
quences expressing referents have subsequences in common,
i.e. most expressions for players start with either the prefix
“purple” or “pink” followed by a number. Thus, what mainly
distinguishes referents are the numbers, and due to recogni-
tion errors sometimes only subsequences expressing numbers
were associated, yielding segmentation and parsing errors be-
cause the prefix is needed for determining the correct referent.
In case of ASR output, applying the top-down step additional-
lly yielded an improvement over applying only the bottom-
up step, indicating that syntactic knowledge – which is typi-
cally ignored in algorithms for unsupervised segmentation
– can indeed provide useful segmentation cues, at least when
working with noisy sequences.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper presented a method for learning a semantic parser
applicable to spoken utterances. We have shown that the pre-
sent learning mechanisms yield a parser achieving state-of-
the-art performance in case of textual input. Furthermore, our
results indicate that even in spite of noise and contextual am-
biguity, in case of spoken utterances it is still possible to learn
a parser which can be used to parse unseen spoken utterances.

3We applied sphinx-3 [18] with the configuration and resources available
online at http://cmusphinx.sourceforge.net/wiki/phonemerecognition. Si-
4Notice that in case of ASR output the baseline is very low as due to
recognition errors it is the case that only a single NL appears in both the
training and the test data for two folds, in one case together with 8 and in the
other case together with 3 possible mrs. By applying approximate matching
the baseline can be increased to F1 = 19.6%.
5Notice that in this case expressions for referents can also be found by
coupling co-occurrence frequencies with a length bias [20].
6. REFERENCES


