DECISION LISTS FOR LEXICAL AMBIGUITY RESOLUTION:
Application to Accent Restoration in Spanish and French

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Abstract

This paper presents a statistical decision procedure for lexical ambiguity resolution. The algorithm exploits both local syntactic patterns and more distant collocational evidence, generating an efficient, effective, and highly perspicuous recipe for resolving a given ambiguity. By identifying and utilizing only the single best disambiguating evidence in a target context, the algorithm avoids the problematic complex modeling of statistical dependencies. Although directly applicable to a wide class of ambiguities, the algorithm is described and evaluated in a realistic case study, the problem of restoring missing accents in Spanish and French text. Current accuracy exceeds 99% on the full task, and typically is over 90% for even the most difficult ambiguities.

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents a general-purpose statistical decision procedure for lexical ambiguity resolution based on decision lists (Rivest, 1987). The algorithm considers multiple types of evidence in the context of an ambiguous word, exploiting differences in collocational distribution as measured by log-likelihoods. Unlike standard Bayesian approaches, however, it does not combine the log-likelihoods of all available pieces of contextual evidence, but bases its classifications solely on the single most reliable piece of evidence identified in the target context. Perhaps surprisingly, this strategy appears to yield the same or even slightly better precision than the combination of evidence approach when trained on the same features. It also brings with it several additional advantages, the greatest of which is the ability to include multiple, highly non-independent sources of evidence without complex modeling of dependencies. Some other advantages are significant simplicity and ease of implementation, transparent understandability of the resulting decision list, and easy adaptability to new domains. The particular domain chosen here as a case study is the problem of restoring missing accents[1] to Spanish and French text. Because it requires the resolution of both semantic and syntactic ambiguity, and offers an objective ground truth for automatic evaluation, it is particularly well suited for demonstrating and testing the capabilities of the given algorithm. It is also a practical problem with immediate application.

PROBLEM DESCRIPTION

The general problem considered here is the resolution of lexical ambiguity, both syntactic and semantic, based on properties of the surrounding context. Accent restoration is merely an instance of a closely-related class of problems including word-sense disambiguation, word choice selection in machine translation, homograph and homophone disambiguation, and capitalization restoration. The given algorithm may be used to solve each of these problems, and has been applied without modification to the case of homograph disambiguation in speech synthesis (Sproat, Hirschberg and Yarowsky, 1992).

It may not be immediately apparent to the reader why this set of problems forms a natural class, similar in origin and solvable by a single type of algorithm. In each case it is necessary to disambiguate two or more semantically distinct word-forms which have been conflated into the same representation in some medium.

In the prototypical instance of this class, word-sense disambiguation, such distinct semantic concepts as *river bank*, *financial bank* and *to bank an airplane* are conflated in ordinary text. Word associations and syntactic patterns are sufficient to identify and label the correct form. In homophone disambiguation, distinct semantic concepts such as *ceiling* and *sealing* have also become represented by the same ambiguous form, but in the medium of speech and with similar disambiguating clues.

Capitalization restoration is a similar problem in that distinct semantic concepts such as *AIDS/aids* (disease or helpful tools) and *Bush/bush* (president or shrub)

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[1] For brevity, the term *accent* will typically refer to the general class of accents and other diacritics, including ê,è,é,ö

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14. ABSTRACT
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are ambiguous, but in the medium of all-capitalized (or casefree) text, which includes titles and the beginning of sentences. Note that what was once just a capitalization ambiguity between *Prolog* (computer language) and *prolog* (introduction) has is becoming a "sense" ambiguity since the computer language is now often written in lower case, indicating the fundamental similarity of these problems.

Accent restoration involves lexical ambiguity, such as between the concepts *côte* (coast) and *côté* (side), in textual mediums where accents are missing. It is traditional in Spanish and French for diacritics to be omitted from capitalized letters. This is particularly a problem in all-capitalized text such as headlines. Accents in on-line text may also be systematically stripped by many computational processes which are not 8-bit clean (such as some e-mail transmissions), and may be routinely omitted by Spanish and French typists in informal computer correspondence.

Missing accents may create both semantic and syntactic ambiguities, including tense or mood distinctions which may only be resolved by distant temporal markers or non-syntactic cues. The most common accent ambiguity in Spanish is between the endings *-o* and *-ó*, such as in the case of completo vs. completó. This is a present/preterite tense ambiguity for nearly all -ar verbs, and very often also a part of speech ambiguity, as the -o form is a frequently a noun as well. The second most common general ambiguity is between the past-subjunctive and future tenses of nearly all -ar verbs (eg: *terminara* vs. *terminará*), both of which are 3rd person singular forms. This is a particularly challenging class and is not readily amenable to traditional part-of-speech tagging algorithms such as local trigram-based taggers. Some purely semantic ambiguities include the nouns *secretaria* (secretary) vs. *secretaría* (secretariat), *sabana* (grassland) vs. *sábana* (bed sheet), and *politica* (female politician) vs. *política* (politics). The distribution of ambiguity types in French is similar. The most common case is between *-e* and *-é*, which is both a past participle/present tense ambiguity, and often a part-of-speech ambiguity (with nouns and adjectives) as well. Purely semantic ambiguities are more common than in Spanish, and include *traité/traite* (treaty/draft), *marche/marché* (step/market), and the *cote* example mentioned above.

Accent restoration provides several advantages as a case study for the explication and evaluation of the proposed decision-list algorithm. First, as noted above, it offers a broad spectrum of ambiguity types, both syntactic and semantic, and shows the ability of the algorithm to handle these diverse problems. Second, the correct accent pattern is directly recoverable: unlimited quantities of test material may be constructed by stripping the accents from correctly-accented text and then using the original as a fully objective standard for automatic evaluation. By contrast, in traditional word-sense disambiguation, hand-labeling training and test data is a laborious and subjective task. Third, the task of restoring missing accents and resolving ambiguous forms shows considerable commercial applicability, both as a stand-alone application or part of the front-end to NLP systems. There is also a large potential commercial market in its use in grammar and spelling correctors, and in aids for inserting the proper diacritics automatically when one types[2]. Thus while accent restoration may not be be the prototypical member of the class of lexical-ambiguity resolution problems, it is an especially useful one for describing and evaluating a proposed solution to this class of problems.

PREVIOUS WORK

The problem of accent restoration in text has received minimal coverage in the literature, especially in English, despite its many interesting aspects. Most work in this area appears to done in the form of in-house or commercial software, so for the most part the problem and its potential solutions are without comprehensive published analysis. The best treatment I've discovered is from Fernand Marty (1986, 1992), who for more than a decade has been painstakingly crafting a system which includes accent restoration as part of a comprehensive system of syntactic, morphological and phonetic analysis, with an intended application in French text-to-speech synthesis. He incorporates information extracted from several French dictionaries and uses basic collocational and syntactic evidence in hand-built rules and heuristics. While the scope and complexity of this effort is remarkable, this paper will focus on a solution to the problem which requires considerably less effort to implement.

The scope of work in lexical ambiguity resolution is very large. Thus in the interest of space, discussion will focus on the direct historic precursors and sources of inspiration for the approach presented here. The central tradition from which it emerges is that of the Bayesian classifier (Mosteller and Wallace, 1964). This was expanded upon by (Gale et al., 1992), and in a class-based variant by (Yarowsky, 1992). Decision trees (Brown, 1991) have been usefully applied to word-sense ambiguities, and HMM part-of-speech taggers (Jelinek 1985, Church 1988, Merialdo 1990) have addressed the syntactic ambiguities presented here. Hearst (1991) presented an effective approach to modeling local contextual evidence, while Resnik (1993) gave a classic treatment of the use of word classes in selectional constraints. An algorithm for combining syntactic and semantic evidence in lexical ambiguity resolution has been realized in (Chang et al., 1992). A particularly successful algorithm for integrating a wide diversity of evidence types using error driven learning was presented in Brill (1993). While it has been applied primarily to syntactic problems, it shows tremendous promise for equally impressive results in the area of semantic ambiguity resolution.

[2]Such a tool would particularly useful for typing Spanish or French on Anglo-centric computer keyboards, where entering accents and other diacritic marks every few keystrokes can be laborious.

The formal model of decision lists was presented in (Rivest, 1987). I have restricted feature conjuncts to a much narrower complexity than allowed in the original model – namely to word and class trigrams. The current approach was initially presented in (Sproat et al., 1992), applied to the problem of homograph resolution in text-to-speech synthesis. The algorithm achieved 97% mean accuracy on a disambiguation task involving a sample of 13 homographs[3].

ALGORITHM

Step 1: Identify the Ambiguities in Accent Pattern

Most words in Spanish and French exhibit only one accent pattern. Basic corpus analysis will indicate which is the most common pattern for each word, and may be used in conjunction with or independent of dictionaries and other lexical resources.

The initial step is to take a histogram of a corpus *with* accents and diacritics retained, and compute a table of accent pattern distributions as follows:

De-accented Form	Accent Pattern	%	Number
cesse	cesse	53%	669
	cessé	47%	593
cout	coût	100%	330
couta	coûta	100%	41
coute	coûté	53%	107
	coûte	47%	96
cote	côté	69%	2645
	côte	28%	1040
	cote	3%	99
	coté	<1%	15
cotiere	côtière	100%	296

For words with multiple accent patterns, steps 2-5 are applied.

Step 2: Collect Training Contexts

For a particular case of accent ambiguity identified above, collect $\pm k$ words of context around all occurrences in the corpus, label the concordance line with the observed accent pattern, and then strip the accents from the data. This will yield a training set such as the following:

Pattern	Context		
(1) côté	du laisser de	*cote*	faute de temps
(1) côté	appeler l' autre	*cote*	de l' atlantique
(1) côté	passe de notre	*cote*	de la frontiere
(2) côte	vivre sur notre	*cote*	ouest toujours verte
(2) côte	creer sur la	*cote*	du labrador des
(2) côte	travaillaient cote a	*cote*	, ils avaient

The training corpora used in this experiment were the Spanish AP Newswire (1991-1993, 49 million words), the French Canadian Hansards (1986-1988, 19 million words), and a collection from *Le Monde* (1 million words).

Step 3: Measure Collocational Distributions

The driving force behind this disambiguation algorithm is the uneven distribution of collocations[4] with respect to the ambiguous token being classified. Certain collocations will indicate one accent pattern, while different collocations will tend to indicate another. The goal of this stage of the algorithm is to measure a large number of collocational distributions to select those which are most useful in identifying the accent pattern of the ambiguous word.

The following are the initial types of collocations considered:

- Word immediately to the right (+1 W)
- Word immediately to the left (-1 W)
- Word found in $\pm k$ word window[5] ($\pm$k W)
- Pair of words at offsets -2 and -1
- Pair of words at offsets -1 and +1
- Pair of words at offsets +1 and +2

For the two major accent patterns of the French word *cote*, below is a small sample of these distributions for several types of collocations:

Position	Collocation	côte	côté
-1 w	du *cote*	0	536
	la *cote*	766	1
	un *cote*	0	216
	notre *cote*	10	70
+1 w	*cote* ouest	288	1
	cote est	174	3
	cote du	55	156
+1w,+2w	*cote* du gouvernement	0	62
-2w,-1w	cote a *cote*	23	0
$\pm$k w	poisson (in $\pm k$ words)	20	0
$\pm$k w	ports (in $\pm k$ words)	22	0
$\pm$k w	opposition (in $\pm k$ words)	0	39

This core set of evidence presupposes no language-specific knowledge. However, if additional language resources are available, it may be desirable to include a larger feature set. For example, if lemmatization procedures are available, collocational measures for morphological roots will tend to yield more succinct and generalizable evidence than measuring the distributions for each of the inflected forms. If part-of-speech information is available in a lexicon, it is useful to compute the

[3] Baseline accuracy for this data (using the most common pronunciation) is 67%.

[4] The term *collocation* is used here in its broad sense, meaning words appearing adjacent to or near each other (literally, in the same location), and does not imply only idiomatic or non-compositional associations.

[5] The optimal value of k is sensitive to the type of ambiguity. Semantic or topic-based ambiguities warrant a larger window ($k \approx 20-50$), while more local syntactic ambiguities warrant a smaller window ($k \approx 3$ *or* 4)

distributions for part-of-speech bigrams and trigrams as above. Note that it's not necessary to determine the actual parts-of-speech of words in context; using only the most likely part of speech or a set of all possibilities will produce adequate, if somewhat diluted, distributional evidence. Similarly, it is useful to compute collocational statistics for arbitrary word classes, such as the class WEEKDAY ={ *domingo*, *lunes*, *martes*, ... }. Such classes may cover many types of associations, and need not be mutually exclusive.

For the French experiments, no additional linguistic knowledge or lexical resources were used. The decision lists were trained solely on raw word associations without additional patterns based on part of speech, morphological analysis or word class. Hence the reported performance is representative of what may be achieved with a rapid, inexpensive implementation based strictly on the distributional properties of raw text.

For the Spanish experiments, a richer set of evidence was utilized. Use of a morphological analyzer (developed by Tzoukermann and Liberman (1990)) allowed distributional measures to be computed for associations of lemmas (morphological roots), improving generalization to different inflected forms not observed in the training data. Also, a basic lexicon with possible parts of speech (augmented by the morphological analyzer) allowed adjacent part-of-speech sequences to be used as disambiguating evidence. A relatively coarse level of analysis (e.g. NOUN, ADJECTIVE, SUBJECT-PRONOUN, ARTICLE, etc.), augmented with independently modeled features representing gender, person, and number, was found to be most effective. However, when a word was listed with multiple parts-of-speech, no relative frequency distribution was available. Such words were given a part-of-speech tag consisting of the union of the possibilities (eg ADJECTIVE-NOUN), as in Kupiec (1989). Thus sequences of pure part-of-speech tags were highly reliable, while the potential sources of noise were isolated and modeled separately. In addition, several word classes such as WEEKDAY and MONTH were defined, primarily focusing on time words because so many accent ambiguities involve tense distinctions.

To build a full part of speech tagger for Spanish would be quite costly (and require special tagged corpora). The current approach uses just the information available in dictionaries, exploiting only that which is useful for the accent restoration task. Were dictionaries not available, a productive approximation could have been made using the associational distributions of suffixes (such as *-aba*, *-aste*, *-amos*) which are often satisfactory indicators of part of speech in morphologically rich languages such as Spanish.

The use of the word-class and part-of-speech data is illustrated below, with the example of distinguishing *terminara/terminará* (a subjunctive/future tense ambiguity):

Collocation	**termin-ara**	**termin-ará**
PREPOSITION que *terminara*	31	0
de que *terminara*	15	0
para que *terminara*	14	0
NOUN que *terminara*	0	13
carrera que *terminara*	0	3
reunion que *terminara*	0	2
acuerdo que *terminara*	0	2
que *terminara*	42	37
WEEKDAY (within $\pm k$ words)	0	23
domingo (within $\pm k$ words)	0	10
viernes (within $\pm k$ words)	0	4

Step 4: Sort by Log-Likelihood into Decision Lists

The next step is to compute the ratio called the *log-likelihood*:

$$Abs(Log(\frac{Pr(Accent\_Pattern_1|Collocation_i)}{Pr(Accent\_Pattern_2|Collocation_i)}))$$

The collocations most strongly indicative of a particular pattern will have the largest log-likelihood. Sorting by this value will list the strongest and most reliable evidence first[6].

Evidence sorted in the above manner will yield a decision list like the following, highly abbreviated example[7]:

LogL	Evidence	Classification
8.28	PREPOSITION que *terminara*	⇒ terminara
†7.24	de que *terminara*	⇒ terminara
†7.14	para que *terminara*	⇒ terminara
6.87	y *terminara*	⇒ terminará
6.64	WEEKDAY (within $\pm k$ words)	⇒ terminará
5.82	NOUN que *terminara*	⇒ terminará
†5.45	domingo (within $\pm k$ words)	⇒ terminará

The resulting decision list is used to classify new examples by identifying the highest line in the list that matches the given context and returning the indicated

[6]Problems arise when an observed count is 0. Clearly the probability of seeing *côté* in the context of *poisson* is not 0, even though no such collocation was observed in the training data. Finding a more accurate probability estimate depends on several factors, including the size of the training sample, nature of the collocation (adjacent bigrams or wider context), our prior expectation about the similarity of contexts, and the amount of noise in the training data. Several smoothing methods have been explored here, including those discussed in (Gale et al., 1992). In one technique, all observed distributions with the same 0-denominator raw frequency ratio (such as 2/0) are taken collectively, the average agreement rate of these distributions with additional held-out training data is measured, and from this a more realistic estimate of the likelihood ratio (e.g. 1.8/0.2) is computed. However, in the simplest implementation, satisfactory results may be achieved by adding a small constant α to the numerator and denominator, where α is selected empirically to optimize classification performance. For this data, relatively small α (between 0.1 and 0.25) tended to be effective, while noisier training data warrant larger α.

[7]Entries marked with † are pruned in Step 5, below.

classification. See Step 7 for a full description of this process.

Step 5: Optional Pruning and Interpolation

A potentially useful optional procedure is the interpolation of log-likelihood ratios between those computed from the full data set (the *global* probabilities) and those computed from the residual training data left at a given point in the decision list when all higher-ranked patterns failed to match (i.e. the *residual* probabilities). The residual probabilities are more relevant, but since the size of the residual training data shrinks at each level in the list, they are often much more poorly estimated (and in many cases there may be no relevant data left in the residual on which to compute the distribution of accent patterns for a given collocation). In contrast, the global probabilities are better estimated but less relevant. A reasonable compromise is to interpolate between the two, where the interpolated estimate is $\beta \times global + \gamma \times residual$. When the residual probabilities are based on a large training set and are well estimated, γ should dominate, while in cases the relevant residual is small or non-existent, β should dominate. If always $\beta = 0$ and $\gamma = 1$ (exclusive use of the residual), the result is a degenerate (strictly right-branching) decision tree with severe sparse data problems. Alternately, if one assumes that likelihood ratios for a given collocation are functionally equivalent at each line of a decision list, then one could exclusively use the global (always $\beta = 1$ and $\gamma = 0$). This is clearly the easiest and fastest approach, as probability distributions do not need to be recomputed as the list is constructed. Which approach is best? Using only the global proabilities does surprisingly well, and the results cited here are based on this readily replicatable procedure. The reason is grounded in the strong tendency of a word to exhibit only one sense or accent pattern per collocation (discussed in Step 6 and (Yarowsky, 1993)). Most classifications are based on a x vs. 0 distribution, and while the magnitude of the log-likelihood ratios may decrease in the residual, they rarely change sign. There are cases where this does happen and it appears that some interpolation helps, but for *this* problem the relatively small difference in performance does not seem to justify the greatly increased computational cost.

Two kinds of optional pruning can also increase the efficiency of the decision lists. The first handles the problem of "redundancy by subsumption," which is clearly visible in the example decision lists above (in WEEKDAY and *domingo*). When lemmas and word-classes precede their member words in the list, the latter will be ignored and can be pruned. If a bigram is unambiguous, probability distributions for dependent trigrams will not even be generated, since they will provide no additional information.

The second, pruning in a cross-validation phase, compensates for the minimal observed over-modeling of the data. Once a decision list is built it is applied to its own training set plus some held-out cross-validation data (*not* the test data). Lines in the list which contribute to more incorrect classifications than correct ones are removed. This also indirectly handles problems that may result from the omission of the interpolation step. If space is at a premium, lines which are never used in the cross-validation step may also be pruned. However, useful information is lost here, and words pruned in this way may have contributed to the classification of testing examples. A 3% drop in performance is observed, but an over 90% reduction in space is realized. The optimum pruning strategy is subject to cost-benefit analysis. In the results reported below, all pruning except this final space-saving step was utilized.

Step 6: Train Decision Lists for General Classes of Ambiguity

For many similar types of ambiguities, such as the Spanish subjunctive/future distinction between *-ara* and *ará*, the decision lists for individual cases will be quite similar and use the same basic evidence for the classification (such as presence of nearby time adverbials). It is useful to build a general decision list for all *-ara/ará* ambiguities. This also tends to improve performance on words for which there is inadequate training data to build a full individual decision lists. The process for building this general class disambiguator is basically identical to that described in Steps 2-5 above, except that in Step 2, training contexts are pooled for all individual instances of the class (such as all *-ara/-ará* ambiguities). It is important to give each individual *-ara* word roughly equal representation in the training set, however, lest the list model the idiosyncrasies of the most frequent class members, rather than identify the shared common features representative of the full class.

In Spanish, decision lists are trained for the general ambiguity classes including *-o/-ó*, *-e/-é*, *-ara/-ará*, and *-aran/-arán*. For each ambiguous word belonginging to one of these classes, the accuracy of the word-specific decision list is compared with the class-based list. If the class's list performs adequately it is used. Words with idiosyncrasies that are not modeled well by the class's list retain their own word-specific decision list.

Step 7: Using the Decision Lists

Once these decision lists have been created, they may be used in real time to determine the accent pattern for ambiguous words in new contexts.

At run time, each word encountered in a text is looked up in a table. If the accent pattern is unambiguous, as determined in Step 1, the correct pattern is printed. Ambiguous words have a table of the possible accent patterns and a pointer to a decision list, either for that specific word or its ambiguity class (as determined in Step 6). This given list is searched for the highest ranking match in the word's context, and a classification number is returned, indicating the most likely of the word's accent patterns given the context[8].

[8]If all entries in a decision list fail to match in a particular new context, a final entry called DEFAULT is used;

From a statistical perspective, the evidence at the top of this list will most reliably disambiguate the target word. Given a word in a new context to be assigned an accent pattern, if we may only base the classification on a single line in the decision list, it should be the highest ranking pattern that is present in the target context. This is uncontroversial, and is solidly based in Bayesian decision theory.

The question, however, is what to do with the less-reliable evidence that may also be present in the target context. The common tradition is to combine the available evidence in a weighted sum or product. This is done by Bayesian classifiers, neural nets, IR-based classifiers and N-gram part-of-speech taggers. The system reported here is unusual in that it does no such combination. *Only* the single most reliable piece of evidence matched in the target context is used. For example, in a context of *cote* containing *poisson*, *ports* and *atlantique*, if the adjacent feminine article *la cote* (the coast) is present, only this best evidence is used and the supporting semantic information ignored. Note that if the masculine article *le cote* (the side) were present in a similar maritime context, the most reliable evidence (gender agreement) would override the semantic clues which would otherwise dominate if all evidence was combined. If no gender agreement constraint were present in that context, the first matching semantic evidence would be used.

There are several motivations for this approach. The first is that combining all available evidence rarely produces a different classification than just using the single most reliable evidence, and when these differ it is as likely to hurt as to help. In a study comparing results for 20 words in a binary homograph disambiguation task, based strictly on words in local (±4 word) context, the following differences were observed between an algorithm taking the single best evidence, and an otherwise identical algorithm combining all available matching evidence:[9]

Combining vs. Not Combining Probabilities

Agree -	Both classifications correct	92%
	Both classifications incorrect	6%
Disagree -	Single best evidence correct	1.3%
	Combined evidence correct	0.7%
Total -		100%

Of course that this behavior does not hold for all classification tasks, but *does* seem to be characteristic of lexically-based word classifications. This may be explained by the empirical observation that in most cases, and with high probability, words exhibit only one *sense* in a given collocation (Yarowsky, 1993). Thus for this type of ambiguity resolution, there is no apparent detriment, and some apparent performance gain, from using only the single most reliable evidence in a classification. There are other advantages as well, including run-time efficiency and ease of parallelization. However, the greatest gain comes from the ability to incorporate multiple, non-independent information types in the decision procedure. As noted above, a given word in context (such as *Castillos*) may match several times in the decision list, once for its parts of speech, lemma, capitalized and capitalization-free forms, and possible word-classes as well. By only using one of these matches, the gross exaggeration of probability from combining all of these non-independent log-likelihoods is avoided. While these dependencies may be modeled and corrected for in Bayesian formalisms, it is difficult and costly to do so. Using only one log-likelihood ratio without combination frees the algorithm to include a wide spectrum of highly non-independent information without additional algorithmic complexity or performance loss.

it indicates the most likely accent pattern in cases where nothing matches.

[9] In cases of disagreement, using the single best evidence outperforms the combination of evidence 65% to 35%. This observed difference is 1.9 standard deviations greater than expected by chance and is statistically significant.

EVALUATION

Because we have only stripped accents artificially for testing purposes, and the "correct" patterns exist on-line in the original corpus, we can evaluate performance objectively and automatically. This contrasts with other classification tasks such as word-sense disambiguation and part-of-speech tagging, where at some point human judgements are required. Regrettably, however, there are errors in the original corpus, which can be quite substantial depending on the type of accent. For example, in the Spanish data, accents over the i (í) are frequently omitted; in a sample test 3.7% of the appropriate í accents were missing. Thus the following results must be interpreted as agreement rates with the corpus accent pattern; the true percent correct may be several percentage points higher.

The following table gives a breakdown of the different types of Spanish accent ambiguities, their relative frequency in the training corpus, and the algorithm's performance on each:[10]

Summary of Performance on Spanish:

Ambiguous Cases (18% of tokens):			
Type	Freq.	Agreement	Prior
-o/-ó	81 %	98 %	86%
-ara/-ará,-aran/-arán	4 %	92 %	84%
Function Words	13 %	98 %	94%
Other	2 %	97 %	95%
Total		98 %	93%
Unambiguous Cases (82% of tokens):			
		100 %	100%
Overall Performance:		99.6 %	98.7%

As observed before, the prior probabilities in favor of the most common accent pattern are highly skewed, so one does reasonably well at this task by always using the most common pattern. But the error rate is still

[10] The term *prior* is a measure of the baseline performance one would expect if the algorithm always chose the most common option.

roughly 1 per every 75 words, which is unacceptably high. This algorithm reduces that error rate by over 65%. However, to get a better picture of the algorithm's performance, the following table gives a breakdown of results for a random set of the most problematic cases – words exhibiting the largest absolute number of the non-majority accent patterns. Collectively they constitute the most common potential sources of error.

Performance on Individual Ambiguities

Spanish:

Pattern 1	Pattern 2	Agrmnt	Prior	N
anuncio	anunció	98.4%	57%	9459
registro	registró	98.4%	60%	2596
marco	marcó	98.2%	52%	2069
completo	completó	98.1%	54%	1701
retiro	retiró	97.5%	56%	3713
duro	duró	96.8%	52%	1466
paso	pasó	96.4%	50%	6383
regalo	regaló	90.7%	56%	280
terminara	terminará	82.9%	59%	218
llegara	llegará	78.4%	64%	860
deje	dejé	89.1%	68%	313
gane	gané	80.7%	60%	279
secretaria	secretaría	84.5%	52%	1065
seria	sería	97.7%	93%	1065
hacia	hacía	97.3%	91%	2483
esta	está	97.1%	61%	14140
mi	mí	93.7%	82%	1221

French:

cessé	cesse	97.7%	53%	1262
décidé	décide	96.5%	64%	3667
laisse	laissé	95.5%	50%	2624
commence	commencé	95.2%	54%	2105
côté	côte	98.1%	69%	3893
traité	traite	95.6%	71%	2865

Evaluation is based on the corpora described in the algorithm's Step 2. In all experiments, 4/5 of the data was used for training and the remaining 1/5 held out for testing. More accurate measures of algorithm performance were obtained by repeating each experiment 5 times, using a different 1/5 of the data for each test, and averaging the results. Note that in every experiment, results were measured on independent test data not seen in the training phase.

It should be emphasized that the actual percent correct is higher than these agreement figures, due to errors in the original corpus. The relatively low agreement rate on words with accented i's (í) is a result of this. To study this discrepancy further, a human judge fluent in Spanish determined whether the corpus or decision list algorithm was correct in two cases of disagreement. For the ambiguity case of *mi/mí*, the corpus was incorrect in 46% of the disputed tokens. For the ambiguity *anuncio/anunció*, the corpus was incorrect in 56% of the disputed tokens. I hope to obtain a more reliable source of test material. However, it does appear that in some cases the system's precision may rival that of the AP Newswire's Spanish writers and translators.

DISCUSSION

The algorithm presented here has several advantages which make it suitable for general lexical disambiguation tasks that require integrating both semantic and syntactic distinctions. The incorporation of word (and optionally part-of-speech) trigrams allows the modeling of many local syntactic constraints, while collocational evidence in a wider context allows for more semantic distinctions. A key advantage of this approach is that it allows the use of multiple, highly non-independent evidence types (such as root form, inflected form, part of speech, thesaurus category or application-specific clusters) and does so in a way that avoids the complex modeling of statistical dependencies. This allows the decision lists to find the level of representation that best matches the observed probability distributions. It is a kitchen-sink approach of the best kind – throw in many types of potentially relevant features and watch what floats to the top. While there are certainly other ways to combine such evidence, this approach has many advantages. In particular, precision seems to be at least as good as that achieved with Bayesian methods applied to the same evidence. This is not surprising, given the observation in (Leacock et al., 1993) that widely divergent sense-disambiguation algorithms tend to perform roughly the same given the same evidence. The distinguishing criteria therefore become:

- How readily can new and multiple types of evidence be incorporated into the algorithm?
- How easy is the output to understand?
- Can the resulting decision procedure be easily edited by hand?
- Is it simple to implement and replicate, and can it be applied quickly to new domains?

The current algorithm rates very highly on all these standards of evaluation, especially relative to some of the impenetrable black boxes produced by many machine learning algorithms. Its output is highly perspicuous: the resulting decision list is organized like a recipe, with the most useful evidence first and in highly readable form. The generated decision procedure is also easy to augment by hand, changing or adding patterns to the list. The algorithm is also extremely flexible – it is quite straightforward to use any new feature for which a probability distribution can be calculated. This is a considerable strength relative to other algorithms which are more constrained in their ability to handle diverse types of evidence. In a comparative study (Yarowsky, 1994), the decision list algorithm outperformed both an N-Gram tagger and Bayesian classifier primarily because it could effectively integrate a wider range of available evidence types than its competitors. Although a part-of-speech tagger exploiting gender and number agreement might resolve many accent ambiguities, such constraints will fail to apply in many cases and are difficult to apply generally, given the the problem of identifying agreement relationships. It would also be at considerable cost, as good taggers or parsers typically involve several person-years of development, plus often expensive proprietary lexicons and hand-tagged training corpora. In contrast, the current algorithm could be applied quite quickly and cheaply to this problem. It was originally developed for homograph disambiguation in text-to-speech synthesis (Sproat et al., 1992), and was applied to the problem of accent restoration with virtually no modifications in the code. It was applied to a new language, French, in a matter of days and with no special lexical resources or linguistic knowledge, basing its performance upon a strictly self-organizing analysis of the distributional properties of French text. The flexibility and generality of the algorithm and its potential feature set makes it readily applicable to other problems of recovering lost information from text corpora; I am currently pursuing its application to such problems as capitalization restoration and the task of recovering vowels in Hebrew text.

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented a general-purpose algorithm for lexical ambiguity resolution that is perspicuous, easy to implement, flexible and applied quickly to new domains. It incorporates class-based models at several levels, and while it requires no special lexical resources or linguistic knowledge, it effectively and transparently incorporates those which are available. It successfully integrates part-of-speech patterns with local and longer-distance collocational information to resolve both semantic and syntactic ambiguities. Finally, although the case study of accent restoration in Spanish and French was chosen for its diversity of ambiguity types and plentiful source of data for fully automatic and objective evaluation, the algorithm solves a worthwhile problem in its own right with promising commercial potential.

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