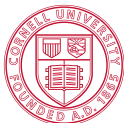


Finding Counterexamples from Parsing Conflicts

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Department of Computer Science

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improving

parser generators

(awesome for flawless grammars)

with better

error messages

(confusing for faulty grammars)

Puzzling error messages waste our time

```
stmt → if expr then stmt else stmt  
      | if expr then stmt  
      | expr ? stmt stmt  
      | arr [ expr ] := expr  
expr → num | expr + expr  
num  → <digit> | num <digit>
```

↓
Yacc



LALR parser generator

Puzzling error messages waste our time

```
stmt → if expr then stmt else stmt
      | if expr then stmt
      | expr ? stmt stmt
      | arr [ expr ] := expr
expr → num | expr + expr
num  → <digit> | num <digit>
```

↓
Yacc



LALR parser generator

Warning : *** Shift/Reduce conflict
found in state #10
between reduction on
stmt ::= IF expr THEN stmt •
and shift on
stmt ::= IF expr THEN stmt • ELSE stmt
under symbol ELSE

Warning : *** Shift/Reduce conflict
found in state #13
between reduction on
expr ::= expr PLUS expr •
and shift on
expr ::= expr • PLUS expr
under symbol PLUS

Warning : *** Shift/Reduce conflict
found in state #1
between reduction on
expr ::= num •
and shift on
num ::= num • DIGIT
under symbol DIGIT

Why error messages are puzzling

errors reported as **conflicts**
(parser generator internals)

not

in terms of grammar or language

```
Warning : *** Shift/Reduce conflict
          found in state #10
          between reduction on
            stmt ::= IF expr THEN stmt •
          and shift on
            stmt ::= IF expr THEN stmt • ELSE stmt
          under symbol ELSE
```

```
Warning : *** Shift/Reduce conflict
          found in state #13
          between reduction on
            expr ::= expr PLUS expr •
          and shift on
            expr ::= expr • PLUS expr
          under symbol PLUS
```

```
Warning : *** Shift/Reduce conflict
          found in state #1
```

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Why are there 3 parsing conflicts in my tiny grammar?

Succinct explanations?

I'm still switching thing around, and my original question had some errors since the **elseifs** sequence had an **else** always at the end which was wrong. Here is another take at the question, this time I get two shift/reduce conflicts:

```
flow : '#' IF '(' ')' statements elsebody
      ;

elsebody : else
          | elseifs else
          ;

else : '#' ELSE statements '#' END
      | '#' END
      ;

elseifs : /* empty */
         | elseifs '#' ELSEIF statements
         ;
```

The conflicts now are:

```
// Parser Conflict Information for grammar file "program.y"

Shift/Reduce conflict on symbol "'#'", parser will shift
Reduce 12: elseifs -> /* empty */
Shift "'#*': State-10 -> State-13
Items for From-state State 10
  7 flow: '#' IF '(' ')' statements . elsebody
  4 statements: statements . stmt
Items for Next-state State 13
  10 else: '#' . ELSE statements '#' END
  11 else: '#' . END
  7 flow: '#' . IF '(' ')' statements elsebody

Shift/Reduce conflict on symbol "'#'", parser will shift
Reduce 13: elseifs -> elseifs, '#', ELSEIF, statements
Shift "'#*': State-24 -> State-6
Items for From-state State 24
  13 elseifs: elseifs '#' ELSEIF statements .
  -lookahead: '#'
  4 statements: statements . stmt
Items for Next-state State 6
  7 flow: '#' . IF '(' ')' statements elsebody

// End conflict information for parser
```

Empty rules just aggravate the gppg i'm afraid. But they seem so natural to use I keep trying them.

I already know right recursion solves the problem as *FROM INFORMATION* has said. But I'm looking

A conflict means that the grammar you gave to bison is not LALR(1), so it can't decide what action to take in every possible case in order to correctly parse the grammar.

In your case, the problem is that your grammar is ambiguous. If you give it an input like

```
NUMBER AND NUMBER AND NUMBER
```

it can't decide if it should parse it as equivalent to

```
( NUMBER AND NUMBER ) AND NUMBER
```

or

```
NUMBER AND ( NUMBER AND NUMBER )
```

There are a number of ways you can resolve this:

- you can use `%left AND` or `%right AND` to tell bison that it should treat `AND` as a left- or right-associative infix operator
- you can refactor the `search_condition` rule to make it unambiguous:

```
search_condition : search_condition AND primary
                  | primary
                  ;
primary : '(' search_condition ')'
         | predicate
         ;
```

share improve this answer

answered Nov 1 '11 at 18:00

 Chris Dodd
47.8k ● 1 ● 40 ● 88

Succinct explanations?

I'm still switching thing around, and my original question had some errors since the grammar had an **else** allways at the end which was wrong. Here is another take at the question with two shift/reduce conflicts:

```
flow : '#' IF '(' ')' statements elsebody
      ;
elsebody : else
          | elseifs else
          ;
else : '#' ELSE statements '#' END
      | '#' END
      ;
elseifs : /* empty */
         | elseifs '#' ELSEIF statements
         ;
```

The conflicts now are:

```
// Parser Conflict Information for grammar file "program.y"
Shift/Reduce conflict on symbol "'#'", parser will shift
Reduce 12: elseifs -> /* empty */
Shift "'#*": State-10 -> State-13
Items for From-state State 10
  7 flow: '#' IF '(' ')' statements . elsebody
  4 statements: statements . stmt
Items for Next-state State 13
  10 else: '#' . ELSE statements '#' END
  11 else: '#' . END
  7 flow: '#' . IF '(' ')' statements elsebody
Shift/Reduce conflict on symbol "'#'", parser will shift
Reduce 13: elseifs -> elseifs, '#', ELSEIF, statements
Shift "'#*": State-24 -> State-6
Items for From-state State 24
  13 elseifs: elseifs '#' ELSEIF statements .
  -lookahead: '#'
  4 statements: statements . stmt
Items for Next-state State 6
  7 flow: '#' . IF '(' ')' statements elsebody
// End conflict information for parser
```

Empty rules just aggravate the gppg i'm afraid. But they seem so natural to use I keep trying them.

I already know right recursion enhance the problem as *FROM INFORMATION* has said. But I'm looking

our case, the problem is the

is not LALR(1), so it can't decide what action to take for the grammar.

If you give it an input like

NUMBER AND NUMBER AND NUMBER

it can't decide if it should parse it as eq

(NUMBER AND NUMBER) AND NUMBER

OR

and treat AND as a left- or right-

ambiguous:

NUMBER AND (NUMBER AND NUMBER)

counterexample to claim
"grammar is LALR"

answered Nov 1 '11 at 18:00

Chris Dodd
47.8k • 1 • 40 • 88

Goal: debug **without** learning
parser generator internals

Problem statement

We seek counterexamples that are...

1. easy to understand
2. efficient to find

Good counterexamples are hard to find

```
stmt → if expr then stmt else stmt
      | if expr then stmt
      | expr ? stmt stmt
      | arr [ expr ] := expr
expr  → num | expr + expr
num   → <digit> | num <digit>
```

ambiguous grammar
(serious syntactic problem)

⇓

want ambiguous counterexample

⇓

counterexample should indicate
ambiguity in grammar

Good counterexamples are hard to find

```
stmt → if expr then stmt else stmt
      | if expr then stmt
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```

ambiguous grammar
(serious syntactic problem)

⇓

want ambiguous counterexample

⇓

counterexample should indicate
ambiguity in grammar

Bad news:

Ambiguity detection is undecidable.

Game over?

Comparison: prior & our approaches

approach	ambiguities checked	accurate reports	efficient	
approximation NU test [S 07]	✓		✓	allows false positives
brute force AMBER [S 01] DMS [BPM 04]	✓	✓		never terminates on unambiguous grammars
punting on ambiguities ANTLR 4 [PHF 14] Elkhound [MN 04]			✓	can miss unexpected ambiguities
our counterexample finder	✓	✓	✓	

Problem statement

We seek counterexamples that are...

1. **easy to understand**
2. efficient to find

Good counterexamples

No more concrete than necessary

```
stmt → if expr then stmt else stmt
      | if expr then stmt
      | expr ? stmt stmt
      | arr [ expr ] := expr
expr  → num | expr + expr
num   → ⟨digit⟩ | num ⟨digit⟩
```

if 42 then if 17 then arr[2] := 5 else arr[4] := 7
too specific, distracting

if **expr** then if **expr** then **stmt** else **stmt** ✓
general and abstract
use nonterminals when possible

Good counterexamples

Derivation of most specific nonterminal causing ambiguity

```
stmt → if expr then stmt else stmt
      | if expr then stmt
      | expr ? stmt stmt
      | arr [ expr ] := expr
expr  → num | expr + expr
num   → <digit> | num <digit>
```

$stmt \rightarrow^* expr + expr + expr ? stmt stmt$
not specific enough
extra tokens distracting

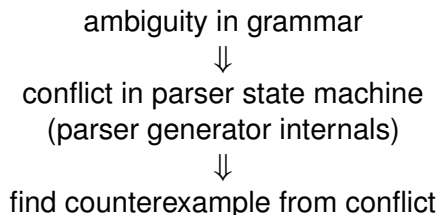
expr $\rightarrow^* expr + expr + expr$ ✓
root cause of ambiguity

Problem statement

We seek counterexamples that are...

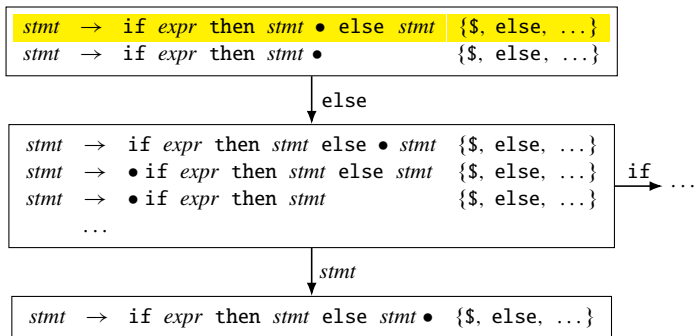
1. **easy to understand** ✓
(most general derivation of most specific nonterminal causing ambiguity)
2. **efficient to find**

Idea: exploit parser state machine



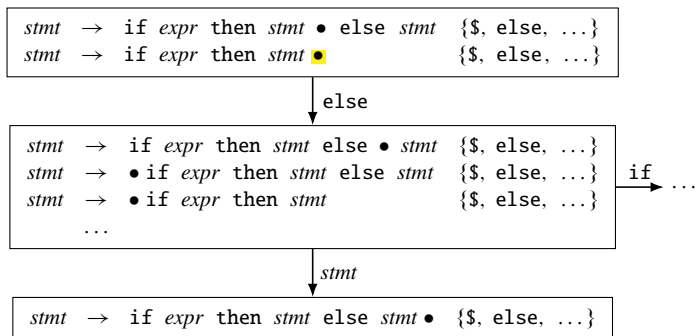
Time to learn parser generator internals...
... one last time

Anatomy of LR parser state machine



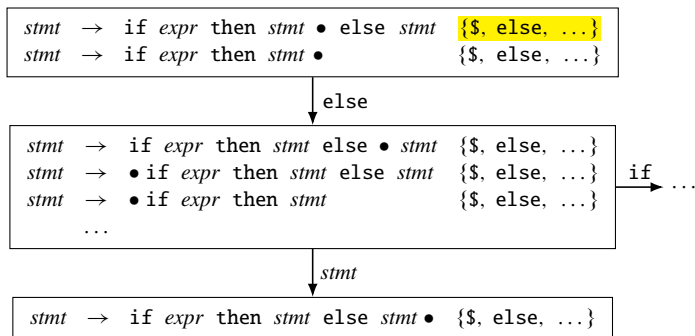
A state contains a collection of **production items**

Anatomy of LR parser state machine



A state contains a collection of production items
The **dot** (•) indicates progress on completing a production

Anatomy of LR parser state machine

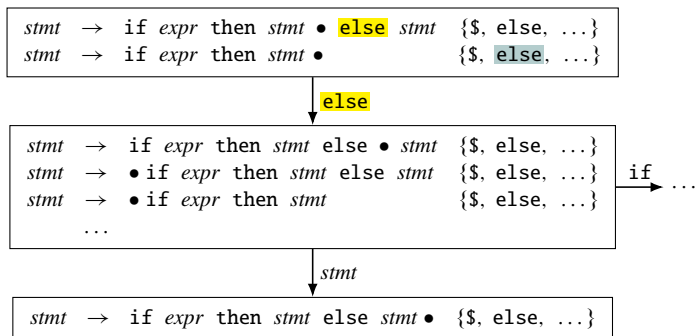


A state contains a collection of production items

The dot (\bullet) indicates progress on completing a production

The **lookahead set** lists terminal symbols that can follow production

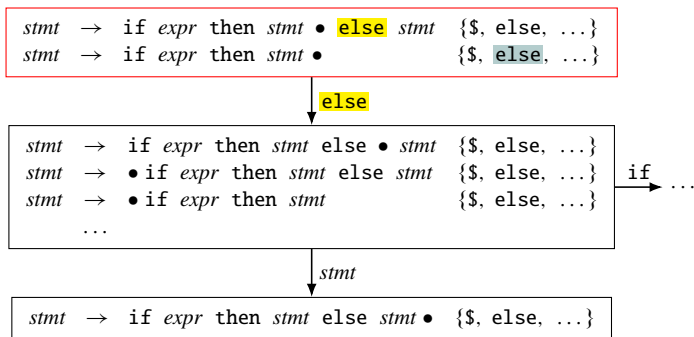
Anatomy of LR parser state machine



Parser actions:

- ◆ **shift**: consume next input symbol
(has **outgoing transition**)
- ◆ **reduce**: finish up a production
(lookahead set of item ending with \bullet has **next symbol**)

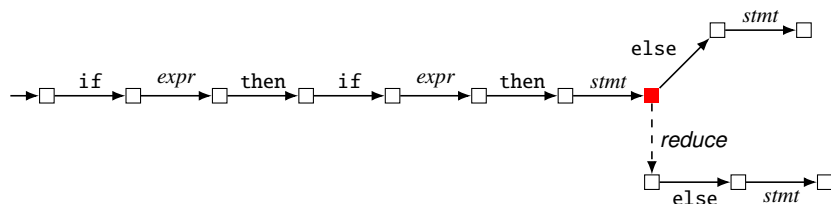
Parsing conflicts



- ◆ **shift/reduce** conflict:
shift & reduce possible on same input symbol
- ◆ **reduce/reduce** conflict:
items ending with \bullet have intersecting lookahead sets

Connection between conflict and ambiguity

conflict \Rightarrow \exists input taking parser
from start to conflict states
 \Downarrow
ambiguity \Rightarrow parser actions differ at conflict state
and diverge for rest of input
 \Downarrow
keep track of both parses simultaneously
to find ambiguous counterexample
(**unifying counterexample**)



Simulating copies of parser in parallel

product parser: states = Cartesian product of original parser items

$stmt \rightarrow if\ expr\ then\ stmt \bullet\ else\ stmt$

$stmt \rightarrow if\ expr\ then\ stmt \bullet$

← item for 1st parser

← item for 2nd parser

ensures: identical input parsed by both copies

Actions on product parser

Intuition: Keeping the input identical for both copies.

$stmt \rightarrow if \bullet expr \text{ then } stmt \text{ else } stmt$
 $stmt \rightarrow if \bullet expr \text{ then } stmt$

$expr$

$stmt \rightarrow if \text{ expr } \bullet \text{ then } stmt \text{ else } stmt$
 $stmt \rightarrow if \text{ expr } \bullet \text{ then } stmt$

transition on same symbol

$stmt \rightarrow if \bullet expr \text{ then } stmt \text{ else } stmt$
 $stmt \rightarrow if \bullet expr \text{ then } stmt$

[prod]

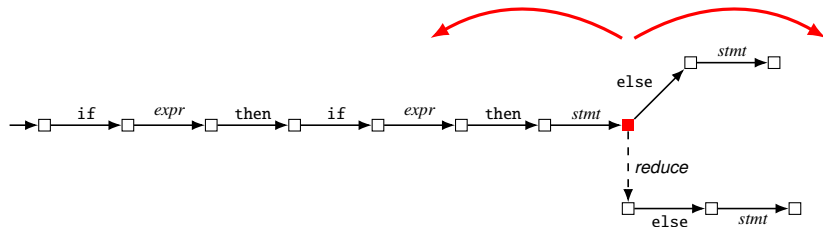
$expr \rightarrow \bullet expr + expr$
 $stmt \rightarrow if \bullet expr \text{ then } stmt$

production step: work on deeper production

Searching forward & backward from conflict state

searching from start state = unguided brute force
(need to use conflict state anyway)

start at conflict state = guided brute force
(well begun is half done)



Search stages

reduction on $stmt ::= IF\ expr\ THEN\ stmt \bullet$
shift on $stmt ::= IF\ expr\ THEN\ stmt \bullet ELSE\ stmt$
under symbol ELSE

1. completing reduce item

\overbrace{stmt}
if $expr$ then $stmt \bullet$

2. completing shift item

... \overbrace{stmt} ...
 \overbrace{stmt}
if $expr$ then $stmt \bullet$ else $stmt$
 \overbrace{stmt}

3. finding ambiguous nonterminal

... \overbrace{stmt} ...
 \overbrace{stmt}
if $expr$ then $stmt \bullet$ else $stmt$
 \overbrace{stmt}
 \overbrace{stmt}
...

4. completing counterexample

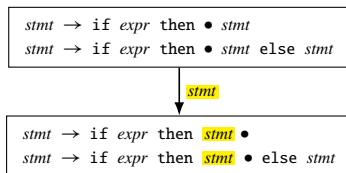
$\overbrace{\overbrace{stmt}$
 \overbrace{stmt}
if $expr$ then if $expr$ then $stmt \bullet$ else $stmt$
 \overbrace{stmt}
 \overbrace{stmt}

Our search in action

Stage 1: completing reduce item

reduction on $stmt ::= IF\ expr\ THEN\ stmt \bullet$
shift on $stmt ::= IF\ expr\ THEN\ stmt \bullet ELSE\ stmt$
under symbol ELSE

Start at conflict state



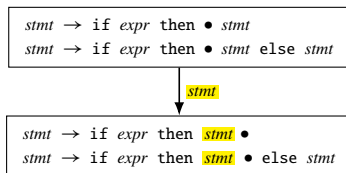
backward transition

Our search in action

Stage 1: completing reduce item

reduction on $stmt ::= IF\ expr\ THEN\ stmt \bullet$
shift on $stmt ::= IF\ expr\ THEN\ stmt \bullet ELSE\ stmt$
under symbol ELSE

Start at conflict state; take backward transition



backward transition

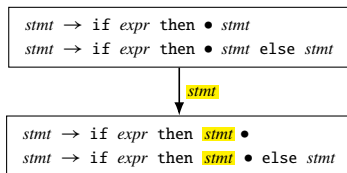
$stmt \bullet$

Our search in action

Stage 1: completing reduce item

reduction on $stmt ::= IF\ expr\ THEN\ stmt \bullet$
shift on $stmt ::= IF\ expr\ THEN\ stmt \bullet ELSE\ stmt$
under symbol ELSE

Start at conflict state; take backward transitions



backward transition

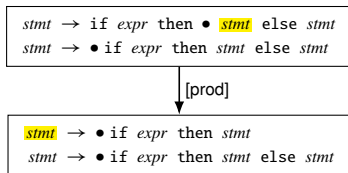
$stmt$
 $if\ expr\ then\ stmt \bullet$

Our search in action

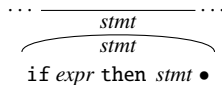
Stage 1: completing reduce item

reduction on $stmt ::= IF\ expr\ THEN\ stmt\ \bullet$
shift on $stmt ::= IF\ expr\ THEN\ stmt\ \bullet\ ELSE\ stmt$
under symbol ELSE

Find out who wants this derivation; take backward production step



backward production step

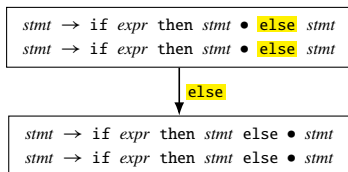


Our search in action

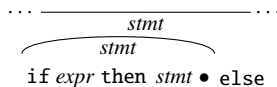
Stage 2: completing shift item

reduction on $stmt ::= IF\ expr\ THEN\ stmt \bullet$
shift on $stmt ::= IF\ expr\ THEN\ stmt \bullet ELSE\ stmt$
under symbol ELSE

Try to derive the next symbol; take forward transition



forward transition

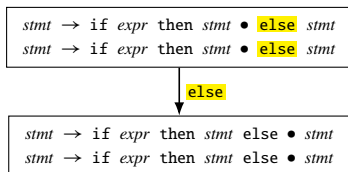


Our search in action

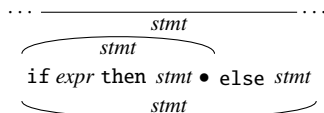
Stage 2: completing shift item

reduction on $stmt ::= IF\ expr\ THEN\ stmt \bullet$
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under symbol ELSE

Try to derive the next symbol; take forward transitions



forward transition

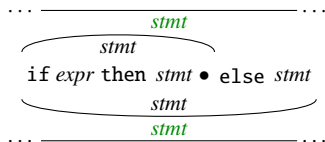
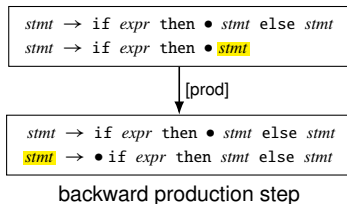


Our search in action

Stage 3: finding ambiguous nonterminal

reduction on $stmt ::= IF\ expr\ THEN\ stmt\ \bullet$
shift on $stmt ::= IF\ expr\ THEN\ stmt\ \bullet\ ELSE\ stmt$
under symbol ELSE

Find out who wants this derivation; take backward production step



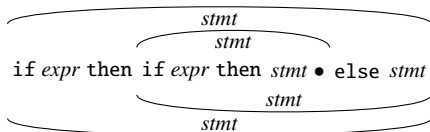
Our search in action

Stage 4: completing counterexample

```
reduction on stmt ::= IF expr THEN stmt •  
shift on      stmt ::= IF expr THEN stmt • ELSE stmt  
under symbol ELSE
```

Keep expanding outward

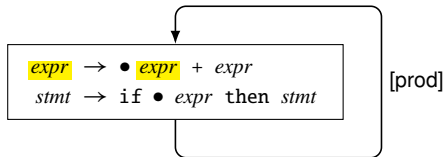
Complete counterexample:



Our search vs undecidability

Nontermination happens when

- ◆ grammar is not ambiguous, and
- ◆ production step is taken repeatedly



production step: work on deeper production

Implementation

Extended CUP LALR parser generator:

- ◆ ~1,500 lines of code added
- ◆ counterexample searched for each conflict



Warning : *** Shift/Reduce conflict found in state #1

between reduction on $expr ::= num \bullet$
and shift on $num ::= num \bullet \langle digit \rangle$
under symbol $\langle digit \rangle$

Ambiguity detected for nonterminal $stmt$

Example: $expr \ ? \ arr \ [\ expr \] \ := \ num \bullet \langle digit \rangle \langle digit \rangle \ ? \ stmt \ stmt$

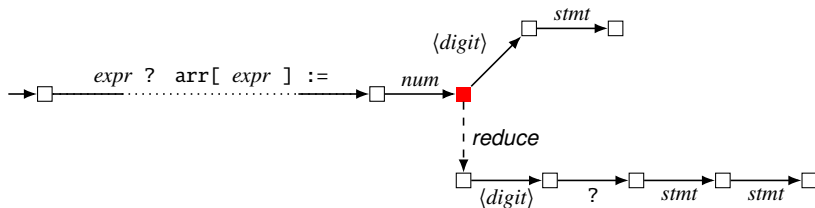
Derivation using reduction: $stmt ::= \dots$

Derivation using shift : $stmt ::= \dots$

Resolved in favor of shifting.

Implementation vs undecidability

- ◆ 5-second timeout
 - duration you're willing to wait
- ◆ reports **nonunifying counterexample** instead
 - symbols may differ after conflict state
 - search is decidable



Evaluation

Tested on a desktop...

our grammars

grammars from StackOverflow
and StackExchange

grammars used to evaluate
grammar filtering technique
(approximation + brute force)

Grammar	# nonterms	# prods	# states	# conflicts	Ambig?	# unif	# nonunif	# time out	Time (seconds)	
									Total	Average
figure1	3	9	24	3	✓	3	0	0	0.072	0.024
figure3	4	7	10	1	✗	0	1	0	0.010	0.010
figure7	4	10	16	2	✓	2	0	0	0.016	0.008
ambfailed01	6	10	17	1	✓	0	1	0	0.010	0.010
abcd	5	11	22	3	✓	3	0	0	0.024	0.008
simp2	10	41	70	1	✓	1	0	0	0.548	0.548
xi	16	41	82	6	✓	6	0	0	0.155	0.026
eqn	14	67	133	1	✓	1	0	0	0.169	0.169
java-ext1	185	445	767	2	✗	0	0	2	T/L	T/L
java-ext2	234	599	1255	1	✗	0	0	1	T/L	T/L
stackexc01	2	7	13	3	✓	3	0	0	0.023	0.008
stackexc02	6	11	15	1	✗	0	1	0	0.008	0.008
stackovf01	2	5	9	1	✗	0	1	0	0.009	0.009
stackovf02	2	5	9	4	✓	4	0	0	0.043	0.011
stackovf03	2	6	10	1	✓	1	0	0	0.017	0.017
stackovf04	5	9	13	1	✗	0	1	0	0.009	0.009
stackovf05	5	10	14	1	✓	1	0	0	0.010	0.010
stackovf06	6	10	15	2	✗	0	2	0	0.012	0.006
stackovf07	7	12	17	3	✓	3	0	0	0.028	0.009
stackovf08	3	13	21	8	✗	0	8	0	0.025	0.003
stackovf09	6	12	27	1	✗	0	1	0	0.017	0.017
stackovf10	9	20	53	19	✓	19	0	0	0.140	0.007
SQL.1	8	23	46	1	✓	1	0	0	0.024	0.024 (1.8s)
SQL.2	29	81	151	1	✓	1	0	0	0.060	0.060 (0.1s)
SQL.3	29	81	149	1	✓	1	0	0	0.024	0.024 (0.1s)
SQL.4	29	81	151	1	✓	1	0	0	0.031	0.031 (0.0s)
SQL.5	29	81	151	1	✓	1	0	0	0.030	0.030 (0.4s)
Pascal.1	79	177	323	3	✓	2	0	1	0.196	0.098 (0.3s)
Pascal.2	79	177	324	5	✓	5	0	0	0.296	0.059 (0.1s)
Pascal.3	79	177	321	1	✓	1	0	0	0.070	0.070 (1.2s)
Pascal.4	79	177	322	1	✓	1	0	0	0.081	0.081 (0.3s)
Pascal.5	79	177	322	1	✓	1	0	0	0.113	0.113 (0.3s)
C.1	64	214	369	1	✓	1	0	0	0.327	0.327 (1.3s)
C.2	64	214	368	1	✓	1	0	0	0.219	0.219 (1.11h)
C.3	64	214	368	4	✓	4	0	0	1.015	0.254 (0.5s)
C.4	64	214	369	1	✓	0	0	1	T/L	T/L (1.3s)
C.5	64	214	370	1	✓	1	0	0	0.212	0.212 (4.9s)
Java.1	152	351	607	1	✓	1	0	0	0.569	0.569 (32.4s)
Java.2	152	351	606	1133	✓	141	0	9 (983)	35.384	0.251 (0.4s)
Java.3	152	351	608	2	✓	2	0	0	0.435	0.218 (35.1s)
Java.4	152	351	608	14	✓	6	2	6	2.042	0.255 (6.5s)
Java.5	152	351	607	3	✓	3	0	0	0.526	0.175 (3.3s)

Evaluation results

- effective: 92% of conflicts didn't time out (nonunifying counterexamples reported for other 8%)
- efficient: if not timed out, 0.18s spent per conflict
10.7x faster than grammar filtering
8ms per conflict for StackOverflow grammars

Grammar	# nonterms	# prod	# states	# conflicts	Ambig.	# unif	# nonunif	# time out	Time (seconds)	
									Total	Average
figure1	3	9	24	3	✓	3	0	0	0.072	0.024
figure3	4	7	10	1	✗	0	1	0	0.010	0.010
figure7	4	10	16	2	✓	2	0	0	0.016	0.008
stackov#1	6	10	17	1	✓	0	1	0	0.010	0.010
comp2	5	11	22	3	✓	3	0	0	0.024	0.008
java-est1	185	445	767	2	✗	0	0	2	TL	TL
java-est2	234	588	955	1	✗	0	0	1	TL	TL
stackov#4	6	14	15	1	✗	0	1	0	0.008	0.008
stackov#5	5	9	1	1	✗	0	1	0	0.009	0.009
stackov#6	5	9	4	1	✓	4	0	0	0.043	0.011
stackov#13	6	10	1	1	✓	1	0	0	0.017	0.017
stackov#14	6	10	1	1	✓	1	0	0	0.009	0.009
stackov#15	6	10	1	1	✓	1	0	0	0.010	0.010
stackov#16	6	10	15	2	✗	0	2	0	0.012	0.006
stackov#17	7	12	17	3	✓	3	0	0	0.028	0.009
stackov#18	3	13	21	8	✗	0	8	0	0.025	0.003
stackov#19	6	12	27	1	✗	0	1	0	0.017	0.017
stackov#10	9	20	53	19	✓	19	0	0	0.140	0.007



Questions	Tags	Users	Badges	Unanswered	Ask Question
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Why are there 3 parsing conflicts in my tiny grammar?

3 unifying counterexamples found in 25 milliseconds

SQL.3	29	81	149	1	✓	1	0	0	0.024	0.024	(0.1s)
SQL.4	29	81	151	1	✓	1	0	0	0.031	0.031	(0.0s)
SQL.5	29	81	151	1	✓	1	0	0	0.030	0.030	(0.4s)
Pascal.1	79	177	323	3	✓	2	0	1	0.196	0.098	(0.3s)
Pascal.2	79	177	324	5	✓	5	0	0	0.296	0.059	(0.1s)
Pascal.3	79	177	321	1	✓	1	0	0	0.070	0.070	(1.2s)
Pascal.4	79	177	322	1	✓	1	0	0	0.081	0.081	(0.5s)
Pascal.5	79	177	322	1	✓	1	0	0	0.113	0.113	(0.3s)
C.2	64	214	368	1	✓	1	0	0	0.327	0.327	(1.3s)
C.3	64	214	368	4	✓	4	0	0	0.219	0.219	(1.11h)
C.4	64	214	369	1	✓	0	0	1	1.015	0.254	(0.5s)
C.5	64	214	370	1	✓	1	0	0	0.212	0.212	(4.9s)
Java.1	152	351	607	1	✓	1	0	0	0.569	0.569	(32.4s)
Java.2	152	351	606	1133	✓	141	0	9 (983)	35.384	0.251	(0.4s)
Java.3	152	351	608	2	✓	2	0	0	0.435	0.218	(35.1s)
Java.4	152	351	608	14	✓	6	2	6	2.042	0.255	(6.5s)
Java.5	152	351	607	3	✓	3	0	0	0.526	0.175	(3.3s)

Problem statement

We seek counterexamples that are...

1. **easy to understand** ✓
(most general derivation of most specific nonterminal causing ambiguity)
2. **efficient to find** ✓
(search outward from conflict state in parser state machine)
(applicable to LR parser generators, not just LALR)

Time is always against us

More in the paper

We covered. . .

- ◆ properties of good counterexamples
- ◆ unifying counterexamples
- ◆ product parser
- ◆ outward search from conflict state

We did not cover. . .

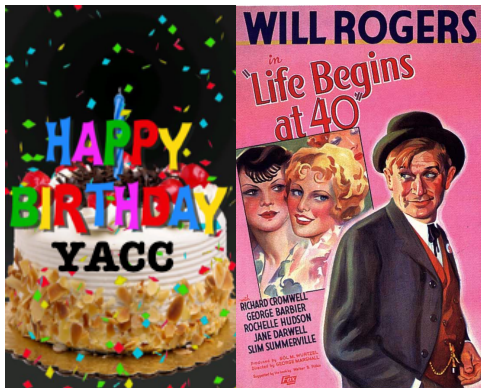
- ◆ conflicts not associated with ambiguities
- ◆ lookahead-sensitive graph
- ◆ shortest lookahead-sensitive path
- ◆ implementation optimizations & tradeoffs

Takeaways

- ◆ Easier-to-understand error messages possible for parser generators
- ◆ Counterexamples usually found efficiently despite undecidability
- ◆ Now part of Polyglot: <https://github.com/polyglot-compiler>
- ◆ A new expectation for future parser generators?

Takeaways

- ◆ Easier-to-understand error messages possible for parser generators
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- ◆ Now part of Polyglot: <https://github.com/polyglot-compiler>
- ◆ A new expectation for future parser generators?



Finding Counterexamples from Parsing Conflicts

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Available on **GitHub**: <http://git.io/vTQp8>

Google:



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