

Introduction to Algorithms and Data Structures

Lecture 24: LL(1) predictive parsing

John Longley

School of Informatics
University of Edinburgh

11 February 2025

Efficient parsing for artificial languages

Consider how we'd like to parse a program in the little programming language from Lecture 20.

stmt \rightarrow if-stmt | while-stmt | begin-stmt | assg-stmt
if-stmt \rightarrow **if** bool-expr **then** stmt **else** stmt
while-stmt \rightarrow **while** bool-expr **do** stmt
begin-stmt \rightarrow **begin** stmt-list **end**
stmt-list \rightarrow stmt | stmt ; stmt-list
assg-stmt \rightarrow var := arith-expr
bool-expr \rightarrow arith-expr compare-op arith-expr
compare-op \rightarrow < | > | <= | >= | == | !=

We'd like to read the program from left to right, processing each **token** (i.e. terminal symbol occurrence) only once — hoping for $O(n)$ runtime.

Predictive parsing: the idea

Start symbol is **stmt**.

Want to construct a **leftmost derivation** of our program starting from this (i.e. expanding the leftmost non-terminal at each step).

Let's suppose the first token in the program is **begin**.

From this alone, we can tell that the first two steps must be

$$\begin{aligned}\text{stmt} &\rightarrow \text{begin-stmt} \\ &\rightarrow \text{begin stmt-list end}\end{aligned}$$

So we have to parse the complete program as **begin stmt-list end**.

Can now step over **begin**, and proceed to parse the remaining input as **stmt-list end**.

We think of this as the **predicted form** for the remaining input.

LL(1) predictive parsing: intuition

In each of these two steps, the correct production to apply has been determined from just two pieces of information:

- ▶ the current token (e.g. **begin**).
- ▶ the nonterminal to be expanded (e.g. **stmt**, **begin-stmt**).

If it's **always** possible to determine the next production from just this information, then the grammar is said to be **LL(1)**.

(Meaning: read input from Left; build Leftmost derivation; look just 1 token ahead.) In this case, parsing can be very efficient.

Unfortunately, our example grammar isn't quite LL(1), and the very next step illustrates this.

We now have to expand **stmt-list**. Suppose second input token is **if**. Which rule should we apply?

stmt-list \rightarrow **stmt** or **stmt-list** \rightarrow **stmt ; stmt-list** ?

No way to tell without further lookahead!

Fixing a grammar

In this case, we can recast the rules for **stmt-list** to fix the problem:

stmt-list \rightarrow **stmt stmt-tail**

stmt-tail \rightarrow **ϵ | ; stmt stmt-tail**

From the **if**, now see that the next two rules must be:

stmt-list \rightarrow **stmt stmt-tail**

stmt \rightarrow **if-stmt**

if-stmt \rightarrow **if bool-expr then stmt else stmt**

The whole derivation so far:

stmt \rightarrow **begin-stmt**

\rightarrow **begin stmt-list end**

\rightarrow **begin stmt stmt-tail end**

\rightarrow **begin if-stmt stmt-tail end**

\rightarrow **begin if bool-expr then stmt else stmt stmt-tail end**

This accounts for the first two tokens, **begin if**. Predicted form for the rest is **bool-expr then stmt else stmt stmt-tail end**.

Parse tables

Consider the following grammar for bracket sequences, e.g. $((()))()$

$$S \rightarrow \epsilon \mid TS \qquad T \rightarrow (S)$$

This is LL(1): can always tell from the 'current token' and 'current non-terminal' which rule to apply. Take on trust for now.

Idea: That means we can draw up a 2-dim **parse table**, telling us which rule to apply in any situation. In this case:

	()	\$
S	$S \rightarrow TS$	$S \rightarrow \epsilon$	$S \rightarrow \epsilon$
T	$T \rightarrow (S)$		

- ▶ **Columns** are labelled by **terminals** plus 'end-of-input' marker \$.
- ▶ **Rows** are labelled by **non-terminals**.
- ▶ Entry in column a and row X tells us the rule to apply if we have a in the input and X is predicted.
- ▶ **Blank entries:** situations that never arise for a legal input.

Parsing is now easy: at each step, just do what the table tells us!

Example of LL(1) parsing

	()	\$
S	$S \rightarrow TS$	$S \rightarrow \epsilon$	$S \rightarrow \epsilon$
T	$T \rightarrow (S)$		

Let's use this table to parse the input string $(())$.

A **stack** keeps track of the predicted form for remaining input.

Operation	Remaining input	Stack state
	$(())\$$	S
Lookup $(, S$	$(())\$$	TS
Lookup $(, T$	$(())\$$	$(S)S$
Match $($	$()\$$	$S)S$
Lookup $(, S$	$()\$$	$TS)S$
Lookup $(, T$	$()\$$	$(S)S)S$
Match $($	$)\$$	$S)S)S$
Lookup $), S$	$)\$$	$)S)S$
Match $)$	$\$$	$S)S$
Lookup $), S$	$\$$	$)S$
Match $)$	$\$$	S
Lookup $\$, S$	$\$$	empty stack

(Also easy to build a **syntax tree** as we go along!)

Short exercise

	()	\$
S	$S \rightarrow TS$	$S \rightarrow \epsilon$	$S \rightarrow \epsilon$
T	$T \rightarrow (S)$		

For each of the following two input strings:

) (

what will go wrong when we try to apply our parsing algorithm?

1. Blank entry in table encountered
2. Input symbol (or end marker) doesn't match predicted symbol
3. Stack empties before end of string reached

Answer: For **)**, we start by expanding S to ϵ . But this empties the stack, whereas we haven't consumed any input yet. So **3**.

For **(**, we get to a point where we've reached the end marker $\$$ in the input, which doesn't match the predicted symbol **)** on the stack. So **2**.

LL(1) parsing: the algorithm

LL1_Parse (table,S,input)

pos = 0

initialize stack with single entry S

while stack not empty

 x = stack.peek()

 if x is non-terminal # Lookup case

 case table[x,input[pos]] of

 blank: error

 rule $x \rightarrow \beta$:

 stack.pop()

 push symbols of β onto stack

 (backwards!)

 else # Match case

 if x = input[pos]

 stack.pop()

 pos += 1

 else error

if input[pos] = \$

 return Success

else error

Parse table revisited

Remember: The parse table entry for X, a tells us which rule to apply if we're expecting an X and see an a .

- ▶ Often, the a will be simply the first symbol of the X -subphrase in question.
- ▶ But not always: maybe the X -subphrase in question is ϵ , and the a belongs to whatever follows the X .

	()	\$
S	$S \rightarrow TS$	$S \rightarrow \epsilon$	$S \rightarrow \epsilon$
T	$T \rightarrow (S)$		

In this simple case, not too hard to see by ad-hoc reasoning that the parse table is correct.

For a large grammar, this might be hard!

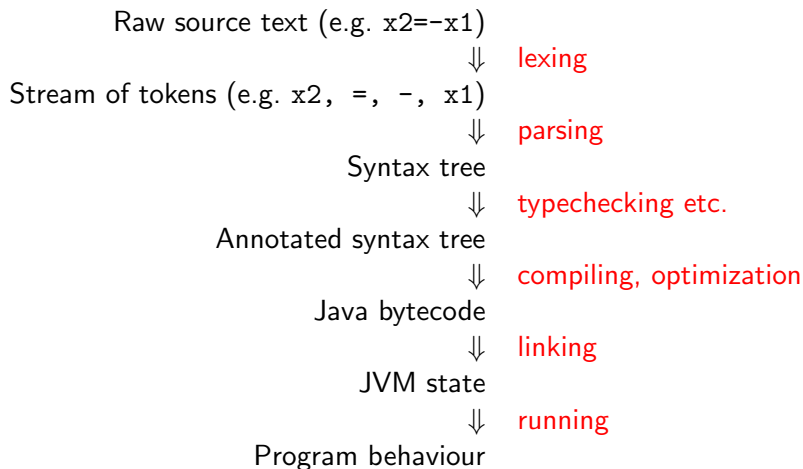
However, there's an **algorithm** that takes a grammar and constructs the parse table (or else detects the grammar isn't LL(1)). Involves **First** and **Follow** sets — but won't pursue this here.

Further remarks

- ▶ LL(1) is an example of a **top-down** parser: builds syntax trees from the root. Contrast with CYK which is **bottom-up**.
- ▶ For any ‘naturally arising’ LL(1) grammar, easy to see that our parser runs in time $\Theta(n)$ (with small hidden constants).
- ▶ Not every CF language has an LL(1) grammar. But if we’re designing a language, we can try to ensure that it does!
- ▶ LL(1) is nice for simple ‘command languages’ — and the ‘lightweight’ parsing algorithm is a plus.
- ▶ For large-scale languages, may want a bit more flexibility. Common choice is **LR(1) parsing** (more complex than LL(1)).
- ▶ In the **real world**, no one implements parsers for large languages by hand! We just write a CFG, then run a **parser generator** which creates one automatically — typically by constructing a parse table.

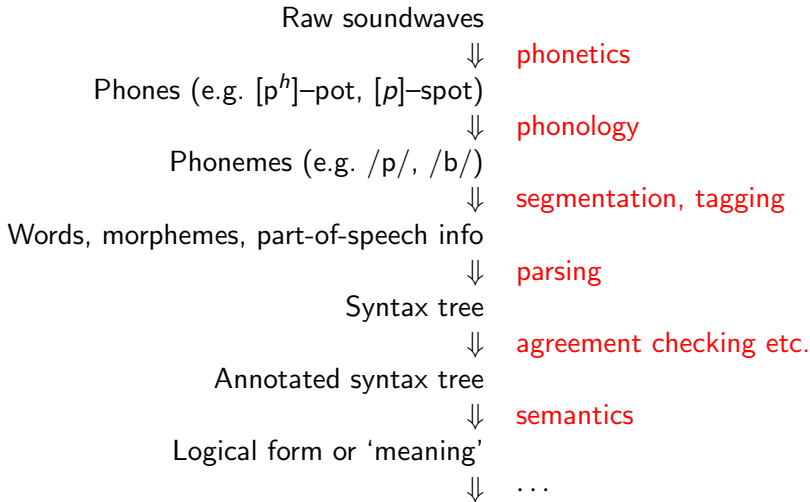
Putting it in context: The language processing pipeline

Think about the phases in which e.g. a Java program is processed:



The language processing pipeline (NL version)

Broadly similar pipeline e.g. for spoken English:



Though with ambiguity at all stages, and much ‘feedback’ from later stages to earlier ones. *IADS Lecture 24 Slide 13*

Reading

- ▶ Appel and Ginsburg, *Modern Compiler Implementation in C*, Sections 3.1 and 3.2. [Online access via UoE library](#).
More detail than we need: covers the algorithm for constructing the parse table.
Equivalent books exist for ML and Java (but no online library access for the latter).
- ▶ Aho, Sethi and Ullman, *Compilers: Principles, Techniques, Tools*, Section 4.4. Close to our treatment, but may be hard to find online.