Introduction to Parsing
Ambiguity and Syntax Errors

Outline

- Regular languages revisited
- Parser overview
- Context-free grammars (CFG's)
- Derivations
- Ambiguity
- Syntax errors

Languages and Automata

- Formal languages are very important in CS
  - Especially in programming languages
- Regular languages
  - The weakest formal languages widely used
  - Many applications
- We will also study context-free languages

Limitations of Regular Languages

Intuition: A finite automaton that runs long enough must repeat states

- A finite automaton *cannot remember* # of times it has visited a particular state
- because a finite automaton has finite memory
  - Only enough to store in which state it is
  - Cannot count, except up to a finite limit
- Many languages are not regular
- E.g., language of balanced parentheses is not regular: $\{ (^i)^i \mid i \geq 0\}$

The Functionality of the Parser

- **Input:** sequence of tokens from lexer
- **Output:** parse tree of the program

Example

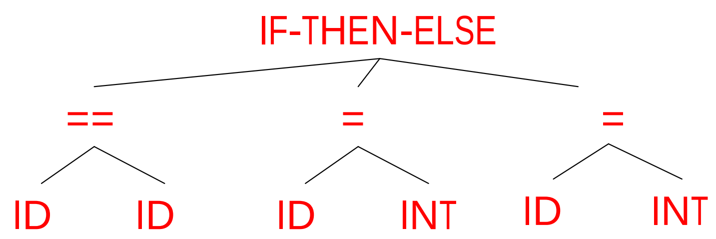
- If-then-else statement

  if (x == y) then z =1; else z = 2;

- Parser input

  IF (ID == ID) THEN ID = INT; ELSE ID = INT;

- Possible parser output



Comparison with Lexical Analysis

Phase	*Input*	*Output*
Lexer	Sequence of characters	Sequence of tokens
Parser	Sequence of tokens	Parse tree

The Role of the Parser

- Not all sequences of tokens are programs ...
- Parser must distinguish between valid and invalid sequences of tokens
- We need
  - *A* language for describing valid sequences of tokens
  - *A* method for distinguishing valid from invalid sequences of tokens

Context-Free Grammars

- Many programming language constructs have a recursive structure
- A STMT is of the form

  if COND then STMT else STMT , or

  while COND do STMT , or

  …
- Context-free grammars are a natural notation for this recursive structure

CFGs (Cont.)

- A CFG consists of
  - A set of *terminals* T
  - A set of *non-terminals* N
  - A *start symbol* S (a non-terminal)
  - A set of *productions*

Assuming $X \in N$ the productions are of the form

$X \to \varepsilon$, or

$X \to Y_1 Y_2 \ldots Y_n$ where $Y_i \in N \cup T$

Notational Conventions

- In these lecture notes
  - Non-terminals are written upper-case
  - Terminals are written lower-case
  - The start symbol is the left-hand side of the first production

Examples of CFGs

A fragment of our example language (simplified):

STMT → if COND then STMT else STMT
 | while COND do STMT
 | id = int

Examples of CFGs (cont.)

Grammar for simple arithmetic expressions:

$$
\begin{aligned}
E \rightarrow\ & E * E \\
|\ & E + E \\
|\ & (E) \\
|\ & id
\end{aligned}
$$

The Language of a CFG

Read productions as replacement rules:

$X \rightarrow Y_1 \dots Y_n$

Means X can be replaced by $Y_1 \dots Y_n$

$X \rightarrow \varepsilon$

Means X can be erased (replaced with empty string)

Key Idea

(1) Begin with a string consisting of the start symbol "S"

(2) Replace any non-terminal X in the string by a right-hand side of some production

$$X \rightarrow Y_1 \cdots Y_n$$

(3) Repeat (2) until there are no non-terminals in the string

The Language of a CFG (Cont.)

More formally, we write

$$X_1 \cdots X_i \cdots X_n \rightarrow X_1 \cdots X_{i-1} Y_1 \cdots Y_m X_{i+1} \cdots X_n$$

if there is a production

$$X_i \rightarrow Y_1 \cdots Y_m$$

The Language of a CFG (Cont.)

Write

$$X_1 \cdots X_n \xrightarrow{*} Y_1 \cdots Y_m$$

if

$$X_1 \cdots X_n \rightarrow \cdots \rightarrow \cdots \rightarrow Y_1 \cdots Y_m$$

in 0 or more steps

The Language of a CFG

Let G be a context-free grammar with start symbol S. Then the language of G is:

$$\left\{ a_1 \ldots a_n \mid S \xrightarrow{*} a_1 \ldots a_n \text{ and every } a_i \text{ is a terminal} \right\}$$

Terminals

- Terminals are called so because there are no rules for replacing them
- Once generated, terminals are permanent
- Terminals ought to be tokens of the language

Examples

$L(G)$ is the language of the CFG G

Strings of balanced parentheses $\left\{ (^i)^i \mid i \geq 0 \right\}$

Two grammars:

$$\begin{aligned} S &\rightarrow (S) \\ S &\rightarrow \varepsilon \end{aligned} \quad \text{or} \quad \begin{aligned} S &\rightarrow (S) \\ &\mid \varepsilon \end{aligned}$$

Example

A fragment of our example language (simplified):

STMT → if COND then STMT
    | if COND then STMT else STMT
    | while COND do STMT
    | id = int
COND → (id == id)
    | (id != id)

Example (Cont.)

Some elements of the our language

id = int
if (id == id) then id = int else id = int
while (id != id) do id = int
while (id == id) do while (id != id) do id = int
if (id != id) then if (id == id) then id = int else id = int

Arithmetic Example

Simple arithmetic expressions:

$$E \rightarrow E+E \mid E * E \mid (E) \mid id$$

Some elements of the language:

id	id + id
(id)	id * id
(id) * id	id * (id)

Notes

The idea of a CFG is a big step.
But:

- Membership in a language is just "yes" or "no"; we also need the parse tree of the input
- Must handle errors gracefully
- Need an implementation of CFG's (e.g., yacc)

More Notes

- Form of the grammar is important
  - *Many grammars generate the same language*
  - Parsing tools are sensitive to the grammar

Note: Tools for regular languages (e.g., lex/ML-Lex) are also sensitive to the form of the regular expression, but this is rarely a problem in practice

Derivations and Parse Trees

A *derivation* is a sequence of productions

$$S \to \cdots \to \cdots \to \cdots$$

A derivation can be drawn as a tree

- Start symbol is the tree's root
- For a production $X \to Y_1 \cdots Y_n$ add children $Y_1 \cdots Y_n$ to node X

Derivation Example

- Grammar

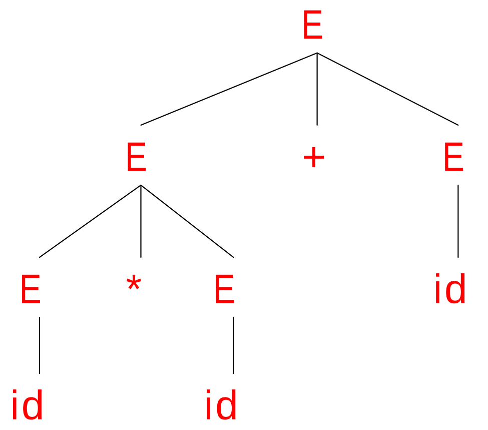
$$\mathrm{E} \to \mathrm{E+E} \mid \mathrm{E} * \mathrm{E} \mid (\mathrm{E}) \mid \mathrm{id}$$

- String

$$\mathrm{id} * \mathrm{id} + \mathrm{id}$$

Derivation Example (Cont.)

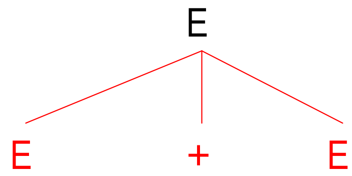
$$
\begin{aligned}
& \mathrm{E} \\
\to\ & \mathrm{E+E} \\
\to\ & \mathrm{E} * \mathrm{E+E} \\
\to\ & \mathrm{id} * \mathrm{E} + \mathrm{E} \\
\to\ & \mathrm{id} * \mathrm{id} + \mathrm{E} \\
\to\ & \mathrm{id} * \mathrm{id} + \mathrm{id}
\end{aligned}
$$



Derivation in Detail (1)

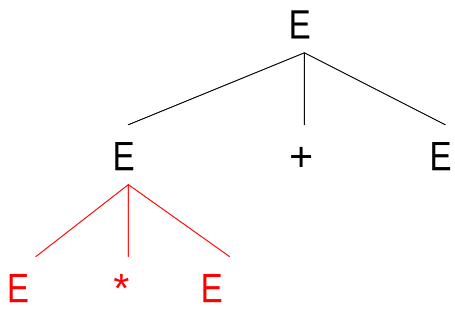
$$E$$

Derivation in Detail (2)



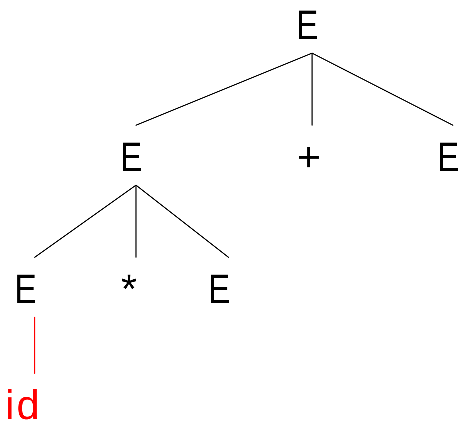
$$\begin{aligned} & E \\ \rightarrow\ & E+E \end{aligned}$$

Derivation in Detail (3)



$$\begin{aligned} & E \\ \rightarrow\ & E+E \\ \rightarrow\ & E * E+E \end{aligned}$$

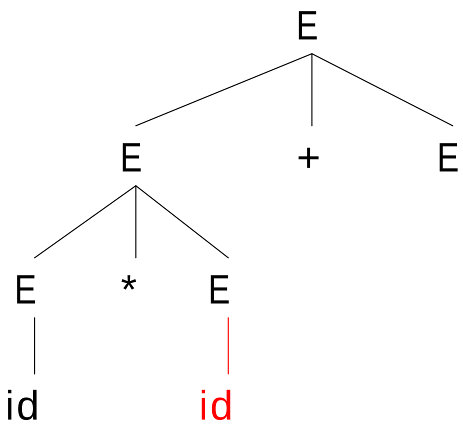
Derivation in Detail (4)



$$\begin{aligned} & E \\ \rightarrow\ & E+E \\ \rightarrow\ & E * E+E \\ \rightarrow\ & id * E + E \end{aligned}$$

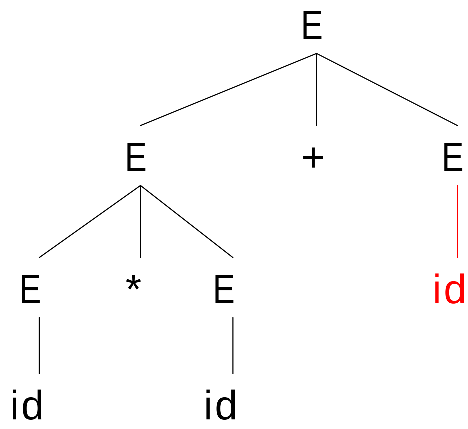
Derivation in Detail (5)

$$
\begin{aligned}
& E \\
\rightarrow\ & E+E \\
\rightarrow\ & E * E+E \\
\rightarrow\ & id * E + E \\
\rightarrow\ & id * id + E
\end{aligned}
$$



Derivation in Detail (6)

$$
\begin{aligned}
& E \\
\rightarrow\ & E+E \\
\rightarrow\ & E * E+E \\
\rightarrow\ & id * E + E \\
\rightarrow\ & id * id + E \\
\rightarrow\ & id * id + id
\end{aligned}
$$



Notes on Derivations

- A parse tree has
  - Terminals at the leaves
  - Non-terminals at the interior nodes
- An in-order traversal of the leaves is the original input
- The parse tree shows the association of operations, the input string does not

Left-most and Right-most Derivations

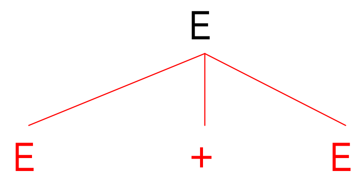
- What was shown before was a *left-most derivation*
  - At each step, replace the left-most non-terminal
- There is an equivalent notion of a *right-most derivation*
  - Shown on the right

$$
\begin{aligned}
& E \\
\rightarrow\ & E+E \\
\rightarrow\ & E+id \\
\rightarrow\ & E * E + id \\
\rightarrow\ & E * id + id \\
\rightarrow\ & id * id + id
\end{aligned}
$$

Right-most Derivation in Detail (1)

E

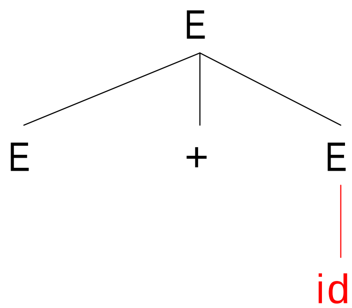
Right-most Derivation in Detail (2)



E

→ E+E

Right-most Derivation in Detail (3)

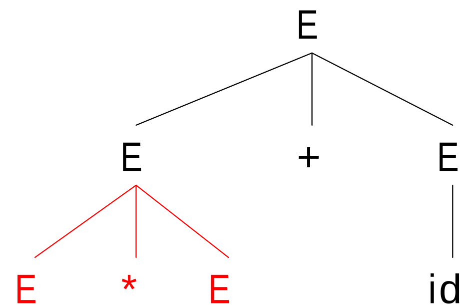


E

→ E+E

→ E+id

Right-most Derivation in Detail (4)



E

→ E+E

→ E+id

→ $E * E + id$

Right-most Derivation in Detail (5)

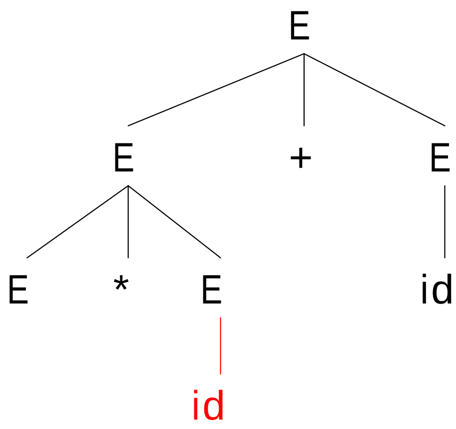
E

$\rightarrow$ E+E

$\rightarrow$ E+id

$\rightarrow$ $E * E$ + id

$\rightarrow$ $E * id$ + id



Right-most Derivation in Detail (6)

E

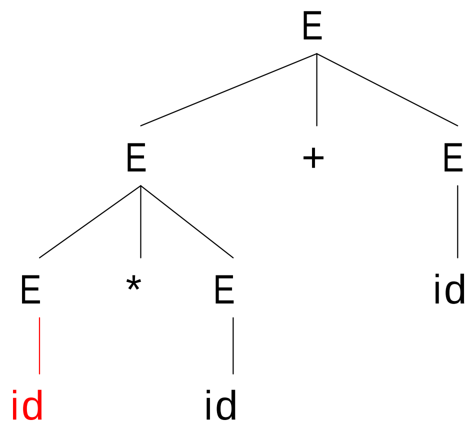
$\rightarrow$ E+E

$\rightarrow$ E+id

$\rightarrow$ $E * E$ + id

$\rightarrow$ $E * id$ + id

$\rightarrow$ $id * id$ + id



Derivations and Parse Trees

- Note that right-most and left-most derivations have the same parse tree

- The difference *is just in the order* in which branches are added

Summary of Derivations

- We are not just interested in whether

  $s \in L(G)$

  - We need a parse tree for *s*

- A derivation defines a parse tree
  - But one parse tree may have many derivations

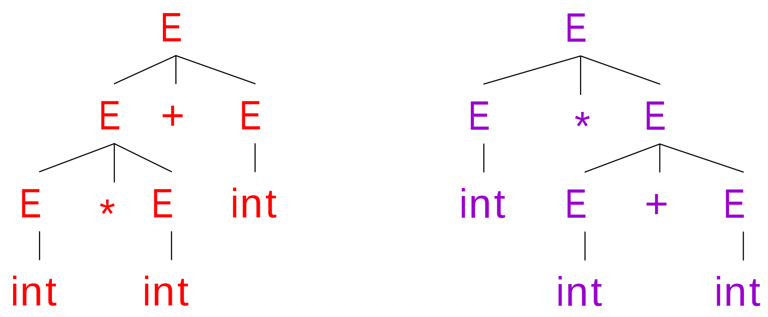
- Left-most and right-most derivations are important in parser implementation

Ambiguity

- Grammar:

$$E \rightarrow E + E \mid E * E \mid (E) \mid int$$

- The string int * int + int has two parse trees



Ambiguity (Cont.)

- A grammar is *ambiguous* if it has more than one parse tree for some string
  - Equivalently, there is more than one right-most or left-most derivation for some string
- Ambiguity is bad
  - Leaves meaning of some programs ill-defined
- Ambiguity is common in programming languages
  - Arithmetic expressions
  - IF-THEN-ELSE

Dealing with Ambiguity

- There are several ways to handle ambiguity
- Most direct method is to rewrite grammar unambiguously

$$E \rightarrow T + E \mid T$$
$$T \rightarrow int * T \mid int \mid (E)$$

- This grammar enforces precedence of * over +

Ambiguity: The Dangling Else

- Consider the following grammar

$$S \rightarrow \text{if } C \text{ then } S$$
$$\mid \text{ if } C \text{ then } S \text{ else } S$$
$$\mid \text{ OTHER}$$

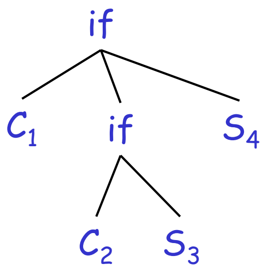
- This grammar is also ambiguous

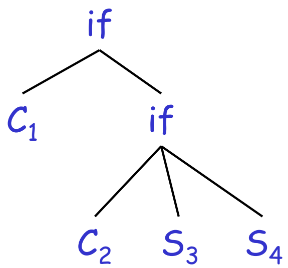
The Dangling Else: Example

- The expression

  if C_1 then if C_2 then S_3 else S_4

  has two parse trees





- Typically we want the second form

The Dangling Else: A Fix

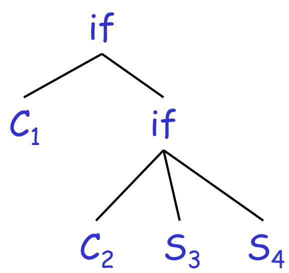
- else should match the closest unmatched then
- We can describe this in the grammar

```
S → MIF                          /* all then are matched */
  | UIF                          /* some then are unmatched */
MIF → if C then MIF else MIF
    | OTHER
UIF → if C then S
    | if C then MIF else UIF
```

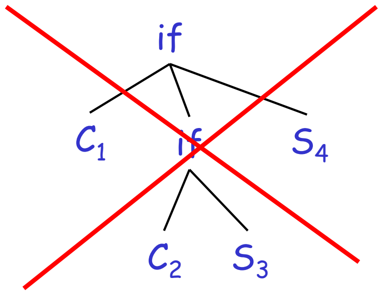
- Describes the same set of strings

The Dangling Else: Example Revisited

- The expression if C_1 then if C_2 then S_3 else S_4



- A valid parse tree (for a UIF)



- Not valid because the then expression is not a MIF

Ambiguity

- No general techniques for handling ambiguity
- Impossible to convert automatically an ambiguous grammar to an unambiguous one
- Used with care, ambiguity can simplify the grammar
  - Sometimes allows more natural definitions
  - We need disambiguation mechanisms

Precedence and Associativity Declarations

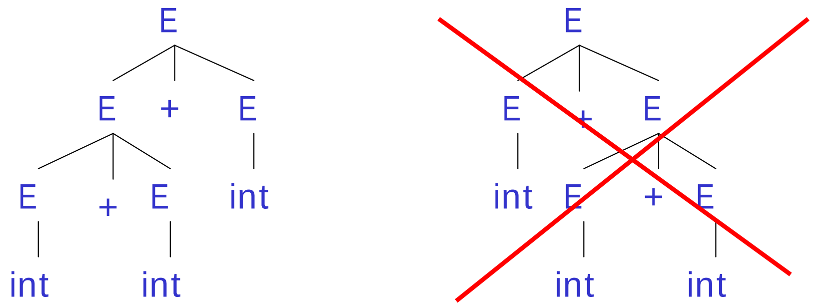
- Instead of rewriting the grammar
  - Use the more natural (ambiguous) grammar
  - Along with disambiguating declarations

- Most tools allow <u>precedence and associativity declarations</u> to disambiguate grammars

- Examples …

Associativity Declarations

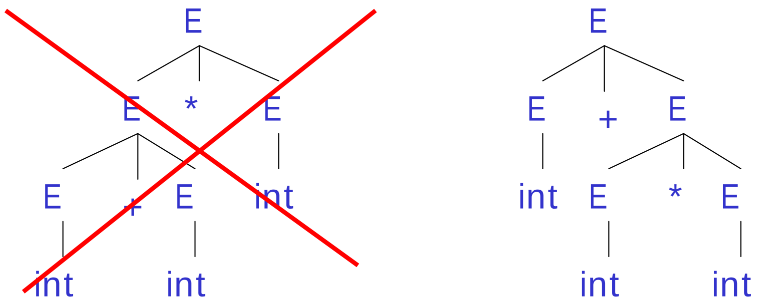
- Consider the grammar E → E + E | int
- Ambiguous: two parse trees of int + int + int



- Left associativity declaration: %left +

Precedence Declarations

- Consider the grammar E → E + E | E * E | int
  And the string int + int * int



- Precedence declarations: %left +
  %left *

Error Handling

- Purpose of the compiler is
  - To detect non-valid programs
  - To translate the valid ones
- Many kinds of possible errors (e.g. in C)

Error kind	Example	Detected by …
Lexical	… $ …	Lexer
Syntax	… x *% …	Parser
Semantic	… int x; y = x(3); …	Type checker
Correctness	your favorite program	Tester/User

Syntax Error Handling

- Error handler should
  - Report errors accurately and clearly
  - Recover from an error quickly
  - Not slow down compilation of valid code
- Good error handling is not easy to achieve

Approaches to Syntax Error Recovery

- From simple to complex
  - Panic mode
  - Error productions
  - Automatic local or global correction
- Not all are supported by all parser generators

Error Recovery: Panic Mode

- Simplest, most popular method
- When an error is detected:
  - Discard tokens until one with a clear role is found
  - Continue from there
- Such tokens are called synchronizing tokens
  - Typically the statement or expression terminators

Syntax Error Recovery: Panic Mode (Cont.)

- Consider the erroneous expression

  (1 + + 2) + 3
- Panic-mode recovery:
  - Skip ahead to next integer and then continue
- (ML)-Yacc: use the special terminal error to describe how much input to skip

  $E \rightarrow$ int | E + E | (E) | error int | (error)

Syntax Error Recovery: Error Productions

- Idea: specify in the grammar known common mistakes
- Essentially promotes common errors to alternative syntax
- Example:
  - Write 5 x instead of 5 * x
  - Add the production $E \rightarrow \ldots \mid E\ E$
- Disadvantage
  - Complicates the grammar

Syntax Error Recovery: Past and Present

- Past
  - Slow recompilation cycle (even once a day)
  - Find as many errors in one cycle as possible
  - Researchers could not let go of the topic
- Present
  - Quick recompilation cycle
  - Users tend to correct one error/cycle
  - Complex error recovery is needed less
  - Panic-mode seems enough