G52MAL
Machines and Their Languages
Lecture 16

Recursive-Descent Parsing:
Elimination of Left Recursion

Henrik Nilsson

University of Nottingham, UK

This Lecture

- The problem of recursive-descent parsing and left recursive grammars.
- Elimination of left recursion.

Left Recursion

Consider: $A \rightarrow Aa \mid \epsilon$

Parsing function:

```
parseA :: [Token] -> Maybe [Token]
parseA ts =
    case parseA ts of
        Just ('a' : ts') -> Just ts'
        _                -> Just ts
```

Any problem?

Would ***loop***! Recursive-descent parsers ***cannot*** (easily) deal with ***left-recursive*** grammars.

Elimination of Left Recursion (1)

- A grammar is ***left-recursive*** if there is some non-terminal A such that $A \stackrel{+}{\Rightarrow} A\alpha$.
- Certain parsing methods ***cannot*** handle left-recursive grammars.
- If we want to use such a parsing method for parsing a language $L = L(G)$ given by a left-recursive grammar G, then the grammar first has to be transformed into an ***equivalent*** grammar G' that is ***not*** left-recursive.

Recap: Equivalence of Grammars

Two grammars G_1 and G_2 are ***equivalent*** iff $L(G_1) = L(G_2)$.

Example:

$$G_1: \begin{array}{rcl} S & \rightarrow & \epsilon \mid A \\ A & \rightarrow & a \mid aA \end{array} \qquad G_2: \begin{array}{rcl} S & \rightarrow & A \\ A & \rightarrow & \epsilon \mid Aa \end{array}$$

$L(G_1) = \{a\}^* = L(G_2)$

(The equivalence of CFGs is in general ***undecidable***.)

Elimination of Left Recursion (2)

- We will first consider ***immediate*** left recursion; i.e., productions of the form
$$A \rightarrow A\alpha$$
We will further assume that α cannot derive ϵ.
- Key idea: $A \rightarrow \beta \mid A\alpha$ and $A \rightarrow \beta(\alpha)^*$ are equivalent.
- The latter can be expressed as:

$$\begin{array}{rcl} A & \rightarrow & \beta A' \\ A' & \rightarrow & \alpha A' \mid \epsilon \end{array}$$

Exercise

- The following grammar G_1 is immediately left-recursive:
$$A \rightarrow b \mid Aa$$
Draw the derivation tree for baa using G_1.
- The following is a non-left-recursive grammar G_1' equivalent to G_1:
$$\begin{array}{rcl} A & \rightarrow & bA' \\ A' & \rightarrow & aA' \mid \epsilon \end{array}$$
Draw the derivation tree for baa using G_1'.

Elimination of Left Recursion (3)

For each nonterminal A defined by some left-recursive production, group the productions for A

$$A \rightarrow A\alpha_1 \mid A\alpha_2 \mid \ldots \mid A\alpha_m \mid \beta_1 \mid \beta_2 \mid \ldots \mid \beta_n$$

such that no β_i begins with an A.

Then replace the A productions by

$$\begin{array}{rcl} A & \rightarrow & \beta_1 A' \mid \beta_2 A' \mid \ldots \mid \beta_n A' \\ A' & \rightarrow & \alpha_1 A' \mid \alpha_2 A' \mid \ldots \mid \alpha_m A' \mid \epsilon \end{array}$$

Assumption: no α_i derives ϵ.

Elimination of Left Recursion (4)

Consider the (immediately) left-recursive grammar:

$$
\begin{aligned}
S &\rightarrow A \mid B \\
A &\rightarrow ABc \mid AAdd \mid a \mid aa \\
B &\rightarrow Bee \mid b
\end{aligned}
$$

Terminal strings derivable from B include:

b, bee, $beeee$, $beeeeee$

Terminal strings derivable from A include:

a, aa, $aadd$, $aaadd$, $aaadddd$, abc, $aabc$, $abeec$, $aabeec$, $abeecbeec$, $aabeeeecddbeec$

Elimination of Left Recursion (5)

Let us do a leftmost derivation of $aabeeeecddbeec$:

$$
\begin{aligned}
S &\Rightarrow A \\
&\Rightarrow ABc \\
&\Rightarrow AAddBc \\
&\Rightarrow aAddBc \\
&\Rightarrow aABcddBc \\
&\Rightarrow aaBcddBc \\
&\Rightarrow aaBeecddBc \\
&\Rightarrow aaBeeeecddBc \\
&\Rightarrow aabeeeecddBc \\
&\Rightarrow aabeeeecddBeec \\
&\Rightarrow aabeeeecddbeec
\end{aligned}
$$

Elimination of Left Recursion (6)

Here is the grammar again:

$$
\begin{aligned}
S &\rightarrow A \mid B \\
A &\rightarrow ABc \mid AAdd \mid a \mid aa \\
B &\rightarrow Bee \mid b
\end{aligned}
$$

An equivalent right-recursive grammar:

$$
\begin{aligned}
S &\rightarrow A \mid B \\
A &\rightarrow aA' \mid aaA' \\
A' &\rightarrow BcA' \mid AddA' \mid \epsilon
\end{aligned}
\qquad
\begin{aligned}
B &\rightarrow bB' \\
B' &\rightarrow eeB' \mid \epsilon
\end{aligned}
$$

Elimination of Left Recursion (7)

Derivation of $aabeeeecddbeec$ in the new grammar:

$$
\begin{aligned}
S &\Rightarrow A \Rightarrow aA' \Rightarrow aAddA' \Rightarrow aaA'ddA' \\
&\Rightarrow aaBcA'ddA' \\
&\Rightarrow aabB'cA'ddA' \\
&\Rightarrow aabeeB'cA'ddA' \\
&\Rightarrow aabeeeeB'cA'ddA' \\
&\Rightarrow aabeeeecA'ddA' \\
&\Rightarrow aabeeeecddA' \\
&\Rightarrow aabeeeecddBcA' \\
&\Rightarrow aabeeeecddbB'cA' \\
&\Rightarrow aabeeeecddbeeB'cA' \\
&\Rightarrow aabeeeecddbeecA' \Rightarrow aabeeeecddbeec
\end{aligned}
$$

General Left Recursion (1)

To eliminate ***general*** left recursion:

- first transform the grammar into an ***immediately*** left-recursive grammar through systematic substitution
- then proceed as before.

Substitution

- An occurrence of a non-terminal in a right-hand side may be replaced by the right-hand sides of the productions for that non-terminal if done in all possible ways.
- All productions for non-terminals that, as a result, cannot be reached from the start symbol, can be eliminated.

(See e.g. Aho, Sethi, and Ullman (1986) for details.)

General Left Recursion (2)

For example, the generally left-recursive grammar

$$\begin{aligned} A &\rightarrow Ba \\ B &\rightarrow Ab \mid Ac \mid \epsilon \end{aligned}$$

is first transformed into the immediately left-recursive grammar

$$\begin{aligned} A &\rightarrow Aba \\ A &\rightarrow Aca \\ A &\rightarrow a \end{aligned}$$

Exercise

Transform the following generally left-recursive grammar

$$\begin{aligned} A &\rightarrow BaB \\ B &\rightarrow Cb \mid \epsilon \\ C &\rightarrow Ab \mid Ac \end{aligned}$$

into an equivalent immediately left-recursive grammar.

Then eliminate the left recursion.

Solution (1)

First:

$$\begin{aligned} A &\rightarrow BaB \\ B &\rightarrow Abb \mid Acb \mid \epsilon \end{aligned}$$

Then:

$$\begin{aligned} A &\rightarrow AbbaB \mid AcbaB \mid aB \\ B &\rightarrow Abb \mid Acb \mid \epsilon \end{aligned}$$

Or, eliminating B completely:

$$\begin{aligned} A &\rightarrow AbbaAbb \mid AcbaAbb \mid aAbb \\ &\mid\quad AbbaAcb \mid AcbaAcb \mid aAcb \\ &\mid\quad Abba \mid Acba \mid a \end{aligned}$$

Solution (2)

Let's go with the smaller version (fewer productions):

$$\begin{aligned} A &\rightarrow AbbaB \mid AcbaB \mid aB \\ B &\rightarrow Abb \mid Acb \mid \epsilon \end{aligned}$$

Only productions for A are immediately left-recursive. Applying the elimination transformation:

$$\begin{aligned} A &\rightarrow aBA' \\ A' &\rightarrow bbaBA' \mid cbaBA' \mid \epsilon \\ B &\rightarrow Abb \mid Acb \mid \epsilon \end{aligned}$$

Note: A appears to the left in B-productions; yet grammar no longer left-recursive. Why?