Where Syntax Meets Semantics

Three “Equivalent” Grammars

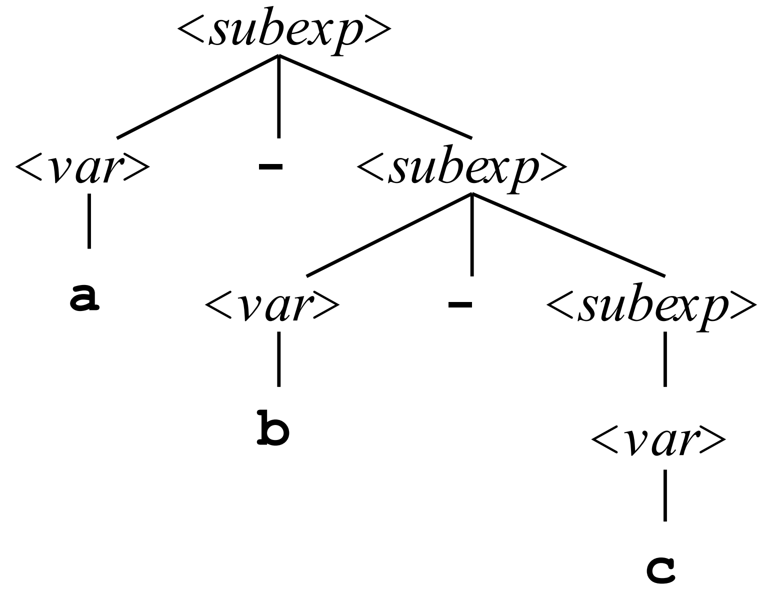
G1: *<subexp>* `::=` **`a`** | **`b`** | **`c`** | *<subexp>* **`-`** *<subexp>*

G2: *<subexp>* `::=` *<var>* **`-`** *<subexp>* | *<var>*
<var> `::=` **`a`** | **`b`** | **`c`**

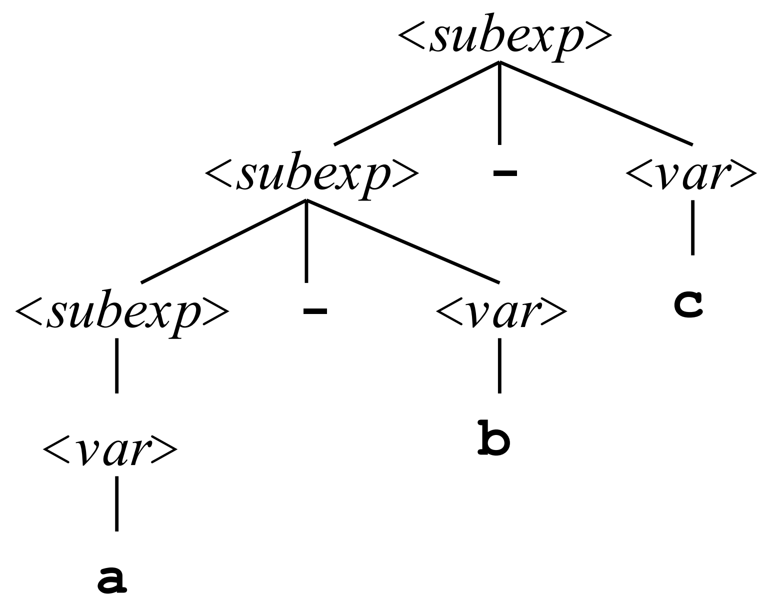
G3: *<subexp>* `::=` *<subexp>* **`-`** *<var>* | *<var>*
<var> `::=` **`a`** | **`b`** | **`c`**

These grammars all define the same language: the language of strings that contain one or more **`a`**s, **`b`**s or **`c`**s separated by minus signs. But...

G2 parse tree:



G3 parse tree:



Why Parse Trees Matter

- We want the structure of the parse tree to correspond to the semantics of the string it generates
- This makes grammar design much harder: we're interested in the structure of each parse tree, not just in the generated string
- Parse trees are where syntax meets semantics

Outline

- Operators
- Precedence
- Associativity
- Other ambiguities: dangling else
- Cluttered grammars
- Parse trees and EBNF
- Abstract syntax trees

Operators

- Special syntax for frequently-used simple operations like addition, subtraction, multiplication and division
- The word *operator* refers both to the token used to specify the operation (like **+** and *****) and to the operation itself
- Usually predefined, but not always
- Usually a single token, but not always

Operator Terminology

- *Operands* are the inputs to an operator, like **`1`** and **`2`** in the expression **`1+2`**
- *Unary* operators take one operand: **`-1`**
- *Binary* operators take two: **`1+2`**
- *Ternary* operators take three: **`a?b:c`**

More Operator Terminology

- In most programming languages, binary operators use an *infix* notation: **`a + b`**
- Sometimes you see *prefix* notation: **`+ a b`**
- Sometimes *postfix* notation: **`a b +`**
- Unary operators, similarly:
  - (Can't be infix, of course)
  - Can be prefix, as in **`-1`**
  - Can be postfix, as in **`a++`**

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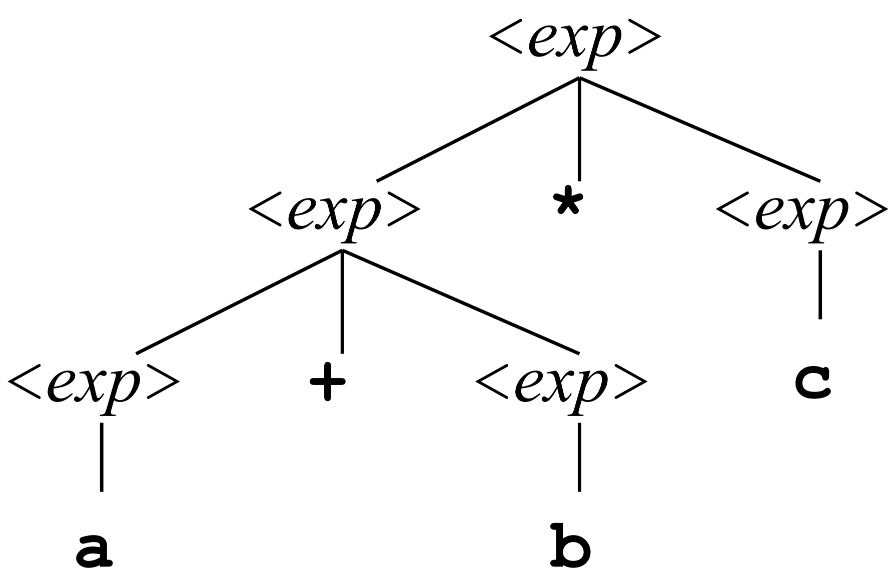
Working Grammar

G4**:** <*exp*> **::=** <*exp*> **+** <*exp*>
| <*exp*> ***** <*exp*>
| **(**<*exp*>**)**
| **a** | **b** | **c**

This generates a language of arithmetic expressions using parentheses, the operators **+** and *****, and the variables **a**, **b** and **c**

Issue #1: Precedence



Our grammar generates this tree for **`a+b*c`**. In this tree, the addition is performed before the multiplication, which is not the usual convention for operator *precedence*.

Operator Precedence

- Applies when the order of evaluation is not completely decided by parentheses
- Each operator has a *precedence level,* and those with higher precedence are performed before those with lower precedence, as if parenthesized
- Most languages put **`*`** at a higher precedence level than **`+`**, so that

  `a+b*c` = **`a+(b*c)`**

Precedence Examples

- C (15 levels of precedence—too many?)

```
a = b < c ? * p + b * c : 1 << d ()
```

- Pascal (5 levels—not enough?)

```
a <= 0 or 100 <= a
```

- Smalltalk (1 level for all binary operators)

```
a + b * c
```

Precedence In The Grammar

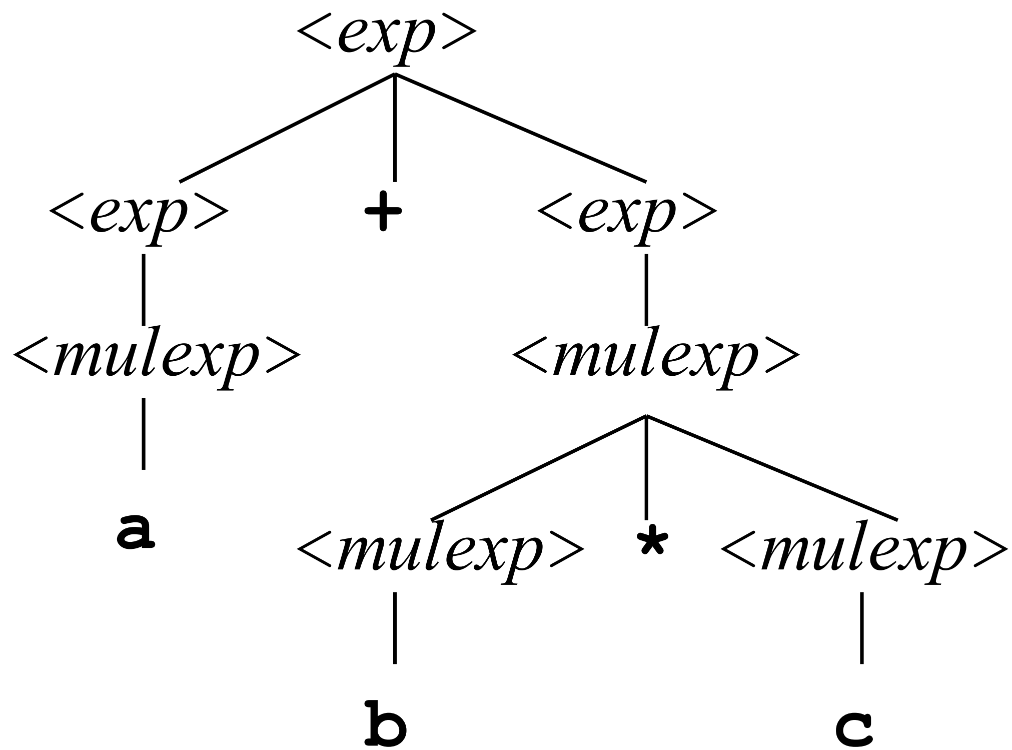
G4**:** *<exp>* **::=** *<exp>* **+** *<exp>*
| *<exp>* ***** *<exp>*
| **(***<exp>***)**
| **a** | **b** | **c**

To fix the precedence problem, we modify the grammar so that it is forced to put ***** below **+** in the parse tree.

G5**:** *<exp>* **::=** *<exp>* **+** *<exp>* | *<mulexp>*
<mulexp> **::=** *<mulexp>* ***** *<mulexp>*
| **(***<exp>***)**
| **a** | **b** | **c**

Correct Precedence

G5 parse tree:



Our new grammar generates this tree for **`a+b*c`**. It generates the same language as before, but no longer generates parse trees with incorrect precedence.

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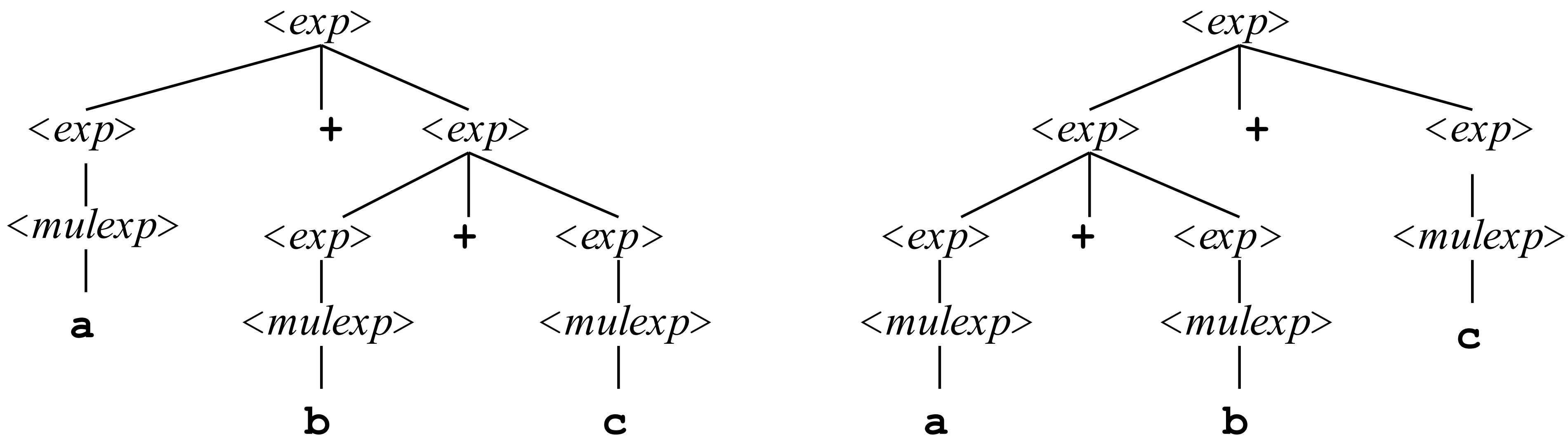
Issue #2: Associativity



Our grammar G5 generates both these trees for **`a+b+c`**. The first one is not the usual convention for operator *associativity*.

Operator Associativity

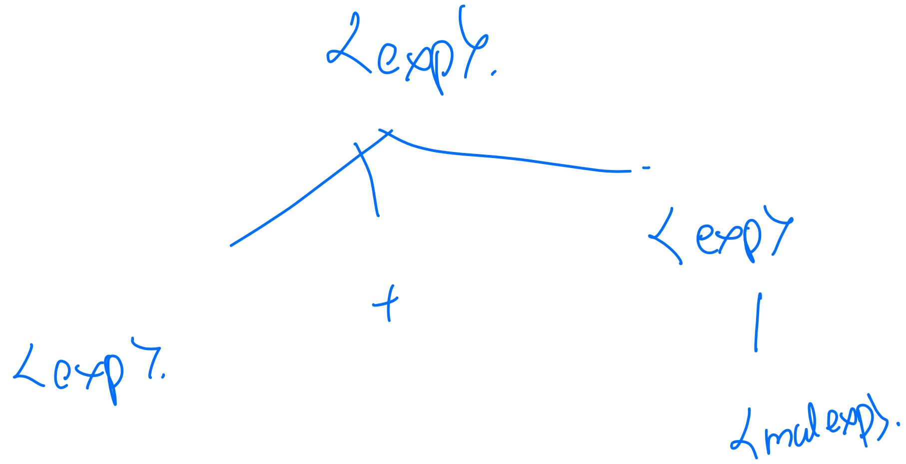
- Applies when the order of evaluation is not decided by parentheses or by precedence
- *Left-associative* operators group left to right: **`a+b+c+d = ((a+b)+c)+d`**
- *Right-associative* operators group right to left: **`a+b+c+d = a+(b+(c+d))`**
- Most operators in most languages are left-associative, but there are exceptions

(a + b) + c)

<exp> ::= <exp> + <exp> | <mulexp>

<mulexp> ::= <mulexp> * <rootexp> | <mulexp> * <mulexp>

<rootexp> ::= <rootexp> | a | b | c



Associativity Examples

- C

  `a<<b<<c` — most operators are left-associative
  `a=b=0`— right-associative (assignment)

- ML

  `3-2-1`— most operators are left-associative
  `1::2::nil` — right-associative (list builder)

- Fortran

  `a/b*c`— most operators are left-associative
  `a**b**c` — right-associative (exponentiation)

*. Associativity → left force . * Precedence → force further away .

Associativity In The Grammar

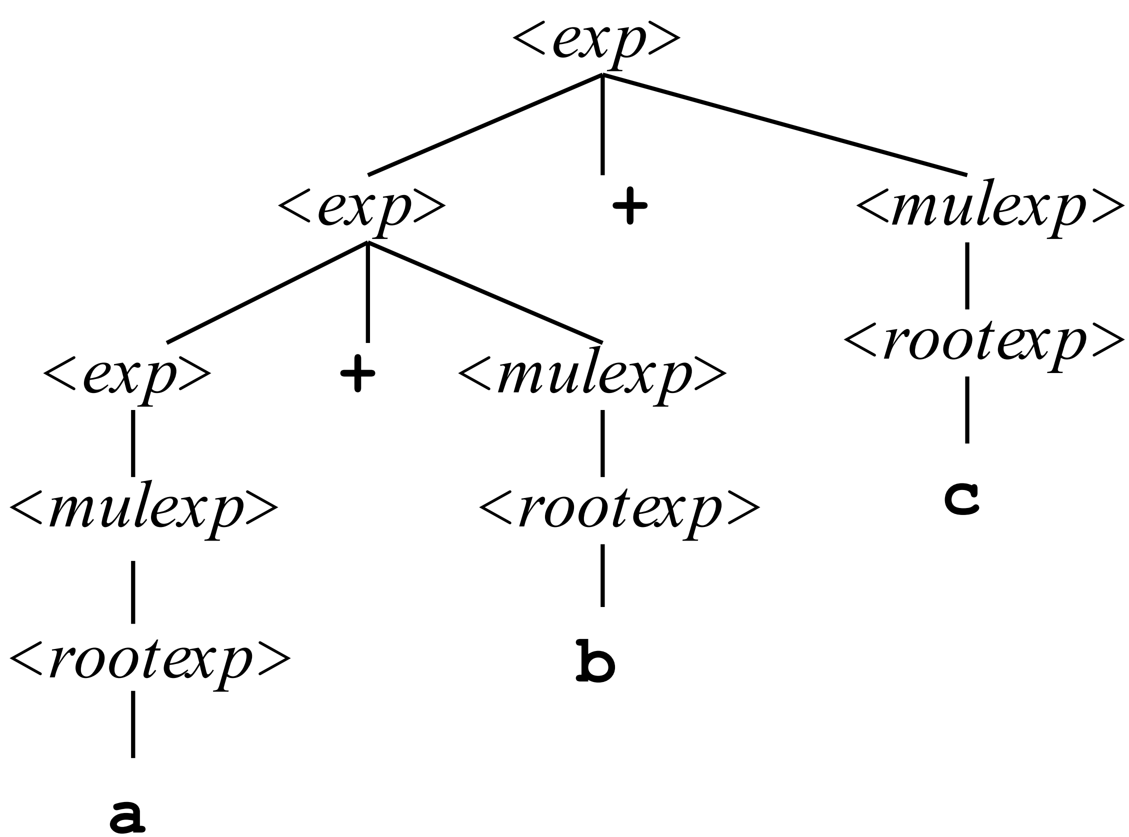
G5: <*exp*> ::= <*exp*> **+** <*exp*> | <*mulexp*>
<*mulexp*> ::= <*mulexp*> ***** <*mulexp*>
| **(**<*exp*>**)**
| **a** | **b** | **c**

To fix the associativity problem, we modify the grammar to make trees of **+**s grow down to the left (and likewise for *****s)

to get left association

G6: <*exp*> ::= <*exp*> **+** <*mulexp*> | <*mulexp*>
<*mulexp*> ::= <*mulexp*> ***** <*rootexp*> | <*rootexp*>
<*rootexp*> ::= **(**<*exp*>**)**
| **a** | **b** | **c**

Correct Associativity



Our new grammar generates this tree for **`a+b+c`**. It generates the same language as before, but no longer generates trees with incorrect associativity.

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Issue #3: Ambiguity

- G4 was *ambiguous*: it generated more than one parse tree for the same string
- Fixing the associativity and precedence problems eliminated all the ambiguity
- This is usually a good thing: the parse tree corresponds to the meaning of the program, and we don’t want ambiguity about that
- Not all ambiguity stems from confusion about precedence and associativity...

Dangling Else In Grammars

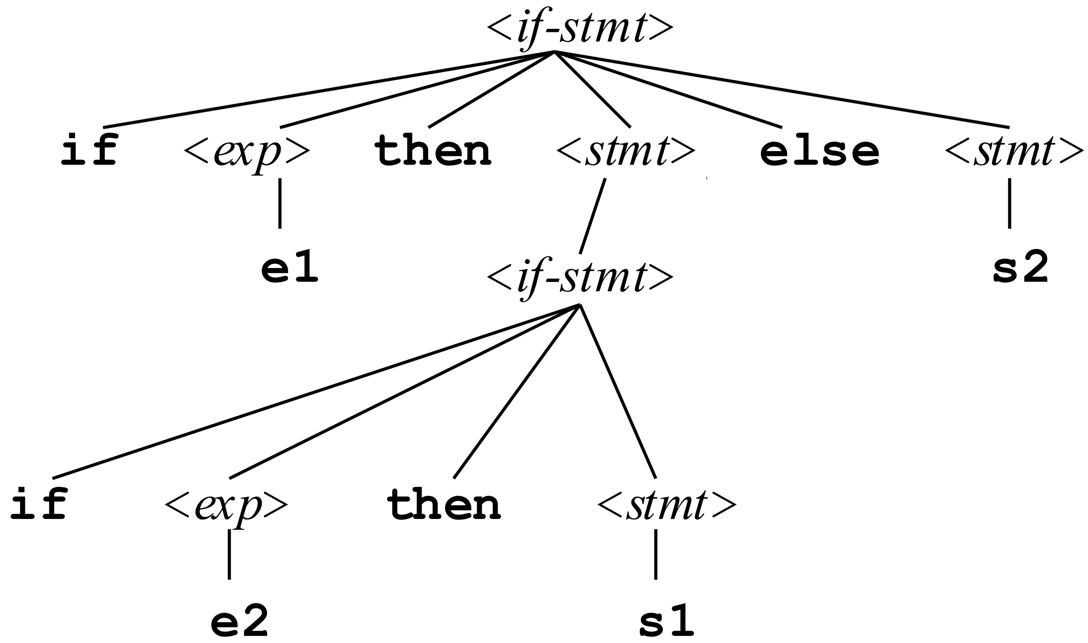
<stmt> **::=** *<if-stmt>* | **s1** | **s2**
<if-stmt> **::=** **if** *<expr>* **then** *<stmt>* **else** *<stmt>*
          | **if** *<expr>* **then** *<stmt>*
<expr> **::=** **e1** | **e2**

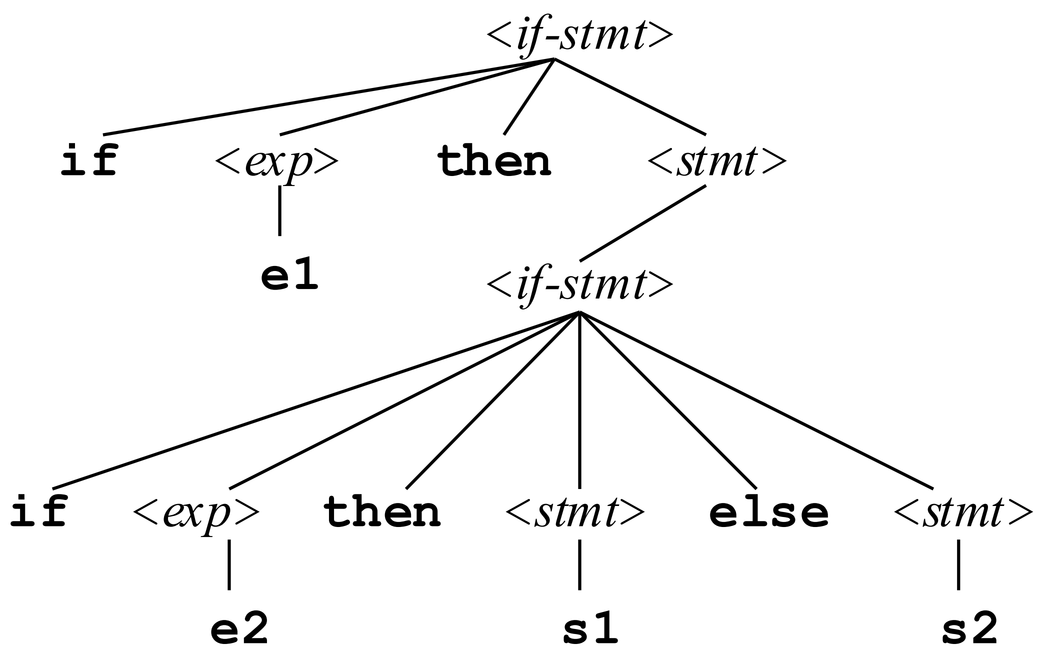
This grammar has a classic "dangling-else ambiguity." The statement we want derive is

always go with nearest ~~else~~ if.

```
if e1 then if e2 then s1 else s2
```

and the next slide shows two different parse trees for it...





Most languages that have this problem choose this parse tree: **`else`** goes with nearest unmatched **`then`**

Eliminating The Ambiguity

<stmt> **::=** *<if-stmt>* | **s1** | **s2**
<if-stmt> **::=** **if** *<expr>* **then** *<stmt>* **else** *<stmt>*
| **if** *<expr>* **then** *<stmt>*
<expr> **::=** **e1** | **e2**

We want to insist that if this expands into an **if**, that **if** must already have its own **else**. First, we make a new non-terminal *<full-stmt>* that generates everything *<stmt>* generates, except that it can not generate **if** statements with no **else**:

<full-stmt> **::=** *<full-if>* | **s1** | **s2**
<full-if> **::=** **if** *<expr>* **then** *<full-stmt>* **else** *<full-stmt>*

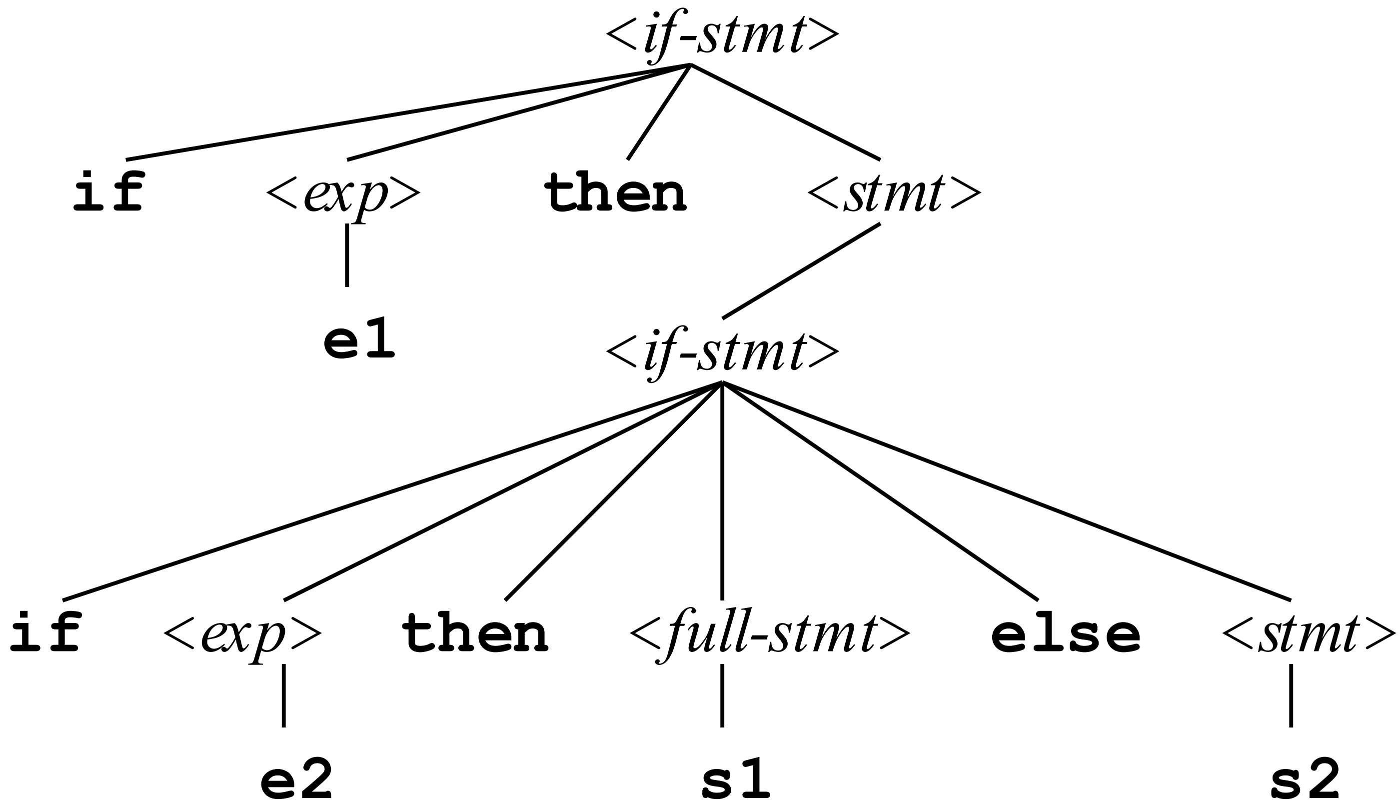
Eliminating The Ambiguity

<stmt> `::=` *<if-stmt>* `|` **`s1`** `|` **`s2`**
<if-stmt> `::=` **`if`** *<expr>* **`then`** *<full-stmt>* **`else`** *<stmt>*
  `|` **`if`** *<expr>* **`then`** *<stmt>*
<expr> `::=` **`e1`** `|` **`e2`**

Then we use the new non-terminal here.

The effect is that the new grammar can match an **`else`** part with an **`if`** part only if all the nearer **`if`** parts are already matched.

Correct Parse Tree



Dangling Else

- We fixed the grammar, but…
- The grammar trouble reflects a problem with the language, which we did not change
- A chain of if-then-else constructs can be very hard for people to read
- Especially true if some but not all of the else parts are present

Clearer Styles

```
int a=0;
if (0==0)
  if (0==1) a=1;
  else a=2;
```

Better: correct indentation

```
int a=0;
if (0==0) {
  if (0==1) a=1;
  else a=2;
}
```

Even better: use of a block reinforces the structure

Languages That Don't Dangle

- Some languages define if-then-else in a way that forces the programmer to be more clear
  - Algol does not allow the **`then`** part to be another **`if`** statement – though it can be a block containing an **`if`** statement
  - Ada requires each **`if`** statement to be terminated with an **`end if`**
  - Python requires nested **`if`** statement to be indented

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Clutter

- The new if-then-else grammar is harder for people to read than the old one
- It has a lot of clutter: more productions and more non-terminals
- Same with G4, G5 and G6: we eliminated the ambiguity but made the grammar harder for people to read
- This is not always the right trade-off

Reminder: Multiple Audiences

- In Chapter 2 we saw that grammars have multiple audiences:
  - Novices want to find out what legal programs look like
  - Experts—advanced users and language system implementers—want an exact, detailed definition
  - Tools—parser and scanner generators—want an exact, detailed definition in a particular, machine-readable form
- Tools often need ambiguity eliminated, while people often prefer a more readable grammar

Options

- Rewrite grammar to eliminate ambiguity
- Leave ambiguity but explain in accompanying text how things like associativity, precedence, and the dangling else should be parsed
- Do both in separate grammars

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EBNF and Parse Trees

- You know that {x} means "zero or more repetitions of x" in EBNF
- So <*exp*> ::= <*mulexp*> {`+` <*mulexp*>} should mean a <*mulexp*> followed by zero or more repetitions of "`+` <*mulexp*>"
- But what then is the associativity of that `+` operator? What kind of parse tree would be generated for `a+a+a`?

EBNF and Associativity

- One approach:
  - Use {} anywhere it helps
  - Add a paragraph of text dealing with ambiguities, associativity of operators, etc.
- Another approach:
  - Define a convention: for example, that the form <*exp*> ::= <*mulexp*> {+ <*mulexp*>} will be used only for left-associative operators
  - Use explicitly recursive rules for anything unconventional:

    <*expa*> ::= <*expb*> [= <*expa*>]

About Syntax Diagrams

- Similar problem: what parse tree is generated?
- As in EBNF applications, add a paragraph of text dealing with ambiguities, associativity, precedence, and so on

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Full-Size Grammars

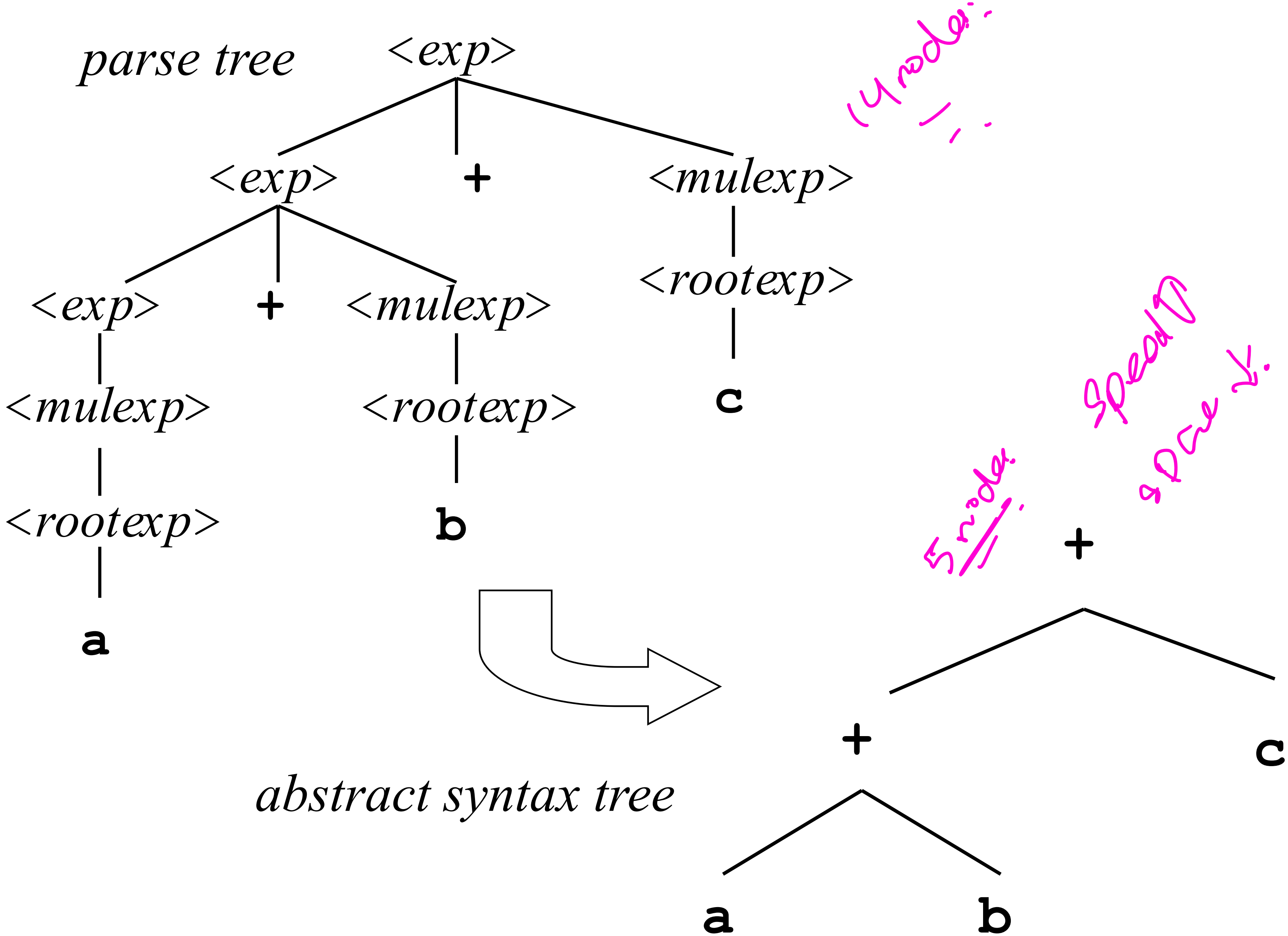
- In any realistically large language, there are many non-terminals
- Especially true when in the cluttered but unambiguous form needed by parsing tools
- Extra non-terminals guide construction of unique parse tree
- Once parse tree is found, such non-terminals are no longer of interest

to optimize → space

→ speed.

Abstract Syntax Tree

- Language systems usually store an abbreviated version of the parse tree called the *abstract syntax tree*
- Details are implementation-dependent
- Usually, there is a node for every operation, with a subtree for every operand


parse tree
<exp>
<exp>
+
<mulexp>
<exp>
+
<mulexp>
<rootexp>
<mulexp>
<rootexp>
c
<rootexp>
b
a
abstract syntax tree
+
+
c
a
b
14 nodes
5 nodes
speed
space

Parsing, Revisited

- When a language system parses a program, it goes through all the steps necessary to find the parse tree
- But it usually does not construct an explicit representation of the parse tree in memory
- Most systems construct an AST instead
- We will see ASTs again in Chapter 23

Conclusion

- Grammars define syntax, *and more*
- They define not just a set of legal programs, but a parse tree for each program
- The structure of a parse tree corresponds to the order in which different parts of the program are to be executed
- Thus, grammars contribute (a little) to the definition of semantics