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My Experience with the NLP Mooc

Overall, I really enjoyed working through the Natural Language Processing class on Coursera. I think it was just difficult enough to be both manageable and rewarding, as well as worth the amount of time it required. A few things that I enjoyed about the class were that I felt like I was learning the entire time, there were multiple avenues for learning the same content (videos, notes, programming assignments) that I was able to switch between, and it kept interested enough in the topic to want to go learn some of the more cutting edge approaches to NLP and apply what I learn. Some things I did not like about the class were that the applications felt a little bit abstract. I just signed up for a data science class on Coursera and the first assignment is to try to infer something relevant to your interests through Twitter data. That seems much more engaging than the NLP class assignments where we translate Parliament notes from Spanish to English. Also, despite being one of the longer classes, it felt short and "incomplete" in that it just gave a brief overview of some old methods used for specific things, while explicitly stating they are no longer in use, and only spending about two weeks on some more modern approaches. This class really should be billed as an introductory NLP class as it covers some of the basics, but really leaves you wanting more.

As far as learning objectives for this class go, I really had no expectations going into this class other than I would learn something related to language tagging. The first thing I certainly got out of it was all of the different things that NLP can be used for besides tagging, such as parsing, translation, grammar/spell checking, and simply having a language model to validate whether or not a sample of text is a part of the given language (I can envision this being used to validate programmatically generated text for something like a chatbot). Through reading the class notes, I also had to get comfortable with reading copious amounts of math notation, something I'm not used to. Having the notes was great though, because it meant not having to keep pausing a video to try to understand how a given algorithm worked. Most importantly, I think the programming assignments were the most valuable contribution to my learning through this course, as they required a thorough understanding of the concepts before they could be implemented. I know that for the machine translation assignment, I went into it having barely understood both the related videos and notes, but by the time I finished writing my first attempt at a translation model, it all made sense, and implementing the second model was a breeze.