Stop overusing regular expressions!

Franklin Chen
http://franklinchen.com/

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Famous quote

In 1997, Jamie Zawinski famously wrote:

> *Some people, when confronted with a problem, think, "I know, I'll use regular expressions." Now they have two problems.*

Purpose of this talk

Assumption: you already have experience using regexes
Goals:

- Change how you think about and use regexes
- Introduce you to advantages of using parser combinators
- Show a smooth way to transition from regexes to parsers
- Discuss *practical* tradeoffs
- Show only tested, running code:
  `https://github.com/franklinchen/talk-on-overusing-regular-expressions`

Non-goals:

- Will not discuss computer science theory
- Will not discuss parser generators such as `yacc` and `ANTLR`

Example code in which languages?

Considerations:

- This is a *polyglot* conference
- Time limitations

Decision: focus primarily on two representative languages.

- Ruby: dynamic typing
  - Perl, Python, JavaScript, Clojure, etc.
- Scala: static typing:
  - Java, C++, C#, F#, ML, Haskell, etc.

An infamous regex for email

The reason for my talk!

A big Perl regex for email address based on RFC 822 grammar:

```
/(?:(?:\r\n)?[ \t])*(?:(?:(?:[^()<>@,;:\\".\[\] \000-\031]+
)+|\Z|(?=[\["()<>@,;:\\".\[\]]))|"(?:[^\"\r\\]|\\.|(?:(?:\r
\r\n)?[ \t])*)(?:\.(?:(?:\r\n)?[ \t])*(?:[^()<>@,;:\\".\[\]
?:\r\n)?[ \t])+|\Z|(?=[\["()<>@,;:\\".\[\]]))|"(?:[^\"\r\\]
\t]))*"(?:(?:\r\n)?[ \t])*))*@(?:(?:\r\n)?[ \t])*(?:[^()<>@
31]+(?:(?:(?:\r\n)?[ \t])+|\Z|(?=[\["()<>@,;:\\".\[\]]))|\
](?:(?:\r\n)?[ \t])*)(?:\.(?:(?:\r\n)?[ \t])*(?:[^()<>@,;:\
(?:(?:(?:\r\n)?[ \t])+|\Z|(?=[\["()<>@,;:\\".\[\]]))|\[([^\
(?:\r\n)?[ \t])*))*|(?:[^()<>@,;:\\".\[\] \000-\031]+(?:(?
|(?=[\["()<>@,;:\\".\[\]]))|"(?:[^\"\r\\]|\\.|(?:(?:\r\n)?
?[ \t])*)*\<(?:(?:\r\n)?[ \t])*(?:@(?:[^()<>@,;:\\".\[\] \(
r\n)?[ \t])+|\Z|(?=[\["()<>@,;:\\".\[\]]))|\[([^\[\]\r\\]|\
 \t])*)(?:\.(?:(?:\r\n)?[ \t])*(?:[^()<>@,;:\\".\[\] \000-\
?[ \t])+|\Z|(?=[\["()<>@,;:\\".\[\]]))|\[([^\[\]\r\\]|\\.)*
)*))*(?:,@(?:(?:\r\n)?[ \t])*(?:[^()<>@,;:\\".\[\] \000-\03
 \t])+|\Z|(?=[\["()<>@,;:\\".\[\]]))|\[([^\[\]\r\\]|\\.)*\]
```

Personal story: my email address fiasco

To track and prevent spam: `FranklinChen+spam@cmu.edu`

- Some sites *wrongly* claimed invalid (because of +)
- Other sites did allow registration
  - I caught spam
  - Unsubscribing failed!
    - Some wrong claimed invalid (!?!)
    - Some silently failed to unsubscribe
    - Had to set up spam filter

Problem: different regexes for email?

Examples: which one is better?

```
/\A[^@]+@[^@]+\z/
```

vs.

```
/\A[a-zA-Z]+@([^@\.]+\.)+[^@\.]+\z/
```

Readability: first example

Use `x` for readability!

```
/\A          # match string begin
   [^@]+       # local part: 1+ chars of not @
   @           # @
   [^@]+       # domain: 1+ chars of not @
   \z/x     # match string end
```

matches

```
FranklinChen+spam
@
cmu.edu
```

Advice: please write regexes in this formatted style!

Readability: second example

```
/\A          # match string begin
   [a-zA-Z]+ # local part: 1+ of Roman alphabetic
   @         # @
   (         # 1+ of this group
     [^@\.]+   # 1+ of not (@ or dot)
     \.        # dot
   )+
   [^@\.]+   # 1+ of not (@ or dot)
 \z/x        # match string end
```

does *not* match

```
FranklinChen+spam
@
cmu.edu
```

Don't Do It Yourself: find libraries

Infamous regex revisited: was automatically generated into the Perl module `Mail::RFC822::Address` based on the RFC 822 spec.
If you use Perl and need to validate email addresses:

```
# Install the library
$ cpanm Mail::RFC822::Address
```

Other Perl regexes: `Regexp::Common`

Regex match success vs. failure

Parentheses for captured grouping:

```
if ($address =~ /\A          # match string begin
  ([a-zA-Z]+) # $1: local part: 1+ Roman alphabetic
  @           # @
  (           # $2: entire domain
    (?:         # 1+ of this non-capturing group
      [^@\.]+     # 1+ of not (@ or dot)
      \.          # dot
    )+
    ([^@\.]+) # $3: 1+ of not (@ or dot)
  )
   \z/x) {    # match string end
    print "local part: $1; domain: $2; top level: $3\n";
}
else {
    print "Regex match failed!\n";
}
```

Regexes do not report errors usefully

Success:

```
$ perl/extract_parts.pl 'prez@whitehouse.gov'
local part: prez; domain: whitehouse.gov; top level: gov
```

But failure:

```
$ perl/extract_parts.pl 'FranklinChen+spam@cmu.edu'
Regex match failed!
```

We have a dilemma:

- Bug in the regex?
- The data really doesn't match?

Better error reporting: how?

Would prefer something at least minimally like:

```
[1.13] failure: ‘@’ expected but ‘+’ found

FranklinChen+spam@cmu.edu
             ^
```

Features of *parser* libraries:

- Extraction of line, column information of error
- Automatically generated error explanation
- Hooks for customizing error explanation
- Hooks for error recovery

Moving from regexes to grammar parsers

- Only discuss parser combinators, not generators
- Use the second email regex as a starting point
- Use modularization

Modularized regex: Ruby

Ruby allows interpolation of regexes into other regexes:

```ruby
class EmailValidator::PrettyRegexMatcher
  LOCAL_PART = /[a-zA-Z]+/x
  DOMAIN_CHAR = /[^@\.]/x
  SUB_DOMAIN = /#{DOMAIN_CHAR}+/x
  AT = /@/x
  DOT = /\./x
  DOMAIN = /( #{SUB_DOMAIN} #{DOT} )+ #{SUB_DOMAIN}/x
  EMAIL = /\A #{LOCAL_PART} #{AT} #{DOMAIN} \z/x

  def match(s)
    s =~ EMAIL
  end
end
```

Modularized regex: Scala

```
object PrettyRegexMatcher {
  val user = """[a-zA-Z]+"""
  val domainChar = """[^@\.]"""
  val domainSegment = raw"""(?x) $domainChar+"""
  val at = """@"""
  val dot = """\."""
  val domain = raw"""(?x)
    ($domainSegment $dot)+ $domainSegment"""
  val email = raw"""(?x) \A $user $at $domain \z"""
  val emailRegex = email.r

  def matches(s: String): Boolean =
    (emailRegex findFirstMatchIn s).nonEmpty
end
```

- Triple quotes are for raw strings (no backslash interpretation)
- `raw` allows raw variable interpolation
- `.r` is a method converting `String` to `Regex`

Email parser: Ruby

Ruby does not have a standard parser combinator library. One that is popular is Parslet.

```
require 'parslet'

class EmailValidator::Parser < Parslet::Parser
  rule(:local_part) { match['a-zA-Z'].repeat(1) }
  rule(:domain_char) { match['^@\\.'] }
  rule(:at)          { str('@') }
  rule(:dot)     { str('.') }
  rule(:sub_domain) { domain_char.repeat(1) }
  rule(:domain) { (sub_domain >> dot).repeat(1) >>
                  sub_domain }
  rule(:email)  { local_part >> at >> domain }
end
```

Email parser: Scala

Scala comes with standard parser combinator library.

```
import scala.util.parsing.combinator.RegexParsers

object EmailParsers extends RegexParsers {
  override def skipWhitespace = false

  def localPart: Parser[String] = """[a-zA-Z]+""".r
  def domainChar = """[^@\.]""".r
  def at = "@"
  def dot = "."
  def subDomain = rep1(domainChar)
  def domain = rep1(subDomain ~ dot) ~ subDomain
  def email = localPart ~ at ~ domain
}
```

Inheriting from `RegexParsers` allows the implicit conversions from regexes into parsers.

Running and reporting errors: Ruby

```ruby
parser = EmailValidator::Parser.new
begin
  parser.email.parse(address)
  puts "Successfully parsed #{address}"
rescue Parslet::ParseFailed => error
  puts "Parse failed, and here's why:"
  puts error.cause.ascii_tree
end
```

```
$ validate_email 'FranklinChen+spam@cmu.edu'
Parse failed, and here's why:
Failed to match sequence (LOCAL_PART AT DOMAIN) at
  line 1 char 13.
`- Expected "@", but got "+" at line 1 char 13.
```

Running and reporting errors: Scala

```scala
def runParser(address: String) {
  import EmailParsers._

  // parseAll is method inherited from RegexParsers
  parseAll(email, address) match {
    case Success(_, _) =>
      println(s"Successfully parsed $address")
    case failure: NoSuccess =>
      println("Parse failed, and here's why:")
      println(failure)
  }
}
```

```
Parse failed, and here's why:
[1.13] failure: '@' expected but '+' found

FranklinChen+spam@cmu.edu
            ^
```

Infamous email regex revisited: conversion!

- `Mail::RFC822::Address` Perl regex: actually manually back-converted from a parser!
- Original module used Perl parser library `Parse::RecDescent`
- Regex author turned the grammar rules into a modularized regex
- Reason: speed

Perl modularized regex source code excerpt:

```
# ...
my $localpart = "$word(?:\\.$lwsp*$word)*";
my $sub_domain = "(?:$atom|$domain_literal)";
my $domain = "$sub_domain(?:\\.$lwsp*$sub_domain)*";
my $addr_spec = "$localpart\@$lwsp*$domain";
# ...
```

Why validate email address anyway?

- Software development: always look at the bigger picture
- This guy advocates simply sending a user an activation email
- Engineering tradeoff: the email sending and receiving programs need to handle the email address anyway

Email example wrapup

- It is possible to write a regex
- But first try to use someone else's tested regex
- If you do write your own regex, modularize it
- For error reporting, use a parser: convert from modularized regex
- Do you even need to solve the problem?

More complex parsing: toy JSON

```
{
    "distance" : 5.6,
    "address" : {
        "street" : "0 Nowhere Road",
        "neighbors" : ["X", "Y"],
        "garage" : null
    }
}
```

Trick question: could you use a regex to parse this?

Recursive regular expressions?

2007: Perl 5.10 introduced "recursive regular expressions" that can parse *context-free grammars* that have rules embedding a reference to themselves.

```
$regex = qr/
  \(                  # match an open paren (
    (                 #   followed by
      [^()]+          #     1+ non-paren characters
    |                 #   OR
      (??{$regex})    #     the regex itself
    )*                #   repeated 0+ times
  \)                  # followed by a close paren )
/x;
```

- *Not recommended*!
- But, gateway to context-free *grammars*

Toy JSON parser: Scala

```
object ToyJSONParsers extends JavaTokenParsers {
  def value: Parser[Any] = obj | arr |
    stringLiteral | floatingPointNumber |
    "null" | "true" | "false"
  def obj = "{" ~ repsep(member, ",") ~ "}"
  def arr = "[" ~ repsep(value, ",") ~ "]"
  def member = stringLiteral ~ ":" ~ value
}
```

- Inherit from `JavaTokenParsers`: reuse `stringLiteral` and `floatingPointNumber` parsers
- `~` is overloaded operator to mean *sequencing* of parsers
- `value` parser returns `Any` (equivalent to Java `Object`) because we have not yet refined the parser with our own domain model

Fancier toy JSON parser: domain modeling

Want to actually query the data upon parsing, to use.

```
{
    "distance" : 5.6,
    "address" : {
        "street" : "0 Nowhere Road",
        "neighbors" : ["X", "Y"],
        "garage" : null
    }
}
```

- We may want to traverse the JSON to `address` and then to the second neighbor, to check whether it is `"Y"`
- Pseudocode after storing in domain model:
  `data.address.neighbors[1] == "Y"`

Domain modeling as objects

```
{
    "distance" : 5.6,
    "address" : {
        "street" : "0 Nowhere Road",
        "neighbors" : ["X", "Y"],
        "garage" : null
    }
}
```

A natural domain model:

```
JObject(
  Map(distance -> JFloat(5.6),
      address -> JObject(
        Map(street -> JString(0 Nowhere Road),
            neighbors ->
              JArray(List(JString(X), JString(Y))),
            garage -> JNull))))
```

Domain modeling: Scala

```scala
// sealed means: can't extend outside the source file
sealed abstract class ToyJSON

case class JObject(map: Map[String, ToyJSON]) extends
  ToyJSON
case class JArray(list: List[ToyJSON]) extends ToyJSON
case class JString(string: String) extends ToyJSON
case class JFloat(float: Float) extends ToyJSON
case object JNull extends ToyJSON
case class JBoolean(boolean: Boolean) extends ToyJSON
```

Fancier toy JSON parser: Scala

```
def value: Parser[ToyJSON] = obj | arr |
  stringLiteralStripped ^^ { s => JString(s) } |
  floatingPointNumber ^^ { s => JFloat(s.toFloat) } |
  "null" ^^^ JNull | "true" ^^^ JBoolean(true) |
  "false" ^^^ JBoolean(false)
def stringLiteralStripped: Parser[String] =
  stringLiteral ^^ { s => s.substring(1, s.length-1) }
def obj: Parser[JObject] = "{" ~> (repsep(member, ",") ^^
     { aList => JObject(aList.toMap) }) <~ "}"
def arr: Parser[JArray] = "[" ~> (repsep(value, ",") ^^
     { aList => JArray(aList) }) <~ "]"
def member: Parser[(String, ToyJSON)] =
  ((stringLiteralStripped <~ ":") ~ value) ^^
   { case s ~ v => s -> v }
```

Running the fancy toy JSON parser

```
val j = """{
  "distance" : 5.6,
  "address" : {
    "street" : "0 Nowhere Road",
    "neighbors" : ["X", "Y"],
    "garage" : null
  }
}"""

parseAll(value, j) match {
  case Success(result, _) =>
    println(result)
  case failure: NoSuccess =>
    println("Parse failed, and here's why:")
    println(failure)
}
```

Output: what we proposed when data modeling!

JSON: reminder not to reinvent

- Use a standard JSON parsing library!
  - Scala has one.
  - All languages have a standard JSON parsing library.
  - Shop around: alternate libraries have different tradeoffs.
- Other standard formats: HTML, XML, CSV, etc.

JSON wrapup

- Parsing can be simple
- Domain modeling is trickier but still fit on one page
- *Use an existing JSON parsing library already!*

Final regex example

- These slides use the Python library Pygments for syntax highlighting of all code (highly recommended)
- Experienced bugs in the highlighting of regexes in Perl code
- Found out why, in source code for `class PerlLexer`

```
#TODO: give this to a perl guy who knows how to parse perl
tokens = {
 'balanced-regex': [
  (r'/(\\\\|\\[^\\]|[^\\/])*/[egimosx]*', String.Regex, '#p
  (r'!(\\\\|\\[^\\]|[^\\!])*![egimosx]*', String.Regex, '#p
  (r'\\(\\\\|[^\\])*\\[egimosx]*', String.Regex, '#pop'),
  (r'{(\\\\|\\[^\\]|[^\\}])*}[egimosx]*', String.Regex, '#p
  (r'<(\\\\|\\[^\\]|[^\\>])*>[egimosx]*', String.Regex, '#p
  (r'\[(\\\\|\\[^\\]|[^\\\]])*\][egimosx]*', String.Regex,
  (r'\((\\\\|\\[^\\]|[^\\\)])*\)[egimosx]*', String.Regex,
  (r'@(\\\\|\\[^\\]|[^\\\@])*@[egimosx]*', String.Regex, '#
  (r'%(\\\\|\\[^\\]|[^\\\%])*%[egimosx]*', String.Regex, '#
  (r'\$(\\\\|\\[^\\]|[^\\\$])*\$[egimosx]*', String.Regex,
```

Conclusion

- Regular expressions
  - No error reporting
  - Flat data
- More general grammars
  - Composable structure (using combinator parsers)
  - Hierarchical, nested data
- Avoid reinventing

All materials for this talk available at https://github.com/franklinchen/talk-on-overusing-regular-expressions.
The hyperlinks on the slide PDFs are clickable.