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Formal Explainability for Artificial Intelligence in Dynamic Environments

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Abstract

In dynamic environments, the goal of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is to build intelligent agents capable of addressing sequential decision-making settings. Reinforcement Learning (RL) is a branch of Machine Learning that addresses sequential decision-making by agents to perform tasks. In this context, there are two important challenges for humans to understand decisions made by agents: (1) the sequential decisions are connected, and (2) the agents may use opaque black-box models (e.g., neural networks) for each decision.

Despite the success of RL in sequential decision-making, the lack of transparency in understanding their decisions can make the agents hard to validate. To address the need for transparency, there are efforts to develop Explainable Artificial Intelligence (XAI) and its subfield, Explainable Reinforcement Learning. XAI is a set of methods designed to make AI models easier to comprehend. Despite the importance of Explainable Reinforcement Learning in developing trustworthy intelligent agents, there are gaps in current research to make sequential decision-making explainable.

This project proposes to explain sequential decision-making using formal reasoning. To achieve this goal, the proposal focuses on (1) Formal Explainability for Finite Automata, to address sequential actions in deterministic environments, and (2) Formal Explainability for Reinforcement Learning, where the agent's behaviour is non-interpretable.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The deplyoyment of Artificial Intelligence (AI) algorithms has necessitated the need for eXplainability AI (XAI) methods in order to ensure transparency, trust, and accountability. While much of the field has focused on heuristic explanations for opaque models, there is an interest in formal approaches that provide rigorous guarantees about the explanations generated [1, 2].

A fundamental challenge in dynamic environments is explaining sequential decision-making, To address this, we model these processes using Automata, which provide a symbolic and tractable representation of sequential decision functions. This approach allows us to generate formal explanations, why a specific sequence of actions leads to a particular outcome. Automata are widely used in software verification [3], design of communication protocols [4],and sintax parsing in compiler [5]. When a computational model, such as a Finite Automaton (FA) or a Pushdown Automaton (PDA), accepts or rejects an input string, the reasoning behind that decision can be non-trivial. Understanding why a specific input was accepted or rejected is crucial for debugging, and refinement purposes.

This research project investigates the formalization of explanations for sequential decision-making. Having addressed an approach to deliver formal explanations for Finite Automata (FA) in the first stage of this research, and submitting it to a ICALP 2026. We now move to address explanations for Context-Free Languages (CFG) using Pushdown Automata (PDA).

1.1 Refined scope - problem statement

While standard XAI focuses on feature attribution in classifiers, the "features" in formal languages are sequential and structural. Since the confirmation report, the research scope has been refined to address three primary gaps:

- **Research Problem 1 (Completed): Explaining Finite Automata.** Finite Automata are often assumed to be interpretable. However, large FA are cognitively inaccessible to humans. We have developed a framework to compute formal explanations for the acceptance and rejection of inputs in FA, providing a rigorous foundation for automaton-based explainability.

- **Research Problem 2: Explaining Pushdown Automata (PDA).** Context-free languages, recognized by PDAs, introduce a stack-based memory that allows to represent makes explanations more complex. A single character's "badness" may depend on a token seen much earlier in the stream. The second problem addresses the generation of Minimal Contrastive Explanations (CXPs) the minimal sets of modifications required to turn a rejected word into an accepted one.

  There is a lack of quantitative metrics that assign a "degree of responsibility" to specific indices in a rejected string. The third problem focuses on the development of the Features Attribution Score (RAS), using constrained optimization (Non-Negative Least Squares) to provide a probabilistic ranking of which tokens most significantly contribute to a structural rejection.

- **Research Problem 3: Explaining Markov Decision Processes.** How can the Feature Attribution Score be extended to explain failure states in Reinforcement Learning policies modeled as MDPs? This problem explores the adaptation of RAS to sequential decision-making, where actions influence future states and rewards.

1.2 Contributions to knowledge - achieved and projected

Chapter 2

Research Literature

Chapter 3

Progress

Definition environment.

The Grammar $\mathcal{A}$ PCFG is defined as a tuple $G = (V, \Sigma, R, S, P)$, where:

- V is a finite set of non-terminal symbols.

- Σ is a finite set of terminal symbols (the alphabet).

- R is a finite set of production rules.

- $S \in V$ is the start symbol.

- $P : R \rightarrow [0, 1]$ is a probability function such that for each $A \in V$, $\sum_{A \rightarrow \alpha \in R} P(A \rightarrow \alpha) = 1$.

The Rejected WordLet $w = \sigma_1 \sigma_2 ... \sigma_n$ be a string in Σ^*. We say w is rejected if $w \notin L(G)$, where $L(G)$ is the language generated by the grammar.

Definition: Contrastive Set. For a rejected word w of length n, a set of indices $I \subseteq \{1, \ldots, n\}$ is a Contrastive Explanation if:

- Feasibility: There exists a word $w' \in L(G)$ such that w and w' differ only at indices $i \in I$. Formally, $\forall j \notin I, \sigma_j = \sigma'_j$.

- Minimality: No proper subset $I' \subset I$ satisfies the feasibility condition.

Example: For $w = ()))$, the index set $I = \{2\}$ is a contrastive explanation because changing index 2 to $)$ results in $w' = (()) \in L(G)$, and the empty set $\emptyset$ is not feasible.

Introducing Probabilistic Preference. In a PCFG, not all accepted words w' are equal. We can rank explanations by the likelihood of the correction they enable.

The Scoring Function For any word $w' \in L(G)$, the score $P(w')$ is the maximum probability among all possible parse trees T that yield w' (Viterbi Algorithm):

$$P(w') = \max_{T \in \text{Trees}(w')} P(T)$$

Optimal Contrastive Explanation Given a rejected word w, an explanation I_1 is probabilistically superior to I_2 if the best correction enabled by I_1 is more likely than that of I_2. We define the Explanation Weight as:

$$\text{Weight}(I) = \max\{P(w') \mid w' \text{ matches } w \text{ except at indices } I, w' \in L(G)\}$$

The Extended CYK Table

Standard CYK populates a 3D table $T[i, j, A]$, representing the maximum probability that non-terminal A derives the substring from index i to j.

For a word $w = \sigma_1 \sigma_2 ... \sigma_n$ and an index set I:

- **Base Case (Length 1)** For each position $i \in \{1, \ldots, n\}$ and each non-terminal A:

  - If $i \notin I$ (Fixed):
    $$T[i, 1, A] = P(A \to \sigma_i)$$

    (If no such rule exists, the probability is 0).

  - If $i \in I$ (Wildcard):

    $$T[i, 1, A] = \max_{\sigma \in \Sigma}\{P(A \to \sigma)\}$$

    This selects the most likely terminal that A can produce at that "broken" index.

- **Recursive Step (Length $l > 1$)** For each length l from 2 to n, each starting position i from 1 to $n - l + 1$, and each non-terminal A:

$$T[i, l, A] = \max_{A \to BC \in R} \left(\max_{1 \le k < l} \{P(A \to BC) \cdot T[i, k, B] \cdot T[i + k, l - k, C]\} \right)$$

Hotspots for Contrastive Explanations

Theorem: Given a word $w = \sigma_1 \sigma_1 \ldots \sigma_n$, and grammar G, such that $w \notin L(G)$. Let $\mathcal{E}$ be the set of all contrastive explanations for w. If H is a hitting set of all contrastive explanations $\mathcal{E}$, then no word w' that keeps the indices in H fixed to their original values in w can be accepted by the grammar. Mathematically:

If $\forall i \in H, \sigma_i' = \sigma_i$, then $w' \notin L(G)$.

Proof by Contradiction

Step 1: Assume the negation. Assume there exists a word $w' \in L(G)$ such that w' agrees with the original rejected word w on all indices in the hitting set H.

$$\forall i \in H : \sigma_i' = \sigma_i$$

Step 2: Let J be the set of indices where w' differs from w $(J \cap H = \emptyset)$.

$$J = \{j \mid \sigma_j' \ne \sigma_j\}$$

Step 3: Relate to Contrastive Explanations.

Since $w' \in L(G)$ and it was formed by changing indices J in w, then by definition, J is a "feasible" contrastive set. It must either be a minimal contrastive explanation or a superset of one.

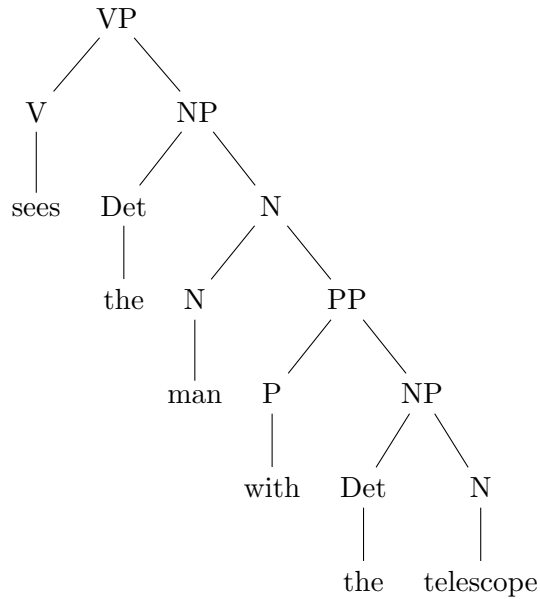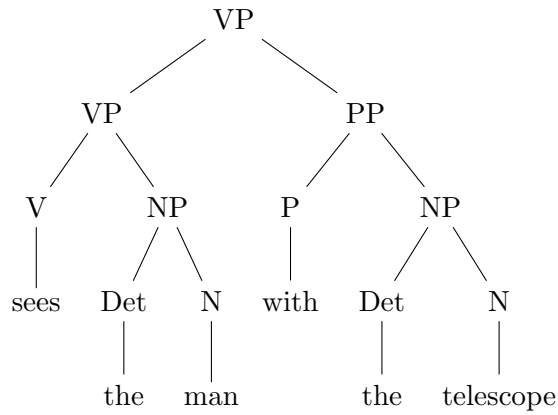$$\exists I \in \mathcal{E} \text{ such that } I \subseteq J$$
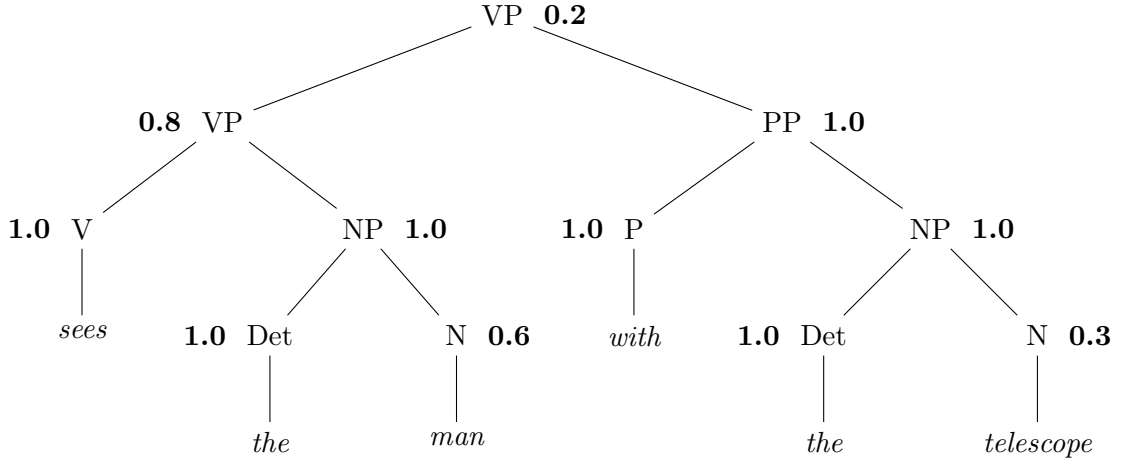
Step 4: The Contradiction.

We know from Step 2 that $J \cap H = \emptyset$. Since $I \subseteq J$, it follows that $I \cap H = \emptyset$. However, by definition, H is a hitting set of $\mathcal{E}$, meaning it must have a non-empty intersection with every $I \in \mathcal{E}$.

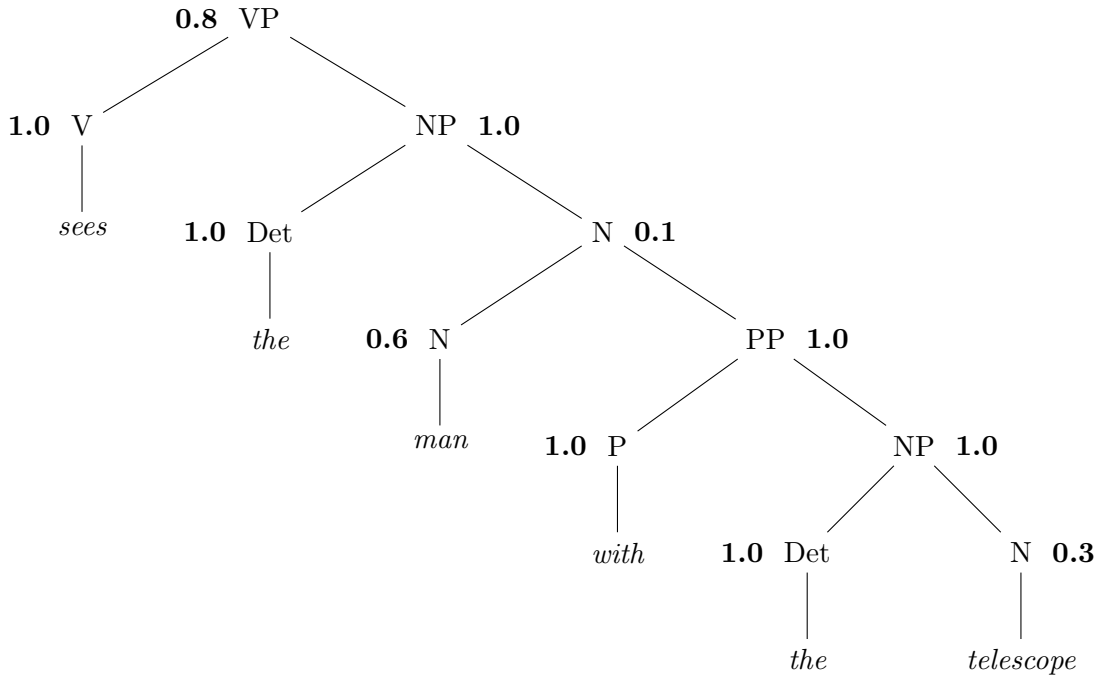$$H \cap I \ne \emptyset \quad \text{(Contradiction)}$$

Conclusion: Our assumption that an accepted word w' exists is false. Therefore, the indices in H effectively "block" all possible paths to acceptance. They are the necessary components of the error.

0.8	$VP \to V\ NP$	1	$NP \to Det\ N$	0.1	$N \to N\ PP$	1	$Det \to$ the	0.6	$N \to$ man
0.2	$VP \to VP\ PP$	1	$PP \to P\ NP$	1	$V \to$ sees	1	$P \to$ with	0.3	$N \to$ telescope

```
                    VP
          ┌─────────┴─────────┐
         VP                   PP
      ┌───┴───┐            ┌───┴───┐
      V      NP            P      NP
      │     ┌─┴─┐          │     ┌─┴──┐
    sees  Det   N        with  Det    N
           │    │               │     │
          the  man             the  telescope
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```
          VP
      ┌───┴───┐
      V      NP
      │    ┌──┴──┐
    sees  Det    N
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          the  N     PP
               │   ┌─┴──┐
              man  P    NP
                   │  ┌─┴──┐
                 with Det   N
                      │     │
                     the  telescope
```

P(t1) = 0.6 · 0.8 · 0.2 · 0.3 = 0.0288

P(t2) = 0.6 · 0.8 · 0.1 · 0.3 = 0.0144

p(VP,sees the man with the telescope) = 0.0288 + 0.0144 = 0.432

Given the grammar G and the rejected word $w \notin L(G)$. Let $\mathcal{E} = \{I_1, I_2, \ldots, I_k\}$ the collection of all Minimal Contrastive Explanations

Each $I \in \mathcal{E}$ represents the hypotesis H_I: "The error happened exactly in the set of index I".

$P(A)$: Probability to get an accepted Tree with a minimal cxp. Every I_i are disjoint.
$P(A) = P(I_1) + P(I_2) + \cdots + P(I_k)$

$$P(I \mid A) = \frac{P(I)}{\sum_{J \in \mathcal{E}} P(J)}$$

$$P(\text{Error in } i \mid A) = \sum_{I \in \mathcal{E}} P(\text{Error in } i \mid I, A) P(I \mid A)$$

$$P(\text{Error in } i \mid I, A) = \mathbb{F}(i \in I) = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if } i \in I \\ 0 & \text{if } i \notin I \end{cases}$$

3.1 Future Work and Timeline to Completion

Appendix A

An Appendix

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