Distractor Generation for Chinese Fill-in-the-blank Items

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Abstract

This paper reports the first study on automatic generation of distractors for fill-in-the-blank items for learning Chinese vocabulary. We investigate the quality of distractors generated by a number of criteria, including part-of-speech, difficulty level, spelling, word co-occurrence and semantic similarity. Evaluations show that a semantic similarity measure, based on the `word2vec` model, yields distractors that are significantly more plausible than those generated by baseline methods.

1 Introduction

The fill-in-the-blank item is a common form of exercise in computer-assisted language learning (CALL) systems. Also known as a cloze or gap-fill item, a fill-in-the-blank item is constructed on the basis of a carrier sentence. One word in the sentence — called the *target word*, or *key* — is blanked out, and the learner attempts to fill it. The top of Table 1 shows an example carrier sentence whose target word is *tiaojian* 'condition'.[1]

To enable automatic feedback, a fill-in-the-blank item often specifies choices, including the target word itself and several distractors, as shown at the bottom of Table 1. Distractors need to be carefully chosen: they must be sufficiently plausible, but must not be acceptable answers. Literature in language pedagogy generally recommends the following criteria to authors of fill-in-the-blank items: a distractor should belong to the same word class and same difficult level, and have approximately the same length, as the target word (Heaton, 1989); it should collocate strongly with a word in the sentence (Hoshino, 2013); and it should be semantically related with the target word, ideally a "false synonym" (Goodrich, 1977). An empirical study confirmed that distractors indeed tend to be syntactically and semantically homogenous (Pho et al., 2014).

他因爲那裏的 ___ 不好，所以不去那裏上大學。 He chose not to attend that university because its ___ are not good.

1. 條件 *tiaojian* 'condition'	← Target word
	↓ Distractors
2. 原因 *yuanyin* 'reason'	`Human`
3. 頻道 *pindao* 'channel'	`Baseline`
4. 條約 *tiaoyue* 'agreement'	`+Spell`
5. 函數 *hanshu* 'function'	`+Co-occur`
6. 因素 *yinsu* 'factor'	`+Similar`

Table 1: An example fill-in-the-blank item, with a carrier sentence with a blank (top); and six choices for the blank (bottom), including the target word (correct answer), and distractors generated by five different methods (see Section 4).

To automate the time-consuming process of selecting distractors, there has been much interest in developing algorithms that, given a carrier sentence and a target word, can find appropriate distractors. To-date, most research effort on distractor generation for language learning has focused on English.

This paper presents the first attempt to automatically generate distractors in fill-in-the-blank items for learners of Chinese as a foreign language. In Section 2, we review related research areas. In Section 3, we present our datasets. In Section 4, we outline our criteria for distractor generation. In Section 5, we describe the evaluation procedure. In Section 6, we report evaluation results, show-

[1] This example is taken from (Liu, 2004).

ing that a semantic similarity measure based on the `word2vec` model yields distractors that are significantly more plausible than those generated by baseline methods.

2 Previous work

An algorithm for generating distractors must attempt a trade-off between two objectives. One objective is plausibility. Most approaches require the distractor and the target word to have the same part-of-speech (POS) and similar level of difficulty, often approximated by word frequency (Coniam, 1997; Shei, 2001; Brown et al., 2005). They must also be semantically close, which can be quantified with semantic distance in WordNet (Lin et al., 2007; Pino et al., 2008; Chen et al., 2015; Susanti et al., 2015), thesauri (Sumita et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2010), ontologies (Karamanis et al., 2006; Ding and Gu, 2010), or handcrafted rules (Chen et al., 2006). Another approach generates distractors that are semantically similar to the target word in some sense, but not in the particular sense in the carrier sentence (Zesch and Melamud, 2014). Others directly extract frequent mistakes in learner corpora to serve as distractors (Sakaguchi et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2016). Error-annotated Chinese learner corpora are still not large enough, however, to support broad-coverage distractor generation.

A second, often competing objective is to ensure that the distractor, however plausible, is not an acceptable answer. Most approaches require that the distractor never, or only rarely, collocate with other words in the carrier sentence. Some define collocation as n-grams in a context window centered on the distractor (Liu et al., 2005). Others also consider words elsewhere in the carrier sentence, for example those present in the Word Sketch of the distractor (Smith et al., 2010) or those that are grammatically related to the distractor in dependencies (Sakaguchi et al., 2013). Still others restrict potential distractors to antonyms of the target word, words with the same hypernym, and synonym of synonyms in WordNet (Knoop and Wilske, 2013).

To the best of our knowledge, there is not yet any reported attempt to generate distractors for learning Chinese vocabulary. The only previous work on Chinese distractor generation was designed for testing knowledge in the aviation domain, and leveraged a domain-specific ontology (Ding and Gu, 2010).

3 Data

To facilitate our study, we compiled two datasets:

Textbook Corpus We collected 299 fill-in-the-blank items, each with a target word and two to three distractors, from three Chinese textbooks (Liu, 2004, 2010; Wang, 2007). An analysis on this corpus confirms many of the criteria proposed in the literature: in 63% of the items, all distractors have the same POS as the target word; and in 45% of the items, at least one distractor shares a common character with the target word.

Wiki Corpus We extracted 14 million sentences from Chinese Wikipedia for calculating word frequency, similarity and co-occurrence statistics in the Candidate Generation step. We then performed word segmentation, POS tagging and dependency analysis on a subset of 5.5 million sentences with the Stanford Chinese parser (Levy and Manning, 2003) for use in the Candidate Filtering step.

4 Approach

We follow a two-step process where the first step, Candidate Generation, optimizes distractor plausibility; and the second step, Candidate Filtering, aims to filter out distractor candidates that are acceptable answers.

4.1 Candidate Generation

We implemented the following criteria for generating a ranked list of distractor candidates:

Baseline (`Baseline`) The baseline re-implements the criteria proposed by Coniam (1997): the distractor must have the same POS and the similar difficulty level as the target word. We extract all words in the Wiki corpus with the same POS, and then rank them by the proximity of their word frequency and that of the target word. In Table 1, for example, *pindao* 'channel' was chosen because, among all nouns, its word frequency is closest to that of the target word *tiaojian*.

Spelling similarity (`+Spell`) Many Chinese words contain multiple characters; two words that have one or more characters

in common may be easily confusable for learners. This method requires the candidate to share at least one common character with the target word. In our running example in Table 1, *tiaoyue* 'agreement' was chosen because, among all words that contain the character *tiao* or *jian* (which combine to form the target word *tiaojian*), it has the most similar word frequency.

Word co-occurrence (`+Co-occur`) A distractor that often co-occurs with the target word may be easily confusable for learners. We ranked the candidate distractors according to their pointwise mutual information (PMI) score with the target word, as estimated on the Wiki corpus. In our running example in Table 1, *hanshu* 'function' was chosen because of its frequent co-occurrence with *tiaojian* 'condition'.

Word similarity (`+Similar`) Words that are semantically close to the target word tend to be plausible candidates. We ranked candidate distractors according to their similarity score with the target word. We obtained these scores by training a `word2vec` model (Mikolov et al., 2013) on the Wiki corpus.[2] We opted for `word2vec` over thesauri or Chinese lexical databases such as HowNet because of its broader coverage. In the example in Table 1, the distractor *yinsu* 因素 'factor' was chosen because it has the highest similarity score with *tiaojian* in the `word2vec` model.

4.2 Candidate Filtering

A distractor is called "reliable" if it yields an incorrect sentence. This step aims to remove those candidates that are also acceptable answers, leaving only the reliable distractors. We do so by examining whether the distractor can collocate with words in the rest of the carrier sentence. The system examines the candidates in the ranked list produced by the Candidate Generation step (Section 4.1), and removes candidates that are rejected by both filters below:

Trigram The word trigram, formed by the distractor, the previous word and the following word in the carrier sentence, must not appear in the Wiki corpus. In the example in Figure 1, the trigram "*de yinsu bu*" must not be attested.

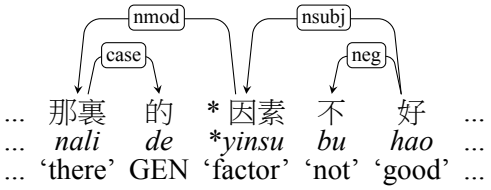

Figure 1: In the Candidate Filtering step (Section 4.2), candidate distractors whose dependency relations are attested in the corpus are rejected. To determine whether *yinsu* can serve as a distractor in the carrier sentence in Table 1, the system determines whether the dependency relations nmod(*yinsu*, *nali*) or nsubj(*hao*, *yinsu*) is attested in a large corpus of Chinese texts.

Dependency The Trigram filter alone might be too strict, since words that are grammatically related to the distractor may be further away. Among dependency relations in the parse tree of the carrier sentence, we extract all those with the distractor as head or child, and require that these relation must not be attested in the Wiki corpus. This filter is similar to the approach by Smith et al. (2010), but instead of the grammatical relations in Word Sketches, we consider all dependency relations. In our running example in Table 1, the candidate 情况 *qingkuang* 'situation' was rejected because it is attested to serve as the subject of *hao* 'good'. The next distractor in the ranked list, *yinsu* 'factor', was chosen instead since it never served as the subject of *hao* 'good', and was never modified by the noun *nali* 'there'.

5 Evaluation

5.1 Test data

According to Da (2007), basic ability in Chinese news reading require a vocabulary of around 20,000 words. Among the target words in the Textbook Corpus, we selected 37 nouns and verbs such that they were roughly equally spaced among the 20,000 most frequent words in the Wiki Corpus.

For each of these 37 words, we generated distractors using each of the four criteria in Section 4 (`Baseline`, `+Spell`, `+Co-occur`, and `+Similar`). In addition, we randomly picked one

[2] We trained a bag-of-words (CBOW) model of 400 dimensions and window size 5 with `word2vec`.

Method	Reliability
Baseline	100%
+Co-occur	98.6%
+Spell	93.2%
+Similar	93.2%
Human	100%

Table 2: Reliability of the various distractor generation methods.

distractor from the corresponding fill-in-the-blank item in the Textbook corpus (Human). We thus have 37 items, each with six choices[3]: one correct answer, and five distractors. Table 1 shows an example.

5.2 Human annotation

We asked two human judges, both native Chinese speakers, to annotate these choices, without revealing the target word. For each choice in the item, the judges decided whether it was correct or incorrect; they may identify zero, one or multiple correct answers. For an incorrect answer, they further assessed its plausibility as a distractor on a three-point scale: "Plausible" (3), "Somewhat plausible' (2)', or "Obviously wrong" (1).

The kappa for the human annotation is 0.529, which is considered a "moderate" level of agreement (Landis and Koch, 1977). As a annotation quality check, we found that overall, in 6.8% of the times, a judge labels the target word as a distractor.

6 Results

6.1 Reliability

As shown in Table 2, the Baseline and +Co-occur methods performed best in terms of reliability: 100% and 98.6% of their respective distractors can be used. The +Spell and +Similar methods, at 93.2%, were more prone to generating distractors that yield correct sentences. This is not unexpected since the +Similar method explicitly tries to find distractors that are semantically similar to the target word.

The reliability rate would have been lower if not for the Candidate Filtering step. The Trigram and Dependency filters rejected 16 of the 37 top candidates returned by the +Similar method. A post-hoc analysis found that 11 of the 16 rejected candidates would indeed have been acceptable answers. The filters thus boosted the reliability rate by 30%, at the cost of falsely rejecting 5 top-ranked candidates.

[3]Except that in 5 items, the +Co-occur and +Similar methods generated the same distractor; in another item, Baseline and +Co-occur generated the same distractor.

Method	Average score	Plausible or somewhat plausible
Baseline	1.06	5.2%
+Co-occur	1.27	8.6%
+Spell	1.66	39.7%
+Similar	**1.76**	**46.6%**
Human	**1.68**	**53.4%**

Table 3: Average scores, out of a 3-point scale (see Section 5.2), of distractors generated by the various methods in the human evaluation.

6.2 Plausibility

Table 3 shows the results on plausibility. Both the +Similar method[4] and the +Spell method[5] outperformed the baseline, both in terms of the average score and the proportion of distractors considered at least somewhat plausible.

Distractors of the +Similar method have very competitive quality, scoring on average 1.76, slightly higher than the average score of the Human method (1.68). A qualitative review found that while the +Similar method can sometimes yield distractors that are even more plausible than those given by humans[6], they are also more likely overall to be rated "Obviously Wrong", especially when the model fails to take into account word sense ambiguity: 53.4% of the Human distractors are rated Plausible or Somewhat Plausible, versus only 46.6% for the +Similar method.

7 Conclusions

We presented the first study on automatic generation of distractors for fill-in-the-blank items for learning Chinese. Evaluations showed that a semantic similarity measure, based on the word2vec model, offers a significant improvement over a baseline that considers only part-of-speech and word frequency, and achieves competitive plausibility in comparison to human-crafted items.

[4]$p < 0.001$, by McNemar's test.

[5]$p < 0.021$ by McNemar's test.

[6]Since we randomly selected one distractor out of three in the Textbook Corpus, the Human score reflects the average plausibility of the human-authored distractors, rather than the best one.

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