

Project proposal

PPP – ENS Lyon

M1. 2014

Title	Projet Pensées Profondes (PPP)
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Abstract	<i>Projet Pensées Profondes</i> aim is to build a project about natural language question answering framework. It would be done at the ENS Lyon, from September to December 2014, by a team of seven M1 students. This proposal presents our subject and exposes our goals.

1 Introduction

What is the birth date of the first president of the United States? This is the typical question that we would like to answer quickly and succinctly with an automatic question answering system. This requires four steps.

Understanding the natural language. The input string given in standard English has to be transformed into a normal form.

Querying some database (e.g. Wikidata), using the normal form. Some operations may then be applied, like performing a sort.

Selecting the most relevant results.

Displaying the answer in a convenient fashion.

2 Expected results

The first goal of the PPP is to provide a free, modular and well documented query answering tool that will interest research communities for extensibility features.

We expect to have in December a framework that would allow people to ask questions in plain text through a web user interface, a core module able to transform this question into a normal form and a demo backend module able to answer to historical questions using Wikidata data.

We expect also to have done some research on natural languages analysis using neuronal networks. These researches may lead, if successful, to a small scientific article.

3 Targeted users

Our main purpose is to allow people to design their own modules and easily include them in the tool. For example, sports modules could be done to answer questions about contests results or upcoming meetings. We intend also to make at least one important module, using Wikidata, in order to provide a demo and attract the Wikipedia community. At a time when intelligent search engine tools are increasingly used, we think it is now or never for the open source community to propose its own product.

On the other hand, we also target the end users of the query answering system. We would like to provide a quick and intuitive way to search information.

4 Concurrent services

Several private companies offer question answering frameworks.

WolframAlpha¹, a tool developed by Wolfram Research, provide a web based service to answer directly questions asked in English. It is well known for its abilities to process mathematical statements. It focuses on historical and scientific facts, such as *When was the French revolution?* or *What is the root of pi?*.

Google Knowledge Graph², developed by Google, answer to some search on Google by a related summary. For instance, searching *Leonardo da Vinci* will give a short biography of this person, and display its most famous paintings.

Google Now³, Siri⁴ and Cortana⁵, three intelligent personal assistants developed respectively by Google, Apple and Microsoft, provide a mobile based service to answer questions asked in natural language (generally, those of the owner of the mobile device). They focus on practical facts, such as *Where is the nearest restaurant?*.

In a first time, the PPP aims at providing a clever way to browse Wikidata, by giving the user the direct answer to his question, not the link of the related Wikipedia web page. Thus, our software will not be suited to answer such practical questions, although some new modules can be made if there exists a related database. Google Now, Siri and Cortana are therefore not direct concurrent services.

The PPP is closer to the WolframAlpha tool, and to some extent to the Google Knowledge Graph. However, it is a free project, and will be modular and well documented. We hope that it will interest the Wikimedia community, in order to keep it updated in the future. Moreover, we will not focus on mathematical questions, as WolframAlpha does.

5 Software

The goal is to develop a query answering framework able to answer to simple questions with different back-ends.

The software is divided in several components which interact via the HTTP protocol.

The user interface consist of several front-ends. The most natural is a web page, but we can also think about a Android application or a Firefox OS web app. Via this interface, we can submit a query.

The query is transformed into a standard form. This form has to be understandable for a computer and describe the question. This work is done in two ways. There is a classical natural language processing module and a machine learning-based module. This kind of transformation is very difficult. To avoid

¹<https://www.wolframalpha.com/>

²<http://www.google.com/insidesearch/features/search/knowledge.html>

³<http://www.google.com/landing/now/>

⁴<https://www.apple.com/fr/ios/siri/>

⁵<http://windows.microsoft.com/en-us/windows-8/cortana>

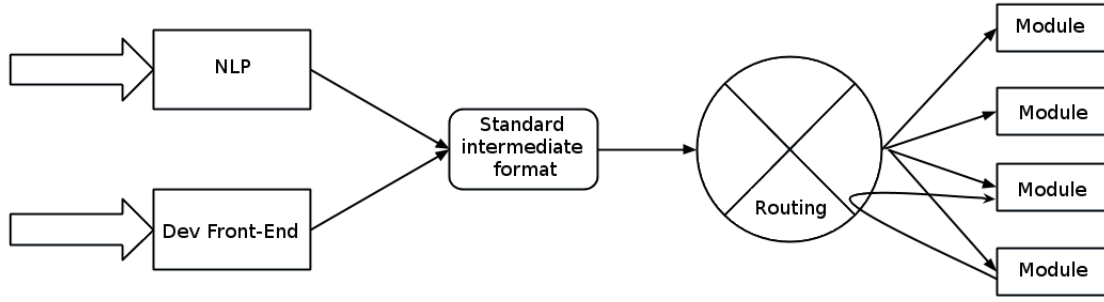


Figure 1: Global structure

having to go through this step, we can develop another front-end for developers which allow to input a question directly in normal form.

The standard form is sent into the core. The core's job is routing. It has to send the request in each module to obtain the answers. Sometime, a module can request an answer of another module, for example in the question *What is two times the population of Argentina?* which needs a geographic data and a mathematical operation. Such a question needs the successive work of two modules.

To overcome the constraints of language, the core makes some request to the Wikidata module to translate each word of the standard form into the associated Wikidata code.

Once a response is generated, it is sent to the interface to be displayed.

A specific module is needed for each database or kind of computation (mathematical, predictive machine learning...).

6 Technological innovations

We would like to build one of the first open source question answering system. Our goal is to discover the theory of natural language processing, and apply our knowledge to design our tool. We intend to put together some existing libraries (e.g. natural language parsers) and our own implementations of algorithms. In particular, we hope we will be able to implement a neuronal network in order to perform machine learning. For example, we are going to explore deep learning technologies for the natural language processing problem.

One of our most important goal is to provide the first full-modular question answering system. We do not pretend to build in 3 months a better tool than WolframAlpha for example, but we hope to make available an efficient and attractive system that will motivate people to integrate their own module in the tool. Thus, we think that using the HTTP protocol for the communication between modules is an important part of our project, because it will allow a wide variety of programming languages to design modules.

Finally, our technical approach consists in quickly obtaining first results and a first working tool. Thus, we could use existing libraries in a first time. Then, we will improve it depending on our remaining time.

7 Schedule

We have planned a simple schedule in two periods.

For the mid-term, we plan to have a functional developer front-end, core, the Wikidata module (with the transformation in standard form with Wikidata codes), a first approach of the natural language

parser and a base for machine learning. With this base, the software should be able to answer simple questions using the developer interface.

For the final term, we plan to have an enhanced natural language parser (especially for the machine learning-based one), a simple web front-end and a fully operational Wikidata module.

Depending on the remaining time, we can develop other modules, e.g. modules for OEIS, mathematics... Our objective is not to provide a lot of modules, but a modular tool with at least one “demo-module” using Wikidata.

8 Task partition

We decide to form three working teams with mid-term and final evaluations goals. Some of them may be split after the mid-term evaluation.

A first team, composed of Thomas and Valentin, has to develop the core and the front-ends. This work should not be too long, especially for the front-ends part. For the mid-term we plan to have a working core, a basic HTML frontend and a developer frontend that would allow input directly questions in the standard form. For the final evaluation, if there is time, we will improve the HTML frontend and maybe build an Android application.

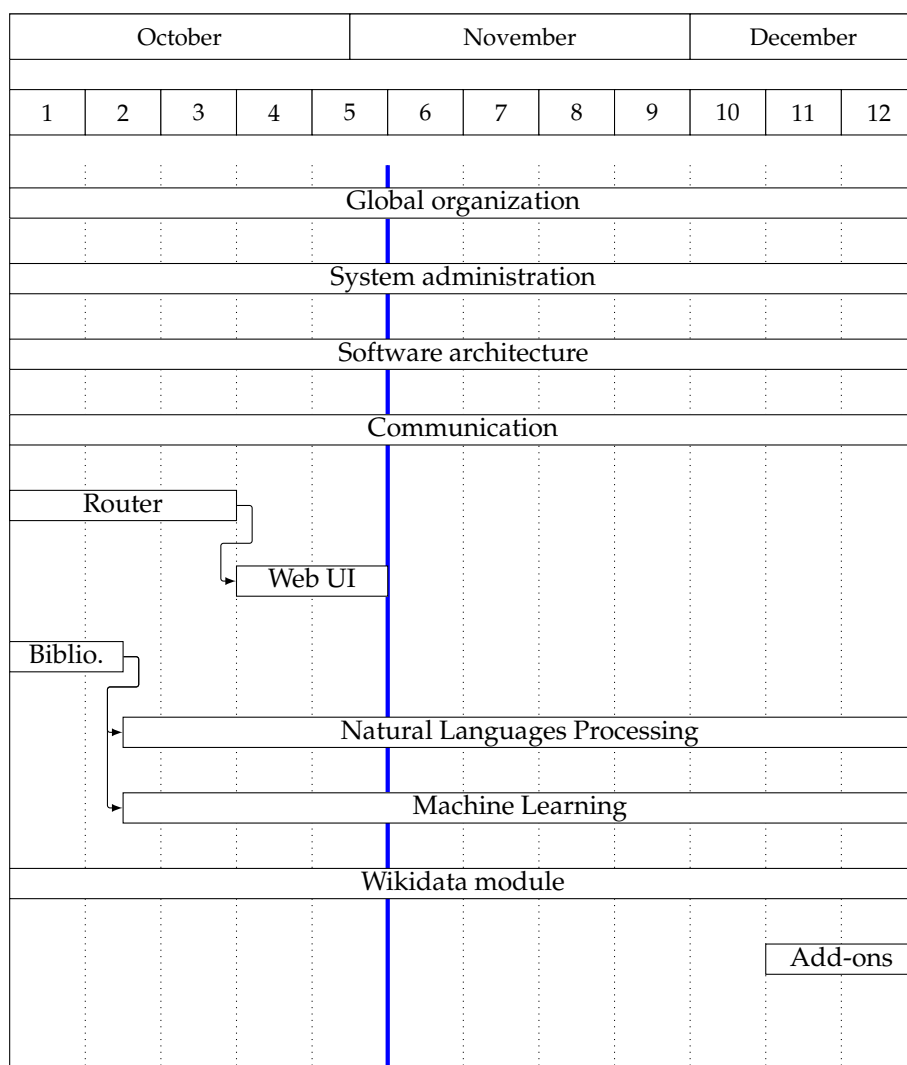
The second team will be charged with designing the first module, based on Wikidata. It is composed of Thomas, Valentin and Tom. Thomas’s knowledge on Wikidata will be essential to make the work easier. The main goal is to have a module able to answer to simple questions like *When was Gandhi born?* for the mid-term. This team could eventually be split after in a team for enhanced Wikidata module and another for making new modules.

The natural languages parsers (using eventually machine learning and neuronal networks) will be done by the last team composed of Yassine, Quentin, Raphaël and Marc. Since we cannot predict the difficulty of this task, we do not currently know if some members of this team will design other modules. The goal for the mid-term is to have a first natural languages parser using intensively existing libraries and a bibliographical study in order to understand how natural language parsers are designed, and then choose our own approach. We hope to be able to have an implemented machine learning algorithm based on neuronal networks for the final evaluation.

9 Organization

There will be several workpackages, and some manager associated to each one. The role of these managers is to ensure the good progress of their workpackage.

Identifier	Workpackage	Person in charge
WP0	Global organization	Marc
WP1	System administration	Valentin
WP2	Software architecture	Thomas
WP3	Communication	Tom
WP4	Bibliography	Yassine
WP5	Router	Valentin
WP6	Web user interface	Thomas
WP7	Natural Languages Processing	Raphaël
WP8	Machine Learning	Quentin
WP9	Wikidata module	Thomas
WP10	Add-ons	Marc



Midterm

10 Budget

As demo servers will be provided by Wikimedia, we do not need any particular budget.

11 Test protocol

Evaluating a question answering system is quite a subjective task. Actually, we do not plan to have a full exhaustive test protocol. We will probably evaluate manually the relevance of our tool on some questions. Depending on its performances, we could also use existing benchmarks provided by question answering challenges (e.g. TREC challenge).