“Learning Highly Recursive Input Grammars”: A Replication Study

Sulav Malla

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Supervisors:
Rahul Gopinath, The University of Sydney

School of Electrical and Computer Engineering
The University of Sydney

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Abstract

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Contents

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

In the field of software testing, generating test inputs for a program (fuzzing) is a well-known and popular technique. To improve the effectiveness of fuzzers, recent research has focused on recovering input grammars from existing programs, as incorporating knowledge about the input language and grammar of the program under test drastically improves the effectiveness of fuzzers [1].

Learning Highly Recursive Input Grammars, authored by Lemieux C., Sen K., and Kulkarni N., and published in 2021 at UCB [2], presents an algorithm called ARVADA, developed for this purpose. ARVADA attempts to learn context-free grammars (CFGs) of a specified program given a set of valid inputs and a boolean-value black-box oracle $\mathcal{O}$. Along with presenting the algorithm, the paper evaluates it by comparing ARVADA to GLADE [3], a previously developed state-of-the-art algorithm for the same task in a similar setting. During the evaluation, it was observed that the F1 scores of GLADE were much lower than those reported in the official GLADE paper [3]. This led to a replication study of the original GLADE paper, conducted by Gopinath R., Bachir B., and Zeller A., and published as "Synthesizing Input Grammars: A Replication Study" [4] at CISPA, which investigated the accuracy of the results in the original paper. Similarly, as done by the researchers at CISPA, this thesis aims to replicate ARVADA to reproduce and investigate the results presented in the original paper [2].

This thesis is an attempt to reproduce ARVADA in a clean-room environment, meaning with no reference to or knowledge of the original implementation, but only the abstraction and explanations provided in the paper [2]. The implementation language of choice is C.

First, this paper will introduce general concepts of grammar and parsing, the importance of learning input grammars, a deeper explanation of ARVADA, and the motivation for conducting a replication study. This is followed by a brief explanation of ARVADA and how it works according to the original paper [2], then a more in-depth explanation of the algorithm and how it was reproduced in C with reference to the code. Afterward, an evaluation compares the results of the reproduced implementation with those from the original paper [2]. Finally, a discussion highlights and comments on the original algorithm, the reproduced results, and the overall process of conducting the replication study, followed by a brief conclusion.

- All code and implementation are open source and can be found here: `https://github.com/Stainima/ARVADA`

Chapter 2

GENERAL REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.0.1 What is ARVADA?

Introduction

ARVADA is an algorithm published in "Learning Highly Recursive Input Grammars" [2] at the University of California, Berkeley in 2021. It is designed to learn context-free grammars from a set of positive examples and a Boolean-valued oracle $\mathcal{O}$. Starting from initially flat parse trees, ARVADA repeatedly applies two specialized operations, **bubbling** and **merging**, to incrementally add structure to these trees. From this structured representation, it extracts the smallest possible set of context-free grammar rules that accommodate all the given examples. The algorithm aims to generalize the language as much as possible without overgeneralizing beyond what is accepted by $\mathcal{O}$.

Like GLADE [3], ARVADA operates under the assumption of a black-box oracle $\mathcal{O}$. This means that ARVADA has no access to or knowledge of the internal workings of the oracle and can only observe the Boolean values returned by $\mathcal{O}$.

Explanation

ARVADA takes as input the oracle $\mathcal{O}$ and a set of positive, valid oracle inputs S. For each string $s \in S$, querying $\mathcal{O}(s)$ returns `True`. The algorithm begins by constructing a flat parse tree for each string in S. Each tree has a single root node t_0 whose children correspond to the individual characters of the input string s.

Next, ARVADA performs the **bubbling** operation. In this step, a sequence of sibling nodes in the tree is selected and replaced with a new non-terminal node. This new node takes the selected sibling nodes as its children, thereby introducing an additional level of structure. Essentially, ARVADA transforms sequences of terminal nodes in the flat parse tree into subtrees by introducing new non-terminal nodes and progressively adding structure to the tree.

ARVADA then decides whether to accept or reject each bubble by checking whether the newly bubbled structure enables a sound generalization of the learned grammar. Each non-leaf node in the tree can be viewed as a non-terminal in the emerging grammar. To determine whether a bubble should be accepted, ARVADA checks whether replacing any node in the tree with the new bubbled subtree results in the generation of valid input strings according to $\mathcal{O}$. If the replacement produces valid strings, the bubble is accepted, and the tree is restructured so that both the bubbled subtree and the replaced node share the same non-terminal label.

The addition of new non-terminal nodes expands the language defined by the learned grammar, since any string derivable from the same label can now be substituted interchangeably. This relabeling of the bubbled subtree and the replaced node is called a **merge**, as it merges the labels of two previously distinct nodes in the tree. If a bubble is not accepted, it is discarded, and none of the trees are affected or structurally modified.

Explanation

2.0.2 What are Grammars?

Grammars both in the natural and artifical language can be defined as a set of rules by which valid sentences in a language are constructed [5]. Beginning with a start symbol, which is a single non-termial, production rules are applied sequentially adding alphabet from the grammar to generate a string which is valid in the grammar.

2.0.3 Further Quesitons

What are parsers?

What are context free grammar?

Why do a replication study?

2.0.4 Why C?

In the original study [2], the ARVADA algorithm was implemented in Python. When compared to GLADE [3], which was implemented in Java, ARVADA exhibited a slower average runtime across all benchmarks. As stated in the study, this could be attributed to the natural runtime disadvantage of Python compared to Java.

In a comparative study, “A Pragmatic Comparison of Four Different Programming Languages” [6], it was found that if speed and efficiency were important in an implementation, C was a better options compared to Python. C, being a mid-level, statically typed, structured language that runs under a compiler, will always be faster than a dynamic language run under an interpreter such as Python [7]. Along with being a structured language, C also comes with only essential features. These limited features contribute to its efficiency but also introduce a higher level of complexity compared to Python [6][7].

Hence, with the aim of replicating and improving upon the runtime bottleneck presented by Python—while acknowledging the rise in complexity C introduces compared to Python—C was chosen as the language of implementation.

Why ARVADA / Problem Statement?

Why is learning highly input grammar important?

What is GLADE?
What are other Similar works done?
What is the work done in this field after ARVADA?

Chapter 3

METHODOLGIES & IMPLEMENTATION

Methodolgies: ARVADA walkthrough

How you did it, and point out any differences?

Listing 3.1: Struct used in code to store all *trees*

```
typedef struct nodes{
    int capacity;
    int count;
    struct node **nodes;
} Nodes;
```

Listing 3.2: Struct used in *trees*

```
typedef struct node{
    int capacity;
    char character;
    struct node *parent;
    int t;
    int num_child;
    int pos;
    struct node **children;
} Node;
```

Chapter 4

EVALUATION

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

Chapter 6

CONCLUSION

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