Evaluating Semantic Parsing against a Simple Web-based Question Answering Model

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Abstract

Semantic parsing shines at analyzing complex natural language that involves composition and computation over multiple pieces of evidence. However, datasets for semantic parsing contain many factoid questions that can be answered from a single web document. In this paper, we propose to evaluate semantic parsing-based question answering models by comparing them to a question answering baseline that queries the web and extracts the answer only from web snippets, without access to the target knowledge-base. We investigate this approach on COMPLEXQUESTIONS, a dataset designed to focus on compositional language, and find that our model obtains reasonable performance ($\sim$35 F_1 compared to 41 F_1 of state-of-the-art). We find in our analysis that our model performs well on complex questions involving conjunctions, but struggles on questions that involve relation composition and superlatives.

1 Introduction

Question answering (QA) has witnessed a surge of interest in recent years (Hill et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2015; Pasupat and Liang, 2015; Chen et al., 2016; Joshi et al., 2017), as it is one of the prominent tests for natural language understanding. QA can be coarsely divided into semantic parsing-based QA, where a question is translated into a logical form that is executed against a knowledge-base (Zelle and Mooney, 1996; Zettlemoyer and Collins, 2005; Liang et al., 2011; Kwiatkowski et al., 2013; Reddy et al., 2014; Berant and Liang, 2015), and unstructured QA, where a question is answered directly from some relevant text (Voorhees and Tice, 2000; Hermann et al., 2015; Hewlett et al., 2016; Kadlec et al., 2016; Seo et al., 2016).

In semantic parsing, background knowledge has already been compiled into a knowledge-base (KB), and thus the challenge is in interpreting the question, which may contain compositional constructions (*"What is the second-highest mountain in Europe?"*) or computations (*"What is the difference in population between France and Germany?"*). In unstructured QA, the model needs to also interpret the language of a document, and thus most datasets focus on matching the question against the document and extracting the answer from some local context, such as a sentence or a paragraph (Onishi et al., 2016; Rajpurkar et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2015).

Since semantic parsing models excel at handling complex linguistic constructions and reasoning over multiple facts, a natural way to examine whether a benchmark indeed requires modeling these properties, is to train an unstructured QA model, and check if it under-performs compared to semantic parsing models. If questions can be answered by examining local contexts only, then the use of a knowledge-base is perhaps unnecessary. However, to the best of our knowledge, only models that utilize the KB have been evaluated on common semantic parsing benchmarks.

The goal of this paper is to bridge this evaluation gap. We develop a simple log-linear model, in the spirit of traditional web-based QA systems (Kwok et al., 2001; Brill et al., 2002), that answers questions by querying the web and extracting the answer from returned web snippets. Thus, our evaluation scheme is suitable for semantic parsing benchmarks in which the knowledge required for answering questions is covered by the web (in contrast with virtual assitants for which the knowledge is specific to an application).

We test this model on COMPLEXQUESTIONS (Bao et al., 2016), a dataset designed to require more compositionality compared to earlier datasets, such as WEBQUESTIONS (Berant et al., 2013) and SIMPLEQUESTIONS (Bordes et al., 2015). We find that a simple QA model, despite having no access to the target KB, performs reasonably well on this dataset ($\sim$35 F_1 compared to the state-of-the-art of 41 F_1). Moreover, for the subset of questions for which the right answer can be found in one of the web snippets, we outperform the semantic parser (51.9 F_1 vs. 48.5 F_1). We analyze results for different types of compositionality and find that superlatives and relation composition constructions are challenging for a web-based QA system, while conjunctions and events with multiple arguments are easier.

An important insight is that semantic parsers must overcome the mismatch between natural language and formal language. Consequently, language that can be easily matched against the web may become challenging to express in logical form. For example, the word *"wife"* is an atomic binary relation in natural language, but expressed with a complex binary $\lambda x.\lambda y.\text{Spouse}(x, y) \wedge \text{Gender}(x, \text{Female})$ in knowledge-bases. Thus, some of the complexity of understanding natural language is removed when working with a natural language representation.

To conclude, we propose to evaluate the extent to which semantic parsing-based QA benchmarks require compositionality by comparing semantic parsing models to a baseline that extracts the answer from short web snippets. We obtain reasonable performance on COMPLEXQUESTIONS, and analyze the types of compositionality that are challenging for a web-based QA model. To ensure reproducibility, we release our dataset, which attaches to each example from COMPLEXQUESTIONS the top-100 retrieved web snippets.[1]

2 Problem Setting and Dataset

Given a training set of triples $\{q^{(i)}, R^{(i)}, a^{(i)}\}_{i=1}^{N}$, where $q^{(i)}$ is a question, $R^{(i)}$ is a web result set, and $a^{(i)}$ is the answer, our goal is to learn a model that produces an answer a for a new question-result set pair (q, R). A web result set R consists of $K(= 100)$ web snippets, where each snippet s_i

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R:

> s_1: **Billy Batts (Character) - Biography - IMDb** Billy Batts (Character) on IMDb: Movies, TV, Celebs, and more... ... Devino is portrayed by <u>Frank Vincent</u> in the film Goodfellas. Page last updated by !!!de leted!!!
>
> s_2: <u>**Frank Vincent**</u> **- Wikipedia** He appeared in Scorsese's 1990 film Goodfellas, where he played Billy Batts, a made man in the Gambino crime family. He also played a role in Scorsese's...
>
> $\vdots$
>
> s_{100}: **Voice-over in Goodfellas** In the summer when they played cards all night, nobody ever called the cops. .... But we had a problem with Billy Batts. This was a touchy thing. Tommy had killed a made man. Billy was a part of the Bambino crew and untouchable. Before you...

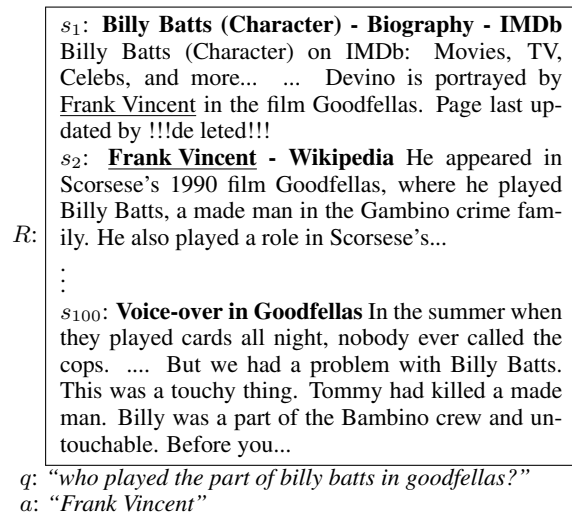q: *"who played the part of billy batts in goodfellas?"*
a: *"Frank Vincent"*

Figure 1: A training example containing a result set R, a question q and an answer a. The result set R contains 100 web snippets s_i, each including a title (boldface) and text. The answer is underlined.

has a title and a text fragment. An example for a training example is provided in Figure 1.

Semantic parsing-based QA datasets contain question-answer pairs alongside a background KB. To convert such datasets to our setup, we run the question q against Google's search engine and scrape the top-K web snippets. We use only the web snippets and ignore any boxes or other information returned (see Figure 1 and the full dataset in the supplementary material).

Compositionality We argue that if a dataset truly requires a compositional model, then it should be difficult to tackle with methods that only match the question against short web snippets. This is since it is unlikely to integrate all necessary pieces of evidence from the snippets.

We convert COMPLEXQUESTIONS into the aforementioned format, and manually analyze the types of compositionality that occur on 100 random training examples. Table 1 provides an example for each of the question types we found:

> SIMPLE: an application of a single binary relation on a single entity.
>
> FILTER: a question where the semantic type of the answer is mentioned (*"tv shows"* in Table 1).
>
> N-ARY: A question about a single event that involves more than one entity (*"juni"* and *"spy kids 4"* in Table 1).
>
> CONJUNCTION: A question whose answer is the conjunction of more than one binary relation in the question.

Type	Example	%
SIMPLE	*"who has gone out with cornelis de graeff"*	17%
FILTER	*"which tv shows has wayne rostad starred in"*	18%
N-ARY	*"who played juni in spy kids 4?"*	51%
CONJ.	*"what has queen latifah starred in that doug mchenry directed"*	10%
COMPOS.	*"who was the grandson of king david's father?"*	7%
SUPERL.	*"who is the richest sports woman?"*	9%
OTHER	*"what is the name george lopez on the show?"*	8%

Table 1: An example for each compositionality type and the proportion of examples in 100 random examples. A question can fall into multiple types, and thus the sum exceeds 100%.

COMPOSITION A question that involves composing more than one binary relation over an entity (*"grandson"* and *"father"* in Table 1).

SUPERLATIVE A question that requires sorting or comparing entities based on a numeric property.

OTHER Any other question.

Table 1 illustrates that COMPLEXQUESTIONS is dominated by N-ARY questions that involve an event with multiple entities. In Section 4 we evaluate the performance of a simple QA model for each compositionality type, and find that N-ARY questions are handled well by our web-based QA system.

3 Model

Our model comprises two parts. First, we extract a set of answer candidates, $\mathcal{A}$, from the web result set. Then, we train a log-linear model that outputs a distribution over the candidates in $\mathcal{A}$, and is used at test time to find the most probable answers.

Candidate Extraction We extract all 1-grams, 2-grams, 3-grams and 4-grams (lowercased) that appear in R, yielding roughly 5,000 candidates per question. We then discard any candidate that fully appears in the question itself, and define $\mathcal{A}$ to be the top-K candidates based on their tf-idf score, where term frequency is computed on all the snippets in R, and inverse document frequency is computed on a large external corpus.

Candidate Ranking We define a log-linear model over the candidates in $\mathcal{A}$:

$$p_\theta(a \mid q, R) = \frac{\exp(\phi(q, R, a)^\top \theta)}{\sum_{a' \in \mathcal{A}} \exp(\phi(q, R, a')^\top \theta)},$$

where $\theta \in \mathbb{R}^d$ are learned parameters, and $\phi(\cdot) \in \mathbb{R}^d$ is a feature function. We train

our model by maximizing the regularized conditional log-likelihood objective $\sum_{i=1}^{N} \log p_\theta(a^{(i)} \mid q^{(i)}, R^{(i)}) + \lambda \cdot ||\theta||_2^2$. At test time, we return the most probable answers based on $p_\theta(a \mid q, R)$ (details in Section 4). While semantic parsers generally return a set, in COMPLEXQUESTIONS 87% of the answers are a singleton set.

Features A candidate span a often has multiple mentions in the result set R. Therefore, our feature function $\phi(\cdot)$ computes the average of the features extracted from each mention. The main information sources used are the match between the candidate answer itself and the question (top of Table 2) and the match between the context of a candidate answer in a specific mention and the question (bottom of Table 2), as well as the Google rank in which the mention appeared.

Lexicalized features are useful for our task, but the number of training examples is too small to train a fully lexicalized model. Therefore, we define lexicalized features over the 50 most common non-stop words in COMPLEXQUESTIONS. Last, our context features are defined in a 6-word window around the candidate answer mention, where the feature value decays exponentially as the distance from the candidate answer mention grows. Overall, we compute a total of 892 features over the dataset.

4 Experiments

COMPLEXQUESTIONS contains 1,300 training examples and 800 test examples. We performed 5 random 70/30 splits of the training set for development. We computed POS tags and named entities with Stanford CoreNLP (Manning et al., 2014). We did not employ any co-reference resolution tool in this work. If after candidate extraction, we do not find the gold answer in the top-$K(=140)$ candidates, we discard the example, resulting in a training set of 856 examples.

We compare our model, WEBQA, to STAGG (Yih et al., 2015) and COMPQ (Bao et al., 2016), which are to the best of our knowledge the highest performing semantic parsing models on both COMPLEXQUESTIONS and WEBQUESTIONS. For these systems, we only report test F_1 numbers that are provided in the original papers, as we do not have access to the code or predictions. We evaluate models by computing average F_1, the official evaluation metric defined for COMPLEXQUESTIONS. This measure computes the F_1

Template	Description
SPAN LENGTH	Indicator for the number of tokens in a_m
TF-IDF	Binned and raw tf-idf scores of a_m for every span length
CAPITALIZED	Whether a_m is capitalized
STOP WORD	Fraction of words in a_m that are stop words
IN QUEST	Fraction of words in a_m that are in q
IN QUEST+COMMON	Conjunction of IN QUEST with common words in q
IN QUESTION DIST.	Max./avg. cosine similarity between a_m words and q words
WH+NE	Conjunction of wh-word in q and named entity tags (NE) of a_m
WH+POS	Conjunction of wh-word in q and part-of-speech tags of a_m
NE+NE	Conjunction of NE tags in q and NE tags in a_m
NE+COMMON	Conjunction of NE tags in a_m and common words in q
MAX-NE	Whether a_m is a NE with maximal span (not contained in another NE)
YEAR	Binned indicator for year if a_m is a year
CTXT MATCH	Max./avg. over non stop words in q, for whether a q word occurs around a_m, weighted by distance from a_m
CTXT SIMILARITY	Max./avg. cosine similarity over non-stop words in q, between q words and words around a_m, weighted by distance
IN TITLE	Whether a_m is in the title part of the snippet
CTXT ENTITY	Indicator for whether a common word appears between a_m and a named entity that appears in q
GOOGLE RANK	Binned snippet rank of a_m in the result set R

Table 2: Features templates used to extract features from each answer candidate mention a_m. Cosine similarity is computed with pre-trained GloVe embeddings (Pennington et al., 2014). The definition of *common words* and *weighting by distance* is in the body of the paper.

System	Dev		Test		
	F_1	p@1	F_1	p@1	MRR
STAGG	-	-	37.7	-	-
COMPQ	-	-	**40.9**	-	-
WEBQA	35.3	36.4	32.6	33.5	42.4
WEBQA-EXTRAPOL	-	-	34.4	-	-
COMPQ-SUBSET	-	-	48.5	-	-
WEBQA-SUBSET	53.6	55.1	51.9	53.4	67.5

Table 3: Results on development (average over random splits) and test set. Middle: results on all examples. Bottom: results on the subset where candidate extraction succeeded.

between the set of answers returned by the system and the set of gold answers, and averages across questions. To allow WEBQA to return a set rather than a single answer, we return the most probable answer a^* as well as any answer a such that $(\phi(q, R, a^*)^\top \theta - \phi(q, R, a)^\top \theta) < 0.5$. We also compute precision@1 and Mean Reciprocal Rank (MRR) for WEBQA, since we have a ranking over answers. To compute metrics we lowercase the gold and predicted spans and perform exact string match.

Table 3 presents the results of our evaluation. WEBQA obtained 32.6 F_1 (33.5 p@1, 42.4 MRR) compared to 40.9 F_1 of COMPQ. Our candidate extraction step finds the correct answer in the top-K candidates in 65.9% of development examples and 62.7% of test examples. Thus, our test F_1 on examples for which candidate extraction succeeded (WEBQA-SUBSET) is 51.9 (53.4 p@1, 67.5 MRR).

We were able to indirectly compare WEBQA-SUBSET to COMPQ: Bao et al. (2016) graciously provided us with the predictions of COMPQ when it was trained on COMPLEXQUESTIONS, WEBQUESTIONS, and SIMPLEQUESTIONS. In this

setup, COMPQ obtained 42.2 F_1 on the test set (compared to 40.9 F_1, when training on COMPLEXQUESTIONS only, as we do). Restricting the predictions to the subset for which candidate extraction succeeded, the F_1 of COMPQ-SUBSET is 48.5, which is 3.4 F_1 points lower than WEBQA-SUBSET, which was trained on less data.

Not using a KB, results in a considerable disadvantage for WEBQA. KB entities have normalized descriptions, and the answers have been annotated according to those descriptions. We, conversely, find answers on the web and often predict a correct answer, but get penalized due to small string differences. E.g., for *"what is the longest river in China?"* we answer *"yangtze river"*, while the gold answer is *"yangtze"*. To quantify this effect we manually annotated all 258 examples in the first random development set split, and determined whether string matching failed, and we actually returned the gold answer.[2] This improved performance from 53.6 F_1 to 56.6 F_1 (on examples that passed candidate extraction). Further normalizing gold and predicted entities, such that *"Hillary Clinton"* and *"Hillary Rodham Clinton"* are unified, improved F_1 to 57.3 F_1. Extrapolating this to the test set would result in an F_1 of 34.4 (WEBQA-EXTRAPOL in Table 3) and 34.9, respectively.

Last, to determine the contribution of each feature template, we performed ablation tests and we present the five feature templates that resulted in the largest drop to performance on the development set in Table 4. Note that TF-IDF is by far the most impactful feature, leading to a large drop of 12 points in performance. This shows the importance of using the redundancy of the web for our QA system.

Analysis To understand the success of WEBQA on different compositionality types, we manu-

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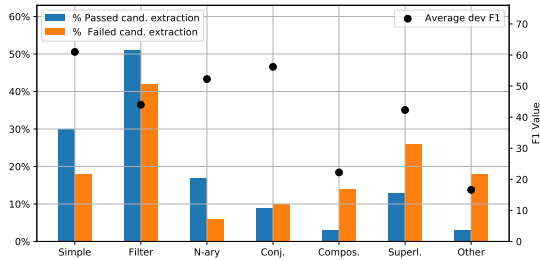[2] We also publicly release our annotations.

Figure 2: Proportion of examples that passed or failed candidate extraction for each compositionality type, as well as average F_1 for each compositionality type. COMPOSITION and SUPERLATIVE questions are difficult for WEBQA.

Feature Template	$\mathbf{F_1}$	Δ
WEBQA	53.6	
- MAX-NE	51.8	-1.8
- NE+COMMON	51.8	-1.8
- GOOGLE RANK	51.4	-2.2
- IN QUEST	50.1	-3.5
- TF-IDF	41.5	-12

Table 4: Feature ablation results. The five features that lead to largest drop in performance are displayed.

ally annotated the compositionality type of 100 random examples that passed candidate extraction and 50 random examples that failed candidate extraction. Figure 2 presents the results of this analysis, as well as the average F_1 obtained for each compositionality type on the 100 examples that passed candidate extraction (note that a question can belong to multilpe compositionality types). We observe that COMPOSITION and SUPERLATIVE questions are challenging for WEBQA, while SIMPLE, FILTER, and N-ARY quesitons are easier (recall that a large fraction of the questions in COMPLEXQUESTIONS are N-ARY). Interestingly, WEBQA performs well on CONJUNCTION questions (*"what film victor garber starred in that rob marshall directed"*), possibly because the correct answer can obtain signal from multiple snippets.

An advantage of finding answers to questions from web documents compared to semantic parsing, is that we do not need to learn the "language of the KB". For example, the question *"who is the governor of California 2010"* can be matched directly to web snippets, while in Freebase (Bollacker et al., 2008) the word *"governor"* is expressed by a complex predicate $\lambda x.\exists z.\text{GoverPos}(x, z) \wedge \text{PosTitle}(z, \text{Governor})$. This could provide a partial explanation for the reasonable performance of WEBQA.

5 Related Work

Our model WEBQA performs QA using web snippets, similar to traditional QA systems like MULDER (Kwok et al., 2001) and AskMSR (Brill et al., 2002). However, it it enjoys the advances in commerical search engines of the last decade, and uses a simple log-linear model, which has become standard in Natural Language Processing.

Similar to this work, Yao et al. (2014) analyzed a semantic parsing benchmark with a simple QA system. However, they employed a semantic parser that is limited to applying a single binary relation on a single entity, while we develop a QA system that does not use the target KB at all.

Last, in parallel to this work Chen et al. (2017) evaluated an unstructured QA system against semantic parsing benchmarks. However, their focus was on examining the contributions of multi-task learning and distant supervision to training rather than to compare to state-of-the-art semantic parsers.

6 Conclusion

We propose in this paper to evaluate semantic parsing-based QA systems by comparing them to a web-based QA baseline. We evaluate such a QA system on COMPLEXQUESTIONS and find that it obtains reasonable performance. We analyze performance and find that COMPOSITION and SUPERLATIVE questions are challenging for a web-based QA system, while CONJUNCTION and N-ARY questions can often be handled by our QA model.

Reproducibility Code, data, annotations, and experiments for this paper are available on the CodaLab platform at `https://worksheets.codalab.org/worksheets/0x91d77db37e0a4bbbaeb37b8972f4784f/`.

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