

Theorem: It is undecidable whether or not the languages generated by two given context-free grammars have an empty intersection.

Proof: By a reduction of post correspondence problem (which is known to be undecidable) to the empty intersection problem.

Given a set d_1, \dots, d_n of dominos where, for $i=1, \dots, n$, the top string of d_i is w_i and the bottom string of $d_i = x_i$. Consider the context-free grammars

$$\begin{aligned} W \rightarrow w_1 W d_1 \mid w_2 W d_2 \mid \dots \mid w_n W d_n \mid w_1 d_1 \mid w_2 d_2 \mid \dots \mid w_n d_n \mid \\ \text{and} \\ X \rightarrow x_1 X d_1 \mid x_2 X d_2 \mid \dots \mid x_n X d_n \mid x_1 d_1 \mid x_2 d_2 \mid \dots \mid x_n d_n \mid \end{aligned}$$

Now notice that the given instance of PCS has a match exactly when the intersection of the languages generated by the resulting grammars above is nonempty.

Theorem: It is undecidable whether or not a given context-free grammar is ambiguous.

Proof: Given an instance of PCP, create the grammar G with productions $S \rightarrow W \mid X$ and the productions for X and W above. Now the given instance has a match exactly when G is ambiguous.

[Rob van Glabbeek](mailto:rvg@cs.stanford.edu)

rvg@cs.stanford.edu