Universiteit Utrecht

[Faculty of **Science**
Information and Computing Sciences]

Talen en Compilers

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2. Grammars and Parsing

This lecture

Grammars and Parsing

- Recap
- Grammars
- Examples of context-free grammars
- Ambiguity
- Parsing, concrete and abstract syntax

2.1 Recap

Previous lecture

Alphabet A finite set of symbols.

Language A set of words/sentences, i.e., sequences of symbols from the alphabet.

We have discussed different ways to define languages:

- by enumerating all elements,
- using a predicate,
- using an inductive definition

Example: palindromes

The language of palindromes PAL is defined as follows:

- ε is in PAL,
- a, b, c are in PAL,
- if P is in PAL, then aPa, bPb and cPc are also in PAL.

2.2 Grammars

Grammars

A **grammar** is a formalism to describe a language inductively.

Grammars consist of rewrite rules, called **productions**.

A grammar for palindromes

$$
\begin{aligned}
P &\to \varepsilon \\
P &\to \mathtt{a} \\
P &\to \mathtt{b} \\
P &\to \mathtt{c} \\
P &\to \mathtt{a}P\mathtt{a} \\
P &\to \mathtt{b}P\mathtt{b} \\
P &\to \mathtt{c}P\mathtt{c}
\end{aligned}
$$

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\end{aligned}
$$

The language of palindromes PAL is defined as follows:

- ε is in PAL,
- a, b, c are in PAL,
- if P is in PAL, then aPa, bPb and cPc are also in PAL.

Very close to the inductive definition.

Grammars

$P \rightarrow \varepsilon$
$P \rightarrow \mathtt{a}$
$P \rightarrow \mathtt{b}$
$P \rightarrow \mathtt{c}$
$P \rightarrow \mathtt{a}P\mathtt{a}$
$P \rightarrow \mathtt{b}P\mathtt{b}$
$P \rightarrow \mathtt{c}P\mathtt{c}$

- A grammar consists of multiple **productions**. Productions can be seen as rewrite rules. If the left hand side matches, it can be replaced by the right hand side.

Grammars

$P \to \varepsilon$
$P \to \mathtt{a}$
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- A grammar consists of multiple **productions**. Productions can be seen as rewrite rules. If the left hand side matches, it can be replaced by the right hand side.
- The grammar makes use of auxiliary symbols – called **nonterminals** – that are not part of the alphabet and hence cannot be part of the final word/sentence.

Grammars

$P \rightarrow \varepsilon$
$P \rightarrow a$
$P \rightarrow b$
$P \rightarrow c$
$P \rightarrow aPa$
$P \rightarrow bPb$
$P \rightarrow cPc$

- A grammar consists of multiple **productions**. Productions can be seen as rewrite rules. If the left hand side matches, it can be replaced by the right hand side.
- The grammar makes use of auxiliary symbols – called **nonterminals** – that are not part of the alphabet and hence cannot be part of the final word/sentence.
- The symbols from the alphabet are also called **terminals**.

Derivation

Starting from a nonterminal, we can rewrite successively until we reach a string of terminals:

$P \to \varepsilon$
$P \to \texttt{a}$
$P \to \texttt{b}$
$P \to \texttt{c}$
$P \to \texttt{a}P\texttt{a}$
$P \to \texttt{b}P\texttt{b}$
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P

Derivation

Starting from a nonterminal, we can rewrite successively until we reach a string of terminals:

$P \rightarrow \varepsilon$
$P \rightarrow a$
$P \rightarrow b$
$P \rightarrow c$
$P \rightarrow aPa$
$P \rightarrow bPb$
$P \rightarrow cPc$

$$
\begin{aligned}
& P \\
\Rightarrow\ & aPa
\end{aligned}
$$

Derivation

Starting from a nonterminal, we can rewrite successively until we reach a string of terminals:

$P \to \varepsilon$
$P \to a$
$P \to b$
$P \to c$
$P \to aPa$
$P \to bPb$
$P \to cPc$

P
$\Rightarrow aPa$
$\Rightarrow acPca$

Derivation

Starting from a nonterminal, we can rewrite successively until we reach a string of terminals:

$P \to \varepsilon$
$P \to a$
$P \to b$
$P \to c$
$P \to aPa$
$P \to bPb$
$P \to cPc$

$$\begin{aligned} & P \\ \Rightarrow\ & aPa \\ \Rightarrow\ & acPca \\ \Rightarrow\ & accPcca \end{aligned}$$

Derivation

$$\begin{aligned} P &\rightarrow \varepsilon \\ P &\rightarrow \mathtt{a} \\ P &\rightarrow \mathtt{b} \\ P &\rightarrow \mathtt{c} \\ P &\rightarrow \mathtt{a}P\mathtt{a} \\ P &\rightarrow \mathtt{b}P\mathtt{b} \\ P &\rightarrow \mathtt{c}P\mathtt{c} \end{aligned}$$

Starting from a nonterminal, we can rewrite successively until we reach a string of terminals:

$$\begin{aligned} & P \\ \Rightarrow\ & \mathtt{a}P\mathtt{a} \\ \Rightarrow\ & \mathtt{ac}P\mathtt{ca} \\ \Rightarrow\ & \mathtt{acc}P\mathtt{cca} \\ \Rightarrow\ & \mathtt{accbcca} \end{aligned}$$

Derivation

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\end{aligned}
$$

$$
\begin{aligned}
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\Rightarrow\ & \mathtt{ac}P\mathtt{ca} \\
\Rightarrow\ & \mathtt{acc}P\mathtt{cca} \\
\Rightarrow\ & \mathtt{accbcca}
\end{aligned}
$$

We call such a sequence a **derivation**. All strings that can be derived from a nonterminal are in the **language generated by the nonterminal**.

Multiple nonterminals

Grammars can have multiple nonterminals:

$$
\begin{aligned}
S &\rightarrow A \\
S &\rightarrow B \\
A &\rightarrow \texttt{c} \\
A &\rightarrow AA \\
B &\rightarrow \texttt{d} \\
B &\rightarrow BB
\end{aligned}
$$

Multiple nonterminals

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One nonterminal in the grammar is called the **start symbol**.

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\mathsf{B} &\rightarrow \mathtt{d} \\
\mathsf{B} &\rightarrow \mathsf{BB}
\end{aligned}
$$

One nonterminal in the grammar is called the **start symbol**.

If not otherwise mentioned, we implicitly assume that the nonterminal on the left hand side of the first production is the start symbol (and we often, but not always, call it 'S').

Multiple nonterminals

Grammars can have multiple nonterminals:

S → A
S → B
A → c
A → AA
B → d
B → BB

Question

What is the language generated by this grammar (i.e., generated by S)?

One nonterminal in the grammar is called the **start symbol**.

If not otherwise mentioned, we implicitly assume that the nonterminal on the left hand side of the first production is the start symbol (and we often, but not always, call it 'S').

Context-free grammars

The grammars we consider are restricted:

- the left hand side of a production always consists of a single nonterminal

Grammars with this restriction are called **context-free**.

Remarks about grammars

- Not all languages can be generated/described by a grammar.
- Multiple grammars may describe the same language.
- Grammars which generate the same language are equivalent.
- Even fewer languages can be described by a context-free grammar.
- Languages that can be described by a context-free grammar are called **context-free languages**.
- Context-free languages are relatively easy to deal with algorithmically, and therefore most programming languages are context-free languages.

Multiple grammars for one language

$S \to aS$
$S \to a$

$S \to Sa$
$S \to a$

$S \to SS$
$S \to a$

$S \to AS$
$S \to A$
$A \to a$

2.3 Examples of context-free grammars

Language of (single) digits

$$
\begin{aligned}
&\text{Dig} \to 0\\
&\text{Dig} \to 1\\
&\text{Dig} \to 2\\
&\text{Dig} \to 3\\
&\text{Dig} \to 4\\
&\text{Dig} \to 5\\
&\text{Dig} \to 6\\
&\text{Dig} \to 7\\
&\text{Dig} \to 8\\
&\text{Dig} \to 9
\end{aligned}
$$

Language of (single) digits

Dig → 0
Dig → 1
Dig → 2
Dig → 3
Dig → 4
Dig → 5
Dig → 6
Dig → 7
Dig → 8
Dig → 9

Multiple productions for the same nonterminal can be joined:

Dig → 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9

(We still count ten productions!)

Sequences of digits

> Digs $\rightarrow \varepsilon$ | Dig Digs

Sequences of digits

$$\text{Digs} \rightarrow \varepsilon \mid \text{Dig Digs}$$

This grammar allows sequences with leading zeros:

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Digs} &\Rightarrow \text{Dig Digs} \Rightarrow \text{Dig Dig Digs} \Rightarrow \text{Dig Dig Dig Digs} \\ &\Rightarrow \text{Dig Dig Dig}\ \varepsilon \Rightarrow^* 007\end{aligned}$$

The symbol '$\Rightarrow^*$' means that we make multiple (zero or more, but finitely many) derivation steps at once.

Sequences of digits

$\text{Digs} \rightarrow \varepsilon \mid \text{Dig Digs}$

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The symbol '$\Rightarrow^{*}$' means that we make multiple (zero or more, but finitely many) derivation steps at once.

We also allow the star notation on the right hand side of a grammar to abbreviate zero or more occurrences of symbols:

$\text{Digs} \rightarrow \text{Dig}^{*}$

Natural numbers

To disallow leading zeros we introduce another nonterminal:

> Dig-0 $\rightarrow$ 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9

Natural numbers

To disallow leading zeros we introduce another nonterminal:

> Dig-0 $\rightarrow$ 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9

> Nat $\rightarrow$ 0 | Dig-0 Digs

Integers

> Sign → + | -
> Int → Sign Nat | Nat

The sign is optional.

Integers

$$
\begin{aligned}
\text{Sign} &\rightarrow + \mid - \\
\text{Int} &\rightarrow \text{Sign Nat} \mid \text{Nat}
\end{aligned}
$$

The sign is optional.

There is an abbreviation for optional symbols as well:

$$\text{Int} \rightarrow \text{Sign}?\ \text{Nat}$$

Letters

Letters are much like digits.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{SLetter} &\rightarrow \mathtt{a} \mid \mathtt{b} \mid \ldots \mid \mathtt{z} \\ \text{CLetter} &\rightarrow \mathtt{A} \mid \mathtt{B} \mid \ldots \mid \mathtt{Z} \end{aligned}$$

(52 productions in total.)

Letters

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$$\text{CLetter} \rightarrow \mathtt{A} \mid \mathtt{B} \mid \ldots \mid \mathtt{Z}$$

(52 productions in total.)

$$\text{Letter} \rightarrow \text{SLetter} \mid \text{CLetter}$$

Identifiers

In many languages, identifiers must not start with a number, but can have numbers following an initial letter.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{AlphaNum} &\rightarrow \text{Letter} \mid \text{Dig} \\ \text{Identifier} &\rightarrow \text{SLetter AlphaNum}^{*} \end{aligned}$$

Variations are easy to define (such as allowing certain symbols, for example '_', as well).

A fragment of C#

$$
\begin{aligned}
\text{Stat} &\rightarrow \text{Var} = \text{Expr}\ ;\\
&\mid\ \texttt{if}\ (\ \text{Expr}\ )\ \text{Stat}\ \texttt{else}\ \text{Stat}\\
&\mid\ \texttt{while}\ (\ \text{Expr}\ )\ \text{Stat}\\
\text{Expr} &\rightarrow \text{Integer}\\
&\mid\ \text{Var}\\
&\mid\ \text{Expr Op Expr}\\
\text{Var} &\rightarrow \text{Identifier}\\
\text{Op} &\rightarrow \text{Sign} \mid *
\end{aligned}
$$

2.4 Ambiguity

Multiple derivations for one sentence

Consider the grammar:

> S → SS
> S → a

These are three derivations of aaa:

$$S \Rightarrow SS \Rightarrow aS \Rightarrow aSS \Rightarrow aSa \Rightarrow aaa \tag{1}$$

$$S \Rightarrow SS \Rightarrow aS \Rightarrow aSS \Rightarrow aaS \Rightarrow aaa \tag{2}$$

$$S \Rightarrow SS \Rightarrow Sa \Rightarrow SSa \Rightarrow aSa \Rightarrow aaa \tag{3}$$

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These are three derivations of aaa:

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$$S \Rightarrow SS \Rightarrow aS \Rightarrow aSS \Rightarrow aaS \Rightarrow aaa \quad (2)$$

$$S \Rightarrow SS \Rightarrow Sa \Rightarrow SSa \Rightarrow aSa \Rightarrow aaa \quad (3)$$

Question

Why is (3) fundamentally different from (1) and (2)?

Ambiguity

A grammar where every sentence corresponds to a unique parse tree is called **unambiguous**.

If this is not the case, the grammar is called **ambiguous**.

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The grammar

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is thus ambiguous.

Question

Why are ambiguous grammars bad?

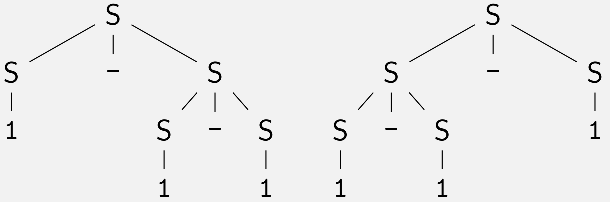
Ambiguity and semantics

Let's look ahead for a moment. Later we are going to assign **semantics** to parse trees.

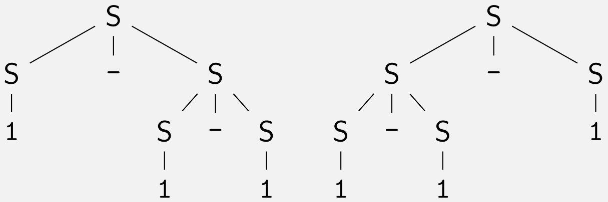
Assume the (ambiguous) grammar:

> S → S–S
> S → 1

Now the sentence 1–1–1 corresponds to two parse trees:



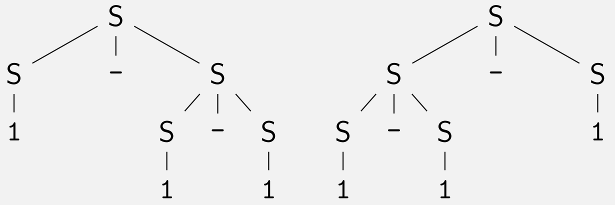
Ambiguity and semantics – contd.



Using the standard semantics,

- the left tree corresponds to the value 1,
- the right tree corresponds to the value −1.

Ambiguity and semantics – contd.



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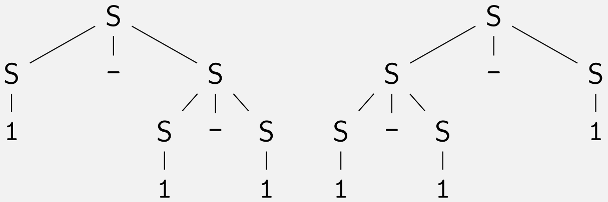
Hence, **ambiguous grammars lead to ambiguous semantics**.

Ambiguity and semantics – contd.



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Hence, **ambiguous grammars lead to ambiguous semantics**.

Later, we will also see that ambiguous grammars can cause inefficiency.

Words of warning: syntax vs. semantics

Do not immediately associate semantics with a sentence:

> `1-1-1`

A language defines which sentences are syntactically correct. Assigning meaning to these sentences is a separate step.

Words of warning: syntax vs. semantics

Do not immediately associate semantics with a sentence:

> `1-1-1`

A language defines which sentences are syntactically correct. Assigning meaning to these sentences is a separate step.

Depending on the semantics we assign, a string such as `1-1-1` can have many different meanings:

- it could mean the value 1 or -1,
- it could mean the 1st of January in year 1,
- it could mean that the first item in a table should be copied three times,
- ...

Dangling else

A famous ambiguity problem, demonstrated using a simplified grammar:

$$
\begin{aligned}
S \rightarrow\ & \texttt{if}\ \texttt{b}\ \texttt{then}\ S\ \texttt{else}\ S \\
\mid\ & \texttt{if}\ \texttt{b}\ \texttt{then}\ S \\
\mid\ & \texttt{a}
\end{aligned}
$$

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A famous ambiguity problem, demonstrated using a simplified grammar:

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Consider:

```
if b then if b then a else a
```

Dangling else

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|\ & \texttt{if b then } \mathsf{S} \\
|\ & \texttt{a}
\end{aligned}
$$

Consider:

```
if b then if b then a else a
```

Exercise 2.17

Ambiguity is a property of grammars

All of these grammars describe the same language:

$$S \to aS$$
$$S \to a$$

$$S \to Sa$$
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Are all of them ambiguous?

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$S \to A$
$A \to a$

Are all of them ambiguous?

Note: some CF languages have only ambiguous grammars.

Grammar transformations

A **grammar transformation** is a mapping from one grammar to another, such that the generated language remains the same.

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Formally:

A grammar transformation maps a grammar G to another grammar G′ such that

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Grammar transformations can help us to transform grammars with undesirable properties (such as ambiguity) into grammars with other (hopefully better) properties.

Most grammar transformations are motivated by facilitating parsing.

2.5 Parsing, concrete and abstract syntax

Parsing problem

Given a grammar G and a string s, the **parsing problem** is to decide whether or not $s \in L(G)$.

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Given a grammar G and a string s, the **parsing problem** is to decide whether or not s $\in L(\mathsf{G})$.

Furthermore, if s $\in L(\mathsf{G})$, we want evidence/proof/an explanation why this is the case, usually in the form of a parse tree.

Parse trees in Haskell

Consider this grammar (What is the language? Is it ambiguous?)

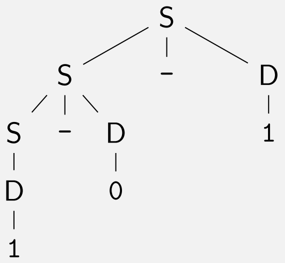
> $S \rightarrow S\text{–}D \mid D$
> $D \rightarrow 0 \mid 1$

Parse trees in Haskell

Consider this grammar (What is the language? Is it ambiguous?)

> S → S–D | D
> D → 0 | 1

The string 1–0–1 corresponds to the parse tree



Parse trees in Haskell – contd.

Idea

Let us represent nonterminals as **datatypes**:

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- In every node of the parse tree, we have a choice between one of the productions for the nonterminal in question.
- If we want to build a value of a Haskell datatype, we have a choice between any of that datatype's **constructors**.

Parse trees in Haskell – contd.

Idea

Let us represent nonterminals as **datatypes**:

- In every node of the parse tree, we have a choice between one of the productions for the nonterminal in question.
- If we want to build a value of a Haskell datatype, we have a choice between any of that datatype's **constructors**.

Hence, productions become constructors.

Parse trees in Haskell – contd.

S → S-D | D D → 0 | 1	**data** S = ... | ... **data** D = ... | ...

What names to choose for the constructors?

Parse trees in Haskell – contd.

S → S–D | D	**data** S = ... | ...
D → 0 | 1	**data** D = ... | ...

What names to choose for the constructors? – Our choice, but let's try to pick somewhat meaningful names.

Parse trees in Haskell – contd.

$S \rightarrow S\text{-}D \mid D$	**data** S = Minus ... | SingleDigit ...
$D \rightarrow 0 \mid 1$	**data** D = Zero ... | One ...

What names to choose for the constructors? – Our choice, but let's try to pick somewhat meaningful names.

And what do we do for each of the nonterminals on the right hand sides of the productions?

Parse trees in Haskell – contd.

$S \rightarrow S\text{–}D \mid D$ $D \rightarrow 0 \mid 1$	**data** S = Minus ... | SingleDigit ... **data** D = Zero ... | One ...

What names to choose for the constructors? – Our choice, but let's try to pick somewhat meaningful names.

And what do we do for each of the nonterminals on the right hand sides of the productions? – They become arguments of the constructor.

Parse trees in Haskell – contd.

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And what do we do with the terminals on the right hand sides of the productions?

Parse trees in Haskell – contd.

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What names to choose for the constructors? – Our choice, but let's try to pick somewhat meaningful names.

And what do we do for each of the nonterminals on the right hand sides of the productions? – They become arguments of the constructor.

And what do we do with the terminals on the right hand sides of the productions? – Do we actually need them?

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Parse trees in Haskell – contd.

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What names to choose for the constructors? – Our choice, but let's try to pick somewhat meaningful names.

And what do we do for each of the nonterminals on the right hand sides of the productions? – They become arguments of the constructor.

And what do we do with the terminals on the right hand sides of the productions? – Do we actually need them? – No, the choice of the constructor already contains enough information to **reconstruct** the terminals.

Concrete and abstract syntax

The grammar and the datatype describe the language.

concrete: **abstract** syntax:

$$\begin{array}{l} S \rightarrow S\text{–}D \mid D \\ D \rightarrow 0 \mid 1 \end{array}$$

$$\begin{array}{l} \textbf{data}\ S = \text{Minus}\ S\ D \mid \text{SingleDigit}\ D \\ \textbf{data}\ D = \text{Zero} \mid \text{One} \end{array}$$

Concrete and abstract syntax

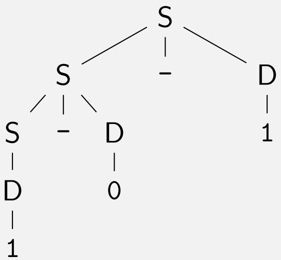
The grammar and the datatype describe the language.

concrete: **abstract** syntax:

S → S−D | D
D → 0 | 1

data S = Minus S D | SingleDigit D
data D = Zero | One

The string 1−0−1 corresponds to the parse tree



Haskell

```
Minus (Minus (SingleDigit One)
             Zero)
      One
```

Semantic functions

S → S-D | D
D → 0 | 1

```
data S = Minus S D | SingleDigit D
data D = Zero | One
```

Back to the string representation:

```
printS :: S → String
printS (Minus s d)       = printS s ++ "-" ++ printD d
printS (SingleDigit d) = printD d
printD :: D → String
printD Zero                = "0"
printD One                 = "1"
```

Semantic functions

$S \rightarrow S\text{-}D \mid D$
$D \rightarrow 0 \mid 1$

```
data S = Minus S D | SingleDigit D
data D = Zero | One
```

Back to the string representation:

```
printS :: S → String
printS (Minus s d)       = printS s ++ "-" ++ printD d
printS (SingleDigit d) = printD d
printD :: D → String
printD Zero               = "0"
printD One                = "1"
```

```
sample = Minus (Minus (SingleDigit One) Zero) One
printS sample   evaluates to    "1-0-1"
```

Semantic functions – contd.

$$S \rightarrow S\text{–}D \mid D \qquad D \rightarrow 0 \mid 1$$

data S = Minus S D | SingleDigit D
data D = Zero | One

Another semantic function – evaluation:

```
evalS :: S → Int
evalS (Minus s d)       = evalS s − evalD d
evalS (SingleDigit d) = evalD d
evalD :: D → Int
evalD Zero              = 0
evalD One               = 1
```

Semantic functions – contd.

S → S–D | D D → 0 | 1	**data** S = Minus S D | SingleDigit D **data** D = Zero | One

Another semantic function – evaluation:

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evalS (Minus s d)       = evalS s − evalD d
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evalD :: D → Int
evalD Zero              = 0
evalD One               = 1
```

```
sample = Minus (Minus (SingleDigit One) Zero) One
evalS sample   evaluates to   0
```

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