Ontology learning as a use case for neural-symbolic integration

Pascal Hitzler et al.
AIFB, University of Karlsruhe, Germany

Abstract

We argue that the field of neural-symbolic integration is in need of identifying application scenarios for guiding further research. We furthermore argue that ontology learning — as occuring in the context of semantic technologies — provides such an application scenario with potential for success and high impact for neural-symbolic integration.

1 Neural-Symbolic Integration

Intelligent systems based on symbolic knowledge processing on the one hand, and on artificial neural networks (also called connectionist systems) on the other, differ substantially. They are both standard approaches to artificial intelligence and it would be very desirable to combine the robust neural networking machinery with symbolic knowledge representation and reasoning paradigms like logic programming in such a way that the strengths of either paradigm will be retained. The importance of these efforts to bridge the gap between the connectionist and symbolic paradigms of Artificial Intelligence has been widely recognised. Since the amount of hybrid data which includes symbolic elements as well as statistical aspects and noise increases dramatically in diverse areas such as bioinformatics or text and web domains, this problem is of particular practical importance. The merging of theory (background knowledge) and data learning (learning from examples) in neural networks has been indicated to provide learning systems that are more effective than purely symbolic and purely connectionist systems, especially when data are noisy and described by real-valued as well as symbolic components.

The above results, due also to the massively parallel architecture of neural networks, contributed decisively to the growing interest in developing neural-symbolic systems, i.e. hybrid systems based on neural networks that are capable of learning from examples and background knowledge, and of performing reasoning tasks in a massively parallel fashion. Typically, translation algorithms from a symbolic to a connectionist representation and vice-versa are employed to provide either (i) a neural implementation of a logic, (ii) a logical characterization of a neural system, or (iii) a hybrid system that brings together features from connectionism and symbolic Artificial Intelligence.

However, while symbolic knowledge representation is highly recursive and well understood from a declarative point of view, neural networks encode knowledge implicitly in their weights as a result of learning and generalisation from raw data which is usually characterized by simple feature vectors. While significant theoretical progress has recently been made on knowledge representation and reasoning using neural networks on the one side and direct processing of symbolic and structured data with neural methods on the other side, the integration of neural computation and expressive logics such as first order logic is still in its early stages of methodological development. As for knowledge extraction, neural networks have been applied to a variety of real-world problems (e.g. in bioinformatics, engineering, robotics), having been particularly successful when data are noisy, but entirely satisfactory methods for extracting symbolic knowledge from such trained networks are still to be found, and principled problems to ensure the stability and learnability of recursive models currently impose severe restrictions on connectionist systems. In order to advance the state of the art, we believe that it is necessary to look at the biological inspiration for neural-symbolic integration, to use more formal approaches for translating between the connectionist and symbolic paradigms, and to pay more attention to potential application scenarios. We will argue in the following that ontology learning provides such an application scenario with potential for success and high impact.

2 The Need for Use Cases

The general motivation for research in the field of neural-symbolic integration just given arises from conceptual observations on the complementary nature of symbolic and neural-network-based artificial intelligence which we described. This conceptual perspective is sufficient for justifying the mainly foundations-driven lines of research being undertaken in this area so far. However, it appears that this conceptual approach to the study of neural-symbolic integration has now reached an impasse which requires the identification of use cases and application scenarios in order to drive future research.

Indeed, the theory of integrated neural-symbolic systems has reached a quite mature state but has not been tested so far on real application data. From the pioneering work by McCulloch and Pitts [22], a number of systems have been developed in the 80s and 90s, including Towell and Shavlik's KBANN [28], Shastri's SHRUTI [26], the work by Pinkas [24], Hölldobler [17], and d'Avila Garcez et al. [11; 13], to mention a few, and we refer to [8; 12; 15] for comprehensive literature overviews. These systems, however, have been developed for the study of general principles, and are in general not suitable for real data or application scenarios. Nevertheless, these studies provide methods which can be exploited for the development of tools for use cases, and significant progress can now only be expected by developing practical tools out of the fundamental research undertaken in the past.

The systems just mentioned — and most of the research on neural-symbolic integration to date — is based on propositional logic or similarly finitistic paradigms. Significantly large and expressible fragments of first order logic are rarely being used because the integration task becomes much harder due to the fact that the underlying language is infinite but shall be encoded using networks with a finite number of nodes [6]. The few approaches known to us for overcoming this problem are work on recursive autoassociative memory, RAAM, initiated by Pollack [25], which concerns the learning of recursive terms over a first-order language, and research based on a proposal by Hölldobler et al. [19], spelled out first for the propositional case in [18], and reported also in [16]. It is based on the idea that logic programs can be represented — at least up to subsumption equivalence [21] — by their associated single-step or immediate consequence operators. Such an operator can then be mapped to a function on the real numbers, which can under certain conditions in turn be encoded or approximated e.g. by feedforward networks with sigmoidal activation functions using an approximation theorem due to Funahashi [10]. Despite a number of sophisticated theoretical results building on the latter approach — reported e.g. in [19; 4; 16; 6; 5] —, first-order neural-symbolic integration still appears to be a widely open issue, where advances are very difficult, and it is very hard to judge to date to what extent the theoretical approaches can work in practice. The development of use cases with varying levels of expressive complexity are therefore needed in order to drive the development of methods for neural-symbolic integration beyond propositional logic.

3 Semantic Technologies and Ontology Learning

With amazing speed, the world wide web has become a widely spread means of communication and information sharing. Today, it is an integral part of our society, and will continue to grow. However, most of the available information cannot easily be processed by machines, but has to be read and interpreted by human readers. In order to overcome this limitation, a world-wide research effort is currently being undertaken, following the vision spelled out by Berners-Lee et al. [7], to make the contents of the world wide web accessible, interpretable, and usable by machines. The resulting extension of the World Wide Web is commonly being referred to as the *Semantic Web*, and the underlying technological infrastructure which is currently being developed is referred to as *Semantic Technologies*.

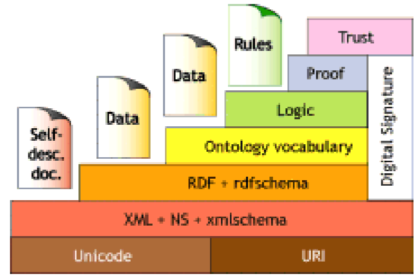

Figure 1: The Semantic Web Layer Cake

A key idea of the effort is that web content shall be provided with conceptual background — often referred to as *ontologies* [27] — which allows machines to put the information into a context in order to make it interpretable. These research efforts are grouped around the so-called semantic web layer cake, shown in Figure 1; it depicts subsequent layers of functionality and expressiveness, which shall be put in place incrementally. Most recently — having established RDF and RDFSchema as basic syntax — the OWL Web Ontology Language [2; 23], which is a decidable fragment of first-order logic, has been recommended by the world wide web consortium (W3C) for the ontology vocabulary.

Conceptual knowledge is provided by means of statements in some logical framework, and the discussion concerning suitable logics is still ongoing. Description Logics [3] will most likely play a major role, as they provide the foundation for OWL, but other approaches are also being considered. Currently, the development of an expressive rule-based logic layer on top of OWL for the inference of ontological knowledge is being investigated. But also fragments or OWL, including Horn and propositional languages, are being used, as different application scenarios necessitate different trade-offs between expressibility, conceptual and computational complexity, and scalability.

The construction of ontologies in whatever language, however, appears as a narrow bottleneck to the proliferation of the Semantic Web and other applications of Semantic Technologies. The success of the Semantic Web and its technologies indeed depends on the rapid and inexpensive development, coordination, and evolution of ontologies. Currently, however, these steps all require cumbersome engineering processes, associated with high costs and heavy time strain on domain experts. It is therefore desirable to automate the ontology creation and ontology refinement process, or at least to provide intelligent ontology learning systems that aid the ontology engineer in his task.

From a bird's eye's view, such a system should be able to handle terms and synonyms, in order to build abstract concepts and concept hierarchies from text-based websites. This basic ontological knowledge then needs to be further refined using relations and rules, in accordance with established or to-be-established standards for ontology representation. Current systems [9] use only very basic ontology languages, but technological advances are expected soon, since the need for expressive ontology languages is generally agreed upon.

4 Ontology Learning as Use Case

We argue that ontology learning as just described constitutes a highly interesting application area for neural-symbolic integration. As use case it appears to be conceptually sound, technically feasible, and of potential high impact. We present our arguments in the following.

4.1 Conceptually Sound

Machine learning methods based on artificial neural networks are known to perform well in the presence of noisy data. If ontologies are to be learned from such uncontrolled data like real existing webpages or other large data repositories, the handling of noise becomes a real issue. At the same time, making reasonable generalizations by learning from input data like html pages requires to take background knowledge into account, which in this case is naturally ontology-based and thus symbolic. Furthermore, the required output necessarily has to be in a logic-based format because it will have to be processed by standard tools from the semantic web context.

The ontology learning setting thus requires the integration of symbolic and neural-networks-based approaches, which is provided by the methods developed in the field of neural-symbolic integration.

While it cannot be argued that research on purely symbolic ontology learning methods still leaves much scope for further development, current results and systems indicate that machine learning of ontologies is a very hard task and that the most suitable methods and approaches still remain to be identified. We believe that in the end mixed strategies will have to be combined in order to arrive at practical tools, and due to the above mentioned reasons neural-symbolic learning components can be expected to play a significant role.

4.2 Technically Feasible

The specific nature of ontology research led to the development of a variety of different ontology representation languages, and various further modifications or these. Some of them are depicted in Figure 2. Standardization efforts are successfully being undertaken, but it is to be expected that a number of ontology languages of different logical expressivity will remain in practical use. This diversity is natural due to the different particular needs of application scenarios.

As we have identified earlier, the different levels of expressivity correspond well to the specific requirements on a use case scenario to drive neural-symbolic integration research. Propositional methods can be applied to the learning of concept hierarchies or DLP ontologies. Decidable fragments such as the different versions of OWL provide more sophisticated challenges without having to tackle the full range of difficulties inherent in first-order neural-symbolic integration. We also expect that the learning of conceptual knowledge should harmonize naturally with learning paradigms based on Kohonen maps or similar architectures.

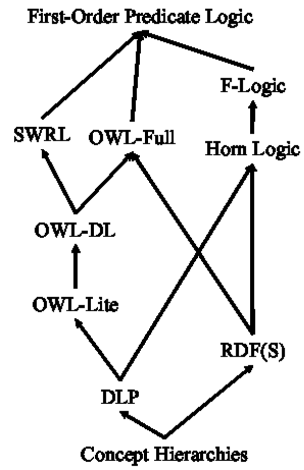

Figure 2: Some ontology languages. Arrows indicate inclusions between the languages. Concept hierarches are simple is-a hierarchies corresponding to certain fragments of propositional logic. The standard OWL [2; 23] already comes in different versions. DLP [14; 29] refers to a weak but practically interesting datalog fragment of OWL. F-Logic [20; 1] provides an alternative ontology paradigm.

4.3 High Potential Impact

The learning of ontologies from raw data has been identified as an important topic for the development of Semantic Technologies. These, in turn, are currently migrating into various research and application areas in artificial intelligence and elsewhere, including knowledge management, ambient computing, cognitive systems, bioinformatics, etc. At the same time, ontology learning appears to be a very hard task, and suitable new learning methods are currently being sought. Neural-symbolic integration has the potential for significant contricutions to this area and thus to one of the currently prominent streams in computer science.

5 Conclusions

We have identified ontology learning as a potential use case for neural-symbolic integration. We believe that this would further neural-symbolic integration as a field, and provide significant contributions to the development of Semantic Technologies.

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