Short paper

Detecting and correcting real-word errors in Tamil sentences

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Abstract. Spell checkers concern two types of errors namely non-word errors and real-word errors. Non-word errors fall into two sub-categories: First one is that the word itself is invalid; the other is that the word is valid but not present in a valid lexicon. Real-word error means that the word is valid but inappropriate in the context of the sentence. An approach to correcting real-word errors in Tamil language is proposed in this paper. A bigram probabilistic model is constructed to determine appropriateness of the valid word in the context of the sentence using a 3GB volume of corpora of Tamil text. In case of lacking appropriateness, the word is marked as a real-word error and minimum edit distance technique is used to find lexically similar words, and the appropriateness of such words is measured by a word-level n-gram language probabilistic model. A hash table with word-length as the key is used to speed up the search for words to check for the lexical similarity. Words of length differing less than two with the length of the ‘inappropriate’ word are considered to search in the hash table. Test results show that the suggestions generated by the system are with 98% accuracy as approved by a Scholar in Tamil language.

Keywords. Tamil, real-word error, bigram, minimum edit distance, error correction.

1 Introduction

Tamil language possesses a rich history of more than 2000 years and spoken primarily in Sri Lanka, India, Malaysia and Singapore. Tamil, a Dravidian language, an official language of Sri Lanka, is an agglutinative language having rich morphological structure. Tamil words are formed by lexical roots
followed by one or more suffixes (Navalar 1998, Sangar 2006, Nuhman 2013).

Spell checker is a tool that finds and corrects misspelt words in a text document. Spelling error detection and correction techniques are widely used by text editing systems, search engines, machine translation systems, speech recognition systems, text to speech and speech to text conversion systems, speech recognition systems and optical character recognition systems.

Misspelt words can be classified into two categories of errors namely non-word errors and real-word errors (Kukich 1992, Samanta and Chaudhuri 2013). Non-word errors fall into two sub-categories: First one is that the word itself is invalid (e.g. மளை) and the other is that the word is valid (e.g. அைகு) but not present in a valid lexicon. Real-word error means that the word is valid but inappropriate in the context of the sentence. For example, the sentence மளை நாட்டில் மளை பெய்யும் becomes non-sensical when the two words மளை and மளை are swapped.

In this paper, we focus on detecting and correcting real-word errors in Tamil sentences. We propose a method that uses bigram probabilistic model to detect the real-word errors and minimum edit distance technique to generate the suggestions for them while making use of a hash table to speed up the lookup.

2 Methodology

The input word is first checked with lexicon using a tree-based lookup algorithm to see whether the word is valid or invalid. Letter-level and word-level bigrams & trigrams techniques are used to generate suggestions for the invalid words with two different types of hash tables to speed up the search. After correcting all the invalid words in the sentences, real-word errors are detected and corrected. As highlighted in Figure 1, real-word errors are detected by considering the appropriateness of the words in the context of the sentence. The appropriateness of the words is determined by a bigram probabilistic model constructed using a pooled corpus of Tamil text (as described in Section 2.1). In case of lacking appropriateness, the word is marked as a real-word error, and then minimum edit distance (MED) technique is used to find lexically similar words. These words are taken as candidates for suggestions to the word of concern that is marked as a real-word error. The appropriateness of these candidates is measured by a word-level n-gram language probabilistic model (described in Section 2.2). Finally, the suggestions are refined by considering the probabilities of bigrams formed by each of these candidates with the word that follows the word of concern in the given sentence. It is interesting to note that the real-word errors are found
to be lexically similar to the word that was intended in the context. It is rather rare or unnatural in Tamil to see real-word errors that are not lexically similar.

**Fig. 1. Flowchart of the real-word error detection and correction steps**

2.1 **Bigram probabilistic model to determine the appropriateness of words**

The bigram probabilistic model constructed to determine the appropriateness of a word in the context of the sentence is described below. Let the sequence of words \((w_1, w_2, ..., w_n)\) denote the sentence in the corpus. Several Tamil corpora collected from various sources including Tamil news websites, Tamil articles, Tamil story books etc. were incrementally pooled into a single corpus. While they were collected, validity of words was checked by our system and texts were added to the corpus after correcting the invalid words. Also new valid words were added to the lexicon.

Let \((\text{\$start}, w_1), (w_1, w_2), (w_2, w_3), (w_3, w_4), ..., (w_{n-1}, w_n), (w_n, \text{\$end})\) denote the word-level bigrams of the corpus.

Let \(pm\) be the bigram probability matrix that is constructed for the corpus using Equation 1.

\[
pm_{ij} = p_r(w_j|w_i) = \frac{\text{count of bigram}(w_i, w_j) + 1}{\text{count of } w_i + n} \quad \text{for } i, j = 1, 2, \ldots n \quad (1)
\]

where \(n = |V|\) is the size of the vocabulary set \(V\).
The size of the vocabulary set is 1,778,676. To calculate the probability \( p_{mi} \), the Laplace smoothing technique (Jurafsky and Martin 2018) is used to get rid of zero probabilities. As the result of this smoothing, the probability \( \frac{c}{N_w} \) of a \( P_r(w_i | w_{i-1}) \) becomes \( \frac{c+1}{N_w+n} \). That is, the zero probability now becomes \( \frac{1}{N_w+n} \) after smoothing.

To determine the appropriateness of word \( w_i \), the probabilities \( P_r(w_i | w_{i-1}) \) and \( P_r(w_{i+1} | w_i) \) are considered. When either one of them is found to be too small (that is less than a prescribed threshold), \( w_i \) is considered inappropriate in the context of the sentence. In the experiments it found that words with bigram probabilities less than \( 10^{-6} \) are not suitable in the context of the sentences, as determined by the Scholar in Tamil language, and thus the value \( 10^{-6} \) is chosen to be a good threshold for word to be considered as appropriate or inappropriate.

Let us consider an example to see how to detect a real-word error in a sentence: ‘அவன் நெக்களைச் சாப்ெிட்டான்’. The bigram probabilistic model built for the corpus gives the bigram probabilities for this sentence as follows:

\[
\begin{align*}
P_r(அவன் | \text{Start}) &= 4.3623 \times 10^{-4} \\
P_r(னெக்களைச் | அவன்) &= 5.3920 \times 10^{-7} \\
P_r(சாப்ெிட்டான் | நெக்களைச்) &= 5.6221 \times 10^{-7} \\
P_r(\text{End} | சாப்ெிட்டான்) &= 8.7481 \times 10^{-5}
\end{align*}
\]

Of the above values, \( P_r(னெக்களைச் | அவன்) \) and \( P_r(சாப்ெிட்டான் | நெக்களைச்) \) are found to be less than the threshold value of \( 10^{-6} \), indicating the word ‘னெக்களைச்’ is inappropriate in this sentence making a real-word error.

How to find words lexically similar to the word under consideration, and how to choose the most appropriate one out the lexically similar ones are described below.

### 2.2 Finding lexically similar appropriate words

As the first step to generate suggestion for alternative words for inappropriate word \( w_i \) of length \( m_i \), lexically similar words are found using Minimum Edit Distance (MED) technique. MED is the minimum number of editing operation required to transform one string into another (Damerau 1964, Wagner and Fisher 1974). A lexicon word that gives minimum edit distance with erroneous word less than four is considered as a lexically similar suggestion for the erroneous word. For the erroneous word of length \( m_i \), words of lengths from \( m_i-1 \) to \( m_i+1 \) are checked for lexical similarity. This range was determined by analysing the words with wider range of length.
After generating the lexically similar words for real-word errors, the appropriateness of the generated words is measured by a word-level n-gram language probabilistic model. The model helps choosing suggestions for erroneous words from the constructed corpus. The model is constructed for the sentences in the corpus as follows:

Let the sequence of words \((w_1, w_2, w_3, \ldots, w_n)\) denote the sentence in the corpus, \((($\text{start}$), (w_1), (w_2), \ldots, (w_n), ($\text{end}$))\) denote its unigram sequence, \(((w_1, w_2), (w_2, w_3), \ldots, (w_{n-1}, w_n), (w_n, $\text{end}$))\) denote its bigram sequence and \(((w_1, w_2, w_3), (w_2, w_3, w_4), \ldots, (w_{n-2}, w_{n-1}, w_n), (w_{n-1}, w_n, $\text{end}$))\) denote its trigram sequence.

Let \(p_i\) denote a measure for a word \(w_i\) calculated by using Equation 2 as instructed in (Jurañsky and Martin 2018).

\[
p_i = \lambda_1 p_i^{(1)} + \lambda_2 p_i^{(2)} + \lambda_3 p_i^{(3)}
\]

where \(\lambda_i\)'s are positive scalars such that \(\lambda_1 + \lambda_2 + \lambda_3 = 1\),

\(p_i^{(1)}\) denotes the probability \(p_r(w_i)\) in the corpus,

\(p_i^{(2)}\) denotes the probability \(p_r(w_i \mid w_{i-1})\) in the corpus, and

\(p_i^{(3)}\) denotes the probability \(p_r(w_i \mid w_{i-2}, w_{i-1})\) in the corpus.

The values of \(\lambda_i\)'s are tuned by using a set of test sentences, and the respective values 0.05, 0.7 and 0.25 are found to be working well with the constructed corpus.

The probabilities \(p_i^{(1)}, p_i^{(2)}\) and \(p_i^{(3)}\) are calculated using Equations 3, 4 & 5 respectively listed below:

\[
p_i^{(1)} = p_r(w_i) = \frac{\text{count of } w_i}{\text{Total no. of words in the corpus}}
\]

\[
p_i^{(2)} = p_r(w_i \mid w_{i-1}) = \frac{\text{count of bigrams } (w_{i-1}, w_i)}{\text{count of } w_{i-1}}
\]

\[
p_i^{(3)} = p_r(w_i \mid w_{i-2}, w_{i-1}) = \frac{\text{count of trigrams } (w_{i-2}, w_{i-1}, w_i)}{\text{count of } (w_{i-2}, w_{i-1})}
\]

After calculating the measures for all the suggestion words for an erroneous word using Equation 2, the suggestion words are ranked based on their measures and top ranked words are picked as suggestions for the erroneous word under consideration. Up to five words that give \(p\) measure greater than the threshold value \(10^{-6}\) are considered for suggestions. The value \(10^{-6}\) is found to be a good threshold as being determined by analysing the words in...
the constructed corpus. Moreover, it is found that the number of appropriate words is found to be less than five in many cases.

Let \( \{\hat{w}_i^j\}_{j=1}^k \) be a set of top k candidates for suggestions for inappropriate word \( w_i \). Let \( w_{i+1} \) be the word that comes next to \( w_i \) in the sentence under consideration and the candidates \( \hat{w}_i^j \) that give the probability \( \hat{p}_j = p_r(w_{i+1} | \hat{w}_i^j) \) greater than \( 10^{-6} \) are taken as refined suggestions.

Let’s go back to our example sentence: ‘அவன் இங்களைச் சாப்டான்’.

Once the word ‘இங்களைச்’ is found to be inappropriate as already described in Section 2.1, the real-word error correction module generates lexically similar words for the word ‘இங்களைச்’ using MED: The module finds the words {‘இங்களைச்’, ‘இங்களைச்’, ‘இங்களைச்’, ‘இங்களைச்’, ‘செடைங்களைச்’, ‘சடைங்களைச்’, ‘சடைங்களைச்’} from the lexicon as lexically similar to ‘இங்களைச்’. These words are considered as candidates for suggestion.

The word-level n-gram language probabilistic model ranks these candidates based on their measures of \( p_i \)s that are calculated using Equation 2 as described above. For the example considered above, \( p \) measures for the suggestion candidates are:

\[
\begin{align*}
p_1 &= p(இங்களைச்) = 2.7173 \times 10^{-4} \\
p_2 &= p(இங்களைச்) = 1.7502 \times 10^{-5} \\
p_3 &= p(இங்களைச்) = 8.0030 \times 10^{-6} \\
p_4 &= p(இங்களைச்) = 8.3220 \times 10^{-6} \\
p_5 &= p(சடைங்களை) = 9.4058 \times 10^{-6} \\
p_6 &= p(சடைங்களை) = 2.8425 \times 10^{-8} \\
p_7 &= p(சடைங்களை) = 7.3924 \times 10^{-9}
\end{align*}
\]

After determining the measures of these lexically similar words, up to five words with measures more than a predetermined threshold \( 10^{-6} \) would be selected. For the above example, the words ‘இங்களைச்’, ‘இங்களைச்’, ‘இங்களைச்’, ‘செடைங்களைச்’ and ‘சடைங்களைச்’ would be selected as their measures are higher than the threshold of \( 10^{-6} \).

For these selected five words \( \hat{p}_j = P_r(w_{i+1} | \hat{w}_i^j)_{j=1...5} \) are obtained from the bigram probability matrix as follows:

\[
\begin{align*}
\hat{p}_1 &= P_r(சடைங்களைச் | இங்களைச்) = 2.3482 * 10^{-3} \\
\hat{p}_2 &= P_r(சடைங்களைச் | இங்களைச்) = 2.2393 * 10^{-3} \\
\hat{p}_3 &= P_r(சடைங்களைச் | இங்களைச்) = 5.6187 * 10^{-7}
\end{align*}
\]
\[ p_4 = P_r(\text{உயிர்ப்பாட்டு} | \text{புதைப்பாட்டு}) = 5.5821 \times 10^{-9} \]
\[ p_5 = P_r(\text{உயிர்ப்பாட்டு} | \text{செய்யப்பாட்டு}) = 5.6219 \times 10^{-9} \]

Of these values, \( P_r(\text{உயிர்ப்பாட்டு} | \text{புதைப்பாட்டு}) \) and \( P_r(\text{உயிர்ப்பாட்டு} | \text{செய்யப்பாட்டு}) \) are greater than the threshold value of \( 10^{-6} \) and thus the words \{‘புதைப்பாட்டு’, ‘செய்யப்பாட்டு’\} are given as refined suggestions for the real-word error ‘புதைப்பாட்டு’.

Time taken for generating lexically similar words for \( w_i \) is dependent on the lexicon size and lookup method. Fortunately, using a hash table is a good approach to speed up the lookup as an alternative to mere linear search. In order to select the words of given length, the hash table with word-length as the key is built for the lexicon words and stored in a Python pickle for easy and quick restoration, which significantly saves time.

3 Results and Discussion

The programming language Python 3.5 has been used to write the programs and run on Ubuntu 16.04 on a Dell machine with Intel Core i7-6500U processor of 2.5GHz clock speed and with 8GB RAM.

The proposed real-word error detection and correction system corrects following types of real-word errors that occur due to the wrong choice of letters from the confusion sets and due to ‘sandhi’ mistakes. Sandhi inflects two words coming in between them. The following groups of letters form confusion sets:

\{\text{ய, எ, உ}\}: In Tamil, they sound somewhat similar to ‘la’,
\{\text{ந, நா, நி}\}: these letters sound somewhat similar to ‘na’ and
\{\text{ற, ர}\}: these letters sound somewhat similar to ‘ra’.

Each of these letters in each of these sets has distinct pronunciation, and has to be used appropriately with care.

The error due to wrong choice of letters from any confusion set more likely to occur when a transliteration method is used to type Tamil text or in speech to text conversion. For example, to input மளை one may type ‘malai’, ‘maLai’, ‘malzi’ (as all sounds similar) instead of right choice for letter ‘ளை’ in the transliteration system. The sandhi mistake occurs due to the wrong suffix letter or missing of it. The right suffix depends on the word that follows it. It should be noted that the suggestions to all these errors are found to be lexically similar to the erroneous words.

During the error detection and correction process, the inappropriate words in the sentences and suggestion words for them are recorded. The following five examples show the output of the real-word error detection and correction.

Example 1: (Correcting contextual spelling mistakes that occur due to the
Real-word errors in Tamil sentences

Example 1: (Correcting contextual spelling mistakes that occur due to the letters in the confusion set \{\text{ை, ய, ஐ}\})
Input sentence: அவன் பைங்களைச் சாப்பிட்டான்.
Output:
Real-word errors: பைங்களைச்
Suggestions: பைங்கைல் / பைங்கைல்

Example 2: (Correcting contextual spelling mistakes that occur due to the letters in the confusion set \{\text{ை, ய, ஐ}\})
Input sentence: அவள் களற லங்கா உண்டு அணிந்திருந்தாள்.
Output:
Real-word errors: களற or லங்கா
Suggestions: களறை / லங்காை / களறை / லங்காை

Example 3: (Correcting contextual spelling mistakes that occur due to the letters in the confusion set \{\text{ை, ய, ஐ}\})
Input sentence: நாண் கநற்று ககாயிலுக்கு கொகைன்.
Output:
Real-word errors: நாண்
Suggestions: நான்

Example 4: (Correcting sandhi (junctional inflection) mistakes between two words)
Input sentence: நான் அவளைச் கண்கடன்.
Output:
Real-word errors: அவளைச்
Suggestions: அவளைக் / அவளைக் / அவளரக்

Example 5: (Correcting any real-word error in a sentence)
Input sentence: அந்த விதியின் நடுகவைப்பயான்று உள்ளைது.
Output:
Real-word errors: விதியின்
Suggestions: வீதியின் / விடுதியின் / நதியின்

In Examples 1, 2 & 3, the real-word error detection and correction system detects and corrects the contextual spelling mistakes. In Example 4, there is a ‘sandhi’ mistake between the words ‘அவளைச்’ and ‘கண்கடன்’. However, the proposed system identifies the word ‘அவளைச்’ as a real-word error and suggests the word ‘அவளைக்’ as the most appropriate alternative to ‘அவளைச்’ that results in correcting the sandhi mistake. In Example 5, the real-word error detection and correction system identifies the word
‘விதியின்’ as a real-word error and provides the words {‘விதியின்’, ‘விடுதியின்’, ‘நதியின்’} as suggestions.

This experiment is tested with two sets of sentences:

- Set 1 consists of one thousand sentences of random choice (none being taken from the corpus already built). These 1000 input test sentences have 131 real-word errors as confirmed by a Scholar in Tamil language, and the bigram probabilistic model detects all of them.

- Set 2 consists of 100 sentences deliberately made different from those in Set 1 so that each has a real-word error, the bigram probabilistic model detects all of them.

The following table shows the details of
(A) the number of real-word errors existed in the chosen sets of sentences,
(B) the number of real-word errors detected by the system,
(C) the number of real-word errors with at least one suggestion with the bigram probabilistic measure greater than or equal to $10^{-6}$ as described in Section 2.2,
(D) the number of generated suggestions with the bigram probabilistic measure greater than or equal to $10^{-6}$ as described in Section 2.2, and
(E) the number of generated suggestions approved by Tamil Scholar.

| Test set | (A) | (B) | (C) | (D) | (E) |
|----------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Set 1    | 131 | 131 | 99* | 130 | 127 (97.7%) |
| Set 2    | 100 | 100 | 90* | 156 | 154 (98.7%) |

* the reason for not getting any suggestion for 32 + 10 words is that the bigram involving the word in the input sentence that follows the suggestion candidate does not exist in the model constructed for the corpus.

The test results show that 98% of the suggestions generated by the system are found to be suitable as approved by a Scholar in Tamil language.

4 Conclusion

In this work, a method has been proposed to detect and correct real-word errors in Tamil sentences. In this regard, a bigram probabilistic model is constructed to detect real-word errors. Minimum edit distance technique is used to generate suggestions. Test results show that the bigram probabilistic
model detects all the real-word errors in input sentences and suggestions generated by the system are with 98% accuracy as approved by a Scholar in Tamil language.

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