Abstract

This paper identifies and examines the key principles underlying building a state-of-the-art grammatical error correction system. We do this by analyzing the Illinois system that placed first among seventeen teams in the recent CoNLL-2013 shared task on grammatical error correction.

The system focuses on five different types of errors common among non-native English writers. We describe four design principles that are relevant for correcting all of these errors, analyze the system along these dimensions, and show how each of these dimensions contributes to the performance.

1 Introduction

The field of text correction has seen an increased interest in the past several years, with a focus on correcting grammatical errors made by English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. Three competitions devoted to error correction for non-native writers took place recently: HOO-2011 (Dale and Kilgarriff, 2011), HOO-2012 (Dale et al., 2012), and the CoNLL-2013 shared task (Ng et al., 2013). The most recent and most prominent among these, the CoNLL-2013 shared task, covers several common ESL errors, including article and preposition usage mistakes, mistakes in noun number, and various verb errors, as illustrated in Fig. 1.¹ Seventeen teams that participated in the task developed a wide array of approaches that include discriminative classifiers, language models, statistical machine-translation systems, and rule-based modules. Many of the systems also made use of linguistic resources such as additional annotated learner corpora, and defined high-level features that take into account syntactic and semantic knowledge.

Even though the systems incorporated similar resources, the scores varied widely. The top system, from the University of Illinois, obtained an F1 score of 31.20², while the second team scored 25.01 and the median result was 8.48 points.³ These results suggest that there is not enough understanding of what works best and what elements are essential for building a state-of-the-art error correction system.

In this paper, we identify key principles for building a robust grammatical error correction system and show their importance in the context of the shared task. We do this by analyzing the Illinois system and evaluating it along several dimensions: choice

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¹The CoNLL-2014 shared task that completed at the time of writing this paper was an extension of the CoNLL-2013 competition (Ng et al., 2014) but addressed all types of errors. The Illinois-Columbia submission, a slightly extended version of the Illinois CoNLL-2013 system, ranked at the top. For a description of the Illinois-Columbia submission, we refer the reader to Rozovskaya et al. (2014a).

²The state-of-the-art performance of the Illinois system discussed here is with respect to individual components for different errors. Improvements in Rozovskaya and Roth (2013) over the Illinois system that are due to joint learning and inference are orthogonal, and the analysis in this paper still applies there.

³F1 might not be the ideal metric for this task but this was the one chosen in the evaluation. See more in Sec. 6.
of learning algorithm; choice of training data (native 
or annotated learner data); model adaptation to the 
mistakes made by the writers; and the use of linguist-
ic knowledge. For each dimension, several imple-
mentations are compared, including, when possible, 
approaches chosen by other teams. We also vali-
date the obtained results on another learner corpus. 
Overall, this paper makes two contributions: (1) we 
explain the success of the Illinois system, and (2) we 
provide an understanding and qualitative analysis of 
different dimensions that are essential for success in 
this task, with the goal of aiding future research on 
it. Given that the Illinois system has been the top 
system in four competitive evaluations over the last 
few years (HOO and CoNLL), we believe that the 
analysis we propose will be useful for researchers in 
this area.

In the next section, we present the CoNLL-2013 
competition. Sec. 3 gives an overview of the ap-
proaches adopted by the top five teams. Sec. 4 de-
scribes the Illinois system. In Sec. 5, the analysis of 
the Illinois system is presented. Sec. 6 offers a brief 
discussion, and Sec. 7 concludes the paper.

2 Task Description

The CoNLL-2013 shared task focuses on five 
common mistakes made by ESL writers: article/deter-
miner, preposition, noun number, verb 
agreement, verb form. The training data of the 
shared task is the NUCLE corpus (Dahlmeier et al., 
2013), which contains essays written by learners of 
English (we also refer to it as learner data or shared 
task training data). The test data consists of 50 
essays by students from the same linguistic back-
ground. The training and the test data contain 1.2M 
and 29K words, respectively.

Table 1 shows the number of errors by type and 
the error rates. Determiner errors are the most 
common and account for 42.1% of all errors in training. 
Note that the test data contains a much larger pro-
portion of annotated mistakes; e.g. determiner errors 
occur four times more often in the test data than in 
the training data (only 2.4% of noun phrases in the 
training data have determiner errors, versus 10% in 
the test data). The differences might be attributed 
to differences in annotation standards, annotators, 
or writers, as the test data was annotated at a later 
time. The shared task provided two sets of test an-
notations: the original annotated data and a set with 
additional revisions that also includes alternative an-
notations proposed by participants. Clearly, having 
alternative answers is the right approach as there are 
typically multiple ways to correct an error. How-
ever, because the alternatives are based on the error 
analysis of the participating systems, the revised set 
may be biased (Ng et al., 2013). Consequently, we 
report results on the original set.

3 Model Dimensions

Table 2 summarizes approaches and methodologies 
of the top five systems. The prevailing approach 
consists in building a statistical model either on 
learner data or on a much larger corpus of native En-
lish data. For native data, several teams make use 
of the Web 1T 5-gram corpus (henceforth Web1T, 
(Brants and Franz, 2006)). NARA employs a statis-
tical machine translation model for two error types; 
two systems have rule-based components for se-
lected errors. Based on the analysis of the Illinois 
system, we identify the following, inter-dependent, 
dimensions that will be examined in this work:

1. Learning algorithm: Most of the teams, includ-
ing Illinois, built statistical models. We show that 
the choice of the learning algorithm is very impor-
tant and affects the performance of the system.

2. Adaptation to learner errors: Previous stud-
ies, e.g. (Rozovskaya and Roth, 2011) showed 
that adaptation, i.e. developing models that utilize 
knowledge about error patterns of the non-native 
writers, is extremely important. We summarize 
adaptation techniques proposed earlier and examine 
their impact on the performance of the system.

3. Linguistic knowledge: It is essential to use some 
linguistic knowledge when developing error correc-
tion modules, e.g., to identify which type of verb
error occurs in a given context, before the appropriate correction module is employed. We describe and evaluate the contribution of these elements.

4. Training data: We discuss the advantages of training on learner data or native English data in the context of the shared task and in broader context.

4 The Illinois System

The Illinois system consists of five machine-learning models, each specializing in correcting one of the errors described above. The words that are selected as input to a classifier are called candidates (Table 3). In the preposition system, for example, candidates are determined by surface forms. In other systems, determining the candidates might be more involved.

All modules take as input the corpus documents pre-processed with a part-of-speech tagger\(^4\) (Even-Zohar and Roth, 2001) and shallow parser\(^5\) (Punyakanok and Roth, 2001). In the Illinois submission, some modules are trained on native data, others on learner data. The modules trained on learner data make use of a discriminative algorithm, while native-trained modules make use of the Naïve Bayes (NB) algorithm. The Illinois system has an option for a post-processing step where corrections that always result in a false positive in training are ignored but this option is not used here.

4.1 Determiner Errors

The majority of determiner errors involve articles, although some errors also involve pronouns. The Illinois system addresses only article errors. Candidates include articles (“a”, “an”, “the”)\(^6\) and omissions, by considering noun-phrase-initial contexts where an article is likely to be omitted. The confusion set for articles is thus \{a, the, ∅\}. The article classifier is the same as the one in the HOO shared tasks (Rozovskaya et al., 2012; Rozovskaya et al., 2011), where it demonstrated superior performance. It is a discriminative model that makes use of the Averaged Perceptron algorithm (AP, (Freund and Schapire, 1996)) implemented with LBJava (Rizzolo and Roth, 2010) and is trained on learner data with rich features and adaptation to learner errors. See Sec. 5.2 and Sec. 5.3.

4.2 Preposition Errors

Similar to determiners, we distinguish three types of preposition mistakes: choosing an incorrect preposition, using a superfluous preposition, and omitting a preposition. In contrast to determiners, for learners of many first language backgrounds, most of the preposition errors are replacements, i.e., where the

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\(^4\)http://cogcomp.cs.illinois.edu/page/software_view/POS
\(^5\)http://cogcomp.cs.illinois.edu/page/software_view/Chunker
\(^6\)The variants “a” and “an” are collapsed to one class.
“Hence, the environmental factors also *contributes/contribute to various difficulties, *giving/given problems in nuclear technology.”

| Error | Confusion set |
|-------|---------------|
| Agr.  | {INF=contribute, S=contributes} |
| Form  | {INF=give, ED=given, ING=giving, S=gives} |

Table 4: Confusion sets for agreement and form. For irregular verbs, the second candidate in the confusion set for Verb form is the past participle.

The Illinois system implements two verb modules – agreement and form – that consist of the following components: (1) candidate identification; (2) determining the relevant module for each candidate based on verb finiteness; (3) correction modules for each error type. The confusion set for verbs depends on the target word and includes its morphological variants (Table 4). For irregular verbs, the past participle form is included, while the past tense form is not (i.e. “given” is included but “gave” is not), since tense errors are not part of the task. To generate morphological variants, the system makes use of a morphological analyzer verbMorph; it assumes (1) a list of valid verb lemmas (compiled using a POS-

Table 5: System comparisons. Column 1 indicates the dimension, and column 2 lists systems whose approaches provide a relevant point of comparison.

5 System Analysis

In this section, we evaluate the Illinois system along the four dimensions identified in Sec. 3, compare its components to alternative configurations implemented by other teams, and present additional experiments that further analyze each dimension. While a direct comparison with other systems is not always possible due to other differences between the systems, we believe that these results are still useful. Table 5 lists systems used for comparison. It is important to note that the dimensions are not independent. For instance, there is a correlation between algorithm choice and training data.

7The tool and more detail about it can be found at http://cogcomp.cs.illinois.edu/page/publication_view/743
Results are reported on the test data using F1 computed with the CoNLL scorer (Dahlmeier and Ng, 2012). Error-specific results are generated based on the output of individual modules. Note that these are not directly comparable to error-specific results in the CoNLL overview paper: the latter are approximate as the organizers did not have the error type information for corrections in the output. The complete system includes the union of corrections made by each of these modules, where the corrections are applied in order. Ordering overlapping candidates might potentially affect the final output, when modules correctly identify an error but propose different corrections, but this does not happen in practice. Modules that are part of the Illinois submission are marked with an asterisk in all tables.

To demonstrate that our findings are not specific to CoNLL, we also show results on the FCE dataset. It is produced by learners from seventeen first language backgrounds and contains 500,000 words from the Cambridge Learner Corpus (CLC) (Yannakoudakis et al., 2011). We split the corpus into two equal parts – training and test. The statistics are shown in Appendix Tables A.16 and A.17.

5.1 Dim. 1: Learning Algorithm

Rozovskaya and Roth (2011, Sec. 3) discuss the relations between the amount of training data, learning algorithms, and the resulting performance. They show that on training sets of similar sizes, discriminative classifiers outperform other machine learning methods on this task. Following these results, the Illinois article module that is trained on the NUCLE corpus uses the discriminative approach AP. Most of the other teams that train on the NUCLE corpus also use a discriminative method.

However, when a very large native training set such as the Web1T corpus is available, it is often advantageous to use it. The Web1T corpus is a collection of n-gram counts of length one to five over a corpus of $10^{12}$ words. Since the corpus does not come with complete sentences, it is not straightforward to make use of a discriminative classifier because of the limited window provided around each example: training a discriminative model would limit the surrounding context features to a 2-word window. Because we wish to make use of the context features that extend beyond the 2-word window, it is only possible to use count-based methods, such as NB or LM. Several teams make use of the Web1T corpus: UMC uses a count-based LM for article, preposition, and noun number errors; NTHU addresses all errors with a count-based model with backoff, which is essentially a variation of a language model with backoff. The Illinois system employs the Web1T corpus for all errors, except articles, using NB.

Training Naïve Bayes for Deletions and Insertions The reason for not using the Web1T corpus for article errors is that training NB on Web1T for deletions and insertions presents a problem, and the majority of article errors are of this type. Recall that Web1T contains only n-gram counts, which makes it difficult to estimate the prior count for the $∅$ candidate. (With access to complete sentences, the prior of $∅$ is estimated by counting the total number of $∅$ candidates; e.g., in case of articles, the number of NPs with $∅$ article is computed.) We solve this problem by treating the article and the word following it as one target. For instance, to estimate prior counts for the article candidates in front of the word “camera” in “including camera”, we obtain counts for “camera”, “a camera”, “the camera”. In the case of the $∅$ candidate, the word “camera” acts as the target. Thus, the confusion set for the article classifier is modified as follows: instead of the three articles (as shown in Sec. 4.1), each member of the confusion set is a concatenation of the article and the word that follows it, e.g. $\{a$-camera, the_camera, camera$\}$. The counts for contextual features are obtained similarly, e.g. a feature that includes a preceding word would correspond to the count of “including $x$”, where $x$ can take any value from the confusion set. The above solution allows us to train NB for article errors and to extend the preposition classifier to handle extraneous preposition errors (Table 6).

Rozovskaya and Roth (2011) study several algorithms trained on the Web1T corpus and observe that, when evaluated with the same context window size, NB performs better than other count-based methods. In order to show the impact of the algorithm choice, in Table 6, we compare LM and NB models. Both models use word n-grams spanning the target word in the 4-word window. We train LMs
Table 6: Comparison of learning models. Web1T corpus. Modules that are part of the Illinois submission are marked with an asterisk.

| Error | Model | F1  |
|-------|-------|-----|
|       |       | CoNLL | FCE  |
| Art.  | LM    | 21.11 | 24.15 |
|       | NB    | **32.45** | **30.78** |
| Prep. | LM    | 12.09 | 30.01 |
|       | NB    | **14.04** | 29.40 |
| Noun  | LM    | 40.72 | 32.41 |
|       | NB    | **42.60** | 34.40 |
| Agr.  | LM    | 20.65 | 33.53 |
|       | NB    | **26.46** | 36.42 |
| Form  | LM    | 13.40 | 08.46 |
|       | NB    | **14.50** | **12.16** |

Table 7: Priors confusion matrix used for adapting NB. Each entry shows Prob(candidate|source), where source corresponds to the verb form chosen by the author.

| Source | ED    | INF     | ING     | S    |
|--------|-------|---------|---------|------|
| ED     | 0.99675 | 0.00192 | 0.00103 | 0.00030 |
| INF    | 0.00177 | 0.99630 | 0.00168 | 0.00025 |
| ING    | 0.00124 | 0.00447 | 0.99407 | 0.00022 |
| S      | 0.00054 | 0.00544 | 0.00132 | 0.99269 |

with SRILM (Stolcke, 2002) using Jelinek-Mercer linear interpolation as a smoothing method (Chen and Goodman, 1996). On the CoNLL test data, NB outperforms LM on all errors; on the FCE corpus, NB is superior on all errors, except preposition errors, where LM outperforms NB only very slightly. We attribute this to the fact that the preposition problem has more labels; when there is a big confusion set, more features have default smooth weights, so there is no advantage to running NB. We found that with fewer classes (6 rather than 12 prepositions), NB outperforms LM. It is also possible that when we have a lot of labels, the theoretical difference between the algorithms disappears. Note that NB can be improved via adaptation (next section) and then it outperforms the LM also for preposition errors.

5.2 Dim. 2: Adaptation to Learner Errors

In the previous section, the models were trained on native data. These models have no notion of the error patterns of the learners. Here we discuss model adaptation to learner errors, i.e. developing models that utilize the knowledge about the types of mistakes learners make. Adaptation is based on the fact that learners make mistakes in a systematic manner, e.g. errors are influenced by the writer’s first language (Gass and Selinker, 1992; Ionin et al., 2008).

There are different ways to adapt a model that depend on the type of training data (learner or native) and the algorithm choice. The key application of adaptation is for models trained on native English data, because the learned models do not know anything about the errors learners make. With adaptation, models trained on native data can use the author’s word (the source word) as a feature and thus propose a correction based on what the author originally wrote. This is crucial, as the source word is an important piece of information (Rozovskaya and Roth, 2010b). Below, several adaptation techniques are summarized and evaluated. The Illinois system makes use of adaptation in the article model via the inflation method and adapts its NB preposition classifier trained on Web1T with the priors method.

Adapting NB

The priors method (Rozovskaya and Roth, 2011, Sec. 4) is an adaptation technique for a NB model trained on native English data; it is based on changing the distribution of priors over the correction candidates. Candidate prior is a special parameter in NB; when NB is trained on native data, candidate priors correspond to the relative frequencies of the candidates in the native corpus and do not provide any information on the real distribution of mistakes and the dependence of the correction on the word used by the author.

In the priors method, candidate priors are changed using an error confusion matrix based on learner data that specifies how likely each confusion pair is. Table 7 shows the confusion matrix for verb form errors, computed on the NUCLE data. Adapted priors are dependent on the author’s original verb form used: let s be a form of the verb appearing in the source text, and c a correction candidate. Then the adapted prior of c given s is:

$$prior(c|s) = \frac{C(s, c)}{C(s)}$$

where $C(s)$ denotes the number of times s appeared in the learner data, and $C(s, c)$ denotes the number of times c was the correct form when s was used by a writer. The adapted priors differ by the source: the probability of candidate INF when the source form is S, is more than twice than when the source form is
Table 8: Adapting NB with the priors method. All models are trained on the Web1T corpus. Modules that are part of the Illinois submission are marked with an asterisk.

| Error | Model      | \text{CoNLL} | F1  |
|-------|------------|--------------|-----|
|       |            | Train | Test |       |
| Art.  | NB         | 18.28 | 32.45 | 30.78 |
|       | NB-adapted | 19.18 | 34.49 | 31.76 |
| Prep. | NB         | 09.03 | 14.04 | 29.40 |
|       | NB-adapted | 10.94 | 12.14 | 32.22 |
| Noun  | NB*        | 23.06 | 42.60 | 34.40 |
|       | NB-adapted | 22.89 | 42.31 | 32.38 |
| Agr.  | NB*        | 16.72 | 26.46 | 36.42 |
|       | NB-adapted | 17.62 | 23.46 | 38.57 |
| Form  | NB*        | 11.93 | 14.50 | 12.16 |
|       | NB-adapted | 14.63 | 18.35 | 16.67 |

Table 8: Adapting NB with the priors method. All models are trained on the Web1T corpus. Modules that are part of the Illinois submission are marked with an asterisk.

ED; the probability that S is the correct form is very high, which reflects the low error rates.

Table 8 compares NB and NB-adapted models. Because of the dichotomy in the error rates in CoNLL training and test data, we also show experiments using 5-fold cross-validation on the training data. Adaptation always helps on the CoNLL training data and the FCE data (except noun errors), but on the test data it only helps on article and verb form errors. This is due to discrepancies in the error rates, as adaptation exploits the property that learner errors are systematic. Indeed, when priors are estimated on the test data (in 5-fold cross-validation), the performance improves, e.g. the preposition module attains an F1 of 18.05 instead of 12.14.

Concerning lack of improvement on noun number errors, we hypothesize that these errors differ from the other mistakes in that the appropriate form strongly depends on the surface form of the noun, which would, in turn, suggest that the dependency of the label on the grammatical form of the source that the adaptation is trying to discover is weak. Indeed, the prior distribution of \{singular, plural\} label space does not change much when the source feature is taken into account. The unadapted priors for “singular” and “plural” are 0.75 and 0.25, respectively. Similarly, the adapted priors (singular|plural) and (plural|singular) are 0.034 and 0.016, respectively. In other words, the unadapted prior probability for “plural” is three times lower than for “singular”, which does not change much with adaptation. This is different for other errors. For instance, in case of verb agreement, the unadapted prior for “plural” is 0.617, more than three times than the “singular” prior of 0.20. With adaptation, these priors become almost the same (0.016 and 0.012).

Adapting AP The AP is a discriminative learning algorithm and does not use priors on the set of candidates. In order to reflect our estimate of the error distribution, the AP algorithm is adapted differently, by introducing into the native data artificial errors, in a rate that reflects the errors made by the ESL writers (Rozovskaya and Roth, 2010b). The idea is to simulate learner errors in training, through artificial mistakes (also produced using an error confusion matrix). The original method was proposed for models trained on native data. This technique can be further enhanced using the error inflation method (Rozovskaya et al., 2012, Sec. 6) applied to models trained on native or learner data.

The Illinois system uses error inflation in its article classifier. Because this classifier is trained on learner data, the source article can be used as a feature. However, since learner errors are sparse, the source feature encourages the model to abstain from flagging a mistake, which results in low recall. The error inflation technique addresses this problem by boosting the proportion of errors in the training data. It does this by generating additional artificial errors using the error distribution from the training set.

Table 9 shows the results of adapting the AP classifier using error inflation. (We omit noun results, since the noun AP model performs better without the source feature, which is similar to the noun NB model, as discussed above.) The inflation method improves recall and, consequently, F1. It should be noted that although inflation also decreases precision it is still helpful. In fact, because of the low error rates, performance on the CoNLL dataset with natural errors is very poor, often resulting in F1 being equal to 0 due to no errors being detected.

Inflation vs. Sampling To demonstrate the impact of error inflation, we compare it against sampling, an approach used by other teams – e.g. HIT – that improves recall by removing correct examples in training. The HIT article model is similar to the
Table 9: Adapting AP using error inflation. Models are trained on learner data with word n-gram features and the source feature. Inflation constant shows how many correct instances remain (e.g. 0.9 indicates that 90% of correct examples are unchanged, while 10% are converted to mistakes.) Modules that are part of the Illinois submission are marked with an asterisk.

Table 10: Comparison of the inflation and sampling methods on article errors (CoNLL). The proportion of errors in training in each row is identical.

Illinois model but scored three points below. Table 10 shows that sampling falls behind the inflation method, since it considerably reduces the training size to achieve similar error rates. The proportion of errors in training in each row is identical: sampling achieves the error rates by removing correct examples, whereas the inflation method converts some positive examples to artificial mistakes. Inflation constant shows how many correct instances remain; smaller inflation values correspond to more erroneous instances in training; the sampling approach, correspondingly, removes more positive examples.

To summarize, we have demonstrated the impact of error inflation by comparing it to a similar method used by another team; we have also shown that further improvements can be obtained by adapting NB to learner errors using the priors method, when training and test data exhibit similar error patterns.

5.3 Dim. 3: Linguistic Knowledge

The use of linguistic knowledge is important in several components of the error correction system: feature engineering, candidate identification, and special techniques for correcting verb errors.

**Features** It is known from many NLP tasks that feature engineering is important, and this is the case here. Note that this is relevant only when training on learner data, as models trained on Web1T can make use of n-gram features only but for the NUCLE corpus we have several layers of linguistic annotation.\(^\text{10}\) We found that for article and agreement errors, using deeper linguistic knowledge is especially beneficial. The article features in the Illinois module, in addition to the surface form of the context, encode POS and shallow parse properties. These features are presented in Rozovskaya et al. (2013, Table 3) and Appendix Table A.19. The Illinois agreement module is trained on Web1T but further analysis reveals that it is better to train on learner data with rich features. The word n-gram and POS agreement features are the same as those in the article module. Syntactic features encode properties of the subject of the verb and are presented in Rozovskaya et al. (2014b, Table 7) and Appendix Table A.18; these are based on the syntactic parser (Klein and Manning, 2003) and the dependency converter (Marneffe et al., 2006).

Table 11 shows that adding rich features is helpful. Notably, adding deeper syntactic knowledge to the agreement module is useful, although parse features are likely to contain more noise.\(^\text{11}\) Foster (2007) and Lee and Seneff (2008) observe a degrade in performance on syntactic parsers due to grammatical noise that also includes agreement errors. For articles, we chose to add syntactic knowledge from shallow parse as it is likely to be sufficient for articles and more accurate than full-parse features.

**Candidate Identification** for errors on open-class

\(^{10}\)Feature engineering will also be relevant when training on a native corpus that has linguistic annotation.

\(^{11}\)Parse features have also been found useful in preposition error correction (Tetreault et al., 2010).
words is rarely discussed but is a crucial step: it is not possible to identify the relevant candidates using a closed list of words, and the procedure needs to rely on pre-processing tools, whose performance on learner data is suboptimal.\textsuperscript{12} Rozovskaya et al. (2014b, Sec. 5.1) describe and evaluate several candidate selection methods for verbs. The Illinois system implements their best method that addresses pre-processing errors, by selecting words tagged as verbs as well as words tagged as NN, whose lemma is on the list of valid verb lemmas (Sec. 4.3).

Following descriptions provided by several teams, we evaluate several candidate selection methods for nouns. The first method includes words tagged as NN or NNS that head an NP. NTHU and HIT use this method; NTHU obtained the second best noun score, after the Illinois system; its model is also trained on Web1T. The second method includes all words tagged as NN and NNS and is used in several other systems, e.g. SZEG, (Berend et al., 2013).

The above procedures suffer from pre-processing errors. The Illinois method addresses this problem by adding words that end in common noun suffixes, e.g. “ment”, “ments”, and “ist”. The percentage of noun errors selected as candidates by each method and the impact of each method on the performance are shown in Table 12. The Illinois method has the best result on both datasets; on CoNLL, it improves F1 score by 2 points and recovers 43% of the candidates that are missed by the first approach. On FCE, the second method is able to recover more erroneous candidates, but it does not perform as well as the last method, possibly, due to the number of noisy candidates it generates. To conclude, pre-processing mistakes should be taken into consideration, when correcting errors, especially on open-class words.

**Using Verb Finiteness to Correct Verb Errors** As shown in Table 4, the surface realizations that correspond to the agreement candidates are a subset of the possible surface realizations of the form classifier. One natural approach, thus, is to train one classifier to predict the correct surface form of the verb. However, the same surface realization may correspond to multiple grammatical properties. This ob-

\textsuperscript{12}Candidate selection is also difficult for closed-class errors in the case of omissions, e.g. articles, but article errors have been studied rather extensively, e.g. (Han et al., 2006), and we have no room to elaborate on it here.

| Candidate ident. method | Error recall (%) | F1 | Error recall (%) | F1 |
|-------------------------|------------------|----|-----------------|----|
|                         | CoNLL | FCE | CoNLL | FCE |
| NP heads                | 87.72 | 92.32 | 40.47 | 34.16 |
| All nouns               | 89.50 | 95.29 | 41.08 | 33.16 |
| Nouns+heuristics*       | 92.84 | 94.86 | 42.60 | 34.40 |

Table 12: Nouns: effect of candidate identification methods on the correction performance. Models are trained using NB. Error recall denotes the percentage of nouns containing number errors that are selected as candidates. Modules that are part of the Illinois submission are marked with an asterisk.

| Training method | F1 |
|-----------------|----|
| One classifier  | 16.43 | 21.14 |
| Finiteness-based training (I) | 18.59 | 27.72 |
| Finiteness-based training (II) | 21.08 | 29.98 |

Table 13: Improvement due to separate training for verb errors. Models are trained using the AP algorithm.

**Table 13: Improvement due to separate training for verb errors.** Models are trained using the AP algorithm.

**Table 12: Nouns: effect of candidate identification methods on the correction performance.** Models are trained using NB. Error recall denotes the percentage of nouns containing number errors that are selected as candidates. Modules that are part of the Illinois submission are marked with an asterisk.
unigram word and POS features of tokens that do not appear immediately next to the verb. Recall from the discussion on features that the agreement module can be further improved by adding syntactic knowledge. In the next section, it is shown that an even better approach is to train on learner data for agreement mistakes and on native data for form errors. The results in Table 13 are for AP models but similar improvements due to separate training are observed for NB models trained on Web1T. Note that the NTHU system also corrects all verb errors using a model trained on Web1T but handles all these errors together; its verb module scored 8 F1 points below the Illinois one. While there are other differences between the two systems, the results suggest that part of the improvement within the Illinois system is indeed due to handling the two errors separately.

5.4 Dim. 4: Training Data

NUCLE is a large corpus produced by learners of the same language background as the test data. Because of its large size, training on this corpus is a natural choice. Indeed, many teams follow this approach. On the other hand, an important issue in the CoNLL task is the difference between the training and test sets, which has impact on the selection of the training set – the large Web1T has more coverage and allows for better generalization. We show that for some errors it is especially advantageous to train on a larger corpus of native data. It should be noted that while we refer to the Web1T corpus as “native”, it certainly contains data from language learners; we assume that the noise can be neglected.

Table 14 compares models trained on native and learner data in their best configurations based on the training data. Overall, we find that Web1T is clearly preferable for noun errors. We attribute this to the observation that noun number usage strongly depends on the surface form of the noun, and not just the contextual cues and syntactic structure. For example, certain nouns in English tend to be used exclusively in singular or plural form. Thus, considerably more data compared to other error types is required to learn model parameters.

On article and preposition errors, native-trained models perform slightly better on CoNLL, while learner-trained models are better on FCE. We conjecture that the FCE training set is more similar to the respective test data and thus provides an advantage over training on native data.

On verb agreement errors, native-trained models perform better than those trained on learner data, when the same n-gram features are used. However, when we add POS and syntactic knowledge, training on learner data is advantageous. Finally, for verb form errors, there is an advantage when training on a lot of native data, although the difference is not as substantial as for noun errors. This suggests that unlike agreement mistakes that are better addressed using syntax, form errors, similar to nouns, benefit from training on a lot of data with n-gram features.

To summarize, choice of the training data is an important consideration for building a robust system. Researchers compared native- and learner-trained models for prepositions (Han et al., 2010; Cahill et al., 2013), while the analysis in this work addresses five error types – showing that errors behave differently – and evaluates on two corpora.13

6 Discussion

In Table 15, we show the results of the system, where the best modules are selected based on the performance on the training data. We also show the Illinois modules (without post-processing). The following changes are made with respect to the Illinois submission: the preposition system is based on an LM and enhanced to handle spurious preposition errors (thus the Illinois result of 7.10 shown here is

| Error | Train. data | Learning algorithm | Features | F1 CoNLL | F1 FCE |
|-------|-------------|--------------------|----------|----------|--------|
| Art.  | Native Learner | NB-adapt.* | n-gram POS+chunk | 34.49 33.50 | 31.76 35.66 |
| Prep. | Native Learner | LM: NB-adapt.* | n-gram n-gram | 12.09 10.26 | 32.22 33.93 |
| Noun  | Native Learner | NB* | n-gram POS | 42.60 19.22 | 32.38 17.28 |
| Agr.  | Native Learner | NB-adapt.* | n-gram POS+syntax | 23.46 27.93 | 38.57 41.23 |
| Form  | Native Learner | NB-adapt.* | n-gram POS | 18.35 12.32 | 16.67 12.02 |

Table 14: Choice of training data: learner vs. native (Web1T). For prepositions, LM is chosen for CoNLL, and NB-adapted for FCE. Modules that are part of the Illinois submission are marked with an asterisk.

13For studies that directly combine native and learner data in training, see Gamon (2010) and Dahlmeier and Ng (2011).
Table 15: Results on CoNLL of the Illinois system (without post-processing) and this work. NB and LM models are trained on Web1T; AP models are trained on NUCLE. Modules different from the Illinois submission are in bold.

| Error  | Illinois submission Model | This work Model | F1  |
|--------|---------------------------|-----------------|-----|
| Art.   | AP-infl.                  | AP-infl.        | 33.50 |
| Prep.  | NB-adapt.                 | LM              | 12.09 |
| Noun   | NB                        | NB              | 42.60 |
| Agr.   | NB                        | AP-infl.        | 27.93 |
| Form   | NB                        | NB-adapt.       | 18.35 |
| All    |                           |                 | 31.43 |

Table 15: Results on CoNLL of the Illinois system (without post-processing) and this work. NB and LM models are trained on Web1T; AP models are trained on NUCLE. Modules different from the Illinois submission are in bold.

different from the 12.14 in Table 8); the agreement classifier is trained on the learner data using AP with rich features and error inflation; the form classifier is adapted to learner mistakes, whereas the Illinois submission trains NB without adaptation. The key improvements are observed with respect to least frequent errors, so the overall improvement is small. Importantly, the Illinois system already takes into account the four dimensions analyzed in this paper.

In CoNLL-2013, systems were compared using F1. Practical systems, however, should be tuned for good precision to guarantee that the overall quality of the text does not go down. Clearly, optimizing for F1 does not ensure that the system improves the quality of the text (see Appendix B). A different evaluation metric based on the accuracy of the data is proposed in Rozovskaya and Roth (2010b). For further discussion of evaluation metrics, see also Wagner (2012) and Chodorow et al. (2012).

It is also worth noting that the obtained results underestimate the performance because the agreement on what constitutes a mistake can be quite low (Madnani et al., 2011), so providing alternative corrections is important. The revised annotations address this problem. The Illinois system improves its F1 from 31.20 to 42.14 on revised annotations. However, these numbers are still an underestimation because the analysis typically eliminates precision errors but not recall errors. This is not specific to CoNLL: an error analysis of the false positives in CLC that includes the FCE showed an increase in precision from 33% to 85% and 33% to 75% for preposition and article errors (Gamon, 2010).

An error analysis of the training data also allows us to determine prominent groups of system errors and identify areas for potential improvement, which we outline below. **Cascading NLP errors:** In the example below, the Illinois system incorrectly changes “need” to “needs” as it considers “victim” to be the subject of that verb: “Also, not only the kidnappers and the victim needs to be tracked down, but also jailbreakers.” **Errors in interacting linguistic structures:** The Illinois system considers every word independently and thus cannot handle interacting phenomena. In the example below, the article and the noun number classifiers propose corrections that result in an ungrammatical structure “such a situations”: “In such situation, individuals will lose their basic privacy.” This problem is addressed via global models (Rozovskaya and Roth, 2013) and results in an improvement over the Illinois system.

**Errors due to limited context:** The Illinois system does not consider context beyond sentence level. In the example below, the system incorrectly proposes to delete “the” but the wider context indicates that the definite article is more appropriate here: “We have to admit that how to prevent the abuse and how to use it reasonably depend on a sound legal system, and it means surveillance has its own restriction.”

7 Conclusion

We identified key design principles in developing a state-of-the-art error correction system. We did this through analysis of the top system in the CoNLL-2013 shared task along several dimensions. The key dimensions that we identified and analyzed concern the choice of a learning algorithm, adaptation to learner mistakes, linguistic knowledge, and the choice of the training data. We showed that the decisions in each case depend both on the type of a mistake and the specific setting, e.g. how much annotated learner data is available. Furthermore, we provided points of comparison with other systems along these four dimensions.

Acknowledgments

We thank Peter Chew and the anonymous reviewers for the feedback. Most of this work was done while the first author was at the University of Illinois. This material is based on research sponsored by DARPA under agreement number FA8750-13-2-0008 and by the Army Research Laboratory (ARL) under agreement W911NF-09-2-0053. Any opinions, findings, conclusions or recommendations are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the view of the agencies.
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Appendix A  Features and Additional Information about the Data

| Classifier | Art. | Prep. | Noun | Agr. | Form |
|------------|------|-------|------|------|------|
| Train      | 43K  | 20K   | 39K  | 22K  | 37K  |
| Test       | 43K  | 20K   | 39K  | 22K  | 37K  |

Table A.16: Number of candidate words by classifier type in training and test data (FCE).

| Error  | Number of errors and error rate |
|--------|---------------------------------|
|        | Train                          | Test                          |
| Art.   | 2336 (5.4%)                    | 2290 (5.3%)                   |
| Prep.  | 1263 (6.4%)                    | 1205 (6.1%)                   |
| Noun   | 858 (2.2%)                     | 805 (2.0%)                    |
| Verb agr. | 319 (1.5%)                  | 330 (1.4%)                    |
| Verb form | 104 (0.3%)                  | 127 (0.3%)                    |

Table A.17: Statistics on annotated errors in the FCE corpus. Percentage denotes the error rates, i.e. the number of erroneous instances with respect to the total number of relevant instances in the data.

| Features         | Description                                                                 |
|------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| (1) subjHead, subjPOS | the surface form and the POS tag of the subject head                        |
| (2) subjDet       | determiner of the subject NP                                                |
| (3) subjDistance  | distance between the verb and the subject head                              |
| (4) subjNumber    | Sing – singular pronouns and nouns; Pl – plural pronouns and nouns          |
| (5) subjPerson    | 3rdSing – “she”, “he”, “it”, singular nouns; Not3rdSing – “we”, “you”, “they”, plural nouns; 1stSing – “I” |
| (6) conjunctions  | (1)&(3); (4)&(5)                                                            |

Table A.18: Verb agreement features that use syntactic knowledge.

Appendix B  Evaluation Metrics

Here, we discuss the CoNLL-2013 shared task evaluation metric and provide a little bit more detail on the performance of the Illinois modules in this context. As shown in Table 1 in Sec. 2, over 90% of words (about 98% in training) are used correctly. The low error rates are the key reason the error correction task is so difficult: it is quite challenging for a system to improve over a writer that already performs at the level of over 90%. Indeed, very few NLP tasks already have systems that perform at that level. The error sparsity makes it very challenging to identify mistakes accurately. In fact, the highest precision of 46.45%, as calculated by the shared task evaluation metric, is achieved by the Illinois system. However, once the precision drops below 50%, the system introduces more mistakes than it identifies.

We can look at individual modules and see whether for any type of mistake the system improves the quality of the text. Fig. 2 shows Precision/Recall curves for the system in Table 15. It is interesting to note that performance varies widely by error type. The easiest are noun and article usage errors: for nouns, we can do pretty well at the recall point 20% (with the corresponding precision of over 60%); for articles, the precision is around 50% at the recall value of 20%. For agreement errors, we can get a precision of 55% with a very high threshold (identifying only 5% of mistakes). Finally, on two mistakes – preposition and verb form – the system never achieves a precision over 50%.
Table A.19: Features used in the article error correction system. $w_B$ and $w_A$ denote the word immediately before and after the target, respectively; and $p_B$ and $p_A$ denote the POS tag before and after the target. headWord denotes the head of the NP complement. $NC$ stands for noun compound and is active if second to last word in the NP is tagged as a noun. Verb features are active if the NP is the direct object of a verb. Preposition features are active if the NP is immediately preceded by a preposition. Adj feature is active if the first word (or the second word preceded by an adverb) in the NP is an adjective. NpWords and npTags denote all words (POS tags) in the NP.
