Categorizing Example Types in Context: Applications for the Generation of Tutorial Descriptions

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Abstract

Different situations may require the presentation of different types of examples. For instance, some situations require the presentation of positive examples only, while others require both positive and negative examples. Furthermore, different examples often have specific presentation requirements: they need to appear in an appropriate sequence, be introduced properly and often require associated prompts. It is important to be able to identify what is needed in which case, and what needs to be done in presenting the example. A categorization of examples, along with their associated presentation requirements would help tremendously. This issue is particularly salient in the design of a computational framework for the generation of tutorial descriptions which include examples. Previous work on characterizing examples has approached the issue from the direction of *when* different types of examples should be provided, rather than *what* characterizes the different types. In this paper, we extend previous work on example characterization in two ways: (i) we show that the scope of the characterization must be extended to include not just the example, but also the surrounding context, and (ii) we characterize examples in terms of three orthogonal dimensions: the *information content*, the *intended audience*, and the *knowledge type*. We present descriptions from text-books on LISP to illustrate our points, and describe how such categorizations can be effectively used by a computational system to generate descriptions that incorporate examples.

Introduction

It has long been known that examples are very useful in communication – especially in explanations and instruction. New ideas, concepts or terms are conveyed with greater ease and clarity if the descriptions are accompanied by appropriate examples, e.g., (Houtz *et al.*, 1973; MacLachlan, 1986; Pirolli, 1991; Reder *et al.*, 1986). Furthermore, people often like examples because they tend to put abstract, theoretical information into concrete terms they can understand. An important issue in the use of examples is the 'suitability' of the example to be presented. Previous studies on the categorization of the 'suitability' of different examples include: a study by Polya, based their intended use (Polya, 1945), and by Rissland, based on the 'example type' (Michener, 1978).[1] However, these categorizations did not explicitly take into account the *context* in which the example was presented. Yet, the context of an example affects its characterization and usefulness. In this paper, we shall describe a different categorization of examples: one which takes into account the example's surrounding context and can be described in terms of three orthogonal dimensions. We also show how this categorization can be useful to an intelligent tutoring system, which can then utilize this knowledge to prune large amounts of its search space in looking for appropriate examples to present.

A list always begins with a left parenthesis. Then come zero or more pieces of data (called the elements of the list) and a right parenthesis. Some examples of lists are:

(AARDVARK)
(RED YELLOW GREEN BLUE)
(2 3 5 11 19)
(3 FRENCH FRIES)

A List may contain other lists as elements. Given the three lists:

(BLUE SKY) (GREEN GRASS) (BROWN EARTH)

we can make a list by combining them all with a parenthesis:

((BLUE SKY) (GREEN GRASS) (BROWN EARTH))

Figure 1: A description with examples.

For example, Figure 1 shows the description of the LISP concept `list`. The highlighted regions mark the portions which are generated because examples are introduced. The first highlighted portion, contains some

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[1] Rissland has published as 'Edwina Rissland' and 'Edwina Rissland Michener,' so references to Rissland may show up differently, as [Rissland ...] or [Michener ...].

introductory text before presenting four examples that are meant to convey information about the different types of elements that can be in a list. These examples, therefore, end up replacing textual information that would have conveyed the same information. The second highlighted portion contains both text and some examples that serve as background for the presentation of the actual example, which is ((BLUE SKY) (GREEN GRASS) (BROWN EARTH)). It is thus clear that the introduction of examples affects both the descriptive parts of the explanation and the other examples in different ways.

There are many issues that must be considered in selecting and presenting examples (Mittal and Paris, 1992). In this paper, we address the issue of characterizing the *type of examples* that appear in tutorial descriptions, as this can help a system in choosing appropriate examples to present. In the following sections, we describe previous work on categorizing example types, and illustrate how the same example can be categorized in two different categories if the accompanying description is not taken into account. Finally, we present our categorization, taking into consideration the surrounding context of the examples.

Previous Work on Categorizing Examples

A very wide variety of examples can be potentially used to illustrate any given point. However, not all examples are equally effective in all situations; some are better than others in specific contexts, and others tend to illustrate different aspects of the same concept in different ways and achieve different goals. Categorizing examples is useful because identifying a category from which to generate an example can greatly constrain the number of possible examples that can be applicable in the given situation.

Polya categorized examples into three categories (Polya, 1945): (*i*) *leading examples*, (*ii*) *suggestive examples*, and (*iii*) *counter examples*. These categories were defined in the context of instruction. Leading examples were ones that contained mostly *critical*[2] features and very few "irrelevant features;" they were meant for naive users. Suggestive examples contained more *variable*[3] features than leading examples and were meant to "guide the student in the correct direction." Counter-examples were negative examples that illustrated how instances were *not* indicative of some concept.

In her work, Rissland categorized examples into five categories (Michener, 1978; Michener, 1977): (*i*) *introductory examples:* perspicuous, simple cases, (*ii*) *model examples:* general, paradigmatic cases, (*iii*) *reference examples:* standard, ubiquitous cases, (*iv*) *counter examples:* limiting, falsifying cases, and (*v*) *anomalous examples:* exceptional, pathological cases.

[2]Critical features are features that are *necessary* for an example to be considered a positive example of a concept. Changes to a critical feature cause a positive example to become a negative example.

[3]Variable features are features that can *vary* in a positive example. Changes to variable features creates different positive examples.

We believe that both categorizations suffer from two problems: (*i*) they do not explicitly take into account the context of the presentation, and the same example can often be classified into different categories, (*ii*) the definition of the category is not clearly specified; it is therefore difficult to implement in a computational system. Furthermore, the two categorizations above did not specify relationships (if any) between their different categories, nor did they specify whether these categories were mutually exclusive.

The Necessity for Categorizing Examples based on the Context

Our categorization of examples was driven by the need to be able to generate tutorial and explanatory descriptions that integrate examples coherently in a computational framework.[4] In such a framework, the system must be able to select (or generate) suitable examples that can illustrate the points the system needs to communicate in the explanation or in the definition being presented to the user. The suitability of an example is usually determined in the context it appears in, rather than in the abstract: it depends upon the goal of the description, what features are being presented, where in the overall description the example appears, etc.

Furthermore, the suitability of the example is also affected by other examples around it. A number of studies on the cognitive effectiveness of examples have shown that the presentation order of the examples plays an important role in user comprehension (e.g., (Litchfield *et al.*, 1990; Park and Tennsyon, 1986)). Thus, the appropriateness of one example, presented for the same description, can be different, based on other examples that appear with it, and where it appears. It is therefore obvious that an example can be categorized only in conjunction with the context in which it appears.

We shall now describe the three dimensions along which we characterize an example in context: the relationship of the information in the example to that in the context, the intended audience of the example, and the knowledge type being communicated by the examples.

The First Dimension: The relationship between the example and the description

One of the dimensions that an example can be characterized along is the relationship of the information contained in the example with the information contained in the accompanying descriptive explanation that it illustrates. Along this dimension, an example can fall into three categories:

1. *Positive Examples:* These examples are instances of the concept being described and satisfy the properties of the concept as described in the accompanying description. These examples must possess all the critical features of the concept they illustrate. Such examples play a

[4]Further details on this work on the design and implementation of a natural language system capable of integrating examples and text can be seen in (Mittal and Paris, 1992; Mittal and Paris, 1993).

supportive or *elaborative* role to the information in the description.

2. *Negative Examples:* Negative examples (or counter-examples) are *not* instances of the concept being described. These are cases that do *not* meet the requirements specified in the accompanying description, and they play a *contrastive* role in the context. Negative examples can be very useful, because they help rule out non-critical features of a concept (Houtz *et al.*, 1973). For instance, the following pair of examples

```
(AARDVARK) ; example of a list
 AARDVARK  ; not a list
```

about the concept of a `list` in the programming language LISP illustrate the need for parentheses in a `list`. Thus, *features in common* between positive and negative examples *can be ruled out as sufficient* features, while *differing features* are highlighted as *necessary* and thus become more important.

3. *Anomalous Examples:* Anomalous examples represent irregular or exceptional cases. These are either: (i) instances of the concept described, but not covered by the description, or (ii) those are likely to be mis-classified by the user (because of an incomplete description). Thus, positive instances which appear to be very different from other positive examples, or negative instances which appear to be very similar to positive examples, would be classified as anomalous cases.

The classification of an example into either of these categories depends upon the context established by the accompanying descriptive explanation. As mentioned previously, it is possible that an example which would be classified as an anomalous example in one context could be classified as a normal, positive example in another context. Consider the following description of a `list` in LISP:

> A left parenthesis followed by zero or more S-expressions followed by a right parenthesis is a list.
>
> (From (Shapiro, 1986))

Given the above definition of a `list`, the following example would classify as a positive example:

```
(1 2 3 4 5 67)
```

and the following would be a negative one:

```
1234567
```

However, the following examples would be anomalous cases, because they are not covered by the definition presented above:

```
NIL          ;  the list NIL
(a . b)      ;  examples of a dotted-list
```

This categorization of examples would change, with another definition:

> A `list` is a `CONS`-cell whose `CDR` is either the atom `NIL` or another list. The atom `NIL` is the identifier that represents the empty list and the boolean concept `FALSE`.
>
> (From (Steele Jr., 1984))

In this case, `NIL` *becomes a positive example* of a `list`. Similarly, a `list` may be so defined as to include the concept of a dotted-list as well.

It is clear that it is difficult, and sometimes impossible, to classify an example as belonging to a certain category without taking into consideration the surrounding contextual information. It is also difficult to categorize examples as being 'suggestive' or 'model' or 'reference' without having a complete definition of these different categories. It is also not possible to label an example 'positive' or 'negative' without knowing the definition it is supposed to illustrate (`AARDVARK` is positive example of an `atom`, but is a negative example of a `list`). In addition, an example that is 'anomalous' in one context can classify as a positive example in another context. Correct classification of the examples is essential, because examples must be presented in accordance with the category they happen to classify in. For instance, anomalous examples can cause great confusion in an introductory user if presented along with other positive examples. Anomalous examples should be treated as such (presented separately from the regular examples, with a suitable introduction to notify the user of the anomalous nature of such examples).

The Second Dimension: The intended audience

The second dimension that examples can be characterized along is dictated by the intended audience type of the presentation. This is an important constraint on the selection of information to be presented *both* in the description and the example. There have been many studies on the need for varying both the amount of information and the manner of its presentation, based on the user (e.g., (London, 1992; Yoder, 1986; Paris, 1988)). These studies have demonstrated that there are significant differences in descriptions and examples meant for different user types.

As we have already mentioned before, the major shortcoming of both the previous example categorizations was due to the fact that they did not take the accompanying context into account. In contrast, we consider *both* the description and the example for categorization. This is essential in our case, because the system needs to generate both the text as well as the example in its explanation. Often, even though the examples tend to look alike, the accompanying descriptions are very different for different user types. For instance, Pirolli found that in some domains, such as recursion, the examples presented to both naive and advanced users were almost identical, but their explanations were very different (Pirolli, 1991). Feldman and Klausmeier found similar differences in the phrasing of definitions presented to fourth and eight grade students (Feldman and Klausmeier, 1974).

From our analyses of naturally occurring texts, we have classified examples (in the context of their accompanying descriptions) into three main classes – *introductory*, *intermediate* and *advanced*. This classification constrains the content and the presentation style of the descriptions and the examples used with them:

1. *introductory:* – users with little or no previous exposure assumed for the concept; goal is to *learn about* the concept,
2. *intermediate:* – users with moderate previous exposure; goal is to *learn to make use* of the concept,

3. *advanced:* – users with extensive knowledge; goal is to clarify some point or misconception about the concept.

Introductory Users: Examples in introductory descriptions[5] tend to be simple ones – where 'simple' refers to the fact that they are usually single-featured (or if they have multiple features, sometimes two, where the two features are along two different feature dimensions). In our domain of LISP descriptions, the accompanying description is syntactic or surface/appearance oriented. Anomalous examples are usually absent, and if they are presented, they are done so *after* all the other examples. Examples are often introduced as soon as the point they illustrate is mentioned in the text.

Consider for instance the description in Figure 1. The descriptions are centered around the syntax or the surface appearance of the `list`. The examples are simple and illustrate a feature at a time (the *type* of data elements, except in one case where the *type* and the *number*, two different dimensions of variation, are illustrated). Examples do not always have prompts,[6] because the same information is often realized as sentences in the accompanying description.

Intermediate Users: Descriptions written for the 'intermediate' user (who is already assumed to have introductory knowledge) tend to be more complex than the ones for introductory users, in that they include more detail on *how* the information may be *used* by the user. The examples are not always presented immediately; if there are a number of related points, these points are stated first, before a group of examples illustrating these points are presented. The examples themselves are usually briefly annotated (with prompts). Intermediate descriptions contain a few introductory examples, which are then followed by typical uses of such example instances, which contain mostly multi-featured examples. For example, the description in Figure 2 describes how a `list` can be used to represent shopping lists, store phone numbers and write function calls.

Advanced Users: Since the purpose of advanced or reference materials is *not* instruction, it is not surprising that both the textual description and the accompanying examples are very different from those in the introductory ones. The documentation and the examples usually occur in a fixed format, with the examples following the definition and the explanation. The examples are not simple, single-featured, but tend to be few and multi-featured (typically three to four features). The examples are often almost independent of the textual description, with little cross-referencing between the two. This almost invariably results in prompts being used to indicate some of the salient characteristics of the examples. Since the descriptions tend to be comprehensive, there are few (if any) anomalous examples. If there are any anomalous examples, they are *always* presented. For example, a description of a `list` from an advanced, reference manual is shown in Figure 3.

[5] We shall use terms such as 'introductory descriptions' to indicate descriptions meant for an introductory audience.

[6] 'Prompts' are additional text or markers associated with examples to draw attention to specific features in the examples (Engelmann and Carnine, 1982).

A list looks like a sequence of objects, without commas between them, enclosed in parentheses.

⋮

Appropriately constructed lists can also be used to call functions in LISP. If you type any of the lists in table 2-4 to LISP, you will get an appropriate response.

```
Table 2-2:
  (1 2 3 4 5)        ; List of numbers
  (A B C D)          ; List of symbols
  (#\A #\B #\C #\D)  ; List of characters
Table 2-3:
  (This is (also) a list)
  ("this is a string in a list" -53)
  ((Beth "555-5834") (Pat "555-8098"))
Table 2-4:
  (SQRT 2)
  (+ 2 3)
  (- 6 5 4)
```

Lists can be considered ways to store data. For example, you might want to store your inventory as a list, or group together names and phone numbers in a list.

Figure 2: Intermediate descriptions with 'use' oriented examples from (Tatar, 1987), p.16.

A `list` is recursively defined to be either the empty list or a CONS whose CDR component is a `list`. The CAR components of the CONSes are called the elements of the list. For each element of the list, there is a CONS. The empty list has no elements at all. A `list` is annotated by writing the elements of the list in order, separated by blank space (space, tab, or return character) and surrounded by parentheses. For example:

```
(a b c)              ; A list of 3 symbols
(2.0s0 (a 1) #\*)    ; A list of 3 things:a
                     ; float, a list, and a
                     ; character object
```

The empty list `NIL` therefore can be written ( ), because it is a list with no elements.

From (Steele Jr., 1984), p.26

Figure 3: Reference documentation is complete and tends to have few (multi-featured) examples.

The Third Dimension: The Knowledge-Type

In addition to the *user-type* and the *example-type* which can be used to constrain the possible choices that need to be made in generation, the *knowledge-type* can also be used during the generation process to determine the appropriate type and sequence of examples to be generated in an explanation. The *knowledge-type* refers to the categorization of information into one of three broad classes: *concepts*, *relations* or *processes*. There can be significant differences in the presentation of examples and the accompanying de-

The `list` function takes any number of inputs and makes a list of them all. For example:

INPUT to `list`		OUTPUT
'foo 'bar 'baz	→	(foo bar baz)
'foo	→	(foo)
'sun NIL	→	(sun NIL)
'(frob)	→	((frob))

From (Touretzky, 1984), p.51

Figure 4: Examples of relations focus on the items being related.

scriptions based on whether the idea to to be explained is a concept, relation or a process.

Consider for instance the *concept* 'list' (as described in Figure 1) and the *relation* 'list' (functions are relations that hold between the input parameters and the output values of the function), as described in Figure 4.

The *concept* list is described as an object, and examples of list are instances which exemplify the term 'list'; the *function* list, on the other hand, is described in terms of its input and output parameters, and examples of the function reflect this fact. Similarly, *processes*, which are sequences of functions are described differently and their examples are often instances of function parameters at every step in the sequence. In generating examples of relations, it is important to keep in consideration that the examples used as input-output parameters must be known to the hearer. The system must also be careful to choose examples which are not anomalous or exceptional cases for these parameters.

Examples of processes consist of chains of events that take place in a particular order. The goal is to communicate the *sequence of events* and their *cumulative effect*. As in the case of examples of relations, the system must ensure that all the concepts and relations needed to present a process example are known to the user before the process example is presented.

Discussion

The three dimensions along which we categorize examples are not limited to the gradations that we have mentioned in this paper. In our framework, there are yet finer gradations which are used by the system in making decisions. For instance, *concepts* are further sub-divided into whether they are *single-featured*, *multiple-featured*, or *comparative* concepts. These finer gradations allow us to make better decisions about both the number of examples as well as their presentation order in our system. Figure 5 shows a representation of the three dimensions in this categorization.

Applications to the Generation of Tutorial Descriptions

The categorization of examples (in the context of their accompanying description) that we have outlined is extremely useful in constructing a system for generating tutorial descriptions. Our major goal is not just the selection (or generation) of appropriate examples by themselves,

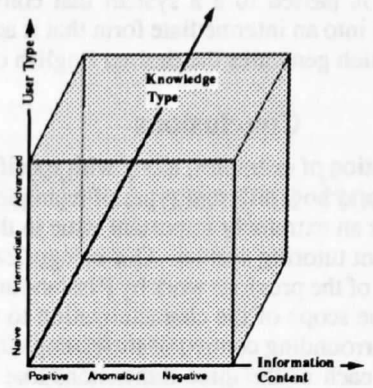

Figure 5: The three dimensions along which examples can be categorized in context.

but the generation of a description that integrates examples and text in an effective manner. This requirement brings up many issues that may otherwise be not considered as important: issues such as the interaction between the examples and the description (how the text changes because of the presence of examples), the placement of the examples in relation to the explanation (before, within or after the description), etc.

Our current framework implements the generation of examples within a text-generation system by explicitly posting the goals of providing examples. Our system uses a planning mechanism: given a top level communicative goal (such as `(DESCRIBE LIST)`), the system finds plans capable of achieving this goal. Plans typically post further sub-goals to be satisfied, and planning continues until primitive speech acts – i.e., directly realizable in English – are achieved. The result of the planning process is a discourse tree, where the nodes represent goals at various levels of abstraction (with the root being the initial goal, and the leaves representing primitive realization statements, such as `(INFORM ...)` statements. In the discourse tree, the discourse goals are related through coherence relations. This tree is then passed to a grammar interface which converts it into a set of inputs suitable for input to a natural language generation system (Penman (Mann, 1983)). Examples are generated by explicitly posting a goal within the text planning system: i.e., some of the plan operators used in the system include the generation of examples as one of their steps, when applicable. This ensures that the examples embody specific information that either illustrates or complements the information in the accompanying textual description. Issues such as the number of examples to be presented, the order in which they should be presented, whether they should have prompts associated with them, etc. can then be determined in conjunction (using the constraints imposed on the selection) with the categorization of the examples to be presented. Associated with each gradation in our categorization, we have specific presentation heuristics for the examples and their descriptions. The resulting discourse structure is then processed to make final decisions, such as the choice of lexical items. Finally, the completed

discourse tree is passed to a a system that converts the INFORM goals into an intermediate form that is accessible to Penman, which generates the desired English output.

Conclusions

The categorization of examples, along with specific guidelines of when and how different types of examples should be presented is an extremely important issue in the design of an intelligent tutoring system. Our categorization is a generalization of the previous work by Rissland and Polya, and extends the scope of the characterization to take into account the surrounding context of the example. The categories along each of the three dimensions that we have mentioned are only meant to illustrate how they affect the examples and the text to be presented. These categories can be sub-divided further into smaller classes and specific presentation methods can be associated with each class.

We have implemented a system that plans the presentation of coherent text and examples. The plan operators (which select information to be presented), also make use of the information along the *user-type* and the *knowledge-type* dimensions to structure the content as well as the surface form of the description appropriately. Thus, the characterization's modular nature allows the represented information to be shared among different resources in the system.

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