Efficient n-gram, Skipgram and Flexgram Modelling with Colibri Core

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Counting n-grams lies at the core of any frequentist corpus analysis and is often considered a trivial matter. Going beyond consecutive n-grams to patterns such as skipgrams and flexgrams increases the demand for efficient solutions. The need to operate on big corpus data does so even more. Lossless compression and non-trivial algorithms are needed to lower the memory demands, yet retain good speed. Colibri Core is software for the efficient computation and querying of n-grams, skipgrams and flexgrams from corpus data. The resulting pattern models can be analysed and compared in various ways. The software offers a programming library for C++ and Python, as well as command-line tools.

Keywords: Natural Language Processing; n-grams; skipgrams; corpus frequency; corpus analysis

(1) Overview

Introduction
The n-gram, a sequence of \(n\) consecutive word tokens, is a core concept for many Natural Language Processing (NLP) applications. One of the most basic NLP tasks is to read corpus text and compute an \(n\)-gram frequency list, elementary for any kind of statistical analysis. The unigram frequency list, i.e. the word frequency list, is the simplest instance of this task which is especially ubiquitous. Computing \(n\)-gram frequency on a corpus text is fairly trivial, and any beginning computer science student will have no trouble to accomplish this in just a few lines of code in a modern high-level programming language. However, optimising this to reduce memory constraints, improve speed, and scale to large data, is a more complex matter. Colibri Core, the NLP software we introduce here, offers efficient algorithms to do this.

N-grams are typically distributed in a Zipfian fashion, implying there are only a few high-frequency patterns, with words such as common function words in the lead, and there is a long tail of patterns that occur only very sparsely. This basic fact makes counting a notoriously memory-hungry enterprise, as patterns occurring below a minimum frequency threshold can not be discarded from memory until the entire corpus has been processed sequentially.

When working with large data sets and higher-order \(n\)-ngrams, this memory problem becomes apparent quickly when trivial solutions are employed. Colibri Core, on the other hand, offers tools and programming libraries that are heavily optimised to 1) reduce memory usage, and 2) offer high-speed performance.

The task of finding n-grams is generalised in Colibri Core to the task of finding patterns or constructions (we use the terms interchangeably). Furthermore, once patterns are identified, resulting in a pattern model, Colibri Core can extract relations between the patterns.

As the name Colibri Core suggests, the software is geared to provide core functionality for modelling patterns and exposes this functionality as a programming library as well as through command line tools. It aims to provide a solid foundation upon which more specialised software can be built, such as software for language modelling. The software is aimed at NLP software developers and researchers with a solid technical background.

Related Work
Pattern extraction, and with it pattern matching, plays an important role in computer science. In the NLP literature, n-grams are a common type of pattern, and their modelling is often researched in the context of statistical language modelling. Software that springs from such studies is widespread in the field. Examples, by no means exhaustive, are SRILM [13], IRSTLM [2], and KenLM [5]. Focus on efficient modelling with regards to memory consumption and look-up speed is an important component in such studies. Others also focus on big data storage in this field [4], though this study did not produce a usable open source software solution.

Colibri Core, however, takes a step back and is not a language modelling toolkit and therefore can’t be readily compared with one. It is, however, very suitable to be used as a foundation to that end, which has been done by one study already [10]. What we do have in common with language modelling toolkits is that both types of systems contain a store of patterns (i.e. n-grams or beyond) and their frequencies, in which quick look-up is essential, and both
provide a procedure to compute such a model. Both LM toolkits as well as Colibri Core employ various optimisations to reduce the memory usage of this store, and keep access times high.

Language Modelling toolkits do not generally offer any of the functionality Colibri Core offers when it comes to thresholding, indexing, nor the modelling of non-consecutive patterns such as skipgrams. The issue of skipgram extraction and modelling gained more traction in the past decade, see for instance [3]. The notion of skipgram (or rather flexgram in our terms, as shall become apparent later) also plays a part in vector space representations [9] that have become increasingly popular.

We think Colibri Core fills an interesting niche that is not covered by other readily available software. It provides solutions for the modelling of n-grams and skipgrams/flexgrams in an efficient and sufficiently extensible manner.

Implementation and Architecture
The overall architecture of Colibri Core is visualised in Figure 1, from a data flow perspective. The components shown here will be discussed in this section.

We will present the various features and optimisations that are implemented in Colibri Core. We start with an introduction of patterns and their encoding, Then discuss the implemented optimisation we use to count n-grams, and subsequently skipgrams. We then discuss more advanced parametrisation and end with a section on the computation of flexgrams.

Feature: Patterns
We distinguish three categories of patterns, and define them as follows:

1. N-grams – A sequence of \( n \) word tokens that are all consecutive. For example: “to be or not to be”

2. Skipgrams – A fixed-length sequence of \( p \) word tokens and \( q \) token placeholders/wildcards with total length \( n (n = p + q) \), the placeholders constitute gaps or skips and a skipgram can contain multiple of these. In turn, a gap can span one or more tokens. For example: “to _ or _ be”

3. Flexgrams – A sequence with one or more gaps of variable length, which implies the pattern by itself is of undefined length. For example: “to * or * be”

Our definitions are defined narrowly and, with exception of n-grams do not necessarily match up precisely to the way the concepts are used in other studies. Some may use the term skipgram to include what we call flexgram, or use another term such as “elastigram” to refer to flexgrams.

Skipgrams are used in the field to obtain a higher level of generalisation than can be offered by n-grams. They can, for instance, be found as features in classification tasks [1], or as a means in language modelling to decrease perplexity [3,10].

Dealing with word tokens implies that the corpus data has to be in a tokenised form. We start from the basis of plain-text corpus data, containing one unit per line; a unit can correspond to a sentence, paragraph, tweet or whatever unit is deemed appropriate for the task at hand. Corpus data can alternatively be provided in FoLiA XML format [14] as well, although linguistic annotation will be ignored.

Text data is typically stored as a string of characters. The characters themselves draw their denotation from a character encoding. The storage of a huge amount of strings is inefficient from a memory perspective, considering the fact that words follow a Zipfian distribution. Colibri Core therefore works on the basis of a lossless compression, in which each unique word token is assigned a numeric type identifier, which we call a class. This effectively defines the

Figure 1: The Colibri Core architecture; light green squares represent data models, yellowish rounded squares represent processes that manipulate data.
Algorithm 1: Informed Iterative Counting for n-grams. Take m to be the maximum n-gram order we intend to extract, t to be the minimum occurrence threshold, and M to be the pattern model in memory, with unigrams already counted in the more trivial fashion.

```plaintext
for n ∈ 2...m do
  for line ∈ corpus do
    for ngram ∈ extractNGrams(line, n) do
      nn1gram, nn1gram, ← extractNGrams(ngram, n – 1)
      if M(nn1gram, ) ≥ t & M(nn1gram, ) ≥ t then
        M(ngram) ← M(ngram) + 1
      end if
    end for
  end for
  pruneNGrams(M, n, t)
end for
return M
```

vocabulary of your data, which we call a class encoding. A pattern is not represented as an array of characters, but as an array of these classes instead. Such methods are commonly employed in Language Modelling toolkits as well, where 24 or 32-bit integers uniquely assigned to words are typically chosen [4].

In Colibri Core, further lossless compression is achieved by holding this array of classes in a dynamic-length byte representation rather than fixed-sized integers. This allows for low class values to be stored in fewer bytes than high class values. Classes 0 to 127 can be stored in a single byte, higher classes require at least two bytes. To achieve maximum compression, classes are assigned to word tokens based on frequency (i.e. entropy encoding): words with the highest frequency receive the lowest classes. This is essentially a variant of Huffman coding [6]. Some of the lowest classes are reserved for special purposes, e.g. to delimit sentences (class 0) or skipped content (classes 3 and 4).

Of each byte in the class representation, the highest bit is reserved as a continuation marker. As long as the continuation marker is set, the next byte is still part of the class. When it is low, we know we are at the final byte of a class representation. The class itself is stored in the remaining 7-bits of each byte. In practise this results in good compression and reduces memory usage; an example corpus taking up 221 MB on disk in plaintext form is reduced to just 60 MB when compressed. A subset of the Google billion word corpus, 769 million words in 30 million sentences, takes 3.9 GB in plaintext form, and 1.2 GB when compressed in this matter.

To encode a text corpus, a class encoding needs to be computed first, as visualised in the top-left corner of Figure 1. To decode the encoded corpus back to plain text, the class encoding is needed again. Colibri Core provides tools and exposes library functions to do this.

Optimisation: Informed Iterative Counting

N-gram frequency lists are often parametrised by a certain threshold. All n-grams below this occurrence threshold are pruned. We can circumvent the problem of having to hold a huge amount of patterns in memory that do not meet the threshold, as is typical in a Zipfian distribution.

We do this by employing informed counting. Informed counting is an iterative procedure, shown in pseudo code in Algorithm 1. Here we take m to be the maximum n-gram order we intend to extract. The whole corpus is then processed for each n where 1 < n ≤ m, extracting the respective n-grams at each iteration. This means that at each iteration, we can consult the results of the previous iteration. We can then readily discard any n-gram with n > 1 for which either of the two n – 1-grams it contains does not meet the threshold, as it follows that the n-gram can never meet the threshold either. By outright discarding an n-gram we do not need to store it and its count in memory. After each iteration of n, we prune all the n-grams that did not reach the threshold.

Though not expressed in the simplified algorithm above, the actual implementation accounts for more parameters, such as setting a lower bound to n. The amount of back-off, going all the way up to m – 1 here, can also be fine-tuned.

This algorithm makes concessions to processing speed, as multiple passes over the data are needed, to conserve memory. A performance evaluation of this algorithm will be addressed later in the section on Quality Control.

Optimisation: Informed Skipgram Counting

The computation of skipgrams is parametrised by an upper limit l ≤ m in the number of tokens, i.e. the total length of the skipgram (including gaps) expressed in tokens. The possible configuration of gaps increase exponentially with the total length spanned. A skipgram of size three has only one possible gap configuration; a _ z. A skipgram of size four already has three possible configurations; a _ _ z, a b _ z or a _ y z. The algorithm, shown in Algorithm 2 considers all possible configurations in which skips can be inserted in all of the n-grams in the model. It can discard a skipgram candidate by looking at the non-skipped parts that make up the skipgram, and by checking whether those exceed the set threshold. Note that the computation of skipgrams first requires counts of all n-grams where 0 < n ≥ l.

In this algorithm, the possible Configurations(ngram) function returns all possible skipgram configurations for the given n-gram. Note that the configuration of gaps depends only on
for n ∈ 3..l do
    for ngram ← getNGrams(M, n, t) do
        for skipgram ∈ possibleConfigurations(ngram) do
            docount ← True
            for part ∈ parts(skipgram) do
                if M(part) < t then
                    docount ← False
                    Break
                end if
            end for
            if docount then
                M(skipgram) ← M(skipgram) + 1
            end if
        end for
    end for
    pruneSkipgrams(M, n, t)
end for
return M

Algorithm 2: Informed Counting for skipgrams. Take t to be the maximum skipgram order we intend to extract, t to be the minimum occurrence threshold, and M to be the pattern model in memory, with ngrams already counted.

the length of the n-gram, regardless of its content, and can therefore easily be pre-computed. The parts(skipgram) function returns all consecutive parts that are subsumed in the skipgram, i.e. the parts delimited by the gaps. 

Like Algorithm 1, Algorithm 2 assumes a threshold t > 1. When t = 1, more trivial algorithms are invoked, as the user does not want to prune anything. These make only a single pass over the data. For skipgrams this leads to an explosion of resulting patterns, exponential with number of tokens, and is best avoided.

Parametrisation: What counts?
The counting algorithms are parametrised by various other parameters which are not shown in Algorithm 1 and Algorithm 2 to reduce complexity. The wide variety of parameters allow the user to influence precisely what is counted and this is one of the main assets of Colibri Core. Parameters exist to affect the following:

- The minimum and maximum length (in words/tokens) of the n-grams and/or skipgrams to be extracted. Setting minimum and maximum length to the same value will produce a model of homogeneous pattern length (e.g. only trigrams or words).

- A secondary word occurrence threshold can be configured. This is a value set higher than the primary occurrence threshold. Only patterns occurring above the primary threshold, and for which each of the individual words/unigrams in the pattern passes the secondary threshold as well, will be included in the model.

- N-grams that are not subsumed by higher order n-grams, i.e. which do not occur as part of a higher order n-gram in the data/model, can be pruned from the model. This allows you to extract for instance all trigrams and all bigrams and unigrams that make up the trigrams, but not the bigrams and unigrams that are not subsumed in trigrams.

- Skipgrams can be constrained using the skip type threshold. This requires that at least the specified number of distinct patterns must fit in the gaps of the skipgram. Higher values will produce less skipgrams, but typically more generic ones. For instance, a skipgram such as The_house will then only be included in the model if the corpus has instances in which the gap can be filled by at least the specified number of distinct patterns. If the threshold is set to 2 for example, and the corpus contains The_big_house and The_small_house, then the skipgram The_house is included. If the corpus only has one of these instantiations, and no other instantiations of the skipgram either, then the skipgram would not be included.

- Skipgrams and n-grams are typically computed using the same occurrence threshold, but it is also possible to use a different threshold for skipgrams.

Feature: Pattern Models
A pattern model is a key → value store, where the keys correspond to patterns and the values typically correspond to occurrence counts, although any kind of other value is supported too. Our aim with pattern models is to have a data structure that allows for quick lookup and iteration, as well as quick insertion during training. Moreover, memory consumption should be as conservative as possible, to allow handling of big data.

The underlying C++ library allows for choosing the actual underlying container implementation and value type through templating. The default container datatype is a hash map, which guarantees O(1) access and update times under ideal hashing conditions. The hash is computed directly from the binary representation of a pattern. Storing each pattern individually results in a lot of redundant information to be stored, as patterns overlap to a large degree. To conserve memory, the models can store pattern pointers instead. Instead of duplicating the
content for each pattern, these point to the original corpus data which is held in memory.

The use of hash maps can be contrasted to the use of suffix (or prefix) tries [17], a common data structure for storing n-grams in which a tree is constructed and any path in the tree, complete or incomplete, corresponds to a suffix (or prefix). Although suffix tries also benefit from decreased memory use due to no overlap in pattern data, the strongly linked nature of tries causes a significant overhead in memory use* that quickly exceeds the memory footprint of hash maps. For this reason, hash maps are the default and tries are currently not implemented in Colibri Core. The templating, however, does allow for such an implementation to be added in the future. This flexibility to abstract over the underlying data structure is one of the assets of Colibri Core.

At this point, we need to address suffix arrays [8] as well, which is a sorted array of suffixes, derived from suffix tries but with significantly decreased space requirements. Suffix arrays with longest common prefix (LCP) arrays will consume less memory than our hash maps, but are typically much slower to construct and query. Though no exhaustive experiment was conducted to this end, we did compare a predecessor of Colibri Core with a suffix array implementation [12] and found our implementation to be significantly faster in model construction.

We distinguish two types of pattern model, depending on the type of the values, which in the underlying C++ implementation is subject to templating as well:

1. **Unindexed Pattern Models** – Values are simple integers
2. **Indexed Pattern Models** – Values are arrays of indices where the pattern’s occurrences in the corpus are stored.

Obviously, indexed pattern models make a considerably higher demand on memory. They do, however, allow for a broader range of computations, as shall become apparent in subsequent sections.

The command-line tool colibri-patternmodeller exposes most of the functionality for training, viewing and editing pattern models (see also Figure 1). In the C++ and Python APIs, this functionality is generally available through methods on some flavour of the PatternModel class.

**Optimisation: Two-step training**

Training indexed patterns models is more memory intensive than training unindexed models, especially in very large corpora (say at least a hundred million words). To lower the demand on memory for such corpora, we implement a two-step training procedure. This involves first constructing an unindexed pattern model and subsequently constructing an indexed model on the basis of that, by making another pass over the corpus and gathering all indices. The gain here is in avoiding temporary storage of the indices that will not pass the occurrence threshold but that cannot be ruled out a priori by the informed counting algorithm. This conservation of memory comes at the cost of extended execution time.

**Feature: Corpus Comparison**

The computation of pattern models on two or more distinct corpora, provided the class encoding is the same for all of them, provides a basis for comparative corpus analysis. One measure for corpus comparison introduced in the software is the notion of coverage. This metric is expressed as the number of tokens in the test corpus that is covered by the patterns from the training corpus. This makes it an asymmetric metric, so the choice of training and test corpus matters. The metric can be represented either in absolute counts, or in normalised form as a fraction of the total amount of tokens in the test corpus.

To perform such comparisons, we first compute a pattern model on the training corpus, and subsequently compute a second pattern model on the test corpus, but constrained by the former pattern model. The ability to train constrained models is present throughout the software and can for instance also be used to train a pattern model based on a custom preset list of patterns, effectively limiting the model to this preselection. The previously described two-step training algorithm is also an example of constrained training.

Summarised statistics are computed at multiple levels. Measures such as occurrence count and coverage can be consulted for aggregates of n-grams, skipgrams, or flexgrams, as well as specific patterns. The former two can be inspected specifically for each of the different pattern sizes present in the model, i.e. for each value of n.

The coverage metric is a fairly crude metric of corpus overlap, despite the ability to assess it for different aggregates. A more widely established metric for corpus comparison is log-likelihood. Log likelihood expresses how much more likely any given pattern is for either of the two models. It therefore allows you to identify how indicative a pattern is for a particular corpus. Our implementation follows the methodology of [11]. They compute the log-likelihood (L) given the frequency of a pattern in corpus 1 (a), and corpus 2 (b) as follows:

\[
L = 2\alpha (\log \frac{a}{E_1} + b (\log \frac{b}{E_2}), \quad \text{where} \quad E_i = \frac{N_i (a+b)}{N_1 + N_2}
\]

**Feature: Relations between Patterns**

Various relations can be extracted between patterns in a pattern model, either through the API or a dedicated query tool. For all but the first of the relation types an indexed pattern model is required.

### Subsumption Relation

n-gram \( x_1 \cdots x_n \) subsumes \( n-1 \)-grams \( x_1 \cdots x_{n-1} \) and \( x_n \).

### Succession Relation

Patterns that occur in a sequence in the corpus data. For example: pattern \( x \) precedes \( yz \) and pattern \( z \) succeeds \( xy \).

### Instantiation Relation

Skipgrams or flexgrams may be instantiated by other patterns. For example, “to be _ not _” is instantiated by “or _ to”, resulting in the 6-gram “to be or not to be”. This type of relation thus allows you to precisely determine what patterns occur in certain gaps.
Co-occurrence Relation — Different patterns can naturally co-occur multiple times within the the structural "units" you decided upon for the corpus (e.g. sentences, paragraphs, tweets, etc). These units are newline delimited in your original input. The measure of such co-occurrence can be expressed by established metrics such as Jaccard and (normalised) mutual pointwise information.

For each of these categories, the relationship is bidirectional, i.e. you can query for the subsuming patterns as well as the subsumed patterns. The left neighbours as well as the right neighbours, the instantiations as well as the abstractions. The co-occurrence relationship is fully symmetrical.

These latter three relationships rely on both the forward index inherent in an indexed pattern model, as well as the reverse index, a function from positions in the corpus to an array of patterns that are found at said position. The reverse index is not modelled in memory as an explicit mapping from positions to patterns, that would use too much memory, but as a simpler reverse index that only keeps track of where each unit/sentence starts. This can then be used to quickly resolve specific positions to all possible patterns.

Feature: Flexgram Counting

Thus far, we have explained the algorithms for n-gram counting and skipgram counting, but have not yet done so for flexgrams, i.e. patterns with variable-width gaps. The implementation allows flexgrams to be computed in two different ways. The first is by extracting skipgrams first, and then abstracting flexgrams from these skipgrams. In this case the flexgram computation is constrained by the same maximum-size limit under which the skipgrams have been extracted. The second method for flexgram extraction proceeds through the co-occurrence relation. A flexgram is formed whenever two patterns (within the same structural unit) co-occur above a set threshold. The implementation of this latter method is currently limited to flexgrams with a single variable-width gap. This method is recommended when the user is interested in long-distance flexgrams, whereas the abstraction method is recommended when the user is more interested in having multiple gaps or the relationship between flexgrams and skipgrams.

Quality Control

Unit tests

To ensure the software is working as intended, an extensive series of unit tests is available. The tool colibri-test tests the various functions of the C++ library. The test.py script tests the Python binding. Testing in the form of continuous integration is made possible through Travis CI, where all test results are publicly available for inspection.

Performance Evaluation

In this section we conduct a performance evaluation of Colibri Core by measuring the time to compute a pattern model, and the memory resources used.

Comparisons can be made between Colibri Core’s unindexed vs indexed models, between the optimised pointer models vs standard pattern models, and between preloading a corpus in memory or reading it directly from file. For the experiments, shown in Table 1, we used a corpus of Dutch translations of TED talks of 127, 806 sentences and 2, 330, 075 words. We perform tests without thresholding as well as with an occurrence threshold of 2, and extract anything from unigrams to 8-grams.

For reference, we include a naive Python implementation that simply counts n-grams and stores them in a Python dictionary where the keys are strings and the values integers. We also include a comparable implementation that uses NLTK. Similarly, we include a naive C++ implementation based on a std::unordered_map<string,uint32_t>. The memory reduction that can be observed when comparing these against the Colibri Core models is attributed to the class encoding scheme we use. These memory optimaisations do come with a performance drawback that is especially noticeable when no thresholding is applied.

The pattern pointer models prove capable of further reduction in memory consumption, and offer a clear speed advantage as well. The pointer models use a representation of patterns that refer to the original corpus data, which is fully loaded into memory, rather than storing a separate copy for each pattern.

For the experiments with thresholding, we added a simple Python implementation of iterative counting and assess the value of the algorithm as such by comparing it against the naive Python implementation that simply prunes values below threshold at the very end. We clearly observe a drastic reduction in memory usage, at the cost of a longer execution time due to the multiple iterations.

Though Colibri Core is not a Language Modelling toolkit in itself, a comparison with a popular third-party LM toolkit may be of interest. We compare an unindexed pattern model containing unigrams, bigrams and trigrams to a similar model in SRILM [13]. Due to the many other features Colibri Core offers regarding thresholding, indexing, skipgrams and flexgrams, it can not yet rival the performance and memory efficiency of dedicated LM systems, which allow for more specific optimisations.

Indexed Pattern Models are by definition larger in memory than unindexed models, but they do offer a significant speed benefit in the computation of skipgrams, both of which can be observed in Table 1.

The C++ library allows for easy swapping of the underlying datastructure for pattern models. The default hashmap (std::unordered_map) solution can be contrasted to a pattern model using using an ordered map (std::map). As expected, the ordered map proves to be significantly slower and does not yield a memory advantage either.

As Colibri Core is suited for the processing of large data sets, provided sensible thresholds are set, we conduct extra experiments on the JRC-Acquis corpus, containing 31.3 million words in over 850, 000 sentences, and on a portion of the Google Billion Word corpus, where we use.
a set of 768 million words in 30 million sentences. These results are shown in Table 2.

Noticeable in the big data experiments is the explosion in memory consumption when skipgrams are computed on an unindexed pattern model. This is attributed directly to the sheer amount of skipgrams that can be extracted from the data, and the fact that unindexed models can only compute skip-grams exhaustively and do not support the skip type threshold discussed in Section “Parametrisation: What counts?”.

**Documentation**

Extensive documentation, including API references for both Python and C++, is provided at https://proycon.github.io/colibri-core. An interactive tutorial for Python is also available. The next section will provide a small example of possible usage from the command line.

**Usage Example**

Although we refer to the aforementioned documentation and the Python tutorial for extensive usage instructions, we include a short use case in this section and show how to use the command line tools. Assume you have a corpus corpus.txt and you want to extract all n-grams, skip-grams and flexgrams that occur more than five times. We set the maximum length to 8. For skipgrams, we add the additional constraint that it abstracts over at least three different ngrams, i.e. there are three different ways of filling the gaps. Flexgrams we derive from skipgrams.

First we should ensure this corpus is properly tokenised and that sentence splitting has been performed, putting each sentence on one line to make this the basic unit Colibri Core can count with. This preprocessing is not done by Colibri Core but using an external tokeniser such as ucto:

```
$ ucto ucto -L en -n corpus.txt > corpus.tok.txt
```

Once preprocessing is done, we can encode the corpus in a form suitable for Colibri Core, computing a class encoding and converting the data to it, as explained in section “Feature: Patterns”. The flow of this and all subsequent steps is also visualised in the architectural scheme in Figure 1.

```
$ colibri-classencode corpus.tok.txt
```

**Table 1**: Colibri Core performance benchmarks on the IWSLT data set. Performed by the colibri-benchmarks tool and the benchmarks.py script for the Python baselines. All non-Colibri Core references are marked with an asterisk (*). Memory usage is measured as the difference in resident memory after training and before training. Peak memory usage is measured absolutely as reported by the OS and included in parentheses. All experiments were performed on a Linux system with an Intel Xeon CPU (E5-2630L v3) at 1.80GHz and 256GB RAM. Parameter $t$ refers to the occurrence threshold, $l$ to the maximum pattern length.
This will result in the encoded corpus \texttt{corpus.tok.colibri.dat} and the corresponding vocabulary file \texttt{corpus.tok.colibri.cls}.

The main tool \texttt{colibri-patternmodeller} can now be invoked to extract ngrams, skipgrams and flexgrams and output a pattern model, as described in section “Feature: Pattern models”, to file:

\begin{verbatim}
$ colibri-patternmodeller --datafile corpus.tok.colibri.dat \
   --outputmodel corpus.colibri.patternmodel \ 
   --threshold 5 --maxlength 8 --skipgrams --skiptypes 3 --flexgrams S
\end{verbatim}

We have opted for an indexed pattern model, which gives us more thresholding options such as \texttt{--skiptypes}, and makes skipgram extraction more efficient, but at the cost of a much higher memory footprint compared to the simpler unindexed models.\textsuperscript{13}

We can now read the model from file and produce output to standard output in the form of 1) a print of all patterns in the model, 2) a statistical report summarising counts for various groups of patterns, and 3) a histogram of pattern frequencies:

\begin{verbatim}
$ colibri-patternmodeller --inputmodel corpus.colibri.patternmodel \ 
   --classfile corpus.tok.colibri.cls \ 
   --print --report --histogram
\end{verbatim}

The following support, including but not limited to bug reports, feature requests and general pleas for assistance, is provided through the Github issue tracker at \url{https://github.com/proycon/colibri-core/issues}. As such, the archive of issues is always publicly consultable.

\(2\) Availability

**Operating System**

Colibri Core should be able to run on modern POSIX-compliant operating systems, including Linux, FreeBSD and Mac OS X. It is tested to compile with current versions of both gcc as well as clang.

**Programming Language**

Colibri Core is written in C++, adhering to the C++11 standard. The Python binding is written in Cython (0.23 or above) and supports both Python 2.7 as well as Python 3. The latter is recommended.

The Python binding ensures that the functionality of Colibri Core is easily accessible from Python without sacrificing the great performance benefit native code provides. Python was chosen as it is a high-level programming language in widespread use in the scientific community, and the NLP community in particular. It demands less expertise from the developer than C++ and is more suitable for rapid prototyping.

**Additional system requirements**

Colibri Core provides memory-based techniques where models are held entirely in memory to guarantee maximum performance on lookup and computation. This approach can be contrasted to e.g. database approaches which have much higher latency. It does place considerable memory requirements on

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{lll}
\hline
\textbf{Experiment} & \textbf{CPU time} & \textbf{Memory} \\
\hline
\textbf{JRC-Acquis data, with thresholding \((t = 2, l = 8)\)} & & \\
*Naive Python implementation & 8m 4s & 11407 MB \\
Unindexed Pattern Model (from file) & 4m 18s & 1704 MB (1803 MB) \\
Unindexed Pattern Model (preloaded corpus) & 3m 58s & 1700 MB (1800 MB) \\
Unindexed Pattern Pointer Model (preloaded corpus) & 3m 1s & 1344 MB (1445 MB) \\
Indexed Pattern Model (preloaded corpus) & 4m 36s & 4117 MB (4217 MB) \\
Unindexed Pattern Model (preloaded corpus), skipgrams & 61m 1s & 30420 MB (30520 MB) \\
Indexed Pattern Model (preloaded corpus), skipgrams, skiptypes = 12 & 80m 11s & 29746 MB (29846 MB) \\
\textbf{JRC-Acquis data, LM comparison, trigram model \((t = 1, l = 3)\)} & & \\
Unindexed Pattern Model (from file) & 42s & 716 MB (847 MB) \\
*SRILM ngram-count & 12s & 348 MB \\
\textbf{Google Billion Words corpus, with heavy thresholding \((t = 10, l = 4, y = 20)\)} & & \\
Unindexed Pattern Pointer Model (preloaded corpus) & 83m 14s & 12279 MB (15317 MB) \\
\textbf{Google Billion Words corpus, trigram model \((t = 1, l = 3)\)} & & \\
Unindexed Pattern Model (from file) & 25m 16s & 16568 MB (19788 MB) \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Benchmarks on two large data sets. Same setup as Table 1. Parameter \texttt{y} represents the occurrence threshold specifically for skipgrams.}
\end{table}
the system on which it is run, though this depends entirely on
the size of the data and the thresholds the user uses. We rec-
commend at least 16GB RAM. In practice, using Colibri Core on
high-end computing servers with 256GB RAM is not uncom-
non for extensive computation on big data sets.

Colibri Core is single-threaded due to the non-distribut-
able nature of most of the algorithms. A 64-bit architec-
ture is required, 32-bit is not supported.

Dependencies
Colibri Core relies on the standard C/C++ library and a
full build environment including autoconf and automake;
Python 2.7 or 3; Cython 0.23 or above. Support for reading
the FolIA XML format for text is entirely optional and
requires the libfolia library.14

List of contributors
Developed by Maarten van Gompel, with contributions
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Software Location
Archive
Name: Zenodo
Persistent Identifier: https://dx.doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.55641
Publisher: Maarten van Gompel
Licence: GNU General Public Licence v3
Date published: June 15th, 2016 (v2.4.1)

Code repository
Name: GitHub
Identifier: https://github.com/proycon/colibri-core
Website: https://proycon.github.io/colibri-core
Licence: GNU General Public Licence v3
Date published: since September 21st, 2013, latest
release at the time of writing is v2.4.1 (June 15th, 2016)

Language
English

(3) Reuse potential
Colibri Core explicitly aims to provide a foundation for
researchers in the NLP community to build their tools
and research on. The software is already being employed
in ongoing research on Machine Translation,15 Bayesian
Language Modelling,16 Kneser-Ney Language Modelling,17
spelling correction,18 and event prediction in social media
streams.19 This has culminated in the publication of sev-
eral studies that use Colibri Core [16,10,7].

As a programming library for both C++ and Python,
Colibri Core can be potentially adopted by a wide variety
of third party developers. As a set of tools and scripts, Colibri
Core also has merit standalone. It is, however, focused on
command-line usage and therefore still requires a certain
technical expertise from the end-user.

To increase the accessibility of Colibri Core, a RESTful
webservice as well as generic web interface is already
provided through CLAM[15]. With this we hope to meet
the needs of less technical end-users, as well as auto-
mated networked clients. This webservice is hosted at
https://webservices-lst.science.ru.nl.

Future work building upon Colibri Core may focus on
offering high-level user-interfaces to reach a wider audi-
ence, and on further improvement of its performance.

Competing Interests
The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Notes
1 The initial and final token may never be gaps in the
extracted skipgrams.
2 using the unordered map STL container in C++11
3 Spooky Hash v2 is used for hashing: http://burtle-
burtle.net/bob/hash/spooky.html
4 Each pattern pointer takes up 16 bytes
5 Each pointer consumes 8 bytes on 64-bit architectures,
and one would be needed for every transition between
two tokens.
6 Here, $E_i$ expresses expected values, $N_i$ is the total
amount of tokens in the respective corpus
7 https://travis-ci.org/proycon/colibri-core
8 The data is from the IWSLT 2012 Evaluation Campaign,
html#MTtrack. Tokenisation was performed using
9 Natural Language Toolkit, a popular platform for
NLP on Python: http://www.nltk.org. Our im-
plementation follows the naive approach but uses
ngrams () from nltk.util and FreqDist
from nltk.probability
10 SRILM’s ngram-count is run in vanilla form, i.e. no
smoothing or interpolation, with the options -no-
bos -no-eos. Note that the encoding of classes is
a separate step in Colibri Core, so our total CPU time
should be considered to be a second longer than re-
ported for a more fair comparison.
11 the hash key is still computed as it determines the or-
dering
12 https://languagemachines.github.io/ucto
13 Use the --unindexed flag to build an
unindexed model
14 https://proycon.github.io/folia
15 https://github.com/proycon/colibri-mt
16 https://github.com/naiaden/cococopyp
17 https://github.com/naiaden/apodiformes
18 https://github.com/proycon/gecco
19 https://github.com/fkunneman/ADNEXT_predict

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7. Kunneman, F and van den Bosch, A 2016 ‘Open-domain extraction of future events from twitter’, Natural Language Engineering. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1351324916000036


