Automatic Readability Assessment

Features, models and their applicability

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Introduction

Background

Our Approach

Corpus

Features

Modeling

Results

Practical Usage

German

Current Work

Outline of the Talk

- Background
  - What is readability assessment?
  - Where is it useful?
  - How do we build an automatic model for readability?
- Our Approach
  - Corpus, Features and Modeling
- Applicability to real world
  - for various domains and genres
  - sentences instead of documents
  - practical applications
- Readability Assessment for German

Introduction
Background
Our Approach
Corpus
Features
Modeling
Results
Practical Usage
German
Current Work

What is readability assessment?

Measuring **how difficult** it is to read a text,

- given a **purpose**, e.g.,
  - identifying appropriate texts for the readers
  - evaluation of natural language generation systems
- based on **properties of the text** using criteria which are
  - theory-driven (e.g., difficult syntactic constructions)
  - data-induced (e.g., corpora with graded texts)
  - in-between (e.g., derived frequency information for words)
- for a **user**, given some information about him (e.g., language ability, age, working memory)
  - obtained directly (e.g., questionnaire), or
  - indirectly (e.g, inferred from nature of a search query)

Introduction
Background
Our Approach
Corpus
Features
Modeling
Results
Practical Usage
German
Current Work

Where is this useful?

- retrieving relevant reading materials for language learners (e.g., REAP project, http://reap.cs.cmu.edu)
- evaluating the quality of abstracts and automatically generated summaries (Kanungo & Orr 2009)
- readers with special needs (e.g., adults with intellectual disabilities as in Huenerfauth et al. 2009)
- personalized search (Liu et al. 2004)
- assessing difficulty of questions in survey questionnaires (**?**)

Introduction
Background
Our Approach
Corpus
Features
Modeling
Results
Practical Usage
German
Current Work

Where is this useful?

Our work

- text simplification (Vajjala & Meurers, EACL 2014)
  - application context: bilingual classrooms (project starting in June 2014)
- identifying television programs into age-groups based on subtitles (Vajjala & Meurers, PITR 2014)
- comparing the linguistic complexity of German text books across school types & grades (ongoing project)
- analyzing impact of linguistic complexity of questionnaire data on the results (Göllner et al, GEBF 2014 talk)

Introduction
Background
Our Approach
Corpus
Features
Modeling
Results
Practical Usage
German
Current Work

How is readability assessment done?

Traditional Approaches

- *Traditional readability formulae* used shallow, easy to quantify features
  - e.g., average sentence length, average word length
  - Kincaid et al. (1975), DuBay (2004), . . .
- Some others were based on *lexical measures*
  - e.g., words on specific word lists
  - Chall & Dale (1995), . . .
- These approaches are popular even now (e.g., in Word).
- Tools exist for calculating scores using
  - popular formulae (e.g., https://readability-score.com)
  - proprietary approaches (e.g., http://www.lexile.com)

How is readability assessment done?

Computational Approaches

- Language n-gram models
  (Si & Callan 2001; Collins-Thompson & Callan 2004; Petersen & Ostendorf 2009)
- Machine learning using lexical and syntactic features
  (Schwarm & Ostendorf 2005; Heilman et al. 2007; Feng 2010)
- Language specific morphological features
  (Dell'Orletta et al. 2011; Francois & Fairon 2012; Hancke et al. 2012)
- Features motivated by cognitive perspective
  (Crossley & McNamara 2011)
- Features motivated by Second Language Acquisition (SLA)
  - measures of language development or proficiency can successfully be used as measures of text complexity
    (Vajjala & Meurers 2012)

Introduction
Background
Our Approach
Corpus
Features
Modeling
Results
Practical Usage
German
Current Work

Typical Steps in a Machine Learning Approach

- You have some texts annotated with reading level (**corpus**) or you collect some graded texts.
- Start with a hypothesis about text complexity and quantify the hypothesis (**features**).
- How will you build a machine learning model? (**modeling**)
  - Group it in to discrete readability levels (= classification) e.g., beginner, intermediate, advanced
  - continuous readability levels (= regression) e.g., grade 1, 2, . . .
- Verify the performance (**evaluation**) and use this model for predicting the reading level of new texts.

Introduction
Background
Our Approach
Corpus
Features
Modeling
Results
Practical Usage
German
Current Work

Our Approach: Overview

- **Corpus**: accessible graded corpora (not created by us)
- **Features**: utilize insights on linguistic complexity from Second Language Acquisition and Psycholinguistics
- **Modeling and Evaluation**: build and evaluate regression and classification models
- **Real-life Evaluation**: test applicability by performing multiple evaluations with real-world test sets

Introduction
Background
Our Approach
Corpus
Features
Modeling
Results
Practical Usage
German
Current Work

The WeeBit Corpus (Vajjala & Meurers 2012)

We combined two reading level annotated corpora to create a new corpus: WeeBit.

Grade Level	*Age in Years*	*Number of Articles*	*Avg. Number of Sentences/Article*
from WeeklyReader			
Level 2	7–8	629	23.41
Level 3	8–9	801	23.28
Level 4	9–10	814	28.12
from BBCBitesize			
KS3	11–14	644	22.71
GCSE	14–16	3500	27.85

Note: If you want to use this corpus for your experiments, please contact me after the talk or send an email later!

Introduction
Background
Our Approach
Corpus
Features
Modeling
Results
Practical Usage
German
Current Work

Features from Vajjala & Meurers (2012)

- Lexical Features
  - lexical richness features from Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research
    - e.g., Type-Token ratio, noun variation, ...
  - POS density features
    - e.g., # nouns/# words, # adverbs/# words, ...
  - traditional features and formulae
    - e.g., # characters per word, Flesch-Kincaid score, ...
- Syntactic Features
  - syntactic complexity features from SLA research.
    - e.g., # dep. clauses/clause, average clause length, ...
  - other parse tree features
    - e.g., # NPs per sentence, avg. parse tree height, ...

Introduction
Background
Our Approach
Corpus
Features
Modeling
Results
Practical Usage
German
Current Work

Features from Vajjala & Meurers (2014a)

- Morphological properties of words
  - e.g., Does the word contain a stem along with an affix? *abundant=abound+ant*
- Age of Acquisition (AoA)
  - average age-of-acquisition of words in a text
- Other Psycholinguistic features
  - e.g., word abstractness
- Avg. number of senses per word (obtained from WordNet)

Introduction
Background
Our Approach
Corpus
Features
Modeling
Results
Practical Usage
German
Current Work

Implementation details

Tools, Resources and Algorithms used

- Tools:
  - For Lexical Features
    - Stanford Tagger (Toutanova, Klein, Manning & Singer 2003)
  - For Syntactic Features
    - Berkeley Parser (Petrov & Klein 2007)
    - Tregex Pattern Matcher (Levy & Andrew 2006)
  - For Machine Learning algorithms
    - WEKA (http://www.cs.waikato.ac.nz/ml/weka/)
    - modeled readability as regression, using SMOReg algorithm.
- Resources:
  - Celex Lexical Database (http://celex.mpi.nl)
  - Kuperman et al. (2012)'s AoA ratings
  - MRC Psycholinguistic database (http://ota.oucs.ox.ac.uk/headers/1054.xml)
  - Wordnet Database (http://wordnet.princeton.edu)

Introduction
Background
Our Approach
Corpus
Features
Modeling
Results
Practical Usage
German
Current Work

How good is our model?

- performance with 10-fold Cross-validation
  - Pearson Correlation = 0.9
  - Room Mean Square Error (RMSE) = 0.53

Introduction

Background

Our Approach

Corpus

Features

Modeling

Results

Practical Usage

German

Current Work

How good is our model?

- performance with 10-fold Cross-validation
  - Pearson Correlation = 0.9
  - Room Mean Square Error (RMSE) = 0.53
- Performance on a standard test set
  - Common Core Standards example set
  - 168 texts belonging to grade levels 2–12
  - Evaluation: Spearman's rank correlation (scales differ)

Introduction
Background
Our Approach
Corpus
Features
Modeling
Results
Practical Usage
German
Current Work

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System	**Spearman**
Our System	**0.69**
Nelson et al. (2012):	
REAP (http://reap.cs.cmu.edu)	0.54
ATOS (http://renlearn.com/atos)	0.59
DRP (http://questarai.com/Products/DRPProgram)	0.53
Lexile (http://lexile.com)	0.50
Reading Maturity (http://readingmaturity.com)	**0.69**
SourceRater (http://naeptba.ets.org/SourceRater3)	**0.75**

Introduction
Background
Our Approach
Corpus
Features
Modeling
Results
Practical Usage
German
Current Work

Does this approach work on real-world texts?

(Vajjala & Meurers 2014c)

- How well does our readability model generalize?
- Do our features generalize for other datasets?
- Is there a topic or genre effect?
- What happens if we analyze sentences instead of texts?
  - → How accurately can we identify the differences in the sentential reading level before and after simplification?

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Introduction
Background
Our Approach
Corpus
Features
Modeling
Results
Practical Usage
German
Current Work

How does our model generalize?

(Vajjala & Meurers 2014c)

- How will we know?
  - test the model with other reading level annotated datasets.

  → created by different groups, with different purposes

Introduction

Background

Our Approach

Corpus

Features

Modeling

Results

Practical Usage

German

Current Work

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Test set	Description	Spearman
CommonCore	168 docs, scale: 2-12	0.69
TASA corpus	37K docs, scale: 28-110	0.86
Math Readability Corpus	120 docs, scale: 1-7	0.29

Introduction
Background
Our Approach
Corpus
Features
Modeling
Results
Practical Usage
German
Current Work

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Introduction
Background
Our Approach
Corpus
Features
Modeling
Results
Practical Usage
German
Current Work

How do the features generalize?

(Vajjala & Meurers 2014c)

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Corpus	Description	Pearson	RMSE
WeeBit	625 docs per level, 5 levels	0.92	0.53
CommonCore	168 docs, scale: 2-12	0.59	2.69
TASA	37K docs, scale: 28-110	0.97	1.77
Math Readability	120 docs, scale: 1-7	0.51	1.73

Introduction
Background
Our Approach
Corpus
Features
Modeling
Results
Practical Usage
German
Current Work

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Introduction

Background

Our Approach

Corpus

Features

Modeling

Results

Practical Usage

German

Current Work

Is there a topic or genre effect?

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Introduction

Background

Our Approach

Corpus

Features

Modeling

Results

Practical Usage

German

Current Work

Is there a topic or genre effect?

(Vajjala & Meurers 2014c)

- How will we know?
  - → Common Core standards test set has genre annotation.

Is there a topic or genre effect?

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- How will we know?
  - → Common Core standards test set has genre annotation.
- Genre-wise performance of our model on the dataset:

Genre	Spearman's Correlation
Speech	0.35
Literature	0.51
Informative	0.76
Misc.	0.69

Introduction
Background
Our Approach
Corpus
Features
Modeling
Results
Practical Usage
German
Current Work

Is there a topic or genre effect?

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- Can this effect be overcome?

Introduction
Background
Our Approach
Corpus
Features
Modeling
Results
Practical Usage
German
Current Work

Is there a topic or genre effect?

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- Can this effect be overcome?
  - Yes, by training genre-specific models.
  - → Vajjala & Meurers (2014b)

Introduction
Background
Our Approach
Corpus
Features
Modeling
Results
Practical Usage
German
Current Work

Tackling the topic or genre effect

(Vajjala & Meurers 2014b)

- We used our feature set to train a model that identifies age-specific TV programs.
- Data: subtitles from 4 BBC channels, that are annotated with three age-groups.
- Result: 96% classification accuracy
- Analysis:
  - single most predictive feature: average AoA of words
  - But accuracy is not reduced if this feature is removed.

  → The classifier is informed by a range of characteristics, not just a single, dominating one.

Introduction
Background
Our Approach
Corpus
Features
Modeling
Results
Practical Usage
German
Current Work

Does this approach work on real-world texts?

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- Is there a topic or genre effect?
- **What happens if we analyze sentences?**

Documents to sentences?

Readability at sentence level

- Does a readability model identify differences between unsimplified and simplified versions of sentences?
- Yes, e.g., consider (sentences from OneStopEnglish.com):

Sentence	Actual reading level	Reading level assigned by our model
In Beijing, mourners and admirers made their way to lay flowers and light candles at the Apple Store.	*Advanced*	3.6
In Beijing, mourners and admirers came to lay flowers and light candles at the Apple Store.	*Intermediate*	2.3
In Beijing, people went to the Apple Store with flowers and candles.	*Elementary*	1.0

- Why is such sentence level annotation needed?
  - for us: performing and evaluating text simplification

Readability at sentence level

How do we go about this?

- Can our model detect readability at sentence level?
  → Yes, because we do not have any discourse features.
- How do we do that?
  - Approach 1: train a model on sentence level data.
  - Approach 2: use document level model on sentences.
- Approach 1 did not work well. So we explored approach 2.
  - We first studied the distribution of reading levels between sentence pairs.
  - Later used the scores of a document level model to train a sentence ranking model (work in progress).

Introduction
Background
Our Approach
Corpus
Features
Modeling
Results
Practical Usage
German
Current Work

Readability at sentence level

Two Datasets

- Sentence aligned Wikipedia–Simple Wikipedia dataset, released by Zhu et al. (2010)
- A three level (advanced/intermediate/elementary) sentence aligned corpus.
  - compiled by us from OneStopEnglish.com, consisting of simplified versions of articles from The Guardian

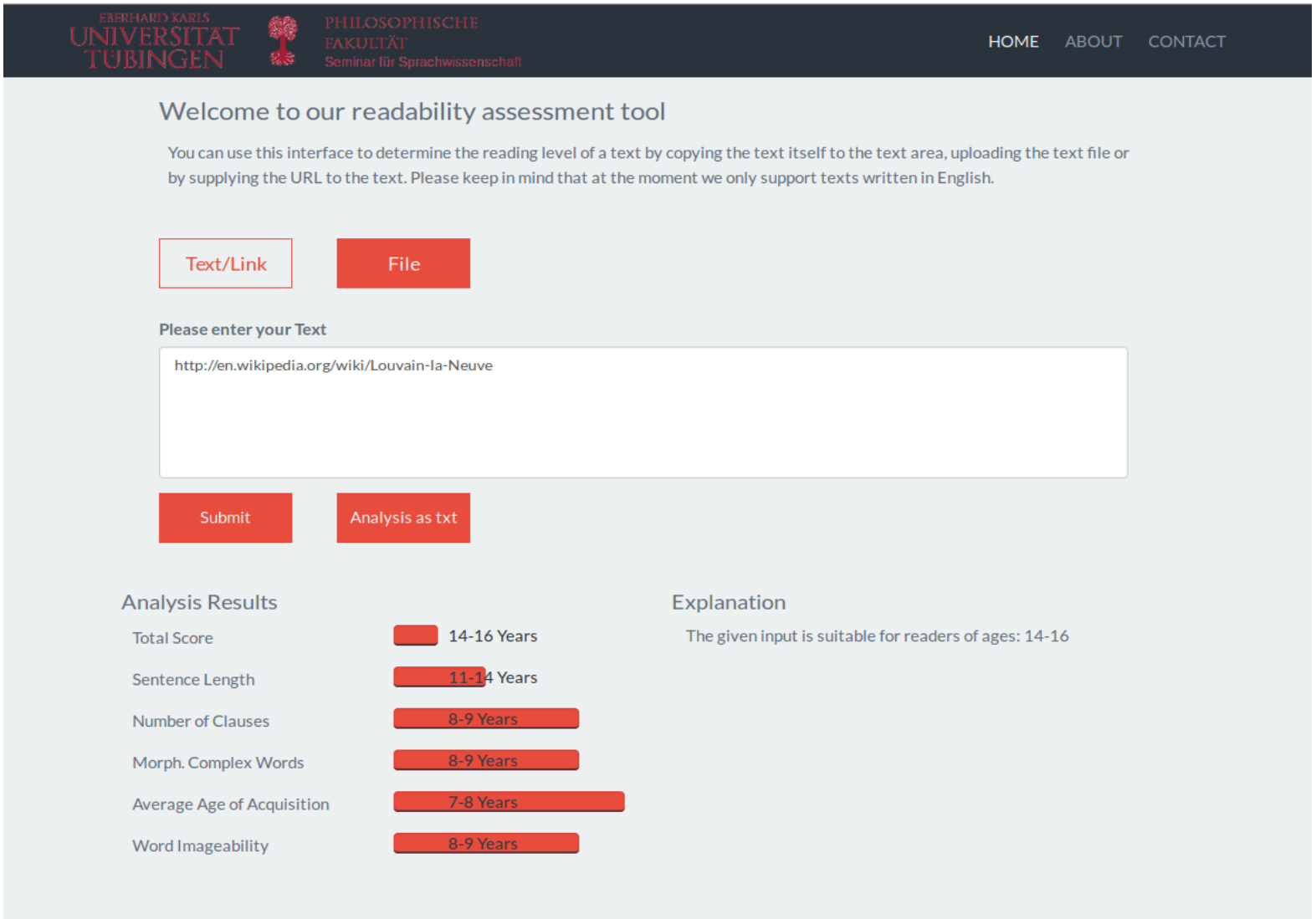
Readability at sentence level

What did we learn? (Vajjala & Meurers 2014a)

- Simplification is relative
  - → A simplified sentence is simpler than its unsimplified version, but can be harder than another sentence.
- Our approach is particularly successful in classifying the relative reading level of harder sentences.
- It promises to be useful for identifying particularly relevant targets for simplification
  - and to evaluate simplifications given specific readability constraints.

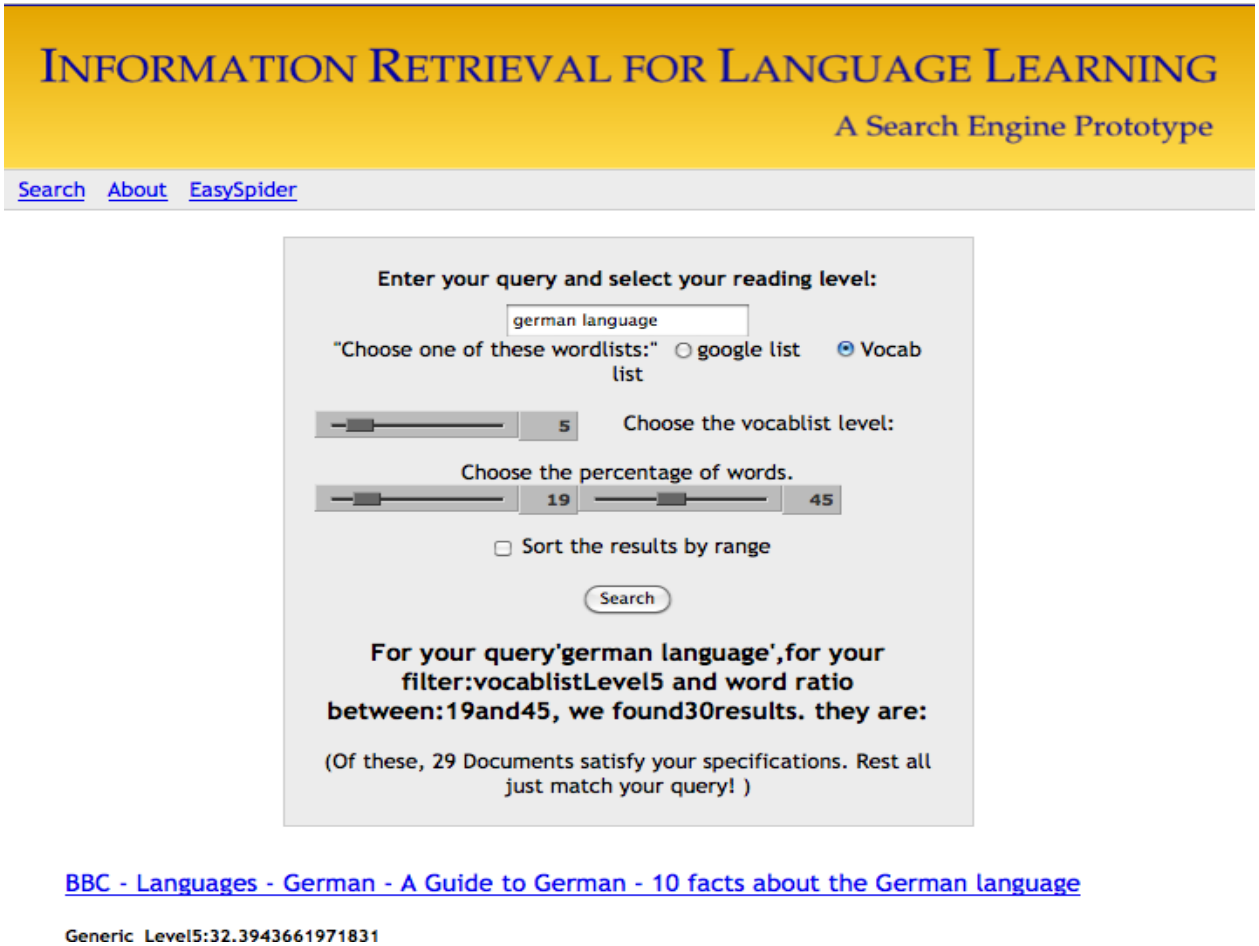
Introduction
Background
Our Approach
Corpus
Features
Modeling
Results
Practical Usage
German
Current Work

Our Reading level predictor in action



The web-interface is being developed by Ido Friman and will be available soon.

A search engine filtering by vocabulary difficulty



An extension of the Language-Aware Search Engine (**??**).

Readability Assessment beyond English

- Will this approach work for another language?
- Yes, we experimented with German (Hancke et al. 2012).

Introduction
Background
Our Approach
Corpus
Features
Modeling
Results
Practical Usage
German
Current Work

Readability Assessment for German

Corpus (Hancke, Meurers & Vajjala 2012)

- We created a two class German corpus from two websites containing articles on similar topics:
  - Website for children: GEOlino (http://www.geolino.de)
  - Website for adults: GEO (http://www.geo.de)
  - They are educational monthly magazines covering articles related to technology, nature etc.
  - GEOlino not a simplified version of GEO.
    - Content is created seperately for child readers.
- Modeling: Binary classification.

Introduction
Background
Our Approach
Corpus
Features
Modeling
Results
Practical Usage
German
Current Work

Readability Assessment for German

Features and Model evaluation (Hancke, Meurers & Vajjala 2012)

- Features:
  - **General**: lexical, syntactic, language model features
  - **Language specific**: based on inflectional and derivational morphology of German
- Model performance:
  - Binary classification: 90% accuracy
  - Morphological features alone perform at 85% accuracy.

Current and Future Work

- We are working on combining regression and ranking for determining readability at sentence level,
  - and using this information for automatic text simplification.
- Our related projects in LEAD:
  - Analyzing German school text books across grade levels and school types using readability features
    - with Karin Berendes, Detmar Meurers, Doreen Bryant
  - Studying the cognitive correlates of readability using eye-tracking experiments.
    - with Detmar Meurers, Katharina Scheiter, Alexander Eitel
  - Towards Appropriate Reading Material for Bilingual Classrooms: Evaluating the role of linguistic complexity analysis and text simplification in authentic contexts
    - with Detmar Meurers, Kathrin Jonkmann, Jörg-U. Keßler

Introduction
Background
Our Approach
Corpus
Features
Modeling
Results
Practical Usage
German
Current Work

Thank you!

- Questions? :-)
- Contact: sowmya@sfs.uni-tuebingen.de
- Bibliography: http://purl.org/net/readability-bib.html

Introduction
Background
Our Approach
Corpus
Features
Modeling
Results
Practical Usage
German
Current Work

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Introduction
Background
Our Approach
Corpus
Features
Modeling
Results
Practical Usage
German
Current Work

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