Regular Languages

We will introduce a number of classes of languages. One of the simplest, and most important, classes is the class of regular languages. Many classes are defined by the complexity of their membership problems. A regular language is one whose membership problem can be decided by a machine with finitely many states, meaning finite memory.

Abstract Machines

An abstract machine is a mathematical object. A physical machine, such as your laptop, can be modeled by an abstract machine, but an abstract machine might not be equivalent to any physical machine. In this course, all machines are abstract.

An abstract machine $M$ has states and operates by steps. It can read input and write output. It has an initial state. At each step, $M$

- reads input, which must be a finite (possibly empty) string over an alphabet $\Sigma$, the input alphabet of $M$.
- changes state.
- writes output, which is a (possibly empty) string
- possibly halts.

We say a machine $M$ accepts a language $L$ is, given an input string $w$, $M$ may eventually halt if and only if $w \in L$.

We say a machine $M$ decides a language $L$ if, given an input string $w$, $M$ always halts, and outputs “1” if $w \in L$, and "0" if $w \notin L$.

A machine could have infinitely many states, sometimes called configurations. Some machines have finitely many states: there are called finite automata. (Plural automata, singular automaton.)

A language is regular if and only if it is be decided by a finite automaton. It is also true that a language is regular if and only if it is accepted by some finite automaton. This is because every non-deterministic finite automaton, or NFA, is equivalent to some deterministic finite automaton, or DFA.

In other words, the membership problem of $L$ can be answered by a machine with only finite memory.

Not Regular. Let $L$ be the language of all strings over \{a, b\} which have equal numbers of each symbol. For example, the empty string $\varepsilon$ is a member of $L$, as are $ab, ba, aabb, abab, abba$. $L$ is infinite. How would you write a program to decide $L$? Your program would read a string $w$ one at a time, and would maintain a number $m$. Initially $m = 0$. Each time M read an a, it would increment $m$, and each time it read a b it would decrement $m$. When the input is fully processed, $M$ announces that $w \in L$ if $m = 0$, and that $w \notin L$ if $w \neq 0$.

The problem is that the program would have to be able to store arbitrarily large integers. Since $m$ could have any length, storing $m$ could overflow $M$’s finite memory.
Example

This example illustrates a DFA, which we call $M$. $M$ has four states, $q_0$, $q_1$, $q_2$, and $q_3$. At the start of a computation, $M$ is in the start state, $q_0$. The input for a computation is a string $w \in \Sigma^*$, where $\Sigma = \{a, b\}$. A step of $M$ is defined as follows.

1. If the input file is empty, jump to step 4. otherwise, proceed to step 2.
2. Read the first symbol in the input, then proceed to step 3.
3. Move to a new state by following the arrow whose label is the symbol just read, then jump to step 1.
4. If the current state is final (indicated by a double circle) halt and accept. (That is, output “1.”) Otherwise, halt and reject. (That is, output “0.”)

$M$ has a dead state, namely $q_3$. If a computation reaches a dead state, the string will be rejected regardless of the remaining symbols.

You can walk through a computation with a given input string. You can determine that $M$ accepts $b$, $ab$, $aab$, and $abab$. We write $L(M)$ to mean the language accepted by $M$. Can you describe $L(M)$ in a few words?

Two machines $M_1$ and $M_2$ are equivalent if $L(M_1) = L(M_2)$. Can you find a DFA with fewer states that is equivalent to $M$?