

# A Question Answer System for Legal Information Retrieval

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## Abstract.

In this paper we present a question-answering system for Portuguese juridical documents.

The system has two modules: preliminary analysis of documents (information extraction) and query processing (information retrieval). The proposed approach is based on computational linguistic theories: syntactical analysis (constraint grammars); followed by semantic analysis using the discourse representation theory; and, finally, a semantic/pragmatic interpretation using ontologies and logical inference.

Knowledge representation and ontologies are handled through the use of an extension to PROLOG, ISCO, which allows to integrate logic programming and external databases. In this way it is possible to solve scalability problems like the need to represent more than 10 millions of discourse entities.

The system was evaluated with the complete set of decisions from several Portuguese juridical institutions (Supreme Courts, High Court, Courts, and Attorney-General's Office) in a total of 180,000 documents. The obtained results were quite interesting and motivating and allowed the identification of some strong and weak characteristics of the system.

**Keywords.** Natural language processing of legal sources  
Question answering retrieval in law and governmental services

## 1. Introduction

This paper describes an ongoing project at the Informatics Department of the University of Évora, Portugal, aiming to develop a question answering system for the Portuguese language and to apply it to the juridical domain.

Question answering systems are an important topic of research in the natural language processing field and much work has been done by many researchers in the last years. Several international conferences have special tracks for this topic, namely, the TREC – Text REtrieval Conference (<http://trec.nist.gov>) or the CLEF – Cross Language Evaluation Forum (<http://www.clef-campaign.org>).

The legal domain is an area where question answering systems could (and should) be applied, allowing citizens to have an easier access to legal information. In the last years, some work has been done trying to develop such systems and, for instance, in the JU-

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RIX'2003 conference, a special workshop was made on the topic "Question Answering for Interrogating Legal Documents".

In Portugal criminal processes are not kept in a way that facilitates the search for information. Most of them are kept just as a set of documents without any particular structure. In order to overcome the lack of a structured knowledge base, we propose the use of a question answering system with the following goals:

- Answering user questions posed in natural language using the information contained in the criminal processes.  
Using our system an investigator can interrogate the system obtaining useful information about:
  - \* Places: Where can we buy drugs?
  - \* Dates: When was Mr. X arrested?
  - \* Definitions: What is a drug dealer?
  - \* Specific: How many times was Mr X accused? Who was arrested by dealing drugs in process X? What crimes committed Mr Y?
- Indicate a set of relevant processes.  
The investigator may not be interested in obtaining just answers to questions; it may be interested in the knowledge source used for answering those questions.
- Help in the task of semi-automatically structure the criminal processes.  
This task is important namely to enable the Portuguese State to obtain liable statistics about the problems of criminal investigation in Portugal.

The system has two modules: preliminary analysis of documents (information extraction) and query processing (information retrieval).

The analysis of the document collection and queries is done using models from computational linguistic theories. The methodology includes: syntactical analysis of sentences using the constraint grammar Palavras [3]; semantical analysis using discourse representation theory [5]; and, finally, semantic/pragmatic interpretation using ontologies and logical inference.

Knowledge representation and ontologies are handled through the use of an extension to PROLOG, ISCO[1,2], which allows to integrate logic programming and external databases. In this way it is possible to solve scalability problems like the need to represent more than 10 millions of discourse entities.

The QA system is able to answer queries in natural language, based on information conveyed by a collection of documents. The answer to a specific question is: a set of words and the identification of the document and sentence, which was used as the source of information. For instance, for the following question:

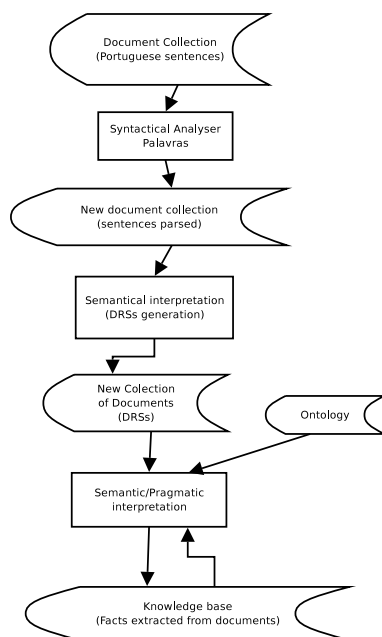
Who is the President of Portugal?

Our system answers:

Jorge Sampaio - document: d125/doc040103/001 - sentence: 5

The proposed system is an evolution of a previous system evaluated at CLEF 2004 [6] and applied to a Portuguese newspaper domain.

In the next section the architecture of the system is described. In sections 3 and 4 the syntactical and the semantical modules are described in detail. Section 5 presents the



**Figure 1.** Document Processing

knowledge representation approach. Section 6 describes the semantic-pragmatic interpretation of the documents, based on the previous analysis and on the ontology. Section 7 shows the processing of a query and the generation of the correspondent answer. In section 8 the evaluation results are presented. Finally, in section 9 some conclusions and future work are discussed.

## 2. Architecture

The QA system has two main modules:

- Information extraction;
 

This module extracts information from the documents and it creates a knowledge base. The module, see figure 1, is composed by several sub-modules:

  - Syntactical analysis: sentences are processed with the Palavras[3] parser. After this phase, a new collection of documents (with the parsing result) is obtained.
  - Semantic analysis: the new collection of sentences is rewritten [5] creating another collection, where each document has a DRS (structure for the discourse representation), a list of discourse referents and a set of conditions.
  - Semantic and pragmatic interpretation: in this phase the previous collection of documents is processed, taking into account an ontology and, as a result, a knowledge base is built. This knowledge base contains instances of the ontology.
- Information retrieval:
 

This module processes the query and it generates the answer: a set of words and the identification of the document and sentence where the answer was found. Figure 2 shows the diagram of this module. It is composed by the following

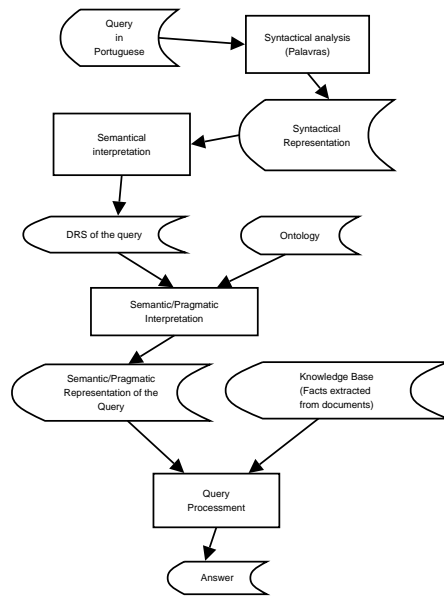


Figure 2. Query Processing

phases:

- Syntactical analysis: using the parser Palavras [3].
- Semantic analysis: from the parser output, a discourse structure is built – a DRS[5] with the correspondent referents.
- Semantic/Pragmatic interpretation: in this phase, some conditions are rewritten, taking into account the ontology, and generating a new DRS.
- Query Processing: the final query representation is interpreted in the knowledge base through the unification of the discourse entities of the query with documents discourse entities (see section 7).

In the next sections these sub-modules are described in more detail.

### 3. Syntactical analysis

Syntactical analysis is obtained through the use of the PALAVRAS parser from Eckhard Bick [3], developed in the context of the VISL<sup>1</sup> project at the *University of Southern Denmark*. This parser gives good morpho-syntactical information and it has a good coverage of the Portuguese language. For instance, in our system the verb lemma (infinitive form) is used as the name of the predicates in the semantic analysis.

As an example, consider the following sentence (3.1):

A Joana morreu de asfixia. "Joana died of asphyxia".

The syntactical structure of this sentence is the following:

<sup>1</sup>Visual Interactive Syntax Learning

```

sta(fcl,
  subj(np,
    n(art('o', 'F', 'S', '<artd>'), 'A'),
    h(prop('Joana', 'F', 'S'), 'Joana')),
  p(v_fin('morrer', 'PS', '3S', 'IND'), 'morreu'),
  piv(pp, h(prp('de'), 'de'),
    p(n('asfixia', 'F', 'S', '<sick>'), 'asfixia', '.')))

```

This structure is represented in Prolog and is used as the input of the semantic analyser.

#### 4. Semantic analysis

The semantic analysis rewrites the syntactical structure into a discourse representation structure [5], DRS. At present, we only deal with factual sentences, i.e., sentences with existential quantification over the discourse entities. So, our discourse structures are sets of referents, existentially quantified variables, and sets of conditions, first order predicates.

Each syntactical tree, represented in Prolog, is rewritten accordingly with a set of rules and integrated in a DRS.

In order to allow alternative interpretations, the link between prepositional phrases is done using the relation *rel* with 3 arguments, the preposition and two discourse entities. This predicate *rel* allows the semantic/pragmatic interpretation to infer the adequate connection between the referents. For instance, the sentence 'O dono da casa'/'The owner of the house', is represented by the following DRS:

```

drs( entities:[ A:(def, male, sing),
               B:(def, female, sing)],
      conditions:[owner(A),
                 house(B),
                 rel(of,A,B)])

```

As it can be seen in the next section, this representation allows the semantic/pragmatic interpretation to rewrite the DRS, obtaining the following structure:

```

drs( entities:[ A:(def, male, sing),
               B:(def, female, sing)],
      conditions:[belongs(A,B), person(A), house(B)])

```

In order to show an example of a syntactical tree transformation into a DRS, we show sentence (3.1) rewritten :

```

drs( entities:[ A:(def, fem, sing),
               B:(def, fem, sing)],
      conditions:[ name(A, 'Joana'),
                  died(A),
                  rel (of, A, B),
                  asphyxia(B)])

```

User queries are also interpreted and rewritten into DRS. For instance, the question:

Como morreu Joana?/How did Joana die? (4.1)

is transformed into the following discourse structure:

```
drs(entities:[F:(def, fem, sing),
            G: interrog(que), male/fem, sing]
     conditions:[died(F),
                 name(F, 'Joana'),
                 rel(of, F, G)])
```

This representation is obtained because “Como/How” is interpreted as “de que/of what”. In the semantic-pragmatic interpretation and in the query processing phase, the structure (4.1) might unify with sentence (3.1) and we may obtain the following answer: “Joana died of asphyxia”.

## 5. Ontology and knowledge representation

In order to represent the ontology and the extracted facts, we use an extension of logic programming, ISCO[1,2], which allows Prolog to access databases. This technology is fundamental to our system because we have a very large database of referents: more than 9 millions only for the Público newspaper.

Databases are defined in ISCO from ontologies. Our system uses two different ontologies:

- one ontology built by us aiming to model common knowledge, such as, geography (mainly places), and dates;  
This kind of knowledge is important to correctly extract facts from the documents and to be able to answer questions about places. The ontology defines places (cities, countries, ...) and relations between places.
- one ontology generated automatically from the document collection [8,7];  
This ontology, although being very simple, allows the representation of the domain knowledge.

The ontology can be defined directly in ISCO or in OWL (Ontology Web Language) and transformed in ISCO [7].

The knowledge extraction module identifies facts (instances of an ontology classes) and inserts them as rows in database tables.

For instance, sentence (3.1), with semantic representation in page 5, would generate several tuples in the database. First order logical expressions are *skolemized*, i.e., each variable existentially quantified is replaced by a different identifier:

- (123, 'Joana') is added to table *name*
- (123) is added to table *die*
- (124) is added to table *asphyxia*
- rel(of, 123, 124) is added to table *rel*

In the document processing phase, our system uses the first sentence interpretation (note that for each sentence there might exist several distinct interpretations). This is caused by temporal and spacial complexity problems but it does not seem to decrease

much the performance of the system. Nevertheless, additional measures should be done in order to fully evaluate the impact of this option.

Additionally, we also add information to the database linking referents with the documents and sentences where they appeared. For instance the tuple:

(123, 'd03/doc950605/005', 4) would be added to table *referred\_in*.

## 6. Semantic/Pragmatic Interpretation

Semantic/pragmatic interpretation tries to reinterpret semantical information, taking into account the considered ontology.

This process receives as input a discourse representation structure, DRS, and it interprets it using rules obtained from the knowledge ontology and the information in the database.

In order to obtain a good interpretation, our strategy is to search for the best explanation that supports the sentence logical form. This strategy for pragmatic interpretation was initially proposed by [4].

The knowledge base for the pragmatic interpretation is built from the ontology description in ISCO. The inference in the knowledge base uses abduction and finite domain constraint solvers.

Suppose the following sentence:

“A. conduz com uma taxa de alcoolemia de 2.15.”

“A. drives with an alcoholic rate of 2.15.”.

which, by the semantic analysis, is transformed into the following structure: one DRS, four discourse referents, and a set of conditions:

```
drs(entities:[A:(def,male,sing),
             B:(indef,fem,sing),
             C:(indef,fem,sing),
             D:(def,male,sing)]
     conditions:[name(A, 'A.'),
                 drive(A),
                 rel(with,A,B),
                 rate(B),
                 rel(of,B,C),
                 alcohol(C),
                 rel(of,C,D),
                 number(D,2.15)])
```

The semantic/pragmatic interpretation process, using information from the ontology, will rewrite the DRS into the following one:

```
drs(entities:[A:(def,male,sing),
             B:(def,male,sing)]
     conditions:[name(A, 'A.'),
                 person(A),
                 drive(A,_,_,B),
                 alcohol\_rate(B,2.15)])
```

The interpretation of  $rel(with, A, B)$  as  $drive(A, \_ , \_ , B)$  is possible because the ontology has a class *drive*, which relates persons driving in a time interval with a alcoholic rate in blood.

One of the major problems of this phase is to correctly identify the distinct referents in the documents. It is important to use the same skolem constant to identify the same referent and different individuals should have always different identifiers (skolem constants).

## 7. Answer generation

The generation of the answer is done in two steps:

1. identification of the database referent that unifies with the referent of the interrogative pronoun in the question.
2. retrieval of the referent properties and generation of the answer.

In order to illustrate this process, suppose the following question:

“Quem cometeu um homicídio por conduzir alcoolizado?”

“Who committed an homicide because he/she was driving drunk?”

This question is represent by the following DRS, after syntactical and semantical analysis:

```
drs(entities:[A:(who,male/fem,sing),
             B:(indef,male,sing),
             C:(indef,male,sing)],
     conditions:[committed(A,B),
                homicide(B),
                rel(because,A,C),
                drunk(C),
                drive(C)])
```

The semantic/pragmatic interpretation of this question is done using the ontology of concepts and it allows to obtain the following DRS:

```
drs(entities:[A:(who,male/fem,sing),
             B:(indef,male/fem,sing/plu),
             C:(def,fem,sing)],
     conditions:[homicide(A,B),
                person(A),
                person(B),
                drive(A,\_ ,\_ ,\_ ,C),
                alcohol\_rate(C),C>0.5])
```

- In order to perform the first step of the answer generation the following approach is followed:

We keep the referent variables of the question and we try to prove the conditions of the DRS in the knowledge base. If the conditions can be satisfied in the knowledge base, the discourse referents are unified with the identifiers (skolem constants) of the individuals.



- The next step is to retrieve the words that constitute the answer:

In this phase we should retrieve the conditions about the identified referent *A* and choose which ones better characterize the entity. Our first option is to choose a condition with the predicate *name* (*name(A,Name)*).

However, it is not always simple to find the adequate answer to a question. See, for instance, the following questions:

- \* How many times was Mr. X accused?
- \* What crimes committed X?
- \* How were Mr. X crimes committed?

In order to choose the best answer to a question our system has an algorithm which takes into account the syntactical category of the words that may appear in the answer and it tries to avoid answers with words that appear in the question.

Questions about places or dates have a special treatment involving the access to a database of places or dates.

Note that several answers may exist for a specific question. We calculate all possible answers and present them to the investigator.

Our system is able to obtain answers with conditions in several documents but, at this phase, we constrained the system to obtain only answers with referents introduced in the same sentence (predicate *referred\_in* allows to obtain that information –see page 7).

## 8. Evaluation

At present we do not have final results for the evaluation of our QA-system applied to the juridical domain. We only have results for a general domain – Portuguese newspapers – in the context of CLEF – Cross Language Evaluation Forum – 2005. However, preliminary results for the juridical domain seem to be similar with the ones obtained at CLEF. In this forum a set (200) of questions was elaborated by a jury and given to the system. The system's answers were, then, evaluated by the same jury.

Our system had the following results:

- 25% of correct answers (50 answers).
- 1.5% correct but unsupported answers (3 answers).
- 11% inexact answers – too many (or too few) words (22 answers).
- 62.5% wrong answers (125 answers).

The system had 125 wrong answers, but it is important to point out that 105 of these wrong answers were NIL answers, i.e., situations where the system was not able to find any answer to the questions. So, only in 10% of the situations (20 answers) our system gave a really wrong answer.

A preliminary analysis of the other incorrect answers showed that the main cause of problems in our system is related with lack of knowledge: wrong syntactical analysis; lack of synonyms; and, mostly, an incomplete ontology. In fact, most problems are related with incorrect pragmatic analysis due to an incomplete ontology.

This problem analysis is valid also for the juridical domain. It is crucial for the performance of the QA-system to have a good representation of the domain; a good ontology is the key-factor in this process.

## 9. Conclusions and Future Work

We propose an architecture for a question answering system for the Portuguese language and we applied it to the legal domain.

Our system uses natural language processing techniques to create a knowledge base with the information conveyed by documents. Queries are analysed by the same tools and logical inferences over the knowledge base are performed, trying to find an adequate answer. The inference process is performed using a logic programming framework and the Prolog inference engine.

The system main problems are related with errors in the several NLP tools and with the lack of coverage of the ontology.

As future work, we intend to explore the problem of automatically build ontologies. The improvement of the used NLP tools is another area needing much work: to improve the syntactical parser and, specially, the semantic analyser (which is a quite open problem in the NLP community). We also intend to handle anaphoric relations in the documents, allowing the reduction of the number of distinct referents.

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