1. Introduction

Corpus-based approaches have risen in popularity over the last two decades in the field of natural language processing (NLP); in many areas corpus-based approaches equal in performance, or rival traditional rule-based methods. With the increase in computational power and the advancement and ease of use of machine-learning (ML) techniques, it is no wonder that corpus-based approaches continue to gain in popularity. In the late 1990s a sizable textbook was published assessing to their merits, and even a decade before, research had appeared pursuing such techniques.

Corpus-based approaches also allow for more language and domain independence within a model, important in today’s multilingual world.

The advent of corpus-based approaches also meant that the creation of corpora was required — corpus-based approaches are obviously impossible without them. The individual creation of custom tools for annotation tasks is a tremendous investment of time and labor, which when viewed in a wholistic manner shows how repetitive and wasteful such an investment can be. These custom fitted tools do of course address the demands of the project for which they were born, but also because of this tend towards inflexibility and disposability. Regardless of the problems of interoperability that arise when different tools are used with different data formats (something desirable when trying to cross-test methods with different pre-existing data-sets), a cycle forms of creating new tools for trivial tasks, or perhaps even worse conforming and compromising annotation criteria to fit within the limits of an existing tool made for a previous project, which impinges on the quality of the resource. Corpus-based methods will only grow in scale and complexity, and so it is crucial the annotation tool does not stand in the way.*

The bottom line is that corpus creation (and also management) is time consuming enough without having to spend more resources in battling the development of a custom tool. In addition, previous studies have shown that the early phases of a project are the most volatile, resulting in rapid changes to the annotation schema. This can also cause delays and cost additional resources if the annotation tool is too rigid or otherwise unable to adapt to the changes.

A survey proposed seven categories desirable for any annotation tool: diversity of data, multi-

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* In addition, as data sets continue to grow in size and methods mature, it will be necessary to compare them, meaning a standardized format will also be necessary.
level annotation, diversity of annotation, simplicity, customizability, quality assurance and convertibility. The goal of these categories is to remove the obstacles outlined as problems above. They are well thought out, but there is one caveat to them: they are document-centric, or rather, they simply do not address the bigger scope of managing the annotation process. Furthermore, though they do raise concerns about areas that need to be addressed, they do not propose how these areas are to be tackled. In simple corpora this may not be much of a concern, but in larger projects – and as corpus-based techniques continue to grow and advance so do the sizes of the corpora – it becomes a serious issue.

In order to create a tool suitable for use in the future, it is important to pinpoint the needs of an annotation project. In Section 2 we outline what we think these needs are, and then in Section 3 propose a framework for addressing them. We next introduce Slate (Segment and Link-based Annotation Tool Enhanced), the second iteration of a web-based annotation tool under development that utilizes this framework, with a real world example. We then conclude the paper and discuss future work.

2. Annotation Needs

Creating corpora is becoming a serious endeavor; it is an ordeal entirely separate from, and from some viewpoints secondary to, the technique that will utilize a given language resource. Such a trend will only worsen as techniques, and therefore the corpora they use, continue to grow in scale and complexity.

Thus it is not only that the annotation system must be flexible enough to accommodate a wide variety of annotation tasks, but that it must also provide for a means to manage the tasks themselves. Otherwise, the creation of the resources will hinder the development of the technique, the reason behind why they were made.

Let us concretize the definitions of terms important for defining annotation needs: annotation tasks, annotation projects, and annotation systems. An annotation task has a specific goal in mind, such as annotating all predicate-argument dependencies in a set of raw resources, or identifying all coreference-chains in a collection of news articles, etc. An annotation task is more generally a type of annotation work to be done, whereas an annotation project, is an instance of that work. For example, if we wish to perform two tasks on the same dataset, such as predicate-argument dependencies and then coreference-chains, we should consider these as two separate annotation projects, as well. An annotation system is software that allows a user to create annotation projects for annotation tasks.

Let us then specify what is needed from an annotation system. Dipper et al. proposed seven categories for what is needed from an annotation tool, but they operate mostly at the document-level. Our list of needs below focuses instead at a more macro, annotation project management level. We therefore skip needs related only to the act of annotation (such as appearance), though it is covered by our framework introduced in Section 3.

1) User and role management. Annotation projects are too complex to have a single user type with no roles assigned to them. The system must distinguish between annotators and administrators in order to prevent annotators from unwittingly altering a key part of the project they should not have access to in the first place.

2) Delegation and monitoring of work. The system must allow for an administrator to assign/reassign work to annotators, and to monitor their progress. It is important to forestall an annotator falling behind due to difficulties or other factors as it may also delay the completion of the corpus if the work is not reassigned, or the obstacle stopping the annotator not resolved.

3) Adaptability to new annotation tasks. The system must be flexible enough to easily accommodate a new annotation task. If administrators cannot easily create a new project, and define the annotation requirements then the system will not be useful to them.

4) Adaptability within the current annotation task. During the lifespan of any given project, it often meets with many changes, especially during the initial phases of a project. It is crucial that the system allow for the adjustment of annotation guidelines in such a way as to (1) facilitate the correction of any already annotated items by identifying those resources, and (2) to have the flexibility to accommodate the changes themselves.

5) Diffing and merging. Creating a corpus often entails the diffing and merging of data from multiple annotators on a single resource to create a gold standard. Annotator agreement is an important statistic in general for corpora, but in order to have an end product, it may be important to resolve any differences between different annotators. The system must allow an administrator to diff all annotated resources with multiple sets of annotations, and then to merge any differences that are found. In the event that multiple sets of annotations on the same resource are desired however, the system should also not stand in the way.
Versioning of corpora. A corpus is a product, an end result. But just as any other product goes through life cycles, so too may the corpus. In other words, after all work has been completed (and the gold standard created), there must be a way to package the result and label it uniquely for use. After a release there are often fixes, amendments, etc. and these changes must be tracked so that an additional version can be released. Without management of versioning, the “current state” of the annotation project is all that is known; for large projects, especially, it is important to identity milestones or to “tag” a given state so that one may be able to go back to it later. This way changes made after the “tagging” will not unknowingly be included into a release.

Extensibility in terms of layering. As corpora are continuing to grow in size, it is no wonder that they are also fundamentally becoming more complex. We have seen recently the stacking, or layering, of corpora upon one another. Attempts at diversifying a single corpus with various types of annotations are on the rise, such as the Discourse TreeBank on top of the Penn TreeBank, or the NAIST Text Corpus atop the Kyoto Text Corpus. The system must allow for adding new layers upon previous ones, seamlessly. Often the lower layers are directly referenced by the new ones. It must allow for this as well without jeopardizing the quality of the lower levels. This idea is shown in Figure 1, where if we consider each level being a separate project, the one above directly references annotations in the preceding layer.

Extensibility in terms of tools. Many annotation tasks these days involve (semi-)automatic tagging, followed by an annotator reviewing and correcting any mistakes in the output. The system should ideally allow the annotator to call plugins to the system to tag a given resource to facilitate this. This step could be done prior to data import, but allowing the user to do so afterwards has several benefits, such as enabling them to quickly view the results of the automatic tagging, and to rerun it with different parameters again should it not have provided the expected output. The plugins should be able to be created by anyone (not only the creators of the system).

Extensibility in terms of importing/exporting. The system should also allow the user to either define rules or call plugins to convert the data from one format to another. This allows the system to be somewhat agnostic to the data format. This is important as there are a variety of formats, though the system should provide its own that is capable of handling any supported annotation scheme. Including generated comments may facilitate in human verification of the exported resource. This step could be done after export, but having the ability to have the data processed automatically increases productivity for menial tasks that should not require human intervention (and which may also introduce error).

Support for multiple languages. Research today is carried out in a variety of languages, and the system should support them.
ministrators and annotators. (Note that user roles are not present in Figure 2.) An administrator oversees projects, configures them, adds/removes annotators, and assigns annotation tasks. The administrator should also be able to check the progress of the annotators to make sure no roadblocks are preventing them from finishing their assigned work, or if they become incapacitated for some reason, allow the administrator to easily reassign outstanding work. As mentioned in Section 2, the administrator should also be able to create versions of the project (need (6)), import, export, and in all other ways administer the project. They should not, however, be able to annotate resources.

The annotator, therefore, is solely responsible for this task of annotation. They can select a resource that has been assigned to them and annotate it; they are sandboxed from other users to prevent biases from interfering with their work (meaning they do not see others’ work).

This separation between administrator and annotator roles is simple, but it is intuitive; it also provides the necessary separation to properly manage a project and still get the annotation work done. Later on an administrator can diff the resources and merge them as necessary for creating a gold standard. More details about project configuration are explained as the remaining entities and annotation methodology are elaborated on below.

3.2 Entities

As Figure 2 shows, there are a number of entities interconnected to one another. In this section we will focus on the more macro-level entities, Project, Document, Document Set, and then touch upon Tagsets, which are explained more in the next section. The framework is based around the concept of a document, which is the only entity that can be directly annotated (shown in the upper right corner of Figure 2). It can represent any kind of data you wish (e.g., a news article, paragraph, book). Since dealing directly with large quantities of documents can be daunting, they are grouped into a more macro-level document set. A document can be a member of multiple document sets, so a document set could be created to encapsulate both raw resources from different sources, and groups of work to delegate to annotators. As the UML figure shows, annotators are assigned document sets, not documents; again, this is to make coordinating large volumes of documents easy, while keeping them coherently managed to some degree.

The highest level entity in the framework is the project. A project represents an annotation task, such as predicate-argument dependency or coreference-chains, and contains a reference to one or more document sets. An important point here is that a project contains a reference to one or more document sets; the sets themselves exist beyond, or outside of, the project. This means that they can (and should) be reused for multiple projects.

More formally, we define a user as an annotator or administrator with access to the system, belonging to one or more projects (a user may be working on multiple tasks, concurrently, or in sequence); an annotator will have access to zero or more document sets within any given project, while the administrator can do all the actions outlined in Section 3.1. Since the point of task delegation is to split the work among many individuals, the framework allows for this by enabling the administrator to assign different document sets to different users.

The majority of the UML diagram, however, focuses on tagsets and their relations. This is the fundamental mechanism behind generalized annotation in the framework, and is explained in the next section.

3.3 Abstracting Annotation

So far we have outlined several of the main entities that make up the framework. But the crux
of being able to support multiple annotation tasks (needs (3) & (4)) is the notion of abstracting annotation. Abstracting annotation means that we remove any definitions for what types of entities can be annotated from the system, and instead create a framework that allows administrators to define them themselves. Conceptually, all an annotation is, is either a label placed on a span of text, or a label placed on a relationship between such spans, as is shown in Figure 4. So we allow the administrator to create as many definitions for types of annotations as they like, and then during annotation, the annotator can create instances of these admin-defined types, shown in Figures 2 and 3, respectively. It is important to understand there is a difference between a definition of a type, and an instance of that type. Also note that the framework itself is agnostic to the definitions; to the system it sees only different types of segments and links.

The annotations on text-spans we call segments, and the relationships between them, links. Links may be directional, such as in the predicate-argument dependency example shown in Figure 4, or undirected, such as when annotating coreference-chains. As Figure 2 shows, segments and links both extend from an abstract tag. For the remainder of this paper, if segment or link is not specified, then the explanation applies to both.

However, simple labels and their relations are limiting; we might want to store additional information both about segments, and about any links that connect them. For this, attributes are necessary. Say we wish to supplement a segment type definition for “Noun” with information about its plurality; for this we could create an attribute with the possible values of “singular” and “plural”. We can then formalize the definition of a tag $T$ to be a label $label$ and a set of attributes $a_i$ composed of a name $name$ and a value type $val\_type$, along with a possible default value $def\_val$, and a flag $req$ indicating whether or not the attribute is required:

$$T = (label, \{a_0, a_1, \ldots, a_{n-1}\}),$$

where $a_i = (name, val\_type, def\_val, req)$.

The value type could be an enumeration, all possible character strings (i.e. free input), number ranges, etc. We can then group these segment and link type definitions into a tagset, and assign the tagset to a project. Projects may need to contain multiple tagsets, depending on the task. In the case that the project is extending another previous project (need (7)), it will be important to disable creation of instances from that tagset, and instead only allow the annotator to view them (reflected in Figure 2).

### 3.4 Tagset Management

Especially during the early phases of a project, the annotation specification is victim to changes in design (need (4)). By creating versions/revisions of tagsets, we can enable the system to keep track of what resources are annotated with which version of each type; allowing an administrator to verify that all documents are annotated with the current spec. Examples include an administrator adding an attribute to verbs, or adding a value to an existing attribute, etc. In the framework all instances of annotations are marked with the version/revision of the tagset that was used when they were annotated. It may also be beneficial to denote the difference between changes that complement a current version (e.g. accommodating a new case found during annotation that does not affect other annotations), i.e. revisions, and changes that require reannotating resources (versions).
4. A Real World Example

In this section we introduce Slate, a web-based annotation tool that implements the framework explained above, with a real world example. Though Slate is not yet available to the general public, we have been collaborating with several laboratories to tune Slate to real scenarios. Here we briefly introduce the software using data provided by one such collaborator. The example here illustrates annotating errors within non-native Japanese speakers’ prose. A deep analysis of such annotation is beyond the scope of this paper, but we here briefly outline what this task involves.

First, a corpus of non-native Japanese speakers’ prose is necessary. Annotators then annotate sentences by marking text spans were errors result, such as using the wrong tense of a verb, or the wrong particle (’ga’ for ’wa’, and so on). The annotators further correct the span to what the proper usage is conceived to be, and further classify the error into one or more of several predefined categories, such as grammatical, tense, honorifics, etc. Since errors may be noncontiguous but intrinsically related, it is also desirable to be able to link these text spans together, such as the use of ‘mettani’ with ‘arimasu’, instead of ‘arimasen’, which is the correct usage.

Refer to the following basic workflow when following along with the example below.

Project Manager does
(1) Define a project
(2) Upload documents for annotation
(3) Create annotators / assign work

Annotator does
(1) Select an assigned document
(2) Begin / continue annotation

4.1 Defining a project and its tagset(s)

The first step is to define a project for the error annotation task. Figure 5 shows the project definition screen. Once this has been done, we define the tagset or tagsets we need for the task. In this case, a single tagset will suffice, but more than one is equally feasible. Figure 6 shows the tagset definition screen. Here we create a segment that will be used to annotate non-native speakers written errors. We then must create the attributes needed for this segment, as shown in Figure 7. In this case we create attributes for the correction (how the sentence should read), which we make freeform, for any additional comments the annotator may wish to make, also as freeform, and finally for the error type, which we want to make a predefined list annotators can easily select from at the time of annotation.

The segment after the creation of these attributes is shown in Figure 8. We then create a link that allows us to mark two or more segments as being part of the same error semantically, or lexically, as shown in Figure 9. It is also possible at this point to define the default colors (i.e. appearance) of the segment and link as it will be displayed to the annotator. This can be seen in Figures 8 and 9. The link does not need any attributes in this example.

4.2 Importing data into a project

The next step is to import the data so that it can be annotated. The data is either entirely new and unannotated, or as is more likely the case, already annotated with some data from some other task in the past. In the latter case, the data must be reformatted into the proper format; a future feature will allow a conversion plugin to do the work at import time as well. Figure 10 shows the import screen for adding new data to an existing project.
Fig. 6 Creating a new tagset

Fig. 7 Adding an attribute to a segment definition

Fig. 8 Segment definition after adding attributes

Fig. 9 Configuring link definition appearance
4.3 Creating and assigning work to annotators

After data has been imported, it must be assigned to annotators so they can perform the work. This is accomplished by assigning document sets, composed of documents as explained in Section 3.2, to annotators. Figure 11 shows the screen for creating a new annotator account, and Figure 12 shows the screen for assigning one or more document sets to a given annotator.

4.4 Annotating documents

Once an annotator has been assigned one or more document sets, they can log in and begin the work. Figure 13 shows the screen an annotator is presented with upon logging in. Here they can select a document from those that they have been assigned to begin/continue work. Information about the selected project, document set, and document appear to the right. Selecting a document results in the main annotation screen, shown in Figure 14. The left panel is the main annotation panel; the right side provides a set of tool panels that show document information, the available tagsets for annotation, and a list of segments/links that exist within the current document. Here the annotator annotates the text by finding errors, and then clicking and dragging the mouse, the same as selecting text in almost any text editor, and then letting go of the mouse button. After they...
have defined the textspan, they can click on the annotation to set attribute values, in this case the corrected text, the error type, and any additional comments.

![Fig. 13 Annotator home screen](image)

4.5 Exporting annotated data

Once all the annotation work has been completed, it is necessary to export the data so that it can be utilized – the point of creating resources is in their use, not in their creation. In a future release, Slate will support exporting in any format for which a plugin exists.

5. Conclusion

This paper presented a list of 10 needs for annotation systems in order to support corpus-based NLP research moving into the future. The needs fall into two groups: framework-level (needs (1)–(7)), and implementation-level ((8)–(10)). A framework was introduced to tackle the framework-level needs, and a system Slate built on top of the framework, to handle the implementation-level needs. At its core, the framework provides a mechanism for abstracting annotation and the creation of layered resources through its use of tagsets, containing segments and links with attributes as well as constraints. The framework further provides a foundation for managing annotation resources and multiple annotation tasks. The framework allows an administrator to define a task and then monitor its progress, letting the annotator do what they were intended to do: annotate. Appearance settings allow the annotator to quickly know what types of segments/links they are working with, and the constraints reduce negligent annotation errors (such as not allowing predicate-argument dependency to join two arguments), though the appearance alone helps with this. Future work can be divided into two categories: framework-level, and implementation-level. For the former, it may be beneficial to more concretely specify how corpus versioning should be carried out. For the latter, a number of features are still left unimplemented. We plan to release an alpha version soon.

Acknowledgments

This work is partially supported by the Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research Priority Area Program “Japanese Corpus” (2006–2010), sponsored by MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology–Japan).
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