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To cite this version:

HAL Id: hal-01088092
https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01088092
Submitted on 1 Dec 2014

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Semantic Filtering of Scientific Articles guided by a Domain Ontology

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Abstract — The problem that we address in this paper is how to improve the accuracy of retrieving specialized information within a textual scientific corpus. We present a new approach in which the keywords expressing the bibliographical needs of a researcher are related to a domain ontology. We illustrate how such a declarative ontology-based approach can be used both for computing varied statistics, and also for helping experts to find useful fine-grained information within a textual corpus.

Index Terms— Concept extraction from text, information integration, ontology-based data access, semantic search.

I. INTRODUCTION

F

or researchers, finding the bibliographical articles likely to improve their knowledge on their domain of expertise is a crucial but time-consuming task. Subscription keywords-based search tools exist to help researchers monitoring the web or bibliographic databases of their domain. However, due to the limitation of keywords to capture fine-grained knowledge, the bibliographical articles returned by keywords filtering need a further analysis to retain those that are really relevant to the needs of the researcher. Up to now, this analysis is done manually by the researcher herself or by a human assistant.

In this paper, we present a new approach in which the keywords expressing the bibliographical needs of a researcher are related to a fine-grained description of her domain of expertise in the form of an ontology. An ontology is a formal description providing users with a shared understanding of a given domain, and can also be interpreted and processed by machines thanks to a logical semantics that enables inference and reasoning.

In this paper, we first summarize the methodology underlying our approach, that takes as input a domain ontology and a corpus of articles, and constructs automatically a knowledge base enriching the input domain ontology with the relevant content and structure of the corpus. Then we illustrate through examples, the interest of such a declarative ontology-based approach both for computing varied statistics on the corpus and its correlation with formal terms of a domain of interest, and also for helping experts to find useful fine-grained information within a textual corpus.

II. METHODOLOGY

Our approach consists in using a domain ontology for extracting the relevant content of a given bibliographical corpus and for representing it as a knowledge base equipped with reasoning and querying capabilities.

Step 1 is the design of ontology that can be either created manually by a domain expert or extracted from a pre-existing one. The ontology is provided using Semantic Web standards [2] (namely, RDFS enriched with rules), and stored as a set of RDF triples and a set of rules. Each formal term introduced by the expert is associated with a set of textual expressions that correspond to it in the scientific literature. This results in a table of correspondence used as input in the second step.

Step 2 consists in the automatic extraction from each paper in the corpus of the sentences that contain textual expressions corresponding to formal terms of the ontology. This is done using a suite of simple Perl scripts that take as input the corpus and the table of correspondence.

Step 3 consists in automatically assigning each paper and each extracted sentence to unique identifiers that are typed by the classes Papers and Sentences respectively. This information is encoded into RDF triples that are automatically inserted into the domain ontology. RDF triples expressing that each paper’s identifier is related to the paper’s title are also inserted in the ontology by using the RDF property rdfs:label. Similarly, each sentence identifier is associated to its textual content by using the RDF property rdf:comment and the corresponding triples are injected in the ontology. We have also defined the following properties for which the corresponding triples are also automatically injected in the ontology:

- publishedIn: to relate a paper’s identifier to its year of publication,
- isaSentenceOf: to relate a sentence’s identifier to the paper it belongs to
- mentions: to relate a sentence to a formal term (instance, class or property) of the domain ontology,
- isAbout: to relate a paper to a formal term (instance, class or property) of the domain ontology.

A paper (respectively a sentence) may be about (respectively may mention) several formal terms. In fact, this last property isAbout is defined from the properties mentions and isaSentenceOf by a rule saying that: if a sentence ?s belonging to a paper ?p mentions a formal term

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?t then it can be inferred that the paper ?p is about the formal term ?t.

Another rule says that: if a sentence ?s mentions a formal term ?t that is either an instance or a subclass of a class ?c then it can be inferred that ?s mentions the formal term ?c.

We have chosen to store and process the resulting knowledge base as a deductive RDF triple-store using, but not limited to, TopBraid Composer [5]. TopBraid Composer is a commercial tool specifically designed for RDF, which is also available as free version. It fully supports the SPARQL query language for expressive querying and also has built-in support for custom inference rules. These rules are applied to infer automatically all the RDF triples that can be entailed from the original triples and the rules.

Step 4 consists in exploiting the resulting knowledge base with reasoning and querying capabilities supported by TopBraid Composer. This knowledge base, made of a set of RDF triples and a set of rules, is a deductive database that can be saturated [3] and then queried using the query language SPARQL [4]. SPARQL is the SQL of RDF: it is a W3C standard allowing to ask possibly complex queries on demand. SPARQL is a powerful structured query language that provides a full set of query operations such as SELECT, JOIN, SORT and aggregation operators based on GROUP-BY. It can be used to compute simple statistics and also to compute answers to queries entered by human experts.

III. NOVELTY

Compared to existing works on semantic search issued from the Information Retrieval community (such as [7], [8], [9], [10], [11], [12], [13], [14]), the distinguishing point of our approach is to offer a powerful SQL-like query language that enables a unified and powerful approach to express fine-grained queries combining structure, content and semantics. The results returned to the users are not a list of ranked documents but precise fine-grained answers and correlations between formal terms of a specialized domain knowledge and relevant sentences within documents.

The only code that has to be used is generic and is restricted to implement the steps 2 and 3 described above in the methodology. The queries and statistics of interest can be specified declaratively and on demand using SPARQL, and computed by any SPARQL query engine. Exploiting the SPARQL power allowed us to develop a uniform and declarative query-based approach for a fine-grained analysis of a specialized bibliographical corpus.

This approach enables querying capabilities that goes much beyond the concept-based search capabilities offered by semantic search engines such as TextPresso [15] for example, and more generally by information retrieval systems. In addition, in contrast with our approach, the computation of statistics of interest is not supported by (semantic) search engines and must be done by writing Perl or Python scripts or by using dedicated tools.

IV. ONTOLOGY-BASED DESCRIPTION OF A TEXTUAL CORPUS

Our approach is generic but in order to explain it and to show its feasibility, we have focused on a specialized medical domain related to a rare disease (Prader-Willi syndrome [1]) of which one of us is an expert and for which we had access to a corpus of almost 6000 articles representative of the broad spectrum of the literature relevant to this rare syndrome. We first give an overview of the domain ontology and of its automatic enrichment. We then show through examples the power of SPARQL queries both for formulating expert demands of information and for computing some useful statistics on the corpus and its content.

A. Overview of the Prader-Willi ontology

The most general classes are Anomaly_PW, Symptom_PW, Troubles_PW, Treatment_PW, Hormone, and Gene (where the suffix_PW denotes that the anomalies, symptoms, etc. that we consider are those specific to Prader-Willi setting). Instances and Subclasses can be declared in RDF by triples built with the RDF property rdf:typeof and the RDFS property subclassOf, as shown in Example 1.

Example 1:

The triple <obesity, rdf:typeof, Symptom_PW> is the declaration of the fact that obesity is a symptom encountered in Prader Willi syndrome, while the following triple <Behaviour_Troubles_PW, rdfs:subClassOf, Troubles_PW> encodes the knowledge that behaviour troubles are a special kind of troubles occurring for patients suffering from Prader Willi syndrome.

Figure 1 shows an extract of the resulting class hierarchy.

Rules enable to express transitivity of the subclass relation and also inheritance of instances between classes like the rule shown in Example 2.

Example 2:


The variables (indicated by ?) are placeholders that can be replaced by constants denoting specific instances and classes accordingly. Such a rule will infer for instance that boulimia (declared as an instance of hyperphagia, itself asserted as a subclass of Eating_Diorder_PW)) is a special case of eating disorder related to Prader Willi syndrome.

Querying the resulting saturated RDF dataset using SPARQL guarantees to be sound and complete, i.e., to return all the answers satisfying any input query given the input RDF facts and the rules.

Fig. 1 Hierarchy of classes in the Prader-Willi ontology (extract)

We give below the different domain properties that we have defined:

- Associated_With: to relate a symptom to a trouble.
- Caused_By: to relate a trouble to an anomaly.
- Stimulates: to relate a hormone to another hormone.

Rules enable to express transitivity of the subclass relation and also inheritance of instances between classes like the rule shown in Example 2.
As an illustration, Figures 2 and 3 are screenshots of SPARQL queries and their answers using TopBraid Composer.

The current domain ontology is small (25 classes, 61 instances and 3 relations) and far from being complete. It would require more interaction with the expert. Nevertheless, the important point is that it can be easily updated by adding new classes, instances or properties using TopBraid Composer, or by enriching it using medical ontologies available in Linked Data cloud.

B. Incorporating relevant information extracted from the corpus into the domain ontology

This step relies on a table of correspondence provided by the expert where each formal term of the Prader-Willi ontology is associated with a list of textual expressions that correspond to it in the scientific literature.

Example 3:

The current table of correspondence lists feeding problems, eating disorders, food intake disorders, appetite regulation problems as textual expressions corresponding to the formal term Eating Disorder_PW (declared as a class in the domain ontology).

First, for each paper, the sentences that contain one of the textual expressions corresponding to a formal term are automatically extracted.

Example 4:

From the following inserted triples (where p1608s14 is the identifier of the 14\textsuperscript{th} sentence extracted from the paper number 1608, and HH denotes the class of Hypothalamic Hormones):

\[
\langle p1608s14, \text{mentions}, \text{Oxytocin} \rangle, \\
\langle \text{Oxytocin}, \text{rdf:type}, \text{HH} \rangle, \\
\langle \text{HH}, \text{rdfs:subClassOf}, \text{Hormone} \rangle
\]

It will be inferred and added to the saturated ontology:

\[
\langle \text{p1608s14 pw:mentions pw:HH} \rangle \\
\langle \text{p1608s14 pw:mentions pw:Hormone} \rangle
\]

In terms of size, the domain ontology alone is 160 KB while the combined ontology (i.e., the domain ontology enriched with knowledge about the textual content of the corpus) is much bigger: 264 MB corresponding to 1.627.068 RDF triples built on 27 classes, 7 properties and 365.798 instances. The number of scientific papers in the corpus is 5950 from which 359.787 sentences have been extracted (because relevant to at least one formal term of the Prader-Willi ontology). Finally, the size of the saturated combined ontology is 393 MB corresponding to 2.941.688 RDF triples.

V. QUERY-BASED ANALYSIS AND SEMANTIC SEARCH

In this section, we show through examples the power of SPARQL queries both for formulating expert demands and for computing some useful statistics on the corpus and its content. The queries are classified into three categories. The first category illustrates typical queries of experts to search in a corpus information related to their domain of expertise. The second category illustrates how to use queries for a simple statistical analysis of corpus, while third category enables fine-grained semantic analysis of its content.

A. Query-based information retrieval

Fig. 5 shows a query (and its results) asking for papers that contain sentences mentioning both hormones and symptoms, and if such papers exist, to display their titles and the corresponding sentences.

It is worthwhile to note that, thanks to the triples inferred by rules, this general query (in which no specific hormone and no specific symptom is made specific) allows to return very relevant specific information. For instance, the sentence whose full content is displayed in Fig.5 contains obesity (that is a specific symptom encountered in Prader-Willi) and insulin (that is a specific hormone) that are not explicit in the query. Using search engines based on keyword-based queries, it would have been impossible to express such a query and to obtain such precise answers.
Fig. 5 How to find papers with sentences mentioning some hormones and some symptoms related to Prader-Willi

Fig. 6 shows a query that is more specific than the previous one in which the expert is interested in finding papers in which a same sentence mentions explicitly an association between a symptom and a specific neurotransmitter (namely the dopamine).

These two queries clearly illustrate the added-value of our ontology-based approach equipped with querying and inference capabilities compared to keyword-based or even concept-based search.

B. Query-based simple statistical analysis of the corpus

First, we have measured to what extent the corpus is related to the Prader-Willi ontology described in Section IV.

Fig.7 and Fig.8 show that, despite the small size of the current Prader-Willi domain ontology, our approach allowed to automatically extract from the corpus a significant amount of information relevant to the Prader-Willi domain.

Fig.7 shows the result of the following SPARQL query that asks for displaying the 30 papers that contain the most sentences related to the current Prader-Willi ontology.

Sparql:

Fig. 8 Histogram showing the distribution of the number of sentences within papers
Second, we have identified the most frequent formal terms that are mentioned in the papers. The query and the corresponding results are given in Fig. 9.

![Fig. 9 The query asking for the 30 most frequent formal terms mentioned in the papers, and the visualization of its results.](image-url)

Not surprisingly, the most frequent formal terms that are mentioned in the papers are the general entities (Symptom, Gene, Hormone, Troubles). This is because our approach is able to infer that a paper implicitly mentions a given formal term (e.g., a Symptom) if it mentions explicitly a subclass of an instance of it. Interestingly, among the specific formal terms (i.e., instances in the ontology), Obesity is the most frequent in the papers of the Prader-Willi corpus. This is a strong hint (validated by the expert) that obesity is one of the main symptoms of Prader-Willi syndrome.

C. Query-based fine-grained analysis of the corpus

We have written several queries to investigate co-occurrences within a same sentence of different types of formal terms related to the Prader-Willi domain. Fig. 10 reports on the co-occurrences that have been queried and found between one of the 3 domain specific relations and the one hand, and a formal concept of the domain on the other hand. The most frequent relation co-occurring with other concepts related to Prader-Willi is clearly the relation Associated_With. Exploring the corresponding sentences could help to find new concepts to enrich the current ontology.

![Fig. 10 The query-based computation of the number of co-occurrences of each of the 3 relations with a formal concept](image-url)

Fig. 11 shows the query for computing the 30 most frequent co-occurrences of symptoms and hormones, and the results ordered by their frequency. As we can see, the number of (explicit or implicit) co-occurrences of symptoms and hormones is big (approximately 21,000 sentences), which suggests a strong relation between them. The most frequent co-occurrence between two specific entities respectively instances of the classes Hormones and Symptoms is Insulin with Obesity. This suggests a possible link between insulin and obesity in Prader-Willi domain.

![Fig. 11 The query-based computation of the number of co-occurrences of hormones and symptoms](image-url)

Among these correlation results, the expert wanted to zoom on the correlation between a specific hormone (namely Oxytocin) and the general formal term Symptom_PW denoting the set of symptoms of the Prader-Willi declared in our ontology. Her demand was then to visualize the evolution over time of the correlation of oxytocin with Prader-Willi syndrome. Fig.12 shows the query corresponding to this demand, and the resulting curve.

![Fig. 12 Query-based computation of evolution over time of occurrences of oxytocin into the corpus](image-url)
Fig. 12 clearly shows the increasing importance taken by oxytocin within the scientific literature about Prader-Willi syndrome since 2006. This reflects the current advances on this rare disease for which the role of oxytocin has been investigated quite recently. Note that the decreasing of the curve for 2013 may be due to the fact that our corpus contains much less papers published in 2013 than in the previous years.

VI. CONCLUSION

We have designed a novel approach to filter and query a corpus of scientific articles related to a domain of specialization for which an ontology exists or can be built. The novelty of this approach is to represent the textual content relevant to the domain of interest as knowledge added to the ontology, thus making explicit the link between sentences and papers with formal terms they refer to. This enables to use a powerful SQL-like query language, namely SPARQL to express possibly complex queries on demand. Our approach is declarative and generic. The domain ontology can be simply updated by an expert who just has to add or delete triples using the editor of TopBraid Composer, and additional articles can be added to the corpus but the whole algorithmic machinery remains unchanged. In this paper, this approach is illustrated on a specialized medical domain, namely the Prader-Willi syndrome. However, it can be easily applied to another domain simply by providing as input an ontology of this domain and a corpus of articles.

We have implemented this approach using W3C standards that make it conform to Linked Data [6]. This opens the possibility to easily extend it to ontologies available in the Linked Data cloud.

As future work, in line with existing works combining ontologies and text mining (e.g., [15], [16], [18], [19]), we plan to exploit text mining techniques in order to (semi-)automatically enrich the domain ontology. The fact to have a preliminary ontology is important because it can be exploited to facilitate concept extraction. For instance, by focusing on sentences recognized by our method as mentioning one relation (e.g., Associated_With), extracting expressions corresponding to new concepts based on their position in the sentence compared to the expressions known to refer to the recognized relation is a simple but promising approach. In turn, the enriched ontology will enable to extract more sentences relevant to the domain of interest. This iterative process, combining simple text mining techniques and ontology-based corpus filtering is likely to be robust while limiting the manual help of human experts.

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