

Meta-interpreters in Prolog

A program fully developed in Prolog.

1. Introduction

The main difference between **meta-predicates** and **meta-interpreters** is: **meta-predicates** are built-in Prolog tools that influence the standard execution of the program. In contrast, **meta-interpreters** are programs, designed and tested by a developer, that take another program in input and define their own interpretation rules.

Simply, we can develop a new interpreter that follows our **interpretation rules**.

The meta-interpreters use two main meta-predicates:

1. **clause(Head, Body)**: used to detect if it exists a given clause inside the database program.

```
p(1).
q(x, a) :- p(x), r(a).

?- clause(q(x, y) BODY)
yes X = 1 Y = a BODY = p(1), r(a);
no
```

2. **call(T)**: evaluation of the subject *T* of the **call** meta-predicate.

2. Meta-interpreter

In **Prolog**, as we already know, there is no **difference** between programs and data. From this first assumption and by the set of **built-in predicates**, we could design any kind of **meta-interpreter**.

A meta-interpreter is a specific type of meta-program, that takes in input a program and returns another program. In other words, we can define any given meta-interpreter as: a program written in a specific language **L** that is able to execute other programs written in that language **L**.

In **Prolog**, we shall say that a meta-interpreter for a language **L** is defined as an interpreter for **L**, but fully written in **Prolog**.

Given these premises, would it be possible to make a **Prolog machine** written in Prolog for interpreting another Prolog program? This query is answered by the **vanilla meta-interpreter**.

3. Vanilla meta-interpreter

The **vanilla meta-interpreter** is a Prolog machine designed in Prolog for executing Prolog programs.

Assuming a predicate **solve(Goal)** (outside of the set of built-in predicates) that answers true if the variable **Goal** can be proved using the clauses of the current program taken in account, a possible vanilla

meta-interpreter would be:

```
solve(true) :- !.
solve((A, B)) :- !, solve(A), solve(B).
solve(A) :- clause(A, B), solve(B).
```

This snippet of code has three main passages:

- 1st step. If we pass a **true fact** to the procedure, then all the other possibilities are thrown away from the search tree and the computation stops.
- 2nd step. (**A, B**) is the **conjunction** of different literals. The goal of the predicate is to prove the truth of the conjunction. This clause answers to the question: *which is the resolution order of the conjunction?*. By this example, we have chosen the **left-most** rule.
- 3rd step. Given a rule **A**, the predicate will check if, inside the database program, **A** is already defined as a rule with a body **B**, and then we solve **B** in order to find the truth of the rule.

The last instance provides us the real meaning of the vanilla meta-interpreter: given a **goal**, it will use our Prolog program to prove that **goal**.

But, what is the main advantage of using a **home-made** interpreter? We have already a Prolog interpreter that does the same and also better than us. Vanilla interpreter mimics the same behavior of the Prolog interpreter, with a main difference: vanilla is developed in Prolog, indeed the standard one is written in C, so its compilation time is very fast.

However, we can use the vanilla meta-interpreter **to change** the general behavior of Prolog program language. Let's see some snippets for better understanding.

Right-most rule example

Define a Prolog interpreter that adopts the rule **right-most**.

From the previous snippet, we can achieve the **right-most** rule by changing the order of the resolution process.

```
solve(true) :- !.
solve((A, B)) :- !, solve(B), solve(A).
solve(A) :- clause(A, B), solve(B).
```

Note: the predicate **solve(. . .)** does not belong to the set of built-in ones.

Number of steps example

Define a prolog interpreter **solve(Goal, Step)** that:

- It is true if Goal can be proved.
- In case Goal is proved, Step is the number of resolution steps used to prove the Goal.

```
solve(true, 0) :- !.
solve((A, B), S) :- !, solve(A, SA), solve(B, SB), S is SA + SB.
solve(A, S) :- clause(A, B), solve(B, SB), S is 1 + SB.
```

As before, we focus on the main passages:

- 1st step. Solving a **true fact** requires 0 steps.
- 2nd step. The total number of steps to solve the conjunction (A, B) is equal to the sum of the steps for solving A and B.
- 3rd step. The amount of steps necessary to solve the rule A is equal to the steps to solve the **body** of the rule.

```
a :- b, c.
b :- d.
c.
d.

?- solve(a, Step)
yes Step = 4
```

For solving the rule a are necessary 4 steps. The number is simply computed by all the unifications done: a :- b, c. → a :- d, c. → a :- true, c. → a :- true, true..

4. Expert System

An **expert system** is a construction over the knowledge base that allows us to make queries about the same knowledge base.

Let's suppose we have a knowledge base, and we want to query it looking to prove something.

```
good_pet(X) :- bird(X), small(X).
good_pet(X) :- cuddly(X), yellow(X).
bird(X) :- has_feathers(X), tweets(X).
yellow(tweety).
```

We want to know if **tweety** is a good pet:

```
?- good_pet(tweety).
ERROR. Undefined procedure: has_feathers/1
```

Does it mean that we do not know if **tweety** has feathers?

No, since Prolog assumes the **Close World Assumption** (every unstaged information is considered false), **tweety** does not have feathers. However, when we look to the knowledge base we are more to the side of

the **Open World Assumption**: the informations not stated are not false but simply unknown. We have to define a way to retrieve them.

The basic idea is to extend our **knowledge base**. If we try to prove a **Goal** using the given knowledge base and we fail, then we could ask more informations to the user. By the way, this approach has two main problems:

- Following this method, our Prolog program will end up asking everything to the user.
- At every new start we lose all the informations already asked to the user.

We need a method that allows us to store the retrieved informations inside a permanent storage.

5. Modifying dynamically the program

Any time a Prolog program is consulted, its representation in terms of data structure is loaded into a database. This database is the **program database** loaded in memory, handled by the common DBMS (DataBase Management System) techniques.

Note: a Prolog program is a set of **Horn clauses** and they are splitted by the domains of the database, in order to store them as a table definition.

We can use this representation to update the knowledge base. The main methods to update the knowledge base are:

- 1st **assert(T)**
The clause **T** is added to the database program in a non-specified position of the data structure.
- 2nd **asserta(T)**
The clause **T** is added at the beginning of the database.
- 3rd **assertz(T)**
The clause **T** is added at the end of the database.
- 4th **retract(T)**
Removes the first clause that matches **T**.
- 5th **abolish(T)/retract_all(T)**
Removes all the occurrences of that clause from the database.

All the clauses **T** must be already instantiated before the executions of the described predicates. We have to pay attention when we use these methods, they can change the **declarative semantic** of the Prolog program.