YAML/JSON Validator Tool Project

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# Project Objectives

This project is part of the effort to incorporate the provision of the OpenAPI Specification (OAS) validation and standardization into CPF’s current API processes that require support from ITPMs.

As a summary of the analysis of the different API formats, OAS is chosen for this project due to its simple, yet extensible structure with many modern features that other formats do not support such as updated parameter types, improved examples, references, and links, and callbacks among many others.

Benefits of incorporating the OAS standard include increasing the value of CPF’s APIs by designing APIs strategically and being more reusable. This project aims to refactor existing and new APIs in a streamlined manner to meet industry standards and onboard APIs securely onto the API Exchange Platform (AXP)

# Project Components

Two tools in the AXP Dev Portal website are part of this project:

1. YAML/JSON OAS3.0 Validation Tool and
2. YAML/JSON API Preview Tool.

The validation tool will take the developer’s YAML/JSON document as input, validate it based on the [OAS 3.0.3 specification](https://swagger.io/specification/v3/), and output any structural errors, if any. Additional information on the errors is also displayed to give the developer advice on how to correct the errors.

A screen shot of a computer program

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*YAML Document Example*

The preview tool will allow anyone – be it the development team or end consumers – to visualize and interact with the API’s resources without having any of the implementation logic in place. It is essentially a concise overview of a website server with examples of website responses if an end user were to use it. This preview page is automatically generated from the YAML/JSON document provided using Swagger UI plugin.

A screenshot of a computer

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

*API Preview Example*

These two tools will be presented together on a website.

It is important to note that these two tools exist and are maintained presently in the open-source community, with the main inspiration being [Swagger UI](https://swagger.io/). As a result, there is a need for these in-house developed tools to be different to bring value. Two main additional features will be added on top of the validation tool:

1. Custom Validation Rules
2. Spelling Checking

The custom validation rules check the following:

* No special characters in the API path
* Path subtier length must conform to CPF’s API requirements
* Path version must match the info version
* Subtier must be in camel case format
* Subtier spelling mistakes
* First word of subtier must be a verb
* Properties that are stated to be required must be present

The spelling checking feature will check for any spelling mistakes in parts of the YAML/JSON document that have heavy sentencing. This will ignore parts that are intended to have improper English jargon and focus on parts that should be spelling-checked.

# Project Progression

This section will go into detail on how the tools are developed and the concerns encountered along the way.

## Version 0.1

My initial thought on this project is simply that it is already done by Swagger UI, which is a company/community large enough to maintain this sort of application with very high standards. There will be no need to create another similar one. After being given the existing codebase and one template example of a YAML file, and quick research on Swagger UI, there are two obstacles on why we cannot just use the already-developed tool by Swagger UI:

1. We need to pay to add custom validation rules on Swagger UI’s tool
2. There is no in-built spelling-checking feature. We will have to use Grammarly, which is a spelling-checking application, as a browser plugin or desktop application. This cannot be expected of the user by default.

Therefore, we will need to code the application from scratch. While both tools are open-source on Github, which means we can essentially copy their code, it does not make sense to do so as we will have no information on whether custom validation rules can be added or not. It will be clearer if we code it ourselves, which will make the application easier to maintain and customize in the future.

Note that these concerns are only on the validation tool, not the preview tool so we will just be using the preview plugin from Swagger UI, which is a part of the Swagger UI preview tool. This will reduce the time taken to program our own API preview GUI and I think it looks great already. Therefore, most of the time will be spent on developing the validation tool.

Version 0.1 of the validation tool is designed to use Flask to route two websites for the two tools respectively. Flask is a web framework written in Python and it is a lightweight framework as it does not require many dependencies, which makes it very fast in performance. It will serve as our back-end server, serving our routes and creating the validation logic of our YAML/JSON document.

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*Flask routing*

The websites themselves are the front-end and will be using simple HTML, CSS, and client-side JavaScript to reduce the dependencies needed for faster performance. JQuery is the library used in JavaScript to bring the back-end and front-end together. It is used to call the routes created in Flask to validate the YAML/JSON document provided by the front-end. It will then respond with either a “Success” message if there are no errors, or a list of the errors, if any. Concepts such as debouncing and web sockets are used to make the validation process smoother by allowing the validation request to happen once there is a change in the input, removing the need to click a button.

To begin coding the validation logic, one needs to understand the structure of YAML and JSON. YAML and JSON are both information formats for data to be sent across websites and servers. Without these formats, information sent from one website to another would not be standardized so one website might not understand the information sent by another. YAML is the more human-understandable format, with proper indentation and syntax. JSON is the more machine-understandable format as it is in the format of a dictionary, which is a data structure. In theory and practice, this makes validating JSON much easier than YAML because one just needs to go through the dictionary without needing to parse YAML.

Therefore, Version 0.1 chose to validate using JSON which first converts YAML to JSON before implementing the validation logic. Each field and its corresponding value of the JSON document can then be extracted easily, as shown in the example. For example, if the field “openapi” appears in the document, its value will be doc\_json[“openapi”].

A screen shot of a computer code

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*Extracting fields from JSON*

The simple structure of the example YAML/JSON document provided makes this method viable because there won’t be many fields to extract. The naïve approach to implementing the validation logic is simply using functions. This method will be known as the “functional method” for convenience. The functions will take each of the extracted values as input and validate them. As long as the field exists and is extracted, this opens up many possibilities for how each of the values can be validated, such as checking if it is present or not, whether it is in a certain string format or not, etc. This makes adding custom validation rules very easy.

Another attractive reason to use this functional method is that Python has a lot of well-developed and documented libraries for almost every functionality that exists (arguably even more modern libraries than JavaScript, even though JavaScript is the most used language). For example, NLTK can be used for natural language processing and there are many spelling-checking libraries. This would mean that our server will have a lot of dependencies to process, which impacts performance the most. The more complex features we need to implement, the lower the performance.

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*Functional methods to validate fields*

This functional method makes unit testing possible and easy because the inputs to each of these functions can be made up and tested individually. Unit testing is done using another Python library called PyTest.

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*Unit testing example*

Once we have tested the validation logic, we can integrate our back-end with the front-end and perform integration testing. Integration testing directly tests the interaction between the end user and the whole application. This will cover everything that the end user can click, input, or scroll on the website and how the website will respond to those actions. Integration is done using another Python library called Selenium.

A screen shot of a computer code

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*Integration testing example*

Once we have finished the first iteration of the Software Development Lifecycle (SDLC) of the application, we can then deploy our application onto a URL that anyone can access and use because just running the application on a local machine is not scalable. This is done by hosting our application on a cloud server, which is running 24/7. But before we can put our application onto a cloud server, we have to make sure our application can run on every machine. This has been a tricky problem for many years because different operating systems have different names for the dependencies we are using. If we simply move the application files from a Windows machine to a MacOS machine, some dependencies might not be identified, hence causing the application to run improperly. This is solved by [Docker](https://docs.docker.com/get-started/overview/), a Software-As-A-Service to package and OS-level virtualize software applications from its infrastructure so that applications can run on any machine. Applications packaged by Docker are called containers and once they run, are called images, which is essentially a snapshot of the application that is running correctly.

Azure is mainly used in CPF so we will be using that as our cloud service. While we can just deploy our application container onto an Azure container registry and create an application service with a public URL, this is not scalable because what if we change some code in our application? We will need to redeploy everything again as the updated code will not be on Azure. Azure Pipeline is a DevOps tool in Azure used to automate the Software Development Lifecycle (SLDC) as well as deploy applications among many other features. It is capable of tracking changes in your code and performing the whole process of testing and deploying without manually doing so.

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*4-step pipeline*

This concludes Version 0.1 of the project (unfortunately I don’t have screenshots of this version). Concerns with this version:

1. Back-end performance worsens with more possible fields to extract. This is inevitable with the functional method because each extraction will need to iterate more of the JSON document. This will cause slow responses (lag) from the server when validating.
2. Not fully implementing OAS 3.0, which is one of the core components of the project. We want to add on top of OAS 3.0, not compromising rules that are part of OAS3.0 for the custom validation rules. Many of the complex features of OAS 3.0 such as references and links cannot be implemented easily using the functional method as it involves recursion for each pair of fields to be extracted. This will worsen the back-end performance exponentially.
3. Error messages are not beneficial enough to the developer. By transforming the YAML document into JSON, we lose beneficial information such as the line number of the error or the parent field that caused the error.

The validation logic of the YAML/JSON document is the challenging part of this project depending on how extensive and exhaustive the validation needs to be. For many small applications that are just validating a small YAML/JSON document that does not follow OAS3.0, the functional method is still viable. This is thought to be the case initially. However, as the requirements require the implementation of the entire OAS3.0, we need to change the validation approach.

## Version 1.0

To avoid iterating the JSON document multiple times and recursion between the pairs of fields, we have to validate the YAML/JSON document in its YAML form. This means that if the developer inputs YAML, we will validate YAML, and if the developer inputs JSON, we will convert it into YAML first before validating.

This started my research into how YAML can be validated and the result ended up with what I call the “schema method”. This schema method uses a template to crosscheck line-by-line with the YAML/JSON document to ensure that every field and value is what is expected (In the example below, “title” is the field, and the value must be a string). You can think of a schema as a blueprint for your YAML/JSON document. Additional rules can be added to restrict values such as data types, required values, etc. If any of the rules are violated, or there is an unexpected field, it is an error.

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*Schema for <Info> in OAS3.0*

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*<info> section in example YAML document*

It might be obvious that the best solution is to use what Swagger UI uses because we know it works. However, Swagger UI is using JavaScript libraries, not Python libraries. Remember that we are using Python to implement our validation logic. This would mean we would have to use NodeJS to implement our validation logic, which is a JavaScript runtime environment, which can be thought of as the JavaScript version of Flask but with more functionalities. Not wanting to add more technologies to this project, I explored the limits of Python to see if we can do the same thing in Python.

There are 2 well-documented and maintained libraries in Python that can help us with this schema method. These libraries allow you to create schemas of a certain format and the library will help you crosscheck and then output errors, if any:

1. [PyKwalify](https://pykwalify.readthedocs.io/en/unstable/)
2. [Cerberus](https://docs.python-cerberus.org/en/stable/)

It is not clear in the beginning which library is better than the other, so both are used to see which would fit OAS3.0 better. Note that OAS3.0 has some advanced features that are part of its specification. These features ultimately were the deciding factors on whether to continue using the library or not:

* References and links. This means the schema must support recursion. Recursion here means that it is possible that a field can have infinite other fields with a fixed schema. If the library does not support schema with references and links, we will have to hardcode the repeated fields until a limited depth, which is not what OAS3.0 wants
* “OR” logic. This is very similar to “IF-ELSE” statements where if a field is present, another field should not.
* Regular expressions. This applies especially to the fields, not so much to the values. Regular expressions are a specific format for how the fields should be named. If regular expressions are supported, it will greatly reduce the number of fields hardcoded in the schema
* Custom validation rules. If the schema does not allow custom validation rules, it cannot be used as it would bring no value to the project

After two weeks spent exploring the two libraries, the following results are determined:

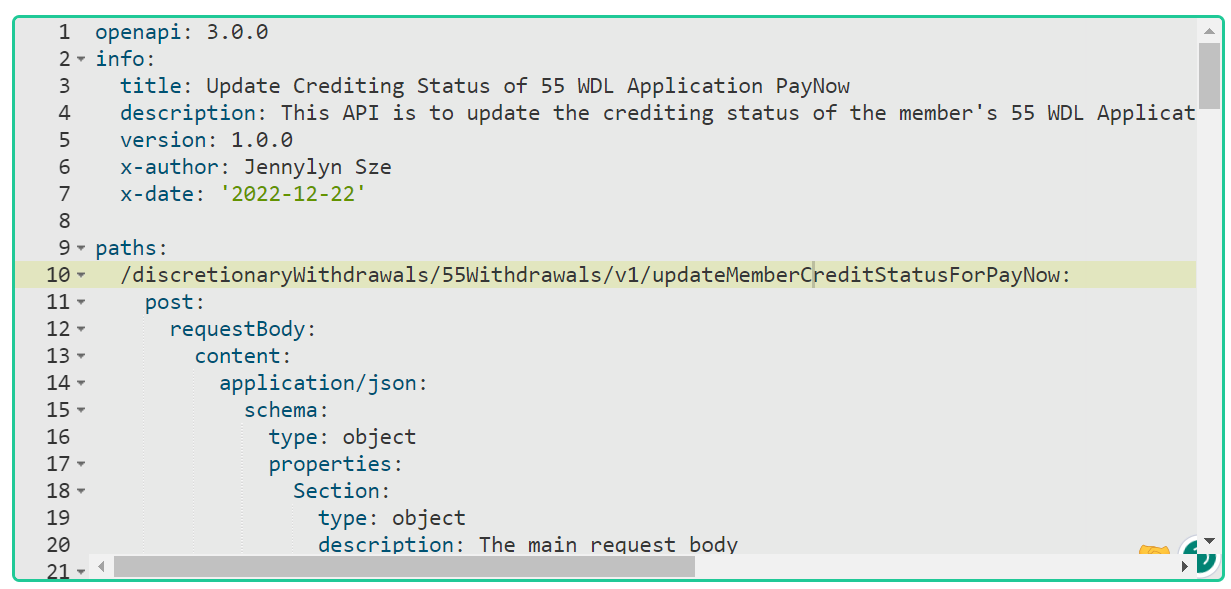
|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | PyKwalify | Cerberus |
| References and links | Not possible | Not possible |
| “OR” logic | Possible | Possible |
| Regular expressions | Possible | Not possible |
| Custom validation rules | Not possible | Possible |

The conclusion is that both libraries are not fully compatible with OAS3.0, and thus are only good options for simpler YAML/JSON documents. PyKwalify cannot be used entirely because custom validation rules are very important to the project and its error reporting is not as useful as Cerberus. Cerberus, on the other hand, can be used but we need a lot more time to implement the whole OAS3.0 schema. These are the main reasons why:

* While Cerberus cannot support references and links directly, in the CPF context, we can arbitrarily say that our APIs will not have repeated fields up to 3 times. For example, in the example, YAML document given, fields are only repeated up to 2 times maximum.
* Regular expressions are inevitable, and can only be solved by taking more time to add fields specific to the CPF context.

At this point in time, the amount of time and effort needed to implement this schema is taken into consideration because it might not be possible to finish by the end of the internship. The schema, at the point of being given up, is at 70 thousand lines long without including the custom validation rules. This is highly unmaintainable and hard to modify if there are any schema changes. Therefore, there is a need to shift away from Python and go into JavaScript to implement our schema that satisfies all the features required.

Note that this does not mean nothing was achieved in the 2 weeks of exploring PyKwalify and Cerberus. These two libraries exposed the Python library called ruamel.yaml, which allows us to map each line of the YAML/JSON document to line numbers, and inspired the use of Ace Editor, which is a code editor that displays line numbers and with highlighting features that we can put on our website. This adds to the usability and appearance of the text input, which ultimately aids in providing value to the project.



*Ace Editor*

Implementing the schema in JavaScript is trivial, all we need to do is to see what library Swagger UI is using, and it is called [Another JSON Schema Validator (Ajv)](https://ajv.js.org/). Ajv is arguably not as well documented as Cerberus, but it is used by a lot more people in the community. Ajv can implement all the features we need and has very useful error messages. The schema was then finished in 1 week. However, to add Ajv as our validation method requires some technology changes in our back-end.

Before talking about the technology changes, we need to talk about the main differences between using Flask versus NodeJS as back-end servers. Both of them are generally the same in terms of functionalities, but it is the libraries that make a difference:

1. Flask uses pip while NodeJS uses npm or yarn, all of which are package managers to install, update, and remove dependencies and libraries. Pip is not compatible with npm or yarn, so if we use both Flask and NodeJS, there will be two package managers to handle. This just adds to maintainability.
2. NodeJS is faster than Flask in terms of compiling
3. In general, JavaScript libraries are harder to maintain than Python libraries and are not as diverse as Python libraries, at least for those that apply to this project

Our back-end will be using both Flask and NodeJS with separate responsibilities. Flask will handle the page routing and the line number mapping feature. This is because it is harder to do in JavaScript and performs slower than if it is implemented in Python. NodeJS will handle our validation logic and will contain most of the libraries used. The front-end will be served by Flask, but will only communicate with the NodeJS server. The NodeJS server will only call the line number mapping feature from the Flask server, and respond to the front-end validation requests

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*Project Architecture*

This schema method of validating YAML/JSON is not a typical method to validate fields and values because we are not the ones coding the function to validate whether the fields and values satisfy the rules applied to them, it is the library that does it. Therefore, we only need to test the custom validation rules that we created. This greatly reduces the amount of unit testing we need to perform.

# Improvements Going Forward

Improvements that can be made:

* Include autosuggestions for spelling checking feature
* Add a database for the custom dictionary so that user does not need to re-write words in the CPF context repeatedly
* Find a way to perform line number mapping in JavaScript to completely remove Flask. This will reduce redundant complexity in the back-end.
* Improve GUI