Owlifier: Creating OWL-DL Ontologies from Simple Spreadsheet-Based Knowledge Descriptions☆

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Abstract

Discovery and integration of data is important in many ecological studies, especially those that concern broad-scale ecological questions. Discovery and integration is often a difficult and time-consuming task for researchers, in part because informal, ambiguous, and sometimes inconsistent terms are used to describe data semantics. Ontologies can help address this problem by providing a means to define ecological concepts to more consistently annotate, relate, and search for data sets. However, unlike in molecular biology or biomedicine, few ontology development efforts exist within ecology. Ontology development often requires considerable expertise in ontology languages and development tools, which is often a barrier for ontology creation in ecology. In this paper we address this problem by providing an approach for ontology creation that allows ecologists to use common spreadsheet tools to describe different aspects of an ontology. We present conventions for creating, relating, and constraining concepts through spreadsheets, and provide software tools for converting these ontologies into equivalent OWL-DL representations. We also consider inverse translations, i.e., to convert ontologies represented using OWL-DL into our spreadsheet format. Our approach allows large lists of terms to be easily related and organized into concept hierarchies, and generally provides a more intuitive and natural interface for ontology development by ecologists.

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1. Introduction

Within the fields of molecular biology and biomedicine considerable effort has gone into developing ontologies for improving data discovery and integration [2, 1]. While similar benefits can be obtained for ecological data, far fewer efforts exist to develop richer and more consistent terminologies of ecology concepts [9, 12]. The use of formal ontologies can significantly enhance metadata descriptions of ecological data. Annotating data with ontology terms can both

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help users interpret data as well as enable advanced capabilities for data discovery and integration, e.g., by exploiting subsumption and part-of hierarchies as well as more formal constraints such as cardinality restrictions on properties and term equivalence.

Efforts to engage scientists in the development of ontologies typically leverage the W3C Web Ontology Language (OWL) [17] as a standard XML syntax for representing and sharing ontologies. A key advantage of OWL is that it is supported by a wide range of generic tools, including editors [8, 7], reasoning systems [16, 18], query languages [13, 11], and storage technologies [5, 4]. Most of these tools, however, are primarily targeted at experts in knowledge engineering and software development familiar with the underlying description logic semantics of OWL-DL [6]. This is especially true with ontology editors (such as Protege, SWOOP, etc.), which allow for very detailed ontology specifications, but at the same time require considerable understanding of the underlying ontology formalisms and syntax. Thus, we see the lack of suitable ontology editing tools for scientists as one of the major barriers for more wide-scale adoption of ontologies in ecology.

This paper presents a novel approach for ontology creation that aims at being more intuitive for ecologists and that can be used to rapidly construct large ontologies for describing scientific data. Our approach is to allow scientists to use common spreadsheet-based tools to describe, in an intuitive way, different aspects of an ontology, and then to take these descriptions and convert them into full-fledged OWL ontologies using a software application called owlifier. An owlifier spreadsheet consists of a set of *blocks* that have a predefined template structure for users to fill in. Each non-empty row in an owlifier table constitutes a block. Each block defines different aspects of an ontology including ontology classes, subclasses, synonyms, and properties. We also provide blocks for plain-text descriptions of classes and properties, and for referencing one or more existing ontologies (e.g., to extend an existing ontology or to define ontology articulations). Blocks can be sparse (inheriting from previous blocks), which can further simplify the creation of large ontologies.

While not as expressive as OWL-DL, our approach can produce ontology structures essential for enhanced data discovery and integration [10], while at the same time provide a more accessible user interface for ecologists. Further, our approach can be used to rapidly construct class hierarchies from long lists of keywords using familiar spreadsheet software. For instance, an ecologist can easily list (or import) a set of terms, and then incrementally organize these into class hierarchies, and define relevant properties and their constraints. Based on our experiences using owlifier with ecologists and evolutionary biologists studying trait data, we found that this approach can enable them to quickly and easily comprehend and construct useful ontologies.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. In Section 2 we describe the basic syntax and semantics of owlifier. We define blocks that support a large subset of OWL-DL and that also generally follow the ontology creation guidelines defined in [15]. We also simplify certain aspects of ontology creation using OWL-DL, e.g., by assuming classes are disjoint by default (unless specified otherwise) and by applying implicit property restriction closures [15]. In Section 3 we describe additional characteristics of owlifier and discuss issues with respect to classification and reasoning. In Section 4 we briefly describe the owlifier implementation, and conlcude in Section 5 with related and future work. In general, the goal of owlifier is not to support all constructs in OWL-DL, but instead to provide a higher-level ontology syntax (via spreadsheet blocks) that is easy for ecologists to use and understand while also providing the necessary constructs for developing typical ecological ontologies. By compiling owlifier to OWL-DL, we also allow for experts to refine and extend the ontology using more advanced ontology editing tools if necessary.

2. The Syntax and Semantics of Owlifier

An owlifier table defines an OWL-DL [17] ontology through a set of *blocks* representing one or more ontology definitions. Each non-empty row in an owlifier table corresponds to a block. The type of the block is given in the first column of the row. We describe each type of block supported by owlifier below. Here we assume that if any properties or classes used in a block are not imported from another ontology, then they are to be added to the ontology being specified by the owlifier table. In general, we name blocks according to the more generic terms used in [3, 10] instead of those of OWL-DL. This allows owlifier to generate ontologies that extend the observational model of [3, 10] for data annotation, and in certain cases avoids confusion with established terms commonly used within ecology.

Import Blocks. Import blocks assign namespace labels to external ontologies. Each external ontology is imported into the current ontology. We refer to the ontologies of import blocks as *imported ontologies*. Using import blocks, classes and properties of imported ontologies can be used within other blocks of an owlifier table. Rows containing import blocks take the form

import	n	u

where n is a namespace label and u is an OWL ontology URI. Classes and properties from imported ontologies are referenced by prefixing the namespace label n to the corresponding class or property name in the normal way. As an example, the following block imports the SWEET "Earth Realm" ontology [14]

```
import sweet http://sweet.jpl.nasa.gov/ontology/earthrealm.owl
```

With this import block the class denoting Marine Ecosystems (a class defined in the SWEET ontology) can be referred to from within an owlifier table using the expression sweet:MarineEcosystem. Because this class refers to a class in another ontology, we refer to it as an *imported class*.

Entity Blocks. Entity blocks are the primary blocks used to define ontologies. An entity block introduces new OWL classes and specifies subclass relationships.

Imported classes may also be used within entity blocks by prefixing class names with namespace labels (as described above). Rows containing entity blocks take the form

entity	c_1	c_2	$\ldots$	c_n

$(n \geq 1)$

where each class c_i is asserted in the current ontology to subsume c_{i+1}, for $1 \leq i < n$. That is, each c_i in an entity block induces the description-logic axiom $c_{i+1} \sqsubseteq c_i$. If both c_i and c_{i+1} are imported classes, we say that the block defines an "articulation" (i.e., mapping) between the two classes. The following entity block defines a simple subclass hierarchy.

entity PhysicalFeature AquaticPhysicalFeature River

This block states that Physical Feature, Aquatic Physical Feature, and River are classes; River is a subclass of Aquatic Physical Feature; and Aquatic Physical Feature is a subclass of Physical Feature. The following entity block introduces a new class via an imported class.

entity sweet:MarineEcosystem IntertidalEcosystem

This block states that Intertidal Ecosystem is a subclass of the Marine Ecosystem class imported from the SWEET ontology. Similarly, assuming "marine" denotes an existing ontology of marine ecosystem concepts, the following entity block defines a simple class articulation.

entity sweet:MarineEcosystem marine:DeapSeaEcosystem

This block states that the Deap Sea Ecosystem class of the marine ontology is a subclass of the Marine Ecosystem class of the SWEET ontology.

Synonym Blocks. Synonym blocks define equivalence relationships between ontology classes. Rows containing synonym blocks take the form

synonym	c_1	c_2	$\ldots$	c_n

$(n \geq 2)$

where each class c_i is equivalent to class c_{i+1} in the current ontology, for $1 \leq i < n$. That is, each c_i in a synonym blocks induces a description logic axiom of the form $c_i \equiv c_{i+1}$. The following synonym block defines a simple equivalence relationship.

synonym Maize Corn

This block states that the Maize and Corn classes are synonyms, i.e., equivalent classes. Similar to entity blocks, synonym blocks often contain imported classes, e.g., to extend an existing ontology or to define ontology articulations.

Overlap Blocks. Except in certain situations (described further in Section 3), classes are generally assumed to be disjoint in owlifier. Overlap blocks explicitly relax this assumption by stating that a give set of classes may have overlapping instances. Rows containing overlap blocks take the form

overlap	c_1	c_2	...	c_n

$(n \geq 2)$

where each class c_i is allowed to share instances with each class c_j, for $1 \leq i, j \leq n$. In particular, a given c_i and c_j in an overlap block are not defined to be disjoint classes in the current ontology. As an example, consider the following entity blocks that define the classes Estuary, Lagoon, and Marsh as subclasses of Ecological Habitats.

```
entity EcologicalHabitat Estuary
entity EcologicalHabitat Lagoon
entity EcologicalHabitat Marsh
```

Given only these blocks, owlifier treats Estuary, Lagoon, and Marsh as disjoint classes. To relax this assumption and allow, e.g., types of Lagoons to also be types of Estuaries, we explicitly add the following overlap block

```
overlap Estuary Lagoon
```

In general, overlap blocks are rarely used but provide a mechanism to override the default behavior of owlifier in asserting disjoint classes.

Relationship Blocks. Relationship blocks define *required* object properties of classes. An object property within OWL is a property defined between two class instances. Rows containing relationship blocks take the form

relationship	p	c_1	c_2	...	c_n

$(n \geq 2)$

where p is an object property and each c_i is a class, for $1 \leq i \leq n$. For every class c_i, the relationship block induces the DL axiom $c_i \sqsubseteq \exists p.c_{i+1}$ stating that each instance of c_i has, amongst possibly other things, a relationship through p to some instance of c_{i+1}. For example, the following block states that the class California Voles live in Grassy Areas.

```
relationship livesIn CaliforniaVole GrassyArea
```

In some cases, a particular property can apply to a sequence of classes, and for convenience, each such class can be specified in a single block. For example, consider the following block.

```
relationship directlyBelow Hypolimnion Thermocline Epilimnion
```

This block states that, e.g., within a thermally stratified lake, the Hypolimnion layer is directly below the Thermocline layer, and the Thermocline layer is directly below the Epilimnion layer.

Transitive Blocks. Transitive blocks are special cases of relationship blocks where the object property is asserted to be transitive. If a property p is declared to be transitive, whenever p relates an individual o_1 to an individual o_2, and an individual o_2 to an individual o_3, then p is also assumed to relate o_1 to o_3. Rows containing transitive blocks take the form

transitive	p	c_1	c_2	$\ldots$	c_n

$(n \geq 2)$

where p is an object property and each c_i is a class, for $1 \leq i \leq n$. The following block is a simple example of a transitive relationship.

transitive hasPart Body Head Eye Retina

This block states that every Body has a Head as a part, every Head has an Eye as a part, and every Eye has a Retina as a part. Moreover, because the part-of property here is defined to be transitive, it is possible to infer that every Body also has an Eye and a Retina through the corresponding relationship restrictiosn, i.e., $\mathsf{Body} \sqsubseteq \exists \mathsf{hasPart.Head}$, $\mathsf{Head} \sqsubseteq \exists \mathsf{hasPart.Eye}$, and $\mathsf{Eye} \sqsubseteq \exists \mathsf{hasPart.Retina}$.

Inverse Blocks. Inverse blocks state that two object properties are inverses of each other. If p_1 and p_2 are defined to be inverse properties, whenever p_1 relates an individual o_1 to an individual o_2 then p_2 is assumd to relate o_2 to o_1. Rows containing inverse blocks take the form

inverse	p_1	p_2

where p_1 and p_2 are object properties. A common example of inverse properties are `partOf` and `hasPart`.

*** HERE ***

Attribute Blocks. Attribute blocks define required *datatype* properties of concepts. Unlike object properties, a datatype property within OWL is a property defined between a class instance and a literal value (e.g., string, integer, etc.). Rows containing attribute blocks take the form

attribute	p	c_1	c_2	$\ldots$	c_n

$(n \geq 1)$

where p is a datatype property and c_i is a class, for $1 \leq i \leq n$. For each concept c_i, the attribute block induces the description logic axiom $c_i \sqsubseteq \exists p$ stating that each instance of c_i has, amongst possibly other things, a property p with a literal value. As an example, the following ...

Value Blocks. Value blocks define required datatype property *constant values* for concepts. A value block has the form

value	P	V	C_1	C_2	$\ldots$	C_n

$(n \geq 1)$

where P is a datatype property, C_i is a concept for $1 \leq i \leq n$, and V is a datatype value. For each concept C_i, the value block induces the DL axiom

$$C_i \sqsubseteq (V \in P)$$

stating that each instance of C_i has a value V for property P. The value restrictions stated by value blocks are often used for defining so-called *value partitions* [**?**].

Minimum Blocks. Minimum blocks state the minimum number of properties P an instance of a concept may have. Minimum blocks have the form

minimum	P	N	C_1	C_2	$\ldots$	C_m

where N is the minimum number of properties P that instances of concept C_1 may have to instances of concept C_2, C_2 to C_3, and so on. A cardinality block induces the DL axiom

$$C_i \sqsubseteq (\leq N P.C_{i+1})$$

stating that each instance of C_i must be related to at least N unique instances of C_{i+1} via P. For example, the blocks

minimum hasPart 1 Body Head Nose
minimum hasPart 2 Head Eye

states that a body has at least one head and at least two eyes.

Maximum Blocks. Maximum blocks state the maximum number of properties P an instance of a concept may have. Maximum blocks have the form

maximum	P	N	C_1	C_2	$\ldots$	C_m

where N is the maximum number of properties P that instances of concept C_1 may have to instances of concept C_2, C_2 to C_3, and so on. A cardinality block induces the DL axiom

$$C_i \sqsubseteq (\geq N P.C_{i+1})$$

stating that each instance of C_i may be related to at most N unique instances of C_{i+1} via P. For example, the blocks

maximum hasPart 1 Body Head
maximum hasPart 2 Head Eye

states that a body has at least one head and at least two eyes.

Sufficient Blocks. Sufficient blocks state that any instance having a property P to an instance of a concept C_2 is a sufficient condition for being an instance of a concept C_1. A sufficient block has the form

sufficient	C_1	P	C_2

where C_1 is the target concept (i.e., denoting the concept definition), P is the sufficient property, and C_2 is the sufficient concept. A sufficient block induces the DL axiom

$$C_1 \equiv \exists P.C_2$$

Sufficient blocks provide a mechansism to construct simple class definitions (i.e., classes defined precisely by other classes), primarily for use with value partitions. [NOTE: these should be anded together?]

Description Blocks. Description blocks assign plain-text definitions to concepts and properties. A description block has the form

description	T	S

where T is either a property or a concept and S is a description string.

Note Blocks. Note blocks add comments to the current ontology, and are ignored by owlifier. A note block has the form

note	S

where S is a comment string.

3. Additional Characteristics of Owlifier

Some desirable properties:

- non-ambiguous (no block leads to ambiguous DL axioms)
- "reasonable" (not everything has to be explicitly stated)
- ???

*** Say something about relaxing block syntax ... to make it easier to specify ontologies. Also, allow blocks to be given in any order.

4. Implementation of Owlifier

Flags:

- delimeter characters
- perform classification
- warnings
- owlifier to owl and owl to owlifier
- ???

5. Conclusion

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