

Proposal for serializable enums in P4

P4 Serializable Types Subcommittee

Abstract

We propose extending the enumeration type to allow specification of a backing type and representation, allowing such enums to be used as serializable data.

1. Making serializable `enums`

P4's `enum` type is currently left up to the compiler to determine the representation and backing type for the `enum`, however, as the current P4 spec acknowledges, there are instances where an `enum` is exposed to the control plane, and a compiler must specify how it will handle such enumerations in communication with the control plane.

Instead of having this be a place where one implementation might vary from another, we propose that the `enum` type be extended to allow specifying both the backing type and the numeric representation of enumeration items.

We propose an extending `enum` as follows:

```
enumDeclaration
  : optAnnotations ENUM name '{' identifierList '}'
  | optAnnotations ENUM typeRef name '{' specifiedIdentifierList '}'

specifiedIdentifierList
  : specifiedIdentifier
  | specifiedIdentifierList ', ' specifiedIdentifier

specifiedIdentifier
  : name '=' initializer
```

This keeps the original `enum` for use internal to the P4 program, but also provides a serializable `enum` with both the backing type and the numeric representation

specified. In this case, we expect the initializer to be a compile-time known values.

We imagine a simple example looking something like the following:

```
enum bit<8> example_t {  
    first = 0,  
    second = 1,  
    third = 2  
}
```

This specifies that `example_t` is a serializable `enum` serializable to the type `bit<8>` (following the syntax for `typedef` of `typeRef` followed by name) with three entries `first`, which serializes to `0`; `second`, which serializes to `1`; and `third`, which serializes to `2`.

If we added a new entry that was not representable in the `bit<8>`, we would expect the compiler to raise an error.

```
enum bit<8> example_t {  
    first = 0,  
    second = 1,  
    third = 2,  
    more = 300 // compiler would raise error.  
}
```

One use case we can imagine is for specifying things like ethernet types to use within an ethernet header:

```
enum bit<16> etherType_t {  
    BF_FABRIC = 0x9000,  
    VLAN = 0x8100,  
    QINQ = 0x9100,  
    MPLS = 0x8847,  
    IPV4 = 0x0800,  
    IPV6 = 0x86dd,  
    ARP = 0x0806,  
    RARP = 0x8035,  
    NSH = 0x894f,  
    ETHERNET = 0x6558,  
    ROCE = 0x8915,  
    FCOE = 0x8906,  
}
```

```

    TRILL    = 0x22f3,
    VNTAG    = 0x8926,
    LLDP     = 0x88cc,
    LACP     = 0x8809
    // ...
}

typedef bit<48> macAddr_t;

header ether_t {
    macAddr_t    dstAddr;
    macAddr_t    srcAddr;
    etherType_t  etherType;
}

```

2. Handling incomplete enums

An incomplete enumeration is one that does not have a symbol for every numeric value expressible in the backing type. The `etherType_t` enum example above is an illustration of this. This is an issue for any operation that translates a numeric value that does not have an associated symbol in the enum. For example, both `packet_in.extract` and a cast from `bit<16>` to the `etherType_t` could result in the `enum` having a value that does not correspond to the enum.

There are a couple of ways to handle this situation. First, we could simply disallow serializable `enum` types in headers and disallow casts to enums from `bit<n>` values. This eliminates the problem, but limits the usefulness of `enum` values in the data plane. Second, we could allow the result of an `extract` or a cast to hold an undefined value, in the same way an uninitialized value contains an unsigned value. Thus:

```

etherType_t et;

// et has an undefined value here

ether_t h;

in.extract(h);

```

```
// h.etherType may have an undefined value here

bit<16> x = /* some valid 16-bit value */;
etherType_t et = x;

// et may have an undefined value here
```

In the case of `packet_in.extract` we might alternatively choose to raise an error when an unsupported value is raised.

3. Handling multiple symbols for a type

Another issue is that an `enum` could contain multiple numeric values for a single symbol. If these symbols are intended to not be equivalent, than this raises an issue in the representation. We propose either disallowing multiple symbols from having the same value, or treating the two symbols as interchangeable in the program.