

Detecting Violations of CSS Code Conventions

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Abstract

Code conventions are used to preserve code base consistency and express preference of a particular programming style. Typically, code conventions are expressed in natural language and it is the responsibility of the developers to read, understand and apply them. Developers need to ensure that their code complies to a given style guide manually. There are a number of tools that can automatically detect violations of conventions, however, current solutions remain rigid, laborious or with limited scope.

This thesis aims at answering three research questions. First, it evaluates the need for CSS conventions based on whether CSS is still handcrafted. Second, it discovers existing code conventions. Third, it designs a domain-specific language that is capable of expressing existing CSS code conventions. The thesis presents a specification of the designed domain-specific language and an implementation of its interpreter that detects violations automatically.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Code conventions put constraints on how code should be written in the context of a project, organization or programming language. Style guides can comprise conventions that refer to whitespacing, indentation, code layout, preference of syntactic structures, code patterns and anti- patterns. They are mainly used to achieve code consistency, which in turn improves the readability, understandability and maintainability of the code [Citations].

Style guides are often designed in an ad hoc manner. Coding conventions typically live in documents that contain a description of each rule in natural language accompanied by code examples. This is the case with the style guidelines of Mozilla [8], Google [6], GitHub [10], WordPress [11] and Drupal [4]. To apply the conventions, developers first need to read, understand and apply them manually. Such an approach introduces a number of issues. Using natural language can make guidelines incorrect, ambiguous, implicit or too general. Another problem is that developers apply conventions manually, which increases the chances of introducing violations involuntarily. There are tools that check for compliance with guidelines, however, they are often hard to customize or limited to one type of violations, e.g. only whitespacing.

The core idea behind the project is to provide a solution that lets developers express an arbitrary set of coding conventions and detect their violations automatically in an IDE. Writing conventions in an executable form could assist authors in detecting incorrect, ambiguous or inconsistent guidelines. Automatic detection of violations could minimize the effort required by developers to write code that complies to the guidelines. To meet the constraints of a Masters project, the implementation is limited to the domain of Cascading Style Sheets (CSS). The project requires determining the need for CSS code conventions in organizations, collecting and analyzing available style guides, and providing a way to express conventions. Specifically, the project attempts to answer the following set of questions:

Research Question 1: Do developers still maintain plain CSS?

Research Question 2: What code conventions for CSS exist?

Research Question 3: How to express existing CSS code conventions?

The thesis is organized as follows. Chapter 2 contains background notions and terms used throughout the thesis. The method and results for RQ1 are presented in Chapter 3. Discovering the existing code conventions is illustrated in Chapter 4. The design and description of a DSL is presented in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 concludes the thesis.

Chapter 2

Background

2.1 Bunge-Wand-Weber ontology

A **conceptualization** is an abstract, simplified view of the world that is represented for some purpose [Gru95]. It consists of the concepts that are assumed to exist in some area of interest and their relationships [Gru95]. An **ontology** is an explicit specification of a conceptualization [Gru95]. It describes what is fundamental in the totality of what exists and it defines the most general categories to which we need to refer in constructing a description of reality [MS04].

Milton further distinguishes between two kinds of ontologies: top-level and domain-specific [MS04]. Ontologies of the former type are highly general and provide the theoretical foundations for representation and modeling of systems. Ontologies of the latter type are restricted to define concepts and their relations that fall in a particular domain. Every domain-specific ontology needs to use categories that are captured in a top-level ontology. In this sense a domain-specific ontology is based on a specific top-level ontology [MS04].

The Bunge-Wand-Weber (BWW) ontology [WW90] is a high-level ontology used in the representation model developed by Wand and Weber [WW95]. Table 2.1 presents a selected set of the ontological constructs in the BWW ontology.

Table 2.1: Selected ontological constructs in the BWW representation model

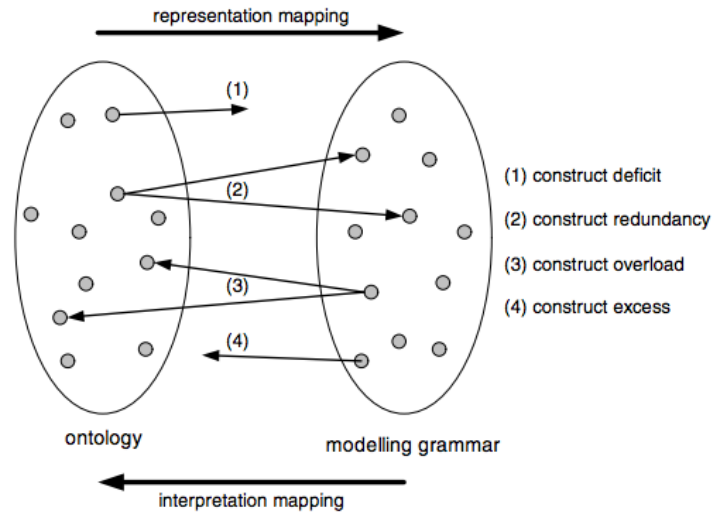
Ontological construct	Explanation
Thing	The elementary unit in the BWW ontological model. The real world is made up of things. A composite thing may be made up of other things (composite or primitive).
Properties	Things possess properties. A property is modeled via a function that maps the thing into some value. A property of a composite thing that belongs to a component thing is called an hereditary property. Otherwise it is called an emergent property. A property that is inherently a property of an individual thing is called an intrinsic property. A property that is meaningful only in the context of two or more things is called a mutual or relational property.
State	A vector of values for all property functions of a thing.
Event	A change of state of a thing. It is effected via a transformation.
Transformation	A mapping from a domain comprising states to a codomain comprising states.
History	The chronologically ordered states that a thing traverses.

Coupling	A thing acts on another thing if its existence affects the history of the other thing. The two things are said to be coupled or interact.
Class	A class is a set of things that can be defined via their possessing a characteristic property.
Kind	A kind is a set of things that can be defined only via their possessing two or more properties.
System	A set of things is a system if, for any bi-partitioning of the set, couplings exist among things in the two subsets.
System Composition	The things in the system are its composition.
System Environment	Things that are not in the system but interact with things in the system are called the environment of the system.

2.2 Ontological analysis

Ontological analysis is an established approach for evaluating the quality of software engineering notations [Moo09]. It consists of a two way comparison between a set of modeling grammar constructs and a set of ontological constructs. The **interpretation mapping** compares the notation with the ontology and the **representation mapping** compares the ontology with the notation [GE07]. The underpinning of ontological analysis is that modeling grammars are incomplete if they are not able to represent what exists in reality [GR00]. Furthermore, the analysis requires one-to-one mapping between the modeling grammar and the ontological constructs. Any deviation from such correspondence leads to an anomaly (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1: Ontological Analysis [GE07]



Construct deficit occurs when an ontological construct does not have a corresponding construct in the modeling grammar. **Construct redundancy** is observed when a single ontological construct maps to more than one modeling grammar construct. **Construct overload** appears when a modeling grammar construct corresponds to more than one ontological construct. **Construct excess** occurs when a modeling grammar construct does not map to any ontological construct. [Moo09]

Chapter 3

Evaluating the Need for CSS Code Conventions

3.1 Research Method

Despite the new features added in the second [BÇHL11] and third [Ete11] versions of CSS, the language has obvious limitations, for example, lack of variables. A number of preprocessors have evolved to tackle the downsides of CSS. Solutions such as SASS [CWE06], LESS [SSP⁺09] and Stylus [Hol15] offer enhanced or even different syntax and translate it to CSS. Preprocessors are not only ubiquitously recommended, but also widely adopted in practice. The presence of such solutions poses the question whether conventions for CSS are required at all. If nowadays CSS is generated and not handcrafted, there is not need for conventions for CSS. There is need for conventions for the preprocessor languages.

To determine whether CSS is still handcrafted, all commits to open source repositories hosted on GitHub for the period Jan-Apr 2015 have been analyzed. To differentiate between plain CSS and preprocessor code, the extensions of all files in the commits were inspected. In case the commit contains a file with extension `.scss`, `.sass`, `.less` or `.styl`, it is considered preprocessor maintenance. In case the commit contains files with the `.css` extension and no preprocessor extensions, it is considered maintenance of plain CSS. Since the main objective of the search is to determine maintenance, only files that were modified are taken into consideration. Files that were added are excluded from the results, since developers often add third-party CSS libraries to their repositories.

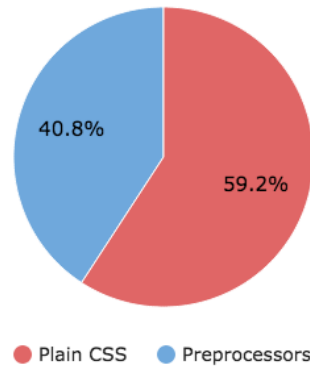
3.2 Results

A total of 1,589,713 commits to 1,311,654 public repositories have been analyzed. X of these were not processed due to errors. Typical errors contain repositories that have been turned private and... The number of commits that maintain any form of CSS is X. Figure 1 summarizes the findings.

3.3 Analysis

There are a number of limitations that need to be considered before interpreting the results of the experiment. Firstly, the search is conducted on a single hosting platform - GitHub. That said, currently GitHub reports having over 10 million users and 24 million repositories [Git], which makes it the largest code host in the world [GVSZ14]. Secondly, the search is narrowed to the publicly available repositories. Thus, it lies on the premise that there is not a significant difference between the public and private repositories hosted on the platform. Thirdly, the experiment detects only the three most popular preprocessor extensions and omits other preprocessors. It is possible that a number of custom preprocessors are used in practice. However, it is assumed that the number of such commits would not increase the number of total CSS commits to the extend at which the percentage of plain CSS commits is significantly diminished.

Figure 3.1: Results



Having the above limitations in mind, the experiment provides evidence to conclude that despite the popularity of preprocessors, plain CSS is still handcrafted in the beginning of 2015.

Chapter 4

Discovering Existing CSS Code Conventions

4.1 Research Method

The primary organization responsible for the specification of CSS has not published an official CSS style guide. As a result, the CSS community has produced a pool of coding conventions, best practices, guidelines and recommendations.

To discover existing CSS code conventions, two searches with the keywords “CSS code conventions” have been made using the search engines <http://duckduckgo.com> and <http://google.com>. The first 100 results of each search have been analyzed. From each result only conventions that refer to plain CSS have been taken into account and conventions related to preprocessors have been ignored. In case the result contains links to other style guides, these references have been considered as results and analyzed separately.

During the process of discovering conventions, a number of issues have been observed. First, some of the conventions did not provide sufficient information to be applied in practice. Such an example is the convention “dont use CSS hacks try a different approach first” when the style guide does not define the meaning of CSS hacks. Overgeneralized conventions have been omitted from the results.

Another part of the discovered conventions introduced a discrepancy between their description in natural language and the provided code example. An instance of such contradiction is when the convention “nothing but declarations should be indented” is followed by a code snippet illustrating that rules in media queries should also be indented. In such cases the convention is interpreted as described by the code example.

In some cases, when conventions are not supported with code examples, their description remains open for interpretation. For example, “rules with more than 4 selectors are not allowed” could be seen as forbidding multi-selectors with more than four selectors, or disallowing selectors with more than four simple-selectors. All possible interpretations of ambiguous conventions were registered as separate conventions.

There are conventions that are not explicitly stated, but could only be inferred by the other rules. For example, the convention “you can put long values on multiple lines” implies that values should appear on one line. Implicit conventions were registered as explicit conventions.

4.2 Results

As a result of the searches, a set of 165 unique CSS code conventions has been accumulated. Sources of these conventions include CSS professionals, open-source communities and companies, such as [Google](#), [GitHub](#), [Wordpress](#), [Drupal](#). Following is a listing that contains a selected set of the discovered conventions:

- Avoid qualifying ID and class names with type selectors.

- Use RGBA only when opacity is needed.
- Use short hexadecimal values.
- CSS files must not include any @charset statements.
- Disallow @import.
- When possible, use em instead of pix.
- Avoid using z-indexes when possible.
- Require compatible vendor prefixes.
- Do not use !important.
- Do not use id selectors.
- Id and class names should be lowercase.
- All values except the contents of strings should be lowercase.
- HTML tags should be lowercase.
- Put a ; at the end of declarations.
- Do not put quotes in URL declarations.
- Use short hex values.
- Use the shorthand margin property.
- Do not use units after 0 values.
- Use a leading zero for decimal values.
- Use single quotes in charsets.
- Use single quotes in attribute selectors.
- Put one space between the colon and the value of a declaration.
- Put one space between the last selector and the block.
- One selector per line.
- A rule must not contain height and border, border-top, border-bottom, padding, padding-top, or padding-bottom.
- A rule must not contain width and border, border-left, border-right, padding, padding-left, or padding-right.
- Warning if a property is included in a rule twice and contains the same value.
- Forbid empty rules.
- A vendor-prefixed property must be followed by a standard property.
- Require fallback color. A color property with a RGBA(), HSL(), or HSLA() color without a preceding color property that has an older color format.
- A rule that has display: inline-block should not use float.
- A rule that has display: block should not use vertical-align.
- Use 4 spaces for indentation, no tabs.
- No trailing spaces.

The full list of all discovered conventions along with their sources and explanation of their meaning is available in the [CssCoco GitHub repository](#).

Chapter 5

Expressing CSS Code Conventions

5.1 Analysis of conventions corpus

Code conventions is an umbrella term that comprises a vast set of rules. To check what the CSS conventions are all about, I analyzed the conventions and it turned out there are three broad groups of conventions. In general, CSS conventions refer to whitespace and indentation, to syntax preference or to programming style.

Further, the analysis consists of analyzing each individual convention.

The approach used to explore the domain consists of analyzing how the current system works. In other words, the analysis aims at revealing how developers detect violations manually, what is knowledge developers need and what are the particular steps they make. The domain analysis phase consists of two steps:

- Determine possible violations. In this step the meaning of the convention is discussed and violations are made explicit.
- List the specific actions that need to be taken to detect violations manually. Developers check their code for compliance manually. To perform such checks, developers need to understand different concepts, e.g. the concept of a rule, html element, ids, etc and perform certain actions, such as find a structure, evaluate a constraint etc.

The following analysis of three conventions illustrates the process described above. Analysis of all conventions in the corpus are available at [GitHub](#).

Convention: Disallow empty rules.

Author: CSS lint

Violations: Presence of rulesets that do not contain declarations. In case at least one declaration is present, the ruleset does not violate the convention. Examples include:

```
1 .myclass { } /* violation */  
2 .myclass { /* Comment */ } /* violation */  
3 .myclass { color: green; } /* not violation */
```

Actions: Recognize rulesets and declarations. Determine whether a ruleset does not contain any declarations.

This convention aims at getting rid of one type of refactoring leftovers - rulesets without declarations [CSS lint]. Removing empty rulesets reduces the total size of CSS that needs to be processed by the browser. One possible approach for discovering violations of the convention at hand is to search the

stylesheet for rulesets and then check whether each ruleset contains a declaration. To perform this search successfully, developers need to understand the concept of a ruleset and a declaration, i.e. they need to be able to recognize these two CSS structures. Further, developers need to determine relations between structures, particularly, whether a ruleset contains a declaration.

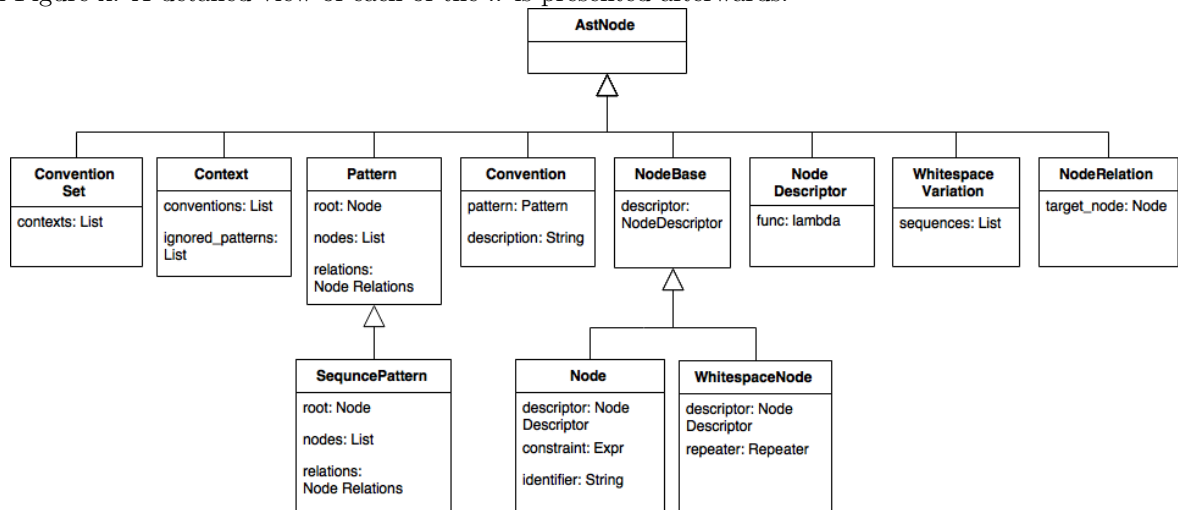
In this way, all conventions have been analyzed and as a result, the following set of conclusions have been made:

- 1) Every convention imposes a set of constraints over the program. Violations occur when these constraints are not met.
- 2) Conventions can refer to nodes in abstract syntax tree, concrete syntax tree and parse tree of CSS.
- 3) Conventions can refer to nodes based on their type or function in the program (hex, color)
- 4) Conventions can refer to nodes based on CSS-specific knowledge, e.g. is vendor-specific property
- 4) Conventions can refer to nodes based on their context. Typically, conventions do not target a node in isolation but a number of related nodes that form a pattern. The nodes do not have to be immediately related, they could be scattered across the tree.
- 5) Conventions could be related. For example, it is often the case that two conventions are related within the boundaries of a style guide. Often a given convention serves as an exception for another convention, or relaxes the constraints of another convention.

5.2 Abstract syntax

TODO: shall I add context and convention diagrams Types are still missing

This section describes the abstract syntax of CssCoco. An overview of the abstract syntax is shown in Figure x. A detailed view of each of the .. is presented afterwards.



ConventionSet represents a style guide. It comprises a number of conventions that form coherent guidelines. Attribute **contexts** is a list of Contexts that contain conventions.

Context represents a group of conventions that belong to the same semantic group (e.g. whitespace, syntax preference, programming style). Attribute **conventions** is a list of Contexts that contain conventions. Attribute **ignored_patterns** is a list of Patterns that are ignored while searching for the target pattern. For example, while searching for violations of semantic conventions, the whitespace and indentation nodes are ignored.

Convention represents a rule that enforces specific constraints. Attribute **pattern** is the pattern that the convention targets. Attribute **description** is the description of the convention in natural text. This description is displayed to the user when a violation of the convention is discovered.

Pattern represents a description of a node or a combination of related nodes that given convention constraints. Attribute **root** is the top node described in the pattern. Attribute **nodes** is a collection of all nodes described by the pattern. Attribute **relations** is a collection of relationships between the nodes used in the pattern.

SequencePattern represents a special type pattern in which nodes are allowed to be only siblings. Attribute **root** is the top node described in the pattern. Attribute **nodes** is a collection of all nodes described by the pattern. Attribute **relations** is a collection of relationships between the nodes used in the pattern.

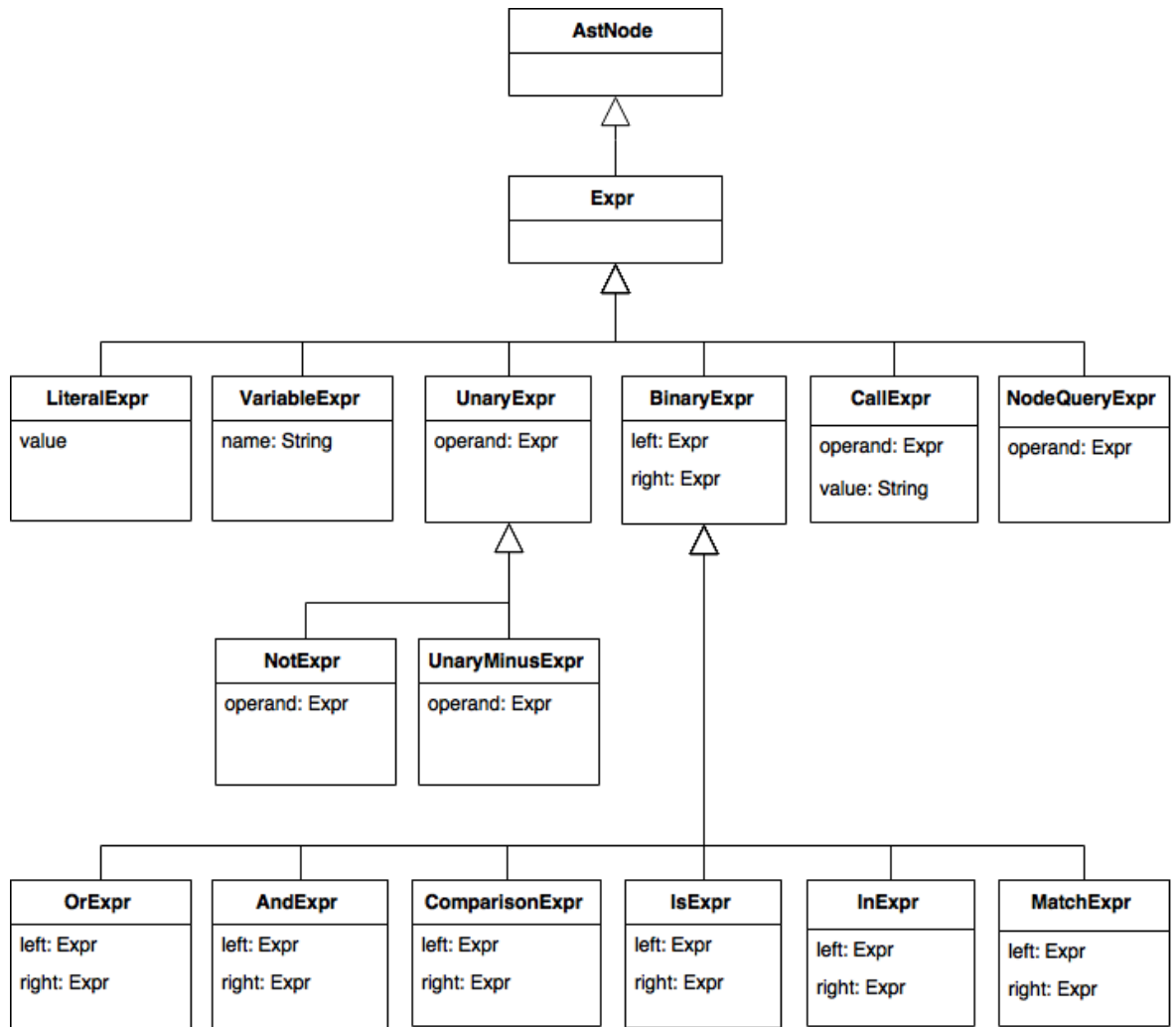
Node represents a description of a non-whitespace node used in a Pattern. Attribute **descriptor** contains information about the type of the described node. Attribute **constraint** is an expression that designates additional constraints applied to the node. Attribute **identifier** is a given string that can be used as a reference to the matched node.

WhitespaceNode represents a description of a whitespace node that references space, newline, indentation symbols. Attribute **descriptor** contains information about the type of the described node. Attribute **repeater** is an optional constraint that specific the number of times a whitespace node can appear consecutively. Repeaters are useful to express conventions that do not specify exact quantities of whitespace symbols. For example, the convention “put at least one blank line between rules” sets a lower limit of the number of blank lines, but not an upper limit.

WhitespaceVariation represents a description of acceptable whitespace sequences. Whitespace variations are allowed to appear as operands of BeforeExpr, AfterExpr and BetweenExpr. Attribute **descriptor** contains information about the type of the described node. Attribute **constraint** is an expression that designates additional constraints applied to the node. Attribute **identifier** is a given string that can be used as a reference to the matched node.

NodeDescriptor represents a description of the type of the Node. Conventions refer to nodes using their CSS type, their function in the CSS program or their concrete syntax representation. For example, the code “#E6E6E6” can be addressed both as a hexadecimal value and as a color. Attribute **func** is a lambda function that determines whether a node meets the type constraint. This function is used to select match candidates while searching the CSS tree for violation patterns. In this way the additional constraints imposed by the Node are evaluated only for the candidates.

NodeRelation represents a relation between two Nodes. Specializations of node relation are previous sibling, next sibling, parent and ancestor relations. Attribute **target_node** designates the Node targeted by the relation.



LiteralExpr represents an expression containing a literal value. Attribute **value** is the value of the literal expression.

VariableExpr represents a reference to a matched node. Attribute **name** is the identifier used to reference the node.

UnaryExpr represents expressions with a single operand. Attribute **operand** is operand of the expression.

NotExpr represents logical negation expression.

UnaryMinusExpr represents unary minus expression.

BinaryExpr represents expressions with a two operands.

Attributes **left** and **right** represent the first and second operands, respectively.

OrExpr represents logical disjunction expression.

AndExpr represents logical conjunction expression.

ComparisonExpr represents expression that compares two operands.

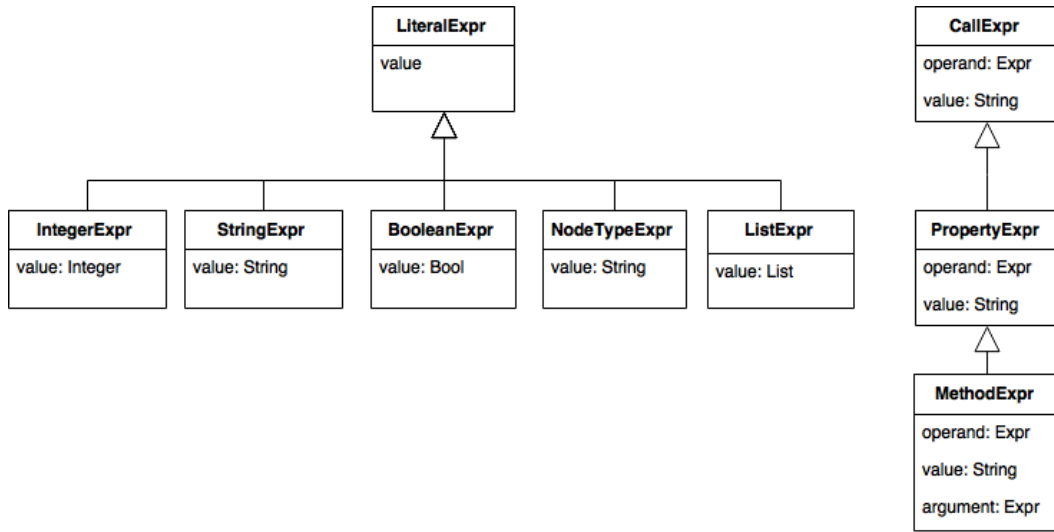
IsExpr represents expression that checks whether the first operand is of the given type, specified by the second operand.

InExpr represents expression that checks whether the first operand is present in a list of values, specified by the second operand.

MatchExpr represents expression that checks whether the first operand matches a regular expression, specified by the second operand.

CallExpr represents expression that invokes a API property or method of the operand. Attribute **operand** is the operand of the expression. Attribute **value** is the name of the API property or method that is invoked.

NodeQueryExpr represents expression that queries node context. Attribute **operand** is the node used as a reference point for the query.



IntegerExpr represents expression containing a integer value.

StringExpr represents expression containing a string value.

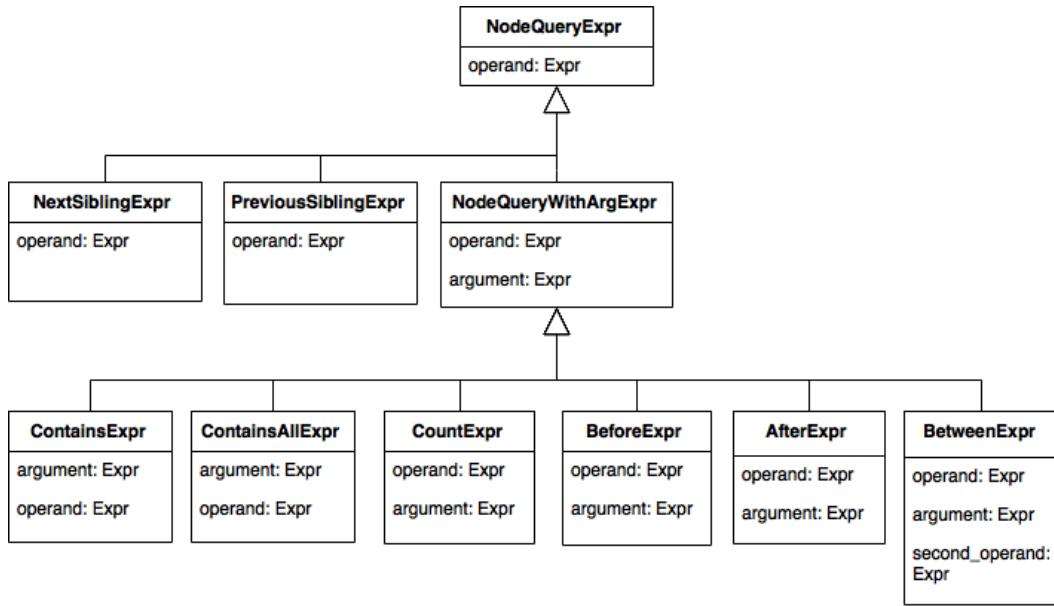
BooleanExpr represents expression containing a boolean value.

ListExpr represents expression containing a list value. The elements of the list are of type LiteralExpr.

NodeTypeExpr represents expression containing a string value that describes node type.

PropertyExpr represents an expression that returns the value of a property of the operand node. Attribute **operand** represents the node targeted by the expression. Attribute **value** holds the name of the property that is accessed.

MethodExpr represents an expression that returns invokes a method of the operand node. Attribute **argument** represents argument passed to the invoked method.



NextSiblingExpr represents expression that returns the following sibling of the operand node.

PreviousSiblingExpr represents expression that returns the previous sibling of the operand node.

NodeQueryWithArgExpr represents expression that queries node context and uses additional constraints for the query. Attribute **argument** represents the additional constraints used by the query.

ContainsExpr represents an expression that checks whether the operand node contains a node that matches given constraints.

ContainsAllExpr represents an expression that checks whether the operand node contains nodes that match given constraints.

CountExpr represents an expression that counts the number of ancestor nodes of the operand that match a given constraint.

BeforeExpr represents an expression that checks whether a given whitespace variation appears before the operand node.

AfterExpr represents an expression that checks whether a given whitespace variation appears after the operand node.

BetweenExpr represents an expression that checks whether a given whitespace variation appears between the two operand nodes.

5.3 Concrete syntax

This section contains the concrete syntax of the designed DSL. Below are presented the grammar rules accompanied by the mapping to the abstract syntax of the language.

stylesheet represents a style guide.

Abstract Syntax Mapping: ast.ConventionSet.

```
stylesheet : context* ;
```


context represents a group of logically related conventions. A single style guide can comprise a number of conventions that enforce various constraints, e.g. whitespace, syntax preference, program style. Such categories refer to different types of nodes and require ignoring certain patterns.

Abstract Syntax Mapping: `ast.Context`.

```
context : Identifier '{' convention* '}' ;
```

convention represents a single rule in the style guide. Conventions are typically expressed by directly stating what is disallowed or describing a condition that if met, requires additional constraints. The former way of expressing conventions are represented by the **forbid** conventions. The latter approach uses the structure `find ... require` To break down complex disallowing conventions, the structure `find ... forbid ...` has been introduced. It aims at improving readability of conventions.

Abstract Syntax Mapping: `ast.Convention`.

```
convention : 'forbid' pattern 'message' String
            | 'find' pattern ('require'|'forbid') logic_expr 'message' String
            ;
```

pattern represents a pattern of nodes and their relations. It can describe a horizontal sequence of sibling nodes and or a vertical pattern of nested nodes. Also, it can describe pairs of elements.

Abstract Syntax Mapping: `ast.Pattern`.

```
pattern : node_declaration (('in'|'next-to') node_declaration)*
        | fork ('in' node_declaration)*
        ;
fork : '(' node_declaration (',' node_declaration)+ ')' ;
node_declaration : (Identifier '=')? semantic_node ;
```

semantic_node represents a non-whitespace node. It describes the type of the node and its additional constraints.

Abstract Syntax Mapping: `ast.Node`.

```
semantic_node : node_type ('{' logic_expr '}')? ;
```

whitespace_variation represents a sequence of whitespace nodes. They differ from the rest of the nodes types because the user can specify how many times they need to be consecutively repeated.

Abstract Syntax Mapping: `ast.WhitespaceVariation`, `ast.WhitespaceNode`, `ast.Repeater`.

```
whitespace_variation : whitespace_node ('or' whitespace_node)* ;
whitespace_node : Identifier ('{' repeater '}')? ;
repeater : Integer ',' Integer? | ('(',')')? Integer ;
```

logic_expr represents expressions that perform logic operations and glue arithmetic and type expressions.

Abstract Syntax Mapping: `ast.NotExpr`, `ast.AndExpr`, `ast.OrExpr` and all `arithmetic_expression` and `type_expression` mappings.

```
logic_expr : '(' logic_expr ')'
            | 'not' logic_expr
            | logic_expr 'and' logic_expr
            | logic_expr 'or' logic_expr
            | type_expr
            | arithmetic_expr
            ;
```

type_expr represents expressions that ensure node type and perform node queries of whitespace nodes. They are located in a separate parser rule because they interpret Identifiers as node type expressions instead of a API calls.

Abstract Syntax Mapping: ast.IsExpr, ast.BeforeExpr, ast.AfterExpr, ast.BetweenExpr.

```
type_expr : arithmetic_expr operator='is' type_=Identifier
          | whitespace_variation ('before' | 'after') type_operand
          | whitespace_variation 'between' type_operand 'and' type_operand
          ;
type_operand : Identifier | semantic_node ;
```

arithmetic_expr represents arithmetic, comparison, set membership and regex expressions. These are located in a separate parser rule because they interpret identifiers as API calls instead of node type expressions.

Abstract Syntax Mapping: ast.UnaryMinus, ast.UnaryPlus, ast.LessThan, ast.LessThanOrEq, ast.GreaterThan, ast.GreaterThanOrEq, ast.Equal, ast.NotEqual, ast.InExpr, ast.MatchExpr, ast.LiteralExpr.

```
arithmetic_expr : ('-'|'+') arithmetic_expr
                | arithmetic_expr ('<'|'>'|'<='|'>='|'=='|'!=') arithmetic_expr
                | arithmetic_expr ('in'|'not in'|'match'|'not match') arithmetic_expr
                | call_expression
                | element
                ;
element : Boolean | Integer | String | list_ ;
```

call_expr represents an API call expression and also node query expression.

Abstract Syntax Mapping: ast.CallExpr and ast.NodeQueryExpr.

```
call_expr : call_expr '.' call_expr
          | Identifier ('(' (element | semantic_node) ')')?
          ;
```

Boolean: represents Boolean literal expression.

Abstract Syntax Mapping: ast.BooleanExpr.

```
Boolean : 'true' | 'True' | 'false' | 'False' ;
```

String: represents String literal expression.

Abstract Syntax Mapping: ast.StringExpr.

```
String : "\"" (EscapeSequence | ~[''])* "\"" ;
EscapeSequence : "\\\" \"'\" ;
```

Integer: represents Integer literal expression.

Abstract Syntax Mapping: ast.IntegerExpr.

```
Integer : (ZeroDigit | NonZeroDigit Digit*) ;
Digit : ZeroDigit | NonZeroDigit ;
NonZeroDigit : [1-9] ;
ZeroDigit : [0] ;
```

list and **list_element** represent the List literal expression.

Abstract Syntax Mapping: ast.ListExpr.

```
list_ : '[' list_element (',' list_element)* ']' ;
list_element : Integer | String | semantic_node ;
Letter : [a-zA-Z] ;
Identifier : (Letter|Digit|'_'|'-' )*
```

type_expression represents the NodeType literal expression.

Abstract Syntax Mapping: `ast.NodeType`.

```
node_type : '(' node_type ')'
          | 'not' node_type
          | node_type 'and' node_type
          | node_type 'or' node_type
          | Identifier
          ;
```

5.4 Validation

The method chosen for validating the designed domain-specific language is ontological analysis, since it is a widely-accepted way for evaluating software notations [OHS02, GR00, Moo09, PW97, WZ96]. The particular approach used for conducting ontological analysis consists of several steps. First, a domain-specific ontology is designed. Second, the ontology is used as a reference point for the interpretation and representation mappings. Third, emerged anomalies are analyzed and conclusion about the quality of the notation is made.

5.4.1 Ontology design

The first stage of validation requires designing a domain-specific ontology. The specific domain of the developed ontology is limited to detecting violations of CSS code conventions. In other words, the designed ontology tries to capture only the concepts and their relations, that exist when an agent searches a CSS program for violations of given set of code conventions.

The designed domain-specific ontology is based on the BWW top-level ontology [WW90], i.e. it uses the high-level categories of the BWW ontology to describe the objects, concepts and entities in the specific domain. The rationale behind the decision to use BWW ontology is that it has been the leading ontology used for ontological analysis [Moo09]. The main ontological constructs used in the BWW ontology are listed in section 2.1.

Following is a list with the main concepts discovered in the domain along with their descriptions. The used BWW concepts are written in *italics* and the domain-specific concepts are written in **bold**.

Class **Style Guide** describes the coding practices adopted in the context of a single project, organization, community or language. An individual Style Guide is a composite thing built of Conventions and their relations. Conventions in a Style Guide are interpreted together to form a coherent set of guidelines.

Property **Number of Conventions** indicates the size of the Style Guide.

Class **Convention** is a rule that imposes constraints on the CSS program. It is the building block of Style Guides. An individual Convention is a composite thing that consists of a Context.

Intrinsic Property **Description** explains the meaning of the Convention in natural text.

Mutual Property **Exception** is a relation between Conventions in which a given convention serves as an exception of another Convention.

Mutual Property **Allowance** is a relation between Conventions in which a given convention relaxes the constraints of another Convention.

Class **Context** is a description of a Pattern that the Convention forbids. An individual Context is a composite thing that comprises a number of logically related Constraints.

Property **Ignored Constructs** specifies constructs that are disregarded while searching for a Context.

Class **Constraint** is a restriction that needs to be fulfilled. Different types of Constraints are represented as kinds.

Property **Subject** indicates the operand on which the Constraint operates. Things that can be a subject are the Type, Textual Representation or CSS-specific knowledge of a Construct.

Kind **Comparison Constraint** is a type of Constraint that compares the subject to another value.

Property **Subject**

Property **Value**

Kind **Type Constraint** is a type of Constraint that checks whether the subject is of a given type.

Property **Subject**

Property **Type**

Kind **Textual Form Constraint** is a type of Constraint that imposes restrictions on the textual representation of the subject.

Property **Subject**

Property **Form**

Kind **Set Membership Constraint** is a type of Constraint that requires the subject to be a member of a set.

Property **Subject**

Property **Set**

Kind **Context Constraint** is a type of Constraint that requires the subject to be in a particular context.

Property **Subject**

Property **Context Description**

Class **Violation Log** is the final product of a violations search. An individual Violation Log is a composite thing that contains Violations.

Property **Number of Violations** indicates the size of the Violation Log.

Class **Violation** A Violation occurs when a Pattern that matches the Context of a Convention is found.

Property **Description** explains in natural text what causes the Violation. Typically, the Description is extracted from the Convention that the Violation breaks.

Property **Position in Stylesheet** indicates the location of the Pattern that violates the Convention in the Stylesheet.

Class **Stylesheet** is the CSS code that needs to be checked for compliance with the Style Guide. An instance of Stylesheet is a composite thing that comprises a number of Constructs.

Class **Construct** is a part of the Stylesheet. It can refer to nodes in the CSS abstract syntax tree, concrete syntax tree and parse tree. Examples include whitespacing, indentation, comments, colons, delimiters, rulesets, declarations, etc.

Property **Type** identifies the function of a Construct in the program. Examples are strings, attribute values etc.

Property **Textual Representation** is the string of a Construct that appears in the CSS program. Examples are tabs, “;”, and “.myclass”

Property **CSS-specific knowledge** encapsulates properties of nodes specific to the CSS domain. For example, a CSS declaration node can possess knowledge whether it is vendor specific or not.

Mutual Property **Relation** is a relation between two Constructs. For example, two Constructs may be adjacent or nested.

Class **Pattern** is a particular part of the CSS program that matches the description of a Context. An instance of a Pattern is a composite thing built from one or many Constructs and Relations between them.

Property **Number of Constructs** denotes the size of the Pattern.

Event Search for Violations in Stylesheet occurs when the developer completes the search for violations in a Stylesheet, a Violation Log is created.

New State Violation Log { Violations = value }

Event Context (of Convention) Discovered occurs when the Context of a convention is discovered, a Violation is recorded in the Violation Log. The state of the Violation contain its description and position in Stylesheet.

New State Violation { Description = value, Position in Stylesheet = value }

TODO: include property and event of the Stylesheet!

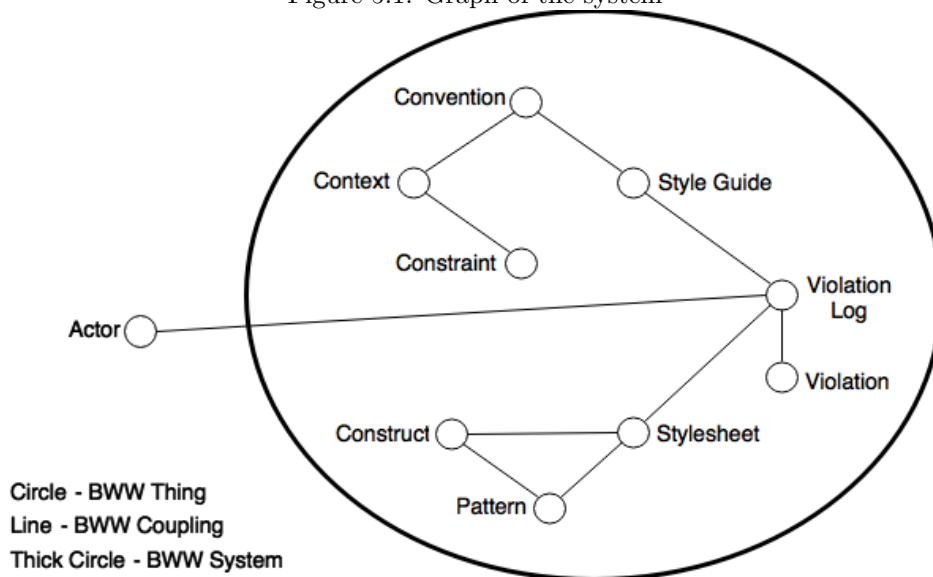
The descriptions provided in the listing above often state that an instance of a class is a composite thing that consists of other things. To provide a better understanding of the way composite things are constructed, the same concepts are also expressed using the Backus-Naur Form (BNF) notation:

STYLE_GUIDE	::= CONVENTIONS
CONVENTIONS	::= CONVENTIONS CONVENTION CONVENTION
CONVENTION	::= CONTEXT
CONTEXT	::= CONSTRAINTS
CONSTRAINTS	::= CONSTRAINTS CONSTRAINT CONSTRAINT
CONSTRAINT	::= COMPARISON_CONSTRAINT TYPE_CONSTRAINT TEXT_CONSTRAINT SET_CONSTRAINT CONTEXT_CONSTRAINT
VIOLATION_LOG	::= VIOLATIONS
VIOLATIONS	::= VIOLATIONS VIOLATION VIOLATION EPSILON
STYLESHEET	::= CONSTRUCTS
CONSTRUCTS	::= CONSTRUCTS CONSTRUCT CONSTRUCT
PATTERN	::= CONSTRUCTS

The grammar above illustrates that a Style Guide needs to contain 1 or more Conventions. Similarly, a Context requires 1 or more Constraints in order to exist. A Violation Log, however, could exist without any Violations in the cases when a Stylesheet is checked for conformance to a Style Guide and no violations are discovered. Both Stylesheet and Pattern are defined through 1 or more Constructs. Note that the concept of Stylesheet does not map to a CSS file, but to the whole CSS code that needs to be processed, regardless of type of CSS (internal or external). This is why a Stylesheet requires at least one Construct in order to exist.

While the above grammar presents the composition of things, it does not illustrate how things interact with each other. To provide a better understanding of the dynamics between things defined in the ontology, a graph of the system is presented in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1: Graph of the system



According to the theory, a coupling occurs when the existence of a given thing affects the history of another thing and, in turn, history is defined as the chronological ordered states that a thing traverses [WW90]. Thus, in the domain-specific ontology a coupling exists between the Style Guide and the Convention things, because the existence of a Convention alters the state of the Style Guide. Similarly, a Context changes the state of a Convention and a Constraint affects the state of a Context.

There are also couplings between Construct, Pattern and Stylesheet things. Both Stylesheet and Pattern are composed of Constructs, and thus affected by their existence. Since a Pattern is a specific occurrence of a combination of Constructs, it is also coupled to Stylesheet.

A Violation is coupled to a Violation Log, since the presence of a new Violation alters the state of the log. Further, a Violation Log contains information about the violations of a particular Style Guide that occur in a specific Stylesheet. In this sense, a Violation Log is a function of a Style Guide and a Stylesheet and it is coupled to both things.

There are two external events that an Actor can initiate: searching for violations and discovering violations. Both of these events express couplings, because they change the state of the Violation Log and the Violation, respectively. Note that an Actor can create any of the things that appear in Figure 5.1. In practice, the Actor can introduce additional Conventions, change the Style Guide, alter the existing Constructs and rewrite the Stylesheet. However, these events are considered outside the domain of the designed ontology.

5.4.2 Ontological analysis

The ontological analysis uses the designed domain-specific ontology. It consists of two mappings - representation and interpretation. As suggested by other authors, the two mappings are expressed in the form of two tables.

Typically ontological analysis is used to compare the abstract syntax of the language constructs to the concepts of an ontology. In the particular case, the language aims at expressing the existing code conventions. This means that only the part of ontology that describes a Style Guide should be included. Since the domain of the ontology refers to detecting violations of code conventions, it does not map to the language constructs only, but to the whole solution that comprises the language and its interpreter. Thus, the particular approach used to conduct the ontological analysis is comparing the designed domain-specific ontology to the whole designed system. We believe that such comparison provides a thorough analysis of the whole solution.

5.4.2.1 Representation Mapping

In this section the constructs of the domain-specific ontology are mapped to the constructs of the designed system. Table 5.1. presents the correspondence between the two sets of constructs.

Table 5.1: Representation mapping

Ontological constructs	Modeling constructs
Style Guide	Convention Set
Number of Conventions of Style Guide	Conventions of Convention Set
Convention	Convention
Description of Convention	Description of Convention
Exception of Conventions	Exceptions of Convention
Allowance of Conventions	Relaxing Conventions of Convention
Context	Pattern descriptor, Node descriptor, Node Relation
Ignored Constructs	Convention Context
Constraint	Expression
Subject of Constraint	API Call, Literal Expression, Variable Expression, Unary?

Comparison Constraint	Comparison Expression
Type Constraint	Is Expression
Textual Form Constraint	Match Expression
Set Membership Constraint	Set Membership Expression
Context Constraint	Context Query Expression
Violation Log	Violation Log
Number of Violations	Violations of Violation Log
Violation	Violation
Description of Violation	Description of Violation
Position in Stylesheet of Violation	Position of Violation
Stylesheet	Tree
Construct	Node
Type of Construct	Search Categories of Node
Textual Representation of Construct	String of Node
CSS-specific knowledge	API of Node
Relation between Constructs	Node Relation
Pattern	Node, Node Relation
Number of Constructs of Pattern	Node Descriptors of Pattern Descriptor

Classes

The majority of the ontological classes have a direct mapping to a construct in the solution. For example, a Style Guide is mapped to a Convention Set, a Convention is mapped to Convention etc. However, some of the defined correspondences require further explanation. For example, the ontological concept of a Context is represented by a combination of modeling constructs: Pattern Descriptor, Node Descriptor and Node Relation. In the ontology a Context represents a description of a Pattern. For example, a Context could be “all color values” which describes all CSS nodes that express colors, i.e. hexadecimal values, text colors, rgb, rgba, hsl and hsla nodes. That said, a Context could also refer to a particular type of color value - “hex color values”. In this sense, the Context corresponds to a Pattern Descriptor ...

The notion of Constraint is a particular limitation used in a Context and typically, it is applied to a single node. The corresponding construct in the system is Expression. Similarly, the specific kinds of Constraints are mapped to subclasses of the Expression. Specifically, a Comparison Constraint matches the notion of Comparison Expression. The Type Constraint is expressed through the Is Expression, which allows verifying the type of a node. The Textual Form Constraint maps to the Match Expression, which allows using regular expressions on strings. The Set Membership Expression corresponds to the In Expression that checks whether the subject belongs in a given list of values. The Context Constraint matches the Node Query Expression, which retrieves node that have a given relation to the current node.

The concept of Construct corresponds to a Node in the system and a Stylesheet maps to a special kind of Node that contains the code that needs to be processed. A Pattern is a combination of Nodes. Note that a Pattern does not correspond to a Node Relation. While relations are used to describe a Pattern in the concept of a Context, they are not required in a Pattern.

Properties

Similarly to classes, most of the ontological properties map directly to the modeling constructs, however, some of them need more explanation. The property Subject of Constraint can map to a number of constructs in the system. In fact, a Subject corresponds to API Call, Literal Expression or Variable Expression.

The property Ignored Constructs of class Context denotes certain constructs that need to be ignored while searching for the Context. The property is a consequence of the different level of abstraction of the expressed conventions. As the Domain Analysis section illustrates, conventions can refer to the concepts in the abstract syntax tree, concrete syntax tree and parse tree of CSS. Thus, the Ignored Constructs denote the specific level of abstraction the convention uses. In the system the notion of

Ignored Constructs is represented by a group of conventions called Contexts. In the system a Context contains conventions that refer to the same level of abstraction and, thus, have the same Ignored Constructs.

The property Type of class Construct corresponds to the Search Categories of Node, which allow a single node to be referred using a number of different categories. The property CSS-specific knowledge of class Construct is mapped to the API of Node. Each Node in the system comprises a number of properties that are meaningful for its function in the CSS program.

Events

Violations Finder

5.4.2.2 Interpretation Mapping

In this section the constructs of the designed system are mapped to the constructs of the domain-specific ontology. Table 5.2. presents the correspondence between the two sets of constructs.

Table 5.2: Interpretation mapping

Modeling constructs	Ontological constructs
Convention Set	Style Guide
Conventions of Convention Set	Number of Conventions of Style Guide
Convention Context	Ignored Constructs of a Context
Convention	Convention
Description property of Convention	Description of Convention
Exceptions of Convention	Exception of Conventions
Relaxing Conventions of Convention	Allowance of Conventions
Pattern Descriptor, Node Descriptor, Node Relation	Context
Node Descriptors of Pattern Descriptor	Number of Constructs of Pattern
Expression, Logical Expression	Constraint
Comparison Expression	Comparison Constraint
Is Expression	Type Constraint
Match Expression	Textual Form Constraint
Set Membership Expression	Set Membership Constraint
Context Query Expression	Context Constraint
API Call, Literal Expression, Variable Expression	Constraint Subject
Node	Construct
Search Categories of Node	Type of Construct
String of Node	Textual Representation of Construct
API of Node	CSS-specific knowledge of Construct
Node, Node Relation	Pattern
Tree	Stylesheet
Violations Log	Violations Log
Violations of Violations Log	Number of Violations
Violation	Violation
Description of Violation	Description of Violation
Position of Violation	Position in Stylesheet of Violation

Abstract Syntax Package

The majority of modeling constructs that belong the abstract syntax of the language map to a single ontological construct. For example, Convention Set corresponds to the concept of a Style Guide, Convention maps to the concept of Convention, and Expression matches a Constraint.

The `WhitespaceVariation` is a special type combination of whitespace nodes that can only appear on as operands of `Before`, `After` and `Between` Expressions. A `WhitespaceVariation` is semantically a constraint.

Or `And` and `Not Expr` do not have a direct ontological concept. However, they are used to glue the constraints imposed by a single convention. In this sense, they fall in the expression -¿ Context mapping.

Analysis Package

Violation and Violations

Violation finder + Expression evaluation and values belong to

Type checker

CSS Package

Node

Stylesheet

5.4.3 Ontological Evaluation of the System

The representation and interpretation mappings between the ontology and the system allow discovery of one of the four discrepancies: construct redundancy, construct overload, construct excess and construct deficit.

5.4.3.1 Redundant Constructs

Construct redundancy is a type of anomaly in which more than one modeling constructs can represent a single ontological construct. Candidate redundant constructs are the `CallExpression`, `LiteralExpression`, `VariableExpression` and `UnaryExpression`, since they all appear to map to the same ontological construct - `Constraint`. However, none of these constructs, taken individually, is capable of representing the concept of `Constraint`. It is their combination that expresses the concept. For this reason, the candidate constructs are not considered redundant. In fact, a number of researchers have compared a construct to a combination of constructs [GE07].

5.4.3.2 Construct Overload

Construct overload emerges when a single modeling construct can represent a number of ontological constructs. No candidates for construct overload have been found.

5.4.3.3 Construct Excess

Construct excess is a discrepancy in which a modeling construct does not have a mapping ontological construct. The system contains a number of classes and packages that do not have a corresponding ontological concepts, e.g. `Type Checker`. However, the class is used to ensure the correctness of the `Style Guide`. In this sense, it has a supporting function that contributes to an ontological concept.

5.4.3.4 Construct Deficit

Construct deficit appears when an ontological construct does not have a corresponding modeling structure. A candidate for such discrepancy is the property `Checked` of class `Stylesheet` as it appears without a matching construct in the system. However, maintaining the status of a `Stylesheet` is considered outside the scope of the system. Such functionality can be added based on whether the IDE or text editor expose such knowledge. That said, the structure remains in the environment of the system and thus, the candidate is not considered a deficit.

Having the above consideration in mind, we believe the ontological analysis provides sufficient evidence to consider the designed system both ontologically clear and complete.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

This work makes several contributions. 1) 2) It contains a summary of existing CSS coding conventions. 3) It designs a domain specific language that expresses conventions and its interpreter to detect violations automatically.

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