Ref: JLAMP\_2018\_23  
Title: Probabilistic Software product lines  
Journal: Journal of Logical and Algebraic Methods in Programming

Dear Dr. Camacho Gonzalez,

We have received all review reports of your submission

Based on them we are inviting you to submit a revised version of your paper that takes into account the issues outlined by the three reviewers.

If you decide to revise the paper, please enclose the revised manuscript with a companion letter where you describe the list of changes and/or a rebuttal against each point raised by the reviewers.

Please let us know in any case if you plan to revise the paper.

We would like to take the opportunity to thank you again for having considered our journal for the publication of your research and for the great work done so far.

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I look forward to receiving your revised manuscript as soon as possible.

Kind regards,

Professor Loreti  
Handling Editor  
Journal of Logical and Algebraic Methods in Programming

**Comments from the editors and reviewers:**

-**Reviewer 1**  
  
  - The paper presents SPLAP. It is a probabilistic extension of SPLA, a process algebra for specifying software product lines (SPL) presented in previous works by the authors.

**Details about each section**

**Section 1** introduces the paper and mentions related approaches. But no comparison with other approaches is actually given

**Section 2.1** introduces the syntax and operational semantics of SPLAP.

The authors also show that the operational semantics of SPLAP agrees with the one of SPLA, if probabilities are discarded from the derivations.

I believe that the description of the syntax delegates too much to previous works of the authors presenting the syntax of SPLA. More intuition should be given about the role and meaning of each operator. For example:

* How should conjunction be interpreted?
* The operator 'P1 choose-one\_p P2' allows choosing probabilistically among the two SPL P1 and P2 with probability p and 1-p, respectively. Then, it is said that this operator is actually n-ary. How should be interpreted such n-ary version? Which are the probabilities involved?

**Section 2.2** introduces a denotation semantics for SPLAP, while **Section 3** proves that the two semantics are equivalent

**Section 4** extends the language with a new operator to 'hide' in the semantics part of the features we are not interested in. This allows to obtain more compact state spaces, and hence to handle larger models.

I am not sure about this section for two reasons:

* I am not sure about the relevance/importance of this section in the paper. The presented notion of hiding is not considered/mentioned in any other section.
* Why do you need a new section for this operator? Couldn't you present it in section 2?

**Section 5** validates the approach by running its tool instantiation against large SPL models.

First, it considers a model with 1500 features generated using the tool BeTTy. It shows how to study the probability of having each of the 1500 features (and the runtime of this analysis).

Then, the authors perform a scalability analysis of their tool for models with up to 10000 features. Three classes of models are considered, with different configurations in terms of presence of optional.mandatory features and choose-one/conjunction operators.

I have two concerns about these analyses:

First, in the second-last paragraph of page 12, the authors justify unexpected variations in the runtimes in terms of disk latencies, memory paging, etc. These problems can be solved by performing each experiment many times (e.g. 10), and providing the average runtime for each experiment. In page 13 the authors mention that they repeated experiments more times, but apparently they chose one runtime.

Second, I cannot understand how the models have been generated using BeTTy. In page 12 the authors say:

* the probability of having a mandatory feature is 0.2,
* ... having an optional feature is 0.3,
* ... having a feature in a choose-one is 0.25,
* ... having a feature in a choose-one is 0.25.

To the best of my knowledge, a mandatory feature is a feature that must be present in every product generated by the product line. Hence, I would have expected to find that 20% of the features have probability 1 of being installed. However, as shown in figures 5 and 6, this is not the case. I believe that the authors should give more intuition about the nature of the models they consider.

**Discussion**

In addition to the observations done above, I believe that the authors should improve the accessibility of their work. In particular, sections 2, 3, and 4 are long and contain many definitions and results. The authors should provide more motivation and examples. I would suggest the authors to use a running example starting from section 1 or 2, and use it to better explain/exemplify parts of SPLAP.

Furthermore, the authors show that the implementation of the denotational semantics of SPLAP is much more time/memory efficient (many orders of magnitude) with respect to the one of SPLA. But no explanation for this is given. In the first 3 lines of the conclusions, the authors say that the motivation behind the proposed probabilistic extension is to alleviate the state space explosion problem. Why is that? Why should the probabilistic extension alleviate such problem?

Finally, given that this is a journal paper, I am surprised by the fact that proofs are provided in two appendices. Will these appendices be published? Will they be made available online?

For these points, and for the ones raised above, I suggest the authors revise their submission.

Minor comments:

- Please rephrase the sentence 'The results are promising .... (450 features).' I can't understand what it means.

- Among the related works, you did not mention ProFeat, a probabilistic language for SPL based on PRISM (https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00165-017-0432-4)

- You mention three tools: QFLan, Z3, and Multivesta. I would suggest to provide a citation for each.

- Why do you forbid probability values 0 and 1?

-**Reviewer 2**  
  
  - **Summary**

The paper under review introduces a probabilistic process algebra SPLA^P that extends SPLA, a process algebra for software product line (SPL) models that follows the feature-oriented domain analysis approach (FODA) [28]. SPLA has been specified by the authors in a preceding paper [1].

The authors claim that the use of their probabilistic extension of eases testing, analysis, and tailoring software products, e.g., by prioritizing feature combinations that are most likely to be included in the SPL.

The operational semantics of process algebra terms is provided by a kind of probabilistic transition system. Compatibility to the semantics of [1] is shown when abstracting away probabilistic annotations. A case study is carried out using an own implementation of the formal framework.

**Evaluation**

The paper addresses an important field of SPL engineering, namely including stochastic information about features, their composition, and testing into the development process of SPLs. Unfortunately, the paper lacks of a justification of the probabilistic semantics, misses comparison to related work, and does not show feasibility of the approach. Hence I recommend to reject the paper.

**Comments**

1) There is no explanation or justification why the chosen operational semantics is suitable for its purpose. Intuitively I would expect that the probability attached to some A-transition corresponds to the probability of the event of composing feature A to the current feature combination. However, when, e.g., considering the term t1=A;tick /\ (B;tick /\ C;tick), after composing A, there is only a probability of 1/4 each for composing B and C. Hence, the probability of having the only possible feature combination ABC is less than 1, which let me conclude that the semantics is not appropriate. Furthermore, equality of process algebra terms is only considered with respect to their products. I argue that, as the semantics is an operational one, it would be more appropriate to take (probabilistic) bisimulation into account. The example term t2=(A;tick /\ B;tick) /\ C;tick then shows that the operational semantics is not associative (opposed to the claim that the proof of [1] takes over): choosing A in t1 has probability of 1/2, whereas it has probability of 1/4 in t2. The reason for these pathologies is in my opinion the somehow arbitrary choice of dividing probabilities in conjunctions by 2 (rules [con1], [con4] etc.). Please correct me if I am wrong, but in either case, there should be more explanations including examples where probabilities are involved (there is no example at all).

2) Furthermore, for me it is not clear what the probabilities attached to transitions actually mean. The only modeling formalism for probabilistic SPLs is provided by SPLA^P terms. In [1] however, a translation of FODA diagrams to SPLA terms has been given. For me it is not clear how a corresponding translation would provide an SPLA^P term as the authors do not deal with probabilistic variants of feature models at all.

3) There has been plenty of work done in the area of probabilistic SPLs and I miss a comparison with the existing approaches to estimate the contribution of the paper. For instance, the aim of [19] and the paper under review is highly related - what is the benefit of using the new approach presented in the paper instead of [19]? Furthermore, a reference to [a] is missing. There, a probabilistic feature model has been presented that supports dynamic (probabilistic) SPLs. I think that the intention of this paper is somehow covered by their approach as the stepwise feature compositions could be encoded into the (operational/automata-based) “feature controller” formalism in [a]. There is also an implementation of the theoretical framework of [a] published as [b] that could be mentioned.

4) The case study is not convincingly showing applicability of the approach. First, it is not clear how the randomly generated feature models include stochastic information. Correct me if I am wrong, but I understood that “the probability of having a mandatory feature is 20%” means that during the generation process of BeTTy the probability of generating a mandatory feature is 1/5. I could not find any hint where the annotated probabilities in the process terms come from and hence, I cannot evaluate the results. Furthermore, it is questionable to argue about runtimes of around 20ms - to make more reliable statements, the number of features should be increased to lower potential impacts of other processes or side effects.

**Minor comments**

- Definition 2.1 is missing (cf. Definition 5).

- Reference [8] and [9] are the same.

- Page 3 presents a long chain of references concerning probabilistic systems without any comment or explanation. It would be helpful to describe the relation of these publications to the presented paper.

- Please explain in detail why the choose-one operator \/\_p is n-ary. Furthermore, include the n-ary interpretation into your semantics (currently only binary).

- The semantics is not uniquely defined. I assume that you look for the smallest probabilistic transition relation fulfilling the rules of Figure 2.

- The statement that the rules of Figure 2 are in essential the same as in [1] is not correct as it is: the rule [req2] has been changed in [8] and taken from there.

- Lemma 2: Q already fixed.

- Check typos in Proposition 5

**References**

[a] Clemens Dubslaff, Christel Baier, Sascha Klüppelholz: Probabilistic Model Checking for Feature-Oriented Systems. Trans. Aspect-Oriented Software Development 12: 180-220 (2015)

[b] Philipp Chrszon, Clemens Dubslaff, Sascha Klüppelholz, Christel Baier: ProFeat: feature-oriented engineering for family-based probabilistic model checking. Formal Asp. Comput. 30(1): 45-75 (2018)

-**Reviewer 3**  
  
  -

This paper presents the syntax and semantics of a feature modeling language with probabilistic information on the features. Probabilities may be introduced for choices amongst different features and for optional features. The paper provides an operational and denotational semantics for their language and demonstrates their equivalence. The denotational semantic is implemented in Python and evaluated on feature models generated by BeTTy to show the applicability and scalability of the approach.

**General comments:**

The paper is well written and accessible. The mathematical notations are explained with the right level of details. A small example of a feature model with probabilities encoded using the defined language would be a nice plus.

My main concerns are about: (i) the empirical study and (ii) the absence of related work.

**(i)** This paper defines a new feature modeling language for probabilistic feature models but I did not get where are the probabilities in the feature models generated by BeTTy. Did I miss something? How does the probability help to be "several times more efficient than traditional analysis" if there is no probability in the feature model? Do you assume default probabilities for the choices and optional features?

The feature models used in the empirical study have been generated using BeTTy using different configurations. Why did you use those configurations? Please explain where do the values come from. Why is there only one configuration for the applicability, compared to the four used for the scalability? How confident are you that those feature models represent real feature models? For instance, do the parameters of the configuration mimic properties of real feature models? See for instance: Johansen M.F., Haugen Ø., Fleurey F. (2011) Properties of Realistic Feature Models Make Combinatorial Testing of Product Lines Feasible. In: Whittle J., Clark T., Kühne T. (eds) Model Driven Engineering Languages and Systems. MODELS 2011. Lecture Notes in Computer Science, vol 6981. Springer, Berlin, Heidelberg

I suggest reorganizing the section in:

- a small introduction to describe what the evaluation is about and what are the research questions. Please indicate what is measured and what do you consider as acceptable to consider the approach as acceptable and scalable;  
- a setup subsection/paragraph describing the setup of the evaluation (including the generation of the feature models);  
- a result subsection/paragraph with the graphs and their description, and the answer to the research questions;  
- a discussion subsection/paragraph with the comparison with the previous implementation and the threats to validity. Some of the questions here above may be discussed in that subsection/paragraph.

Please note that since there is randomness involved (for the generation of the model and for the measuring the time analysis), the evaluation should be run a certain number of times to gain confidence in the results. Since the evaluation is not the core of the paper (and the data are not used to derive precise conclusions), I think this can be avoided here. But, it has to be clearly described in the setup and discussed in the threats to validity.

(For more information about statistical significance for evaluation with randomness, see for instance: Arcuri, A. and Briand, L. 2014. A Hitchhiker’s guide to statistical tests for assessing randomized algorithms in software engineering. Software Testing, Verification and Reliability. 24, 3 (2014), 219–250. DOI:https://doi.org/10.1002/stvr.1486.)

The replication package is incomplete. It does not contain the BeTTy feature models and not all the data presented in the paper are there. Completing the readme with the requirements to run the scripts and providing a Makefile or bash script to run the complete evaluation would also be nice.

**(ii)** There is a large amount of existing work on statistical analysis for SPLs and feature modeling with attributed feature models. Some of them are described at the end of the introduction. I suggest to move them to a related work section and to complete it. For instance:

Mahsa Varshosaz and Ramtin Khosravi. 2013. Discrete time Markov chain families: modeling and verification of probabilistic software product lines. In Proceedings of the 17th International Software Product Line Conference co-located workshops (SPLC '13 Workshops). ACM, New York, NY, USA, 34-41. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1145/2499777.2500725

Philipp Chrszon, Clemens Dubslaff, Sascha Klüppelholz, and Christel Baier. 2018. ProFeat: feature-oriented engineering for family-based probabilistic model checking. Form. Asp. Comput. 30, 1 (January 2018), 45-75. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/s00165-017-0432-4

Martin Fagereng Johansen, Øystein Haugen, Franck Fleurey, Anne Grete Eldegard, and Torbjørn Syversen. 2012. Generating better partial covering arrays by modeling weights on sub-product lines. In Proceedings of the 15th international conference on Model Driven Engineering Languages and Systems (MODELS'12), Robert B. France, Jürgen Kazmeier, Ruth Breu, and Colin Atkinson (Eds.). Springer-Verlag, Berlin, Heidelberg, 269-284. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-33666-9\_18

Specific comments:

- Section 1, "This cost may represent different aspects of a feature, such us lines" -> such as

- Use 'cite' LaTeX package to automatically order citation numbers in the text.

- Section 5, "The model used in the experiments has been executed several times" Please indicate how many times. Is it also the case for the models used for the scalability evaluation? If yes, please indicate how many times.

- Figure 4, are the values presented averages? If not, why not representing all the points and use a smoothing function like https://ggplot2.tidyverse.org/reference/geom\_smooth.html to enhance the rendering?

- Section 5, "Secondly, an experiment" I suggest replacing experiment by evaluation.

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