

# Zoo: A framework for the verification of concurrent OCaml 5 programs using separation logic

Anonymous author

Anonymous affiliation

Anonymous author

Anonymous affiliation

## Abstract

The release of OCAML 5, which introduced parallelism into the language, drove the need for safe and efficient concurrent data structures. New libraries like SATURN aim at addressing this need. From the perspective of formal verification, this is an opportunity to apply and further state-of-the-art techniques to provide stronger guarantees.

We present a framework for verifying fine-grained concurrent OCAML 5 algorithms. We followed a pragmatic approach, studying OCAML code written by concurrency expert to delimit a limited but sufficient fragment of the language to express these algorithms; the outcome is a dialect of OCAML that we call ZOOLANG. We formalized its semantics carefully via a deep embedding in the ROCQ proof assistant. We provide a tool to translate source OCAML programs into ZOOLANG syntax inside ROCQ, where they can be specified and verified using the IRIS concurrent separation logic.

We verified fine-grained concurrent algorithms, along with subsets of the OCAML standard library necessary to express them: the classic Treiber stack, and a use of reference-counting for file descriptors within the `Eio` library. This formalization work uncovered delicate questions of programming-language semantics, around physical equality for example. In the process, we also extended OCAML to more efficiently express certain concurrent programs.

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## 1 Introduction

Designing concurrent algorithms, in particular fine-grained concurrent algorithms, is a notoriously difficult task. Similarly, the formal verification of such algorithms is also difficult. It typically involves finding and reasoning about non-trivial linearization points [21, 29, 52, 53, 11].

In recent years, concurrent separation logic [5] has enabled significant progress in this area. In particular, the development of IRIS [28], a state-of-the-art mechanized *higher-order* concurrent separation logic with *user-defined ghost state*, has nourished a rich and successful line of works [29, 52, 53, 11, 6, 27, 46, 36, 35, 17, 41, 39, 38], dealing with external [53] and future-dependent [29, 52, 11] linearization points, relaxed memory [36, 35, 17, 41] and automation [39, 38].

Most of these works [29, 52, 53, 6, 27, 46, 39, 38] and many others [19, 43, 51, 33] rely on HEAPLANG [49], the exemplar IRIS language. HEAPLANG is a concurrent, imperative, untyped, call-by-value functional language. To the best of our knowledge, it is currently the closest language to OCAML 5 in the IRIS ecosystem—we review the existing frameworks in Section 2. It has been extended to handle weak memory [36] and algebraic effects [18].



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Although HEAPLANG is theoretically expressive enough to represent OCAML programs, our experiments showed that it is fairly impractical when it comes to verifying large OCAML libraries. Indeed, it lacks basic abstractions such as algebraic data types (tuples, mutable and immutable records, variants) and mutually recursive functions. Verifying OCAML programs in HEAPLANG requires difficult translation choices and introduces various encodings, to the point that the relation between the source and verified programs can become difficult to maintain and reason about. It also has very few standard data structures that can be directly reused. This view, we believe, is shared by many people in the IRIS community. Our first motivation in this work is therefore to fill this gap by providing a more practical OCAML-like verification language: ZOOLANG. This language consists in a subset of OCAML 5 extended with atomic record fields and equipped with a formal semantics and a program logic based on IRIS. We were influenced by the PERENNIAL [8, 9, 10, 11] framework, which achieved similar goals for the GO language with a focus on crash-safety. As in PERENNIAL, we also provide a translator from OCAML to ZOOLANG: `ocaml2zoo`. We call the resulting framework ZOO.

Another, maybe less obvious, shortcoming of HEAPLANG is the soundness of its semantics with respect to OCAML, in other words how faithful it is to the original language. One ubiquitous—particularly in lock-free algorithms relying on low-level atomic primitives—and subtle point is *physical equality*. In Section 5, we show that (1) HEAPLANG’s semantics for physical equality is not compatible with OCAML and (2) OCAML’s informal semantics is actually too imprecise to verify basic concurrent algorithms. To remedy this, we propose a new formal semantics for physical equality and structural equality. We hope this work will influence the way these notions are specified in OCAML.

In summary, we claim the following contributions:

1. We present ZOOLANG, a convenient subset of OCAML 5 formalized in ROCQ (Sections 3 and 4). ZOOLANG comes with a program logic based on IRIS and supports proof automation through DIAFRAME [39, 38].
2. We provide a translator from OCAML to ZOOLANG: `ocaml2zoo` (Section 3), built for practical applications – it supports full projects using the `dune` build system.
3. We formalize physical equality (Section 5) and structural equality (Section 6) in a faithful way. The careful analysis of these notions suggests a new OCAML feature: *generative constructors*.
4. We extend OCAML with *atomic record fields* and *atomic arrays* to ease the development of fine-grained concurrent algorithms (Section 7).
5. We verify realistic use cases (Section 5) involving physical equality: (1) Treiber stack [7], (2) a thread-safe wrapper around a file descriptor using reference-counting from the `Eio` [34] library.

## 2 Related work

The idea of applying formal methods to verify OCAML programs is not new. Generally speaking, there are mainly two ways:

### 2.1 Non-automated verification

The verified program is translated, manually or in an automated way, into a representation living inside a proof assistant. The user has to write specifications and prove them.

The representation may be primitive, like Gallina for ROCQ. For pure programs, this is rather straightforward, *e.g.* in `hs-to-coq` [47]. For imperative programs, this is more

challenging. One solution is to use a monad, *e.g.* in `coq-of-ocaml` [14], but it does not support concurrency.

The representation may be embedded, meaning the semantics of the language is formalized in the proof assistant. This is the path taken by some recent works [12, 24, 8, 16] harnessing the power of separation logic. In particular, CFML [12] and OSIRIS [16] target OCAML. However, CFML does not support concurrency and is not based on IRIS. OSIRIS, still under development, is based on IRIS but does not support concurrency.

At the time of writing, HEAPLANG is thus the most appropriate tool to verify concurrent OCAML programs. We discussed limitations of HEAPLANG in the introduction, and ZOOLANG is our proposal to improve on this. (Conversely, one notable limitation of ZOOLANG today is its lack of support for OCAML’s relaxed memory model.)

## 2.2 Semi-automated verification

In semi-automated verification approaches, the verified program is annotated by the user to guide the verification tool: preconditions, postconditions, invariants, *etc.* Given this input, the verification tool generates proof obligations that are mostly automatically discharged. One may further distinguish two types of semi-automated systems: *foundational* and *non-foundational*.

In *non-foundational* automated verification, the tool and the external solvers it may rely on are part of the trusted computing base. It is the most common approach and has been widely applied in the literature [48, 40, 26, 20, 3, 22, 32, 44], including to OCAML by CAMELEER [42], which uses the GOSPEL specification language [13] and WHY3 [22].

In *foundational* automated verification, the proofs are checked by a proof assistant like ROCQ, meaning the automation does not have to be trusted. To our knowledge, it has been applied to C [45] and RUST [23].

ZOO is a non-automated verification framework—except for our use DIAFRAME for local automation of separation logic reasoning. We would be interested in moving towards more automation in the future.

## 3 Zoo in practice

In this section, we give an overview of our framework. We also provide a minimal example<sup>1</sup> demonstrating its use.

### 3.1 Language

The core of ZOO is ZOOLANG: a concurrent, imperative, untyped, functional programming language fully formalized in ROCQ. Its semantics has been designed to match OCAML’s.

ZOOLANG comes with a program logic based on IRIS: reasoning rules expressed in separation logic (including rules for the different constructs of the language) along with ROCQ tactics that integrate into the IRIS proof mode [31, 30]. In addition, it supports DIAFRAME [39, 38], enabling proof automation.

The ZOOLANG syntax is given in Figure 1<sup>2</sup>, omitting mutually recursive toplevel functions that are treated specifically. Expressions include standard constructs like booleans, integers, anonymous functions (that may be recursive), applications, `let` bindings, sequence, unary

<sup>1</sup> Non-anonymous link

<sup>2</sup> More precisely, it is the syntax of the surface language, including ROCQ notations.

RocQ term	$t$	
constructor	$C$	
projection	$proj$	
record field	$fld$	
identifier	$s, f$	$\in \text{String}$
integer	$n$	$\in \mathbb{Z}$
boolean	$b$	$\in \mathbb{B}$
binder	$x$	$::= \langle \rangle \mid s$
unary operator	$\oplus$	$::= \sim \mid -$
binary operator	$\otimes$	$::= + \mid - \mid * \mid \text{'quot'} \mid \text{'rem'} \mid \text{'land'} \mid \text{'lor'} \mid \text{'lsl'} \mid \text{'lsr'}$ $\mid \leq \mid < \mid > \mid = \mid \neq \mid == \mid !=$ $\mid \text{and} \mid \text{or}$
expression	$e$	$::= t \mid s \mid \#n \mid \#b$ $\mid \text{fun: } x_1 \dots x_n \Rightarrow e \mid \text{rec: } f x_1 \dots x_n \Rightarrow e \mid e_1 e_2$ $\mid \text{let: } x := e_1 \text{ in } e_2 \mid e_1 ;; e_2$ $\mid \text{let: } f x_1 \dots x_n := e_1 \text{ in } e_2 \mid \text{letrec: } f x_1 \dots x_n := e_1 \text{ in } e_2$ $\mid \text{let: 'C } x_1 \dots x_n := e_1 \text{ in } e_2 \mid \text{let: } x_1, \dots, x_n := e_1 \text{ in } e_2$ $\mid \oplus e \mid e_1 \otimes e_2$ $\mid \text{if: } e_0 \text{ then } e_1 \text{ (else } e_2 \text{)}^?$ $\mid \text{for: } x := e_1 \text{ to } e_2 \text{ begin } e_3 \text{ end}$ $\mid \S C \mid \text{'C } (e_1, \dots, e_n) \mid (e_1, \dots, e_n) \mid e.\langle proj \rangle$ $\mid [] \mid e_1 :: e_2$ $\mid \text{'C } \{e_1, \dots, e_n\} \mid \{e_1, \dots, e_n\} \mid e.\{fld\} \mid e_1 \leftarrow \{fld\} e_2$ $\mid \text{ref } e \mid !e \mid e_1 \leftarrow e_2$ $\mid \text{match: } e_0 \text{ with } br_1 \mid \dots \mid br_n (l_ \text{ as } s)^? \Rightarrow e \text{ end}$ $\mid e.[fld] \mid \text{Xchg } e_1 e_2 \mid \text{CAS } e_1 e_2 e_3 \mid \text{FAA } e_1 e_2$ $\mid \text{Proph} \mid \text{Resolve } e_0 e_1 e_2$
branch	$br$	$::= C (x_1 \dots x_n)^? (\text{as } s)^? \Rightarrow e$ $\mid [] (\text{as } s)^? \Rightarrow e \mid x_1 :: x_2 (\text{as } s)^? \Rightarrow e$
toplevel value	$v$	$::= t \mid \#n \mid \#b$ $\mid \text{fun: } x_1 \dots x_n \Rightarrow e \mid \text{rec: } f x_1 \dots x_n \Rightarrow e$ $\mid \S C \mid \text{'C } (v_1, \dots, v_n) \mid (v_1, \dots, v_n)$ $\mid [] \mid v_1 :: v_2$

■ **Figure 1** ZOOLANG syntax (omitting mutually recursive toplevel functions)

and binary operators, conditionals, **for** loops, tuples. In any expression, one can refer to a RocQ term representing a ZOOLANG value (of type **val**) using its RocQ identifier. ZOOLANG is deeply embedded: variables (bound by functions and **let**) are quoted, represented as strings.

Data constructors (immutable memory blocks) are supported through two constructs :  $\S C$  represents a constant constructor (e.g.  $\S \text{None}$ ),  $\text{'C } (e_1, \dots, e_n)$  represents a non-constant constructor (e.g.  $\text{'Some } (e)$ ). Unlike OCAML, ZOOLANG has projections of the form  $e.\langle proj \rangle$  (e.g.  $(x, y).\langle 1 \rangle$ ), that can be used to obtain a specific component of a tuple or data constructor. ZOOLANG supports shallow pattern matching (patterns cannot be nested) on data constructors with an optional fallback case.

Mutable memory blocks are constructed using either the untagged record syntax  $\{e_1, \dots, e_n\}$  or the tagged record syntax  $\text{'C } \{e_1, \dots, e_n\}$ . Reading a record field can be performed using

```

type 'a t =
  'a list Atomic.t

let create () =
  Atomic.make []

let rec push t v =
  let old = Atomic.get t in
  let new_ = v :: old in
  if not @@ Atomic.compare_and_set t old new_ then (
    Domain.cpu_relax () ;
    push t v
  )

let rec pop t =
  match Atomic.get t with
  | [] ->
    None
  | v :: new_ as old ->
    if Atomic.compare_and_set t old new_ then (
      Some v
    ) else (
      Domain.cpu_relax () ;
      pop t
    )

```

■ **Figure 2** Implementation of a concurrent stack

141  $e.\{fld\}$  and writing to a record field using  $e_1 \leftarrow \{fld\} e_2$ . Pattern matching can also be used  
 142 on mutable tagged blocks provided that cases do not bind anything—in other words, only  
 143 the tag is examined, no memory access is performed. References are also supported through  
 144 the usual constructs : `ref e` creates a reference, `!e` reads a reference and  $e_1 \leftarrow e_2$  writes  
 145 into a reference. The syntax seemingly does not include constructs for arrays but they are  
 146 supported through the `Array` standard module (*e.g.* `array_make`).

147 Note that ZOOLANG follows OCAML in sometimes eschewing orthogonality to provide  
 148 more compact memory representations: constructors are  $n$ -ary instead of taking a tuple as  
 149 parameter, and the tagged record syntax is distinct from a constructor taking a mutable record  
 150 as parameter. In each case the simplifying encoding would introduce an extra indirection in  
 151 memory, which is absent from the ZOOLANG semantics. Performance-conscious experts care  
 152 about these representation choices, and we care about faithfully modeling their programs.

153 Parallelism is mainly supported through the `Domain` standard module (*e.g.* `domain_spawn`).  
 154 Special constructs (`Xchg`, `CAS`, `FAA`; see Section 4.4) are used to model atomic references.

155 The `Prop` and `Resolve` constructs model *prophecy variables* [29], see Section 4.5.

## 156 3.2 Translation from OCaml to ZooLang

157 While ZOOLANG lives in ROCQ, we want to verify OCAML programs. To connect them

we provide the tool `ocaml2zoo` to translate OCAML source files<sup>3</sup> into ROCQ files containing ZOOLANG code. This tool can process entire `dune` projects, and support several libraries provided together or as dependencies of the project.

The supported OCAML fragment includes: tuples, variants, records (including inline records), shallow `match`, atomic record fields, unboxed types, toplevel mutually recursive functions.

Consider, for example, the OCAML implementation of a concurrent stack [7] in Figure 2. The `push` function is translated into:

```
Definition stack_push : val :=
  rec: "push" "t" "v" =>
    let: "old" := !"t" in
    let: "new_" := "v" :: "old" in
    if: ~ CAS "t".[contents] "old" "new_" then (
      domain_yield () ;;
      "push" "t" "v"
    ).
```

**Gabriel**{If we need more space we can move this code to Figure 2, as a second column on the right.}

### 3.3 Specifications and proofs

Once the translation to ZOOLANG is done, the user can write specifications and prove them in IRIS. For instance, the specification of the `stack_push` function could be:

```
Lemma stack_push_spec t  $\iota$  v :
  <<< stack_inv t  $\iota$ 
  |  $\forall$  vs, stack_model t vs >>>
  stack_push t v @  $\uparrow\iota$ 
  <<< stack_model t (v :: vs)
  | RET (); True >>>.
Proof. ... Qed.
```

Here, we use a *logically atomic specification* [15], which has been proven [4] to be equivalent to *linearizability* [25] in sequentially consistent memory models.

Similarly to Hoare triples, the specification is formed of a precondition and a postcondition, represented in angular brackets. But each is split in two parts, a *public* or *atomic* condition, and a *private* condition. Following standard IRIS notations, the private conditions are on the outside (first line of the precondition, last line of the postcondition) and the atomic conditions are inside.

For this particular operation, the private postcondition is trivial. The private condition `stack_inv t` is the stack invariant. Intuitively, it asserts that  $t$  is a valid concurrent stack. More precisely, it enforces a set of logical constraints—a concurrent protocol—that  $t$  must respect at all times.

The atomic pre- and post-conditions specify the linearization point of the operation: during the execution of `stack_push`, the abstract state of the stack held by `stack_model` is atomically updated from  $vs$  to  $v :: vs$ ; in other words,  $v$  is atomically pushed at the top of the stack.

<sup>3</sup> Actually, `ocaml2zoo` processes binary annotation files (`.cmt` files).

## 4 Zoo features

In this section, we review the salient features of ZOO, which we found lacking when we attempted to use HEAPLANG to verify real-world OCAML programs. We start with the most generic ones and then address those related to concurrency.

### 4.1 Algebraic data types

ZOO is an untyped language but, to write interesting programs, it is convenient to work with abstractions like algebraic data types. To simulate tuples, variants and records, we designed a machinery to define projections, constructors and record fields.

For example, one may define a list-like type with:

```
Notation "'Nil'" := (in_type "t" 0) (in custom zoo_tag).
Notation "'Cons'" := (in_type "t" 1) (in custom zoo_tag).
```

Users do not need to write this incantation directly, as they are generated by `ocaml2zoo` from the OCAML type declarations. Suffice it to say that it introduces the two tags in the `zoo_tag` custom entry, on which the notations for data constructors rely. The `in_type` term is needed to distinguish the tags of distinct data types; crucially, it cannot be simplified away by ROCQ, as this could lead to confusion during the reduction of expressions.

Given this incantation, one may directly use the tags `Nil` and `Cons` in data constructors using the corresponding ZOO LANG constructs:

```
Definition map : val :=
  rec: "map" "fn" "t" =>
    match: "t" with
    | Nil =>
      $Nil
    | Cons "x" "t" =>
      let: "y" := "fn" "x" in
      'Cons( "y", "map" "fn" "t" )
    end.
```

Similarly, one may define a record-like type with two mutable fields `f1` and `f2`:

```
Notation "'f1'" := (in_type "t" 0) (in custom zoo_field).
Notation "'f2'" := (in_type "t" 1) (in custom zoo_field).
```

```
Definition swap : val :=
  fun: "t" =>
    let: "f1" := "t".{f1} in
    "t" <-{f1} "t".{f2} ;;
    "t" <-{f2} "f1".
```

### 4.2 Mutually recursive functions

ZOO supports non-recursive (`fun:  $x_1 \dots x_n \Rightarrow e$` ) and recursive (`rec:  $f \ x_1 \dots x_n \Rightarrow e$` ) functions but only *oplevel* mutually recursive functions. It is non-trivial to properly handle mutual recursion: when applying a mutually recursive function, a naive approach would replace calls to sibling functions by their respective bodies, but this typically makes the

resulting expression unreadable. To prevent it, the mutually recursive functions have to know one another to preserve their names during  $\beta$ -reduction. We simulate this using some boilerplate that can be generated by `ocaml2zoo`. For instance, one may define two mutually recursive functions `f` and `g` as follows:

```

Definition f_g := (
  recs: "f" "x" => "g" "x"
  and:  "g" "x" => "f" "x"
)%zoo_recs.

(* boilerplate *)
Definition f := ValRecs 0 f_g.
Definition g := ValRecs 1 f_g.
Instance : AsValRecs' f 0 f_g [f;g]. Proof. done. Qed.
Instance : AsValRecs' g 1 f_g [f;g]. Proof. done. Qed.

```

### 4.3 Standard library

To save users from reinventing the wheel, we provide a standard library—more or less a subset of the OCAML standard library. Currently, it mainly includes standard data structures like: array (`Array`), resizable array (`Dynarray`), list (`List`), stack (`Stack`), queue (`Queue`), double-ended queue, mutex (`Mutex`), condition variable (`Condition`).

Each of these standard modules contains ZOO LANG functions and their verified specifications. These specifications are modular: they can be used to verify more complex data structures. As an evidence of this, lists [1] and arrays [2] have been successfully used in verification efforts based on ZOO.

### 4.4 Concurrent primitives

ZOO supports concurrent primitives both on atomic references (from `Atomic`) and atomic record fields (from `Atomic.Loc`<sup>4</sup>) according to the table below. The OCAML expressions listed in the left-hand column translate into the ZOO expressions in the right-hand column. Notice that an atomic location `[%atomic.loc e.f]` (of type `_ Atomic.Loc.t`) translates directly into `e.[f]`.

OCAML	Zoo
<code>Atomic.get e</code>	<code>!e</code>
<code>Atomic.set e<sub>1</sub> e<sub>2</sub></code>	<code>e<sub>1</sub> &lt;- e<sub>2</sub></code>
<code>Atomic.exchange e<sub>1</sub> e<sub>2</sub></code>	<code>Xchg e<sub>1</sub>. [contents] e<sub>2</sub></code>
<code>Atomic.compare_and_set e<sub>1</sub> e<sub>2</sub> e<sub>3</sub></code>	<code>CAS e<sub>1</sub>. [contents] e<sub>2</sub> e<sub>3</sub></code>
<code>Atomic.fetch_and_add e<sub>1</sub> e<sub>2</sub></code>	<code>FAA e<sub>1</sub>. [contents] e<sub>2</sub></code>
<code>Atomic.Loc.exchange [%atomic.loc e<sub>1</sub>.f] e<sub>2</sub></code>	<code>Xchg e<sub>1</sub>. [f] e<sub>2</sub></code>
<code>Atomic.Loc.compare_and_set [%atomic.loc e<sub>1</sub>.f] e<sub>2</sub> e<sub>3</sub></code>	<code>CAS e<sub>1</sub>. [f] e<sub>2</sub> e<sub>3</sub></code>
<code>Atomic.Loc.fetch_and_add [%atomic.loc e<sub>1</sub>.f] e<sub>2</sub></code>	<code>FAA e<sub>1</sub>. [f] e<sub>2</sub></code>

One important aspect of this translation is that atomic accesses (`Atomic.get` and `Atomic.set`) correspond to plain loads and stores. This is because we are working in a

<sup>4</sup> The `Atomic.Loc` module is part of the PR that implements atomic record fields.



sequentially consistent memory model: there is no difference between atomic and non-atomic memory locations.

## 4.5 Prophecy variables

Lock-free algorithms exhibit complex behaviors. To tackle them, IRIS provides powerful mechanisms such as *prophecy variables* [29]. Essentially, prophecy variables can be used to predict the future of the program execution and reason about it. They are key to handle *future-dependent linearization points*: linearization points that may or may not occur at a given location in the code depending on a future observation.

ZOO supports prophecy variables through the `Proph` and `Resolve` expressions—as in HEAPLANG, the canonical IRIS language. In OCAML, these expressions correspond to `Zoo.proph` and `Zoo.resolve`, that are recognized by `ocaml2zoo`.

## 5 Physical equality

The notion of *physical equality* is ubiquitous in fine-grained concurrent algorithms. It appears not only in the semantics of the `==` operator, but also in the semantics of the `Atomic.compare_and_set` primitive, which atomically sets an atomic reference to a desired value if its current content is physically equal to an expected value. This primitive is commonly used to try committing an atomic operation in a retry loop, as in the `push` and `pop` functions of Figure 2.

### 5.1 Physical equality in HeapLang

In HEAPLANG, this primitive is provided but restricted. Indeed, its semantics is only defined if either the expected or the desired value fits in a single memory word in the HEAPLANG value representation: literals (booleans, integers and pointers<sup>5</sup>) and literal injections<sup>6</sup>; otherwise, the program is stuck. In practice, this restriction forces the programmer to introduce an indirection [50, 29, 52] to physically compare complex values, *e.g.* lists. Furthermore, when the semantics is defined, values are compared using their ROCQ representations; physical equality boils down to ROCQ equality.

### 5.2 Physical equality in OCaml

In OCAML, physical equality is more tricky and often considered dangerous. *Structural equality*, which we describe in Section 6, should be the preferred way of comparing values. However, structural equality is typically much slower than physical equality, as it basically compiles to only one assembly instruction. Also, the `Atomic.compare_and_set` requires the comparison to be atomic, which is the case for physical equality but not structural equality.

In particular, the semantics of physical equality is *non-deterministic*. To see why, consider the case of *immutable blocks* representing constructors and immutable records (as opposed to *mutable blocks* representing mutable records), *e.g.* `Some 0`. The physical comparison of two seemingly identical immutable blocks, according to the ROCQ representation (essentially a tag and a list of fields), may return `false`. Indeed, at runtime, a non-empty immutable block

<sup>5</sup> HEAPLANG allows arbitrary pointer arithmetic and therefore inner pointers. This is forbidden in both OCAML and ZOOLANG, as any reachable value has to be compatible with the garbage collector.

<sup>6</sup> HEAPLANG has no primitive notion of constructor, only pairs and injections (left and right).

```

type state =
  | Open of Unix.file_descr
  | Closing of (unit -> unit)

type t =
  { mutable ops: int [@atomic];
    mutable state: state [@atomic];
  }

let make fd =
  { ops= 0; state= Open fd }

let closed =
  Closing (fun () -> ())
let close t =
  match t.state with
  | Closing _ ->
    false
  | Open fd as prev ->
    let close () = Unix.close fd in
    let next = Closing close in
    if Atomic.Loc.compare_and_set [%atomic.loc t.state] prev next then (
      if t.ops == 0
      && Atomic.Loc.compare_and_set [%atomic.loc t.state] next closed
      then
        close () ;
      true
    ) else (
      false
    )

```

■ **Figure 3** `Rcfd.close` function from Eio [34]

is represented by a pointer to a tagged memory block. In this case, physical equality is just pointer comparison. It is clear that two pointers being distinct does not imply the pointed memory blocks are. In other words, we cannot determine the result of physical comparison just by looking at the abstract values.

The question is then: what guarantees do we get when physical equality returns `true` and when it returns `false`? Basically, the only<sup>7</sup> guarantee that OCAML documents is: if two values are physically equal, they are also structurally equal. This means we don't learn anything when two values are physically distinct.

In the following, we will explore both cases, looking at the optimizations that the compiler or the runtime system may perform. We will show that the aforementioned guarantee is arguably not sufficient to verify interesting concurrent programs and attempt to establish

<sup>7</sup> Actually, the OCAML manual mentions a second guarantee for "mutable types". Its informal, if not confusing, formulation makes it hard to interpret. We neglect it here, as it does not interfere with our reasoning.

278 stronger guarantees.

### 279 5.3 When physical equality returns `true`

280 Let us go back to the concurrent stack of Figure 2 and more specifically the `push` function. To  
 281 prove the atomic specification given in Section 3, we rely on the fact that, if `Atomic.compare_and_set`  
 282 returns `true`, we actually observe the same list of values in the sense of ROCQ equality.  
 283 However, assuming only structural equality as per OCAML's specification of physical equality,  
 284 this cannot be proven. To see why, consider, *e.g.*, a stack of references (`'a ref`). As structural  
 285 equality is indeed *structural*, it traverses the references without comparing their *physical*  
 286 *identities*. In other words, we cannot conclude the references are *exactly* the same. Hence,  
 287 we cannot prove the specification.

288 This conclusion might seem surprising and counterintuitive. Indeed, we know that physical  
 289 equality essentially boils down to a comparison instruction, so we should be able to say  
 290 more. Departing from OCAML's imprecise specification, let us attempt to establish stronger  
 291 guarantees. We assume the following classification of values: booleans, integers, mutable  
 292 blocks (pointers), immutable blocks, functions.

293 The easy cases are mutable blocks and functions. Each of these two classes is disjoint  
 294 from the others. We can reasonably assume that, when physical equality returns `true` and  
 295 one of the compared values belongs to either of these classes, the two values are actually the  
 296 same in ROCQ. As far as we are aware, there is no optimization that could break this.

297 Booleans, integers and empty immutable blocks are represented by immediate integers  
 298 through an encoding. This encoding induces conflicts: two seemingly distinct values in ROCQ  
 299 may have the same encoding. For example, the following tests all return `true` (`Obj.repr` is  
 300 an unsafe primitive revealing the memory representation of a value):

```
let test1 = Obj.repr false == Obj.repr 0 (* true *)
let test2 = Obj.repr None == Obj.repr 0 (* true *)
let test3 = Obj.repr [] == Obj.repr 0 (* true *)
```

301 The semantics of unrestricted physical equality has to reflect these conflicts. In our  
 302 experience, restricting compared values similarly to typing is quite burdensome; the specification  
 303 of polymorphic data structures using physical equality has to be systematically restricted. In  
 304 summary, when physical equality on immediate values returns `true`, it is guaranteed that  
 305 they have the same encoding.

306 Finally, let us consider the case of non-empty immutable blocks. At runtime, they are  
 307 represented by pointers to tagged memory blocks. At first approximation, it is tempting to  
 308 say that physically equal immutable blocks really are the same in ROCQ. Alas, this is not  
 309 true. To explain why, we have to recall that the OCAML compiler and the runtime system  
 310 (*e.g.*, through hash-consing) may perform *sharing*: immutable blocks containing physically  
 311 equal fields may be shared. For example, the following tests may return `true`:

```
let test1 = Some 0 == Some 0 (* true *)
let test2 = [0;1] == [0;1] (* true *)
```

312 On its own, sharing is not a problem. However, coupled with representation conflicts, it  
 313 can be surprising. Indeed, consider the `any` type defined as:

```
type any = Any : 'a -> any
```

314 The following tests may return `true`:

```

let test1 = Any false == Any 0 (* true *)
let test2 = Any None == Any 0 (* true *)
let test3 = Any [] == Any 0 (* true *)

```

Now, going back to the `push` function of Figure 2, we have a problem. Given a stack of `any`, it is possible for the `Atomic.compare_and_set` to observe a current list (e.g., `[Any 0]`) physically equal to the expected list (e.g., `[Any false]`) while these are actually distinct in ROCQ. In short, the expected specification of Section 3 is incorrect. To fix it, we would need to reason *modulo physical equality*, which is non-standard and quite burdensome.

We believe this really is a shortcoming, at least from the verification perspective. Therefore, we propose to extend OCAML with *generative immutable blocks*<sup>8</sup>. These generative blocks are just like regular immutable blocks, except they cannot be shared. Hence, if physical equality on two generative blocks returns `true`, these blocks are necessarily equal in ROCQ. At user level, this notion is materialized by *generative constructors*. For instance, to verify the expected `push` specification, we can use a generative version of lists:

```

type 'a list =
  | Nil
  | Cons of 'a * 'a list [@generative]

```

## 5.4 When physical equality returns `false`

The informal OCAML specification does not give any guarantee when physical equality returns `false`. In most cases, including try loops, this is fine. However, in some specific cases, more information is needed.

Consider the `Rcfd` module from the `Eio` [34] library, an excerpt of which is given in Figure 3<sup>9</sup>. Thomas Leonard, its author, suggested that we verify this real-life example because of its intricate logical state. However, we found out that it is also relevant regarding the semantics of physical equality. Essentially, it consists in wrapping a file descriptor in a thread-safe way using reference-counting. At creation in the `make` function, the wrapper starts in the `Open` state. At some point, it can switch to the `Closing` state in the `close` function and can never go back to the `Open` state. Crucially, the `Open` state does not change throughout the lifetime of the data structure.

The interest of `Rcfd` lies in the `close` function. First, the function reads the state. If this state is `Closing`, it returns `false`; the wrapper has been closed. If this state is `Open`, it tries to switch to the `Closing` state using `Atomic.Loc.compare_and_set`; if this attempt fails, it also returns `false`. In this particular case, we would like to prove that the wrapper has been closed, or equivalently that `Atomic.Loc.compare_and_set` cannot have observed `Open`. Intuitively, this is true because there is only one `Open`.

Obviously, we need some kind of guarantee related to the *physical identity* of `Open` when `Atomic.Loc.compare_and_set` returns `false`. If `Open` were a mutable block, we could argue that this block cannot be physically distinct from itself; no optimization we know of would allow that. Unfortunately, it is an immutable block, and immutable blocks are subject to more optimizations. In fact, something surprising but allowed<sup>10</sup> by OCAML can happen: *unsharing*, the dual of sharing. Indeed, any immutable block can be unshared, that is reallocated. For example, the following test may theoretically return `false`:

<sup>8</sup> Non-anonymous link

<sup>9</sup> We make use of *atomic record fields* as introduced in Section 7.1.

<sup>10</sup> This has been confirmed by OCAML experts developing the FLAMBDA backend.

```

let x = Some 0
let test = x == x (* false *)

```

351 Going back to `Rcfd`, we have a problem: in the second branch, the `Open` block corresponding  
 352 to `prev` could be unshared, which would make `Atomic.Loc.compare_and_set` fail. Hence,  
 353 we cannot prove the expected specification.

354 To remedy this unfortunate situation, we propose to reuse the notions of generative  
 355 immutable blocks, that we introduced to prevent sharing, to also forbid unsharing. More  
 356 precisely, each generative block is annotated with a *logical identifier*<sup>11</sup> representing its physical  
 357 identity, much like a pointer for a mutable block. If physical equality on two generative  
 358 blocks returns `false`, the two identifiers are necessarily distinct. Given this semantics, we  
 359 can verify the `close` function. Indeed, if `Atomic.Loc.compare_and_set` fails, we now know  
 360 that the identifiers of the two blocks, if any, are distinct. As there is only one `Open` block  
 361 whose identifier does not change, it cannot be the case that the current state is `Open`, hence  
 362 it is `Closing` and we can conclude. In practice, it suffices to patch the `state` type:

```

type state =
  | Open of Unix.file_descr [@@generative]
  | Closing of (unit -> unit)

```

## 363 6 Structural equality

## 364 7 OCaml extensions for fine-grained concurrent programming

365 Over the course of this work, we studied efficient fine-grained concurrent OCAML programs  
 366 written by experts. This revealed various limitations of OCAML in these domains, that  
 367 those experts would work around using unsafe casts, often at the cost of both readability  
 368 and memory-safety; and also some mismatches between their mental model of the semantics  
 369 of OCAML and the mental model used by the OCAML compiler authors. We worked on  
 370 improving OCAML itself to reduce these work-arounds or semantic mismatches.

### 371 7.1 Atomic record fields

#### 372 7.1.1 Before

373 OCAML 5 offers a type `'a Atomic.t` of atomic references exposing sequentially-consistent  
 374 atomic operations. Data races on non-atomic mutable locations has a much weaker semantics  
 375 and is generally considered a programming error. For example, the Michael-Scott concurrent  
 376 queue [37] relies on a linked list structure that could be defined as follows:

```

type 'a node =
  | Nil
  | Cons of { value : 'a; next : 'a node Atomic.t }

```

377 Performance-minded concurrency experts dislike this representation, because `'a Atomic.t`  
 378 introduces an indirection in memory: it is represented as a pointer to a block containing the  
 379 value of type `'a`. Instead, they use something like the following:

---

<sup>11</sup> Actually, for practical reasons, we distinguish identified and unidentified generative blocks.

```

type 'a node =
| Nil
| Cons of { mutable next: 'a node; value: 'a }

let as_atomic : 'a node -> 'a node Atomic.t option = function
| Nil -> None
| (Next _) as record -> Some (Obj.magic record : 'a node Atomic.t)

```

380 Notice that the `next` field of the `Cons` constructor has been moved first in the type  
 381 declaration. Because the OCAML compiler respects field-declaration order in data layout, a  
 382 value `Cons { next; value }` has a similar low-level representation to a reference (atomic  
 383 or not) pointing at `next`, with an extra argument. The code uses `Obj.magic` to unsafely cast  
 384 this value to an atomic reference, which appears to work as intended.

385 `Obj.magic` is a shunned unsafe cast (the OCAML equivalent of `unsafe` or `unsafePerformIO`).  
 386 It is very difficult to be confident about its usage given that it may typically violate  
 387 assumptions made by the OCAML compiler and optimizer. In the example above, casting  
 388 a two-fields record into a one-argument atomic reference may or may not be sound—but  
 389 it gives measurable performance improvements on concurrent queue benchmarks. (TODO:  
 390 benchmark to quantify the improvement.)

391 It is possible to statically forbid passing `Nil` to `as_atomic` to avoid error handling,  
 392 by turning `'a node` into a GADT indexed over it a type-level representation of its head  
 393 constructor. Examples of this pattern can be found in the `Kcas` library by Vesa Karvonen.  
 394 It is difficult to write correctly and use, in particular as unsafe casts can sometimes hide  
 395 type-errors in the intended static discipline.

396 Note that this unsafe approach only works for the first field of a record, so it is not  
 397 applicable to records that hold several atomic fields, such as the toplevel record storing  
 398 atomic `front` and `back` pointers for the concurrent queue.

## 399 7.1.2 Atomic fields proposal

400 We proposed a design for atomic record fields as an OCAML language change proposal:  
 401 RFC #39<sup>12</sup>. Declaring a record field atomic simply requires an `[@atomic]` attribute—and  
 402 could eventually become a proper keyword of the language.

```

(* re-implementation of atomic references *)
type 'a atomic_ref = { mutable contents : 'a [@atomic]; }

(* concurrent linked list *)
type 'a node =
| Nil
| Cons of { value: 'a; mutable next : 'a node [@atomic]; }

(* bounded SPSC circular buffer *)
type 'a bag = {
  data : 'a Atomic.t array;
  mutable front: int [@atomic];

```

---

<sup>12</sup>Non-anonymous link

```

    mutable back: int [@atomic];
}

```

The design difficulty is to express atomic operations on atomic record fields. For example, if `buf` has type `'a bag` above, then one naturally expects the existing notation `buf.front` to perform an atomic read and `buf.front <- n` to perform an atomic write. But how would one express exchange, compare-and-set and fetch-and-add? We would like to avoid adding a new primitive language construct for each atomic operation.

Our proposed implementation<sup>13</sup> introduces a built-in type `'a Atomic.Loc.t` for an atomic location that holds an element of type `'a`, with a syntax extension `[%atomic.loc <expr>.<field>]` to construct such locations. Atomic primitives operate on values of type `'a Atomic.Loc.t`, and they are exposed as functions of the module `Atomic.Loc`.

For example, the standard library exposes

```

val Atomic.Loc.fetch_and_add : int Atomic.Loc.t -> int -> int

```

and users can write:

```

let preincrement_front (buf : 'a bag) : int =
  Atomic.Loc.fetch_and_add [%atomic.loc buf.front] 1

```

where `[%atomic.loc buf.front]` has type `int Atomic.Loc.t`. Internally, a value of type `'a Atomic.Loc.t` can be represented as a pair of a record and an integer offset for the desired field, and the `atomic.loc` construction builds this pair in a well-typed manner. When a primitive of the `Atomic.Loc` module is applied to an `atomic.loc` expression, the compiler can optimize away the construction of the pair—but it would happen if there was an abstraction barrier between the construction and its use.

Note: the type `'a Atomic.t` of atomic references exposes a function

```

val Atomic.make_contended : 'a -> 'a Atomic.t

```

that ensures that the returned atomic value is allocated with enough alignment and padding to sit alone on its cache line, to avoid performance issues caused by false sharing. Currently there is no such support for padding of atomic record fields (we are planning to work on this if the support for atomic fields gets merged in standard OCAML), so the less-compact atomic references remain preferable in certain scenarios.

## 7.2 Atomic arrays

On top of our atomic record fields, we have implemented support for atomic arrays, another facility commonly requested by authors of efficient concurrent programs. Our previous example of a concurrent bag of type `'a bag` used a backing array of type `'a Atomic.t array`, which contains more indirections than may be desirable, as each array element is a pointer to a block containing the value of type `'a`, instead of storing the value of type `'a` directly in the array.

Our implementation of atomic arrays<sup>14</sup> builds on top of the type `'a Atomic.Loc.t` we described in the previous section, and it relies on two new low-level primitives provided by the compiler:

<sup>13</sup>Non-anonymous link

<sup>14</sup>Non-anonymous link



```

val Atomic_array.index : 'a array -> int -> 'a Atomic.Loc.t
val Atomic_array.unsafe_index : 'a array -> int -> 'a Atomic.Loc.t

```

The function `index` takes an array and an integer index within the array, and returns an atomic location into the corresponding element after performing a bound check. `unsafe_index` omits the boundcheck—additional performance at the cost of memory-safety—and allows to express the atomic counterpart of the unsafe operations `Array.unsafe_get` and `Array.unsafe_set`. The atomic primitives of the module `Atomic.Loc` can then be used on these indices; our implementation implements a library module on top of these primitives to provide a higher-level layer to the user, with direct array operations such as:

```

val Atomic_array.exchange : 'a Atomic_array.t -> int -> 'a -> 'a
val Atomic_array.unsafe_exchange : 'a Atomic_array.t -> int -> 'a -> 'a

```

## 8 Conclusion and future work

The development of ZOO is still ongoing. While it is not yet available on `opam`, it can be installed and used in other ROCQ projects. We provide a minimal example demonstrating its use.

ZOO supports a limited fragment of OCAML that is sufficient for most of our needs. Its main weakness so far is its memory model, which is sequentially consistent as opposed to the relaxed OCAML 5 memory model. It also lacks exceptions and algebraic effects, that we plan to introduce in the future.

Another interesting direction would be to combine ZOO with semi-automated techniques. Similarly to WHY3, the simple parts of the verification effort would be done in a semi-automated way, while the most difficult parts would be conducted in ROCQ.

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