

# Nearly Macro-free MicroKanren

Jason Hemann  
Daniel P. Friedman  
jason.hemann@shu.edu  
dfried@cs.indiana.edu

## Abstract

This paper describes changes to the microKanren implementation to broaden the kinds of platforms it may be embedded in. We lift microKanren’s macro-support requirement for host platforms, trading it for modest runtime features common to most languages. The resulting implementation is smaller, simpler, and relevant even to implementers that enjoy macro support. For those without it, we address some practical concerns that necessarily occur without macros so they can better weigh their options.

**CCS Concepts:** • Software and its engineering → Constraint and logic languages; Automatic programming.

**Keywords:** logic programming, miniKanren, DSLs, embedding, macros

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## 1 Introduction

The authors designed microKanren [5] as a compact relational programming language kernel to undergird a miniKanren implementation. The surface miniKanren syntax and higher-level operators are implemented as macros. microKanren is often used as a tool for understanding the guts of a relational programming language through studying its implementation. By re-implementing miniKanren as separate surface syntax macros over a purely-function microKanren kernel, the authors hoped this separation would simultaneously aid implementers when studying the source code, and

also that the functional core would make the language easier to port to other functional hosts. To support both those efforts, they also chose to program in a deliberately small and workaday set of Scheme primitives.

The sum of those implementation choices restricted the design space to necessitate somewhat awkward compromises in several places including binary logical operators, one at a time local variable introduction, and leaks in the streams abstractions. This left the surface syntax macros seem practically mandatory, and so divided host languages into the macro language “haves” and the macro-less “have nots”. Here, we bridge some of that divide by re-implementing parts of the kernel with some modest run time features common to most languages.

In this paper we:

- show how to functionally implement more general logical operators, cleanly obviating some of the surface macros
- provide guidance and utilitarian solutions for eliminating all other macros in the *TRS2e* microKanren implementation
- survey the purely functional design space, and weigh the trade offs and real-world concerns of completely eliminating those remaining macros.

This exercise resulted in some higher-level operators, a more succinct kernel language, and made possible some performance improvement. Approximately half of the changes are applicable to any microKanren implementation, and the other half are necessarily awkward yet practical strategies for platforms lacking macro support.

In Section 2, we illustrate by example what made surface syntax macros feel practically mandatory. In Section 3, we implement conjunction and disjunction, and in Section 4 we discuss the re-implementation of the impure operators. We discuss the remaining macros in Section 5. We close some outstanding questions on performance impacts of these implementation choices, and consider how Kanren language implementers outside of the Scheme family might benefit from these alternatives.

## 2 All Aboard!

We assume the reader is familiar with the microKanren-based miniKanren implementation of *The Reasoned Schemer, 2nd Ed (TRS2e)* [4]. In addition, at places we make occasional references to earlier iterations such as Hemann et al. [6], an expanded archival version of the 2013 paper [5].

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```
(define ((disj g . gs) s)
  (D (g s) gs s))

(define (D s∞ gs s)
  (cond
    ((null? gs) s∞)
    (else
     (append∞ s∞
      (D ((car gs) s) (cdr gs) s))))))
```

**Listing 1.** Eventual redefinition of `disj`

Haifa’s Carmelit is the world’s shortest subway system with a line of just six stations; a sufficiently small example. But in microKanren, to model the order a passenger visit the stops riding the subway end to end requires 11 logical operator nodes, because microKanren only provides *binary* conjunctions and disjunctions. (Listing 10 contains this paper’s alternative solution, requiring just three.) For a logic programming language, only binary logical operators is too low level. To our eyes, this makes the superficial syntax macros are practically mandatory, and host languages without a macro system are out of luck.

The microKanren language doesn’t offer the programmer much guidance in using that fine-grained control. For a series of  $n$  goals, the programmer can associate them to the left, to the right, or some mixtures of the two. The language itself does not seem to obviously encourage one particular choice.

The *TRS2e* microKanren’s soft-cut operator, `ifte`, is similarly low level. It permits a single test, a single consequent, and a single alternative. To build an if-then-else cascade, a microKanren programmer without the `conda` surface macro would need to unroll that cascade by hand.

The *TRS2e* language implementation relies on macros `fresh`, `defrel`, and `run` to introduce new logic variables, globally define relations, and execute queries. We can, and have, implemented these same behaviors via shallow embeddings without macros. These implementations had some harsh trade offs. We will revisit some of those trade-offs, survey the landscape of other available choices, and suggest performant compromises for the truly macroless.

### 3 `disj` and `conj` logical goal constructors

We want to implement disjunction and conjunction over one-or-more goals as functions. These implementations should not require `apply` or rely on the binary `disj2` and `conj2`. Further, they should not build any extraneous closures: unnecessarily building closures at runtime is always a bad idea. This re-implementation requires a host that supports variable arity functions, a feature available in many languages including JavaScript, Ruby, Java, and Python.

```
(define ((conj g . gs) s)
  (C gs (g s)))

(define (C gs s∞)
  (cond
    ((null? gs) s∞)
    (else
     (C (cdr gs)
      (append-map∞ (car gs) s∞))))))
```

**Listing 2.** Eventual redefinition of `conj`

Listings 1 and 2 show our new implementations. Mandating one-or-more arguments lets us re-implement these operators as shallow wrappers over simple folds. Variadic functions make these operators more ergonomic, and Scheme’s polyvariadic function syntax (that is to say “at least  $k$  arguments”, for some positive integer  $k$ ) ensures at a host-language level that the microKanren programmer provides at least one parameter to `conj` and `disj`. Embeddings in languages with variadic but without polyvariadic function syntax would have to implement that check. The first step in each is merely to remove the rest argument `gs` and act as if there were no need for a rest argument. That is, all of our focus will be on the *list*, `gs`. Unlike `D`, the function `C` does not take in the state `s`; the help procedure does not need the state for conjunction. In each recursive call, we accumulate by mapping (using the special delaying implementation of `append-map∞` for miniKanren streams) the next goal in the list. This left-fold implementation of conjunction therefore left-associates the conjuncts.

#### 3.1 Semantic equivalence

A developer might derive these definitions as follows. We start from the definition of the `disj` macro in Listing 3. At the cost of an `apply`, we can build the corresponding explicitly recursive `disj` function.

```
(define-syntax disj
  (syntax-rules ()
    ((disj g) g)
    ((disj g0 g1 g ...)
     (disj2 g0 (disj g1 g ...)))))

(define (disj g . gs)
  (cond
    ((null? gs) g)
    (else (disj2 g (apply disj gs)))))
```

**Listing 3.** Deriving `disj` function from macro

Since `disj` produces and consumes goals, we can  $\eta$  expand the definition in Listing 3 by a curried parameter `s`. We then split `disj` into two mutually-recursive procedures, to build the variant in Listing 4.

```
(define ((disj g . gs) s)
  (D g gs s))

(define (D g gs s)
  (cond
    ((null? gs) (g s))
    (else ((disj2 g (apply disj gs)) s))))
```

**Listing 4.** An  $\eta$  expanded and split definition of `disj`

We can replace the call to `disj2` in Listing 4 by its definition in terms of `append∞` and perform a trivial  $\beta$ -reduction. The explicit `s` argument suggests removing the call to `apply` and making `D` recursive. The result is the version of `D` in Listing 5. The definition of `disj` remains unchanged from Listing 4.

```
(define (D g gs s)
  (cond
    ((null? gs) (g s))
    (else
     (append∞ (g s)
                (D (car gs) (cdr gs) s))))))
```

**Listing 5.** Derivation of `disj` function definition

We combine `g` and `s` in each clause; this suggests constructing that stream in `disj` and passing it along. Making this final change results in the definition in Listing 1.

```
(define-syntax conj
  (syntax-rules ()
    ((conj g) g)
    ((conj g g1 gs ...)
     (conj (conj2 g g1) gs ...))))

(define (conj g . gs)
  (cond
    ((null? gs) g)
    (else
     (apply conj
              (cons (conj2 g (car gs)) (cdr gs))))))
```

**Listing 6.** `conj2`-based `conj` function and macro

We can derive the definition of `conj` from Listing 2 via a similar process. Starting with the variadic function based on the macro in Listing 6, we first  $\eta$ -expand and split the definition.

We next substitute for the definitions of `conj` and `conj2`.

```
(define ((conj g . gs) s)
  (C g gs s))

(define (C g gs s)
  (cond
    ((null? gs) (g s))
    (else
     (apply conj
              (cons (conj2 g (car gs)) (cdr gs))
                  s))))
```

**Listing 7.** Derivation of split `conj` function definition

```
(define (C g gs s)
  (cond
    ((null? gs) (g s))
    (else
     (C (λ (s) (append-map∞ (car gs) (g s)))
         (cdr gs)
         s))))
```

**Listing 8.** Replacing `apply` in `C` function definition

Finally, since `C` only needs `s` to *build* the stream, we can assemble the stream on the way in—instead of passing in `g` and `s` separately, we pass in their combination as a stream. The function is tail recursive, we can change the signature in the one and only external call and the recursive call. We show the result in Listing 2.

Both the functional and the macro based versions of Listing 6 use a left fold over the goals, whereas the versions of `disj` use a right fold. This is not an accident. Folklore suggests left associating conjunctions tends to improve the performance of miniKanren’s interleaving search. The authors know of no thorough algorithmic proof of such claims, but see for instance discussions and implementation in [9] for some of the related work so far. We have generally, however, resorted to small step visualizations of the search tree to explain the performance impact. The authors believe it is worth considering if we can make an equally compelling argument for this preference through equational reasoning and comparing the implementations of functions.

```
(define (conj g . gs)
  (cond
    ((null? gs) g)
    (else (conj2 g (apply conj gs)))))
```

**Listing 9.** A right-fold variant of `conj`

Listing 9 shows a right-fold variant of `conj`. The choice to fold left becomes a little more obvious after we  $\eta$ -expand, unfold to a recursive help function, substitute in the definition of `conj2`, and  $\beta$ -reduce.

```
(defrel (carmelit-subway a b c d e f)
  (disj
    (conj (== a 'carmel-center)
          (== b 'golomb)
          (== c 'masada)
          (== d 'haneviim)
          (== e 'hadar-city-hall)
          (== f 'downtown))
    (conj (== a 'downtown)
          (== b 'hadar-city-hall)
          (== c 'haneviim)
          (== d 'masada)
          (== e 'golomb)
          (== f 'carmel-center))))
```

**Listing 10.** A new Carmelit subway without conde

```
(define ((conj g . gs) s)
  (C gs (g s)))

(define (C g gs s)
  (cond
    ((null? gs) (g s))
    (else (append-map (apply C gs) (g s)))))
```

Here, we cannot (easily) replace the apply call by a recursive call to C, because we are still waiting for an s. We can only abstract over s and wait. Since we know that any call to append-map we construct will always yield a result, the version in Listing 2 is tail recursive. The equivalent right-fold implementation needs either to construct a closure for every recursive call, or otherwise demands a help function mutually recursive with C.

```
(define (C gs s)
  (cond
    ((null? gs) s)
    (else
     (append-map
      (λ (s) (C (cdr gs) ((car gs) s)))
      s)))))
```

If we want to implement a variadic version that does not rely on a primitive conj2 and does not resort to apply, we have the two aforementioned choices. Basic programming horse sense suggests the more elegant variant from Listing 2.

Though this note mainly concerns the choice to implement surface language behavior as functions, it may also point to these as more natural user-level primitives than conde. An implementation could choose to forego conde and provide just those underlying logical primitives disj and conj to the user, as in the new definition of Carmelit in Listing 10. Moreover, reintroducing the nullary case only requires a simple wrapper macro, or otherwise, a run-time null? check for a very slight cost.

```
(define-syntax conda
  (syntax-rules ()
    ((conda (g0 g ...) (conj g0 g ...))
     ((conda (g0 g ...) ln ...)
      (ifte g0 (conj g ...) (conda ln ...)))))

(define ((ifte g1 g2 g3) s)
  (let loop ((s (g1 s)))
    (cond
      ((null? s) (g3 s))
      ((pair? s)
       (append-map g2 s))
      (else (lambda ()
                (loop (s)))))
```

**Listing 11.** A typical implementation of conda

## 4 Tidying up the Impure Operators

The operators conda and conde look superficially similar, syntactically. Semantically though, conda’s nested “if-then-else” behavior is quite different, and implementing the desired behavior for conda from existing pieces exposes some strangeness. The definition of conda (see Listing 11) requires one or more conjuncts per clause and one or more clauses. The consequent of each conda clause is the one and only place in the whole language implementation that permits nullary conjunctions of goals. This soft-cut operator seems to force both nullary conjunction and those primitive goals #s and #u into the language.

Some programmers would be perfectly satisfied just using ifte directly. But just as the standard forked if begat McCarthy’s if notation and cond, a programmer may eventually feel the need for a nested implementation. Here are other (alternative) implementation choices one could consider.

1. Syntactically mandate that all clauses *except the final default clause* contain at least two goals.
2. Introduce a special clause of the conda macro specifically for “if then” clauses with a single goal.
3. Unconditionally add a #s goal to each clause during macro expansion.

Each of these choices can, implicitly or explicitly, force additional unneeded executions of unwanted goals. Working with variable arity function syntax also suggests a more elegant solution for conda.

The implementation in Listing 12 includes the delay-and-restart behavior of ifte together with conda’s logical cascade. The s can be either empty, non-empty, or a function of no arguments. In the last case, we invoke s. Rather than building a largely redundant implementation of condu, we

```

(define ((conda q a . q-and-a*) s)
  (A (q s) a q-and-a* s))

(define (A s $\infty$  a q-and-a* s)
  (cond
    ((null? s $\infty$ )
     (cond
       ((null? (cdr q-and-a*)) ((car q-and-a*) s))
       (else (A ((car q-and-a*) s)
                  (cadr q-and-a*)
                  (cddr q-and-a*)
                  s))))
    ((pair? s $\infty$ ) (append-map $\infty$  a s $\infty$ ))
    (else (lambda () (A (s $\infty$ ) a q-and-a* s))))))

```

**Listing 12.** A functional conda implementation

```

(define (once g)
  (lambda (s)
    (let loop ((s-inf (g s)))
      (cond
        ((null? s-inf) '())
        ((pair? s-inf)
         (cons (car s-inf) '()))
        (else (lambda ()
                  (loop (s-inf)))))))

```

**Listing 13.** The once function

expose the higher-order goal `once` to the user. The definition of `once` in Listing 13 is taken directly from [4]. The programmer can simulate `condu` by wrapping `once` around every test goal.

## 5 Remainders and Practicalities

We have not fully obviated the use of macros. In this section we collect together some workarounds to obviate macros in the rest of the implementation. Some of these come with significant drawbacks. With these, however, a programmer in even a pedestrian functional language should be able to directly translate the implementation and our test programs.

**define.** The microKanren programmer can just use their host language’s `define` feature to construct relations as host-language functions, and manually introduce the delays in relations. This may be a larger concession than it looks, since it exposes the delay and interleave mechanism to the user, and both correct interleaving and even the termination of relation *definitions* rely on a whole-program correctness property of relation definitions having a delay. Listing 14 relies on a help function `Zzz` to introduce delays, akin to some earlier implementations [5].

```

(define (subtleo x)
  (Zzz
   (disj
    (subtleo x)
    (== x 'cat)))))

```

**Listing 14.** Omitting the delay is a subtle bug

```

(call/initial-state 1
  (let ((q (var 'q)))
    (conj
     (let ((x (var 'x)))
       (== q x))
     (reify q))))

```

**Listing 15.** Queries as expressed with global-state variables

**fresh.** In any implementation there must be some mechanism to produce the next fresh variable. For example, we treat the natural numbers as an indexed set of variables, and we thread the current index through the computation. We use `add1` to get the next index; to go from index to variable is the identity function. For another example, we could represent each variable using a unique memory location, sokuza-kanren [8] style, and the operation to produce a new variable requires introducing an unused memory location. Depending on the implementation of variables, you may also need additional functions to support your implementation of variables. If variables are not from an indexed set, you may also need an operation to (re)construct specifically the first element of the set, or otherwise store that value for later re-use.

Of course, one of these approaches requires memory allocation and external global state, while the other does not. Furthermore, the latter approach models logic variables as coming from a single global pool rather than reusing them separately across each disjunct, and so requires some global store and strictly more logic variables overall.

With this latter approach, however, we can expose `var` directly to the programmer and the programmer can use `let` bindings to introduce several logic variables simultaneously.

**run.** We note that we can also implement `run` without using macros. Using the purely-functional implementation of logic variables, the definitions of `run` and `run*` easily translate to functions like `call/initial-state` [5]. The query is itself expressed as a goal that introduces the first logic variable `q`. The pointer-based logic variable approach forces the programmer to explicitly invoke `reify` as though it were a goal as the last step of executing the query, as in Listing 15.

## 6 Future Work

This note shows how to provide a somewhat more powerful core language that significantly reduces the need for macros. The result almost rivals the expressivity of the full “microKanren + macros” approach. Variadic functions make this implementation much more convenient for the end programmer, and Scheme’s polyvariadic function syntax ensures at a host-language level that the microKanren programmer provides at least one parameter to `conj` and `disj`.

The old desugaring macros do not seem to suggest how to associate the calls to the binary primitives—both left and right look equally nice. Forcing ourselves to program the solution functionally, and the restrictions we placed on ourselves in this reimplementing, removed a degree of implementation freedom and led us to what seems like the right solution.

The result is closer to the design of Prolog, where the user represents conjunction of goals in the body of a clause with a comma and disjunction, either implicitly in listing various clauses or explicitly with a semicolon. We assume it is agreed that our definitions of `disj` and `conj` themselves are sufficiently high-level operators for a surface language and that the zero-element base cases are at best unnecessary and likely undesirable; given the opportunity to define a surface language and its desugaring, we really shouldn’t tempt the programmer by making undesirable programs representable when we can avoid it.

Techniques for implementing `defrel`, `fresh` and `run` (and `run*`) without macros come with serious drawbacks. These include exposing the implementation of streams and delays, and the inefficiency and clumsiness of introducing variables one at a time, or the need to reason with global state.

From time to time we find that the usual miniKanren implementation is *itself* lower-level than we would like to program with relations. Early microKanren implementations restrict themselves to syntax-rules macros. Some programmers use macros to extend the language further as with `match` [7]. Some constructions over miniKanren, such as `minikanren-ee` [1], may rely on more expressive macro systems like `syntax-parse` [2].

We would still like to know if our desiderata here are *causally* related to good miniKanren performance. Can we reason at the implementation level and peer through to the implications for performance? If left associating `conj` is indeed uniformly a dramatic improvement, the community might consider reclassifying left-associative conjunction as a matter of correctness rather than an optimization, as in “tail call optimization” vs. “Properly Implemented Tail Call Handling” [3]. Regardless, we hope this document helps narrow the gap between implementations in functional host languages with and without macro systems and helps implementers build more elegant, expressive and efficient Kanrens in their chosen host languages.

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