

On dynamic extensions of context-dependent parser

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Abstract

1 Introduction

Most of the modern programming language syntax cannot be formulated using a context free grammar only. The problem is that rich syntax very often comes with a number of ambiguities. Consider the following examples:

1. The classical example from C language is a type-cast syntax. As a user can define an arbitrary type using `typedef` construct, the type casting expression `(x) + 5` is undecidable, unless we know if `x` is a type or not.
2. Assume that we extend C syntax to allow an array concatenation using infix binary `++` operator and constant-arrays to be written as `[1, 2, 3]`. We immediately run into the problem to disambiguate the following expression: `a ++ [1]`, as it could mean an application of postfix `++` indexed by 1 or it could be an array concatenation of `a` and `[1]`.
3. Assuming the language allows any unary function to be applied as infix, postfix and standard notation, we cannot disambiguate an expression `log (x) - log (y)`, if we allow unary application of postfix minus. Potential interpretations are: `log (- log (x)) (y)` which is obviously an error, or `minus (log (x), log (y))`.

Sometimes it may be the case that context influences not only parsing decisions but also the lexing decisions. Consider the following examples:

1. C++ allows nested templates, which means that one could write an expression `template <type foo, list <int>>`, assuming that the last `>>` is two closing groups. In order to do that, the lexer must be aware of this context, as in a standard context character sequence `<<` means shift left.
2. Assuming that a programmer is allowed to define her own operators, the lexer rules must be changed, in case the name of the operator extends the existing one. For example, assume one defined an operation `+-`. It means that from now on an expression `+ -5` should be lexed as `(+ -, 5)`, rather than `(+, -, 5)`.

In order to resolve the above ambiguities using LALR parser generator engine, we have to make sure that one can annotate the grammar with a correct choices for each shift/reduce or reduce/reduce conflict, which puts a number of restrictions on the execution engine. Secondly, we have to implement the context support, which means that we need to have a mechanism which would not interfere with conflict-resolution. Finally, one has to have an interface to a lexer in case lexing becomes context-dependent, and it may be integrated with an error-recovery mechanism.

Having said that, we may see that using parser generators could be of the same challenge as writing a parser by hands, where all the ambiguities could be carefully resolved according to the language specification. As it turns out most of the complicated languages front-ends use hand-written recursive descent parsers, specially treating ambiguous cases. For example the following languages do: C/C++/ObjectiveC in GNU GCC [1], clang in LLVM [], javascript in google V8 [].

2 Parser model

Our work is concerned with a dynamic grammar modification on the fly, and as a base of our approach we are going to consider an LL(k) recursive descent parser with a certain properties.

As a running example in this paper we are going to use an imaginary language with a C-like syntax. Consider a grammar of the language.

```

program      ::= ( function ) * ;
function     ::= type-id '(' arg-list ')' stmt-block ;
arg-list     ::= ( type-id id ) * ;
stmt-block   ::= '{' ( expr | return ';' ) * '}' ;
expr         ::= fun-call | assign | cond-expr ;
fun-call     ::= id '(' ( expr ) * ')' ;
assign       ::= id '=' expr ;
cond-expr    ::= bin-expr '?' cond-expr ':' expr ;
bin-expr     ::= bin-expr binop primary-expr
primary-expr ::= number | prefix-op expr | '(' expr ')' ;
binop        ::= '&&' | '||' | '==' | '!=' ... ;
prefix-op    ::= '-' | '+' | '!' | '~' ;

```

First of all we ask, that every production is represented as a function with a signature `Parser -> (AST|Error)`, i.e. function gets a parser-object on input and returns either an AST node or an error. We would call those functions handle-functions. We require that handle-functions structure mimic a formulation of the grammar, i.e. if a production A depends on a production B, we require function handle-A to call function handle-B.

Each handle-function implements error recovery (if needed) and takes care about disambiguating productions according to the language specification, resolving operation priorities, syntax ambiguities and so on. Each handle function has an access to the parser, which keeps has an internal state, which changes when a handle-function is applied. In a some sense an application of a handle-function is a reduce step of a shift-reducer.

Each handle-function is paired with a predicate function which checks whether a sequence of tokens pointed by a parser-state matches a given rule. This type of functions we will call is-functions. Application of an is-function does not modify the state of the parser. Is-functions may require unbounded look-ahead from the parser, which also happens to be a requirement. We assume that in order to resolve complicated ambiguities unbounded look-ahead is needed anyways, as language expressions normally allow unbounded nesting.

Assuming that all the requirements are met, the grammar $G = (N, T, P, S)$ provides a full information required to build a support for user-defined matches.

3 Dynamic extension

We introduce a generic syntax extension which can be applied to any language recognized by a parser which meet all the requirements from section 2. The syntax extension is capable to perform standard preprocessing tasks providing also a functionality to do partial evaluation and non-trivial generic code transformations.

On the user level we introduce a single macro definition which is called `match` and which substitutes a sequence of tokens matched with a certain pattern with another sequence of tokens. Consider the following example:

```
match [\expr] foo ( a , b ) -> [\expr] a + b
```

where we substitute a sequence of tokens `foo (a,b)`, which would be normally matched by an ‘expr’ rule of our grammar, with token-sequence `a + b` and applying ‘expr’ production on them. The above definition has a number of differences from the classical C preprocessor macro-definition `#define foo(a, b) a + b`:

- The above macro definition is not a function and `a b` are not arguments. The macro will match expressions where identifiers `a` and `b` are passed. In terms of tokens, only the sequence of tokens ‘foo’, ‘(’, ‘a’, ‘b’, ‘)’ will be matched. Hence, the match would not replace expressions `foo (2, 3)` or `foo (b, a)`.
- The match is bounded to one particular production in the grammar, which is ‘expr’ in this example. It means that it would not perform a substitution in case one wrote `foo (a, b)` as a member of a statement block or a function header.
- The result of the substitution is always a single value, which avoids the classical situation with missing parentheses in the macro definition, i.e. if a macro-definition `#define foo(a, b) a + b` is applied to `foo (2,3) * 5`, expansion would make it `2 + 3 * 5`, where a conceptual expansion of the above match would look like `(2+3) * 5`.

It should be pointed out that in order to associate macro with some production it’s necessary to provide grammar rules for a programmer. This will allow to take context into account and to interact with grammar parser dynamically.

3.1 Language patterns

FIXME: *This subsection has to be rewritten!* The depicted parser would be impractical without pattern matching. To illustrate this we would like to match expression `foo(a, b)`, which can be occurred in place of ‘expr’ production and `a, b` are allowed to be any relevant arguments.

```
match [\expr] foo ( \expr , \expr )
  -> [\expr] \expr[1] + \expr[2]
```

Let’s compare this example with the previous one. We state here that we expect two token sequences in the brackets that would be interpreted as ‘expr’ productions. The type of production is important as this allows to perform an effective type checking. Specifically, this macro will recognize `foo (return 0, 1)` as a fallacious, unlike the C macro which will not point out any error.

It is noteworthy to mention about pitfalls of this approach. The macro extension associates user-defined rules with the grammar of the language. Therefore, these rules might conflict with existing ones and an ambiguous grammar can be produced. We state here that user has to control such situations himself, otherwise, an error of the parser will be raise.

Furthermore, we provide an interface to a lexer. For instance, it’s possible to use some specific tokens in user-defined productions.

```
match [\expr] | \expr | -> [\expr] absolute_value (\expr[1])
```

Here we introduce a new `|` token which could be used for getting an absolute number value. A remarkable point is that expressions such as `|-5|` or even `||-5||`, as this macro takes lexical scope into account. Notice that `|1|2|` will produce an error as expected.

New tokens defined in the left part of the matcher are appended to a valid token table. We can use them equally well as ‘native grammar’ tokens. It allows to build legacy rules using new tokens:

```
match [\expr] < \expr > -> [\expr] | \expr[1] |
```

As a matter of fact only defined tokens can be used in the right part of the macro.

FIXME: *Rewritten until this very moment*

Matches work as a standard Term Rewrite System (S, R) , where S is a set of terms; $S = L_t \cup P_t$, where L_t is a set of tokens recognized by lexer, and P_t is a set of pseudo-tokens which are escaped production-names of the parser. R is a set of rewrite rules, where $\forall r_i \in R \Rightarrow r_i :: \{S \cup P_t\}^n \rightarrow S^m$. R_t is a set of regular expression symbols which is allowed to formulate a rule.

Each rule has a general form of:

$$s_1 \text{ if } p(s_1) \rightarrow s_2.$$

Where s_1 is a regular expression over tokens and pseudo-tokens, $p(s_1)$ is a predicate which must evaluate to true, in order to enable match expand; s_2 is a sequence of tokens and pseudo-tokens which is used as a substitution.

The left hand side of each match allows a user to build a new production of the grammar restricted by a power of regular expressions. So, for instance it would not be possible to build a rule $(a^k b^m, k = m)$, as the new rule is recognized by DFA without any memory.

Now as a left-hand side of the match has a free form and the rewriting system is recursive by its nature, we face a number of problems in case we want to prove correctness of the system. We have a standard word problem and stopping problem of the rewrite system. It is important to understand that in our case we are not dealing with a single TRS, but we have a mechanism to construct an arbitrary rewrite system.

Another important problem is to guarantee that the right-hand side of the match, is a valid rule in a given production of a given grammar. For example:

```
...
match [\expr] bar ( \id, \expr )      -> [\expr] \id{1} ( \expr{1} )■
match [\expr] foo ( \expr , \expr )   -> [\expr] bar ( baz , \expr{1} )■
match [\expr] \id ( \expr )           -> [\expr] \id{1} ( \expr{1}, \expr{1} )■
...
```

Here we can see, that there is no chance to check statically whether the last rule is going to be expanded to the one of the matches or not, as it depends only on the value of `id`. Now, in case of `foo` we cannot check, if a user meant to pass a higher-order function `baz` or just a token `baz`.

It would be possible to resolve the situation at runtime, and one still would not be able to get a program that does not belong to the language generated by the grammar. However, the meaning of the program is unprovable, which practically means we have a powerful tool to obfuscate the code.

In order to resolve the situation, we want to introduce more static knowledge to the rewriting rules by introducing types. Now, we have to understand, that there is a clear distinction between the match that performs a substitution, and the helper-matches which make a transformation of the tokens matched by the left part of the match. The main reason here is that when we express a transformation of the matched token-sequence, the intermediate results we pass through helper-matches don't have to be a valid parser expressions. However we still want to type-check them. Consider the following example: (`expr + expr ...`):

```
match [\expr] foo (\expr \[, \expr \) *)
-> [\expr] bar replace (tail (res), \, , +)
```

This match replaces function `foo` (1,2,3) call with `bar` (1+2+3). In order to do that we want to have a generic function that operates on the list of tokens and pseudo-tokens, which replaces every occurrence of `,` with `+`. Evaluation of `'replace'` happens outside of any productions and in general case, the return type of such a type of a function could be not a valid input for any parser production.

It means that here we would like to make a clear cut between the match and the match-function. We should keep in mind, that it is always possible to express any match-function using the rewriting system of the matches, however first of all we would like to introduce the semantics and type system description for both matches and match-functions.

3.2 Type system

Obviously matches and match-functions have to share the notion of types they are operating with. What kind of types the matched left-hand side of the match can produce? If we consider that each pseudo-token represents a type, we may note that the regular expression automatically generates an algebraic data type. This is fairly easy to prove constructively:

1. Each pseudo-token generates a type.
2. Each concatenation generates a tuple.
3. Each choice generates an alternative. For instance `\id|\expr` can be represented with a type `(id|expr)`.
4. Each asterisk generates a list of types generated by a sub-asterisk expression. For example: `\(a | b \) *` can be represented as `[(a | b)]`.

Finally, in order to express a bounded recursion, one has to operate with integer and boolean types. Supporting algebraic data types comes with several built-in function in order to traverse the lists and to find the type of the variable at runtime, for being able to branch depending on the type of the expression. So we introduce the following built-in functions:

head Returns the first element of the list or `nil`

tail Returns the list without the first element.

concat Construct a list from two lists.

type Return a type of a given expression.

Finally we have to introduce the syntax of the match-functions and describe the way one can check that the type returned by an application of the match-functions is correct with respect to the grammar rule on the right hand side of the match.

3.3 Match-function syntax

The syntax of the match function can be derived from a functional language like ML, making sure that the types are properly recognized.

FIXME: *BLA-BLA-BLA*

Now let's consider an example which replaces `foo (expr, expr ...)` with `bar (expr + expr + ...)`.

```
match-fun replace :: ([expr|\op[',']], \op['']) \op \op
                -> ([expr|\op['+'']], \op[''])
replace lst r w = lst if len (lst) == 1
                  |
                  concat (head (lst), replace (tail (lst), r, w))
                  if (type (head (lst)) == \expr)
                  |
                  tail (lst) otherwise
```

```
match [\expr] foo ( \expr \(, \expr\) * )
-> [\expr] bar ( replace (tail (tail (res))), \,, + )
```

4 Application

4.1 Preprocessing

4.2 Templates

4.3 Optimisation potential

5 Evaluation

Here is a bunch of links for the existing macro-preprocessors:

ML/I	http://www.ml1.org.uk/html/doc/ml1sig.html
GEMA	http://gema.sourceforge.net/new/docs.shtml
GPP	http://files.nothingisreal.com/software/gpp/gpp.html В этой штуке советую заглянуть в ADVANCED EXAMPLES с лямбдой
TRAC	http://web.archive.org/web/20050205172849/http://tracfoundation.org/t2001tech.htm Это очень разумная идея правда совсем дохлая – там тоже функциональный язык внутри живет, но работает на строках кажись

Еще бывают: m4, cpp, lisp/scheme macros, tex?...

5.1 Lisp macros

In some way the concept of Lisp is very close to the idea of dynamic parser described here. Instead of operating with strings, Lisp deals with tokens. However, the syntax of Lisp is very different from the most programming languages. This makes macro transformation an efficient tool in Lisp. The main question here is to figure out are we capable to have a similar functionality in our dynamic parser regardless syntax differences.

A Lisp program is represented as a nested list structure. Each list represents a form which can be transformed or evaluated. The homoiconicity in Lisp allows to simplify macro processing significantly. Consider the problem mentioned in section 1: $\log(x) - \log(y)$ – expression which could be interpreted differently depending on the context. In Lisp each case would have a separate representation: $((\log(-(\log x))) y)$ or $(-(\log x) (\log y))$. You can see that there is no need for compiler to guess the context.

There is another advantage of such approach. The prefix notation allows to make a decision depending on the first character in the list. Particularly, there are two options:

1. Mark expression as a function call, providing the first character is defined in the function table.
2. Evaluate the expression given a macro definition.

A macro expansion consists of two steps as well, which are performed sequentially:

1. Build an expression specified by macro definition.
2. Evaluate generated expression.

These steps are distinguished as the first one operates with expressions, and the second one deals with its values. To perform evaluation an expression-value table is needed, because when expression transformation can't be performed, the evaluation process begins. Macro expansion performance capabilities generally depend on evaluation. To improve evaluation there are several incremental Lisp compilers. These compilers can evaluate expressions in macro when all necessary information become available.

It should be pointed out that it is possible to build a dynamic parser similar to the one in Lisp, however some issues are to be handled:

- Given a program represented as a sequence of tokens, it is necessary to resolve the context unambiguously. In some particular cases it could be a tricky task, as a number of look-ahead tokens is unbounded.
- There is no 'decisive' token in the sequence. We are to use regular expressions to parse the whole expression.

6 Future work

References

- [1] Free Software Foundation. GCC. <http://gcc.gnu.org>.