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Towards Efficient Search: Leveraging Relational Interpreters and Partial Deduction Techniques

by

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Towards Efficient Search: Leveraging Relational Interpreters and Partial Deduction Techniques

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Abstract. There is a duality between the problems of verification and search. It becomes evident in the context of relational, or pure logic, programming. Since any program in this paradigm can be executed in different modes, one interpreter can serve as both a verifier and a solver. One disadvantage of this method is its often poor performance. Several specialization techniques can be employed to mitigate the issue based on a mode and partially known arguments, i.e. the information known prior to execution. The goal of this work is to leverage partial deduction techniques to improve the performance of relational interpreters within the verifier-to-solver approach.

1 Introduction

Verifying a solution to a problem is much easier than finding one—this common wisdom is known to anyone who has ever had the opportunity to both teach and learn [20]. Consider the Tower of Hanoi, a well-known mathematical puzzle. In it, you have three rods and a sequence of disks of various diameters stacked on one rod so that no disk lies on top of a smaller one, forming a pyramid. The task is then to move all disks on a different rod in such a way that:

- Only one disk can be moved at a time.
- A move consists of taking a topmost disk from one stack and placing it on top of an empty rod or a different stack.
- No bigger disk can be placed on top of a smaller disk.

It is trivial to verify that a sequence of moves is legal, namely, that it does not break the pyramid invariant. Searching for such a sequence is more convoluted, and writing a solver for this problem necessitates understanding of recursion and mathematical induction. The same parallels can be drawn between other related tasks: interpretation of a program is less involved than program synthesis; type checking is much simpler than type inhabitation problem. And in these cases, the first problem can be viewed as a case of verification, while the other is search. Luckily, there is a not-so-obvious duality between the two tasks. The process of finding a solution can be seen as an inversion of verification.

There are many ways one can invert a program [1,2,3]. One of them achieves the goal by using logic programming. In this paradigm, each program is a specification based on formal logic. The central point of the approach is that one specification can solve multiple problems by running appropriate queries, which is also known by running a program in different *directions* or modes.

For example, a program `append xs ys zs` relates two lists `xs` and `ys` with their concatenation `zs`. We can supply the program with two concrete lists and run the program in the forward direction to find the result of concatenation: `run q (append [1,2] [3] q)`, which is a list `q = [1,2,3]`. Moreover, we can run the program backwards by giving it only the value of the last argument: `run p, q (append p q [1,2])`. In this direction, the program searches for every pair of lists that can be concatenated to `[1,2]`, and it evaluates to three possible answers: `{<p = [], q = [1, 2]>; <p = [1], q = [2]>; <p = [1,2], q = []>}`.

Now, consider a verifier written in a logic programming language for the Tower of Hanoi puzzle `verify moves isLegal`. Given a specific sequence of moves, it will compute `isLegal = True` or `isLegal = False` based on whether the sequence is admissible. However, if we execute the same verifier backwards, say `run q (verify q True)`, then it will find all possible legal sequences of moves, thus serving as a solver. One neat feature is that one can generate a logic verifier from its

functional implementation by relational conversion [21], or unnesting. Thus, one can implement a simple, often trivial, program that checks that a candidate is indeed a solution and then get a solver almost for free.

This verifier-to-solver approach is widely known in the pure logic (also called relational) programming community gathered around the KANREN language family [10,6]. These are light-weight, easily extendible, embedded languages aimed to bring the power of logic programming into general purpose languages. They also implement the complete search strategy that is capable of finding every answer to a query, given enough time [13]. The last feature distinguishes KANREN from PROLOG and other well-known logic languages, which have not been designed with search completeness in mind. In addition to this, KANREN discourages the use of cuts and non-relational constructions such as `copy-term` that are prevalent in other logic languages, and for that reason, every program writen in pure KANREN can be safely run in any direction.

The caveat of the framework is its often poor performance when done in the naive way. Firstly, execution time of a relational program highly depends on its direction. The verifiers created by unnesting inherently work fast only in the forward direction, not when they are run as solvers. Secondly, there are associated costs of relational programming itself: from expensive unifications to the scheduling complexity [28]. Lastly, when a program is run as a solver, we often know some of its arguments. For example, the solver for the Tower of Hanoi will always be executed with the argument `isLegal = True`.

A family of optimization techniques called *specialization*, or *partial evaluation*, are capable of mitigating some of the listed sources of inefficiency [8,35]. Specialization precomputes parts of program execution based on information known about a program before execution. For example, consider a function `exp n x = if n == 0 then 1 else x * (exp (n - 1) x)` and imagine that we know from some context that it is always being called with the argument `n` equal to `4`. In this case, we can partially evaluate the function to `exp_4 x = x * x * x * x * 1` that is more efficient than the original function called with `n = 4`. Note, that a smart enough specializer can also be able to generate a function of form `exp_4 x = let sqr = x * x in sqr * sqr` that makes even less multiplications.

This pattern can be expressed in a way that if there is a function with some of its arguments statically known `f` x_{static} $y_{dynamic}$, it can be transformed into a more efficient function `f_`x_{static} with its parts dependent on the static arguments precomputed. The resulting program must be equivalent to the original one, meaning that given the same dynamic arguments, it will return the same results: `f` x_{static} $y_{dynamic}$ `==` `f_`x_{static} $y_{dynamic}$.

In the field of logic programming, specialization is generally known as partial deduction [16]. Besides the values of static arguments, a partial deducer can also consider the information about a direction of a program or the interaction between logic variables in a conjunction of calls. In addition to specialization, a relation with a given direction can be converted into a function in which expensive logic operations are replaced with streamlined functional counterparts.

In this research, we have adapted several well-known partial evaluation algorithms for logic programming to work with MINIKANREN—a minimal core relational language. We have also developed a novel partial evaluation method called Conservative Partial Deduction [35]. Then we combined it with the functional conversion in an effort to get even greater performance increase [36].

The goal of the research is to determine what combination of partial evaluation techniques is capable of making the verifier-to-solver approach a reality.

2 Related Work

2.1 Logic Programming Languages

Over the years, multiple logic programming languages have been developed, with PROLOG [5] being the most widespread. It was the first successful attempt to enable declarative programming by means of writing programs in a subset of formal logic. At its core, PROLOG uses Horn clauses, a semidecidable subset of first-order predicate logic. Each program formulates a set of facts and predicates that connect these facts. The evaluation of a program is done by an Selective Linear Definite clause resolution [27] (SLD resolution) of a query, often following depth-first approach.

For years, logic programming was highly limited by hardware capabilities, leading to necessary compromises. One of them was an early removal of occurs-check from the unification algorithm [7].

This means that running a query `"? f(X, a(X))."`, given a program `"f(X, X)."`, produces a nonsensical result `"X ↦ a(X)"`. It is up to the user to ensure that a variable never occurs in a term it is unified with. Fortunatelly, a special sound unification predicate such as `unify_with_occurs_check` can be used to prevent such results.

Another compromise is linked to the implementation details and has more significant consequences. Logic languages are inherently nondeterministic, and evaluation on a deterministic computer requires decisions about how to explore the search space. PROLOG was first designed for automatic theorem proving, an area in which a single solution to a query is generally sufficient. Thus, most PROLOG implementations feature depth-first search, which often results in either nontermination or the generation of infinitely many similar answers to a query when an infinite branch of the search tree is explored. Additionally, non-relational constructs such as a cut and `copy-term` have been adopted for efficiency reason. Unfortunately, these two aspects often limit a relation to a single mode and directly contradict the main idea of declarative programming: a program can no longer be written with disregard of the peculiarities of the language.

Recently, there has been a resurgence of the logic programming paradigm with the emergence of new languages, including MERCURY[3], CURRY[4], MINIKANREN[5], and others. Additionally, a prominent video games developer Epic Games invested into designing a new functional-logic programming language [4]. This new generation of logic languages combines the paradigms of logic and more mainstream fuctional programming. MERCURY and CURRY are stand-alone logic-functional programming languages with dedicated compilers that makes it difficult to interoperate with bigger systems typically written in a general-purpose language.

In contrast, MINIKANREN is implemented as a lightweight embedded domain-specific language, enabling the power of logic programming in any general purpose language. MINIKANREN features interleaving search [13] that guarantees that every solution to a query will be found, given enough time. Moreover, its extendible architecture allows for easy experimentation and addition of new features. The main design philosophy of MINIKANREN is to adhere to the pure logic programming as much as possible, so any program can be called in any direction. Taking all these considerations into account, we chose MINIKANREN as the main language for this research.

2.2 Specialization

The first specialization method, called supercompilation, was introduced by Turchin in 1986 [32]. It was designed for the Refal programming language [34], which was significantly different from the mainstream languages of the time. Since then, supercompilation has been adapted for various languages, expanding its utility across various programming paradigms [14,22]. Numerous modifications have also emerged, featuring alternative termination strategies, generalization, and splitting techniques [17,31,33].

Several optimizations rely on the information about program arguments known statically. These optimizations precompute the parts of the program that depend on the known arguments and produce a more efficient residual program. Such transformations are generally known as mixed computations, specialization, or partial evaluation. It was first introduced by Ershov [9] and was mostly aimed at imperative languages. A lot of effort has been extended to partial evaluation [12,11] since its first appearance, including the development of self-applicable partial evaluators.

In logic programming, a general framework called rules + strategies, or fold/unfold transformations, was introduced by Pettorossi and Proietti [26,25]. It serves as a foundational theory for many semantics-preserving transformations, including tupling, specialization, compiling control, and partial deduction. Unfortunately, this approach relies on user guidance for control decisions, its termination is not always guaranteed, and because of it its automation is complicated.

Specialization in logic programming is commonly referred to as partial deduction. It was introduced by Komorowski [15] and formalized by Lloyd and Shepherdson [19]. Comparing to fold/unfold transformations, partial deduction is less powerful, because it considers every atom on its own and does not track dependencies between variables. However, it is significantly easier to control and can be automated.

[3] The website of the MERCURY programming language `https://mercurylang.org/`

[4] The website of the CURRY programming language `https://curry.pages.ps.informatik.uni-kiel.de/curry-lang.org/`

[5] The website of the MINIKANREN programming language `http://minikanren.org/`

The main drawback of partial deduction is addressed by Leuschel with conjunctive partial deduction [8] in the ECCE system. This method makes use of the interaction between conjuncts for specialization, removing some repeating traversals of data structures as a result. We implemented this algorithm as a proof-of-concept for `miniKanren`, and found out that some of the specialization results were subpar. In some cases, the specialized programs performed worse than the original ones.

Partial evaluators are categorized into offline and online methods, depending on whether control decisions are made before or during the specialization stage. LOGEN is the implementation of the offline approach for logic programming, developed by Leuschel [18]. It includes an automatic binding-time analysis to derive annotations used to guide the specialization process. Offline specialization usually takes less time than online, and is capable to generate shorter and more efficient programs.

The fact that majority of PROLOG implementations do not impose a type system may be seen as a disadvantage when it comes to optimizations. MERCURY developed a strong static type and mode system that can be used in compilation [24,23]. Mode analysis embodies data-flow analysis that makes it possible to compile the same definition into several functions specialized for the given direction.

3 Research Objectives

The goal of the research is to figure out what combination of partial evaluation techniques is capable of making the verifier-to-solver approach a reality. This involves the following tasks:

- Explore partial deduction techniques specifically developed for logic programming, focusing on their application to relational interpreters.
- Implement functional conversion to generate a function that retains the semantics of the original relational interpreter.
- Integrate the specialization methods with the conversion for further speed up.
- Collect a benchmark suite to evaluate the performance impact of these transformations.

4 Current Progress

To date, several steps have been taken towards achiving the research objectives.

Firstly, we formalized the verifier-to-solver approach in the paper *"Relational Interpreters for Search Problems."* by Petr Lozov, Ekaterina Verbitskaia, and Dmitry Boulytchev, published at the Relational Programming Workshop, 2019. The full text is available here. This paper also highlights the pitfalls of the approach and motivates the need for program specialization.

Secondly, we noticed that Conjunctive Partial Deduction generates vastly different results depending on the order of the conjuncts within a definition. In an effort to combat this drawback, we proposed a novel partial evaluation for MINIKANREN in the paper *"An Empirical Study of Partial Deduction for MINIKANREN."* by Ekaterina Verbitskaia, Daniil Berezun, and Dmitry Boulytchev, published at Verification and Program Transformation Workshop, 2021. The full text is available here. The difference with CPD lies in the way conjunctions are treated. They are split more often and thus generate smaller programs. The method was able to achieve a 1.5-2 times performance increase on a propositional evaluator program and almost a 40 times performance increase on a type checker.

Finally, we described functional conversion that makes it possible to generate a functional implementation of a solver from a functional implementation of a verifier in the paper *"A Case Study in Functional Conversion and Mode Inference in MINIKANREN."* by Ekaterina Verbitskaia, Igor Engel, and Daniil Berezun, published at the Partial Evaluation and Program Manipulation Workshop, 2024. The full text is available here. We were able to get rid of some inefficiences innate to the relational programming itself. Among these are expensive unification with occurs-check that can often be replaced with much cheaper functional couterparts such as pattern matching and syntactic equality check based on the program's mode. To achived this goal, we adapted mode analysis [30,29] to MINIKANREN. This analysis determines data flow based on what variables are known to be ground at runtime and also reorders conjuncts based on a heuristic aimed at

reducing the search space. The implemented functional conversion gave the propositional evaluation program a 2.5-fold increase in performance. For some programs dealing with arithmetic, it improved performance by up to two orders of magnitude.

Significant progress has already been made in all the main declared areas, so to complete the work, it remains to collect all the results and describe their joint contribution to bringing the verifier-to-solver approach to life.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this research proposal aims to study the application of partial deduction and functional conversion within relational interpreters, focusing on converting verifiers to solvers. The introduction of Conservative Partial Deduction and functional conversion has shown its potential by increasing the efficiency of relational interpreters. The next steps involve refining these techniques and integrating them into a comprehensive system that could transform the functionality of relational interpreters. By conducting thorough benchmarking, this work plans to further validate the effectiveness of these methods and push the boundaries of what relational logic programming can achieve.

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