

Coping with shared mutable state in a typestate-oriented concurrent language

ABSTRACT

In this PhD thesis plan, we propose to design a type system for a core **object** and **typestate-oriented** language to reason on **shared mutable state** while ensuring *memory* and *thread-safety*, *protocol compliance* (that method calls are performed in order) and *completion* (if the program terminates, all protocols are finished and resources are freed). We plan to address this by implementing a **type system framework** parametric over **separation algebras** allowing one to distinguish between *thread-local* and *thread-shared* resources, and between *affine* and *linear* ones.

1 CONTEXT

Users expect applications to be well-behaved and efficient. However, all sorts of bugs appear in software. Issues compromising memory-safety, like null dereferencing [17], dangling pointers, or memory leaks, lead to crashes. Since concurrency is intrinsic to modern software and hardware, issues affecting thread-safety, like data-races or race-conditions [36], lead to subtle bugs [29]. Protocol-related bugs [4, 38], like executing methods out of order, or forgetting to call a finalizer method, result in programs that fail to follow the intended behaviour, leading to business logic issues or even security ones [11–13, 28]. For efficiency, modern software relies heavily on imperative and concurrent language features, exploiting shared mutable state. However, reasoning about these programs is very difficult [26, 29]. Thus, software verification is crucial to ensure programs are correct with respect to their intended behaviour [18].

Most static verification techniques are based either on type systems or deductive logics. *Type systems* are widely used in industrial languages to avoid data-errors. However, most do not prevent critical bugs, like null dereferencing, such as C and Java. More modern languages have adopted richer type systems that avoid more errors: Kotlin distinguishes nullable from non-nullable types; Rust’s ownership model guarantees memory and thread-safety. Nonetheless, mainstream languages still do not enforce relevant properties, such as guaranteeing that object protocols are followed and completed. Behavioural type disciplines, like typestates [14, 16, 40, 41] and session types [19, 20, 42], have been proposed and thoroughly studied to fill this gap, but are not used in the industry. *Deductive reasoning* is not integrated in compilers; nonetheless, it is used to verify properties that cannot be expressed in common type systems, like functional correctness. For instance, the VeriFast tool verifies C and Java code given separation logic specifications [22].

2 PROBLEMS

In the literature, there are many approaches to static program verification. However, each solution is usually focused on a particular issue and is limited to a fixed set of features. So, there is no *unified system* which combines the qualities of several approaches while accounting for modern features. For example, dynamic thread creation is usually not accounted for in high-level languages, while parallel composition, which is not used in modern languages, is subject of

more research, as Dodds et al. [15] point out. Moreover, there are useful disciplines in the literature that are not then implemented in mainstream programming languages, such as behavioural types [1].

There is also a tension between expressiveness and proof ease. *Type systems* have a lower annotation effort than deductive logics but are usually less expressive. One may need unnecessary workarounds to show that the code is correct, like rewriting it in an unnatural way, using defensive programming, or using locks in sequential code. In the worst case, the code might not be accepted. *Deductive logics* are more expressive but may require challenging proofs or cumbersome encodings [33]: the developer wastes time, and the correctness proof intuition gets lost in the encoding.

Thus, programming languages should ideally provide: (1) a *unified framework* to check safety of code supporting several modern features – connecting what exists in the literature with what is used in the industry; (2) a *balance* between expressiveness and proof ease, exploiting low specification efforts and good abstractions – improving developer experience. We consider that a *decidable type system* can provide the right balance since the programmer would not be required to provide proofs. However, a *unified framework* to deal with **protocols** and **shared mutable state** in type systems is still lacking and there are problems that still need to be addressed. In particular, we identify three concrete unsolved issues:

- (1) Sharing patterns are severely limited: either sharing is forbidden (by enforcing linearity¹), or limited to a fixed set of capabilities, or a certain ownership discipline, preventing circular data structures from being implemented;
- (2) Thread-local data and thread-shared data are not differentiated, forcing the use of locks even in sequential code;
- (3) Protocol completion is supported only in linear settings. In the presence of sharing, affinity² has been preferred, leading to memory leaks or uncompleted protocols.

To highlight these points, please consider, for example purposes, the JavaScript asynchronous code [27, 34, 39] in List. 1 featuring a producer and consumer. Both share a queue (implemented as an linked list) containing stateful objects with protocol (line 1). The producer performs a task and adds the result to the queue (lines 4-5). The consumer keeps taking values while there are objects to consume or while a producer is requesting the queue for future additions (lines 10-11). Due to the interleaving of actions and the sharing pattern exhibited, which relies on a complex cooperation between the producer and consumer (i.e. the producer adds items expecting the consumer to receive them all and complete their protocols), verifying that the protocols are respected and completed is not trivial. If the producer requested the queue in line 5 instead of line 16, it would be possible for the consumer to execute first, observe that the queue was empty and unused, and terminate immediately. After the producer finished, the whole program would terminate with the queue having unconsumed objects.

¹Which only allows one reference to data.

²Which allows data to not be used (i.e. dropped).

Listing 1: Asynchronous producer and consumer

```
117
118 1 const queue = new Queue();
119 2
120 3 async function producer() {
121 4   const data = await otherTask1();
122 5   queue.add(data);
123 6   queue.unuse();
124 7 }
124 8
125 9 async function consumer() {
126 10  while (queue.inUse()) {
127 11    const data = await queue.take();
128 12    await otherTask2(data);
129 13  }
129 14 }
130 15 // Claim use before starting the consumer
131 16 queue.use();
131 17 await Promise.all([producer(), consumer()]);
```

Issue 1 prevents the verification of the queue and controlling the states of the objects [33]. Some approaches might be able to tackle this, but at the cost of either not having a fine-grained resource control, necessary to ensure protocol completion (Issue 3), or by requiring the use of deductive reasoning. Moreover, as explained before, the sharing pattern relies on a complex cooperation between the producer and consumer which is difficult to model while ensuring protocol completion. How to tame mutable shared state has been usually studied either in sequential settings or multi-threaded programs. For this reason, unless the program is fully sequential, it is usually assumed that data may be shared between threads, forcing one to use some form of synchronization to access it (Issue 2). Finally, as far as we can tell, principled techniques to better handle mutable shared state in single-threaded asynchronous settings have not been proposed (where the interleaving of asynchronous calls leads to concurrency without parallelism³ - thanks to the “run to completion” scheduling of event loops [10, 31, 34, 39, 43]).

The borrowing rules of Rust [44] do not support this scenario. One would likely need to use locks to control the access to the queue and reference counting to know when to drop the queue, moving the verification to run time. Even with a library⁴, the types are fixed so there is no notion of protocol. CLASS [37] does not support fine-grained resource control or linear state in cells. Access permissions of Plural [5] are not expressive enough to model this kind of cooperation. Rely-guarantee protocols [30] could be used to model the example, but locks are required in concurrent settings and protocol completion is not guaranteed. The aforementioned issues have been addressed in some settings, but still only partially:

- (1) With the proliferation of solutions to tackle issues of expressiveness, each one with their own advantages and disadvantages, a unified framework is desired. Iris, a framework for higher-order concurrent separation logic [24], allows users to implement their own logical (ghost) resources (as partial commutative monoids), and has been successfully used to derive and implement many different formal systems. Although Iris is an unifying and expressive framework, deductive reasoning and expertise are required.

³As Cutsem et al. [10] point out, “the use of event loops avoids low-level data races that are inherent in the shared-memory multithreading paradigm”.

⁴<https://doc.rust-lang.org/std/sync/mpsc/fn.channel.html>

- (2) There is some work on capabilities which distinguish between thread-local from thread-shared data [8, 9, 45], but the set of available capabilities is fixed and there are limitations to how data may be transferred between threads. In Iris, it is possible to encode “thread-local invariants” which can be opened non-atomically [21], but doing the encoding is non-trivial and requires expert users.
- (3) Recent logics have preferred to use affine resources, such as Iris, which do not allow the precise tracking of resources. However, there is now some work extending Iris with linear resources [23], or even both kinds [7, 25]. Unfortunately, this is only available in the deductive logics realm.

3 RESEARCH STATEMENT

Our main objective for the PhD thesis is to:

Design a typed core OO language supporting shared mutable state and objects protocols, with memory and thread-safety, protocol compliance and completion.

The core language should provide modern features, support **protocols**, and reason about **shared mutable state**. Safe programs should be *memory-safe* (i.e. no null dereferencing, dangling pointers or memory leaks) and *thread-safe* (i.e. no low-level data-races). Moreover, safe programs should respect all objects protocols (*protocol compliance*) and ensure that upon termination all protocols are finished (*protocol completion*). The former is crucial to ensure that methods are executed in the right sequence. The latter is critical to guarantee that necessary method calls are not forgotten and resources are freed. To fulfil this goal, we plan the following.

Formalise the language semantics supporting modern features, like aliasing, mutable state, locks, dynamic thread creation (with fork and join), and asynchronous code (enabled by each thread having an event loop, inspired by AmbientTalk [10] and JavaScript [34, 39]), in the Coq proof assistant [3].

Develop a type system framework *parametric* over *separation algebras* [6], allowing more expressive ways to reason about shared data. Taking inspiration from Iris [24], we want to ease the creation of new type systems, without requiring one to repeat soundness proofs: one just needs to instantiate the framework with the right sharing capabilities. We plan to mechanise the solution in the Coq proof assistant [3], using computer-aided proofs to establish the soundness of the approach. With this *type system based approach*, we believe we provide a much needed balance between expressiveness and ease of use while providing an *unifying framework* from which more works can be developed, to avoid adding to “the next 700 type systems” [35]. The *technical novelties* would include the ability to distinguish between thread-local and thread-shared resources, and between affine and linear ones. Moreover, we will develop a *decidable algorithm* from the rules of the resulting type system.

Evaluate the approach by applying the principles in mainstream languages, like TypeScript or Java. JaTyC [2, 32], a Java typestate-checking tool, has been our test ambient. It statically ensures memory-safety, protocol compliance and completion. However, objects must be used linearly. To support flexible sharing, we also plan to develop an integration of typestates with particular *separation algebras*, such as access permissions [5] and rely-guarantee protocols [30], thus going beyond the state of the art.

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