

Implementing Semantics of Object Oriented Languages Using Attribute Grammars

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Abstract

Object-oriented solutions are becoming an established paradigm for writing robust, reusable software. Many object-oriented languages have begun to appear. This paper examines how the special object-oriented concepts might be implemented in a compiler using the also wellestablished tool of attribute grammars.

KEYWORDS: Attribute grammar, object-oriented, inheritance, polymorphism, late binding

1 Introduction

Attribute Grammars, invented by Knuth in the 60's (Knu68, Knu71), are used for semantic analysis by compiler writers in many of today's compilers and compiler tools (Far82, Lor84, Aho86, Fis88). Static type checking, storage allocation, expressions for array offsets,

even symbol table creation and dataflow analysis (Bab78, Boc78) are described using attributes and attribute grammars.

Object-oriented programming languages present special problems to the compiler designer. Encapsulation, information hiding, message passing and methods, inheritance, overloading and polymorphism, late binding, are concepts associated with object oriented programming (Wil87). The syntax and semantics for expressing these concepts is an issue for compiler designers, as well.

In this paper, an attribute grammar is presented describing some object-oriented programming language concepts. Every effort has been made to keep the syntax and semantics simple and yet broad enough to be applied to actual object-oriented languages. A pseudocode example (a Banking System) and its BNF are used for illustration.

Section 2 reviews object-oriented concepts in order to show the philosophy and simplifications made to arrive at the pseudocode; Section 3 contains the BNF and the bank example; Section 4 reviews attribute grammars and their use in creating language processors; Section 5 shows the attributes and semantic functions for implementing the semantics of object-oriented programming concepts. Section 6 draws conclusions concerning the applicability of this to object-oriented languages.

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2 Review of Object-Oriented Concepts

Object-oriented concepts evolved from encapsulation and information hiding of abstract data types. To encapsulation and information hiding are added messages, methods, inheritance, overloading, polymorphism, and late binding (Cox86, Sch87).

In this paper, we adopt the definitions of object-oriented as defined in [Weg87]. Thus, an object-oriented language supports objects which, themselves, belong to classes. The classes are hierarchically connected by an inheritance mechanism.

In addition, we consider polymorphism and late-binding.

2.1 Objects, Classes and Data Abstraction

Objects are dynamic data on which dynamic actions are performed, and which have a state. A class is a static grouping to which similar objects belong and under whose auspices new objects may be created. The data is described by variables and behavior is characterized by permitted operations.

Data abstraction hides the internal representation of the data and the implementation of the operations. The user specifies what operation is to be performed, not how the operation is to be performed.

2.2 Messages and Methods

Data abstraction prevents an object's data from being directly manipulated. To perform an operation on an object, a message is sent. The message contains a selector which tells the object what to do. The message may also contain parameters to aid in the operation or through which the object may return values.

A class groups actions called methods and variables called class variables. When an object of a particular class receives a message to perform an action, it finds the method(s) corresponding to the message selector and performs the action. For a banking system, a message may be sent to a Savings Account object telling it to generate an account number for a new Savings Account. *GenerateAccountNumber* is the selector in the message. The sender of the message does not know how this number is generated. The object Savings Account invokes its method, *GenerateAccountNumber* to generate the account number.

Two types of variables may be identified - class variables whose values vary for each object instance of that class and shared variables whose values are common and accessible to, and changeable by, all object instances of a class.

2.3 Subclasses, Superclasses and Inheritance

Reusability of software is enhanced via inheritance, a technique for defining new classes called subclasses in terms of existing classes. These new classes are defined by describing how they are similar and how they differ from their preexisting super classes. They may share the same memory layout and respond to messages with the same or slightly altered methods.

A subclass is said to inherit characteristics of its superclass, enabling the creation of classes which are very similar to other classes, thus saving "programmer" time. Multiple inheritance allows a class to inherit from more than one superclass. Altering a method from that of a superclass is referred to as specialization. In our model, inheritance of data and methods is stated explicitly. This does not require the programmer to write (much) more code, and is worth the tradeoff in safety.

A Bank Account class may have two subclasses, Checking Account and Savings Account. These subclasses may inherit many, but not all, of the methods of Bank Account. A class called NOWAccount may be defined and be an example of multiple inheritance if it is a subclass of both Checking Account and Savings Account and inherits from both. For NOWAccount, one of the inherited methods, GetInterestRate, may be specialized by appending a method, CheckForMinimumBalance, to the beginning.

2.4 Overloading and Polymorphism

Overloading allows an operator to operate on more than one data type. For example, virtually all languages allow "+" to operate on both integer and real type data. Polymorphism extends this capability to allow procedures to operate on different types and functions to return values of different types on different calls (Har84). For example, a procedure Sort would be polymorphic if it could be used as the selector in a message to both an integer array object and a character array object. The objects themselves would invoke methods corresponding to the selector to perform the appropriate actions. In the bank example for (simple) polymorphism, GetInterestRate is the selector in a message to both a Savings Account object and a NOWAccount object.

2.5 Late Binding

Binding is the process whereby object operations and operands are combined. Early binding combines them at compile time (static binding) or before (program writing time) and is implemented with case statements which must be changed if a new data type is to be included for the operation. Late binding combines them as late as when the program is running (dynamic binding). Messages often require dynamic binding - in our example, the message to tell an account to add interest to the balance involves dynamic binding since the type of account is not known at compile time (see Late Binding example in section 5.5)

3. Pseudocode BNF and an Example

Briefly, a program consists of a number of class descriptions followed by a number of actions.

The syntax for each class consists of the class name, the names of any super classes, the class and shared variables, methods, both inherited and those introduced in the class, and the definitions of the introduced variables and methods.

Class variables have their own values for each object instance of the class while shared variables share the value and make it accessible to each object instance.

Actions are the usual statements found in algorithmic programming languages with the addition of the message statement whose syntax is the ObjectName to receive the message, followed by a selector which tells the object what to do, followed by any parameters if necessary.

NEW creates a new instance of a class, and GET, given appropriate information, searches a data base for a previously created object.

Tokens are bolded. The metalanguage is extended BNF with {What}⁺ indicating 1 or more What's and [What] indicating and optional What. It is these productions to which attribute functions will be added in section 4. Rather than repeat all the words that end in Name, the notation

____Name is used. Delimiters such as semicolons are omitted. BNF for expressions and data types is also omitted for simplicity.

Program	>
{ClassDescription}+	{Action}+
ClassDescription	>

```
Class
                    ClassName
  SuperClass
             SuperClassNames |None
  ClassVariables
                  InheritClassNames
      {Inherit
     From ClassName}+ | None
      Introduce IntroClassNames
                   None
  SharedVariables
                 SharedVarNames }
     {Inherit
                         | None
      From ClassName}+
      Introduce SharedVarNames
                None
  Methods
                 Methods | None
  EndClass
                 ClassName
                        -->
Methods
  {Inherit
              InheritMethodNames
       From ClassName}+
                          | None
             IntroMethodNames
  Introduce
              | None
  {SpecializeSpecializeMethodName
      With MethodName Before }+
  {SpecializeSpecializeMethodName
      With MethodName After }+
              None
  Definitions
                    Definitions
              None
                        -->
 Definitions
     {Method
              MethodName
               | MethodName
             (ParameterNames)
      LocalNames
                 LocalNames | None
      BeginMethod
            {Statement}+
      EndMethod MethodName}+
                     -->
Action
   Action ActionName
   LocalNames
                 LocalNames | None
   BeginAction
         {Statement;}+
   EndAction ActionName
Statement
                     -->
    Assignment
   | Selection
     WhileLoop
   Instantiation
   Message
     Return (Expression)
   | Read (Names)
   | Write (Expression)
Assignment
                              -->
   Name := Expression
Selection
                               -->
```

```
Selection
If (Expression) Then
{Statement;}+
```



Figure 1 BNF For OOPL Concepts

The pseudocode program in the Appendix consists of five classes: a Utilities class providing input and output procedures, a Bank Account class with two subclasses Checking Account and Savings Account; the fifth class, NOW Account is a subclass of both Checking Account and Savings Account and is provided as an example of multiple inheritance.

Although the example is somewhat lengthy, a true banking system would be far longer. Only the class declarations are shown here. Actions that operate on object instances from these classes are shown in section 5.

Types are omitted; for example, owner, address, phonenumber etc are all (likely) of type string.

4. Review of Attribute Grammar Concepts

Attribute grammars consist of BNF describing the syntax with semantic functions describing the semantics. In the BNF for the pseudocode example described here, a program consists of class descriptions describing both the data and operations associated with objects of each class. Attribute grammars are used in compiler environments to specify semantics in the same sense that BNF specifies syntax. Just as compiler tools allow BNF to be input to create the syntax analyzer, there are also tools which create a semantic analyzer from attribute grammar input (Far82). Many of these syntax/semantic analyzer generator tools work together :



Figure 2 Syntax/Semantic Analyzer Tool

In Figure two, an attribute grammar, consisting of BNF plus token descriptions and semantic functions is input. From the token description, a lexical analyzer is built; from the BNF a syntax analyzer is built; from the attributes and semantic functions, the evaluator is built. Alternatively, for some attribute grammars for which it is too difficult at compiler generation time to generate the evaluator (Ken76, Ken77), handcoded evaluators can be written with varying ease and efficiency. Although it is possible to evaluate some attributes at parse time, this paper presumes that all attributes are evaluated after the program has been parsed.

4.1 Attributes

Attributes are variables to which values are assigned. Each attribute variable is associated with a nonterminal or terminal of the grammar. Thus, in the BNF pseudocode for our example, the variable *MethodList* (italics will be used for attributes) is associated with the nonterminal ClassDescription (as well as with various other nonterminals). The notation is :

ClassDescription.MethodList

ClassDescription is the nonterminal representing a syntactic class and *MethodList* is its associated attribute which will be assigned a semantic value.

Values are assigned to attributes by equations called semantic functions. These equations are evaluated locally, that is, within the scope of a production. Consider, for example, the production defining the syntax of ClassDescription. To it has been added a semantic equation defining a semantic value for a variable *MethodList* to be associated with the nonterminal ClassDescription.

At compile time, the attribute *MethodList* will be evaluated at the node(s) ClassDescription :



ClassDescription.MethodList := Methods.MethodList

The attribute, *MethodList*, is associated with both the nonterminals ClassDescription and Methods. At compile time, the value of *MethodList* is passed up the parse tree since the nonterminal Methods appears on the right-hand side of the equation and the nonterminal ClassDescription appears on the left-hand side. Such attributes are termed synthesized. Attributes whose values are passed down the parse tree are termed inherited.

Terminals may have only synthesized attributes, and their values are assigned by the lexical analyzer. Inherited attributes of the start symbol are given values via parameters when attribute evaluation begins.

5 Implementing Semantics of Object-Oriented Languages Using Attributes

In this section, we show how inheritance, multiple inheritance, message passing, polymorphism, and even late binding can be facilitated at compile time by attribute grammars. In what follows, we show separate parse trees for separate class declarations. In addition, it can be assumed that the parser can create a topological ordering in which to evaluate attributes. Thus, for our example, the attributes for BankAccount are evaluated before those for SavingsAccount and before those for CheckingAccount. The attributes for SavingsAccount and CheckingAccount are evaluated before those for NOWAccount and the attributes for all the class declarations are evaluated before those of the actions. This ordering is shown in Figure three.



Figure 3 Attribute Evaluation Order

5.1 The Unevaluated Parse Trees

For the four classes of interest here, Bank Account (BA), Savings Account (SA), Checking Account (CA) and NOWAccount (NOW), the parse trees before attribute evaluation are shown in Figure four. Nodes that are not of interest here (e.g., Shared Variables) are not shown for simplicity. Method Names are abbreviated, e.g., GIR for GetInterestRate. **Bank Account :**



Figure 4 The Class Trees

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5.2 The Attributes

There are three attributes :

(1) ClassName, abbreviated CN, an inherited attribute, passed down the class declaration tree to the Methods subtree. As the mnemonics imply, it carries the name of the current class down the tree.

(2) SuperClassNames, abbreviated SN, an inherited attribute which descends to the Methods subtree and is used to make available the names of superclasses to the class.

(3) MethodList, abbreviated ML, a synthesized attribute which, when it finally reaches the top of the tree, contains a list of methods available to the current class. Its value is a list of pairs : ClassName & MethodName for each MethodName available to the ClassName, and for each class name. They are ordered so that the methods belonging to the current class are listed first, with superclass methods listed second.

5.3 The Semantic Functions

The two productions of interest here are those for ClassDescription and Methods : The semantic functions follow each production.

```
ClassDescription
                      -->
  Class
                    ClassName
 SuperClass
             SuperClassNames | None
  ClassVariables
                   InheritClassNames}
      {Inherit
      From ClassName}+
                          | None
                 IntroClassNames
      Introduce
                   None
  SharedVariables
     {Inherit
                  SharedClassNames)
      From ClassName}+
                          | None
      Introduce SharedClassNames
                   i None
  Methods
                       Methods | None
  EndClass
                      ClassName
 (i) Methods.CN = LexValue
                         (ClassName)
 (ii) Methods.SN ={LexValue
                   (SuperClassNames) }
 (iii) ClassDescription.ML =
                           Methods.ML
Methods
                     -->
   {Inherit InheritMethodNames
      From ClassName +
                        None
   Introduce
              IntroduceMethodNames
                 | None
   {Specialize
                SpecializeMethodName
```

```
& {LexValue(IntroduceMethodNames)}
+ Methods.CN
```

& {LexValue
 (SpecializeMethodName '
 NewMethodName) } + Methods.SN &
 ({LexValue(InheritMethodNames)}
 - {LexValue
 (SpecializeMethodNames)})

The notation is explained as follows :

{ } indicates an ordered list.

& is defined for both elements and lists :

a & {B, C, D, ...} is {a & B, a & C, a & D, ...}

{a, b, ...} & {B, C, D, ...} is {a &B, a & C, a & D, ..., b & B, b & C, b & D, ...}

where lowercase represents elements and uppercase represents sets.

+ appends two lists, that is,

 $\{a, b, c, ...\} + \{d, e, ...\}$ is $\{a, b, c, d, e\}$

- is set difference, that is,

 $\{a, b, c\} - \{b\}$ is $\{a, c\}$

' appends two method names, that is,

a 'b appends the new method name b before or after a, according to the syntax.

5.4 Attribute Evaluation

Using a topological ordering, the attributes for Bank Account will be evaluated first, then those for Savings Account, Checking Account and NOWAccount.

Bank Account

Attribute CN can be evaluated using function (i):



Attribute SN can be evaluated using function (ii) :

Bank Account :



Attribute *ML* can be calculated using functions (iii) and (iv). For function (iv),



Bank Account :



^*₡* ={BA&GIR,BA&CB...,BA&GAN}}

Function (iii) is simply a copy rule and the completely attributed tree is :



The rest of the trees are shown after complete attribute evaluation :

Savings Account:



Checking Account:





5.5 An Application

Inheritance, polymorphism, and late binding issues can now be facilitated using these attributes. We address each of these three issues by defining actions for the bank example.

(1) Inheritance

Since the code which defines a method may be passed down from class to subclass to subclass, and perhaps altered along the way, it is helpful and efficient to maintain the lists shown above which indicate the methods which a class has available to it. This information need not be used until run-time when a message is sent to an object to perform the selector operation. This technique is shown in Figure five.

Action CreateNewSavingsAccount {Example of inheritance, object instantiation and messaging) LocalNames CompoundInterestRate := 6, {ThisAccount used for instantiation of savings account object} ThisAccount : SavingsAccount, {IO used for instantiation of a utilities object} 10 : Utilities BeginAction {CreateNewSavingsAccount} {Instantiate a savings account object} ThisAccount := New (SavingsAccount); {Instantiate a Utilities object }

```
IO := New (Utilities);
    { Send messages to object utilities and
to object savings account to set fields }
    IO : PutPrompt ("Owner?");
    IO : Input (Owner) ;
    ThisAccount : SetOwner(Owner);
    IO : PutPrompt ("Address?")
    IO : Input (Address);
    ThisAccount : SetAddress (Address);
    IO : PutPrompt ("PhoneNumber?");
    IO : Input (PhoneNumber);
    ThisAccount :
           SetPhoneNumber (PhoneNumber);
    ThisAccount : GenerateAccountNumber;
    IO : PutPrompt ("InitialDeposit");
    IO : Input (InitialDeposit);
    ThisAccount : DepositFunds
                      (InitialDeposit);
    ThisAccount : AddInterestToBalance;
```

EndAction CreateNewSavingsAccount

Figure 5 Inheritance

Here, the object Savings Account is created and messages are sent to it. The names of the corresponding methods are easily found from the attribute list computed for Savings Account.

Multiple inheritance is easily facilitated with the computed attribute lists, also.

(2) Polymorphism

The action in Figure six illustrates polymorphism by sending a message with the same selector (AddInterestToBalance) to two different objects. The attributes computed for NOWAccount and Savings Account again facilitate the selection of the correct method.

```
Action AddInterest
{Example shows simple polymorphism - can be
resolved at compile time}
Local Names
 Accountl used for instantiation of a
 NOWaccount object}
 Account1 : NOWAccount,
{Account2 used for instantiation of a
Savings account object}
Account2 : SavingsAccount,
{IO used for instantiation of a Utilities
object}
IO : Utilities
BeginAction {AddInterest}
  IO := NEW(Utilities);
  IO : Input (AccountName);
  Account1 :=
```

```
GET (NOWAccount, AccountName);
{Presumably, AccountName has
2 different accounts}
Account2 :=
GET (SavingsAccountAccountName);
Account1 : AddInterestToBalance;
Account2 : AddInterestToBalance;
```

EndAction AddInterest

Figure 6 Simple Polymorphism

(3) Late Binding

Dynamic binding is a philosophy basic to many objectoriented programming environments. And yet, it is often admitted that dynamic binding is a flexibility that is paid for in terms of efficiency. The solution may be to do as much bookkeeping at compile time as possible to facilitate dynamic binding. Figure seven shows a message that is sent to an object whose identity is not known until runtime (since the object type itself is an input value) :

```
Action AddInterest
```

{Example shows late binding}
Local Names
{Used for instantiation of an account
object}
Account : BankAccount,
{Used for instantiation of a Utilities
object}
IO : Utilities
BeginAction {AddInterest}
IO := NEW(Utilities);
IO : Input(AccountType);
IO : Input(Deposit);
Account := NEW(AccountType);

Account : DepositFunds(Deposit); Account : AddInterestToBalance

EndAction AddInterest

```
Figure 7 Late Binding
```

Here, the specific object, whether it be a Savings Account, a Checking Account or a NOWAccount is not known until run-time. Nevertheless, once the proper object is identified, the bookkeeping done by the compiler facilitates accessing the proper method.

6. Conclusions

The use of attributes in compilers for semantic analysis is well established. Object-oriented languages present unusual semantic analysis needs in addition to the usual ones found in all languages. Using a very high-level syntax and BNF, three simple attributes, and four functions, we computed information that facilitates inheritance (including multiple inheritance), polymorphism, even bookkeeping for late binding.

In a real language, there would, of course, be many more nodes to the parse tree, and many more ^Ofunctions to compute. In addition, restrictions were made to the concepts here to ensure simplicity, and in some cases, just to ensure a decision. For example, not all object-oriented languages would declare inheritance in the ways done here, e.g., it is common to assume methods are inherited and to explicitly remove those not desired rather than mentioning explicitly those to be inherited (Gol84). Thus, the attribute functions need to be specialized for a particular syntax.

Appendix

A Simple Banking System Using OOPL Constructs

{ Class Descriptions }

Class Utilities SuperClass None ClassVariables Inherit None Introduce None SharedVariables Inherit None Introduce None Methods Inherit None Introduce Input, PutPrompt Specialize None Definitions Method Input (Info) LocalNames None BeginMethod Read(Info); EndMethod Input Method PutPrompt (Info)

```
LocalNames None
              BeginMethod
                 Write (Info);
           EndMethod PutPrompt
            Utilities
EndClass
Class
          BankAccount
     SuperClass
                      None
     ClassVariables
           Inherit
                      None
           Introduce
                  Owner,
                  Address,
                  PhoneNumber,
                  AccountNumber
                   Balance
    SharedVariables
                      None
          Inherit
          Introduce
         HighInterestRate := 0.07,
            LowInterestRate := 0.045,
              NextAccountNumber:= 0
     Methods
          Inherit
                      None
          Introduce
                GetInterestRate,
                DepositFunds,
                SetOwner,
                SetAddress,
                SetPhoneNumber,
                GenerateAccountNumber
            Specialize
                           None
     Definitions
        Method GetInterestRate
          LocalNames None
           BeginMethod
           If (Balance > 10000) Then
           Return (HighInterestRate);
          Else
             Return (LowInterestRate);
          EndIf;
         EndMethod GetInterestRate
         Method DepositFunds
                  (AmountDeposited)
           LocalNames None
           BeginMethod
               Balance := Balance +
               AmountDeposited
         EndMethod Deposit Funds
         Method SetOwner (Name)
            LocalNames None
            BeginMethod
               Owner := Name;
         EndMethod SetOwner
         Method SetAddress (Name)
            LocalNames None
            BeginMethod
              Address := Name;
         EndMethod SetAddress
         Method SetPhoneNumber
                       (Number)
```

LocalNames None BeginMethod PhoneNumber := Number; EndMethod SetPhoneNumber Method GenerateAccountNumber LocalNames None BeginMethod NextAccountNumber := NextAccountNumber + 1: AccountNumber:= NextAccountNumber; EndMethod GenerateAccountNumber EndClass BankAccount Class SavingsAccount SuperClass BankAccount ClassVariables Inherit Owner, Address, PhoneNumber, AccountNumber, Balance From BankAccount Introduce None SharedVariables Inherit HighInterestRate := 0.07, LowInterestRate := 0.045, NextAccountNumber:= 0 Introduce None Methods Inherit GetInterestRate, DepositFunds, SetOwner, SetAddress, SetPhoneNumber, GenerateAccountNumber, From BankAccount Introduce WithDrawFunds, AddInterestToBalance Specialize None Definitions Method WithDrawFunds (AmountRequested) LocalNames IO, PromptString BeginMethod If (AmountRequested > Balance) Then IO := New(Utilities); IO := PutPrompt (PromptString); Else Balance := Balance -AmountRequested; EndIf EndMethod WithdrawFunds

Method AddInterestToBalance LocalNames InterestRate BeginMethod InterestRate := self : GetInterestRate; Balance := Balance + Balance *InterestRate; EndMethod AddInterestToBalance EndClass SavingsAccount Class CheckingAccount SuperClass BankAccount ClassVariables Inherit Owner, Address, PhoneNumber, AccountNumber Balance From BankAccount Introduce JointAccount, SecondAccountHolder SharedVariables Inherit HighInterestRate := 0.07; LowInterestRate := 0.045; NextAccountNumber:= 0 From BankAccount Introduce BounceFee := 12.50 Methods Inherit DepositFunds, {GetInterestRate removed} SetOwner, SetAddress, SetPhoneNumber, GenerateAccountNumber, From BankAccount Introduce ClearCheck Specialize None Definitions Method ClearCheck (CheckAmount) LocalNames IO, SomePrompt BeginMethod If (CheckAmount > Balance Then IO := New(Utilities); IO:PutPrompt (SomePrompt); Balance := Balance -BounceFee; Else Balance := Balance -CheckAmount; EndIf EndMethod ClearCheck EndClass CheckingAccount

Class NOWAccount SuperClass SavingsAccount, CheckingAccount ClassVariables Inherit Owner, Address, PhoneNumber, Balance, AccountNumber JointAccount, SecondAccountHolder From CheckingAccount Introduce None SharedVariables Inherit HighInterestRate := 0.07; LowInterestRate := 0.045; NextAccountNumber:= 0 From SavingsAccount Introduce None Methods Inherit GetInterestRate, DepositFunds, SetOwner, SetAddress, SetPhoneNumber, GenerateAccountNumber, WithDrawFunds, AddInterestToBalance From Savings Account Inherit ClearCheck CheckingAccount From Introduce None Specialize GetInterestRate With CheckForMinimumBalance Before Definitions Method CheckForMinimumBalance LocalNames None BeginMethod If (Balance < 1000) Then Return (0); EndIf; EndMethod CheckForMinimumBalance CheckForMinimumBalance NOWAccount

EndClass

{ Actions }

. . .

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