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Untangling Crosscutting Concerns in Domain-specific Languages with Domain-specific Join Points

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ABSTRACT
Like programs written in general-purpose languages, programs written in DSLs may also suffer from tangling and scattering in the presence of domain-specific crosscutting concerns. This paper presents an architecture that supports aspect-oriented features for domain-specific base languages. Both base programs and advices are written in different domain-specific languages. The framework relies on the concept of domain-specific join point.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
D.3.3 [Software Engineering]: Language Constructs and Features—Frameworks

General Terms
Design, Languages

Keywords
Aspect-oriented Programming, Domain-specific Languages

1. INTRODUCTION
In most aspect-oriented languages the concern-specific code is written in the same language as the base program, i.e., the part of the program that is not considered concern-specific. Although, crosscutting concerns may be more directly expressed using domain-specific abstractions. To address this problem, domain-specific aspect languages (DSALs for short) provide abstractions to implement aspects for a special domain in a declarative way. Several DSALs have been proposed, each targeting a particular domain (e.g., [16] for distributed software). These languages improve AOP technology by combining it with DSL technology.

However, the combination of AOP and DSL technology can be effective in the other direction as well, having aspects improve the modularity of DSLs. Like programs written in general-purpose languages, programs written in DSLs may also suffer from tangling and scattering in the presence of domain-specific crosscutting concerns. Several approaches provide aspects for DSLs in a particular domain (e.g., [18] for weaving in grammar specifications).

Most existing AO language implementations strongly depend on a particular base language: For each new base language, e.g., a new DSL, an AOP tool must be re-implemented specifically for this DSL, resulting in wasted development costs. Extensible aspect compilers [4,3] and run-times [17,22,21] support reusing aspect implementation infrastructure for general purpose base languages such as Java or Scheme. Yet, none of them targets DSLs as the base language. On the other hand, none of the extensible DSAL approaches [19,5,12] supports composing a domain-specific advice language with a domain-specific base language.

In this paper, our contribution is an approach for defining aspect languages for DSLs. We present a framework, called POPART, that supports aspect-oriented features for domain-specific base languages. Both base programs and advices are written in different DSLs. The framework relies on the concept of domain-specific join point, that has been identified as an open question during the Third Workshop on Domain-Specific Aspect Languages [7].

The paper is organized as follows: Sec.2 elaborates the need for domain-specific join point models. Sec.3 elaborates how domain-specific aspect languages can be implemented for DSLs. Sec.4 discusses related work and Sec.5 concludes the paper.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT
Domain-specific languages (DSLs) provide special abstractions that are closer to their problem domain, hence enable developers to express their intents more directly.

Consider a simple workflow language, [5] for assembling composite applications from services inspired from BPEL [1]. The DSL, called ProcessDSL, provides abstractions to define processes that consist of several tasks to be executed in a sequence. ProcessDSL introduces several domain-specific keywords: the literal registry abstracts over the details of accessing the registry component; the operation notify is used to send an email message to all stakeholders of a process; process and task are domain-specific abstractions. Furthermore, Process DSL defines keywords for security enforcement: the two operations encrypt and decrypt are used to secure messages; literals (e.g., RSA) enable to select an appropriate encryption algorithm; and the literal me represents the identity on whose behalf the process is executed.
def task(name = "getOffers") { 
  def services = registry.find("Banking");
  services.each { bank ->
    def enc_req = encrypt(new RateReq(), RSA.bank.pubKey);
    def enc_resp = bank.call("getRate", enc_req);
    offers [bank] = decrypt (encResp, RSA.me.privKey);
  }
}

def task(name = "selectOffer") {
  def bank = ... //get cheapest bank from offers
  def enc_req = encrypt(new BorrowRequest(), RSA.bank.pubKey);
  def enc_resp = bank.call("borrow", enc_req);
  def resp = decrypt (encResp, RSA.me.privKey);
  notify " Borrowed a credit from ${bank}: ${resp}";
}

Figure 1: An Example DSL for Workflows

3. ASPECTS FOR DOMAIN-SPECIFIC BASE LANGUAGES

The Pluggable and OPen Aspect Run-Time (POPART for short) is an open framework for defining aspect languages. POPART can be used to define aspect languages for any domain, as long as the base language infrastructure can be instrumented (cf. Sec. 3.4). The support for aspects for domain-specific base languages is implemented as a set of plug-ins in POPART. A plug-in consists of several classes that define the syntax and semantics of a particular part of the aspect language. To implement a DSAL in POPART, the DSAL’s implementer provides three plug-ins for: (a) the domain-specific join point model; (b) the domain-specific pointcut language; (c) the domain-specific advice language.

Figure 2 shows this plug-in architecture for implementing aspect-oriented DSLs. The aforementioned plug-ins are shown as gray boxes (indices a–c). This architecture enables to reuse default aspect-oriented semantics provided by the framework. The addition of necessary domain abstractions are made on top of these default aspect-oriented mechanisms.

Embedded DSLs are used to implement the domain-specific pointcut language and domain-specific advice language plug-ins. The point of using embedded DSLs is simplicity: the domain syntax is simply encoded as expressions of the host language and the domain-specific semantics are implemented as a library in the host language. The embedded DSL principle allows us: 1) to reuse the default aspect-oriented keywords and semantics for the DSAL, such as aspect and around; 2) general-purpose constructs in advice, as the reuse of each in Fig. 1) general-purpose operators in pointcuts.

3.1 Domain-specific Join Point Models

Implementing an aspect language for a DSL requires to define what elements in a DSL semantics can be considered as possible join points. A join point is a point in the execution of a program, where an aspect can contribute functionalities.

Definition: A domain-specific join point is a join-point related to a domain abstraction (domain event, domain keyword, etc.).

Definition: A domain-specific join point model is a specification of all possible domain-specific join-points. A domain-specific join point model is used to bind the domain-specific aspect language to a domain-specific base language. A domain-specific join point model determines which points in the execution of DSL programs are visible to aspects and where aspects can contribute functionality.
A domain-specific join point model can be defined according to the following steps: (1) analyze the domain-specific base language to find relevant points in the execution of DSL base programs; (2) for each of these points, add a new kind of join point into the join point model; (3) for each kind of join point provide an instrumentation module that fires the join point to the aspect engine.

In POPART, a domain-specific join point model is defined by extending an object-oriented framework that models the generic aspect meta-model shared by all domain-specific plug-ins. Fig.3 schematically shows the extension for implementing a specific join point model for the ProcessDSL language presented in Sec.2. The gray boxes contain framework classes. The other classes correspond to the specification of a domain-specific join point model for ProcessDSL.

The ProcessDSL join point model consists of the following domain-specific join points, each with a specific context:

- **Process execution** Points at which a process instance is executed. The context exposed to advices contains: the process name, the task list.

- **Task execution** Points at which a task of a process is executed. Context is: the task name, the activities.

- **Service selection** Points at which the registry is consulted to select services of a certain category. Context is: the category pattern that is used to select services and the resulting set of selected services.

- **Service call** Points at which a service is called, e.g., a remote call to a Web service via its service proxy. Context is: the name of the service being called, the arguments of the call, whether the invocation is remote or local, and the result of the invocation.

Let us now consider the example of service call join points. For implementing this join point type, we add the class `ServiceCallJoinPoint` of Fig.3 to the join point model of ProcessDSL. Next, we have to provide an adequate instrumentation module. Specifically, the ProcessDSL interpreter contains a class `ServiceProxy` that is responsible for invoking Web service, i.e., when encountering a service call operation in DSL code, the `ServiceProxy.call (...)` will be called, which generates a SOAP message that is sent out to a Web service. At this point, the instrumentation must fire instances of class `ServiceCallJoinPoint` to the POPART engine. We use an AspectJ [2] aspect to instrument the DSL interpreter classes. E.g., for service call, we have implemented an aspect that extracts context information out of the interpreter classes, creates a `ServiceCallJoinPoint`, and fires it to POPART. For the other join points, similar instrumentation modules fire instances of either `ServiceSelectionJoinPoint`, `ProcessExecutionJoinPoint`, or `TaskExecutionJoinPoint`.

### 3.2 Domain-Specific Pointcut Languages

For writing pointcuts for a corresponding join point model within POPART, a pointcut language plug-in has to be implemented. The domain-specific pointcut language enables to select join points from a domain-specific join point model. A domain-specific pointcut language reduces the semantic gap that exists when using a DSAL composed of general-purpose pointcut language and domain-specific advice language.

**Definition:** A *domain-specific pointcut language* is a language that enables the specification of pointcuts using high-level, domain-specific keywords. It can be attached to a domain-specific join point model.

A domain-specific pointcut language is implemented as a subclass of `PointcutDSL` of the framework, as shown Fig.3. While the domain independent operation on pointcuts can be reused from `PointcutDSL`, e.g., boolean operations, new keywords are defined for new domain-specific pointcut designators. For instance, for ProcessDSL, a subclass `PointcutDSL` is created that extends `PointcutDSL` and implements keyword methods, such as `service_call()` and `service_selection()`.

In the following, a pointcut expression is given in the pointcut language for the workflow DSL. The pointcut expression matches all remote invocations to services whose operation name matches the regular expression with "get.*":

```java
service_call("get.*") & if_pcd { external }
```

The pointcut expression requires `service_call` and `if_pcd` using "&". While the pointcut designator `service_call()` selects all service calls that operation name match the regular expression "get.", the `if_pcd()` pointcut designator checks whether the service call is a remote call.

The pointcut language plug-in implements the keyword semantics in `ProcessPointcutDSL`. For each pointcut designator keyword, a method is implemented with the corresponding keyword name, which takes the pointcut parameters, and returns an instance of `PointcutDesignator` that is used to match against join point instances. E.g., on receiving `service_call(...)`, the pointcut language interpreter creates a `ServiceCallPCD` object (Fig.3), passing the regular expression "get.(.*)". The `ServiceCallPCD` selects all `ServiceCallJoinPoints` with service names matching its regular expression. Note that the semantics of the general-
aspect(name="SecurityAspect") {
  around (service_call(".*") & if_pcd { external }) {
    encrypt(request.RSA, thisJoinPoint.service.pubKey);
    def enc_resp = proceed();
    response = decrypt(enc_resp.RSA, thisJoinPoint.process.privKey);
  }
}

Figure 4: A Security Aspect for ProcessDSL.

4. RELATED WORK

The abc compiler [4] allows to define new kinds of pointcuts as extensions to the AspectJ semantics, but is not targeted for DSALs and only weaves on Java.

The Aspect SandBox (ASB) [17] is a framework for prototyping alternative AOP semantics implemented in Scheme. ASB has been improved with an extensible join point model [22]. ASB allows defining new kinds of join points at the cost of heavy impacts in the weaver implementation.

Several DSAL frameworks have been proposed for general-purpose base languages, such as Java: Reflex [21], AweSome [15], JAMI [12], and Dinkelaker et. al. [9]. They have certain support for the composition of different extensions and resolving conflict between them, however the differences in their support for implementing DSALs are not important for a comparison. They all only employ a join point model for Java. Because new kinds of join points are out of scope, weaving on DSLS is not supported.

XAspects [19] is an extensible system that defines a DSAL as an aspect. Other aspects are plug-ins that extend DSL implementations with particular concerns. XAspects uses special pointcuts for traversals, but cannot define new kinds of pointcuts. XAspects uses the join point model of AspectJ and does not support new join point types.

Strembeck and Zdun defined [20] an aspect-oriented DSL for role-based access control. While they make an ad-hoc implementation using a dynamic aspect language, our contribution is generic. POOPART can be used to aspectize any DSL. Moreover, its plug-in architecture allows us to use different languages for base programs and advice.

To our knowledge, only Heidenreich et al. proposed [13] a generic approach for aspect-oriented DSALs that is based on invasive software composition, i.e., source code rewriting. Our paper differs on two points: 1) the POOPART framework

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1. we use well-established aspect-oriented pointcut-and-advice semantics for DSLs that are similar to AspectJ [2] semantics.

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This preprint is provided by the contributing authors.
is dynamic, hence, allows to load and unload domain-specific aspects at runtime, 2) while Heidenreich et al. assume that the base program and the advice are written in the same language, POPART allows to use different domain-specific languages in the base program and the advice.

5. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

We presented the POPART framework that supports the implementation of aspect-oriented DSLs. It is based on the concept of domain-specific join point model. This concept enables to deal with aspect composition only based on domain relevant events. POPART provides a plug-in architecture for implementing aspect languages for domain-specific languages.

A DSL can be integrated with the framework by defining a domain-specific join point model, a domain-specific pointcut language, and a domain-specific advice language. POPART relieves the DSAL designer of implementing common aspect semantics – only additional domain abstractions and semantics must be integrated into the framework.

We have implemented a domain-specific aspect language for a simple workflow language as an application case. The sample DSL’s design has been inspired from complex workflow languages, such as BPEL. The aspect-oriented programming prototype for the DSL is implemented (whereby reusing existing libraries for complex domain operations such as encryption) in three plug-in consisting of 15 classes, with less than 500 LOC. The prototype supports common aspect-oriented features, such as general-purpose pointcut designators (e.g., and, or, not, cflow, if) and advice keywords (e.g. thisJoinPoint, proceed). Moreover, the ProcessDSL prototype comes with other features of POPART discussed in [10]: semantic variation in aspect languages at runtime; dynamic aspects; and resolution of aspect interactions.

Future work will address the current limitations: 1) measuring and improving execution speed 2) implementing missing features such as inter-type declarations, and 3) composition of different domain-specific advice languages and the resolution of possible conflicts between language definitions.

The POPART source code and the implementation of the example ProcessDSL can be downloaded from: http://www.stg.tu-darmstadt.de/popart

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7. REFERENCES