A functional language for specifying business reports

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A Functional Language for Specifying Business Reports

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Abstract

We describe our work on developing a functional
domain specific language for specifying business
reports. The report specification language is part of
a novel enterprise resource planning system based
on the idea of a providing a lean core system that
is highly customisable via a variety of domain spe-
cific languages.

1 Introduction

Process-oriented event-driven transaction systems
(POETS) is a novel software architecture for en-
terprise resource planning (ERP) systems, intro-
duced by Henglein et al. [1]. Rather than storing
both transactional data and implicit process state
in a database, POETS employs a pragmatic sepa-
racion between (a) transactional data, that is what
has happened; (b) reports, that is what can be de-
vised from the transactional data; and (c) contracts,
that is which transactions are expected in the fu-
ture. Moreover, rather than using general purpose
programming languages to specify business pro-
cesses, POETS utilises declarative domain-specific
languages (DSLs) to customise the different as-
pects of a system. The use of DSLs not only en-
ables explicit formalisation of business processes,
it also minimises the gap between requirements and
a running system.

A simplified overview over the POETS architec-
ture is presented in Figure 1. At the heart of the sys-
tem is the event log, which is an append-only list of
transactions. Transactions represent relevant events
that may occur, such as a payment by a customer, a
delivery of goods by a shipping agency, or a move-
ment of items into an inventory. This does not only
satisfies the legal requirement for ERP systems to
archive all transaction data that is relevant for au-
diting but also makes it possible to compute reports
incrementally as shown by Nissen and Larsen [3].

2 The Report Language

The purpose of the report engine is to provide a
structured view of the data base that is constituted
by the system’s event log. This structured view of
the data in the event log comes in the form of a
report, a collection of condensed structured infor-
mation compiled from the event log. Conceptually,
a report is compiled from the event log by a func-
tion of type EventLog \(\rightarrow\) Report, a report function.
The report language provides a means to specify
such a report function in a declarative manner.

The report language is – much like the query
fragment of SQL – a functional language with-
out side effects. It only provides operations to
non-destructively manipulate and combine values.
Since the system’s storage is based on a shallow
event log – basically a list of event representations
– the report language has to provide operations to
relate, filter and aggregate pieces of information.
Moreover, as the data stored in the event log is in-
herently heterogeneous – containing data of differ-
ent kind – the report language needs to offer a com-
prehensive type system that allows to safely operate
in this setting.

The entire system is based on a common basis
of base types consisting of strings, Booleans, in-
tegers, lists etc. Apart from that the system offers
user-defined record types with an inheritance sys-
tem based on nominal subtyping. To this end, PO-
ETS also offers an ontology language that is used to
describe record types, their fields and their interde-
pendence. The central record type is Event, which
represents the events that are registered in the event
log. In fact, as far as the report language is con-
cerned, the event log is a value of type [Event].

Every interaction with the running system is re-
lected with a corresponding value of (a subtype of)
type Event in the event log. The simplest exam-
ple is the interface to the report engine itself. It
allows to add, modify and remove reports. Each
such operation is reflected by an event of type [Event].
CreateReport, UpdateReport, and DeleteReport, respectively. The former two are subtypes of PutReport, which in turn is like DeleteReport – a subtype of ReportEvent.

This allows us to write the following simple report function that creates the report which lists the names of all active (i.e. not deleted) reports:

- `reportNames : [String]`
- `reportNames = [pr.name | pr : PutReport ← events, ur : ReportEvent ← events, ur.name ≡ cr.name]`

Every report function implicitly has as its first argument the event log of type `[Event]` – a list of events – bound to the name `events`. The syntax of the report language – and to large parts also its semantics – is based on Haskell [2]. The central data structure is that of lists. In order to formulate operations on lists concisely, we use list comprehensions [4] as seen in the above example. A list comprehension of the form `[ e | c ]` denotes a list containing elements of the form `e` generated by `c`, where `c` is a sequence of `generators` and `filters`.

As we have mentioned, access to type information and its propagation to subsequent computations is essential due to the fact that the event log is a list of heterogeneously typed elements – events of different kinds. The generator `cr : CreateReport ← events` iterates through elements of the list `events` binding each element to the variable `cr`. The typing `cr : CreateReport` restricts this iteration to elements of type `CreateReport`. This type information is propagated through the subsequent generators and filters of the list comprehension. In the filter `ur.name ≡ cr.name`, we use the fact that elements of type `ReportEvents` have a field `name` of type `String`. When binding the first element of the result of the nested list comprehension to the variable `pr` it is also checked whether this element is in fact of type `PutReport`. Thus we ignore reports that are marked as deleted via a `DeleteReport` event.

The report language is based on the simply typed lambda calculus extended with a polymorphic (non-recursive) let expression and a type case expression. The core language is given by the following grammar:

\[ e ::= x | c | \lambda x.e | e_1 e_2 | \text{let } x = e \text{ in } e' | \text{type } x = e \text{ of } \{ r \rightarrow e_1 ; \_ \rightarrow e_2 \} \]

where `x` ranges over variables, and `c` over constants which includes integers, Booleans, tuple and list constructors as well as operations on them like +, if-then-else etc. In particular, we have a fold operation `fold` of type `(\alpha \rightarrow \beta \rightarrow \beta) \rightarrow \beta \rightarrow [\alpha] \rightarrow \beta`. This is the only operation of the report language that permits recursive computations on lists. List comprehensions are mere syntactic sugar and can be reduced to `fold` and let expressions as for example in Haskell [2].

The extended list comprehension of the report language that allow filtering according to run time type information depend on type case expressions of the form `type x = e \text{ of } \{ r \rightarrow e_1 ; \_ \rightarrow e_2 \}`. In such a type case expression, an expression `e` of some record type `r_e` gets evaluated to record value `v` which is then bound to a variable `x`. The record type `r` that the record value `v` is matched against can be any subtype of `r_e`. The further evaluation of the type case expression depends on the type `r_v` of the record value `v`. This type can be any subtype of `r_e`.

![Diagram](image-url)
If \( r_\alpha \leq r \), the evaluation proceeds with \( e_1 \), otherwise with \( e_2 \). Binding \( e \) to a variable \( x \) allows to use the stricter type \( r \) in the expression \( e_1 \).

Although, the subtyping discipline that we use is nominal, the type system also allows the programmer to use record types as if the subtyping was purely structural. This is needed in order to allow the sharing of field names between distinct record types. To this end, we use type constraints of the form \( \alpha.f : \tau \) which intuitively states that \( \alpha \) is a record type with a field \( f \) of type \( \tau \). Field selectors are merely postfix operators. For example the \( .name \) field selector in the example is of type \( \alpha.name : \beta \Rightarrow \alpha \Rightarrow \beta \).

Another important aspect of POETS in general and the report language in particular is the maintaining of references and the access of the data they refer to. This becomes necessary as certain pieces of information, e.g. customer information are attached to a unique entity with lifecycle, e.g. a customer. To this end, POETS allow to create an entity with a unique id – a reference. Subsequently, information attached to this entity can be updated and eventually, the entity can be removed altogether. All these changes are, of course, reflected in the event log and can thus be examined by a report function. Nevertheless, due to the importance of references, the report language offers dedicated dereferencing operations that allow quick and typesafe access to the data associated with entities.

While the type system is important in order to avoid obvious specification errors, it is also important to ensure a fast execution of the thus obtained functional specifications. This is, of course, a general issue for querying systems. In our system, it is, however, of even greater importance since shifting the structure of the data – from the data store to the domain of queries – means that queries operate on the complete data set of the data base and thus each report has to be recomputed after each transaction. In other words, if treated naïvely, the conceptual simplification provided by the flat event log has to be paid via much more expensive computations.

This issue can be addressed by transforming a given report function \( f \) into an incremental function \( f' \) which updates a previously computed report according to the changes that have occurred since the report was computed before. That is, given an event log \( l \) and an update to it \( l \oplus e \), we require that \( f(l \oplus e) = f'(f(l), e) \). The new report \( f(l \oplus e) \) is obtained by updating the previous report \( f(l) \) according to the changes \( e \). In the case of the event log, we have a list structure. Changes only occur monotonically, by adding new elements to it: Given an event log \( l \) and a new event \( e \), the new event log is \( e \# l \), where \# is the list constructor of type \( \alpha 
\Rightarrow \lbrack \alpha \rbrack \rightarrow \lbrack \alpha \rbrack \).

Here it is crucial that we have restricted the report language such that operations on lists are limited to the higher-order function \texttt{fold}. The fundamental idea of incrementalising report functions is based on the following equation:

\[
\text{fold } f \; e \; (x \# xs) = f\; x \; (\text{fold } f \; e \; (xs))
\]

Based on this idea, we are able to make the computation of most reports independent of the size of the event log but only dependent of the changes to the event log and the previous report [3]. Unfortunately, if we have for example list comprehensions containing more than one generator, we get report functions with nested folds. In order to properly incremenatalise such functions, we need to move from list structures to multisets. This is, however, only rarely a practical restriction since most aggregation functions are based on commutative binary operations and are thus oblivious to ordering.

References


