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Variables in Action Descriptions: Merging $\mathcal{C}+$ with ADL

Vladimir Lifschitz and Wanwan Ren

University of Texas, Austin, USA

{vl, rww6}@cs.utexas.edu

Abstract

Action description language $\mathcal{C}+$ is more expressive than ADL in many ways; for instance, it addresses the ramification problem. On the other hand, ADL is based on first-order logic, while $\mathcal{C}+$ is only propositional; expressions with variables, which are frequently used when action domains are described in $\mathcal{C}+$, are merely schemas describing finite sets of causal laws that are formed according to the same pattern. In this paper we propose a new approach to the semantics of action descriptions with variables that combines attractive features of ADL and $\mathcal{C}+$.

1 Introduction

Current research on the design of action description languages continues the line of work that started with the invention of ADL [Pednault, 1994]. Semantically, an action description represents a transition system (“state-transition model,” in Pednault’s terminology), that is, a directed graph, with vertices corresponding to states of the world, and edges corresponding to transitions that may be caused by the execution of actions.

Modern action description languages, such as $\mathcal{C}+$ [Giunchiglia *et al.*, 2004], are more expressive than ADL in many ways. In particular, they solve the ramification problem, that is, allow the user to characterize effects of actions indirectly. But in one sense ADL is more expressive than $\mathcal{C}+$: the former is based on first-order logic, and the latter is only propositional. In [Pednault, 1994], *state-transition models for a first-order language* are defined (Definition 2.3); their states are semantic structures, or interpretations, in the sense of first-order logic. In $\mathcal{C}+$, on the other hand, a state is an interpretation of a (multi-valued) propositional signature [Giunchiglia *et al.*, 2004, Section 4.4]. There are no variables in $\mathcal{C}+$, strictly speaking. Expressions with variables, which are frequently used when action domains are described in $\mathcal{C}+$, are merely schemas describing finite sets of causal laws that are formed according to the same pattern.

For example, the description of the blocks-world action $Put(b, l)$ in [Pednault, 1994, Figure 2] has the formula

$On(b, l)$ on its add list. In this formula, b and l are object variables in the sense of first-order logic, and On is a binary predicate constant. In $\mathcal{C}+$ we can express the same idea by writing

$$Put(b, l) \text{ causes } On(b, l). \quad (1)$$

But here b and l are *metavariables*, and we need to specify their possible values when we say that (1) is part of an action description. We can say, for instance, that b stands for any of the symbols $Block1$, $Block2$, $Block3$, and that l stands for $Block1$, $Block2$, $Block3$ or $Table$. Expression (1) will denote then a set of 12 causal laws, obtained from (1) by grounding. The expression $On(Block2, Table)$, occurring in one of them, is a fluent constant, according to the syntax of $\mathcal{C}+$, but the three parts that this expression is built from — On , $Block2$ and $Table$ — have no syntactic status in the definition of the language.

In this paper we show how to define a semantics of action descriptions that is similar to the semantics of $\mathcal{C}+$ and, at the same time, allows us to use genuine object variables. Like the semantics of ADL, it is based on state-transition models for first-order languages.

The tool that helps us achieve this is the first-order causal logic proposed in [Lifschitz, 1997]. Recall that the semantics of $\mathcal{C}+$ is characterized in [Giunchiglia *et al.*, 2004, Section 4.2] by a translation that turns any action description D into a sequence of propositional causal theories D_0, D_1, \dots . Models of D_m correspond to the possible behaviors of the state-transition system described by D over successive time instants $0, 1, \dots, m$. In particular, models of D_0 are the states of the system, and models of D_1 are its transitions. In our modification of this approach, D_m becomes a *first-order* causal theory. As a result, the new semantics of causal laws with variables avoids any references to grounding. We argue that this feature will bring significant advantages when applied to more complex action languages.

The central part of this paper is Section 5, which describes a new way to represent action descriptions by causal theories. It is preceded by the discussion of the syntax of action descriptions with variables adopted in this paper and a review of first-order causal logic, and followed by the investigation of mathematical properties of the new semantics.

$\langle \text{fluent formula} \rangle ::= \langle \text{formula} \rangle$
 $\langle \text{action formula} \rangle ::= \langle \text{formula} \rangle$

Formulas are formed using propositional connectives; for simplicity, quantifiers are not allowed:

$\langle \text{formula} \rangle ::= \langle \text{atom} \rangle \mid \langle \text{'('} \langle \text{term} \rangle \text{'='} \langle \text{term} \rangle \text{'}' \rangle \mid$
 $\quad \perp \mid \top \mid \langle \text{'\neg'} \langle \text{formula} \rangle \rangle \mid$
 $\quad \langle \text{'('} \langle \text{formula} \rangle \langle \text{binary connective} \rangle$
 $\quad \langle \text{formula} \rangle \text{'}' \rangle$

$\langle \text{atom} \rangle$
 $::= (\langle \text{Boolean fluent name} \rangle \mid \langle \text{action name} \rangle)$
 $\quad [\langle \text{'\{'} \langle \text{argument} \rangle \text{'\}'} \rangle \langle \text{argument} \rangle \text{'}']$
 $\langle \text{argument} \rangle ::= \langle \text{object name} \rangle \mid \langle \text{variable name} \rangle$
 $\langle \text{term} \rangle ::= \langle \text{non-Boolean fluent name} \rangle \mid$
 $\quad \langle \text{object name} \rangle \mid \langle \text{variable name} \rangle$

Any name occurring in an action description should be declared exactly once. In declarations, atoms and terms, a name can only be used in accordance with its declaration.

A fluent formula cannot contain action names. An action formula should contain an action name, but it cannot contain fluent names.

4 Review of Causal Logic

The review of the syntax and semantics of causal theories in this section follows [Lifschitz, 1997, Section 2].

A *causal rule* is an expression of the form

$$F \Leftarrow G, \quad (2)$$

where F and G are first-order formulas, called the *head* and the *body* of the rule. Expression (2) reads: there is a cause for F if G holds. A *causal theory* is defined by

- a finite subset of the signature¹ of the underlying language, called the *explainable symbols* of the theory, and
- a finite set of causal rules.

In the definition of the semantics of causal theories below, we use the substitution of variables for the explainable symbols in a formula. In connection with this, it is convenient to denote formulas by expressions like $F(E)$, where E is the list of all explainable symbols. Then, for any tuple e of variables that is similar² to E , the result of replacing all occurrences of the constants E in $F(E)$ by the variables e can be denoted by $F(e)$.

Consider a causal theory T with the explainable symbols E and the causal rules

$$F_i(E, x^i) \Leftarrow G_i(E, x^i) \quad (i = 1, \dots),$$

¹The *signature* of a (nonsorted) first-order language is the set of its function constants and predicate constants (other than equality). This includes, in particular, object constants (function constants of arity 0) and propositional constants (predicate constants of arity 0).

²The similarity condition means that (i) e has the same length as E , (ii) if the k -th member of E is a function constant then the k -th member of e is a function variable of the same arity, and (iii) if the k -th member of E is a predicate constant then the k -th member of e is a predicate variable of the same arity.

where x^i is the list of all free variables of the i -th rule. Take a tuple e of new variables similar to E . By $T^*(e)$ we denote the formula

$$\bigwedge_i \forall x^i (G_i(E, x^i) \rightarrow F_i(e, x^i)).$$

Note that the occurrences of explainable symbols in the heads are replaced here by variables, and the occurrences in the bodies are not. We will view T as shorthand for the sentence

$$\forall e (T^*(e) \leftrightarrow e = E). \quad (3)$$

(The expression $e = E$ stands for the conjunction of the equalities between the members of e and the corresponding members of E .) For instance, by a *model* of T we mean a model of (3); a formula is *entailed* by T if it is entailed by (3). Note that the tuple e may contain function and predicate variables, so that (3) is, generally, a second-order formula.

Intuitively, the condition $T^*(e)$ expresses that the possible values e of the explainable symbols E are “causally explained” by the rules of T . Sentence (3) says that the actual values of these symbols are the only ones that are explained by the rules of T .

For instance, let T be the causal theory with the rules

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Room}(\text{Room}1) &\Leftarrow \top, \\ \text{Room}(\text{Room}2) &\Leftarrow \top, \\ \neg \text{Room}(x) &\Leftarrow \neg \text{Room}(x), \end{aligned} \quad (4)$$

where the predicate constant Room is explainable, and the object constants $\text{Room}1$, $\text{Room}2$ are not explainable. Intuitively, the last line of (4) expresses the closed-world assumption for Room in the language of causal logic: if x is not a room then there is a cause for this. In this case, E is Room , e is a unary predicate variable room , and $T^*(\text{room})$ is

$$\begin{aligned} \text{room}(\text{Room}1) \wedge \text{room}(\text{Room}2) \\ \wedge \forall x (\neg \text{Room}(x) \rightarrow \neg \text{room}(x)). \end{aligned}$$

The second-order sentence

$$\forall \text{room} (T^*(\text{room}) \leftrightarrow \text{room} = \text{Room})$$

can be equivalently rewritten as the first-order sentence

$$\forall x (\text{Room}(x) \leftrightarrow x = \text{Room}1 \vee x = \text{Room}2). \quad (5)$$

5 Semantics of Action Descriptions

Given an action description D and a nonnegative integer m , the corresponding causal theory D_m is formed as follows.

Its signature σ^{D_m} consists of

- an explainable unary predicate constant S for each sort name S declared in D ;
- a non-explainable object constant V for each object name V declared in D ;
- an explainable predicate constant $i : P$ for each Boolean fluent name P declared in D , and every $i \in \{0, \dots, m\}$; the arity of $i : P$ is the same as the arity of P ;

- an explainable object constant $i : C$ for each non-Boolean fluent name C declared in D , and every $i \in \{0, \dots, m\}$;
- an explainable predicate constant $i : P$ for each action name P declared in D , and every $i \in \{0, \dots, m-1\}$; the arity of $i : P$ is the same as the arity of P .

For instance, the signature σ^{R_m} corresponding to the action description R shown in Figure 1 consists of the object constants

$$Room1, Room2, i : Location$$

and the unary predicate constants

$$Room, i : GoTo.$$

Among these, $Room1$ and $Room2$ are non-explainable.

For any object name V declared in D , $SORT_V$ stands for the sort name assigned to V in the object declaration part, and similarly for variable names and for non-Boolean fluent names. By $i : F$ we denote the result of prepending $i :$ to all fluent names and action names in F .

The causal theory D_m consists of the following rules:

- (i) $\neg S(x) \Leftarrow \neg S(x)$ for each sort name S , where x is an object variable;
- (ii) $SORT_V(V) \Leftarrow \top$ for each object name V ;
- (iii) $V_1 \neq V_2 \Leftarrow \top$ for each pair of distinct object names V_1, V_2 ;
- (iv) the rules

$$\begin{aligned} 0 : P(x_1, \dots, x_n) &\Leftarrow 0 : P(x_1, \dots, x_n) \\ &\quad \wedge S_1(x_1) \wedge \dots \wedge S_n(x_n), \\ \neg 0 : P(x_1, \dots, x_n) &\Leftarrow \neg 0 : P(x_1, \dots, x_n) \\ &\quad \wedge S_1(x_1) \wedge \dots \wedge S_n(x_n) \end{aligned}$$

for each Boolean fluent schema $P(S_1, \dots, S_n)$ from D , where x_1, \dots, x_n are distinct object variables;

- (v) the rules

$$\neg i : P(x_1, \dots, x_n) \Leftarrow \neg S_j(x_j) \quad (1 \leq j \leq n)$$

for each Boolean fluent schema $P(S_1, \dots, S_n)$ from D and $0 \leq i \leq m$, and for each action schema $P(S_1, \dots, S_n)$ from D and $0 \leq i < m$, where x_1, \dots, x_n are distinct object variables;

- (vi) the rules

$$0 : C = x \Leftarrow 0 : C = x \wedge SORT_C(x)$$

and

$$\neg(i : C = x) \Leftarrow \neg SORT_C(x) \quad (0 \leq i \leq m)$$

for each non-Boolean fluent name C , where x is an object variable;

- (vii) the rules

$$i : F \Leftarrow i : G \wedge \bigwedge_x SORT_x(x) \quad (0 \leq i \leq m)$$

for each static causal law

$$\text{caused } F \text{ if } G$$

in D , where the conjunction is over all variables x occurring in F or G ;

$$\begin{aligned} \neg Room(x) &\Leftarrow \neg Room(x), \\ Room(Room1) &\Leftarrow \top, \\ Room(Room2) &\Leftarrow \top, \\ Room1 \neq Room2 &\Leftarrow \top, \\ \neg i : GoTo(x) &\Leftarrow \neg Room(x) \quad (0 \leq i < m), \\ 0 : Location = x &\Leftarrow 0 : Location = x \wedge Room(x), \\ \neg(i : Location = x) &\Leftarrow \neg Room(x) \quad (0 \leq i \leq m), \\ i+1 : Location = r &\Leftarrow i+1 : Location = r \\ &\quad \wedge i : Location = r \wedge Room(r), \\ i : GoTo(r) &\Leftarrow i : GoTo(r) \wedge Room(r), \\ \neg i : GoTo(r) &\Leftarrow \neg i : GoTo(r) \wedge Room(r), \\ i+1 : Location = r &\Leftarrow i : GoTo(r) \wedge Room(r) \\ &\quad (0 \leq i < m). \end{aligned}$$

Figure 2: Rules of causal theory R_m

- (viii) the rules

$$i : F \Leftarrow i : G \wedge \bigwedge_x SORT_x(x) \quad (0 \leq i < m)$$

for each action dynamic causal law

$$\text{caused } F \text{ if } G$$

in D , where the conjunction is over all variables x occurring in F or G ;

- (ix) the rules

$$i+1 : F \Leftarrow i+1 : G \wedge i : H \wedge \bigwedge_x SORT_x(x) \quad (0 \leq i < m)$$

for each fluent dynamic causal law

$$\text{caused } F \text{ if } G \text{ after } H$$

in D , where the conjunction is over all variables x occurring in F, G or H .

Clauses (vii)–(ix) in this definition generalize the process of translating causal laws of $\mathcal{C}+$ into propositional causal logic described in [Giunchiglia *et al.*, 2004, Section 4.2].

Intuitively, the models of D_m in the sense of Section 4 represent the possible behaviors, or “histories,” of the state-transition system described by D over successive time instants $0, 1, \dots, m$.

For instance, the causal theory R_m corresponding to the action description R from Figure 1 is shown in Figure 2. The models of this theory are described in Section 2 above.

For any sort name S , by $|S|$ we denote the set of all object names of sort S .

Proposition 1 *For any sort name S , D_m entails*

$$\forall x \left(S(x) \leftrightarrow \bigvee_{V \in |S|} x = V \right).$$

In other words, the extent of any sort in a model of D_m is the set of elements of the universe representing the objects of that sort. For instance, any model of R_m satisfies (5).

6 States and Transitions

The models of D_0 will be called *states*; the models of D_1 are *transitions*.

In the theory of $\mathcal{C}+$, the view that histories of length m can be thought of as paths in a transition system is justified by two theorems, Propositions 7 and 8 from [Giunchiglia *et al.*, 2004]. The first of them shows that any transition “starts” in a state and “ends” in a state. According to the second theorem, an interpretation of the signature of D_m is a model of D_m if and only if it “consists of m transitions.” Propositions 2 and 3 below are similar to these theorems.

Let D be an action description. For any interpretation I of σ^{D_1} , by I^0 and I^1 we denote the interpretations of σ^{D_0} defined as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} |I^i| &= |I|, \\ I^i[S] &= I[S] \text{ for every sort name } S, \\ I^i[V] &= I[V] \text{ for every object name } V, \\ I^i[0 : C] &= I[i : C] \text{ for every fluent name } C \\ &\quad (i = 0, 1). \end{aligned}$$

Proposition 2 *For any transition I , the interpretations I^0 and I^1 are states.*

For any interpretation I of σ^{D_m} , by $I^{(i)}$ ($0 \leq i < m$) we denote the interpretations of σ^{D_1} defined as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} |I^{(i)}| &= |I|, \\ I^{(i)}[S] &= I[S] \text{ for every sort name } S, \\ I^{(i)}[V] &= I[V] \text{ for every object name } V, \\ I^{(i)}[0 : C] &= I[i : C] \text{ for every fluent or action name } C, \\ I^{(i)}[1 : C] &= I[i + 1 : C] \text{ for every fluent name } C. \end{aligned}$$

Proposition 3 *For any positive integer m and any interpretation I of σ^{D_m} , I is a model of D_m iff every $I^{(i)}$ ($0 \leq i < m$) is a transition.*

7 Reduction to $\mathcal{C}+$

As discussed in the introduction, our semantics treats variables in essentially the same way as the semantics of classical logic. On the other hand, when actions are described in $\mathcal{C}+$, variables can be only used in schematic expressions that represent groups of causal laws obtained from these expressions by grounding. To relate these two views to each other, we show in this section that grounding allows us to characterize the new semantics in terms of the semantics of $\mathcal{C}+$, at least under the assumption that the “extent” $|S|$ of every sort S is non-empty. This assumption corresponds to the requirement, in the semantics of $\mathcal{C}+$, that the domain of every constant be a non-empty set.

Given an action description D in the sense of Section 3 such that $|S| \neq \emptyset$ for each of its sort names S , the corresponding $\mathcal{C}+$ action description D' is formed as follows. Its signature consists of

- Boolean simple fluent constants $C(V_1, \dots, V_n)$ for each Boolean fluent schema $C(S_1, \dots, S_n)$ in the constant declaration part of D , where V_i ($1 \leq i \leq n$) is an object name of sort S_i ;

- a simple fluent constant C with domain $|SORT_C|$, for each non-Boolean fluent name C declared in D ;
- Boolean action constants $C(V_1, \dots, V_n)$ for each action schema $C(S_1, \dots, S_n)$ in the constant declaration part of D , where V_i ($1 \leq i \leq n$) is an object name of sort S_i .

For instance, the signature of the $\mathcal{C}+$ action description R' corresponding to action description R (Figure 1) consists of three constants: the simple fluent constant *Location* with domain $\{Room1, Room2\}$ and the Boolean action constants *GoTo(Room1)* and *GoTo(Room2)*.

The presence of variables in causal laws in the sense of Section 3 is not the only feature that makes them more general than the causal laws of $\mathcal{C}+$. In a formula of the form $t_1 = t_2$, we allow each of the terms t_1, t_2 to be an arbitrary object name or an arbitrary non-Boolean fluent name. In atoms in the sense of $\mathcal{C}+$, on the other hand, the left-hand side must be a constant, and the right-hand side must be an element of the domain of that constant. (Also, Boolean constants and equalities between two constants can be used as abbreviations; see [Giunchiglia *et al.*, 2004, Section 2.1].) For this reason, the causal laws of D' are obtained from the causal laws in the axioms part of D in two steps: first grounding, then adapting the form of equalities to the requirements of the syntax of $\mathcal{C}+$.

By D' we denote the $\mathcal{C}+$ action description obtained from D by

- grounding all causal laws of D so that the symbols substituted for each variable x are arbitrary object names of the sort $SORT_x$,
- then modifying the parts $t_1 = t_2$ in the expressions obtained after result of grounding, as follows:
 - whenever t_1 and t_2 are object names, replace $t_1 = t_2$ with \top if t_1 equals t_2 , and with \perp otherwise;
 - then, whenever t_1 is an object name and t_2 is a fluent name, replace $t_1 = t_2$ with $t_2 = t_1$;
 - then, whenever t_1 is a fluent name and t_2 is an object name of a sort different from $SORT_{t_1}$, replace $t_1 = t_2$ with \perp .

(See Figure 3 for an example.)

Proposition 4 below shows how models of D_m in the sense of Section 5 can be characterized in terms of models of D'_m in the sense of $\mathcal{C}+$. In its statement, we refer to the following two conditions on an interpretation I of σ^{D_m} :

- $I \models V_1 \neq V_2$ for any distinct object names V_1, V_2 ;
- $I \models \bigvee_{V \in |SORT_C|} i : C = V$ for any non-Boolean fluent name C and any $i \in \{0, \dots, m\}$.

For any interpretation I of σ^{D_m} satisfying these conditions, by I' we denote the interpretation (in the sense of $\mathcal{C}+$) of the signature $\sigma^{D'_m}$ such that

caused $Location = Room1$
 if $Location = Room1$ **after** $Location = Room1$,
caused $Location = Room2$
 if $Location = Room2$ **after** $Location = Room2$,
caused $GoTo(Room1)$ **if** $GoTo(Room1)$,
caused $GoTo(Room2)$ **if** $GoTo(Room2)$,
caused $\neg GoTo(Room1)$ **if** $\neg GoTo(Room1)$,
caused $\neg GoTo(Room2)$ **if** $\neg GoTo(Room2)$,
caused $Location = Room1$
 if \top **after** $GoTo(Room1)$,
caused $Location = Room2$
 if \top **after** $GoTo(Room2)$.

Figure 3: $\mathcal{C}+$ action description R'

- for each Boolean constant $i : C(V_1, \dots, V_n)$,
 $I'[i : C(V_1, \dots, V_n)] = I[i : C](I[V_1], \dots, I[V_n])$;
- for each non-Boolean constant $i : C$, $I'[i : C]$ is the object name V such that $I[i : C] = I[V]$.

(Conditions (a) and (b) guarantee the existence and uniqueness of such V .)

Proposition 4 *An interpretation I of σ^{D_m} is a model of D_m iff*

- $I \models \forall x \left(S(x) \leftrightarrow \bigvee_{V \in |S|} x = V \right)$,
- I satisfies conditions (a) and (b),
- I' is a model of D'_m (in the sense of $\mathcal{C}+$).

Thus for the interpretations satisfying the formula from Proposition 1 and the conditions needed to define the mapping $I \mapsto I'$, the new semantics of action descriptions can be reduced to the semantics of $\mathcal{C}+$ by grounding.

8 Conclusion

The semantics of action descriptions proposed in this paper combines attractive features of ADL and $\mathcal{C}+$. Like the former, it is based on state-transition models for languages with variables and does not refer to grounding; like the latter, it uses a nonmonotonic causal logic to solve the ramification problem.

We expect that the advantages of the new approach to the semantics of action descriptions will become essential when we extend it to additional syntactic constructs, important for the purposes of knowledge representation. Here are two examples of such features, both implemented in the input language of the Causal Calculator (CCALC)³.

The syntax defined in Section 3 allows the list of arguments in an atom to include object names and variable names, but not constant names. But it is sometimes convenient to write, for instance, $C_1(C_2)$, where C_1 is

a Boolean fluent name and C_2 is a non-Boolean fluent name; this expression has the same meaning as

$$\exists x(C_2 = x \wedge C_1(x)),$$

where x is a variable of the same sort as C_2 . A semantics based on grounding has to be explicit about “expansion steps” like this; the semantics defined in Section 5 applies to the extended syntax without any changes.

Second, it is often convenient to declare one sort to be a subsort of another. In the new approach, the assertion that S_1 is a subsort of S_2 can be understood as

$$S_1(x) \rightarrow S_2(x) \Leftarrow \top.$$

Explaining subsort declarations in terms of grounding is more cumbersome.

Our semantics of action descriptions is somewhat similar to the semantics of logic programming proposed in [Ferraris, Lee, & Lifschitz, 2007]: both refer to non-monotonic translations into classical second-order logic and are, in this sense, similar to circumscription [McCarthy, 1986]. We expect that these parallel approaches to action descriptions and to stable models will help us extend the results on representing actions by logic programs from [Lifschitz & Turner, 1999] to action descriptions with variables.

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³<http://www.cs.utexas.edu/users/tag/ccalc/> .