On Ordering Problems in Message Passing Software

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Disciplines
Computer Sciences | Software Engineering

Comments

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On Ordering Problems in Message Passing Software

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Categories and Subject Descriptors D.1.3 [Programming Techniques]: Concurrent Programming — Distributed programming;D.3.3[Programming Languages]:Language Constructs and Features—Concurrent programming structures

Keywords Message passing, quantification of message ordering problems, asynchronous messages

1. Introduction

The message passing paradigm allows for modular development [3, 26] and reasoning [6, 18, 27] of its programs. In the message passing paradigm, a module (process) communicates with other concurrently running processes by sending and receiving messages. For enhanced throughput, these messages are usually sent asynchronously [3, 4]. However, asynchronous sending of messages introduces the possibility of ordering problems that we call the message ordering problem and makes development of message passing software difficult and error-prone. In an ordering problem, two messages with a specific sequential order in the program text could take effect in the opposite order in the program execution. Previous work [12, 24, 30, 47] shows that ordering problems are prevalent and could lead to bugs that are hard to find and debug. A bug usually happens when a programmer, based on the program text, assumes a message order which may not actually exist during the program execution.

```java
1 class Client extends Actor {
2    ActorName server; ..
3    @message void start() {
4        send(server, "set", 1); // async message send
5        int v = send(server, "get"); // async message send
6        assert(v == 1); // assertion Φ
7    } ..
8 }
```

Figure 1: A message ordering problem happens when using the program text, on lines 4–5, a programmer mistakenly assumes that the asynchronous message set is sent and processed before get, causing a real world bug [24].

To illustrate, Figure 1—written in the message passing programming language ActorFoundry [1]—shows a simplified version of a real world bug [24] caused by a message ordering problem. A Client process (actor), sends an asynchronous message set to a server process, on line 4 to set the value of a variable in the server to 1. Later, the client sends another asynchronous message get, on line 5 to read the value of the variable in the server. Because sending of the set message appears before sending of the get message in the program text, it is very likely [12, 24, 30, 47] that a sequentially-trained programmer assumes that the set message is sent and processed in the server before the get message and therefore get reads the value 1 set by set and the
assertion $\Phi$ holds; and this is exactly what the programmer assumes in this example [24, 47]. However, the execution of the program could surprise the programmer by causing a bug and violation of $\Phi$. This is because, depending on the messaging semantics of ActorFoundry, set and get messages could during program execution be received and processed by the server in an order which is the opposite of their appearance order in the program text in the client. This in turn causes the get message to return a value that may not be equal to 1 and therefore cause a bug and violate $\Phi$. This bug happens because, based on the program text, the programmer mistakenly assumes an ordering (in-order delivery and processing) between set and get messages that may not exist during the program execution, depending on the semantics of the message send operation.

1.1 Root Causes of Message Ordering Problems

We believe that the semantic variations of the following 3 criteria in the message passing paradigm are the root causes of message ordering problems:

- $C_1$: Message synchronization semantics, categorized into asynchronous and synchronous messaging [22].
- $C_2$: Message processing semantics, categorized into nondeterministic and in-order delivery and processing.
- $C_3$: Sharing semantics, categorized into data sharing and data isolation of memory effects between processes.

In addition to semantic variations of $C_1$–$C_3$, two other factors could make it harder for a programmer to understand and avoid message ordering problems: (1) semantic tuning of the underlying message passing paradigm of a single program and (2) diversity of semantic variations that are available for the message passing paradigm.

1.1.1 Semantic Tuning in a Single Paradigm

There are message passing languages and frameworks, such as Akka [4], that allow the programmer to configure various semantics for $C_1$–$C_3$ in the underlying message passing paradigm of a single program. Such semantic tuning could make message ordering problems harder to understand and avoid: a program that is free from message ordering problems in one configuration may suffer from ordering problems in another configuration.

For example, suppose the code in Figure 1 was written in Akka instead of ActorFoundry. Akka allows the programmer to configure the message synchronization semantics of send and to change it from the default asynchronous messaging to synchronous. Such configuration of message synchronization semantics takes original program with a message ordering problem and changes it to a program without any ordering problems. A similar scenario in the opposite direction can happen as well: a configuration change from synchronous to asynchronous messaging could change a program without message ordering problems into one with message ordering problems.

To further illustrate semantic tuning, Akka configurations allow a programmer to configure and run a program with either asynchronous or synchronous messaging for $C_1$. For $C_2$, ActorFoundry and HAL constraints [19] allow configurations of both nondeterministic and in-order message delivery and processing. For $C_3$, Kilim annotations [43] allow configurations for both data sharing and isolation.

1.1.2 Semantic Diversity in Multiple Paradigms

There are several message passing programming languages and frameworks available with different semantics for $C_1$–$C_3$. Such semantic diversity could make it difficult to understand and avoid message ordering problems, especially when a program with no ordering problems in one paradigm may suffer from ordering problems in another paradigm [39] and vice versa. For example, deprecation of Scala Actor [17] message passing paradigm and its evolution into Akka may require a programmer to migrate their program from Scala Actor to Akka with cautionary warnings like:

“Due to differences between the two actor implementations it is possible that errors appear. It is recommended to thoroughly test the code after each step of the migration process.” — The Scala Actors Migration Guide [39]

There is no guarantee that a program in Scala Actor with no ordering problems will have no ordering problems when migrated to Akka.

To illustrate the semantic diversity, Scala [16] and Panini [37, 38] support both asynchronous and synchronous messaging for $C_1$ whereas Erlang [5] and standard actor model only support asynchronous messaging. For $C_2$, ActorFoundry messages are delivered and could be processed nondeterministically whereas Akka and JCoBox [40] support in-order delivery and processing. For $C_3$, the standard actor model supports data isolation between processes, Scala allows sharing and ActorFoundry supports both.

1.2 Understanding Message Ordering Problems

On the one hand, the concurrency revolution requires sequentially-trained programmers that mostly think sequentially [30] to write concurrent programs in the message passing paradigm, which is a modular concurrent programming model with increasing popularity. On the other hand, the message ordering problems make programming in this paradigm difficult and error-prone [24, 47] for these programmers [30, 45]. We believe that the engineering of message passing software could be easier if we know more about the characteristics of message ordering problems in practice. This makes it critical to study and understand the relation between the semantics of a message passing paradigm and the ordering problems of its programs.

1.3 Contributions

This paper makes the following contributions:

- Illustration of the relation between message ordering problems and synchronization semantics, message delivery and processing semantics, and sharing semantics; and
• Quantify the relation between the semantics of five message passing models and their ordering problems for various concurrent programming patterns in about 130,000 lines of code adapted from previous work; and

• Study the minimum number of processes and messages that are required to trigger these ordering problems; and

• Quantify the overlapping of message passing models in preventing the same ordering problems; and

• Discuss implications of our findings for application developers, framework designer and application verifiers in the engineering of concurrent message passing software.

Outline §2 illustrates the relation of ordering problems and various semantics of the message passing models. §3 defines causal happens-before relations for our five message passing models, defines unsafe interleavings of operations that lead to ordering problems and discusses our static analysis for detection of ordering problems. §4 presents our study setup. §5 discusses our observations and their implications. §6 discusses related work. §7 concludes the paper.

2. Problems

This section illustrates the relation between ordering problems and semantic variations of C1–C3 for message synchronization, message delivery and processing, and data sharing semantics of the underlying message passing model.

```java
class Client extends Actor{
  ActorName server;
  Client(ActorName s){ server = s; }
  send(server, "set", 1);
  int v = send(server, "get");
  assert(v == 1); // assertion \Phi
}

class Server extends Actor{
  int val = 0;
  @message void set(int v){ val = v; }
  @message int get(){ return val; }
}

class Driver{
  static void main(String[] args){
    ActorName server = createActor(Server.class);
    ActorName client = createActor(Client.class);
    send(client, "start", server);
  }
}
```

Figure 2: (1) With synchronous messaging for C1 or in-order message delivery and processing for C2, Client has no ordering problems. (2) With alternative semantics for C1 or C2, Client suffers from message ordering problems.

To illustrate, Figure 2 shows the Client from Figure 1 with its Server. The code is implemented in ActorFoundry where a process is declared by a class that extends the Actor class and is instantiated using the createActor constructor; a message handler is a method marked with the @message annotation. For example, lines 11–12 declare the process Client, line 18 instantiates a process instance client and line 12 declares a message handler set. The Server keeps track of a variable val and provides access to it using its message handlers set and get. The Client sets the value of val to 1 by sending a set message to the server, on line 3 reads its value by sending a get message, on line 5 and finally checks if val is actually set to 1 using the assertion \Phi, on line 7. Driver, the entry point to the program, creates client and server process instances, on lines 7–9 and initiates the execution of client by sending it a start message, on line 10. The name of the receiving process, a message name and message parameters are required when sending a message using the send operation. In the message send on line 3 server is the name of the receiving process, set is the name of the message and 1 is the parameter of the message in the server. The assertion \Phi is the representative for message ordering problems. That is, the assertion holds when there is no ordering problem and is otherwise violated.

Semantics of ActorFoundry ActorFoundry supports: (1) asynchronous send and synchronous blocking call messaging for C1; (2) nondeterministic delivery and processing and programmer-specified processing of messages for C2; and (3) data isolation for C3 by its call by value messaging (or by relying on the programmer to guarantee data isolation for call by reference messaging).

In the following, we illustrate the relation of message ordering problems and C1–C3.

2.1 C1: Message Synchronization Semantics

To illustrate the relation of ordering problems and message synchronization, we consider two alternative semantics for send: asynchronous and synchronous messaging.

2.1.1 Synchronous

With synchronous semantics for message sends, Client has no ordering problems and the assertion \Phi holds. This is because the blocking semantics of messages sends ensures that the set message that appears before the get message in the program text is in fact sent and processed before get.

2.1.2 Asynchronous

On the other hand, with asynchronous semantics for message sends, Client has message ordering problems. This is because, the set message may be processed by the server after the get message, which is the opposite of their order in the program text, especially if the messages are processed in a nondeterministic order. Since the message handlers for messages set and get write and read the same variable val in the server, their execution in the opposite order causes a message ordering problem. Despite the programmer’s assumption the get message may read a value of val which is not equal to 1 and the assertion \Phi is violated.

1 This is for illustration purposes only, otherwise we treat call messages as synchronous and send as asynchronous as specified in the semantics.
2.2 C2: Message Delivery and Processing Semantics

To illustrate the relation of ordering problems and message delivery and processing, we consider two alternative semantics for message delivery and processing: nondeterministic and in-order. In nondeterministic messaging semantics, there is no order for either the delivery or processing of messages. However, in in-order delivery, two messages sent directly (with no intermediate processes) from one process to another are guaranteed to be delivered in the same order that they are sent. Similarly, in in-order processing, messages are processed in the order by which they are delivered.

2.2.1 In-order

With in-order delivery and processing, Client has no ordering problems, because the set and get messages are delivered and processed in the order in which they appear in the program text. That is, the set message is delivered and processed before the get message in the server. This is true even for asynchronous message synchronization semantics.

2.2.2 Nondeterministic

Unlike in-order delivery and processing, with nondeterministic delivery and processing, Client has ordering problems. This is because set and get messages could be delivered to the server and processed in any arbitrary order. Such arbitrary order could include an order in which get is processed before set.

2.3 C3: Sharing Semantics

To illustrate the relation of message ordering problems and sharing, we consider two alternative semantics for sharing among processes: data sharing and data isolation.

In ActorFoundry, a process cannot directly access the internal state of another process because call by value messaging guarantees data isolation. Therefore, data sharing can only happen through call by reference messaging [32].

To illustrate, Figure 3 shows a variation of Figure 2 in which the server keeps track of the value of an object val, line 12 instead of its primitive integer counterpart in Figure 2. The omitted code remains the same.

```java
1 class Client extends Actor { ..
2   @message void start() { ..
3       Value val = new Value();
4       send(server, "init", val);
5       send(server, "set", 1);
6       val.num = 2;
7       assert(val.num == 2); // assertion φ
8   }
9 }
10 class Value { int num; }
11 class Server extends Actor{
12   Value val;
13   @message void set(int v) { val.num = v; }
14   @message void init(Value v) { val = v; }
15 }
```

Figure 3: (1) With isolation C3 Client has no ordering problems. (2) With data sharing Client suffers from message ordering problems.

2.3.1 Data Sharing

With data sharing among processes, Client has message ordering problems especially if message sends are asynchronous and message delivery and processing is nondeterministic. This is because the call by reference semantics of the init message, on line 14, shares the object val between the client and the server and the asynchronous semantics of message sends allows the assignment in the client, on line 6, to execute before the processing of the set message in the server, sent on line 5. This could result in values for val.num that may not be equal to 2 and violate φ.

2.3.2 Data Isolation

On the other hand, with data isolation, the Client has no message ordering problems. This is because the call by value semantics for sending of the init message transfers a deep copy of val to the server instead sharing it. Therefore, the client and the server work on two separate unrelated copies of the object.

2.4 Summary

As illustrated, the presence of message ordering problems can vary greatly as the semantics of message synchronization, message delivery and processing, and sharing vary in the underlying message passing paradigm. Figure 4 summarizes the relation between message ordering problems in Client and the semantic variations for C1–C3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>C1</th>
<th>C2</th>
<th>C3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>synchronous</td>
<td>asynchronous</td>
<td>nondeterministic, inorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4: Relation of message ordering problems in Client with semantics variations of C1–C3. Yes and No mark the presence and absence of ordering problems.

3. Detection Analysis for Ordering Problems

This section defines 5 message passing models based on semantic variations of C1–C3, defines happens-before relations of their operations and describes our static analysis to detect ordering problems in these models.

3.1 Five Message Passing Models

Based on the semantic variations of C1–C3 for message synchronization, message delivery and processing, and sharing we define five message passing models: (1) base is a model with asynchronous and no built-in synchronous messaging for C1, non-deterministic message delivery and processing for C2 and data sharing among processes for C3; (2) +sync adds built-in synchronous messaging to base; (3) +inorder adds in-order delivery and processing of messages to base; (4) +trans adds transitive in-order delivery and processing to base; and finally (5) +isol adds data isolation to base. In transitive in-order delivery and processing, two messages sent
from one process to another are delivered and processed in the same order they are sent, if the first message is sent directly (with no intermediate processes) while the second message could be sent directly or indirectly.

### 3.2 Happens-Before Relations

A happens-before relation defines a causal order between executions of operations. Definition 1 defines the happens-before relation \( \prec \) for our models. To accommodate the encoding of both synchronous and asynchronous messages, we divide sending and processing of a message into \( \text{MsgSend} \) and \( \text{MsgReturn} \) and divide the processing of the message into \( \text{MsgStart} \) and \( \text{MsgEnd} \).

**Definition 1.** *(Happens-before relation \( \prec \))*

Let \( \text{Op}(o, i, A) \) be the operation \( o \) at the position \( i \) in the program text of a process \( A \). Let \( \text{MsgSend}(m, A, A') \) be sending of a message \( m \) from process \( A \) to \( A' \), \( \text{MsgStart}(m, A, A') \) and \( \text{MsgEnd}(m, A, A') \) be the start and end of the processing of \( m \) in \( A' \) and \( \text{MsgReturn}(m, A, A') \) be the returning to \( A \) after the end of the processing of \( m \) in \( A' \); let \( \text{Handler}(m, A') \) be the message handler of \( m \) sent in \( A' \). Let \( \prec \) denote the happens before relation. Then the following happens-before relations holds in our models.

(i) For base:

1. if \( i < j \), then \( \text{Op}(o, i, A) \prec \text{Op}(o', j, A) \)
2. \( \text{MsgSend}(m, A, A') \prec \text{MsgStart}(m, A, A') \)
3. \( \text{MsgSend}(m, A, A') \prec \text{MsgReturn}(m, A, A') \)
4. \( \text{MsgStart}(m, A, A') \prec \text{MsgEnd}(m, A, A') \)
5. if \( \text{Op}(o, i, A) \in \text{Handler}(m, A') \) then \( \text{MsgStart}(m, A, A') \prec \text{Op}(o, i, A') \) and \( \text{Op}(o, i, A') \prec \text{MsgEnd}(m, A, A') \)

(ii) For \( \text{+sync} \) and its synchronous messaging:

6. \( \text{MsgEnd}(m, A, A') \prec \text{MsgReturn}(m, A, A') \)

(iii) For \( \text{+inorder} \) and its in-order delivery and processing:

7. if \( \text{MsgSend}(m, A, A') \prec \text{MsgSend}(m', A, A') \) then \( \text{MsgEnd}(m, A, A') \prec \text{MsgStart}(m', A, A') \)

(iv) And finally for \( \text{+trans} \) and its transitive in-order:

8. if \( \text{MsgSend}(m, A, A') \prec \text{MsgSend}(m_1, A, B_1) \) and \( \text{MsgSend}(m_1, A, B_1) \prec \text{MsgSend}(m_2, B_1, B_2) \) \( \vdots \) \( \cdots \prec \text{MsgSend}(m_n, B_{n-1}, B_n) \prec \text{MsgSend}(m', B_n, A') \) then \( \text{MsgEnd}(m, A, A') \prec \text{MsgStart}(m', B_n, A') \).

Data isolation in \( \text{+isol} \) does not add any extra happens-before relations between operations of the model. The happens-before relation is transitively closed [13].

**Definition 1** says that in:

**base** model (i) An operation happens-before another operation if the former appears before the latter in the program text; (2) Sending of a message in the sender happens before the start of its processing in the receiver; (3) Sending of the message happens before its returning; (4) Start of the processing of a message happens before the end of its processing, and (5) Start of the processing of the message happens before any operation in its message handler.

(6) For a synchronous message the end of the processing of a message happens before the returning of the message. This is not true for asynchronous messages where the message returns right after it is sent, independent of the start and end of its processing. All happens-before relations of \( \text{base} \) are included in the happens-before relations for \( \text{+sync} \), as \( \text{+sync} \) is built on top of \( \text{base} \). The same applies to any of our models built on top of another.

(7) For two messages sent to another process directly (with no intermediate process) the first message is delivered and processed first and therefore the end of its processing happens before the start of the second message.

(8) For two messages sent to another process in which the first message is sent directly and the second message is sent directly or indirectly (through one or more intermediate processes), the first message is delivered and processed before the second one.

Figure 5 illustrates the happens-before relations for operations of the \text{Client} process in Figure 2 for two models \( \text{base} \) and \( \text{+sync} \).

### 3.3 Unsafe Interleavings

Definition 2 defines an unsafe interleaving of operations of a process that leads to a message ordering problem.

**Definition 2.** *(Unsafe interleavings of operations)*

Let \( \text{op}_1 \) and \( \text{op}_2 \) be operations of a process \( A \) such that \( \text{op}_1 \) appears before \( \text{op}_2 \) in the program text; let \( \text{op}_1 \) and \( \text{op}_2 \) send messages to other processes, directly or indirectly, and cause the execution of two other operations \( \text{op}'_1 \) and \( \text{op}'_2 \). Then \( \text{op}_1 \) and \( \text{op}_2 \) from an unsafe interleaving if and only if:

- There is no happens-before relation \( \prec \) between \( \text{op}'_1 \) and \( \text{op}'_2 \), as defined in Definition 1, and
- Operations \( \text{op}'_1 \) and \( \text{op}'_2 \) have conflicting memory effects.

Definition 2 is based on an observation from previous work that most sequentially-trained programmers think sequentially and they often wrongly assume that during the execution of a program messages are sent and processed in the same order that they appear in the program text [12 [24] [30] [47]]. Two memory effects conflict if they access the same memory location and at least one of them is a write.

### 3.4 Detection Analysis

Our static analysis to detect ordering problems has two phases: (1) convert a program to its corresponding system graph and (2) analyze the system graph for the unsafe interleaving of operations that lead to ordering problems.

**System graph** The system graph of a program is an alternative representation of the program that encodes its processes, their message exchanges, happens-before relations and memory effects. One benefit of the system graph is that it
allows our analysis to be independent of the implementation language of the program. Figure 6 shows the system graph for the program in Figure 2 for base and +sync models.

Finding ordering problems  To find ordering problems of a program in a message passing model, our analysis: (1) first uses the happens-before relations of the model, defined in §3.2 to statically infer happens-before relations among as many operations of processes as possible. Output of this phase is a set of process operations with no happens-before relations between them. (2) For each pair of these operations the analysis uses the sharing semantics of the model to decide if their memory effects conflict. Finally (3) pairs of operations that do not have any happens-before relation and their memory effects conflict are flagged, as defined in Definition 2 as unsafe interleavings.

To illustrate, consider the Client process in Figure 2 and its system graph in Figure 6. In Client, sending of the set message appears before the sending of the get message in the program text. And sending of set and get messages in the Client causes the execution of the set and get message handlers in the Server, respectively. Memory effects of message handlers set and get are writing and reading of the value of the same location val. When analyzing the system graph in the base model (solid happens-before relation arrows), there is no happens-before relation between the execution of set and get message handlers in the server which means that their memory effects conflict. Therefore, the pair of set and get messages in the client form an unsafe interleaving that the analysis flags as a message ordering problem. However, when analyzing the system graph in the +sync model (with both solid and dashed happens-before arrows) the analysis using transitivity of the happens-before relation infers that there is a happens-before relation (red arrow) between the execution of set and get message handlers. Therefore, there does not exist any unsafe interleavings or message ordering problems in the client.

4. Case Studies

This section discusses our benchmark applications and their refactoring process.

4.1 Benchmarks

We study 34 small to large sized benchmark applications totalling about 130,000 lines of code adapted from the following previous work: (1) Basset [24], (2) Habanero [20], (3) Jetlang [21], (4) well-known benchmarks, including NAS Parallel Benchmarks [15] and parallel JavaGrande [42] and (5) examples shipped with the Panini compiler [34]. These benchmark applications are implemented in a variety of concurrent programming patterns [31] including Master Worker (MW), Loop Parallelism (FL), Pipeline (PL) and Event-based Coordination (EC). Figure 8 shows our benchmarks.

For our analysis, we first refactored the benchmark applications to their corresponding message passing programs in the message passing language Panini [6 37 38]. Then we converted these programs into their corresponding system graphs and later analyzed these system graphs.

4.1.1 Refactoring to Panini

Panini is a message passing concurrent programming language that promotes capsule-oriented programming [37 38]. In Panini, a capsule, similar to a process, encapsulates its data and thread of control and communicates with other capsules by sending and receiving messages. A procedure of a capsule is similar to a message handler of a process. To illustrate, Figure 7 shows a refactoring of the ActorFoundry program in Figure 2 into Panini where lines 1–5 declare the Client capsule; lines 14–18 define a system declaration in which lines 16 and 17 declare client and server capsule instances and line 17 connects them together.
To refactor our benchmarks, we follow a very strict and non-intrusive set of mostly syntactic refactoring steps. Our refactoring steps for a multi-threaded benchmark application are: (1) refactor a thread object to a capsule; (2) refactor a synchronized method or block to a capsule procedure; and (3) create a capsule field for a top-level class instance. Our refactoring steps for a message passing benchmark application are: (1) refactor a process to a capsule (2) refactor a message handler to a capsule procedure and a message send to an invocation of the capsule procedure; (3) create processes in its system declaration.

```java
1 capsule Server {
2   int val = 0;
3   void set(int v) { val = v; }
4   int get() { return val; }
5 }
6 capsule Client(Server server) {
7     server.set(1);
8     v = server.get();
9     assert(v == 1);
10    }
11 }
```

Figure 7: Refactoring of Figure 2 in Panini [37, 38].

### 4.1.2 System Graph Construction

Conversion of a Panini program to its corresponding system graph and computation of its processes and their message exchanges is rather straightforward. In Panini, capsule instances are statically specified in the system declaration and cannot be stored or passed among capsules and there is no subtyping relation among capsule types [6]. To compute the memory effects of capsules, we use a sound alias analysis technique from previous work [9, 28]. Note that our analysis is also applicable in the presence of dynamic process creation as long as a system graph soundly abstracts the processes of the program and their communications.

### 4.2 Soundness and Completeness

Soundness of our analysis guarantees the absence of false negatives. That is, if there is an ordering problem our analysis will report it. For completeness, and to avoid false positives, we manually verify that a reported ordering problem, is an actual problem.

It is noteworthy that the existence of a message ordering problem in a benchmark application does not necessarily mean that the application is buggy. This is because, similar to data races, not every message ordering problem leads to a bug and some may even be intentional for performance purposes. Also we analyze the application in five different message passing models while the application is originally implemented with only one of these models in mind. Therefore, a message passing problem that exists in one model may not exist in the original model.

### 5. Quantification, Observations and Implications

This section quantifies the relation between message ordering problems and our message passing models defined in §3.1 and studies how these ordering problems can be triggered in various concurrent programming patterns [31]. It also discusses observations of our study and their implications as complementary guidelines that could be useful for application developers, application verifiers and framework designers when engineering message passing software.

It is noteworthy that, although our findings are the result of studying a large amount of code in a variety of applications we do not intend to draw general conclusions about all message passing applications or paradigms. Also, all our findings and implications are only associated with the applications and message passing models studied.

#### 5.1 Models and Patterns

We first discuss our findings for our five message passing models of base, +sync, +inorder, +trans and +isol per concurrent patterns of our benchmark applications. Figure 5 and its bar chart representation in Figure 9 show our findings. Our findings suggest the following trends.

#### 5.1.1 Event-Based Coordination

- Together, in-order message delivery and processing of +inorder and message synchrony of +sync, written as (+inorder and +sync), prevent 97% of message ordering problems in Event-based Coordination applications.
- Data isolation in +isol does not prevent any ordering problems in this pattern.

In-order messaging in +inorder prevents most of the ordering problems because Event-based Coordination applications usually involve multiple iterations where the same set of messages is exchanged among the same set of processes in each iteration; and the processing of messages of one iteration should be ordered before messages of its subsequent iterations. In-order messaging guarantees such ordering for each iteration. Synchronous messaging of +sync helps with ordering problems of the check-then-act idiom in Barbershop and Philosopher applications in this pattern, where it ensures that a check message blocks the execution of its act message until the check message is processed. Data isolation of +isol prevents the least number of ordering problems because programmers manually enforce the data isolation or exchanged messages are mostly primitive values. Transitivity of +trans is not very important, because system graphs of these applications, except Barbershop, do not include any triangle pattern. In a triangle pattern, a process A sends a message to process A’ directly and sends another message to A’ indirectly. Triangle patterns are main beneficiaries of transitivity of message delivery and processing.
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<th>+inorder</th>
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<td>117</td>
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<td>389</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Unresolved</strong></td>
<td>39</td>
<td>(10%)</td>
<td>(53%)</td>
<td>(2%)</td>
<td>(36%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 8: Quantification of ordering problems over message passing models for various concurrent programming patterns [31]: Master Worker (MW), Pipeline (PL), Loop Parallelism (FL) and Event-based Coordination (EC).

5.1.2 Loop Parallelism

- (+sync and +inorder and +isol) together prevent all ordering problems in Loop Parallelism applications.
- Transitivity of in-order message delivery and processing in +trans does not prevent any ordering problems.

For this pattern, +sync prevents the most ordering problems (89%) followed by +inorder (54%) and +isol (46%) and +trans prevents none (0%). There is overlapping between models in prevention of ordering problems. That is, there are ordering problems that can be prevented by more than one model, as discussed in §5.2.

Loop Parallelism [31] usually involves an implicit barrier point [35] to synchronize all iterations of a loop before proceeding. +sync enables easy enforcement of such synchronization points. +inorder helps with ordering messages of different loops according to the appearance order of the loops in the program text. Extensive use of call by reference messages, to avoid copying of data, makes +isol important in the prevention of ordering problems. Absence of triangle patterns makes +trans the least beneficial model.

5.1.3 Pipeline

+inorder prevents all ordering problems in Pipeline applications. +sync, +trans and +isol prevent none.

In Pipeline [31] applications, each stage of the pipeline should process messages in the same order they are delivered which in turn makes +inorder the most important. The shared data between the pipeline stages is restricted to be a sequence (stream) and stage processes do not reuse the data after processing it. This in turn makes +isol less important for Pipeline applications, which verifies the findings of previous work [35]. Since a stage process does not synchronize with its subsequent stage processes, +sync is not important. Lack of triangle patterns renders +trans less important.

5.1.4 Master Worker

(+inorder and +trans and +isol) only prevent 36% of ordering problems in Master Worker. +sync prevents none.

In Master Worker [31], the master process usually uses different messages to initialize worker processes, assign work to them and shut them down. These messages should be processed by workers in the order in which they are sent which in turn makes +inorder more important. Unlike other patterns, the system graphs for these applications usually contain more triangle patterns which in turn make +trans important. +isol is less important because master and workers usually do not share data with each other.

5.1.5 Unresolved Ordering Problems

78% of ordering problems in Master Worker can be prevented by commutativity guarantees.

Figure 8 shows that there are ordering problems that cannot be prevented by any model and therefore remain unresolved. However, stronger guarantees such as commutativity of operations can prevent some of these problems. Two operations are commutative if they can be executed in any order without changing the outcome.

5.1.6 All Together

For all of the applications across all patterns, +sync prevents most of the message ordering problems (70%), followed by +inorder (53%) and +isol (36%) where +trans only prevents 2% of the problems.

+inorder prevents most of the ordering problems for Event-based Coordination, Pipeline and Master Worker applica-
tions whereas +sync prevents the most for Loop Parallelism. +trans prevents no ordering problems in Loop Parallelism and Pipeline and +isol prevents none in Event-based Coordination and Pipeline.

5.2 Overlapping of Models
There are ordering problems that could be prevented by only one model while there are others that could be prevented by multiple models. Figure 10 quantifies the relation between ordering problems and the overlapping of our models. The overlapping area of two models shows the number of ordering problems prevented by either model. Figure 10 suggests the following trends in overlapping.

5.2.1 Event-Based Coordination
- (+inorder and +trans) can prevent all ordering problems that +sync prevents in Event-based Coordination.
- More than half of the ordering problems in this pattern can only be prevented by +inorder.

This makes +inorder critical in preventing ordering problems in Event-based Coordination applications. Definition 3 defines a critical model for an application.

DEFINITION 3. (A critical model)
A message passing model is critical to a message passing application, if there are ordering problems in the application that can be prevented only by that model.

5.2.2 Loop Parallelism
- (+inorder and +isol) can prevent all ordering problems that +sync can prevent in Loop Parallelism.
- Both +inorder and +isol are critical in preventing message ordering problems in this pattern.

More than 9% of message ordering problems in Loop Parallelism can be prevented only by +inorder. Similarly, less than 2% can be prevented only by +isol.

5.2.3 Pipeline
For Pipeline applications, all ordering problems are prevented by +inorder and there is no overlapping.

5.2.4 Master Worker
+inorder, +trans and +isol are critical to Master Worker. +inorder is the most critical model because it prevents 54% of ordering problems that cannot be prevented by other models. +trans is more critical than +isol because it prevents 39% where +isol prevents 8% of ordering problems that cannot be prevented by other models.

5.2.5 All Together
- +inorder is critical to applications in all Event-based, Loop Parallelism, Pipeline and Master Worker patterns.
- +isol is critical to Loop Parallelism and Master Worker.
- +trans is critical to Master Worker only.
- +sync is not a critical model for any pattern.

5.3 Triggering of Ordering Problems
A message ordering problem that leads to a bug should be reproducible by a test case for debugging purposes. The complexity of such a test case is exponential in the number of processes it should control [30] and messages among them [25][47]. For efficiency, it is necessary to be able to trigger a bug with minimum number of processes and messages. Figure 11 suggests the minimum number of processes and messages, whose interleavings should be controlled to trigger ordering problems in each model. Figure 11 suggests the following trends.

5.3.1 Minimum Number of Processes
More than half of the ordering problems can be triggered by controlling the interleavings of only 2 processes.

5.3.2 Minimum Number of Messages
- More than three quarters of problems in +trans, base and +isol are triggered by only 2 messages.
- There are message ordering problems that can be triggered with only 1 message.

One message can trigger an ordering problem in a process A when A sends a message and the effects of processing that message in other processes conflicts with the rest of A.

5.3.3 All Together
Only 2 processes and 2 messages trigger 75% of ordering problems in +isol and 49% in +trans and base.

However, such a testing configuration only triggers 2% of ordering problems in +inorder. Triggering about half of problems in +inorder requires up to 3 processes and 3 messages and the other half needs even more.

5.4 Implications
Our observations could provide key insights as complementary guidelines to previous work [24][30][46][47] for application developers, application verifiers and framework designers who engineer message passing software.

5.4.1 Application Developers
An application developer may use our findings in deciding: (1) how to tune the semantics of a message passing paradigm or (2) choose the proper paradigm with suitable semantics for their applications. For example:

(+inorder and +isol and +sync) for all Based on the observations in §5.1.6 and §5.2.5 the application developer may decide to implement their applications in a model whose semantics, by default or through semantic tuning, supports synchronous messaging, in-order delivery and processing, and data isolation. This is because such a model, (+inorder and +isol and +sync), prevents the majority (100%) of ordering problems and +inorder, +isol and +sync are all critical to one programming pattern or another.
Figure 9: Ordering problems for various message passing models and concurrent patterns. Vertical axis is in logarithmic scale.

Figure 10: Overlapping of various message passing models in preventing ordering problems.

Figure 11: Quantification of minimum number of processes and messages required to trigger ordering problems.

Panini [37, 38] and JCoBox [40] by default support such a model and Akka [4] can be configured to support it.

**+inorder for Pipeline** Based on the observation in §5.1.3, the application developer may decide to tune the semantics of their model to only support in-order delivery and processing for their Pipeline applications and not the whole (+inorder and +isol and +sync). This is because +inorder prevents the majority (100%) of ordering problems while +isol prevents none for Pipeline.

**Budgeted test efforts** Based on the observation in §5.1.2, for Loop Parallelism, the application verifier may decide to allocate twice the effort to test for ordering problems related to synchrony compared to isolation and almost no effort for transitivity. This is because +sync prevents 89% of ordering problems in this pattern compared to +isol that prevents 46%. However, based on the observation in §5.2.2, the verifier may refine his decision and decide to actually not test for synchrony and focus mostly on in-order delivery and processing and isolation. This is because (+inorder and +isol) can prevent all ordering problems that +sync prevents.

5.5 Application Verifiers

An application verifier may use our findings in: (1) designing test cases with minimal complexity and (2) budgeting and focusing of test efforts. For example:

**Minimal test cases** Based on the observation in §5.5.3, the application verifier can design test cases with minimal complexity by controlling only 2 processes and 2 messages between them and test for three quarters of ordering problems, if the underlying model supports isolation. The complexity of a test case is exponential in the number of processes and messages it controls.

5.6 Framework Designers

A framework designer may use our findings in deciding which semantic features are more important than others in the design of their framework. For example:
Critical +inorder and +isol Based on the observation in §5.2.5 the framework designer may decide to include both in-order message delivery and processing, and data isolation in their framework. This is because there are message ordering problems in Event-based Coordination, Loop Parallelism, Pipeline and Master Worker patterns that can be prevented only by +inorder and there are ordering problems in Loop Parallelism and Master Worker that can only be prevented by +isol.

+inorder is important for session-based programming framework The observation in §5.2.5 verifies and supports the decision of the framework designer in previous work [18] for supporting in-order message delivery and processing for the prevention of ordering problems in session-based message passing programming. A session structures a set of messages between a set of participating processes.

+sync is important in Habanero framework The observation in §5.1.2 verifies and supports the decision of the framework designer in the Habanero framework [20] to support synchronous messaging in their framework to enhance productivity of programmers for Loop Parallelism programs. Based on the observation in §5.2.5 the framework designer could alternatively decide to support the combination of in-order and isolation instead of message synchrony. This is because, (+inorder and +isol) can prevent all the ordering problems +sync can.

5.7 Modular Enforcement of Aliasing
Data isolation among processes is a simple form of modular enforcement of aliasing [13, 40] in which each process encapsulates and owns its data and does not share its data with other processes. With data isolation, data of a process can be accessed only through its message handlers. The observation in §5.3.3 shows that modular enforcement of aliasing can decrease the complexity of testing and test cases. This is because in a model with data isolation, three quarters of message ordering problems can be prevented by minimal test cases that control only 2 messages and 2 processes.

5.8 Threats to Validity
External validity The external validity of our study is limited by our choice of benchmark applications that are from either previous work or well-known concurrent benchmarks. Due to such a choice, we cannot claim that they form an exhaustive set of all typical message passing programs. Another threat to external validity of our study is that the same application is not implemented in various concurrent patterns and therefore there is an uneven distribution of ordering problems among applications of different patterns.

Internal validity The internal validity of our study is limited by our refactoring process to adapt message passing programs of previous work and multi-threaded benchmarks to Panini [37, 38] though our well-defined refactoring is designed to be mostly syntactic and as minimally intrusive as possible. Another threat to internal validity is that our analysis cannot detect manual implementations of synchronous messages using asynchrony [22], in-order delivery and processing and transitive in-order delivery.

6. Related Work
Sequential consistency Grace [8] proposes a transactional memory technique to enforce sequential semantics and avoid concurrency bugs for multi-threaded programs. Safe futures [49] and Asynchronous, Typed Events [29] provide a semblance of sequential semantics for multi-threaded programs. Lamport [23] proposes requirements for shared memory multiprocessor programs to guarantee sequential consistency. Qadeer [36] and Cain et al. [11] propose model checking techniques for sequential consistency. However, these works do not study the relation between ordering problem and semantic variations of message passing models.

Testing and model checking Lauterburg et al. [24] proposes Basset to explore possible interleaving of message passing programs. Sen and Agha [41] propose jCute to explore behaviors of message passing programs using concolic execution for test generation. Fredlund and Svensson propose McErlang [14] to model check distributed and fault tolerant Erlang programs. Tasharofi et al. [46] proposes Setac for testing Scala programs using user specified constraints on nondeterministic schedule of message exchanges; and proposes Bita [47] for testing using higher coverage scheduling. Bordini et al. [10] propose a translation from the message passing language AgentSpeak into Java to enable its model checking by Java PathFinder (JPF). Other previous work [7, 44] propose model checking techniques for distributed and networked systems. However, these works are mostly concerned about testing and model checking of message passing programs and not about the relation of ordering problem and semantic variations of message passing models.

7. Conclusion and Future Work
In this work we studied and quantified the relation between message ordering problems and semantic variations for the semantics of three criteria $C_1$–$C_3$ of message synchronization, message delivery and processing and sharing. We discussed implications of our findings for application developers, application verifiers and framework designers that engineer message passing paradigms. We also verified some of the findings of previous work. One avenue for future work is to study other problems of message passing programming in addition to ordering problems.

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