Preserving Separation of Concerns Through Compilation

Hridesh Rajan  
*Iowa State University*

Robert Dyer  
*Iowa State University*, rdyer@iastate.edu

Youssef Wasfy Hanna  
*Iowa State University*, youssef.hanna@gmail.com

Harish Narayanappa  
*Iowa State University*, harishbn15@gmail.com

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Abstract
Current aspect-oriented (AO) compilation techniques fail to preserve the separation of concerns for post-compilation phases. At the minimum, it makes efficient incremental compilation and unit testing of AO programs challenging. The contribution of this work is an improved approach for aspect-oriented compilation. Our approach rests on a new interface between the AO high-level language (HLL) compiler implementation and the runtime environment. Our interface abstracts the realization of the crosscutting behavior at run-time from the HLL compiler implementations. The interface governs the intermediate code that the HLL compiler can generate and the semantics of the crosscutting primitives that it can expect. We present a preliminary evaluation using a simple but representative AO program showing the benefits of our approach.

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ABSTRACT

Current aspect-oriented (AO) compilation techniques fail to preserve the separation of concerns in the post-compilation phases. At the minimum, it makes efficient incremental compilation and unit testing of AO programs challenging. The contribution of this work is an improved approach for aspect-oriented compilation that promises to address these issues. Our approach rests on a new interface between the AO high-level language (HLL) compiler implementations and the execution models. Our interface abstracts the realization of the crosscutting behavior at run-time from the HLL compiler implementations. The interface governs the intermediate code that the HLL compiler can generate and the semantics of the crosscutting primitives that it can expect. We present a preliminary evaluation using a simple but representative AO program showing the benefits of our approach.

1. INTRODUCTION

Aspect-oriented programming (AOP) techniques [9] separate traditionally non-modular (crosscutting) concerns during the analysis, design and implementation phases. In the compilation phase, however, to conform to existing execution models \(^1\), implementations of the crosscutting concerns are scattered and tangled again with the base code (See Figure 1). This loss of separation of concerns is a fundamental problem that leads to complications in post-compilation phases.

At the minimum, this problem makes efficient incremental compilation and unit testing of AO programs challenging. The best AO compilers available today take significantly more time compared to their object-oriented counterparts for incremental compilation. A recent report on the application of AspectJ [8] to the development of a J2EE web application for Video Monitoring Services of America showed that incremental compilation using the AspectJ compiler usually takes at least 2-3 seconds longer than near instant compilation using a pure Java compiler [12]. It also showed that if an aspect is changed the incremental compilation requires re-compilation.

The report observed that due to the increase in incremental compilation time, human attention can wander and it can take time to re-contextualize after the compilation. This problem is particularly pronounced for the full builds, which tempt the programmer to switch to another task entirely (e.g. email, Slashdot headlines).

The significant increase in incremental compilation time is because when a crosscutting concern in the source code changes, the impact ripples to the fragmented locations in the compiled program forcing their re-compilation. Note that the system studied by Lesiecki [12] can be classified as a small to medium scale system with just 700 classes and around 70 aspects. In a large-scale system, slowdown in the development process can potentially outweigh the benefits of separation of concerns.

Besides incremental compilation, loss of separation of concerns also makes unit testing of AO programs difficult. The dependence of aspects on other classes and vice versa makes it harder to test them separately. AOSD has shown real benefits in its ability to achieve a separation of some traditionally non-modular concerns. In order to continue receiving these benefits in large-scale systems without impeding the design-build-test cycle common in agile development processes, it is essential to address these issues effectively.

The tyranny of the dominant decomposition [23], based on files, modules, classes, in the execution models, and the conformance requirement imposed on AO compilers, affects the efficiency and the complexity of post-compilation phases. The design decision to produce an output that conforms to the existing execution models was perhaps a genuine effort to attract early adopters by lowering the barrier to entry. Now, the potential shown by the technology as well as trends towards industrial adoption [21] warrants investigating the validity of this design decision and its impacts.

This problem is not unique to AOSD; rather it pertains in general to the mechanisms for separation of concerns (SoC) (See Figure 2). Consider an analogy in the procedural abstraction world. In an instruction set architecture (ISA) that does not support method calls, one could still decompose a program into a set of procedures in the analysis, design and implementation phases. The compiler would then translate these programs into a monolithic set of instructions by in-lining the procedure bodies.

For these programs, benefits of procedural abstraction such as modular reasoning, parallel development, etc., are observed in analysis, design and implementation phases. In later phases, however, it is difficult to utilize the benefits because there is no clear separation anymore. For example, changes in the source code of a procedure affect all call

\(^1\)By execution model, we mean infrastructure for which a high-level language compiler generates executable code e.g. in the context of AspectJ [8] it would mean the Java Virtual Machine (JVM) [14] and for Eos [20] it would mean the .NET Framework [15].
sites of the procedure, because it is in-lined. Incrementally compiling these procedures is thus harder and more time consuming. Unit testing such procedures is also a challenge. The support for method call in ISAs, along with the invention and refinement of linking technology has more or less solved these problems for procedural decomposition.

Consider another analogy in the object-oriented world. Like procedural abstraction, object-orientation can be emulated in the analysis, design and implementation phases without the support for objects and dynamic dispatch by translating the OO program into a procedural program that uses methods and structures; however, losing the traceability of concerns during compilation does affect post-compilation phases. The problem is solved by providing support for class and virtual method calls abstractions at the interface.

For both SoC techniques, emergence of an abstraction mechanism at the interface between the language compilers and execution models extended the benefits of SoC techniques to post compilation phases (See Figure 2). These mechanisms pushed the decoupling between concerns further down the execution model, abstracting it behind the interface. Encouraged by the history of the past two major SoC techniques in this work we present a new interface between aspect-oriented compilers and execution models. Our interface provides new primitives to represent crosscutting concerns. This interface governs the code that a high-level language compiler generates and the semantics of the primitives that the execution model provides. It abstracts the details of realization of crosscutting mechanisms in the execution model from the language compiler implementation.

In the next section, we provide motivation for our approach. The Section 3 discusses some related work. Section 4 describes our approach in detail. We also present a preliminary evaluation of our approach. Some limitations of our approach and future research directions are discussed in Section 5. Section 6 concludes.

2. MOTIVATION

To motivate our approach, we first demonstrate common static weaving techniques through a simple example application (See Figure 3). We have implemented this application using Eos [7, 18]. Eos is an aspect-oriented extension of C# for Microsoft .NET Framework [15] that implements the unified-aspect model proposed by Rajan and Sullivan [20]. Rajan and Sullivan showed that the AspectJ notions of aspect and class can be unified in a new module construct that they called the classpect, and that this new model is significantly simpler and able to accommodate a broader set of requirements for modular solutions to complex integration problems [22].

The binding construct in this model allows modularization of crosscutting concerns. A binding is a mechanism to select a subset of join points in the execution of the program and associate a method to execute at those points. The subset of join points selected by the binding are called subjects of the join point. The method that is associated by the binding to execute at these join points is called the handler of the binding.

Our application has two classpects: HelloWorld (shown inside the white box) and Trace (shown inside the grey box). The classpect HelloWorld declares a method Main that prints the string Hello on the screen and exits. The classpect Trace declares a pointcut traceMethods to select all method execution join points in the program and a static binding. The effect of declaring the binding is that the handler method trace is invoked at all the subject join points selected by the pointcut traceMethods and prints the string trace() called. As a result, after the execution of the method Main the string trace() called is printed.

We compiled this simple application using the Eos compiler [19]. We disassembled the assembly usingildasm, the disassembler for .NET Framework. Figure 4 shows the dis-
Figure 3: A Simple Aspect-Oriented Application

assembly. We have used the common intermediate language (CIL) notations to represent the disassembly. Please note that the weaving techniques for static bindings is similar to that of AspectJ-like languages [8], so the intermediate code shown in Figure 4 is a representative of the current weaving techniques.

The Figure shows the disassembly of Hello in the white box and the disassembly of the Trace in the grey box. As can be observed, the intermediate code to invoke Trace at join points is inserted into the class Hello in the method Main. As a result, the concern modularized by the classpect Trace ends up being scattered and tangled with the Hello concern. This scattering and tangling directly affects incremental compilation. For example, let us assume that the source code for the classpect Trace changes, so that it now selects all execution join points where the method name begins with a Set for example SetX, SetY, etc. The method Main in the Hello class is no longer selected by this pointcut for advising.

This change will trigger the incremental compilation of Trace. In addition, it will also trigger the compilation of Hello to reflect the changes in the pointcut. The full re-compilation of this simple system is not a huge burden on the program; however, in nontrivial systems the overhead of compilation can be significant enough to disrupt the build-test-debug cycle common in current agile software development processes. The re-compilation time is affected by two factors. First, increase in the number of crosscutting concerns in a large scale system. Second, increase in the number of modular concerns that these crosscutting concerns are scattered and tangled with. For a change in a crosscutting concern such as tracing or logging, recompilation of the entire system will be necessary.

We attribute this increase in incremental compilation time to the scattering and tangling of the concerns in the intermediate code. If the separation of concerns would have been preserved in the intermediate code, it would have been sufficient to just recompile the changed concerns in the system. The nature of the concerns modularized by aspect-oriented techniques dictates that they execute at scattered and tangled points in the execution of the program. The complete separation at runtime thus seems unavoidable; however, we argue and show through preliminary results that we can do better.

Figure 4: Disassembled HelloWorld

3. RELATED WORK

Three closely related and complimentary research ideas are run-time weaving, load-time weaving and virtual machine support for aspect-oriented programming. We will discuss these ideas in detail below.

There are several approaches for run-time weaving such as PROSE [17], Handi-Wrap [4], Eos [19], etc. A typical approach to runtime weaving is to attach hooks at run-time. An alternative approach is to attach hooks only at potentially interesting join points. In the former case, aspects can use all possible join points, excluding those that are created dynamically so the system will be more flexible. The disadvantage is the high overhead of unnecessary hooks. In the later case, only those aspects that utilize existing hooks can be deployed at run-time, but the overhead will be minimal for a runtime approach.

Eos uses the first model, i.e. only instrument the join points that may potentially be needed. Handi-Wrap uses the second model, making all join points available through wrappers. PROSE indirectly uses the second model, exposing all join points through the debugger interface. PROSE allows aspects to be loaded dynamically without restarting the system. An additional advantage of indirectly exposing join points through debugger interface is that new join points (created by reflection) are registered automatically. As observed by Popovici et al. [17] and Ortin et al. [16], however, performance in both cases is a problem.

A load-time weaving approach delays weaving of crosscutting concerns until the class loader loads the class file and defines it to the virtual machine [13]. Load-time weaving approaches typically provide weaving information in the form of XML directives or annotations. The aspect weaver then
revises the assemblies or classes according to weaving directives at load-time. Often a custom class loader is needed.

There are load-time weaving approaches for both Java and .NET framework. For example, AspectJ [8] recently added load-time weaving support. Weave.NET [11] uses a similar approach for .NET framework. The JMangler framework can also be used for load-time weaving [10]. It provides mechanisms to plug-in class-loaders into the JVM.

A benefit of the load- and run-time weaving approaches is that they delay weaving of aspect-oriented programs. It may be possible to improve incremental compilation using these approaches, although we do not currently have any evidence to confirm or to deny. A contribution of our approach might also be perceived as delaying weaving, however, we view the interface and corresponding contracts between the language designs and execution model designs as the main contribution of our work. The load-time weaving approaches do not provide these benefits.

Steamloom [5] extends the Jikes Research Virtual Machine (BVM), an open source Java virtual machine [1]. Traditional approaches for supporting dynamic crosscutting involve weaving aspects into the program at compilation. Steamloom moves weaving into the Virtual Machine (VM), which allows preserving the original structure of the code after compilation and shows performance improvements of 2.4 to 4 times when compared to AspectJ. It accomplishes this by modifying the Type Information Block to point methods to a stub that modifies the existing bytecode to weave in the advice.

Our approach and Steamloom are in some sense complimentary. Similar to Steamloom, our approach also advocates support for crosscutting in the execution models. Steamloom investigates techniques to improve the performance of these crosscutting mechanisms provided by the execution model, whereas, our approach focuses on separating the compiler implementations and execution model implementations by defining an interface between the two. Our focus is on providing the basic mechanisms at the interface that can be used as primitives by compiler implementations. Our approach thus potentially allows multiple language models to use the same VM and/or multiple VMs. Each of these VMs may have their own method of weaving. Steamloom, however, restricts the type hierarchy of aspects. An aspect must inherit from a special class. In languages like Java, this restriction burns the only available inheritance link. Our approach does not impose any restrictions on programming language constructs, leaving those design decisions to programming language designers and compiler implementers.

In the next section, we will discuss our approach to preserve separation of concerns through the compilation process. We will then discuss the implementation of the HelloWorld application using our approach.

4. OUR APPROACH AND PRELIMINARY EVALUATION

We have developed an improved approach to aspect-oriented compilation. The basis of our approach is a new interface to represent crosscutting abstractions between the HLL compiler implementation and the runtime environment. This interface abstracts the realization of the crosscutting behavior at run-time from the HLL compiler im-

| bind | 1. Pops top two values from the stack: pattern and delegate 
| remove | 2. Semantics: After this atomic instruction is complete, for every join point matching the pattern, the delegate is invoked. 

Figure 5: Extensions to the combined intermediate language (ECIL)
classpect Trace provides two methods, On and Off. The ECIL representation of method On consists of instructions to push the delegate to the handler and the pattern on the stack followed by the bind instruction (similar to the static constructor implementation in the static tracing example). The method Off also consists of instructions to push the delegate and the pattern followed by the remove instruction. The semantics of bind and remove ensures that calling On activates the tracing and calling Off deactivates it.

We argue that providing abstractions to represent crosscutting concerns at this level has two potential benefits. First, it preserves the separation of concerns at the intermediate code level. Second, it allows for separate development of aspect-oriented compilers and runtime environments using and supporting the new interface. We also showed that both static and runtime advising are supported.

Please note that at this time we have explicitly decided not to support static crosscutting mechanisms such as inter-type declarations. There are two reasons behind this design decision. First, in most inter-type declarations there is a one-to-one explicit mapping between the classes and the aspects. Therefore, the impact of changes in the aspect can be statically traced to a very small number of classes. As a result, the increase in compilation time is not significant. Second, inter-type declarations can be emulated using partial classes in C# version 2.0 [6].

5. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE WORK

The current version of our interface has at least two known limitations. First, we have not yet developed a statically verifiable and type-safe mechanism to support various different types of join points and pointcut expressions. Currently, the pattern is specified as a string. For example, a string execution(any any.Set(..)) will select all method execution points for which the method name is Set. The correctness of this string cannot be checked statically at the intermediate code level. However, it doesn’t prevent the HLL compilers from providing an AspectJ-like pointcut sublanguage, statically verifying the pointcut expression supplied by the user and then generating the verified pointcut as a string in the intermediate code. Second, current version of our interface does not support instance-level weaving [19]. Future extensions will address these limitation.

In the future, we plan to complete three tasks. First, we will address the limitations, mentioned above and those pointed out by the workshop participants, in the design of our interface. Second, we plan to design and implement an extension to the Shared Source Common Language Infrastructure (SSCLI) [3] to support ECIL (for Extended CIL) to provide an example interface in Microsoft .NET context. In particular, the just in time (JIT) compiler will be extended to interpret ECIL. We plan to use the Phoenix infrastructure [2] to ease development of this extended JIT compiler. The Eos compiler [7] will also be extended to generate ECIL.

6. CONCLUSION

In this work, we argued that the loss of separation of concerns during compilation makes post-compilation phases challenging. We proposed a solution in the form of an interface between the high-level language compiler implementations and the execution models. Our interface specifies the intermediate code that the compiler can generate and the semantics of crosscutting primitives it can expect. We further demonstrated through a simple example that both static and runtime weaving can be expressed in terms of these primitives. We also observed that separation of crosscutting concerns is preserved in the intermediate modules that use these primitives. We speculate, but have not systematically tested yet, that preserving the separation of concerns will significantly improve the incremental compilation time.

Contingent upon successfully addressing the remaining challenges, we hypothesize that this research might make two fundamental advances in the theory of AOSD. First, it
may demonstrate that preserving separation of concerns, as far out in the software development process as possible, has tangible benefits, and second, it may provide an improved compilation and execution model for AOP. We claim that it might have at least three tangible benefits. First, the improved aspect compilation and execution model will considerably decrease the incremental compilation time. Second, it will ease unit testing of aspect programs. Third, it will significantly reduce the complexity of aspect-oriented compilers making new language implementations easier.

The decoupling between language compilers and the execution model achieved by our interface also has the potential to enable independent research in these areas. Simpler aspect language designs and compiler implementations might be realized without spending significant time on the optimization of the underlying AO execution models. Novel optimization mechanisms for the underlying execution models can be developed independent of the language design as long as it conforms to the interface.

7. REFERENCES