Research Article

Formalizing Semantics for UML Activity Diagram through Regular Expression Translation

1Brahma Hazela, 1Deepak Arora and 2Vipin Saxena
1Department of Computer Science and Engineering, Amity University, India, Tel.: +91-09839123463
2Department of Computer Science, Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Lucknow, India

Abstract: Formalization of UML models now becomes a requisite action by most of the software designers. UML is semiformal in nature. So it becomes necessary to formalize the UML which would reduce the overall complexity of software design. Today as software becoming more interactive and distributed in nature, the formal syntax and automated verification analysis of behavioral aspect of any model becomes very important in order to reduce overall software development cost and time. UML Activity diagram has become widely acceptable tool for documenting the artifacts related to Control flow and complexity of the software system. Here Authors proposed the semantics for activity diagram of UML by means of regular expression and its equivalent transition system. UML has now become one of the most widely acceptable standards for visual modeling related to object based software development. Since inception, continuous adoption of various design patterns and profiles of software have been included to make it more flexible and capable to represent different views of software design at early phases of its development. It is also found that the mapping of these visual modeling structures to some pre-established formal graphical notations of data structures like graph certainly provides more realistic and robust automated verification and validation ground for these models. The available literature shows the tremendous research work is being carried out to make it more adoptable and reliable visual modeling platform across the globe. Although UML has a richer and wider visual modeling skill set, but still it is not very easy to find better ground for establishing, set of rules and semantics for UML model verification and validation. The research work also proposes a formal verification and traceability method for any activity model with the help of Arden's lemma. The correctness of proposed verification method has been shown with supporting case studies after generating its corresponding formal regular expression.

Keywords: Arden’s lemma, finite state machine, regular expression, transition system, UML activity diagram

INTRODUCTION

Unified Modeling Language (UML) is a framework or platform that is used for writing blueprints of software by industry experts. UML is process independent framework. Unified Modeling Language (UML) (Rumbaugh et al., 2001) specification provides the details of various software systems having varying complexity and hardware designs (Martin and Müller, 2005; Berlin Müller et al., 2006). UML provides a set of graphical notation to visualize different views of a system. UML models can also be customized for a specific domain. UML activity diagram is a widely accepted tool for software designing at the system level. The semi-formal specification of the activity diagram is specifically useful to describe the concurrent behavior of complex logic operations of software systems.

In past, various verification techniques have been proposed to validate software design through automated generation of test case (Ammann et al., 1998).

Traditional verification and validation methods of software system are less efficient as they are basis of handwork. These software methods took more time to developed and hence increased of overall development cost. Now-a-days, software testing highly demands its automaton due to development of testing advancement. The effective and maintainable testing of software can only be guaranteed through automated generation of test cases. Software testing industries are now choosing a methodology known as Model based testing. The main potential advantage of this testing approach includes the faults detection in software at early stage and reducing the overall time for the development of software. In Literature review, different diagram of UML has been considered for generation of various test
cases (Wang et al., 2005; Li and Lam, 2005; Chandler et al., 2005; Chen et al., 2006; Xu et al., 2005).

Activity diagram of UML are most suitable for the study of behavioral aspects of a given system. Behavior modeling for a service-oriented architecture system and large software system can be allowed through workflows specifications (Eshuis et al., 2002; Alonso et al., 2004).

Over the past decade, in Software development process it has been found that software models can be best expressed by Unified Modeling Language (UML). One of the limitations of UML is that it lacks formal semantics as it focuses only on syntax for system modeling. Today, implementation of formal methods is a very hard task to automate software engineering by software designers because of complex mathematical theory behind them. However, formal semantics based on UML specification have already been discussed (OMG, 2007; Baresi and Heckel, 2002; Ehrig et al., 1999).

A research work on formal semantics for activity diagram had already been given in many research work using different formal languages. Phenomenon of Dynamic Meta Modeling was explained by Hausmann (2005). This modeling was done by graph transformation system. In his study, Hausmann (2005) defined a concept named “Rule Invocation” to extend the traditional graph rules. DMM is compromise of two rules named as big and small step rules. The rules of Big-step are traditional in nature that invoked small-step rules. Author also used the concept of Dynamic Meta Modeling to define the semantics for activity diagram. DMM and semantics were used by Engels et al. (2007) for modeling and workflows verification. In their study, author change the rules of GROOVE (Rensink, 2004) which was also verified by GROOVE, to check the action reachability and deadlock freeness properties of work flows. In reference to the previous work, the given approach provides more flexibility for system verification properties. Rule Invocation and different Small or big step rules defined by Hausmann (2005) can’t be modeled directly by the use of existing tool by the designers. Petri-net was used by Störrle and Hausmann (2005) that provides semantic background for the UML activities.

In their work, authors examine the activities described in the UML through the de-notational semantics.

This approach describes basic data and control flow, exception handling and expansion nodes. Authors also found that some standard constructs are not easy to be formalized by Petri nets. So, they concluded that Petri nets cannot be possibly used to complete semantics in UML 2.0 due to transverse. Strong fairness property was used to verify the functional requirement of state chart-like semantics for activity diagrams of UML 1.5. This property states that the infinite loops should be avoided by model as discussed by Eshuis (2006). Cimatti et al. (2000) has suggested methods for verification and correctness of the strong fairness property in an expression of LTL where NuSMV model checker is used. The approaches discussed in Börger et al. (2000) and Bolton and Davies (2000) are the predecessor of UML 1.5. Baldan et al. (2005) define static model of a system by using instance graph. They used the hyper graph with synchronized feature to control the applications of the rules that are defined for each action. Instead of defining the semantics for activity, Synchronized Hyper graphs were used to show the dynamic model behavior by using UML activities. They implemented monadic second-order logic for the verification of hyper graphs without introducing any tools. Furthermore, they found that activity diagrams are largely useful to describe the flow of events. This assignment is necessary for transformation of test case information into activity diagram. It generates an activity graph in which every edge represent the flow in activity diagram and each node representing a test case construct from activity diagram. UML is semiformal in nature and formalization of the UML diagram has now become the dominant area of research.

In this research work, authors have proposed a model transformation approach in order to generate regular expression, corresponding to any UML activity diagram. The target regular expression will be suitable for verification and determining the consistency of the system. The proposed method represents the relationship of UML activity diagram with well establish mathematical structure like activity graphs. This relationship can further be useful to generate equivalent transition diagram for a given activity model. The authors have covered the concept of strings, rules, languages and regular expression of computation theory to establish the relation between finite state automata and UML activity graph. Authors have also explained a transition system by referring the transformation approach of UML activity diagram into state diagram. The main idea of Activity diagram formalization has given by discussing the Arden’s theorem for generating regular expression from the transition system. The result of this formalization will reduce the overall software development complexity.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Authors have given the concept of UML activity diagram along with its equivalent transition system. Further, based on the existing concepts of formal language theory, different patterns of strings generated by regular expressions of a transition system have also explore by means of different case studies.

**Activity diagram:** UML Activity Diagrams refer to a method of software engineering that is modeled to describe business processes, procedures and work flows. Activity diagram of UML is a kind of behavioral modeling. Any UML Activity Diagram may have its equivalent UML activity graph and both are somewhat similar to state machine diagrams.
Modeling of different computational as well as organizational processes can be done through Activity diagram of UML. Activity diagrams show the flow of activities in a stepwise manner, constructed with small number of shapes and are connected through arrows. The most important shape type includes:

- Actions denoted by rectangles having rounded corner. Diamond shape represents decisions during activity.
- Start (split) or end (join) of concurrent activities represents by horizontal Bars.
- Initial state or start of the workflow is represented by black circle.
- Solid black fill encircled represents the end or final state.
- Arrows represent the order in which activities happen from start to end state.


Strings, languages and regular expressions: Theory of formal languages is the base for any programming languages. Formal theory refers to the fact that all the rules for the languages are stated explicitly in terms of what strings of symbols can occur. A Symbol is an abstract or user defined identity. Letters and digits are example of a set of symbols, which is finite in nature and is also known as alphabet, for example, x = \{a, b\} is an alphabetic set with symbols a and b. Another alphabet is Y = \{tiger, elephant, snake and python\} is a set of alphabet with symbols tiger, elephant, snake and python. A String can be defined as a finite sequence of symbols from that alphabet. Strings play an important role in testing of patterns. Finite state machine takes strings as inputs and test for its acceptability. Thus a string serves as a test input. A language is a collection of strings. For example, the language of binary numbers is the combination of all strings defined over zeros and ones. Total number of symbols count in a string gives the length of string which is written as |s|. For example, |1010| = 4 and |hot, pot| = 3. An empty String must be of length 0, which can be written as \(\varepsilon\). Concatenation of two strings \(s_1\) and \(s_2\) is denoted by \(s_1 \cdot s_2\). For example, given the alphabet X = \{a, b\} and two strings \(abb\) and \(bab\) over X, then concatenation of two strings would be \(abb \cdot bab = abbabb\).

A Set of strings can be described through Regular expression based on certain syntax rules (Raschke, 2009). Regular expressions are used by most of the application software for searching and manipulating text patterns as in word processors and programming languages. Short description of a set can be given as Regular expressions, without elements listing. For example, a set of two strings "green" and "green" would be a regex "green\[ea\]n\". Regular expression provides a compact representation of sets of strings. For example, the regular expression \((ab)^*\) represent the set of strings that consists of the empty string, the string \(ab\) and all strings obtained by concatenating the string \(ab\) with itself one or more times. Expression \((ab)^*\) denotes an infinite set. Formally, a regular expressions, generates various patterns of strings that can be recognized by finite state automata. Suppose X is a set of finite alphabet, then regular expressions over X are given as here:

If \(p \in X\), then \(\{p\}\) is a regular expression that represent the set \{p\}. If we consider regular expressions \(R_1\) and \(R_2\) over the alphabet X that represents the two set \(L_1\) and \(L_2\), respectively, then concatenation of two regular expressions written as \(R_1 \cdot R_2\). \(R_1 \cup R_2\) is also regular expression represented by the set \(\{L_1, L_2\}\). Similarly, \(\{L_1 \cup L_2\}\). If \(R_1\) is a regular expression, then \(R_1^*\) is also a regular expression known as Kleen closure of \(R_1\).

Regular expressions are useful in expressing both finite and infinite test sequences. For example, if a program takes a sequence of zeroes and ones and flips from 0 to 1 and vice versa, then a few possible sets of test inputs are \(0^*\), \(10^+1010\). Regular expressions are also useful in defining the all possible inputs to a finite state machine that will give transition of the machine from one arbitrary state to another state. Every regular expression ‘Re’ can be recognized by a given transition system and finite automaton. For further explanation, consider two different languages and their finite state automaton that accepts the language defined by regular expression as given in Fig. 1:

**Example: 1**

\(L = (a|b)\)  
ex. \{ac, bc\}

**Example: 2**

\(L = a^* b\)  
ex. \{b, ab, aab, aaab, .......\}

For every regular expression ‘Re’, there exists a corresponding finite automaton that accepts the regular
set given by ‘Re’ due to equivalent expressive power of
Regular expressions and finite automata.
So we can say that regular languages, regular
expressions and finite automata are all different
representation of the same string. In this reference,
Arden’s Theorem defines the transformation rules and
semantics to convert a transition system to its
corresponding regular expression. According to
Arden’s method, let the P and Q are regular expressions
over alphabet Σ and if P does not have null string, then
given equation in ‘R’, written as R = (Q+RP) have a
solution R = QP*. This unique solution can be found by
substituting the value of R = QP* in the R.H.S. of R =
Q + RP, further R = Q+(Q+RP) P = Q+QP+RP*, Now
by substituting the value of R again and again, we will
get the following set of equations:

\[ R = Q+QP + QP^2 + QP^3 \ldots \]
\[ R = Q (I + P + P^2 + P^3 + \ldots) \]
\[ R = Q (c + P + P^2 + P^3 + \ldots) \]

The second part of the product on the L.H.S can be
replaced with the help of kleen closure property. So the
final equation becomes \( R = QP^* \), which is unique
solution as stated above. For getting regular expression
for the given automata we first create equations of the
given form for all the states:

\[ q_1 = q_1w_{11} + q_2w_{21} + \ldots + q_nw_{nn} + c \]
\( (q_1 \text{ is the initial state}) \)
\[ q_2 = q_1w_{12} + q_2w_{22} + \ldots + q_nw_{nn} + \ldots \]
\[ q_n = q_1w_{1n} + q_2w_{2n} + \ldots + q_nw_{nn} \]

Here, \( w_{ij} \) is the regular expression representing the
set of labels of edges from \( q_i \) to \( q_j \). For parallel edges,
we find similar expressions for all states in the
expression. Then, these equations are solved to get the
equation for \( q_1 \) in terms of \( w_{ij} \) and that expression is the
required solution, where \( q_1 \) is a final state.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Formalization and Generation of Regular
Expression is shown by a simple login process as in
Fig. 2.
The user will enter the login name and password.
And then, these details must be validated by the system
to check the correctness of unique pairing, user name and
password. In case of valid entry, system allows to
login the user. In case of invalid information, system
will ask from its user to re-enter their credentials.

Based on notion of semantics for translation of
UML Diagrams into finite state machines for Model
Checking (Deepak et al., 2012; Raschke, 2009) and
formalization of UML activity diagram using finite
state machine (Rodrigues, 2000), it is concluded that a
transition system can be drawn from the given UML
activity diagram as shown in Fig. 3.

Through massive literature survey it can be
concluded that regular expressions are one of the
important algebraic expression in theory of computation
that can also be implemented by Finite State
Automaton. A Finite State Automata is a significant
tool of computational linguistics. A regular expression
is a formula in a special language that is used for
characterizing a set of strings known as pattern. Any
regular expression can be modeled through finite state
automaton. Based on the Fig. 2 one can arrive at the
following set of equations:

\[ q_1 = q_2y_3 + \Delta \]
(1)

(As \( q_1 \) is the initial state a ‘\( \Delta \)’ should be added by
Arden’s theorem for generating regular expression from
transition system):

\[ q_2 = qy_1 \]
(2)
\[ q_3 = q_2h_1 \]
(3)
\[ q_4 = q_2y_2 \]
(4)
\[ q_5 = q_2y_4 \]
(5)
\[ q_6 = q_2h_2 + q_3y_5 \]
(6)

From Eq. (2):

\[ q_2 = (q_2y_3 + \Delta ) y_1 = (q_2y_3y_1 + y_1) \]
Or,

\[ q_2 = y_1 + q_2y_3y_1 \]
Or,

\[ q_2 = y_1 + q_2h_1y_3y_1 \]

By Eq. (3):

\[ q_3 = y_1 + q_2 (n_1y_3y_1) \]
(7)

By Arden’s theorem for generating regular
expression from the transition system, if regular
expression is of the form of \( R = Q+RP \) then the unique
solution of this regular expression is \( R = QP^* \).

\[ q_2 = y_1 (n_1y_3y_1)^* \]
(8)

From Eq. (6), we get:

\[ q_4 = q_2n_2 + q_3y_5 = q_2n_2 + q_3y_5 \]
By Eq. 
\[ q_4 = y_1 (n_1y_3y_1)^*n_1n_2 + y_1 (n_1y_3y_1)^*y_2y_4y_5 \] 
(9)

By substituting of \( q_2 \) from Eq. (7), we get the regular expression as:

This expression gives the desire sequence of activities performed throughout the login process. The complete regular expression can be verified through the following two cases:
Case 1: First activity includes login name and password entered by user then transit to next activity which required further validation. If the login and password entered by the user is incorrect, then system allows two more attempts before the termination of activity. As soon as the valid attempts exhaust, the system will terminate the session. This sequence of activities can be best described by the regular expression, \( y_1(n_1y_3y_1)^*n_1n_2 \). This expression is concatenated form of \( y_1 \) and \( (n_1y_3y_1)^*n_1n_2 \), which confirms that without capturing the desire inputs for login, the next sequence of activities can’t be performed.

Case 2: The inputs to the system may leads to transition of new activity. If the client successfully logged into the system, the client settings of the system are displayed for further customization. If the client does not require customization there then at this juncture there remains an option of logout from the system by terminating the session. This sequence of activity can be described by the regular expression, \( y_1(n_1y_3y_1)^*y_2y_4y_5 \). This expression confirms that with correct login and password entered by the user the end user can customized their settings.

CONCLUSION

In this study, authors have established a set of semantics to generate corresponding regular expressions for a UML activity diagram. These semantics proves that the verification can be done by the means of generated regular expressions. The use of Arden’s theorem make it more concise in order to assure the generation of corresponding regular expression without transition system. This will reduce overall effort towards verification of any UML activity diagram.

For illustration purpose different case studies have been shown to prove the correctness of proposed methodology.

These regular expressions can be further helpful in verifying the UML activity diagrams at early stages of software development. The language generated by these regular expressions is also useful in generating and validating different test cases.

The proposed research work can be extended towards other behavioral diagrams for the development of important phase of compiler design known as lexical analysis.

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