

Creating Domain-Specific Modeling Languages with OPM/D

A Meta-modeling approach

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Keywords: Domain-specific Modeling Languages, Object-process Methodology, Meta-modeling.

Abstract: Domain-specific languages and model-driven development are two promising approaches for tackling the complexity of software systems development. However creating domain-specific modeling languages is a complex task that makes the definition of new languages difficult. To alleviate this difficulty, we developed OPM/D, a visual meta-modeling language for the definition of domain-specific modeling languages. Languages in OPM/D are defined via a static structural meta-model of the language and a set of validation rules applied at edit time. The language editor is created on-the-fly through language interpretation, minimizing the time between language definition and its use. Our approach has been applied to define a subset of the OPM modeling language, and is developed using the Eclipse platform and technologies.

1 INTRODUCTION

Developing and evolving complex software systems is difficult. A large portion of software-intensive projects get behind schedule, many of the features they provide do not correspond to the ones the user had required, they are not stable after delivery, and their total costs are well above their initial estimated ones. Several publications ((United States Government Accountability Office, 2008), (White et al., 2007) and (The Standish Group International, 2009)) show recent examples of these ailments. In the classical software engineering essay "No Silver Bullet" (Brooks, 1987), Fred Brooks noted two kinds of complexity in software: essential and accidental. Since "essential" complexity cannot be removed from software, we must try to reduce the "accidental" complexity in the development of software systems. Two advances in software development propose ways to cope with this "accidental" complexity: Model Driven Development (MDD) and Domain-specific Languages (DSLs). To join these two fields together, there is need to create Domain-specific Modeling Languages (DSMLs).

Developing DSLs is not a simple task, and it becomes even more complex when developing DSMLs. To help reduce this complexity barrier, we have created and implemented OPM/D, a simple yet powerful modeling language for defining domain-specific modeling languages. OPM/D is the first step in our goal

of creating fully executable DSMLs in a visual and intuitive way. This work is structured as follows: Section 2 surveys related work on the subject of DSML creation tools. Section 3 describes our approach for creating new DSMLs through OPM/D using simplified version of OPM as the modeled language, and Section 4 discusses the approach and presents ideas and plans for future development.

2 Related Work

There are three basic approaches for developing DSMLs: class frameworks, code generation toolkits and meta-tool platforms.

Class frameworks provide the lowest level of abstraction to the language creator, but allow a very high level of customization. Developing languages using these framework requires experienced programmers and long development times. Languages created with these frameworks cannot be defined directly by domain expert because of their complexity, neither do they allow language prototyping because of their long development cycles. Some examples of existing graphical class frameworks are GEF (Eclipse Foundation, 2012a), Netbeans Visual Library (Netbeans, 2010), JGraphX (JGraph Ltd., 2013), Graphiti (Eclipse Foundation, 2012c), and JUNG (JUNG Framework Development Team, 2010).

Code generation toolkits provide a higher level

of abstraction to the language creator. In this toolkit, the language editor is created by generating code based on some type of language specification. While these tools allow for both faster and easier definition of DSMLs, customizing the code generated by these tools is usually a complex task. Furthermore, changes made to the generated code complicate changing the original language specification and re-generating the editor code. Some examples of generation toolkits are GMF (Eclipse Foundation, 2012b), Visual Studio Visualization and Modeling SDK (Microsoft Corporation, 2012) and VisualDiaGen (Minas, 2004).

Meta-tool platforms provide a higher level of flexibility by using meta-model language interpretation instead of code generation. In these platforms, the language creator defines the meta-model of the language using the definitions available in the tool. When the user wants to create a model for a desired language, the platform interprets the meta-model and creates a matching editor for the model. Meta-tool platforms support better meta-model evolution and in some cases are able to validate meta-model changes that may invalidate existing models. Some examples of meta-tool platforms are MetaEdit+ (MetaCase, 2013), GME (Davis, 2003), and Marama (Grundy et al., 2012). Version 2 of the UML language (OMG, 2010) provides a mechanism that can be used to describe DSMLs using the profiles mechanism (Selic, 2007), but the authors are unaware of any systems that implement the definition of new DSML using this mechanism.

OPM/D uses the meta-tool platform approach. The main differences between OPM/D and existing meta-tool approaches is that with OPM/D the entire language definition is done visually. This is in contrast with MetaEdit+, where the language is defined using dialogs; GME, where language constraints are defined using OCL (OMG, 2012); and Marama, which also uses OCL to define constraints.

3 Creating DSMLs with OPM/D

OPM/D provides a visual language and a methodology to define domain-specific modeling languages. New DSMLs are defined by creating a language meta-model, which specifies the syntax of the language being defined and what operations the modeler can apply at each point during the model construction process. This language meta-model is created using the OPM/D meta-modeling language, which is a subset of the graphical language used by the Object-Process Methodology (OPM) (Dori, 2002). We decided to use OPM as the basis our meta-modeling language

because of the following reasons:

1. OPM has been used to model real-world problems from different domains such as biological systems (Dori and Choder, 2007) (Somekh et al., 2012), ERP (Soffer, 2003) and Web Applications (Reinhartz-Berger et al., 2002). This variability in application domains provides a high level of confidence that the language is rich enough to model complex systems in general, and DSMLs in particular.
2. OPM allows for the modeling of both static and dynamic aspects of a system. When defining a DSML, both of these traits need to be defined: static models define the static syntax of the language, while dynamic models are used to validate model changes at run-time.
3. Empirical experiments (Reinhartz-Berger and Dori, 2005) suggest that OPM is easier to understand than UML when modeling dynamic aspects of a system, and at least as good as UML when modeling structural aspects of a system.

An OPM/D language meta-model is composed of two parts: (1) the static structure of the entities in the language, and (2) a set of construction rules that validate model construction operations done by the modeler.

3.1 The OPM/D Meta-modeling Language

An OPM/D language meta-model consist of a static structure and a set of validation rules, both of which are defined using Object-Process Diagram (OPD). An OPD is a directed typed graph (Bibliowicz and Dori, 2011). The nodes of the graph can be Object nodes, Process nodes, and State nodes, which must be contained inside Object nodes. The links of the graph can be Structural links and Procedural Links. Structural links can be Aggregation, Exhibition or Specialization links. Procedural links can be Instrument, Consumption and Result. The visual representation of the OPM/D nodes and links is shown in Figures 1 and 2.

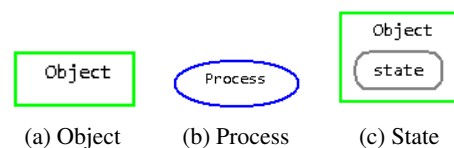


Figure 1: OPM/D nodes

The essential semantics of OPM/D nodes and links are described as follows (Due to lack of space, it is impossible to formally define them here; a complete and expanded definition of them can be found

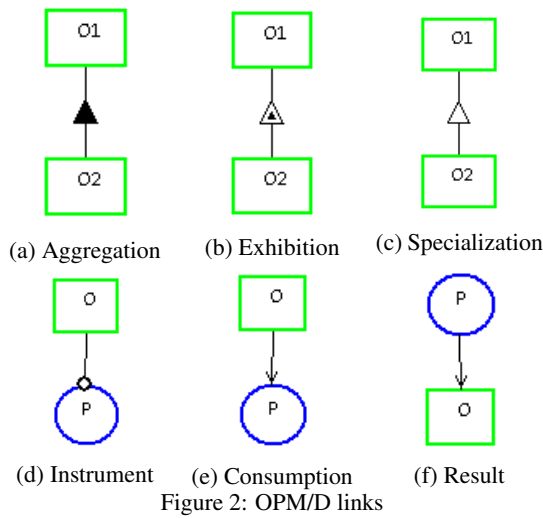


Figure 2: OPM/D links

in (Dori, 2002)): Object nodes define both data structures and variables (similar to prototype-based programming). Processes affect objects by consuming, creating or affecting them. State nodes show possible states/values of the containing object. Aggregation links define whole-parts relations: the whole is the source of the link, and the target is a part of the whole. Exhibition links define properties: the target of the link a is property exhibited by the source of the link. Specialization links are similar to OO inheritance relations: the target of the relation receives all the parts and attributes from its parent, and can also be used in place of its parent type. Instrument links denote that the target process uses the source object, but it doesn't change it, while Consumption links show that the process consumes the object, so it may not be used by other processes occurring later. Result links show that a process yields an object.

Following the rules of OPM, nodes in OPM/D can be in-zoomed or unfolded. In-zooming is used to show the internal components that compose the node (mostly used to describe process execution), while out-zooming is used to show structural decomposition of the node by placing it at the top of the diagram. Both operations are shown in Figure 3.

Having defined the basic syntax and semantics of the OPM/D language, we can now describe how it is used to graphically define DSMLs. We will do this by using an example language that is a simplified version of OPM.

3.2 Defining the Static Structure

Every OPM/D language starts with a basic meta-model that contains the structure shown in Figure 4.

Two basic entities must be defined to create a lan-

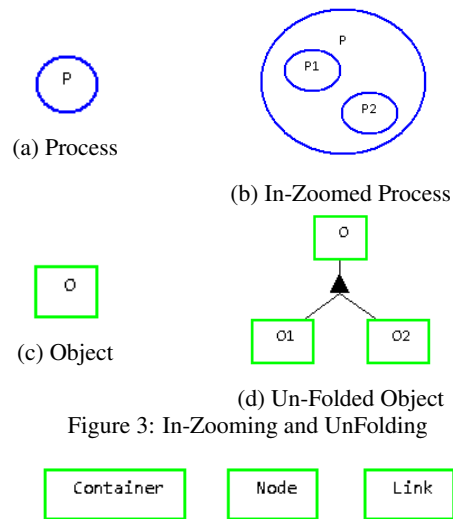


Figure 3: In-Zooming and UnFolding

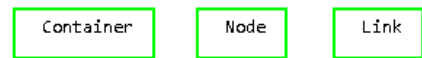


Figure 4: Initial language structure.

guage: the container where language diagrams are stored, and at least one node that can be added to this container. In OPM/D, these definitions are done by unfolding the container and node object.

In OPM/D, the static structure of a DSML is defined via a meta-model that extends three primitive objects: Container, Node and Link. These three nodes are abstract nodes that are used as the basis for its definition, and they cannot be instantiated in the new language.

The following conventions define how the meta-model is built. We will use the name "element" for the graphical nodes that appear in the new language:

1. All elements must inherit from the Node object.
2. If an element can contain other elements, it must also inherit from the Container object.
3. Non-leaf objects are abstract elements, and cannot be drawn. Only leaf object elements can be added to a diagram.
4. There must be at least one object which inherits from Container and not from Node. This element becomes the canvas in which the diagram is drawn. More than one canvas may be defined in the meta-model to provide model kinds for the same language.
5. The Link hierarchy only defines the static hierarchy of the link without defining how and two which nodes the link may be connected. This is done using validation rules, which are described below.

Based on the above definitions, to start our example, we need to define three types of elements: Object, Process, and Link. This is done by unfolding the

Node object into a new diagram, as shown in Figure 5. We have added here an abstract node *Thing*, which cannot be drawn on the diagram, but will be used later on in the validation rules.

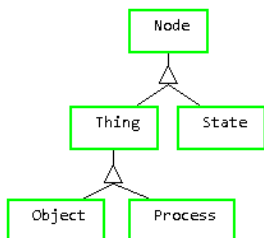


Figure 5: Unfolded Node object.

Having defined the nodes, we define the containers: OPD, Object, and Process. Notice that OPD is not defined as a Node, therefore it is interpreted as a canvas for the language. The definition is done by unfolding the Container object as shown in Figure 6.

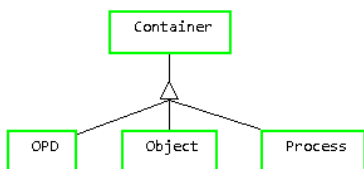


Figure 6: Unfolded Container object.

Finally, we define the links that may occur in the language: Exhibition, Consumption and Result. The unfolded Link object is shown in Figure 7.

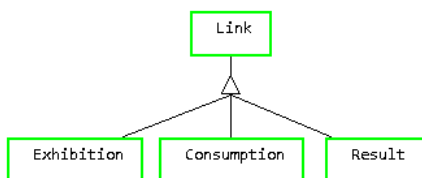


Figure 7: Unfolded Links object.

The language defined above creates a new DSML with one canvas (OPD), three nodes types (Object, Process, and State), of which two are also containers (Object and Process), and three links type (Exhibition, Consumption, and Result). We have not defined validation rules or visual properties yet, therefore all nodes in the language are drawn as rectangles, links can connect between any two types of nodes, and containers can contain any type of nodes.

3.3 Validation Rules

Validation rules are applied when the user adds new elements (nodes or links) to the diagram. We currently support only simple validation rules based on

the local context of the diagram. We plan to support complex validation rules that can query the model to verify the validity of an operation and validation rules for other modeling operations, such as deleting elements. The built-in validation rules are:

1. Node Add Validating: validates whether a node can be added to a container.
2. Link Connect Validating: validates whether a link can connect two nodes.

These validation rules are shown in Figure 8. Here we introduce a new types of notation in the object: *object:type*. This notation indicates that the *object* that is in the node must be of type *type*, where *type* is one of the types defined in the static structure of the language.

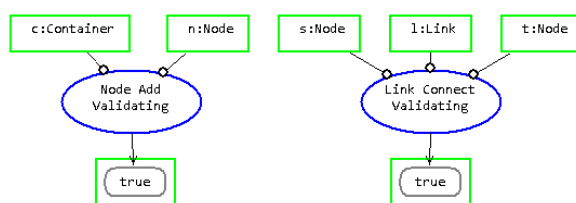


Figure 8: Initial validation rules.

To add new validation rules, we unfold the built-in validation rules and change their parameter types and the result of the validation. Continuing our example, note the following:

1. A state can only be contained inside an object, as shown in Figure 9. Notice that we first invalidate the containment for all other containers, and then validate only for object containers.

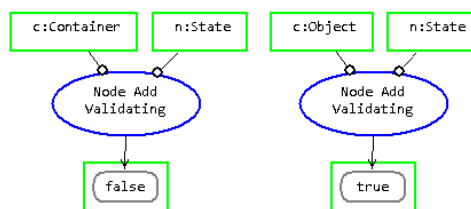


Figure 9: Validation of state containment.

2. Exhibition links can only start or end at things, as shown in Figure 10.

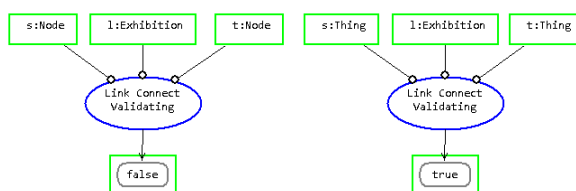


Figure 10: Validation of exhibition link connection.

3. Result links must start at a process and end at an object or state, as shown in Figure 11.

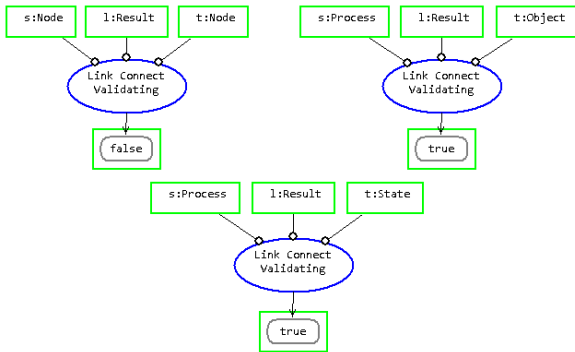


Figure 11: Validation of result link connection.

As seen in the examples, validation rules are matched using the operation type and the types of the parameters for which the validation rules are called. For instance, the rule shown on the right-hand side of Figure 9 is applied when a new node of type State is added on top of an Object container, making the operation valid. If another type of container were to be selected, the rule on the left hand side of Figure 9 would be applied, invalidating the operation.

Not all operation must have a validation rule, in which case the framework must decide what to do. This decision is made by searching for the validation rule that most closely matches the parameters provided by the applied operation. This may be problematic because there may be more than one matching rule and it is possible to create contradictory rules. Take for example the rules defined in Figure 12.

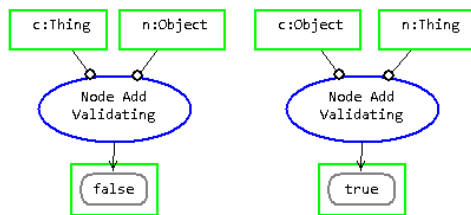


Figure 12: Contradictory validation rules.

If an Object node is added to another Object node, should the operation be valid or invalid? both options can be possible matches. To break this inconsistency, we determined that invalid rules take precedence over invalid rules. That is, if there is more than one matching validation rule for an operation, all of the matching rules must be valid for the full operation to be valid.

3.4 Adding Visual and Non-visual Properties

Visual representation is one of the key features of DSMLs. Differentiating nodes by their visual properties makes models easier and faster to understand (Moody, 2009). Furthermore, a node may have other properties that are not represented visually but are part of the information that the node contains. OPM/D supports this by allowing the definition of visual and non-visual properties for all meta-model elements.

Each element in the OPM/D meta-model can be un-folded to define the visual and non-visual properties that it exhibits. Visual properties affect the visual representation of the nodes, while non-visual properties add information which has no visual representation. We currently allow for the definition of one visual property: Figure. Since OPM/D is developed using Eclipse GEF/draw2d, a figure is an implementation of a draw2d Figure interface. Some built-in draw2d figures are Rectangle, Ellipse, Polygon, and Polyline. For non-visual properties, it is possible to define any number of properties, where each property must be of one of the basic Java primitive types (int, boolean, String, etc.) and enumerations (represented as OPM/D states).

The default figure used for OPM/D nodes is Rectangle, and the default figure for links is Polyline. These can be changed by overriding this definition, as shown in Figure 13, which shows that an Object has a Rectangle figure and two non-visual properties: name of type String, and type of type String.

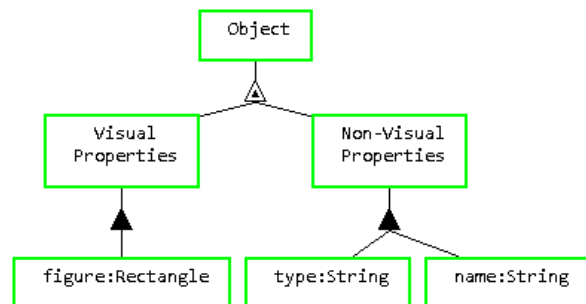


Figure 13: Defining visual and non-visual properties

The visual properties themselves can exhibit more properties. For example, a figure can exhibit a color and a size; a Polyline can exhibit a sourceDecoration and a targetDecoration. The full scope of the possible properties that can be defined is out of the scope of this work.

4 Conclusions and Future Work

We have presented the principles of OPM/D, a meta-modeling language, which is a subset of Object-Process Methodology (OPM), for defining and creating DSMLs. The language is based on the graphical language of OPM. To demonstrate the capabilities of OPM/D, we have shown how to define a simplified version of the OPM modeling language. OPM/D, a subset of OPM, can define not just OPM, but any DSML. OPM/D allows for the visual definition of DSMLs in two parts: a static model and a set of validation rules. The static models define the elements of the language, while the validation rules control what elements can be added to the model and how they can be added, ensuring that the resulting model of the defined DSML is correct by construction at all times.

The basic OPM/D framework and language has been implemented as an open-source plugin on top of the Eclipse platform, using Eclipse EMF and GEF technologies. The source code is available at github: <https://github.com/vainolo/OPClipse>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was supported by EU FP7 Project VISIONAIR, Contract 262044.

We thank the OPClipse team: Eyal Heineman, Kobi Ravid, Ilan Tchernovitz, Alez Zhitnitsky, and Nimrod Shenhav for their help in reviewing the OPM/D language definitions, and for making the implementation possible.

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