PFPL Supplement: Concurrent Algol, Reformulated

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1 Introduction

The technical formulation of Concurrent Algol (CA) in Chapter 40 of PFPL is a mildly uncomfortable compromise of considerations. There is a tension between the desire to maintain the dynamics of MA largely intact (which is especially desirable when it is fleshed out into a full-scale language) and the desire to integrate mechanisms for allocating channels (classes), spawning new processes, and emitting and accepting messages (or, in the more general case, synchronizing on a disjunction of events). The compromise used in PFPL is to introduce a judgment representing the possible “local steps” of execution. A local step transforming one command into another can have one of three ancillary effects:

1. It can allocate a fresh channel.
2. It can spawn a new process.
3. It can engender a synchronization action.

These steps are integrated into the “global steps” governing the program as a whole, notably the synchronization of processes capable of undertaking complementary actions.

Another approach that avoids some of these complexities (or, more properly, moves them around) is to eliminate the idea that command execution can, in itself, engender effects. Rather, any effects are moved to the process level, where they are handled as in Chapter 39 on process calculus. Doing so avoids the need for the ad hoc mechanism of local execution steps, but requires that states be fleshed out to account for synchronization among processes. It is also necessary to introduce a choice mechanism, either an acausal choice, as is done here, or a causal choice, which is left as an exercise.

2 Alternative Dynamics of CA

The process level of the CA dynamics is changed as follows:

\[
p ::= 1 \mid p_1 \otimes p_2 \mid 0 \mid p_1 + p_2 \mid \nu a \cdot \tau.p \mid !e \mid ?(x.p) \mid ?a(x.p) \mid \text{run}\{a\}(m)\]

There are two forms of receive process, generic and selective, and non-deterministic choice among processes. The atomic process consisting of a single command is parameterized by a channel indicating where the return value is to be sent; this is used to implement sequencing (see below).
The statics of processes is as given in Chapter 40, augmented with the rules given in Figure 1 governing choice, sending, and receiving. Messages are dynamically classified. The selective receive operation filters out those with a specified class, passing the associated value directly to the recipient process. The dynamics of processes is as in Chapter 40, with the addition of the rules given in Figure 2. Bear in mind that processes are identified up to structural congruence, so that, for example, choice applies to either summand implicitly, not just the left.

With this machinery in place it is possible to define the dynamics of commands in a straightforward way that avoids the need for the local action judgment. (See Figure 3.) The evident rules for evaluating sub-expressions are omitted for brevity.

A return command sends the return value on the destination channel of the running process. Sequencing is implemented using an internal channel, which is provided as destination to the first command in the sequence, and along which the returned value is communicated to the second command in the sequence. Thus, sequencing is reduced to synchronization, which in turn admits a purely process-level treatment of effects. Spawning an encapsulated command creates a new process, with no destination, returning the unit value to the spawning process.\(^1\) Allocation of a new channel allocates a new channel and returns a reference to it to the allocating process. Emitting a message emits the message concurrently with (that is, asynchronously with) the return of the unit value to the emitter. Generic and selective receive perform the indicated operations and return the resulting value to the receiving process. Synchronization on the null process transitions to the null choice, and synchronization on a binary choice transitions to a binary choice of synchronizations. Finally,

\(^1\)One could instead send a reference to the return channel of the spawned process for later synchronization by the spawning process.
Figure 3: Revised CA Dynamics (Selected Rules)
synchronization on a wrapper transitions to a sequencing command that effects the wrapping after synchronization.

Exercise 2.1. The use of nominally acausal choice in the dynamics is not essential; all choices are among (generic and selective) receives along a channel, and hence can be reformulated using causal choice. Do so. Hint: use structural congruence to provide a convenient normal form on event values as an n-ary choice of wrapped receive events.

References