

# Design Patterns for Parsing

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## ABSTRACT

We provide a systematic transformation of an LL(1) grammar to an object model that consists of

- an object structure representing the non-terminal symbols and their corresponding grammar production rules,
- a union of classes representing the terminal symbols (tokens).

We present a variant form of the visitor pattern and apply it to the above union of token classes to model a predictive recursive descent parser on the given grammar. Parsing a non-terminal is represented by a visitor to the tokens. For non-terminals that have more than one production rule, the corresponding visitors are chained together according to the chain of responsibility pattern in order to be processed correctly by a valid token. The abstract factory pattern, where each concrete factory corresponds to a non-terminal symbol, is used to manufacture appropriate parsing visitors.

Our object-oriented formulation for predictive recursive descent parsing eliminates the traditional construction of the predictive parsing table and yields a parser that is declarative and has minimal conditionals. It not only serves to teach standard techniques in parsing but also as a non-trivial exercise of object modeling for objects-first introductory courses.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

D.1.5 [Programming Techniques]: Object-oriented Programming.

## General Terms

Algorithms, design, languages.

## Keywords

Parsing, grammar, CS1/CS2, objects-first, design patterns, pedagogy, modeling.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The 2001 ACM Computing Curricula lists the objects-first approach as a legitimate way to teach object-oriented programming (OOP) in introductory computer science courses [1]. OOP educators would concur that in order for such courses to

be effective, they must progress normally yet quickly to cover topics that are complex enough to make a compelling case for OOP (see for instance, [2][3]). A wealth of problems in various phases of a compiler can be appropriately modeled as object-oriented systems. However, such problems are rarely discussed at the introductory level in current computer science curricula.

A quick tour of web sites and extant textbooks [4][5][6][7] seems to indicate that context-free grammars (CFG) and their related topics are usually relegated to upper division courses in programming languages and compiler construction. Efforts have been made to introduce object-oriented design patterns such as the composite and visitor patterns into such courses at the semantic analysis phases but not at the syntax analysis phase [5][8]. Perhaps because it is considered well understood, the current treatment of predictive recursive descent parsing (PRDP), typified by the construction of a predictive parsing table and the use of a large stack of conditionals on the token type to select the appropriate production rule, offers no innovation and incorporates no object-oriented concepts. Such a procedural approach does not scale, is rigid and cannot easily adapt to change: a small modification in the grammar such as adding a new production rule for an existing non-terminal symbol will require a complete rewrite of the code.

We present in this paper an object-oriented formulation of PRDP for LL(1) grammars that is flexible and extensible, yet simple enough to be taught in a CS2 objects-first course. At this level, it is pedagogically prudent to start with a simple grammar and gradually expand it to enforce and enhance the student’s understanding. Thus, it is crucial that an open-ended number of tokens, non-terminal symbols and production rules can be added to a given grammar with minimal perturbation to the existing code. The key design element is to equip the tokens with the capability to perform an open-ended number of tasks and to shift the responsibility of determining what production rule to parse to the tokens themselves. Such capability is effectuated via a variant of the visitor pattern [9] whose formulation will be described in Section 2.

We also need to model the non-terminal symbols of a grammar and their corresponding production rules, which define the syntax for all sentences generated by the given grammar. Section 3 illustrates via a simple example a systematic transformation of a given LL(1) grammar to an equivalent grammar where each non-terminal symbol translates to a class/interface whose production rules are expressed in terms of “has-a” and “is-a” relationships. The composite pattern [9] is used extensively here, resulting in an object model that represents the meta-structure of the parse tree.

In our parsing framework, the parsing of each non-terminal is modeled as a visitor to a token. To decouple the parsing visitors

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```

public abstract class AToken {
    private String _lexeme;
    public abstract Object execute(ITokVisitor algo, Object param);
}
// -----
public interface ITokVisitor {
    public Object defaultCase(AToken host, Object param);
}
// -----
public class NumToken extends AToken {

    public static interface INumVisitor extends ITokVisitor {
        public Object numCase(NumToken host, Object param);
    }

    public static abstract class AChainVis implements INumVisitor {
        private ITokVisitor _successor;
        protected AChainVis(ITokVisitor successor) {
            _successor = successor;
        }

        public Object defaultCase(AToken host, Object param) {
            return host.execute(_successor, param);
        }
    }

    public Object execute(ITokVisitor algo, Object param) {
        return (algo instanceof INumVisitor)?
            ((INumVisitor) algo).numCase(this, param):
            algo.defaultCase(this, param);
    }
}

```

**Listing 1: Modified visitor pattern for tokens (constructors omitted)**

and achieve a much higher level of modularity, we apply the abstract factory pattern [9] and relegate the manufacturing of parsing visitors to appropriate concrete factories instead. Section 4 explains how such a design helps produce a robust object-oriented predictive recursive descent parser that requires only local knowledge of each grammar rule and as a result is flexible and readily extensible.

Section 5 demonstrates the flexibility and extensibility of our parsing approach with an example of how expanding the original grammar with several new tokens, non-terminals and production rules only results in minimal perturbations of the existing code.

## 2 DESIGN PATTERNS FOR TOKENS

Our object-oriented formulation of LL(1) grammars seeks to delineate and decouple the task of parsing each grammar rule for each non-terminal from the task of selecting the appropriate rule to parse. The parsing algorithm for each non-terminal  $X$  knows exactly what the rules are for  $X$  and how to proceed with each of the rules but does not know which rule to apply without identifying the current token. On the other hand, the current token intrinsically knows its type and thus can select the appropriate rule but does not know what the rule needs to do at that juncture. The visitor pattern allows these two classes of objects to cooperate to carry out the correct parsing task at the correct time without querying the current input token for its type: the tokens serve as hosts and the parsing algorithms are the visitors.

However, the standard visitor pattern requires that the number of hosts is invariant, which does not meet our design goal of being able to add an arbitrary numbers of tokens, i.e. hosts, to the system. At the core of the visitor pattern is the guarantee that any given host only calls the method of the visitor corresponding to

that host. Instead of a single visitor interface that offers a fixed number of methods to a fixed number of hosts, consider a union of interfaces, one per host.

We implement this union as an interface called *ITokVisitor* with a single default case method corresponding to the abstract host, *AToken* (see Listing 1). Thus, every concrete host accepts this visitor. Each concrete host defines its own visitor sub-interface with a method specific to that host. When a concrete host accepts a visitor using *AToken.execute(...)*, it checks if that visitor is its own specific visitor and calls the host-specific method of the visitor if this is the case, otherwise it calls the default case method. For instance, in Listing 1, the *NumToken* host checks if the visitor, *algo*, is of type *INumVisitor*. If it is, the host-specific method of the visitor, *numCase(...)*, is called, otherwise the default case method, *defaultCase(...)*, is called.

The visitor pattern is designed for situations where the host's type is unknown at run-time. During parsing, the current token may be one in a set of valid tokens. To enable the current token to select the appropriate visitors, we apply the chain of responsibility design pattern [9] to chain together all the visitors of the valid tokens. The assumption that the grammar is LL(1) guarantees that exactly one visitor in the chain corresponds to the current valid token. This point will be further elucidated in Section 4, where we describe the lazy manufacturing of appropriate visitors using factories.

The tokens so designed do not have any knowledge about any grammar or any action one wants to do with them. This allows the tokens from the same set to be used in different grammars. Moreover, we can add any new token to the system by subclassing *AToken* and defining a corresponding nested sub-interface for *ITokVisitor* without affecting any of the existing code. Section 5 will further illustrate the flexibility and extensibility of our design.

We now tackle the problem of modeling the non-terminals and their production rules.

## 3 DESIGN PATTERNS FOR NON-TERMINALS AND PRODUCTION RULES

As a simple example, consider the CFG for infix arithmetic expressions using only addition, numbers and identifiers:

$$E :: F \mid F + E \qquad F :: \text{num} \mid \text{id}$$

The above grammar is not LL(1) but can be left-factored to yield the following equivalent LL(1) grammar.

$$E :: F E' \qquad F :: \text{num} \mid \text{id} \\ E' :: \text{empty} \mid + E$$

This grammar isn't quite ready to be modeled as classes however. This is because there is still a sequence of symbols, "+ E", that is not yet associated with a unique symbol. So, we perform one more grammar transformation where each distinct sequence of two or more symbols on the right-hand side of the production rules is given a unique non-terminal symbol on the left-hand side of the rules (" + E" is replaced by  $E1a$ ). Single tokens occurring in a branch also receive their own non-terminal (**num** and **id** are replaced by  $F1$  and  $F2$ , respectively). It is clear that this is an equivalent grammar because it simply gives names to existing sequences of symbols or tokens. Below, we have changed the names slightly to remove the primes and create Java-legal symbol names:



```

// E1aFact is an inner class of EFact

// parse "+" followed by an E
private class E1aFact extends ATVFactory {
    private EFact _eFact;
    private ITokVisitor _parseE;

    private Innit _initializer = new Innit() {
        public void init() {
            _initializer = NoOpInnit.Singleton; // do it only once
            _parseE = _eFact.makeVisitor(); // make visitor
        }
    };

    public E1aFact(ITokenizer tkz) { super(tkz); _eFact = EFact.this; }

    public ITokVisitor makeVisitor() {
        _initializer.init(); // lazy initialization
        return new PlusToken.ADefaultVis() {
            public Object plusCase(PlusToken host, Object inp) {
                return new E1a(host, (E) nextToken().execute(_parseE, inp));
            }
            public Object defaultCase(AToken host, Object param) {
                throw new IllegalArgumentException("Wrong token");
            }
        };
    }

    public ITokVisitor makeChainedVisitor(final ITokVisitor succ) {
        _initializer.init(); // lazy initialization
        return new PlusToken.AChainVis(succ) {
            public Object plusCase(PlusToken host, Object inp) {
                return new E1a(host, (E) nextToken().execute(_parseE, inp));
            }
        };
    }
}

```

**Listing 2: Typical factory for a sequence parsing visitor.**

`makeChainedVisitor()`, since only then is it guaranteed that all factories have been created and circular references can safely be established. The initializer object `_initializer`, which performs this lazy construction, is instantiated anonymously and replaces itself with a no-operation to ascertain it is executed only once. This is an example of the state design pattern. Listing 2 shows how the use of anonymous inner classes in the `makeVisitor()` method to instantiate the parsing visitor creates a closure that includes the stored visitor, `_parseE`.

The factories for branch terms (e.g. F, see Listing 3) are initialized with the factories for all their right-hand side terms. A visitor that parses a branch is the union of all the visitors that parse its subclasses. Since the grammar is LL(1), and each method of a visitor corresponds to a particular token, none of the subclasses' visitors utilize the same method for processing. Thus the union of the subclasses' visitors can be accomplished by using the chain of responsibility design pattern [9]. But since the factory for the branch doesn't know what methods are utilized by the subclasses' visitors, it is forced to delegate the process of creating this chain to one of the factories of the subclasses. Hence, all factories provide a method, `makeChainedVisitor(ITVFactory succ)`, to produce a visitor that, in case itself is not the intended receiver (i.e. `defaultCase()` is called), delegates to another visitor, the successor `succ`, thereby establishing the chain of responsibility. The E and **empty** terms are special cases since they have defined behaviors for all token cases. Thus the visitors for these terms can only be the end of a chain.

```

// FFact is an inner class of EFact

// parse either an F1 or an F2
private class FFact extends ATVFactory {
    private F1Fact _f1Fact;
    private F2Fact _f2Fact;

    public FFact(ITokenizer tkz) {
        super(tkz);
        _f1Fact = new F1Fact(tkz);
        _f2Fact = new F2Fact(tkz);
    }

    public ITokVisitor makeVisitor() {
        return _f1Fact.makeChainedVisitor(_f2Fact.makeVisitor());
    }

    public ITokVisitor makeChainedVisitor(ITokVisitor succ) {
        return _f1Fact.makeChainedVisitor(
            _f2Fact.makeChainedVisitor(succ));
    }

    private class F1Fact extends ATVFactory { ... }
    private class F2Fact extends ATVFactory { ... }
}

```

**Listing 3: Typical factory for a branch parsing visitor.**

The result is that instead of constructing the parsing visitors directly, one now constructs the parsing visitor factories displayed in Figure 2. Note that the object structure of the factories matches that of the grammar object model in Figure 1, except that all the factory-factory relationships are compositional. Each factory's construction only requires the factories of those terms it is directly related to, either by composition or by subclass. One thus need only know the grammar one level at a time, no global knowledge of the grammar is needed. This decoupling of the grammar terms makes the system very robust with respect to changes in the grammar. To start parsing, we simply ask the top-level factory, `EFact`, to make its visitor and apply that visitor to the first token. Note that we can avoid using mutating `setXXX()` methods usually necessary to produce a circular relationship if we create factories as inner classes inside the closures of other factories that use them. In Listing 2, `EFact.this` can be accessed directly because `EFact` closes over `E1aFact`. In Listing 3, instances of `F1Fact` and `F2Fact` can be created directly since they are implemented as inner classes of `FFact`. We have demonstrated this technique in an automated parser generator; unfortunately, this nesting of factory classes tends to generate a single unwieldy source file for a large grammar.

## 5 EXTENDING THE GRAMMAR

Consider a grammar that adds parenthesized expressions and multiplication to the grammar used above:

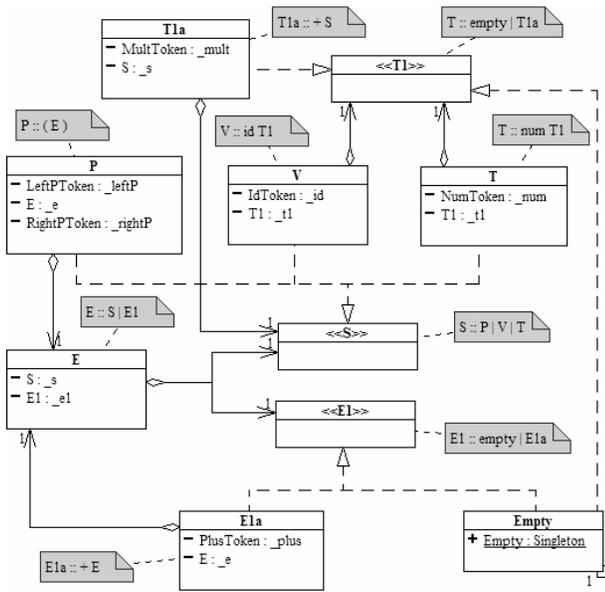
```

E :: S E1
E1 :: empty | E1a
E1a :: + E
S :: P | T | V
P :: ( E

T :: num T1
V :: id T1
T1 :: empty | T1a
T1a :: * S

```

For this new grammar, we have changed the composition of E, added five more non-terminals, three tokens, and seven production rules, and removed a non-terminal and a rule. To parse this grammar, we have to change only two fields and one constructor parameter in the E class, and replace the F factory, `FFact`, with the new S factory, `SFact`, in the factory for E. The remaining classes can be added without modifying any of the



**Figure 3: Object model for the extended grammar.**

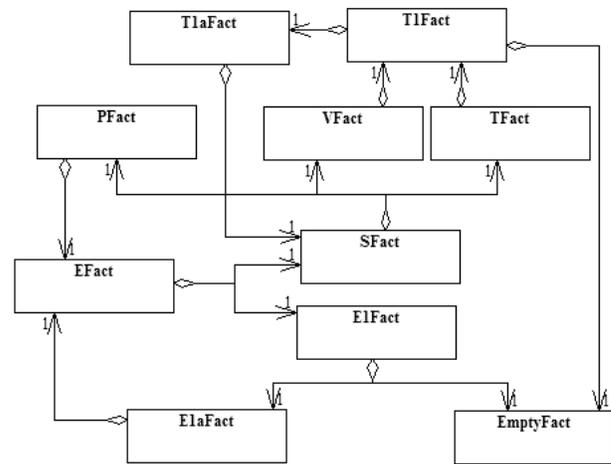
existing code. The UML class diagram for the terminals and non-terminals is depicted in Figure 3, the diagram for the factories can be found in Figure 4. Again, the structure of the factories matches that of the grammar.

In a procedural style it is hard to achieve the same extensibility that our object-oriented formulation exhibits. Traditionally, the addition of the "(" token as legal beginning of an expression would require a pervasive change to the existing parser. Our modified visitor pattern combined with the factory pattern provides the desired decoupling that pinpoints where the changes should be made and prevents a propagation of changes through the system.

## 6 CONCLUSION

We have created an object-oriented predictive recursive descent parser by starting with an LL(1) context-free grammar and applying a simple transformation. The resulting equivalent grammar was directly modeled by a class structure using inheritance to represent branches and composition to represent sequences. Since the tokens determine whether or not the input corresponds to the grammar, a variant of the visitor design pattern was used to provide direct dispatching to the appropriate parsing code, thus eliminating conditionals, and to allow the open-ended addition of tokens to the grammar with minimal perturbation of the existing code. The code thus became declarative in nature. The abstract factory pattern was used to decouple the individual grammar elements from each other and create a flexible, extensible system. The traditional global case analysis, predictive parsing table and attendant stack of conditionals gave way to a simple local analysis and delegation-based behavior. The chain of responsibility pattern was used to model the union of parsing behaviors needed under branching conditions. While it is beyond the scope of this paper, the object structure of the parse tree can easily be extended with its own visitors to enable semantic analysis of the parsed input.

It is important to recognize that OO PRDP cannot be taught in isolation. It must be carefully integrated into an objects-first curriculum that emphasizes OOP/OOD, design patterns, and abstract decomposition. At our institution, this material is covered near the end of CS2, which is an OO data structures and



**Figure 4: Factories for the extended grammar.**

algorithms course. At this point in the curriculum, the students are already versed in basic OOP/OOD practices, including all the design patterns mentioned here. The PRDP formulation serves not only to expose the students to fundamentals of syntactic analysis, but also as a vehicle for teaching them how to decompose a problem into a flexible and extensible object system.

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