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Disproving termination with overapproximation

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Abstract—When disproving termination using known techniques (e.g. recurrence sets), abstractions that overapproximate the program’s transition relation are unsound. In this paper we introduce live abstractions, a natural class of abstractions that can be combined with the recent concept of closed recurrence sets to soundly disprove termination. To demonstrate the practical usefulness of this new approach we show how programs with nonlinear, nondeterministic, and heap-based commands can be shown nonterminating using linear overapproximations.

1. INTRODUCTION

A program is terminating iff its transition relation (when restricted to reachable states) is well-founded. Because every subrelation of a well-founded relation is itself well-founded, if we prove an abstraction that overapproximates the program to be terminating, then we have proved the concrete program terminating. The reverse, unfortunately, is not true: the existence of a nonterminating overapproximating abstraction does not imply that the original concrete program is nonterminating. Thus, when proving nontermination, we currently cannot make use of the many techniques from program analysis that overapproximate programs.

In this paper we revisit a recently introduced concept called a closed recurrence set [8]. The existence of a closed recurrence set for a program implies that the program does not terminate. Curiously, the existence of a closed recurrence set for an overapproximating abstraction (meeting certain restrictions, which we formalize as live abstractions) also implies nontermination of the original concrete program. Thus, when combined with our technique, we can now use overapproximating abstractions when attempting to prove nontermination.

To demonstrate the usefulness of our approach we describe an experimental evaluation where nonlinear, nondeterministic, and heap-based programs are proved to be nonterminating using off-the-shelf overapproximating linear abstractions.

Limitations. As discussed in detail in the paper: not all overapproximating abstractions are compatible with our approach. We address this problem by describing the conditions on abstractions that make the abstraction sound for our approach, as the notion of live abstractions. Many of the known abstractions indeed meet these conditions. Additionally, closed recurrence sets are not complete, i.e. in some cases a closed recurrence set will not exist for nonterminating programs. In these situations our approach can still help in combination with previous techniques to disprove termination (e.g. underapproximation) in cases where existing techniques alone could not.

In our automation, counterexamples to termination are expressed as simple while loops, a.k.a. lasso paths, which are used extensively in the termination and nontermination proving literature. Unfortunately, not all counterexamples to termination can be expressed as lassos (see e.g. [8, Section 4] for a program where only aperiodic nonterminating runs exist). Furthermore, as done in TNT [18], when disproving termination of real programs with complex control-flow graphs, we must first search for candidate lassos before applying our approach. Like TNT, our tool also exhaustively searches program’s control flow graph for candidate lassos. Alternatively, candidate lassos can be obtained from a termination prover when it fails to prove termination. Thus our technique can be efficiently combined with a termination prover.

Related work. Termination proving tools are now well-known, e.g. [5], [6], [11], [12], [14], [15], [22], etc. The difference here is that we are disproving, rather than proving termination. While in some trivial cases termination provers can easily disprove termination (e.g. when variables are not modified in an infinite loop), in practice this is not the focus for these tools. Failure to find a termination proof does not imply a proof of nontermination. Thus dedicated techniques for nontermination proving are essential.

Since termination is not a safety property, its falsification cannot always be witnessed by a finite trace; thus testing cannot reliably be used to identify termination bugs.

In recent work, Chen et al. [8] introduce the notion of closed recurrence sets, upon which we build in this paper. Chen et al. combine closed recurrence sets with counterexample-guided underapproximation to harness safety provers for proving nontermination. The method hinges on the availability of suitable safety provers for the regarded class of programs, which currently makes an application of their method to nonlinear or heap-based programs difficult. We go beyond this limitation.

Closed recurrence sets were inspired by TNT [18], which uses a characterization of nontermination by (open) recurrence sets. Note that closed recurrence sets are stronger than recurrence sets: a recurrence set exists iff a program is nonterminating, whereas closed recurrence sets only imply nontermination; that is why they are useful for approximation. We show that additional techniques can be used to mitigate the relative strength of the condition. In contrast to us, TNT is restricted to programs using linear arithmetic. Our approach supports unbounded nondeterminism in the program’s transition relation, whereas TNT is restricted to deterministic commands. As discussed later, this is due to a happy interaction between the definition of closed recurrence sets and Farkas’ lemma.

Larraz et al. [23] prove non-termination via Max-SMT solving. The method explores all strongly connected subgraphs
of a program’s CFG and thus can find witnesses for non-
termination that need not be lasso paths. However this ap-
proach is limited to linear arithmetic as well.

Termination analysis tools for constraint-logic programs
(e.g. [30]) can in cases be used to prove nontermination
of imperative programs (e.g. JULIA [31] can show nontermi-
nation for Java bytecode programs if the abstraction to constraint-
logic programs is exact, but provides no witness like a recur-
rence set to the user). The main difficulty here is in the applica-
tion of the tools to imperative programs, as overapproximating
abstractions are typically used for converting languages such
as Java and C to constraint-logic programs. These abstractions
are in general unsound for directly proving nontermination.

Our work may in fact have application in this domain.

APROVE [15] uses SMT solving to prove nontermination
of Java programs [7]. First nontermination of a loop regardless of
its context is proved, then reachability of the loop with suitable
values. The drawback of their technique is that they require
either that (after program slicing to the variables that influence
the loop control flow) the values of the program variables are
always the same at the loop header or that the loop conditions
themselves must be loop invariants.

The tool INVEL [34] analyzes nontermination of Java pro-
grams using a combination of theorem proving and invariant
generation. Like Brockschmidt et al. [7], we were unable to
obtain a working version of INVEL. Note that in the em-
pirical evaluation by Brockschmidt et al. [7], the APROVE
tool (which we have compared against) subsumed INVEL
on INVEL’s data set. Finally, INVEL is only applicable to
deterministic integer programs, whereas our approach allows
nondeterminism and heap-based data structures as well.

Gulwani et al. [17] can prove nontermination in some cases
by proving the exit points of the program unreachable, but
use a restriction to linear arithmetic. Their technique is fairly
imprecise in the presence of nondeterminism in the input.

Atig et al. [2] reduce nontermination of multithreaded
programs to nontermination reasoning for sequential programs.
Our work complements Atig et al., as we improve the un-
underlying sequential tools that future multithreaded tools can use.

Previous works (e.g. [10], [19], [32]) describe techniques for
proving properties expressed in branching-time temporal logic
of infinite-state programs. Nontermination can be encoded
in these logics (e.g. in CTL, nontermination is EG pc ≠
END). Our work complements these previous works. Here
we facilitate the use of overapproximation.

Finally, several automatic tools exist for proving non-
termination of term rewrite systems (e.g. [13], [16], [29]).
However, in nontermination analysis for term rewriting the
entire state space is considered as legitimate initial states for
(a possibly infinite) evaluation sequence, whereas our setting
also factors in reachability from the initial states.

2. ILLUSTRATING EXAMPLE

Before formally introducing our approach, we first describe
the idea informally using an example. Imagine that we want
to show nontermination of the toy program in Fig. 1(a). Here

we are using an assume statement [27], which does not allow
executions to pass unless the condition is valid.\footnote{For ter-
mination, we can encode assume(e) ⇔ if ¬e then exit(); fi}

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Fig. 1. Nonlinear program (a), and its linear abstraction (b). The command
assume [27] only allows executions to continue when the condition holds,
nondet represents nondeterministic choice.

```plaintext
assume(j ≥ 1 and k ≥ 1); assume(j ≥ 1 and k ≥ 1);
while i ≥ 0 do while i ≥ 0 do
    i := j × k;    i := nondet();
    j := j + 1;    j := j + 1;
    k := k + 1;    k := k + 1;
    skip; // location ℓ    assume(i ≥ 1);
do  do
    done    done
```

```plaintext
(a) (b)
```

prove existence of a set of states $G$ at the loop head in the live abstraction meeting the following conditions then we know that both the abstraction and the original concrete program are nonterminating: a) $G$ is nonempty and at least one state in $G$ is reachable, b) every state in $G$ has at least one transition, and c) all transitions from $G$ in the abstraction only lead to $G$. If these conditions hold then $G$ is a closed recurrence set. This now allows us to use tools on the overapproximating abstraction rather than the original program to establish nontermination. Here such a set could be given by $G = \{s \mid s = i \geq 1\}$.

**Combining over- and underapproximation.** Sometimes closed recurrence sets are alone not enough: we may still require the use of underapproximation. However, even then, our approach facilitates the mixture of over- and underapproximation to make more powerful nontermination proving tools.

Consider the program in Fig. 2(a). Here it is difficult to find a useful linear overapproximation directly because of the nondeterministic assignment to the variable $m$. However, if an underapproximation of a program is nonterminating, then the original program itself is nonterminating as well. Here we can use known techniques to automatically find an underapproximation that rules out the unwanted transitions. Consider the program in Fig. 2(b), an underapproximation of the program in Fig. 2(a) restricting the choice for nondeterministic assignment to the variable $m$. Using our approach we can now easily find a useful linear overapproximation that is a live abstraction for this program. The program in Fig. 2(c) is a linear overapproximation of the underapproximation in Fig. 2(b). Here, we can find a closed recurrence set $G = \{s\mid s = i \geq 1 \wedge m \geq 0\}$ for the program in Fig. 2(c), which proves nontermination of the program in Fig. 2(b), which in turn proves nontermination of the program in Fig. 2(a). Note that it is unsound to first overapproximate and then underapproximate: as in this example we must first underapproximate and then overapproximate. Also note that for overapproximations we only consider live abstractions.

3. Closed recurrence sets and overapproximation

In this section we discuss closed recurrence sets and their relationship to overapproximation.

**Transition Systems.** A transition system $(S, R, I, F)$ is defined by a set of states $S$, a transition relation $R \subseteq S \times S$, a set of initial states $I \subseteq S$ and a set of final states $F \subseteq S$. For a state $s$ with $R(s, s')$, we say that $s'$ is a post-state of $s$ and that $s$ is a pre-state of $s'$. We also call $s'$ a successor of $s$ under $R$. Execution of a transition system can only halt in a final state, so every state $s \notin F$ must have a successor under $R$, and any final state $f \in F$ has no successors under $R$.

**Example.** Consider the example in Fig. 1(a). We can describe the loop and its initial condition as a transition system $(S, R, I, F)$ where any state $s$ is basically a tuple $(i, j, k)$ of values of variables and $S = \mathbb{Z}^3$, $R = \{(s, s') \mid s, s' = i \geq 0 \wedge j = i \times k \wedge j = j + 1 \wedge k = k + 1\}$, $I = \{s \mid s = j \geq 1 \wedge k \geq 1\}$, $F = \{s \mid s = i < 0\}$.

**A. Closed recurrence sets.**

A transition system $(S, R, I, F)$ is nonterminating iff there exists an infinite transition sequence $s_0 \xrightarrow{R} s_1 \xrightarrow{R} s_2 \xrightarrow{R} \ldots$ with $s_0 \in I$. Gupta et al. [18] characterize nontermination of a relation $R$ by the existence of a recurrence set, viz. a nonempty set of states $G$ such that for each $s \in G$ there exists a transition to some $s' \in G$. Here we extend the notion of a recurrence set to transition systems. A transition system $(S, R, I, F)$ has a recurrence set (or open recurrence set) of states $G(s)$ iff

$$\exists s \exists s', G(s) \implies R(s, s') \wedge G(s').$$

A transition system $(S, R, I, F)$ is nonterminating iff it has a recurrence set of states.

Quantifier alternation as in Condition (2) can be a headache for automation. To avoid this problem Gupta et al. [18] restrict the transition relation to deterministic programs only. In this case we can represent the post-state $s'$ using a unique expression in terms of the pre-state $s$. Thus the existential quantifier can be eliminated by instantiating it with this expression.

**Example.** For the loop from Fig. 1(a), we can have a recurrence set $G = \{(i = 1, j = 1, k = 1), (i = 1, j = 2, k = 2), (i = 4, j = 3, k = 3), (i = 9, j = 4, k = 4), \ldots\}$. We can write

**Definition (Closed Recurrence Set [8])**

A set $G$ is a closed recurrence set for a transition system $(S, R, I, F)$ iff the following three conditions hold:

$$\exists s, G(s) \wedge I(s)$$

$$\forall s \exists s', G(s) \implies R(s, s')$$

$$\forall s \forall s', G(s) \wedge R(s, s') \implies G(s')$$
In contrast to standard (open) recurrence sets, we now require a purely universal property: for each \( s \in G \) and for each of its successors \( s' \), also \( s' \) must be in the recurrence set (Condition (5)). So instead of requiring that we can stay in the recurrence set, we now demand that we must stay in the recurrence set. This has several advantages. First, without quantifier alternation, Farkas’ lemma can now be applied directly. This now helps us to incorporate nondeterministic transition systems too. Secondly, the interaction with overapproximation is improved. The downside is that the condition can be too strong.

There is an additional problem: what if a state \( s \) in our recurrence set \( G \) has no successor \( s' \) at all? This would bring our alleged infinite transition sequence to a sudden halt, yet our universal formula would trivially hold. To deal with this issue, we must impose that each \( s \in G \) has some successor \( s' \) (Condition (4)). But this existential statement need not mention that \( s' \) must be in \( G \) again—our previous universal statement already takes care of this. In this way, we have gained something: the existential quantifier in Condition (4) refers only to the (known) transition relation gained something: the existential quantifier in Condition (4) statement already takes care of this. In this way, we have gained something: the existential quantifier in Condition (4) refers only to the (known) transition relation \( R \) and, as we shall see in the Section 5 on automation, the condition can be easily automated in spite of quantifier alternation when we search for a closed recurrence set \( G \).

Example. For the loop from Fig. 1(b), we can have a closed recurrence set \( G = \{ s \mid s \vdash i \geq 1 \} \). \( G \) satisfies all the conditions of a closed recurrence set.

Theorem (Closed Recurrence Sets are Recurrence Sets)

Let \( G \) be a closed recurrence set for \((S, R, I, F)\). Then \( G \) is also a standard (open) recurrence set for \((S, R, I, F)\).

If our transition system is deterministic, every recurrence set is also a closed recurrence set. In particular, closed recurrence sets characterize nontermination in the setting of Gupta et al. [18], which assumes deterministic programs.

Corollary (Recurrence Sets are Closed Recurrence Sets for Deterministic Transition Systems)

Let \( G \) be a recurrence set for \((S, R, I, F)\) such that for every state \( s \) there exists at most one state \( s' \) with \( R(s, s') \). Then \( G \) is also a closed recurrence set for \((S, R, I, F)\).

B. Live abstractions

We now describe generic conditions on abstractions that are sufficient to establish soundness for nontermination proving using our approach, in the form of live abstractions.

Live Abstractions. We assume that an abstraction of \( T = (S, R, I, F) \) is a system \( T^a = (S^a, R^a, I^a, F^a) \), with a concretion (or meaning) function \([\cdot]: S^a \to P(S)\).

Definition (Live Abstraction)

An abstraction \( T^a = (S^a, R^a, I^a, F^a) \) is live iff

\[
\forall s, s', a. R(s, s') \land s \in [a] \rightarrow \exists a'. R^a(a, a') \land s' \in [a']
\]

(Simulation)

\[
\forall f \forall g. f \in F \land f \in [g] \rightarrow g \in F^a
\]

(Upward Termination)

The Simulation (or, ‘up simulation’) condition is a standard one for overapproximation: it says that any steps you can take in the concrete transition system can be overapproximated in the abstract transition system. The Upward Termination condition says that for every final state in the concrete transition system, any corresponding abstract state is also a final state in the abstract transition system. Together Simulation and Upward Termination imply that for every terminating run in the concrete transition system, also any corresponding run in the abstract transition system is terminating.

The connection of these conditions to disproving termination then is: if there is an initial state \( a_0 \) from which all computations in the abstract program are nonterminating and there is an initial state \( s_0 \) in the concrete program such that \( s_0 \in [a_0] \), then all computations in the concrete program starting from \( s_0 \) are nonterminating (i.e., for live abstractions, closed recurrence carries over from the abstract to the concrete).

Theorem (Soundness)

Consider a live abstraction \((S^a, R^a, I^a, F^a)\) for a transition system \((S, R, I, F)\). Suppose \( G^a \) is a closed recurrence set for \((S^a, R^a, I^a, F^a)\) and for some \( a_0 \) we have \( G^a(a_0) \land I^a(a_0) \land \exists s_0. (s_0 \in [a_0] \land I(s_0)) \). Then there also exists a closed recurrence set \( G = \{ s | \exists a. G^a(a) \land s \in [a] \} \) for \((S, R, I, F)\).

Proof. We need to prove Conditions (3), (4), and (5) for \( G \).

For Condition (3) for \( G \): We have for some \( a_0 \), \( G^a(a_0) \land I^a(a_0) \land \exists s_0. (s_0 \in [a_0] \land I(s_0)) \). Thus for such \( s_0 \) we have \( I(s_0) \) and the definition of \( G \) implies \( G(s_0) \). Thus we have Condition (3) for \( G \).

For Condition (4) for \( G \): Let \( s \) such that \( G(s) \). We now prove that \( s \notin F \) by contradiction. Suppose \( s \in F \). The definition of \( G \) implies \( \exists a. s \in [a] \land G^a(a) \). Condition (4) for \( G^a \) implies \( \exists a'. R^a(a, a') \). However Upward Termination implies \( a \notin F^a \), which implies \( \neg \exists a'. R^a(a, a') \). Thus we have a contradiction. Thus we must have \( s \notin F \). This gives Condition (4) for \( G \).

For Condition (5) for \( G \): Let \( s, s' \) such that \( G(s) \land R(s, s') \). The definition of \( G \) implies \( \exists a. s \in [a] \land G^a(a) \). Moreover, the Simulation condition gives \( \exists a'. R^a(a, a') \land s' \in [a'] \). Condition (5) for \( G^a \) implies \( G^a(a') \). The definition of \( G \) gives \( G(s') \) and thus we have Condition (5) for \( G \).

Note that similar to what many abstractions do, a live abstraction can overapproximate the concrete initial states. For a live abstraction to be useful for proving nontermination using closed recurrence sets, we only need \( a_0 \in S^a \) and \( s_0 \in S \) that satisfy the conditions of the soundness theorem.

Example. Recall Fig. 1(a) and its abstraction in Fig. 1(b).

We can represent the abstraction as a transition system:

\[
I^a = \{ a | a \vdash i \geq 1 \wedge k \geq 1 \} \quad F^a = \{ a | a \vdash i < 0 \} \\
S^a = \mathbb{Z}^3 \quad R^a = \{ (a, a') | (a, a') \vdash i \geq 0 \wedge j' \geq 1 \wedge j = i + 1 \wedge k' = k + 1 \}
\]

The abstraction contains \( j' \geq 1 \) in the transition relation of the loop instead of the nonlinear update \( j' = j \times k \). Here the abstraction has not changed the state space, the set of initial states and the set of final states, but it has weakened
the transition relation of the loop. Note that this abstraction fulfills all criteria for a live abstraction.

Example. Consider again the examples from Fig. 1(a) and (b). Here we have the closed recurrence set \( \mathcal{G} = \{ s | s \vdash i \geq 1 \} \) for the loop in our abstraction in Fig. 1(b). This implies existence of a closed recurrence set \( \mathcal{G} \) for the loop in the concrete program in Fig. 1(a) and hence its nontermination.

Example. To see why we need the Upward Termination condition for the abstraction, consider the following transition system \((S, R^\alpha, I^\alpha, F^\alpha)\):

\[
S = \{ s_0, s_1, s_2, s_3 \} \quad I = \{ s_0 \} \quad F = \{ s_1 \}
\]

\[
R^\alpha = \{ (s_0, s_1), (s_2, s_3), (s_3, s_0) \} \quad I^\alpha = \{ s_0 \} \quad F^\alpha = \emptyset
\]

Here an abstract state is a subset of the set of all concrete states, where we have “merged” the states \( s_1 \) and \( s_2 \) to a single state. The abstraction satisfies the Simulation condition but not Upward Termination because \( s_1 \) is a final state in the concrete transition system, but the corresponding abstract state \( \{ s_1, s_2 \} \) is not a final state in the abstract transition system. The abstraction has a closed recurrence set \( \{ s_0 \} \) and hence its nontermination.

4. Classes of Live Abstractions for Automation

As mentioned earlier, in our automation we focus on program fragments of a special shape: lassos.

Definition (Lasso) A lasso is a program fragment that contains a sequence of commands called a stem followed by a simple loop with guarded updates. The guard of a simple loop is a conjunction of atomic conditions. Formally a lasso \( L \) is a transition system \((S, R_{\text{loop}}, I_{\text{loop}}, F_{\text{loop}})\) where \( S \) is the set of states in the domain, \( R_{\text{loop}} \) is the transition relation of the loop, and \( I_{\text{loop}} \) is the set of initial states for the loop. \( I_{\text{loop}} \) represents the strongest postcondition after execution of the stem. \( F_{\text{loop}} \) is a set of final states for the loop such that for every final state there is no transition inside the loop.

Abstracting nonlinear commands. We describe the abstraction that our tool uses to abstract nonlinear commands present in the lassos. In our abstraction nonlinear assignment commands are abstracted, but loop guards are kept unchanged.

Towards the purpose of abstracting assignments we first compute a linear location invariant at the end of the loop (using APRON’s [20] octagon abstract domain [26] in our implementation). We then replace the nonlinear update command with a nondeterministic choice and add an assume statement with the invariant at the end of the loop. Instead of octagons, here also dedicated disjunctive analyses for nonlinearity (e.g., the technique by Alonso et al. [1]) can be used to increase precision of the overapproximation. However, as our experiments show, here we can already get quite far using standard octagons.

Consider the nonlinear lasso in Fig. 1(a) and its linear abstraction in Fig. 3 that our tool computes. Here, \( i - 1 \geq 0 \)

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{assume}(j \geq 1 \text{ and } k \geq 1); \\
\text{while } i \geq 0 \\
& \quad i := \text{nondet}(); \\
& \quad j := j + 1; \\
& \quad k := k + 1; \\
\text{assume}(i + j \geq 0 \text{ and } i \geq 1 \text{ and } k \geq 0); \quad // \text{ location } \ell
\end{align*}
\]

Fig. 3. Linear overapproximation of the program in Fig. 1(a) computed by our tool using APRON [20]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{assume}(\ldots); \\
\text{assume}(\ldots); \\
\text{assume}(\ldots); \\
\text{\textbf{while } } i \times j \geq 0 \text{ \textbf{do}} & \quad \text{\textbf{while } } v \geq 0 \text{ \textbf{do}} \\
& \quad i := \ldots; & \quad v := \ldots; \\
& \quad j := \ldots; & \quad j := \ldots; \\
\text{\textbf{done}} & \quad \text{\textbf{done}} \\
& \quad v := i \times j; &
\end{align*}
\]

Fig. 4. Lasso (a) with nonlinear lasso (b) with auxiliary variable with linear guards

\[
0 \land i + j - 3 \geq 0 \land i - j + 1 \geq 0 \land i + k - 3 \geq 0 \text{ is the invariant computed at location } \ell \text{ of the original lasso from Fig. 1(a) by the APRON library using the octagon abstract domain.}
\]

Mapping nonlinear assignments to nondeterministic assignments is clearly an overapproximation. This abstraction of assignments satisfies the Simulation condition of live abstraction because it adds extra abstract transitions only when a concrete transition (the assignment) is already possible. Since we do not alter loop guards, Upward Termination holds as well because all the final states of the original lasso are final states in the abstract lasso too. Clearly this abstraction satisfies the conditions of a live abstraction. Formally for a concrete lasso with a transition system \((S, R_{\text{loop}}, I_{\text{loop}}, F_{\text{loop}})\) our tool computes an abstract lasso with a transition system \((S^\alpha, R^\alpha_{\text{loop}}, I^\alpha_{\text{loop}}, F^\alpha_{\text{loop}})\) where \( S^\alpha = S, R_{\text{loop}} \subseteq R^\alpha_{\text{loop}}, I^\alpha_{\text{loop}} = I_{\text{loop}}, F^\alpha_{\text{loop}} = F_{\text{loop}} \) and the concretion function is essentially the identity, i.e., \( \forall a \in S^\alpha, [a] = \{a\} \).

Dealing with nonlinear guards. We use a simple trick to get rid of nonlinearity out of guards. Consider Fig. 4. We remove nonlinearity present in the guards by adding an auxiliary variable \( v \). The rest of the analysis proceeds as before.

This approach yields nonlinear commands in the stem of our lassos. The stem commands enter our constraints only existentially (as we will see in Section 5). Thus constraint solvers can deal with such constraints efficiently.

Abstracting heap-based commands. Magill et al. [25] propose an overapproximating abstraction from programs operating on the heap to purely arithmetic programs. The abstraction is obtained by instrumenting a memory safety proof for the program. Since in general memory safety only holds under certain preconditions, the user can specify the shape of the
heap data structures by user-defined predicates in separation logic [28]. We can use Magill’s tool THOR [25] to abstract heap-based C programs into linear arithmetic programs operating over the integers. This is exemplified in Fig. 5. In the arithmetic program the variable \( k \) tracks the length of the list segment from \( p \) to \( \text{null} \), and the other variables are temporaries used in the update of \( k \).

Magill’s PhD thesis [24, Def. 29] describes the notion of stuttering simulation and proves (in his Thm. 18) that the abstraction satisfies the properties of stuttering simulation. In stuttering simulation for a transition in the concrete system, the corresponding transition in the abstract system may contain a sequence of steps and vice versa. An abstraction satisfying stuttering simulation obeys standard simulation condition and additionally for stuttering simulation to hold, the Upward Termination condition is needed. Thus Magill’s abstraction satisfies the properties of a live abstraction and thus is safe for our approach of nontermination proving.

We could also abstract linked-list programs via the results connecting lists and counter automata [4]. These results are in fact stronger, a bisimulation rather than a simulation, for lists.

Combining over- and underapproximation. As previously mentioned, closed recurrence sets must in some cases be used in conjunction with underapproximation. Here we can use existing techniques for underapproximation in combination with our own. Note that closed recurrence sets form a complete method when combined with underapproximation, in the sense that every nonterminating program also has an underapproximation with a closed recurrence set.

Underapproximation. We call a transition system \((S, R', I', F')\) an underapproximation of a transition system \((S, R, I, F)\) iff \( R' \subseteq R, I' \subseteq I, F \subseteq F' \).

Theorem (Open Recurrence Sets Always Contain Closed Recurrence Sets [8]) There exists a recurrence set \( \mathcal{G} \) for \((S, R, I, F)\) iff there exist an underapproximation \((S, R', I', F')\) of \((S, R, I, F)\) and \( \mathcal{G}' \subseteq \mathcal{G} \) such that \( \mathcal{G}' \) is a closed recurrence set for \((S, R', I', F')\).

5. FINDING CLOSED RECURRENCE SETS
In the previous section we showed how it is possible to prove nontermination of a program by proving the existence of a closed recurrence set for an abstraction of the program. Here we address the problem of how to find a closed recurrence set for the abstracted program, i.e., a program over linear integer arithmetic. We will search for a closed recurrence set \( \mathcal{G} \) described by a conjunction of linear inequalities \( Qx \leq q \).

We adapt the Farkas-based approach used in TNT to find closed recurrence sets rather than recurrence sets. In our application the restriction to deterministic relations from TNT can be lifted. This is particularly important when working with abstractions of programs, which can introduce nondeterminism even when the concrete program is deterministic. It is also essential for treating the heap, because of the nondeterminism inherent in malloc.

In this section it will be convenient to phrase our discussion in terms of lassos expressed in linear arithmetic, as such lassos are convenient for automation. In the domain of linear arithmetic, a state \( s \) is just a vector \( x \) that represents the valuation of program variables. A lasso \( L \) in linear arithmetic can be expressed as a transition system \((S, R_{\text{loop}}(x, x'), I_{\text{loop}}(x), F_{\text{loop}}(x))\). In terms of programs, \( I_{\text{loop}}(x) \) represents the strongest postcondition of a path leading to the loop body, with precondition ‘true’ from which the program starts, and \( R_{\text{loop}}(x, x') \) is the transition relation corresponding to the composition of a sequence of (possibly nondeterministic) assignment statements in the loop body, guarded by a condition. \( F_{\text{loop}}(x) \) represents the set of final states such that no loop transition can take place from any final state. As we are working in linear arithmetic, we can represent the transition relation of the loop by systems of inequalities

\[
R_{\text{loop}}(x, x') \triangleq Gx \leq g \land Ux + U'x' \leq u
\]

where \( Gx \leq g \) describes the guards and \( Ux + U'x' \leq u \) the updates. Here \( G, U \) and \( U' \) are matrices, \( g \) and \( u \) are vectors. We make the following assumption:

\[
\forall x \exists x'. Gx \leq g \Rightarrow Ux + U'x' \leq u. \tag{6}
\]

The assumption says that whenever the guards of a lasso can be satisfied we are guaranteed to have a next state given by the updates. This holds in a lasso with a satisfiable transition system when every row in \( U' \) contains a non-zero coefficient, which corresponds to an update of the variables.

We are in search of a predicate \( \mathcal{G} \) expressed as a system of inequalities using coefficients, i.e., \( \mathcal{G} \equiv Qx \leq q \), where \( Q \) is a matrix and \( q \) a vector of existentially quantified variables. The number of rows in \( Q \) and \( q \) then corresponds to the number of inequalities which we use.

We wish to employ a constraint solver (e.g. Z3 [21]) to find the coefficients \( Q \) and \( q \). A difficulty in doing so is that these conditions contain mixtures of existential and universal quantifiers: \( Q \) and \( q \) are existentially quantified at the top-level, and both (4) and (5) use universals. Many constraint solvers struggle to solve problems such as these. The standard approach (e.g. in invariant generation [9], rank function synthesis [5] and recurrence set synthesis [18]) is to apply Farkas’ lemma to convert the problem into a purely existential one that is easier for existing solvers.
In the remainder of this section we describe a Farkas-based reduction to automate the search for closed recurrence sets. To find a closed recurrence set for \((S, R_\text{loop}(x, x'), I_\text{loop}(x), F_\text{loop}(x))\) we must find \(Q\) and \(q\) such that the following conditions are satisfied (here we have substituted \(Qx \leq q\) for \(G\) in Conditions (3), (4), and (5)):

\[
\exists x. Qx \leq q \land I_\text{loop}(x) \tag{7}
\]
\[
\forall x. \exists x'. Qx \leq q \rightarrow R_\text{loop}(x, x') \tag{8}
\]
\[
\forall x\forall x'. Qx \leq q \land R_\text{loop}(x, x') \rightarrow Qx' \leq q \tag{9}
\]

In order to apply Farkas’ lemma we must eliminate the \(\forall\) alternation in Condition (8).\(^2\) Assumption (6) lets us remove the existential quantifier in (8),\(^3\) which now becomes:

\[
\forall x. Qx \leq q \rightarrow Gx \leq g \tag{10}
\]

Next, although it is not essential, because of (10) we can drop \(Gx \leq q\) from \(R_\text{loop}(x, x')\) in (9), thus giving us a simpler constraint to solve:

\[
\forall x\forall x'. Qx \leq q \land Ux + U'x' \leq u \rightarrow Qx' \leq q \tag{11}
\]

Conditions (7), (10), and (11) are sufficient constraints for finding a closed recurrence set. Furthermore, (10) and (11) are now in a form which facilitates applications of Farkas’ lemma to eliminate the universal quantifiers, and we obtain:

\[
\exists \Lambda_1 \geq 0. \Lambda_1 Q = G \land \Lambda_1 q \leq g \tag{12}
\]

and

\[
\exists \Lambda_2 \geq 0. \Lambda_2 \left( \begin{array}{c} Q \\ U \end{array} \right) = 0 \land \Lambda_2 \left( \begin{array}{c} 0 \\ U' \end{array} \right) = Q \land \Lambda_2 \left( \begin{array}{c} q \\ u \end{array} \right) \leq q \tag{13}
\]

The constraints that we finally generate are (7), (12), and (13). These conditions are readily solved by off-the-shelf constraint solving tools. A satisfying assignment for these constraints gives us values of coefficients in \(Q\) and \(q\), thus giving us the closed recurrence set.

Note that if the constraints are unsatisfiable, like Gupta et al. [18] we can use \(Q\) and \(q\) with increasingly many rows (and hence inequalities) in \(Qx \leq q\). In this way, we can increase the precision of our method further.

6. IMPLEMENTATION AND EXPERIMENTS

In order to assess the practicality of our approach we have developed a prototype implementation called ANANT. Given a program’s CFG, ANANT exhaustively searches for candidate lassos.\(^4\) For every lasso the tool applies our method, using Z3 as the constraint solver for the constraints from Section 5 together with abstractions for heap and nonlinear commands described in Section 3. If a lasso under consideration contains a loop variable with a nondeterministic update that also appears in the loop guard, before applying the abstraction the tool first applies an underapproximation strategy. To obtain the desired underapproximation the tool adds an assume statement at the end of the loop body that enforces the loop guard (as done for variable \(m\) in Fig. 2(b)).

We make ANANT available for download along with its source code at the following URL:

http://www0.cs.ucl.ac.uk/staff/K.Nimkar/live-abstraction

We compared ANANT experimentally to several other tools. As a benchmark set (also available at the above URL), we have gathered 33 example programs containing nonlinear, nondeterministic and heap-based commands from various sources.

Since nontermination usually indicates a bug, some of our benchmarks implement functions computing factorial, logarithm, etc., with typical programming mistakes that lead to nontermination. The set also includes the nonterminating examples from Berdine et al. [3], in particular the bug in a Windows device driver discussed in this paper. While Berdine et al. report that their analysis uncovers this bug by absence of a successful termination proof, we can now go a step further and actually prove nontermination of such heap programs.

We compared ANANT to the following tools:

- APROVE [15], using the Java bytecode frontend with the nontermination analysis by Brockschmidt et al. [7].
- JULIA [33], implementing a reduction to constraint logic programming described by Payet and Spoto [31].

Like Brockschmidt et al. [7], we were unable to obtain a working version of the tool INVEL [34]. Note that the other nontermination provers (e.g. TNT [18], T2 [8] and CPPI INV [23]) are not applicable, as they do not support programs with nonlinear or heap-based commands.

Fig. 6 shows the results of our experiments with ANANT, APROVE, and JULIA. We ran ANANT and APROVE on an Intel i7-2640M CPU clocked at 2.8 GHz under Linux. For JULIA, an unknown cloud-based configuration was used. All tools were run with 600 s timeout. As Fig. 6 shows, ANANT succeeded on 29 of 33 benchmarks, whereas APROVE and JULIA succeeded on only 2 and 4 benchmarks, respectively. This difference is not surprising since overapproximation was thus far not applicable to disproving termination for nonlinear and heap-based programs. In contrast, as our experiments show, we can now disprove termination in many such cases.

It is worth highlighting that e.g. on benchmark 9, ANANT took over 4 min to disprove termination, vs. JULIA’s <7 s. This difference may partly be due to different machine configurations. However, note that a combined prover for termination and nontermination (like APROVE or JULIA) can discard parts of the program proved terminating and only analyze the rest for nontermination. This can lead to a more focused search for a nontermination proof than ANANT’s approach of enumerating arbitrary lassos (whose termination might be easy to prove). Thus, ideally, our contributions for disproving termination should be combined with a termination prover.

\(^2\)When Gupta et al. [18] search for recurrence sets, they also need to eliminate the \(\forall\) alternation in their constraints for automation. They do so by instantiating the existential variable explicitly with the value of the update. The price for this is that the update must be deterministic. We do not have this restriction.

\(^3\)The statements (6) \& (8) and (6) \& (10) are equivalent.

\(^4\)ANANT uses the same syntax for transition systems as the termination prover T2 [6]. For heap-based programs in C syntax, the lasso extraction is currently conducted manually.
7. Conclusion

Overapproximation is the workhorse of program analysis. Unfortunately, overapproximation can invalidate conventional techniques for disproving termination. In this paper we have introduced the notion of a live abstraction to show how overapproximation can help, not hinder nontermination proving. The idea is to prove the existence of a closed recurrence set rather than simply a recurrence set. This modification in strategy allows us to use off-the-shelf overapproximating abstractions, leading to a new set of methods for disproving termination of real programs.

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REFERENCES


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