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Multi-threading and message communication in Qu-Prolog

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Abstract

This paper presents the multi-threading and internet message communication capabilities of Qu-Prolog. Message addresses are symbolic and the communications package provides high-level support that completely hides details of IP addresses and port numbers as well as the underlying TCP/IP transport layer. The combination of the multi-threads and the high level inter-thread message communications provide simple, powerful support for implementing internet distributed intelligent applications.

KEYWORDS: logic programming, multi-threading, high-level communication, Qu-Prolog, ICM

1 Introduction

Qu-Prolog (Robinson, 1997; Hagen *et al.*, 1999) is an extension of Prolog designed primarily as an implementation and tactic language for interactive theorem provers, particularly those that carry out schematic proofs. Qu-Prolog has built-in support for the kinds of data structures typically encountered in theorem proving activities such as object variables, substitutions and quantified terms. Qu-Prolog is the implementation language of the Ergo theorem prover (Becht *et al.*, 1996), which has seen substantial use in development of verified software, both directly (Fidge *et al.*, 1995) and indirectly through prototyping a program refinement tool (Carrington *et al.*, 1996).

As part of our ongoing efforts to scale up our formal development tools, we are interested in developing multi-user versions of these tools. In particular, we are interested in implementing a multi-threaded, multi-user version of Ergo where a collection of people and automated theorem provers can work together to produce a proof.

As a preliminary step to this, we have augmented Qu-Prolog to support multi-threading and high-level inter-thread communication between Qu-Prolog threads running anywhere on the internet. An initial case study on multi-threaded theorem proving is described in Cook *et al.* (1999).

This paper reports on these new features of Qu-Prolog. Our main aim in designing the thread mechanism is to provide simple and powerful methods for programming distributed Prolog-based agent applications. Some simple examples of using our approach for DAI applications are given in Clark *et al.* (1998).

Apart from the ability to give symbolic names to threads and the management of messages, the implementation of threads is similar to that of other multi-threaded Prologs, such as BinProlog (Tarau, 1997) and SICStus MT (Eskilson and Carlsson, 1998). The novelty of the Qu-Prolog approach to threads is the high level inter-thread message-based communication which transparently communicates messages independently of location. Inter-thread communication uses the API of McCabe's InterAgent Communications Model (ICM) (McCabe, 1999). This means that Qu-Prolog applications can transparently link with other applications that use the ICM such as April (McCabe and Clark, 1995) applications.

Qu-Prolog inter-thread communication borrows ideas from both Erlang (Armstrong *et al.*, 1993) and April. Threads in Qu-Prolog behave as communicating processes which have a single message buffer of unread messages. They will suspend if they want to read a message and the buffer is empty, and will then resume as soon as a message, communicated from another thread or application, is added to the buffer.

The organization of the paper is as follows. In Section 2 we briefly describe Qu-Prolog threads. In Section 3 we present the high-level inter-thread communication of Qu-Prolog and in Section 4 we discuss its implementation. Sections 5 and 6 illustrate the use of threads and high-level communication by presenting an implementation of the Linda model for interprocess communication and an implementation of distributed query processing in which each Prolog query server can process many queries simultaneously. In Section 7 we compare Qu-Prolog with SICStus-MT, BinProlog, CIAO, Mozart-Oz, Erlang and April.

2 Threads

Qu-Prolog is implemented as an extended WAM emulated in C++. Thread execution is controlled by a scheduler that is responsible for time-slicing threads, managing blocking of I/O and ICM message and signal handling.

In the implementation the threads within a single Qu-Prolog process share the static code area and the asserted and recorded databases. On the other hand, threads carry out independent Qu-Prolog computations and so, for example, have separate heaps, stacks and trails.

The Qu-Prolog thread library contains predicates for creating and deleting threads, symbolically naming threads, and for controlling thread execution. The sizes of the WAM data areas for each thread can be set at creation time so that the size of each individual thread can be tailored to its intended use.

The predicates

```
thread_fork_anonymous(-ThreadID, +Goal, +Sizes)
thread_fork(-ThreadID, +Name, +Goal, +Sizes)
```

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create a new thread and execute `Goal` within the thread. When the goal finishes executing (by success or failure) the thread terminates. The sizes of the various data areas, such as the heap, is specified in the `Sizes` data structure. If this argument is missing, the default sizes are used. `ThreadID` is the ID of the created thread, and in the second predicate, `Name` is the symbolic name given to the thread.

Typically, the main or initial thread of an application is in charge of forking threads. If this is an 'intelligent' server application this initial thread is usually programmed as a top level tail recursive or repeat/fail loop that responds to messages sent to it from any number of client applications. We shall give an example of this later. For some of these 'queries' the main thread may fork one or more new threads to process the 'query' or to engage in a conversation with the client. The client, in turn, can fork a thread for each conversation. This enables peer to peer, or agent to agent application programming, rather than just client/server programming.

The predicates

```
thread_forbid
thread_resume
```

are used to allow a thread to take control so that it can, for example, perform an atomic operation like an assert on the shared dynamic clauses. `thread_forbid` prevents other threads from having a time-slice and `thread_resume` resumes time-slicing.

Apart from being able to symbolically name threads, the implementation of threads is similar to that of other multi-threaded Prologs and will not be discussed further in this paper, except where it relates to communication.

3 Inter-thread communications

In this section we give a user-level view of inter-thread communication and symbolic addressing in Qu-Prolog. By inter-thread communication we mean communication between any two threads whether they are in the same Qu-Prolog process or different Qu-Prolog processes, even on different machines.

Throughout this section we concentrate on the higher-level communication support in Qu-Prolog. We consider two layers: the basic support for inter-thread communication; and a very-high-level layer built on the basic support. Qu-Prolog also supports low-level communications via sockets but this is reasonably standard and is therefore not discussed in this paper. The socket level primitives can be used for communicating with pre-existing Internet services, such as HTTP or FTP servers.

From a user perspective, the higher-level communication support treats communication between threads in a uniform way – all messages to a thread, irrespective of the sources of the messages, are added to the end of the thread's single message buffer.

Each message that appears in a thread's message buffer has three components: the actual message; the sender address; and the reply-to address. Generally, the reply-to address is the same as the sender address (the default) but the sender can set the reply-to address when, for example, the message is forwarded.

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Each thread address also has three components: the identity of the thread; the identity of the Qu-Prolog process that contains the thread; and the identity of the machine running the Qu-Prolog process[1].

For threads, the identity is either an integer representing the thread ID given to the thread at creation time or its symbolic name given to it when it was created or by the use of the predicate `thread_set_symbol/1`.

The identity of a process is a symbolic name given to the process when it is started at the operating system level. The machine identity is typically the IP address, but can also be any of its internet symbolic names.

3.1 Basic inter-thread communication

The basic communication layer provides support for constructing address data structures, for sending messages and for accessing the message buffer.

The most general message send predicate is

```
ipc_send(+Message, +ToAddress, +ReplyAddress, +Options)
```

where `Message` is a Prolog term that is the message, `ToAddress` is an address data structure representing the message destination, `ReplyAddress` is an address data structure representing the reply-to address, and `Options` is a list of flags that control how the message term is represented as a string of characters.

The option flags are `remember_names` and `encode`. One important requirement of Qu-Prolog is to support interaction with symbolic data. This is achieved by being able to associate variable names with variables. Qu-Prolog has variants of the read and write predicates that remember variable names that are input and generate names for unnamed variables on output. An important consequence of this is that if a variable is read in whose name is the same as an existing variable, then the input variable will become the existing variable.

This feature is extended to messages. If the `remember_names` option is set then any unnamed variables in the message are given names. This option, in combination with the equivalent option for receiving messages, provides a variable connection across threads, and thereby supports processing of schematic data across threads. In particular, if one thread T1 sends a sequence of messages to the same destination thread T2, some or all of which contain the same internal variable `X1` of T1, this will be given the same name `N` in all the messages in which it occurs. T2 will map each occurrence of `N`, in the different messages, into the same internal variable `X2` of T2. This allows incremental transmission of queries between threads.

The `encode` option determines if efficient Prolog term compression is to be used or if the term is to be sent in 'raw' string form. For Qu-Prolog-to-Qu-Prolog communication, the encoded form is much more efficient both for writing and reading. If, however, a message is being sent to a non-Qu-Prolog process then the raw string form is usually more appropriate.

[1] Strictly speaking, this is the identity of the host running the ICM communications server with which the Qu-Prolog process is registered. This is usually the machine on which the Qu-Prolog process is running, but need not be. See Section 4.

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There are three predicates for accessing the message buffer. They are (in their most general forms)

```
ipc_recv(?Message, ?FromAddress, ?ReplyAddress, +Options)
ipc_peek(?Message, -Reference, ?FromAddress, ?ReplyAddress, +Options)
ipc_commit(+Reference)
```

`ipc_recv` reads the first message in the buffer and unifies the message and its address data structures with the corresponding supplied arguments. It fails if the unification with this first message fails. So, usually all the arguments of the call are unbound variables.

`ipc_peek` searches the message buffer (from the beginning) for a message that unifies with the supplied message and address arguments, returning `Reference` as a reference to the matching message in the buffer (really a pointer to the message buffer). On backtracking it will try to find another match.

`ipc_commit` is used to remove a message from the message buffer. Typically, `ipc_peek` and `ipc_commit` are used in combination to search for a particular message and then remove it.

For both `ipc_recv` and `ipc_peek`, if no (matching) message is found then the behaviour of the call is determined by the `timeout` flag in the options list. If the flag is set to `block` then the call is delayed until another message arrives (the default). If the flag is `poll` then the call fails immediately. Otherwise, if the flag is an integer n then the call will suspend for up to n seconds. If no message arrives in that time then the call fails.

The other possible option is `remember_names`. If this is set then a connection will be made between named variables in the message and corresponding named variables in the thread, which typically were variables of previous messages received using this option. If the option is not set then no connection is made between variables in the message and variables of the thread. This provides 'separation of variables'.

The encode option is not required because this information is part of the incoming message and is used to determine if decoding is required.

3.2 High-level inter-thread communication

The higher level layer provides application writers with a powerful yet simple interface to the basic inter-thread communications layer. Again, there are two parts to this layer: management of addresses, and communication.

In this layer full addresses take the form

```
ThreadName:ApplicationName@HostName.
```

As with email communication, the global name can be shortened for local communications. Just `ThreadName:ApplicationName` can be used for a communication to a thread running on the same machine, and just `ThreadName` can be used to send to another thread running within the same Qu-Prolog application. Thus, an

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`ApplicationName` is a thread name domain and a `HostName` is an application name domain.

The special addresses `self` and `creator` respectively refer to the thread itself, and the thread that forked it, providing there is such a thread. For a top level thread, creator denotes the thread.

These addresses are used in this layer for sending messages and for pattern matching against addresses in incoming messages.

The predicates

```
Message ->> Address
Message ->> Address reply_to ReplyAddress
```

are used to *send* messages. So, for example,

```
connect ->> main_thread:server_process
```

sends the `connect` symbol as a message to the thread with name `main_thread` in the Qu-Prolog application `server_process` on the local machine.

```
connect ->> main_thread:server_process reply_to creator
```

sends the same message but also sets its associated reply-to address to the creator of the message sender. Further examples of uses of communication using this layer are given later.

Each of the predicates

```
Message <<- Address
Message <<- Address reply_to ReplyAddress
```

reads the first message from the message buffer and unifies it with the supplied arguments. The call suspends if there are no messages in the buffer. It fails if the first message does not unify with the supplied arguments.

Each of the predicates

```
Message <<= Address
Message <<= Address reply_to ReplyAddress
```

searches the message buffer looking for a message that unifies with the supplied arguments. If one is found, that message is removed, otherwise the call suspends until another message arrives. It continues, checking each newly arrived message, until one does unify.

The most powerful form of message receive is the `message_choice` call which has the form

```
message_choice (
    MsgGuard1 -> CallConj1
    ;
    MsgGuard2 -> CallConj2
    .
    .
    MsgGuardn -> CallConjn)
```

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where each `MsgGuardi` has the form

```
MsgPtn <<- S reply_to R :: Test
```

in which the `reply_to R` and `:: Test` are optional. This will scan the message buffer of the thread testing each message against the sequence of alternative message guards in turn. When a message is found which matches the `MsgPtn <<- S reply_to R` of any one of the message guards, *and* the associated `Test` call succeeds, the message is removed from the buffer and the corresponding `CallConj` is executed. The `Test` call can be an arbitrary Prolog call that typically tests variable values generated by the unification of the message with the message pattern

```
MsgPtn << S reply_to R
```

As with the single message search operator `<<=`, the `message_choice` call will suspend if the end of the message buffer is reached and will be automatically resumed when a new message is added. However, in this case we can set a limit on the time for which the `message_choice` call and the thread that executes it should suspend. We do this by including

```
timeout(T) -> TimeOutCall
```

as a last alternative of the message choice call. This will limit to `T` seconds the time that the call suspends, after the search for an acceptable message has reached the end of the buffer. When the time limit is reached the `message_choice` call executes `TimeOutCall`.

In the current implementation of the higher-level message communication operators, the communication options of the lower level communications predicates they invoke are set to do encoding and to remember variable names. It is, however, straightforward to modify or extend the definitions if other behaviours are required. All the high level communications primitives are implemented as a library of Prolog programs that use the base level primitives.

3.3 Local inter-thread communication using the dynamic database

The only way that threads running in different Qu-Prolog applications can communicate is via messages. However, Qu-Prolog threads running *within* a single Qu-Prolog application can also communicate using the dynamic database. When a thread executes an `assert` or `record` this is added to the data area accessible by all the local threads. An asserted clause can later be accessed by another local thread using `clause` or `retract`. By executing these calls as arguments to a special `thread_wait` meta-call predicate, we can make the accessing call suspend (rather than fail) until a matching clause is asserted by another local thread. So threads within an application can synchronise either via explicit message passing or by blocking accesses to the shared dynamic memory. We shall use this second form of synchronisation for local threads in our Linda server example.

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4 Communications: Implementation

Our original implementation of communications was based on ideas from April and included a name server that kept track of symbolic names, and local caches of mappings between symbolic address and low-level (TCP/IP) addresses.

At the same time Frank McCabe was developing the *InterAgent Communications Model* (ICM). This model was developed from April and the newer versions of April use this model for communications.

Recently, we replaced our communications support with the ICM API. We did this for a number of reasons. Firstly, it allowed us to concentrate more on Qu-Prolog specific development rather than on communications development. Secondly, the ICM is more robust than our original implementation with respect to processes dying. Thirdly, the ICM has good support for such things as 'mobile computing' and lastly, it allows Qu-Prolog to communicate with other applications, such as April applications, that use the ICM API. We also found that it was very straightforward to add the ICM API to the Tk interpreter, thereby making it easy to write GUI's that interact with applications using message passing. It is then simple to produce a system that has multiple Qu-Prolog applications interacting with multiple GUI's.

The ICM can be divided into two parts: the ICM communication servers that route messages from one process that uses the ICM API to another such process; and the ICM API that provides functions for connecting to and disconnecting from an ICM communication server and for sending and receiving messages.

In order to use the ICM for communication, at least one ICM communication server needs to be running on the network. Typically, for a wide area network there will be one communication server per machine, but for a local area network there might be a single ICM communication server running on a designated machine. However, for simplicity of presentation, in the rest of the paper we shall assume that there is a communication server running on each machine on which the Qu-Prolog application running.

An application that wants to use the ICM registers its name with one of the ICM communication servers, typically the local communication server. The ICM (if there is one) then takes responsibility for routing messages to and from this process.

ICM addresses are similar to the Qu-Prolog addresses described earlier. The basic ICM address consists of a *home*, a *name* and a *target*. The *home* is the name of a machine running an ICM communication server, the *name* is the name of a process registered with this communication server, and the *target* is a field that is not used directly by the ICM, but is intended for use by the application. For Qu-Prolog the target is used as the thread name (or ID).

When a named Qu-Prolog process is launched, the process registers its name with the ICM communication server running on the same host (the default). This opens two TCP connections, one for outgoing messages, one for incoming messages. It then forks a POSIX thread for processing the incoming messages from the communication server and begins execution of the initial Qu-Prolog thread. The incoming message handling thread consists of a loop that waits for a message from the communication server, decodes the message, and adds the message to the message buffer of the local thread identified by the target field of the address.

The way outgoing message are handled depends on the recipient's address. If the recipient is a thread with the same Qu-Prolog process then the message is simply copied to the recipient's message buffer. Otherwise, the message is dispatched using functions from the ICM API to the local communication server for routing to the target thread of some other Qu-Prolog process. If the other Qu-Prolog process is running on the same host, only the local ICM communication server is involved. It looks up the name in its list of registered processes, and sends the message via the TCP connection that was opened when the process registered. If the Qu-Prolog process is on another host, the local communication server dispatches the message to the communication server running on that host, which is identified in the full thread address. To do this, it may open a temporary TCP connection. The target communication server then forwards it to the identified Qu-Prolog process, which, in turn, puts it into the thread's message buffer. All this middleware is invisible to the Qu-Prolog application programmer.

The ICM system has considerable functionality for robust inter-host communication. For example, if the target Qu-Prolog process is a registered process but is temporarily down, its communication server will hold any messages for any of its threads until the process resumes, and re-connects with the communication server. It addition, for hosts that may be temporarily disconnected from the network, such as a laptop computer, we can designate a proxy communication server that is on a host permanently on the network. All messages for the communication server on the laptop will then be automatically re-routed to the proxy server when the laptop is disconnected. On re-connection, they will be automatically downloaded to the laptop communication server, for forwarding to its local processes and their threads. Again, this is invisible to the Qu-Prolog application programmer.

5 The Linda model

In this section we illustrate some of the multi-threading and high-level communication features of Qu-Prolog by presenting an implementation of the Linda model for inter-process communication (Carriero and Gelernter, 1989). Note, however, that Qu-Prolog's primary form of communication is via message passing, not through the use of the Linda model or other forms of communication using blackboards.

In the Linda model processes communicate by adding and removing data tuples to and from a shared tuple data space. They can suspend, waiting for a tuple that matches a certain pattern.

Each communication process can execute the following operations on the tuple space.

- `out(`*Tuple*`)` – Add *Tuple* to the tuple space.
- `in(`*Tuple*`)` – Remove *Tuple* from the tuple space (block until match found).
- `rd(`*Tuple*`)` – Lookup *Tuple* in the tuple space (block until match found).
- `inp(`*Tuple*`)` – Remove *Tuple* from the tuple space (fail if match not found).
- `rdp(`*Tuple*`)` – Lookup *Tuple* in the tuple space (fail if match not found).

For simplicity, we have chosen not to deal with the Linda `eval` operation. This

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```
main(_) :-
    thread_set_symbol(main_linda_thread),
    linda_loop.

linda_loop :-
    repeat,
    connect <<= FromAddr,
    thread_fork_anonymous(_, linda_thread(FromAddr)),
    fail.

linda_thread(A) :-
    connected ->> A, thread_loop(A).

thread_loop(A) :-
    repeat,
    message_choice (           % only from its client, A.
      out(T) <<- A -> assert(T), inserted ->> A
      ;
      in(T) <<- A -> thread_wait(retract(T)), ok(T) ->> A
      ;
      rd(T) <<- A -> thread_wait(clause(T, _)), ok(T) ->> A
      ;
      inp(T) <<- A -> (retract(T) -> ok(T) ->> A ; fail ->> A)
      ;
      rdp(T) <<- A -> (clause(T, _) -> ok(T) ->> A ; fail ->> A)
    ),
    fail.
```

Fig. 1. The Linda server.

could be implemented using, for example, a variant of distributed querying given later.

Figure 1 presents an implementation of a Linda tuple server that uses the dynamic database of a Qu-Prolog process, called `linda_server` when launched, to store the tuple space. Each tuple of the tuple space becomes a fact in the dynamic database which is shared across all threads within the `linda_server` process. Each thread can therefore access, assert and retract any of these facts. The initial thread of this application, the one started when the application is launched, is called `main_linda_thread`. Each process that wants to access the tuple space must first register with the `linda_server` by sending a `connect` message to `main_linda_thread:linda_server@hostname`.

The server process is launched using the `-A linda_server` switch which names the process. On startup, the initial server thread names itself and then enters a loop waiting for `connect` messages from a client process. It ignores all other messages.

On receipt of a `connect` message the process forks a thread to deal with the client. The created thread sends a `connected` acknowledgement to the client, which also serves to identify the thread to the client (as the sender of the acknowledgement), and then enters a loop to process client requests. The thread will suspend waiting for the client's requests. It processes them by appropriate operations on the dynamic

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```
remember_linda_thread_address(A) :-
    my_id(ID), assert(linda_th_addr(ID,A)).
get_linda_thread_address(A) :-
    my_id(ID), linda_th_addr(ID,A).

linda_connect :-
    connect >> main_linda_thread : linda_server @ linda_machine,
    connected <<= A,
    remember_linda_thread_address(A).
linda_disconnect :-
    thread_tid(TID),
    retract(linda_th_addr(TID,A)),
    disconnect ->> A.

linda_out(T) :-
    get_linda_address(A), out(T) ->> A, inserted <<= A.
linda_in(T) :-
    get_linda_address(A), in(T) ->> A, ok(T) <<= A.
linda_rd(T) :-
    get_linda_address(A), rd(T) ->> A, ok(T) <<= A.
linda_inp(T) :-
    get_linda_address(A), inp(T) ->> A, M <<= A, M = ok(T).
linda_rdp(T) :-
    get_linda_address(A), rdp(T) ->> A, M <<= A, M = ok(T).
```

Fig. 2. Linda client support.

database. The multi-threading of Qu-Prolog allows a very simple and elegant implementation of the Linda model. The client processes of the tuple space manager can be distributed over the Internet.

The predicate `thread_wait/1` causes the thread to block until the supplied tuple term `T` gets asserted. Note that by using one thread per client, only those threads that should block do so and the server can continue to process commands from (non-blocked) clients.

The code in Figure 2 provides a library of predicates for use by a Linda client implemented in Qu-Prolog. For this example we assume `linda_machine` is the machine on which a Linda server is running.

Each Linda client communicates with a Linda thread created specifically to handle this client. Each client therefore needs to keep track of the address of its Linda thread. We have chosen to do this by asserting the address together with the client thread identifier. The client thread identifier is included to avoid confusion when several Linda clients are running in one Qu-Prolog process and therefore sharing the dynamic database.

Note, in particular, the use of symbolic names to identify the destination in the `connect` message send, and the use by the client of the the identity of the sender of the `connected` reply it receives as the identity of its server thread.

The blocking behaviour of the operations is achieved on the client's side by message blocking and on the server's side by the use of `thread_wait/1`. The clients

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need not be Qu-Prolog threads. Using the ICM API they could, for example, be C or April processes using Qu-Prolog as the Linda tuple space handler.

6 Distributed querying

We have seen that it is straightforward to have messages sent between Qu-Prolog threads running in Qu-Prolog applications anywhere on the internet. Let us consider an application in which we have several Qu-Prologs running, one per host, each of which has its own 'deductive database' of Prolog rules. Imagine a query interface that allows a user to enter a query on any host to any one of these query servers, which may be on another host. Imagine the interface allows the querier to request that either *all* the answers be returned, in one reply, or that the answers should be returned *one at a time*, on demand.

To handle the query requests, each remote query can have a main thread that accepts either an `all_of(C)` message – a request to the server to produce all solutions of the query `C` - or a `stream_of(C)` message – a request to produce the answers one at a time. It handles the former by using findall to construct the reply. It handles the latter by forking a temporary thread to interact with the user, who can request the answers one at a time, or terminate the query thread at any stage. Forking a temporary thread allows the main query thread to deal with other queries, from the same or other users of the distributed information system.

The top level of the query server is similar to the Linda server and is presented in Figure 3. When launched with a `-A query_server` switch, the query server's main thread starts executing and names itself `query_thread` . A client can then interact with the server by sending a query to `query_thread:query_server@machine`.

Note that an `all_of` message is handled by executing a `findall` within the main query thread. However, the `stream_of` message causes a new thread to be started, executing the call `ans_gen(Call,R)` where `Call` is the query and `R` is the thread to which answers will be sent – the client. Notice that this time the identity of the forked query thread is sent to the client in a `query_thread_is` message from the main thread. Alternatively, as in the Linda program, we could have made the temporary query thread identify itself to the client with an initial message. The client will now interact with this temporary thread. Notice that the server identifies the client as the `reply_to` of the received query, rather than the `sender` of the query. This allows queries to be forwarded to a query server on behalf of another thread. Such forwarding might be used by broker Qu-Prolog applications acting as intermediaries in the distributed information system.

The `ans_gen` program finds the first solution instance of `Call`, sends it to the client `R`, and then waits for a `next` or `finish` message to arrive from `R` to see if it should find another solution or not. If, when it has received a `next` message, there are no more solutions, it signals this by replying with the message `fail`. A client can also send a `finish` message, to prematurely terminate the search for solutions.

Figure 4 presents an interface to a client program interface to any of the query servers via two meta-call predicates `?` and `??`. A call of the form `C?QS` sends an

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```
main(_) :-
    thread_set_symbol(query_thread),
    query_loop.

query_loop :-
    repeat,
    message_choice  (
      all_of(Call) <<- _ reply_to R -> findall(Call,Call,L),
                                       answer_list(L) ->> R
      ;
      stream_of(Call) <<- _ reply_to R ->
                              thread_fork_anonymous(I,ans_gen(Call,R)),
                              query_thread_is(I) ->> R
    ),
    fail.

ans_gen(Call,R):-
   call(Call),
   answer_instance(Call) ->> R, % send answer to client R
   message_choice (
      next <<- R -> fail   % fail back to get next answer
      ;
      finish <<- R -> thread_exit). % terminate on finish
ans_gen(Call,R) :-
   fail ->> R,    % when no more answers send fail to client
   thread_exit.  % and terminate
```

Fig. 3. A query server.

`all_of(C)` message to the query server `QS`, waits for the list of solutions from the server, and then uses `member` to locally backtrack over the solutions as required.

A call of the form `C??QS` sends a `stream_of(C)` message to `QS`, waits for the thread ID and the first answer, and then uses `deal_with_ans` to process the reply and to manage any subsequent backtracking.

The above meta calls can be used in user queries and in clauses in the databases of each query server. So a user query to one server can result in a chain of remote queries being sent over the network of query servers. The initial query server thus serves as an interface to the entire network.

There is a slight problem with the above implementation of remote querying. If a query or clause executes a cut (`!`) after a `C??QS` call, but before all the solutions have been requested and returned, the temporary thread created by `QS` will not be exited, and will be left as an orphan. A slight elaboration of the query server program and the `??` program will ensure that such orphan threads are all sent a `finish` message, providing the distributed query evaluation is started with a top level user query to one of the servers. We will not give the code, but we will explain the idea.

The user interface program, and each query server thread (even a temporary thread), remembers the identities of all the remote query threads started as a result of a `??` call it executes. A thread `T` forgets the identity of one of these remote query threads `QTh` if `QTh` indicates its termination by sending `T` a `fail` message.

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```
Call?Q_S:-
  all_of(Call) ->> Q_S,
  answer_list(L) <<= Q_S,
  member(Call,L).

Call??Q_S :-
  stream_of(Call) ->> Q_S,  % send stream_of query to Q_S
  query_thread_is(QTh) <<= Q_S, % wait for id of new thread
  Ans <<= QTh,  % wait for first answer from this thread
  deal_with_ans(Ans,Call,QTh).

deal_with_ans(fail,_,QTh) :- % answer is fail message
   !, fail.                  % no (more) answers
deal_with_ans(answer_instance(C),C,_).
deal_with_ans(answer_instance(_),C,QTh):-
  next ->> QTh, % request next ans for remote C call
  Ans <<= QTh,
  deal_with_ans(Ans,C,QTh).
```

Fig. 4. Query server client support.

The remembering and forgetting can be done by having the `??` program assert a `remote_thread(T,QTh)` fact when it gets the `query_thread_is(QTh)` message, and having `deal_with_ans` retract the fact on receipt of the `fail` message from `QTh`, indicating its normal termination.

We now modify the `query_loop` program so that it executes a call to:

```
kill_orphans :-
   my_id(ID),
   forall(retract(remote_thread(ID, QTh)),finish >> QTh).
```

after it has found and returned all the solutions to an `all_of` query request. This will cause all remote query threads started during its execution to be terminated. In addition, we modify the program for `ans_gen` so that it calls `kill_orphans` just before it executes a `thread_exit`, both on normal termination (after it has returned all its answers) and on receipt of a `finish` message (premature termination). The latter, which is a propagation of `finish` messages, implements distributed garbage collection of query threads started when a `finish` is sent either by the user interface program, or when any query thread has found all the solutions to its query.

A `finish` will be sent by the user interface if the user indicated one at a time answers causing the query to be dispatched as a `stream_of` request, *and* the user indicates they want no more answers before all the answers have been returned (equivalent to a top level !). The user interface initiates distributed garbage collection of what would be orphan threads by sending a `finish` message to the temporary query thread handling its `stream_of` request. On receipt of the `finish`, this thread will, in turn, execute `kill_orphans` and so send `finish` messages to any remote threads it started, that have not yet terminated. They, in turn, will execute `kill_orphans`, effectively forwarding the `finish` message to their orphan

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threads. Eventually, all orphaned query threads started by the user query, directly or indirectly, will be terminated.

The other case to consider is when all the answers to the user query have been returned to the user interface program. Whether or not the user query was dispatched as an `all_of` or a `stream_of` remote query, garbage collection of the orphan threads will be started by the query thread that handled the query by it calling `kill_orphans` when all the answers have been returned to the user interface.

7 Comparisons

In this section we briefly compare communication in Qu-Prolog with that of SICStus-MT, BinProlog, CIAO, Erlang, Mozart-Oz and April.

For messages between threads within the same Prolog process, SICStus-MT uses much the same approach as Qu-Prolog – both have a single message buffer, which they call a port, both are able to scan the buffer looking for message patterns, and both suspend if no (matching) messages are found. The main differences are that SICStus-MT does not use message buffers for communication between threads in *different* SICStus-MT processes, and symbolic names are not used for threads. To communicate between different Prolog processes TCP communication primitives must be used.

The main method of high-level communication used by BinProlog is through the use of Linda tuple spaces. Our implementation of the Linda model demonstrates that it is easy to emulate the BinProlog style in Qu-Prolog. On the other hand, it would also be easy to emulate the Qu-Prolog style of communication using BinProlog's tuple space. The symbolic addresses could be included as extra arguments to tuples stored in the tuple space and this information could be used by threads looking for messages meant for them.

If efficiency of communication is measured by the number of communications needed to send a message from source to destination then a comparison can be made between the two systems. Assuming, in the BinProlog system, one tuple space is used then three communications are required: one to put the message in the tuple space; one to ask the tuple space for a message; and one for the tuple space to send the message. In Qu-Prolog the number required depends on the number of ICM communication servers 'between' the sender and receiver. If the sender, receiver are in Qu-Prolog process registed with the same ICM communciation server then two communications are required, if they are registered with different commuication servers then three communications are required. Note that when messages are sent between threads in the same Qu-Prolog process then no communications are required – term copying from the heap of the sender to the buffer of the receiver is used.

In the case of Qu-Prolog the other overheads of communication relate to the message handling thread – ICM message decoding and copying to message buffers. In BinProlog the main extra overheads seem to be related to the management of the tuple space.

The CIAO system (Carro and Hermenegildo, 1999) uses of the dynamic Prolog database for communicating between threads in the same process. Whereas Qu-

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Prolog uses `assert` and `retract` to update the database and `thread_wait` to suspend calls to the database, the CIAO system uses extensions of the normal dynamic database access/update predicates that automatically suspend if a thread tries to access a clause for a dynamic predicate declared as `concurrent`. The concurrent predicates are the ones that are used for inter-thread communication. This automatic suspension also applies to normal calls to a concurrent predicate, even on backtracking. Thus, a thread will suspend when a call to a concurrent predicate has 'seen' all the clauses for the predicate that have so far been asserted by the other threads. This allows the dynamic database to be used to communicate a stream of data between threads, as an incrementally asserted set of facts, with automatic suspension of consuming threads that run ahead of the producers. In Qu-Prolog we would normally achieve this by using message communication between the consumers and a single intermediary thread that multicasts each data item to all the consumers.

The CIAO inter-thread communication can be enhanced by the use of attributed variables (Hemenegildo *et al*., 1995) to allow communication of variable bindings between threads via the dynamic database. Attributes are terms that can be associated with unbound variables. Whenever a variable with an attached attribute is bound, a user defined program is automatically invoked that is passed the variables current attribute values and the value to which it is bound. The attribute value(s) can be used to uniquely identify the variable. The invoked user defined program can then assert the attribute/value pair in the dynamic database, thereby making the binding available to other threads. (Hemenegildo *et al*., 1995) shows how this mechanism can be used to implement concurrent processes apparently communicating via incrementally generated bindings for shared variables, when the only communication is via the dynamic database.

We have not previously mentioned this, but variables in Qu-Prolog can have delayed goals associated with them that are woken when the variable becomes instantiated (even to another variable). Following (Hemenegildo *et al*., 1995), we believe we might be able to use this mechanism and the `remember_names` feature of Qu-Prolog to also implement 'shared variable' communication between Qu-Prolog local threads.

Erlang is essentially a concurrent committed choice logic programming language with a functional syntax. However, instead of communicating between the different processes implicitly, via incrementally generated bindings of shared variables, explicit communication via message send and receive operations are used. As with Qu-Prolog, each Erlang process has a single message buffer, and messages are read from the buffer using a disjunction of guarded commands, very like the Qu-Prolog `message_choice` operator. In fact, Qu-Prolog's `message_choice` operator is modelled on the disjunctive message receive of Erlang. Erlang processes can only communicate via messages, there is no shared database. In addition the language has only pattern matching, not unification.

Mozart-Oz (Haridi *et al*., 1998) is essentially a concurrent constraint programming language extended to support Prolog style query evaluation, objects, and communication over networks. The primary form of communication between Mozart processes,

which must be explicitly launched, is via shared data stores that can hold any Mozart value, including unbound variables. When a value `V` is posted to such a store, which a process must do explicitly by calling a special system method with `V` as argument, the store returns a ticket `T` uniquely identifying `V` in the local store. This is an ASCII string that is an internet wide unique identity for `V`. (It includes the identity of the host which holds the store as well as a store unique identity for `V`.) Any other Mozart process, whether local or remote, can retrieve the value by calling another system method with the ticket `T` as argument. In addition, if the posted value is an unbound variable, any number of other processes can invoke another system method to set a watch on the variable, again identifying the variable by its ticket. Then, when the variable is bound, by the process that posted it to the store, or any other process that has gained normal access to it using its ticket, all the watch processes will be automatically sent its value. This gives a multi-cast mechanism via shared variables placed in stores.

April is not a logic programming language, it is a higher-order (in the functional programming sense) distributed symbolic language. However, it is similar to both Erlang and Qu-Prolog in that each April process has a single message buffer from which messages can be extracted using a disjunction of guarded message receives containing message patterns. April and Qu-Prolog both use the ICM message transport system. April messages must be completed ground terms but higher order values, such as function and procedure closures, as well as objects (similar to Mozart objects), can be sent in messages. Both Erlang and April influenced the design of the inter-thread communication of Qu-Prolog.

8 Conclusion

In this paper we presented the multi-threading and message communication capabilities of Qu-Prolog and outlined the implementation of message processing. The high-level methods for sending and receiving messages were discussed and examples of the implementations of the Linda model and a distributed query server system were presented.

We have also implemented a concurrent OO extension of Qu-Prolog in which objects are active and are each executing as separate threads. Each active object acts rather like a query server, responding to calls on its clauses which are sent as messages from other active objects. These clauses are the methods of the object. They are given in class definitions that can use multiple inheritance to define the method clauses of a given class. Predicate definitions within each class hierarchy are disjoint, even if they use overlapping predicate names. This is implemented using predicate renaming, invisible to the programmer. State for each active object can be represented as property values stored in the record data base, or as clauses for special dynamic predicates, declared as state predicates of the object's class. Asserted clauses for such dynamic predicates always include the identity of the object (thread) that asserted them, so state clauses for the different objects of the same class, even when running in the same Qu-Prolog, are distinguishable. This implicit indexing of the dynamic clause of an object by its identity is invisible to the programmer.

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Another key feature is a special system predicate, `my_state/1`, that allows all the dynamic clauses and property values of an executing object `O`, capturing its current state, to be reified as a list. This can then be sent in a message to an object server, that can use it to launch an object with the same state on another machine. This can be an object of the same class as `O` providing that the new machine has access to the class definition for `O`, which could even be fetched from a code server. This gives us object cloning, and allows us to program applications with mobile agents implemented as active deductive objects that transport themselves in this way.

Our thesis is that the combination of multiple threads and high-level communication using symbolic addresses supported by Qu-Prolog provides application writers with simple and powerful techniques for implementing a wide range of intelligent distributed systems, possibly opening up new application areas for logic programming.

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