AURA: A Programming Language for Authorization and Audit

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Disciplines
Computer Sciences

Comments

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This paper presents AURA, a programming language for access control that treats ordinary programming constructs (e.g., integers and recursive functions) and authorization logic constructs (e.g., principals and access control policies) in a uniform way. AURA is based on polymorphic DCC and uses dependent types to permit assertions that refer directly to AURA values while keeping computation out of the assertion level to ensure tractability. The main technical results of this paper include fully mechanically verified proofs of the decidability and soundness for AURA’s type system, and a prototype typechecker and interpreter.

Categories and Subject Descriptors D.3.1 [Programming Languages]: Formal Definitions and Theory; D.4.6 [Operating Systems]: Security and Protection – Access controls; F.4.1 [Mathematical Logic and Formal Languages]: Mathematical Logic – Lambda calculus and related systems

General Terms Design, Language, Security

1. Introduction
There can be no universal definition of security. Every piece of confidential data and every sensitive resource may have specialized access control requirements. At the same time, almost every modern computer system stores some private information or provides a service intended only for certain clients. To ensure that only allowed principals—human users or other computer systems—can reach the protected resources, these access control requirements must be carefully defined and enforced. An authorization policy specifies whether a request by a principal to access a resource should be granted, and a reference monitor mediates all access to the resource, ensuring that the handling of requests complies with the authorization policy.

One significant challenge in building secure systems that enforce access control is that, as the number of resources and principals grows, specifying the authorization policy becomes more difficult. The situation is further complicated in decentralized or distributed settings, where resources may have different owners and the principals may have non-trivial trust relationships. Once the policies become sufficiently complex, understanding which principals may access which resources is itself a daunting problem. Consequently, reference monitors that enforce such policies also become complex, which is not a desired situation when (as in a conventional access control scheme) the reference monitor is part of the trusted computing base.

To help mitigate this complexity, researchers have proposed authorization logics that facilitate reasoning about principals, requests, and policy assertions [5, 14, 20, 1, 2]. Several of these logics have been concerned with specifying access control policies in distributed settings [45, 6, 11, 21, 20]. Part of the appeal of authorization logics is that proofs of propositions in the logic can act as capabilities that provide the reference monitor with evidence that a given request should be granted. As proposed by Appel and Felten [6], proof-carrying authorization places the burden of validating the authorization decision on the principal requesting access. Moreover, the explicit proofs can be logged for future auditing, which can help track down bugs in the authorization policy [40].

Authorization logics are rich and concise languages for specifying access control policies, abstracting away low-level details like authentication and cryptography. Unfortunately, these logics are rather removed from the languages used to write software that must respect the access control policies; tools like typecheckers that help the programmer write correct programs will not necessarily help the programmer make correct use of an authorization logic. This is especially problematic in the case of a reference monitor, which has the task of enforcing policies written in an authorization logic and must be considered part of the trusted computing base.

This paper presents the design of AURA, a domain-specific programming language that incorporates a constructive authorization logic based on DCC [4, 2] as part of its type system. Rather than mediating between programs and policy statements written in two distinct languages, AURA uses dependent types to permit policy statements that refer directly to AURA values (like integers or datatype constructors). For example, a function playFor, which plays a song s on behalf of a principal p, might have the following type, which requires a proof that principal p is permitted to play s:

\[
(s:Song) \rightarrow (p:pron) \rightarrow pf (self says MayPlay p s) \rightarrow Unit.
\]

As indicated by this type, AURA programs may construct and manipulate authorization proofs just as they might other program values, and the AURA programming model provides notions of principals (p), authority (self), and policy assertions (MayPlay) in addition to standard functional language features like higher-order functions, polymorphism, and recursive algebraic datatypes. In addition, security-relevant implementation details—like the creation of audit trails or the cryptographic interpretation of certain logical statements—can be handled automatically with little to no programmer intervention.

Because policy assertions are part of AURA’s type system, deciding whether to grant access amounts to typechecking a proof ob-
ject. This can be performed by AURA’s runtime, removing individual reference monitors from the trusted computing base. Moreover, any program written in AURA benefits from the immediate availability of the authorization logic; many misbehaving programs can now be ruled out at compile time. Finally, DCC, on which AURA is based, has been shown to be useful in representing other forms of language-based security, such as the type-based enforcement of information-flow properties as found in Jif [31] or FlowCaml [35]; AURA thus represents a promising avenue for further work in connecting these concepts.

The main contributions of this paper are as follows:

- We present the design of core AURA, a language with support for first-class, dependent authorization policies.
- We give a fully machine-checked proof of type soundness for the core language.
- We also give a fully machine-checked proof of decidability of typechecking for AURA.
- We describe a prototype implementation of a typechecker and interpreter and give sample programs.

Typical dependently typed languages (see Section 6) use types to encode precise program specifications. Our goal is different: AURA uses dependent types to naturally connect data with proofs for run-time policy enforcement. Compared with a conventional dependently typed language, AURA adds some features—assertion types, digitally signed objects as proofs, the ability to index the family of assertion types, digitally signed objects as proofs, the ability to index the family of assertion types, digitally signed objects as proofs, and the assert

MayPlay a freebird

AURA as an authorization logic

We first turn our attention to AURA’s assertions, which are based on the polymorphic core calculus of dependency (DCC) [4] and in particular on DCC’s interpretation as an authorization logic [2]. In both DCC and AURA, an indexed monad says associates propositions with principals. The statement $a$ says $P$ holds when a proof for $P$ is known, when $a$ says $P$ logically follows from monad operations that we will describe shortly, or when the principal $a$ directly affirms $P$. It is critical to note, however, that $a$ says $P$ does not imply $P$. We augment DCC with dependent types, which allow principals to express propositions about data, and with the constructs say and sign, which allow for the aforementioned direct affirmations.

Principals in AURA, written $a, b, c$, etc. and having type prin, represent distinct components of a software system. They may correspond to human users or system components such as an operating system kernel, a particular server, and so on. Formally, principals are treated as special values in AURA; they are characterized by their ability to index the family of says monads.

As ‘a says’ is a monad [42], we can construct a term of type $a$ says $P$ from a proof of $P$ using the operation return $a, P$. A proof encapsulated in a says monad cannot be used directly; rather, the monad’s bind operation, written $(\text{return } p (\lambda x: P. q))$ allows $x$ to stand in for the proof encapsulated by $p$ and appear in the expression $q$.

For example, consider the principals $a$ and $b$, the song freebird, and the assertion MayPlay introduced earlier. The statements

\[
\text{ok : } a \text{ says } (\text{MayPlay } a \text{ freebird})
\]

\[
\text{delegate : } b \text{ says } (p: \text{prin}) \rightarrow (s: \text{Song}) \rightarrow \\
(a \text{ says } (\text{MayPlay } s)) \rightarrow \\
(\text{MayPlay } s))
\]

assert that $a$ gives herself permission to play freebird and $b$ delegates to $a$ the authority to make any variety of MayPlay statement on his behalf. These two terms may be used to create a proof of $b$ says (MayPlay a freebird) as follows:

\[
\text{bind delegate } (\lambda d: (p: \text{prin}) \rightarrow (s: \text{Song}) \rightarrow \\
(a \text{ says } (\text{MayPlay } s)) \rightarrow \\
(\text{MayPlay } s)) \rightarrow \\
(\text{MayPlay } p s)) \\
\text{return } b (d \text{ a freebird ok})
\]

Such a proof might have direct utility—it could be passed to the playFor function if self is $b$—or it might become part of a larger chain of reasoning.

In addition to uses of return, AURA allows for the introduction of proofs of $a$ says $P$ without corresponding proofs of $P$ by providing a pair of constructs, say and sign, that represent a principal’s active affirmation of a proposition. The value sign($a, P$) has type $a$ says $P$; intuitively we may think of it as a digital signature using

\footnote{\text{URA} is most similar to the cut-down variant of DCC called CDD [3]. Full DCC, as opposed to AURA and CDD, features a relaxed typing rule for bind and admits type coercions unsuitable for access control.}
a’s private key on proposition \( P \). Such a value is intended to have a
stable meaning as it is passed throughout a distributed system.

Only the principal \( a \)—or, equivalently, programs with access to
a’s private key—should be able to create a term of the form
\( \text{sign}(a, P) \). We thus prohibit such terms from appearing in source
programs and introduce the related term \( P \), which represents an
effectful computation that uses the runtime’s current authority—
that is, its private key—to sign proposition \( P \). When executed, say \( P \)
generates a fresh value \( \text{sign}(\text{self}, P) \), where \( \text{self} \) is a distinguished
principal representing the current runtime authority.

It is worth noting that a principal can assert any proposition, even \( \text{False} \). Because assertions are confined to the monad—thanks
to the non-interference property of DCC—such an assertion can
do little harm apart from making that particular principal’s own
assertions inconsistent. In practice, it is useful to restrict the kinds
of assertions that various principals can make, but, \emph{a priori}, AURA
requires no such constraints.

The concept of a program’s runtime authority already has a natural
analog in the operating system world—a UNIX process, for example,
has an associated user ID that often, but not always, cor-
responds to the user who started the process. In a more distributed
setting, running under the authority of \( a \) can indeed be represented
by possession of \( a \)’s private key. In such a setting objects of the
form \( \text{sign}(a, P) \) can be represented by actual digital signatures, and
principal identifiers—which, in AURA, are first class values of type
\( \text{prin} \)—can be thought of as public keys.

The restriction of authority to a single principal is only for sim-
licity’s sake: although syntax would need to be changed, nothing
in our development would conflict with a more complex notion of
authority. AURA currently provides no means of transferring au-
thority, in effect disallowing programs from directly manipulating
private keys; this prevents AURA programs from creating new prin-
cipals (i.e., key pairs) at runtime but also trivially disallows the ac-
cidental disclosure of private keys. Were AURA to be extended with
support for dynamically generated principals, the addition of infor-
mation flow tracking could assist in ensuring that private keys stay
sufficiently private.

2.2 Authorization proofs and dependent types

By defining assertions as types and proofs as terms we are taking
advantage of the well-known Curry-Howard Isomorphism [19, 24]
between logic and programming languages. One benefit to this ap-
proach is that AURA programs use the same constructs to manip-
ulate both data and proofs. More critically it provides—via depen-
dent typing, which allows types to mention terms—an elegant way
for access control statements to mention data. For instance, in the
example given earlier, \emph{freebird} is data that appears at the assertion
(i.e. type) level. The type signature for the function \emph{playFor} in the
introduction is another example of such dependency.

URA incorporates dependent types directly—in contrast to, for
example, using GADTs [34] or static equality proofs [37] to simu-
late the required dependencies. Such an approach allows straightforward
use of data at the type level and avoids replication of the
same constructs in both static and dynamic form, but unconstrained
use of dependent types can quickly lead to an undecidable typing
judgment. Moreover, care must be taken to separate effectful com-
putations from pure proof objects.

Much like CIC [18], AURA has separate universes Type and
Prop, with the constants Type and Prop themselves being clas-
sified by \emph{Kind}. The previously mentioned assertion \emph{MayPlay}, for
instance, would be given the assertion type \( \text{prin} \rightarrow \text{Song} \rightarrow \text{Prop} \).
Unlike CIC, both types of kind Type and propositions of kind Prop
describe data that may be available at runtime. Propositions, how-
ever, are required to be completely computation-free: propositions
never reduce and AURA does not employ type-level reduction dur-
ing typechecking, meaning that only dependencies on values (i.e.,
well-formed normal forms) for which equality comparison is avail-
able can be used in non-trivial ways. This turns out to be enough to
ensure the decidability of AURA’s type system.

URA offers a type-refining equality test on \emph{atomic} values—
for instance, principals and booleans—as well as a dynamic cast
between objects of equivalent types, which prove necessary for
certain equalities that arise only at runtime. For example, when
typechecking if \( \text{self} = \text{a} \) then \( \text{e1} \) else \( \text{e2} \), the fact that \( \text{self} = \text{a} \) is
automatically made available while typechecking \( \text{e2} \) (due to the fact
that \( \text{prin} \) is an atomic type), and hence proofs of type self says \( P \)
can be cast to type \( \text{a} \) says \( P \) and vice-versa.

The distinction between Type and Prop is also illustrated by the
previously introduced say and sign. On the one hand, say \( P \)
certainly belongs in Type’s universe. We intend it to be reduced by our
operational semantics—and this reduction is an effectful (if
trivial) computation dependent on a program’s runtime authority.
On the other hand, \( \text{sign}(a, P) \) should be of type \( a \) says \( P \), which,
like \( P \), is of kind Prop. To solve this dilemma we introduce the
modality \( \text{pf} : \text{Prop} \rightarrow \text{Type} \), allowing us to give say \( P \) the type pf
\((\text{self} \text{ says } P) \) of kind Type. The \( \text{pf} \) modality comes equipped with
its own bind and return operations, allowing proofs to be manip-
ulated by computations while keeping the worlds of computations
and assertions separate.

URA’s dependent types also address something that might
have seemed odd about our cryptographic interpretation of the says
monad, namely that one most often thinks of digitally signing \emph{data},
whereas \( \text{sign}(a, P) \) signs only an assertion. With dependent types,
however, this issue evaporates, as an assertion can refer to whatever
data might be endorsed. We find this design compelling, because a
digital signature on raw data does not necessarily have a sensible
meaning; signing only propositions ensures that the signed data is
attributed with some semantics, just as, for example, a physical
signature on a contract will indicate whether the signer is party to
the contract or merely a witness.

Our previous work [40] addressed only the Prop fragment of
URA; it did not consider the Type level constructs necessary for
programming. This paper presents a complete programming model
that includes recursive datatypes, constructs such as the \( \text{pf} \) modality
and say operator, and dynamic type refinement in if statements,
which are absent from our previous work. The new additions to the
language (particularly recursive datatypes) significantly complicate
the metatheory.

2.3 Auditing in AURA

Passing proofs at runtime is also useful for after the fact auditing
of AURA programs. The full details are given elsewhere [40] but
we note that, when full proofs are logged for every resource ac-
cess, it becomes possible to determine how access was granted at a
very fine granularity. This is of great importance when the intent of
some institutional policy is not properly reflected in the actual rules
enforced by a software system—for example, an auditor can examine
the proof that allowed an unwanted access to take place and
determine whether and where authority was improperly delegated.

These guarantees can be made as long as the interface to the
resources of interest is sufficiently rich: we can simply decree that
each interface function—that is, a function that wraps a lower level
operating system call—must write its arguments to the log. There
are no constraints on what the rest of the reference monitor may do
other than that it must respect this interface; it is not possible to in-
advertently add a path through the program that causes insufficient
information to be logged. This is in keeping with AURA’s general
philosophy of resilience toward programmer mistakes.

Returning to \emph{playFor}, let us assume that there exists a native
function \emph{rawPlayFor} : \emph{Song} \rightarrow \emph{Unit} that is not security-aware and
hence is not available to the programmer. We define the interface function \texttt{playFor} as simply

\[
\lambda x: \text{Song}. \quad \lambda \text{proof}: \text{pf} \quad (\text{self says} \quad \text{MayPlay} \quad \text{p s}) \quad \text{rawPlayFor} \quad \text{s}.
\]

Because \texttt{playFor} is an interface function—i.e., because it has access to \texttt{rawPlayFor}—its arguments will automatically be logged, and because the access control policy is entirely encoded in \texttt{playFor}’s signature, the log will automatically contain everything an auditor needs to determine precisely how any song was authorized to be played.

3. The AURA Core Language

This section presents the main technical contributions of this paper, namely a formal description of the AURA core language, its type system, operational semantics, and the corresponding proofs of type soundness and decidability of typechecking. Due to space constraints, we present only the key components of the type system. Omitted details can be found in the companion tech report [25] and the Coq implementation.

We adopt the design philosophy of elaboration-style semantics (as used, for example, by Lee et al. [29]): the AURA intermediate language is intended to make typechecking as explicit as possible. Following this principle, our design eschews complex pattern matches, equality tests over complex values, and implicit casts. Our goal was to cleanly divide the compiler into two parts: an elaboration phase that uses inference, possibly with heuristics and programmer-supplied hints, to construct an internal representation that makes all type information explicit; and a compilation phase that processes the fully elaborated intermediate representation into executable code.

3.1 AURA core syntax

As described above, AURA is a call-by-value polymorphic lambda calculus. It consists of a “term-level” programming language (whose expressions are classified by types of kind Type) for writing algorithms and manipulating data and a “proof-level” assertion language (whose expressions are classified by propositions of kind Prop) for writing proofs of access control statements. These two languages share many features (\lambda-abstraction, application, constructors, etc.) and, because of dependent types, propositions and types may both mention terms of either sort. To simplify the presentation of AURA, it makes sense to unify as many of these constructs as possible. We thus adopt a lambda-cube style presentation [10] that uses the same syntactic constructs for terms, proofs, types, and propositions. Different categories are distinguished by the type system as necessary. This approach also has the appeal of greatly reducing the number of objects in the language, which simplifies both the metatheory and implementation. Our design was significantly influenced by the Henk intermediate language [26], which also adopts this compact representation.

The lambda-cube terms of the AURA core syntax are given by:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Terms} & \quad t ::= x \mid \text{ctr} \mid \ldots \mid \lambda x: t_1. \, t_2 \mid t_1 \, t_2 \mid \langle x: t_1 \rangle \rightarrow t_2 \mid \text{match} \, t_2 \, t_3 \text{ with } \{ b \} \mid \langle t_1 : t_2 \rangle \\
\text{Branches} & \quad b ::= \ldots \mid b \mid \text{ctr} \rightharpoonup t
\end{align*}
\]

Here, \( x \) ranges over variables, and \( \text{ctr} \) ranges over programmer-defined constructors created using datatype declarations as described below. In addition to the standard lambda abstraction, application, and dependent arrows, AURA also has a pattern matching construct and an explicit typecast. In the expression match \( t_1 \, t_2 \) with \( \{ b \} \), \( t_1 \) is the term under analysis, \( t_2 \) is the return type, and \( b \) is a list of branches that \( t_1 \) is matched against. Type annotation \( t_2 \) ensures that typechecking is straightforward even when the set of branches is empty. The explicit cast \( \langle t_1 : t_2 \rangle \) ensures (safely) that \( t_1 \) be considered to have type \( t_2 \).

To express and reason about access control, AURA extends the core syntax above with additional terms. Here, and throughout the rest of the paper, we use metavariable conventions that make it easier to recall constraints placed on a term by the type system: \( a \) ranges over principals, \( P \) ranges over propositions, \( p \) ranges over proofs, \( e \) ranges over program expressions, and \( v \) stands for values. All of these metavariables are synonymous with \( t \), which we use to indicate syntactic objects of any flavor. The AURA-specific syntax is given by:

\[
t ::= \ldots \mid \text{Type} \mid \text{Prop} \mid \text{Kind} \mid \text{prop} \mid \text{say} \mid \text{bind} \mid \text{return} \mid \text{args}
\]

3.2 Typechecking AURA

AURA’s type system contains the following judgments:

- Well-formed signature \( S \vdash \cdot \)
- Well-formed typing environment \( S \vdash E \)
- Well-typed term \( S; E \vdash t : s \)
- Well-typed match branches \( S; E; s; \text{args} \vdash \text{branches} : t \)

Figure 1 shows the term typechecking rules. We omit the rules for typechecking signatures and branches, though we describe their salient features below.

In all these judgments, \( S \) is a signature that declares types, propositions, and assertions (described in more detail below). A typing environment \( E \) maps variables to their types as usual, but it also records the hypothetical equalities among atomic run-time values. In the definition of environments below, a binding \( x \approx (v_1 = v_2) : t \) indicates that values \( v_1 \) and \( v_2 \) have type \( t \), and that the run-time values of \( v_1 \) and \( v_2 \) are equal.

\[
\text{Environments} \quad E ::= \cdot \mid E, x : t \mid E, x \approx (v_1 = v_2) : t
\]

3.3 Signatures: data declarations and assertions

Programmers can define bundles of mutually recursive datatypes and propositions in AURA just as they can in other programming languages. A signature \( S \) collects together these data definitions and, as a consequence, a well-formed signature can be thought of as map from constructor identifiers to their types. We omit the formal grammar and typing rules for signatures, as they are largely straightforward; here we explain signatures via examples.

Data definitions may be parameterized. For example, the familiar polymorphic list declaration is written:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{data List : Type} & \rightarrow \text{Type} \quad \{ \\
| \text{nil : (t:Type) → List} \quad \text{List t} \\
| \text{cons : (t:Type) → t → List} \rightarrow \text{List t → List} \rightarrow \text{List t} \}
\end{align*}
\]

AURA’s type system rules out data declarations that require nontrivial equality constraints at the type level. For example, the following GADT-like declaration is ruled out, since \text{Bad t u} would imply \( t = u \):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{data Bad : Type} & \rightarrow \text{Type} \rightarrow \text{Type} \quad \{ \\
| \text{bad : (t:Type) → Bad t t} \}
\end{align*}
\]

\[2\] In the Coq development, these constructs are represented using constants and term application.
Logical connectives like conjunction and disjunction can be encoded using dependent propositions, as in Coq and other type-based provers. For example:

- **data** `And : Prop → Prop → Prop {  
  `both : (p1:Prop) → (p2:Prop) → p1 → p2 → And p1 p2` }

  AURA’s type system conservatively constrains `Prop` definitions to be inductive by disallowing negative occurrences of `Prop` constructors. Such a restriction is essential for consistency of the logic, since otherwise it would be possible to write loops that inhabit any proposition, including `False`. `False` itself is definable: it is a proposition with no constructors:

- **data** `False : Prop {  
}

Assertions, like the `MayPlay` proposition from Section 2, are uninhabited constants that construct `Pros`:

- **assert** `MayPlay : prin → Song → Prop

While assertions are similar in flavor to datatypes with no constructors, there is a key difference. When an empty datatype is scrutinized by a match expression, the match may be assigned any type. Hence if we were to define `MayPlay` as an empty inductive type, `A says False` would follow from `A says MayPlay A freebird`. In contrast, there is no elimination form for assertions. This means that principals may sign assertions without compromising their says monad’s consistency.

### 3.4 Core term typing

Type is the type of computation expressions, and `Prop` is the type of propositions. The constant `Kind` classifies both `Type` and `Prop`, as shown in rules `WF-TM-TYPE` and `WF-TM-PROP`. (Here and elsewhere, we use the lowercase word “type” to mean any classifier in the type system—`Prop` and `Type` are both “types” in this sense.)

The typechecking rules for constructors declared in the signature (`WF-TM-CTR`) and for free variables (`WF-TM-FV`) are completely standard. More interesting is `WF-TM-ARR`, which states that the type of an arrow is the type of arrow’s output type. The
latter is required to be one of Type, Prop, or Kind, which rules out nonsensical arrow forms. For example, \((x: \text{Type}) \rightarrow \text{Type}\) is legal whereas \((x: \text{Type}) \rightarrow \text{self}\) is not— the former could be the type of the polymorphic list constructor while the latter doesn’t make sense since self is a computation-level value.

The WF-TM-ABS rule for introducing functions is standard except that, as in other lambda-cube like languages, AURA restricts what sorts of abstractions may be created. The argument to a function can be a term value, a proof, a type or a proposition. The resulting lambda must be typable with an arrow that itself has type Type or Prop. These restrictions imply that lambda abstractions may only be computational functions or proof terms. A resulting lambda must be typable with an arrow that itself has type constructors declared in the signature, and any parameters to expressions that have saturated (fully applied) types can be matched with type constructors, while useful for verification, appear superfluous here.

The interesting part of the WF-TM-APP rule is the side condition requiring either that \(t_2\) is a value \((\text{val}(t_2))\) or that \(u\) does not depend on \(x (x \notin \text{ft}(u))\). This restriction has the effect that, while AURA seems to be quite liberal with respect to the dependencies allowed by well-formed \((x: s) \rightarrow t\) terms, the actual dependencies admitted by the type system are quite simple. For instance, although the type system supports singleton types like \(S(0)\), it cannot check \(S(1+2)\) because the latter type depends on a non-value.

The upshot of these restrictions is that truly dependent types in AURA depend on values— i.e. terms that cannot reduce. While this limits the applicability of dependent types for program verification tasks, it greatly simplifies the metatheory, since there is no possibility of effectful computations appearing in a type.

Typechecking pattern match expressions is fairly standard (WF-TM-MATCHES), though it is a bit intricate due to AURA’s support for a rich class of parameterized recursive datatypes. Only expressions that have saturated (fully applied) types can be matched against. The types of the branches must exhaustively match the constructors declared in the signature, and any parameters to the datatype being analyzed are also made available inside the branches. Each branch must return an expression of the same type, which is the result type of the entire match expression. Since datatypes and propositions in AURA may be nullary (have zero constructors), typechecking without inference requires that the match expression carry an annotation. The auxiliary definitions and the judgments used for typechecking the branches themselves are presented in the companion tech report [25].

3.5 Principals and proofs

Principals are an integral part of access control logics, and AURA treats principals as first-class objects with type prin. The only built-in principal is self, which represents the identity of the currently running process (see WF-TM-PRIN and WF-TM-SELF); additional principal identifier constants could be accommodated by adding them with type prin, but we omit such a rule for simplicity’s sake.

As described in Section 2, AURA uses the principal-indexed says monad to express access control policies. The proposition \(a\ says\ P\) means that principal \(a\) has asserted proposition \(P\) (either directly or indirectly). The expression return\(_a\ p\) introduces proofs into the \(a\) says monad, and bind\(_a\ e_1\ e_2\) allows for reasoning under the monad. These constraints are shown in rules WF-TM-APP, WF-TM-APP-RET and WF-TM-APP-BIND. The rules are adapted from DCC [2], or more properly CDD [3], as AURA eschews DCC’s label lattice in favor of explicit delegation among principals.

The expression sign\(_a\ (a, P)\) witnesses the assertion of proposition \(P\) by principal \(a\) (WF-TM-SIGN). Since sign\(_a\ (a, P)\) is intended to model evidence manufactured by \(a\) without justification, it should never appear in a source program. Moreover, since signed propositions are intended to be distributed and thus may escape the

\[
\begin{array}{llll}
\text{converts } E \, t \, t & \text{CONV-REFL} & \text{converts } E \, s \, t & \text{CONV-ASSYMM} \\
\text{converts } E \, u \, t & \text{converts } E \, u \, t & \text{converts } E \, s \, t & \text{CONV-TRANS} \\
x \sim (s = t) \, k \in E & \text{CONV-AXIOM} \\
\end{array}
\]

Figure 2. Conversion

scope of the running AURA program, they are required to be closed. Note, however, that the declaration signature \(S\) must be available in whatever context the signature is to be ascribed meaning. In practice, this means that two distributed AURA programs that wish to exchange proofs need to agree on the signatures used to construct those proofs.

Creating sign\(_a\ (a, P)\) requires \(a\)’s authority. AURA models the authority of a running program with the principal constant self. The say \(P\) operation creates an object of type pf self says \(P\). Intuitively, this operation creates the signed assertion sign\(_a\) (self, \(P\)) and injects it as a proof term for further manipulation (see WF-TM-SAY).

AURA uses the constant pf : Prop \rightarrow Type to wrap the access control proofs that witness propositions as program values, as shown in the rule WF-TM-PF. The pf type operates monadically: return\(_p\) p injects a proof into the term level and bind\(_p\) allows a computation to compose proofs (rules WF-TM-PF-RET and WF-TM-PF-BIND). Such a separation between proofs and computations is necessary to prevent effectful program expressions from appearing in a proof term. For example, if say \(P\) was given type self says \(P\) rather than pf (self says \(P\)), it would be possible to create a bogus “proof” \(\lambda x:\text{Prop}. \text{say} \, x;\) the meaning of this “proof” would depend on the authority (self) of the program that applied the proof object.

3.6 Equality and conversion

Some typing rules (e.g. WF-TM-APP) require checking that two terms can be given the same type. Satisfying such constraints in a dependently typed language requires deciding when two terms are equal—a difficult static analysis problem in the best case.

In AURA we address this with a conditional construct. Dynamically, if \(v_1 = v_2\) then \(e_1\) else \(e_2\) steps to \(e_1\) when \(v_1\) and \(v_2\) are equal, otherwise the expression steps to \(e_2\). Statically (rule WF-TM-IF), the then branch is typed in an environment containing the static constraint \((v_1 = v_2)\). As we will see shortly, the constraint may be used to perform safe typecasts. This is an instance of the type refinement problem, well known from pattern matching in languages such as Coq [17], Agda [33], and Epigram [30].

AURA limits its built-in equality tests to inhabitants of atomic types. The built-in prin type is atomic, as is any type defined by a non-parameterized Type declaration, each of whose constructors takes no arguments. The List type is not atomic, nor is List nat (since cons takes an argument). However, the following Song type is atomic:

\[
\text{data Song : Type } \{ \text{freebird : Song } | \text{ironman : Song } \}
\]
In other words, atomic types are primitive and enumerated types. Our definition of atomic type is limiting, but we believe it can be naturally extended to first-order datatypes.

With equalities over atomic types in the context, we can now consider the issue of general type equality. As in standard presentations of the Calculus of Constructions [10] we address type equality in two acts.

Two types in AURA are considered equivalent when they are related by the conversion relation. This relation, written `converts` and defined in Figure 2, is of course reflexive, symmetric, and transitive; the key rule is `CONV-AXIOM`, which uses equality assumptions in the environment. For instance, under assumption `x = self`, term `x` says `P` converts to `self` says `P`. As equalities only mention atomic values, conversion will only alter the “value” parts of a type—convertible types always have the same shape up to embedded data values.

URA contains explicit, safe typecasts. As specified in rule `WFM-CAST`, term `(c : T)` is assigned type `T` whenever `c`’s type is convertible with `T`. Many standard presentations of dependently typed languages use implicit conversions, which may occur anywhere in a type derivation, but the explicit cast is appealing as it gives an algorithmic type system. Casts have no run-time effect and are simply discarded by our operational semantics.

3.7 Evaluation rules

Figure 3 defines AURA’s operational semantics using a call-by-value small-step evaluation relation.

Most of the evaluation rules are straightforward. The rule `PF-BIND` is a standard beta reduction for monads. The term `say P` creates a proof that principal `self` has asserted that proposition `P` is true; therefore, it evaluates to an assertion “signed” by principal `self`. There are two possibilities in the evaluation of if `v1 = v2` then `e1` else `e2` which evaluates to `e1`, otherwise it evaluates to `e2`. We define two auxiliary reduction relations to implement the reduction rule for pattern matching.

We write `(v, b) ->_b v` to denote the evaluation of a value `v` against a set of branches. These evaluation rules searches through the list of branches until `v` matches with the constructor of one of the branches, at which point the rules focus on the branch and supply the body of the branch with the arguments in `v`. The tricky part lies in correctly identifying the arguments in `v` and discarding the type parameters. We write `(v, c, body) ->_c (e, n)` to denote the evaluation of the body of the branch where `v` matches with the constructor `c` in the branch. Here, `n` is the number of parameters that should be discarded before the first argument of `v` is found. For example, the first parameter `nat` in the value `cons nat 3 (nil nat)` of type `List nat` has no computational content; therefore it should be discarded during the evaluation of pattern matching. Note that the semantics represents constructors as a pair of the constructor name `c` and its number of type parameters. For instance, in the definition of polymorphic lists shown previously, the representation of `cons` is `(cons, 1)`.

3.8 Metatheory

We have proved soundness (in terms of progress and preservation) for AURA. The proofs are fully mechanized in the Coq proof assistant.

Theorem 1 (Preservation). If `S; · ⊢ e : t` and `e → e'`, then `S; · ⊢ e' : t`.

Theorem 2 (Progress). If `S; · ⊢ e : t` then either `val(e)` or `exists e'` such that `e → e'`.

We have also proved that typechecking in AURA is decidable.

Theorem 3 (Typechecking is Decidable).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><code>t → t'</code></th>
<th><code>val(v)</code></th>
<th><code>APP</code></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><code>(λx : t, e) v</code></td>
<td><code>(v/x)e</code></td>
<td><code>PF-BIND</code></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><code>bind_p (return_p e1) e2</code></td>
<td><code>e2 e1</code></td>
<td><code>SAY</code></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><code>say P → return_p (sign(self, P))</code></td>
<td><code>e2 e1</code></td>
<td><code>IF-EQ</code></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><code>v1 = v2</code></td>
<td><code>v1 = v2</code></td>
<td><code>IF-NEQ</code></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><code>v1 ≠ v2</code></td>
<td><code>v1 ≠ v2</code></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><code>val(v)</code></td>
<td><code>v</code></td>
<td><code>CAST</code></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><code>(v, branches) →_b e</code></td>
<td><code>match v t with {branches} → e</code></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><code>(v, b) →_b v</code></td>
<td><code>(v, c, body) →_c (e, 0)</code></td>
<td><code>B-HERE</code></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><code>(v, brn c body {rest}) →_b e</code></td>
<td><code>(v, rest) →_b e</code></td>
<td><code>B-EARLIER</code></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><code>(v, c, body) →_c (e, n)</code></td>
<td><code>(v, c, body) →_c (body, n)</code></td>
<td><code>CTR-BASE</code></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><code>val(v2) m &gt; 0</code></td>
<td><code>(v1, (c, n), body) →_c (body, m)</code></td>
<td><code>CTR-PARAM</code></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><code>(v1, v2, (c, n), body) →_c (body, m - 1)</code></td>
<td><code>(v1, (c, n), body) →_c (e, 0)</code></td>
<td><code>CTR-ARG</code></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3. Reduction Rules

- If `S ⊢ φ` and `S ⊢ E`, then `∀e, ∀t, it is decidable whether there exists a derivation such that S; E ⊢ c : t.`
- If `S ⊢ φ` then `∀E it is decidable whether there exists a derivation such that S ⊢ E.`
- It is decidable whether there exists a derivation such that `S ⊢ φ`.

We have mechanized all parts of these decidability results by giving constructive proofs of the form `φ ∨ ¬φ`. For instance, the constructive proof of `(S ⊢ φ) ∨ ¬(S ⊢ φ)` is a total algorithm that decides signature well-formedness.

For ease of explanation, the judgments and rules presented in this section are a close approximation of the formal definitions of AURA. For instance, in order to prove the preservation of pattern matching, we have to take the parameters and arguments supplied to the constructor in the pattern matching evaluation rules. In order to prove the decidability of typechecking, we strengthened the typing judgments to take two signature arguments: one contains the type declarations of the top-level type constructors (e.g., `List`) that can appear in mutually recursively defined datatypes and the other is used for looking up the constructors (e.g., `nil, cons`) of the top-level type constructors. However, this simplified presentation has
the same key invariants as the full type system. The full detailed version can be found in the companion tech report.

4. Validation and Prototype Implementation

Mechanized proofs AURA has 20 reduction rules, 40 typing judgments (including the well-formedness of terms, environments and signatures), and numerous other relations such as atomic equality types to constrain the type system. For a system of this size, implementing a fully complete, mechanized version of the soundness proofs is challenging.

We formalized the proofs of soundness and the decidability of typechecking for AURA in the Coq proof assistant\(^7\). We use a variant of the locally nameless representation [9] to formalize the metatheory of the language. Well documented definitions of AURA including typing rules, reduction rules, and other related relations require about 1400 lines of Coq code. The soundness proofs take about 6000 lines of Coq code, and the proofs of the decidability of typechecking take about 5000 lines of Coq code. The automation used in the these Coq proofs is relatively rudimentary; we did not devote much time to writing automation tactics.

The most intricate parts of the language design are the invariants of the inductive datatypes, the dependent types, atomic equality types, and the conversion relations. This complexity is reflected in the Coq proof development in two ways: one is in the number of lemmas stating the invariants of the datatype signatures, the other is in the number of revisions made to the Coq proofs due to design changes motivated by failure to prove soundness. We found that for such a complicated system, mechanized proofs are well-suited for dealing with design iteration, as Coq can easily identify which proofs require modification when the language design changes.

Because AURA is a superset of system F with inductively defined datatypes, we conjecture that, without much difficulty, we could extract mechanized soundness proofs of other related type systems from the Coq proofs of AURA.

Typechecker and interpreter The prototype AURA typechecker and interpreter together implement the language as it is formalized in Coq with only minor differences. The typechecker recognizes a common type system to interoperate with AURA. We will also explore the possibilities of rewriting an interpreter, and using some of the language extensions discussed in Section 4.

This policy is defined over predicates Owns and MayPlay, which are declared as assertions in lines 5 and 6. Recall that assertions are appropriate because we cannot expect to find closed proofs of ownership and delegation in pure type theory.

The main policy rule, shareRule (line 12) is defined using a say expression. The type of shareRule is an implication wrapped in two monads. The outer pf monad is required because say accesses a private key and must be treated effectfully. The inner self says monad is required to track the provenance of the policy. The implication encodes the delegation policy above. This rule provides a way to build up a value of type pf (self says (MayPlay a s)), which is required before a can play song s.

The exact form of shareRule is somewhat inconvenient. We derive two more convenient rules, shareRule' and shareRule'' (lines 53 and 76). These rules use monadic bind and return operations to change the placement of pf and says type constructors relative to shareRule’s type. The resulting type of shareRule'' shows that one can obtain a proof of pf (self says (MayPlay a s)) by a simple application of shareRule' to various arguments, as shown in line 101.

The key functionality of the music server is provided by a function stub, playFor, which is intended to model an effectful function that streams a provided song to a specified principal. Its type is given by the annotation on line 20. The playFor function takes the song to be played and the principal it should play on behalf of as its first two arguments. The third argument is a proof of the proposition self says (MayPlay A s), demonstrating the requesting principal’s capability to play the song, which is required by the server’s policy. As modeling an audio API would clutter the example, playFor simply returns a unit value. In a real implementation, playFor would call into the trusted computing base, which would also log appropriate proofs for future auditing.

The remaining code implements the application’s main functionality. The handleRequest function takes a delegation request and, using a provided database of owner information, attempts to construct an appropriate self says MayPlay proof. If it succeeds, playFor is invoked.

The implementation of handleRequest (line 93) is straightforward. There are two interesting things to note. First, handleRequest takes a database of owner information expressed as a list of OwnerRecords. OwnerRecord (line 8) is an inductive type whose single constructor has a dependent type. Because ownerRecord’s third argument depends on its first two, OwnerRecord encodes an existential type. Second, the match expression on line 98 relies on the fact that (getOwnerProof s o l) returns an object of type Maybe (pf (self says (Owns p s))). Getting such a type is possible because, when getOwnerProof pulls a proof from the list, its type is refined so that the existentially bound principal and song are identified with p and s.

GetOwnerProof (line 30) performs this type refinement in several steps. It uses the fixpoint combinator (line 33) to perform a list search. After each OwnerRecord is decomposed, we must check its constituent parts to determine if it is the correct record and, if so, refine the types appropriately. The action occurs between lines 42 and 48. At runtime the first if expression tests for dynamic equality between the principal we’re searching for, p, and the princi-

\(^7\) Code available at: http://www.cis.upenn.edu/~stevez/sol/
include "tuple.core" include "list.core"

data Song : Type { freebird: Song | ironman: Song }

assert Owns : prin → Song → Prop;
assert MayPlay : prin → Song → Prop;

data OwnerRecord : Type { 
 | ownerRecord : (p: prin) → (s: Song) → 
  (pf (self says (Owns p s))) → OwnerRecord 
}

let shareRule : 
  pf (self says ((o: prin) → (r: prin) → (s: Song) → 
  (Owns o s) → (o says (MayPlay r s)) → (MayPlay r s))) = 
  say ((o: prin) → (r: prin) → (s: Song) → 
  (Owns o s) → (o says (MayPlay r s)) → (MayPlay r s)) 

let getOwnerProof : (x: Song) → (p: prin) → 
  (List OwnerRecord) → 
  (Maybe (pf (self says (Owns p s)))); 

fix (λrec : (List OwnerRecord) → 
  (Maybe (pf (self says (Owns p s))))).

λx : (List OwnerRecord).
match l with 
  (Maybe (pf (self says (Owns p s)))) { 
  nil → notFound p s 
  | cons → λx:OwnerRecord. λxs : List OwnerRecord.
    match s with 
    (Maybe (pf (self says (Owns p s)))) { 
      | ownerRecord → λpr:prin. λx:Sng.
        λproof : pf (self says (Owns p' s')). 
        if p = p' 
        then if s = s' 
        then 
          just (pf (self says (Owns p s))) 
          (proof : (pf (self says (Owns p s)))) 
        else rec xs 
        else rec xs 
    } } 
} 

let shareRule'' : 
  (pf ((o: prin) → (r: prin) → (s: Song) → 
    (self says (Owns o s)) → (o says (MayPlay r s))) = 
  bind shareRule (λsr : (self says (MayPlay r s))) = 
  (o: prin) → (r: prin) → 
  (s: Song) → (Owns o s) → 
  (o says (MayPlay r s)) → 
  (MayPlay r' s' )) 

return (λsr : prin. λr : prin. λs : Song.
  λowns : (self says (Owns o s)).
  λmay : (o says (MayPlay r s)).
  bind sr (λsr2 : ((o': prin) → (r': prin) → (s': Song) → 
    (Owns o' s') → (o' says (MayPlay r' s'))) → 
  (MayPlay r' s')) .
  bind owns (owns' : (Owns o s)).
  return self (sr' o r s' owns' may)))

let shareRule'' : 
  (o: prin) → (p: prin) → (s: Song) → 
  (pf self says (Owns o s)) → 
  (pf (o says (MayPlay p s))) → 
  (pf self says (MayPlay p s)) = 

λx : prin. λp : prin. λs : Song.
  λowns : (pf (self says (Owns o s))).
  λplayPf : pf (o says (MayPlay p s)).
  bind ownsPf (λpf : (self says (Owns o s))).
  bind playPf (λpf' : (o says (MayPlay p s))).
  bind shareRule' (λsr' : 
    (o': prin) → (r': prin) → (s': Song) → 
    (self says (MayPlay r' s'))) → 
  (self says (MayPlay r' s')) .
  (return (sr' o p s o pf pf' )))

in

let handleRequest : (x: Song) → (p: prin) → (o: prin) → 
  (List OwnerRecord) → 
  (delPf : pf (o says (MayPlay p s))) → Unit = 
  λx : Song. λp : prin. λo : prin. λl : List OwnerRecord.
  λdelPf : pf (o says (MayPlay p s)).
  match (getOwnerProof o l) with Unit { 
  | nothing → unit 
  | just → λp : (pf (self says (Owns o s))).
    playFor s p (shareRule'' o p s delPf) 
  } 
} in unit

Figure 5. AURA code for a music store (cont. from Figure 4).

pal store in the current record, p'. A similar check is performed for between Songs s and s'. If both checks succeed then we cast proof:pf (self says Owns p s') to type pf (self says Owns p s) and return it packaged as a Maybe. If either dynamic check fails we repeat again, and, if no match is found, we eventually return Nothing.

6. Related Work

We have published related results on AURA, a language closely related to the Prop fragment of AURA [40]. This includes soundness and strong normalization proofs for AURA, as well as discussion and examples of audit in the presence of authorization proofs.

One intended semantics for AURA implements objects of form sign(A, P) as digital signatures. All cryptography occurs at a lower level of abstraction than the language definition. This approach has previously been used to implement declarative information flow policies [41]. An alternative approach is to treat keys as types or first class objects and to provide encryption or signing primitives in the language [7, 15, 36, 28, 27]. Such approaches typically provide the programmer with additional flexibility but complicate the programming model.

Authorization logics Many logics and languages [5, 6, 14, 11, 21, 2, 19, 20] have tracked authorization using says. We follow the approach of DCC [2], a logic in which says is defined as an indexed monad. This is compelling for several reasons. First, DCC proofs are lambda-terms, a fact we exploit to closely couple the Prop and Type universes. Second, DCC is a strong logic and important authorization concepts, such as the acts-for relation and the hand-off rule (A says B acts-for A) → (B acts-for A), can be defined or derived. Third, DCC is known to enjoy a non-interference property: in the absence of delegation, statements in the A says monad will not affect the B says monad. AURA modifies DCC in several ways. In addition to adding dependent types, AURA omits DCC’s protects relation. The protects relation strengthens monadic bind, making propositions A says (B says P) and B says (A says P) inter-derivable. While useful in other settings, such equivalences appear

Figure 4. AURA code for a music store (cont. in Figure 5).
incorrect for access control. Additionally AURA’s use of signatures changes some meta-theoretic properties of DCC leading to, for example, a more subtle proof of normalization [40].

The Grey project [11] uses proof carrying authorization in a manner similar to AURA. In Grey, mobile phone handsets build authorization proofs that unlock doors. While AURA is a unified authorization logic and computation language, Grey’s logic is not integrated with a computation language.

DeYoung, Garg, and Pfenning [20] describe a constructive authorization logic that is parameterized by a notation of time. Propositions and proofs are annotated with time intervals during which they may be judged valid. This allows revocation to be modeled as credential expiration.

**Language-based access control** The trust management system PolicyMaker [13] treats the handling of access control decisions as a distributed programming problem. A PolicyMaker assertion is a pair containing a function and (roughly) a principal. In general, assertion functions may communicate with each other, and each function’s output is tagged by the associated principal. PolicyMaker checks if a request complies with policy by running all assertion functions and seeing if they produce an output in which a distinguished principal POLICY says “approve”. Principal tags appear similar is purpose, but not realization, to says in AURA. Note also that expressing security properties via term-level computation is fundamentally different from expressing them as types, the approach followed in other work discussed here. The ideas in PolicyMaker have been refined in KeyNote [13] and REFEREE [16].

Fournet, Gordon and Maffeis [21, 22] discuss authorization logic in the context of distributed systems. They use a limited form of dependent pairs to associate propositions with data. Unlike in AURA, proofs are erased at runtime. Consequently, their type discipline is best suited for closed systems that do not require high-assurance logging.

The Fable language [38] associates security labels with data values. Labels may be used to encode information flow, access control, and other policies. Technically, labels are terms that may be referred to at the type level; colored judgments separate the data and label worlds. The key security property is that standard computations (i.e. application computations described with color app) are parametric in their labeled inputs. Unlike AURA proofs, the label sub-language (i.e. policy computations described with color pol) admits arbitrary recursion. Hence the color separation may restrict security sensitive operations to a small trusted computing base, but does not give rise to a logical soundness property.

**Dependent type theory** The AURA language design was influenced by dependent type systems like the Calculus of Constructions (CoC) [10, 18]. Both CoC and AURA contain dependent types and a unified syntax encompassing both types and terms. However there are several important differences between CoC and AURA. Most critically, CoC’s type equality includes beta equivalence but AURA’s does not. Type-level beta reduction, while convenient for verification, is unnecessary for expressing authorization predicates, and greatly complicates language design and use.

As realized in the Coq proof assistant [17], CoC can contain inductive types and different universes for computation and logic types—AURA universes Prop and Type correspond to Prop and Set in Coq. However, because Set is limited to pure computations, Coq does not need AURA’s pf mechanism to separate Prop from Set. In Coq all inductive declarations are subject to a complex positivity constraint which ensures inductive types have a well-defined logical interpretation. By contrast, AURA uses a simpler positivity constraint in Prop and no constraint in Type. Additionally, AURA permits less type refinement than Coq does for type indices—Coq datatype types can be used to encode GADTs. Compared with Coq, AURA is strictly weaker for defining logical predicates, but is more expressive for defining datatypes for use in computation.

Several other projects have combined dependent types and pragmatic language design. Ynot (an embedding of Hoare Type Theory [32] in Coq), Agda [33], and Epigram [30] are intended to support general purpose program verification and usually require that the programmer construct proofs interactively. By contrast, Dependent ML [47], ATS [47, 46], and RSP1 [44] provide distinguished dependency domains and can only express constraints on objects from these domains. These dependency domains are intended to be amenable to automated analysis. Cayenne [8] extends Haskell with general purpose dependent types. In Cayenne, type equality is checked by normalizing potentially divergent Haskell terms, a strategy which may cause type checking to itself to diverge. Hancock and Setzer [23] present a core calculus for interactive programming in dependent type theory; their language uses an IO monad to encapsulate stateful computations. Inhabitants of the monad are modeled as imperative programs and type equality is judged up to a bisimulation on (imperative) program text.

Peyton Jones and Meijer describe the Henk typed intermediate language [26], Henk is an extension of the lambda cube family of programming languages that includes CoC. Like AURA, Henk is intended to be a richly-typed compiler intermediate language. Unlike AURA, Henk has not been proved sound. Additionally, its lack of a pf monad (or equivalent technique for isolating computations from proofs) makes it unsuitable for programming in the presence of both dependent types and effects.

### 7. Future Work

**Future work: Theory** One important direction for future work is to study AURA’s security properties, such as the non-interference of AURA’s authorization logic and the strong normalization of AURA’s authorization proofs. The non-interference property of authorization logics (c.f. [2]) allows analysis on the influence of one principal’s assertions to other principals’ beliefs; this provides more confidence in the correctness of authorization logics. Since AURA used DCC as the authorization logic, we believe a proof similar to that presented in [2] is also possible for AURA.

AURA allows programmers to specify secure functions such as playFor to protect access to resources. As a corollary of the type safety theorem, these functions cannot be invoked unless a valid proof is provided. To ensure that proofs are meaningful and can later be compared during auditing, we would like to prove that every reduction of a proof will result in the same normal form. In our previous work [40], we have proved that a simplified Prop fragment of AURA is strongly normalizing and confluent. As future work, we intend to prove the same results for the full Prop fragment of AURA using similar techniques.

As discussed in Section 3, AURA’s restrictions on dependency and its weak notion of type refinement allow for decidable type-checking. We believe that there may be other decidable, but more-liberal, variants of the type system. As we continue to write AURA programs, we expect to discover precisely what relaxations of the type system would be useful to programmers. Additionally, the literature on GADTs [34] and dependent pattern matching [33] promises to be a fertile source of inspiration and examples. Future versions of AURA may be extended along these lines.

Likewise, while making the pf construct a monad was a convenient and effective design decision, we might be able to relax its treatment. For instance, pf’s elimination form is currently monadic bind, but it is probably safe to instead eliminate pf by pattern matching when constructing arbitrary objects in Type. We conjecture that this does not affect the soundness of AURA, and we plan to explore such alternative designs in the future.
Section 2 describes the correspondence between a says P and objects digitally signed by a’s private key. It is natural, then, to wonder about the possibility of an analog for public key encryption—perhaps terms of type T for a could be constructed from objects of type T encrypted with a’s public key. It is unclear how to integrate such an additional construct with AURA, not least because while the says monad makes complete sense operating only at the Prop level, we almost certainly want to encrypt data of kind Type. Additionally, our use of dependent types means that the type of an AURA term will often reference part of the term, which may well be unacceptable for data that is meant to be encrypted.

The tracking of information flow was one of the first uses proposed for DCC [4], and even without encryption AURA’s assertions are sometimes reminiscent of confidentiality tracking; were encryption to be added, the similarities would be even more pronounced. It may be possible to take advantage of this by equipping AURA with a more general notion of information flow—which does not necessarily have as straightforward a cryptographic interpretation—for use internal to a single well-typed application while reverting to the coarser-grained says (and possibly for) when communication with the outside world is desired. The challenge, of course, is to make this change of granularities as fluid and light as possible.

Even without information flow it may still be useful to have a better idea of which proofs may come from the outside world. After all, operations on digital signatures are not trivial, but since proofs are defined to be computation-free, a purely local proof could be given a more efficient but less portable representation, and certain proofs might be completely elided at runtime. For the first case, we would first need to extend our formalism with some notion of network communication; inference could be performed backwards from communication points to ascertain which proofs need not be represented in portable form. As an initial step towards recognizing the second case, we might consider an additional form of abstraction, with an argument that cannot be used in certain ways but is guaranteed to be necessary only at compile time; ideally, however, we would want to infer these abstractions during compilation.

It is clear from our examples that AURA is fairly verbose. As it is meant to be an intermediate language, this is not a pressing usability issue. We hope that a higher-level language that generates AURA will be able to cut down on this verbosity using inference techniques. Our proof-passing style also suggests the use of some variety of proof inference. Of course, this very quickly becomes undecidable, but that does not rule out practical partial solutions.

Finally, although AURA emphasizes the security aspects of programming with an embedded authorization logic, there might be other applications of this idea. In particular, one of the challenges of making program verification via dependent types practical is the need to construct and otherwise manipulate proof objects. Of course, one can always add axioms to the logic, but doing so can easily compromise its consistency. Failures due to a poor choice of axioms might be hard to isolate when debugging. The says monads of DCC provide a possible intermediate ground: One could imagine associating a principal with each module of the program and then allowing modules to make assertions. Explicit trust delegations would then be required when importing axioms from one module to another; such delegations would document the module dependencies and help the typechecker isolate uses of faulty axioms. We speculate that it is even possible that blame (in the style similar to that proposed by Wadler and Findler [43]) can be appropriately assigned to offending modules whenever a run-time error caused by incorrect assertions is encountered.

Future work: Practice The single-step interpreter is useful as a tool for checking the correctness of small examples; however, it is infeasible to use it to run code in a production environment. As such, we are extending the implementation to generate CIL byte-code compatible with both Microsoft’s .NET CLR and the open-source Mono runtime. Don Syme’s work on ILX aids us greatly in this effort. ILX, described in [39], is a group of extensions to the CIL that facilitates the use of higher-order functions, discriminated unions and parametric polymorphism. By compiling for this existing standard execution environment, we will gain access to the ecosystem of .NET software and libraries. Most notably, we should be able to make use of existing code for cryptography and cross-platform networking. We will also be free from having to worry about lower-level issues like efficient machine code generation and garbage collection, both of which are well outside of the AURA project’s scope.

Additionally, there remain practical issues that AURA must address in order to fully express policies likely to be found in its intended problem domain. Chief among these is the demand for the signatures that expire, either due to explicit revocation or simply the passage of time. This stands in contrast to our current formalism—and, indeed, most formalisms of programming languages, as a term that successfully typechecks is generally seen as valid for regardless of the time or the state of the world. It would, of course, be possible to define the operational semantics of AURA such that every operation has a chance to fail at runtime due to digital signature expiration, but this could easily make programming quite cumbersome. Instead, we hope to find a solution that allows time and reversion to be referenced by AURA in an intuitive way; one possibility, explored by Garg and Pfenning [20], is the use of linear logic, which is naturally suited to describing resources that can, in some sense, be used up.

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References


