

# Towards Compiler-Independent Certifying Compilation

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## Abstract

Certifying compilation allows a compiler to produce annotations which prove that target code abides by a specified safety policy. An independent verifier can check the code without needing to trust the compiler. For such a system to be generally useful, the safety policy should be expressive enough to allow different compilers to effectively produce certifiable code.

In this work, we use our experience in writing a certifying compiler to suggest general design principles which should allow concise yet expressive certificates. As an extended example, we present our compiler’s translation of the control flow of Popcorn, a high-level language with function pointers and exception handlers, to TALx86, a typed assembly language with registers, a stack, memory, and code blocks. This example motivates techniques for controlling certificate size and verification time.

We quantify the effectiveness of techniques for reducing the overhead of certifying compilation by measuring the effects their use has on a real Popcorn application, the compiler itself. The selective use of these techniques can change certificate size and verification time by well over an order of magnitude.

## 1 Background

A certifying compiler takes high-level source code and produces target code with a *certificate* which ensures that the target code respects a desired safety or security policy. To date, certifying compilers have primarily concentrated on producing certificates of type safety. For example, Sun’s `javac` compiler maps Java source code to statically typed Java Virtual Machine Language (JVML) code. The JVML code includes typing annotations that a dataflow analysis-based verifier can use to ensure that the code is type safe.

However, both the instructions and the type system of JVML are relatively high-level and are specifically tailored to Java. Consequently, JVML is ill-suited for compiling a variety of source-level programming languages to high-performance code. For example, JVML provides only high-level method-call and method-return operations. Also, it provides no provision for performing general tail-calls on methods. Therefore, JVML cannot be used as a target for certifying compilers of functional programming languages such as Scheme that require tail-call elimination.

In addition, current platforms for JVML either interpret programs or compile them further to native code. To achieve

acceptable performance seems to demand compilation with a good deal of optimization. To avoid security or safety holes, the translation from JVML to native code should also be certifying so that we may easily verify the safety of the resulting code.

Another example of a certifying compiler is Nacula and Lee’s Touchstone compiler [17]. Touchstone compiles a small, type-safe subset of C to high-performance DEC Alpha assembly language. The key novelty of Touchstone is that the certificate it produces is a formal “proof” that the code is type-correct. Checking the proof for type-correctness is relatively easy, especially when compared to the *ad hoc* verification process of the JVML. As such, the Touchstone certificates provide a higher degree of trustworthiness.

The proofs of the Touchstone system are represented using the general purpose logical framework LF [8]. The advantage of using LF to encode the proofs is that, from an implementation perspective, it is easy to change the type system of the target language. In particular, the proof checker is parameterized by a set of primitive axioms and inference rules that effectively define the type system. The checker itself does not need to change if these rules are changed. Consequently, the use of LF makes it easy to change type systems to adapt to different source languages or different compilation strategies.

Nonetheless, while changing the type system is easy for the implementor, doing so obligates one to an enormous proof burden: Every change requires a proof of the soundness of the type system with respect to the underlying machine’s semantics. Constructing such proofs is an extremely difficult task.

### 1.1 An Alternative Approach

The goal of our work is to make it easy for certifying compilers to produce provably type-correct code without having to change the type system of the target language. Towards this end, we have been studying the design and implementation of general-purpose type systems suitable for assembly language [15, 16, 14]. Ultimately, we hope to discover typing constructs that support certifying compilation of a number of orthogonal programming language features.

Our current work focuses on the design of an extremely expressive type system for the Intel IA32 assembly language and a verifier that we call TALx86 [15, 16, 14, 13]. Where possible, we have avoided baking in high-level language abstractions like procedures, exception handlers, or objects. We also have not baked in compiler-specific abstractions

such as activation records or calling conventions. Rather, the type system of TALx86 provides a number of primitive type constructors, like parametric polymorphism, label types, existential types, products, recursive types, etc. that may be used to encode language features and compiler invariants. These type constructors have either been well studied in other contexts or modeled and proven sound by our group.

In addition, we and others have shown how to encode a number of important language and compiler features using our type constructors. For example, our encoding of procedures easily supports tail-call optimizations because the control-flow transfers are achieved through simple machine-level jumps. In other words, we did not have to change the type system of TALx86 to support these optimizations. In this respect, TALx86 provides an attractive target for certifying compilers.

## 1.2 The Problem

Unfortunately, there is a particularly difficult engineering tradeoff that arises when a certifying compiler targets a general purpose type system like TALx86: Encoding high level language features, compiler invariants, and optimizations into primitive type constructors results in extremely large types and typing annotations – *often orders of magnitude larger than the code itself*. Thus, there is a very real danger that our noble goal of using one general-purpose type system will be defeated by practical considerations of space and time.

Some researchers, such as Appel and Felty [1], suggest going even further than we do with respect to minimizing potential soundness errors. In particular, they have recently proposed formally specifying the type system in terms that relate directly to the underlying machine semantics. By embedding the policy in a higher-order logical framework, they hope that compilers may define their own type systems and formally prove them sound with respect to the underlying semantics. This work is a promising direction for developing an infrastructure that is truly independent of the source language and compiler. However, it is clear that an even more primitive approach than ours will only exacerbate the problems with respect to certificate size and verification time.

The work presented here is essentially a case study in writing a certifying compiler that targets the general-purpose typed assembly language TALx86. The source language for our compiler, called Popcorn, shares much of its syntax with C, but it has a number of advanced language features including first-class parametric polymorphism, non-regular algebraic datatypes with limited pattern matching, function pointers, exceptions, first-class abstract data types, modules, etc. Indeed, the language is suitably high-level that we have easily ported various ML libraries to Popcorn and constructed the certifying compiler for Popcorn in Popcorn itself.

Although the TALx86 type system is very expressive, it is far from a “universal typed assembly language”. However, we have found that it is expressive enough to allow a reasonable translation of Popcorn’s linguistic features. Because the compiler’s invariants are encoded in the primitive typing constructs of TALx86, the most difficult aspect of efficient, scalable verification is handling the potentially enormous size of the target-level types. We use our experience to suggest general techniques for controlling this overhead that we believe transcend the specifics of our system. The

efficacy of these techniques is demonstrated quantitatively for the libraries and compiler itself. In particular, the size of the type annotations and the time needed to verify the libraries and compiler itself are essentially linear in the size of the object code.

In the next section, we give a taxonomy for general approaches to reducing typing annotation overhead and further discuss other projects related to certifying compilation. Then in Section 3 we summarize relevant aspects of the TALx86 type system, annotations, and verification process. We then show how these features are used to encode the provably safe compilation of the control-flow aspects of Popcorn, including procedures and exceptions. This extended example demonstrates that an expressive type system can allow a reasonable compilation strategy for an unknown language. It also shows qualitatively that if handled naively, type annotation size becomes unwieldy. In Section 4, we use the example to analyze several approaches that we have examined for reducing type annotation overhead. Section 5 presents the quantitative results of our investigation, where we conclude that the TALx86 approach scales to a medium-size application and that almost all of the techniques contribute significantly to reducing the overheads of certifying compilation. Finally, we summarize our conclusions as a collection of guidelines for designers of low-level safety policies.

## 2 Approaches to Efficient Certification

Keeping annotation size small and verification time short in the presence of optimizations and advanced source languages is an important requirement for a practical system that relies on certified code. In this section, we classify some approaches to managing the overhead of certifying compilation and discuss their relative merits. None of the approaches are mutually exclusive; any system will probably have elements of all of them.

**The “Bake it in” Approach** If the type system only supports one way of compiling something, then compilers do not need to write down that they are using that way. For example, the type system could fix a calling convention and require compilers to group code blocks into procedures. Both the `javac` and Touchstone compilers use this approach.

Baking in assumptions about procedures eliminates the need for any annotations describing the interactions between procedures. However, it inhibits some inter-procedural optimizations (such as inter-procedural register allocation) and makes it difficult to compile languages with other control features, such as exception handlers. In general, the “bake it in” approach reflects particular source features into the target language rather than providing low-level constructors suitable for encoding a variety of source constructs.

Even very general frameworks inevitably bake in more than the underlying machine requires, however. Although the work by Appel and Felty aims to remove all such restrictions, doing so soundly is extremely difficult. For example, their current system does not allow a memory location to be written twice. This restriction not only effectively limits the current applicability to purely functional source languages, but it inhibits implementation strategies as common as using a call stack.

**The “Don’t optimize” Approach** If a complicated analysis is necessary to prove an optimization safe, then the rea-

soning involved must be encoded in the annotations. For example, when compiling dynamically typed languages such as Scheme, dynamic type tests are in general necessary to ensure type safety. A simple strategy is to simply perform the appropriate type test before every operation. With this approach, a verifier can easily ensure safety with a minimum of annotations. This is the essence of the verification approach suggested by Kozen [10] and indeed results in relatively small annotations and fast verification, but at the price of performance and flexibility.

In contrast, an optimizing compiler may attempt to eliminate the dynamic checks by performing, for instance, a “soft-typing” analysis [23]. However, the optimized code will require a more sophisticated type system to convince the verifier that type tests are unnecessary. In general, such type systems require additional annotations to make verification tractable. For example, the Touchstone type system supports static verification of array bounds checks, but requires additional invariants and proof terms to support the optimization.

Another common example is record initialization. An easy way to prove that memory is properly initialized is to write to the memory in the same basic block in which the memory is allocated. Proving that other instruction schedules are safe may require dataflow annotations which describe the location of uninitialized memory.

Unoptimized code also tends to be more uniform which in turn makes the annotations more uniform. For example, if a callee-save register is always pushed onto the stack by the callee (even when the register is not used), then the annotations that describe the stack throughout the program will have more in common. Such techniques can improve the results of the “Compression” approach (discussed below) at the expense of efficiency.

**The “Reconstruction” Approach** If it is easy for the verifier to infer a correct annotation, then such annotations can be elided. For example, Necula shows how simple techniques may be used for automatically reconstructing large portions of the proofs produced by the Touchstone compiler [18].

It is important that verification time not unduly suffer, however. For this reason, code producers should know the effects that annotation elision can have. Unfortunately, in expressive systems such as TALx86, many forms of type reconstruction are intractable or undecidable. The verifier could provide some simple heuristics or default guesses, but such maneuvers are weaker forms of the “bake it in” approach.

**The “Compression” Approach** Given a collection of annotations, we could create a more concise representation that contains the same information. One technique for producing a compact wire format is to run a standard program such as `gzip` on a serialized version. If the repetition in the annotations manifests itself as repetition in the byte stream, this technique can be amazingly effective. However, it does not help improve the time or space required for verification if the byte stream is uncompressed prior to processing.

A slightly more domain-specific technique is to create a binary encoding that shares common subterms between annotations. This approach is effectively common subexpression elimination on types. Since the verifier is aware of this sharing, it can exploit it to consume less space. There

is an interesting trade-off with respect to in-place modification. If a simplification (such as converting an annotation to a canonical form for internal use) is sound in all contexts, then it can be performed once on the shared term. However, if a transformation is context-dependent, the verifier must make a copy in the presence of sharing.

Work on reducing the size of JVMIL annotations have largely followed the compression approach [19, 2]. For example, these projects have found ways to exploit similarities across an entire archive of class files. Also, they carefully design the wire format so that downloading and verification may be pipe-lined. The TALx86 encoding does not currently have this property, but there is nothing essential to the language that prevents it.

Shao *et al.* [20] have investigated the engineering trade-offs of sharing in the context of typed intermediate languages. They suggest a consistent use of hash-consing (essentially on-line common subexpression elimination), explicit substitution, and de Bruijn indices as a solution. The problem of managing low-level types during compilation is quite similar to the problem of managing them during verification, but in the case of type-directed compilation it is appropriate to specialize the task to the compiler.

**The “Abbreviation” Approach** The next step beyond simple sharing is to use *higher-order* annotations to factor out common portions. Such annotations are essentially functions at the level of types. This approach was suggested by Tarditi *et al.* in their TIL compiler [22]. As we show in Section 3, this approach can exploit similarities that sharing cannot. Furthermore, higher-order annotations make it relatively easy for a compiler writer to express high-level abstractions within the type system of the target language. In our experience, using abbreviations places no additional burden on the compiler writer since she is already reasoning in terms of these abstractions. However, if the verifier must expand the abbreviations in order to verify the code, no gain in verification space is achieved and verification time may suffer.

In our system, we use *all* of these approaches to reduce annotation size and verification time. However, we have attempted to minimize the “bake it in” and “don’t optimize” approaches in favor of the other techniques. Unlike `javac`, `ECC` or `Touchstone`, TALx86 makes no commitment to calling convention or data representation. In fact, it has no built-in notion of functions; all control flow is just between blocks of code. The design challenge for TALx86, then, is to provide generally useful constructors that compilers can use in novel ways to encode the safety of their compilation strategy.

However, as a type system, TALx86 does “bake in” more than a primitive logical description of the machine. For example, it builds in a distinction between integers and pointers. Also, memory locations are statically divided into code and data (although extensions support run-time code generation [9]). In order to investigate the practicality of expressive low-level safety policies, we have relied on a rigorous, informal proof of soundness and a procedural implementation of the verifier. This approach has allowed us to examine the feasibility of compiler-independent safety policies on a far larger scale than has been previously possible.

In essence, the motivation for our compiler is to stress the implementation of all these ideas with a medium-size application. In that vein, the compiler consists of 39 modules;

type-safe linking[7] allows them to be compiled separately.

### 3 Compiling to TALx86: An Extended Example

In this section, we briefly review the structure of the TALx86 type system, its annotations, and the process of verification. More thorough discussions of the underlying formalism may be found elsewhere [16, 14]. Here, we concentrate on the details relevant to our study.

A TALx86 object file consists of Intel IA32 assembly language instructions and data. As in a conventional assembly language, the instructions and data are organized into labeled sequences. Unlike conventional assembly language, some labels are equipped with a typing annotation. The typing annotations on the labels of instruction sequences, called *code types*, specify a typing pre-condition that must be satisfied before control may be transferred to the label. The pre-condition specifies, among other things, the types of registers and stack slots. For example, if the code type annotating a label *L* is  $\{\text{eax}:\text{int4}, \text{ebx}:\text{S}(3), \text{ecx}:\sim^*[\text{int4}, \text{int4}]\}$ , then control may only be transferred to the address denoted by *L* when the register *eax* contains a 4-byte integer, the register *ebx* contains the integer value 3, and the register *ecx* contains a pointer to a pair of 4-byte integers.

Verification of code proceeds by taking each labeled instruction sequence and building a typing context that assumes registers have values with types as specified by the pre-condition. Each instruction is then type-checked, in sequence, under the current set of context assumptions, possibly producing a new context. For most instructions, the verifier can automatically infer a suitable typing post condition in a style similar to data-flow analysis or strongest post-conditions. Some instructions require additional annotations to help the verifier. For example, in some settings, it is necessary to explicitly coerce values to an isomorphic type or super type or to explicitly instantiate polymorphic type variables.

Not all labels require a typing annotation. However, code blocks without annotations may be checked multiple times under different contexts, depending upon the control-flow paths of the program. To ensure termination of verification, the type-checker requires annotations on labels that are (a) moved into a register, the stack, or data structure (*e.g.* exception handlers), (b) are the targets of backwards branches (*e.g.* loop headers), or (c) are exported from the object file module (*e.g.* function entry points.) These restrictions ensure that verification of an object file terminates.

As in a conventional compiler, our certifying compiler translates the high-level control flow constructs of Popcorn into suitable collections of labeled instruction sequences with appropriate low-level control transfers. For present purposes, control flow in Popcorn takes one of three forms:

- An intra-procedural jump (*e.g.*, loops and conditionals)
- A function call or return
- An invocation of the current exception handler

Currently, our compiler only performs intra-procedural optimizations, so the code types for function entry labels are quite uniform and can be derived systematically from the source-level function’s type. For simplicity, we discuss these code types first. We then discuss the code types for labels internal to functions, focusing on why they are more

complicated than function entries. We emphasize that the distinction between the different flavors of code labels (function entries, internal labels, exception handlers) is a Popcorn convention encoded in the pre-conditions and is in no way specific to TALx86. (Indeed, we have constructed other toy compilers that use radically different conventions.)

In what follows, we present relevant TALx86 constructs as necessary, but for the purposes of this paper, it is sufficient to treat the types as low-level syntax for describing pre-conditions. Our purpose is not to dwell on the artifacts of TALx86 or its relative expressiveness. Rather, we want to give an intuitive feeling for the following claims which we believe transcend TALx86:

- If the safety policy does not bake in data and control flow abstractions, then the annotations the compiler uses to encode them can become large.
- In fact, the annotations describing compiler conventions consume much more space than the annotations that are specific to a particular source program.
- Although the compiler convention annotations are large, they are also very uniform and repetitious, though they become less so in the presence of optimizations.

Because of this focus, we purposely do not explain some of the aspects of the annotations other than to mention the general things they are encoding. The reader interested in such details should consult the literature[16, 14, 7, 13, 6, 21].

#### 3.1 Function Entry Labels

As a running example, we consider a Popcorn function *foo* which takes one parameter, an *int*, and returns an *int*. The Popcorn type *int* is compiled to the TALx86 type *int4*. Arithmetic operations are allowed on values of this type but treating them as pointers is not. Our compiler uses the standard C calling convention for the IA32. Under this convention, the parameters are passed on the stack, the caller pops the parameters, the return address is shallowest on the stack, and the return value is passed in register EAX. All of these specifics are encoded in TALx86 by giving *foo* this pre-condition:

```
foo: ∀s:Ts. {esp: {esp: int4::s eax:int4}::int4::s}
```

The pre-condition for *foo* concerns only ESP (the stack pointer) and requires that this register point to a stack that contains a return address (which itself has a pre-condition), then an *int4* (*i.e.* the parameter), and then some stack, *s*. The return address expects an *int4* in register EAX and the stack to have shape *int4::s*. The pre-condition is polymorphic over the “rest” of the stack as indicated by the forall-quantification over the stack-type variables *s*. This allows a caller to abstract the current type of the stack upon entry, and ensure that the type is preserved upon return. Types in TALx86 are classified into kinds (types of types), so that we do not confuse “standard” types such as *int4* with non-standard types such as stack types. To maintain the distinction, we must label the bound type variable *s* with its kind (*Ts*).

Notice that our annotation already includes much more information than it would need to if the safety policy dictated a calling convention. In that case, we would presumably just give the parameter types and return type of the function.

Our annotation does not quite describe the standard C calling convention. In particular, the standard requires EBX, ESI, and EDI to be callee-save. (It also requires EBP, traditionally the frame pointer, to be callee-save. Our compiler uses EBP for the exception handler.) We encode callee-save registers using polymorphism:<sup>1</sup>

```
foo: ∀s:Ts a1:T4 a2:T4 a3:T4.
  {esp: {esp: int4::s eax:int4 ebx:a1 esi:a2 edi:a3}
    ::int4::s
    ebx:a1 esi:a2 edi:a3}
```

This pre-condition indicates that for any standard types  $a1, a2, a3$ ,<sup>2</sup> the appropriate registers must have those types before `foo` is called and again when the return address is invoked. This annotation restricts the behavior of `foo` to preserve these registers since it does not know of any other values with these types. Notice that if we wish to use different conventions about which registers should be callee-saves, then we need only change the pre-condition on `foo`. In particular, we do not need to change the underlying type system of TALx86.

Much more detail is required to encode our compiler’s translation of exception handling, so we just sketch the main ideas. We reserve register EBP to point into the middle of the stack where a pointer to the current exception handler resides. This handler expects an exception packet in register EAX. Since `foo` might need to raise an exception, its pre-condition must encode this strategy. Also, it must encode that if `foo` returns normally, the exception handler is still in EBP. In the arcane syntax of TALx86, we express all these details as follows:

```
foo: ∀s1:Ts s2:Ts a1:T4 a2:T4 a3:T4.
  {esp: {esp: int4::s1@{esp:s2 eax:exn}::s2
    ebp: {esp:s2 eax:exn}::s2
    eax:int4
    ebx:a1 esi:a2 edi:a3
    ::int4::s1@{esp:s2 eax:exn}::s2}
    ebp: {esp:s2 eax:exn}::s2
    ebx:a1 esi:a2 edi:a3}
```

We urge the reader not to focus on the details other than to notice that none of the additions are particular to `foo`, nor would it be appropriate for a safety policy to bake in this specific treatment of exception handlers. Also, we have assumed there is a type `exn` for exception packets. TALx86 does not provide this type directly, so our compiler must encode its own representation using an extensible sum[6]. Each of the four occurrences of `exn` above should in fact be replaced by the typing expression

```
∃c:Tm ~*[(~T~rw(c)*[int4~rw])~rw,c]
```

but in the interest of type-setting, we spare the reader the result.

For the sake of completeness, we offer a final amendment to make this pre-condition correct. Our compiler schedules function calls while some heap records may be partially initialized. This strategy is better than the “don’t optimize” approach of always initializing records within a basic block, but it requires that we convince the verifier that no aliases to

partially initialized records escape. For reasons not relevant to this discussion, the pre-condition for `foo` must be polymorphic over two *capability variables*[21] for this approach to work:

```
foo: ∀s1:Ts s2:Ts e1:Tcap e2:Tcap a1:T4 a2:T4 a3:T4.
  {esp: {esp: int4::s1@{esp:s2 eax:exn cap:e2}::s2
    ebp: {esp:s2 eax:exn cap:e2}::s2
    eax:int4
    ebx:a1 esi:a2 edi:a3
    cap: &[e1,e2]}
    ::int4::s1@{esp:s2 eax:exn cap:e2}::s2}
  ebp: {esp:s2 eax:exn cap:e2}::s2
  ebx:a1 esi:a2 edi:a3
  cap: &[e1,e2]}
```

In short, because our compiler has complicated inter-procedural invariants, the naive encoding into TALx86 is anything but concise. (The unconvinced reader is invited to encode a function which takes a function pointer as a parameter.) However, the only parts particular to our example function `foo` are the return type, which is written once, and the parameter types, which are written twice. Moreover, even these parts are the same for all functions that take and return integer values.

### 3.2 Internal Labels

In this section, we present the pre-conditions for labels that are only targets of intra-procedural jumps. For simplicity, we only discuss labels in functions that do not declare any local exception handlers. This special case is by far the most common, so it is worth considering explicitly. Because our compiler does perform intra-procedural optimizations, most relevantly register allocation, the pre-conditions for internal labels are less uniform than those for function entry labels. Specifically, they must encode several properties about the program point that the label designates:

- A local variable may reside in a register or on the stack.
- Some stack slots may not hold live values, so along different control-flow paths to the label, a stack slot may have values of different types.
- Some callee-save values may be stored on the stack while others remain in registers.
- Some heap records may be partially initialized.

First we describe the relevant aspects of our term translation. Any callee-save values that cannot remain in registers are stored on the stack in the function prologue and restored into registers in the function epilogue. The space for this storage is just shallower than the return address. Local variables that do not fit in registers are stored in “spill slots” that are shallowest on the stack. The number of spill slots remains constant in the body of a function. This strategy is fairly normal, but it is far too specific to be dictated by TALx86. Indeed, our original Popcorn compiler did not perform register allocation and simply pushed and popped variables on the stack as needed.

The pre-condition for internal labels gives the type and location (register or spill slot) for each live local variable. If a stack slot is not live, we must still give it some “placeholder” type so that the stack type describes a stack of the correct

<sup>1</sup>Here and below, underlining is for emphasis; it is not part of TALx86.

<sup>2</sup>The kind  $T4$  includes all types whose values fit in a register.

size. Different control-flow paths may use the same stack slot for temporary variables of different types. In these cases, no single type can serve as this placeholder. TALx86 provides a primitive type `top4` which is a super-type of all types of kind T4. We give this type to the dead stack slots at the control-flow join and the appropriate subtyping on control transfers is handled implicitly by the verifier.

In addition to live variables, all of the invariants involving the stack, the exception handler, etc. must be preserved as control flows through labels, so this information looks much like it does for function entry labels.

For example, suppose our function `foo` uses all of the callee-save registers and needs three spill slots. Furthermore, suppose that at an internal label 1 there are two live variables, both of type `int4`, one in register ESI and one in the middle spill slot. Then a correct pre-condition for 1 is:

```
1: ∀s1:Ts s2:Ts e1:Tcap e2:Tcap a1:T4 a2:T4 a3:T4.
{esp:
  top4::int4::top4::a3::a2::a1
  ::{esp: int4::s1@{esp:s2 eax:exn cap:e2}::s2
    ebp: {esp:s2 eax:exn cap:e2}::s2
    eax:int4
    ebx:a1 esi:a2 edi:a3
    cap: &[e1,e2]}
  ::int4::s1@{esp:s2 eax:exn cap:e2}::s2}
ebp: {esp:s2 eax:exn cap:e2}::s2
cap: &[e1,e2]
esi: int4}
```

Our register allocator tries not to use callee-save registers so that functions do not have to save and restore them. For example, suppose registers ESI and EDI are not used in a function. Then internal labels will encode that a value of type `a1` is on the stack in the appropriate place, ESI contains a value of type `a2`, and EDI contains a value of type `a3`.

If one or more records were partially initialized on entry to 1, then the pre-condition would have a more complicated capability; the details of this strategy are not important. What should be clear at this point is that the type annotation for a given internal label will be considerably less uniform than that of a function entry point.

## 4 Recovering Conciseness

Continuing the examples from the previous section, we describe and critique three techniques for reducing the size of annotations. The next section quantifies the effectiveness of these and other techniques.

### 4.1 Sharing Common Subterms

Since the annotations repeat information, we can greatly reduce their total size by replacing identical terms with a pointer to a shared term. This technique is common referred to as “hash consing”. As an example, consider again the pre-condition for the function `foo` which takes and returns an `int`:

```
type exn = ∃c:Tm ~*[(^T^rw(c)*[int4^rw])^rw,c]
foo:∀s1:Ts s2:Ts e1:Tcap e2:Tcap a1:T4 a2:T4 a3:T4.
{esp: {esp: int4::s1@{esp:s2 eax:exn cap:e2}::s2
  ebp: {esp:s2 eax:exn cap:e2}::s2
  eax:int4
  ebx:a1 esi:a2 edi:a3
```

```
    cap: &[e1,e2]}
    ::int4::s1@{esp:s2 eax:exn cap:e2}::s2}
ebp: {esp:s2 eax:exn cap:e2}::s2
ebx:a1 esi:a2 edi:a3
cap: &[e1,e2]}
```

Removing some common subterms by hand, we can represent the same information with the following pseudo-annotation:

```
1 = ∃c:Tm ~*[(^T^rw(c)*[int4^rw])^rw,c]
2 = &[e1,e2]
3 = {esp:s2 eax: [1] cap:e2}::s2
4 = int4::s1@ [3]
5 = {esp: [4] ebp: [3] eax:int4
    ebx:a1 esi:a2 edi:a3 cap: [2] }::[4]

foo:∀s1:Ts s2:Ts e1:Tcap e2:Tcap a1:T4 a2:T4 a3:T4.
{esp: [5] ebp: [3] ebx:a1 esi:a2 edi:a3 cap: [2] }
```

Other pre-conditions can share subterms with this one. For example, the pre-condition for 1 from the previous section can be re-written as:

```
1: ∀s1:Ts s2:Ts e1:Tcap e2:Tcap a1:T4 a2:T4 a3:T4.
{esp: top4::int4::top4::a3::a2::a1:: [5]
  ebp: [3] cap: [2] esi:int4}
```

Despite exploiting significant sharing, this example illustrates some limitations of sharing common subterms. First, we would like to share all the occurrences of “`s1:Ts s2:Ts ... a3:T4`”, but whether or not we can do so depends on the abstract syntax of the language. Second, pre-conditions for functions with different parameter types or return types cannot exploit subterms 4 or 5.

### 4.2 Parameterized Abbreviations

TALx86 provides user-defined (*i.e.* compiler-defined) higher-order type constructors. These functions from types to types have several uses. In particular, they are necessary to encode source-level type constructors, such as array, list, or object types. Here we show how to use higher-order type constructors to define parameterized abbreviations. Such abbreviations can be used to share common patterns that hash-consing of subterms cannot, but for our verifier, it is difficult to exploit abbreviations during verification.

Since every function entry pre-condition created by Popcorn is the same except for its parameter types and return types, we can create a parameterized abbreviation that describes the generic situation. Then at each function entry label, we apply the abbreviation to the appropriate types.

```
type F = fn params:Ts ret:T4.
∀s1:Ts s2:Ts e1:Tcap e2:Tcap a1:T4 a2:T4 a3:T4.
{esp: {esp: params@s1@{esp:s2 eax:exn cap:e2}::s2
  ebp: {esp:s2 eax:exn cap:e2}::s2
  eax: ret
  ebx:a1 esi:a2 edi:a3
  cap: &[e1,e2]}
  ::params@s1@{esp:s2 eax:exn cap:e2}::s2}
ebp: {esp:s2 eax:exn cap:e2}::s2
ebx:a1 esi:a2 edi:a3
```

```
cap: &[e1,e2]}
```

```
foo: F int4::se int4
```

The only new feature other than the abbreviation is the type `se` which describes empty stacks. We use it here to terminate a list of parameter types. The use of abbreviations greatly simplifies the structure of the compiler because it centralizes invariants such as calling conventions. In addition, abbreviations make it easier to print out meaningful error messages when a type-error is encountered.

It is not clear how a compiler-independent verifier could exploit an abbreviation like `F` during verification time. Suppose the first instruction in block `foo` increments the input parameter. The verifier must check that given the pre-condition `F int4::se int4`, it must be safe to perform an increment on the value on top of the stack. This verification requires inspecting the result of the abbreviation application since the verifier does not know that the argument `int4::se` describes the top of the stack. As we show in the section on experimental results, using abbreviations sometimes slows down verification because of this phenomenon.

The abbreviation `F` can be used often because all function entry pre-conditions are similar. To use abbreviations for internal labels, we must capture the additional properties that distinguish these pre-conditions. In addition to `F`'s parameters, we also need parameters for the spill slots, the live registers, and something to do with partial initialization issues. We also use a primitive type constructor for combining two pre-conditions. That way we can pass in the live registers as one pre-condition and merge it with a pre-condition that describes the reserved registers.

```
type L =
fn params:Ts ret:T4 spills:Ts part:Tcap regs:Tpre.
  \s1:Ts s2:Ts e1:Tcap e2:Tcap a1:T4 a2:T4 a3:T4.
  {esp:
    spills@a3::a2::a1
    ::{esp: params@{esp:s2 eax:exn cap:e2}::s2
      ebp: {esp:s2 eax:exn cap:e2}::s2
      eax: ret
      ebx:a1 esi:a2 edi:a3
      cap: &[e1,e2]}
    ::params@{esp:s2 eax:exn cap:e2}::s2}
  ebp: {esp:s2 eax:exn cap:e2}::s2
  cap: &[part,e1,e2]}
  & regs
```

```
l: L int4::se int4
  top4::int4::top4::se ce {esi:int4}
```

`L` is correct, but it is only useful for labels in functions where all three callee-save values are stored on the stack. With a “don’t optimize” approach, we could make all functions meet this description, but we lose most of the advantages of callee-save registers as a result. A better approach is to provide  $2^3 = 8$  different abbreviations, one for each combination of callee-save values being stored on the stack. In fact, we only need four such abbreviations since our register allocator uses the callee-save registers in a fixed order. Since the compiler is the creator of the abbreviations, this specialization is possible and appropriate.

### 4.3 Eliding Pre-conditions

Recall that the verifier checks a code block by assuming its pre-condition is true and then processing each instruction in turn, checking it for safety and computing a pre-condition for the remainder of the block. At a control transfer to another block, it suffices to ensure that the current pre-condition implies the pre-condition on the destination label.

TALx86 takes a “reconstruction” approach by allowing many label pre-conditions to be elided. To check a control transfer to a block with an elided pre-condition, the verifier simply uses the current pre-condition at the source of the transfer to check the target block. Hence if a block with elided pre-condition has multiple control flow predecessors, it is verified multiple times under (possibly) different pre-conditions.

To ensure termination of verification, we must prohibit annotation-free loops in the control flow graph. For this reason, TALx86 allows a pre-condition to be elided only if the block is only the target of forward jumps. Even with this restriction, the number of times a block is checked is the number of *paths* through the control-flow graph to the block such that no block on the path has an explicit pre-condition. This number can be exponential in the number of code blocks, so it is unwise to elide explicit pre-conditions indiscriminantly. As the next section demonstrates, an exponential number of paths is rare, but it does occur and it can have disastrous effects on verification time.

The approach taken by our compiler is to set an *elision threshold*,  $T$ , and insist that no code block is verified more than  $T$  times. Notice that  $T = 0$  means all labels have explicit pre-conditions and  $T = 1$  means all merge points have explicit pre-conditions. For higher values of  $T$ , we expect space requirements to decrease, but verification time to increase. Given a value for  $T$ , we might like to minimize the number of labels that have explicit pre-conditions. Unfortunately, this problem is NP-Complete for  $T \geq 3$ . Currently, the compiler does a simple greedy depth-first traversal of the control-flow graph, leaving off pre-conditions until the threshold demands otherwise.

## 5 Experimental Results

In this section, we present what we consider to be the first quantitative study on the practicality of certifying a real program using a type system not specifically designed for the compiler or source language. We conclude that targeting compiler-independent safety policies is practical and scalable, but that careful use of appropriate techniques can significantly reduce verification space and time.

Our example is the Popcorn compiler itself. This choice saves us the effort of writing a compiler and an application. It also suggests that our application is useful and our source language is realistic. Of course, studying a new application written by ourselves in our own language makes many comparisons impossible. Since we are more interested in studying the overheads of compiling to expressive low-level safety policies than in producing excellent code, we find this approach attractive.

The compiler consists of 39 Popcorn source files compiled separately. The more interesting optimizations performed are Chaitin-style intra-procedural register allocation[4] (using optimistic spilling[3] and conservative coalescing[5]) and the elimination of fully redundant null-checks for object dereferences. The entire compiler is roughly 18,000 lines

of source code and compiles to 816 kilobytes of object code (335 kilobytes after running `strip`).

The sizes we report include the sum across files of all annotations, not just those for code labels. They do not include interface information used for type-safe linking. All execution times were measured on a 266MHz Pentium II running Windows NT 4.0. The verifier and assembler are written in O’Caml[12] and compiled to native code.

We first show that naive choices in the annotation language and compiler can produce a system with unacceptable space and/or time overhead. Then we show that our actual implementation avoids these pitfalls. Next we adjust various parameters and disable various techniques to discover the usefulness of individual approaches and how they interact. Finally, we discuss how the overhead of TALx86 could be lowered further by extending the successful techniques to other aspects of the system.

## 5.1 Two Bad Approaches

A simple encoding of the TALx86 annotations is insufficient. First, consider a system where we do not use the abbreviations developed in Section 4, our type annotations repeat types rather than sharing them, and we put types on all code labels. Then the total annotation size for our program is over 4.5 megabytes, several times the size of the object code. As for verification time, if we make no attempt to share common subterms created during verification, then it takes 59 seconds to verify all of the files.

A second possibility is to remove as many pre-conditions as possible. That is, we only put an explicit pre-condition on a code label if the label is used as a call destination, a backwards branch destination, or a first-class value. Indeed, the total size of our annotations drops to 1.85 megabytes. However, the verifier now checks some code blocks a very large number of times. Total verification time rises to 18 minutes and 30 seconds.

These two coarse experiments yield some immediate conclusions. First, the actual amount of safety information describing a compiled program is large so we would like to abbreviate it. Second, the number of loop-free paths through our application code is, in places, much larger than the size of the code. Therefore, it is unwise to make verification time proportional to the number of loop-free paths as the second approach does.

The latter conclusion is important for certified code frameworks (such as proof-carrying code) that construct verification conditions at verification time via a form of weakest pre-condition computation [11]. If done naively, the constructed condition can have exponential size by creating a different logical clause for every loop-free path. For a compiler to exploit the weakness of such a pre-condition, it would need to have optimized based on an exponential amount of path-sensitive information. We conclude that constructing weakest pre-conditions in this way is impractical and wasteful. We propose that such systems should use the annotations to guide the construction of the verification condition.

## 5.2 A Usable System

Having shown how bad matters can get, we now present the actual overhead that our system achieves. First we identify the main techniques used and the overall annotation size and verification time that result. Then we show that verification time is roughly proportional to file size which suggests that

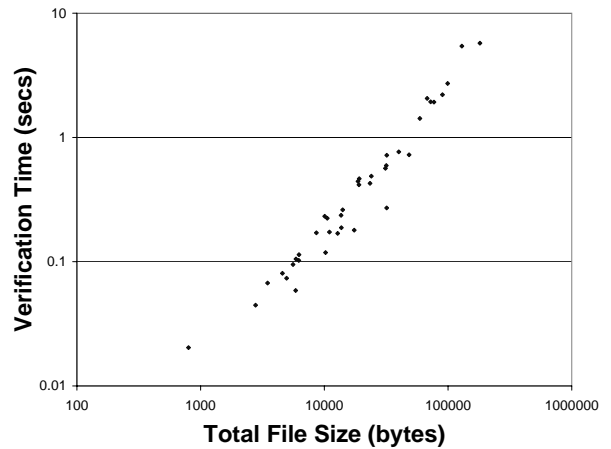


Figure 1: Verification Time vs. File Size

our approach should scale to larger applications. Finally, we partition the source code into several styles, show that the overhead is reasonable for all of them, and discuss salient differences.

Unlike the “straw man” systems constructed above, the real encoding of TALx86 annotations uses several tables to share common occurrences. Specifically, uses of identifiers, types, kinds, and coercions are actually indices into the appropriate table which contains the annotation. The code producer avoids duplicates when constructing the table. The benefit of this approach is proportional to the amount of repetition; there is a small penalty for annotations that occur only once. We call this technique “sharing”; more specifically it is full common subexpression elimination on types at the file level.

Since this sharing will not create parameterized abbreviations, we also use the abbreviations developed in Section 3.

We set the elision threshold to four. At this value, many forward control flow points will not need explicit pre-conditions, but no block is verified more than a small number of times.

Finally, the verifier uses “hash consing” to share types that are created during verification. That is, when creating a new type, the verifier consults a table to see if it has encountered the type previously. If so, it uses the type in the table. Moreover, reductions on higher-order type constructors are performed in a lazy manner: in particular, we use a weak-head normalization strategy with memoization to avoid both unnecessary reductions and duplicated reductions. As such, other uses of the type will not have to recompute the reduction. Because of complications with the scope of abbreviations, the hash consing table is emptied before verifying each file. If memory becomes scarce, we could empty the table at any point, but this measure has not been necessary in practice. Note that the use of hash consing cannot affect the size of explicit annotations.

With this system, total annotation size drops from 4.5 megabytes to 419 kilobytes and verification time is reduced from 59 to 34.5 seconds. As for compilation time, our compiler takes 40 seconds to compile the Popcorn source files into ASCII TALx86 files which are essentially Microsoft Assembler (MASM) style files augmented with annotations. A separate tool takes 23 seconds to assemble all of these files;



Style	Object Code (kB)	Annotations (kB)	Verification Time (sec)	Size Ratio	Time Ratio
Polymorphic Libraries	36.4	19.6	1.19	.54	46.9
Monomorphic Libraries	34.8	15.1	.94	.43	53.1
Mostly Type Definitions	45.7	30.6	1.29	.67	58.9
Machine-generated	148.4	82.0	6.30	.55	36.6
Compilation	550.0	271.4	22.3	.49	36.8

Figure 2: Effect of Different Code Styles

this time includes the creation of the binary encoding of the annotations with sharing. As we add more optimizations to our compiler, we expect compilation time to increase more than verification time. The latter may actually decrease as object code size decreases.

Performing `gzip` compression on the 419 kilobytes of annotations reduces their size to 163 kilobytes. The ratio of compression is similar to that for our object files; the unstripped files compress from 816 to 252 kilobytes and the stripped files compress from 335 to 102 kilobytes.

A desirable property is that verification time is generally proportional to file size. In theory, TALx86 verification could take exponential time, so we are pleased to see that empirically this has not occurred. Figure 1 plots verification time against total size (object code plus annotations) for all of the files in the compiler. The time stays roughly proportional as file size grows by over an order of magnitude. Small files take proportionally longer to verify because of start-up costs and the overhead of using a hash cons table. Such files take just a fraction of a second to verify, so we consider these costs insignificant.

So far we have presented results for the entire compiler as a whole. By analyzing the results for different styles of code we can gain additional insight. Of course, all of the code is in the same source language, compiled by the same compiler, and written by the authors. Nonetheless, we can partition the files into several broad categories:

- Polymorphic library files: These files provide generally useful utilities such as iterators over generic container types. Examples include files for lists, dictionaries, sets, and re-sizing arrays.
- Monomorphic library files: Examples include files for bit vectors and command-line argument processing.
- Datatype files: These files primarily define types used by the compiler and provide only simple code to create or destruct instances of the type. Examples include files for the abstract syntax of Popcorn, the compiler’s intermediate language, an abstract syntax for TALx86, and an environment maintained while translating from the intermediate language to TALx86.
- Machine-generated files: These files include the scanner and the parser. Compared to other styles of code, they are characterized by a small number of large functions which contain switch statements with many cases. They also have large constant arrays.
- Compilation files: These files actually do the compilation. Examples include files for type-checking, register allocation, and printing the output.

Figure 2 summarizes the annotation size and verification time relative to the categorization.<sup>3</sup> The “Size Ratio” is annotation size divided by the object code size. The “Time Ratio” is the sum of the two sizes divided by the verification time.

Most importantly, all of the size ratios are well within a factor of two and the time ratios are even closer to each other. We conclude that the overhead of producing provably safe machine code is not dominated by any particular style of code we have written. Even so, the results differ enough to make some interesting distinctions.

The datatype files have the largest (worst) size ratio and largest (best) time ratio. The former is because type definitions are compiled into annotations which describe the corresponding TALx86 types, but there is no associated object code. The size ratio can actually be arbitrarily high as the amount of code in a source file goes to zero. The time ratio is also not surprising; the time-consuming part of verification is checking that each instruction is safe given its context.

The relatively high size ratio for machine-generated code is an artifact of how parsers are generated. Essentially, all of the different token types are put into a large union. The code which processes tokens is therefore filled with annotations which coerce values into and out of this union.

The annotation size overhead for polymorphism is slightly larger than we expected. At the source level, a single type modifier lists the type variables for an entire function. Since TALx86 has no notion of function, all of the labels for such a function must express their type variables.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, control transfers between these labels must explicitly instantiate the additional type variables.

Finally, the time ratio is noticeably smaller (worse) for the compilation code. This style of code contains a much higher proportion of function calls. (Libraries have mostly leaf procedures. Machine-generated code has large functions.) Because of the complicated type instantiations that occur at a call site, these instructions take the most time to verify.

### 5.3 Effectiveness of Individual Techniques

So far we have shown that our system achieves reasonable performance and uses a number of techniques for controlling annotation overhead, but we have not seen which of the techniques are effective. In this section, we examine what happens if we selectively disable some of these techniques.

Figure 3 summarizes the total annotation size when the elision threshold is four and the other techniques are used selectively. We discuss this data in detail below. When “Sharing” is no, we do not use tables for sharing types and

<sup>3</sup>The sum of the verification times is slightly less than the time to verify all the files together due to secondary effects.

<sup>4</sup>Pre-conditions can still be elided, fortunately.

		Annotation Size (kB)		Verification Time (sec)	
Sharing	Abbreviations	Uncompressed	Compressed (kB)	No hash consing	Hash consing
no	no	2041	155	50	38
no	yes	793	132	42	36
yes	no	503	205	37.5	34.5
yes	yes	419	163	40.5	34.5

Figure 3: Effect of Abbreviations, Sharing Subterms, and Hash Consing

coercions. Instead, we repeat the types directly in the annotations. We still share identifiers so that the lengths of strings is insignificant. If “Abbreviations” is no, then all abbreviations are fully expanded before the annotations are written. “Uncompressed” is the total size of all the annotations. “Compressed” is the sum of the result of running `gzip` on each file’s annotations separately. The final two columns give total execution time with and without hash consing enabled.

We first discuss the effect of sharing and abbreviations on the explicit annotation size. Both techniques appear very effective if we ignore the effect of `gzip`. Abbreviations alone reduce size by a factor of three whereas sharing alone reduces size by a factor of four. Using abbreviations and sharing reduces size by about another fifteen percent as compared to a system with just sharing. Hence neither technique subsumes the other, but they do recover much of the same repetition.

However, if what we really care about is the size of annotations that must be sent to a code consumer, then we should consider running `gzip`. It is clear that `gzip` is extremely effective; our worst result for compressed annotations is a factor of two better than our best result for uncompressed annotations. More subtle is the fact that `gzip` achieves a smaller result when sharing is *not* used in our binary encoding. This surprising result is a product of how our tables are implemented and how `gzip` performs compression. In short, `gzip` constructs its own tables and uses a much more compact format than our encoding. Worse, our tables hide repetition from `gzip` which looks for common strings. We conclude that if annotation size is the primary concern, then the binary encoding should remain “`gzip`-friendly”.

Abbreviations are actually much more effective than the data in the figure indicates. The compiler’s abbreviations are only used for code pre-conditions, so optimization on this one aspect of annotation size must eventually demonstrate Amdahl’s Law. We considered what the total annotation size would be if we removed *all* explicit code pre-conditions. Of course, the result of this drastic measure is unverifiable, but it provides a lower bound for the effectiveness of the abbreviations.<sup>5</sup> The total size is still 377 kilobytes, so abbreviations reduced the size of code pre-conditions by about a factor of three.

We now discuss the effect of the techniques on verification time. Here `gzip` is useless since our verifier works on uncompressed annotations. Without hash consing, sharing significantly reduces verification time. While the verifier under these conditions does not share types that it creates during verification, it does share types that originally occur in the annotations. The result suggests that these types cover many of those used during verification.<sup>6</sup> Without sharing,

abbreviations are a great help since they recover the most common occurrences. However, with sharing, abbreviations actually *hurt* verification time. Essentially, the additional gains in sharing are outweighed by the time to expand the abbreviations during verification.

With hash consing, the different verification times are much closer to each other. Effectively, using a table rediscovered any sharing, so without sharing initially we only have to pay the cost to achieve this rediscovery. More interestingly, the penalty for using abbreviations goes away. We believe this result is due to the fact that with hash consing, any abbreviation applied to the same argument only needs to be expanded once and then the result can be used in multiple places.

Using hash consing reduces verification time significantly, but only with a careful implementation of the hashing. For example, if we give our hash cons table a size near a power of two (as number theory warns against), verification time takes longer than without hash consing at all. The good news is that optimizing the verifier can sometimes be reduced to fundamental properties of data structures. The bad news is this fact means the difference between verification times under different parameters is more brittle than we would like.

As explained in the previous section, TALx86 code blocks that are only targets of forward branches do not need annotations, but they will be re-verified along every unannotated control-flow path. Given an elision threshold  $T$ , our compiler ensures that no block will be verified more than  $T$  times. Subject to this constraint, it uses a simple greedy algorithm to leave annotations off labels. Figure 4 shows the effect of changing the value of  $T$ . Sharing and abbreviations are both used.

The left chart in Figure 4 shows that total annotation size drops by over fifteen percent as  $T$  is 1 instead of 0. We conclude that low-level systems should not require pre-conditions on all blocks. However, the additional space savings as  $T$  is given values larger than 8 are quite small. This fact justifies the use of  $T = 4$  for the other data presented.

The other charts in Figure 4 show the verification time for different values of  $T$ . Verification time initially drops as  $T$  gets the value 1 instead of 0. This phenomenon indicates that it takes a lot of time to process an explicit annotation and compare it to a pre-condition. As  $T$  takes values 2, 4, 8, and 16, verification time rises noticeably but only by a few seconds. We conclude that this range of values allow for different reasonable time-space trade-offs. As  $T$  takes larger values, verification time rises sharply. Although very few additional blocks have their pre-conditions elided, these blocks are then checked a very large number of times. In fact, for large  $T$ , the time spent verifying different files varies drastically since most files do not have any such blocks.

<sup>5</sup>Actually, there are a few other places where the abbreviations are used, such as when a polymorphic function is instantiated at a function type, but such situations are exceedingly rare in our code.

<sup>6</sup>Parsing time is a small but noticeable fraction of the difference.

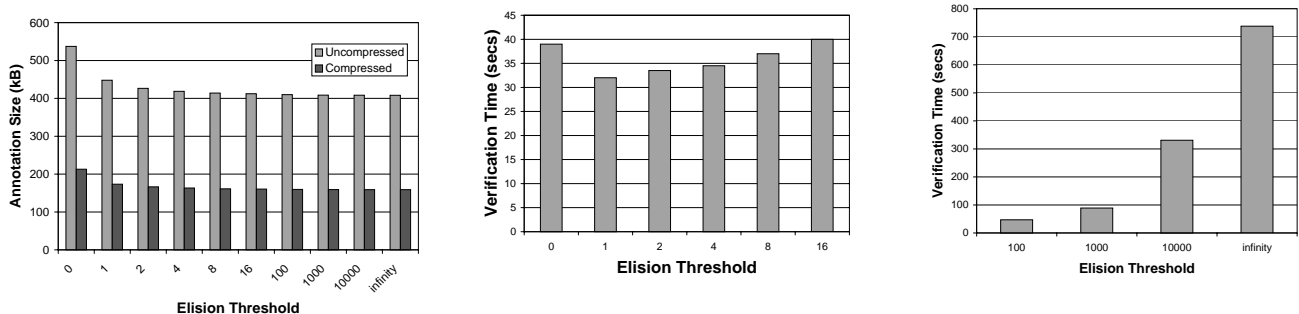


Figure 4: Effect of Elision Threshold

#### 5.4 Useful Extensions

We have presented a system where uncompressed safety annotations consume roughly half the space of the object code they describe, and we have given techniques (sharing, abbreviations, and elision) that help in this regard. Now we investigate whether the current system is the best we can hope to achieve or if the techniques could contribute more to reducing the TALx86 overhead. By moving beyond what the current system supports, we demonstrate the latter conclusion.

First, we notice that sharing common subterms was so effective because it shares type annotations across an entire file. The file level is currently the best we can do because we compile each file separately. In a scenario where all of the object files are packaged together, it may be reasonable to share annotations in a single table for the entire package. Although our current tools cannot process such a package, we are able to generate it by hand and measure its size. The total size drops from 419 kilobytes to 338 kilobytes. We conclude that different files in our project have many similar annotations; we should be able to exploit this property to further reduce overhead.

Second, the annotations that describe what coercions apply at each instruction are not currently shared. While there are common occurrences in the annotations, some of the most common only take one byte to represent, so sharing these annotations must carefully avoid increasing space requirements.

Third, verification time suffers significantly from memory allocation and garbage collection. Although we have implemented hash consing to address this bottleneck, Shao *et al.*[20] use their experience with type-directed compilers to suggest that two other devices, de Bruijn indices and explicit substitutions, can further improve performance. Unfortunately, modifying our verifier to use these techniques is non-trivial, so we relegate such an investigation to future work.

Fourth, some well-chosen uses of type reconstruction could eliminate many of the explicit annotations. For example, if the verifier performed unification of (first-order) type variables, then the compiler could eliminate all of the type applications at control transfer points. This elision would improve our annotation size to 330 kilobytes. (We computed this figure by eliding the instantiations even though the verifier cannot process the result.) More importantly, re-

construction approaches improve the size even in the presence of `gzip`; the compressed annotations drop from 163 kilobytes to 141 kilobytes in this case.

In summary, the TALx86 system shows that techniques such as sharing and elision make certified code scalable and practical, but even TALx86 could use these techniques more aggressively to achieve lower overhead.

#### 6 Conclusions

Our Popcorn compiler encodes the safety of its output in TALx86. As a Popcorn application itself, it also serves as the largest application we know of that has been compiled to a safe machine language. Because we believe safety policies should not be tailored to a particular compiler, we encode the aspects of Popcorn compilation relevant to safety in the more primitive constructs of TALx86. We have found that the most important factor in the scalability of certifying compilation is the size of code pre-conditions.

Based on our experience, we present the following conclusions for compiler-independent low-level code certification systems.

- Common subexpression elimination of explicit annotations is a practical necessity. Sharing terms created during verification is also helpful, but it is important to carefully manage the overheads inherent in doing so.
- Parameterized abbreviations can be usefully exploited by compilers to encode their invariants. Although abbreviations improve the size of explicit annotations, it is more difficult to exploit abbreviations during verification.
- Serial compression utilities, such as `gzip`, are very helpful, but they are not a complete substitute for other techniques. Moreover, if good compression is a system requirement, one should understand the compression algorithm when designing the uncompressed format.
- Overhead should never be proportional to the number of loop-free control-flow paths in a program.

We believe these suggestions should assist other projects avoid common pitfalls and focus on the important factors for achieving expressiveness and scalability.

## Acknowledgments

Much of the TALx86 infrastructure was written by other members of the TAL research group. Fred Smith contributed greatly to the prototype Popcorn compiler used for bootstrapping. We proved that optimal annotation elision is NP-complete for an elision threshold greater than five; David Kempe refined the claim to include all thresholds greater than two.

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