A Formal Model of Affordances for Flexible Robotic Task Execution

Daniel Beßler ¹ and Robert Porzel ² and Mihai Pomarlan ³ and Michael Beetz ¹ and Rainer Malaka ² and John Bateman ³

Abstract. One of the key reasoning tasks of robotic agents is inferring possible actions that can be accomplished with a given object at hand. This cognitive task is commonly referred to as inferring the affordances of objects. In this paper, we propose a novel conceptualization of affordances and its realization as a description logic ontology. The key idea of the framework is that it proposes candidate affordances through inference, and that these can then be validated through physics-based simulation. We showcase the practical use of our conceptualization by means of demonstrating what competency questions an agent equipped with it can answer. The proposed formal model is implemented as a TBox OWL ontology of affordances based on the DOLCE Ultra Light + DnS foundational ontology.

1 INTRODUCTION

Everyday activities, such as preparing meals, setting tables and cleaning up, take place in non-standardized environments and can vary greatly in their procedural execution. Enabling artificial robotic agents to perform such tasks under realistic conditions goes far beyond programming them to perform a specific action sequence in a given environment. Some consider the technological leap necessary to go from achieving a task to mastering an activity to be a pivotal challenge in cognitive robotics today.

Anyone waking up in a household that has not been visited before and entering the unfamiliar kitchen in the morning with the intention to make some coffee, would theoretically have to solve a problem that features an infinitely large search space. Nevertheless, no one would divide the kitchen into a grid and start searching for the coffee grounds, let us say, at square A1. Human agents would start looking for suitable containers within cupboards that are in reach of the coffee maker first. Additionally, in case the filters cannot be found at all, we would consider the use of suitable alternatives such as sieves, paper towels, or else.

In an effort to describe the interaction between living beings and their environment Gibson coined the term affordance stating that:

"The affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill." [10]

Gibson readily acknowledged the problematic ontological character of this concepts by continuing:

"...an affordance is neither an objective property nor a subjective property; or it is both if you like. An affordance cuts across the dichotomy of subjective-objective. [...] It is both physical and psychical, yet neither." [ibid]

The central notion – the capability of living beings to interact with and change their environment are tightly linked to an ability to infer affordances – is undisputed. Additionally, this inference must be based on a coupling of our perceptions of the situation at hand to our knowledge of the world.

The relevance of affordances for autonomous robotics has been recognized by several authors [21]. The reason is that, once outside rigidly structured environments, an agent – biological or artificial – needs to adapt and to some degree improvise, or take advantage of, action possibilities that are conducive to its goals. This needs a theory of affordances, and a reformulation of current object-centric reasoning and planning around these concepts. Without affordance-based reasoning, a robot is, essentially, stuck into thinking about objects as in, is there a lid around here? With affordances, object uses and roles become more important, thus opening up a new avenue for more abstract thinking as in, is there something that can cover a container around here? Such an example is displayed in Figure 1.

Affordances are also important when taking the perspectives of other agents. Household service robots, for example, are often required to arrange an environment – e.g., by setting a table – such that the future actions of human users are enabled. Whether an arrangement is good or not depends on whether it provides the needed affordances for the future action.

In the following, we will give an overview of prior modelling approaches to motivate the congruencies and divergences of our work. Thereafter, we will present our descriptive theory of affordances and how it contributes to reasoning about finding and combining appropriate objects and discovering possible dispositions at hand. Lastly, some practical applications of our models will be presented.

1 Department of Artificial Intelligence, University of Bremen, 28359 Bremen, Germany danielb@beetz@uni-bremen.de
2 Digital Media Lab, University of Bremen, 28359 Bremen, Germany porzel@malaka@tzi.de
3 Department of Linguistics, University of Bremen, 28359 Bremen, Germany pomarlan@bateman@uni-bremen.de

Figure 1. A robot that reasons about what can be used to cover a pot.
2 PREVIOUS WORK

Modelling affordances has been a challenging problem for numerous years. As we seek to build our model on the DOLCE+DnS UltraLite (DUL) foundational framework [15], we will highlight prior approaches as they pertain to the DOLCE modelling paradigm. Other work concerning, for example, the learning of relational affordance models for robots [16], is independent from the respective modelling approach taken. Any of the following approaches could be populated with the learned affordances.

One attempt to model affordances within the DOLCE framework is as Qualities of a Physical Artifact as proposed by Ortman and Kuhn [21]. This modelling approach assumes an affordance to be inherent in a given object (the afforder) and to exist independent of the other entities (the afferees) involved. However, if one models affordances as qualities, questions such as what can something be used with so as to manifest an affordance are out of scope; the answer requires functional relations between objects.

An alternative approach is to model affordances as Events, as proposed by Moralez [17], based on the idea that an affordance happens when the right objects participate in it. The problems that arise with this approach are, besides going against the fundamental construal of events, it also confuses affordances with the act of perceiv- ing them. Agents do not just perceive, but also conceptualize affordances by exploiting similarities underlying classes of situations regardless of whether these situations have been perceived or are imagined.

Yet another approach has been to model functional affordances [2, 11, 13], which describe the typical affordances that an object provides, often because it is designed with particular uses in mind. The cited research highlights situations where substitutions of objects or actions are necessary, and describes how the substitution is guided by knowledge of functional affordances, conceptual similarity of objects or actions from a taxonomy, and a preference order on substitutions. The difference to our approach is that a functional affordance is, essentially, a property of an object; a cup is for holding water, and for drinking from. In our approach, an affordance is rather a descriptive context between several entities.

The model proposed in the following section seeks to remedy the shortcomings of the aforementioned approaches and is based on the dispositional theory of Turvey [25], in which a disposition of an object (the bearer) can be realized when it meets another suitably disposed object (the trigger) in the right conditions (the background). Toyoshima consequently presented an ontological ABox model for dispositions based on Turvey’s insights [24].

However, as Turvey’s approach bases on particular kinds of dispositions inherited by the environment, we want to point out that notions of affordances as a function of environmental properties have been criticized several times [22, 26] as the agentive aspect is ignored – i.e. what is available to the agent. Chemero, for example, defines affordances as relations between abilities of organisms and features of the environment [9]. This definition has also been extended with a notion of interaction based on the view proposed by Norman, who puts the visibility of an object’s affordance at the center [20]. While we regard this view as appropriate for the perspective of human-computer interaction and design, the dispute with Gibson’s view that an affordance is there whether an agent can perceive it or not has not been resolved [19]. In the model proposed herein, as we will elaborate below, an environmentally facilitated affordance exists when it can be conceptualized by an agent as such.

3 THE DESCRIPTIVE AFFORDANCE THEORY

The dispositional theory of Turvey states that a disposition is the property of a thing that is a potential [25]. We are only interested in dispositions that enable robots to perform tasks so we can be more specific regarding the potential of dispositions.

Definition 1 A disposition is a property of an object that can enable an agent to perform a certain task.

It is important to note that we view a task as a conceptualization of an event, abstracting away from particularities of its occurrence by only referring to roles objects need to take during the task. For example, the actual event of an object leaving a hand and landing on the floor can be construed as accidental dropping or intentional throwing of that object. Fundamentally, dispositions are absolute properties and, therefore, not contingent on a given context. We consequently view a disposition as a quality of the environment that is implied by the existence of the object that carries it. Regardless of the exploitation of an object disposition in a given task, the disposition is there as a quality of that object.

We view affordances as descriptions of what objects in the environment offer to the agent, and that conceptualize tasks afforded by them. Hence affordances exist independently of the agents’ ability to manifest them, they are inherited from what the environment offers. However, an affordance is not a property of the environment but rather describes how an agent may make use of some property of the environment by executing the task that is defined by the affordance.

Definition 2 An affordance is the description of a disposition.

Each disposition is described by an affordance that defines the task afforded by the disposition. An apple, for example, has a disposition that affords us to eat it. The task defined by this affordance includes, for example, the role edible, and another role consumer. We distinguish between the role of the carrier of the disposition (the bearer), and the role of the object that is afforded by the disposition (the trigger), and assume that any disposition is described by exactly one affordance that defines both roles.

The manifestation of an affordance is a situation that satisfies the affordance, meaning that an action was performed that executes the afforded task with appropriate objects taking roles during that action. However, the afforded task may need to be decomposed into several sub-tasks, or executed in different ways depending on, for example, the ability of the agent, or availability of objects. Hence, the way an afforded task is to be executed by an agent is not implied by the affordance, so the task execution can be described by several alternative plans that define the afforded task in different ways.

Dispositions can be seen as the objective analog to capabilities for agentive entities. Therefore, objects can be the bearer of dispositions while agents can have capabilities. Consequently, we propose to also view the Capability concept as a type of quality inherited by the agent that carries it. However, we do not consider the Capability concept in the scope of this paper. Our model extends previous ones that also take Turvey as a starting point [22, 9, 24] by situating dispositions in the so-called ground ontology and connecting them to affordances that are part of the descriptive branch of the ontology [15]. As we will show below, this decoupling gives the model a level of flexibility analogous to the flexibility gained by the decoupling of actions from tasks [8].

Please note that this definition is open to manifestations of affordances that take place without agentive entities involved, e.g. due to a serendipitous event involving inanimate objects, but as this bears no relevance to our domain, we focus on those affordances that enable agents to perform tasks.
3.1 Affordance Concept

Let us first formalize the Disposition concept. Fundamentally, it is a property of the object that is the bearer of the disposition. This relationship between bearer and disposition is denoted by the relation symbol `hasDisposition (HASD)`. For the sake of saving space, we refer to the affordance concept by the letter `A`, and to the disposition concept by the letter `D`.

We model dispositions as qualities [1] carried out by exactly one object [2,3], and described by exactly one affordance [4]. The `describes` relation (DESCR) holds between a description (e.g., an affordance) and entities that are conceptualized by the description [5].

Affordances define task and roles afforded by the disposition they describe. Specifically, we distinguish between roles afforded to the bearer of the disposition, and the ones afforded to the trigger. Consequently, we introduce two relations `definesBearer (DEFB)` and `definesTrigger (DEFT)` that link an affordance to the respective role.

The `definition` (DEF) holds between a description (e.g., an affordance) and a conceptualization [6], both `definesBearer` and `definesTrigger` are subproperties of this relation [7 and 8]. The `definesTask` relation (DEFT) is formalized analogously.

Finally, we formalize the Affordance concept by axiomatizing its relationship to dispositions described, and concepts defined by it.

We view affordances as descriptions [9] that only describe dispositions [10]. An affordance defines exactly one task [11], and two roles for bearer and trigger of the disposition [12,13]. Axiom [14] is an identity constraint that restricts the bearer role to the objects that carry a disposition that is described by the affordance, meaning that the role may only classify (CLS) these objects. These relationships between concepts defined in our theory are depicted in Figure 2.

We further say that a disposition affords the task and roles defined by the affordance that describes the disposition. Different specifications of this relation are useful when particular disposition types are axiomatized. Consequently, we introduce a relation `affords` (AFF), and sub-relations `affordsBearer (AFFB)`, `affordsTrigger (AFFT)`, and `affordsTask (AFFT)`. 

![Figure 2. Relationships between affordances and dispositions in our theory.](image)
Another class of dispositions refers to the potential to modify aspects of others. We say that objects that afford us to change others inherit the Alteration disposition (ALT). Alteration is primarily inherited by designed tools and devices such as a dishwashers that afford to clean cutlery, or freezers that afford to regulate the temperature of objects. However, a counterpart of the Alteration disposition may be inherited by objects that tend to undergo certain modifications. This is, for example, the dirty cutlery after dinner that affords us to clean it, or the melting ice cream that affords us to put it back into the freezer. The main difference is that these counterpart dispositions afford different roles for the bearer and the trigger of the disposition, namely that the bearer of one disposition needs to take it back into the freezer. The main difference is that these counterpart dispositions afford different roles for the bearer and the trigger of the disposition, namely that the bearer of one disposition needs to take the role of the trigger in the other.

Tasks defined by the affordance describing an alteration disposition include an additional parameter, the setpoint (SP), that qualifies the targeted change, for example, that dirty cutlery affords to change its Cleanliness quality such that the cutlery is not qualified as dirty anymore. The actual quantification of the targeted change may differ from one property type to another such that it cannot be axiomatized on the more general level. However, sub-classes of the Alteration disposition can be classified according to the type of quality that is afforded to be altered, and axiomatized with a more concrete notion of what values the property may take.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{SP}(x) & \rightarrow \text{Parameter}(x) \\
\text{SP}(x) & \rightarrow \forall y(\text{CLS}(x, y) \rightarrow \text{Region}(y)) \\
\text{SP}(x) & \rightarrow \exists y(\text{DEF}(y, x) \rightarrow \lambda(y))
\end{align*}
\] (24)

Hence, setpoints are used to classify regions that quantify the targeted change \((25)\), and there exists some affordance that defines each setpoint \((26)\).

Based on the setpoint notion, we axiomatize the relations \(\text{DEF}_{SP}\) and \(\text{AFF}_{SP}\) analogously to the other variants of the \(\text{DEF}\) and \(\text{AFF}\) relations, and assert that alterations also afford a setpoint parameter:

\[
\text{ALT}(x) \rightarrow \exists y(\text{AFF}_{SP}(x, y))
\] (27)

The other two types of dispositions considered in our model are Connectivity and Containment. The Connectivity disposition of an object affords to connect others with it, such as a hook that affords to hang up objects. Linkage is a more specific type of connectivity that implies a stronger connection between bearer and trigger such that they resist spatial separation to some extent. Another variant of connectivity is the Support disposition that affords, for example, stabilizing a posture, or controlling an object. The Containment disposition affords the Container role for the bearer of the disposition, however, without implying a portal that can be used to insert items into the container. Insertion is a variant of containment that, in addition, affords a portal role.

As the goal of this work is to introduce and evaluate a modelling approach and corresponding ontology pattern for affordances, we employ some concrete examples from our domain. Given the multitude and diversity of tasks executed by human and artificial agents, we expect a fully fleshed out model to include a small set of high-level dispositions that feature increasingly specific sub-dispositions. However, as with the discussion on the number and nature of image schema \((11)\), that are influenced by our perception and interactions with the physical world, we expect an exhaustive model to be attainable, and moreover learnable \((12)\), given a suitable target representation as the one proposed here.

### 3.3 Inherited Dispositions

The dispositions of an object are usually inherited from the class the object belongs to. The apple that affords us to eat it, for example, does that because the individual apple belongs to a category of objects that all inherit this disposition, for example, the category of comestible objects. Note that we may, for example, also restrict the Perishable quality of objects that afford us to eat them to values that indicate that the food is not spoiled.

For example, let us consider a dirty piece of cutlery in the kitchen (denoted \(\text{DC}\)). With dirty we mean the object has a quality Cleanliness that takes some value from a region Dirty whose members only quantify dirty objects.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{DC}(x) & \iff \exists y(\text{HAS}_y(x, y) \land \text{Cleanliness}(y)) \land (28) \\
\text{DC}(x) & \implies \exists y(\text{HAS}_y(x, y) \land \text{Dirty}(y)) \land (29)
\end{align*}
\]

Axiom \((29)\) states that such dirty cutlery affords to clean it. \(\text{HAS}_y\) refers to the hasQuality relation that links objects and their qualities, and \(\text{HAS}_y\) refers to the hasRegion relation that links qualities to their value.

Next, we formalize that \(\text{demand to be cleaned}\) means to alter the cleanliness quality of the demanding object to some value from a region Clean whose members only quantify clean objects, and that the disposition of the dirty cutlery to be cleaned (denoted as \(\text{C}_0\)) affords this task where the bearer of the disposition takes the role of the Cleaned object.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{C}_0(x) & \rightarrow \forall y(\text{AFF}_{ra}(x, y) \rightarrow \text{CT}(y)) \land (30) \\
\text{C}_0(x) & \rightarrow \forall y(\text{AFF}_{t}(x, y) \rightarrow \text{Cleaner}(y)) \land (31) \\
\text{C}_0(x) & \rightarrow \forall y(\text{AFF}_{a}(x, y) \rightarrow \text{Cleaned}(y)) \land (32) \\
\text{C}_0(x) & \rightarrow \forall y, z(\text{AFF}_{a}(x, z) \land \text{CLS}(z, y) \rightarrow \text{DC}(y)) \land (33) \\
\text{C}_0(x) & \rightarrow \forall y, z(\text{AFF}_{sp}(x, z) \land \text{CLS}(z, y) \rightarrow \text{Clean}(y)) \land (34)
\end{align*}
\]

The task afforded by the disposition is referred to as CT (short for cleaning task). Analogously, we can state that a dishwasher (denoted \(\text{D}_0\)) has the disposition to clean dirty cutlery.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{D}_0(x) & \rightarrow \exists y(\text{HAS}_y(x, y) \land \text{Clean}(y)) \land (35)
\end{align*}
\]

The disposition of the dishwasher to clean cutlery (denoted \(\text{C}_1\)) can be seen as the counterpart of the disposition \(\text{C}_0\) of the cutlery to be cleaned. Meaning that both dispositions afford the same task, and that the bearer and the trigger roles are reversed. However, the disposition of the dishwasher is more restrictive as it also constrains the trigger object of the disposition to be dirty cutlery. The disposition of the cutlery, on the other hand, does not constrain the class of the trigger object used to clean it.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{C}_1(x) & \rightarrow \forall y(\text{AFF}_{a}(x, y) \rightarrow \text{CT}(y)) \land (36) \\
\text{C}_1(x) & \rightarrow \forall y(\text{AFF}_{a}(x, y) \rightarrow \text{Cleaner}(y)) \land (37) \\
\text{C}_1(x) & \rightarrow \forall y(\text{AFF}_{t}(x, y) \rightarrow \text{Cleaned}(y)) \land (38) \\
\text{C}_1(x) & \rightarrow \forall y, z(\text{AFF}_{a}(x, z) \land \text{CLS}(z, y) \rightarrow \text{DC}(y)) \land (39) \\
\text{C}_1(x) & \rightarrow \forall y, z(\text{AFF}_{sp}(x, z) \land \text{CLS}(z, y) \rightarrow \text{Clean}(y)) \land (40)
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{C}_1(x) & \rightarrow \forall y, z(\text{AFF}_{sp}(x, z) \land \text{CLS}(z, y) \rightarrow \text{Clean}(y)) \land (41)
\end{align*}
\]
3.4 Implementation

For practical use of our theory, we provide a reference implementation as Ontology Web Language (OWL) ontology. In the process of creating an OWL 2 DL ontology that implements our theory, we have converted the axioms listed in this paper to Description Logics (DL). More specifically, to the SROIQ(D) fragment of DL. We were able to formulate each of the axioms except of the identity constraint (Axiom 14) which is not expressible in OWL 2 because co-reference of an entity with different roles cannot be expressed. This means that the OWL ontology does not enforce that only the bearer of a disposition may take the bearer role defined in the affordance.

Let us consider again the example of a dishwasher affording the task to clean dirty cutlery. One aspect of it is that the dishwasher affords the Alteration of the cleanliness quality of cutlery. Another aspect is that the cutlery can be inserted into it which is a disposition with type Insertion. This can be written in Manchester OWL Syntax as:

Listing 1. Dishwasher dispositions

\[\begin{align*}
\text{Class} & : \text{Dishwasher} \\
\text{SubClassOf} & : \\
\quad & (\text{hasDisposition exactly } 1 \text{ Insertion}) \\
\quad & (\text{hasDisposition exactly } 1 \text{ Alteration}) \\
\quad & (\text{affordsTrigger only } (\text{classifies only DirtyCutlery})))
\end{align*}\]

This is not a complete list of all dispositions a dishwasher has, however, it serves the purpose to give an intuition about how the dispositions of objects are formalized in OWL using our affordance theory.

The reference implementation is publicly accessible\(^5\) and is part of a larger framework of ontologies. The overarching goal of the framework is to enhance robot decision making capabilities, and therefore to make the plans robots execute more general and re-usable. This is achieved by providing a tell and ask interface to interact with the knowledge content of the ontologies which is realized by the KnowRob knowledge base\(^23\).

4 THE THEORY AT WORK

In the following section, we showcase the practical work and the ensuing flexibility that our model facilitates in the domain of cognitive robotics for everyday activities\(^3\). Goal of this larger research undertaking is to depart from single task robotics, where a robot has to be trained to cover an object provided a designated pot and lid are at hand, to a flexible mastery of a basic activity, such as covering. For this we need, first of all, a flexible means for dispositional matching which is a dispositionally qualified object, such as a container. We seek for disposal counterparts and respective objects that can play the corresponding roles, for example, to serve as a cover. This type of flexible common-sense reasoning will provide potential triggers for specific bearers and vice versa, but will not guarantee that a specific instance of that object type will actually work in creating the needed affordance. Therefore, in a second step, we test via simulation how our potential afforders and affordees work together.

4.1 Dispositional Matching

One of the most essential aspects covered by our model is that dispositions have a counterpart, another disposition whose carrier is compatible with the disposition offered by some other object. We say that objects have a dispositional match in such a case. The match is not dependent on agentive aspects, it is only derived from properties of the objects carrying the dispositions. Hence, the existence of a match is not equivalent to say that some agent can actually use both objects with each other – this further depends on the agents’ capability to execute the task afforded by the dispositions.

Both dispositions contributing in a match afford their own individual task (i.e., an individual that is an instance of the Task concept). One aspect of a dispositional match is that both individual tasks are instances of the same task concept. The other aspect is that any object contributing in a match must be compatible to the trigger role afforded by the disposition of the other object. A match exists in case these axioms can be added to the knowledge base without making it inconsistent. This can be written as displayed in Algorithm 1.

Algorithm 1: Dispositional Matching

\begin{algorithm}
\textbf{Input}: Two disposition individuals \(d_1\) and \(d_2\), and a consistent ontology \(O = (A, T, R)\) where \(A\) is an ABox, \(T\) is a TBox, and \(R\) is a RBox.
\textbf{Output}: True in case there is a dispositional match between \(d_1\) and \(d_2\), otherwise false is returned.
\begin{verbatim}
1 \(o_1 \leftarrow \text{hasDisposition}(d_1)\)
2 \(o_2 \leftarrow \text{hasDisposition}(d_2)\)
3 tsk1 \(\leftarrow \text{affordsTask}(d_1)\)
4 tsk2 \(\leftarrow \text{affordsTask}(d_2)\)
5 tri1 \(\leftarrow \text{affordsTrigger}(d_1)\)
6 tri2 \(\leftarrow \text{affordsTrigger}(d_2)\)
7 /* The axiomatization of a dispositional match. */
8 \(A_1 \leftarrow A \land \{t\}\)\(tsk_1 \equiv tsk_2\), \(CLS(tri_1, o_2)\), \(CLS(tri_2, o_1)\})
9 \(O_1 \leftarrow (A_1, T, R)\)
10 /* Is \(O_1\) inconsistent? */
11 \(\text{if } O_1 \models T \subseteq \perp \text{ then return false}
12 \text{else return true}
13 \end{verbatim}
\end{algorithm}

The match between tasks is axiomatized as \(tsk_1 \equiv tsk_2\), meaning that \(tsk_1\) and \(tsk_2\) are the same individual. This is inconsistent, for example, in case \(tsk_1\) and \(tsk_2\) are individuals of disjoint classes. Hence, we assume a task taxonomy that includes disjointness axioms between tasks sharing a direct superclass. However, the axiom \(tsk_1 \equiv tsk_2\) still holds in case \(tsk_1\) is an instance of a class that is a direct relative of the class instantiated by \(tsk_2\).

The other two axioms are used to test whether the object carrying the counterpart disposition is a valid assignment for the \(CLS\) role that links the trigger role to the objects that are classified by this role. This would be inconsistent, for example, in case the bearer of the disposition, the disposition itself, or the affordance describing the disposition constrains the type of object that may take the trigger role to one disjoint from the type of the potential trigger object.

We further assume that the bearer role is a valid role to take for the bearer of the disposition. The identity axiom\(^13\) would contradict an invalid assertion. However, our OWL implementation does not contain this axiom such that this relation must be enforced elsewhere when this implementation is used.
4.2 Competency Questions

The goal of a reasoning system is to infer useful answers to questions about an agent's face. In the case of our affordance and dispositions model, these are questions related to item usage and action potentials.

Our general procedure to answer such questions is to create an ontology importing our theory of dispositions and affordances, and our ontology of objects, and add axioms to define concepts relevant for a particular query. These axioms can be generated via Generic Ontology Design Patterns \[14\] written in generic DOL \[18\]. E.g., the query concept in Listing 5 is instantiated from the pattern in Listing 2.

Listing 2. A pattern in Generic DOL to create a query concept for affordance testing

```
pattern AffordanceQuery { Class: D; Class: T } given EASE =
Class: WithAffordance[D,T]
EquivalentTo:
  DesignedArtifact and
  hasDisposition some (D and
  (affordsTrigger some (classifies only T)))
```

What can be used for a particular purpose? The main question is, given an affordance, what is a combination of objects needed to manifest it. This is important for an autonomous robot for several reasons. First, the robot might need to formulate intermediate goals and plan sub-tasks to achieve them, and to have flexibility it must not be limited by blind, hard-coded object choice; rather, it should be able to select appropriate objects for the goals it sets for itself. Second, commands given by a human, or instruction steps meant to teach how to do something, are often ambiguous about tools to use – because such commands or instructions were typically meant for other humans, who do have the cognitive machinery to go from a requested action potentiality to the items needed to manifest it.

To answer such queries, one would add a concept for classes of objects that can be, for example, the bearer of a disposition to manifest an affordance. A DL reasoner can then be queried for subsumption.

Let us consider the following example: we are looking for an object that is the bearer of a Tempering disposition – that is, it can subject some Substance to a set temperature.

Listing 3. OWL expansion of the Generic DOL instantiation AffordanceQuery[Tempering,Substance], yielding a named concept to query for object classes that can be the bearer of a disposition to manifest an affordance

```
Class: WithAffordance_Tempering_Substance
EquivalentTo:
  DesignedArtifact and
  hasDisposition some (Tempering and
  (affordsTrigger some (classifies only Substance)))
```

Running a DL subsumption query on our objects and affordances ontology, augmented with the definition of the concept listed above, produces that the concept listed above, produces that Refrigerator and HotPlate are sub-concepts, that is, they can be used to temper substances.

What can this be used for? A second competency question an agent such as an autonomous robot must answer is, given an item, what can it be used for. This is an important step for a robot to understand an environment in terms of the affordances it actually provides, which in turn is useful when it has to answer how to manifest a particular affordance, or to verify that the environment has been set up in such a way that affordances are available to another agent. Specifically, this question addresses the issue of identifying dispositions of items in the surroundings of the robot.

Semantic maps of environments are often populated with objects and annotations about them, including dispositions. If this is available, then querying for the known dispositions of an object is simply a lookup in a semantic map. However, the information in the semantic map may be incomplete, such as when seeing a new item, in which case one must reason based on DBox axioms.

Let us consider the following example: The robot is looking at an item it recognizes as a dishwasher, and asks itself what dispositions it might have. As before, the general approach is to define a concept to add to the ontology for a reasoning query, but there is a complication. The fact that a disposition is not mentioned in the definition of an object concept does not mean some individual object will not have the disposition. Instead, the query concept is about what disposition an object must have to be a member of its class.

Listing 4. An example named concept to query for disposition classes that are borne by an object

```
Class: WithoutDisposition,Dishwasher,Insertion
EquivalentTo:
  Dishwasher and (hasDisposition only (not Insertion))
```

Running a DL subsumption query on our dispositions and objects ontology, augmented with the definition of the concept listed above, produces that this concept is subsumed by Nothing, therefore every individual dishwasher must allow some kind of items to be inserted in it. A similar query with a concept WithoutDisposition(Dishwasher,Moveable) does not return that the query concept is empty, meaning there may be individual dishwashers that cannot be moved.

What can this be used with? This competency question tackles the fact that, typically, the manifestation of an affordance needs appropriate combinations of objects – that is, objects with sufficiently matched dispositions. In some sense, a cookie cutter is an object allowing the shaping of (some) other objects – but it cannot be used to shape a block of wood. This is the other step towards building an affordance-aware understanding of the robot’s environment.

Consider the following example: we want to test whether a particular item can be tempered by the Refrigerator.

Listing 5. An example named concept to query whether an object class can be the trigger for a disposition borne by another object class

```
Class: IsTrigger,PancakeMix,Temping,Refrigerator
EquivalentTo:
  PancakeMix and (isClassifiedBy some
  (isTriggerAffered By some
  (Tempering and
  (isDispositionOf some Refrigerator))))
```

Running a DL subsumption query on our dispositions and objects ontology, augmented with the definition of the concept listed above, proves this concept is not subsumed by Nothing, therefore the PancakeMix can be tempered by the Refrigerator. A similar test run with Stove as the item to try and temper produces that IsTrigger(Stove,Temping,Refrigerator) is a subconcept of Nothing; this is because the Stove is not a Substance or FoodItem, which are the only classes in our model, a Refrigerator cannot temper.

What cannot be used to manifest a particular affordance? This, and likewise negative versions of the other previous competency questions, are important to consider because the knowledge of the world is likely incomplete; not being able to prove, via inference, that a disposition is available or an affordance manifestable does
not mean this is actually so. It simply means the agent does not know enough to prove, and perhaps might find it illuminating to test, whether in simulation or in the real world.

Sometimes however, a robot does know enough to prove that an object does not have a particular disposition, or that a combination of objects cannot be used to manifest an affordance. These negative results can be used to avoid unnecessary tests via other techniques to detect what dispositions and affordances are available.

For example, let us consider that we need to cover a pot, and it is not clear which items might provide the necessary disposition to achieve this. However, we know that whatever is a potential cover is not clear which items might provide the necessary disposition to detect what dispositions and affordances are available.

To query for which object classes do the pot and cover attempt by cup, plate, spatula respectively. Images show final states of the world, where a final state is computed by letting the simulated world run through several physics steps.

5 CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

In this paper, we have proposed the Descriptive Affordance Theory – a theory, inspired by Turvey’s notion of dispositions, that attempts to capture the descriptive nature of affordances. We have shown, by using an OWL ontology implementation of our theory, that models of the theory can be used to answer a set of questions highly relevant in the domain of autonomous robotics. We believe that such a theory of affordances is an important vehicle to reduce the programming effort needed to deliver robots that autonomously perform many tasks in many different environments in a flexible manner.

The proposed theory opens the doors for significant future research directions. First of all, we have only concentrated on object-centric aspects, that is, properties of objects and what they afford. We have stated that we also see the capabilities of agents as qualities, but we have neither included a theory of capabilities nor discussed the embodiment of the agent in the scope of this work.

Concerning the former initial work has been presented that aligns very well with our descriptive approach to affordances. As for the latter, embodiment is a crucial aspect in robot task execution as well, because slightly different movements can have dramatically different consequences. Affordances may also allow and constrain the execution of motions in certain ways which also is a pertinent subject for future work. Ultimately, we see the need to establish a set of well-founded modular theories for the cognitive building blocks for flexible, adaptive and robust behavior, such as image-, force dynamic- and x-schema.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) as part of Collaborative Research Center (SFB) 1320 EASE - Everyday Activity Scienceand Engineering, University of Bremen (http://www.ease-crc.org/), subprojects H2, P1 and R1.
REFERENCES


