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Parallel Processing Approaches In Robotics

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Abstract **– This paper presents the different possibilities for parallel processing in robot control architectures. At the beginning, we shortly review the historic development of control architectures. Then, a list of requirements for control architectures is set up from a parallel processing point of view. As our main topic, we identify the levels of parallel processing in robot control architectures. With each level of parallelism, examples for a typical robot control architecture are presented. Finally, a list of keywords is provided for each previous work we refer to.**

1. INTRODUCTION

In spite of significant improvements in processing speed, sequential processors are far from rendering sufficient computing capacity for an advanced robotic system. On the other hand, modern VLSI technology offers a unique opportunity to close this gap by parallel computing. One could object that highly parallel computers do not serve as a conceivable platform for robotics due to their high cost and limited availability. However, it can be expected that the progress in the design of new VLSI circuits and the reduction in component cost will make the highly parallel machines new available very economical. Probably in the next decade, it will be possible to build parallel computers with relatively low costs.

Today's sequential computers may be sped up only through intensive technological effort since the performance is physically limited by present architectures. High computational parallelism is one solution to this problem. By adding processing units in parallel computers, the process time can be arbitrarily sped up for corresponding complex problems. On the other hand, the available computational parallelism has to be exploited in an efficient way. The solution methods from different applications can be parallelized in various ways. An improvement in performance cannot be achieved by solely increasing the number of processing units because the time necessary for communication or additional data administration may increase simultaneously.

Thus, an important task is the parallelization of existing problem solutions in robotics so that they are suitable for highly computational parallelism. In several cases, fundamentally new algorithms have to be designed, so that a parallelization is feasible. Specially designed computer architectures for robotic control are surveyed in [33]. Several parallel robot control architectures have been suggested, however, which can be distinguished by different levels of parallelism that are presented in the main section of this paper.

For automated manufacturing, the historical development of control structures can be followed [21]. It ranges from the central control to the distributed control. In each of these control structures, the control components are separated from the manufacturing components and are interconnected by their control interrelationships. For parallel processing, each control component can be regarded as a single processing element (PE) (see Section 3.7).

For robot control architectures, a classification scheme has been proposed in [38]. It covers the extreme viewpoints of the historical development, hierarchical and distributed control. Additionally, function-oriented and behavior-oriented approaches are distinguished. Altogether, this results in four different classes. For parallel processing, each function or each behavior can be performed by an extra PE (see Sections 3.5 and 3.6).

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: First, we elaborate on the requirements for general control systems with emphasis on parallelism in Section 2. Then, as the main section, we distinguish eight different levels of parallel processing in robotic control architectures in Section 3. For each level, a definition, some examples and an evaluation according to the requirements are given. Finally, after a summary of results in Section 4, a list of references with a list of keywords corresponding to the parallelization levels is appended.

2. REQUIREMENTS TO CONTROL ARCHITECTURES

Before discussing parallel control architecture, it is important to explain what a control architecture is. After a short definition, we will continue explaining the requirements for the control architecture.

According to [21], a control *architecture* makes a control *system* from control *components*. The architecture determines the interrelationships between the component and the mechanisms for coordination. The architecture is a crucial point for a system, because it establishes the limitations and possibilities for changing the system in the future.

Requirements on robot control architectures can be described from a general point of view [26], for manufacturing systems [21], and for software architectures of robot control [29, 11]. Important requirements from the parallel processing point of view include:

Robustness: Robustness of a system is perceived as the ability of the system to handle imperfect inputs, unexpected events, uncertainties, and sudden malfunctions [21]. The system, for which a failure in a subsystem implicates a break down of the whole system, is not robust. This is, for instance, the case for systems built on the pipeline principle.

Modifiability / scalability (off-line): A system is said to be modifiable if changes by adding, modifying or removing elements of the system may be easily made. In this paper, we focus on a special type of element, the processing element, so that we pay a particular attention to the scalability (off-line) of the system as it is defined in [43]: The scalability of a parallel system is a measure of its capacity to increase speedup in proportion to the number of PEs. It reflects a parallel system's ability to utilize off-line changing resources effectively.

Adaptability / scalability (on-line): The robot is able to manage its internal resources on-line according to the external circumstances. In our case, this could concern the on-line mapping of the tasks which have to be fulfilled onto the computing resources.

Reactivity to the environment: The reactivity refers to the capability of detecting events and acting within a short period of time, depending on the context. It is quantitatively measured by the response time. One aim of parallel processing is to achieve short response times.

Resolving of multiple goals: In most cases, situations involving conflicting concurrent actions are inevitable. The control system should provide functions to achieve those multiple goals [26]. Sometimes, the multiple goals can be achieved by multiple tasks, which may be processed in parallel.

Programmability: Usually, complex control systems are partitioned in multiple (parallel) components for simpler handling. In this case, programming the single components becomes simpler, but interrelationships become more complex.

3. PARALLEL PROCESSING LEVELS

We now focus on the parallel processing approaches used to meet the requirements of Section 2. We show to what extent these methods have been applied, and in which cases they are advantageous and why.

First, it is necessary to remark that there are no throughoutly parallelized architectures available for robot control. Only single areas have been regarded for parallel processing. This leads us to distinguish the following eight levels of parallel processing in robot control architectures: multirobot level, robot level, kinematics level, control level, functions level, behaviours level, abstraction level, algorithm level.

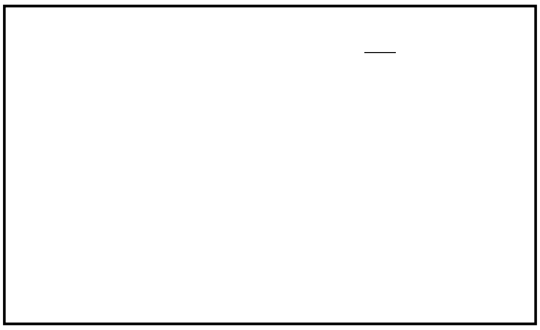
In the next subsections, for each level, we will give a general definition, present a typical example followed by other examples, and conclude how we can take advantage of parallelism according to the requirements in robot control, especially what the scalability (on-line), modifiability (off-line), and robustness concerns.

3.1 Multirobot Level

For many tasks, for instance, when the problem is very complex or of a large scope (exploration mission), it is often advantageous to use several robots instead of a single one. The conventional, strictly centralized control method has to deal with many problems, such as a communication problem due to the huge amount of information to be processed. Another problem is that the strictly centralized coordination or scheduling of the robots is very difficult in an unforeseeable environment. These problems can be solved by giving the simultaneously working robots some independence, or by parallelizing the problem. Many approaches are possible involving the interaction between the robots (degree of dependence, homogenous versus heterogeneous robots, communication complexity).

For example, at one extremity, one finds a decentralized structure with non-cooperative robots (non-advanced communication), whose interactions result in emergent global behavior. In [22], this emergent behavior is used to perform the material handling requirements in a workcell (see Fig. 1). The processing machines (cutting machine, assembly machine, …) broadcast load or unload messages to the listening swarm robots. These machine-material handling requirements are satisfied by the available robots, which work in parallel without central planning and without communicating with each other. Thus, no modification to the swarm material handling system is required while the workcell environment changes (addition or deletion of robots or machines). This implies to robustness and high adaptability. But this system is subject to deadlocks and is less efficient than centralized systems due to the limitiation to solely local decision capabilities [22].

Other examples of the swarm robots model in nature are the immune system (in [53]) and a colony of ants (in [60]). [50] showed the global performance variations of the colony by modifying the number of robots and introducing low level communications among them. More complex autonomous robots are able to cooperate and partition the global task [4]. Local communication among the robots is sometimes sufficient, whereas global communication can be advantageous for heterogeneous robot and optimization problems [59]. A more centralized approach is presented in [63] with robots which have to obey a master. The robots independently plan and execute their own tasks, which introduces time uncertainty and makes the scheduling problem of the centralized master nontrivial. Holonical architectures for manufacturing multirobot workcells allow the robot to negotiate on the task with the scheduler [10]. In [52], this holonic architecture is compared with the hierarchical and heterarchical ones in terms of robustness and efficiency. Other work concerning parallel multirobot systems concentrates on the interprocess communication in an industrial context [58, 31].



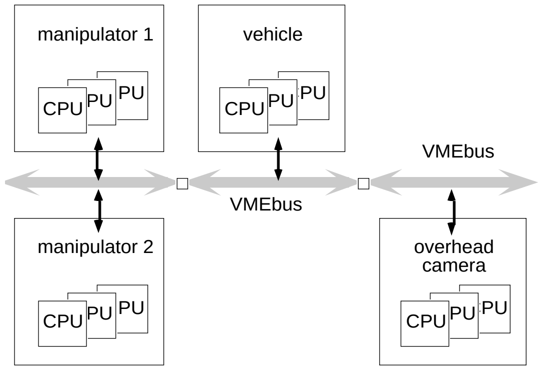


Fig. 2: Parallelism on the robot level: The autonomous mobile manipulation system KAMRO

By allocating an extra PE to each robot component, the robot components can work in parallel. This reduces the execution time, e.g., by positioning the endeffector while the robot moves. But temporarily unused components, e.g., an immobile manipulating vehicle has unused PEs, which indicates low scalability.

3.3 Kinematics Level

In many cases, the high degree-of-freedom of a manipulator makes it impossible for one PE control fast enough. One option is to decompose the main control loop into several control loops. For each joint of a kinematics chain (e.g., base, shoulder, elbow, and three joints for end-effector orientation) an extra loop may be provided, which is associated with a single PE.

For example, the walking machine LAURON has six legs with three DOF each and is controlled by 24 microprocessors [17]. Each joint has its own PE, on which an appropriated small feedback loop (sensor, control, effector) is implemented (see Fig. 3).

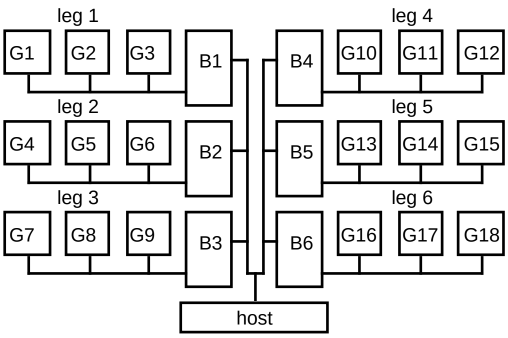


Fig. 3: Parallelism on the kinematics level: The 6-legged walking machine LAURON [17]

The redundant manipulator described in [6] moves in a two-dimensional space and has seven DOF. Each joint has its own PE. The keyboard player robot WABOT, presented in [61], is provided with 50 PEs to control the 50 DOF. A reconfigurable modular manipulator system was developed in [57], where each joint corresponds to a hardware module which can be added or removed, increasing or decreasing the number of degrees of freedom of the manipulator.

Parallel processing at the kinematics level has two advantages. First, the computer hardware architecture reflects the robot hardware architecture which provides a clear overview of the system, and makes it easier to develop and to debug. Second, these schemes are statically extensible. Thus, with an appropriate scalable algorithm (such as described in [68, 66]), an additional joint could easily be controlled by adding another PE.

3.4 Control Level

In order to guarantee the stability of the controlled system, a high sample rate is often required. In complex cases, a single PE cannot achieve the aspired timing. The control task has to be broken down into simpler subtasks which are small enough to be performed by a single PE. This task can be partitioned at the control level by pipelining the functions of the control loop.

For example, the controller of the three fingered Karlsruher Dextrous Hand requires a sample rate of 10 kHz. In order to cope with this high demand, the approach adopted in [48] splits up the control loop of one finger into single functions (sensing, controlling, acting, coordinates transformation). Each of these functions is processed by a sparate PE (see Fig. 4).

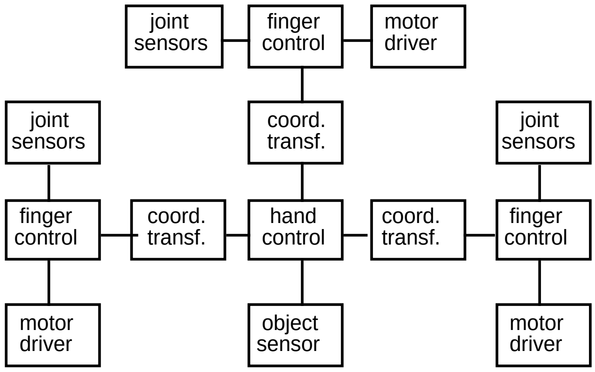


Fig. 4: Parallelism on the control level: The Karlsruher Dextrous Hand [49]

In [66], the control loop is parallelized according to the manipulator joints and according to the functions of the control loop (pipeline principle). Each joint has its own closed loop control and each of them is divided into functions, which are processed on different PEs.

The advantages of parallelization at the control level are mentioned in [25]. Each processor can be specialized to its own job (a special function of the control loop), by adding appropriate co-processors. Another advantage is that the input and output functions are separated from the algorithmic functions, and the programmer can concentrate on the algorithm. Also, the hardware architecture provides a clear overview of the functionalities of the system, which makes the development easier.

3.5 Functions level

In this section, we focus on the functions as they are defined in [38]: perception, planning, execution, exception handling. Each function is provided with a processor, so that on this level, the different functions (or tasks) of a robot are processed in parallel.

For example, the mobile autonomous robot YAMABICO was tested with an architecture based on centralized decision making and distributed functions such as: locomotion control, sensor information, inter-robot communication and world map database [42]. Each function is independently modularized and implemented on a different set of Transputers (see Fig. 5). The functions work in parallel and communicate through a dual port RAM, which can be accessed asynchronously from the other modules. The master module can also send interrupts through the dual port RAM.

Different blackboard systems, which facilitate highly parallel design approaches, are presented in [62]. The car NAVLAB uses five modules (global planning, local planning, perception, mission execution and hardware control) and communicates via a parallel blackboard [32]. KAMRO uses a hybrid distributed system to implement a functional decomposition of control [46]. The Ground Surveillance Robot (GSR) is used as a platform for sensor fusion techniques with a parallel blackboard [34]. In [45], the coordination and integration of several real-time activities occurs via a blackboard for mobile robot navigation. Generalizing the concept of logical sensors developed in [36], which have their own computing capabilities, the robot HILARE presented in [11, 29] uses independent modules on its functional level. For this robot, the on-board partition of the functional modules on the different PEs is shown in [56].

Although hierarchical structures in general offer high efficiency and can optimize problems, they have to deal with communication problems, the computational bottlenecks, the difficulty of integrating additional sensors, the reaction capacity (messages have to go through several layers before reaching the actuator) and the robustness (due to the pipeline principle, if a bug occurs in a level, the whole structure breaks down).

3.8 Algorithm Level

At this level, the single algorithms of a robot system are parallelized. The aim is to speed up the algorithms which need a huge amount of computation in order to satisfy the required real-time constraints. Previous work is flourishing in this area, especially in the following four fields: image processing, motion planning, kinematics and dynamics.

On the one hand, image processing techniques offer well parallelized algorithms and appropriate hardware. A good overview on parallel robot vision algorithms is provided in [13]. On the other hand, motion planning algorithms have long execution times and are a critical point for closing the control loop made up of sensing, planning, and acting. A review of parallel processing approaches to motion planning is given in [37].

In Robot joint control, i.e. in kinematics and dynamics computation, there are the most severe time constraints of robot control architectures. The computational power of a single PE is not sufficient to control a manipulator with several DOF. A survey of parallel processing approaches to robot kinematics is given in [40]. Parallel approaches to dynamics are given in [27, 69, 28]. Additionally, there are very specific architectures combining CORDIC processor arrays and DSPs, e.g., in [64].

Additionally, general computing architectures, which are independent of the algorithms to be tested, which have powerful communication systems using message passing, are developed in [30]. In [1, 41], two modular architectures, using tightly and loosely coupled subsystems are developed.

Results obtained by parallelizing algorithms vary. It depends on the degree of dependency among the equations. Image processing problems can be broken down quite well by dividing the image into smaller independent blocks, whereas kinematics or dynamics algorithms contain coupled equations, which lead to a communication overhead when parallelizing.

4. CONCLUSION

One promising method to master the complexity of a system such as a robot consists of breaking down the system into independent subsystems. These subsystems can then be easily mapped onto parallel processing elements.

In our first step, we recalled the requirements for robot control architectures, especially from the parallel processing viewpoint. Then, we presented the eight levels at which this system partitioning occurs in current robot applications: multirobot level, robot level, kinematics level, control level, functions level, behaviors level, abstraction level and algorithm level.

As a conclusion, one can say that there are no thoroughly parallelized architectures available for robot control. For the given approaches, most of the following statements are valid:

- Only separate areas have been regarded for parallel processing. These areas can now be easily distinguished by the parallelism levels.
- The approaches are only scalable within one level. For example, in the kinematics level, only joints can be easily added, adding functions may result in a complete re-design of the architecture.
- Some levels often occur in a mixed form, e.g., component / functions level or abstraction / control level, but this is not necessarily the case

The presented work may not serve as an orthogonal classification scheme for parallel robot control, but it is certainly useful for making the (potential) parallelism in existing control architectures more distinct. Additionally, the different levels of parallelism can help to increase parallel processing in future robot control architectures. This again will lead to scalable architectures, shorter response times, and easier programming of the robot systems.

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