

Why It's Nice to be Quoted: Quasiquoting for Prolog

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Abstract. Prolog's support for dynamic programming, meta programming and text processing using context free grammars make the language highly suitable for defining *domain specific languages* (DSL) as well as analysing, refactoring or generating expression states in other (programming) languages. Well known DSLs are the DCG (Definite Clause Grammar) notation and constraint languages such as CHR. These extensions use Prolog operator declarations and the `{...}` notation to realise a good syntax. When external languages, such as HTML, SQL or JavaScript enter the picture, operators no longer satisfy for embedding snippets of these languages into a Prolog source file. In addition, Prolog has poor support for quoting long text fragments.

Haskell introduced *quasi quotations* to resolve this problem. In this paper we 'ported' the Haskell mechanism for quasi quoting to Prolog. We show that this can be done cleanly and that quasi quoting can solve the above mentioned problems.

1 Introduction

Prolog is commonly used for tasks where it needs to manage snippets of code written in the syntax of an external language such as HTML, SQL or JavaScript. Such code snippets often do not comply with the standard Prolog syntax for various reasons [5]:

- Using operator syntax, with only prefix, infix and postfix operators are insufficient. For example, consider the JavaScript `case` statement.
- Basic lexical primitives are incompatible. For example, consider textual content in HTML documents.
- The Prolog term that results from parsing an expression is insufficient for recovering the intent in the target language. For example, consider identifier names that start with an uppercase letter, which will read as a Prolog variable.

In [5], we claim that some simple languages can be covered well by tweaking the Prolog syntax using operators, while it is possible to realise acceptable representations for some other, e.g., XML based languages by using a Prolog syntax to represent the (simple) data model of these language. In other cases, embedding of external languages can be supported partially using semantic transformations. For example, calls to Prolog predicates whose functor matches a table in an RDBMS and whose arity matches the

number of columns can be translated into SQL queries [2]. In [5], we propose a number of syntactic extensions to broaden the range of languages that can be supported using one of the above means.

In this paper, we propose a solution for complex external languages for which none of the above achieves a satisfactory embedding. The solution is called *quasi quotations*, where we borrow the integration into the language from Haskell [4]. A Haskell quasi quotation, as a syntactic element, has a syntax identifier (a function symbol) and a snippet of quoted text. The function associated with the syntax identifier is called during parsing and can manipulate the text and massage it to fit further processing by Haskell. It is good practice for the function to create an abstract syntax tree by parsing the text according to the rules of the external language. As we will see in this paper, more lightweight approaches can also be sufficient.

This paper is organised as follows. After examining related work, we revisit the problem statement and describe why current support in Prolog is insufficient to solve this problem in a satisfactory way. In section 6 we introduce the notion of quasi quoting and how it fits into managing strings that present data structures from other languages. In section 7, we introduce the concrete solution proposed for SWI-Prolog. This is followed by examples, future work and the conclusions.

2 Related work

Quasi quotations are used for embedding snippets in many ‘scripting’ languages because they form an easy to understand mechanism to create long strings or ASTs (*Abstract Syntax Tree*) with embedded variables that are given values determined by the environment. Pure textual replacement carries the risk of *injection* attacks, which triggered research towards more safe *template* engines.³ Notably modern scripting languages such as Python and Ruby provide a rich palette of such techniques. This paper follows the reasoning and technique described in “Why It’s Nice to be Quoted: Quasiquoting for Haskell” [4]. We refer to this article for further background information. Another interesting system is Camlp4 [1], which provides parsing and ‘anti parsing’ infrastructure for OCaml. Both approaches allows for extending the host language. The main difference with our approach is that we merely propose a hook into the Prolog parser that enable smart processing of quasi quotations without dictating how these quotations are processed.

3 The need to embed snippets of external languages in Prolog

We will explain this need by an example from SWI-Prolog’s web page generating facilities [6]. Web pages are by no means the only place where these problems arise [4], but the domain is quite familiar to many programmers and is of particular interest to us

³ TAL (<http://www.owlfish.com/software/simpleTAL/tal-guide.html>)
Cheetah (<http://www.cheetahtemplate.org/examples.html>)
Django (<https://docs.djangoproject.com/en/dev/ref/templates/>)
Jinja2 (<http://jinja.pocoo.org/docs/templates/>).

because generating web pages is an important application area for SWI-Prolog. A modern web page typically consists of HTML that creates the initial DOM structure, CSS that provides styling and JavaScript for creating interactive components. Our solution for generating HTML is similar to PiLLoW [3] and based on representing the HTML DOM structure as a nested Prolog term. The SWI-Prolog HTML page generation library provides good solutions for

- Generating the page structure.
- Definition and reuse of DCGs that generate page fragments.
- Create references (URLs) to other pages on the server.
- Modular inclusion of resources, such as style and JavaScript files including dependency tracking and automatic ordering by computing a partial order based on the dependencies.

Pages generated with this infrastructure are guaranteed to be syntactically correct, regardless of the data from which the page is created. This built-in protection against injection attacks is considered a key asset of the server infrastructure and a property that we wish to maintain when integrating JavaScript into the page.

In earlier publications [5,6] we already identified two missing pieces: (1) longer (HTML) text fragments and (2) JavaScript fragments. The first problem can be solved using PWP⁴. PWP was developed by Richard O’Keefe and can be considered the opposite of the above described Prolog based page generator. The page is described in XML and reserved XML elements and tags trigger the generation of dynamic page components based on the evaluation of Prolog goals. Like the Prolog page generator, PWP protects against injection attacks because it considers solutions from Prolog as data that is used to extend the XML DOM, which is subsequently serialized for generating the final page. PWP simplifies the specification of pages with large amounts of text, but the rule format is less natural and it lacks the modularity of the Prolog based generator.

We have been struggling with JavaScript, trying various approaches. Currently, there are a large number of JavaScript frameworks that provide ‘widgets’ for use on web pages. Popular examples are YUI⁵ and jQuery⁶. Including these widgets typically demands creating a DOM structure that carries an `id` attribute and represents the data (e.g., a menu may be represented as a `ul` list or an advanced text editor can be represented as a `textarea`). This DOM element is transformed into the target widget by calling a JavaScript initialisation function that modifies the DOM of the target element and installs *event handlers* that provide the dynamic behavior of the element. The initialisation function often takes a *configuration* object (a JavaScript *object literal*, `{name:value, ...}`), where some of the values are *callback functions*, represented as JavaScript lambda functions.

The HTML framework is well equipped to create the initial DOM and pull in the JavaScript and CSS resources using its dependency framework. The initialisation call

⁴ Prolog Well-formed Pages, <http://www.swi-prolog.org/pldoc/package/sgml.html>

⁵ <http://yuilibrary.com/>

⁶ <http://jquery.com/>

is easy enough to abstract, except when the configuration object contains lambda functions. These are often required to massage JSON data from the server into the desired visualisation and support AJAX based operations, such as computing auto-completion candidates. It is quite common for such objects to require dozens of lines of JavaScript. Representing JavaScript lambda functions requires support for the complete complexity of the language. One way to do this is to represent the JavaScript fragment as a list of literals, mixed with DCG rules that insert content generated from Prolog, such as URLs or JavaScript literal objects. This leads to code as below, which we consider hard to type on a keyboard, hard to read and, because it is so hard to read, often subject to syntax errors. Finally, the code below is subject to injection attacks, unless we hand the variables *URL* and *Id* to a grammar that generates valid JavaScript string content from any Prolog atom.

```
[ '$.ajax({ url: "",URL,'",\n',
  '         data: { id: "",Id,'",\n',
  '               }\n',
  '         });\n'
]
```

We tried several designs to improve on the above, none of which we considered satisfactory. Below are the main directions that we tried.

- Abstract away. This implies using the HTML page generation facilities to generate e.g., make a JavaScript call, initialize a variable from Prolog data, etc. To remain manageable, a fairly high level of abstraction is needed that is geared towards the JavaScript framework used. This is problematic because it makes it hard for the programmer to relate the JavaScript examples from the framework documentation to the Prolog code. Although it is possible to abstract some of the lambda functions, there is too much variation to deal with all of them.
- Put the JavaScript in a separate file. This creates many short files that typically only support a specific generated HTML page because the details of the required JavaScript, such as locations on the server that must be addressed vary from page to page. Because there is no formal relation between the two pages, it is hard to relate them and keep them in sync.
- Create application specific JavaScript resources that can be configured without the need for lambda functions in the configuration object. The problem here is that the application developers create their own refinement of the external widget library that requires understanding and documentation, while the externally provided libraries are already quite high level. In other words, the newly created layer adds mostly new complications for managing and understanding the code.

We have come to the conclusion that (1) we need a mechanism that allows for including JavaScript into the Prolog page generation source code, (2) the representation of JavaScript in the Prolog source must be easy to type on a keyboard and understand, (3) the generated JavaScript should be safeguarded against injection attacks without explicit calls to encode data and (4) syntactic validation of the generated fragments are likely to improve productivity.

4 Using Prolog syntax

First, we investigated to what extent the syntax extensions proposed in [5] would help to represent JavaScript naturally using Prolog syntax. We realised support for the empty argument lists (e.g., `name()`), array notation and function bodies using `{...}`. These were resolved after a proposal by Jose Morales, which extends the notion of operators to lists and curly-bracket blocks. In addition to our hope of improving JavaScript support, list subscription and curly-bracket attribute lists are in use with B-Prolog and ECLiPSe.

We have realised a prototype that can express a fair deal of the JavaScript syntax. However, the following problems remain unresolved:

- It requires `!` and `.` to be defined as operators. These operators are known to cause ambiguity issues.
- Quoting of identifiers may be needed (e.g., `'String'(...)`)
- A special symbol is needed to distinguish identifiers from strings. ("string" cannot be used because it is a list of integers).
- Restrictions are needed with regard to spaces. No space is allowed after function symbols and keywords such as `while`. In some places additional spaces are required to prevent Prolog from reading two JavaScript tokens as a single Prolog token.
- Some symbols clash with Prolog. Consider `|` or `%`, which play a totally different role in the Prolog syntax.
- Some JavaScript snippets can be turned into valid Prolog syntax, but the resulting AST is ambiguous. For example, `++a` is different from `a++`, but both result in the Prolog term `++(a)`.

We believe that the result would have been more usable than using Prolog quoted atoms for short (1-10 lines) JavaScript snippets, that include simple lambda functions such as making trivial AJAX callbacks. Our main point of doubt is that it is hard to convey the restrictions to casual Prolog users, which makes it likely to get surprised by output that differs from the expectations and can only be understood through deep knowledge of Prolog's syntax and underlying term representation.

5 The three problems

If we cannot include JavaScript using Prolog syntax with user-defined operators, the other option is to use (quoted) text. For this, we need to solve three orthogonal problems:

1. Allow for long quoted text. Current (ISO) Prolog only provides single and double quoted text, which follow the same rules. In particular
 - Quoted text cannot span more than one line, unless the newline is escaped with a backslash.
 - The backslash and quote must be escaped with a backslash.
 - If good layout of the output is desirable, there is no way to indent continuation lines in the Prolog source such that the indentation does not show up in the output.

With these restrictions, simple copy and paste of example code must be followed by a tedious process of making the text fit the Prolog syntax, while the reverse is needed to test the code, for example in a JavaScript console.

2. Relate Prolog variables (data) to references in the quoted material.
3. Establish a *safe* way to embed data into the template string.

These problems are independent. We illustrate this with a small HTML example that presents a page with the current time. We use an HTML skeleton to make the comparison fair. In pure Prolog, this could be achieved using the following code snippet:

```
... ,
get_time (Now) ,
format_time (atom (Date) , '%+' , Now) ,
print_html ([date=Date] ,
            '<h1>My digital clock</h1>\n\
            <p>It is now {{date}}</p>').
```

The task of **print_html/2** is to relate the template variable `date` to the Prolog variable `Date` (third item above), determine the lexical context of `{{date}}` to know the proper encoding that needs to be done, realise this encoding on the Prolog `atom` and create the proper output string. This is the second item on the list above. Ideally, we would like an error if the HTML fragment is malformed to begin with.

In pure ISO Prolog, all work must be done at runtime. Many Prolog systems provide **goal_expansion/2** or similar, which allows for doing the analysis of the template at compile time. What remains on our wishlist is to (1) get rid of `[date=Date]` and (2) get rid of complicated escape sequences for languages that frequently use quotes or backslashes. We propose to solve both issues using quasi quotations for Prolog.

6 Quasi Quotations

Quasi quotations find their origin in linguistics⁷ and introduces *variables* into textual expressions. They are commonly used in *scripting* languages. For example:

```
a=world; echo "Hello $a"           // Unix shell
$a = "world"; print "Hello $a"; // Perl
```

This approach is natural to the (novice) programmer. Unfortunately it does not work for Prolog because nothing in the normal Prolog compilation process provides access to the names of variables. In addition, plain text insertion is a direct invitation to *injection* attacks. As described in section 5, the template replacement code must be aware of the syntax to perform a safe, i.e., properly escaped, insertion of the variable.

Haskell quasi quotes resolve the injection problem (which is described as a *typing* problem in [4]) by associating a syntax identifier directly with the quoted data. The syntax identifier is associated with a function which typically parses the quoted material into an abstract syntax tree that can represent the target language.

⁷ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quasi-quotation>

7 Quasi Quotations in Prolog

Realising quasi quotations requires for a syntactic construct that (1) provides long quoted strings, (2) associates the quotation to a predicate that can act on it according to the requirements of processing the external language and (3) provides access to the clause’s variable dictionary.

There are few options for adding a syntax extension to Prolog because Prolog ‘symbol’ characters glue together to form an atom to which operator properties can be assigned. According to Ulrich Neumerkel,⁸ taking sequences of Prolog solo character that do not form names is a good starting point. Among others, this allows for `{ | . . . | }`. Combined with a term that identifies the syntax, we propose the following syntax for Prolog quasi quotations, where *Syntax* is an arbitrary (callable) Prolog term:

```
{ | syntax-identifier | | quoted-material | }
```

In the rather unlikely event that `|}` needs to be embedded in the quoted material, this can be realised in two ways: (1) define the predicate that processes the quotation to respect some escape sequence or (2) use the existing flexibility of the target language to avoid `|}`. An example of (1) could be to introduce the mapping `\\ → \`, `\{ → {`, `\} → }`, after which the user can write `| \}`. An example of (2) can be to insert a space between the two if this does not change the semantics or write `\u007c}` inside a string if the target language supports `\uXXXX` escapes inside strings.

Orthogonal to the syntax is the mapping of the quoted material to a Prolog term, which can be a full AST of the snippet or a simplified representation as used in section 8.2. This mapping is defined by the *syntax-identifier*, a callable term to which we refer as *Syntax* from now on. At the same time, quasi quotation merges (Prolog) variables from the environment into the quoted material. Quasi quotations are processed as follows:

- The predicate **read/1** is modified to recognize the *Syntax* term and the quoted text.
- After all normal processing is finished, **read/1** performs the following call:

```
call(+SyntaxName, +Content, +SyntaxArgs, +VarDict, -Result)
```

Here, *SyntaxName* is the functor of the *Syntax* term and *SyntaxArgs* is the list of arguments, i.e., `Syntax = . . . [SyntaxName | SyntaxArgs]`. In section 8, we will see why it is useful to split the functor from the arguments. *Content* is an opaque handle to the quoted material as we will see later. *VarDict* is *Name = Var* list conforming to **read_term/3** and **write_term/3**. *Result* is determined by the call to the deterministic predicate *SyntaxName/4*. The predicate **read/1** inserts *Result* at the location of the quasi quotation in the output term.

- The *Result* term (and thus the quasi quotation) must be a goal (see section 8.3) or appear as the argument of a goal that processes (often serializes) the result (often an AST). For example, **reply_html_page/3** in section 8.1 is designed to serialize the HTML DOM (AST) produced by the HTML parser called by the quasi quoter.

⁸ <https://lists.iai.uni-bonn.de/pipermail/swi-prolog/2013/010422.html>

We provide two support predicates for *SyntaxName/4* to process the result. Note that there are no restrictions on how the called predicate combines the quoted text with the syntax arguments and variable dictionary to construct the final term.

phrase_from_quasi_quotation(:*Grammar*, +*Content*)

Calls the grammar *Grammar* on the list formed by *Content*. This predicate uses the *pure input* library described in [7] to parse the content. Syntax errors may be raised using the non-terminal `syntax_error//1`, which produces a precise syntax location that consists of the file, line number, line position and character count.

with_quasi_quotation_input(+*Content*, -*Stream*, :*Goal*)

Calls *Goal* on the Prolog stream *Stream*. The stream position information reflects the location in the source file, except for the byte count.

8 Examples of using quasi quotes in Prolog

In this section we provide three examples to illustrate quasi quotations. The first example (HTML) is based on the existing SWI-Prolog libraries for parsing and serializing HTML. The second example demonstrates how JavaScript can be handled safely (but with limited syntax checking support) by only tokenising the quotation. The third example concerns SPARQL,⁹ demonstrates the value of the quasi quotation approach in a scenario where the parsed quasi quotation is used as a Prolog query.

8.1 Quasi quoting HTML

The first, complete, example illustrates safe embedding of long HTML texts into a Prolog web page. The code of the quasi quoter is given in figure 2. First, we give a fully working webserver based on this quasi quoter in figure 1. We notice that the quoted material can contain multiple lines, does not require any line endings and may contain quotes. The content of the quoted material is valid HTML and because an editor can easily detect the `{ |html and | }` indicators, it is not hard for development tools to provide support for the embedded HTML, such as highlighting, indentation or completion.

The HTML quoter is defined to limit Prolog variables that are replaced to those that appear as *arguments* to the `html` syntax indicator (*Date* in figure 1). The convention to pass variables that are subject to replacement explicitly has the following advantages: (1) it avoids a *singleton variable* warning on *Date*¹⁰, (2) Prolog clauses have a relatively large number of variables due to the lack of functional notation which can avoid variables and destructive assignment which allows for reusing a variable, (3) it makes the substitution more explicit and (4) it allows the quoter to check that all intended replacements were made.

The HTML quasi quoter as defined in figure 2 replaces Prolog variables indicated by its arguments (`html(Date)`) if they appear as value for an attribute or content of an element. It performs the following steps:

⁹ <http://www.w3.org/TR/sparql11-overview/>

¹⁰ This problem can also be resolved by the quasi quoter by removing singleton variables that appear inside the result term of the quasi quoter.

```

:- use_module(library(http/thread_httpd)).
:- use_module(library(http/http_dispatch)).
:- use_module(library(http/html_write)).

server(Port) :- http_server(http_dispatch, [port(Port)]).

:- http_handler(/, clock, []).

clock(_Request) :-
    get_time(Now),
    format_time(atom(Date), '%+', Now),
    reply_html_page(
        title('My digital clock'),
        {|html(Date)||
        <h1>My digital clock</h1>

        <p>It is now <span class="time">Date</span>
        |}).

```

Fig. 1. Example web server with embedded HTML

1. Parse the quoted HTML text using **load_html/3**. The option `max_errors(0)` causes the parser to throw a `syntax_error` exception and abort on the first error. As this processing happens while reading the source, the HTML syntax error is reported during compilation and includes line, line position and character count information.
2. The XML DOM structure is recursively traversed and attributes that have a Prolog variable as value or content that matches a Prolog variable from *Syntax* is replaced by this variable.

When the page is generated (figure 1), binding of the variable *Date* completes the XML DOM structure. This structure is serialised by **reply_html_page/3**. The serialisation ensures type safety and the generation of correct HTML syntax.¹¹

8.2 Embedding JavaScript

The HTML quasi quoter of the previous section was easily implemented because the SWI-Prolog infrastructure already contains a parser and serializer for HTML. We do not have these for JavaScript. We are likely to develop this in the future, but here we want to illustrate that it is possible to achieve safe template replacement by only using a *tokeniser*.

¹¹ The HTML infrastructure has a global option to select between HTML and XHTML serialisation, which implies that HTML in the Prolog source may be serialised as XHTML to the client.

```

:- module(html_quasi_quotations, [ html/4 ]).
:- use_module(library(sgml)).
:- use_module(library(apply)).
:- use_module(library(lists)).
:- use_module(library(quasi_quotations)).

:- quasi_quotation_syntax(html).

html(Content, Vars, Dict, DOM) :-
    include(qq_var(Vars), Dict, QQDict),
    with_quasi_quotation_input(
        Content, In,
        load_html(In, DOM0,
            [ max_errors(0)
              ])),
    xml_content(QQDict, DOM0, DOM).

qq_var(Vars, _=Var) :- member(V, Vars), V == Var, !.

xml_content(Dict, [Name], [Var]) :-
    atom(Name),
    memberchk(Name=Var, Dict), !.
xml_content(Dict, Content0, Content) :-
    maplist(xml_content_element(Dict), Content0, Content).

xml_content_element(Dict,
    element(Tag, Attrs0, Content0),
    element(Tag, Attrs, Content)) :- !,
    maplist(xml_attribute(Dict), Attrs0, Attrs),
    xml_content(Dict, Content0, Content).
xml_content_element(_, Element, Element).

xml_attribute(Dict, Attr=Name, Attr=Var) :-
    memberchk(Name=Var, Dict), !.
xml_attribute(_, Attr, Attr).

```

Fig. 2. Source for the HTML quasi quoter

Because JavaScript is generated as part of the HTML page generation, the JavaScript quasi quoter produces output for the HTML backend. It translates the JavaScript into a list of two types of elements: (1) plain atoms (that will be emitted in the context of a `script` element) and calls to a grammar `js_expression//1`, which defines a translation of native Prolog data into JavaScript literals according to table 1.

The quasi quoter tokenises the quoted material using an ECMAScript compliant tokeniser, implemented using a Prolog grammar. The quoter (figure 4) replaces *identi-*

Prolog	JavaScript
number	number
atom	string (escaped using JavaScript syntax)
@true	boolean true
@false	boolean false
@null	null constant
List	array
object(NameValueList)	object literal
{ Name:Value, ... }	object literal

Table 1. Prolog to JavaScript conversion

fier tokens that match with a Prolog variable with a call to `js_expression//1`, and translates the remainder into plain atoms. Figure 3 shows a shortened predicate from the SWI-Prolog website that applies the JavaScript quasi quoter to initialise a jQuery widget called *tagit*. The actual predicate contains a larger configuration object, just ‘more of the same’. In this example, the first block is used to compute server URLs and properties for *Obj* that we need in the remainder. Next, the `html//1` call creates the DOM needed for the *tagit* widget. Here, we could also have used the HTML quasi quoter. The choice is rather arbitrary in this case because the fragment is short and defines only structure and data that is passed in from a variable. Next, we see `html_requires//1`, which ensures that the page head is extended to load the required JavaScript and CSS resources and finally, there is the script fragment with embedded Prolog variables. Because Prolog variables are valid JavaScript identifiers, the fragment contains valid JavaScript syntax.

8.3 Embedding SPARQL

SPARQL¹² is the query language for the semantic web RDF language. In most of this section, one may replace SPARQL with SQL. ClioPatria is SWI-Prolog’s semantic web framework, which contains a SPARQL ‘endpoint’. The SPARQL engine compiles a SPARQL query into a Prolog query, optimizes and executes this query and serializes the results according to the SPARQL result specification.

When writing middleware (reasoning) in the ClioPatria, one typically uses direct queries to the embedded RDF store for the reasoning. In some cases, one would like to use SPARQL for specifying the query. Consider cases where the query is already available in SPARQL, the query must also be used with external servers or the author is much more fluent in SPARQL than in Prolog. The quasi quotation syntax can be used to write down the code below. The SPARQL query is parsed at compile time and the SPARQL projection variables can naturally integrate with the Prolog variable of the enclosing clause. Note that in this example, we think it is better not to pass the substituted variables as arguments to the `sparql` syntax term because this list is made explicit in the variable projection clause that starts the query.

¹² <http://www.w3.org/TR/sparql11-overview/>

```

prolog:doc_object_page_footer(Obj, _Options) -->
{ http_link_to_id(complete_tag, [], Complete),
  http_link_to_id(show_tag, [], OnClick),
  http_link_to_id(remove_tag, [], Remove),
  object_id(Obj, ObjectID),
  object_tags(Obj, Tags),
  atomic_list_concat(Tags, ',', Data)
},
html(div(class('user-annotations'),
         input([id(tags), value(Data)]))),
html_requires(tagit),
js_script(|javascript(Complete, OnClick, ObjectID, Remove)||
          $(document).ready(function() {
            $("#tags").tagit({
              autocomplete: { delay: 0.3,
                             minLength: 1,
                             source: Complete
                          },
              onTagClicked: function(event, ui) {
                window.location.href = OnClick+"tag="+
                  encodeURIComponent(ui.tagLabel);
              },
              beforeTagRemoved: function(event, ui) {
                $.ajax({ dataType: "json",
                       url: Remove,
                       data: { tag: ui.tagLabel,
                              obj: ObjectID
                            }
                      });
              }
            });
          });
|}).

```

Fig. 3. Shortened code fragment from the SWI-Prolog website that illustrates the embedding of JavaScript for initializing a widget.

```

...
{|sparql||
  SELECT ?Name, ?Place WHERE {
    ...
  }
|}>

```

```

javascript(Content, Vars, Dict, \Parts) :-
    include(qq_var(Vars), Dict, QQDict),
    phrase_from_quasi_quotation(
        js(QQDict, Parts), Content).

qq_var(Vars, _=Var) :- member(V, Vars), V == Var, !.

js(Dict, [Pre, Subst|More]) -->
    here(Here0), js_tokens(_, here(Here1),
    js_token(identifier(Name)),
    { memberchk(Name=Var, Dict), !,
      Subst = \js_expression(Var),
      diff_to_atom(Here0, Here1, Pre)
    },
    js(Dict, More).
js(_, [Last]) -->
    string(Codes), \+ [_], !,
    { atom_codes(Last, Codes) }.

js_tokens([]) --> [].
js_tokens([H|T]) --> js_token(H), js_tokens(T).

%! diff_to_atom(+Start, +End, -Atom)
%
% True when Atom is an atom that represents the
% characters between Start and End, where End must
% be in the tail of the list Start.

diff_to_atom(Start, End, Atom) :-
    diff_list(Start, End, List),
    atom_codes(Atom, List).

diff_list(Start, End, List) :- Start == End, !, List = [].
diff_list([H|Start], End, [H|List]) :-
    diff_list(Start, End, List).

here(Here, Here, Here).

```

Fig. 4. Partial source for the javascript syntax quoter.

A similar approach is feasible with SQL, offering a more convenient way to interact with the database than using *prepared statements* and both a safer and more convenient way than direct text-based SQL queries.

9 Implementation

The implementation of quasi quotation handling in an existing Prolog system is straightforward and should not require more than a couple of days. The tokeniser is extended to recognise `{|`. On encountering this token, the parser builds a list of terms, each of which represents a quasi quotation. If the list of quasi quotations is not empty when **read/1** reads the fullstop token, it materializes the variable dictionary and calls a routine that calls the quasi quotation parsers. Note that quasi quotations are parsed *after* **read/1** completes reading the term. This allows for quasi quotations to refer to variables that appear *after* the quasi quotation (see section 8.3). This does imply that **read/1** must buffer the quoted text. The functionality is made available to the user through the library `quasi_quotations.pl`, which appeared in SWI-Prolog 6.3.17.

The Prolog tokeniser is extended with two tokens. `{|` is a new token that starts a quasi quotation. The sequence `| | . . . | }` is processed as a single token.

10 Future work

Quasi quotations are young in SWI-Prolog. We believe that the core functionality described in this article is largely future-proof.

One of the future tasks is to establish libraries that facilitate syntax handling and safe replacement. Another is to establish design patterns for using this technology. What can be learned from the Haskell, Python and Ruby communities here? Quasi quotations typically ‘evaluate’ to a Prolog term that shares variables with the clause into which it is embedded. We do not have a functional syntax that we can exploit to force ‘evaluation’ of this term with instantiated variables. On the other hand, we can also use the non-ground abstract syntax tree and use it for e.g., *matching* tasks.

11 Conclusions

In this article we have motivated why it is necessary to be able to embed longer snippets of code written in another language in Prolog source code. This requires for a syntax that permits embedding, practically without the need for Prolog escaping in the embedded text. Next, this text must be related to Prolog data. The integration of Prolog data into the snippet must be done according to the syntax and data model of the external language. This implies we need a programmable component that is related to the quoted material.

Combining these requirements into one syntactic extension that is executed by **read/1** simplifies support by tooling such as editors, provides natural access to Prolog variables and allows for seamless integration of error messages.

We have demonstrated quasi quotations using two implemented quoters. These quoters allow for easy copying and pasting material in their native syntax to and from Prolog source. Using these quoters is likely to reduce the learning curve for embedding snippets into Prolog, while the quasi quoter can guarantee that the integrated material is (syntactically) correct and that Prolog material is *safely* integrated.

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