Towards an Interactive Keyword Search over Relational Databases

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ABSTRACT
Keyword search over relational databases has been widely studied for the exploration of structured data in a user-friendly way. However, users typically have limited domain knowledge or are unable to precisely specify their search intention. Existing methods find the minimal units that contain all the query keywords, and largely ignore the interpretation of possible users' search intentions. As a result, users are often overwhelmed with a lot of irrelevant answers. Moreover, without a visually pleasing way to present the answers, users often have difficulty understanding the answers because of their complex structures. Therefore, we design an interactive yet visually pleasing search paradigm called ExpressQ. ExpressQ extends the keyword query language to include keywords that match meta-data, e.g., names of relations and attributes. These keywords are utilized to infer users' search intention. Each possible search intention is represented as a query pattern, whose meaning is described in human natural language. Through a series of user interactions, ExpressQ can determine the search intention of the user, and translate the corresponding query patterns into SQLs to retrieve answers to the query. The ExpressQ prototype is available at http://expressq.comp.nus.edu.sg.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
H.3.3 [Information Storage and Retrieval]: Information Search and Retrieval—Search process

Keywords
Keyword Search; Relational Database; Interactive Approach

1. INTRODUCTION
The primary interaction between relational databases (RDB) and users starts from SQL queries, which assumes that users are familiar with database schemas and the query language. As databases increase in size and become more accessible to a diverse and less technically oriented audience, new forms of data exploration become increasingly attractive, and keyword search is one of them to explore information in RDB.

Existing search methods typically consider a keyword query as a set of user specified keywords that match tuple values. One traditional approach to evaluate the query is to materialize the database as a graph where each node represents a tuple and each edge represents a foreign key-key reference. The query answers are the minimal connected subgraphs that contain all the keywords [1]. Another approach translates the keyword query into a set of SQL statements, and leverages on relational DBMSs to retrieve answers [2, 5]. However, these works do not consider users' search intentions due to the intrinsic ambiguity of keyword queries, and often return an overwhelming amount of answers, many of which are complex and not easily understood. As a result, users usually have to re-formulate their queries multiple times before they can get the desired information.

Our goal is to design an exploratory search paradigm that actively involves the user in the search process in order to address the following challenges in relational keyword queries:

1. How to identify the search target of a user query;
2. How to identify the context of a keyword since keywords can match tuple values as well as meta-data such as the names of relation and attributes [6];
3. How to present the query answers such that they facilitate human understanding and convey the relationship between data items [7, 3].

To achieve our goal, we build a system called ExpressQ, which provides an interactive approach to relational keyword search. ExpressQ captures the semantics of objects and relationships in the database, and handles keywords matching the names of relations and attributes. Given a keyword query, ExpressQ infers the search target of the query by identifying the objects/relationships referred to by the keywords. Then it constructs query patterns to represent the user’s possible search intention, and rank the patterns. The meanings of these patterns are described in human natural languages in order to facilitate users' understanding. Based on the user’s choice of query patterns, ExpressQ will generate SQL statements to retrieve the answers.

The work in [4] presents a natural language interface for querying RDB. However, their focus is how to understand a loosely structured query, while we strive to interpret the search intention of a keyword query and interactively construct SQLs.
2. PRELIMINARIES

The relations in a database can be classified into object relations, relationship relations, mixed relations and component relations [7]. Intuitively, an object (relationship) relation contains information of objects (relationships), namely, the single-valued attributes of an object class (relationship type). A mixed relation contains information of both objects and relationships, which occurs when there is a many-to-one relationship. The multivalued attributes of objects and relationships are stored in component relations.

ExpressQ models the relational schema with an undirected graph called Object-Relationship-Mixed (ORM) schema graph \( G = (V,E) \). Each node \( v \in V \) comprises of an object/relationship/mixed relation and its component relations, and is associated with a \( v.type \in \{ \text{object, relationship, mixed} \} \). Two nodes \( u \) and \( v \) are connected via an edge \( e(u,v) \in E \) if there exists a foreign key-key constraint between the relations in \( u \) and that in \( v \).

Consider the sample company database in Figure 1. Figure 2 shows the corresponding ORM schema graph of the database. Note that node Employee is a mixed node because of the many-to-one relationships between employees and departments.

![Figure 1: Sample company database](image1)

![Figure 2: ORM schema graph of Figure 1](image2)

Suppose a user issues the keyword query \{Smith Green\}, where both the keywords match the names of several employees. Based on the ORM schema graph in Figure 2, some of the possible interpretations of this query are:

a. Find information on the project in which both employees Green and Smith are involved.

b. Find information on the department in which both employees Green and Smith work.

c. Find information on the department which conducts a project that involves the employee Green and the employee Smith works in.

Existing RDB keyword search engines [1, 2, 5] would consider all the above query interpretations and retrieve the corresponding information from the database. Consequently, the user is often overwhelmed by a lot of answers.

ExpressQ extends the keyword query language in order to reduce the interpretations of keyword queries. An extended keyword query consists of a sequence of keywords such that each keyword matches a relation name, or an attribute name or a tuple value. For instance, if the user is interested in the information on the department that both the employee Smith and the employee Green work in, s/he can issue the query as \{Department Employee Smith Employee Green\}. The keyword Department indicates that the user is interested in the information of the department, while the keyword Employee gives the context that Smith and Green refer to names of two employees.

3. SYSTEM ARCHITECTURE

Figure 3 depicts the architecture of ExpressQ. The system takes as input a keyword query, and generates a set of SQL statements that best capture the user’s search intention. During the query processing, it interacts with the user in the front end and communicates with the database and its corresponding schema in the back end, in order to retrieve the information that the user is interested in.

There are four main components in ExpressQ, namely, Query Analyzer, Query Interpreter, Ranker, and SQL Generator. The following sections discuss the functions of these components.

![Figure 3: System Architecture](image3)

3.1 Query Analyzer

The Query Analyzer parses each keyword in the query and obtains the possible matches of the keywords. Based on the ORM schema graph of the database, the Query Analyzer determines the object/relationship that a keyword refers to, and creates tags for the keyword. A tag is given by \( T = (label, attr, cond) \), where label is the name of the object/relationship, attr is the attribute name, and cond is the restriction on the object/relationship. A keyword may have multiple tags as it matches different objects or relationships. This results in multiple sequences of tags for a query. After obtaining a sequence of tags for the keywords in the query, the Query Analyzer groups the keywords that refer to the same object or relationship together.

Consider the keyword query \{Project Employee Green Brown\}. Table 1 shows two sequence of tags created for the query. Based on the tags, we can tell that the keywords Project and Employee refer to the names of projects and employees in the database, while the keyword Green refers to an employee name. Note that the keyword Brown has two tags. Tag \( T_{14} \) captures the information that Brown refers to
an employee name, while tag $T_{14}$ captures the information that Brown refers to a department address.

Figure 4 shows the screenshot of the interface where ExpressQ lists the different matches of the keywords in this query for the user to select.

### 3.2 Query Interpreter

The Query Interpreter constructs a set of query patterns to represent the possible search intention of the user. A query pattern is a minimal connected graph derived from the ORM schema graph. Intuitively, the Query Interpreter creates a node to denote the object/relationship referred to by each group of keywords. These nodes will correspond to the nodes in the ORM schema graph and the Query Interpreter connects them based on the edges in the graph.

For example, given the first sequence of tags for the keyword query \{Project Employee Green Brown\} in Table 1, ExpressQ creates three nodes to denote a project object, the employee named Green and the employee named Brown. Based on the ORM schema graph in Figure 2, the Project node can connect to the Employee node via the EmpProj node. Hence, ExpressQ connects these three objects by creating two EmpProj relationships between the employees and the project. The query pattern $P_1$ obtained is shown in Figure 5, indicating that the user is interested in projects that involve both the employees Green and Brown.

Further, the Project node can also connect to the Employee node via the path Project $\rightarrow$ ProjDept $\rightarrow$ Department $\rightarrow$ Employee in the ORM schema graph. By creating nodes (ProjDept and Department) according to this path, we obtain the query pattern $P_2$ in Figure 5. This pattern depicts the user’s intention to find projects which involves Green and are conducted by the department where Brown works.

### 3.3 Ranker

Since ExpressQ may generate multiple query patterns for a keyword query, it is necessary to rank these patterns. The Ranker in ExpressQ takes into account how many objects are involved in the query patterns. This is captured by the number of object/mixed nodes in the patterns. The Ranker also identifies the target nodes and the condition nodes by their tags. A target node indicates the output object of the query, and is typically specified by a keyword matching the name of a relation or an attribute. On the other hand, a condition node indicates the restrictions for the output object, and is specified by a keyword matching some tuple value. Consequently, query patterns with fewer object/mixed nodes, and a shorter average distance between target nodes and condition nodes will be ranked higher.

In Figure 5, the query pattern $P_1$ contains 3 object/mixed nodes while the query pattern $P_2$ contains 4 object/mixed nodes. Both $P_1$ and $P_2$ have one target node (Project) and two condition nodes (Employee). We compute the average distance between the Project node and two Employee nodes. $P_1$ has an average distance of 2 while the $P_2$ has an average distance of 2.5. Thus, $P_1$ is ranked higher than $P_2$.

### 3.4 SQL Generator

The SQL Generator translates a query pattern into an SQL statement to retrieve the result from the database. Existing RDB keyword search engines typically generate SQLs that project every attribute of joining relations [2, 5]. As a result, many irrelevant attributes are projected, which makes the output overwhelming and difficult to understand.

In contrast, ExpressQ only projects the information on the target node. In particular, if the target node specifies the output object by its name, then the SQL Generator will include all the attributes of the object in the SELECT clause. Otherwise, if it specifies the name of an attribute of the output object, then the system will include the corresponding attribute in the SELECT clause.

For example, ExpressQ will translate the query pattern $P_1$ in Figure 5 to the following SQL statement:

```
SELECT P.Pid, P.Name, P.Budget
FROM Project P, EmpProj EP1, Employee E1, EmpProj EP2, Employee E2
 E1.Name contains 'Green' AND E2.Name contains 'Brown'
```

Note that ExpressQ only outputs the relevant project information. In contrast, existing works will project the attributes of 5 relations in the FROM clause, and the output will contain a lot of irrelevant information.

### 3.5 User Interaction

One key feature of ExpressQ is its friendly interaction with the user to understand his/her search intention so that it can be selective in its generation of SQL statements and subsequent retrieval of relevant answers for the user. A keyword query is inherently ambiguous for the following reasons:

1. a query keyword can have multiple matches in the database, and
The user insight into how the query is interpreted by the system is critical to keyword search over relational databases. In our demonstration, we will present a web-based browsing interface of ExpressQ, which communicates with the main Java based server. The system is available at http://expressq.comp.nus.edu.sg. We intend to show the use of ExpressQ against a number of real application scenarios such as the IMDB database (www.imdb.com), and the ACM Digital Library (dl.acm.org).

The demonstration will consist of two parts. First, we will run a number of sample keyword queries against these sources. We will demonstrate how ExpressQ exploits the semantics of objects/relationships in the database and utilize the keywords that match meta-data in the query to infer the search intention for these queries. Next, the user will be free to run their own queries. We will demonstrate how ExpressQ interactively leads the user to retrieve the intended answers effectively. During the query processing, the system will present different interpretations of the queries. The user will be able to choose the ones he/she is interested in, and thus obtain the answers that satisfy the search intention.

Through this demonstration, we will highlight three key-points to the audience. First, the interpretation of the user’s search intention is critical to keyword search over relational database. This requires the keyword search system to be knowledgeable about the semantics of objects and relationships in the database. Second, keywords that match the meta-data are helpful to infer the search intention of the user since they provide the context of subsequent keywords in the query. Third, the presentations of the query interpretations and query answers are important to facilitate user understanding and subsequent interaction with the system.

Figure 6: Screenshot of answers retrieved

4. DEMONSTRATION

As the user often has some particular search intention in mind, ExpressQ actively involves the user in the query evaluation process. In particular, if a keyword is associated with more than one tag, the user is offered the opportunity to choose the tag(s); if the Query Interpreter constructs more than one query pattern, the user is again allowed to select his/her intended query pattern and retrieve the corresponding answers. This interactive approach has the advantage of systematically leading the user to obtain answers that satisfy his/her search intention. This approach also gives the user insight into how the query is interpreted by the system and the results that can be expected.

Recall the query \(\text{Project Employee Green Brown}\). Suppose the user issues this query to find the project that involves both the employees \text{Green} and \text{Brown}. Since the keyword \text{Brown} can refer to an employee named \text{Brown} or a department at \text{Brown} street, the ExpressQ shows the possible matches for the user to choose from (see Figure 4). If the user selects \text{Brown} as referring to an employee name, then ExpressQ will show how the employees \text{Brown} and \text{Green} can relate to a project in terms of query patterns (see Figure 5). Note that these patterns are ordered by their ranking scores.

Another feature of ExpressQ is it depicts the query interpretations and answers in human natural language to facilitate users’ understanding. For instance, the tag \(T_{14} = \text{(Employee, Name, Brown)}\) in Table 1 is described as “\text{Brown} refers to an employee with name matching \text{Brown}”. The query pattern \(P_1\) in Figure 5 is represented as a tree annotated with the semantics of objects and relationships. The root of the tree denotes the output object while the leaves denote the restrictions on the output object. The meaning of this pattern is to “Find the projects that involve the employee with name matching \text{Green} and involve the employee with name matching \text{Brown}”. Thereby, the user can easily identify the intended query pattern by the tree structure, and verify its meaning by the description. After the user selects a query pattern, ExpressQ retrieves the answers and represents them according to the corresponding search intention. Figure 6 shows the screenshot of the interface which displays the answers w.r.t. the query pattern \(P_1\) in Figure 5.