Mining Java Class Naming Conventions

Conference or Workshop Item

How to cite:

For guidance on citations see FAQs.

© 2011 IEEE (Paper); 2011 The Open University (Data)

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher’s website:
http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1109/ICSM.2011.6080776

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online’s data policy on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.
Mining Java Class Naming Conventions

Simon Butler, Michel Wermelinger, Yijun Yu and Helen Sharp
Centre for Research in Computing, Department of Computing
The Open University, Milton Keynes, United Kingdom

Abstract—Class names represent the concepts implemented in object-oriented source code and are key elements in program comprehension and, thus, software maintenance. Programming conventions often state that class names should be noun-phrases, but there is little further guidance for developers on the composition of class names. Other researchers have observed that the majority of Java class identifier names are composed of one or more nouns preceded, optionally, by one or more adjectives. However, no detailed analysis of class identifier name structure has been undertaken that could be leveraged to support program comprehension activities.

We investigate the lexical and syntactic composition of Java class identifier names in two ways. Firstly, as others have done for C function and Java method names, we identify conventional patterns found in the use of parts of speech. Secondly, we identify the origin of words used in class names within the name of any super class and implemented interfaces to identify patterns of class name construction related to inheritance.

Through the analysis of 120,000 unique class names found in 60 open source projects we identify both common and project specific class naming conventions. We apply this knowledge in a case study of the mind-mapping tool Freemind to investigate whether class names that follow unconventional naming schemes are candidates for refactoring—either a name refactoring that conforms to established naming conventions within the code base, or refactoring of the class that results in conventionally named classes.

Keywords—Java class naming; identifier names;

I. INTRODUCTION

Class identifier names represent the core entities and concepts encoded in object-oriented source code, and are vital to program comprehension [1], [2]. Programming conventions advise that developers choose ‘meaningful’ identifier names and that class identifier names should be nouns [3], [4] or descriptive nouns [4]. More advanced practitioner texts advocate a considered approach to identifier naming [5], and a variety of conventions of language use have arisen as a result of praxis [6].

Analysis of C function identifier names led to support for automated name refactoring [7]. Similar analysis of Java method identifier names found a link between identifier names and method implementation [8], which was successfully leveraged to identify candidates for name refactoring and to suggest possible refactorings [9].

Despite the importance of class identifier names for program comprehension, an essential activity in software development and maintenance, there is no detailed understanding of their structure. In this paper we present a survey of the class identifier names found in 16.5 MSLOC of open source Java projects. We analyse the identifier names to recover patterns of part-of-speech (PoS) used in their construction and identify common grammatical structures. We also catalogue the repetition of the component words of super class and interface names in class identifier names. Such reuse is evident in the Java library, for example, where the java.util classes Hashset and TreeSet retain the name of the Set interface implemented by their common super class AbstractSet. However, little is known of the extent to which these types of pattern are replicated in production source code and under what circumstances.

Common, recognisable identifier naming conventions help support human program comprehension and provide a foothold for machine-based program comprehension techniques that extract knowledge from source code [10]. The class identifier naming patterns used in the wider Java community and within a given project are the mechanisms that developers are familiar with and use to communicate ideas in source code. This knowledge can be incorporated in IDE-based tools to help software developers create class identifier names that are more readily understood, and to provide quality assurance tools for software project managers that are an improvement on the functionality of current tools. In a case study of Freemind, a Java mind-mapping tool, we investigate whether the class naming conventions identified can be applied to identify classes that are candidates for refactoring. Firstly where either the name might be refactored to conform to a more common naming convention, and, secondly, where the class might be refactored to form two or more conventionally named classes. We show that unusually structured class names can indicate the need to refactor a class identifier name and may also indicate the need for a class to be refactored.

The structure of the remainder of this paper is as follows: in Section II we explore related research and describe our methodology in Section III. In Section IV we give an account of our results and discuss our findings in Section V, before drawing our conclusions in Section VI.

II. RELATED WORK

The key areas of research related to this paper concern the investigation and understanding of the structure of identifier names and the practical application of that knowledge.

Knowledge of the structure of identifier names has practical applications in source code comprehension and software development and maintenance. Analysis of C function names by Caprile and Tonella has been applied to automate the refactoring of names [7]. Høst and Østvold undertook detailed
analysis of Java method names [8] and found relationships between method names and method implementation in terms of the micro-patterns [11] found in the compiled bytecode. This knowledge was then applied to develop the automated detection of method naming errors and recommendation of candidate refactorings [9].

Singer and Kirkam [12] identified a link between Java class names and the micro-patterns found in the implementation using the approximation that Java class names are of the form $JJ^*NN^+$, where $JJ$ represents an adjective and $NN$ a noun. However, the link was based on the assumption that the rightmost noun is an indicator of the class’s implementation, and no detailed analysis of the class identifier names was undertaken.

The structure of Java class identifier names was investigated as part of a study of the cognitive aspects of identifier names as a form of communication [6]. The investigation found developers used a variety of morphological and grammatical artifices when constructing identifier names, many of which are not proposed by programming conventions. However, the investigation was conducted using source code from multiple programming languages, not Java alone, and was not a comprehensive survey of naming practice.

Deißenböck and Pizka [13] proposed a scheme of concise and consistent naming where a single identifier name represents a single concept throughout the program, and that identifier names are composed so as to represent discrete concepts unambiguously. In a follow up experiment, Lawrie et al. [14] surveyed the identifier names found in 48 MSLOC of C, C++, Fortran and Java source code to determine the extent of violations of concise and consistent naming. The syntactic methodology employed by Lawrie et al. identifies potential violations of concise and consistent naming which include some conventional patterns of naming found in Java inheritance trees.

Identifier naming conventions were used by Abebe et al. [15] to identify smells in source code. The smells are predicated on deviations from suggested identifier naming conventions that arise from programming conventions, and, to a lesser extent, deviation from established conventions arising from identifier naming praxis. A single rule concerns the grammatical structure of class identifier names, and states that class identifier names should contain at least one noun and not contain any verbs. However, this work is based on naming conventions that are guidelines of good practice, rather than a knowledge of naming conventions found in practice.

Previous research has investigated identifier naming in Java and detailed investigations have been constrained to method identifier names. Despite the discovery of practical applications for a comprehensive, detailed understanding of the structure of identifier names, there has been no detailed investigation of Java class identifier names.

From a database of 623,000 identifier names extracted from 16.5 MSLOC of Java source code found in 60 open source Java projects, we extracted and tokenised 120,000 unique class identifier names using our source code mining tool [16], [17]. The tool was configured to detect and ignore both test code and generated source code, using heuristics. We applied two separate analytical techniques to each identifier name: part-of-speech tagging to help identify any common grammatical patterns, and an investigation of the origins of class identifier name components, if any, found within the names of the immediate super class and implemented interfaces.

We also undertook a case study of Freemind®; a Java mind-mapping application, to establish whether unconventionally structured class identifier names indicate that either there is a problem with the class name – so that it can be refactored to a more conventionally structured name – or that there is a problem with the class itself. And, in the latter case, whether any possible refactorings could be identified that might result in two or more conventionally named classes.

### A. Analysing Grammatical Composition

Previous investigations of C function names and Java method names [18], [8], [19] used part of speech (PoS) tagging to identify grammatical patterns in names. Some teams have created their own PoS tagger tuned to identifier names [8], while others have used an off-the-shelf PoS tagger [19]. We followed the latter route by using the Stanford Log-linear PoS tagger.

Our initial experiments were undertaken with the default tagger provided with the Stanford PoS tagger. Using the tagger, which is trained on a corpus of articles taken from The Wall Street Journal, we observed, through manual inspection, error rates of 15–30% for whole identifier names, depending on the project analysed. The chief sources of error appeared to be the difference between the structure of Java class names and the conventional English sentences that form the tagger’s training corpus, and the presence of abbreviations and a technical vocabulary. The consequence of this was that the tagger was trying to tag unknown words in an unrecognised context. As a result we saw common English words tagged as foreign words. We also observed issues related to the resolution of ambiguous PoS. For example the class name `ContentHandler` consisting of two nouns was consistently tagged as an adjective followed by a noun, and the word ‘set’ was often tagged as a verb when used as a noun.

We experimented by creating more sentence-like structures from class names by including the Java keywords from the class declaration and appending the name of the super class and implemented interface. For example, for the class `CustomPropertiesTagHandler`, found in GanttProject,
which has no explicit super class and implements two interfaces, we would construct the phrase class custom properties tag handler implements tag handler and parsing listener. We saw no significant improvement in accuracy.

We decided to train our own PoS tagger using the Stanford PoS tagger. We extracted a training corpus of 9,000 class names at random from 13 of the 60 projects analysed, including the Java library. Each name was tagged manually and any class names that could not be unambiguously tagged were discarded. A tagger was trained on the corpus. A separate test corpus of 2,000 class identifier names was created by manually tagging class names extracted randomly from a further 8 of the projects analysed. An accuracy of 95% was achieved when tagging individual words and abbreviations against the test corpus. However, unrecognised words and abbreviations were only tagged with 83% accuracy, resulting in an accuracy rate for whole identifier names of 87% being reported by the tagger in test mode.

Whilst not perfect, the accuracy is an improvement on the default tagger. Høst and Østvold [8] state the accuracy of their PoS tagger is better than 97% as the result of manual inspection, but are unclear whether this figure is for individual words or for whole method identifier names. Falleri et al. [19] claim a PoS tagging accuracy of 96% for TreeTagger’s default tagger for identifier names, but, again, are unclear whether this relates to individual tags, or whole identifier names.

B. Inheritance analysis

The common grammatical structures found in class identifier names do not identify how developers encode information in class names. Class names in some inheritance hierarchies in the Java library repeat part of the super class name. For example the class HTMLEditorKit, found in the javax.swing.text.html package, is a subclass of StyledEditorKit. Similarly the classes collections in the java.util package often follow a pattern of naming where a base interface name is retained through intermediate classes to the various implementations. Taking the List classes as an example, the List interface extends the Collection interface, and is implemented in a class by AbstractList. The common list classes – e.g. ArrayList and LinkedList – then extend AbstractList. In other words, a basic implementation of a core interface is often named Abstract(interface name), and specialised implementations extend the abstract class and replace Abstract with an adjectival phrase describing the implementation.

We analyse the incorporation of component words in a class identifier name from the immediate super class and any implemented interfaces. Class names were partitioned into six groups according to whether the class explicitly extends a super class – Java classes that do not explicitly declare a super class extend the root class Object – and the number of interfaces implemented. The notation we use consists of the letters $E$ for extends and $I$ for implements with each letter being followed by a subscript indicating the number of super classes extended or interfaces implemented: the values of the subscript being 0, 1 and $n$ where the last means two or more and can only be a subscript to $I$. For example a class that extends a super class and implements no interfaces is classified as $E_1I_0$.

In this study we investigate lexical inheritance, that is we investigate whether component words from the super class or implemented interface names are found in the class identifier name. Accordingly we draw no distinction between identically named super classes from different packages and ignore any package name that might have been specified by the developers in the extends and implements clauses of class declarations. Similarly we ignore generic type names where they are specified.

C. Case study

Freemind is a mind-mapping application written in Java with an 11 year development history. The application consists of a GUI that allows the user to edit, format and annotate a treelike-graph structure of text nodes. The mind maps are stored in an XML format, and can be exported to a range of external formats including HTML and OpenOffice Writer, and as images, flash animations and Java applets.

Using the results of the grammatical and the inheritance analyses, we identified those classes with identifier names that do not conform to the commonly occurring grammatical patterns found in Freemind class names. The subset of classes was then inspected to determine whether the class might be named according to one of the more commonly occurring grammatical patterns, or, if the class appeared to be appropriately named, whether the unusual name might be indicative of a potential refactoring of the class into two or more classes with more conventional names.

IV. RESULTS

To present our results, we combine the individual Treebank adjective, noun and verb PoS tags so that JJ, NN and VB include all forms of adjective, noun, and verb respectively. By collapsing the Penn Treebank categories we create a simplified tagset similar to that used by Høst and Østvold [9].

A. Grammatical Structure

Table I shows the absolute and relative frequencies for the most common grammatical patterns found in 120,000 class identifier names extracted from 60 open source Java projects. The four grammatical forms given in the table comprise 90% of the identifier names analysed. The remaining 10% of class identifier names are formed using a variety of patterns, some with only a single instance. Of note is that Singer and Kirkham’s approximation of Java class identifier names, $JJ^*NN^+$ [12], can be realised by merging the two most common categories and includes 85% of the class identifier names analysed.

B. The influence of inheritance

Table II shows the distribution of classes according to type of inheritance in classes found in all 60 projects. In total
80% of classes are related to another class by inheritance. Some 58% of classes extend a super class, with the majority, 45% in the $E_1 I_0$ category, not implementing an interface. Overall, 35% of classes implement one or more interfaces, and, reflecting the situation with class-based inheritance, the majority of classes implementing an interface do not also extend a class. Indeed only 13% of classes, overall, take advantage of both dimensions of inheritance available in Java.

Table IV shows the frequency with which elements of super class and interface names are repeated in class identifier names for the different inheritance categories (the $E_0 I_0$ category is omitted from the table). The columns headed all contain the frequency for each category with which the super class or interface name is repeated in its entirety and uninterrupted. The columns headed fragment give the frequency with which one or more fragments of the super class or interface name are repeated. The both column shows the frequency with which elements from both sources are repeated in the class identifier name. For each inheritance category approximately 80% of class identifier names incorporate elements from either the super class or implemented interface identifier names. The repetition of fragments of super class identifier names is more common than the repetition of the entire super class name. Repetition of interface identifier names and fragments occurs with a similar frequency, apart from the $E_1 I_n$ category where fragments of interface names are repeated more often than the entire interface name. Where both dimensions of inheritance are used – the $E_1 I_1$ and $E_1 I_n$ categories – the super class name is the more common source of class identifier name components. Indeed some 40% of identifier names in the $E_1 I_1$ category and 43% in the $E_1 I_n$ category repeat component words from only the super class name, compared to 18% and 22%, respectively, that repeat component words from both super class and interface names alone. We also found that 8% of class identifier names in the $E_0 I_n$ category and 1% in the $E_1 I_n$ category incorporate elements from two or more implemented interface identifier names.

The most common grammatical forms of class identifier names with component words inherited from a super class or interface are given in Table V for each category. In this table we introduce a notation for tagging super class and interface names, as well as their fragments. The tags are $SC$ to represent a super class and $SCF$ for a fragment of the super class name. Similarly we use $II$ and $IIF$ for interface names and fragments of interface names respectively.
The **SCF** pattern found in the **E1I0** and **E1I1** categories, arises in class identifier names like `BuddyPluginPasswordException` found in Vuze which has the super class `BuddyPluginException`, where one or more nouns are inserted into the superclass name to indicate the specialisation.

Where both dimensions of inheritance are used, the **E1I1** and **E1I0** categories, the most common name inheritance components are **NN**+ **SCF**+, **II SCF**+ and **NN**+ **SC**. The **E1I1** category contains identifier names composed exclusively of words repeated from both the super class and implemented interface identifier names. An example of the **II SCF**+ pattern is the `JabRef` class `FieldTextArea` which is a subclass of `JTextArea` and implements the `FieldEditor` interface.

The repetition of entire interface names as suffixes, the **NN**+ **II** pattern, is absent from the **E1I0** category despite being the most common pattern in both the **E0I0** and **E0I1** categories. An example of the class name pattern is the `LinkedHashMap` class in the `java.util` package which has the super class `HashMap`. Many of the instances of the **II NN**+ pattern are examples of class identifier names ending in `Impl`, an abbreviation for implementation, such as `GroovyFeatureImpl` found in NetBeans. Also relatively common are class identifier names composed exclusively of fragments of an interface name, i.e. the pattern **IIF**+. This can result from the use by some developers of the letter **I** as a prefix to indicate an interface identifier name, e.g. `IDialogSettings` found in Eclipse, where the implementing class is named `DialogSettings`. Other examples of the **IIF**+ pattern include the class `JNDIResource`, found in JBoss, that implements the interface `JNDIResource` implemented in the Java library class `RMISocketFactory`, which implements the interfaces `RMIClientSocketFactory` and `RMIServerSocketFactory`.

**C. Freemind**

We extracted 652 class identifier names from Freemind and the frequency of the most common grammatical patterns can be seen in Table VI. The four most common patterns are the same as those found with the greatest frequency for all projects (Table I), and were found with similar frequencies apart from the **VBNN**+ pattern where the frequency for Freemind was almost double that for all the projects analysed. In total the four most common grammatical patterns describe 91% of the class identifier names in Freemind.

The distribution of class identifier names in the inheritance categories for Freemind given in Table VII show a greater proportion of classes in Freemind either extend a super class or implement one or more interfaces than is observed across all the projects analysed (see Table II). Indeed, 66% of classes in Freemind extend a super class, as opposed 58% across all classes.
Table VIII shows the distribution of common grammatical forms of class identifier names that include words derived from the super class or implemented interfaces for each of the inheritance categories in Freemind. While many patterns are common to the same categories in Table VIII and Table V, there are key differences that indicate the existence of project-specific naming conventions in Freemind. For example, the two most frequently occurring patterns in the $E_0I_1$ and $E_0I_n$ categories overall, $NN^+II^+$ and $NN^+IIF^+$, are much more common in Freemind. Furthermore, the pattern $NN^+IIF^+$, where a fragment of the interface name is repeated in the class identifier name, is the more frequent of the two in Freemind and accounts for 29% of the class identifier names in the $E_0I_n$ category.

The $NN^+SCF^+NN^+$ pattern observed with a frequency of 7% in the $E_1I_0$ inheritance category in Freemind occurs with much lower frequency across the projects analysed. Inspection of the instances of the $NN^+SCF^+NN^+$ pattern reveals a local naming convention, an example of which is the class MindMapCloudModel that implements the interface CloudAdapter. The pattern occurs mainly in a small cluster of packages where it is used for classes that form fundamental components of Freemind’s mind maps.

Another feature of Freemind is the relative prominence of class names with grammatical patterns beginning with a verb in the $E_1I_0$ and $E_1I_1$ categories. Identifier names of the $VB NN^+SCF^+$ pattern are mainly of the form $VB NN^+$, when the origin of component words is ignored, and, as already noted, Freemind has a relatively high frequency of identifier names of this general pattern (See Table VI). As we discuss below, many of the classes responsible for handling user initiated actions in the GUI start with a verb. The $VB NN^+SCF^+$ pattern is also prominent in the $E_1I_1$ category, where it is notable that the $NN^+SCF^+$ pattern occurs with a much higher frequency in Freemind (38%) than amongst all the projects analysed (15%). The $IIF^+$ pattern found in the $E_1I_1$ and $E_1I_n$ categories for all the projects surveyed are not found in the same categories for Freemind. Where components from implemented interface identifier names are incorporated into class names in the $E_1I_1$ and $E_1I_n$ categories in Freemind so are fragments of the super class identifier name.

In addition to the four most common grammatical patterns given in Table VI, further patterns were identified accounting for a total of 53 class names (see Table IX), or a relative frequency of 0.08. The most common grammatical pattern amongst this group was $VB NN^+IN NN^+$, where $IN$ represents a preposition. Each of the 53 unconventionally named classes was inspected to understand whether the name used was appropriate and a clear reflection of the role the class plays in the application. If the name did not meet those criteria we explored possible name refactorings that adhered to the established naming conventions found in the project and were permitted within the same namespace. We also considered whether the class might be refactored into classes that could be named conventionally.

The majority of the 53 classes inspected represented actions taken by the user in the GUI, or coordinating events such as automatically saving all open files. On the whole these class identifier names clearly described the role of each class and were not prone to name refactoring.

Some class names were identified that could be refactored to more conventional identifier names. Three were member classes with identifier names prefixed with $My$, which gives the reader little information about the origins of the class, or the detail of the functionality they might expect to encounter. For example the class $MyReader$, a member class of the class $ImportAttributesDialog$ in the
package freemindmodesmindmapmodeattributeactors,
is responsible for rendering the cells of a tree used for
display in the dialogue. Other member classes of the same
class have clear identifier names reflecting the detail of
their purpose, e.g. AttributeTreeNodeInfo. To make the
class name consistent with the other member classes, and
to improve clarity, we suggest the name is refactored to
AttributeTreeNodeRenderer, which adheres to the com-
mon NN+ pattern.

The class ArrayListTransferable is designed to protect
an array list from modification while it is transferred between
two objects. The adjective has been placed after the noun
phrase it is intended to modify, and we suggest the name is
refactored to TransferableArrayList, which is both clearer
and conforms to the common JJ+NN+ pattern.

The class ThreeCheckBoxProperty is a GUI component
that implements a button used in dialogues where the user
has a number of settings available. The button cycles through
three states when clicked, which are represented by a plus
sign, a minus sign and an empty box and have the meanings
change property, remove property and ignore, respectively. The
GUI component does not look like a check box or behave
like one, so that aspect of the name appears to be incorrect.
It is used in properties dialogues, but property in isolation
does not adequately represent its usage context. The common
name for this type of widget is a tri-state checkbox, so the
most appropriate name refactorings are TristateCheckBox
or TristateButton, both of which conform to the JJ+NN+
pattern, and do not contain extraneous detail about the type of
dialogue in which the component is used.

We also found one instance of a spelling mistake: a
class named FileChooserListener, which should have been
FileChooserListener to be consistent with the name of
the Swing JFileChooser instance it creates. The spelling
mistake was identified as the result of the PoS tagger
recording Choose as a verb, thus giving the identifier
name the pattern NN+VBNN+, which is relatively un-
common. The remaining four instances of this pattern in
Freemind are a part of a local naming convention in the
freemindcontrollerfiltercondition package. Most
classes extend NodeCondition or one of its subclasses and
follow a consistent naming scheme based on their position in
the hierarchy. A feature of the naming scheme is the insertion
of a verb between the two component words of the super
class. The classes are used to support a filtering mechanism
that selects particular nodes for display. For example the
class NodeContainsCondition is used to test whether a
node contains a particular condition or attribute. We consider
the class identifier names not to be a problem because the
unconventional naming is used consistently, and the classes,
on inspection, appear to function as described. However, we
would argue that the awkward nature of the naming pattern
may be a design smell, and that a more conventional design,
e.g. the visitor pattern [20], should result in more conventional
class identifier names.

The class StdOutErrLevel is a candidate for
refactoring. StdOutErrLevel is a member class of
freemindmainStdFormatter used in logging and was
identified because the intended abbreviations of ‘output’ as
‘out’ and ‘error’ as ‘err’ are also words. On initial reading
of the name, it appears to be an abbreviation of standard
output error level, or stdout error level. On inspection, the
StdFormatter class is responsible for formatting log records
for Freemind, and StdOutErrLevel is used to assign the
logging threshold for the stdout and stderr streams. The
developers combine the task of setting the logging thresholds
for two streams into the same object, before specifying each
output stream in the call to the constructor (see Figure 2).
There are two solutions: either the class name is refactored to
remove the reference to both standard streams, or the class,
which wraps the java.util.logging.Level class without
adding any functionality, is removed and replaced by direct
calls to the Level library class. The latter is the preferable
solution as it results in a less cluttered class that is easy to
read.

EdgeWidthBackTransformer is one of a group of
member classes of StylePatternFrame in the pack-
age freemindmodesmindmapmodedialogs that transform
strings to widths and back again. The class performs the
inverse function of the class EdgeWidthTransformer and
invokes the method transformStringToString. We suggest
the renaming the class to StringToEdgeWidthTransformer
may be clearer and more consistent. However, the identifier
name remains unconventional.

D. Threats to Validity

As with any empirical study there are threats to validity.
In this case threats to validity concern construct and external
validity. We do not consider internal validity because we make
no claims of causality. Also we have not used any statistical
tests, so we do not consider statistical conclusion validity.

a) Construct Validity: The key threat to construct validity
is the accuracy of the PoS tagger used in the experiment.
The Stanford PoS tagger’s test mode for our tagger reports
an accuracy of 95% for individual words and an accuracy of
85% for whole identifier names. The sources of error include
words that commonly have more than one part of speech,
abbreviations and unknown words. However, despite the error
rate we successfully identified unconventionally constructed identifier names that were candidates for refactoring as well as a possible design smell. An associated threat is that the training and testing corpora were hand tagged by the first author, a native speaker of English, which is a possible source of bias.

The consequence of collapsing the Penn Treebank PoS tags is that 50 proper nouns and 15049 plural nouns are included in the NN tag, and a total of 1393 verb forms are included in the VB tag. These account for 13% of class identifier names containing nouns and 24% of those containing verbs. Only 0.2% of adjectives are tagged as JJR and JJS. While this approach hides some detail, it allows the observation of a general form of class identifier name containing a verb, which might otherwise have been missed.

### TABLE IX
**Classes inspected in Freemind**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Package</th>
<th>Class name</th>
<th>Refactor Name</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>accessories.plugins</td>
<td>ExportToImage</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Describes action initiated in UI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ExportToOoWriter</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Describes action initiated in UI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ExportWithXSLT</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Describes action initiated in UI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>FitToPage</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Describes action initiated in UI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>JumpToMapAction</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Describes action initiated in UI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MyFreemindPropertyListener</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Rename AutomaticLayoutPropertyListener</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SaveAll</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Describes action initiated in UI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>UnfoldAll</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Describes action initiated in UI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>accessories.plugins.dialogs</td>
<td>ArrayListTransferable</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Rename TransferableArrayList</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>accessories.plugins.time</td>
<td>ReplaceAllInfo</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Local naming convention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>accessories.plugins.util.xslt</td>
<td>FileChooseListener</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Rename FileChooserListener</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>freemind.common</td>
<td>ThreeCheckBoxProperty</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Rename TristateButton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>freemind.controller</td>
<td>AboutAction</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Describes action initiated in UI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>DisposeOnClose</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Wraps Swing GUI action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HideAllAttributesAction</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Describes action initiated in UI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MoveToRootAction</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Describes action initiated in UI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ShowAllAttributesAction</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Describes action initiated in UI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ShowSelectionAsRectangle</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Describes action initiated in UI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ZoomInAction</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Describes action initiated in UI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ZoomOutAction</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Describes action initiated in UI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>freemind.controller.filter</td>
<td>CreateNotSatisfiedConditionAction</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Local naming convention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>freemind.controller.filter.condition</td>
<td>AttributeCompareCondition</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Local naming convention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>AttributeExistsCondition</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Local naming convention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>AttributeNotExistsCondition</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Local naming convention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ConditionNotSatisfiedDecorator</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Local naming convention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IgnoreCaseNodeContainsCondition</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Local naming convention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NodeCompareCondition</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Local naming convention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NodeContainsCondition</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Local naming convention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NoFilteringCondition</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Local naming convention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>freemind.extensions</td>
<td>AllDestinationNodesGetter</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Describes action initiated in UI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>freemind.main</td>
<td>StdOutErrLevel</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Remove member class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>freemind.modes</td>
<td>NodeDownAction</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Describes action initiated in UI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>freemind.modes.common</td>
<td>CommonToggleFoldedAction</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Describes action initiated in UI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>freemind.modes.mindmapmode</td>
<td>DoAutomaticSave</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Time-based backup task</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ExportBranchToHTMLAction</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Describes action initiated in UI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ExportToHTMLAction</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Describes action initiated in UI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SetImageByFileChooserAction</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Describes action initiated in UI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SetLinkByFileChooserAction</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Describes action initiated in UI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>freemind.modes.mindmapmode.actions</td>
<td>AddLocalLinkAction</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Describes action initiated in UI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ChangeArrowsInArrowLinkAction</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Describes action initiated in UI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NodeUpAction</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Describes action initiated in UI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RemoveAllIconsAction</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Describes action initiated in UI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SelectAllAction</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Describes action initiated in UI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SetLinkByTextFieldAction</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Describes action initiated in UI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>UsePlainTextAction</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Describes action initiated in UI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>freemind.modes.mindmapmode.attributeactors</td>
<td>MyRenderer</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Rename AttributeTreeCellRenderer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>freemind.modes.mindmapmode.dialogs</td>
<td>EdgeWidthBackTransformer</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Rename StringToEdgeWidthTransformer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>freemind.modes.viewmodes</td>
<td>CommonToggleChildrenFoldedAction</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Describes action initiated in UI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>freemind.view.mindmapview</td>
<td>Selected</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Rename SelectedNodes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>freemind.view.mindmapview.attributeview</td>
<td>MyFocusListener</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Rename AttributeTableFocusListener</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

b) **External Validity:** We used a corpus of 60 open source Java projects totalling some 16.5 MSLOC as the source of the class identifier names analysed in this project. The
60 projects are drawn from a variety of domains to reduce the influence of domain specific identifier names or naming styles. We found considerable variation in the proportions of class and identifier based inheritance used in the projects. Accordingly, while our observations of the patterns of the reuse of component words from the names of super classes and implemented interfaces are reliable for the corpus analysed, caution should be exercised when extrapolating the proportions of these patterns to other projects.

V. DISCUSSION

We employed two methods of analysing of class identifier name structure. The first relied solely on the parts-of-speech used in the class names, and the second considered the origins of the component words in the names of the super class and implemented interfaces. We found that more than 90% of class identifier names can be described using four simple grammatical patterns. Despite the advice given in programming conventions [4], [3] that class identifier names should be nouns, we found that a proportion – around 2% – incorporate verbs and describe actions, rather than entities. From inspection of a sample of the class identifier names containing verbs, we found that many were related to actions initiated by the user in GUI environments.

Programming conventions offer no advice on whether, or how to incorporate information from super class or interface names in class identifier names. Praxis, in the Java library, for example, is for some class and interface hierarchies to retain part of the class identifier name through the inheritance hierarchy. Our analysis of the origins of component words in class identifier names found that 70-80% of classes that extend a superclass or implement an interface include one or more words repeated from the super class or implemented interface name (See Table IV, Table V and Table VIII).

In general, class identifier names repeat fragments of the super class or interface name, rather than the entire name, and it is words found in the super class names that are repeated with the higher frequency. Manual inspection showed that fragments are mostly derived from the latter, or right hand, part of the super class or interface name. Though a common pattern found in exception classes involves the insertion of words in the super class name. We were unable to identify any obvious mechanisms from single generation inheritance that explain how a decision is made to repeat either part or all of the super class or interface name. We expect that it will be possible to derive heuristics from inheritance trees where name fragments are repeated over more than one generation.

The repetition of components of super class and implemented interface identifier names in some class identifier names appears to violate the conciseness rule of Deißenböck and Pizka’s system of concise and consistent naming [13]. A concise name is one that unambiguously represents a given concept within a program. For example, the identifier names position and absolutePosition would break the conciseness rule because the concept of ‘position’ contains the concept ‘absolute position’.

Lawrie et al. [14] used a syntactic methodology to investigate violations of concise and consistent naming. They defined Type I and Type II syntactic violations, both of which imply that the conciseness rule has been broken, and may indicate a failure of the consistency rule. A Type I violation occurs when an identifier name is repeated entirely within another identifier name; and a Type II violation occurs when an identifier name is similarly contained by two or more others. Type I violations occur in a single generation of inheritance where a class identifier name includes the whole of the name of either the super class or an implemented interface.

In Freemind, for example, 89 (14%) of the class identifier names we surveyed are Type I violations. Some class names appear to be genuine violations of the conciseness rule, but most are part of the process of creating program concepts through inheritance. The same is true of the Type II violations we identified. In the latter case the false positives are typified by classes that implement a common interface or base class, e.g. SortedComboBoxModel and ClonedComboBoxModel both implement the Swing interface ComboBoxModel, and describe the concept hierarchy clearly. Lawrie et al. suggested that parts-of-speech may help discriminate between identifier names that represent new concepts and those that are genuine violations. The adjectives in our example fulfil that role, but further study is required to confirm the viability of the method.

Importantly, around 20-30% of class identifier names in each inheritance category were found not to incorporate any words derived from the identifier names of the extended super class or implemented interfaces. Further investigation is needed to identify the occasions on which names are incorporated and those when they are not. One approach is to derive rules of name inheritance from existing behaviour within a code base, which may have a practical application by alerting a developer to an unusual repetition of a component word in a class identifier name, or the omission of a component that is commonly repeated. For example, the Java library interface names Cloneable and Serializable are rarely incorporated in the identifier names of implementing classes. While such a solution is attractive, it does not explain when and why super class and interface name components are repeated. A more detailed approach, analysing identifier names in terms of their grammatical structure, their semantics, and their role or position in the inheritance hierarchy, may result in methods that predict the circumstances under which component words are repeated and which words should be repeated.

The common class identifier naming patterns are familiar mechanisms developers use to communicate ideas. Host and Østvold demonstrated that the link between Java method identifier names is sufficiently strong that poor quality or misleading names can be identified and candidate refactorings suggested [9]. By identifying candidates for renaming, such as ThreeCheckBoxProperty, and a possible design smell, we show that practical results may be achieved through the recognition of unconventionally constructed Java class identifier names. However, while identifier names may reflect
the implementation of a class, conventionally structured class identifier names are not a guarantee of flawless design.

Knowledge of the common conventional grammatical patterns of class identifier naming can be incorporated in IDE-based tools to support the creation of class identifier names that are more readily understood by developers, and that conform to project standards determined by software project managers. Such a tool could alert the developer to an unconventionally structured name and, eventually, recommend possible improvements, including the incorporation of words used in the super class and interfaces, if any. Developers new to a project would have a ready made style guide to support the creation of class identifier names that are familiar to existing colleagues. The same knowledge can be leveraged to provide quality assurance for software project managers that is an improvement on the functionality of current tools. For example, CheckStyle provides only very basic checks of the typographical structure of identifier name, e.g., whether a class identifier name begins with an upper case letter.

For software maintainers new to a project, a tool that extracts the project’s class naming conventions provides an overview of how the project’s developers encode information in identifier names, particularly the extent to which names reflect inheritance. Such information supports program comprehension by identifying which component words are repeated in inheritance trees and can be used to identify related classes and help target lexical searches.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Through the analysis of class identifier names extracted from 60 Java open source projects and a case study of Freemind, we have taken a step towards a detailed understanding of Java class identifier naming conventions used in practice. This paper makes three contributions:

1) We identify the common grammatical structures of Java class identifier names found in praxis and their distributions.

2) We identify the patterns by which component words from the super class or implemented interfaces are repeated in class identifier names, and record their distributions.

3) We show, for the example of Freemind, how the detailed knowledge of project-specific uncommon class identifier naming patterns can be put to practical use to help detect poor class names and design smells and thereby improve program comprehension and design.

Our analysis can be applied in practical software engineering tools to support identifier naming by making developers aware of the naming conventions used in the project they are working on. A tool could offer guidance that supports the creation of more commonly recognisable names, such as indicating when an unconventional form is being used, or making recommendations of possible identifier names during development. The same knowledge can also be applied by software project managers to configure the developers’ tools with project-specific standards, and in tools for identifier name quality assurance that are a considerable improvement on current tools that check the typographical form of names.

We propose to build on this work in two ways. The first is to seek methods of determining the relationship between a class identifier name, its inheritance hierarchy and the identifier names of class members including fields and methods, to support a finer-grained analysis of the correctness, or otherwise, of class identifier names. The second is to apply the knowledge acquired in this research to develop methods for the semantic analysis of identifier names in order to support the creation of ontologies of source code.

REFERENCES


[20] E. Gamma, R. Helm, R. Johnson, and J. Vlissides, Design Patterns: Elements of Reusable Object-Oriented Software. Addison Wesley, 1995.