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Criteria and Application of Autonomous Cooperating Logistic Processes

Katja Windt , Felix Böse, Thorsten Philipp
Bremen Institute of Industrial Technology and Applied Work Science at the University of Bremen, Bremen, Germany

ABSTRACT

Competitive enterprises have to react fast and flexible to an increasing dynamic environment. To achieve the ability to adapt on these new requirements autonomous cooperating logistic processes seems to be an appropriate method. This paper introduces a general definition of autonomous control and its meaning in a logistics context. Based on this, a catalogue of criteria is developed to ensure the identification of autonomous cooperating processes in logistic systems and its distinction to conventionally controlled processes. To demonstrate this catalogue, its criteria and the concerning properties are explained by means of an exemplary shop-floor scenario.

1 INITIAL SITUATION AND CALL FOR ACTION

Over the past years an increase in structural and dynamic complexity of production and logistics systems could be observed. This development is caused by diverse changes, for example, short product life cycles as well as a decreasing number of lots with a simultaneously rising number of product variants and higher product complexity. As a result, new demands were placed on competitive companies, which cannot be fulfilled with conventional controlling methods. Conventional production systems are characterized by central planning and controlling processes, which do not allow fast and flexible adaptation to changing environmental influences. Establishing autonomous cooperating logistics processes seems to be an appropriate method to meet these demands. The idea of autonomous cooperating logistic processes is to develop decentralised and heterarchical planning and controlling methods in contrast to existing central and hierarchical aligned planning and controlling approaches [1]. Autonomous decision functions are shifted to logistic objects. In the context of autonomous control logistic objects are defined as material items (e.g. part, machine, conveyor) or immaterial items (e.g. production order) of a networked logistic system, which have the ability to interact with other logistic objects of the considered system. Autonomous logistic objects are able to act independently according to their own objectives and to navigate through the production network themselves. The autonomy of logistic objects is possible since recent developments by ICT (information and communication technologies), for example RFID technology (Radio Frequency Identification) for identifying, GPS (Global Positioning System) for locating or UMTS (Universal Mobile Telecommunications System) for communicating of logistic objects [2].

These new approaches are currently investigated within the Collaborative Research Center "Autonomous Logistic Processes –A Paradigm Shift and its Limitations" at the University of Bremen, which deals with the implementation of autonomous control as a new paradigm for logistic processes [3]. The intention of this paper is to explain what is meant by autonomous control and to show potentials in logistic systems, particularly in production systems.

Therefore, a definition of the term autonomous cooperation is given. Based on the main statement of this definition, a catalogue of criteria is developed in order to identify autonomous cooperating logistic processes and to emphasize how conventionally managed and autonomous logistics processes differ. The criteria and its individual properties are explained on a concrete object of investigation by a scenario of a manufacturing system.

2 DEFINITION OF AUTONOMOUS COOPERATING LOGISTIC PROCESSES

The vision of autonomous cooperating logistics processes emphasizes the transfer of qualified capabilities on physical logistics objects as explained above. According to the system theory, there is a shift of capabilities from the total system to its system elements [4]. By using new technologies and methods, logistic objects are enabled to render decisions by themselves in a complex and dynamically changing environment. Based on the first results of the work in the context of the CRC 637, autonomous control can be defined as follows:

"Autonomous Control describes processes of decentralized decision-making in heterarchical structures. It presumes interacting elements in non-deterministic systems, which possess the capability and possibility to render decisions independently.
The objective of Autonomous Control is the achievement of increased robustness and positive emergence of the total system due to distributed and flexible coping with dynamics and complexity."[5]

For a better understanding, the main statements of this definition such as decentralised decision-making in heterarchical systems, system elements ability of interaction as well as non-deterministic system and positive emergence, are described and discussed below.

2.1 Decentralised decision-making in heterarchical systems

One feature of autonomous control is the capability of system elements to render decisions independently. Autonomy regarding decision-making is enabled by the alignment of the system elements in the form of a heterarchical organisational structure [6]. Therefore, decentralisation of the decision-making process from the total system to the individual system elements is a typical criterion of autonomous control. Each system-element represents a decision unit, which is equipped with decision-making competence according to the current task [7]. Due to the fact that decision-making processes are purposeful, according to the decision theory, each system element in an autonomously controlled system is characterised by target-oriented behaviour. Global objectives, for example, provided by the corporate management, can be modified independently by the system elements in compliance with its own prioritisation. For example, the objective of high delivery/due-date reliability can be replaced in favour of high machine utilization by the machine itself. Thus the objective system of system elements is dynamic because of its ability to modify objects prioritisation over time, i.e. during the production process.

2.2 System element's ability of interaction

Decentralized decision-making processes require the availability of relevant information for the system elements. Consequently, the capability of system elements to interact with others is a mandatory condition and thus one constitutive characteristic of autonomous control. The ability of interaction can accomplish different values depending on the level of autonomous control. The allocation of data, that other autonomous logistic objects can access, represents a low level of autonomous control. Communication, i.e. bi-directional data exchange between autonomous logistic objects, and coordination, i.e. the ability of autonomous logistic objects to cooperate and coordinate activities of other objects, stands for a higher level of autonomous control.

2.3 Non-deterministic system and positive emergence

In accordance with the upper mentioned definition, the main objective of autonomous control is the achievement of increased robustness and positive emergence of the total system due to a distributed and flexible coping with dynamics and complexity. Non-determinism means that despite precise measurement of the system status and knowledge about all influencing variables of the system, no forecast of the system status can be made. Knowledge of all single steps between primary status and following status is not adequate enough to describe the transformation completely [8]. Thus a fundamental criterion of autonomous control is that for same input of initial values, there are different possibilities for transition in a following status.

As already explained, decentralisation of decision-making processes to the system elements leads to a higher flexibility of the total system, because of the ability to react immediately to unforeseeable, dynamic influencing variables. In this way, autonomous control can lead to a higher robustness of the overall logistic system. Furthermore positive emergence is the main objective of autonomous control. Emergence stands for development of new structures or characteristics by concurrence of simple elements in a complex system. Positive emergence means, that the concurrence of single elements leads to a better achievement of objectives of the total system than it is explicable by considering the behaviour of every single system element. That means related to the context of autonomous cooperating logistic processes, that autonomous control of individual logistic objects (e.g. machines, parts, orders) enables a better achievement of objectives of the total system than can be explained by consideration of the decentralised achievement of objectives (e.g. higher rate of on-time delivery, lower delivery times) of every single logistic object.

3 DERIVATION OF A CATALOGUE OF CRITERIA

The identification of autonomous cooperating logistics objects requires a dissociation from conventionally managed logistics objects. The definition of autonomous control explained in the preceding chapter describes the maximum level of imaginable autonomous control. Thus, all system-elements in an absolutely autonomous cooperating system are able to interact with other system-elements and to render decisions on the basis of an own, decentralized target system. In general, logistic systems probable contain both conventionally managed and autonomously controlled elements and sub-systems respectively. Furthermore, it is assumed that there are different levels of autonomous control which is called degree of autonomous control. For example, one part of a lot could be able to coordinate each production stage of the lot which represents a high degree of autonomy, meanwhile other parts only allocate data regarding their processing states. Consequently, the latter mentioned case shows a lower degree of autonomy.

In the following a catalogue of criteria is derived, that contains the main criteria of autonomous control based on its definition as well as its properties, which describe the different levels of autonomous control. The catalogue of criteria is illustrated in form of a morphologic scheme in **figure 1**.

System layer	Criteria	Properties			
Decision system	Type of objective system	static	mostly static	mostly dynamic	dynamic
	Location of objective system	global	mostly global	mostly local	local
	Organisational structure	hierarchical	mostly hierarchical	mostly heterarchical	heterarchical
	Quantity of alter-native decisions	none	some	many	infinite
	Type of decision making	static	rule-based		learning
	Location of decision making	system layer	subsystem layer		system-elements layer
	System behaviour	elements and system deterministic	elements non-/ system deterministic	system non-/ elements deterministic	elements and system non-deterministic
Information system	Data storage	central	mostly central	mostly decentral	decentral
	Data processing	central	mostly central	mostly decentral	decentral
	Interaction ability	none	data allocation	communication	coordination
Execution system	Flexibility	inflexible	less flexible	flexible	highly flexible
	Identification ability	no elements identifiable	some elements identifiable	many elements identifiable	all elements identifiable
	Measuring ability	none	others	self	self and others

increasing level of autonomous control →

Figure 1. Extract of catalogue of criteria for autonomous cooperating processes

The criteria classification takes place regarding different layers of work in an enterprise. In accordance with Ropohl [9], different layers of work can be classified in organisation and management, informatics methods and I&C technologies as well as in flow of material and logistics, each concerning decision, information and execution system. As already mentioned, the vision of autonomous control encloses transferring qualified capabilities (e.g. decision-making, data processing, measuring) from the total system to the system elements, i.e. autonomous logistic objects. So the visualized system layers relate both to the total system and the system elements. Each criterion has a series of properties, with an increasing level of autonomous control in their order from left to right. For example, a logistic system with decentralised decision-making by its elements has a higher level of autonomous control than a system rendering centralised decisions. Grey marked properties show exemplary, how a considered production system could be represented in the catalogue of criteria. Based on this, an exemplary scenario with the individual criteria and their marked properties are described in the following.

4 EXAMPLARY SCENARIO OF AN AUTONOMOUS COOPERATING PRODUCTION SYSTEM

In this chapter, the criteria and properties explained above are described using a production logistic scenario. **Figure 2** gives an overview of a scenario of a two-stage job shop production.

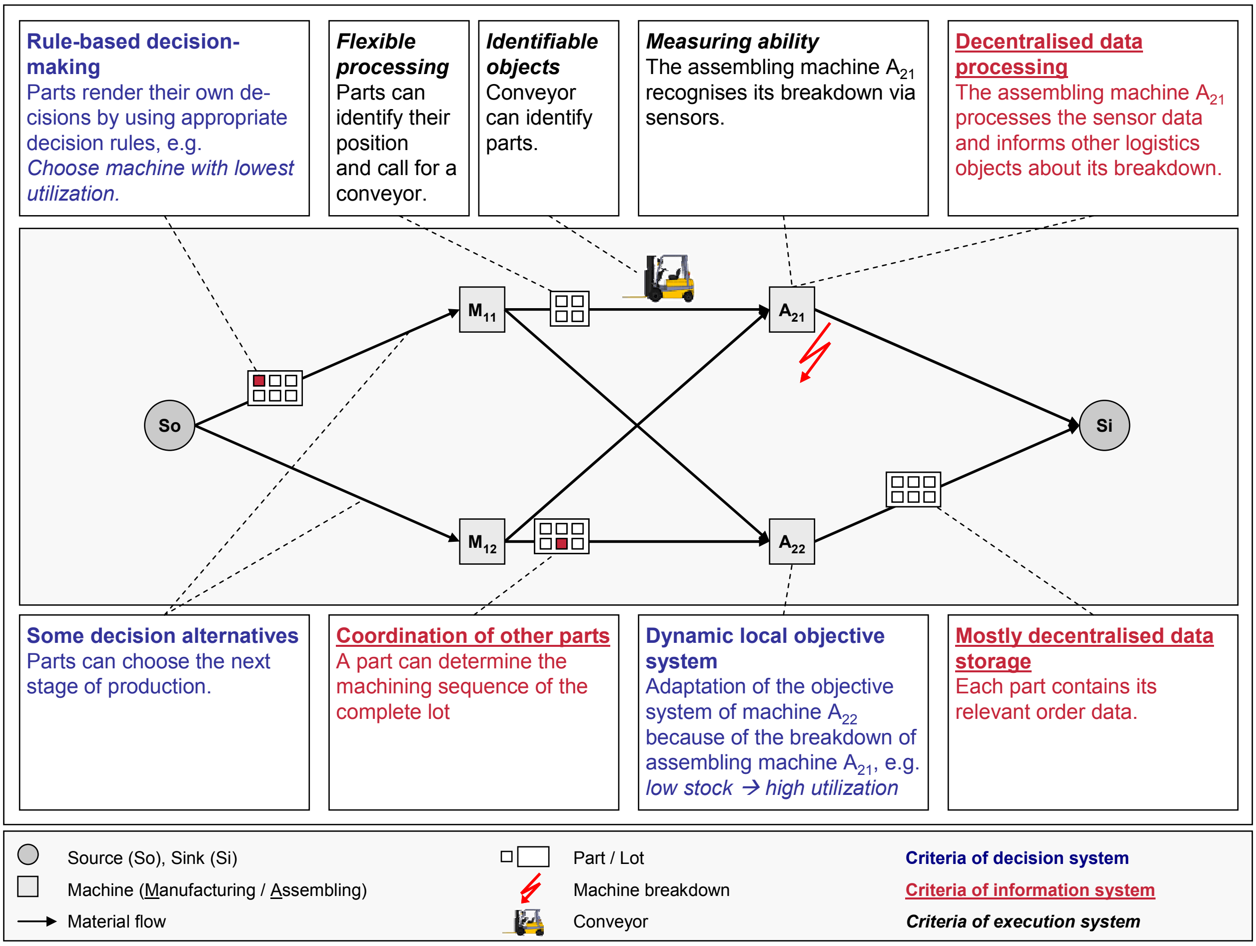

Figure 2. Autonomously controlled scenario

The first production stage contains the manufacturing of a part on two alternative machines (M_{ij}). The raw materials that are needed for production are provided by the source (So). In the

second production stage, the assembly of the parts that were produced in the first stage is done
alternatively on two machines (A_{ij}). The manufactured items leave the material flow net at the sink (Si). At a pre-determined time a disturbance occurs in the form of a breakdown of machine A_{21}.

The autonomous control of the machines provides the opportunity to react fast and flexible to disturbances. Machine A_{21} recognises autonomously its breakdown by permanent measuring and processing of sensors data. Deviations of sensors data are identified, analyzed and appropriate activities are initiated. In this scenario, the machine A_{21} immediately informs other logistics objects about its breakdown, especially machine A_{22}. Based on this information, machine A_{22} could adapt its dynamic local objective system by prioritizing the objective *high utilization* instead of *low stock* to counteract the bottleneck of the assembly stage. Parts waiting in front of machine A_{21} are informed about the machine breakdown. Because of this information and their measuring ability, parts can define their position and initiate their own transport to the alternative machine A_{22}. Because of the identification ability, the conveyor is able to precisely identify the parts.

The existence of alternative manufacturing and assembling stages as well as the availability of local information allows parts to render decisions regarding their way through the production process. The decision-making process in this scenario is rule-based, i.e. logistics objects act according to defined rules. For example, a part could choose the manufacturing machine on the basis of the rule “select machine with lowest rate of utilization”. However in this scenario, parts are characterised by different levels of autonomous control. Some parts just have the ability to allocate data, other parts acting for the entire lot are able to navigate through the production process.

On the basis of this exemplary scenario it has been shown that each logistic system can be classified according to the level of autonomy by means of the introduced catalogue of criteria.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This paper introduced a definition of autonomous cooperating processes and its implementation in logistic systems. Based on this definition, a catalogue of criteria was developed and applied exemplary on a job-shop scenario. As shown in the scenario, to establish autonomous control seems to be an appropriate method to cope with increasing complexity and dynamic environments of today’s logistic systems. Based on the comprehension of autonomous control, future research has to deal with questions concerning changed order processes and modelling methods as well as new evaluation systems for this new paradigm.

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