CSE 341:
Programming Languages

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Lecture 15— Macros

Today

- What are macros and what do they mean?

  - Why do they have a bad reputation?

- Scheme's macro system and hygiene

  - Free variables in macros

  - Bound variables in macros

  - Why hygiene is usually what you want

- What macros are good and not good for

Macros

To oversimplify, a macro is just a rule for rewriting programs as a prepass to evaluation. So it's very syntactic.

The "level" at which macros are defined affects their usefulness.

- "Sublexical" e.g.: Replace `car` with `hd` would turn `cart` into `hdt`.
  - No macro system does this; so macro-expander must know how to break programs into tokens.

- "Pre-parsing" e.g.: Replace `add(x,y)` with `x + y` (where x and y stand for expressions) would turn `add(x,y) * z` into `x + y * z`.
  - Some macro systems are this "dumb" (i.e., token-based); macro writers use more parens than Schemers.

- "Pre-binding" e.g.: Replace `car` with `hd` would turn `(let* ([hd 0] [car 1]) hd)` into `(let* ([hd 0] [hd 1]) hd)`.
  - Few macro systems let bindings shadow macros; Scheme does

The bad news

- Macros are very hard to use well.

- Most macro systems are so impoverished they make it harder.

- Most actual uses of macros are making up for shortcomings in the underlying language.

But:

- Macros have some good uses

- Scheme has a very sensible, integrated macro system

- So let's "do macros justice" for the day.

Hygiene

A "hygienic" macro system:

- Gives fresh names to local variables in macros *at each use* of the macro

- Binds free variables in macros *where the macro is defined*

Without hygiene, macro programmers:

- Get very creative with local-variable names

- Get creative with helper-function names too

- Try to avoid local variables, which conflicts with predictable effects

Hygiene is a big idea for macros, but sometimes is not what you want.

Note: Letting variables shadow macros is also useful, but a separate issue.

Why macros

Non-reasons:

- Anything where an ordinary binding would work just as well.

- Including manual control of inlining.

Reasons:

- Cosmetics

- "Compiling" a domain-specific language

  - Error messages a tough issue though

- Changing evaluation-order rules

  - Function application will not do here

- Introducing binding constructs

  - A function here makes no sense