CSE 341: Programming Languages

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Lecture 21—Defining and Implementing Dynamic-Dispatch
Where are We?

In 7 weeks, we’ve picked up enough ML, Scheme, and Smalltalk to talk intelligently about modern, general-purpose PLs.

• Congratulations to us!

Now we need to:

• Consider OO semantics as carefully as we did FP semantics
• Consider various OO extensions and design decisions
• Consider OO type systems as carefully as we did FP type systems
• Compare OO and FP, specifically extensibility and polymorphism
• Discuss memory management and garbage collection
• See some course concepts in Java

Today: Smalltalk look-up rules, a lower-level view of dynamic dispatch,
Look-up rules

How we resolve various “symbols” is a key part of language definition.

- In many ways, FP boils down to first-class functions, lexical scope, and immutability.

In Smalltalk, we syntactically distinguish variables (which resolve to objects), messages (which determine what method is called), and a few special names (true, false, nil, self, super)

- Java makes the same distinction
- Messages are second-class
Without further ado

To resolve a variable (e.g., $x$):

- Like in ML or Scheme, if a use of $x$ is in the lexical scope of code-block variable ([:$x$ | ...]) or local method variable or parameter, we resolve $x$ using the environment in which the code-block or method-body was defined.
  - Smalltalk implementation must build closures (those pairs of code and environment you built last week)

- Else if a use of $x$ is in a method $m$ of class $A$ (because $A$ or a transitive-superclass of $A$ defines $m$) and $x$ is a instance or class variable of $A$ (because $A$ or a transitive-superclass of $A$ defines $x$), then $x$ resolves to a field of the object self resolves to.

- Else if $x$ is a global (e.g., a class object), then $x$ resolves to that.

Note: Pool dictionaries actually add another possibility, but ignore that.
Now messages

To resolve a message (e.g., m):

- A message is sent to an object (e.g., e m), so first evaluate e to an object obj.
- Get the class of obj (every object has a class).
- If m is defined in A, invoke that method, else recur with superclass of A.
What about self?

As always, evaluation takes place in an environment.

In every environment, self is always bound to some object. (This determines message resolution for self and super.)

Key principles of OOP:

• Inheritance and override (last slide)
• Private fields (just abstraction)
• *The semantics of message send*

To send m to obj means evaluate the body of the method m resolves to for obj in an environment with argument names mapped to actual arguments and self bound to obj.

That last phrase is exactly what “late-binding”, “dynamic dispatch”, and “virtual function call” mean. It is why code defined in superclasses can invoke code defined in subclasses.
Some Perspective on Late-Binding

Later we will discuss design considerations for when late-binding is a good or bad thing. For now, here are some opinions:

- Late-binding makes a more complicated semantics
  - Smalltalk without self is easier to define and reason about
  - It takes months in 142 to get to where we can explain it
  - It makes it harder to reason about programs

- But late-binding is often an elegant pattern for reuse
  - Smalltalk without self is not Smalltalk
  - Late-binding fits well with the “object analogy”
  - Late-binding can make it easier to localize specialized code even when other code wasn’t expecting specialization
A Lower-Level View

Smalltalk clearly encourages late-binding with its message-send semantics.

But a definition in one language is often a pattern in another...

We can simulate late-binding in Scheme easily enough

And sketch how compilers/interpreters implement objects

• A naive but accurate view of implementation can give an alternate way to reason about programs
The Key Idea

The key to implementing late-binding is extending all the methods to take an extra argument (for self).

So an object is implemented as a record holding methods and fields, where methods are passed self explicitly.

And message-resolution always uses self.
What about classes and performance?

This approach, while a fine pattern, has some problems:

- It doesn’t model Smalltalk, where methods can be added/removed from classes dynamically and an object’s class determines behavior.
- It is space-inefficient: all objects of a class have the same methods.
- It is time-inefficient: message-send should be constant-time, not list traversals.

We fix the first two by adding a level of indirection: put a single class field in an object and have a global class-table.

We fix the third with better data structures and various tricks.

Nonetheless: Without dynamic class changes, the “method slot” approach and “class field” approach are equivalent.
Really Implementing Late-Binding

- We have seen late-binding as a Scheme pattern.
- In reality, we have learned roughly how OO implementations do it, without appealing to assembly code (where it really happens).
- Using ML instead of Scheme would have been a pain:
  - The ML type system is "unfriendly" for self.
  - We would have roughly taken the "embed Scheme in ML" approach, giving every object the same ML type.
  - But to be fair, most OO languages are "unfriendly" to ML datatypes, first-class functions, and parametric polymorphism.
  * Another day we’ll show closures as a pattern in OOP.