CSE 341: Programming Languages

Autumn 2005
Lecture 12 — Modules and Abstract Types

Structure basics

Syntax: structure Name = struct bindings end
If x is a variable, exception, type, constructor, etc. defined in Name, the rest of the program refers to it via Name.x

(You can also do open Name, which is often bad style, but convenient when testing.)

So far, this is just namespace management, which is important for large programs, but not very interesting.

Modules

Large programs benefit from more structure than a list of bindings.
Breaking into parts allows separate reasoning:

- Application-level: in terms of module (in ML, structure) invariants
- Type-checking level: in terms of module types
- Implementation level: in terms of module code-generation

By providing a restricted interface (in ML, a signature), there are more equivalent implementations in terms of the interface.

Key restrictions:

- Make bindings inaccessible
- Make types abstract (know type exists, but not its definition)

SML has a much fancier module system, but we'll stick with the basics. Abstract types are a "top-5" feature of modern languages.

Signature basics

(For those interested in learning more, we're doing only opaque signatures on structure definitions.)

A signature signature SQUID = sig ... end is like a type for a structure.

- Describes what types a structure provides.
- Describes what values a structure provides (and their types).

Writing structure Name := SQUID = struct bindings end:

- Ensures Name is a legal implementation of SQUID.
- Ensures code outside of Name assumes nothing more than what SQUID provides.

Hence signatures are what really enable separate reasoning.
Signature matching

Is Name a legal implementation of SQUID.
- Clearly it must define everything in SQUID.
- It can define more (unavailable outside of Name).
- SQUID can restrict the type of polymorphic functions.
- SQUID can make types abstract.

In particular, making a datatype abstract hides the constructors, so clients have no (direct) way to create or access-parts-of values of the type.

That’s often a good thing.

Remember

Key tools for modularity/information hiding in ML: structures and signatures (and functors, which we’re skipping).

A signature that “hides more” makes it easier to:
- Replace the structure implementation without breaking clients.
- Reason about how clients use the structure.

Note: See the extended example code for this lecture for more details...