Aspects of Operational Semantics of Pure Functional Languages

Evaluation of an expression in a functional language can be described as a rewriting of the expression into a canonical form, with the function definitions as the rewrite rules.

Rewrite a function application by replacing the function application by the body of the function, substituting the actual arguments for formals, and renaming variables if needed.

Example. Given the definition
double x = x + x, evaluate double 4.

double 4 ➞
4+4 ➞
8

Evaluation Order

Two important orders of rewriting:

- Normal order - rewrite the leftmost occurrence of a function application. (This is equivalent to call by name.)
- Applicative order - rewrite the innermost occurrence of a function application first. (This is equivalent to call by value.)

Normal order evaluation always gives the same results as lazy evaluation, but may end up evaluating an expression more times.

Evaluation Order Examples

Consider
double x = x + x
average x y = (x + y) / 2

To avoid confusion about infix notation, let’s re-express this as:
double x = plus x x
average x y = divide (plus x y) 2

Evaluate:
double (average 2 4)

Example – Normal Order Evaluation
double (average 2 4) ➞
plus (average 2 4) (average 2 4) ➞
plus (divide (plus 2 4) 2) (average 2 4) ➞
plus (divide 6 2) (average 2 4) ➞
plus 3 (average 2 4) ➞
plus 3 (divide (plus 2 4) 2) ➞
plus 3 (divide 6 2) ➞
plus 3 3 ➞
6

Notice that (average 2 4) was evaluated twice ... lazy evaluation would cache the results of the first evaluation.
Different Semantics for Normal and Applicative Order Evaluation

Example – Applicative Order Evaluation

double (average 2 4) =>
double (divide (plus 2 4) 2) =>
double (divide 6 2) =>
double 3 =>
plus 3 3 =>
6

Properties of Evaluation Order; Strictness

- If there is any evaluation order that will terminate and that will not generate an error, normal order evaluation will terminate and will not generate an error.

- Any evaluation order that terminates without error will give the same result as any other evaluation order that terminates without error.

Definition: a function f is strict in an argument if that argument is always evaluated whenever an application of f is evaluated.

If a function is strict in an argument, we can safely evaluate the argument first if we need the value of applying the function.

This can be useful in optimizing compilers for lazy functional languages.