CSE 341: Programming Languages

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Lecture 6— Nested pattern-matching; course motivation

Patterns

What we know:

- case-expresssions do pattern-matching to choose branch
- val-bindings and fun-arguments also do pattern-matching
  - All functions take one argument
- Can match datatypes (including lists, options) and records (including tuples)

The full story is *more general* — patterns are much richer than we have let on.

Deep patterns

The full definition of pattern-matching is recursive, processing the matched-on value and the pattern together.

A pattern can be:

- A variable (matches everything, introduces a binding)
- `_` (matches everything, no binding)
- A constructor `C` (matches value `C`, *if* `C` carries no data)
- A constructor and a pattern (e.g., `C` $\boldsymbol{p}$) (matches a value if the value "is a `C`" and $\boldsymbol{p}$ matches the value it carries)
- A pair of patterns (`(`$\boldsymbol{p1}$`,`$\boldsymbol{p2}$`)`) (matches a pair if $\boldsymbol{p1}$ matches the first component and $\boldsymbol{p2}$ matches the second component)
- A record pattern...
- ...

Can you handle the truth?

It's really:

- `case e of p1 => e1 | ... | pn => en`
- `val p = e`
- `fun f p1 = e1 | f p2 = e2 ... | f pn = en`

Inexhaustive matches may raise exceptions and are bad style.

Example: could write pattern `Add pr` or `Add (e1,e2)`

Again: The definition of pattern-matching is recursive over the value-being-matched and the pattern.

`_` and binding a variable are just base cases.

Some function examples

- `fun f1 () = 34`
- `fun f2 _ = 34`
- `fun f3 (x,y) = x + y`
- `fun f4 pr = let val (x,y) = pr in x + y end`

Is there *any* difference to callers between `f3` and `f4`?

In most languages, "argument lists" are syntactically separate, *second-class* constructs.

Can be useful: `f3 (if e1 then (3,2) else pr)`

- (We discussed this on Wednesday too.)

See `lec6.sml` for a few examples where nested patterns are quite nice.

Course Motivation

I owe you an answer to why 341 has material worth learning.

1. Why learn programming languages that are quite different from Java, C, C++?
2. Why learn the fundamental concepts that appear in all (most?) programming languages?
3. Why focus on *functional programming* (avoiding mutation, embracing recursion, and writing functions that take/return other functions)?

A couple questions...

What's the best car?

What are the best kind of shoes?

What is the correct house?

Aren't all languages the same?

Yes: Any input-output behavior you can program in language X you can program in language Y

- Java, ML, and a language with one loop and three infinitely-large integers are "equal"
- This is called the "Turing tarpit"

Yes: Certain fundamentals appear in most languages (variables, abstraction, one-of types, *recursive definitions*, ...)

- Travel to learn more about where you're from
- ML, Scheme, Ruby well-suited for letting these fundamentals shine

No: Most cars have 4 tires, 2 headlights, ...

- Mechanics learn general principles and what's different

Aren't the semantics my least concern?

Admittedly, there are many important considerations:

- What libraries are available?
- What can get me a summer internship?
- What does my boss tell me to do?
- What is the de facto industry standard?
- What do I already know?

Technology *leaders* affect the answers to these questions.

Sound reasoning about programs, interfaces, and compilers *requires* knowledge of semantics.

And there is a place in universities for learning *deep truths* and *beautiful insights* as an *end in itself*. (Like watching Hamlet.)

Aren't languages somebody else's problem?

If you design an *extensible* software system, you'll end up designing a (small?) programming language!

Examples: VBScript, JavaScript, PHP, ASP, QuakeC, Renderman, bash, AppleScript, emacs, Eclipse, AutoCAD, ...

Functional programming

Okay, so why ML and Scheme where:

- Mutation is discouraged
- Datatype-based one-of types
- Higher-order functions (next week)

Because:

1. These features are invaluable for correct, elegant, efficient software (great way to think about computation).
2. Functional languages have a history of being ahead of their time
3. They are well-suited to where computing is going (multicore and data centers)

Much of the course is (1), so let's give an infomercial for (2) and (3)...

Ahead of their time

- Garbage collection (Java didn't exist in 1995, SML & Scheme did)
- Generics (`List<T>` in Java, C#), much more like SML than C++
- XML for universal data representation (like Scheme / Lisp)
- Function closures in Python, Ruby, etc.
- Ruby's iterators lifted from CLU (another "useless language")
- ...

All features dismissed as, "fine for academics, but will never make it in the real world".

- Maybe datatypes or currying or multimethods will be next...
- "Conquering" vs. "assimilation"

Recent Surge

- F#, C#, LINQ, Scala, Java 8
- Multicore computing (no mutation = easier to parallelize)
- MapReduce / Hadoop (first published in 2004)
- Small companies (Jane Street, Galois, many others)
  - And not so small (Ericsson's Erlang)
  - All consider functional programming a key competitive advantage
    - In part for hiring smarter people
- Lots of research projects

Note: None of these *examples* use SML or Scheme, but that's okay: think how much you've learned in the last 10 days. They are all informed and influenced by these ideas.

Summary

There is no such thing as a "best programming language". (There are good general design principles we will study.)

A good language is a relevant, crisp, and clear interface for writing software.

Software leaders should know about programming languages.

Learning languages has super-linear payoff.

- But you have to learn the semantics and idioms, not a cute syntactic trick for printing "Hello World".

Functional languages have been on the leading edge for decades, but ideas get absorbed by the masses slowly.

- Perhaps things are starting to change?
- Even if not, it will make you a better Java/C programmer