CSE 341 : Programming Languages

Lecture 6
Fancy Patterns, Exceptions, Tail Recursion

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Nested patterns

• We can nest patterns as deep as we want
  – Just like we can nest expressions as deep as we want
  – Often avoids hard-to-read, wordy nested case expressions

• So the full meaning of pattern-matching is to compare a pattern against a value for the “same shape” and bind variables to the “right parts”
  – More precise recursive definition coming after examples
Useful example: zip/unzip 3 lists

fun zip3 lists =
    case lists of
    ([],[],[]) => []
    | (hd1::tl1,hd2::tl2,hd3::tl3) =>
      (hd1,hd2,hd3)::zip3(tl1,tl2,tl3)
    | _ => raise ListLengthMismatch

fun unzip3 triples =
    case triples of
    [] => ([],[],[])
    | (a,b,c)::tl =>
      let val (l1, l2, l3) = unzip3 tl
      in
      (a::l1,b::l2,c::l3)
      end

More examples to come (see code files)
Style

• Nested patterns can lead to very elegant, concise code
  – Avoid nested case expressions if nested patterns are simpler and avoid unnecessary branches or let-expressions
    • Example: `unzip3` and `nondecreasing`
  – A common idiom is matching against a tuple of datatypes to compare them
    • Examples: `zip3` and `multsign`

• Wildcards are good style: use them instead of variables when you do not need the data
  – Examples: `len` and `multsign`
(Most of) the full definition

The semantics for pattern-matching takes a pattern $p$ and a value $v$ and decides (1) does it match and (2) if so, what variable bindings are introduced.

Since patterns can nest, the definition is elegantly recursive, with a separate rule for each kind of pattern. Some of the rules:

- If $p$ is a variable $x$, the match succeeds and $x$ is bound to $v$
- If $p$ is $\_\_\_$, the match succeeds and no bindings are introduced
- If $p$ is $(p_1,\ldots,p_n)$ and $v$ is $(v_1,\ldots,v_n)$, the match succeeds if and only if $p_1$ matches $v_1$, $\ldots$, $p_n$ matches $v_n$. The bindings are the union of all bindings from the submatches
- If $p$ is $C\; p_1$, the match succeeds if $v$ is $C\; v_1$ (i.e., the same constructor) and $p_1$ matches $v_1$. The bindings are the bindings from the submatch.
- $\ldots$ (there are several other similar forms of patterns)
Examples

- Pattern $a::b::c::d$ matches all lists with $>= 3$ elements

- Pattern $a::b::c::[]$ matches all lists with $3$ elements

- Pattern $((a,b),(c,d))::e$ matches all non-empty lists of pairs of pairs
Exceptions

An exception binding introduces a new kind of exception

```
exception MyFirstException
exception MySecondException of int * int
```

The `raise` primitive raises (a.k.a. throws) an exception

```
raise MyFirstException
raise (MySecondException(7,9))
```

A handle expression can handle (a.k.a. catch) an exception

- If doesn’t match, exception continues to propagate

```
e1 handle MyFirstException => e2
e1 handle MySecondException(x,y) => e2
```
Actually…

Exceptions are a lot like datatype constructors…

• Declaring an exception adds a constructor for type `exn`

• Can pass values of `exn` anywhere (e.g., function arguments)
  – Not too common to do this but can be useful

• `handle` can have multiple branches with patterns for type `exn`
Recursion

Should now be comfortable with recursion:

• No harder than using a loop (whatever that is 😊)

• Often much easier than a loop
  – When processing a tree (e.g., evaluate an arithmetic expression)
  – Examples like appending lists
  – Avoids mutation even for local variables

• Now:
  – How to reason about efficiency of recursion
  – The importance of tail recursion
  – Using an accumulator to achieve tail recursion
  – [No new language features here]
Call-stacks

While a program runs, there is a call stack of function calls that have started but not yet returned

- Calling a function $f$ pushes an instance of $f$ on the stack
- When a call to $f$ finishes, it is popped from the stack

These stack-frames store information like the value of local variables and “what is left to do” in the function

Due to recursion, multiple stack-frames may be calls to the same function
**Example**

```ocaml
fun fact n = if n=0 then 1 else n*fact(n-1)

val x = fact 3
```
Example Revised

```
fun fact n = 
  let fun aux(n,acc) = 
    if n=0
    then acc
    else aux(n-1,acc*n)
  in
  aux(n,1)
end
val x = fact 3
```

Still recursive, more complicated, but the result of recursive calls is the result for the caller (no remaining multiplication)
The call-stacks

fact 3
aux (3, 1)
aux (2, 3)
aux (1, 6)
aux (0, 6)

fact 3:
aux (3, 1): aux (2, 3): aux (1, 6): aux (0, 6)

fact 3:
aux (3, 1): aux (2, 3): aux (1, 6): 6

fact 3:
aux (3, 1): aux (2, 3): aux (1, 6): 6

fact 3:
aux (3, 1): aux (2, 3): aux (1, 6): 6

Etc…
An optimization

It is unnecessary to keep around a stack-frame just so it can get a callee’s result and return it without any further evaluation.

ML recognizes these *tail calls* in the compiler and treats them differently:

- Pop the caller *before* the call, allowing callee to *reuse* the same stack space
- (Along with other optimizations,) as efficient as a loop

Reasonable to assume all functional-language implementations do tail-call optimization
What really happens

fun fact n = 
  let fun aux(n,acc) = 
    if n=0 
    then acc 
    else aux(n-1,acc*n) 
    in 
    aux(n,1) 
  end 
  aux(n,1) 
end

val x = fact 3

fact 3 aux(3,1) aux(2,3) aux(1,6) aux(0,6)
Moral of tail recursion

• Where reasonably elegant, feasible, and important, rewriting functions to be *tail-recursive* can be much more efficient
  – Tail-recursive: recursive calls are tail-calls

• There is a *methodology* that can often guide this transformation:
  – Create a helper function that takes an *accumulator*
  – Old base case becomes initial accumulator
  – New base case becomes final accumulator
Methodology already seen

fun fact n = 
  let fun aux(n,acc) = 
    if n=0 
      then acc 
      else aux(n-1,acc*n) 
  in 
    aux(n,1) 
  end
val x = fact 3
Another example

fun sum xs =  
    case xs of  
        [] => 0  
      | x::xs' => x + sum xs'

fun sum xs =  
    let fun aux(xs,acc) =  
        case xs of  
            [] => acc  
            | x::xs' => aux(xs',x+acc)  
        in  
            aux(xs,0)  
        end
And another

fun rev xs =
  case xs of
    [] => []
    | x::xs' => (rev xs') @ [x]

fun rev xs =
  let fun aux(xs,acc) =
    case xs of
      [] => acc
      | x::xs' => aux(xs',x::acc)
    in
    aux(xs,[])
  end
Actually much better

fun rev xs =
  case xs of
    [] => []
  | x::xs' => (rev xs') @ [x]

- For `fact` and `sum`, tail-recursion is faster but both ways linear time
- Non-tail recursive `rev` is quadratic because each recursive call uses append, which must traverse the first list
  - And 1+2+…+(length-1) is almost length*length/2
  - Moral: beware list-append, especially within outer recursion
- Cons constant-time (and fast), so accumulator version much better
**Always tail-recursive?**

There are certainly cases where recursive functions cannot be evaluated in a constant amount of space

Most obvious examples are functions that process trees

In these cases, the natural recursive approach is the way to go
  - You could get one recursive call to be a tail call, but rarely worth the complication

Also beware the wrath of premature optimization
  - Favor clear, concise code
  - But do use less space if inputs may be large
What is a tail-call?

The “nothing left for caller to do” intuition usually suffices
  – If the result of $f \ x$ is the “immediate result” for the
    enclosing function body, then $f \ x$ is a tail call

But we can define “tail position” recursively
  – Then a “tail call” is a function call in “tail position”
Precise definition

A tail call is a function call in tail position

• If an expression is not in tail position, then no subexpressions are

• In fun f p = e, the body e is in tail position

• If if e1 then e2 else e3 is in tail position, then e2 and e3 are in tail position (but e1 is not). (Similar for case-expressions)

• If let b1 ... bn in e end is in tail position, then e is in tail position (but no binding expressions are)

• Function-call arguments e1 e2 are not in tail position

• ...

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