Dynamic dispatch

Dynamic dispatch
- Also known as late binding or virtual methods
- Call `self.m2()` in method `m1` defined in class `C` can resolve to a method `m2` defined in a subclass of `C`
- Most unique characteristic of OOP

Need to define the semantics of method lookup as carefully as we defined variable lookup for our PLs

Review: variable lookup

Rules for "looking things up" is a key part of PL semantics

- ML: Look up variables in the appropriate environment
  - Lexical scope for closures
  - Field names (for records) are different: not variables
- Racket: Like ML plus `let`, `letrec`
- Ruby:
  - Local variables and blocks mostly like ML and Racket
  - But also have instance variables, class variables, methods (all more like record fields)
  - Look up in terms of `self`, which is special

Using self

- `self` maps to some "current" object
- Look up instance variable `@x` using object bound to `self`
- Look up class variables `@@x` using object bound to `self.class`
- Look up methods...

Ruby method lookup

The semantics for method calls also known as message sends `e0.m(e1,...,en)`

1. Evaluate `e0, e1, ... , en` to objects `obj0, obj1, ... , objn`
   - As usual, may involve looking up `self`, variables, fields, etc.
2. Let `C` be the class of `obj0` (every object has a class)
3. If `m` is defined in `C`, pick that method, else recur with the superclass of `C` unless `C` is already Object
   - If no `m` is found, call `method_missing` instead
     - Definition of `method_missing` in Object raises an error
4. Evaluate body of method picked:
   - With formal arguments bound to `obj1, ... , objn`
   - With `self` bound to `obj0` – this implements dynamic dispatch!

Note: Step (3) complicated by mixins: will revise definition later

Punch-line again

To implement dynamic dispatch, evaluate the method body with `self` mapping to the receiver (result of `e0`)

- That way, any `self` calls in body of `m` use the receiver's class,
  - Not necessarily the class that defined `m`
- This much is the same in Ruby, Java, C#, Smalltalk, etc.
Comments on dynamic dispatch

• This is why distFromOrigin2 worked in PolarPoint

• More complicated than the rules for closures
  − Have to treat self specially
  − May seem simpler only if you learned it first
  − Complicated does not necessarily mean inferior or superior

Static overloading

In Java/C/C++, method-lookup rules are similar, but more complicated because > 1 methods in a class can have same name
  − Java/C/C++: Overriding only when number/types of arguments the same
  − Ruby: same-method-name always overriding

Pick the "best one" using the static (!) types of the arguments
  − Complicated rules for "best"
  − Type-checking error if there is no "best"

Relies fundamentally on type-checking rules
  − Ruby has none

A simple example, part 1

In ML (and other languages), closures are closed

```
fun even x = if x=0 then true else odd (x-1)
and odd x = if x=0 then false else even (x-1)
```

So we can shadow odd, but any call to the closure bound to odd above will "do what we expect"
  − Does not matter if we shadow even or not

```
(* does not change odd -- too bad; this would improve it *)
fun even x = (x mod 2)=0

(* does not change odd -- good thing; this would break it *)
fun even x = false
```

A simple example, part 2

In Ruby (and other OOP languages), subclasses can change the behavior of methods they do not override

```
class A
  def even x
    if x==0 then true else odd (x-1) end
  end
  def odd x
    if x==0 then false else even (x-1) end
  end
end

class B < A # improves odd in B objects
def even x ; x % 2 == 0 end
end
class C < A # breaks odd in C objects
def even x ; false end
end
```

The OOP trade-off

Any method that makes calls to overridable methods can have its behavior changed in subclasses even if it is not overridden
  − Maybe on purpose, maybe by mistake
  − Observable behavior includes calls-to-overridable methods

• So harder to reason about "the code you're looking at"
  − Can avoid by disallowing overriding
    * "private" or "final" methods

• So easier for subclasses to affect behavior without copying code
  − Provided method in superclass is not modified later

Manual dynamic dispatch

Now: Write Racket code with little more than pairs and functions that acts like objects with dynamic dispatch

Why do this?
  − (Racket actually has classes and objects available)

• Demonstrates how one language's semantics is an idiom in another language
  − Understand dynamic dispatch better by coding it up
  − Roughly how an interpreter/compiler might

Analogy: Earlier optional material encoding higher-order functions using objects and explicit environments
Our approach

Many ways to do it; our code does this:
- An “object” has a list of field pairs and a list of method pairs

(struct obj (fields methods))

- Field-list element example:
  (mcons 'x 17)

- Method-list element example:
  (cons 'get-x (lambda (self args) …))

Notes:
- Lists sufficient but not efficient
- Not class-based: object has a list of methods, not a class that
  has a list of methods (could do it that way instead)
- Key trick is lambdas taking an extra self argument

- All “regular” arguments put in a list args for simplicity

Key helper functions

Now define plain Racket functions to get field, set field, call method

(define (assoc-m v xs) ...) ; assoc for list of mutable pairs
(define (get obj fld) ...
  (let ([pr (assoc-m fld (obj-fields obj))])
    (if pr (mcdr pr) (error ...))))
(define (set obj fld v) ...
  (let ([pr (assoc-m fld (obj-fields obj))])
    (if pr (set-mcdr! pr v) (error ...))))
(define (send obj msg . args)
  (let ([pr (assoc msg (obj-methods obj))])
    (if pr ((cdr pr) obj args) (error ...))))

Constructing points

Plain-old Racket function can take initial field values and build a
point object
- Use functions get, set, and send on result and in “methods”
- Call to self: (send self ‘m …)
- Method arguments in args list

(define (make-point _x _y)
  (obj ...
    (mcons 'x _x)
    (mcons 'y _y)
    (list (cons 'get-x (λ (self args) (get self ‘x)))
      (cons ‘set-x (λ (self args) (…))))
    (cons ‘get-y (λ (self args) (get self ‘y)))
    (cons ‘set-y (λ (self args) (…)))
    (cons ‘distToOrigin (λ (self args) …))))

“Subclassing”

- Can use make-point to write make-color-point or
  make-polar-point functions (see code)
- Build a new object using fields and methods from “super”
  “constructor”
  - Add new or overriding methods to the beginning of the list
    - send will find the first matching method
  - Since send passes the entire receiver for self, dynamic
    dispatch works as desired
Why not ML?

- We were wise not to try this in ML!
- ML’s type system does not have subtyping for declaring a polar-point type that “is also a” point type
  - Workarounds possible (e.g., one type for all objects)
  - Still no good type for those self arguments to functions
    - Need quite sophisticated type systems to support dynamic dispatch if it is not built into the language
- In fairness, languages with subtyping but not generics make it analogously awkward to write generic code