CSE 413
Programming Languages & Implementation

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Delayed Evaluation, Thunks, Streams, Memoization
Today

- Racket top-level: forward references and evil mutation
- cons and mutable mcons cells
- Delaying evaluation: Function bodies evaluated only at application
- Key idioms of delaying evaluation
  - Conditionals
  - Laziness
  - Streams
  - Memoization
- In general, evaluation rules defined by language semantics
  - Some languages have “lazy” function application!
Top-level definitions

Racket top-level allows forward references and mutation of bindings

- Racket (and Scheme) do have assignment: \( \text{set! x e} \)
  - But used only when really! appropriate!!

- What should a name clash do? (In fact, it’s mutation.)

- How can you program defensively?
  - General point: Make a local copy!

- What do Racketers do in practice?
  - Don’t mutate top-level bindings
  - Use a module system for namespace management
cons and mcons

- cons just makes a pair
  - By convention and standard library, lists are nested pairs that eventually end with null

- In Racket, cons cells are immutable (several good reasons for this)

- mcons cells are mutable — mutable pairs are sometimes useful
  - Racket has a parallel universe of functions for these: mcons, mcar, mcdr, mpair? (also mlist and more if you put (require racket/mpair) at the top of your code)
  - Can mutate the car and cdr of a mcons cell with set-mcar! and set-mcdr!
Delayed Evaluation

For each language construct, there are rules governing when subexpressions get evaluated. In Racket, Java, and most conventional languages:

- function arguments are “eager” (*call-by-value*)
- conditional branches are not

We could define a language in which function arguments were not evaluated before call, but instead at each use of argument in body. (*call-by-name*)

- Sometimes faster: (lambda (x) 3)
- Sometimes slower: (lambda (x) (+ x x))
- Equivalent *only* if function arguments have no side effects and terminate when evaluated
Thunks

We know how to delay evaluation: put expressions in a function!

- Behave just the same thanks to closures
- Call the function when you need the value

A “thunk” is just a function taking no arguments, which works great for delaying evaluation.

- Can be verbed: thunk the expression

Example: Can’t define if with eager evaluation, but can with thunks.
Best of both worlds?

The “lazy” \((call-by-need)\) rule: Evaluate the argument, the first time it’s used. Save answer for subsequent uses.

• Asymptotically it’s the best

• But behind-the-scenes bookkeeping can be costly

• And it’s hard to reason about with effects
  – Typically used in (sub)languages without effects

• Nonetheless, a key idiom with syntactic support in Racket
  – Which we reimplemented with \texttt{force-eval} and \texttt{delay-eval}
  – And related to \textit{memoization}
Streams

- A stream is an “infinite” list — you can ask for the rest of it as many times as you like and you’ll never get null.
- The universe is finite, so a stream must really be an object that acts like an infinite list.
- The idea: use a function to describe what comes next.

Note: Deep connection to sequential feedback circuits

- One new value on each clock cycle

Note: Connection to UNIX pipes

- cmd1 | cmd2 has cmd2 “pull” data from cmd1.
Streams in Racket

A pretty straightforward idiom:

- A stream is a thunk that when called returns a pair:
  
  \[(\text{next-answer . next-thunk})\]

- So “going another iteration with result \(pr\)” is \((\text{cdr pr})\)

- One thunk creating another thunk: use recursion

- Nice division of labor:
  
  - stream-creator knows how to generate values
  
  - stream-client knows how many are needed and what to do with each

- (No new semantics; just new idiom)
Using Streams

Given a stream \( st \), the client can get any number of elements

- First: \( \text{car} \ (st) \)
- Second: \( \text{car} \ ((\text{cdr} \ (st))) \)
- Third: \( \text{car} \ ((\text{cdr} \ ((\text{cdr} \ (st))))) \)

(Usually bind \( \text{cdr} \ st() \) to a variable or pass it to a recursive function)
Memoization

A “cache” of previous results is equivalent if results cannot change.

- Could be slower: cache too big or computation too cheap
- Could be faster: just a lookup
- In our fibonacci example it turns an exponential algorithm into a linear algorithm

An association list is not the fastest data structure for large memo tables, but works fine for 413.

Question: Why does assoc return the pair?