



PAUL G. ALLEN SCHOOL
OF COMPUTER SCIENCE & ENGINEERING

CSE341: Programming Languages

Lecture 17

Implementing Languages Including
Closures

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Typical workflow

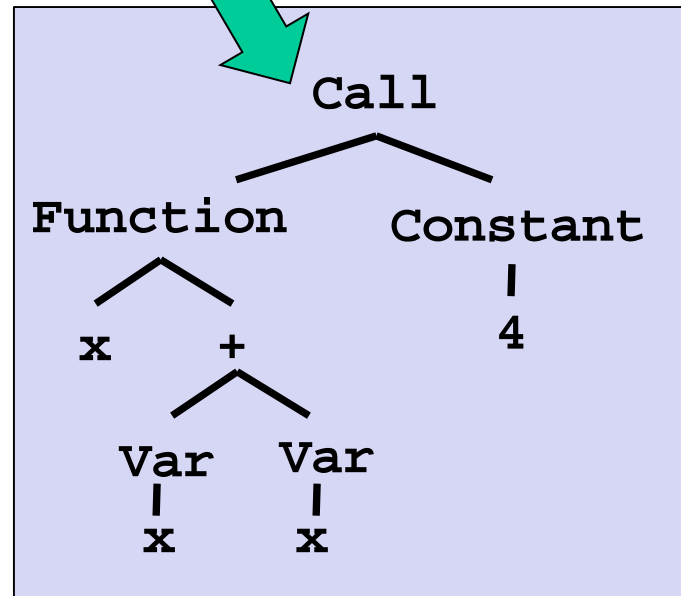
concrete syntax (string)

```
"(fn x => x + x) 4"
```

Possible errors / warnings

Parsing

abstract syntax (tree)



Possible errors / warnings

Type checking?

Rest of implementation

Interpreter or compiler

So “rest of implementation” takes the abstract syntax tree (AST) and “runs the program” to produce a result

Fundamentally, two approaches to implement a PL B :

- Write an **interpreter** in another language A
 - Better names: evaluator, executor
 - Take a program in B and produce an answer (in B)
- Write a **compiler** in another language A to a third language C
 - Better name: translator
 - Translation must *preserve meaning* (equivalence)

We call A the **metalanguage**

- Crucial to keep A and B straight

Reality more complicated

Evaluation (interpreter) and translation (compiler) are your options

- But in modern practice have both and multiple layers

A plausible example:

- Java compiler to bytecode intermediate language
- Have an interpreter for bytecode (itself in binary), but compile frequent functions to binary at run-time
- The chip is itself an interpreter for binary
 - Well, except these days the x86 has a translator in hardware to more primitive micro-operations it then executes

DrRacket uses a similar mix

Sermon

Interpreter versus compiler versus combinations is about a particular language **implementation**, not the language **definition**

So there is no such thing as a “compiled language” or an “interpreted language”

- Programs cannot “see” how the implementation works

Unfortunately, you often hear such phrases

- “C is faster because it’s compiled and LISP is interpreted”
- This is nonsense; politely correct people

- (Admittedly, languages with “eval” must “ship with some implementation of the language” in each program)

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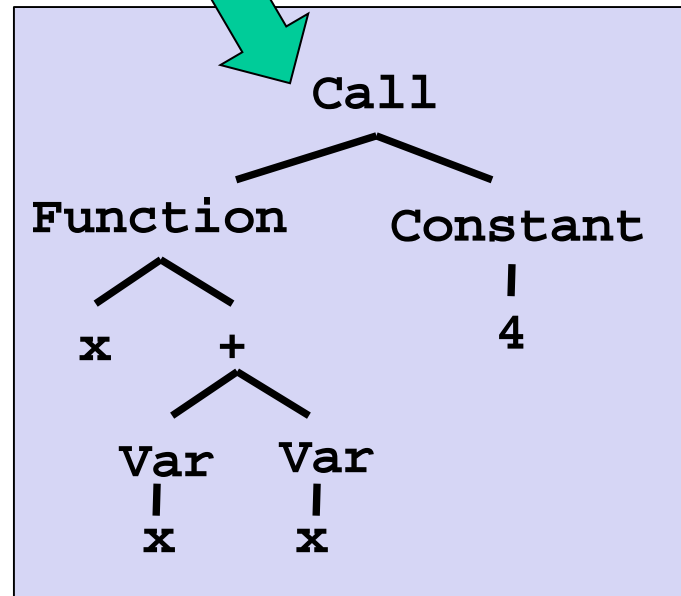
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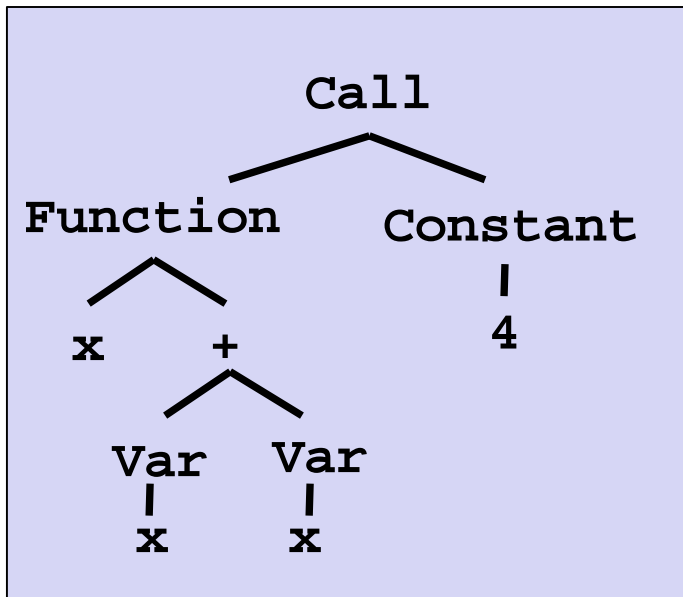
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Type checking?

Rest of implementation

Skipping parsing

- If implementing PL *B* in PL *A*, we can skip parsing
 - Have *B* programmers write ASTs directly in PL *A*
 - Not so bad with ML constructors or Racket structs
 - Embeds *B* programs as trees in *A*



```
; define B's abstract syntax
(struct call ...)
(struct function ...)
(struct var ...)
...
```

```
; example B program
(call (function (list "x")
                (add (var "x")
                    (var "x"))))
      (const 4))
```

Already did an example!

- Let the metalanguage $A = \text{Racket}$
- Let the language-implemented $B = \text{“Arithmetic Language”}$
- Arithmetic programs written with calls to Racket constructors
- The interpreter is `eval-exp`

```
(struct const (int) #:transparent)
(struct negate (e) #:transparent)
(struct add (e1 e2) #:transparent)
(struct multiply (e1 e2) #:transparent)
```

```
(define (eval-exp e)
  (cond [(const? e) e]
        [(negate? e)
         (const (- (const-int
                    (eval-exp (negate-e e)))))]
        [(add? e) ...]
        [(multiply? e) ...]...)
```

*Racket data structure is
Arithmetic Language
program, which
eval-exp runs*

What we know

- Define (abstract) syntax of language B with Racket structs
 - B called MUPL in homework
- Write B programs directly in Racket via constructors
- Implement interpreter for B as a (recursive) Racket function

Now, a subtle-but-important distinction:

- Interpreter can *assume* input is a “legal AST for B”
 - Okay to give wrong answer or inscrutable error otherwise
- Interpreter *must check* that recursive results are the right kind of *value*
 - Give a good error message otherwise

Legal ASTs

- “Trees the interpreter must handle” are a subset of all the trees Racket allows as a dynamically typed language

```
(struct const (int) #:transparent)
(struct negate (e) #:transparent)
(struct add (e1 e2) #:transparent)
(struct multiply (e1 e2) #:transparent)
```

- Can assume “right types” for struct fields
 - `const` holds a number
 - `negate` holds a legal AST
 - `add` and `multiply` hold 2 legal ASTs
- Illegal ASTs can “crash the interpreter” – *this is fine*

```
(multiply (add (const 3) "uh-oh") (const 4))
(negate -7)
```

Interpreter results

- Our interpreters return expressions, but not any expressions
 - Result should always be a *value*, a kind of expression that evaluates to itself
 - If not, the interpreter has a bug
- So far, only values are from `const`, e.g., `(const 17)`
- But a larger language has more values than just numbers
 - Booleans, strings, etc.
 - Pairs of values (definition of value recursive)
 - Closures
 - ...

Example

See code for language that adds booleans, number-comparison, and conditionals:

```
(struct bool (b) #:transparent)
(struct eq-num (e1 e2) #:transparent)
(struct if-then-else (e1 e2 e3) #:transparent)
```

What if the program is a legal AST, but evaluation of it tries to use the wrong kind of value?

- For example, “add a boolean”
- You should detect this and give an error message not in terms of the interpreter implementation
- Means checking a recursive result whenever a particular kind of value is needed
 - No need to check if any kind of value is okay

Dealing with variables

- Interpreters so far have been for languages without variables
 - No let-expressions, functions-with-arguments, etc.
 - Language in homework has all these things
- This segment describes in English what to do
 - Up to you to translate this to code
- Fortunately, what you have to implement is what we have been stressing since the very, very beginning of the course

Dealing with variables

- An environment is a mapping from variables (Racket strings) to values (as defined by the language)
 - Only ever put pairs of strings and values in the environment
- Evaluation takes place in an environment
 - Environment passed as argument to interpreter helper function
 - A variable expression looks up the variable in the environment
 - Most subexpressions use same environment as outer expression
 - A let-expression evaluates its body in a larger environment

The Set-up

So now a recursive helper function has all the interesting stuff:

```
(define (eval-under-env e env)
  (cond ... ; case for each kind of
    )) ; expression
```

- Recursive calls must “pass down” correct environment

Then `eval-exp` just calls `eval-under-env` with same expression and the *empty environment*

On homework, environments themselves are just Racket lists containing Racket pairs of a string (the MUPL variable name, e.g., "**x**") and a MUPL value (e.g., `(int 17)`)

A grading detail

- Stylistically `eval-under-env` would be a helper function one could define locally inside `eval-exp`
- **But do not do this on your homework**
 - We have grading tests that call `eval-under-env` directly, so we need it at top-level

The best part

- The most interesting and mind-bending part of the homework is that the language being implemented has first-class closures
 - With lexical scope of course
- Fortunately, what you have to implement is what we have been stressing since we first learned about closures...

Higher-order functions

The “magic”: How do we use the “right environment” for lexical scope when functions may return other functions, store them in data structures, etc.?

Lack of magic: The interpreter uses a closure data structure (with two parts) to keep the environment it will need to use later

```
(struct closure (env fun) #:transparent)
```

Evaluate a function expression:

- A function is *not* a value; a closure *is* a value
 - Evaluating a function returns a closure
- Create a closure out of (a) the function and (b) the current environment when the function was evaluated

Evaluate a function call:

– ...

Function calls

```
(call e1 e2)
```

- Use current environment to evaluate **e1** to a closure
 - Error if result is a value that is not a closure
- Use current environment to evaluate **e2** to a value
- Evaluate closure's function's body **in the closure's environment**, extended to:
 - Map the function's argument-name to the argument-value
 - And for recursion, map the function's name to the whole closure

This is the same semantics we learned a few weeks ago “coded up”

Given a closure, the code part is *only* ever evaluated using the environment part (extended), *not* the environment at the call-site

Is that expensive?

- *Time* to build a closure is tiny: a struct with two fields
- *Space* to store closures *might* be large if environment is large
 - But environments are immutable, so natural and correct to have lots of sharing, e.g., of list tails (cf. lecture 3)
 - Still, end up keeping around bindings that are not needed
- Alternative used in practice: When creating a closure, store a possibly-smaller environment holding only the variables that are **free variables** in the function body
 - Free variables: Variables that occur, not counting shadowed uses of the same variable name
 - A function body would never need anything else from the environment

Free variables examples

`(lambda () (+ x y z)) ; {x, y, z}`

`(lambda (x) (+ x y z)) ; {y, z}`

`(lambda (x) (if x y z)) ; {y, z}`

`(lambda (x) (let ([y 0]) (+ x y z))) ; {z}`

`(lambda (x y z) (+ x y z)) ; {}`

`(lambda (x) (+ y (let ([y z]) (+ y y)))) ; {y, z}`

Computing free variables

- So does the interpreter have to analyze the code body every time it creates a closure?
- No: Before evaluation begins, compute free variables of every function in program and store this information with the function
- Compared to naïve store-entire-environment approach, building a closure now takes more time but less space
 - And time proportional to number of free variables
 - And various optimizations are possible
- [Also use a much better data structure for looking up variables than a list]

Optional: compiling higher-order functions

- If we are compiling to a language without closures (like assembly), cannot rely on there being a “current environment”
- So compile functions by having the translation produce “regular” functions that *all* take an *extra explicit argument* called “environment”
- And compiler replaces all uses of free variables with code that looks up the variable using the environment argument
 - Can make these fast operations with some tricks
- Running program still creates closures and every function call passes the closure’s environment to the closure’s code

Recall...

Our approach to language implementation:

- Implementing language *B* in language *A*
- Skipping parsing by writing language *B* programs directly in terms of language *A* constructors
- An interpreter written in *A* recursively evaluates

What we know about macros:

- Extend the syntax of a language
- Use of a macro expands into language syntax before the program is run, i.e., before calling the main interpreter function

Put it together

With our set-up, we can use language *A* (i.e., Racket) *functions* that produce language *B* abstract syntax as language *B* “macros”

- Language *B* programs can use the “macros” as though they are part of language *B*
- No change to the interpreter or struct definitions
- Just a programming idiom enabled by our set-up
 - Helps teach what macros are
- See code for example “macro” definitions and “macro” uses
 - “macro expansion” happens before calling `eval-exp`

Hygiene issues

- Earlier we had material on hygiene issues with macros
 - (Among other things), problems with shadowing variables when using local variables to avoid evaluating expressions more than once
- The “macro” approach described here does not deal well with this