

CSE 341: Programming Languages

Autumn 2012

Oct 22 — Delayed Evaluation, Memoization, Thunks, Streams

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Topics

- Delaying evaluation: Function bodies evaluated only at application
- Key idioms of delaying evaluation
 - Conditionals
 - Streams
 - Laziness
 - Memoization
- In general, evaluation rules defined by language semantics
 - Some languages have “lazy” function application as the standard mode for passing parameters (e.g. Haskell)

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Delayed Evaluation

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

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

In *call-by-name semantics*, the function arguments aren’t evaluated before the function call, but instead at each use of argument in body.

- Sometimes faster: $(\lambda (x) 3)$
- Sometimes slower: $(\lambda (x) (+ x x))$
- Equivalent if function argument has no effects/non-termination

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Thunks

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

- Instead of passing a value directly, pass a thunk (function) which yields the value when it is called

If thunks are lightweight enough syntactically, why not make “if” be an ordinary function in a language with call-by-value semantics? (Smalltalk does this ...)

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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: Connection to UNIX pipes

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 side effects – we encountered it in Haskell
- Nonetheless, a key idiom with syntactic support in Racket
 - And related to *memoization*

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
 - Previous 341 homework question: an example where it’s a *lot* faster by preventing an exponential explosion.

An association list is not the fastest data structure for large memo tables, but works fine for 341.

Question: Why does `assoc` return the pair?