Today

Elements of Programming Languages
Lecture 1: Abstract syntax

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Concrete vs. abstract syntax

We will introduce some basic tools used throughout the course:

- Concrete vs. abstract syntax
- Abstract syntax trees
- Induction over expressions

L_{Arith}

We will start out with a very simple (almost trivial) “programming language” called L_{Arith} to illustrate these concepts.

Namely, expressions with integers, + and $\times$

Examples:

1 + 2 ---> 3
1 + 2 * 3 ---> 7
(1 + 2) * 3 ---> 9

Concrete syntax: the actual syntax of a programming language
- Specify using context-free grammars (or generalizations)
- Used in compiler/interpreter front-end, to decide how to interpret strings as programs

Abstract syntax: the “essential” constructs of a programming language
- Specify using so-called Backus Naur Form (BNF) grammars
- Used in specifications and implementations to describe the abstract syntax trees of a language.
**CFG vs. BNF**

- Context-free grammar giving concrete syntax for expressions
  \[ E \rightarrow E\ PLUS\ F \mid F \]
  \[ F \rightarrow F\ TIMES\ F \mid \text{NUM} \mid \text{LPAREN}\ E\ \text{RPAREN} \]
- Needs to handle precedence, parentheses, etc.
- Tokenization (+ →PLUS, etc.), comments, whitespace usually handled by a separate stage

**BNF grammars**

- Context-free grammar giving concrete syntax for expressions
  \[ \text{Expr} \ni e \ ::= e_1 + e_2 \mid e_1 \times e_2 \mid n \in \mathbb{N} \]
- This says: there are three kinds of expressions
  - Additions \( e_1 + e_2 \), where two expressions are combined with the + operator
  - Multiplications \( e_1 \times e_2 \), where two expressions are combined with the \times operator
  - Numbers \( n \in \mathbb{N} \)
- Much like CFG rules, we can "derive" more complex expressions:
  \[ e \rightarrow e_1 + e_2 \rightarrow 3 + e_2 \rightarrow 3 + (e_3 \times e_4) \rightarrow \cdots \]

**BNF conventions**

- We will usually use BNF-style rules to define abstract syntax trees
- and assume that concrete syntax issues such as precedence, parentheses, whitespace, etc. are handled elsewhere.
- **Convention**: the subscripts on occurrences of \( e \) on the RHS don’t affect the meaning, just for readability
- **Convention**: we will freely use parentheses in abstract syntax notation to disambiguate
- e.g. \((1 + 2) \times 3\) vs. \(1 + (2 \times 3)\)

**Abstract Syntax Trees (ASTs)**

We view a BNF grammar to define a collection of *abstract syntax trees*, for example:

These can be represented in a program as trees, or in other ways (which we will cover in due course)
Languages for examples

- We will use several languages for examples throughout the course:
  - Java: typed, object-oriented
  - Python: untyped, object-oriented with some functional features
  - Haskell: typed, functional
  - Scala: typed, combines functional and OO features
  - Sometimes others, to discuss specific features
- You do not need to already know all these languages!

ASTs in Java

- In Java ASTs can be defined using a class hierarchy:
  ```java
  abstract class Expr {}
  class Num extends Expr {
      public int n;
      Num(int _n) {
          n = _n;
      }
  }
  class Times extends Expr {... // similar
  }
  ```

- Traverse ASTs by adding a method to each class:
  ```java
  abstract class Expr {
      abstract public int size();
  }
  class Num extends Expr {
      public int size() {
          return 1;
      }
  }
  class Times extends Expr {
      public int size() {
          return e1.size() + e2.size() + 1;
      }
  }
  ```
ASTs in Python

- Python is similar, but shorter (no types):
  ```python
  class Expr:
    pass # "abstract"
  class Num(Expr):
    def __init__(self,n):
      self.n = n
    def size(self): return 1
  class Plus(Expr):
    def __init__(self,e1,e2):
      self.e1 = e1
      self.e2 = e2
    def size(self):
      return self.e1.size() + self.e2.size() + 1
  class Times(Expr): # similar...
  ```

ASTs in Haskell

- In Haskell, ASTs are easily defined as `datatypes`:
  ```haskell
  data Expr = Num Integer
            | Plus Expr Expr
            | Times Expr Expr
  ```

- Likewise one can easily write functions to traverse them:
  ```haskell
  size :: Expr -> Integer
  size (Num n) = 1
  size (Plus e1 e2) =
      (size e1) + (size e2) + 1
  size (Times e1 e2) =
      (size e1) + (size e2) + 1
  ```

ASTs in Scala

- In Scala, can define ASTs conveniently using `case classes`:
  ```scala
  abstract class Expr
  case class Num(n: Integer) extends Expr
  case class Plus(e1: Expr, e2: Expr) extends Expr
  case class Times(e1: Expr, e2: Expr) extends Expr
  ```

- Again one can easily write functions to traverse them using pattern matching:
  ```scala
  def size (e: Expr): Int = e match {
    case Num(n) => 1
    case Plus(e1,e2) =>
      size(e1) + size(e2) + 1
    case Times(e1,e2) =>
      size(e1) + size(e2) + 1
  }
  ```

Creating ASTs

- Java:
  ```java
  new Plus(new Num(2), new Num(2))
  ```

- Python:
  ```python
  Plus(Num(2), Num(2))
  ```

- Haskell:
  ```haskell
  Plus(Num(2), Num(2))
  ```

- Scala: (the "new" is optional for case classes:)
  ```scala
  new Plus(new Num(2), new Num(2))
  Plus(Num(2), Num(2))
  ```
Precedence, Parentheses and Parsimony

- Infix notation and operator precedence rules are convenient for programmers (looks like familiar math) but complicate language front-end.
- Some languages, notably LISP/Scheme/Racket, eschew infix notation.
- All programs are essentially so-called S-Expressions:
  \[ s ::= a \mid (a\ s_1 \cdots s_n) \]
  so their concrete syntax is very close to abstract syntax.
- For example
  \[
  1 + 2 \quad \longrightarrow \quad (+ \ 1 \ 2)
  \]
  \[
  1 + 2 \ast 3 \quad \longrightarrow \quad (+ \ 1 \ (* \ 2 \ 3))
  \]
  \[
  (1 + 2) \ast 3 \quad \longrightarrow \quad (* \ (+ \ 1 \ 2) \ 3)
  \]

The three most important reasoning techniques

- The three most important reasoning techniques for programming languages are:
  - (Mathematical) induction
  - (Structural) induction
  - (Rule) induction
- We will briefly review the first and present structural induction.
- We will cover rule induction later.

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  - (Structural) induction
    - (over ASTs)
  - (Rule) induction
    - (over derivations)
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Recall the principle of mathematical induction

Mathematical induction

Given a property \( P \) of natural numbers, if:

- \( P(0) \) holds
- for any \( n \in \mathbb{N} \), if \( P(n) \) holds then \( P(n+1) \) also holds

Then \( P(n) \) holds for all \( n \in \mathbb{N} \).

Proof of expression induction principle

Define the \textit{size} of an expression in the obvious way:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{size}(n) &= 1 \\
\text{size}(e_1 + e_2) &= \text{size}(e_1) + \text{size}(e_2) + 1 \\
\text{size}(e_1 \times e_2) &= \text{size}(e_1) + \text{size}(e_2) + 1
\end{align*}
\]

Given \( P(\_\_\_) \) satisfying the assumptions of expression induction, we prove the property

\[ Q(n) = \text{for all } e \text{ with } \text{size}(e) < n \text{ we have } P(e) \]

Since any expression \( e \) has a finite size, \( P(e) \) holds for any expression.
Proof of expression induction principle

We prove that $Q(n)$ holds for all $n$ by induction on $n$:

- The base case $n = 0$ is vacuous.
- For $n + 1$, then assume $Q(n)$ holds and consider any $e$ with $\text{size}(e) < n + 1$. Then there are three cases:
  - if $e = m \in \mathbb{N}$ then $P(e)$ holds by part 1 of expression induction principle.
  - if $e = e_1 + e_2$, then $\text{size}(e_1) < \text{size}(e) \leq n$ and similarly for $\text{size}(e_2) < \text{size}(e) \leq n$. So, by induction, $P(e_1)$ and $P(e_2)$ hold, and by part 2 of expression induction principle $P(e)$ holds.
  - if $e = e_1 \times e_2$, the same reasoning applies.

Summary

- We covered:
  - Concrete vs. Abstract syntax
  - Abstract syntax trees
  - Abstract syntax of L\text{Arith} in several languages
  - Structural induction over syntax trees

- This might seem like a lot to absorb, but don’t worry! We will revisit and reinforce these concepts throughout the course.

- Next time:
  - Evaluation
  - A simple interpreter
  - Operational semantics rules