Elements of Programming Languages

Lecture 14: References, Arrays, and Resources

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Overview

- Over the final few lectures we are exploring *cross-cutting* design issues
- Today we consider a way to incorporate mutable variables/assignment into a functional setting:
  - References
  - Interaction with subtyping and polymorphism
  - Resources, more generally

References

- In $\mathsf{L}_{\mathsf{While}}$, all variables are **mutable** and **global**
- This makes programming fairly tedious and it's easy to make mistakes
- There's also no way to create new variables (short of coming up with a new variable name)
- Can we smoothly add mutable state side-effects to $\mathsf{L}_{\mathsf{Poly}}$?
- Can we provide imperative features within a mostly-functional language?

References

- Consider the following language $\mathsf{L}_{\mathsf{Ref}}$ extending $\mathsf{L}_{\mathsf{Poly}}$:

$$\begin{array}{rcl} e & ::= & \cdots \mid \mathtt{ref}(e) \mid\, !e \mid e_1 := e_2 \mid e_1; e_2 \\ \tau & ::= & \cdots \mid \mathtt{ref}[\tau] \end{array}$$

- Idea: $\mathtt{ref}(e)$ evaluates e to v and creates a **new reference cell** containing v
- $!e$ evaluates e to a reference and **looks up its value**
- $e_1 := e_2$ evaluates e_1 to a reference cell and e_2 to a value and **assigns** the value to the reference cell.
- $e_1; e_2$ evaluates e_1, ignores value, then evaluates e_2

References: Types

$\boxed{\Gamma \vdash e : \tau}$ for L_{Ref}

$$\frac{\Gamma \vdash e : \tau}{\Gamma \vdash \mathtt{ref}(e) : \mathtt{ref}[\tau]} \qquad \frac{\Gamma \vdash e : \mathtt{ref}[\tau]}{\Gamma \vdash !e : \tau}$$

$$\frac{\Gamma \vdash e_1 : \mathtt{ref}[\tau] \quad \Gamma \vdash e_2 : \tau}{\Gamma \vdash e_1 := e_2 : \mathtt{unit}} \qquad \frac{\Gamma \vdash e_1 : \mathtt{unit} \quad \Gamma \vdash e_2 : \tau}{\Gamma \vdash e_1; e_2 : \tau}$$

- $\mathtt{ref}(e)$ creates a reference of type τ if $e : \tau$
- $!e$ gets a value of type τ if $e : \mathtt{ref}[\tau]$
- $e_1 := e_2$ updates reference $e_1 : \mathtt{ref}[\tau]$ with value $e_2 : \tau$. Its return value is $()$.
- $e_1; e_2$ evaluates e_1, ignores the resulting $()$, and evaluates e_2.

References in Scala

Recall that var in Scala makes a variable mutable:

```
class Ref[A](val x: A) {
  private var a = x
  def get = a
  def set(y: A) = { a = y }
}
scala> val x = new Ref[Int](1)
x: Ref[Int] = Ref@725bef66
scala> x.get
res3: Int = 1
scala> x.set(12)
scala> x.get
res5: Int = 12
```


Interpreting references in Scala using Ref

```
case class Ref(e: Expr) extends Expr
case class Deref(e: Expr) extends Expr
case class Assign(e: Expr, e2: Expr) extends Expr
case class Cell(l: Ref[Value]) extends Value

def eval(env: Env[Value], e: Expr) = e match { ...
  case Ref(e)        => Cell(new Ref(eval(env,e)))
  case Deref(e)      => eval(env,e) match {
    case Cell(r) => r.get
  }
  case Assign(e1,e2) => eval(env,e1) match {
    case Cell(r) => r.set(eval(env,e2))
  }
}
```


Imperative Programming and Procedures

- Once we add references to a functional language (e.g. L_{Poly}), we can use function definitions and lambda-abstraction to define *procedures*
- Basically, a procedure is just a function with return type unit

```
val x = new Ref(42)
def incrBy(n: Int): () = {
  x.set(x.get + n)
}
```

- Such a procedure does not return a value, and is only executed for its "side effects" on references
- Using the same idea, we can embed all of the constructs of L_{While} in L_{Ref} (see tutorial)

References: Semantics

- Small steps $\sigma, e \mapsto \sigma', e'$, where $\sigma : Loc \to Value$. "in initial state σ, expression e can step to e' with state σ'."
- What does $\texttt{ref}(e)$ evaluate to? A *pointer* or *memory cell location*, $\ell \in Loc$

$$v \; ::= \; \cdots \mid \ell$$

- These special values only appear during evaluation.

$\sigma, e \mapsto \sigma', e'$ for L_{Ref}

$$\frac{\ell \notin locs(\sigma)}{\sigma, \texttt{ref}(v) \mapsto \sigma[\ell := v], \ell}$$

$$\frac{}{\sigma, !\ell \mapsto \sigma, \sigma(\ell)} \qquad \frac{}{\sigma, \ell := v \mapsto \sigma[\ell := v], ()}$$

References: Semantics

- We also need to change all of the existing small-step rules to pass σ through...

$\sigma, e \mapsto \sigma', e'$

$$\frac{\sigma, e_1 \mapsto \sigma', e_1'}{\sigma, e_1 \oplus e_2 \mapsto \sigma', e_1' \oplus e_2} \qquad \frac{\sigma, e_2 \mapsto \sigma', e_2'}{\sigma, v_1 \oplus e_2 \mapsto \sigma', v_1 \oplus e_2'}$$

$$\frac{}{\sigma, v_1 + v_2 \mapsto \sigma, v_1 +_{\mathbb{N}} v_2} \qquad \frac{}{\sigma, v_1 \times v_2 \mapsto \sigma, v_1 \times_{\mathbb{N}} v_2}$$

$$\vdots$$

- Subexpressions may contain references (leading to allocation or updates), so we need to allow σ to change in any subexpression evaluation step.

References: Semantics

- Finally, we need rules that evaluate inside the reference constructs themselves:

$\sigma, e \mapsto \sigma', e'$

$$\frac{\sigma, e \mapsto \sigma', e'}{\sigma, \texttt{ref}(e) \mapsto \sigma', \texttt{ref}(e')} \qquad \frac{\sigma, e \mapsto \sigma', e'}{\sigma, !e \mapsto \sigma', !e'}$$

$$\frac{\sigma, e_1 \mapsto \sigma', e_1'}{\sigma, e_1 := e_2 \mapsto \sigma', e_1' := e_2} \qquad \frac{\sigma, e_2 \mapsto \sigma', e_2'}{\sigma, v_1 := e_2 \mapsto \sigma', v_1 := e_2'}$$

- Notice again that we need to allow for updates to σ.
- For example, to evaluate $\texttt{ref}(\texttt{ref}(42))$

References: Examples

- Simple example

$$\begin{aligned} & \texttt{let}\ r = \texttt{ref}(42)\ \texttt{in}\ r := 17; !r \\ \mapsto\ & [\ell := 42], \texttt{let}\ r = \ell\ \texttt{in}\ r := 17; !r \\ \mapsto\ & [\ell := 42], \ell := 17; !\ell \\ \mapsto\ & [\ell := 17], !\ell \mapsto [\ell := 17], 17 \end{aligned}$$

- Aliasing/copying

$$\begin{aligned} & \texttt{let}\ r = \texttt{ref}(42)\ \texttt{in}\ (\lambda x.\lambda y.x := !y + 1)\ r\ r \\ \mapsto\ & [\ell = 42], \texttt{let}\ r = \ell\ \texttt{in}\ (\lambda x.\lambda y.x := !y + 1)\ r\ r \\ \mapsto\ & [\ell = 42], (\lambda x.\lambda y.x := !y + 1)\ \ell\ \ell \\ \mapsto\ & [\ell = 42], (\lambda y.!\ell := y + 1)\ \ell \\ \mapsto\ & [\ell = 42], \ell := !\ell + 1 \mapsto [\ell = 42], \ell := 42 + 1 \\ \mapsto\ & [\ell = 42], \ell := 43 \mapsto [\ell = 43], () \end{aligned}$$

Something's missing

- We didn't give a rule for $e_1; e_2$. It's pretty straightforward (exercise!)
- actually, $e_1; e_2$ is *definable* as

$$e_1; e_2 \iff \texttt{let } \_ = e_1 \texttt{ in } e_2$$

  where _ stands for any variable not already in use in e_1, e_2.
- Why?
  - To evaluate $e_1; e_2$, we evaluate e_1 for its side effects, ignore the result, and then evaluate e_2 for its value (plus any side effects)
  - Evaluating $\texttt{let } \_ = e_1 \texttt{ in } e_2$ first evaluates e_1, then binds the resulting () to some variable not used in e_2, and finally evaluates e_2.

Reference semantics: observations

- Notice that any subexpression can create, read or assign a reference:

$$\texttt{let } r = \texttt{ref}(1) \texttt{ in } (r := 1000; 3) + !r$$

- This means that evaluation order really matters!
- Do we get 4 or 1003 from the above?
  - With left-to-right order, $r := 1000$ is evaluated first, then $!r$, so we get 1003
  - If we evaluated right-to-left, then $!r$ would evaluate to 1, before assigning $r := 1000$, so we would get 4
- However, the small-step rules clarify that existing constructs evaluate "as usual", with no side-effects.

Arrays

- Arrays generalize references to allow getting and setting by *index* (i.e. a reference is a one-element array)

$$\begin{aligned} e &::= \cdots \mid \texttt{array}(e_1, e_2) \mid e_1[e_2] \mid e_1[e_2] := e_3 \\ \tau &::= \cdots \mid \texttt{array}[\tau] \end{aligned}$$

- $\texttt{array}(n, init)$ creates an array of n elements, initialized to *init*
- $arr[i]$ gets the ith element; $arr[i] := v$ sets the ith element to v
- This introduces the potential problem of *out-of-bounds accesses*
- Typing, evaluation rules for arrays: exercise

References and subtyping

- Suppose we have an abstract class `C` with subclass `D`.
- Suppose we allowed *contravariant* subtyping for `Ref`, i.e. `Ref[-A]`
- We could then do the following:

```
val x: Ref[C] = new Ref(new C(...))
// D <: C, hence Ref[C] <: Ref[D]
x.callDOnlyFunction(...) // unsound!
```

- which is obviously silly: we shouldn't expect a reference to `C` to be castable to `D`.

References and subtyping

- Suppose we have an abstract class `C` with subclass `D`.
- Suppose we allowed *covariant* subtyping for `Ref`, i.e. `Ref[+A]`
- We could then do the following:

```
val x: Ref[D] = new Ref(new D(...))
// D <: C, so Ref[C] => Unit <: Ref[D] => Unit
x.set(new C(...)) // x still has type Ref[D]
x.get.callDOnlyFunction // unsound!
```

- Therefore, mutable parameterized types like `Ref` must be *invariant* (neither covariant nor contravariant)
- (Java got this wrong, for built-in array types!)

References and polymorphism [non-examinable]

- A related problem: references can violate type soundness in a language with Hindley-Milner style type inference and let-bound polymorphism (e.g. ML, OCaml, F#)

```
let r = ref (fn x => x) in
r := (fn x => x + 1);
!r(true)
```

- `r` initially gets inferred type $\forall \alpha . \alpha \to \alpha$
- We then assign *r* to be a function of type `int` $\to$ `int`
- and then apply *r* to a boolean!
- Accepted solution: the *value restriction* - the right-hand side of a polymorphic `let` must be a value.
- (e.g., in Scala, polymorphism is only introduced via function definitions)

Resources

- References, arrays illustrate a common *resource* pattern:
  - Memory cells (references, arrays, etc.)
  - Files/file handles
  - Database, network connections
  - Locks
- Usage pattern: allocate/open/acquire, use, deallocate/close/release
- Key issues:
  - How to ensure proper use?
  - How to ensure eventual deallocation?
  - How to avoid attempted use after deallocation?

Design choices regarding references and pointers

- Some languages (notably C/C++) distinguish between type τ and type $\tau *$ ("pointer to τ"), i.e. a mutable reference
- Other languages, notably Java, consider many types (e.g. classes) to be "reference types", i.e., all variables of that type are really mutable (and nullable!) references.
- In Scala, variables introduced by `val` are immutable, while using `var` they can be assigned.
- In Haskell, as a pure, functional language, all variables are immutable; references and mutable state are available but must be handled specially

Safe allocation and use of resources

- In a strongly typed language, we can ensure safe resource use by ensuring all expressions of type $\texttt{ref}[\tau]$ are properly *initialized*
- C/C++ does **not** do this: a pointer $\tau*$ may be "uninitialized" (not point to an allocated τ block). Must be initialized separately via `malloc` or other operations.
- Java (sort of) does this: an expression of reference type τ is a reference to an allocated τ (or null!)
- Scala, Haskell don't allow "silent" null values, and so a τ is always an allocated structure
- Moreover, a $\texttt{ref}[\tau]$ is always a reference to an allocated, mutable τ

Safe deallocation of resources?

- Unfortunately, types are not as helpful in enforcing safe deallocation.
- One problem: forgetting to deallocate (*resource leaks*). Leads to poor performance or run-time failure if resources exhausted.
- Another problem: deallocating the same resource more than once (*double free*), or trying to use it after it's been deallocated
- A major reason is *aliasing*: copies of references to allocated resources can propagate to unpredictable parts of the program
- Substructural typing discipline (guest lecture 2) can help with this, but remains an active research topic...

Main approaches to deallocation

- C/C++: explicit deallocation (`free`) must be done by the programmer.
  - (This is very very hard to get right.)
- Java, Scala, Haskell use *garbage collection*. It is the runtime's job to decide when it is safe to deallocate resources.
  - This makes life much easier for the programmer, but requires a much more sophisticated implementation, and complicates optimization/performance tuning
- Lexical scoping or exception handling works well for ensuring deallocation in certain common cases (e.g. files, locks, connections)
- Other approaches include reference counting, regions, etc.

Summary

- We continued to explore design considerations that affect many aspects of a language
- Today:
  - references and mutability, in generality
  - interaction with subtyping and polymorphism
  - some observations about other forms of resources and the "allocate/use/deallocate" pattern