Elements of Programming Languages

Lecture 7: Polymorphism and type inference

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Overview

- We've now covered the basics of a functional programming language, including functions and more complex data structures
- Over the next few lectures, we will consider various forms of **abstraction**
  - polymorphism, type inference
  - type definitions, records, datatypes
  - subtyping
  - modules, interfaces
- Today:
  - polymorphism and type inference

Consider the humble identity function

- A function that returns its input:

```
def idInt(x: Int) = x
def idString(x: String) = x
def idPair(x: (Int,String)) = x
```

- Does the same thing no matter what the type is.
- But we cannot just write this:

```
def id(x) = x
```

(In Scala, every variable needs to have a type.)

Another example

- Consider a pair "swap" operation:

```
def swapInt(p: (Int,Int)) = (p._2,p._1)
def swapString(p: (String,String)) = (p._2,p._1)
def swapIntString(p: (Int,String)) = (p._2,p._1)
```

- Again, the code is the same in both cases; only the types differ.
- But we can't write

```
def swap(p) = (p._2,p._1)
```

What type should `p` have?

Another example

- Consider a higher-order function that calls its argument twice:

```
def twiceInt(f: Int => Int) = {x: Int => f(f(x))}
def twiceStr(f: String => String) =
  {x: String => f(f(x))}
```

- Again, the code is the same in both cases; only the types differ.
- But we can't write

```
def twice(f) = {x => f(f(x))}
```

What types should `f` and `x` have?

Type parameters

In Scala, function definitions can have *type parameters*

```
def id[A](x: A): A = x
```

This says: given a type `A`, the function `id[A]` takes an `A` and returns an `A`.

```
def swap[A,B](p: (A,B)): (B,A) = (p._2,p._1)
```

This says: given types `A,B`, the function `swap[A,B]` takes a pair `(A,B)` and returns a pair `(B,A)`.

```
def twice[A](f: A => A): A => A = {x:A => f(f(x))}
```

This says: given a type `A`, the function `twice[A]` takes a function `f: A => A` and returns a function of type `A => A`

Parametric Polymorphism

- Scala's type parameters are an example of a phenomenon called *polymorphism* (= "many shapes")
- More specifically, *parametric* polymorphism because the function is *parameterized* by the type.
  - Its behavior cannot "depend on" what type replaces parameter `A`.
  - The type parameter `A` is *abstract*
- We also sometimes refer to `A`, `B`, `C` etc. as *type variables*

Polymorphism: More examples

- Polymorphism is even more useful in combination with higher-order functions.
- Recall `compose` from the lab:

```
def compose[A,B,C](f: A => B, g: B => C) =
  {x:A => g(f(x))}
```

- Likewise, the `map` and `filter` functions:

```
def map[A,B](f: A => B, x: List[A]): List[B] = ...
def filter[A](f: A => Bool, x: List[A]): List[A] = ...
```

(though in Scala these are usually defined as methods of `List[A]` so the `A` type parameter and `x` variable are implicit)

Formalization

- We add *type variables* $A, B, C, \ldots$, *type abstractions*, *type applications*, and *polymorphic types*:

$$\begin{array}{rcl} e & ::= & \cdots \mid \Lambda A.\ e \mid e[\tau] \\ \tau & ::= & \cdots \mid A \mid \forall A.\ \tau \end{array}$$

- We also use (capture-avoiding) substitution of types for type variables in expressions and types.
- The type $\forall A.\ \tau$ is the type of expressions that can have type $\tau[\tau'/A]$ for any choice of A. (A is bound in τ.)
- The expression $\Lambda A.\ e$ introduces a type variable for use in e. (Thus, A is bound in any type annotations in e.)
- The expression $e[\tau]$ instantiates a type abstraction
- Define $\mathrm{L_{Poly}}$ to be the extension of $\mathrm{L_{Data}}$ with these features

Formalization: Type and type variables

- Complication: Types now have variables. What is their scope? When is a type variable in scope in a type?
- The polymorphic type $\forall A.\tau$ *binds* A in τ.
- We write $FTV(\tau)$ for the *free type variables* of a type:

$$\begin{array}{rcl} FTV(A) & = & \{A\} \\ FTV(\tau_1 \times \tau_2) & = & FTV(\tau_1) \cup FTV(\tau_2) \\ FTV(\tau_1 + \tau_2) & = & FTV(\tau_1) \cup FTV(\tau_2) \\ FTV(\forall A.\tau) & = & FTV(\tau) - \{A\} \\ FTV(\tau) & = & \emptyset \quad \text{otherwise} \end{array}$$

- Alpha-equivalence and type substitution are defined similarly to expressions.

Formalization: Typechecking polymorphic expressions

$\boxed{\Gamma \vdash e : \tau}$

$$\frac{\Gamma \vdash e : \tau \quad A \notin FTV(\Gamma)}{\Gamma \vdash \Lambda A.\ e : \forall A.\ \tau} \qquad \frac{\Gamma \vdash e : \forall A.\ \tau}{\Gamma \vdash e[\tau_0] : \tau[\tau_0/A]}$$

- Idea: $\Lambda A.\ e$ must typecheck with parameter A not already used elsewhere in type context
- $e[\tau_0]$ applies a polymorphic expression to a type. Result type obtained by substituting for A.
- (Technically, we also need to extend FTV to contexts)
- The other rules are unchanged

Formalization: Semantics of polymorphic expressions

- To model evaluation, we add type abstraction as a possible value form:

$$v ::= \cdots \mid \Lambda A.e$$

- with rules similar to those for λ and application:

$\boxed{e \Downarrow v}$ for $\mathrm{L_{Poly}}$

$$\frac{e \Downarrow \Lambda A.\ e_0 \quad e_0 \Downarrow v}{e[\tau] \Downarrow v} \qquad \frac{}{\Lambda A.\ e \Downarrow \Lambda A.\ e}$$

- In $\mathrm{L_{Poly}}$, type information is irrelevant at run time.
- (Other languages, including Scala, retain some run time type information.)

Convenient notation

- We can augment the syntactic sugar for function definitions to allow type parameters:

$$\texttt{let fun } f[A](x:\tau) = e \texttt{ in} \ldots$$

- This is equivalent to:

$$\texttt{let } f = \Lambda A.\ \lambda x:\tau.\ e \texttt{ in} \ldots$$

- In either case, a function call can be written as

$$f[\tau](x)$$

Examples in $\mathsf{L}_{\mathsf{Poly}}$

- Identity function

$$id = \Lambda A.\lambda x{:}A.\ x$$

- Swap

$$swap = \Lambda A.\Lambda B.\lambda x{:}A \times B.\ (\texttt{snd}\ x, \texttt{fst}\ x)$$

- Twice

$$twice = \Lambda A.\ \lambda f{:}A \to A.\lambda x{:}A.\ f(f(x))$$

- For example:

$$swap[\texttt{int}][\texttt{str}](1, "a") \Downarrow ("a", 1)$$

$$twice[\texttt{int}](\lambda x\!: 2 \times x)(2) \Downarrow 8$$

Examples, typechecked

$$\dfrac{\dfrac{\overline{A; x{:}A \vdash x{:}A}}{[] \vdash \lambda x{:}A.\ x : A \to A} \quad A \notin FTV([])}{[] \vdash \Lambda A.\lambda x{:}A.x : \forall A.A \to A}$$

$$\dfrac{\dfrac{\overline{\vdash swap : \forall A.\forall B.A \times B \to B \times A}}{\vdash swap[\texttt{int}] : \forall B.\texttt{int} \times B \to B \times \texttt{int}}}{\vdash swap[\texttt{int}][\texttt{str}] : \texttt{int} \times \texttt{str} \to \texttt{str} \times \texttt{int}}$$

Lists and parameterized types

- In Scala (and other languages such as Haskell and ML), we can *parameterize* types by other types
- `List[_]` is an example: given a type `T`, it constructs another type `List[T]`
- Such types are sometimes called *type constructors*
- (Later tutorial will cover adding lists to $\mathsf{L}_{\mathsf{Poly}}$)
- We will revisit parameterized types when we cover type definitions and modules

Other forms of polymorphism

- Historically, parametric polymorphism is one of several related techniques for "code reuse" or "overloading"
  - Parametric polymorphism: abstraction over type parameters
  - Subtype polymorphism: reuse based on inclusion relations between types.
  - Ad hoc polymorphism: Reuse of same name for multiple (potentially type-dependent) implementations (e.g. *overloading* + for addition on different numeric types, string concatenation etc.)
- These have some overlap
- We will cover overloading and subtyping in future lectures.

Type inference

- As seen in even small examples, specifying the type parameters of polymorphic functions quickly becomes tiresome

$$swap[\mathtt{int}][\mathtt{str}] \qquad map[\mathtt{int}][\mathtt{str}] \qquad \cdots$$

- Idea: Can we have the benefits of (polymorphic) typing, without the costs? (or at least: with fewer annotations)
- *Type inference*: Given a program without full type information (or with some missing), *infer* type annotations so that the program can be typechecked.

Hindley-Milner type inference

- A very influential approach was developed independently by J. Roger Hindley (in logic) and Robin Milner (in CS).
- Idea: Typecheck an expression symbolically, collecting "constraints" on the unknown type variables
- If the constraints have a common solution then this solution is a most general way to type the expression
  - Constraints can be solved using *unification*, an equation solving technique from automated reasoning/logic programming
- If not, then the expression has a type error

Hindley-Milner example [Non-examinable]

- As an example, consider *swap* defined as follows:

$$\vdash \lambda x : A.(\mathtt{snd}\ x, \mathtt{fst}\ x) : B$$

  A, B are the as yet unknown types of x and *swap*.
- A lambda abstraction creates a function: hence $B = A \to A_1$ for some A_1 such that $x{:}A \vdash (\mathtt{snd}\ x, \mathtt{fst}\ x) : A_1$
- A pair constructs a pair type: hence $A_1 = A_2 \times A_3$ where $x{:}A \vdash \mathtt{snd}\ x : A_2$ and $x{:}A \vdash \mathtt{fst}\ x : A_3$
- This can only be the case if $x : A_3 \times A_2$, i.e. $A = A_3 \times A_2$.
- Solving the constraints: $A = A_3 \times A_2$, $A_1 = A_2 \times A_3$ and so $B = A_2 \times A_3 \to A_3 \times A_2$

Let-bound polymorphism [Non-examinable]

- An important additional idea was introduced in the ML programming language, to avoid the need to explicitly introduce type variables and apply polymorphic functions to type arguments
- When a function is defined using `let fun` (or `let rec`), first infer a type:

$$swap : A_2 \times A_3 \to A_3 \times A_2$$

- Then *abstract* over all of its free type parameters.

$$swap : \forall A.\forall B.A \times B \to B \times A$$

- Finally, when a polymorphic function is *applied*, infer the missing types.

$$swap(1, "a") \rightsquigarrow swap[\mathrm{int}][\mathrm{str}](1, "a")$$

ML-style inference: strengths and weaknesses

- Strengths
  - Elegant and effective
  - Requires no type annotations at all
- Weaknesses
  - Can be difficult to explain errors
  - In theory, can have exponential time complexity (in practice, it runs efficiently on real programs)
  - Very sensitive to extension: subtyping and other extensions to the type system tend to require giving up some nice properties
- (We are intentionally leaving out a lot of technical detail — HM type inference is covered in more detail in ITCS.)

Type inference in Scala

- Scala does not employ full HM type inference, but uses many of the same ideas.
- Type information in Scala flows from function arguments to their results

```
def f[A](x: List[A]): List[(A,A)] = ...
f(List(1,2,3)) // A must be Int, don't need f[Int]
```

- and sequentially through statement blocks

```
var l = List(1,2,3); // l: List[Int] inferred
var y = f(l); // y : List[(Int,Int)] inferred
```


Type inference in Scala

- Type information does **not** flow across arguments in the same argument list

```
def map[A](f: A => B, l: List[A]): List[B] = ...
scala> map({x: Int => x + 1}, List(1,2,3))
res0: List[Int] = List(2, 3, 4)
scala> map({x => x + 1}, List(1,2,3))
<console>:25: error: missing parameter type
```

- But it **can** flow from earlier argument lists to later ones:

```
def map2[A](l: List[A])(f: A => B): List[B] = ...
scala> map2(List(1,2,3)) {x => x + 1}
res1: List[Int] = List(2, 3, 4)
```

Type inference in Scala: strengths and limitations

- Compared to Java, many **fewer** annotations needed
- Compared to ML, Haskell, etc. many **more** annotations needed
- The reason has to do with Scala's integration of polymorphism and **subtyping**
  - needed for integration with Java-style object/class system
  - Combining subtyping and polymorphism is tricky (type inference can easily become undecidable)
  - Scala chooses to avoid global constraint-solving and instead propagate type information *locally*
  - More on subtyping in next lecture!

Summary

- Today we covered:
  - The idea of thinking of the same code as having many different types
  - Parametric polymorphism: makes the type parameter explicit and abstract
  - Brief coverage of *type inference*.
- Next time:
  - Records, subtyping, and pattern matching