CS 4110

Programming Languages & Logics

Lecture 16
Fixed-Point Combinators

Termination in the λ-calculus

We have encoded lots of useful programming functionality that produces values.

Does every closed λ-term eventually terminate under CBN evaluation?

$$\forall \text{ closed term } e.\ \exists e'.\ e \to^{*} e' \wedge e' \not\to \quad ?$$

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No!

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No!

$$\begin{array}{rcl}
\Omega & \triangleq & (\lambda x.\, x\, x)\, (\lambda x.\, x\, x) \\
& \rightarrow & (x\, x)\, \{(\lambda x.\, x\, x)/x\} \\
& = & (\lambda x.\, x\, x)\, (\lambda x.\, x\, x) \\
& = & \Omega
\end{array}$$

Recursive Functions

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We'd like to write it like this...

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$$\mathsf{FACT} \triangleq \lambda n.\, \mathsf{IF}\ (\mathsf{ISZERO}\ n)\ 1\ (\mathsf{TIMES}\ n\ (\mathsf{FACT}\ (\mathsf{PRED}\ n)))$$

In slightly more readable notation this is...

$$\mathsf{FACT} \triangleq \lambda n.\, \textbf{if}\ n = 0\ \textbf{then}\ 1\ \textbf{else}\ n \times \mathsf{FACT}\ (n - 1)$$

...but this is an equation, not a definition!

Recursion removal trick

We can perform a “trick” to define a function FACT that satisfies the recursive equation on the previous slide.

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Define a new function FACT′ that takes a function *f* as an argument. Then, for “recursive” calls, it uses *f f*:

$$\mathrm{FACT}' \triangleq \lambda f.\, \lambda n.\, \textbf{if } n = 0 \textbf{ then } 1 \textbf{ else } n \times ((f\, f)\, (n - 1))$$

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Then define FACT as FACT′ applied to itself:

$$\text{FACT} \triangleq \text{FACT}'\ \text{FACT}'$$

Example

Let’s try evaluating FACT on 3...

FACT 3

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$\mathsf{FACT}\ 3 = (\mathsf{FACT}'\ \mathsf{FACT}')\ 3$

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\begin{aligned}
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&\rightarrow (\lambda n.\, \textbf{if}\ n = 0\ \textbf{then}\ 1\ \textbf{else}\ n \times ((\text{FACT}'\ \text{FACT}')\ (n - 1)))\ 3
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&\to (\lambda n.\ \textbf{if}\ n = 0\ \textbf{then}\ 1\ \textbf{else}\ n \times ((\mathsf{FACT}'\ \mathsf{FACT}')\ (n-1)))\ 3 \\
&\to \textbf{if}\ 3 = 0\ \textbf{then}\ 1\ \textbf{else}\ 3 \times ((\mathsf{FACT}'\ \mathsf{FACT}')\ (3-1)) \\
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&= 3 \times (\mathsf{FACT}\;(3-1))
\end{aligned}$$

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&= 3 \times (\text{FACT}\;(3-1))\\
&\to \ldots\\
&\to 3 \times 2 \times 1 \times 1
\end{aligned}
$$

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&\to \ldots \\
&\to 3 \times 2 \times 1 \times 1 \\
&\to^{*} 6
\end{aligned}
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Fixed point combinators

Our “trick” requires following human-readable instructions. Write a different function f' that takes itself as an argument and uses self-application for recursive calls, and then define f as $f'\ f'$.

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Consider factorial again. It is a fixed point of the following:

$$G \triangleq \lambda f.\, \lambda n.\, \textbf{if } n = 0 \textbf{ then } 1 \textbf{ else } n \times (f\,(n-1))$$

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Recall that if g if a fixed point of G, then $G\,g = g$. To see that any fixed point g is a real factorial function, try evaluating it:

$$g\,5 = (G\,g)\,5$$

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Fixed point combinators

How can we generate the fixed point of G?

In denotational semantics, finding fixed points took a lot of math. In the λ-calculus, we just need a suitable combinator...

Y Combinator

The (infamous) Y combinator is defined as

$$\mathsf{Y} \triangleq \lambda f.\, (\lambda x.\, f\,(x\,x))\,(\lambda x.\, f\,(x\,x))$$

We say that Y is a *fixed point combinator* because Y *f* is a fixed point of *f* (for any lambda term *f*).

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What happens when we evaluate Y *G* under CBV?

Z Combinator

To avoid this issue, we’ll use a slight variant of the Y combinator, called Z, which is easier to use under CBV.

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Example

Let’s see Z in action, on our function *G*.

FACT

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$$\begin{aligned} & \mathrm{FACT} \\ = \quad & \mathrm{Z}\, G \end{aligned}$$

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\end{array}
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= & (\lambda f.\, (\lambda x.\, f\, (\lambda y.\, x\, x\, y))\, (\lambda x.\, f\, (\lambda y.\, x\, x\, y)))\, G \\
\rightarrow & (\lambda x.\, G\, (\lambda y.\, x\, x\, y))\, (\lambda x.\, G\, (\lambda y.\, x\, x\, y))
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= & (\lambda f.\, \lambda n.\, \textbf{if}\ n = 0\ \textbf{then}\ 1\ \textbf{else}\ n \times (f\, (n - 1))) \\
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\rightarrow & \lambda n.\, \textbf{if}\ n = 0\ \textbf{then}\ 1 \\
 & \qquad \textbf{else}\ n \times ((\lambda y.\, (\lambda x.\, G\, (\lambda y.\, x\, x\, y))\, (\lambda x.\, G\, (\lambda y.\, x\, x\, y))\, y)\, (n-1))
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$$

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\rightarrow & (\lambda x.\, G\,(\lambda y.\, x\,x\,y))\,(\lambda x.\, G\,(\lambda y.\, x\,x\,y)) \\
\rightarrow & G\,(\lambda y.\, (\lambda x.\, G\,(\lambda y.\, x\,x\,y))\,(\lambda x.\, G\,(\lambda y.\, x\,x\,y))\,y) \\
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=_\beta & \lambda n.\, \textbf{if}\ n = 0\ \textbf{then}\ 1\ \textbf{else}\ n \times (\lambda y.\, (\mathrm{Z}\,G)\,y)\,(n-1)
\end{array}$$

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= & \lambda n.\, \mathbf{if}\ n = 0\ \mathbf{then}\ 1\ \mathbf{else}\ n \times (\mathrm{FACT}\, (n - 1))
\end{array}
$$

Other fixed point combinators

There are many (indeed infinitely many) fixed-point combinators. Here's a cute one:

$$\mathsf{Y}_k \triangleq (\mathsf{L}\,\mathsf{L})$$

where

$$\begin{aligned}\mathsf{L} \triangleq {} & \lambda abcdefghijklmnopqstuvwxyzr. \\ & (r\,(t\,h\,i\,s\,i\,s\,a\,f\,i\,x\,e\,d\,p\,o\,i\,n\,t\,c\,o\,m\,b\,i\,n\,a\,t\,o\,r))\end{aligned}$$

Turing’s Fixed Point Combinator

To gain some more intuition for fixed point combinators, let’s derive a combinator Θ originally discovered by Turing.

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We know that $\Theta\, f$ is a fixed point of f, so we have

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We can write the following recursive equation:

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We know that $\Theta\, f$ is a fixed point of f, so we have

$$\Theta\, f = f\,(\Theta\, f).$$

We can write the following recursive equation:

$$\Theta = \lambda f.\, f\,(\Theta\, f)$$

Now use the recursion removal trick:

$$\begin{array}{rcl} \Theta' & \triangleq & \lambda t.\, \lambda f.\, f\,(t\; t\; f) \\ \Theta & \triangleq & \Theta'\, \Theta' \end{array}$$

θ Example

$\mathsf{FACT} = \Theta\, G$

θ Example

$$\begin{aligned}\mathsf{FACT} &= \Theta\, G\\ &= ((\lambda t.\, \lambda f.\, f\,(t\,t\,f))\,(\lambda t.\, \lambda f.\, f\,(t\,t\,f)))\, G\end{aligned}$$

θ Example

$$\begin{aligned}
\mathsf{FACT} &= \Theta\, G \\
&= ((\lambda t.\, \lambda f.\, f\,(t\,t\,f))\,(\lambda t.\, \lambda f.\, f\,(t\,t\,f)))\; G \\
&\to (\lambda f.\, f\,((\lambda t.\, \lambda f.\, f\,(t\,t\,f))\,(\lambda t.\, \lambda f.\, f\,(t\,t\,f))\; f))\; G
\end{aligned}$$

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\mathsf{FACT} &= \Theta\, G \\
&= ((\lambda t.\, \lambda f.\, f\,(t\,t\,f))\,(\lambda t.\, \lambda f.\, f\,(t\,t\,f)))\, G \\
&\rightarrow (\lambda f.\, f\,((\lambda t.\, \lambda f.\, f\,(t\,t\,f))\,(\lambda t.\, \lambda f.\, f\,(t\,t\,f))\, f))\, G \\
&\rightarrow G\,((\lambda t.\, \lambda f.\, f\,(t\,t\,f))\,(\lambda t.\, \lambda f.\, f\,(t\,t\,f))\, G)
\end{aligned}$$

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&\to G\,((\lambda t.\, \lambda f.\, f\,(t\,t\,f))\,(\lambda t.\, \lambda f.\, f\,(t\,t\,f))\, G) \\
&= G\,(\Theta\, G)
\end{aligned}$$

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&\rightarrow G\,((\lambda t.\, \lambda f.\, f\,(t\,t\,f))\,(\lambda t.\, \lambda f.\, f\,(t\,t\,f))\,G) \\
&= G\,(\Theta\, G) \\
&= (\lambda f.\, \lambda n.\, \textbf{if}\ n = 0\ \textbf{then}\ 1\ \textbf{else}\ n \times (f\,(n-1)))\,(\Theta\, G) \\
&\rightarrow \lambda n.\, \textbf{if}\ n = 0\ \textbf{then}\ 1\ \textbf{else}\ n \times ((\Theta\, G)\,(n-1)) \\
&= \lambda n.\, \textbf{if}\ n = 0\ \textbf{then}\ 1\ \textbf{else}\ n \times (\mathsf{FACT}\,(n-1))
\end{aligned}$$