

Shell variables

Shells have a notion of variables, each of which can contain data in the form of a string of characters. There are two kinds of shell variables:

- *local variables* that are only seen by the current shell
- *environment variables* that are seen by all programs that the shell starts. There is a way for program to access environment variables. Environment variables can then be used for configuration of programs.

The shell families have different ways of setting up local and environment variables. For the Bourne shell family:

- `var=value` sets the local variable `var` to the given value
- `unset var` undefines the given variable
- `export var` makes the given local variable into an environment variable
- `export var=value` creates an environment variable with the given value
- `export -n var` makes an environment variable into a local variable (undoing the export)

For the C shell family:

- `set var=value` sets the local variable `var` to the given value
- `unset var` undefines the given variable
- `setenv var value` creates an environment variable and gives it the specified value
- `unsetenv var` undefines the given environment variable

Here are some useful environment variables, understood by many programs:

- PATH holds a list of paths (separated by :) that the system searches for a command. To add a new path to this *search path*, you can do the following in bash: `export PATH=/foo/bar:$PATH`. If you understand what this line does and why, you've understood shell substitution.
- HOME contains the full path to your home directory
- USER contains your username
- SHELL contains the full path to your shell
- TERM contains your terminal type, as determined by the system when you logged in.

Variables in bash

here's a model that may help nail down the behavior of variables in bash. Recall that there are two kinds of variables: local variables, and environment variables (also called global variables). The idea is an environment variable will propagate itself to a subshell, while a local variable is, as the name indicates, purely local to a given shell.

You can picture things this way. Each shell has a list of variables and their values. Some of the variables *marked* as environment variables. Two separate facts contribute to the behavior of variables:

1. In a given shell, a variable is either local or environment, but not both, i.e. it is either marked or it is not.
2. When a new shell is created, the variables that were marked in the calling shell are passed down, still marked to the new shell.

In a given shell, you can list all the variables by typing *set*. To specifically see the ones that are marked as environment variables, type *export*. (The process of passing a variable from a shell to a subshell is called exporting.)

If you define a variable as `FOO=10`, it is initially unmarked. To mark a variable for export, i.e., to make it an environment variable, you simply write `export FOO`. You can also define and mark a variable for export at the same time: `export FOO=10`. To unmark a variable, you can use `export -n FOO`. The key thing to notice here is that the fact that a variable is an environment variable or not is simply a mark; changing the value of an existing variable does not affect the mark. Hence, consider the following sample interaction (comments in italics):

```
[cs214-sp02]$ FOO=tarzan      define FOO
[cs214-sp02]$ echo $FOO
```

```

tarzan
[cs214-sp02]$ export FOO      mark for export
[cs214-sp02]$ FOO=jane       change its value
[cs214-sp02]$ bash           invoke subshell
  [cs214-sp02]$ echo $FOO
  jane                        get updated value
  [cs214-sp02]$ exit
[cs214-sp02]$

```

(I indicate a subshell by appropriate indentation.) In the above, we define a variable *FOO*, mark it for export, and then change its value. The change in value does not affect the mark. So, when you invoke a new shell, the variable *FOO*, marked for export, will be passed to the new shell, with its current value.

The second fact mentioned earlier helps explain why changes to an environment variable in a subshell does not affect the environment variables in calling shells. This is because each subshell gets a *copy* of the environment variables of its parent. Hence, the interaction below:

```

[cs214-sp02]$ BAR=tarzan
[cs214-sp02]$ echo $BAR
tarzan
[cs214-sp02]$ export BAR      export BAR
[cs214-sp02]$ bash           invoke subshell
  [cs214-sp02]$ echo $BAR
  tarzan                       sanity check...
  [cs214-sp02]$ BAR=jane       change the value of BAR
  [cs214-sp02]$ echo $BAR
  jane
  [cs214-sp02]$ export | grep BAR
  declare -x BAR="jane"        Note that BAR is still marked
  [cs214-sp02]$ exit
[cs214-sp02]$ echo $BAR      Original value
tarzan
[cs214-sp02]$

```

Specifically, since the subshell is acting only on a copy of the *BAR* variable, any changes it makes only affects its copy. The variable in the calling shell is unaffected.

Remembering the two facts above help answer most variable-related questions: the fact that whether or not a variable is an environment variable is simply a mark attached to the variable, and the fact that a copy of those variables that are marked is passed to subshells.