Programming Languages and Compilers (CS 421)

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Based in part on slides by Mattox Beckman, as updated by Vikram Adve and Gul Agha

Continuations

- A programming technique for all forms of “non-local” control flow:
  - non-local jumps
  - exceptions
  - general conversion of non-tail calls to tail calls
- Essentially it’s a higher-order function version of GOTO

Continuations

- Idea: Use functions to represent the control flow of a program
- Method: Each procedure takes a function as an extra argument to which to pass its result; outer procedure "returns" no result
- Function receiving the result called a continuation
- Continuation acts as "accumulator" for work still to be done

Example of Tail Recursion

```
# let rec app fl x =
    match fl with [] -> x
     | (f :: rem_fs) -> f (app rem_fs x);;
val app : ('a -> 'a) list -> 'a -> 'a = <fun>
# let app fs x =
    let rec app_aux fl acc=
        match fl with [] -> acc
        | (f :: rem_fs) -> app_aux rem_fs
                              (fun z -> acc (f z))
    in app_aux fs (fun y -> y) x;;
val app : ('a -> 'a) list -> 'a -> 'a = <fun>
```

Continuation Passing Style

- Writing procedures such that all procedure calls take a continuation to which to give (pass) the result, and return no result, is called continuation passing style (CPS)

Example of Tail Recursion & CSP

```
# let app fs x =
    let rec app_aux fl acc=
        match fl with [] -> acc
        | (f :: rem_fs) -> app_aux rem_fs
                           (fun z -> acc (f z))
    in app_aux fs (fun y -> y) x;;
val app : ('a -> 'a) list -> 'a -> 'a = <fun>
# let rec appk fl x k =
    match fl with [] -> k x
    | (f :: rem_fs) -> appk rem_fs x (fun z -> k (f z));;
val appk : ('a -> 'a) list -> 'a -> ('a -> 'b) -> 'b
```

Continuation Passing Style

- A compilation technique to implement non-local control flow, especially useful in interpreters.
- A formalization of non-local control flow in denotational semantics
- Possible intermediate state in compiling functional code

Why CPS?

- Makes order of evaluation explicitly clear
- Allocates variables (to become registers) for each step of computation
- Essentially converts functional programs into imperative ones
  - Major step for compiling to assembly or byte code
- Tail recursion easily identified
- Strict forward recursion converted to tail recursion

Example

- Simple reporting continuation:

```
# let report x = (print_int x; print_newline( ) );;
val report : int -> unit = <fun>
```

- Simple function using a continuation:

```
# let addk a b k = k (a + b)
val addk : int -> int -> (int -> ’a) -> ’a = <fun>
# addk 22 20 report;;
2
- : unit = ()
```

Simple Functions Taking Continuations

- Given a primitive operation, can convert it to pass its result forward to a continuation
- Examples:

```
# let subk x y k = k(x + y);;
val timesk : int -> int -> (int -> 'a) -> 'a = <fun>
# let eqk x y k = k(x = y);;
val eqk : 'a -> 'a -> (bool -> 'b) -> 'b = <fun>
# let timesk x y k = k(x * y);;
val timesk : int -> int -> (int -> 'a) -> 'a = <fun>
```

Nesting Continuations

```
# let add_three x y z = x + y + z;;
val add_three : int -> int -> int -> int = <fun>
# let add_three x y z= let p = x + y in  p + z;;
val add_three : int -> int -> int -> int = <fun>
# let add_three_k x y z k =
   addk x y (fun p -> addk p z k );;
val add_three_k : int -> int -> int -> (int -> 'a)
   -> 'a = <fun>
```

Recursive Functions

- Recall:

```
# let rec factorial n =
    if n = 0 then 1 else n * factorial (n - 1);;
  val factorial : int -> int = <fun>
# factorial 5;;
- : int = 120
```

Recursive Functions

```
# let rec factorial n =
    let b = (n = 0) in (* First computation *)
    if b then 1 (* Returned value *)
    else let s = n – 1 in (* Second computation *)
         let r = factorial s in  (* Third computation *)
         n * r in (* Returned value *) ;;
val factorial : int -> int = <fun>
# factorial 5;;
- : int = 120
```

Recursive Functions

```
# let rec factorialk n k =
   eqk n 0
   (fun b ->  (* First computation *)
    if b then k 1 (* Passed value *)
    else subk n 1  (* Second computation *)
    (fun s -> factorialk s  (* Third computation *)
    (fun r -> timesk n r k))) (* Passed value *)
val factorialk : int -> int = <fun>
# factorialk 5 report;;
120
- : unit = ()
```

Recursive Functions

- To make recursive call, must build intermediate continuation to
  - take recursive value: r
  - build it to final result: n * r
  - And pass it to final continuation:
  - times n r k = k (n * r)

CPS for length

```
# let rec lengthk list k = match list with [ ] -> k 0
    | x :: xs -> lengthk xs (fun r -> k (r + 1));;
val lengthk : 'a list -> (int -> 'b) -> 'b = <fun>
# let rec lengthk list k = match list with [ ] -> k 0
    | x :: xs -> lengthk xs (fun r -> addk r 1 k);;
val lengthk : 'a list -> (int -> 'b) -> 'b = <fun>
# lengthk [2;4;6;8] report;;
4
- : unit = ()
```

Terminology

- Tail Position: A subexpression s of expressions e, such that if evaluated, will be taken as the value of e
  - if (x>3) then x + 2 else x - 4
  - let x = 5 in x + 4
- Tail Call: A function call that occurs in tail position
  - if (h x) then f x else (x + g x)

Terminology

- Available: A function call that can be executed by the current expression
- The fastest way to be unavailable is to be guarded by an abstraction (anonymous function).
  - if (h x) then f x else (x + g x)
  - if (h x) then (fun x -> f x) else (g (x + x))

CPS Transformation

- Step 1: Add continuation argument to any function definition:
  - let f arg = e $\Rightarrow$ let f arg k = e
  - Idea: Every function takes an extra parameter saying where the result goes
- Step 2: A simple expression in tail position should be passed to a continuation instead of returned:
  - return a $\Rightarrow$ k a
  - Assuming a is a constant or variable.
  - "Simple" = "No available function calls."

CPS Transformation

- Step 3: Pass the current continuation to every function call in tail position
  - return f arg $\Rightarrow$ f arg k
  - The function “isn’t going to return,” so we need to tell it where to put the result.

CPS Transformation

- Step 4: Each function call not in tail position needs to be built into a new continuation (containing the old continuation as appropriate)
  - return op (f arg) $\Rightarrow$ f arg (fun r -> k(op r))
  - op represents a primitive operation

  - return f(g arg) $\Rightarrow$ g arg (fun r-> f r k)

Example

Before:

```
let rec add_list lst =
match lst with
  [ ] -> 0
| 0 :: xs -> add_list xs
| x :: xs -> (+) x
   (add_list xs);;
```

After:

```
let rec add_listk lst k =
                        (* rule 1 *)
match lst with
| [ ] -> k 0 (* rule 2 *)
| 0 :: xs -> add_listk xs k
                           (* rule 3 *)
| x :: xs -> add_listk xs
             (fun r -> k ((+) x r));;
                     (* rule 4 *)
```

Other Uses for Continuations

- CPS designed to preserve order of evaluation
- Continuations used to express order of evaluation
- Can be used to change order of evaluation
- Implements:
  - Exceptions and exception handling
  - Co-routines
  - (pseudo) threads

Exceptions - Example

```
# exception Zero;;
exception Zero
# let rec list_mult_aux list =
    match list with [ ] -> 1
    | x :: xs ->
     if x = 0 then raise Zero
                  else x * list_mult_aux xs;;
val list_mult_aux : int list -> int = <fun>
```

Exceptions - Example

```
# let list_mult list =
    try list_mult_aux list with Zero -> 0;;
val list_mult : int list -> int = <fun>
# list_mult [3;4;2];;
- : int = 24
# list_mult [7;4;0];;
- : int = 0
# list_mult_aux [7;4;0];;
Exception: Zero.
```

Exceptions

- When an exception is raised
  - The current computation is aborted
  - Control is “thrown” back up the call stack until a matching handler is found
  - All the intermediate calls waiting for a return value are thrown away

Implementing Exceptions

```
# let multkp m n k =
   let r = m * n in
    (print_string "product result: ";
     print_int r; print_string "\n";
     k r);;
val multkp : int -> int -> (int -> 'a) -> 'a
  = <fun>
```

Implementing Exceptions

```
# let rec list_multk_aux list k kexcp =
    match list with [ ] -> k 1
    | x :: xs -> if x = 0 then  kexcp  0
      else list_multk_aux xs
              (fun r -> multkp x r k) kexcp;;
val list_multk_aux : int list -> (int -> 'a) -> (int -> 'a)
  -> 'a = <fun>
# let rec list_multk list k = list_multk_aux list  k  k;;
val list_multk : int list -> (int -> 'a) -> 'a = <fun>
```

Implementing Exceptions

```
# list_multk [3;4;2] report;;
product result: 2
product result: 8
product result: 24
24
- : unit = ()
# list_multk [7;4;0] report;;
0
- : unit = ()
```