CMSC 330: Organization of Programming Languages

Tail Recursion

CMSC330 Spring 2024

Factorial

$$\texttt{fact n} = \begin{cases} \texttt{1} & \texttt{n=0} \\ \texttt{n * fact (n-1)} & \texttt{n>0} \end{cases}$$

```
let rec fact  n =
    if n = 0 then 1
    else n * fact (n-1)
```

```
fact 4 = 24
```

Factorial

$$\texttt{fact n} = \begin{cases} \texttt{1} & \texttt{n=0} \\ \texttt{n * fact (n-1)} & \texttt{n>0} \end{cases}$$

```
fact 3 = 3 * fact 2
       = 3 * 2 * fact 1
       = 3 * 2 * 1 * fact 0
       = 3 * 2 * 1 * 1
       = 3 * 2 * 1
       = 3 * 2
       = 6
```

Stack

fact 0		`1`
fact 1	1	`1 * fact 0`
fact 2	2	`2 * fact 1`
fact 3	3	`3 * fact 2`

Stack Overflow

```
# let rec fact n = if n = 0 then 1 else n * fact (n-1);;
val fact : int -> int = <fun>
# fact 1000000 ;;
Stack overflow during evaluation (looping recursion?).
```

Yet Another Factorial

$$\texttt{aux x a} = \begin{cases} \texttt{a} & \texttt{x=0} \\ \texttt{aux (x-1) x*a} & \texttt{x>0} \end{cases}$$

$$\texttt{fact n = aux n 1}$$

```
let fact n =
  let rec aux x a =
    if x = 0 then a
    else aux (x-1) x*a
  in
  aux n 1
```

Stack

		6
	1,6	aux 1 6
	2,3	aux 2 3
fact 3	3,1	aux 3 1

Yet Another Factorial

```
              ⎧ a                        x=0
aux x a  =   ⎨
              ⎩ aux (x-1) x*a            x>0

fact n   = aux n 1
```

```
fact 3 = aux 3 1
       = aux 2 3
       = aux 1 6
       = 6
```

No Stack!

<u>No need to push a new frame on each call</u>

- The result of the evaluation is just the result of the recursive call – nothing to remember
- *So: Reuse the current frame*

Tail Recursion

- Whenever a function's result is completely computed by its recursive call, it is called **tail recursive**
  - Its "tail" – the last thing it does – is recursive
- Tail recursive functions can be implemented without requiring a stack frame for each call
  - No intermediate variables need to be saved, so the compiler overwrites them
- Typical pattern is to use an accumulator to build up the result, and return it in the base case

Compare fact and aux

```
let rec fact n =
    if n = 0 then 1
    else n * fact (n-1)
```

Waits for recursive call's result to compute final result

```
let fact n =
  let rec aux x acc =
    if x = 1 then acc
    else aux (x-1) (acc*x)
  in
 aux n 1
```

*final result **is** the result of the recursive call*

Exercise: Finish Tail-recursive Version

```
let rec sumlist l =
  match l with
    [] -> 0
  | (x::xs) -> (sumlist xs) + x
```

Tail-recursive version:

```
let sumlist l =
  let rec helper l a =
    match l with
      [] -> a
    | (x::xs) -> helper xs (x+a)
   in
helper l 0
```

Quiz #1

True/false: map is tail-recursive.

```
let rec map f = function
    [] -> []
| (h::t) -> (f h)::(map f t)
```

A. True
B. False

Quiz #1

True/false: map is tail-recursive.

```
let rec map f = function
    [] -> []
  | (h::t) -> (f h)::(map f t)
```

A. True

B. False

Quiz #2

True/false: fold is tail-recursive

```
let rec fold f a = function
   [] -> a
| (h::t) -> fold f (f a h) t
```

A. True
B. False

Quiz #2

True/false: fold is tail-recursive

```
let rec fold f a = function
   [] -> a
| (h::t) -> fold f (f a h) t
```

A. True

B. False

Quiz #3

True/false: fold_right is tail-recursive

```
let rec fold_right f l a =
  match l with
    [] -> a
  | (h::t) -> f h (fold_right f t a)
```

A. True
B. False

Quiz #3

True/false: fold_right is tail-recursive

```
let rec fold_right f l a =
  match l with
    [] -> a
  | (h::t) -> f h (fold_right f t a)
```

A. True

B. False

Tail Recursion is Important

- Pushing a call frame for each recursive call when operating on a list is dangerous
  - One stack frame for each list element
  - Big list = stack overflow!

- So: favor tail recursion when inputs could be large (i.e., recursion could be deep). E.g.,
  - Prefer **`List.fold_left`** to **`List.fold_right`**
    - Library documentation should indicate tail recursion, or not
  - Convert recursive functions to be tail recursive

Quiz #4

True/false: this is a tail-recursive map

```
let map f l =
  let rec helper l a =
    match l with
      [] -> a
    | h::t -> helper t ((f h)::a)
  in helper l []
```

A. True
B. False

Quiz #4

True/false: this is a tail-recursive map

```
let map f l =
  let rec helper l a =
    match l with
      [] -> a
    | h::t -> helper t ((f h)::a)
  in helper l []
```

A. True

B. False (elements are reversed)

A Tail Recursive **map**

```
let map f l =
  let rec helper l a =
    match l with
      [] -> a
    | h::t -> helper t ((f h)::a)
  in rev (helper l [])
```

Could instead change `(f h)::a` to be `a@(f h)`

Q: Why is the above implementation a better choice?

A: $O(n)$ running time, not $O(n^2)$ (where n is length of list)