# Is JavaScript Compiled or Interpreted?

Before we discuss whether JavaScript is compiled or interpreted, let's first define what each term means via an analogy. Let's say that we are stranded on an alien planet. Our spaceship needs fixing and the only way that can happen is if we hire a local mechanic. But therein, lies a problem. The instruction manual that we have is written in a language that the mechanic doesn’t understand. Logically, our next step is to hire a translator and we have a choice of either hiring an interpreter or a compiler. An interpreter would take the list of instructions from us, read the first instruction, translate it to the mechanic, wait for the mechanic to execute the step, and then keep repeating this process till the end of the document. Conversely, if we hire the compiler, it would take our list of instructions, immediately translate the entire page and give it back to us. We can then give the translated list to the mechanic who will quickly start working on the spaceship.

There are drawbacks to both. The interpreter, since it translates line by line, takes too much time between steps but it gives us a chance to quickly correct our instructions if we notice any mistakes. In the case of the compiler, the execution step will be a lot faster, as the mechanic doesn't have to wait to receive instructions; however, if there's a mistake in our instruction, we can't fix it on the fly. This is the case in programming, where the stranded pilot is the user, the interpreter is an engine (a program that executes source code) and the mechanic is the computer.

Now that we’ve got the definitions out of the way, let’s see which category JavaScript fits in. There is a general consensus that JavaScript like most scripting languages is an interpreted language. Although that was the case when JavaScript was first implemented, it has changed over time. Nowadays, it is [JIT-compiled](https://blog.bitsrc.io/the-jit-in-javascript-just-in-time-compiler-798b66e44143) (linked article describes it in detail) to native machine code in all major JavaScript implementations. Exactly when it’s compiled to machine code varies based on implementation. In the current V8 (used in Chrome and Node.js), it starts out using an interpreter since there is little reason to spend time compiling code that only runs once. However, if a function gets executed more than a couple of times, it’s immediately compiled into optimized native machine code. There is no way a JavaScript engine could ever hope to compete with other JavaScript implementations without compiling to machine code as modern JavaScript is really quite fast.

In conclusion, JavaScript, although it was initially implemented as an interpreter, is currently more closer to a compiler than an interpreter.

# The History of typeof null

The typeof operator in javascript takes the operand that is passed to it, and lets the user know what type the operand is from the [9 Data and Structure types that the latest ECMAScript standard defines](https://developer.mozilla.org/en-US/docs/Web/JavaScript/Data_structures). For example, if we run the command ‘typeof(3)’ it will return “number”, if we change the operand to ‘Hello’ it will return “string” and so on and so forth. But when the statement typeof(null) is run on JavaScript, we get ‘object’. This is a bug in the system, as null is a primitive value and not an object.

This bug is a remnant from the first version of JavaScript, where values were stored in 32-bit units, which consisted of a small type tag and the actual data of the value. Initially, there were five types of type tags:

* 000: object. The data is a reference to an object.
* 1: int. The data is a 31-bit signed integer.
* 010: double. The data is a reference to a double floating-point number.
* 100: string. The data is a reference to a string.
* 110: Boolean. The data is a Boolean.

It was easy to assign types to most values bar for two -:

* undefined (JSVAL\_VOID) was the integer −230 (a number outside the integer range).
* null (JSVAL\_NULL) was the machine code NULL pointer. Or: an object type tag plus a reference that is zero.

Since null was represented as the NULL pointer (0x00 in most platforms), it has 0 as type tag, and therefore, typeof(null) returns ‘object’. There have been attempts to fix this bug. One [proposal](https://web.archive.org/web/20160331031419/http:/wiki.ecmascript.org:80/doku.php?id=harmony:typeof_null) was implemented on Chrome’s V8 engine, but it was found that the change broke a lot of existing code and had to be rejected.

In the grand scheme of things, this bug doesn’t have a big enough influence other than semantics and it’s likely that it will remain unfixed for a long time.