Introduction

The following presents a Functional Programming Language named **SK** which is closely based on another such language named **SASL** (the St. Andrews Static Language) created by David Turner [DT79].

A language processor for the SK language has been implemented in Lisp.

Conventions

A right arrow ⇒ is used to denote a “reduction” operation which is essentially a replacement operation. The language processor transforms the expression template on the left into the expression template on the right.

A traditional equal sign = is used in definitions to indicate that the expression to the left is being defined to be the expression on the right.  
  
The equivalence (or identical) sign ≡ is used to indicate that the expressions to the left and to the right are operationally equivalent to each other. The two expressions have the same reduction.

Parentheses fill their traditional mathematical role – to override associativity. They are not used as syntactic constructs, other than to ensure that sub-expressions are nested and interpreted properly.

Definitions

Symbols: σ are alphanumeric strings that begin with a letter.

Terms: τ are either a symbol or a pair.

Pairs: π are formed via an infix “dot” operator. The pair formed from terms τ1 and τ2 is written:

τ1 . τ2

Unlike terms, the dot operator is *right associative*:

τ1 . τ2 . τ3 ≡ τ1 . (τ2 . τ3)

Note: Turner preferred use of the more legible “colon” to the “dot”. We keep to use of the dot here, following its more conventional use by the Lisp family of languages.

A (proper) List is either the symbol nil, which designates an empty list, or they begin with a Pair and are constructed as follows:  
  
The first term of the pair is referred to as the head of the list; and the second term of the pair is referred to as he tail of the list.  
  
The tail of any list is itself a list, a sub-list that is one element shorter than the list represented by the original Pair.

The head element of any list may be any term, including a Pair and may therefore itself represent a list.

The final sub-list of a Proper List is the Empty List, represented by nil. Proper Lists are thus said to be nil-terminated. We shall also speak of “Dotted Lists”, which are terminated by some symbol other than nil.

Printed Representation of Lists

To write any sequence of pairs (whether they may turn out to represent a proper, nil-terminated list or an improper dotted list) one begins by establishing a reference to the “remaining sub-list” of elements. Then the following steps are performed, iteratively:  
  
1) If the remaining sub-list is the symbol nil, writing of the list is complete. [If the remaining sub-list is some other non-nil symbol, writing of the list completes after writing a “dot” followed by writing the non-nil symbol used to terminate the dotted list.]

2) The remaining sub-list must otherwise be a pair; and the head of that sub-list is written. If the head is a symbol, the name of that symbol is written out.

If the head itself represents a list, an open parenthesis is written, followed a recursive application of this method to write out all of the elements of the nested sub-list, followed by a close parenthesis. The parentheses are required to make it clear that the nested list is one of the elements of its parent list.  
  
3) The reference to the “remaining sub-list” of elements is now replaced with the second element of the pair; and the process of writing each sub-list returns to the first step.

For example, the list entered as τ1 . τ2 . nil will be written as:

τ1 τ2

And the dotted list entered as τ1 . τ2 . τ3 will be written as:

τ1 τ2 . τ3  
  
Application

When two terms appear next to each other, the first term is said to be applied to the second. Applications are left associative:

τ1 τ2 τ3 ≡ (τ1 τ2) τ3

Abstraction

Abstraction of a symbol from a term, produces a term:

λx x ⇒ I

λx y ⇒ K y

λx (τ1 τ2) ⇒ S (λx τ1) (λx τ2)

Currying

Square brackets are “syntactic sugar” for an enhanced form of Abstraction known as Currying:

[head . tail]expr = λ(head . tail) expr  
  
λ(head . tail) τ = U (λhead (λtail τ))  
  
λnil τ ⇒ Knil τ

Note: Currying behaves similarly to the Lisp **destructuring-bind** operation.

Uncurrying

The Uncurrying Combinator U implements the semantics of Currying:

U func (head . tail) ⇒ func head tail

Reduction

Reduction of terms:

S τ1 τ2 τ3 ⇒ τ1 τ3 (τ2 τ3)

K τ1 τ2 ⇒ τ1

A similar combinator, introduced by Currying, only reduces where τ2 is nil:

Knil τ1 nil ⇒ τ1

I τ ⇒ τ

Y τ ⇒ τ (Y τ)

Expressions

An expression: expr can be any term, or an abstraction.

Function Definition

(Recursive) Functions: func are defined in terms of expressions.

def func = expr ≡ func = Y (λfunc expr)

def func x expr ≡ def func = λx expr

Note that I and Y can be defined in terms of S and K:

I ≡ S K K

And given:

def Z z h = h (z z h)

Y ≡ Z Z

References

[DT79] "A New Implementation Technique for Applicative Languages" by David A. Turner, 1979,

Software-Practice and Experience [vol.9, pp.31-49] John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.