

Using functor categories to generate intermediate code with Agda

Jack Gao

April 19, 2025

Contents

Chapter 1

Introduction

Contents

1.1	Motivation and related work	4
1.2	Language choice: Agda's advantages	4
1.3	Contributions	5

An Algol-like language is a typed lambda calculus with store. In this dissertation, the source language is an Algol-like language with the following primitive types:

- **comm**: the commands
- **intexp**: the integer expressions
- **intacc**: the integer acceptors
- **intvar**: the integer variables

and the set Θ of types is defined as follows:

$$\Theta := \text{comm} \mid \text{intexp} \mid \text{intacc} \mid \text{intvar} \mid \Theta \rightarrow \Theta$$

[Considering adding an example of Algol-like language here]

The target language is an assembly-style intermediate language for a stack machine. It is defined with four stack-descriptor-indexed families of non-terminals:

- $\langle L_{sd} \rangle$: lefthand sides
- $\langle S_{sd} \rangle$: Simple righthand sides
- $\langle R_{sd} \rangle$: righthand sides
- $\langle I_{sd} \rangle$: instruction sequences

The grammar of the target language is specified in Chapter 3.

This dissertation presents an implementation of a compiler from the source language to the target language with Agda [1]. This implementation is based on the work of Reynolds [2],

who presented a denotational semantics of Algol-like languages in the form of a presheaf category over stack descriptors. The compiler is implemented as a functor from the source language to the target language. The implementation is verified with Agda’s type system, which ensures that the generated code is well-typed and adheres to the semantics of both the source and target languages. This implementation proves and refines Reynolds’ work, providing a practical example of how to use functor categories to generate intermediate code.

1.1 Motivation and related work

The denotational semantics of Algol-like languages can be structured as a presheaf category over stack descriptors, which has been shown by Reynolds [3] and Oles [4] [5]. By interpreting the source language into this category, where objects of the category represent instruction sequences parameterised by stack layouts, the semantic model directly yields a compiler. The mathematical structure of the compiler has been specified by Reynolds in his paper “Using Functor Categories to Generate Intermediate Code” [2].

This project is motivated and guided by the following:

Motivation I. Implementation of the compiler

Reynolds concluded that he did not have a proper dependently typed programming language in hand, so his compiler remained a partial function theoretically. We aim to provide a computer implementation of this theoretical framework in a dependently typed programming language.

Motivation II. Formal verification of the compiler

The terms in Reynolds’ work are also written by hand. Terms are complicated and error-prone, and it is difficult to verify the correctness of the terms. We aim to provide a formalisation of the terms in a proof assistant to verify the correctness of the terms.

Motivation III. Trend of verified compilers

The rise of verified compilers including CompCert [6], CakeML [7] reflects a broader trend toward trustworthy systems, where correctness proofs replace testing for critical guarantees. Like Lean 4 [8], we leverage dependent types to internalise the verification of correctness of terms.

1.2 Language choice: Agda’s advantages

Agda [1] is a dependently typed programming language and proof assistant. Agda captures the source language’s intrinsic syntax with indexed families, which contains only well-typed terms. Therefore, it focuses on the correct programs and rules out the ill-typed nonsensical inputs.

(Example of Agda)

Dependently typed languages provide a natural framework for expressing functor categories is proven both theoretically and practically. There have been dependent-type-theoretic model of categories [9], and it has been shown that functor categories arise naturally as dependent function types [10]. A formalisation of Category Theory, including Cartesian Closed Categories, functors and presheaves has been developed in Agda by Hu and Caratte [11]. Other proof assistants, such as Isabelle/Hol, does not have a dependently typed language structure, and thus cannot express the functor categories as naturally as Agda.

[Do I need a table for comparing other proof assistants and Agda?]

1.3 Contributions

Addressed the two motivations presented in 1.1 and contributed to the following:

Motivation I. Implementation of the compiler

We implemented the compiler from the source language to the target language in Agda.

Motivation II. Formal verification of the compiler

We formalised the terms in the source language and target language in Agda, and proved that the compiler is a functor from the source language to the target language.

Motivation III. Trend of verified compilers

This implementation follows the trend of verified compilers, and provides a practical example of how to use functor categories to generate intermediate code.

Chapter 2

Preparation

Contents

2.1	Starting Point	6
2.2	Category theory background	6
2.2.1	Category	7
2.2.2	Functor	7
2.2.3	Natural transformation	8
2.2.4	Presheaf	8
2.2.5	Functor category	8
2.2.6	Cartesian closed category	8
2.2.7	Yoneda lemma	8
2.2.8	Functor categories	8
2.3	Agda	8
2.4	Requirement Analysis	8
2.5	Tools Used	8

2.1 Starting Point

Prior to this project, I had no experience with Agda. Although I was aware of the open-source online tutorial *Programming Language Foundations in Agda* (PLFA) [12], my preparation was limited to setting up the Agda environment on my laptop by following the “Front Matter” section of the tutorial.

I did not have any other experience with compiler beyond Part IB Compiler Construction Course. I had no prior exposure to category theory and type theory before the Part II lectures.

2.2 Category theory background

Category

2.2.1 Category

Definition (Category). A category \mathcal{C} is specified by the following:

- a collection of objects $\mathbf{obj}(\mathcal{C})$, whose elements are called \mathcal{C} -objects;
- for each $X, Y \in \mathbf{obj}(\mathcal{C})$, a collection of morphisms $\mathcal{C}(X, Y)$, whose elements are called \mathcal{C} -morphisms from X to Y ;
- for each $X \in \mathbf{obj}(\mathcal{C})$, an element $\mathbf{id}_X \in \mathcal{C}(X, X)$ called the identity morphism on X ;
- for each $X, Y, Z \in \mathbf{obj}(\mathcal{C})$, a function

$$\begin{aligned} \mathcal{C}(X, Y) \times \mathcal{C}(Y, Z) &\rightarrow \mathcal{C}(X, Z) \\ (f, g) &\mapsto g \circ f \end{aligned}$$

called the composition of morphisms;

satisfying the following properties:

- **(Unit Law)** for all $X, Y \in \mathbf{obj}(\mathcal{C})$ and $f \in \mathcal{C}(X, Y)$, we have:

$$\mathbf{id}_Y \circ f = f = f \circ \mathbf{id}_X \quad (2.1)$$

- **(Associativity Law)** for all $X, Y, Z, W \in \mathbf{obj}(\mathcal{C})$ and $f \in \mathcal{C}(X, Y)$, $g \in \mathcal{C}(Y, Z)$, $h \in \mathcal{C}(Z, W)$, we have:

$$h \circ (g \circ f) = (h \circ g) \circ f \quad (2.2)$$

[Considering adding different notations for morphisms, composition, identity morphisms, etc.] [Considering adding a diagram for the definition of category] [Considering adding examples of categories]

2.2.2 Functor

Definition (Functor). A functor F from a category \mathcal{C} to a category \mathcal{D} is specified by the following:

- a function

$$\begin{aligned} \mathbf{obj}(\mathcal{C}) &\rightarrow \mathbf{obj}(\mathcal{D}) \\ X &\mapsto F(X) \end{aligned}$$

- for each $X, Y \in \mathbf{obj}(\mathcal{C})$, a function

$$\begin{aligned} \mathcal{C}(X, Y) &\rightarrow \mathcal{D}(F(X), F(Y)) \\ f &\mapsto F(f) \end{aligned}$$

satisfying the following properties:

- for all $X, Y \in \mathbf{obj}(\mathcal{C})$ and $f \in \mathcal{C}(X, Y)$, we have:

$$F(\mathbf{id}_X) = \mathbf{id}_{F(X)} \quad (2.3)$$

- for all $X, Y, Z \in \mathbf{obj}(\mathcal{C})$ and $f \in \mathcal{C}(X, Y)$, $g \in \mathcal{C}(Y, Z)$, we have:

$$F(g \circ f) = F(g) \circ F(f) \quad (2.4)$$

[Considering adding examples of functors: e.g. free functor, forgetful functor, etc.]

2.2.3 Natural transformation

Before introducing the definition of natural transformation, we need to get familiar with the notation of commutative diagrams.

2.2.4 Presheaf

2.2.5 Functor category

2.2.6 Cartesian closed category

2.2.7 Yoneda lemma

2.2.8 Functor categories

2.3 Agda

2.4 Requirement Analysis

2.5 Tools Used

Completing the project is an iterative process. I used Git [13] for version control, and work had been synchronised with a GitHub [14] repository for backup.

For the development environment, I tried both Emacs [15] and Visual Studio Code [16] with an agda-mode extension [17] on Windows Subsystem for Linux with Ubuntu [18] 22.04 LTS. I am more familiar with the snippet and syntax highlighting features of Visual Studio Code, so I used it for most of the development.

The interactive development of Agda with holes and type checking is very useful for debugging.

Code from the PLFA tutorial and Agda standard library [19] were used as references.

1. Tools used: git version control
have tried emacs vscode interactive

Bibliography

- [1] U. Norell, “Dependently typed programming in agda,” in *Proceedings of the 4th International Workshop on Types in Language Design and Implementation*, ser. TLDI ’09, Savannah, GA, USA: Association for Computing Machinery, 2009, pp. 1–2, ISBN: 9781605584201. DOI: 10.1145/1481861.1481862. [Online]. Available: <https://doi.org/10.1145/1481861.1481862>.
- [2] J. C. Reynolds, “Using functor categories to generate intermediate code,” in *Proceedings of the 22nd ACM SIGPLAN-SIGACT Symposium on Principles of Programming Languages*, ser. POPL ’95, San Francisco, California, USA: Association for Computing Machinery, 1995, pp. 25–36, ISBN: 0897916921. DOI: 10.1145/199448.199452. [Online]. Available: <https://doi.org/10.1145/199448.199452>.
- [3] J. C. Reynolds, “The essence of algol,” in *ALGOL-like Languages, Volume 1*. USA: Birkhauser Boston Inc., 1997, pp. 67–88, ISBN: 0817638806.
- [4] F. J. Oles, “A category-theoretic approach to the semantics of programming languages,” AAI8301650, Ph.D. dissertation, USA, 1982.
- [5] F. J. Oles, “Type algebras, functor categories, and block structure,” *DAIMI Report Series*, vol. 12, no. 156, Jan. 1983. DOI: 10.7146/dpb.v12i156.7430. [Online]. Available: <https://tidsskrift.dk/daimipb/article/view/7430>.
- [6] X. Leroy, “Formal verification of a realistic compiler,” *Commun. ACM*, vol. 52, no. 7, pp. 107–115, Jul. 2009, ISSN: 0001-0782. DOI: 10.1145/1538788.1538814. [Online]. Available: <https://doi.org/10.1145/1538788.1538814>.
- [7] R. Kumar, M. O. Myreen, M. Norrish, and S. Owens, “Cakeml: A verified implementation of ml,” in *Proceedings of the 41st ACM SIGPLAN-SIGACT Symposium on Principles of Programming Languages*, ser. POPL ’14, San Diego, California, USA: Association for Computing Machinery, 2014, pp. 179–191, ISBN: 9781450325448. DOI: 10.1145/2535838.2535841. [Online]. Available: <https://doi.org/10.1145/2535838.2535841>.
- [8] L. d. Moura and S. Ullrich, “The lean 4 theorem prover and programming language,” in *Automated Deduction – CADE 28*, A. Platzer and G. Sutcliffe, Eds., Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021, pp. 625–635, ISBN: 978-3-030-79876-5.
- [9] S. Castellan, P. Clairambault, and P. Dybjer, *Categories with families: Unityped, simply typed, and dependently typed*, 2020. arXiv: 1904.00827 [cs.LG]. [Online]. Available: <https://arxiv.org/abs/1904.00827>.
- [10] “Chapter 10 first order dependent type theory,” in *Categorical logic and type theory*, ser. Studies in Logic and the Foundations of Mathematics, B. Jacobs, Ed., vol. 141, Elsevier, 1998, pp. 581–644. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0049-237X\(98\)80040-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0049-237X(98)80040-2). [Online]. Available: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0049237X98800402>.

- [11] J. Z. S. Hu and J. Carette, “Formalizing category theory in agda,” in *Proceedings of the 10th ACM SIGPLAN International Conference on Certified Programs and Proofs*, ser. CPP 2021, Virtual, Denmark: Association for Computing Machinery, 2021, pp. 327–342, ISBN: 9781450382991. doi: 10.1145/3437992.3439922. [Online]. Available: <https://doi.org/10.1145/3437992.3439922>.
- [12] P. Wadler, W. Kokke, and J. G. Siek, *Programming Language Foundations in Agda*. Aug. 2022. [Online]. Available: <https://plfa.inf.ed.ac.uk/20.08/>.
- [13] *Git*, Accessed: 2025-04-15. [Online]. Available: <https://git-scm.com/>.
- [14] *Github*, Accessed: 2025-04-15. [Online]. Available: <https://github.com/>.
- [15] *Gnu emacs*, Accessed: 2025-04-15. [Online]. Available: <https://www.gnu.org/software/emacs/>.
- [16] *Visual studio code*, Accessed: 2025-04-15. [Online]. Available: <https://code.visualstudio.com/>.
- [17] T.-G. LUA, *Agda-mode*, Accessed: 2025-04-15. [Online]. Available: <https://marketplace.visualstudio.com/items?itemName=banacorn.agda-mode>.
- [18] *Windows subsystem for linux (wsl)*, Accessed: 2025-04-15. [Online]. Available: <https://ubuntu.com/desktop/wsl>.
- [19] The Agda Community, *Agda standard library*, version 2.1.1, Release date: 2024-09-07, 2024. [Online]. Available: <https://github.com/agda/agda-stdlib>.