

42: Recursion

Transforming Iteration into Recursion

Iteration

- You're all familiar with iteration in Java:

```
public class Iteration {  
  
    public static int sum(int[] array) {  
        int result = 0;  
        for (int i : array) result += i;  
        return result;  
    }  
  
    public static void main(String[] args) {  
        int[] array = new int[10];  
        for (int i = 0; i < 10; i++) array[i] = i+1;  
        System.out.println(sum(array));  
    }  
}
```

- Note that this involves the use of a mutable variable called *result*.

Addition by recursion

- Iteration vs. Recursion
 - In functional programming we like to avoid the use of mutable variables so that we can prove programs using *referential transparency* (a.k.a. the substitution principle).
 - But what is the more natural way to do the sum? iteration or recursion?
 - I suggest that iteration is a consequence of the Turing/von Neumann architecture. You wouldn't use iteration if you were adding up numbers on a piece of paper.
 - A more mathematical way of defining the sum of a list `xs` of numbers would be:
 - $\text{sum}(xs) = xs.\text{head} + \text{sum}(xs.\text{tail})$

Sum by recursion

- Here's the simplest way to sum in Scala:

```
object Sum extends App {
```

```
  def sum(xs: Seq[Int]): Int = xs match {  
    case Nil => 0  
    case h :: t => h + sum(t)  
  }
```



Recursively call sum

```
  val xs = Stream.from(1) take 10  
  println(sum(xs.toList))  
}
```

- But haven't we always been taught not to use recursion in our programs if we can avoid it?
 - What's wrong with recursion?
 - Think about what would happen if instead of 10 numbers, we summed 10 *billion* numbers.

Stack Overflow

- We'd get a stack overflow. Try it for yourself.
 - That's really bad news. That's why we were taught not to use recursion!
- But in functional programming we can actually avoid using the stack provided that the recursion is *tail* recursive.
 - Suppose that the *last* thing we do in our code is the recursive call itself (that's called *tail* recursion)? We'd also say that the recursive call is in *tail position*. In that case, there'd be nothing we'd need to store on the stack, right?
 - So, we can “unroll” a tail-recursive call into a kind of iteration.

Sum by recursion (take 2)

- Let's take another look

```
object Sum extends App {  
  def sum(xs: Seq[Int]): Int = xs match {  
    case Nil => 0  
    case h :: t => h + sum(t)  
  }  
  
  val xs = Stream.from(1) take 10  
  println(sum(xs.toList))  
}
```



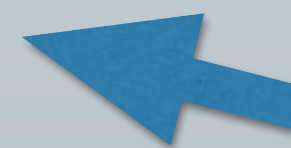
*Recursively call sum
but the last thing we do
is to add h to the result
of the recursive call—
“+” is in tail position.*

- How can we make this tail-recursive?
 - Actually, it's quite easy...

Sum by tail-recursion*

- We create an “inner” method which is tail-recursive
 - Its signature is based on two[†] things:
 - the current value of the result (and which will be yielded when the recursion terminates, in this case when *work* is *Nil*);
 - the work still to do.
- Here’s our new *sum* (note we use *BigInt* because we no longer have a restriction on the size of *xs*):

```
object Sum extends App {  
  def sum(xs: Seq[Int]): BigInt = {  
    def inner(result: BigInt, work: Seq[Int]): BigInt = work match {  
      case Nil => result  
      case h :: t => inner(result+h,t)  
    }  
    inner(0, xs)  
  }  
  
  val xs = Stream.from(1) take 10000000  
  println(sum(xs.toList))  
}
```



*Tail-recursively call inner
which is the last thing we do.*

* also known as tail call recursion

[†] three if you’re processing something 2-dimensional like a tree

How can we be sure it's *tail*-recursive?

- The compiler will optimize it provided that it really is tail-recursive. But what if it's not?
 - In that case, you risk a stack overflow at run-time!
 - But here's what you can do: just add the *tailrec* annotation which asserts that the method *is* tail-recursive and, if it's not, the compiler will warn you:

```
import scala.annotation.tailrec
object Sum extends App {
  def sum(xs: Seq[Int]): BigInt = {
    @tailrec def inner(result: BigInt, work: Seq[Int]): BigInt = work match {
      case Nil => result
      case h :: t => inner(result+h, t)
    }
    inner(0, xs)
  }
  val xs = Stream.from(1) take 10000000
  println(sum(xs.toList))
}
```

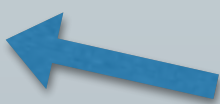

Tail Recursion —factorial

- Let's take a look at perhaps the most obvious recursive function, *factorial*:

```
scala> def badFactorial(x: Int): Long = if (x<=1) 1 else x*badFactorial(x-1)
badFactorial: (x: Int)Long
```

- This isn't tail-recursive. Why not?
- But the following *is* tail-recursive (which we can assert with the annotation):

```
def factorial(n: Int) = {
  @scala.annotation.tailrec def inner(r: Long, n: Int): Long =
    if (n <= 1) r
    else inner(n * r, n - 1)
  inner(1L, n)
}
```



When we create one of these tail-recursive inner methods, we usually have two parameters: the first (*r*) is the current result; the second (*n*) represents the work still to do. Sometimes, there is a third parameter which controls some other aspect of the recursion.

What else can we do that's tail-recursive?

- *sum* and *factorial*
 - In the *sum* case, we added *h* to *result*;
 - In the *factorial* case, we multiplied *n* by *r*.
- *FoldLeft* for a more general aggregation function
 - In general, we can provide our own function to aggregate the current result with the current head (we will also need a value to use as the starting result).

```
def foldLeft[X,Y](xs: Seq[X])(y: Y)(f: (Y,X)=>Y): Y = {  
  @tailrec def inner(result: Y, work: Seq[X]): Y = work match {  
    case Nil => result  
    case h :: t => inner(f(result,h),t)  
  }  
  inner(y, xs)  
}  
  
def sum(xs: Seq[Int]): BigInt = foldLeft(xs)(0)(_+_)  
val xs = Stream.from(1) take 10000  
println(sum(xs.toList))
```

Other recursive methods

- Of course, we can also define *foldRight* but it can't be efficient and tail-recursive unless we are operating on a backwards list.
- We can also define *reduce* like *foldLeft* but in *reduce*, the initial value is inferred to be the zero value in the *Y* type. This constrains *Y* such that we can create a *Y* based on zero. More on that when we get to implicits...

Remember *sequence*, *traverse*?

- What if you had a *Seq[Option[X]]* and you wanted an *Option[Seq[X]]*?
 - *sequence*:
- this method should iterate through *xos* and, if all elements are *Some(x)*, collect them into a sequence *xs* then return *Some(xs)*. If any of the elements are *None*, return *None*.
- Now, we're ready to implement this one:

```
def sequence[X](xos: Seq[Option[X]]): Option[Seq[X]] = (Option(Seq[X]()) /: xos) {  
  (xso, xo) => for (xs <- xso; x <- xo) yield xs :+ x  
}
```



I don't expect you to remember this!!!



Synonym for *foldLeft* where operands are swapped

See also...

- <http://scalaprof.blogspot.com/2016/05/transforming-iteration-into-tail.html>
- <http://scalaprof.blogspot.com/2016/11/a-generic-tail-recursive-method-for.html>