The SML Basis Library

SML provides a wide variety of useful types and functions, grouped into structures, that are included in the *Basis Library*.

A web page fully documenting the Basis Library is linked from the ML page that is part of the Programming Languages Links page on the CS 538 home page.

Many useful types, operators and functions are “preloaded” when you start the SML compiler. These are listed in the “Top-level Environment” section of the Basis Library documentation.

Many other useful definitions must be explicitly fetched from the structures they are defined in.

For example, the **Math** structure contains a number of useful mathematical values and operations.

You may simply enter

```
open Math;
```

while will load all the definitions in **Math**. Doing this may load more definitions than you want. What's worse, a definition loaded may redefine a definition you currently want to stay active. (Recall that ML has virtually no overloading, so functions with the same name in different structures are common.)

A more selective way to access a definition is to qualify it with the structure's name. Hence

```
Math.pi;
val it = 3.14159265359 : real
```

gets the value of **`pi`** defined in **`Math`**.

Should you tire of repeatedly qualifying a name, you can (of course) define a local value to hold its value. Thus

```
val pi = Math.pi;
val pi = 3.14159265359 : real
```

works fine.

An Overview of Structures in the Basis Library

The Basis Library contains a wide variety of useful structures. Here is an overview of some of the most important ones.

- **`Option`**

  Operations for the **`option`** type.

- **`Bool`**

  Operations for the **`bool`** type.

- **`Char`**

  Operations for the **`char`** type.

- **`String`**

  Operations for the **`string`** type.

- **`Byte`**

  Operations for the **`byte`** type.

- **`Int`**

  Operations for the **`int`** type.

- **`IntInf`**

  Operations for an unbounded precision integer type.

- **`Real`**

  Operations for the **`real`** type.

- **`Math`**

  Various mathematical values and operations.

- **`List`**

  Operations for the **`list`** type.

- **`ListPair`**

  Operations on pairs of lists.

- **`Vector`**

  A polymorphic type for immutable (unchangeable) sequences.

- **`IntVector, RealVector, BoolVector, CharVector`**

  Monomorphic types for immutable sequences.

- **`Array`**

  A polymorphic type for mutable (changeable) sequences.

- **`IntArray, RealArray, BoolArray, CharArray`**

  Monomorphic types for mutable sequences.

- **`Array2`**

  A polymorphic 2 dimensional mutable type.

- **`IntArray2, RealArray2, BoolArray2, CharArray2`**

  Monomorphic 2 dimensional mutable types.

- **`TextIO`**

  Character-oriented text IO.

- **`BinIO`**

  Binary IO operations.

- **`OS, Unix, Date, Time, Timer`**

  Operating systems types and operations.

ML Type Inference

One of the most novel aspects of ML is the fact that it infers types for all user declarations.

How does this type inference mechanism work?

Essentially, the ML compiler creates an unknown type for each declaration the user makes. It then solves for these unknowns using known types and a set of type inference rules. That is, for a user-defined identifier `i`, ML wants to determine `T(i)`, the type of `i`.

The type inference rules are:

1. The types of all predefined literals, constants and functions are known in advance. They may be looked-up and used. For example,

   ```
   2 : int
   true : bool
   [] : 'a list
   :: : 'a * 'a list -> 'a list
   ```

2. All occurrences of the same symbol (using scoping rules) have the same type.

3. In the expression

   ```
   I = J
   ```

   we know `T(I)` = `T(J)`.

4. In a conditional
   `(if E1 then E2 else E3)`
   we know that
   `T(E1) = bool`,
   `T(E2) = T(E3) =`
   `T(conditional)`
5. In a function call
   `(f x)`
   we know that
   if `T(f) = 'a -> 'b`
   then `T(x) = 'a`
   and `T(f x) = 'b`
6. In a function definition
   `fun f x = expr;`
   if `t(x) = 'a` and `T(expr) = 'b`
   then `T(f) = 'a -> 'b`

7. In a tuple $(e_1, e_2, \ldots, e_n)$ if we know that
$T(e_i) = {}'a_i \quad 1 \le i \le n$
then $T(e_1, e_2, \ldots, e_n) = {}'a_1 * {}'a_2 * \ldots * {}'a_n$

8. In a record
$\{\ a=e_1, b=e_2, \ldots\ \}$
if $T(e_i) = {}'a_i \quad 1 \le i \le n$ then the type of the record =
$\{a:'a_1,\ b:'a_2,\ \ldots\}$

9. In a list $[v_1, v_2, \ldots v_n]$ if we know that
$T(v_i) = {}'a_i \quad 1 \le i \le n$
then we know that
$'a_1 = {}'a_2 = \ldots = {}'a_n$ and
$T([v_1, v_2, \ldots v_n]) = {}'a_1$ list

To Solve for Types:

1. Assign each untyped symbol its own distinct type variable.
2. Use rules (1) to (9) to solve for and simplify unknown types.
3. Verify that each solution "works" (causes no type errors) throughout the program.

Examples

Consider

```
fun fact(n)=
  if n=1 then 1 else n*fact(n-1);
```

To begin, we'll assign type variables:

`T(fact) = 'a -> 'b`
(**`fact`** is a function)

T(n) = 'c

Now we begin to solve for the types **'a**, **'b** and **'c** must represent.

We know (rule 5) that **'c** = **'a** since **n** is the argument of **fact**.

We know (rule 3) that **'c** = **T(1)** = int since **n=1** is part of the definition.

We know (rule 4) that **T(1)** = **T(if expression)**=**'b** since the if expression is the body of **fact**.

Thus, we have

'a = **'b** =**'c** = **int**, so

T(fact) = **int -> int**

T(n) = **int**

These types are correct for all occurrences of **fact** and **n** in the definition.

A Polymorphic Function:

```
fun leng(L) =
 if L = []
 then 0
 else 1+len(tl L);
```

To begin, we know that

T([]) = **'a list** and

T(tl) = **'b list -> 'b list**

We assign types to **leng** and **L**:

T(leng) = **'c -> 'd**

T(L) = **'e**

Since **L** is the argument of **leng**,

'e = **'c**

From the expression **L=[]** we know

'e = **'a list**

From the fact that **0** is the result of the then, we know the if returns an **int**, so **'d** = **int**.

Thus **T(leng) = 'a list -> int** and

T(L) = 'a list

These solutions are type correct throughout the definition.

Type Inference for Patterns

Type inference works for patterns too.

Consider

```
fun leng [] = 0
 |   leng (a::b) = 1 + leng
b;
```

We first create type variables:

```
T(leng) = 'a -> 'b
T(a) = 'c
T(b) = 'd
```

From `leng []` we conclude that

`'a = 'e list`

From `leng [] = 0` we conclude that

`'b` = `int`

From `leng (a::b)` we conclude that

`'c ='e` and `'d` = `'e list`

Thus we have

`T(leng) = 'e list -> int`

`T(a) = 'e`

`T(b) = 'e list`

This solution is type correct throughout the definition.

Not Everything can be Automatically Typed in ML

Let's try to type

`fun f x = (x x);`

We assume

`T(f) = 'a -> 'b`

`t(x) = 'c`

Now (as usual) `'a` = `'c` since `x` is the argument of `f`.

From the call `(x x)` we conclude that `'c` must be of the form `'d -> 'e` (since `x` is being used as a function).

Moreover, `'c = 'd` since `x` is an argument in `(x x)`.

Thus `'c = 'd ->'e = 'c ->'e`.

But `'c = 'c->'e` has no solution, so in ML this definition is invalid. We can't pass a function to itself as an argument—the type system doesn't allow it.

In Scheme this is allowed:

```
(define (f x) (x x))
```

but a call like

```
(f f)
```

certainly doesn't do anything good!

Type Unions

Let's try to type

`fun f g = ((g 3), (g true));`

Now the type of **`g`** is **`'a -> 'b`** since **`g`** is used as a function.

The call **`(g 3)`** says **`'a`** = **`int`** and the call **`(g true)`** says **`'a`** = **`boolean`**.

Does this mean **`g`** is polymorphic?

That is, is the type of **`f`**

`f : ('a->'b)->'b*'b`?

NO!

All functions have the type **`'a -> 'b`** but not all functions can be passed to **`f`**.

Consider **`not: bool->bool`**.

The call **`(not 3)`** is certainly illegal.

What we'd like in this case is a *union* type. That is, we'd like to be able to type **`g`** as **`(int|bool)->'b`** which ML doesn't allow.

Fortunately, ML does allow type constructors, which are just what we need.

Given

```
datatype  T =
  I of int|B of bool;
```

we can redefine **`f`** as

```
fun f g =
 (g (I(3)), g (B(true)));
val f = fn : (T -> 'a) -> 'a
* 'a
```

Finally, note that in a definition like

```
let
  val  f =
     fn x => x (* id
function*)
in (f 3,f true)
end;
```

type inference works fine:

```
val it = (3,true) : int *
bool
```

Here we define **f** in advance, so its type is known when calls to it are seen.