Learning to program with F#

Jon Sporring

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Chapter 1

Preface

This book has been written as an introduction to programming for novice programmers. It is used on the first programming course at the University of Copenhagen's bachelor in computer science program. It has been typeset in LaTeX, and all programs have been developped and tested in Mono version 4.4.1.

Jon Sporring
Associate Professor, Ph.d.
Department of Computer Science,
University of Copenhagen
September 1, 2016

Chapter 2

Introduction

Programming is a creative process in which exciting problems may be solved and new tools and applications may be created. With programming skills you can create high-level applications to run on a mobile device that interacts with other users, databases, and artificial intelligences; you may create programs that run on super computers for simulating weather systems on alien planets or social phenomenons in the internet economy; and you may create programs that run on small custom-made hardware for controlling your home appliances.

2.1 How to learn to program

In order to learn how to program there are a couple of steps that are useful to follow:

1. Choose a programming language: It is possible to program without a concrete language, but your ideas and thoughts must be expressed in some fairly rigorous way. Actually, theoretical computer science typically does not rely on computers nor programming languages, but uses mathematics to prove properties of algorithms. However, most computer scientists program, and with a real language, you have the added benefit of checking your algorithm and hence your thoughts rigorously on a real computer. This book teaches a subset of F#. The purpose is not to be a reference guide to this language, but to use it as a vessel to teach you, the reader, how to convert your ideas into programs.

2. Learn the language: A computer language is a structure for thought, and it influences which thoughts you choose to implement as a program, and how you choose to do it. Any conversion requires you to acquirer a sufficient level of fluency, for you to be able to make programs. You do not need to be a master in F# nor to know every corner of the language, and you will expand your knowledge as you expose yourself to solving problems in the language, but you must invest an initial amount of time and energy in order to learn the basics of the language. This book aims at getting you started quickly, which is why we intentionally are teaching a small subset of F#. On the net and through other works, you will be able to learn much more.

3. Practice: If you want to be a good programmer, then there is only one way: practice, practice, practice! It has been estimated that to master anything, then you have to have spent at least 10000 hours of practice, so get started logging hours! It of course matters, what you practice. This book teaches 3 different programming themes. The point is that programming is thinking, and the scaffold that you use, shapes your thoughts. It is therefore important to recognize this scaffold, and to have the ability to choose that which suits your ideas and your goals best. And the best way to expand your abilities is to both sharpen your present abilities, push yourself into new territory, and trying something new. Do not be afraid to make errors or be frustrated at first. These are the experiences that make you grow.

4. Solve real problems: I have found that using my programming skills in real situations with customers demanding solutions, that work for them, has allowed me to put into perspective the

programming tools and techniques that I use. Often customers want solutions that work, are secure, are cheap, and delivered fast, which has pulled me as a programmer in the direction of "if it works, then sell it", while on the longer perspective customers also wants bug fixes, upgrades, and new features, which requires carefully designed code, well written test-suites, and good documentation. And as always, the right solution is somewhere in between. Regardless, real problems create real programmers.

2.2 How to solve problems

Programming is the act of solving a problem by writing a program to be executed on a computer. A general method for solving problems was given by George Pólya [5] and adapted to programming is:

Understand the problem: To solve any problem it is crucial that the problem formulation is understood, and questions like: What is to be solved? Do you understand everything in the description of the problem. Is all information for finding the solution available or is something missing?

Design a plan: Good designs mean that programs are faster to program easier to debug and maintain. So before you start typing a program consider things like: What are the requirements and constraints for the program? Which components should the program have? How are these components to work together? Designing often involves drawing a diagram of the program, and writing pseudo-code on paper.

Implement the plan: Implementation is the act of transforming a program design into a code. A crucial part of any implementation is choosing which programming language to use. Also, the solution to many problems will have a number of implementations which vary in how much code they require, to which degree they rely on external libraries, which programming style the are best suited for, what machine resources they require, and what their running times are. With a good design, then the coding is usually easy, since the design will have uncovered the major issues and found solutions for these, but sometimes implementation reveals new problems, which requires rethinking the design. Most implementations also include writing documentation of the code.

Reflect on the result: A crucial part in any programming task is ensuring that the program solves the problem sufficiently. E.g., what are the program's bugs, is the documentation of the code sufficient and relevant for its intended use. Is the code easily maintainable and extendable by other programmers. Are there any general lessons to be learned from or general code developed by the programming experience, which may be used for future programming sessions?

Programming is a very complicated process, and Pólya's list is a useful guide, but not a failsafe approach. Always approach problem solving with an open mind.

2.3 Approaches to programming

This book focuses on 3 fundamentally different approaches to programming:

- Imperative programming
- statements
- state

Imperative programming, which is a type of programming where *statements* are used to change the program's *state*. Imperative programming emphasises *how a program shall accomplish a solution* and less on *what the solution is*. A cooking recipe is an example of the spirit of imperative programming. Almost all computer hardware is designed to execute low-level programs written in imperative style. The first major language was FORTRAN [2] which emphasized imperative style of programming.

- Declarative programming
- Functional programming
- functional programming
- functions
- expressions

Declarative programming, which emphasises *what a program shall accomplish* but not *how*. We will consider Functional programming as an example of declarative programming language. A *functional programming* language evaluates *functions* and avoids state changes. The program consists of *expressions* instead of statements. As a consequence, the output of functions only

depends on its arguments. Functional programming has its roots in lambda calculus [1], and the first language emphasizing functional programming was Lisp [3].

· Structured programming

Structured programming, which emphasises organisation of code in units with well defined interfaces and isolation of internal states and code from other parts of the program. We will focus on Object-oriented programming as the example of structured programming. *Object-orientered programming* is a type of programming, where the states and programs are structured into *objects*. A typical object-oriented design takes a problem formulation and identifies key nouns as potential objects and verbs as potential actions to be take on objects. The first object-oriented programming language was Simula 67 developed by Dahl and Nygaard at the Norwegian Computing Center in Oslo.

· Object-orientered programming

· objects

Most programs follows a single programming paradigm as, e.g., one of the above, but are a mix. Nevertheless, this book will treat each paradigm separately to emphasize their advantages and disadvantages.

2.4 Why use F#

This book uses F# also known as Fsharp, which is a functional first programming language that also supports imperativ and object-oriented programming. It was originally developed for Microsoft's .Net platform, but is available as open source for many operating systems through Mono. As an introduction to programming, F# is a young programming language still under development, with syntax that at times is a bit complex, but it offers a number of advantages:

Interactive and compile mode F# has an interactive and a compile mode of operation: In interactive mode you can write code that is executed immediately in a manner similarly to working with a calculator, while in compile mode, you combine many lines of code possibly in many files into a single application, which is easier to distribute to non F# experts and is faster to execute.

Indentation for scope F# uses indentation to indicate scope: Some lines of code belong together, e.g., should be executed in a certain order and may share data, and indentation helps in specifying this relationship.

Strongly typed F# is strongly typed, reducing the number of run-time errors: F# is picky, and will not allow the programmer to mix up types such as integers and strings. This is a great advantage for large programs.

Multi-platform F# is available on Linux, Mac OS X, Android, iOS, Windows, GPUs, and browsers via the Mono platform.

Free to use and open source F# is supported by the Fsharp foundation (`http://fsharp.org`) and sponsored by Microsoft.

Assemblies F# is designed to be able to easily communicate with other .Net and Mono programs through the language-independent, platform-independent bytecode called Common Intermediate Language (CIL) organised as assemblies. Thus, if you find that certain parts of a program are easy to express in F# and others in C++, then you will be able to combine these parts later into a single program.

Modern computing F# supports all aspects of modern computing including Graphical User Interfaces, Web programming, Information rich programming, Parallel algorithms, ...

Integrated development environments (IDE) F# is supported by major IDEs such as Visual Studio (`https://www.visualstudio.com`) and Xamarin Studio (`https://www.xamarin.com`).

2.5 How to read this book

Learning to program requires mastering a programming language, however most programming languages contains details that are rarely used or used in contexts far from a specific programming topic. Hence, this book takes the approach to start with an introduction to the most basic concepts of F# in Part **??**, followed by the 3 programming paradigms in Part II–IV while gradually expanding the introduction of F# syntax and semantics. In Part V are a number of general topics given for reference. The disadvantage of this approach is that no single part contains a reference guide to F# and F# topics are revisited and expanded across the book. For further reading please consult `http://fsharp.org`.

Chapter 3

Executing F# code

3.1 Source code

F# is a functional first programming language, meaning that it has strong support for functional programming, but F# also supports imperative and object oriented programming. It also has strong support for parallel programming and information rich programs. It was originally developed for Microsoft's .Net platform, but is available as open source for many operating systems through Mono. In this text we consider F# 4.0 and its Mono implementation, which is different from .Net mainly in terms of the number of libraries accessible. The complete language specification is described in `http://fsharp.org/specs/language-spec/4.0/FSharpSpec-4.0-latest.pdf`.

F# has 2 modes of execution, *interactive* and *compiled*. Interactive mode is well suited for small experiments or back-of-an-envelope calculations, but not for programming in general. In Mono, the interactive system is started by calling `fsharpi` from the *console*, while compilation is performed with `fsharpc` and execution of the compiled code is performed using the `mono` command. The various forms of fsharp programs are identified by suffixes:

· interactive
· compiled
· console

`.fs` An *implementation file*, e.g., `myModule.fs` · implementation file

`.fsi` A *signature file*, e.g., `myModule.fsi` · signature file

`.fsx` A *script file*, e.g., `gettingStartedStump.fsx` · script file

`.fsscript` Same as `.fsx`, e.g., `gettingStartedStump.fsscript`

`.exe` An *executable file*, e.g., `gettingStartedStump.exe` · executable file

The implementation, signature, and script files are all typically compiled to produce an executable file, but syntactical correct code can also be entered into the interactive system, in which case these are called *script-fragments*. The implementation and signature files are special kinds of script files used for building *modules*. Modules are collections of smaller programs used by other programs, which will be discussed in detail in Part IV.

· script-fragments
· modules

3.2 Executing programs

Programs may either be executed by the interpreter or by compiling and executing the compiled code. In `Mono` the interpreter is called `fsharpi` and can be used in 2 ways: interactively, where a user enters 1 or more script-fragments separated by the `";;"` lexeme, or to execute a script file treated as a single script-fragment. To illustrate the difference, consider the following program, which declares a value `a` to be the decimal value 3.0 and finally print it to the console:

```
let a = 3.0
printfn "%g" a
```

An interactive session is obtained by starting the console, typing the `fsharpi` command, typing the lines of the program, and ending the script-fragment with the `";;"` lexeme. The following dialogue demonstrates the workflow, where what the user types has been highlighted by a box:

```
$ fsharpi

F# Interactive for F# 4.0 (Open Source Edition)
Freely distributed under the Apache 2.0 Open Source License

For help type #help;;

> let a = 3.0
- printfn "%g" a;;
3

val a : float = 3.0
val it : unit = ()

> #quit;;
```

The interpreter is stopped by pressing `ctrl-d` or typing `"#quit;;"`. Conversely, executing the file with the interpreter as follows,

```
$ fsharpi gettingStartedStump.fsx
3
```

Finally, compiling and executing the code is performed as,

```
$ fsharpc gettingStartedStump.fsx
F# Compiler for F# 4.0 (Open Source Edition)
Freely distributed under the Apache 2.0 Open Source License
$ mono gettingStartedStump.exe
3
```

Both the interpreter and the compiler translates the source code into a format, which can be executed by the computer. While the compiler performs this translation once and stores the result in the executable file, the interpreter translates the code every time the code is executed. Thus, to run the program again with the interpreter, then it must be retranslated as "`$fsharpi gettingStartedStump.fsx`". In contrast, compiled code does not need to be recompiled to be run again, only re-executed using "`$ mono gettingStartedStump.exe`".On a Macbook Pro, with a 2.9 Ghz Intel Core i5, the time the various stages takes for this script are:

Command	Time
`fsharpi gettingStartedStump.fsx`	1.88s
`fsharpc gettingStartedStump.fsx`	1.90s
`mono gettingStartedStump.exe`	0.05s

I.e., executing the script with `fsharpi` is slightly faster than by first compiling it with `fsharpc` and then executing the result with `mono`, $1.88\text{s} < 0.05\text{s} + 1.90\text{s}$, if the script were to be executed only once, but every future execution of the script using the compiled version requires only the use of `mono`, which is much faster than `fsharpi`, $1.88\text{s} \gg 0.05\text{s}$.

The interactive session results in extra output on the *type inference* performed, which is very useful for *debugging* and development of code-fragments, but both executing programs with the interpreted directly from a file and compiling and executing the program is much preferred for programming complete programs, since the starting state is well defined, and since this better supports *unit-testing*, which is a method for debugging programs.

· type inference
· debugging
· unit-testing

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