Preventing runtime errors of Redis at compile time

Abstract

Programmers often interact with database systems, by sending queries through libraries or packages in some programming languages. But people make mistakes, while some of the syntactic and semantic errors can be prevented by the language at compile time, or caught by the package at runtime, most semantic errors are just being ignored, causing problems at the database system.

In this paper, we demonstrates how to prevent those runtime errors at compile time, allowing users to write more reliable database queries without runtime overhead, by exploiting type-level programming techniques such as indexed monad, type-level literals and closed type families in Haskell.

The database system and the package we are targeting are *Redis* and *Hedis* respectively, and our implementation is available as *Edis* on *Hackage*.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

Keywords type-level programming; Haskell; database query language; Redis;

1. Introduction

1.1 Redis

Redis is an open source, in-memory data structure store, used as database, cache and message broker. Each value is associated with a binary-safe string key to identify and manipulate with. Redis supports many different kind of values, such as strings, hashes, lists and sets.

To manipulate these values, Redis comes with a set of atomic operations, called *commands*.

For example, if we want to add a bunch of strings to 2 sets, and intersect them, we could input the following sequence of commands into Redis's client interactively.

```
redis> SADD some-set a b c
(integer) 3
redis> SADD another-set a b
(integer) 2
redis> SINTER some-set another-set
1) "a"
2) "b"
```

Keys such as `some-set` and `another-set` are created on site, with the command `SADD`, which returns the size of set after completed.

1.2 Hedis

Redis can also be used in most programming languages, with 3rd party libraries or packages that talk with Redis' TCP protocol. In Haskell, the most popular package is Hedis.

The previous example in Redis's client would look something like this with Hedis in Haskell.

```
program :: Redis (Either Reply [ByteString])
program = do
    sadd "some-set" ["a", "b"]
    sadd "another-set" ["a", "b", "c"]
    sinter ["some-set", "another-set"]
```

Function `sadd` takes a key and a list of values as arguments, and returns an `Integer`, wrapped in `Either` to indicate possible failures in the context `Redis`[1]of command execution.

```
sadd :: ByteString       -- key
    -> [ByteString]      -- values
    -> Redis (Either Reply Integer)
```

Keys and values are of type `ByteString`, since they are all just binary strings in Redis. If a user wants to store values of arbitrary types, he or she will have to encode and decode them as `ByteString`s.

[1] Hedis provides another kind of context, `RedisTx`, for *transactions*, united with `Redis` under the class of `RedisCtx`. We use `Redis` only here for brevity.

1.3 Problems

"All binary strings are equal, but some binary strings are more equal than others."

Although everything in Redis is essentially a binary string, they are treated differently. Redis supports many different kind of data structures, such as strings, hashes, lists, etc. These values are of different data types, and some commands only work on certain types of them, much like how language C treats a piece of data.

Problem 1 Consider the following example. `SET` is a command that only works on strings. The key `some-string` is now related with a string. If we treat it as a set and add an element to it with `SADD`, a runtime error arises.

```
redis> SET some-string foo
OK
redis> SADD some-string bar
(error) WRONGTYPE Operation against a key
 holding the wrong kind of value
```

Problem 2 Even worse, not all strings are equal! `INCR` parses the string value as an integer, increments it by one, and store it back as a string. If a string value can't be parse as an integer, another runtime error arises

```
redis> SET some-string foo
OK
redis> INCR some-string
(error) ERR value is not an integer or out
 of range
```

In Hedis The same goes for Hedis, since it's only a simple wrapping on top of Redis's protocol written in Haskell.

```
program :: Redis (Either Reply Integer)
program = do
    set "some-string" "foo"
    sadd "some-string" ["a"]
```

It yields the same error as in Redis's client.

```
Left (Error "WRONGTYPE Operation against a
 key holding the wrong kind of value")
```

The Cause These problems arise from the absence of type checking, with respects to **the type of a value that associates with a key**.

1.4 Hedis as an embedded DSL

Haskell makes it easy to build and use Domain Specific Languages (DSLs), and Hedis can be regarded as one of them. What makes Hedis special is that, it has variable bindings (between keys and values), but with very little or no semantic checking, neither dynamically nor statically.

We began with making Hedis a dynamically checked embedded DSL, and implemented a runtime type checker that keeps track of everything. But then we found that things can be a lot easier, by leveraging the host language's type checker, which also make it statically type-checked!

1.5 Contributions

To summarize our contributions:

- We make Hedis statically type-checked, without runtime overhead.
- We demonstrates how to model variable bindings of an embedded DSL with language extensions like type-level literals and data kinds.
- We provide (yet another) an example of encoding effects and constraints of an action in types, with indexed monad[1] and other language extensions such as closed type-families[**?**] and constraints kinds[11].
- Edis, a package we built for programmers. This package helps programmers to write more reliable Redis codes, and also makes Redis polymorphic by automatically converting back and forth from values of any types and boring ByteStrings.

2. Type-level Dictionary

To check the bindings between keys and values, we need a *dictionary-like* structure, and encode it as a *type* somehow.

2.1 Datatype promotion

Normally, at the term level, we could express data type of the dictionary with *type synonym* like this.

```
type Key = String
type Dictionary = [(Key, TypeRep)]
```

To encode this in the type level, everything has to be *promoted*[13] one level up. From terms to types, and from types to kinds.

Luckily, with recently added GHC extension *data kinds*. With data kinds we can define our own kinds just like we can with datatypes, and every suitable datatype will be promoted to be a kind, and its value constructors promoted to be type constructors, automatically.

```
data List a = Nil | Cons a (List a)
```

Give rise to the following kinds and type constructors:[2][3]

```
List k :: BOX
Nil  :: List k
Cons :: k -> List k -> List k
```

[3] To distinguish between types and promoted constructors that have ambiguous names, prefix promoted constructor with a single quote like `'Nil` and `'Cons`

[3] All kinds have *sort* BOX in Haskell[6]

Haskell sugars lists `[1, 2, 3]` and tuples `(1, 'a')` with brackets and parentheses. Promoted lists and tuples are also sugared with single quote prefixed. For example `'[Int, Char]`, `'(Int, Char)`.

2.2 Type-level literals

Now we have type-level lists and tuples to construct the dictionary. For keys, `String` also has a type-level correspondence: `Symbol`.

```
data Symbol
```

Symbol is defined without a value constructor, because it's intended to be used as a promoted kind.

```
"this is a type-level string literal" :: Symbol
```

Nonetheless, it's still useful to have a term-level value that links with a Symbol, when we want to retreive type-level informations at runtime (but not the other way around!).

2.3 Putting everything together

With all of these ingrediants ready, let's build some dictionaries!

```
type DictEmpty = '[]
type Dict0 = '[ '("key", Bool) ]
type Dict1 = '[ '("A", Int), '("B", "A") ]
```

They are defined with *type synonym*, since they are *types* , not *terms*. If we ask `GHCi` what is the kind of `Dict1`, we get `Dict1 :: [ (Symbol, *) ]`

The star `*` is a kind, it stands for any kind of types, such as `Int`, `Char` or even a symbol `"symbol"`, while `Symbol` stands only for all symbols.

3. Indexed Monad

Redis commands are *actions*. We could capture the effects caused by an action, by expressing the states it affects, before and after. That is, the *preconditions* and *postconditions* of an action. In such way, we could also impose constraints on the preconditions.

Indexed monads (or *monadish*, *parameterised monad*)[1] can be used[8][7] to model such preconditions and postconditions in types. An indexed monad is a type constructor that takes three arguments: an intitial state, a final state, and the type of a value that an action computes, which can be read like a Hoare triple[10].

```
class IMonad m where
    unit :: a -> m p p a
    bind :: m p q a -> (a -> m q r b) -> m p r b
```

Class `IMonad` comes with two operations: `unit` for identities and `bind` for compositions, as in Monad.

We define a new datatype `Edis`, which is basically just `Redis` indexed with more informations in types. And we make it an instance of `IMonad`.

```
newtype Edis p q a = Edis { unEdis :: Redis a }

instance IMonad Edis where
    unit = Edis . return
    bind m f = Edis (unEdis m >>= unEdis . f )
```

The first and second argument of type `Edis` is where the dictionaries going to stay.

3.1 The first attempt

In Redis, `PING` does nothing but replies with `PONG` if the connection is alive. In Hedis, `PING` has type:

```
ping :: Redis (Either Reply Status)
```

Now we have `Edis`, let's make our own version of `ping`[4]

```
ping :: Edis xs xs (Either Reply Status)
ping = Edis Hedis.ping
```

Dicionary `xs` in the type remain unaffected after the action, because `ping` does not affect any key-value bindings. To encode other commands that alters key-value bindings, we need type-level functions to annotate those effects on the dictionary.

4. Bookkeeping with type families

4.1 Closed type families

Type families have a wide variaty of applications. They can appear inside type classes[3][2], or at toplevel. Toplevel type families can be used to compute over types, they come in two forms: open[12] and closed [5].

We choose *closed type families*, because it allows overlapping instances, and we need none of the extensibility provided by open type families. For example, consider both term-level and type-level `&&`:

```
(&&) :: Bool -> Bool -> Bool
True && True = True
a    && b    = False

type family And (a :: Bool) (b :: Bool) :: Bool where
    And True True = True
    And a    b    = False
```

The first instance of `And` could be subsumed under the more general instance `And a b`. But the closedness allows these instances to be resoluted in order, just like how cases are resoluted in term-level functions. Also notice that how much `And` resembles to it's term-level brother.

We are using *closed type families*, since

since we need none of the extensibility provided by open type families, and we may need to overlap instances, like what we do in defining function cases.

[4] ping from Hedis is qualified with `Hedis` to prevent function name clashing

4.2 Proxies and Kind polymorphism

Since Haskell has a phase distinction[9] between

To link a symbol with a term-level value

What we need is a *singleton*[4], a type that has only one instance at the term level.

With *kind polymorphism*[13], we have parametric polymorphism at the kind level.

```
Proxy :: Proxy "a"
```

4.3 Closed type families

4.4 Conclusions and Related Work

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