Memory Locations for Variables

Modern programming languages have many different classes of Variables, e.g.

- (1) Global variables
- (2) Parameters
- (3) (function) local variables (also called automatic or activation-specific)
- (4) (object-oriented) member variables
- (5) Etc.

It is the job of the language system to <u>keep track of the values</u> of these variables during the runtime of a program.

⇒ The language system accomplishes this by <u>binding a variable to a</u> <u>memory location</u> and then uses that memory location to store the value of the variable.

Memory Locations for Variables

In imperative programs this is a fairly transparent process - the assignment operator mimics what happens at the hardware level - namely, the updating of memory cells.

In functional languages this is often not so obvious, since there is no global State, but still, variables are bound to memory locations.

Activation Records

In order to track variables for functions, compilers use a data structure called <u>activation record</u> - collects all the variables belonging to one function into this structure.

Example: FORTRAN

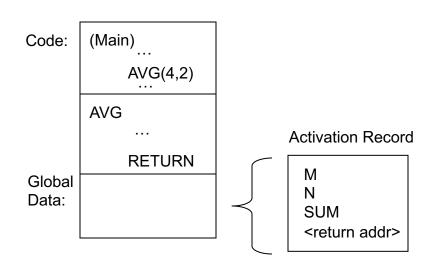
FUNCTION AVG (M,N)

SUM = M + N

AVG = SUM/2.0

RETURN

END



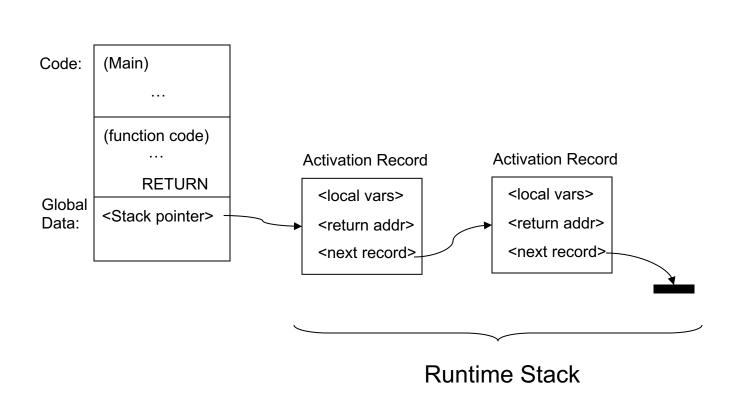
Activation Records are often called Frames

Activation Records

Note: Non-recursive languages such as FORTRAN keep a <u>single</u> activation record <u>per function</u> in the program.

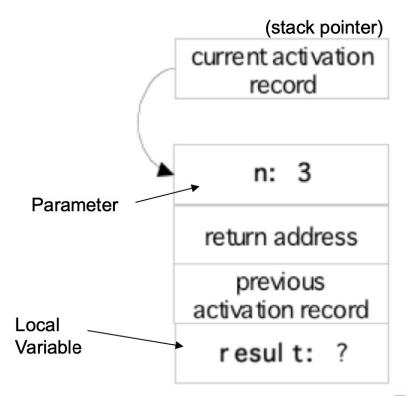
Recursive languages (ML, Java, C, C++, etc) keep a <u>stack</u> of activation records; one <u>per function call</u>.

The Runtime Stack



We are evaluating **fact(3)**. This shows the contents of memory just before the recursive call that creates a second activation.

```
int fact(int n) {
  int result;
  if (n<2) result = 1;
  else result = n * fact(n-1);
  return result;
}</pre>
```



This shows the contents of memory just before the third activation.

```
int fact(int n) {
  int result;
  if (n<2) result = 1;
  else result = n * fact(n-1);
  return result;
}</pre>
```

current activation record

n: 2

return address

previous activation record

result: ?

Screenshot

n: 3

return address

previous activation record

result: ?

This shows the contents of memory just before the third activation returns.

current activation record

int result;
if (n<2) result = 1;
else result = n * fact(n-1);
return result;</pre>

n: 1

return address

previous activation record

result: 1

n: 2

int fact(int n) {

return address

previous activation record

result: ?

n: 3

return address

previous activation record

result: ?

The second activation is about to return.

int fact(int n) {
 int result;
 if (n<2) result = 1;
 else result = n * fact(n-1);</pre>

current activation record

n: 1

return address

previous activation record

result: 1

n: 2

return address

previous activation record

result: 2

n: 3

return address

previous activation record

result: ?

The first activation is about to return with the result **fact(3) = 6**.

```
int fact(int n) {
  int result;
  if (n<2) result = 1;
  else result = n * fact(n-1);
  return result;
}</pre>
```

.

n: 1

return address

previous activation record

result: 1

n: 2

return address

previous activation record

result: 2

current activation record

n: 3

return address

previous activation record

result: 6

C Example - Debugger

- We use the fact.c program
- To use the debugger compile the program with the –g flag
- Then start the debugger: gdb <image name>
- Set break point at fact function
- Run frame, bt, up, down are all debugger commands that allow to see the stack and the frames.
- The program is available in the REPL
 - https://replit.com/@lutzhamel/fact#main.sh