

The Little Schemer Simplified

Deepak Venkatesh

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Note:

These are my personal notes created to deepen my understanding of Lisp and programming in general. ‘The Little Schemer’ (4th edition) by Daniel Friedman and Matthias Felleisen is a remarkable book that teaches programming concepts in a unique and playful way. It builds from first principles using only a small set of primitives, showing how powerful ideas — such as recursion, functional programming, lambda functions, and interpreters — can be expressed using just those few building blocks. I am making this public since other beginners could benefit from these notes.

While the book uses Scheme, I prefer to work in Common Lisp and have adapted the examples accordingly. Despite its lighthearted tone, the book is far from an easy read — it demands close attention and careful thought. My advice to anyone who wants to learn lisp is to first work through David Touretzky’s book titled ‘Common Lisp A Gentle Introduction to Symbolic Computing’ (2nd ed.). It’s a great book for introduction to programming not just Lisp.

All mistakes in these notes, whether typographical or conceptual, are entirely my own. Any misinterpretations are as well. I am still new to both Lisp and programming.

Hardware and Software used for this study

- Common Lisp SBCL version 2.4.1
- emacs
- slime for emacs
- Macbook Pro 2019 2.6 Ghz I7 Intel chip with 16 GB RAM

1 Foreword

By Gerald Sussman of MIT, co-author of the book SICP (the wizard book).

Key Takeaway: *In order to be creative one must first gain control of the medium.*

- Core skills are the first set of things required to master any pursuit.
- Deep understanding is required to visualize beforehand the program which will be written.
- Lisp provides freedom and flexibility (this is something which will only come in due course of time, as we keep learning more about programming).
- Lisp was initially conceived as a theoretical vehicle for recursion and symbolic algebra (this is the algebra we have been taught in school such as $(a + b)^2 = a^2 + b^2 + 2ab$).
- In Lisp procedures are first class. Procedures are essentially a ‘variant’ of functions. A mathematical function maps a given input to an output (domain - range/co-domain) but a procedure is a process to arrive at the result via computation.
- First Class basically means that the procedure itself can be passed around as arguments to other procedures. Procedures can be return values. They can also be stored in data structures. A similar corollary (though not exact) are composite functions which are usually taught in pre-calculus.
- Lisp programs can manipulate representations of Lisp programs - this likely refers to macros and how in Lisp code can be treated as data.

2 Preface

Key Takeaway: *The goal of the book is to teach the reader to think recursively.*

- Programs take data, apply a process on that data, and then produce some data.
- Recursion is the act of defining an object or solving a problem in terms of itself.
- The authors believe that writing programs recursively in Lisp is essentially pattern recognition. Well I think it's true for any programming language or any programming paradigm.
- For recursive programming and studying, this book we will need only a few Common Lisp primitives, namely:
 - CAR
 - CDR
 - CONS
 - ATOM (ATOM? actually which is not a primitive in Common Lisp but explanation below)
 - EQ, EQL, EQUAL, EQUALP (currently unsure if all or only a few will be used)
 - NULL, ZEROP, NUMBERP
 - ADD1, SUB1 (these do not exist in Common Lisp, we will define them when needed)
 - AND, OR
 - LAMBDA
 - COND
 - DEFUN
- The definitions of the above primitives I am not outlining here and will come to it as we work through the book.
- Authors advise to read this book slowly. Very slowly and deliberately. Re-read it multiple times. Every concept should be clear before going onto the next page.

- In the preface we hit the first difference between Scheme and Common Lisp. `()` in Scheme is actually different from that in Common Lisp. Scheme considers `()` as only a list and not an atom. While in Common Lisp `()` is considered both an atom and a list. Therefore, to stay with the theme of this book we will define our own predicate `ATOM?` in Common Lisp which will work like the `atom?` in Scheme. `ATOM` is defined as per the Lisp Hyperspec as well as Common Lisp The Language (2nd ed.) by Guy Steele as ‘The predicate `ATOM` is true if its argument is not a `CONS`, and otherwise is false. In SBCL `ATOM` will give `T`

```
(atom '())
» T
```

We define our own predicate `ATOMP`

```
(defun atom? (x)
  (not (listp x)))
```

So now `ATOMP` for our studies of this book will give `NIL` when tested for an empty list `'()`

```
(atom? '())
» NIL
```

- There is another predicate in Common Lisp `CONSP`. This tests whether the argument to the predicate has a `CONS` cell or not. But when we check for a `CONS` cell for an empty list `()` then `CONSP` returns `NIL`. This perhaps means that the empty list in this case is being treated as an `ATOM`.

3 Toys

This chapter introduces primitives of Lisp. These are the basic building blocks.

3.1 The Law of CAR

Key Takeaway: The primitive CAR is defined only for non-empty lists. The CAR is the first atom (element) of that list. But in Common Lisp the CAR of an empty list will give NIL.

- In Common Lisp an **ATOM** is anything which is not a **CONS**.
- **ATOM** will include single characters, strings, numbers, special characters.
- Anything enclosed in parenthesis/brackets **()** is a list.
- We can have nested lists which are also called improper lists and non-nested lists which are proper lists.
- An S-expression which stands for Symbolic Expression is any Lisp object that can be read and evaluated by the Lisp reader. S-expressions include both **ATOM** and **CONS** (which is used to make lists).
- Q. How many S-expressions are in the list **(how are you doing so far)** and what are they? The book answers 6 and those are the elements in the lists, basically the 6 atoms inside the list. But the list itself is an S-expression in Common Lisp so there are actually 7 S-expressions.
- The next 2 questions build up on this contradiction in my opinion. A question asks how many S-expressions are in the list **((how) are) ((you) (doing so)) far)** and gives the answer as 3. It refers to the 3 lists inside the outermost list. So a list is an S-expression for this question but a list was not an S-expression for the prior question. Furthermore 3 should not be the correct answer here. The answer should be 12 in my opinion - 6 atoms (the words), 6 lists (nested and outermost).
- The difference of **()** again comes up since it is both a list and an atom in Common Lisp unlike Scheme. The **CAR** of **()** will be **NIL** in Common Lisp unlike Scheme. In Common Lisp as per the standards and empty list's **CAR** and **CDR** are both **NIL**.

```
(car ())  
» NIL
```

- CAR is the first atom/element of a list. If we try to find the CAR of a string of character or numbers SBCL will give us a variable unbound error or say that the number is not of the type list.

3.2 The Law of CDR

Key Takeaway: *The primitive CDR is defined only for non-empty lists. The CDR of any non-empty list is always another list. The CDR of an empty list in Common Lisp is NIL.*

- The book says CAR of l is same as `(car l)`. Similarly for CDR.
- CDR of a single atom/element list is NIL or `()`.
- In Tourtezky's book there is a tool called SDRAW. It allows us to do draw CONS cell structures with the CAR & CDR pointers. I have uploaded the code for this tool on Github here. For `(car a)` and `(cdr a)` where `a` is `samosa` will be represented as:

```
[*|*]---> NIL  
|  
|  
V  
SAMOSA
```

- CDR of an empty list will be NIL as per Common Lisp standards.

3.3 The Law of CONS

Key Takeaway: *The primitive CONS takes two arguments. The second argument to CONS must be a list. The result is a list.*

- CONS actually creates a CONS cell. The CAR of which is the first input to CONS and the CDR is pointed to the second input. The return value of the CONS is a pointer to it. Refer Touretzky's Chapter 2, clearly explained.

- Q. What is `(cons s 1)` where `s` is `((a b c))` and `1` is `b`? This brings in the topic of Dotted Lists. In a proper list the chain of `CONS` cells ends with `NIL` as the atom, meaning the last cell points to a `NIL` but in a dotted list the last atom points to a non `NIL` atom. In the above case we will get the following:

```
(cons '((a b c)) 'b)
» (((A B C)) . B)
```

3.4 The Law of NULL

Key Takeaway: *The primitive NULL is defined only for lists.*

- Q. Is it true that the list `1` is the null list where `1` is `()`? Yes, but not because it is the list composed of zero S-expressions but because the list *contains* zero S-expressions. In Common Lisp we don't use `?` at the end of predicates. So it is `NULL` in Common Lisp and `null?` in Scheme.
- Another difference in Common Lisp and Scheme is how they refer to False. In scheme it is explicitly `#t` or `#f` but in Common Lisp it is `T` for True or else it is `NIL` which means False. A section of notes on only `NIL` follows the end of this chapter.

```
(null '(gol gappa))
» NIL
```

```
(null '())
» T
```

- `NULL` of an atom will throw a variable unbound error for a string or say the number is not of the type list.

3.5 The Law of EQ

Key Takeaway: *The function EQ in Common Lisp takes two arguments and compares the unique address of these two arguments.*

- Now there are major difference here between the ways in which equality can be tested. First in Common Lisp symbols are unique where one

symbol can have only address in computer's memory (within a given package in Common Lisp). This address of the symbol object is unique. So if we have a list as (TIME AFTER TIME) then TIME has the address irrespective of the fact that it is repeated twice. The EQ function does this. This is a deviation from the eq? as defined in the book.

- Common Lisp has other equality tests
 - EQ: As explained above
 - EQL: Same as EQ but for two numbers it will compare the values. So integer 4 is different from a floating point 4.0
 - EQUAL: This compares the elements of a list one by one. It is slower than EQ
 - EQUALP: Same as EQUAL but ignores case
 - = Only for number comparison. Integer 4 and floating point 4.0 yields T
- We again come across the treatment of () differently in Scheme and Common Lisp. In Scheme () is only a list and not an atom but in Common Lisp it is both.
- One key point to note is that EQ is a function and not a primitive predicate in Common Lisp. We can verify this

```
(functionp #'eq)
» T
```

- The book states that two lists can be compared using eq?. In Common Lisp EQ function will indeed compare two lists but even if they contain same elements the lists could be distinct and thus EQ will return a NIL. Here if the intent is to compare the contents in the list then we need to use EQUAL.

```
(setf mithai (list 'ladoo 'barfi 'jalebi))
(setf sweets (list 'ladoo 'barfi 'jalebi))
(equal mithai sweets)
» T
(eq mithai sweets)
» NIL
```

- Numbers can also be compared using EQ since it will check their memory addresses.

3.6 Notes on NIL in Common Lisp

- Predicates are functions that answer questions in T or NIL (anything non-NIL is equivalent to T).
- NIL is the only way to say ‘no’ in Lisp. For instance the NOT predicate will return NIL for every input except NIL itself.
- A function is said to return ‘false’ when it returns NIL. But the function is said to return ‘true’ when it returns anything other than NIL.
- Anything other than NIL is treated as true in Lisp.
- A list of zero elements is called an empty list (do not use the term set). It has no cons cells. Denoted by empty brackets ().
- In the computer () i.e. empty list is represented by the symbol NIL.
- The symbol NIL is the empty list (). Thus, NIL is used to mark the end of a CONS cell chain.
- In bracket notation NIL at the end of the CONS chain is omitted as a convention.
- Since NIL and () are same they can be written interchangeably. Therefore, (A () B) is same as (A NIL B)
- The length of the empty list is 0. NIL can be passed to LENGTH since it is an empty list.
- NIL is the only thing which is a symbol and a list.
- The CAR and CDR of NIL is NIL.
- NIL like T, characters and numbers evaluates to itself. This is so because their value cells point to themselves.
- Explicit use as a symbol can be done by quoting i.e. ‘NIL
- Historically empty list was treated as false.

The 5 pointers of the symbol NIL

- Name: NIL

- Value: `NIL` (Thus it is self evaluating. The pointer from value of `NIL` goes back to the symbol `NIL` itself. Same with `T`)
- Function: No associated function
- plist: No associated properties
- Package: In Common Lisp Package

4 Do It, Do It Again, and Again, and Again . . .

This chapter explains recursion. The best material for recursion in my opinion is Chapter 8 in Touretzky's book.

Key Takeaway: *The First Commandment (preliminary): Always ask NULL as the first question in expressing a function*

- After reading Touretzky's chapter on recursion this chapter will feel very easy. Also the first commandment is not really true. Sometimes in recursion the first question is not necessarily NULL. Let's use an example. Make a recursive function to compute a factorial of a number.

```
(defun fact (n)
  (cond ((zerop n) 1)
        (t (* n (fact (- n 1))))))
```

Here the first question actually asks whether the argument `n` is a zero or not. Later in the book the authors do add in this nuance.

- The chapter introduces a function named `LAT?`. It stands for a **list of atoms**. This means every element of the list is an `ATOM?`. We will use our own defined `ATOMP` predicate so that we do not return `T` for a `()`.
- Recursive function definition of `LAT?` in Common Lisp.

```
(defun lat? (l)
  (cond ((null l) t)
        ((atom? (car l)) (lat? (cdr l)))
        (t nil)))
```

- It is important to understand how `COND` functions. Well `COND` is actually a macro. This macro has a series of tests and results. The macro goes from top to bottom. The cases are processed from left to right under each test. Technically we can have more than one result per test for evaluation. As a Common Lisp 'trick' the last test is usually a `T` which evaluates to `TRUE` always and hence the last result is returned. `COND` is a very nice way to do implement `If...then...Else`. I have never seen such seamless conditional in any language yet.

- LAT basically is a `COND` which keeps checking through all the elements of a list to test for `ATOM?` till the list ends. It checks `CAR` one by one for each subsequent `CDR` for `ATOM?`.
- I would study Chapter 8 of Touretzky for getting the intuition on recursion right. The author has done a great job.
- SBCL comes with an inbuilt tool called `TRACE` which lets us see the actual function calls. So lets trace all the recursive examples in this chapter.

```
CL-USER> (lat? '(Jack Sprat could eat no chicken fat))
0: (LAT? (JACK SPRAT COULD EAT NO CHICKEN FAT))
1: (LAT? (SPRAT COULD EAT NO CHICKEN FAT))
2: (LAT? (COULD EAT NO CHICKEN FAT))
3: (LAT? (EAT NO CHICKEN FAT))
4: (LAT? (NO CHICKEN FAT))
5: (LAT? (CHICKEN FAT))
6: (LAT? (FAT))
7: (LAT? NIL)
7: LAT? returned T
6: LAT? returned T
5: LAT? returned T
4: LAT? returned T
3: LAT? returned T
2: LAT? returned T
1: LAT? returned T
0: LAT? returned T
T
```

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- 5 Cons the Magnificent
- 6 Numbers Games
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