Haskell

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Background

The computer science community has a long history of development with functional languages. The earliest of these developments date back to the 1950s, with the introduction of John McCarthy's introduction of Lisp (Hudak, Hughes, Jones, & Wadler, 2007). No longer than a decade later, the importance of lambda calculus in programming languages was identified by Peter Landin and Christopher Strachey (Hudak et al., 2007). These developments were further advanced “in the early ’70s, Rod Burstall and John Darlington were doing program transformation in a first-order functional language with function definition by pattern matching,” while “over the same period David Turner, a former student of Strachey, developed SASL, a pure higher-order functional language with lexically scoped variables...that incorporated Burstall and Darlington’s ideas on pattern matching into an executable programming language” (Hudak et al., 2007). Then, shortly after, a dialect of Lisp known as Scheme was developed by Gerry Sussman and Guy Steele with a more detailed focus on lambda calculus by use of lexical scoping, and ML was created as a meta-language with a polymorphic type system for the theorem prover LCF at Edinburgh by Robin Milner; both Scheme and ML contributed to the landscape of functional languages that would follow (Hudak et al., 2007).

Several key events began to occur that sparked the movement for non-strict or “lazy” evaluation. “Cons should not evaluate its arguments” by Dan Friedman and David Wise, and “A lazy evaluator” by Peter Henderson and James H. Morris Jr. were published in 1976. In the same year, David Turner changed SASL to a non-strict language, and later showed the usefulness of list processing by lazy evaluation. Some individuals were attempting to apply graph reduction principles to software, while research was also conducted on the use of dataflow and graph reduction machines to solve problems as a non-von Neumann architecture. Over the next several years, several conferences and meet-ups began to emerge such as the first Lisp conference in August 1980, the Advanced Course on Functional Programming and its Applications in July 1981, the first conference on Functional Programming Languages and Computer Architecture (FPCA) in September 1981, and the second Lisp conference in September 1982 that marked the beginning of the biannual Lisp and Functional Programming conference (LFP). Many languages like Miranda, Lazy ML, Orwell, and Clean were developed to meet this growing interest in non-strict evaluation, but many seemed to implement similar features and none had much backing as Miranda, developed by David Turner.

Haskell's genesis started with Simon Peyton Jones' visit to Paul Hudak at Yale on his trip to FPCA in the fall of 1987, upon which they “decided to initiate a meeting during FPCA, to garner interest in designing a new, common functional language” (p. 12-3), which was also encouraged by Philip Wadler. At the meeting it was decided that the best place to start developing the new language would be from an existing one. Since Miranda was deemed to be the best language for the task, the committee decided to first approach Turner about the adoption of his language. In response to the request, Turner stated that he wished to prevent multiple dialects of Miranda and declined the committee invitation (Hudak et al., 2007). From this point, the committee decided to set up an email mailing list fplangc@cs.ucl.ac.uk in order to communicate remotely, and eventually met up for their first planned meeting at Yale between January 9-12 in 1988. At this meeting, the group initially decided to establish its goals for the language as following:

* It should be suitable for teaching, research, and applications, including building large systems.
* It should be completely described via the publication of a formal syntax and semantics.
* It should be freely available. Anyone should be permitted to implement the language and distribute it to whomever they please.
* It should be usable as a basis for further language research.
* It should be based on ideas that enjoy a wide consensus.
* It should reduce unnecessary diversity in functional programming languages. OL became the language chosen as a baseline.

Ultimately, the group abandoned OL and exclusive use of proven ideas, and never developed formal semantics. The other main items of discussion were concerned with the committee process and the name of the language. At first, the group decided upon “Curry,” named after Haskell B. Curry, whose contribution to Combinatory Logic was the basis upon which functional programming was built; however the group decided to avoid confusion and puns by instead using “Haskell” with permission from Mrs. Curry (Hudak et al., 2007).

The next most important meeting was at the University of Glasgow, April 6-9, 1988, where many unresolved issues were discussed and Hudak and Wadler were designated as the editors for the first Haskell report. This was followed by other meetings and emails until the Haskell version 1.0 Report was published in April 1990, soon after which the original mailing list was disbanded in place of a public mailing list. Other subsequent reports included:

* Haskell version 1.1 Report (August 1991) – Let expressions and operator sections allowed for the first time.
* Haskell version 1.2 Report (March 1992) – Minor changes and an appearance in *SIGPLAN Notices*.
* Haskell version 1.3 Report (May 1996) – A library report was added to enhance portability, Monadic I/O was added and I/O semantics were dropped, type classes were generalized to higher kinds using constructor classes, and algebraic data types were extended with new-types, strictness annotations, and named fields.
* Haskell version 1.4 Report (April 1997) – List comprehensions were generalized to arbitrary monads.
* Haskell 98 Report (February 1999) – The community agreed to support of a stable standard for the language and list comprehensions reverted to just lists.
* Revised Haskell 98 Report (December 2002) – Cambridge University Press published the Report as a book while still allowing the entire text to be freely available online.

Several other significant events occurred during this time as well, such as the founding of Haskell's website, haskell.org, in 1994 which is maintained by Hudak's group at Yale, and the Haskell committee turned over control of the language to the Haskell community while setting Jones over the Report as the sole editor between 1999-2002 (Hudak et al., 2007).

Regardless of Turner's decision to prevent dialects of Miranda, Haskell's development was highly influenced by it, which also makes Haskell a descendant of ML (Sebesta, 2004). Aspects of Miranda that influenced Haskell include the general methods of purity, higher, order, laziness, and static typing. Other similarities are found in terms of syntax for “the equational style of function definitions, especially pattern matching, guards, and where clauses; algebraic types; the notation for lists and list comprehensions; writing pair types as (num,bool) rather than the int\*bool of ML; capitalisation of data constructors; lexically distinguished user-defined infix operators; the use of a layout rule; and the naming of many standard functions” (Hudak et al., 2007).

General Facts

Haskell uses non-strict or “lazy” evaluation, meaning that it uses a “call-by-need” methodology. This practice requires the overhead of delaying the evaluation until the moment it is needed, which prevents unnecessary evaluations from occurring, similar to “short-circuit evaluation” in C languages. To keep up with these unevaluated expressions, a record known as a “thunk” is created and managed. Lazy evaluation also requires overwriting the expression with the resulting value so that it is not evaluated twice. Sometimes this means that the memory required to hold all this information grows too large for the space allotted. To combat this problem, some strict features were added to the language (O'Sullivan, Goerzen, & Stewart, 2008).

As a result of Haskell's laziness, it follows that the heart of the language must also be pure. By saying that Haskell is “pure,” it is meant that the language does not allow any side effects to occur internally. This being said, there was initially a problem in dealing with I/O. The problem with I/O was later resolved with the introduction of Monads and monadic I/O, which restricted any side effects to only occur when dealing with external data. Therefore, this method separates pure and impure code, making code more modular and easier to debug. (O'Sullivan et al., 2008).

Graham Hutton (2007) defines types very simply as “a collection of related values” (p. 17), and in order to gain the most benefit of using Haskell, the user should have an in-depth understanding of its type system. As a functional language, Haskell evaluates programs as a set of expressions where each expression has its own type (? Hutton, 2007). As a result, the type system allows the programmer to think about a task in a more abstract way when designing programs thanks to an emphasis on strong types, static types, and type inference. When referring to strong types, “strong” means that Haskell will not allow a program to contain type errors (O'Sullivan et al., 2008). That is, since each expression must have its own type and sometimes requires other types (functions), any instance of a mismatched type may be prevented from occurring, such as non-matching parameters or return values to assignment statements. This concept also implies that types cannot be implicitly coerced, however they may be converted by explicitly using coercion functions (O'Sullivan et al., 2008). The benefit to using a strong type system is that any bugs within the program itself that would normally be caused by mismatched types may be eliminated before the initial run ever occurs, but it does also mean that performance of a program is decreased (O'Sullivan et al., 2008). Furthermore, Haskell's type system is static, meaning “that the compiler knows the type of every value and expression at compile time, before any code is executed” (O'Sullivan et al., 2008, p. 19). This principle works hand-in-hand with Haskell's strong type checking to eliminate all possibilities of type errors for an expression given a certain value (O'Sullivan et al., 2008). Lastly, as a consequence of strong and static type checking, a Haskell compiler is also able to infer, most of the time, the type of an expression, which is completely dependent upon the rules that match particular types with certain values (Hutton, 2007). For instance, the integer 555 may be passed to an expression requiring a type of Int without explicitly declaring it, although possible to do so, as such. Even with these key details, a program written in Haskell is not necessarily guaranteed to be completely free from errors such as division by zero or other logic errors (Hutton, 2007).

Among all the compilers available, the Glasgow Haskell Compiler, otherwise known as the GHC, is one of the most popular due to its ability to produce highly efficient programs for major platforms, memory and CPU profiling, its large set of libraries, and an interactive interpreter based on the compiler (O'Sullivan et al., 2008). However, there are several other well known compilers such as the Hugs (“Haskell User's Gofer System”) compiler, a derivative of the Gofer (“Good For Equational Reasoning”) (Hudak et al., 2007). Each of the available compilers are designed to include some form of garbage collection, since Haskell generally abstracts such low-level concepts from the user. However, there are certain tricks that programmers are able to use in order to reduce the amount of memory usage in their programs (O'Sullivan et al., 2008).

In order to incorporate reusable groups of code, Haskell initially presented modules, each with an individual interface and implementation. By the time of publishing the Haskell version 1.4 Report, the interfaces were formally dropped from the language and replaced with the notion that interfaces should be able to be compiled as individual files. As the language grew, it became apparent that a hierarchy was needed to better categorize modules and avoid overlap. Malcolm Wallace headed a solution that used a method similar to Java for subgrouping modules under other parent modules. Following this, even though modules were created to promote code reuse, at first there was no means of distributing them among the community. For this reason, Isaac Jones began work on a system designed to package and distribute modules, known as Cabal, in 2004 which was expanded by David Himmelstrup's Cabal package server, Hackage. Furthermore, although the original release of Haskell included the Prelude library, the general standard for the language, the need arose to create a source of definitions separately from the main language. In order to meet this need and promote a cross-platform design; teams from Hugs, GHC, and nhc worked together on open-source libraries that were compatible with each compiler (Hudak et al., 2007). Currently,

Types and Scopes

When learning about Haskell's type system, it is important to be able to interpret Haskell's definition of types and values and what basic types are built into the language. Expressions and their types are represented in terms of the expression name followed by its type in the format *name* :: *type*, this is also known as the *type signature* (O'Sullivan et al., 2008). When observing this representation, one may consider that the expression “is of” the specified type (Thompson, 1999), where each type will always begin with a capitalized letter. Haskell's basic types include the Bool, containing the logical values True and False; Char, an individual Unicode character; Int, a signed integer value with a fixed width; Integer, a signed integer value with an unbounded size; Float, a single precision floating-point number which is normally not used; and Double, a double precision floating point number.

Impact and Future

As Haskell is approaching the 25th year since its initial publishing, it is important to stop and take into account its progress in order to correctly assess any promise for the future. In the beginning, Haskell began as an academically focused language with a relatively small following, but has grown from under 100 consistent users in 1995 to about 600 users in 2005. Those who have been impacted by Haskell include both academic and industrial groups. According to a web survey taken by Hudak and his associates (2007) for the academic year 2005-2006, 126 teachers from 89 universities among 22 countries; the highest responses being from the “USA (22%), the UK (19%), Germany (11%), Sweden (8%), Australia (7%), and Portugal (5%)”; were estimated to teach Haskell to a range of 5000-10,000 students (p. 12-41). The largest group of students taking these courses in Haskell was estimated to be 2000-4000 annually for undergraduates learning Haskell as their first or second language. The types of courses offering Haskell included a focus on functional or declarative programming, advanced programming, programming languages, theoretical topics, hardware descriptions, domain-specific languages, music, quantum computing, and distributed and parallel programming (Hudak et al., 2007).

As for industrial uses, companies from around the world have decided to implement Haskell in order to enhance their products. Some of these companies and their respective countries include ABM AMRO, an international bank in Amsterdam, The Netherlands; Aetion Technnologies LLC, a defense contractor that conducted business between 1999-2011 in Columbus, Ohio with a focus on projects involving Artificial Intelligence; Better (or Erudify), founded in 2012 and based in both Zurich, Switzerland and New York, USA, used Haskell for its back-end web-servers and learning logic in order to provide high-quality courses; and bCODE Pty Ltd in Sydney, Australia; Fractis Research, which develops mobile-friendly solutions in Freiburg, and Germany; and Functor AB in Stockholm, Sweden, a company that produces tools to help eliminate bugs (Rheno, 2014). In addition, a man by the name of Curt Sampson attempted to outline his experiences with the transition to using Haskell as a functional language upon founding Starling Software in Tokyo, Japan. After reviewing the benefits of functional languages, Sampson and his team convinced their client to allow the use of Haskell. With the team's previous experience in the imperative languages of C, Java, Ruby, C# and Python, Sampson concluded that using Haskell had the advantages of concise and readable code, no noticeable disadvantages in speed thanks to concurrency and parallelism, portability, and the ability to interface with foreign functions in C. However, Sampson also mentions that problems did arise when dealing with refactoring small bits of code, a lack of profiling tools, and space/memory leaks that arose from use of threads, but then later states that some of these issues could likely be resolved with more experience.

So, is Haskell projected to continue living? According to these developments in the academic and industrial communities, it seems to likely be so. This assessment may be further confirmed when evaluating the the active state of its community both in the IRC channel and the Haskell Wiki, which is the official Haskell website. For instance, the Haskell 2010 Report was just recently released, setting revised standards for the language by those who contributed to the mailing list and discussion boards. Considering all these factors, it may even be possible that an increase in developments may be seen in the near future.

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