

# Principles of Programming Languages: Erlang

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# Outline

Introduction

Functional programming

The actors model

Other Erlang characteristics

# Why Erlang?

*The world is parallel.*

*If you want to write programs that behave as other objects behave in the real world, then these programs will have a concurrent structure.*

*Use a language that was designed for writing concurrent applications, and development becomes a lot easier.*

*Erlang programs model how we think and interact.*

# Erlang history

- ▶ 1982-1986. Programming experiments: how to program a telephone exchange
- ▶ 1986. Erlang emerges as a dialect of Prolog. Implementation is a Prolog interpreter
- ▶ 1986. New abstract machine, called JAM
- ▶ 1993. Turbo Erlang (BEAM compiler)
- ▶ 1993. Distributed Erlang
- ▶ 1996. OTP (Open Telecom Platform)
- ▶ 1996. AXD301 switch announced: over a million lines of Erlang, reliability of nine 9s

# Erlang history

- ▶ 1998. Erlang banned within Ericsson for other products
- ▶ 1998. Erlang fathers quit Ericsson
- ▶ 1998. Open source Erlang
- ▶ 2004. Armstrong re-hired by Ericsson
- ▶ 2006. Native symmetric multiprocessing is added to runtime system
- ▶ 2014. April. Latest stable release: 17.0

# Erlang

Erlang is a *functional* and *concurrent* programming language

## Functional

- ▶ Functions are first-class values
- ▶ Computation is performed as mathematical function evaluation

## Concurrent

- ▶ Actor model
- ▶ Asynchronous message passing
- ▶ Efficient concurrency management

# Erlang

- ▶ Erlang runs on the BEAM emulator, or can be compiled to native code (HiPE)
- ▶ A program is compiled to bytecode and then executed inside the emulator
- ▶ It offers an interactive shell

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# Variables

- ▶ Variables must start with a capital letter
- ▶ Variables are untyped
  - ▶ `A = 123456789`
  - ▶ `B = "erlang"`
  - ▶ `C = 123.456 * 789.012`
- ▶ Single assignment
- ▶ Types: integer (arbitrary precision), float (idem), list, tuple, bistring, lambda function (*fun*), atoms

# Atoms

- ▶ Atoms represent non-numerical constant values
- ▶ Atoms start with a lowercase letter
- ▶ Atoms are global
- ▶ Its value is the atom itself
- ▶ If an atom contains some characters (e.g., "-"), you may need to use ticks to delimit them
- ▶ Function names, module names, host names are all atoms

# Tuples

- ▶ A tuple is composed by a fixed number of unnamed fields (e.g., {temp, 12})
- ▶ Since there is no concept of class or struct, a tuple becomes central in holding a set of related values
- ▶ A best practice is to set the first element of a tuple to be an atom describing the *type* the tuple is an instance of
- ▶ Erlang offers some syntactic sugar to enhance this behavior, with the so-called *records*

# Pattern matching

- ▶ Each line in Erlang is actually a pattern match
- ▶ The interpreter evaluates the right-hand side of “=” and tries to match the result against the left-hand side
- ▶ If a match fails, then an error code is generated
- ▶ This is used to extract values from tuples

```
Point = {point, 10, 12},  
{point, X, Y} = Point,  
{_, _, W} = Point.
```

# Lists

- ▶ Lists can have heterogeneous elements: `[erlang, 10, {lemon, 3}]`
- ▶ We can pattern match head and tail
- ▶ Erlang supports list comprehensions
- ▶ Strings are lists of (ASCII) *integers*

```
Buy = [{apple, 10}, {pear, 12}, {orange, 4}, {lemon, 6}],  
[AppleTuple, PearTuple|Others] = Buy,  
NewBuy = [{milk, 2}|Buy],  
NewList = [X || X <- [1, 2, a, 3, 4, b, 5, 6], integer(X), X > 3].
```

## Other types

- ▶ Dictionary (module *dict*): performs as a 2D tuple, where each first element is the key and the second is the value
- ▶ Constant values: defined using the `define` keyword, recalled in code prepending a question mark to the name (usually the name is all uppercase)
- ▶ There are some other types: `pid` (see the *actors* section), `port`, `reference`, `map` (this one is experimental in R17.0)

# Functions

- ▶ A function is univocally identified by name and arity
- ▶ Each function can have multiple clauses, and pattern match on the structure of the passed variables defines the clause to be executed
- ▶ If the arity is different, they are different functions

```
area({square, X}) -> X * X;  
area({rect, X, Y}) -> X * Y;  
area({circle, R}) -> 3.14 * R.
```

```
area(X) -> X * X.
```

```
area(X, Y) -> X * Y.
```

# Functions

- ▶ We can reason on variable values using *guards*
- ▶ Multiple conditions can be combined (*and, or, andalso, orelse*)
- ▶ Only a *small* subset of functions can be used in guards (*no* user-defined functions at all)

```
max(X, Y) when X > Y -> X;  
max(X, Y) -> Y.
```



# Functions

- ▶ We can assign functions to variables
- ▶ We can write lambda functions, and use higher-order functions (e.g., *map*, *filter*, *fold*...)

```
D = fun(X) -> X * 2 end,  
A = [1, 2, 3],  
B = lists:map(D, A).
```

# Control structures

- ▶ The case expression pattern matches on a variable
- ▶ If no pattern matches, the code *fails*
- ▶ The if expression is used *only* with guard conditions

```
case Expression of
  Pattern1 [when Guard1] -> Expr_1;
  Pattern2 [when Guard2] -> Expr_2;
  ...
  Any -> io:format("Unknown pattern: ~p~n", [Any])
end.

if
  Guard1 -> Expr_1;
  Guard2 -> Expr_2;
  ...
  true -> Default
end.
```

# Control structures

- ▶ Since Erlang is a functional language, there is no concept of *while* or *for* loops. . .
- ▶ . . . but, since Erlang is a functional language, we can use recursion and assign functions to variables
- ▶ The interpreter *does* perform tail recursion in constant stack space, so you need to use it (or use library functions)

## Extras

- ▶ Erlang supports bit sequences: pattern matching can be performed on a sequence of bits (specifying number of bits, endianness, signedness)
- ▶ Erlang supports exception handling

```
try Expression of
  Pattern1 [when Guard1] -> Expr_1;
  Pattern2 [when Guard2] -> Expr_2;
  ...
catch
  ExceptionType: ExPattern1 [when Guard1] -> Expr_1;
  ExceptionType: ExPattern2 [when Guard2] -> Expr_2;
  ...
after
  AfterExpression
end.
```

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