How Programming Languages Work (Basics)

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Contents

Introduction

Why you want to make a language, today?

- new hardware
  - GPUs, AI chips, Quantum, …
  - new instructions (e.g., SIMD, matrix, …)
- new general purpose languages
  - Scala, Julia, Go, Rust, etc.

Why you want to make a language, today?

- special purpose (domain specific) languages
  - statistics (R, MatLab, etc.)
  - data processing (SQL, NoSQL, SPARQL, etc.)
  - deep learning
  - constraint solving, proof assistance (Coq, Isabelle, etc.)
  - macro (Visual Basic (MS Office), Emacs Lisp (Emacs), Javascript (web browser), etc.)

Taxonomy : interaction mode

- **interactive / read-eval-print-loop (REPL)**
  - type code directly or load source code in a file interactively
  - Julia
- **batch compile**
  - convert source into an executable file
  - and run it (typically the “main” function)
  - Go, Rust
- some language implementations provide both
  - OCaml

Taxonomy : execution strategy

- **interpreter** executes source code directly with its input
  - interpreter (*source-code*, *input*) $\rightarrow$ *output*
- **compiler** first converts source code into ***a machine (assembly) code*** that is directly executed by the CPU
  - compiler (*source-code*) $\rightarrow$ *machine-code*;
  - *machine-code* (*input*) $\rightarrow$ *output*
- **translator** or **transpiler** are like compiler, but convert into another language, not machine (assembly) code

A (minor) note: machine code vs. assembly code

- in many contexts, they are used almost interchangeably
- machine (assembly) *languages* are almost interchangeable, too
- if asked a difference,
  - ***machine*** code is *the* real encoding of instructions interpretable by a CPU
  - ***assembly*** code refers to a *textual (human-readable) representation* of machine code

Taxonomy : compiler/translator

- **ahead-of-time (AOT)** compiler converts all the program parts into assembly before execution
- **just-in-time (JIT)** compiler converts program parts incrementally as they get executed (e.g., a function at a time)

CPU and machine code : an overview

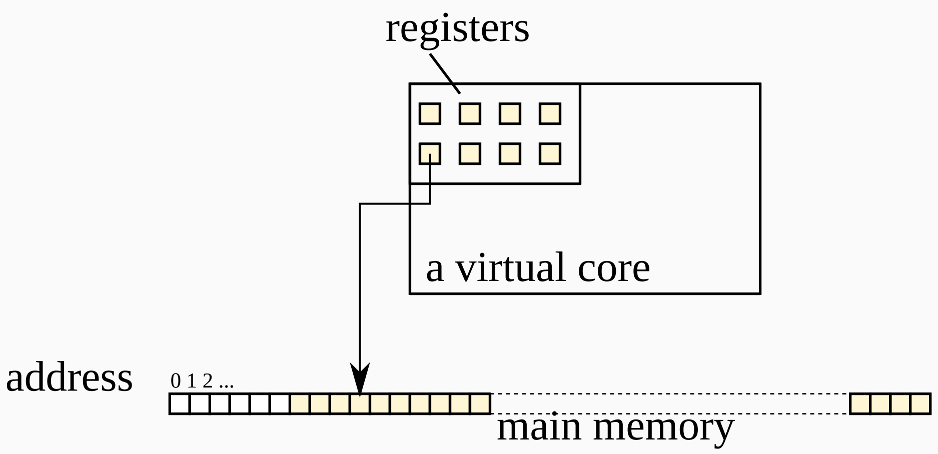
High-level (programming) languages vs. assembly languages

- assembly *is* just another programming language
- it has many features present in programming languages

high-level language	**assembly language**
variables	*registers* and *memory*
structs and arrays	memory and load/store instructions
expressions	arithmetic instructions
if / loop	compare, conditional branch instructions
functions	branch and link instructions

What a CPU looks like

- has a small number (typically < 100) of ***registers***
  - each register can hold a small amount of (e.g., 64-bit) data
- $\Rightarrow$ majority of data are stored in the ***main memory***
  - a few GB to $>$1000 GB

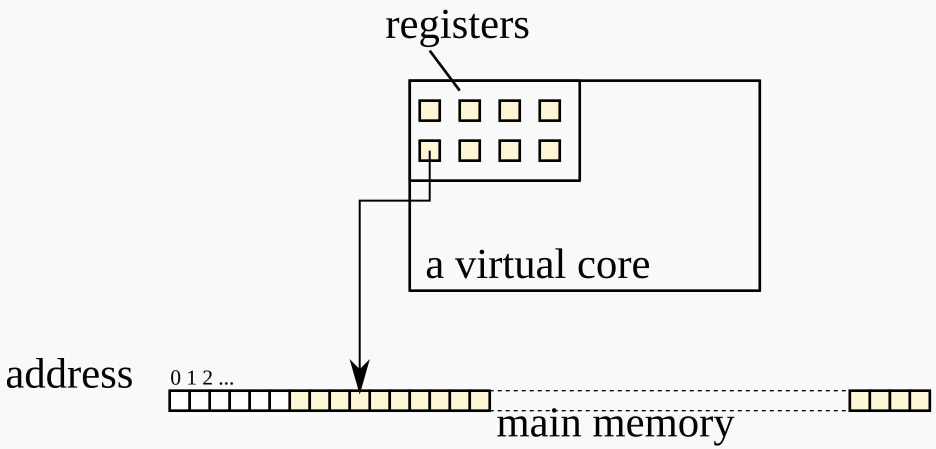


Terminology note : CPU $\ni$ core $\ni$ virtual core

- a ***CPU*** has multiple (typically, 2 to $>$100) ***cores***
- a core has multiple (typically, 1 to a few) ***virtual cores*** or ***hardware threads***
- each virtual core has its own registers and is capable of fetching and executing instructions
- all virtual cores of a CPU share the main memory
- they are often used interchangeably when the distinction is not important
- this course is only concerned about a single virtual core

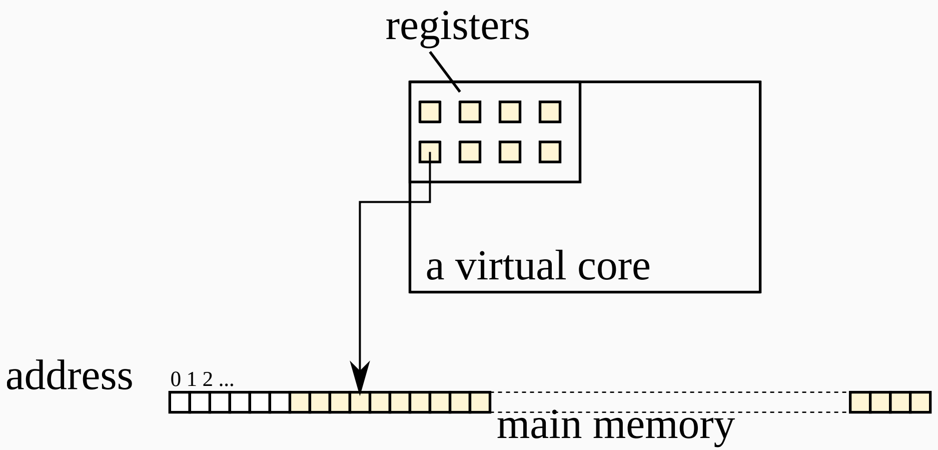
Main memory

- $\approx$ a large array indexed by integers, called ***addresses***
- in machine code level, an address is just an integer



Main memory

- each address typically stores 8 bits (a ***byte***) of data
- a larger word is stored in consecutive addresses. e.g.,
  - 32 bit (4 byte) word occupies 4 consecutive addresses
  - 64 bit (8 byte) word occupies 8 consecutive addresses



What a virtual core does

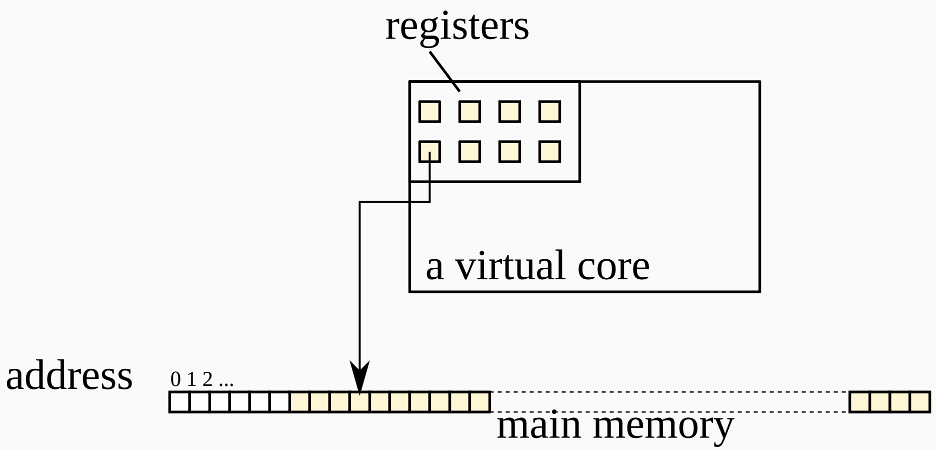
- a core is a machine that does the following:

```
repeat:
  instruction = memory[program counter]
  execute instruction
```

- ***program counter*** (or ***instruction pointer***) is the register that specifies the address to fetch the next instruction from

What an istruction does

1. perform some computation on specified register(s) or a memory address
2. change the program counter
   - typically to the next address of the instruction just executed



Exercise objectives

- `pl06_how_it_gets_compiled`
- learn how a ***compiler*** does the job
- by inspecting assembly code generated from functions of the source language

A glance at ARM64 machine (assembly) code

A glance at ARM64 machine (assembly) code

Rust

```rust
#[no_mangle]
pub fn add123(x:i64, y:i64) -> i64 {
    y + 123
}
```

assembly

```
        .text
        .file   "pl06.1ebfa1..."
        .section .text.add123,...
        .globl  add123
        .p2align        2
        .type   add123,@function
add123:
        .cfi_startproc
        add     x0, x1, #123
        ret
.Lfunc_end0:
        .size   add123, .Lfunc_...
        .cfi_endproc
```

Unimportant lines

- indented lines starting with a dot (e.g., `.file`, `.section`, `.text`, etc.) are ***directives*** (not instructions) and largely not important
- unintended lines ending in a colon (e.g., `add123:`) are ***labels*** used to human-readably specify jump targets

```
        .text
        .file   "pl06.1ebfa1..."
        .section .text.add123,...
        .globl  add123
        .p2align        2
        .type   add123,@function
add123:
        .cfi_startproc
        add     x0, x1, #123
        ret
.Lfunc_end0:
        .size
add123, .Lfunc_end0-add123
        .cfi_endproc
```

Unimportant lines

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```
add123:

        add     x0, x1, #123
        ret
.Lfunc_end0:
```

How to look at assembly

- focus on lines that are *instructions*
- look for a label *similar to* the function name, which is where its instructions start
  - the label may not be exactly the same as the function name (*name mangling*)

```
add123:

        add     x0, x1, #123
        ret
.Lfunc_end0:
```

How to look at instructions

- ex.

```
add     x0, x1, #123
```

performs `x0 = x1 + 123`

- `add` is an ***instruction name*** or *mnemonic*
- takes three ***operands*** (`x0`, `x1`, and `#123`)
  - `x0`, `x1` : register
  - `#123` : constant (***immediate value*** or ***literal***)

ARM64 registers

- integer registers $\times$ 32
  - 64 bit : `x0, x1, ..., x31`
  - 32 bit : `w0, w1, ..., w31`
    - uses low 32 bits of `x0, x1, ..., x31`
- floating point registers $\times$ 32
  - 64 bit (double precision) : `d0, d1, ..., d31`
  - 32 bit (single precision): `s0, s1, ..., s31`
    - uses low 32 bits of `d0, d1, ..., d31`

Implicit registers

- ***condition code register* (CC)** — holds the result of the last compare instruction
- ***program counter register* (PC)** — holds the address of the next instruction

ARM64 instruction categories

- arithmetic / move
- load / store
- compare
- conditional / unconditional branch
- branch and link
- return

Sources

- when you encouter unfamiliar instructions, see Arm A-profile A64 Instruction Set Architecture
- Cheat sheet
- Google / AI

Arithmetic / move

assembly	pseudo C
`sub x0, x1, x2`	`x0 = x1 - x2`
`add x0, x1, x2`	`x0 = x1 + x2`
`mov x0, x1`	`x0 = x1`
...	...

- typically takes three operands
- the result is written to the first operand

Load/store

	assembly	pseudo C
basic load	`ldr x0,[x1]`	`x0 = *(long*)x1`
basic store	`str x0,[x1]`	`*(long*)x1 = x0`
offset	`ldr x0,[x1,#8]`	`x0 = *(long*)(x1+8)`
scaled offset	`ldr x0,[x1,x2,lsl #3]`	`x0 = *(long*)(x1 + (x2<<3))`
pre-increment	`ldr x0,[x1,#8]!`	`x1 += 8; x0 = *(long*)x1`
post-increment	`ldr x0,[x1],#8`	`x0 = *(long*)x1; x1 += 8`
negative offset	`ldur x0,[x1,#-8]`	`x0 = *(long*)(x1 - 8)`
load pair	`ldp x0,x1,[x2]`	`x0 = *(long*)x2;` `x1 = *(long*)(x2 + 8)`

- there are similar veriations for store

Compare and conditional branches

`cmp x0,x1`	CC = `x0 - x1`	$(*)$
`b.eq` *label*	if CC $= 0$, goto *label*	
`b.ls` *label*	if CC < 0 (signed), goto *label*	
`b.ge` *label*	if CC ≥ 0 (signed), goto *label*	
...	...	

- $(*)$
  - CC = *condition code register*
  - CC does not hold the value of `x0 - x1` itself
  - it instead holds whether it is > 0, $= 0$, < 0, etc. as a bit sequence

Other jump variants

`b` *label*	goto *label*	
`bl` *label*	goto *label*; `x30` = the next address of the `bl`	$(*)$
`ret`	goto the address in `x30`	$(\dagger)$

- $(*)$ used for calling a function; set `x30` to where to return after the function
- $(\dagger)$ used for returning from a function; presumably the return address set by `bl` instruction

How a function (call) works

- rules must exist for function calls to work
  - where to pass arguments and the return value
  - how to inform the callee where to jump after finished
  - which registers must be preserved across a call
  - where to use if the function wants to use memory
- they are variously called
  - *calling convention*, *register usage convention*, or
  - ***Application Binary Interface (ABI)***

Applicatoin Binary Interface (ABI)

- specifies assumptions upon function entry and requirements upon function return
- upon function **entry**
  - arguments are on specific registers defined by convention
  - `sp` (= `x31`) register points to the end of *stack*
  - the function must not use region at and above `sp` (can use area below `sp`)

Applicatoin Binary Interface (ABI)

- upon function **return**
  - `sp`, `x30`, and a few other registers determined by convention (*callee save* registers) must have the same value as function entry
  - return value must be on a specific register defined by convention

Illustrating function call

- `bl` *foo* instruction jumps to label (address) *foo* and sets `x30` register to the address immediately following the `bl` instruction

Things to learn in the exercise

1. Calling convention / ABI : How parameters and return values are passed (typically via registers)
2. Data representation : Learn how data types (ints, floats, structs, pointers, arrays) are represented
3. Control flow : How conditionals and loops are implemented
4. Function calls : How function call/return is implemented