

CS 160 Compilers

Lecture 11: Type Checking

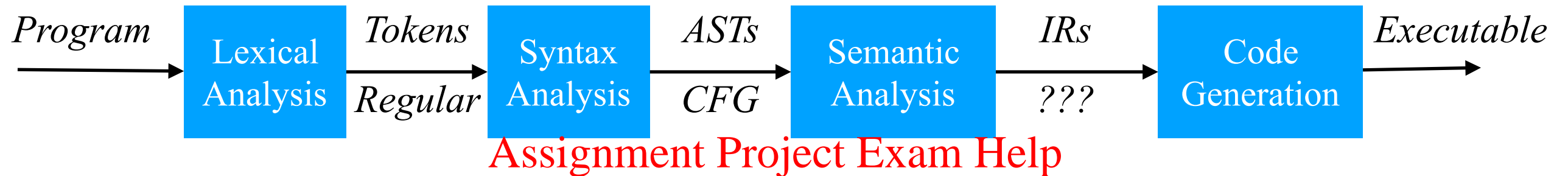
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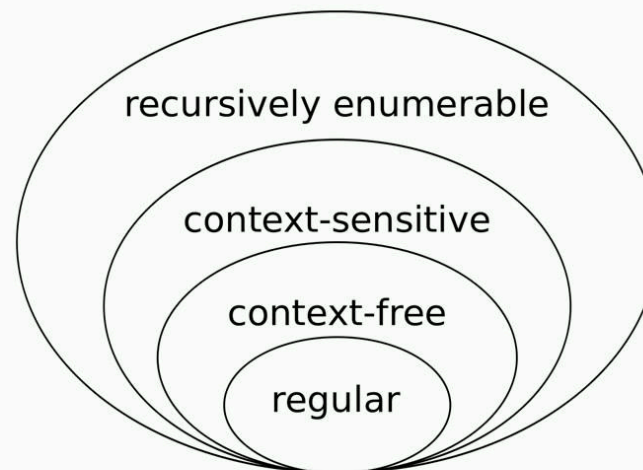
A typical flow of a compiler



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Chomsky hierarchy



<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Chomsky-hierarchy.svg>

Outline

- We will talk about types
- What types compute
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- Why types are useful
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- Brief survey of types in the real world

Motivation

- When writing programs, everything is great as long as the program works.
- Unfortunately, this is usually not the case
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- Programs crash, don't compute what we want them to compute, etc.
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- This is arguably the **biggest problem** software faces today

Software correctness

- We would really want to prove that software has the properties we care about
- And in some sense, we seem to have all the ingredients:
 - A formal understanding of syntax
 - A rigorous mathematic notation to express meaning of programs
 - Some proofs in class showing that a small toy program must evaluate to a certain integer
- So what is the problem?

Software correctness

- Problem: Rice's theorem. Any non-trivial property about a Turing machine is undecidable
- This means that we can never give an algorithm, that for all programs can decide if this program has an error on some inputs.
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- What can we do?
- Give up?

Big idea

- Big Idea: Just because we cannot prove something about the original program does not mean we cannot prove something about an *abstraction* of the program.
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- Strategy: In addition to the operational semantics, we will also define *abstract semantics* that will overapproximate the states a program is in.
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- Example: In Patina, the operational semantics compute a concrete integer or list, while our abstract semantics only compute the if the result is integer or list.

Abstraction

- Of course, any abstraction will be less precise than the program
- One popular abstraction: types
- Let's assume we have types Int and List
- Example: let $x = 10$ in x
- Operational semantics yield concrete value 10
- Abstract semantics that only differentiate the kind (or type) of the expression yield: Integer

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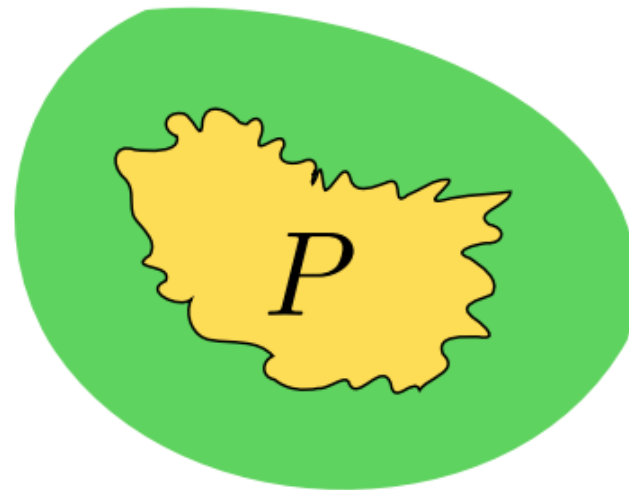
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Abstraction

- But we don't just want any abstraction, we need abstractions that *overapproximate* the result of the concrete program
- Recall the example: let $x = 10$ in x
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- Abstract value *Integer* *overapproximates* 10 since 10 is a kind of integer
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- On the other hand, abstract value *List* does not overapproximate 10.

Soundness

- Specifically, we only care about abstract semantics that are sound
- Soundness means that for any program: If we evaluate it under *concrete* semantics (operational semantics) and our *abstract* semantics, the abstract value obtained overapproximates the concrete value.

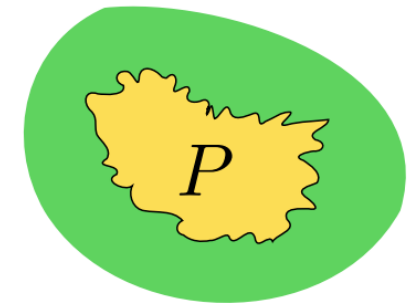


Soundness

- The reason we only care about sound abstract semantics is the following:
- Theorem: If some abstract semantics are sound and an expression is of abstract value x , then its concrete value y is always part of the abstract value x .
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- Why is this useful?
- This means that if a program has no error in the abstract semantics, it is guaranteed not to have an error in the concrete semantics.
- ASTREE tools: <http://www.astree.ens.fr/>



Cost of abstraction



- But using an abstraction comes at a cost:
- What do we know if a program has an error in the abstract semantics?
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- Nothing. We only know that the program may have an error (or not)
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- If under some abstract semantics a program has an error, but the program in fact never has this error under concrete semantics, we say this is a false positive
- Finding the right abstractions is key! Abstraction must match properties of interest to be proven.

Types

- In this class, we will focus on one kind of abstraction: types
- This means abstract values are the types in the language
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- What is a type? An abstract value representing an (usually) infinite set of concrete values
- Question: For proving what kind of properties are types as abstract values useful?
- Answer: To avoid run-time type errors!

Type checking v.s. Type inference

- We saw earlier that types are just a kind of abstract value
- Two strategies to compute types:
 - (1) Ask the programmer
 - (2) Compute types of expressions from the known types of concrete values.
- Most popular languages use strategy (1), known as **type checking**

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Type checking

- Type checking: The programmer provides some types (typically, every variable) and the compiler complains if some types are inconsistent.

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- Languages with type checking: C, C++, Java, ...

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- We will (formally) study type checking first.

Type inference

- In languages with type inference, you don't have to write any types!
- The compiler automatically computes the “best” type of every expression and reports an error if the computed types are not compatible
- Very cool and intriguing idea. We will learn exactly how it works in a few lectures
- There are languages with this feature: ML, OCaml, Haskell, Go

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