# Relational Interpreters in miniKanren

# $({\rm WORKING\ ROUGH\ DRAFT-DRAFT\ }0)$

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# To Dan Friedman

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## **Preface**

The intent of this book is to share the techniques, knowledge, pitfalls, open problems, promising-looking future work/techniques, and literature of writing interpreters as relations in miniKanren. Someone who reads this book actively should be ready to understand, implement, modify, and improve interpreters written as miniKanren relations, read the related literature, and perform original research on the topic.

#### 0.1 What this book is about

This book is about writing interpreters for programming languages, especially for subsets of Scheme. While there are many books on writing interpreters, this book is unusual in that it explores how to write interpreters as relations in the miniKanren relational programming language. By writing interpreters as relations, and by using the implicit constraint solving and search in the faster-miniKanren implementation, we can use the flexibility of relational programming to allow us to experiment with programs in the language being interpreted. For example, a relational interpreter can interpret a program with missing subexpressions<sup>1</sup>, or holes, attempting to fill in the missing subexpressions with values that result in valid programs in the language being interpreted. Or we can give both a program containing holes and the value we expect the program to produce when interpreted, and let faster-miniKanren try to fill in the holes in a way to produce the expected output. We can even write an interpreter that explicitly handles errors, and ask faster-miniKanren to find inputs to the program that trigger these errors.<sup>2</sup>

#### 0.2 What you need to know to read this book

Although this book contains a brief introduction to Scheme, and an introduction to miniKanren, the book is not intended as a tutorial on the fundamentals of programming, nor as an introduction to functional programming. Similarly, the book is not intended to be a primer on the fundamentals of programming

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>Such programs are often called *program sketches* [TODO cite].

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>This is known in the literature as "angelic execution".

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language theory, design, or implementation. While I do try to explain important Scheme and programming languages concepts as they arise (such as lexical scope, closures, and environment-passing interpreters), I assume the reader has enough experience and knowledge to follow along with minimal examples and explanations of these fundamental concepts. If you've encountered these ideas before, and just need a little refresher, I hope the level of explanations and examples will be helpful and sufficient. If you are familiar with functional programming and interpreters, but don't know Scheme, the examples and explanation should also be helpful and sufficient. If you are familiar with some version of miniKanren or microKanren, the chapters on miniKanren should be helpful, since we'll be using aspects of the faster-miniKanren implementation of miniKanren that extend (and may differ from) the languages described in the first and second editions of The Reasoned Schemer, the microKanren papers, my dissertation, and other miniKanren literature.

Since I know different readers will be coming to this book with very different backgrounds, I've added "pretests" to the Scheme and miniKanren introduction chapters, to help you determine if you already know the concepts well enough to skip ahead. Even if you are a Scheme expert, you should probably read the section on pattern matching to make sure you understand the syntax and semantics of the pattern-matcher we'll be using. If you haven't used faster-miniKanren before, or a miniKanren that supports the =/=, symbolo, numbero, and absento constraints, I strongly suggest you read the entire introduction to miniKanren.

#### 0.3 What is not in this book

One important topic this book does not cover is how to implement a miniKanren-for example, how faster-miniKanren is implemented. While this is an interesting topic, and is especially important for some advanced optimizations and for implementing new constraints, this book focuses on writing interpreters as relations. There are other resouces on implementing simple miniKanrens, such as the papers on microKanren [TODO cite these], which is the basis for the miniKanren implementation in the second edition of *The Reasoned Schemer* [TODO cite].

#### 0.4 Running the code in this book

The code in this book was tested with Chez Scheme and Racket. It should be possible to run most code in other Scheme implementations, with few or no changes, with the exception of code that makes extensive use of Chez-specific or Racket-specific features, which I will point out in those chapters, as appropriate.

#### 0.4.1 Getting pmatch from GitHub

#### 0.4.2 Getting faster-miniKanren from GitHub

https://github.com/michaelballantyne/faster-miniKanren

git clone git@github.com:michaelballantyne/faster-minikanren.git

Alternatively, you can click on <> Code button and select Download ZIP to download and uncompress the .zip file containing the entire faster-miniKanren directory.

#### 0.4.3 Using this book with Chez Scheme

**Installing Chez Scheme** 

Starting a Chez Scheme REPL

Loading a file in Chez Scheme

Loading faster-miniKanren in Chez Scheme

#### 0.4.4 Using this book with Racket

#### **Installing Racket**

```
https://racket-lang.org/
https://download.racket-lang.org/
```

#### Important differences between Chez Scheme and Racket

```
representation of quoted values
evaluation order
language levels
macros
```

#### The DrRacket IDE and the Racket REPL

#### Starting and configuring DrRacket

```
changing default language changing default memory limit
```

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Starting a Racket REPL

Requiring a module in Racket

Requiring the faster-miniKanren module in Racket

#### 0.5 Acknowledgements

Dan Friedman and Michael Ballantyne both encouraged me to continue working on this book, and independently encouraged me to break down one giant book into more than one book, each book being more manageable. Dan encouraged me to write a short and direct primer on Scheme with only the needed parts of the language. Michael also encouraged me to continue working on the book in the open.

Darius Bacon wrote me a very helpful email about how using two separate lists to represent a lexical environment, rather than a single association list, can result in better performance and divergence behavior. I had played around with this representation in the past, but had abandoned it before I understood its advantages. Thank you, Darius.

My mother has continually encouraged me to work on this book, and most importantly, to finish it!

[TODO add other acknowledgements]

[TODO add acks for type setting tech, such as the fonts; also can add colophon if  ${\rm I'm}$  so inclined]

# Enough Scheme to get by

We need to know some Scheme, since Scheme is the host language for the faster-miniKanren version of miniKanren we will be using. faster-miniKanren inherits Schemely features such as cons pairs, quote, and letrec.

We also need to know some Scheme because we will be writing interpreters for subsets of Scheme. In particular, we need to feel comfortable with the evaluation rules for Scheme, including the notions of expressions and values.

And we need to know some Scheme if we want to be able to read much of the miniKanren literature.  $^{1}$ 

#### 1.1 A few comments on Scheme

small core

compositional

few exceptions to rules

very powerful—lots of ways to do meta-programming, including the ability to extend the syntax of the language

great for writing interpreters, compilers, and DSLs

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>A reading knowledge of OCaml would also be helpful for reading the miniKanren literature that uses OCanren, a miniKanren-like language embedded in OCaml.

# 1.2 The Scheme reports, versions of Scheme, and implementations of Scheme

- 1.3 Which version and implementations of Scheme we are using, and why
- 1.4 What we need to know about Scheme, and when

#### 1.5 Useful Scheme resources

[todo add full references and URLs; can point to the relevant sections as I describe aspects of Scheme]

The Scheme Programming Language, 4th Edition The Chez Scheme User's Guide [TODO check spelling] R6RS

#### 1.6 Pretest

a "pre-test" for Scheme, so the reader can see if they need to read any of this

Even a reader who knows Scheme might want to read the pattern matching
section

We also describe a few important differences between Scheme and Racket, to ensure the reader can use either one

#### 1.7 Numbers

In this book we restrict ourselves to non-negative integers, which may be of any size:

5 42 0 37623489762387946782365476

#### 1.8 Booleans

The Boolean #f represents "false", while the Boolean #t represents "true".

#### 1.9 quote and symbols

In addition to numbers and Booleans, Scheme can represent abstract concepts and symbolic data using *symbols*, sometimes called *quoted symbols*.

If we want to create a symbol to represent the abstract concept of "love", we can write (quote love) which produces the symbol love. Because symbols are used so often in Scheme, the equivalent shorthand notation 'love can also be used to produce the symbol love.

#### 1.10 Expressions, values, and evaluation

In Scheme terminology, (quote love) is an *expression*. In Scheme, expressions are *evaluated* to produce *values*. In this case, the expression (quote love) evaluates to the value love, which is a symbol. [todo consider pointing out that in Racket, by default, 'love will be displayed, and how to adjust that setting]

All Scheme symbols are values. Numbers and the Booleans #f and #t are also values.

In Scheme we can also quote numbers and Booleans. For example, the expression (quote 5) evaluates to the value 5, which is a number. Similarly, the expression (quote #f) evaluates to the value #f, which is a Boolean.

Actually, we don't need to quote numbers or Booleans in Scheme—numbers and Booleans are "self-evaluating" (or "self-quoting"). For example, the expression 42 evaluates to the value 42, which is a number. The expression #t evaluates to the value #t, which is a Boolean. Scheme symbols, on the other hand, are not self-evaluating, and must be explicitly quoted.<sup>2</sup>

As shorthand, we write "the expression (quote 5) evaluates to the value 5" as:

```
(quote 5) => 5
where the arrow => can be read as "evaluates to".
Similarly, we can write
(quote #f) => #f
(quote love) => love
'love => love
(quote quote) => quote
'quote => quote
42 => 42
6375764356 => 6375764356
and
#t => #t.
```

#### 1.10.1 The general evaluation rule for quote

We know that

 $<sup>^2</sup>$ Scheme symbols must be explicitly quoted so that they are distinct syntactically from variable references, which will encounter shortly.

```
(quote 0) => 0
  (quote 1) => 1
    ...
    (quote 42) => 42
    ...
    (quote 3765783657849) => 3765783657849
    ...
and so forth.
```

We can generalize our "evaluates to" => notation; the more general evaluation rule for quoting numbers is:

```
(quote <num>) => <num>
```

for any number <num>. We use the name num surrounded by the angle brackets < and > to represent any number.

Similarly, the evaluation rule for quoting Booleans is:

```
(quote <bool>) => <bool>
```

for any Boolean <bool>. (Of course there are only two Boolean values, #f and #t.) And the evaluation rule for quoting symbols is

```
(quote <sym>) => <sym>
```

for any symbol <sym>.

More generally, the evaluation rule for quote is:

```
(quote <datum>) => <datum>
```

The word *datum* is the singular form of *data*. Numbers, Booleans, and symbols are three types of data we have encountered so far.

#### 1.11 define, definitions, and variables

We can use define to give a name to a value.

```
For example,
  (define x 5)
gives the name x to the number 5, while
  (define cool-cat (quote Sugie))
gives the name cool-cat to the symbol Sugie.

More generally, we can write:
  (define <id> <expr>)
```

where <id> is any Scheme *identifier* (such as x, my-cat, Hello\_there=137^, or 関連-42) and where <expr> is any expression.

A use of define is called a *definition*. A definition is neither an expression nor a value—it is a *statement*. While evaluation of expressions produces values, statements are evaluated for their *effects*. The effect of evaluating (define x 5) is to introduce a new *variable* named x that is *bound* to the number 5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup>Actually, in Scheme (define x 5) gives the name x to a *location* that contains the value 5. It is possible to assign a different value to the location named by x using set!—for example, (set! x 6). We will avoid the use of set! for now, which means we pretend that define just gives a name to a value.

 $<sup>^4</sup>$ Actually, the variable x is bound to a *location* that contains the value 5.

Once we have defined a variable (such as x), we can reference (or refer to) that variable to get the value to which it is bound (such as the number 5, in the case of the variable x).

We can see the behavior of **define** and variable reference at the Chez Scheme Read-Eval-Print Loop, or *REPL*. First we start Chez Scheme:

```
Chez Scheme Version 10.1.0
Copyright 1984-2024 Cisco Systems, Inc.
>
and then define x to be 5:
Chez Scheme Version 10.1.0
Copyright 1984-2024 Cisco Systems, Inc.
> (define x 5)
   The > prompt on the line following > (define x 5) indicates that Chez
has evaluated the statement (define x 5) and is ready to evaluate the next
expression or statement. To save space, we'll not show the > prompt whenever
an expression evaluates to a value that is printed at the REPL.
   Now that we have defined the variable x, we can refer to it:
> x
x is an expression (a variable reference) that evaluates to the value 5 (a number).
   (In our arrow notation, we would write x \Rightarrow 5.)
   Let's define another variable, like we did above:
> (define cool-cat (quote Sugie))
> cool-cat
Sugie
cool-cat is an expression (a variable reference) that evaluates to the value
Sugie (a symbol).
   What happens if we refer to an unbound variable—that is, a variable that
has not been defined?
> w
Exception: variable w is not bound
```

Type (debug) to enter the debugger.

Chez Scheme evaluates the expression w, which is a variable reference. Since w is an unbound variable, Chez is not able to determine the value bound to w. Instead, Chez Scheme *throws an exception* [todo check terminology: throw exception?] indicating that w is a variable that is not bound.

Let's define w to have the same value as does the variable x:

```
> (define w x)
> w
5

Recall the syntax for uses of define:
   (define <id> <expr>)
```

Also recall that (define x 5) is a statement rather than an expression. What happens if use a definition where an expression is required? Chez Scheme complains by throwing a different type of exception:

```
> (define z (define y 6))
Exception: invalid context for definition (define y 6)
Type (debug) to enter the debugger.
```

We have now encountered the crucial notions of Scheme expressions, values, and statements, which we will need in order to understand and write interpreters.<sup>5</sup>

#### 1.12 Procedures and procedure application

What if we would like to add one to the number five? One way to do this in Scheme is to write the expression (add1 5):

```
> (add1 5)
6
```

The expression (add1 5) is an example of a procedure application, or just application (sometimes called a procedure call, or just call).

If the expression (add1 5) is a procedure application, then what is add1? Let's find out at the REPL:

```
> add1
##cedure add1>
```

Aha! add1 is a variable that is bound to a *procedure*. In Scheme procedures are values, just like numbers, Booleans, and symbols. add1 is a *built-in* procedure that is bound in Chez Scheme's *initial environment*, which is the default set of variable bindings that exist when Chez is started. We can extend or modify the initial environment, as we did before using define.

We can nest procedure applications in Scheme:

 $<sup>^5</sup>$ miniKanren also has the notions of expressions, values, and statements, and introduces the new notion of terms, a generalization of the notion of values. [todo add crossref]

```
> (add1 (add1 5))
7
```

There are many built-in procedures in the initial Scheme environment, and even more in the initial Chez Scheme environment, since Chez extends Scheme with many additional procedures. If we want to add two numbers, we can use the built-in Scheme procedure +:

```
> (+ 3 4)
7
and:
> (+ 7835467856 98236472167)
106071940023
    Of course, we can nest procedure applications:
> (+ (add1 (+ 3 (add1 7) (+ 5 6))))
23
```

As is the case with add1, + is a variable that is bound to a procedure in Chez Scheme's initial environment:

```
> +
#cedure +>
```

The procedure bound to add1 takes exactly one argument. In contrast, the procedure bound to + is *variadic*, meaning that it can take any number of arguments. For example, the procedure bound to + can take three arguments:

```
> (+ 5 6 7)
18
one argument:
> (+ 5)
or even zero arguments:
> (+)
0
```

The expression (+) evaluates to 0 because zero is the additive identity (the number that when added to another number preserves the value of that second number).

#### 1.13 Predicates, including type predicates

In Scheme, a *predicate* is a procedure that, when called, always terminates (without signalling an error), and that always returns one of the two Boolean literals: #f or #t.

A type predicate is a predicate that can be used to determine the type of a value. For example, the predicate

number?

is a built-in procedure that determines whether its argument is a number:

```
> number?
###cprocedure number?>
> (number? 5)
#t
> (number? (+ 3 4))
#t
> (number? (quote cat))
#f
> (number? #t)
#f
> (number? number?)
#f
```

It is a Scheme convention to end the names of predicates with a question mark. Also by convention, many people pronounce the ? at the end of the predicate's name as "huh"; for example, number? is pronounced "number-huh".

Scheme's built-in type predicates also include boolean?, symbol?, and procedure?:

```
> (boolean? #t)
#t
> (boolean? #f)
#t
> (boolean? 5)
#f
> (boolean? (+ 3 4))
#f
> (boolean? (quote cat))
#f
> (boolean? boolean?)
#f
> (boolean? (number? 5))
#t
> (boolean? (number? #f))
#t
> (symbol? (quote cat))
#t
```

```
> (symbol? 5)
#f
> (symbol? (+ 3 4))
#f
> (symbol? #f)
#f
> (symbol? symbol?)
> (symbol? (symbol? 5))
#f
> (procedure? procedure?)
> (procedure? +)
> (procedure? add1)
> (procedure? 5)
> (procedure? (+ 3 4))
> (procedure? (quote cat))
> (procedure? (quote +))
#f
> (procedure? #t)
> (procedure? (symbol? (quote cat)))
#f
```

#### 1.14 if, test expressions, and truthiness

We can make choices in Scheme using an if expression, which is of the form (if <test> <consequent> <alternative>)

where <test>, <consequent>, and <alternative> are all expressions. For example, in the expression (if #t 3 4), the *subexpression* #t is in the *test position*, the subexpression 3 is in the *consequent position*, and the subexpression 4 is in the *alternative position*.

The rule for evaluation of an if expression is that first the test subexpression is evaluated. If the test subexpression evaluates to a true value, then the consequent subexpression is evaluated, and the resulting value is the value of the entire if expression. If the test subexpression evaluates to a false value, then the alternative subexpression is evaluated, and the resulting value is the value of the entire if expression.

For example:

```
> (if #t 3 4)
3
> (if #f 3 4)
```

Of course we can use more complex expressions for the consequent and alternative subexpressions:

```
> (if #t (+ 3 4) (+ 5 6))
7
> (if #f (+ 3 4) (+ 5 6))
11
```

And we can use more complex expressions for the test subexpression:

```
> (if (number? 72634786) (+ 3 4) (+ 5 6))
7
> (if (symbol? 72634786) (+ 3 4) (+ 5 6))
11
```

#t is not the only true value in Scheme. In fact, any value in Scheme other than #f is considered true. For example, both 5 and 0 are considered true values in Scheme.

```
> (if 42 (+ 3 4) (+ 5 6))
7
> (if (* 6 7) (+ 3 4) (+ 5 6))
7
> (if 'cat (+ 3 4) (+ 5 6))
7
```

#### 1.15 Evaluation order and special forms

```
special forms vs. application
```

keywords

quote, define, and if are keywords; (quote <datum>), (define <id> <expr>),
and (if <expr> <expr> <expr>) are special forms.

Recall that in the initial Scheme environment + is a variable bound to a procedure that adds zero or more numbers:

```
#procedure +>
```

In contrast, in the initial Scheme environment quote is the *keyword* of a special form. Recall that (quote <datum>) is the general syntax for a quote expression. The expression (quote cat) evaluates to the symbol cat. However, evaluating the keyword quote by itself leads to a *syntax error*:

1.16. COMMENTS

```
> quote
```

```
Exception: invalid syntax quote Type (debug) to enter the debugger.
```

#### 1.16 Comments

```
Any characters on a line following the ; character will be ignored. For example, (*\ 3\ 4) ; (/\ 5\ 0) evaluates to 12.
```

The entire S-expression following #; will be ignored. For example,

```
(+ 4 5) #;(* 6
7)
#| and |#
```

#### 1.17 cond

#### 1.18 A few other predicates

```
zero?
even?
odd?
```

#### 1.19 Lists

```
list
    list?
    empty list (quoted)
    null?
    quoted non-empty lists
    nested lists
```

#### 1.20 Pairs and improper lists

```
cons
pair?
```

#### 1.21 S-expressions

[todo need to introduce the concept of the s-expression. Now might be a good time, since we have symbols, numbers, booleans, pairs]

#### 1.22 lambda

#### 1.23 Equality predicates

eq?

#### 1.24 Simple examples

- 1.24.1 member?
- 1.24.2 length
- 1.24.3 append
- 1.24.4 assoc
- 1.25 let
- 1.26 letrec
- 1.27 Lexical scope
- 1.28 More examples
- 1.28.1 append (letrec version)
- 1.28.2 even? and odd? (define version)
- 1.28.3 even? and odd? (letrec version)
- 1.28.4 Curried adder

spelling of Curried?

1.29. EVAL 13

- 1.29 eval
- 1.30 Pattern matching
- 1.31 Grammar for our subset of Scheme

#### 1.32 Differences between Scheme and Racket

evaluation order
printed rep of quoted values
pattern mathing
require vs load
repl usage
eval usage

#### 1.33 Exercises

# A whirlwind introduction to relational programming in miniKanren

- 2.1 What is relational programming?
- 2.2 Which version of miniKanren we are using, and why

faster-miniKanren without defrel

#### 2.3 Useful miniKanren resources

#### 2.4 Pretest

someone who has read TRS1 or TRS2, or who has implemented microKanren, still needs to know about =/=, symbolo, numbero, absento, and the differences between miniKanren in those books and in this book

# 2.5 miniKanren as an embedded DSL, and otherwise

Scheme as host language

#### 2.6 Core miniKanren

```
2.6.1 ==
```

simlarity to equal? (but not to eq?) first-order syntactic unification

- $2.6.2 \quad run^n$
- 2.6.3 conde
- 2.6.4 fresh
- 2.6.5 run\*
- 2.6.6 What miniKanren inherits from Scheme
- 2.7 Logic variables (or, what does "variable" even mean?)
- 2.8 Expressions and terms
- 2.9 Groundness, and the parts of Scheme we can safely use
- 2.10 Relational vs. non-relational programming in miniKanren
- 2.11 Simple examples
- 2.11.1 appendo
- 2.11.2 membero (broken version)
- 2.12 Other useful constraints
- 2.12.1 =/=

disequality

2.12.2 symbolo and numbero

not needed in OCanren, for example

#### 2.12.3 absento

prevention of quoted closures (not needed in OCanren) and other uses, such as not-in-envo in split env

#### 2.13 miniKanren Grammar

beware nesting run or ==, calling Scheme eliminators, unifying with procedures, assuming a term is ground, assuming Scheme can handle even ground logic variables as values

revist in style and gotchas chapter

### 2.14 More examples

- 2.14.1 membero (fixed version)
- 2.14.2 Differences between the miniKanren in this book and other miniKanrens

TRS1

TRS2 microKanren core.logic OCanren

#### 2.14.3 Exercises

18CHAPTER 2. A WHIRLWIND INTRODUCTION TO RELATIONAL PROGRAMMING IN MINIK.

# miniKanren style and common pitfalls

"Will's Rule"

syntactic issue 1: lambda (implicit begin) containing more than one goal expression (without a fresh wrapping those goals)—very hard to debug, since only one of the goals is actually run—defrel prevents this problem

syntactic issue 2: nesting a goal expression inside of a call to ==—can actually succeed, although rarely does what you would intend

use of car, cdr, +, etc.

assuming a Scheme function can operate on the value of a ground logic variable

unifying with a Scheme procedure

mixing Scheme and mk code in a way that doesn't preserve relationality incorrect tagging

# Debugging miniKanren code

#### 4.1 Debugging unexpected failure

leave all args fresh comment out clauses and goals

#### 4.2 Taming and debugging apparent divergence

run 1 vs. run\*

run program with all arguments ground reordering conjuncts
adding a depth counter
adding bounds (as in rel interp)
tabling
using occur check, presumably?

# 4.3 Debugging interpreters (and interpreter-like programs)

how to build up a conde-based program, such as an interpreter, one expression at a time Dan Friedman-style and then run/test it run program "forward" to test it

perhaps inclue alternative  ${\tt run}$  interafce/streaming/alternative set-based test macro

# A simple environment-passing Scheme interpreter in Scheme

CBV lambda-calc plus quote and cons a list for env tagged list to represent closure grammar for the language we are interpreting 24 CHAPTER~5.~~A~SIMPLE~ENVIRONMENT-PASSING~SCHEME~INTERPRETER~IN~SCHEME~

Rewriting the simple environment-passing Scheme interpreter in miniKanren

26CHAPTER 6. REWRITING THE SIMPLE ENVIRONMENT-PASSING SCHEME INTERPRETER

# Quine time

McCarthy challenge given in 'A Micromanual for LISP' Quines, Twines, Thrines absento trick to generate more interesting Twines and Thrines

Using a two-list representation of the environment

30CHAPTER~8.~~USING~A~TWO-LIST~REPRESENTATION~OF~THE~ENVIRONMENT

# Extending the interpreter to handle append

#### 32 CHAPTER 9. EXTENDING THE INTERPRETER TO HANDLE APPEND

# Adding explicit errors

# Adding delimited control operators

delimited continuations and/or effect handlers—can we do so in such a way that avoids "breaking the wires"?

talk about the problem with call/cc and breaking the wires

# Adding mutation

support set! (can we get away with supporting set! without adding a store?) support mutiple pairs and have an explicit store

Writing a parser as a relation

Writing a type inferencer as a relation

Build your own Barliman

# Speeding up the interpreter

[restrict to interpreter changes that don't require hacking faster-miniKanren or in-depth knowledge of the implementation]

dynamic reordering of conjuncts, especially for application fast environment lookup for environments that are sufficiently ground

Open problems