PFPL Supplement: PCF-By-Value

Robert Harper

November 9, 2019

1 Introduction

Languages such as T or F are total in that every well-formed expression has a unique value. Thus, the fact that a program is well-typed suffices to ensure its termination. But typing is only a sufficient condition for termination; it can be onerous to formulate a program in a total language. Both theoretical and practical experience shows that it will ever be thus, for the simple reason that a given type system can only encode certain termination proofs, and cannot capture them all.

Languages such as PCF are partial in that a well-typed program need not terminate. In fact, in such languages it is rather easy to write programs that don’t. More importantly, it is easy to write programs that do terminate, but whose proof of termination is not easily captured by a type system. It becomes the responsibility of programmers to ensure that their programs terminate as part of the larger problem of proving that they work as intended.

When non-termination is possible the distinction between evaluation orders for expressions becomes significant. For example, a program that terminates under a by-name dynamics may well not terminate under a by-value dynamics. For example, the application of a constant function that does not examine its argument will terminate under by-name, even when applied to a divergent argument, but will be divergent under by-value under such conditions. Indeed, such considerations motivated the development of lazy languages, which seek to avoid evaluation of expressions unless their values are truly needed.

To achieve laziness it is necessary to treat unevaluated computations as if they were values. In particular, to allow for examples such as the constant function, it is necessary to substitute possibly divergent computations for
variables. This means that variables are not just placeholders for expressions that have values, but also for undefined expressions that have no value! Doing so amounts to adding additional values to each type, at the very least undefinedness, but also values constructed out of undefinedness. As a result lazy languages have three booleans, rather than two, with the consequence that it is not valid to reason by cases on whether a boolean variable is true or false. Similarly, the principle of mathematical induction is never valid in a lazy setting; there is, and cannot be, a type of natural numbers in such languages!

By contrast by-value, or eager, languages consider variables to range only over values of their type. Thus, there are two booleans, and mathematical induction is valid for the type nat. The formulation of PCF given in PFPL does not bring out this fundamental difference between the by-value and by-name interpretations of the language. To bring this out properly it is helpful to reformulate PCF-by-value that draws a “modal” distinction between values and computations. In this formulation variables range only over values, and the modality makes explicit the requirement that computations be evaluated before being used. The modal formulation has the additional advantage that it scales naturally to account for exceptions, a form of computation that requires explicit sequencing, and for parallelism, which requires a generalization of the modality to allow for simultaneous evaluation of computations. (These extensions are described in Harper (2018a) and Harper (2018b).)

Acknowledgement: Thanks to Todd Wilson for helpful discussions about laziness and eagerness in PCF.

2 PCF-By-Value

The statics of PCF draws a distinction between two modes of expression, values and computations. This separation is expressed in the statics by two forms of typing judgment, $\Gamma \vdash e : \tau$ for values and $\Gamma \vdash e \triangleq \tau$ for computations, which are defined in Figure 1. General recursion is omitted by design; correspondingly, function values may be self-referential.

The meaning of variables is given by the following substitution principles:

Lemma 2.1. 1. If $\Gamma \vdash e : \tau$ and $\Gamma, x : \tau \vdash e : \tau$, then $\Gamma \vdash [e/x]e' : \tau'$.

2. If $\Gamma \vdash e : \tau$ and $\Gamma, x : \tau \vdash e' \triangleq \tau'$, then $\Gamma \vdash [e/x]e' \triangleq \tau'$.
Thus, only values may be substituted for variables, whether in another value, or in a computation.

The dynamics of PCF-by-value is given in Figure 2. Function applications evaluate their argument before the call, and the successor is given an eager interpretation. Moreover, application of a self-referential function provides the function itself, a value, along with the argument value, to the body of the function, unrolling the recursion on demand. It would not be possible to give a by-value dynamics for general recursion, precisely because doing so would require substitution of a non-value for a variable.

It may appear, at first glance, that there is no way to compute the successor of anything other than a value. For example, if \( e \sim \text{nat} \), then how is it possible to compute its successor? The apparent difficulty is that the typing rule for the successor demands that its argument be a value, and not a computation, so the expression \( s(e) \) is ill-formed when \( e \) is a computation that is not also a value. The solution is to sequence the evaluation of the computation \( e \) before the formation of the successor, which we may write as \( \text{let}(e;x.s(x)) \).

But how is the \( \text{let} \) to be defined? There are two possibilities in PCF-by-value, one uses a function, the other uses a conditional:

1. Define \( \text{let}(e;x.s(x)) \) to be the application
   \[
   \text{ap}(\lambda\{\text{nat}\}(x.s(x));e).
   \]

2. Define \( \text{let}(e;x.s(x)) \) to be the conditional
   \[
   \text{ifz}\{\text{nat}\}(e;z.s(z);x.s(s(x))).
   \]

The first solution is more general in that it may be used to define \( \text{let}(e_1;x.e_2) \) in general in terms of application, whereas the second is applicable only to computations of natural numbers.

**Theorem 2.2 (Safety By-Value).**
1. If \( e : \tau \), then \( e \ \text{val} \).
2. If \( e \sim \tau \), then either \( e : \tau \) or \( e \mapsto e' \) for some \( e' \) such that \( e' \sim \tau \).

## 3 Computation Modality

The distinction between the by-name and by-value formulations of PCF is in the meanings of variables. In the by-name case variables range over
\[\Gamma, x : \tau \vdash x : \tau\]  
(1a)

\[\Gamma \vdash z : \text{nat}\]  
(1b)

\[\Gamma \vdash e : \text{nat}\]  
\[\Gamma \vdash s(e) : \text{nat}\]  
(1c)

\[\Gamma, x : \tau_1 \rightarrow \tau_2, y : \tau_1 \vdash e \bowtie \tau_2\]  
\[\Gamma \vdash \text{fun}\{\tau_1; \tau_2\}(x.y.e) : \tau_1 \rightarrow \tau_2\]  
(1d)

\[\Gamma \vdash e : \tau\]  
\[\Gamma \vdash e \bowtie \tau\]  
(1e)

\[\Gamma \vdash e \bowtie \text{nat}\]  
\[\Gamma \vdash e_0 \bowtie \tau\]  
\[\Gamma, x : \text{nat} \vdash e_1 \bowtie \tau\]  
\[\Gamma \vdash \text{ifz}\{\tau\}(e; e_0; x.e_1) \bowtie \tau\]  
(1f)

\[\Gamma \vdash e_1 \bowtie \tau_2 \rightarrow \tau\]  
\[\Gamma \vdash e_2 \bowtie \tau_2\]  
\[\Gamma \vdash \text{ap}(e_1; e_2) \bowtie \tau\]  
(1g)

Figure 1: **PCF By Value: Statics**
\[
\begin{align*}
    \bar{z} & \text{ val} \\
    e & \text{ val} \\
    s(e) & \text{ val}
\end{align*}
\]  
(2a)

\[
\begin{align*}
    & \text{fun}\{\tau_1;\tau_2\}(x.y.e) \text{ val}
\end{align*}
\]  
(2b)

\[
\begin{align*}
    & \overset{e \mapsto e'}{\text{ifz}\{\tau\}(e;e_0;x.e_1) \mapsto \text{ifz}\{\tau\}(e';e_0;x.e_1)}
\end{align*}
\]  
(2c)

\[
\begin{align*}
    & \overset{\text{ifz}\{\tau\}(z;e_0;x.e_1) \mapsto e_0}{\text{s}(e) \text{ val}}
\end{align*}
\]  
(2d)

\[
\begin{align*}
    & \overset{\text{ifz}\{\tau\}(s(e);e_0;x.e_1) \mapsto [e/x]e_1}{\text{s}(e) \text{ val}}
\end{align*}
\]  
(2e)

\[
\begin{align*}
    & \overset{e_1 \mapsto e'_1}{\text{ap}(e_1;e_2) \mapsto \text{ap}(e'_1;e_2)}
\end{align*}
\]  
(2f)

\[
\begin{align*}
    & \overset{e_1 \text{ val} \quad e_2 \mapsto e'_2}{\text{ap}(e_1;e_2) \mapsto \text{ap}(e_1;e'_2)}
\end{align*}
\]  
(2g)

\[
\begin{align*}
    & \overset{\text{ap}(\text{fun}\{\tau_1;\tau_2\}(x.y.e);e_2) \mapsto [\text{fun}\{\tau_1;\tau_2\}(x.y.e),e_2/x,y]e}{\text{ap}(\text{fun}\{\tau_1;\tau_2\}(x.y.e);e_2) \text{ val}}
\end{align*}
\]  
(2h)

Figure 2: PCF By Value: Dynamics

\[
\begin{align*}
    \Gamma & \vdash e \sim \tau \\
    \Gamma & \vdash \text{comp}(e) : \text{comp}(\tau)
\end{align*}
\]  
(3a)

\[
\begin{align*}
    \Gamma & \vdash e_1 : \text{comp}(\tau_1) \\
    \Gamma, x : \tau_1 & \vdash e_2 \sim \tau_2 \\
    \Gamma & \vdash \text{bnd}(e_1;x.e_2) \sim \tau_2
\end{align*}
\]  
(3b)

\[
\begin{align*}
    \overset{e \mapsto e'}{\text{bnd}(\text{comp}(e);x.e_2) \mapsto \text{bnd}(\text{comp}(e');x.e_2)}
\end{align*}
\]  
(3c)

\[
\begin{align*}
    \overset{e \text{ val}}{\text{bnd}(\text{comp}(e);x.e_2) \mapsto [e/x]e_2}
\end{align*}
\]  
(3d)

Figure 3: PCF By Value: Computation Modality

5
unevaluated computations; in the by-value case variables range only over values. When variables range over computations it makes sense to admit $\text{fix}\{\tau\}(x.e)$ at any type—even if it is divergent when evaluated, it still makes sense to form the unrolling, $[\text{fix}\{\tau\}(x.e)/x]e$. But when variables range over values, it is not sensible to perform this substitution. Instead, recursive functions are defined as values, and recursion is unrolled when such a function is applied, using only value substitution.

The two concepts of variables may be reconciled in PCF by introducing the modal type $\text{comp}(\tau)$ whose values are encapsulated computations of the form $\text{comp}(e)$ in which $e$ is an unevaluated computation. The elimination form for the modality is the computation $\text{bnd}(\text{comp}(e_1); x.e_2)$, which evaluates the encapsulated computation $e_1$, then passes its value to the computation $e_2$. The full statics and dynamics of the computation type are given in Figure 3. The safety theorem for PCF-by-value extends to the modality without difficulty.

The computation modality allows us to define $\text{let}$ by the equation

$$\text{let}(e_1; x_1.e_2) \triangleq \text{bnd}(\text{comp}(e_1); x_1.e_2),$$

with derived statics

$$\frac{\Gamma \vdash e_1 \sim \tau_1 \quad \Gamma, x_1 : \tau_1 \vdash e_2 \sim \tau_2}{\Gamma \vdash \text{let}(e_1; x.e_2) \sim \tau_2}. \quad (4a)$$

There is then no loss of generality in restricting the principal arguments of conditionals and applications to be values:

$$\frac{\Gamma \vdash e : \text{nat} \quad \Gamma \vdash e_0 \sim \tau \quad \Gamma, x : \text{nat} \vdash e_1 \sim \tau}{\Gamma \vdash \text{ifz}\{\tau\}(e; e_0; x.e_1) \sim \tau} \quad (4a')$$

$$\frac{\Gamma \vdash e_1 : \tau_2 \rightarrow \tau \quad \Gamma \vdash e_2 : \tau_2}{\Gamma \vdash \text{ap}(e_1; e_2) \sim \tau} \quad (4b)$$

The dynamics may be correspondingly simplified by eliminating rules (2d), (2g), and (2h).

The original forms of application and conditional may be derived using $\text{1let}$, as may be a generalized form of successor:

$$s^*(e) \triangleq \text{let}(e; x.s(x))$$

$$\text{ifz}^*(\tau)(e; e_0; x) \triangleq \text{let}(e; y.\text{ifz}(\tau)(y; e_0; x.e_1))$$

$$\text{ap}^*(e_1; e_2) \triangleq \text{let}(e_1; x_1.\text{let}(e_2; x_2.\text{ap}(x_1; x_2))))$$
References


