Recitation 3:
Gödel’s System T
15-312: Foundations of Programming Languages
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1 Syntax

We now define and explore a language called System T. System T extends E with function types and replaces E’s primitive arithmetic operations with a more general operation on the natural numbers: primitive recursion. The syntax of System T is given by the following grammar:

$$
\text{Typ } \tau ::= \text{nat} \quad \text{number} \\
\quad \tau_1 \to \tau_2 \quad \text{function} \\
\text{Exp } e ::= x \quad \text{variable} \\
\quad z \quad \text{zero} \\
\quad s(e) \quad \text{successor} \\
\quad \text{rec}\{z \mapsto e_0 \mid s(x) \text{ with } y \mapsto e_1\}(e) \quad \text{recursion} \\
\quad \lambda(x : \tau)e \quad \text{abstraction} \\
\quad e_1(e_2) \quad \text{application}
$$

Surprisingly, despite the loss of the arithmetic operations, T is capable of expressing every numeric computation in E and much more.

2 Abstraction and Application

Abstraction and application behave much as we would intuitively expect. An abstraction (function) binds a variable of type \( \tau \) in \( e_1 \), and an application substitutes an expression \( e_2 : \tau \) for that bound variable. Abstractions are first-class expressions: they have a type and can be passed to and returned from other abstractions. Because of this, System T is a language with higher-order functions.

The statics and dynamics for abstraction and application are given below.

2.1 Statics

$$
\begin{align*}
\Gamma, x : \tau_1 &\vdash e_2 : \tau_2 & \Gamma, e_1 : \tau_1 &\vdash e_2 : \tau_1 \\
\Gamma &\vdash \lambda(x : \tau_1)e_2 : \tau_1 \to \tau_2 & \Gamma &\vdash e_1(e_2) : \tau_2
\end{align*}
$$

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2.2 Dynamics

These dynamics rules are for the *eager* form of System $T$. All arguments are evaluated before being substituted into the body of a function. For a lazy dynamics, the $e_2 \mapsto e'_2$ rule would be left out, along with the requirement on the last rule that $e_2$ be a value. Note the first rule, which states that functions are values.\(^1\)

\[
\begin{align*}
\lambda (x : \tau) e & \Rightarrow e_1 \\
\quad e_1 & \mapsto e'_1 \\
\quad e_1(e_2) & \mapsto e'_1(e_2) \\
\quad e_1 & \text{val} \quad e_2 & \mapsto e'_2 \\
\quad e_1(e_2) & \mapsto e_1(e'_2) \\
\quad e_2 & \text{val} \\
\end{align*}
\]

\[
(\lambda (x : \tau) e)(e_2) \mapsto [e_2/x]e
\]

3 Natural Numbers

In System $T$, the natural numbers are defined as either zero, or the successor of a natural number. In addition to this definition, we also now have a single operation that works on naturals: recursion. The statics and dynamics of $\text{nat}$s is given below, while recursion is discussed in the next section.

3.1 Statics

\[
\begin{align*}
\Gamma & \vdash z : \text{nat} \\
\Gamma & \vdash e : \text{nat} \\
\Gamma & \vdash s(e) : \text{nat}
\end{align*}
\]

3.2 Dynamics

For a lazy form of System $T$, the requirement $e \text{ val}$ would be removed.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{val} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

4 Recursion

Now let’s consider the recursion operation for System $T$:

\[
\text{rec}\{z \leftarrow e_0 \mid s(x) \text{ with } y \leftarrow e_1\}(e)
\]

This operation cases on the value of $e$ (either $z$ or $s(e')$). If $e$ is $z$ then the expression evaluates to $e_0$, the base case. If $e$ is $s(e')$ for some natural number $e'$, then it recurs on $e'$, binding the result of the recursion to $y$ and $e'$ to $x$ for use in $e_1$.

\(^1\)As they say in 15-150.
4.1 Statics

\[ \Gamma \vdash e : \text{nat} \quad \Gamma \vdash e_0 : \tau \quad \Gamma, x : \text{nat}, y : \tau \vdash e_1 : \tau \]
\[ \Gamma \vdash \text{rec}\{ z \leftarrow e_0 \mid s(x) \text{ with } y \leftarrow e_1 \}(e) : \tau \]

4.2 Dynamics

\[ e \mapsto e' \]
\[ \text{rec}\{ z \leftarrow e_0 \mid s(x) \text{ with } y \leftarrow e_1 \}(e) \mapsto \text{rec}\{ z \leftarrow e_0 \mid s(x) \text{ with } y \leftarrow e_1 \}(e') \]
\[ \text{rec}\{ z \leftarrow e_0 \mid s(x) \text{ with } y \leftarrow e_1 \}(z) \mapsto e_0 \]
\[ s(e) \text{ val} \]
\[ \text{rec}\{ z \leftarrow e_0 \mid s(x) \text{ with } y \leftarrow e_1 \}(e) \mapsto e, \text{rec}\{ z \leftarrow e_0 \mid s(x) \text{ with } y \leftarrow e_1 \}(e)/x, y/e_1 \]

4.3 Examples for Recursion

4.3.1 Doubling

Understanding the recursor can be tricky, so let’s go through an example. We’ll write a function that doubles a number using the recursor. To do this, let’s consider how we would implement doubling in Standard ML given the following datatype for natural numbers:

\[
\text{datatype nat} = z \mid s \text{ of nat}
\]

We can double a number by doubling its predecessor and then taking the successor of that number twice:

\[
\text{fun double } z = z \\
| \text{double } (s x) = s (s (\text{double } x))
\]

Let’s rewrite this so that it matches the format of the recursor, with the predecessor of \( e \) bound to \( x \) and the result of the recursion bound to \( y \):

\[
\text{fun double } e = \\
\text{case } e \text{ of} \\
\quad z \Rightarrow z \\
| s \ x \Rightarrow \text{let val } y = \text{double } x \text{ in } s \ (s \ y) \text{ end}
\]

This makes it easier to now implement this using the recursor:

\[
\lambda (e : \text{nat}) \text{rec}\{ z \leftarrow z \mid s(x) \text{ with } y \leftarrow s(y) \}(e)
\]

As an exercise to make sure you understand the recursor, try to implement addition in the same manner.

4.3.2 Ackermann

System T is notable for its only explicit recursion operator being primitive recursion. However, its higher-order functions means that it is capable of computing non-primitive-recursive functions, like the well-known Ackermann function \( A(m, n) \), defined as follows:

\[
A(0, n) = n + 1 \\
A(m + 1, 0) = A(m, 1) \\
A(m + 1, n + 1) = A(m, A(m + 1, n))
\]
4.3 Examples for Recursion

Ackermann is not primitive recursive since with a given recursive call, it is possible for \( n \) to increase. This is incompatible with the recursor construct, which requires its argument be deconstructed at every step. However, consider currying \( A(m, n) \):

\[
A(0)(n) = s(n) \\
A(s(m))(0) = A(m)(1) \\
A(s(m))(s(n)) = A(m)(A(s(m))(n))
\]

If we treat \( A(s(m)) \) as the function in question, we observe that whenever it is called recursively, its argument \( n \) decreases in value. We arrive at an insight: \( A(s(m)) \) is a primitive recursive function in as of itself, and we should try writing it as a recursor.

However, there is one hiccup in computing \( A(s(m)) \): the intermediate value we are collecting is not a number, but a function which applies \( A(m) \) every step. Fortunately, System T allows us to write this. Consider the definitions:

\[
\text{id} : \text{n} \rightarrow \text{n} \\
\text{id} \equiv \lambda(x : \text{n}) \ x \\
\text{comp} : (\text{n} \rightarrow \text{n}) \rightarrow (\text{n} \rightarrow \text{n}) \rightarrow \text{n} \rightarrow \text{n} \\
\text{comp} \equiv \lambda(f : \text{n} \rightarrow \text{n}) \lambda(g : \text{n} \rightarrow \text{n}) \lambda(x : \text{n}) \ f(g(x)) \\
\text{iter} : (\text{n} \rightarrow \text{n}) \rightarrow \text{n} \rightarrow \text{n} \rightarrow \text{n} \\
\text{iter} \equiv \lambda(f : \text{n} \rightarrow \text{n}) \lambda(n : \text{n}) \text{rec}\{z \mapsto \text{id} \mid s(x) \text{ with } y \mapsto \text{comp}(f)(y)\}(n)
\]

What does \( \text{iter} \) do? Given a function \( f \) and a number \( n \), it computes the \( n \)-th iterate of \( f \), \( f^n \). That’s exactly what we need!

Rearranging, we have:

\[
A(0)(n) = s(n) \\
A(s(m))(n) = \text{iter}(A(m))(n)(A(m)(1))
\]

Now we can move up one level to express \( A \) as a recursor, and write the Ackermann function in T (using a \( \text{succ} \) function that just takes the successor of a \( \text{n} \)):

\[
\text{succ} : \text{n} \rightarrow \text{n} \\
\text{succ} \equiv \lambda(n : \text{n}) s(n) \\
\text{ack} : \text{n} \rightarrow \text{n} \rightarrow \text{n} \\
\text{ack} \equiv \lambda(m : \text{n}) \text{rec}\{z \mapsto \text{succ} \mid s(x) \text{ with } y \mapsto \lambda(n : \text{n}) \text{iter}(y)(n)(y(s(z)))\}(m)
\]

This is a constructive proof that despite not being primitive recursive, Ackermann is higher-order primitive recursive. System T allows us to compute a large set of functions like Ackermann, though all expressions in T provably terminate (cannot diverge). What does that mean from a computability theory perspective?