

Programming Paradigms

Unit 16 — Erlang Modules, Functions and Control Structures

J. Gamper

Free University of Bozen-Bolzano
Faculty of Computer Science
IDSE

Outline

- 1 Modules and Functions
- 2 Control Structures
- 3 Higher-Order Functions
- 4 Examples

Outline

- 1 **Modules and Functions**
- 2 Control Structures
- 3 Higher-Order Functions
- 4 Examples

Functions and Modules

- Erlang is a **functional** language, so **functions** are the main building blocks
- Functions are defined within **modules**
- Function and module names must be atoms
- Functions must be **exported** before they can be called from outside the module where they are defined
- The standard library has a lot of **predefined** modules, e.g., the `lists` module to work with lists
- When calling a function from another module you need a **qualified name**, i.e., module name and function name separated by a colon

```
> lists:reverse([1,2,3,4]).  
[4,3,2,1]
```

- You've already seen the module `io` for printing "Hello World!"

```
> io:format("Hello World!\n").  
Hello World!  
ok
```

Creating and using Modules

- To create your own module with some functions, you need to do the following:
 - Write a **source file** that contains function definitions and has extension `.erl`
 - **Compile** the module, which generates an executable file with extension `.beam`
 - Use the module
- Let's do this for a very simple piece of code:
 - A function that returns its input value

Creating a Module

- This is what the module file `basic.erl` looks like:

```
-module(basic).  
-export([mirror/1]).
```

```
mirror(Anything) -> Anything.
```

- The first line defines the **name** of the module, an atom
- The second line tells Erlang that the function `mirror`
 - should be **visible outside** of the module and
 - has one **parameter** (that is the meaning of `/1`)
- The third line **defines the function** `mirror` with one argument
 - The symbol `->` separates the function **head** and the function **body**
 - Notice the similarity to Haskell functions and Prolog-style rules

Compiling a Module

- After starting the Erlang shell from the directory of the code file you can **compile** it with the command `c`

```
> c(basic).  
{ok,basic}
```

- This will create an **executable** file `basic.beam`

Using a Module

- Now you can run the functions defined in the module like this:

```
> basic:mirror(1).
```

```
1
```

```
> basic:mirror(abc).
```

```
abc
```

```
> basic:mirror("string").
```

```
"string"
```

```
> mirror(1).
```

```
** exception error: undefined shell command mirror/1
```

- Notice that the parameter **Anything** was bound to different types in each call (number, atom, string)
- This means that Erlang uses **dynamic typing**
- The function name must be **qualified with the module name**, otherwise you get an error

Local Functions

- A module can define several functions
- Some functions might be **local**, i.e., not visible outside

```
-module(double).  
-export([double/1]).
```

```
double(X) -> times(X, 2).
```

```
times(X, N) -> X * N.
```

- This module defines 2 functions
 - `double` can be called from outside the module
 - `times` is local to the module

Function Declaration Revisited

- So far, each function consisted of a single line
- In general, a **function declaration** consists of a **sequence of function clauses** separated by semicolons (;) and terminated by period (.).

```
Name(Arg11, ..., Arg1N) [when GuardSeq1] ->
    Expr11, ..., Expr1M;
...;
Name(ArgK1, ..., ArgKN) [when GuardSeqK] ->
    ExprK1, ..., ExprKM.
```

- Each clause represents a **different matching possibility** (cf. Prolog, Haskell)
- Clauses are separated by a semicolon (;)
- A **function clause** consists of a **head** and a **body**, separated by **->**.
- A **clause head** consists of the function **name**, an **argument** list, and an optional **guard sequence** beginning with the keyword **when**.
- A **clause body** consists of a sequence of **expressions** separated by comma (,)

Function with Multiple Matching Possibilities

- This is a simple example with multiple matching possibilities/clauses

```
-module(matching_function).  
-export([number/1]).
```

```
number(one) -> 1;  
number(two) -> 2;  
number(three) -> 3.
```

- You can execute it like this

```
> c(matching_function).  
{ok,matching_function}  
  
> matching_function:number(one).  
1  
  
> matching_function:number(four).  
** exception error: no function clause matching ...
```

Recursive Functions

- Similar to Prolog, **recursion** plays a big role in Erlang
- Erlang is optimized for **tail recursion**

```
-module(yam).  
-export([fac/1]).  
-export([fib/1]).
```

```
fac(0) -> 1;  
fac(N) -> N * fac(N-1).
```

```
fib(0) -> 1;  
fib(1) -> 1;  
fib(N) -> fib(N-1) + fib(N-2).
```

Function Evaluation

- Function evaluation works essentially in the same way as in Prolog
- The function clauses are **scanned sequentially** (from top to down) until a clause is found that fulfills the following two conditions:
 - the **pattern** in the clause head can be **successfully matched**
 - the **guard** sequence, if any, is **true**
- If such a clause **cannot be found**, a runtime error occurs
- If such a clause **is found**, the corresponding clause body is evaluated:
 - the expressions in the body are **evaluated sequentially** (from left to right)
 - the value of the **last expression** is returned

```

fac(2)           % match clause 2
  2 * fac(1)     % match clause 2
    1 * fac(0)  % match clause 1
      1
        1
          2
            2

```

- This function is not safe. What happens if you call, e.g., `yaml:fac(-3)`?

Functions with Guards

- A **guard (sequence)** is an optional condition that can be placed in the head of a function clause
- They can be used to make functions more **robust**

```
-module(yam).  
-export([fac2/1]).
```

```
fac2(0) -> 1;  
fac2(N) when N > 0 -> N * fac2(N-1).
```

- Now you get the following:

```
> iam:fac2(3).  
6
```

```
> iam:fac2(-3).  
** exception error: no function clause matching iam:fac2(-3)
```

- We will see later on how to avoid even the runtime error

Outline

- 1 Modules and Functions
- 2 Control Structures**
- 3 Higher-Order Functions
- 4 Examples

Control Structures: case

- **Control structures** look similar to functions
- The **case** statement in Erlang looks like this

```
> Animal = "dog".  
"dog"  
> case Animal of  
>   "dog"      -> underdog;  
>   "cat"      -> thundercat;  
>   "elephant" -> dumbo;  
>   _          -> something_else  
> end.  
underdog
```

- The case statement uses **pattern matching** to distinguish various cases
 - A pattern might optionally be followed by a guard
- The underscore (`_`) **matches anything**
- The pattern can be more **complex**, e.g., lists or tuples

Control Structures: `if`

- In contrast to the case statement, the `if` statement uses **guards**
 - i.e., boolean conditions that must be satisfied for a match to succeed

```
> if
>   X > 0 -> positive;
>   X < 0 -> negative;
>   true  -> zero
> end.
```

- One of the branches of a case or `if` statement has to be true, otherwise a runtime error will occur if no match is found
- The reason is that **case and if are functions** that have to return a value
- In the above example, the last guard is simply set to the expression **true**
 - true always succeeds
 - alternatively, `X == 0` could be used (in this case)

Outline

- 1 Modules and Functions
- 2 Control Structures
- 3 Higher-Order Functions**
- 4 Examples

Higher-order Functions

- A function that returns functions or takes functions as arguments is called a **higher-order function**
 - In Ruby this was achieved passing code blocks
 - In Prolog, you can pass as argument a list that contains functor and arguments of a predicate (which then can be composed to a predicate using the univ operator =..)
 - In Haskell, we have seen functions such as `map` that take a (anonymous) function and a list and apply the function to the list
 - In Erlang arbitrary functions can be assigned to variables and be passed around like any other data type
- Let's start with anonymous functions (functions without a name)

Anonymous Functions

- Let's define a function that negates its argument

```
> Negate = fun(I) -> -I end.
```

```
#Fun<erl_eval.6.111823515>
```

```
> Negate(1).
```

```
-1
```

```
> Negate(-3).
```

```
3
```

- The keyword `fun` defines an **anonymous function** that has no name
- This function is assigned to variable `Negate`
- `Negate` actually **is** the function, not the value returned by the function
- By assigning the function to a variable, the function
 - can be passed as a parameter like any other data, and
 - it can even be called with different parameters
- We will show this next

Lists and Higher-order Functions

- A large number of higher-order functions are defined for lists in the module `lists`
- `lists:foreach` takes a function and a list as arguments and iterates over the list applying the function to each element

```
> Numbers = [1,2,3,4].
```

```
[1,2,3,4]
```

```
> Print = fun(X) -> io:format("~p~n", [X]) end.
```

```
> lists:foreach(Print,Numbers).
```

```
1
```

```
2
```

```
3
```

```
4
```

```
ok
```

- `io:format/2` is a function for formatted printing
- `~p` pretty prints an argument, `~n` prints a newline

Mapping Lists

- The `map` function is another function that takes a function and a list as arguments
- However, it applies the function to each element and builds a new list with the results
- The following example increases each element of a list by 1

```
> Numbers = [1,2,3,4].
```

```
[1,2,3,4]
```

```
> lists:map(fun(X) -> X+1 end,Numbers).
```

```
[2,3,4,5]
```

- This example shows also that an anonymous function can be **defined directly** when a function is called

Filtering Lists

- Lists can also be **filtered** using a boolean function.
- The function **lists:filter** builds a new list with all elements that satisfy a given function

```
> Small = fun(X) -> X < 3 end.
```

```
> Small(4).
```

```
false
```

```
> Small(2).
```

```
true
```

```
> lists:filter(Small,Numbers).
```

```
[1,2]
```

Testing Lists

- The function `Small` can also be used to test whether
 - **all** elements (`lists:all`) of a list are less than 3 or
 - **any** element (`lists:any`) of a list is less than 3

```
> lists:all(Small, [0,1,2]).
```

```
true
```

```
> lists:all(Small, [0,1,2,3]).
```

```
false
```

```
> lists:any(Small, [0,1,2,3]).
```

```
true
```

```
> lists:any(Small, [3,4,5]).
```

```
false
```

- The two functions applied on empty lists

```
> lists:any(Small, []).
```

```
false
```

```
> lists:all(Small, []).
```

```
true
```

Extract and Skip Prefix of Lists

- You can also use a filter condition to
 - extract a **prefix** of a list (`lists:takewhile`), i.e., make a list of all elements at the head of a list that satisfy the filter or
 - to skip that elements (`lists:dropwhile`)

```
> lists:takewhile(Small, [1,2,3,4]).  
[1,2]
```

```
> lists:dropwhile(Small, [1,2,3,4]).  
[3,4]
```

```
> lists:takewhile(Small, [1,2,1,4,1]).  
[1,2,1]
```

```
> lists:dropwhile(Small, [1,2,1,4,1]).  
[4,1]
```

Fold Functions on Lists/1

- **Fold** functions are a family of functions that accumulate a return value while processing a data structure, such as a list
- A fold function takes as argument:
 - a function with two parameters
 - an initial accumulator value
 - and a list
- Lets sum up the elements of our list of numbers

```
> Adder = fun(Item,SumSoFar) -> Item + SumSoFar end.
```

```
> InitSum = 0.
```

```
> lists:foldl(Adder,InitSum,[1,2,3,4]).
```

```
10
```

Fold Functions on Lists/2

- Fold functions for lists come in two flavors: `foldl` and `foldr`
- Both of them take the same parameters: a function, initial accumulator value, and a list
- The difference is the order in which they combine the list elements with the accumulator
- `foldl` accumulates elements from left to right
- `foldr` accumulates elements from right to left

```
> P = fun(A, AccIn) -> io:format(" p ", [A]), AccIn end.
```

```
> lists:foldl(P, void, [1,2,3]).
```

```
> 1 2 3 void
```

```
> lists:foldr(P, void, [1,2,3]).
```

```
> 3 2 1 void
```

- Notice that the function assigned to variable `P` has side-effects, hence is not pure functional!

Outline

- 1 Modules and Functions
- 2 Control Structures
- 3 Higher-Order Functions
- 4 Examples**

Example: Length of Lists

- Let's write a function to compute the length of a list (i.e., `length/1`)

```
-module(mylists).
-export([len/1]).
```

```
len([]) -> 0;
len(_|T) -> 1 + len(T).
```

- This is how this function is executed:

```
len([1,2,3]) = len([1 | [2,3]])
              = 1 + len([2 | [3]])
              = 1 + 1 + len([3 | []])
              = 1 + 1 + 1 + len([])
              = 1 + 1 + 1 + 0
              = 1 + 1 + 1
              = 1 + 2
              = 3
```

- This function is not tail-recursive

Example: Length of Lists – Tail-recursive

- To come up with a tail-recursive version, we use an accumulator

```
-module(mylists).
-export([tail_len/1]).
```

```
tail_len(L) -> tail_len(L, 0).
```

```
tail_len([], Acc) -> Acc;
tail_len(_|T, Acc) -> tail_len(T, Acc+1).
```

- This is how this function is executed:

```
tail_len([1,2,3])           = tail_len([1,2,3], 0)
tail_len([1|[2,3]], 0)     = tail_len([2,3], 0+1)
tail_len([2|[3], 1])      = tail_len([3], 1+1)
tail_len([3|[], 2])       = tail_len([], 2+1)
tail_len([], 3)           = 3
```

- This function is tail-recursive

Example: Reverse a List

- We write a function `reverse/1` to reverse a list

```
-module(mylists).
-export([reverse/1]).
```

```
reverse(List) -> reverse(List, []).
```

```
reverse([H|T], Acc) -> reverse(T, [H|Acc]);
reverse([], Acc) -> Acc.
```

- This is how this function is executed:

```
reverse([1,2,3])           = reverse([1,2,3], [])
reverse([1|[2,3]], [])    = reverse([2,3], [1|[]])
reverse([2|[3]], [1])     = reverse([3], [2|[1]])
reverse([3|[]], [2,1])    = reverse([], [3|[2,1]])
reverse([], [3,2,1])      = [3,2,1]
```