

CMSC 330: Organization of Programming Languages

Tail Recursion

Reverse

```
let rec rev l = match l with
  [] -> []
  | (x::xs) -> (rev xs) @ [x]
```

- Pushes a stack frame on each recursive call

```
rev [1;2;3]
→ (rev [2;3]) @ [1]
→ ((rev [3]) @ [2]) @ [1]
→ (((rev []) @ [3]) @ [2]) @ [1]
→ (([] @ [3]) @ [2]) @ [1]
→ ([3] @ [2]) @ [1]
→ [3;2] @ [1]
→ [3;2;1]
```

A Clever Version of Reverse

```
let rec rev_helper l a = match l with
  [] -> a
  | (x::xs) -> rev_helper xs (x::a)
let rev l = rev_helper l []
```

- No need to push a frames for each call!

```
rev [1;2;3] →
rev_helper [1;2;3] [] →
rev_helper [2;3] [1] →
rev_helper [3] [2;1] →
rev_helper [] [3;2;1] →
[3;2;1]
```

Tail Recursion

- Whenever a function ends with a recursive call, it is called **tail recursive**
 - Its “tail” is recursive
- Tail recursive functions can be implemented **without requiring a stack frame for each call**
 - **No intermediate variables need to be saved**, so the compiler overwrites them
- Typical pattern is to use an **accumulator** to build up the result, and return it in the base case

Compare rev and rev_helper

```
let rec rev l =  
  match l with  
  [] -> []  
  | (x::xs) -> (rev xs) @ [x]
```

Waits for recursive call's result to compute final result

```
let rec rev_helper l a =  
  match l with  
  [] -> a  
  | (x::xs) -> rev_helper xs (x::a)
```

final result is the result of the recursive call

Quiz #1

True/false: `map` is tail-recursive.

```
let rec map f = function
  [] -> []
| (h::t) -> (f h) :: (map f t)
```

- A. True
- B. False

Quiz #1

True/false: `map` is tail-recursive.

```
let rec map f = function
  [] -> []
| (h::t) -> (f h) :: (map f t)
```

A. True

B. False

Quiz #2

True/false: `fold` is tail-recursive

```
let rec fold f a = function
  [] -> a
| (h::t) -> fold f (f a h) t
```

- A. True
- B. False

Quiz #2

True/false: `fold` is tail-recursive

```
let rec fold f a = function
  [] -> a
| (h::t) -> fold f (f a h) t
```

A. True

B. False

Quiz #3

True/false: `fold_right` is tail-recursive

```
let rec fold_right f l a =  
  match l with  
  | [] -> a  
  | (h::t) -> f h (fold_right f t a)
```

- A. True
- B. False

Quiz #3

True/false: `fold_right` is tail-recursive

```
let rec fold_right f l a =  
  match l with  
  | [] -> a  
  | (h::t) -> f h (fold_right f t a)
```

A. True

B. False

Tail Recursion is Important

- Pushing a call frame for each recursive call when operating on a list is dangerous
 - One stack frame for each list element
 - Big list = **stack overflow!**
- So: **favor tail recursion when inputs could be large** (i.e., recursion could be deep). E.g.,
 - Prefer `List.fold_left` to `List.fold_right`
 - Library documentation should indicate tail recursion, or not
 - Convert recursive functions to be tail recursive

Tail Recursion Pattern (1 argument)

```
let func x =  
  let rec helper arg acc =  
    if (base case) then acc  
    else  
      let arg' = (argument to recursive call)  
      let acc' = (updated accumulator)  
      helper arg' acc' in in (* end of helper fun *)  
  helper x (initial val of accumulator)  
;;
```

Tail Recursion Pattern with `fact`

let `fact` x =

let rec helper arg acc =

if `arg = 0` then acc

else

let arg' = `arg - 1` in

let acc' = `acc * arg` in

helper arg' acc' in (* end of helper fun *)

helper x `1`

::
;;

Tail Recursion Pattern with `rev`

```
let rev x =
```

```
  let rec rev_helper arg acc =
```

```
    match arg with [] -> acc
```

```
    | h::t ->
```

```
      let arg' = t in
```

```
      let acc' = h::acc in
```

```
      rev_helper arg' acc' in (* end of helper fun *)
```

```
  rev_helper x []
```

```
;;
```

Can generalize to more than one argument, and multiple cases for each recursive call

Quiz #4

True/false: this is a tail-recursive `map`

```
let map f l =  
  let rec helper l a =  
    match l with  
    [] -> a  
    | h::t -> helper t ((f h)::a)  
  in helper l []
```

- A. True
- B. False

Quiz #4

True/false: this is a tail-recursive `map`

```
let map f l =  
  let rec helper l a =  
    match l with  
    [] -> a  
    | h::t -> helper t ((f h)::a)  
  in helper l []
```

A. True

B. False (elements are reversed)

A Tail Recursive map

```
let map f l =  
  let rec helper l a =  
    match l with  
    [] -> a  
    | h::t -> helper t ((f h)::a)  
  in rev (helper l [])
```

Could instead change $(f\ h) :: a$ to be $a @ (f\ h)$

Q: Why is the above implementation a better choice?

A: $O(n)$ running time, not $O(n^2)$ (where n is length of list)