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:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Typ } \tau & ::= \text{nat} & \text{number} \\
& \tau_1 \rightarrow \tau_2 & \text{function} \\
\text{Exp } e & ::= x & \text{variable} \\
& z & \text{zero} \\
& s(e) & \text{successor} \\
& \text{rec}\{z \leftarrow e_0 \mid s(x) \text{ with } y \rightarrow e_1\}(e) & \text{recursion} \\
& \lambda (x : \tau) e & \text{abstraction} \\
& e_1(e_2) & \text{application}
\end{align*}
\]

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

\[
\begin{align*}
\frac{\Gamma, x : \tau_1 \vdash e_2 : \tau_2}{\Gamma \vdash \lambda (x : \tau_1) e_2 : \tau_1 \rightarrow \tau_2} & \quad 
\frac{\Gamma \vdash e_1 : \tau_1 \rightarrow \tau_2 \quad \Gamma \vdash e_2 : \tau_1}{\Gamma \vdash e_1(e_2) : \tau_2}
\end{align*}
\]
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:

$$
\begin{array}{c}
\lambda (x : \tau) e \ val \\
\hline
e_1 \mapsto e'_1 \\
\hline
e_1(e_2) \mapsto e'_1(e_2) \\
\hline
e_1 \ val \quad e_2 \mapsto e'_2 \\
\hline
e_1(e_2) \mapsto e_1(e'_2) \\
\hline
e_2 \ val \\
(\lambda (x : \tau) e)(e_2) \mapsto [e_2/x]e
\end{array}
$$

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 *nats* is given below, while recursion is discussed in the next section.

3.1 Statics

$$
\begin{array}{c}
\Gamma \vdash z : \text{nat} \\
\hline
\Gamma \vdash e : \text{nat} \\
\hline
\Gamma \vdash s(e) : \text{nat}
\end{array}
$$

3.2 Dynamics

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

$$
\begin{array}{c}
z \ val \\
\hline
e \ val \\
\hline
s(e) \ val
\end{array}
$$

4 Recursion

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

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

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 $e_1$.

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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

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

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:

```
datatype nat = z | s of nat
```

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

```
fun double z = z
  | double (s x) = s (s (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 \( y \):

```
fun double e =
  case e of
    z => z
  | s x => let val y = double x in s (s y) 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 \text{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:

\[
A(0, n) = n + 1 \\
A(m + 1, 0) = A(m, 1) \\
A(m + 1, n + 1) = A(m, A(m + 1, n))
\]
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:

\[
\text{id} : \text{nat} \to \text{nat} \\
\text{id} \triangleq \lambda (x : \text{nat}) x \\
\text{comp} : (\text{nat} \to \text{nat}) \to (\text{nat} \to \text{nat}) \to \text{nat} \to \text{nat} \\
\text{comp} \triangleq \lambda (f : \text{nat} \to \text{nat}) \lambda (g : \text{nat} \to \text{nat}) \lambda (x : \text{nat}) f(g(x)) \\
\text{iter} : (\text{nat} \to \text{nat}) \to \text{nat} \to \text{nat} \to \text{nat} \\
\text{iter} \triangleq \lambda (f : \text{nat} \to \text{nat}) \lambda (n : \text{nat}) \text{rec}\{ z \mapsto \text{id} | s(x) \text{ with } y \mapsto \text{comp}(f)(y)\}(n)
\]

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{nat}):

\[
\text{succ} : \text{nat} \to \text{nat} \\
\text{succ} \triangleq \lambda (n : \text{nat}) s(n) \\
\text{ack} : \text{nat} \to \text{nat} \to \text{nat} \\
\text{ack} \triangleq \lambda (m : \text{nat}) \text{rec}\{ z \mapsto \text{succ} | s(x) \text{ with } y \mapsto \lambda (n : \text{nat}) \text{iter}(y)(n)(y(s(z)))\}(m)
\]

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?