

Course introduction

Advanced Compiler Construction
Michel Schinz - 2014-02-20

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General information

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Course goal

The goal of this course is to teach you:

- how to compile high-level functional and object-oriented programming languages,
- how to optimize the generated code, and
- how to support code execution at run time.

To achieve these goals, the course is roughly split in three parts of unequal length:

- a part covering the compilation of high-level concepts (e.g. closures),
- a part covering intermediate languages and optimizations,
- a part covering virtual machines and garbage collection.

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Evaluation

The grade will be based on three aspects:

- several group projects, to be completed in groups of at most two people,
- one or more (depending on class size) individual projects, to be completed alone,
- an individual oral exam.

Warning: the course is evaluated during the semester, which has two important consequences:

- there is no retake exam,
- the oral exam will take place during the last week of the semester, not during the official exam period.

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Grading scheme

The final grade will be based on your results in:

- the various project parts, spread over 11 weeks, which contribute to 80% of the grade,
- the final exam, which contributes to 20% of the grade.

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Resources

Lecturer:

Michel Schinz, BC 140, Michel.Schinz@epfl.ch

Assistants:

Vlad Ureche, INR 320, Vlad.Ureche@epfl.ch

Ravi Kandhadai, BC 355, Ravi.Kandhadai@epfl.ch

Web page:

http://lamp.epfl.ch/teaching/advanced_compiler

Forum:

<http://piazza.com/epfl.ch/spring2014/cs420>

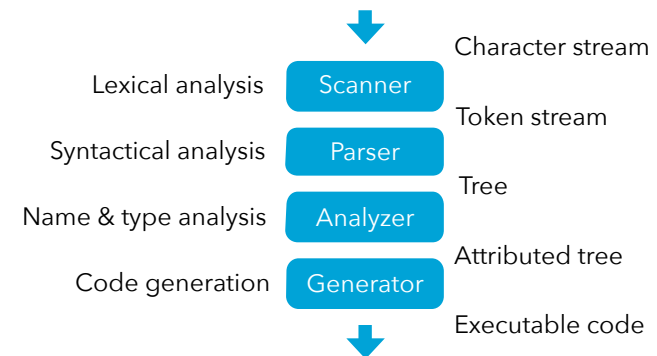
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Course overview

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What is a compiler

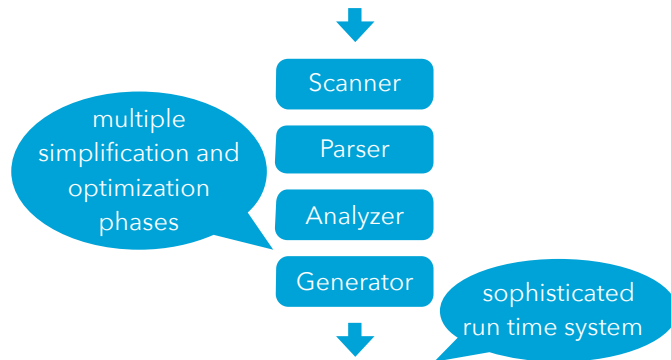
Your current view of a compiler must be something like this:



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What is a compiler, really?

Real compilers are often more complicated...



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Additional phases

Simplification phases transform the program so that complex concepts of the language - pattern matching, anonymous functions, etc. - are translated using simpler ones.

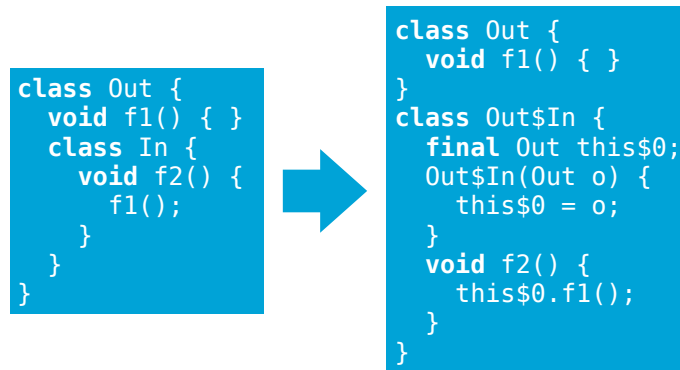
Optimization phases transform the program so that it hopefully makes better use of some resource - e.g. CPU cycles, memory, etc.

Of course, all these phases must preserve the meaning of the original program!

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Simplification phases

Example of a simplification phase: Java compilers have a phase that transforms nested classes to top-level ones.



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Optimization phases

Example of an optimization phase: Java compilers optimize expressions involving constant values. That includes removing **dead code**, i.e. code that can never be executed.

```
class C {
  public final static boolean debug = !true;
  int f() {
    if (debug) {
      System.out.println("C.f() called");
    }
    return 10;
  }
}
```

dead code, removed during compilation

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Intermediate representations

To manipulate the program, simplification and optimization phases must represent it in some way.

One possibility is to use the representation produced by the parser - the abstract syntax tree (AST).

The AST is perfectly suited to certain tasks, but other **intermediate representations (IR)** exist and are more appropriate in some situations.

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Run time system

Implementing a high-level programming language usually means more than just writing a compiler. A complete **run time system** must be written, to provide various services to executing programs, like:

- code loading and linking,
- code interpretations, compilation and optimization,
- memory management (garbage collection),
- concurrency,
- etc.

This is quite a lot, and modern Java Virtual Machines, for example, are more complex than Java compilers!

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Memory management

Most modern programming languages offer **automatic memory management**: the programmer allocates memory explicitly, but deallocation is performed automatically.

The deallocation of memory is usually performed by a part of the run time system called the **garbage collector (GC)**.

A garbage collector periodically frees all memory that has been allocated by the program but is not reachable anymore.

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Virtual machines

Instead of targeting a real processor, a compiler can target a virtual one, usually called a **virtual machine (VM)**. The produced code is then interpreted by a program emulating the virtual machine.

Virtual machines have many advantages:

- the compiler can target a single architecture,
- the program can easily be monitored during execution, e.g. to prevent malicious behavior, or provide debugging facilities,
- the distribution of compiled code is easier.

The main (only?) disadvantage of virtual machines is their speed: it is always slower to interpret a program in software than to execute it directly in hardware.

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Dynamic (JIT) compilation

To make virtual machines faster, **dynamic**, or **just-in-time (JIT)** compilation was invented.

The idea is simple: Instead of interpreting a piece of code, the virtual machine translates it to machine code, and hands that code to the processor for execution.

This is usually faster than interpretation.

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Summary

Compilers for high-level languages are more complex than the ones you've studied, since:

- they must translate high-level concepts like pattern-matching, anonymous functions, etc. to lower-level equivalents,
- they must be accompanied by a sophisticated run time system, and
- they should produce optimized code.

This course will be focused on these aspects of compilers and run time systems.

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