

CMSC 330: Organization of Programming Languages

OCaml Imperative Programming

CMSC330 Fall 2025

So Far, Only Functional Programming

- We haven't given you **any** way so far to change something in memory
 - All you can do is create new values from old
- This makes programming easier since it supports mathematical (i.e., **functional**) reasoning
 - Don't care whether data is shared in memory
 - Aliasing is irrelevant
 - Calling a function f with the same argument always produces the same result
 - For all x and y , we have $f\ x = f\ y$ when $x = y$

Imperative OCaml

- Sometimes it is useful for values to change
 - Call a function that returns an *incremented* counter
 - Store aggregations in *efficient* hash tables
- OCaml **variables** are *immutable*, but
- OCaml has **references**, **fields**, and **arrays** that are actually *mutable*
 - I.e., they can **change**

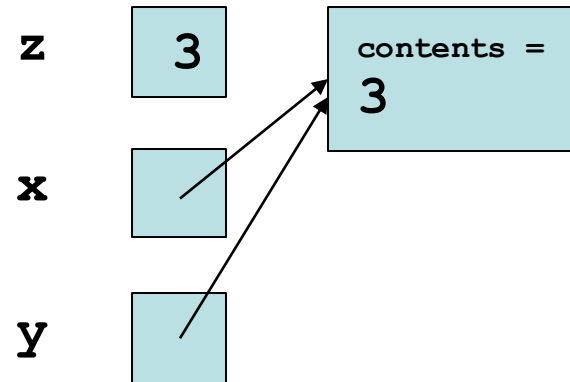
References

- **'a ref**: Pointer to a mutable value of type **'a**
- There are three basic operations on references:
 - ref** : **'a -> 'a ref**
 - Allocate a reference
 - !** : **'a ref -> 'a**
 - Read the value stored in reference
 - :=** : **'a ref -> 'a -> unit**
 - Change the value stored in reference
- Binding variable **x** to a reference is **immutable**
 - The **contents of the reference** **x** points to may change

References Usage

Example:

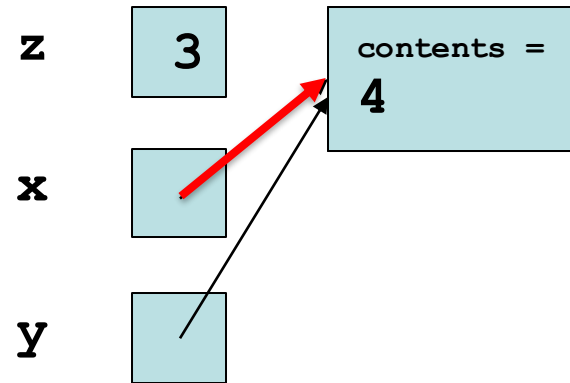
```
# let z = 3;;  
  val z : int = 3  
  
# let x = ref z;;  
  val x : int ref = {contents = 3}  
  
# let y = x;;  
  val y : int ref = {contents = 3}
```



References Usage

Example:

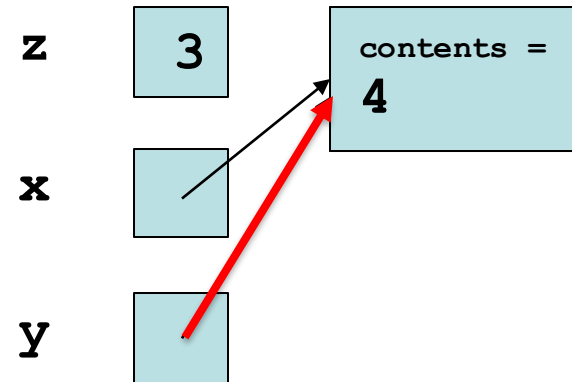
```
# let z = 3;;  
  val z : int = 3  
  
# let x = ref z;;  
  val x : int ref = {contents = 3}  
  
# let y = x;;  
  val y : int ref = {contents = 3}  
  
# x := 4;;  
- : unit = ()
```



References Usage

Example:

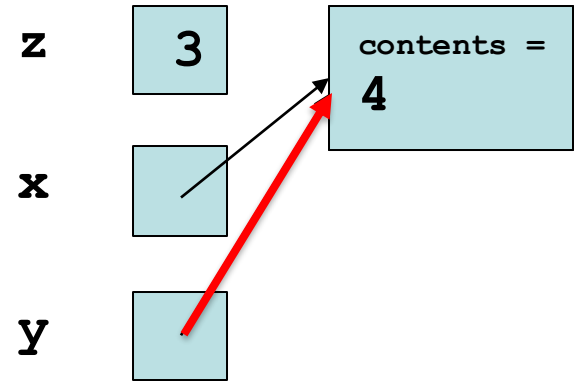
```
# let z = 3;;  
# let x = ref z;;  
# let y = x;;  
# x := 4;;  
# !y;;  
- : int = 4
```



Aliasing

- Reconsider our example

```
let z = 3;;  
let x = ref z;;  
let y = x;;  
x := 4;;
```



Here, variables **y** and **x** are **aliases**:

- In `let y = x`, variable **x** evaluates to a location, and **y** is bound to the **same location**
- So, changing the contents of that location will cause both **!x** and **!y** to change

Quiz 1: What is the value **w**?

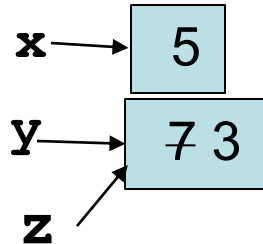
```
let x = ref 5 in
let y = ref 7 in
let z = y in
let _ = y := 3 in
let w = !y + !z in
w
```

- A. 12
- B. 6
- C. 10
- D. 8

Quiz 1: What is the value **w**?

```
let x = ref 5 in
let y = ref 7 in
let z = y in
let _ = y := 3 in
let w = !y + !z in
```

w



$$!y + !z = 3 + 3 = 6$$

A. 12

B. 6

C. 10

D. 8

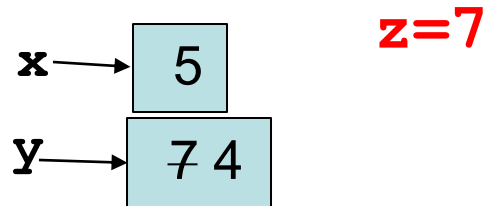
Quiz 1a: What is the value **w**?

```
let x = ref 5 in
let y = ref 7 in
let z = !y in
let _ = y := 4 in
let w = !y + z in
w
```

- A. 12
- B. 6
- C. 9
- D. 11

Quiz 1a: What is the value w ?

```
let x = ref 5 in
let y = ref 7 in
let z = !y in
let _ = y := 4 in
let w = !y + z in
w
```



- A. 12
- B. 6
- C. 9
- D. 11

$$!y + z = 4 + 7 = 11$$

References: Syntax and Semantics

- Syntax: **ref** *e*
- Evaluation
 - Evaluate *e* to a value *v*
 - Allocate a new location *loc* in memory to hold *v*
 - Store *v* in contents of memory at *loc*
 - Return *loc* (which is itself a value)
- Type checking
 - (**ref** *e*) : *t* **ref**
 - if *e* : *t*

References: Syntax and Semantics

- Syntax: $e1 := e2$
- Evaluation
 - Evaluate $e2$ to a value $v2$
 - Evaluate $e1$ to a location loc
 - Store $v2$ in contents of memory at loc
 - Return ()
- Type checking
 - $(e1 := e2) : \text{unit}$
 - if $e1 : t_{\text{ref}}$ and $e2 : t$

References: Syntax and Semantics

- Syntax: $!e$
 - *This is not negation. Operator $!$ is like operator $*$ in C*
- Evaluation
 - Evaluate e to a location loc
 - Return contents v of memory at loc
- Type checking
 - $!e : t$
 - if $e : t$ ref

Sequences: Syntax and Semantics

- Syntax: $e1; e2$
 - $e1; e2$ is the same as `let () =  $e1$  in  $e2$`
- Evaluation
 - Evaluate $e1$ to a value $v1$
 - Evaluate $e2$ to a value $v2$
 - Return $v2$
 - Throws away $v1$ – so $e1$ is useful only if it has *side effects*, e.g., if it modifies a reference's contents or accesses a file
- Type checking
 - $e1; e2 : t$
 - if $e1 : \text{unit}$ and $e2 : t$

:: versus ;

- :: ends an expression in the top-level of OCaml
 - Use it to say: “Give me the value of this expression”
 - Not used in the body of a function
 - Not needed after each function definition
 - Though for now it won’t hurt if used there
- *e1*; *e2* evaluates *e1* and then *e2*, and returns *e2*

```
let print_both (s, t) = print_string s; print_string t;  
                        "Printed s and t"
```

- notice no ; at end – it’s a **separator**, not a **terminator**

Grouping Sequences

- If you're not sure about the scoping rules, use `begin...end`, or *parentheses*, to group together statements with semicolons

```
let x = ref 0
let f () =
  begin
    print_string "hello";
    x := !x + 1
  end
```

```
let x = ref 0
let f () =
  (
    print_string "hello";
    x := !x + 1
  )
```

Implement a Counter

```
# let counter = ref 0 ;;  
  val counter : int ref = { contents=0 }  
  
# let next () =  
    counter := !counter + 1; !counter ;;  
  
val next : unit -> int = <fun>  
  
# next ();;  
  - : int = 1  
  
# next ();;  
  - : int = 2
```

Hide the Reference

```
# let next =  
    let counter = ref 0 in  
    fun () ->  
        counter := !counter + 1; !counter ;;
```

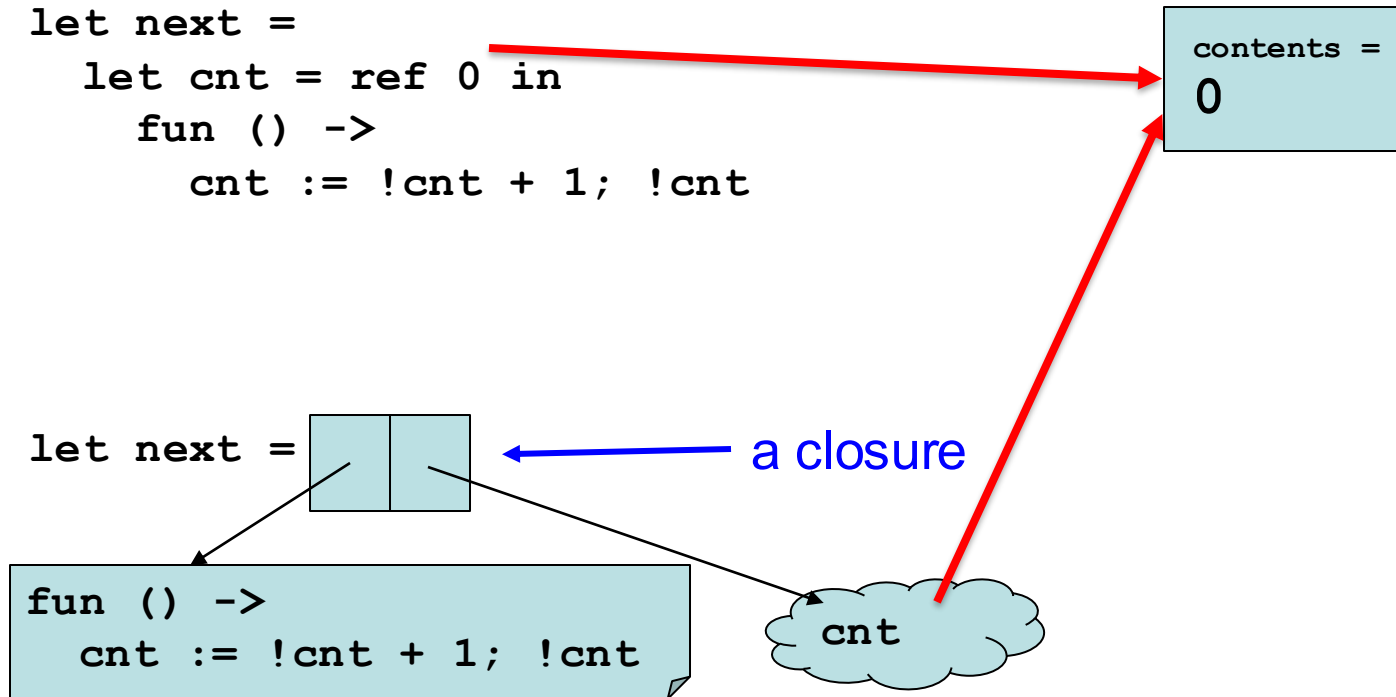
```
val next : unit -> int = <fun>
```

```
# next ();;  
- : int = 1
```

```
# next ();;  
- : int = 2
```

Hide the Reference, Visualized

```
let next =  
  let cnt = ref 0 in  
  fun () ->  
    cnt := !cnt + 1; !cnt
```



Quiz 2: What is wrong with the counter?

```
let next =  
  fun () ->  
    let counter = ref 0 in  
    counter := !counter + 1;  
    !counter
```

- A. It returns a boolean, not an integer
- B. It returns the same integer every time
- C. It returns a reference to an integer instead of an integer
- D. Nothing is wrong

Quiz 2: What is wrong with the counter?

```
let next =  
  fun () ->  
    let counter = ref 0 in  
    counter := !counter + 1;  
    !counter
```

- A. It returns a boolean, not an integer
- B. It returns the same integer every time**
- C. It returns a reference to an integer instead of an integer
- D. Nothing is wrong

The Trade-Off Of Side Effects

- Side effects are necessary
 - That's usually why we run software! We want something to happen that we can observe
- They also make reasoning harder
 - Order of evaluation now matters
 - No referential transparency
 - Calling the same function with the same arguments may produce different results
 - Aliasing may result in hard-to-understand bugs
 - If we call a function with refs `r1` and `r2`, it might do strange things if `r1` and `r2` are aliases

Order of Evaluation

- Consider this example

```
let y = ref 1;;  
let f _ z = z+1;; (* ignores first arg *)  
let w = f (y:=2) !y;;  
w;;
```

- What is **w** if **f**'s arguments are evaluated **left to right**?
 - 3
- What if they are evaluated **right to left**?
 - 2

OCaml Order of Evaluation

- In OCaml, the **order of evaluation** is **unspecified**
 - This means that the language doesn't take a stand, and different implementations may do different things
- On my Mac, OCaml evaluates **right to left**
 - True for the bytecode interpreter and x86 native code
 - Run the previous example and see for yourself!
- Strive to make your programs **produce the same answer regardless of evaluation order**

Order of Evaluation

List items are evaluated in right to left order

```
let f () = Printf.printf "F\t";;
```

```
let g () = Printf.printf "G\t";;
```

```
[f (); g ()]
```

```
G F - : unit list = [(); ()]
```

g () is called before **f ()**

Quiz 3: Will **w**'s value differ

If evaluation order is left to right, rather than right to left?

```
let y    = ref 1 in
let f z = z := !z+1; !z in
let w    = (f y) + (f y) in
w
```

- A. True
- B. False

Quiz 3: Will **w**'s value differ

If evaluation order is left to right, rather than right to left?

```
let y    = ref 1 in
let f z = z := !z+1; !z in
let w    = (f y) + (f y) in
w
```

- A. True
B. False

Quiz 4: Will **w**'s value differ

If evaluation order is left to right, rather than right to left?

```
let y    = ref 1 in
let f z = z := !z+1; !z in
let w    = (f y) + !y in
w
```

- A. True
- B. False

Quiz 4: Will **w**'s value differ

If evaluation order is left to right, rather than right to left?

```
let y    = ref 1 in
let f z = z := !z+1; !z in
let w    = (f y) + !y in
w
```

- A. True
B. False

left to right: 4

right to left: 3

Quiz 5: Which f is **not** referentially transparent?

I.e., not the case that $f\ x = f\ y$ for all $x = y$

```
A. let f z =  
    let y = ref z in  
    y := !y + z;  
    !y
```

```
B. let f =  
    let y = ref 0 in  
    fun z ->  
        y := !y + z; !y
```

```
C. let f z =  
    let y = z in  
    y+z
```

```
D. let f z = z+1
```


Quiz 5: Which f is **not** referentially transparent?

i.e., not the case that $f\ x = f\ y$ for all $x = y$

```
A. let f z =  
    let y = ref z in  
    y := !y + z;  
    !y
```

```
B. let f =  
    let y = ref 0 in  
    fun z ->  
        y := !y + z; !y
```

```
C. let f z =  
    let y = z in  
    y+z
```

```
D. let f z = z+1
```

This is basically the **counter** function

Structural vs. Physical Equality

- Structural comparison: `=` and `<>`
- Physical comparison: `==` and `!=`
- `let x = [1;2;3];; let y = [1;2;3];;`
 - `(x = y)` (* true *) `(x <> y)` (* false *)
 - `(x == y)` (* false *) `(x != y)` (* true *)
- Mostly you want to use `=` and `<>`
 - E.g., the `=` operator is used for pattern matching
- But `=` is a problem with **cyclic data structures**

Equality of `refs` themselves

- Refs are compared **structurally** by their **contents**,
physically by their **addresses**
 - `ref 1 = ref 1` (* true *)
 - `ref 1 <> ref 2` (* true *)
 - `ref 1 != ref 1` (* true *)
 - `let x = ref 1 in x == x` (* true *)

Mutable fields

- Fields of a record type can be declared as mutable:

```
# type point = {x:int; y:int; mutable c:string};;
type point = { x : int; y : int; mutable c : string; }

# let p = {x=0; y=0; c="red"};;
    val p : point = {x = 0; y = 0; c = "red"}

# p.c <- "white";;
- : unit = ()

# p;;
p : point = {x = 0; y = 0; c = "white"}

# p.x <- 3;;
Error: The record field x is not mutable
```

Implementing Refs

- Ref cells are essentially syntactic sugar:

```
type 'a ref = { mutable contents: 'a }  
let ref x = { contents = x }  
let (!) r = r.contents  
let (:=) r newval = r.contents <- newval
```

- ref type is declared in **Pervasives**
- ref functions are compiled to equivalents of above

Arrays

- **Arrays** generalize ref cells from a single mutable value to a sequence of mutable values

```
# let v = [|0.; 1.|];;  
    val v : float array = [|0.; 1.|]  
  
# v.(0) <- 5.;;  
    - : unit = ()  
  
# v;;  
    - : float array = [|5.; 1.|]
```

Quiz 6: What does this evaluate to?

```
let x = [| 0; 1 |] in  
let w = x in  
x.(0) <- 1;  
x == w
```

- A. ()
- B. true
- C. false
- D. *Type error*

Quiz 6: What does this evaluate to?

```
let x = [| 0; 1 |] in  
let w = x in  
x.(0) <- 1;  
x == w
```

- A. ()
- B. **true** – they point to the same array
- C. false
- D. *Type error*

Control structures

- Traditional loop structures are useful with imperative features:

```
while e1 do e2 done
```

```
for x = e1 to e2 do e3 done
```

```
for x = e1 downto e2 do e3 done
```

```
for i = 1 to 5 do  
    Printf.printf "%d " i  
done;;  
1 2 3 4 5,
```

Hash Table

- Hashtbl Module

```
let h = Hashtbl.create 1331;  
Hashtbl.add h "alice" 100;;  
Hashtbl.add h "bob" 200;;  
Hashtbl.iter (Printf.printf "(%s,%d)\n") h;;
```

```
(alice,100)
```

```
(bob,200)
```

List.assoc as Map

- An *association list* is an easy implementation of a map (aka dictionary)

```
let d = [("alice", 100); ("bob", 200);  
         ("cathy", 300)]. (* (string * int) list *)  
# List.assoc "alice" d;;  
- : int = 100
```

```
List.assoc "frank" d;;  
Exception: Not_found.
```

Build a Map Using Functions

```
let empty v = fun _-> 0;;  
let update m k v = fun s->if k=s then v else m s
```

```
let m = empty 0;;  
let m = update m "foo" 100;;  
let m = update m "bar" 200;;  
let m = update m "baz" 300;;
```

```
m "foo";; (* 100 *)  
m "bar";; (* 200 *)  
let m = update m "foo" 101;;  
m "foo";; (* 101 *)
```

Challenge: change the code to return all the values for a key