Chapter 6 – The Abstract Syntax Tree

6.1 Overview

The Abstract Syntax Tree (AST) is an important internal data structure that represents the primary structure of a program. The AST is the starting point for semantic analysis of a program. It is “abstract” in the sense that the structure leaves out the particular details of parsing: the AST does not care whether a language has prefix, postfix, or infix expressions. (In fact, the AST we describe here can be used to represent most procedural languages.)

For our project compiler, we will define an AST in terms of five C structures representing declarations, statements, expressions, types, and parameters. While you have certainly encountered each of these terms while learning programming, they are not always used precisely in practice. This chapter will help you to sort those items out very clearly:

- A **declaration** states the name, type, and value of a symbol so that it can be used in the program. Symbols included items such as constants, variables, and functions.

- A **statement** indicates an action to be carried out that changes the state of the program. Examples include loops, conditionals, and function returns.

- An **expression** is a combination of values and operations that is evaluated according to specific rules and yields a value such as an integer, floating point, or string. In some programming languages, an expression may also have a **side effect** that changes the state of the program.

For each kind of element in the AST, we will give an example of the code and how it is constructed. Because each of these structures potentially has pointers to each of the other types, it is necessary to preview all of them before seeing how they work together.

Once you understand all of the elements of the AST, we finish the chapter by demonstrating how the entire structure can be created automatically through the use of the Bison parser generator.

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6.2 Declarations

A complete C-Minor program is a sequence of declarations. Each declaration states the existence of a variable or a function. A variable declaration may optionally give an initializing value. If none is given, it is given a default value of zero. A function declaration may optionally give the body of the function in code; if no body is given, then the declaration serves as a prototype for a function declared elsewhere.

For example, the following are all valid declarations:

b: boolean;
s: string = "hello";
f: function integer ( x: integer ) = { return x*x; }

A declaration is represented by a decl structure that gives the name, type, value (if an expression), code (if a function), and a pointer to the next declaration in the program:

```c
struct decl {
    char *name;
    struct type *type;
    struct expr *value;
    struct stmt *code;
    struct decl *next;
};
```

Because we will be creating a lot of these structures, you will need a factory function that allocates a structure and initializes its fields, like this:

```c
struct decl * decl_create( char *name,
                          struct *type,
                          struct expr *value,
                          struct stmt *code,
                          struct decl *next )
{
    struct decl *d = malloc(sizeof(*d));
    d->name = name;
    d->type = type;
    d->value = value;
    d->code = code;
    d->next = next;
    return d;
}
```

(You will need to write similar code for statements, expressions, etc, but we won’t keep repeating it here.)
The three declarations on the preceding page can be represented graphically as a linked list, like this:

Note that some of the fields point to nothing: these would be represented by a null pointer, which we omit for clarity. Also, our picture is incomplete and must be expanded: the items representing types, expressions, and statements are all complex structures themselves that we must describe.
6.3 Statements

The body of a function consists of a sequence of statements. A statement indicates that the program is to take a particular action in the order specified, such as computing a value, performing a loop, or choosing between branches of an alternative. A statement can also be a declaration of a local variable. Here is the stmt structure:

```c
struct stmt {
    stmt_t kind;
    struct decl *decl;
    struct expr *init_expr;
    struct expr *expr;
    struct expr *next_expr;
    struct stmt *body;
    struct stmt *else_body;
    struct stmt *next;
};
```

```c
typedef enum {
    STMT_DECL,
    STMT_EXPR,
    STMT_IF_ELSE,
    STMT_FOR,
    STMT_PRINT,
    STMT_RETURN,
    STMT_BLOCK
} stmt_t;
```

The kind field indicates what kind of statement it is:

- **STMT_DECL** indicates a (local) declaration, and the decl field will point to it.
- **STMT_EXPR** indicates an expression statement and the expr field will point to it.
- **STMT_IF_ELSE** indicates an if-else expression such that the expr field will point to the control expression, the body field to the statements executed if it is true, and the else_body field to the statements executed if it is false.
- **STMT_FOR** indicates a for-loop, such that init_expr, expr, and next_expr are the three expressions in the loop header, and body points to the statements in the loop.
- **STMT_PRINT** indicates a print statement, and expr points to the expressions to print.
- **STMT_RETURN** indicates a return statement, and expr points to the expression to return.
- **STMT_BLOCK** indicates a block of statements inside curly braces, and body points to the contained statements.
And, as we did with declarations, we require a function `stmt_create` to create and return a statement structure:

```c
struct stmt * stmt_create( stmt_kind_t kind,
    struct decl *decl, struct expr *init_expr,
    struct expr *expr, struct expr *next_expr,
    struct stmt *body, struct stmt *else_body,
    struct stmt *next );
```

This structure has a lot of fields, but each one serves a purpose and is used when necessary for a particular kind of statement. For example, an if-else statement only uses the `expr`, `body`, and `else_body` fields, leaving the rest null:

```plaintext
if( x<y ) print x; else print y;
```

A for-loop uses the three `expr` fields to represent the three parts of the loop control, and the `body` field to represent the code being executed:

```plaintext
for(i=0;i<10;i++) print i;
```
6.4 Expressions

Expressions are implemented much like the simple expression AST shown in Chapter 5. The difference is that we need many more binary types: one for every operator in the language, including arithmetic, logical, comparison, assignment, and so forth. We also need one for every type of leaf value, including variable names, constant values, and so forth. The name field will be set for `EXPR_NAME`, the integer_value field for `EXPR_INTEGER_LITERAL`, and so on. You may need to add values and types to this structure as you expand your compiler.

```c
struct expr {
    expr_t kind;
    struct expr *left;
    struct expr *right;
    const char *name;
    int integer_value;
    const char* string_literal;
};
```

```c
typedef enum {
    EXPR_ADD,
    EXPR_SUB,
    EXPR_MUL,
    EXPR_DIV,
    EXPR_NAME,
    EXPR_INTEGER_LITERAL,
    EXPR_STRING_LITERAL,
} expr_t;
```

As before, you should create a factory for a binary operator:

```c
struct expr * expr_create( expr_t kind,
                            struct expr *L, struct expr *R );
```

And then a factory for each of the leaf types:

```c
struct expr * expr_create_name( const char *name );
struct expr * expr_create_integer_literal( int i );
struct expr * expr_create_boolean_literal( int b );
struct expr * expr_create_char_literal( char c );
struct expr * expr_create_string_literal( const char *str );
```

Note that you can store the integer, boolean, and character literal values all in the integer_value field.
A few cases deserve special mention. Unary operators like logical-not typically have their sole argument in the left pointer:

```
! x
```

A function call is constructed by creating an `EXPR_CALL` node, such that the left-hand side is the function name, and the right hand side is an unbalanced tree of `EXPR_ARG` nodes. While this looks a bit awkward, it allows us to express a linked list using a tree, and will simplify the handling of function call arguments on the stack during code generation.

```
f(a, b, c)
```
Array subscripting is treated like a binary operator, such that the name of the array is on the left side of the `EXPR_SUBSCRIPT` operator, and an integer expression on the right:

```
\texttt{a[b]}
```

6.5 Types

A type structure encodes the type of every variable and function mentioned in a declaration. Primitive types like `integer` and `boolean` are expressed by simply setting the `kind` field appropriately, and leaving the other fields null. Compound types like `array` and `function` are built by connecting multiple type structures together.

```c
typedef enum {
    TYPE_VOID,
    TYPE_BOOLEAN,
    TYPE_CHARACTER,
    TYPE_INTEGER,
    TYPE_STRING,
    TYPE_ARRAY,
    TYPE_FUNCTION
} type_t;

struct type {
    type_t kind;
    struct type *subtype;
    struct param_list *params;
};

struct param_list {
    char *name;
    struct type *type;
    struct param_list *next;
};
```
For example, to express a basic type like a boolean or an integer, we simply create a standalone type structure, with kind set appropriately, and the other fields null:

```
boolean
```

```
integer
```

To express a compound type like an array of integers, we set kind to TYPE_ARRAY and set subtype to point to a TYPE_INTEGER:

```
array [] integer
```

These can be linked to arbitrary depth, so to express an array of array of integers:

```
array [] array [] integer
```
To express the type of a function, we use `subtype` to express the return type of the function, and then connect a linked list of `param_list` nodes to describe the name and type of each parameter to the function.

For example, here is the type of a function which takes two arguments and returns an integer:

```plaintext
function integer (s:string, c:char)
```

![Diagram of the abstract syntax tree for the type of the function `integer`]

Note that the type structures here let us express some complicated and powerful higher order concepts of programming. By simply swapping in complex types, you can describe an array of ten functions, each returning an integer:

```plaintext
a: array [10] function integer ( x: integer );
```

Or how about a function that returns a function?

```plaintext
f: function function integer (x:integer) (y:integer);
```

Or even a function that returns an array of functions!

```plaintext
g: function array [10]
    function integer (x:integer) (y:integer);
```

While the C-Minor type system is capable of **expressing** these ideas, these combinations will be rejected later in typechecking, because they require a more dynamic implementation than we are prepared to create. If you find these ideas interesting, then you should read up on functional languages such as Scheme and Haskell.

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6.6 Putting it All Together

Now that you have seen each individual component, let’s see how a complete C-Minor function would be expressed as an AST:

```plaintext
compute: function integer ( x:integer ) = {
    i: integer;
    total: integer = 0;
    for(i=0; i<10; i++) {
        total = total + i;
    }
    return total;
}
```

```
DECL "compute"

TYPE_FUNCTION
    subtype
        params
            STMT_DECL
                decl
                    init_expr
                        expr
                            next_expr
                                body
                                    else_body
                                        next

TYPE_INTEGER
    subtype
        params
            PARAM
                name
                    type
                        next

DECL "i"

STMT_DECL
    decl
        init_expr
            expr
                next_expr
                    body
                        else_body
                            next

EXPR_INTEGER
    0

EXPR_NAME
    i

EXPR_INTEGER
    10

STMT_EXPR
    decl
        init_expr
            expr
                next_expr
                    body
                        else_body
                            next

EXPR_NAME
    total

EXPR_ASSIGN
    left
        right

EXPR_NAME
    total

EXPR_ADD
    left
        right

STMT_BLOCK
    decl
        init_expr
            expr
                next_expr
                    body
                        else_body
                            next

EXPR_NAME
    total
```

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6.7 Building the AST

With the functions created so far in this chapter, we could, in principle, construct the AST manually in a sort of nested style. For example, the following code represents a function called `square` which accepts an integer x as a parameter, and returns the value x*x:

```c
int square(int x)
{
    return x * x;
}
```

Obviously, this is no way to write code! Instead, we want our parser to invoke the various creation functions whenever they are reduced, and then hook them up into a complete tree. Using an LR parser generator like Bison, this process is straightforward. (Here I will give you the idea of how to proceed, but you will need to figure out many of the details in order to complete the parser.)

At the top level, a C-Minor program is a sequence of declarations:

```c
program : decl_list
{
    parser_result = $1;
}
```

Then, we write rules for each of the various kinds of declarations in a C-Minor program:

```c
decl : name TOKEN_COLON type TOKEN_SEMI
{ $$ = decl_create($1,$3,0,0); } |
    name TOKEN_COLON type TOKEN_ASSIGN expr TOKEN_SEMI
{ $$ = decl_create($1,$3,$5,0,0); } |
    /* and more cases here */
    ... |
```

Since each `decl` structure is created separately, we must connect them together in a linked list formed by a `decl_list`. This is most easily done...
by making the rule right-recursive, so that `decl` on the left represents one
declaration, and `decl_list` on the right represents the remainder of the
linked list. The end of the list is a null value provided when `decl_list`
produces $\epsilon$.

```
decl_list : decl decl_list
            { $$ = $1; $1->next = $2; }
            | /* epsilon */
            { $$ = 0; }
            ;
```

For each kind of statement, we create a `stmt` structure that pulls out
the necessary elements from the grammar.

```
stmt : TOKEN_IF TOKEN_LPAREN expr TOKEN_RPAREN stmt
       { $$ = stmt_create(STMT_IF_ELSE,0,0,$3,0,$5,$0,0); }
       | TOKEN_LBRACE stmt_list TOKEN_RBRACE
       { $$ = stmt_create(STMT_BLOCK,0,0,0,0,$2,0,0); }
       | /* and more cases here */
       . . .
```

Proceed in this way down through each of the grammar elements of a
C-Minor program: declarations, statements, expressions, types, parameters,
until you reach the leaf elements of literal values and symbols, which
are handled in the same way as in Chapter 5.

There is one last complication: What, exactly is the semantic type of the
values returned as each rule is reduced? It isn’t a single type, because each
kind of rule returns a different data structure: a declaration rule returns a
`struct decl *`, while an identifier rule returns a `char *`. To make this
work, we inform Bison that the semantic value is the union of all of the
types in the AST:

```
%union {
  struct decl *decl;
  struct stmt *stmt;
  . . .
  char *name;
};
```

And then indicate the specific subfield of the union used by each rule:

```
%type <decl> program decl_list decl . . .
%type <stmt> stmt_list stmt . . .
. . .
%type <name> name
```
6.8 Exercises

1. Write a complete LR grammar for C-Minor and test it using Bison. Your first attempt will certainly have many shift-reduce and reduce-reduce conflicts, so use your knowledge of grammars from Chapter 4 to rewrite the grammar and eliminate the conflicts.

2. Write the AST structures and generating functions as outlined in this chapter, and manually construct some simple ASTs using nested function calls as shown above.

3. Add new functions decl_print(), stmt_print(), etc. that print the AST back out so you can verify that the program was generated correctly. Make your output nicely formatted using indentation and consistent spacing, so that the code is easily readable.

4. Add the AST generator functions as action rules to your Bison grammar, so that you can parse complete programs, and print them back out again.

5. Add new functions decl_translate(), stmt_translate(), etc. that output the C-Minor AST in a different language of your own choosing, such as Python or Java or Rust.

6. Add new functions that emit the AST in a graphical form so you can “see” the structure of a program. One approach would be to use the Graphviz DOT format: let each declaration, statement, etc be a node in a graph, and then let each pointer between structures be an edge in the graph.