CHAMELEoN: A CUSTOMIZABLE LANGUAGE FOR TEACHING PROGRAMMING LANGUAGES

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ABSTRACT

CHAMELEoN is a programming language for teaching students the concepts and implementation of computer languages. We describe its syntax and semantics, the educational aspects involved in the implementation of a variety of interpreters for it, its malleability, and student feedback to inspire its use for teaching languages.

INTRODUCTION

The CHAMELEoN programming language, inspired by [3], is a language for teaching students the concepts and implementation of computer languages. In particular, in the course of their study of programming languages, students have implemented a variety of an environment-passing interpreters for CHAMELEoN, in the tradition of [3], initially in Racket (Scheme) and, more recently, in Python.

The scanner and parser for CHAMELEoN were developed using Python Lex-Yacc (PLY v3.9)—a scanner/parser generator for Python—and have been tested in Python 3.4.6. For the details of PLY, see http://www.dabeaz.com/ply/ The front end of our CHAMELEoN interpreter in Racket is built using SLLGEN—a scanner/parser generator for Scheme.
Figure 1: The grammar in EBNF for the CHAMELEON programming language.
The grammar in EBNF for CHAMELEoN (v4) is given in Figure 1. CHAMELEoN can be used as a functional, expression-oriented language [7] or as a statement-oriented language or both. To use it as an expression-oriented language, use the \(<\text{program}\> ::= \langle\text{expression}\rangle\) grammar rule; to use it as an imperative, statement-oriented language, use the \(<\text{program}\> ::= <\text{statement}\>\) rule.

User-defined functions are first-class entities in CHAMELEoN. This means that a function can be the return value of an expression (i.e., an expressed value), bound to an identifier and, thus, stored in the environment of the interpreter (i.e., a denoted value), and passed as an argument to a function. Notice from the rules in Figure 1, CHAMELEoN supports side effect (through variable assignment) and arrays. The primitives array, arrayreference, and arrayassign create an array, dereference an array, and update an array, respectively. While we have multiple versions of CHAMELEoN, each supporting varying concepts, in version 4

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Expressed Value} & = \text{Integer} \cup \text{String} \cup \text{Closure} \\
\text{Denoted Value} & = \text{Reference to an Expressed Value}.
\end{align*}
\]

Thus, akin to Java or Scheme, all denoted values are references, but are implicitly dereferenced.

**LEARNING LANGUAGES THROUGH INTERPRETERS**

There are multiple benefits from incrementally implementing language interpreters. First, students are confronted with one of the most fundamental truths of computing: “the interpreter for a computer language is just another program” [3]. Second, once a language interpreter is established as just another program, students realize quickly that implementing a new concept, construct, or feature in a computer language amounts to little more than a few lines of code in the interpreter. Third, students learn the causal relationship between a language and its interpreter. In other words, they realize that an interpreter for a language explicitly defines the seman-
tics of the language it interprets. The consequences of this realization are compelling: students are mystified by the drastic changes they can affect in the semantics of implemented language by changing only a few lines of code in the interpreter—sometimes as little as one line (e.g., using dynamic scoping rather than static scoping, or using lazy evaluation as opposed to eager evaluation).

Students start by implementing only primitive operations (see Figure 1; save for array manipulations). Then, students develop an evaluate-expression function which accepts an expression and an environment as arguments and evaluates the passed expression in the passed environment and returns the result. This function, which is at the heart of any interpreter, constitutes a large conditional structure based on the type of expression passed (e.g., a variable reference or function definition). Then students add support for conditional evaluation and local binding. Support for local binding requires a lookup environment which leads to the possibility of testing a variety of representations for that environment, as long as it adheres to the well-defined interface used by evaluate-expression. From there, students add support for non-recursive functions, which raises the issue of how to represent a function of which there are a host of options from which to choose. At this point, students can also explore implementing dynamic scoping as an alternative to the default static scoping. This amounts to little more than storing the calling environment, rather than the lexically enclosing environment, in the representation of the function. Next, students implement recursive functions, which require a modified environment. At this point, students have implemented CHAMELEoN v2—a purely functional language—and explored the use of multiple configuration options for both aspects of the design of the interpreter as well as the semantics of implemented concepts (see Table 1).

Next, students start slowly to morph CHAMELEoN, through its interpreter, into an imperative language by adding provision for side effect (e.g., through variable assignment). Variable assignment
Table 1: Configuration options in CHAMELE0N.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interpreter Design Options</th>
<th>Language Semantic Options</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of Environment</td>
<td>Representation of Environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Named</td>
<td>Abstract Syntax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nameless</td>
<td>List of Vectors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Not all implementation options are available for use with the nameless environment.

requires a modification to the representation of the environment. Now, the environment must store references to expressed values, rather than the expressed values themselves. This raises the issue of implicit versus explicit dereferencing, and naturally leads to exploring a variety of parameter-passing mechanisms (e.g., pass-by-reference or pass-by-name/lazy evaluation). Finally, students close the loop on the imperative approach by eliminating the need to use recursion for repetition by instrumenting the language, through its interpreter, to be a statement-oriented, rather than expression-oriented, language. This involves adding support for statement blocks, while loops, and I/O operations.

The use of a scanner/parser generator facilitates this incremental development approach which leads to a malleable interpreter/language. Adding a new feature typically involves adding a new grammar rule and/or primitive, adding a new field to the abstract syntax representation of an expression, and adding a new case to the evaluate-expression function. This is theme of [3].

Configuring the Language

Table 1 enumerates the configuration options available in CHAMELE0N for aspects of the design of the interpreter (e.g., choice of representation of referencing environment), as well as for the semantics of implemented concepts (e.g., choice of parameter-passing mechanism). As we vary the latter, we get a different version of the language (see Table 2).
Table 2: Design choices and implemented concepts in progressive versions of CHAMELEON. The symbol ↓ indicates that the concept is supported through its implementation in the defining language. The symbol ↑ indicates that the concept is implemented from first principles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Design Choice</th>
<th>Version of CHAMELEON</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Expressed Values</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>ints</td>
<td>ints ∪ cls</td>
<td>ints ∪ cls</td>
<td>ints ∪ cls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Denoted Values</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>ints</td>
<td>ints ∪ cls</td>
<td>refs. to expr’d vals.</td>
<td>refs. to expr’d vals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rep. of Env.</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>3 possible</td>
<td>3 possible</td>
<td>3 possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rep. of Functions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>2 possible</td>
<td>2 possible</td>
<td>2 possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rep. of References</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>ASR</td>
<td>ASR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Local Binding</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>↑let ↑</td>
<td>↑let ↑</td>
<td>↑let ↑</td>
<td>↑let ↑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conditionals</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>↓cond ↓</td>
<td>↓cond ↓</td>
<td>↓cond ↓</td>
<td>↓cond ↓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-recursive Functions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>×</td>
<td>↑fun ↑</td>
<td>↑fun ↑</td>
<td>↑fun ↑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Recursive Functions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>×</td>
<td>↑fun ↑</td>
<td>↑fun ↑</td>
<td>↑fun ↑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scoping</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>lexical</td>
<td>lexical</td>
<td>lexical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Env. Bound to Closure</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>deep</td>
<td>deep</td>
<td>deep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parameter Passing</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>↑by value ↑</td>
<td>↑by reference ↑</td>
<td>↑by value ↑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Side Effects</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>×</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>↑assign ↑</td>
<td>↑multiple ↓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Statement Blocks</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Repetition</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>↓while ↓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once students have some experience implementing language interpreters, they can begin to discern how to use the language itself to support features currently unsupported in the interpreter. For instance, prior to supporting recursive functions in CHAMELEON, students can simulate support for recursion by passing a function to itself:

```plaintext
ChAmElEoN> let sum = fun (x) if zero?(x) 0 else +(x, (sum dec1(x)))
in (sum 5)
Runtime Error: Line 2: Unbound Identifier 'sum'

ChAmElEoN> let sum = fun (s, x) if zero?(x) 0 else +(x, (s s, dec1(x)))
in (sum sum, 5)
```

15
Example CHAMELEoN Program: A Simple Stack Object

Through an extension of the prior idea, even though CHAMELEoN does not have support for object-oriented programming, students can use CHAMELEoN to build object-oriented abstractions. For instance, the following CHAMELEoN program, simplified for purposes for exposition, simulates the implementation of a simple stack class with two constructors (new_stack and push) and three observers/messages (emptystack?, top, pop). The output of this program is 3. The stack object is represented as a CHAMELEoN closure.

```chameleon
let
    new_stack = fun ()
        fun (msg)
            if eqv?(msg, 1)
                −1 — error: cannot top an empty stack
            else
                if eqv?(msg, 2)
                    −2 — error: cannot pop an empty stack
                else
                    1 — represents true: stack is empty

    push = fun (elem, stack)
        fun (msg)
            if eqv?(msg, 1) elem
            else if eqv?(msg, 2) stack
                else 0

emptystack? = fun (stack) {stack 0}
top = fun (stack) {stack 1}
pop = fun (stack) {stack 2}
in
let
    simplestack = (new_stack)
in
    (top (push 3, (push 2, (push 1, simplestack))))
```

Other example programs, including an example more faithful to the tenants of object-orientation, especially encapsulation, are available in our Git repositories (see Table 3). These programs demonstrate that we can create object-oriented abstractions from within the CHAMELEoN language.
Table 3: Links to versions of CHAMELEoN interpreters in Python and Racket.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>BitBucket Link to Git Repository</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**STUDENT FEEDBACK**

Students have found CHAMELEoN interpreter-building helpful and fun, and to have educational merit.

- **Building the interpreter was helpful.**
- **Implementing these concepts first hand is what makes this class so worthwhile.**
- **I really liked taking a look at the interpreter, which is at the heart of programming languages. In fact, the interpreter is what defines the programming language.**
- **I feel implementing concepts in a language is the best way to learn some of these tough concepts.**
- **I would not ditch the interpreter, it is what ties many of the course themes together and it is where some of the more abstract concepts were concretely demonstrated.**
- **My favorite module was definitely module three where we got to see how an interpreter comes together.**

**CONCLUSION**

The interpreter-based approach toward learning programming languages is neither unique nor a panacea. Pedagogically, the interpreter and language survey approaches are essentially complements of each other in advantages and disadvantages. For a discussion of the differences and trade-offs, we refer the reader to [4]. A myriad of other approaches for teaching programming languages
have been tried and tested [1 2 5 6 8]. What sets the interpreter-based approach in CHAMELEoN apart from the others, and in particular [3], is the use of Python—an approachable, practical, and widely-used programming language—as the implementation language. The use of CHAMELEoN is integrated into a programming languages textbook—titled Programming Languages: Concepts and Implementation—which is available free and by request on a trial basis for educators interested in adopting this approach. A sample course outline of topics, including course notes, through the textbook is available online at http://academic.udayton.edu/SaverioPerugini/pl. See Table 3 for links to our release versions of CHAMELEoN interpreters in both Python and Racket.

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REFERENCES


