Alternative Evaluation Orders:

Delay and laziness

When are expressions evaluated?

Bonus: memoization
Eager evaluation: arguments first
call-by-value semantics

When do arguments/subexpressions evaluate (ML, Racket)?

- Function arguments: once, before calling function
- Conditional branches: only one branch, after checking condition

fun iffy x y z =
  if x then y else z

fun facty n =
  iffy (n = 0)
     1
   (n * (facty (n - 1)))

What's wrong?

not eager...
Delayed evaluation with thunks

explicit emulation of lexically-scoped call-by-name semantics

Thunk fn () => e
- n. a zero-argument function used to delay evaluation
- v. to create a thunk from an expression:
  "thunk the expression"

No new language features.

fun if_by_name x y z =
  if x () then y () else z ()

fun fact n =
  if_by_name (fn () => n = 0)
  (fn () => 1)
  (fn () => n * (fact (n - 1)))
Thunk: evaluate when value needed

explicit emulation of lexically-scoped call-by-name semantics

fun f1 th = 
  if ... then 7 else ... th() ...

fun f2 th = 
  if ... then 7 else th() + th()

fun f3 th = 
  let val v = th ()
  in if ... then 7 else v + v end

fun f4 th = 
  if ... then 7 else
  let val v = th () in v + v end
Lazy evaluation: first time value is needed

call-by-need semantics

Argument/subexpression evaluated zero or one times, no earlier than first time result is actually needed.

Result reused (not recomputed) if needed again anywhere.

Benefits of delayed evaluation, with minimized costs.

Explicit laziness with promises:
- Promise.delay (fn () => x * f x)
- Promise.force p
Promises: explicit laziness
(a.k.a. suspensions)

signature PROMISE =
sig

(* Type of promises for 'a. *)
type 'a t

(* Take a thunk for an 'a and make a promise to produce an 'a. *)
val delay : (unit -> 'a) -> 'a t

(* If promise not yet forced, call thunk and save. Return saved thunk result. *)
val force : 'a t -> 'a

end
Promises: delay and force  
(a.k.a. suspensions)

structure Promise -> PROMISE =
struct
datatype 'a promise = Thunk of unit -> 'a
  | Value of 'a

type 'a t = 'a promise ref

fun delay thunk = ref (Thunk thunk)

fun force p =
  case !p of
    Value v => v
  | Thunk th =>
    let val v = th ()
    val _ = ans := Value v
    in v end

Limited mutation hidden in ADT.
**Stream: infinite sequence of values**

- Cannot make all the elements *now*.
- Make one when asked, delay making the rest.

- Interface/idiom for **division of labor**:  
  - Stream producer  
  - Stream consumer  
  - Interleave production / consumption in *time*, but *not in code*.

- Examples:  
  - UI events  
  - UNIX pipes: `git diff delay.sml | grep "thunk"`  
  - Sequential logic circuit updates (CS 240)
Streams in ML: false start

Let a stream be a thunk that, when called, returns a pair of
– the next element; and
– the rest of the stream.

\[
\text{fn ( ) } \Rightarrow (\text{next\_element}, \text{next\_thunk})
\]

Given stream \( s \), get elements:
– First: let \( \text{val (v1,s1)} = s () \)
– Second: \( \text{val (v2,s2)} = s1 () \)
– Third: \( \text{val (v3,s3)} = s2 () \ldots \)

Type of \( s \)? \( s1? \)
\( s2? \) \( s3? \ldots ? \)
Streams in ML: recursive types

Single-constructor datatype allows recursive type:

datatype 'a scons = Scons of 'a * (unit -> 'a scons)

type 'a stream = unit -> 'a scons

Given a stream s:

– First: let val Scons(v1,s1) = s ()
– Second: val Scons(v2,s2) = s1 ()
– Third: val Scons(v3,s3) = s2 ()
    ...

Type of s? s1? s2? s3? ...?
Stream consumers

Find index of first element in stream for which f returns true.

```ml
fun firstindex f stream = let fun consume stream acc = let val Scons (v,s) = stream () in if f v then acc else consume s (acc + 1) end end in consume stream 0 end

: ('a -> bool) -> 'a stream -> int
```
Stream producers

```plaintext
fun ones () = Scons (1, ones)
val rec ones = fn () => Scons (1, ones)
```

Create next thunk via **delayed recursion!**
- Return a thunk that, when called, calls the outer function recursively.

```plaintext
val nats =
    let fun f x = Scons (x, fn () => f (x + 1))
in fn () => f 0 end

val powers2 =
    let fun f x = Scons (x, fn () => f (x * 2))
in fn () => f 1 end
```
Getting it wrong

Tries to use a variable before it is defined.

val ones_bad = Scons (1, ones_bad)

Would call ones_worse recursively immediately (infinitely). Does not type-check.

fun ones_worse () = Scons (1, ones_worse ())

Correct: thunk that returns Scons of value and stream (thunk).

fun ones () = Scons (1, ones)
val rec ones = fn () => Scons (1, ones)
Bonus: Lazy by default?

ML:

- Eager evaluation. Explicitly emulate laziness when needed (promises).
- Immutable data, bindings. Explicit mutable cells when needed (refs).
- Side effects anywhere.

Pros: avoid unnecessary work, build elegant infinite data structures.

Cons: difficult to control/predict evaluation order:

- Space usage: when will environments become unreachable?
- Side-effect ordering: when will effects execute?

Haskell: canonical real-world example

- Non-strict evaluation, except pattern-matching. Explicit strictness when needed.
- Usually implemented as lazy evaluation.
- Immutable everything. Emulate mutation/state when needed.
- Side effects banned/restricted/emulated.
Bonus: Memoization
see memo.sml

Not delayed evaluation, but...
- Promises (call-by-need) are memoized thunks (call-by-name), though
  memoization is more general (multiple arguments).
- Can use an indirect recursive style similar to streams (without delay)
  • Actually fixpoint...

Basic idea:
- Save results of expensive pure computations in mutable cache.
- Reuse earlier computed results instead of recomputing.
- Even for recursive calls.

Benefits:
- Save time when recomputing.
- Can reduce exponential recursion costs to linear
  (and amortized by repeated calls with same arguments).

See also: dynamic programming (CS 231)