Alternative Evaluation Orders:

Delay and laziness

When are expressions evaluated?

Bonus: memoization

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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 =  
    if_by_name (n = 0)  
        1  
        (n * (facty (n - 1)))

What’s wrong?

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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)))

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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

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See code examples
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 _ = p := Value v
    in v end

Stream: infinite sequence of values

Infinite sequence:
- 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.

```ml
fn () => (next_element, next_thunk)
```

Given stream `s`, get elements:
- First: let `val (v1,s1) = s ()`
- Second: `val (v2,s2) = s1 ()`
- Third: `val (v3,s3) = s2 () ...`

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
  in consume stream 0 end
: ('a -> bool) -> 'a stream -> int
```

Stream producers

Create next thunk via **delayed recursion**!

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

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

Streams in ML: recursive types

Single-constructor datatype allows recursive type:

```ml
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 () ...`

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Getting it wrong

Tries to use a variable before it is defined.

```ml
val ones_bad = Scons (1, ones_bad)
```

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

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

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

```ml
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)