CHAPTER 1

Integers and variables

The main concepts in this chapter are

abstract syntax trees: Inside the compiler we represent programs with a data-structure called an abstract syntax tree (AST).
recursive functions: We analyze and manipulate abstract syntax trees with recursive functions.
flattening expressions into instructions: One step in compiling high-level languages to low-level languages is flattening expressions into lists of instructions.
selecting instructions: The x86 assembly language offers a peculiar variety of instructions, so selecting which instructions are needed to get the job done is not always easy.
test-driven development: A compiler is a large piece of software. To maximize our productivity (and minimize bugs!) we use good software engineering practices, such as writing lots of good test cases before writing code.

1.1. ASTs and the $P_0$ subset of Python

The first subset of Python that we consider is extremely simple: it consists of print statements, assignment statements, some integer arithmetic, and the input() function. We call this subset $P_0$. The following is an example $P_0$ program.

```
print - input() + input()
```

Programs are written one character at a time but we, as programmers, do not think of programs as sequences of characters. We think about programs in chunks like if statements and for loops. These chunks often have parts, for example, an if statement has a then-clause and an else-clause. Inside the compiler, we often traverse over a program one chunk at a time, going from parent chunks to their children. A data-structure that facilitates this kind of traversal is a tree. Each node in the tree represents a programming language construct and each node has edges that point to its children. When a tree is used to represent a program, we call it an abstract syntax tree.
(AST). While trees in nature grow up with their leaves at the top, we think of ASTs as growing down with the leaves at the bottom.

![Diagram of abstract syntax tree]

**Figure 1.** The abstract syntax tree for `print - input() + input()`.

Figure 1 shows the abstract syntax tree for the previous $P_0$ program. There is a standard Python library that turns a sequence of characters into an AST, using a process called *parsing*, which we learn about in the next chapter. The following interaction with the Python interpreter shows a call to the Python parser.

```python
>>> import compiler
>>> ast = compiler.parse("print - input() + input()")
```

Each node in the AST is a Python object. The objects are instances of Python classes; there is one class for each language construct. In the above interaction we invoked `compiler.parse`, but in your compiler I recommend using an alternative function that takes it’s input from a file: `compiler.parseFile`. Figure 2 shows the Python classes for the AST nodes for $P_0$. For each class, we have only listed its constructor, the `__init__` method. You can find out more about these classes by
1.2. Understand the meaning of $P_0$

The meaning of Python programs, that is, what happens when you run a program, is defined in the Python Reference Manual [20].
EXERCISE 1.1. Read the sections of the Python Reference Manual that apply to $P_0$: 3.2, 5.5, 5.6, 6.1, 6.2, and 6.6. Also read the entry for the `input` function in the Python Library Reference, in section 2.1.

Sometimes it is difficult to understand the technical jargon in programming language reference manuals. A complementary way to learn about the meaning of Python programs is to experiment with the standard Python interpreter. If there is an aspect of the language that you do not understand, create a program that uses that aspect and run it! Suppose you are not sure about a particular feature but have a guess, a hypothesis, about how it works. Think of a program that will produce one output if your hypothesis is correct and produce a different output if your hypothesis is incorrect. You can then run the Python interpreter to validate or disprove your hypothesis.

For example, suppose that you are not sure what happens when the result of an arithmetic operation results in a very large integer, an integer too large to be stored in a machine register ($> 2^{31} - 1$). In the language C, integer operations wrap around, so $2 \times 2^{30}$ produces $-2147483648 [13]$. Does the same thing happen in Python? Let us try it and see:

```
>>> 2 * 2**30
2147483648L
```

No, the number does not wrap around! Instead, Python has two kinds of integers: plain integers for integers in the range $-2^{31}$ to $2^{31} - 1$ and long integers for integers in a range that is only limited by the amount of (virtual) memory in your computer. For $P_0$ we restrict our attention to just plain integers and say that operations that result in integers outside of the range $-2^{31}$ to $2^{31} - 1$ are undefined.

The built-in Python function `input()` reads in a line from standard input (stdin) and then interprets the string as if it were a Python expression, using the built-in `eval` function. For $P_0$ we only require a subset of this functionality. The `input` function need only deal with integer literals. A call to the input function, of the form "input()", is parsed into the function call AST node `CallFunc`. You do not need to handle general function calls, just recognize the special case of a function call where the function being called is named "input".

EXERCISE 1.2. Write some programs in the $P_0$ subset of Python. The programs should be chosen to help you understand the language. Look for corner cases or unusual aspects of the language to test in your programs. Later in this assignment, you will use these programs to test your compiler, so the tests should be thorough and
should exercise all the features of $P_0$. If the tests are not thorough, then your compiler may pass all your tests but still have bugs that are caught by the automatic grader. Run your test programs using the standard Python interpreter.

### 1.3. Write recursive functions

The main programming technique for analyzing and manipulating ASTs is to write recursive functions that traverse the tree. As an example, we create a function called `num_nodes` that counts the number of nodes in an AST. Figure 3 shows a schematic of how this function works. Each triangle represents a call to `num_nodes` and is responsible for counting the number of nodes in the sub-tree whose root is the argument to `num_nodes`. In the figure, the largest triangle is responsible for counting the number of nodes in the sub-tree rooted at `Add`. The key to writing a recursive function is to be lazy! Let the recursion do the work for you. Just process one node and let the recursion handle the children. In Figure 3, we make the recursive calls `num_nodes(left)` and `num_nodes(right)` to count the nodes in the child sub-trees. All we have to do to then is to add the two numbers and add one more to count the current node. Figure 4 shows the definition of the `num_nodes` function.

![Diagram of recursive function processing an AST](image)

**Figure 3.** Schematic for a recursive function processing an AST.

When a node has a *list* of children, as is the case for `Stmt`, a convenient way to process the children is to use List Comprehensions, described in the Python Tutorial [21]. A list comprehension has the following form

```
[compute for variable in list]
```
from compiler.ast import *

def num_nodes(n):
    if isinstance(n, Module):
        return 1 + num_nodes(n.node)
    elif isinstance(n, Stmt):
        return 1 + sum([num_nodes(x) for x in n.nodes])
    elif isinstance(n, Printnl):
        return 1 + num_nodes(n.nodes[0])
    elif isinstance(n, Assign):
        return 1 + num_nodes(n.nodes[0]) + num_nodes(n.expr)
    elif isinstance(n, AssName):
        return 1
    elif isinstance(n, Discard):
        return 1 + num_nodes(n.expr)
    elif isinstance(n, Const):
        return 1
    elif isinstance(n, Name):
        return 1
    elif isinstance(n, Add):
        return 1 + num_nodes(n.left) + num_nodes(n.right)
    elif isinstance(n, UnarySub):
        return 1 + num_nodes(n.expr)
    elif isinstance(n, CallFunc):
        return 1 + num_nodes(n.node)
    else:
        raise Exception('Error in num_nodes: unrecognized AST node')

Figure 4. Recursive function that counts the number of nodes in an AST.

This performs the specified computation for each element in the list, resulting in a list holding the results of the computations. For example, in Figure 4 in the case for Stmt we write

\[\text{[num\_nodes(x) for x in n.nodes]}\]

This code makes a recursive call to num\_nodes for each child node in the list n.nodes. The result of this list comprehension is a list of numbers. The complete code for handling a Stmt node in Figure 4 is

\[
\text{return 1 + sum([num\_nodes(x) for x in n.nodes])}
\]

As is typical in a recursive function, after making the recursive calls to the children, there is some work left to do. We add up the number of nodes from the children using the sum function, which is documented under Built-in Functions in the Python Library Manual [19]. We then add 1 to account for the Stmt node itself.

There are 11 if statements in the num\_nodes function, one for each kind of AST node. In general, when writing a recursive function
over an AST, it is good to double check and make sure that you have written one if for each kind of AST node. The raise of an exception in the else checks that the input does not contain any other kinds of nodes.

1.4. Learn the x86 assembly language

This section gives a brief introduction to the x86 assembly language. There are two variations on the syntax for x86 assembly: the Intel syntax and the AT&T syntax. Here we use the AT&T syntax, which is accepted by the GNU Assembler and by gcc. The main difference between the AT&T syntax and the Intel syntax is that in AT&T syntax the destination register is on the right, whereas in Intel syntax it is on the left.

The x86 assembly language consists of hundreds of instructions and many intricate details. However, for our purposes a tiny subset of the language will do. The program in Figure 5 serves to give a first taste of x86 assembly. This program is equivalent to the following Python program, a small variation on the one we discussed earlier.

```python
x = - input()
print x + input()
```

Perhaps the most obvious difference between Python and x86 is that Python allows expressions to be nested within one another. In contrast, an x86 program consists of a flat sequence of instructions. Another difference is that x86 does not have variables. Instead, it has a fixed set of registers that can each hold 32 bits. The registers have funny three letter names:

```
eax, ebx, ecx, edx, esi, edi, ebp, esp
```

When referring to a register in an instruction, place a percent sign (%) before the name of the register.

When compiling from Python to x86, we may very well have more variables than registers. In such situations we use the stack to store the variables. Recall that a stack is a data structure that supports pushing and popping values in a last-in-first-out (LIFO) manner. In the program in Figure 5, the variable x has been mapped to a stack location. The register esp always contains the address of the item at the front of the stack. In addition to local variables, the stack is also used to pass arguments in a function call. In this course we use the cdecl convention used by the GNU C compiler. The instruction `pushl %eax`, which appears before the call to `print_int_nl`, serves to put the result of the addition on the stack so that it can be
accessed within the `print_int_nl` function. The stack grows down, so the `pushl` instruction causes `esp` to be lowered by 4 bytes (the size of one 32 bit integer).

Because the stack pointer, `esp`, is constantly changing, it would be difficult to use `esp` for referring to local variables stored on the stack. Instead, the `ebp` register (bp is for base pointer) is used for this purpose.

The stack is conceptually a two-dimensional stack. We have already seen that words (32-bit values) are pushed and popped via the stack pointer. Additionally, each function call pushes an activation record to store its local state. The function call’s activation record is popped when the function returns. The first two instructions set up of the activation record. In particular, the instruction `pushl %ebp` saves the current value of the base pointer, that is, the base pointer of the previous activation record. Then, the instruction `movl %esp,%ebp` puts a copy of the stack pointer into `ebp` delineating the start of this call’s activation record. We can then use `ebp` throughout the lifetime of the call to this function to refer to local variables on the stack. And we see that `ebp` points to the head of a linked-list of activation records. In Figure 5, the value of variable `x` is referred to by `-4(%ebp)`, which is the assembly way of writing the C expression `*(ebp - 4)` (the 4 is in bytes). That is, it loads the data from the address stored in `ebp` minus 4 bytes.

The `eax` register plays a special role: functions put their return values in `eax`. For example, in Figure 5, the calls to the `input` function put their results in `eax`. It is a good idea not to put anything important into `eax` before making a function call, as it will be overwritten. In general, a function may overwrite any of the caller-save registers, which are `eax`, `ecx`, and `edx`. The rest of the registers are callee-save which means that if a function wants to use those registers, it has to first save them and then restore them before returning. In Figure 5, the first thing that the `main` function does is save the value of the `ebp` register on the stack. The `leave` instruction copies the contents of the `ebp` register into the `esp` register, so `esp` points to the same place in the stack as the base pointer. It then pops the old base pointer into the `ebp` register. Appendix 6.4 is a quick reference for the x86 instructions that you will likely need. (They are the ones I used in the reference compiler.) For a complete list of x86 instructions, see the Intel manuals [9, 10, 11].
1.5. Flatten expressions

The first step in translating from $P_0$ to x86 is to flatten complex expressions into a series of assignment statements. For example, the program

\[
\text{print } - \text{input()} + 2
\]

is translated to the following

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{tmp0} & = \text{input()} \\
\text{tmp1} & = -\text{tmp0} \\
\text{tmp2} & = \text{tmp1} + 2 \\
\text{print } \text{tmp2}
\end{align*}
\]

In the resulting code, the operands of an expression are either variables or constants, that is, they are simple expressions. If an expression has any other kind of operand, then it is a complex expression.

Exercise 1.3. Write a recursive function that flattens a $P_0$ program into an equivalent $P_0$ program that contains no complex expressions. Test that you have not changed the semantics of the program by writing a function that prints the resulting program. Run the program using the standard python interpreter to verify that it gives the the same answers for all of your test cases.
1.6. Select instructions

The next step is to translate the flattened $P_0$ statements into x86 instructions. For now we will assign all variables to locations on the stack. In chapter 3, we describe a register allocation algorithm that tries to place as many variables as possible into registers.

Figure 6 shows an example translation, selecting x86 instructions to accomplish each $P_0$ statement. Sometimes several x86 instructions are needed to carry out a Python statement. The translation shown here strives for simplicity over performance. You are encouraged to experiment with better instruction sequences, but it is recommended that you only do that after getting a simple version working. The `print_int_nl` function is provided in a C library, the file `runtime.c` on the course web page.

**Exercise 1.4.** Write a function that translates flattened $P_0$ programs into x86 assembly. In addition to selecting instructions for the Python statements, you will need to generate a label for the main function and the proper prologue and epilogue instructions, which you can copy from Figure 5. The suggested organization of your compiler is shown in Figure 7.

Your compiler should be a (Python) script that takes one argument, the name of the input file, and that produces a file (containing the x86 output) with the same name as the input file except that the `.py` suffix should be replaced by the `.s` suffix.

That is, given a wrapper script that invokes your compiler called `pyyc`, invoking

```
$ ./pyyc mytests/test1.py
```

should produce an x86 assembly file `mytests/test1.s`. 

1.6. SELECT INSTRUCTIONS

```python
tmp0 = input()
tmp1 = -tmp0
tmp2 = tmp1 + 2
print(tmp2)
```

```assembly
.globl main
main:
pushl %ebp
movl %esp, %ebp
subl $12,%esp # make stack space for 3 variables
call input
movl %eax, -4(%ebp) # tmp0 is in -4(%ebp)
movl -4(%ebp), %eax
negl %eax
movl %eax, -8(%ebp) # tmp1 is in -8(%ebp)
movl -8(%ebp), %eax
addl $2, %eax
movl %eax, -12(%ebp) # tmp2 is in -12(%ebp)
pushl -12(%ebp) # push the argument on the stack
call print_int_nl
addl $4, %esp # pop the stack
movl $0, %eax # put return value in eax
leave
ret
```

**Figure 6.** Example translation to x86 assembly.

**Figure 7.** Suggested organization of the compiler.