Message Passing

- Threads communicate via send and receive along channels instead of read and write of references
- Not so different? (can implement references on top of channels and channels on top of references)
- Synchronous message-passing
  - Block until communication takes place
  - Encode asynchronous by “spawn someone who blocks”

Concurrent ML

- CML is synchronous message-passing with first-class synchronization events
  - Can wrap synchronization abstractions to make new ones
  - At run-time
- Originally done for ML and fits well with lambdas, type-system, and implementation techniques, but more widely applicable
  - Available in Racket, OCaml, Haskell, ...
- Very elegant and under-appreciated
- Think of threads as very lightweight
  - Creation/space cost about like a function call

The Basics

- type 'a channel (* messages passed on channels *)
  - val new_channel : unit -> 'a channel
- type 'a event (* when sync’ed on, get an 'a *)
  - val send : 'a channel -> 'a -> unit event
  - val receive : 'a channel -> 'a event
  - val sync : 'a event -> 'a
- Send and receive return “events” immediately
- Sync blocks until “the event happens”
- Separating these is key in a few slides

Simple version

Can define helper functions by trivial composition:

```ocaml
let sendNow ch a = sync (send ch a) (* block *)
let recvNow ch = sync (receive ch) (* block *)
```

“Who communicates” is up to the CML implementation

- Can be nondeterministic when there are multiple senders/receivers on the same channel
- Implementation needs collection of waiting senders xor receivers

Terminology note:

- Function names are those in OCaml’s Event library.
- In SML, the CML book, etc.:
  ```
  send -> sendEvt  sendNow -> send
  receive -> recvEvt  recvNow -> recv
  ```

Bank Account Example

See lec17code.ml

- First version: In/out channels are only access to private reference
  - In channel of type action channel
  - Out channel of type float channel
- Second version: Makes functional programmers smile
  - State can be argument to a recursive function
  - “Loop-carried”
  - Hints at deep connection between references and channels
  - Can implement the reference abstraction in CML
The Interface

The real point of the example is that you can abstract all the threading and communication away from clients:

```ml
type acct
val mkAcct : unit -> acct
val get : acct -> float -> float
val put : acct -> float -> float
```

Hidden thread communication:
- `mkAcct` makes a thread (the “this account server”)
- `get` and `put` make the server go around the loop once

Races naturally avoided: the server handles one request at a time
- CML implementation has queues for waiting communications

Streams

Another pattern/concept easy to code up in CML is a stream
- An infinite sequence of values, produced lazily (“on demand”)

Example in `lec17code.ml`: square numbers

Standard more complicated example: A network of streams for producing prime numbers. One approach:
- First stream generates 2, 3, 4, ...
- When the last stream generates a number \( p \), return it and dynamically add a stream as the new last stream
  - Draws input from old last stream but outputs only those that are not divisible by \( p \)

Streams also:
- Have deep connections to circuits
- Are easy to code up in lazy languages like Haskell
- Are a key abstraction in real-time data processing

Wanting choice

- So far just used `sendNow` and `recvNow`, hidden behind simple interfaces
- But these block until the rendezvous, which is insufficient for many important communication patterns
- Example: `add`:
  - `add : int channel -> int channel -> int`
  - Must choose which to receive first, hurting performance if other provider ready earlier
- Example: `or`:
  - `or : bool channel -> bool channel -> bool`
  - Cannot short-circuit

This is why we split out `sync` and have other primitives

Choose and Wrap

```ml
type 'a event (* when sync’ed on, get an ’a *)
val send : 'a channel -> 'a -> unit event
val receive : 'a channel -> 'a event
val sync : 'a event -> 'a
val choose : 'a event list -> 'a event
val wrap : 'a event -> (’a -> ’b) -> ’b event
```

- choose: when synchronized on, block until one of the events happen (cf. UNIX select, but more useful to have sync separate)
- wrap: an event with the function as post-processing

Note: Skipping a couple other key primitives (e.g., `withNack` for timeouts)

Circuits

To an electrical engineer:
- `send` and `receive` are ends of a gate
- `wrap` is combinational logic connected to a gate
- `choose` is a multiplexer
- `sync` is getting a result out

To a programming-language person:
- Build up a data structure describing a communication protocol
- Make it a first-class value that can be by passed to `sync`
- Provide events in interfaces so other libraries can compose larger abstractions

What can’t you do

CML is by-design for point-to-point communication
- Provably impossible to do things like 3-way swap (without busy-waiting or higher-level protocols)
- Related to issues of common-knowledge, especially in a distributed setting
- Metamoral: Being a broad computer scientist is really useful
A note on implementation and paradigms

CML encourages using lots (100,000s) of threads
▶ Example: X Window library with one thread per widget

Threads should be cheap to support this paradigm
▶ SML N/J: about as expensive as making a closure!
   ▶ Think “current stack” plus a few words
   ▶ Cost no time when blocked on a channel (dormant)
▶ OCaml: Not cheap, unfortunately

A thread responding to channels is a lot like an asynchronous object (cf. actors)