Programming Languages: Concepts

(Lectures on High-performance Computing for Economists IV)

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Introduction
Motivation

- Since the invention of Fortran in 1954-1957 to substitute assembly language, hundreds of programming languages have appeared.

- Some more successful than others, some more useful than others.

- Moreover, languages evolve over time (different version of Fortran).

- Different languages are oriented toward certain goals and have different approaches.
Some references


- [http://hyperpolyglot.org/](http://hyperpolyglot.org/)
The basic questions

- Which programming language to learn?
- Which programming language to use in this project?
- Do I need to learn a new language?
Which programming language? I

- Likely to be a large investment.

- Also, you will probably want to be familiar at least with a couple of them (good mental flexibility) plus \LaTeX.

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**Alan Perlis**

A language that doesn’t affect the way you think about programming is not worth knowing.

- There is a good chance you will need to recycle yourself over your career.
Typical problems in economics can be:

1. CPU-intensive.
2. Memory-intensive.

Imply different emphasis.

Because of time constraints, we will not discuss memory-intensive tools such as Hadoop and Spark.
Classification
Classification

• There is no “best” solution.

• But there are some good tips.

• We can classify programming languages according to different criteria.

• We will pick several criteria that are relevant for economists:
  1. Level.
  2. Domain.
  3. Execution.
  4. Type.
  5. Paradigm.
Levels:

1. machine code.


3. High level: like C/C++, Julia, ...

- You can actually mix different levels (C).

- Portability.

- You are unlikely to see low level programming unless you get into the absolute frontier of performance (for instance, with extremely aggressive parallelization).
Fibonacci number

Machine code:

```
8B542408 83FA0077 06B80000 0000C383 FA027706 B8010000 00C353BB
01000000 B9010000 008D0419 83FA0376 078B98B C84AEBF1 5BC3
```

Assembler:

```
ib: mov edx, [esp+8] cmp edx, 0 ja @f mov eax, 0 ret @@: cmp edx, 2 ja @f
mov eax, 1 ret @@: push ebx mov ebx, 1 mov ecx, 1 @@: lea eax, 3 jbe @f mov
ebx, ecx [ebx+ecx] cmp edx, mov ecx, eax dec edx jmp @b @@: pop ebx ret
```

C++:

```
int fibonacci(const int x) {
    if (x==0) return(0);
    if (x==1) return(1);
    return (fibonacci(x-1))+fibonacci(x-2);}
```
• Domain:

1. General-purpose programming languages (GPL), such as Fortran, C/C++, Python, ...

2. Domain specific language (DSL) such as Julia, R, Matlab, Mathematica, ...

• Advantages/disadvantages:

1. GPL are more powerful, usually faster to run.

2. DSL are easier to learn, faster to code, built-in functions and procedures.
Three basic modes to run code:

1. Interpreted: Python, R, Matlab, Mathematica.
2. Compiled: Fortran, C/C++.
3. JIT (Just-in-Time) compilation: Julia.

Interpreted languages can be used with:

1. A command line in a REPL (Read–eval–print loop).

Many DSL are interpreted, but this is neither necessary nor sufficient.

Advantages/disadvantages: similar to GPL versus DSL.

Interpreted and JIT programs are easier to move across platforms.
In reality, things are somewhat messier.

Some languages are explicitly designed with an interpreter and a compiler (Haskell, Scala, F#).

Compiled programs can be extended with third-party interpreters (CINT and Cling for C/C++).

Often, interpreted programs can be compiled with an auxiliary tool (Matlab, Mathematica,...).

Interpreted programs can also be compiled into byte code (R, languages that run on the JVM -by design or by a third party compiler).

We can mix interpretation/compilation with libraries.
Types

- Type strength:
  1. Strong: type enforced.
  2. Weak: type is tried to be adapted.

- Type expression:
  1. Manifest: explicit type.
  2. Inferred: implicit.

- Type checking:
  1. Static: type checking is performed during compile-time.
  2. Dynamic: type checking is performed during run-time.

- Type safety:
  2. Unsafe: no error.
• Advantages of strong/manifest/static/safe type:

1. Easier to find programming mistakes ⇒ ADA, for critical real-time applications, is strongly typed.
2. Easier to read.
3. Easier to optimize for compilers.
4. Faster runtime not all values need to carry a dynamic type.

• Disadvantages:

1. Harder to code.
2. Harder to learn.
3. Harder to prototype.
Types III

- You implement strong/manifest/static/safe typing in dynamically typed languages.

- You can define variables explicitly. For example, in Julia:

```julia
a::Int = 10
```

- It often improve performance speed and safety.

- You can introduce checks:

```julia
a = "This is a string"
if typeof(a) == String
    println(a)
else
    println("Error")
end
```
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C family (a subset of the ALGOL family), also known as “curly-brackets languages”:


- Python: position 1, 16.66%.

- Matlab: position 18, 1.06%.

- R: position 19, 1.05%.

- Fortran: position 34, 0.36%.

- Julia: position 36, 0.34%.
High-performance and scientific computing is a small area within the programming community.

Thus, you need to read the previous numbers carefully.

For example:

1. You will most likely never use JavaScript or PHP (at least while wearing with your “economist” hat) or deal with an embedded system.

2. C# and Objective-C are cousins of C focused on industry applications not very relevant for you.

3. Java (usually) pays a speed penalty.

4. Fortran is still used in some circles in high-performance programming, but most programmers will never bump into anyone who uses Fortran.
Multiprogramming

- Attractive approach in many situations.

- Best IDEs can easily link files from different languages.

- Easier examples:
  2. Rcpp.
  3. Mex files in Matlab.