

Class 42: Association Lists and Searching

Held: Tuesday, April 17, 2007

Summary: Today we visit a database-like application of Scheme, Association lists. Association lists allow you to associate information with a “key” and then look up the value by the key.

Related Pages:

- EBoard.
- Lab: Association Lists.
- Reading: Association Lists.

Due

- HW 13

Notes:

- We’ll begin today’s class with a moment of silence.

Overview:

- Databases and dictionaries.
- Lists as dictionaries.
- `assoc`, a procedure for searching lists.
- Variants of Association Lists.
- Lab.

Simple Database Problems

- Databases are among the most common applications of computers.
 - After all, there’s a reason that Larry Ellison is nearly as rich as Bill Gates.
- A database is a mechanism for storing data so that you can easily access the data you need.
- One simple database activity is looking up values by *keys*.
- Databases that provide only that activity are called *dictionaries*.

Association Lists

- In Scheme, dictionaries are typically implemented with a data structure known as the *association list*.
- An association list is a list of elements each of which has a key as its car.
- You can use the (`assoc key list`) procedure to look up values by key.

Searching in Association Lists

- Suppose Scheme didn't include `assoc`. How would you write it? Probably *recursively*.
- If the list is empty, it does not contain the value.
- If the key of the first element in the list is the key we're looking for, return the corresponding value.
- Otherwise, look in the rest of the list.
- This technique is called *sequential search*.

Variants of Association Lists

- Given that we can write our own `assoc` procedure, we can easily implement a number of interesting variants of association lists.
- For example, if the same key appears multiple times in the association list, we might return *all* matching values (rather than the *first* matching value).
- Similarly, instead of searching by key, we might search by predicate.

alists-lab

- Do the lab.

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