Writing More ‘Fluent’ Lisp

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August 23, 2023

In this document, I provide advice on how to improve your programming style in Lisp based on my experience grading your homework so far.

General Style

- Variable names can be long and descriptive. They should never be in CamelCase, instead they should be separated-with-dashes.
- Write code on multiple lines. While
  \[
  (\text{defun avg} \ (l) \ (/ \ (\text{reduce} \ \#'+ \ l) \ (\text{length} \ l)))
  \]
  is fine, it is not a particularly good habit to be in. Instead, try indenting your code:

  \[
  (\text{defun average} \ (\text{list})
  \quad (/ \ (\text{reduce} \ \#'+ \ \text{list})
  \quad (\text{length} \ \text{list})))
  \]

  Because, in Lisp, indentation is communicates the ‘structure’ of the code and can dramatically improve readability. If you do not want to manually indent your code, use C-M-q in Emacs.

Lispy Mechanics

- Instead of (+ var 1) or (- var 1) use (1+ var) and (1- var), respectively.
- Be judicious with your control flow constructs.
  - Use if when you have two cases, a positive case and a negative case.
  - Use when when you have only a positive case.
  - Use unless when you have only a negative case.
  - Use case if you are checking to see if something matches one of several atomic options (like switch/-case in C).
  - Use cond in any case where you have more options.
- There are several forms of equal: equal, eql, eq, equalp and =.
  - eq: The two objects are at the same memory location. E.g.:
(eq 'a 'a) ⇒ t
(eq 'a 'b) ⇒ nil
(defvar b 'a) (eq 'a b) ⇒ t

- eq: Either the objects fulfill eq or they are numbers of the same type and value or are the same character.
  (eql 2 2) ⇒ t
  (eql 2 2.0) ⇒ nil

- equal: Numbers and Characters: eql; Symbols: eq; Otherwise: the objects are the same structurally.
  (equal "abc" "abc") ⇒ t
  (equal "abc" "ABC") ⇒ nil
  (equal '(a (b c)) '(a (b c))) ⇒ t
  (equal '(a b c) '(a (b c))) ⇒ nil

- equalp: equal; if character, then if char-equal (ignores case); if numbers, having the same numerical value (type notwithstanding).
  (equalp #A#a) ⇒ t
  (equalp 2 #(2 0)) ⇒ nil

- =: Only to be used for numbers, follows eql.

- string=: Only to be used for strings. If you need to compare the equality of strings, use this

- let, let*: These are used to introduce bindings and restrict their lexical scoping. Use this form instead of setf at the start of a function. let* performs its bindings serially, so a later binding can rely on the value of an earlier binding.
  (let ((a 1)
        (b 2))
    (+ a b))

  (let* ((a 1)
         (b (1+ a)))
    (+ a b))

- do, do*, dolist, dotimes – do and do* work similarly, with the starred version binding in parallel. Syntax, generally is of the following form:
  (do ((variable-1 init-form update-form)
       (variable-2 init-form update-form))
      (termination-condition return-value)
      code-here)

dolist is exactly as it says, it does an action for each element of a list, e.g.,

  (dolist (variable list return-value)
    code-here)

Likewise, for dotimes with an n instead of list.

- loop – Avoid pretty generally, it is hard to debug, and un-lispy.

- collect – If you must use loop, you are likely using it for the sake of collect. Instead of something like:
(let (vals)
  (loop for i from n to m
    do (push i vals))
  (reverse vals))

use:

(loop for i from n to m collect i)

However, there are other uses for collect.

• The Higher-Order Functions:
  – map variants – Use these to apply a function to each element of a list (or lists) in turn. E.g.,
    (mapcar #'1+ '(1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10))
  – reduce – When you have a list of a single type of data reduce allows you to reduce the list into a
      single element using some binary function (i.e., a function that takes two arguments). For instance,
      given a function function-name that produces a list of integers, (reduce #'+' function-name) will
      provide the sum of the list returned.
  – remove-if, remove-if-not, complement – Avoid using remove-if-not, instead, use complement,
      for example, instead of
      (remove-if-not #'evenp list)
      use
      (remove-if (complement #'evenp) list)
      (the existence of oddp notwithstanding).
  – funcall, apply – If you are writing a function that accepts a function as an argument, use either
      funcall or apply to use the passed function.

• lambda – Use this construct, which a has syntax similar to that of defun to define anonymous functions.
  You may find this useful in reduce, remove-if or map. E.g.,

(lambda (n)
  (if (oddp n)
      (- n)
      n))