Erlang: Overview

1. Sequential programming

2. Concurrent programming
Erlang was introduced in 1986 by Joe Armstrong, Robert Virding, and Mike Williams, working at Ericsson.

Initially born for telecommunication applications (switches and similar stuff), Erlang is a concurrent-oriented programming language, where distribution is almost transparent.

Its core is functional; not pure like Haskell, but more pragmatic, as suits its industrial setting.

Syntax heavily influenced by its original Prolog implementation.

Dynamic typed like Scheme.

A solid standard library for distributed fault-tolerant applications, called OTP (Open Telecom Platform); support continuously running applications and updates with code swap.
1. Erlang programs run on an ad hoc VM, called BEAM.

2. BEAM is very robust and offers many useful features for parallel and distributed systems, e.g. performance degradation is usually slow, fault-tolerance.

3. For these reasons, there are other languages, besides Erlang, that run on it (analogously to the JVM, but of course in a smaller scale), mainly:

4. *Elixir*, a syntactic re-thinking of Erlang (Ruby-inspired), with macros and protocols.

5. *LFE* (Lisp Flavoured Erlang), the name says it all.
Erlang is not really "mainstream" nowadays, still it is used in some relevant industrial applications, such as: Whatsapp, Call of Duty (servers), Amazon (SimpleDB), Yahoo! (Delicious), Facebook (Chat), Pinterest (actually uses Elixir).

But its most important aspect for us is its present conceptual relevance: new languages and frameworks borrow much from Erlang, consider e.g. Akka (Scala/Java), the so-called "Reactive Manifesto"...

Main points: robust distributed computing is more relevant than ever; also consider that new processors architectures can be considered as like miniature distributed systems!
Variables start with an Upper Case Letter (like in Prolog).

Variables can only be bound **once**! The value of a variable can never be changed once it has been set.

```
Abc
A_long_variable_name
ACamelCaseVariableName
```
Atoms

1. Atoms are like symbols in Scheme.
2. Any character code is allowed within an atom, singly quoted sequences of characters are atoms (not strings).
3. unquoted must be lowercase, to avoid clashes with variables

abcef
start_with_a_lower_case_letter
’Blanks can be quoted’
’Anything inside quotes \n’
Tuples

1. Tuples are used to store a fixed number of items.

   {123, bcd}
   {123, def, abc}
   {person, 'Jim', 'Austrian'} % three atoms!
   {abc, {def, 123}, jkl}

2. There is also the concept of **record** (a.k.a. struct), but in Erlang it is just special syntax for tuples.
Lists

1. Are like in Haskell, e.g. \([1, 2, 3]\), ++ concatenates
2. main difference: \([X \mid L]\) is cons (like \((\text{cons } X \text{ L})\))
3. Strings are lists, like in Haskell, but is getting common to use *bitstrings* and UTF.
4. Comprehensions are more or less like in Haskell:
   > \([\{X,Y\} \mid X <- [-1, 0, 1], Y <- [\text{one, two, three}], X \geq 0]\].
   \([\{0,\text{one}\},\{0,\text{two}\},\{0,\text{three}\},\{1,\text{one}\},\{1,\text{two}\},\{1,\text{three}\}]\)
5. Indeed there is nice syntax and facilities for sequences of bits, also comprehensions
Like in Prolog, (=) is for **pattern matching**; (_ ) is “don’t care”

A = 10  
  Succeeds - binds A to 10

\{A, A, B\} = \{abc, abc, foo\}  
  Succeeds - binds A to abc, B to foo

\{A, A, B\} = \{abc, def, 123\}  
  Fails

\[A,B|C\] = [1,2,3,4,5,6,7]  
  Succeeds - binds A = 1, B = 2, C = [3,4,5,6,7]

\[H|T\] = [abc]  
  Succeeds - binds H = abc, T = []

\{A,_, [B|_], \{B\}\} = \{abc, 23, [22, x], \{22\}\}  
  Succeeds - binds A = abc, B = 22
Maps

There are the (relatively new) maps, basically hash tables.

Here are some examples:

```ruby
> Map = #{one => 1, "Two" => 2, 3 => three}.
#{3 => three,one => 1,"Two" => 2}
> % update/insert
> Map#{one := "I"}.
#{3 => three,one => "I","Two" => 2}
> Map.
#{3 => three,one => 1,"Two" => 2} % unchanged
> % I want the value for "Two":
> #{"Two" := V} = Map.
#{3 => three,one => 1,"Two" => 2}
> V.
2
```
The function and module names (func and module in the above) must be atoms.

Functions are defined within Modules.

Functions must be exported before they can be called from outside the module where they are defined.

Use -import to avoid qualified names, but it is discouraged
-module(demo).
-export([double/1]).
double(X) ->
    times(X, 2).
times(X, N) ->
    X * N.

1 double can be called from outside the module, times is local to the module.
2 double/1 means the function double with one argument (Note that double/1 and double/2 are two different functions).
3 symbols starting with ‘-’ are for the preprocessor (analogous to cpp), while macro calls start with ‘?’
Starting the system

shell> erl
...
Eshell V8.2 (abort with ^G)
1> c(demo).
double/1 times/2 module_info/0
compilation_succeeded
2> demo:double(25).
50
3> demo:times(4,3).
** undefined function:demo:times[4,3] **
** exited: {undef,{demo,times,[4,3]}} **

There are also erlc for compiling, escript for running scripts, etc.
BIFs are in the `erlang` module

They do what you cannot do (or is difficult to do, or too slow) in Erlang, and are usually implemented in C.

date()
time()
length([1,2,3,4,5])
size({a,b,c})
atom_to_list(an_atom) % "an_atom"
list_to_tuple([1,2,3,4]) % [1,2,3,4]
integer_to_list(2234) % "2234"
tuple_to_list({}) ...
A function is defined as a sequence of clauses.

\[
\text{func(Pattern1, Pattern2, ...)} \rightarrow \ldots ; \\
\text{func(Pattern1, Pattern2, ...)} \rightarrow \ldots ; \\
\ldots \\
\text{func(Pattern1, Pattern2, ...)} \rightarrow \ldots .
\]

Clauses are scanned sequentially until a match is found.

When a match is found all variables occurring in the head become bound.

Variables are local to each clause, and are allocated and deallocated automatically.

The body is evaluated sequentially (use ",," as separator).
-module(mathStuff).
-export([[factorial/1, area/1]]).

factorial(0) -> 1;
factorial(N) -> N * factorial(N-1).

area({square, Side}) ->
    Side * Side;
area({circle, Radius}) ->
    3.14 * Radius * Radius;
area({triangle, A, B, C}) ->
    S = (A + B + C)/2,
    math:sqrt(S*(S-A)*(S-B)*(S-C));
area(Other) ->
    {invalid_object, Other}.
factorial(0) -> 1;
factorial(N) when N > 0 ->
    N * factorial(N - 1).

The keyword **when** introduces a guard, like `|` in Haskell.
Examples of Guards

number(X)  - X is a number
integer(X) - X is an integer
float(X)   - X is a float
atom(X)    - X is an atom
tuple(X)   - X is a tuple
list(X)    - X is a list
X > Y + Z  - X is > Y + Z
X =:= Y    - X is exactly equal to Y
X =/= Y    - X is not exactly equal to Y
X == Y     - X is equal to Y

(with int coerced to floats,
i.e. 1 == 1.0 succeeds but 1 =:= 1.0 fails)

length(X) =:= 3  - X is a list of length 3
size(X) =:= 2    - X is a tuple of size 2.

All variables in a guard must be bound.
apply(Mod, Func, Args)

1. Apply the function Func in the module Mod to the arguments in the list Args.
2. Mod and Func must be atoms (or expressions which evaluate to atoms).

   apply(?MODULE, min_max, [[4,1,7,3,9,10]]).
   {1, 10}

3. Any Erlang expression can be used in the arguments to apply.
4. ?MODULE uses the preprocessor to get the current module’s name.
Other useful special forms

case lists:member(a, X) of
    true -> ... ;
    false -> ...
end,

if
    integer(X) -> ... ;
    tuple(X) -> ... ;
    true -> ... % works as an "else"
end,

Note that if needs **guards**, so for user defined predicates it is customary to use case.
Concurrent programming: the Actor Model

1. The Actor Model was introduced by Carl Hewitt, Peter Bishop, and Richard Steiger in 1973
2. Everything is an actor: an independent unit of computation
3. Actors are inherently concurrent
4. Actors can only communicate through messages (async communication)
5. Actors can be created dynamically
6. No requirement on the order of received messages
Concurrency oriented programming language

1. Writing concurrent programs is easy and efficient in Erlang
2. Concurrency can be taken into account at early stages of development
3. Processes are represented using different actors communicating only through messages
4. Each actor is a lightweight process, handled by the VM: it is not mapped directly to a thread or a system process, and the VM schedules its execution
5. The VM handles multiple cores and the distribution of actors in a network
6. Creating a process is fast, and highly concurrent applications can be faster than the equivalent in other programming languages
Concurrent programming

There are three main primitives:

1. spawn creates a new process executing the specified function, returning an identifier

2. send (written !) sends a message to a process through its identifier; the content of the message is simply a variable. The operation is asynchronous

3. receive ... end extract, going from the first, a message from a process’s mailbox queue matching with the provided set of patterns – this is blocking if no message is in the mailbox. The mailbox is persistent until the process quits.
we have a process with Pid1 (Process Identity or Pid)
in it we perform Pid2 = spawn(Mod, Func, Args)
like apply but spawning a new process
after, Pid2 is the process identifier of the new process – this is known only to process Pid1.
Simple Message Passing

1. Process $A$ sends a message to $B$ (it uses $\text{self()}$ to identify itself)
   \[ Pid_B ! \{ \text{self()}, \text{foo} \} \]

2. \{\text{\textit{Pid}_A, \text{foo}}\} is sent to process $B$

3. $B$ receives it with
   
   ```
   receive
     \{\text{From, \textbf{Msg}}\} \rightarrow \text{Actions}
   end
   ```

4. $\text{self()}$ – returns the Pid of the process executing it

5. From and \textbf{Msg} become bound when the message is received.
Simple Message Passing (2)

1. Process $A$ performs
   \[ Pid_B ! \{\text{self()}, \{\text{mymessage}, [1,2,3]\}\} \]

2. $B$ receives it with
   
   ```erlang
   receive
     \{A, \{mymessage, D\}\} -> work_on_data(D);
   end
   ```

3. Messages can carry data and be selectively unpacked

4. Variables $A$ and $D$ become bound when receiving the message

5. If $A$ is bound before receiving a message, then only data from that process is accepted.
An Echo process (1)

-module(echo).
-export([go/0, loop/0]).

go() ->
  Pid2 = spawn(echo, loop, []),
  Pid2 ! {self(), hello},
  receive
    {Pid2, Msg} ->
      io:format("P1 ~w~n",[Msg])
  end,
  Pid2 ! stop.
loop() ->
  receive
    {From, Msg} ->
      From ! {self(), Msg},
      loop(),
    stop ->
      true
  end.
1. A performs $\text{Pid}_C \oplus \text{foo}$
2. B performs $\text{Pid}_C \oplus \text{bar}$
3. code in $C$:
   
   ```
   receive
     foo -> true
   end,
   receive
     bar -> true
   end
   ```
4. foo is received, then bar, irrespective of the order in which they were sent.
Selection of any message

1. A performs $\text{Pid}_C \ ! \ \text{foo}$
2. $B$ performs $\text{Pid}_C \ ! \ \text{bar}$
3. code in $C$:
   
   receive
   
   $\text{Msg} \rightarrow \ldots$ ;
   
   end

4. The first message to arrive at the process $C$ will be processed – the variable $\text{Msg}$ in the process $C$ will be bound to one of the atoms foo or bar depending on which arrives first.
Registered Processes

1. `register(Alias, Pid)` Registers the process Pid with name Alias

   ```erlang
   start() ->
       Pid = spawn(?MODULE, server, [])
       register(analyzer, Pid).
   analyze(Seq) ->
       analyzer ! {self(), {analyze, Seq}},
       receive
           {analysis_result, R} -> R
       end.
   ```

2. Any process can send a message to a registered process.
Client Server Model (1)

1. Client-Server can be easily realized through a simple protocol, where requests have the syntax \{request, ...\}, while replies are written as \{reply, ...\}

2. Server code

   -module(myserver).
   server(Data) -> % note: local data
         receive
            {From,\{request,X\}} ->
               {R, Data1} = fn(X, Data),
               From ! \{myserver,\{reply, R\}\},
               server(Data1)
         end.
Interface Library

-export([request/1]).
request(Req) ->
    myserver ! {self(),{request,Req}},
    receive
        {myserver,{reply,Rep}} -> Rep
    end.
Timeouts

1. Consider this code in process $B$:

   receive
     foo -> Actions1;
   after
     Time -> Actions2;

2. If the message foo is received from $A$ within the time Time perform Actions1 otherwise perform Actions2.
Uses of Timeouts (1)

1. **sleep(T)** – process suspends for T ms.

   ```
sleep(T) ->
   receive
   after
   T -> true
   end.
   ```

2. **suspend()** – process suspends indefinitely.

   ```
suspend() ->
   receive
   after
   infinity -> true
   end.
   ```
The message What is sent to the current process in T ms from now

\[
\text{set_alarm}(T, \text{What}) \rightarrow \\
\quad \text{spawn}(\text{timer, set, [self(), } T, \text{What]}).
\]

\[
\text{set}(\text{Pid}, T, \text{Alarm}) \rightarrow \\
\quad \text{receive} \\
\quad \text{after} \\
\quad \quad T \rightarrow \text{Pid} \ ! \ \text{Alarm} \\
\quad \text{end.} \\
\text{receive} \\
\quad \text{Msg} \rightarrow \ldots \ ;
\]

end
1. flush() – flushes the message buffer

```erlang
flush() ->
  receive
    Any -> flush()
  after
    0 -> true
  end.
```

2. A value of 0 in the timeout means check the message buffer first and if it is empty execute the following code.
Building reliable and scalable applications with Erlang

1. **OTP** (Open Telecom Platform): set of libraries and of design principles for Erlang industrial applications

2. **Behaviours** (note the British spell): ready-to-use design patterns (Server, Supervisor, Event manager . . .), only the functional part of the design has to be implemented (callback functions)

3. Applications structure, with supervision; "**let it crash**" principle

4. Support to code **hot-swap**: application code can be loaded at runtime, and code can be upgraded: the processes running the previous version continue to execute, while any new invocation will execute the new code
"Let it crash": an example

1. We are going to see a simple supervisor linked to a number of workers.
2. Each worker has a state (a natural number, 0 at start), can receive messages with a number to add to it from the supervisor, and sends back its current state. When its local value exceeds 30, a worker ends its activity.
3. The supervisor sends "add" messages to workers, and keeps track of how many of them are still active; when the last one ends, it terminates.
4. We are going to add code to simulate random errors in workers: the supervisor must keep track of such problems and re-start a new worker if one is prematurely terminated.
Code: the main function

main(Count) ->
    register(the_master, self()), % I’m the master, now
    start_master(Count),
    unregister(the_master),
    io:format("That’s all.\n").
When two processes are linked, when one dies or terminates, the other is killed, too. To transform this kill message to an actual manageable message, we need to set its `trap_exit` process flag.

```erlang
start_master(Count) ->
    % The master needs to trap exits:
    process_flag(trap_exit, true),
    create_children(Count),
    master_loop(Count).

% This creates the linked children
create_children(0) -> ok;
create_children(N) ->
    Child = spawn_link(?MODULE, child, [0]), % spawn + link
    io:format("Child ~p created~n", [Child]),
    Child ! {add, 0},
    create_children(N-1).
```
master_loop(Count) ->
    receive
        {value, Child, V} ->
            io:format("child ~p has value ~p ~n", [Child, V]),
            Child ! {add, rand:uniform(10)},
            master_loop(Count);
        {'EXIT', Child, normal} ->
            io:format("child ~p has ended ~n", [Child]),
            if
                Count =:= 1 -> ok; % this was the last
                    true -> master_loop(Count-1)
            end;
        {'EXIT', Child, _} -> % "unnormal" termination
            NewChild = spawn_link(?MODULE, child, [0]),
            io:format("child ~p has died, now replaced by ~p ~n", [Child, NewChild]),
            NewChild ! {add, rand:uniform(10)},
            master_loop(Count)
    end.
child(Data) ->
    receive
        {add, V} ->
            NewData = Data + V,
            BadChance = rand:uniform(10) < 2,
            if
                % random error in child:
                BadChance -> error("I’m dying");
                % child ends naturally:
                NewData > 30 -> ok;
                % there is still work to do:
                true -> the_master ! {value, self(), NewData},
                        child(NewData)
            end
    end.

Let’s run it

1> exlink:main(3).
Child <0.68.0> created
Child <0.69.0> created
Child <0.70.0> created
child <0.68.0> has value 0
child <0.69.0> has value 0
child <0.70.0> has value 0
child <0.68.0> has value 5
child <0.69.0> has value 2
child <0.70.0> has value 6
child <0.68.0> has value 12
child <0.69.0> has value 12
child <0.70.0> has value 16
child <0.68.0> has value 16
child <0.69.0> has value 15
child <0.70.0> has value 22
child <0.68.0> has value 23

=ERROR REPORT==== 9-Jan-2017::12:17:46 ===
Error in process <0.70.0> with exit value:
{"I'm dying",[\{exlink,child,1,[\{file,"exlink.erl"],[\{line,17]\}\}\}\]}
child <0.69.0> has value 19
child <0.70.0> has died, now replaced by <0.71.0>
child <0.68.0> has value 27
child <0.69.0> has value 25
child <0.71.0> has value 9
child <0.68.0> has value 29
child <0.69.0> has ended
child <0.71.0> has value 13
child <0.68.0> has ended
child <0.71.0> has died, now replaced by <0.72.0>

=ERROR REPORT==== 9-Jan-2017::12:17:46 ====
Error in process <0.71.0> with exit value:
{"I’m dying", [exlink, child, 1, [{file, "exlink.erl"}, {line, 17}]]}

child <0.72.0> has value 2
child <0.72.0> has value 9
child <0.72.0> has value 13
child <0.72.0> has value 22
child <0.72.0> has value 27
child <0.72.0> has ended

That’s all.

ok
Acknowledgments: Some examples and inspiration are from the old official Erlang tutorial and Alessandro Sivieri’s old slides for this same course.