

# ELF1 7A Linking Background - ELF Study 1999

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"Study of ELF loading and relocs", 1999

[http://netwinder.osuosl.org/users/p/patb/public\\_html/elf\\_relocs.html](http://netwinder.osuosl.org/users/p/patb/public_html/elf_relocs.html)

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# Compiling 32-bit program on 64-bit gcc

- `gcc -v`
- `gcc -m32 t.c`
- `sudo apt-get install gcc-multilib`
- `sudo apt-get install g++-multilib`
- `gcc-multilib`
- `g++-multilib`
- `gcc -m32`
- `objdump -m i386`

# TOC: Types of linking

- Static vs. dynamic linking
- Build-time, load-time, run-time linking
- Build-time dynamic linking
- Load-time dynamic linking
- `ld-linux.so`

# TOC: Static and dynamic linking

- Binary executable files
- Statically linked files
- Dynamically linked files
- In-memory copy of an executable

# Binary executable file

- a **statically linked binary**  
with all libraries loaded into the executable itself
- a **dynamically linked binary**  
with only some libraries **statically linked**

<https://unix.stackexchange.com/questions/356709/difference-between-ld-and-ld-so>

# Statically linked files

- when you **statically** link a file into an executable, the **contents** of the files are included in the executable at **link** time.
- statically linked executable and library files never change (the last step in the compilation process)

<https://stackoverflow.com/questions/311882/what-do-statically-linked-and-dynamical>



# Dynamically linked files

- when you **dynamically** link a file into an executable, a **pointer** to the file is included in the executable but the **contents** of the file are not included at **link** time.
- these referenced **dynamically linked** files are
  - not brought in the memory until you run the executable
  - loaded into memory by the **dynamic linker** at **run** time

<https://stackoverflow.com/questions/311882/what-do-statically-linked-and-dynamical>

# In-memory copy of an executable

- dynamically linked files are only brought into the **in-memory copy** of the executable, not the executable file on the disk.
  - files on the disk are not modified
  - a shared library is **shared** across several processes
- dynamically loaded libraries can change at the next run time just by replacing the corresponding files on the disk.

<https://stackoverflow.com/questions/311882/what-do-statically-linked-and-dynamical>

# Static binary (1) copying

- **dynamic binaries** load code from external binaries ( .so file) at **run** time
- in **static binaries**, library code ( .a libraries) is copied inside the binary at **build** time
- advantages of **dynamic binaries** are
  - libraries can be reused between different running applications.
  - so they need less memory
  - libraries can be changed later on without recompiling as long as the ABI (Application binary interface) of the library doesn't change.

[https://www.reddit.com/r/linux/comments/6pkzf5/static\\_and\\_dynamic\\_binaries/](https://www.reddit.com/r/linux/comments/6pkzf5/static_and_dynamic_binaries/)

## Static binary (2) non PIC

- code in a **static library** need not be **PIC**
  - position dependent code can jump and call directly without needing any intermediate steps
  - the **linker** adjusts the instructions/data for direct cross-references
- this performance benefit shows up only in high-performance code; e.g., you might get a teenthly boost from a video encoder if you statically compile & link it.
- if the program does any **blocking I/O** it won't matter at all.

[https://www.reddit.com/r/linux/comments/6pkzf5/static\\_and\\_dynamic\\_binaries/](https://www.reddit.com/r/linux/comments/6pkzf5/static_and_dynamic_binaries/)

## Static binary (3) link time optimization

- modern linkers are able to do **link-time optimization** (LTO)
  - the compiler does its job and emits some GIMPLE bytecode along with the usual machine code in the object file.
  - the bytecode gives a gist of
    - what functions/variables are where,
    - what everything does,
    - how to piece it together,
  - and possibly some analysis that's been done as well, since that's a side-effect of optimization.

[https://www.reddit.com/r/linux/comments/6pkzf5/static\\_and\\_dynamic\\_binaries/](https://www.reddit.com/r/linux/comments/6pkzf5/static_and_dynamic_binaries/)

## Static binary (4) performance

- The **linker** can use optimization analysis to knit together code from several object files when it's producing the final executable,
- without LTO, the **linker** basically mashes pieces of object files together as indivisible blocks (+noise).
- So in theory, you might be able to do significantly better with **static compilation** as long as
  - sufficiently many of your object files are produced by gcc -flto
  - linker supports LTO
  - burning on inter-object calls/accesses in loops.

[https://www.reddit.com/r/linux/comments/6pkzf5/static\\_and\\_dynamic\\_binaries/](https://www.reddit.com/r/linux/comments/6pkzf5/static_and_dynamic_binaries/)

# Dynamic binary (1) a program and its dependencies

- the shared libraries must be able to be loaded anywhere in the process' virtual address space and must be relocated
- the **kernel** does only map the program file in memory  
the **dynamic linker** (the interpreter) must
  - locate and map all dependencies  
as well as shared object specified in LD\_PRELOAD
  - relocate the files

<https://www.gabriel.urdhr.fr/2015/01/22/elf-linking/#base-address>

## Dynamic binary (2) kernel

- the **kernel** initialises the process:
- it maps in the virtual address space
  - the main program,
  - the **interpreter** (**dynamic linker**) segments
  - the **vDSO** (virtual Dynamic Shared Object)
- it sets up the **stack** (passing the arguments, environment)
- calls the **dynamic linker** entry point

<https://www.gabriel.urdhr.fr/2015/01/22/elf-linking/#base-address>



- the **vDSO** (virtual Dynamic Shared Object)
  - a Linux kernel mechanism for exporting a carefully selected set of kernel space routines to user space applications
  - to overcome the performance penalty of a mode switch from user to kernel mode that is inherent when **system call** interface is used

<https://www.gabriel.urdhr.fr/2015/01/22/elf-linking/#base-address>

## Dynamic binary (4) dynamic linker

- the **dynamic linker** loads the different ELF objects and binds them together
  - relocates itself
  - finds and loads the necessary **libraries**
  - does the relocations (which binds the ELF objects)
  - calls the initialisation functions of the shared objects
    - those functions are specified in the DT\_INIT and DT\_INIT\_ARRAY entries of the ELF objects.
  - calls the **main program** entry point
    - found in the AT\_ENTRY entry of the auxiliary vector: it has been initialised by the kernel from the e\_entry ELF header field.
- the executable then initialises itself.

# TOC: Build-time, load-time, run-time linking

- Build-time, load-time, run-time
- Build-time vs. load-time linking
- (1) build-time linking for static executables / libraries
- (2) build-time linking for dynamic executables / libraries
- (3) load-time linking for dynamic executables / libraries
- Load-time vs. run-time dynamic linking
- Run-time dynamic linking
- Build-time linker ld
- Run-time linker ld.so
- Linker at the build time
- Kernel at the load time
- Dynamic loader at the load time

# Build-time, load-time, run-time

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compile step	link step	run step	run step
build-time	build-time	load-time	run-time

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<https://stackoverflow.com/questions/52118756/is-ld-called-at-both-compile-time-and-load-time>

# Build-time and load-time linkers

build-time linking	build-time linking	load-time linking
static linking	static linking	dynamic linking
<code>ld</code>	<code>ld</code>	<code>ld.so</code>
for statically linked executables or static libraries	for dynamically linked executables or shared libraries	for dynamically linked executables or shared libraries

<https://unix.stackexchange.com/questions/449107/what-differences-and-relations-are>

# (1) build-time linking for static executables / libraries

- **static linking**, at build-time  
the build-time linker **ld**
  - resolves all the objects used in the program during the build,
  - merges the objects which are used, and
  - produces an executable binary which doesn't use external libraries;

<https://unix.stackexchange.com/questions/449107/what-differences-and-relations-are>

## (2) build-time linking for dynamic executables / libraries

- **static linking**, at build-time:  
the build-time linker **ld**
  - resolves all objects used in the program, but
  - it only stores references to them;
  - instead of storing them in the executable (no merge)
  - records
    - which shared libraries are required at the **run** time,
    - possibly which versions of libraries or symbols are required.
    - which run time loader should be used

<https://unix.stackexchange.com/questions/449107/what-differences-and-relations-are>

<https://stackoverflow.com/questions/52118756/is-ld-called-at-both-compile-time-and>

### (3) load-time linking for dynamic executables / libraries

- **dynamic linking**, at run-time (specifically load-time) :  
the run-time linker **ld.so**, or **dynamic linker**,
  - resolves all the references stored in the executable,
  - loading all the required libraries (shared objects) and
  - updating all the object references before running the program.

<https://unix.stackexchange.com/questions/449107/what-differences-and-relations-are>



# Load-time vs. run-time dynamic linking

- **load-time** dynamic linking  
the OS handles unresolved symbols in the library
  - referenced by the executable (or another library)
  - resolved when the executable/library is **loaded** into memory
- **run-time** dynamic linking  
an **API** provided by the OS or through a library
  - can explicitly load a DLL or DSO when you need it
  - and then perform the symbol resolution

<https://stackoverflow.com/questions/2055840/difference-between-load-time-dynamic->

- using libdl

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<code>dlopen()</code>	gain access to an executable object file
<code>dclose()</code>	close a dlopen object
<code>dlsym()</code>	obtain the address of a symbol from a dlopen object
<code>dlvsym()</code>	Programming interface to dynamic linking loader.
<code>dlerror()</code>	get diagnostic information

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<http://www.yolinux.com/TUTORIALS/LibraryArchives-StaticAndDynamic.html>

# Build-time linker ld

- a **static linker**
  - links a program or library at **compile** (build) time
  - usually as the last step in the compilation process, creating a binary executable or a library.
- a **static library**
  - has the suffix name `.a` denoting archive
  - is created by the `ar` utility
- `ld` is a **static linker** (build-time linker)
- `ld` also plays a role in **dynamic linking** (build-time linker)
  - stores all object references in a dynamic executable

<https://unix.stackexchange.com/questions/356709/difference-between-ld-and-ld-so>

- a **dynamic linker**
  - loads the dynamic libraries into the process' address space at **run** time.
  - libraries were **dynamically linked** at **compile** (build) time
- a **dynamic library**
  - so represents **shared object**
  - the suffix name of **shared libraries**
  - a library that may be dynamically linked into programs
  - one library is shared among several programs
- **ld.so** is a **dynamic linker** (run-time linker)

<https://unix.stackexchange.com/questions/356709/difference-between-ld-and-ld-so>

# Linker at the build time

- compile, link, run
  - `ld` is not called at either **compile** or **run time**
  - only at the **link** step is `/usr/bin/ld` is invoked.
  - on Linux, `ld` is part of the `binutils` package.
- a **link** step is performed as a final step in producing an executable, or a shared library (**build time**)
  - this is called **static linking**, to differentiate this step from **dynamic loading** that will happen at **run time** (specifically **load time**)

<https://stackoverflow.com/questions/52118756/is-ld-called-at-both-compile-time-and>

- The **kernel**
  - loads executable into memory, and
  - checks whether **runtime loader** was requested at static link time.
  - If it was, the **dynamic loader** is also loaded into memory, and
  - execution control is passed to it (instead of the main executable).

<https://stackoverflow.com/questions/52118756/is-ld-called-at-both-compile-time-and>

- the **dynamic loader**
  - examines the executable
    - which other libraries are required
    - whether correct versions can be found,
  - loads them into memory, and
  - performs **symbol resolution** between the main executable and the shared libraries
  - this is the **runtime loading** step, often also called **dynamic linking**
  - on Linux, **dynamic loader** is a part of **libc** (GLIBC, uClibc and musl each have their own loader).

<https://stackoverflow.com/questions/52118756/is-ld-called-at-both-compile-time-and>

# TOC: Linking for dynamic executables / libraries

- Build-time linking for dynamic executables / libraries
- Load-time linking for dynamic executables / libraries



# TOC: Build-time linking for dynamic executables / libraries

- Unresolved symbols
- Referenced libraries
- Copy relocation and symbol table
- PLT thunks
- Dynamic symbol table
- Dynamic relocation table
- Converted relocation types

# Unresolved symbols

- unresolved symbols in a dynamic executable
  - should be resolved
- unresolved symbols in a shared library
  - remain valid

<https://stackoverflow.com/questions/19736853/what-does-ld-do-when-linking-against>

- ld stores the needed library in a DT\_NEEDED record of the \_DYNAMIC object of the output file
  - When the application starts, the dynamic linker looks at the DT\_NEEDED field to find the required libraries. This field contains the soname of the library, so the next step is for the dynamic linker to walk through all the libraries in its search path looking for it.

<http://bottomupcs.sourceforge.net/csbu/x4012.htm>

<https://stackoverflow.com/questions/19736853/what-does-ld-do-when-linking-against>

# Copy relocation and symbol table

- If the output is not position-independent and references *data* objects in the shared library,
  - generate a **copy relocation** to copy the original image of the object into the main program's data segment at load time,
  - create a proper **symbol table entry** so that references to the object in the shared library itself get resolved to the new copy in the main program, rather than the original copy in the library.

<https://stackoverflow.com/questions/19736853/what-does-ld-do-when-linking-against>

- generating **PLT thunks** for the destination of each function call in the output
  - remain unresolved at build-time

<https://stackoverflow.com/questions/19736853/what-does-ld-do-when-linking-against>

# Dynamic symbol table

- creating a **dynamic symbol table**,
  - the **runtime linker** `ld.so` can use **dynamic symbol table** to link the executable against the library at **run-time**
- To see details:

```
objdump -T myprog    (--dynamic-syms)
```

<https://stackoverflow.com/questions/19736853/what-does-ld-do-when-linking-against>

# Dynamic relocation table

- creating the **dynamic relocation table** to check which machine code locations need to be changed to point to dynamically linked symbols.

- To see details:

```
objdump -R myprog    (--dynamic-reloc)
```

<https://stackoverflow.com/questions/19736853/what-does-ld-do-when-linking-against>

# Converted relocation types

- that ld takes object files with various **relocation types**
  - representing anything the compiler or assembler can produce
- resolves most of them except a small number of relocation types
  - for static linking, unresolved relocations are not allowed
  - for dynamic linking, all the remaining relocations shall be converted into a limited set of relocation types shall be resolved by the **dynamic linker** at **load** time.

<https://stackoverflow.com/questions/19736853/what-does-ld-do-when-linking-against>



- At the link time
- `ld-linux.so` vs. `ld.so`
- `glibc`
- `ld-linux.so`

# (1) dynamic applications

- a dynamic applications ( binary, executable )
  - consist of one or more dynamic objects
  - typically a dynamic executable and one or more shared object dependencies
- **run time linker** for dynamic objects

<https://renenyffenegger.ch/notes/development/dynamic-loader>

<https://docs.oracle.com/cd/E19253-01/816-5165/ld.so.1-1/index.html>

## (2) search shared libraries

- to see the **shared object** libraries used by a given application use the **ldd** command
- shared library directories
  - `/lib`
  - `/usr/lib`.
- additional search directory
  - `/etc/ld.so.conf` can be used to configure the dynamic loader to search for other directories (eg. `/usr/local/lib` or `/opt/lib`)

<https://renenyffenegger.ch/notes/development/dynamic-loader>

<https://docs.oracle.com/cd/E19253-01/816-5165/ld.so.1-1/index.html>

### (3) ldd print shared object dependencies

- ldd prints the shared objects (shared libraries) required by each program or shared object specified on the command line.
- An example of its use and output is the following:

```
$ ldd /bin/ls
linux-vdso.so.1 (0x00007ffcc3563000)
libselinux.so.1 => /lib64/libselinux.so.1 (0x00007f87e5459000)
libcap.so.2 => /lib64/libcap.so.2 (0x00007f87e5254000)
libc.so.6 => /lib64/libc.so.6 (0x00007f87e4e92000)
libpcre.so.1 => /lib64/libpcre.so.1 (0x00007f87e4c22000)
libdl.so.2 => /lib64/libdl.so.2 (0x00007f87e4a1e000)
/lib64/ld-linux-x86-64.so.2 (0x00005574bf12e000)
libattr.so.1 => /lib64/libattr.so.1 (0x00007f87e4817000)
libpthread.so.0 => /lib64/libpthread.so.0 (0x00007f87e45fa000)
```

<https://stackoverflow.com/questions/19736853/what-does-ld-do-when-linking-against>

## (4) loading shared libraries

- most modern programs are dynamically linked
- when a **dynamically linked application** is loaded by the **operating system kernel**
- the **dynamic loader** must locate and load the **dynamic libraries** it needs for execution.

[https://www.cs.virginia.edu/~dww4s/articles/ld\\_linux.html](https://www.cs.virginia.edu/~dww4s/articles/ld_linux.html)

## (5) interpreter

- As part of the *initialization* and *execution* of a dynamic application, an **interpreter** is called
  - to run the executable, an **interpreter** program is used
- this **interpreter** completes the **binding** of the application to its shared object dependencies.

<https://docs.oracle.com/cd/E19253-01/816-5165/ld.so.1-1/index.html>

## (6) ld-linux.so vs. ld.so

- The programs `ld.so` and `ld-linux.so` find and load the shared libraries require by a program, prepare the program to run, and then run it.
- linux binaries require **dynamic linking** (linking at run time) unless the **-static** option was given to `ld(1)` during compilation.

<code>ld.so</code>	<code>a.out</code>
<code>ld-linux.so</code>	<code>ELF</code>
<code>/lib/ld-linux.so.1</code>	<code>libc5</code>
<code>/lib/ld-linux.so.2</code>	<code>glibc2</code>

<https://linux.die.net/man/8/ld-linux>

## (7) specifying an interpreter

- **ELF** allows executables to specify an **interpreter**,
  - the **compiler** and **static linker** set the **interpreter** of executables
  - the **interpreter** is set to be `/lib/ld-linux-ia64.so.2` which is the **dynamic linker**
- when the **kernel** loads the binary executable
  - it will check if the **PT\_INTERP** field is present
  - if so load what it points to into memory and start it.

[https://www.bottomupcs.com/dynamic\\_linker.xhtml](https://www.bottomupcs.com/dynamic_linker.xhtml)



## (8) dynamic linker name

- linux's **dynamic loader** / **linker**
  - `ld.so` for `a.out`
  - `ld-linux.so` for ELF
  - **`ld-linux.so.2`** for `glibc`
  - `/lib/ld-linux.so.2`
  - `/lib/ld-linux-x86-64.so.2`
- finding the name of the dynamic loader with  
`readelf -l executable | grep interpreter`
  - `readelf -l` displays the information contained  
in the file's **segment headers**

[https://www.cs.virginia.edu/~dww4s/articles/ld\\_linux.html](https://www.cs.virginia.edu/~dww4s/articles/ld_linux.html)

## (9) executing an interpreter

- indirect execution  
by running some dynamically linked program or shared object
  - the **dynamic linker** is specified  
in the **.interp** section of an ELF file (program)
  - no command-line options to the **dynamic linker**
- direct execution  
by the command-line
  - `/lib/ld-linux.so.* [OPTIONS] [PROGRAM [ARGUMENTS]]`

`man ld-linux.so`

## (10) managing shared libraries

- The **dynamic linker** is the program that *manages shared dynamic libraries on behalf of an executable*.
  - load libraries into memory
  - modify the program at **runtime** (resolving relocation)
  - call the functions in the library

[https://www.bottomupcs.com/dynamic\\_linker.xhtml](https://www.bottomupcs.com/dynamic_linker.xhtml)

## (11) relocations

- dynamically linked executables leave behind **references** that will be fixed at the **runtime**
  - eg. the address of a function in a shared library.
  - the **references** that are left behind are called **relocations**
- the essential part of the **dynamic linker** is fixing up these unresolved addresses at **runtime**,
  - these addresses can be known only when the executable and shared libraries are loaded in memory

[https://www.bottomupcs.com/dynamic\\_linker.xhtml](https://www.bottomupcs.com/dynamic_linker.xhtml)

## (12) resolving relocations

- A **relocation** can simply be thought of as a note that a particular address will need to be fixed at the **load time** of the **runtime**
- before the code is ready to run all the relocations need to be resolved
  - fixing the addresses it refers to to point to the right place.

[https://www.bottomupcs.com/dynamic\\_linker.xhtml](https://www.bottomupcs.com/dynamic_linker.xhtml)

## (13) base address

- the executable code is not shared, and each executable gets its own fresh **address space**
  - in an **executable** file, the code and data segments are given by a **base address** in **virtual memory**
  - the **compiler** knows exact location of the **data section** and can reference it directly
- shared libraries have no such guarantee.
  - the **data section** will be a specified as an **offset** from the **base address**
  - but exact location of the **base address** can only be known at **runtime**

[https://www.bottomupcs.com/dynamic\\_linker.xhtml](https://www.bottomupcs.com/dynamic_linker.xhtml)

## (14) PIC

- all the shared libraries must be produced as **position independent** codes (PIC).
- note that the **data section** is still specified as a fixed **offset** from the **code section**;
- but to actually find the address of data the **offset** needs to be added to the **load address**

[https://www.bottomupcs.com/dynamic\\_linker.xhtml](https://www.bottomupcs.com/dynamic_linker.xhtml)

## (15) SONAME

- the string written to the executable will actually be the **SONAME** of the library, e.g. `mylib.so.0`
- This will ensure that even when a newer and incompatible `mylib.so.1.42` is installed later, the executable will use the compatible ABI version 0 instead.
  - To see details:

```
ldd myprog
```

<https://stackoverflow.com/questions/19736853/what-does-ld-do-when-linking-against>



## (16) Symbolic link

- Usually **dynamic libraries** are set up using **symlinks** only
  - `libfoo.so` is used by `ld`, and
  - `libfoo.so` points to `libfoo.so.1` or to whatever which is used by `ld.so`, and
  - `libfoo.so` is itself typically a symlink to the currently-installed version of the library, e.g. `libfoo.so.1.2.3`

<https://unix.stackexchange.com/questions/449107/what-differences-and-relations-are>

- libc implements both **standard C** functions like `strcpy()` and **POSIX** functions (which may be **system calls**) like `getpid()`  
Note that not all **standard C** functions are in `libc`
  - most math functions are in `libm`

<https://stackoverflow.com/questions/11372872/what-is-the-role-of-libcglbc-in-our>

## (18) System calls and thunks

- **system calls** is different from normal functions because they call to the kernel they can't be resolved by the **linker**
- architecture-specific assembly language **thunks** are used to call into the kernel
- libc provides those assembly language **thunks**

<https://stackoverflow.com/questions/11372872/what-is-the-role-of-libc-glibc-in-our>

## (19) libc and glibc

- in Linux, it is the combination of the **kernel** and **libc** that provides the **POSIX API**
- **libc** is a single library file (both `.so` and `.a` versions are available) in most cases resides in `/usr/lib`
- the **glibc** (**GNU libc**) project provides more than just **libc** it also provides the **libm** and other core libraries like `libpthread`
- So **libc** is just one of the libraries provided by **glibc** and there are other alternate implementations of **libc** other than **glibc**

<https://stackoverflow.com/questions/11372872/what-is-the-role-of-libc-glibc-in-our>

- 1 **C library** described in ANSI,c99,c11 standards.
  - includes macros, symbols, function implementations etc.
  - `printf()`, `malloc()` etc
- 2 **POSIX standard library**.
  - the "userland" glue of **system calls**. (`open()`, `read()` etc)
  - no actual implementations of **system calls** (**kernel** does it)
  - but **glibc** provides the user land interface to the services provided by **kernel** so that user application can use a **system call** just like a ordinary function.
- 3 Also some nonstandard but useful stuff.

<https://linux.die.net/man/8/ld-linux>

- `libc.so` is usually a **linker script**
  - pointing to
    - the 64-bit **C library** (dynamic or shared)
    - **dynamic linker**
  - used to link 64-bit executables at the **build-time**
  - provides instructions for **ld**

- `/* GNU ld script`

```
Use the shared library, but some functions are only in  
the static library, so try that secondarily. */
```

```
OUTPUT_FORMAT(elf64-x86-64)
```

```
GROUP ( /lib/x86_64-linux-gnu/libc.so.6
```

```
        /usr/lib/x86_64-linux-gnu/libc_nonshared.a
```

```
        AS_NEEDED ( /lib/x86_64-linux-gnu/ld-linux-x86-64.so.2 ) )
```

<https://unix.stackexchange.com/questions/449107/what-differences-and-relations-are>

## (22) Linker script

- In the GNU C library's case dynamically linked programs still need some symbols from the static library so a **linker script** is used instead so that the linker can try both (dynamic linking and static linking)
- the **linker script** also refers to the **dynamic linker** which will be used at the runtime (`/lib/x86_64-linux-gnu/ld-linux-x86-64.so.2`) its name is embedded in executables in `.interp`

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