CSE-505: Programming Languages
Lecture 24 — Bounded Polymorphism

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Revenge of Type Variables

Sorted lists in ML (partial):

type 'a slist
make : ('a -> 'a -> int) -> 'a slist
cons : 'a slist -> 'a -> 'a slist
find : 'a slist -> 'a -> 'a option

Getting by with OOP subtyping:

interface Cmp { Int f(Object, Object); }
class SList {
  ... some field definitions ... 
  constructor (Cmp x) {...}
  Slist cons(Object x) {...}
  Object find(Object x) {...}
}

Wanting Type Variables

Will downcast (potential run-time exception) the arguments to f and the result of find

We are not enforcing list-element type-equality

OOP-style subtyping is no replacement for parametric polymorphism; we can have both:

interface Cmp<'a> { Int f('a,'a); } // Cmp not a type

class SList<'a> { // SList not a type (SList<Int> e.g. is)
  ... some field definitions (can use type 'a) ...

  constructor (Cmp<'a> x) {...}
  Slist<'a> cons('a x) {...}
  'a find('a x) {...}
}

Same Old Story

- Interface and class declarations are parameterized; they produce types
- The constructor is polymorphic
  - For all T, given a Cmp<T>, it makes a SList<T>
- If o has type SList<T>, its cons method:
  - Takes a T
  - Returns a SList<T>

No more downcasts; the best of both worlds
Complications

“Interesting” interaction with overloading and multimethods

class B {
    unit f(C<Int> x) {...}
    unit f(C<String> x) {...}
}
class C<’a> { unit g(B x) { x.f(self); } }

For C<T> where T is neither Int nor String, can have no match
▶ Cannot resolve static overloading at compile-time without code duplication and no abstraction (C++)
▶ To resolve overloading or multimethods at run-time, need run-time type information including the instantiation T (C#)
▶ Could disallow such overloading (Java)
▶ Or could just reject this sort of call as unresolvable (?)

Wanting bounds

There are compelling reasons to bound the instantiation of type variables

Simple example: Use at supertype without losing that it’s a subtype

interface I { unit print(); }
class Logger< ’a <: I > { // must apply to subtype of I
    ’a item;
    ’a get_it() { syslog(item.print()); item }
}

Without polymorphism or downcasting, client could only use get_it result for printing

Without bound or downcasting, Logger could not print

Issue isn’t special to OOP

Fancy Example from “A Theory of Objects” Abadi/Cardelli

With forethought, bounds can avoid some subtyping limitations

interface Omnivore { unit eat(Food); }
interface Herbivore { unit eat(Veg); } // Veg <= Food

Allowing Herbivore<’a<:Omnivore could make a vegetarian eat meat (unsound)! But this works:

interface Omnivore<’a <: Food > { unit eat(’a); }
interface Herbivore<’a <: Veg > { unit eat(’a); }

If Herbivore<T> is legal, then Omnivore<T> is legal and Herbivore<T><:Omnivore<T>!

Useful for unit feed(’a food, Omnivore<’a> animal) {...}

Bounded Polymorphism

This “bounded polymorphism” is useful in any language with universal types and subtyping. Instead of ∀α.τ and ∆α.e, we have ∀α<τ<′.τ<′.e:
▶ Change ∆ to be a list of bounds (α<τ) instead of a set of type variables
▶ In e you can subsume from α to τ′
▶ e1[τ1] typechecks when τ1 “satisfies the bound” in type of e1

One limitation: When is (∀α1<τ1.τ2) ≤ (∀α2<τ3.τ4)?
▶ Contravariant bounds and covariant bodies assuming bound are sound, but makes subtyping undecidable
▶ Requiring invariant bounds and covariant bodies regains decidability, but obviously allows less subtyping