CSE-505: Programming Languages

Lecture 24 — Bounded Polymorphism

Zach Tatlock
2015
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 \( \text{find} \)

We are not enforcing list-element type-equality

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

```haskell
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)    {...}
}
```

Zach Tatlock
Same Old Story

- Interface and class declarations are parameterized; they produce types

- The constructor is polymorphic
  - For all $T$, given a $\text{Cmp}<T>$, it makes a $\text{SList}<T>$

- If $o$ has type $\text{SList}<T>$, its cons method:
  - Takes a $T$
  - Returns a $\text{SList}<T>$

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

```java
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 ≤ 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 $\forall \alpha.\tau$ and $\Lambda \alpha.e$, we have $\forall \alpha < \tau'.\tau$ and $\Lambda \alpha < \tau'.e$:

- Change $\Delta$ to be a list of bounds ($\alpha < \tau$) instead of a set of type variables
- In $e$ you can subsume from $\alpha$ to $\tau'$
- $e_1[\tau_1]$ typechecks when $\tau_1$ “satisfies the bound” in type of $e_1$

One limitation: When is $(\forall \alpha_1<\tau_1.\tau_2) \leq (\forall \alpha_2<\tau_3.\tau_4)$?

- 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