

Variance

September 29, 2012

Variance

You have seen the the previous session that some types should be covariant whereas others should not.

Roughly speaking, a type that accepts mutations of its elements should not be covariant.

But immutable types can be covariant, if some conditions on methods are met.

List

✓

Array

✗

Definition of Variance

Say $C[T]$ is a parameterized type and A, B are types such that $A <: B$.

In general, there are *three* possible relationships between $C[A]$ and $C[B]$:

$C[A] <: C[B]$

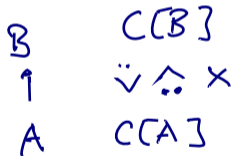
$C[A] >: C[B]$

neither $C[A]$ nor $C[B]$ is a subtype of the other

C is *covariant*

C is *contravariant*

C is *nonvariant*



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$C[A] <: C[B]$

C is *covariant*

$C[A] >: C[B]$

C is *contravariant*

neither $C[A]$ nor $C[B]$ is a subtype of the other

C is *nonvariant*

Scala lets you declare the variance of a type by annotating the type parameter:

`class C[+A] { ... }`

C is *covariant*

`class C[-A] { ... }`

C is *contravariant*

`class C[A] { ... }`

C is *nonvariant*

Exercise

Say you have two function types:

```
type A = IntSet => NonEmpty
```

```
type B = NonEmpty => IntSet
```

According to the Liskov Substitution Principle, which of the following should be true?

- A $<:$ B
- B $<:$ A
- A and B are unrelated.

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- B <: A
- A and B are unrelated.

Typing Rules for Functions

Generally, we have the following rule for subtyping between function types:

If $A2 <: A1$ and $B1 <: B2$, then

$$A1 \Rightarrow B1 <: A2 \Rightarrow B2$$

$$\begin{array}{ccc} A2 & \Rightarrow & B2 \\ \wedge & & \vee \\ A1 & \Rightarrow & B1 \end{array}$$

Function Trait Declaration

So functions are *contravariant* in their argument type(s) and *covariant* in their result type.

This leads to the following revised definition of the Function1 trait:

```
package scala
trait Function1[-T, +U] {
  def apply(x: T): U
}
```


Variance Checks

We have seen in the array example that the combination of covariance with certain operations is unsound.

In this case the problematic operation was the update operation on an array.

If we turn Array into a class, and update into a method, it would look like this:

```
class Array[+T] {  
  def update(x: T) ...  
}
```

The problematic combination is

- ▶ the covariant type parameter T
- ▶ which appears in parameter position of the method update.

Variance Checks (2)

The Scala compiler will check that there are no problematic combinations when compiling a class with variance annotations.

Roughly,

- ▶ *covariant* type parameters can only appear in method results.
- ▶ *contravariant* type parameters can only appear in method parameters.
- ▶ *invariant* type parameters can appear anywhere.

The precise rules are a bit more involved, fortunately the Scala compiler performs them for us.

Variance-Checking the Function Trait

Let's have a look again at Function1:

```
trait Function1[-T, +U] {  
  def apply(x: T): U  
}
```

✓ ✓

Here,

- ▶ T is contravariant and appears only as a method parameter type
- ▶ U is covariant and appears only as a method result type

So the method is checks out OK.

Variance and Lists

Let's get back to the previous implementation of lists.

One shortcoming was that `Nil` had to be a class, whereas we would prefer it to be an object (after all, there is only one empty list).

Can we change that?

Yes, because we can make `List` covariant.

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Let's get back to the previous implementation of lists.

One shortcoming was that `Nil` had to be a class, whereas we would prefer it to be an object (after all, there is only one empty list).

Can we change that?

Yes, because we can make `List` covariant.

Here are the essential modifications:

```
trait List[+T] { ... }  
object Empty extends List[Nothing] { ... }
```

Making Classes Covariant

Sometimes, we have to put in a bit of work to make a class covariant.

Consider adding a prepend method to List which prepends a given element, yielding a new list.

A first implementation of prepend could look like this:

```
trait List[+T] {  
  def prepend(elem: T): List[T] = new Cons(elem, this)  
}
```

But that does not work!

Exercise

Why does the following code not type-check?

```
trait List[+T] {  
  def prepend(elem: T): List[T] = new Cons(elem, this)  
}
```

Possible answers:

- prepend turns List into a mutable class.
- prepend fails variance checking.
- prepend's right-hand side contains a type error.

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Prepend Violates LSP

Indeed, the compiler is right to throw out `List` with `prepend`, because it violates the Liskov Substitution Principle:

Here's something one can do with a list `xs` of type `List[IntSet]`:

```
xs.prepend(Empty)
```

But the same operation on a list `ys` of type `List[NonEmpty]` would lead to a type error:

```
ys.prepend(Empty)
  ^ type mismatch
  required: NonEmpty
  found: Empty
```

So, `List[NonEmpty]` cannot be a subtype of `List[IntSet]`.

Lower Bounds

But prepend is a natural method to have on immutable lists!

Question: How can we make it variance-correct?

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Question: How can we make it variance-correct?

We can use a *lower bound*:

```
def prepend [U >: T] (elem: U): List[U] = new Cons(elem, this)
```

This passes variance checks, because:

- ▶ covariant type parameters may appear in lower bounds of method type parameters
- ▶ contravariant type parameters may appear in upper bounds of method

Exercise

Implement prepend as shown in trait List.

```
def prepend [U >: T] (elem: U): List[U] = new Cons(elem, this)
```

What is the result type of this function:

```
def f(xs: List[NonEmpty], x: Empty) = xs prepend x ?
```

Possible answers:

- does not type check
- List[NonEmpty]
- List[Empty]
- List[IntSet]
- List[Any]

Exercise

Implement prepend as shown in trait List.

```
def prepend [U >: T] (elem: U): List[U] = new Cons(elem, this)
```

What is the result type of this function:

U = ListSet

```
def f(xs: List[NonEmpty], x: Empty) = xs prepend x ?  
  : List[ListSet]
```

Possible answers:

- does not type check
- List[NonEmpty]
- List[Empty]
- List[IntSet]
- List[Any]

