

Overloading in Java

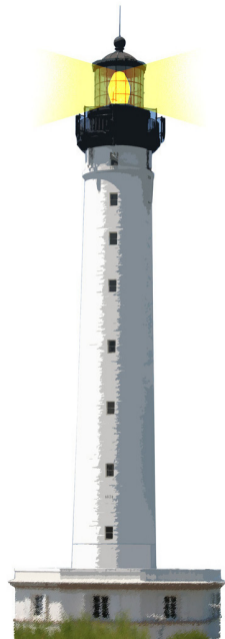
Why you should not use it

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Goal

- What is overloading?
- Why is it a problem?
- What can you do?

This lecture is in the context of the Java programming language.

- It is an incentive to understand for real double dispatch (without overloading)



Overloading

Overloading: methods sharing a name.

```
public class OverloadingSimple {  
    public String m(int a) {  
        return "my parameter is an int";  
    }  
    public String m(String b) {  
        return "my parameter is a string";  
    }  
    public static void main(String[] args) {  
        System.out.println(new OverloadingSimple().m(123));  
        System.out.println(new OverloadingSimple().m("a"));  
    }  
}
```

Seems nice at first to avoid thinking about names.



Exercise

```
class A {  
    public void f(A a) { print("A.f(A)"); }  
}  
class B extends A {  
    public void f(A a) { print("B.f(A)"); }  
    public void f(B b) { print("B.f(B)"); }  
}
```

```
A a = new B(); // take care, this is a B!  
B b = new B();  
a.f(a);   a.f(b);  
b.f(a);   b.f(b);
```

What are the results of these 4 expressions?



Solution

```
class A {  
    public void f(A a) { print("A.f(A)"); }  
}  
class B extends A {  
    public void f(A a) { print("B.f(A)"); }  
    public void f(B b) { print("B.f(B)"); }  
}
```

```
A a = new B(); // take care, this is a B!  
B b = new B();  
a.f(a);   a.f(b);  
b.f(a);   b.f(b);
```

B.f(A) B.f(A)

B.f(A) B.f(B)



Explanation

Overloading + sub-typing is confusing in Java.
In the presence of a message send, the compiler searches a *compatible signature* and stores it. During execution, the lookup algorithm searches for a method with this exact signature, regardless of the dynamic types of arguments.



Looking at a Real Case: a Visitor

```
public class A {  
    public void accept(Visitor visitor) {  
        visitor.visit(this);  
    }  
}  
public class Visitor {  
    public void visit(A a) {  
        System.out.println("Visitor.visit(A)");  
    }  
}  
  
Visitor visitor = new Visitor();  
new A().accept(visitor); // "Visitor.visit(A)"
```

All is well in this perfect world...



Uh! My Visitor is not Executed!

```
public class SubA extends A {  
    public void accept(Visitor visitor) {  
        visitor.visit(this);  
    }  
}  
public class SubVisitor extends Visitor {  
    public void visit(SubA subA) {  
        System.out.println("SubVisitor.visit(SubA)");  
    }  
}
```

```
Visitor visitor = new SubVisitor();  
new SubA().accept(visitor); // "Visitor.visit(A)"
```

When method `SubA.accept()` is compiled, the message `visitor.visit(this)` is bound to `visit(A)`, the only compatible signature in `Visitor`. During execution, `visit(SubA)` is ignored.



Possible Ugly 'Solutions'

One way to fix that could be to add a visit(SubA) method in Visitor (if you can change it):

```
public class Visitor {  
    public void visit(A a) {  
        System.out.println("Visitor.visit(A)");  
    }  
    public void visit(SubA a) {  
        System.out.println("Visitor.visit(SubA)");  
    }  
}
```

This works but has 2 problems (see next slides):

- the methods accept() in A and SubA are identical
- you can't use the visit() methods directly



In Particular

The methods `accept()` in `A` and `SubA` are identical:

```
public class A {  
    public void accept(Visitor visitor) {  
        visitor.visit(this);  
    }  
}  
public class SubA extends A {  
    public void accept(Visitor visitor) {  
        visitor.visit(this);  
    }  
}
```

You could think that `SubA.accept()` is useless because its content is the same as `A.accept()`. But it's not useless as, inside it, the message `visitor.visit(this)` binds to the signature `visit(SubA)` which is what we want.



In Particular

You can't use the `visit()` methods directly:

```
public class Visitor {  
    public void visit(A a) {  
        System.out.println("Visitor.visit(A)");  
    }  
    public void visit(SubA a) {  
        System.out.println("Visitor.visit(SubA)");  
    }  
}
```

```
Visitor visitor = new Visitor();  
A subA = new SubA();  
visitor.visit(subA); // "Visitor.visit(A)"
```

If you use the visitor directly (i.e., without going through `accept()` methods), the static types become important to decide which `visit()` method to execute.



The Real Solution

Don't use overloading and prefer dedicated method names:

```
public class A {  
    public void accept(Visitor visitor) {  
        visitor.visitA(this);  
    }  
}  
  
public class Visitor {  
    public void visitA(A a) {  
        System.out.println("Visitor.visitA(A)");  
    }  
}
```



Summary

1. overloading is nice
2. just pay attention you don't mix it with sub-typing...
3. but OO programming is all about sub-typing...
4. don't use overloading



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