Comparison of two object-oriented languages: Eiffel and Ruby

Quentin De Clerck

January 12, 2014

Contents

1 Foreword

This paper is written in an evaluation context of the course Principles of Object-Oriented Programming Languages and has for aim to compare the features of two object-oriented languages. The chosen languages are Eiffel and Ruby. The reasons we decided to choose these two languages is that both have a different type system and philosophies. Eiffel is a statically typed language that aims to produce reusable, extensible and reliable code **REFERENCE** . Ruby is dynamically typed and has for goals simplicity and productivity. .

Ruby version: ruby 2.0.0p247 (2013-06-27 revision 41674) [universal.x86_64-darwin13]. Eiffel version: EiffelStudio 13 (13.11.9.3542 GPL Edition - macosx-x86-64).

The structure of the paper is divided into two sections. The first section compares for both languages the principal features that are present in most object-oriented programming languages. Since both languages are different in many ways, the second section will focus more on the features that are the most specific to the languages and those that reflects the best the philosophies proper to Eiffel and Ruby.

2 General OO concepts

The aim of this section is to discuss the design choices of the developers of the languages for main concepts of object-oriented languages and to compare the different approaches.

2.1 Everything is an object

Every value in both Eiffel and Ruby are object, even types that are in many languages called primitive types (for example: integers, booleans). Eiffel and Ruby have a similar structure. There is in both languages a class at the top of the hierarchy, this means a class from which every other class in the language inherits its methods. In Ruby this class is called BasicObject and in Eiffel it is called ANY. Besides the ANY class, Eiffel also has the NONE class, which is the class that inherits from every class in the language.

2.2 Access Control

In Eiffel there is no possibility to directly perform an assignment on the value of an attribute. The reason for this inability to assign attributes from the outside is because in Eiffel it is impossible to know from the outside of the object if the feature called is a stored or computed value. If there are changes in the implementation, they do not affect the client class by forcing it to change its interface. This concept is called the uniform-access principle and is central in Eiffel. Because it is impossible to know if the expression is an attribute or a function, the only way to change the state of an object is thus to make a procedure than internally modifies the state: a "setter". But there exist a facility to make it look like assignment is directly possible. This mechanism is called assigner command and consists of specifying in the declaration of the attribute which is the related assignment procedure. The assignment of the attribute will be transformed at compile time in the assignment procedure specified in the declaration. They implemented this facility because developers are used to direct access in other programming languages.

An instance variable in Ruby cannot be read/written without calling a method. Thus there is a need for a "getter" and "setter". The keyword attr_read, attr_write and attr_accessor are syntactic sugar for creating theses methods. Like in Eiffel, the client is unaware if the method is a stored value or a computed one. Thus Ruby also implements the uniform-access principle.

Now there are other mechanisms we have not discussed yet about access controls, namely how to control access to methods to clients outside the scope of the class.

There are three kinds of access controllers in Ruby:

public accessible without restrictions.

protected *only* accessible within the class and subclasses.

private inaccessible *if receiver is explicit* within class and subclasses.

What is meant with ïf the receiver is explicitïs that if the method is called for a specific object, like self or a parameter, then the call will result in an error.By default, every method is public in Ruby and it is possible to change the visibility of the methods at run-time due to the dynamic nature of the language. This dynamic nature will be discussed in a later section.

Eiffel has another approach called Selective Export. It specifies a list of clients to export, enabling them to get access with the features they were listed for. This approach enables to be very precise about the scope of the features. The different possibilities are:

- Making a set of features private to the class by specifying that the feature set should not be exported: {NONE}.
- Making a set of features public to every possible client by specifying nothing or by specifying: {ANY}.
- Making a set of features public to a set of clients by specifying the clients, for example {Class_A, Class_B, Class_C}. It is possible to specify the current class as client, then every subclass will inherit the feature.

This export technology allows to be very specific in the choice of accessible features. Export violations are statically checked by the compiler and thus are detected at compile-time and not at run-time.

2.3 Inheritance

Both languages support single class inheritance but only Eiffel supports multiple inheritance. However Ruby supports mixins which offers the same possibilities as multiple inheritance.

Multiple inheritance is a object-oriented feature where a class inherits from more than one parent class. This can lead to problems like the diamond problem depicted in figure 1. The diamond problem arises when two or more parent classes inherit from the same superclass. This will provoke nameclashes in the subclass inheriting from the multiple parents. Eiffel provides a flexible approach to multiple inheritance. It introduces different keywords that enable to adapt the features inherited from the parent classes. The keywords that are provided for feature adaptation are:

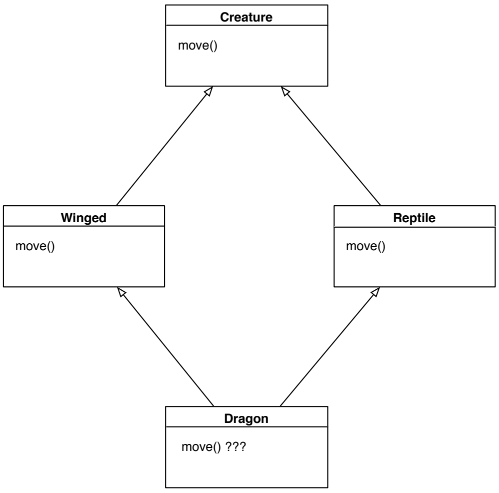

Figure 1: Example of the diamond problem

rename Renames a inherited feature.

export Changes the export list of the inherited features.

undefine Removes one of the inherited feature definitions.

redefine Redefines one of the inherited feature definitions.

select Selects the feature to use when there are homonyms.

Thus the diamond problem can be easily solved in Eiffel thanks to the provided tools. A simple example for solving the depicted problem in figure 1 is to rename the move feature from the Winged class into fly and select the fly feature. Another approach could be to undefine one of the features and selecting the other.

Ruby does not support multiple inheritance, but a *mixin* can be an equivalent feature. Before explaining what a mixin is it is important to explain modules in Ruby. A module is a sort of namespace grouping variables and functions together for obtaining a whole that provides functionalities. Modules cannot be instantiated, their purpose is to add functionality to a class. A mixin allows to include a module as a sort of superclass to the desired class, to mix the module in the class. It is possible to mix more than one module in a class, thus it looks very similar to multiple inheritance. In the example from figure 1, the superclasses could be two modules that implement the different move behaviors. But even if Ruby uses mixins instead of multiple inheritance, the nameclash problem persists. Ruby resolves it automatically by overriding the previous definition, thus it is important for the programmer to be aware of this and give another name to one of the definition if the two method definitions are needed.

2.4 Polymorphism

Polymorphism is a key feature in object-oriented programming languages. Both Ruby and Eiffel support this feature but in a very different conceptual way. Eiffel supports subtype polymorphism, it means that Eiffel allows polymorphism only for the types that have a superclass in common. Thus inheritance is primordial for subtype polymorphism.

In Ruby it is also possible to achieve it using inheritance, but this is more a consequence of the mechanism that permits Ruby to support polymorphism. Ruby is dynamically typed and supports a special style of typing namely, *duck typing*. Duck typing focusses on the methods of an object instead of its type. If the method is supported by the object it will be called whatever the type or output is. If the method call is not supported, then a run-time error is returned. Duck typing is the concept used for polymorphism in Ruby allows thus polymorphism without inheriting from a superclass. It is trivial why polymorphism also works with inheritance in Ruby, classes that inherit from a superclass inherit its methods and duck typing focusses on the presence of methods.

So even if both languages support polymorphism, their approach is completely different. Polymorphic calls are dependent of the type of objects in Eiffel and in Ruby they are dependent of the presence of the method. From a software engineering point of view it is logical that Eiffel focusses on the subtype polymorphism. First it is statically typed, thus there should be a specific type declared with the variable or parameter. However, this could be resolved with a keyword that instructs the compiler that a variable should be dynamically typed. Second and most importantly, this sort of solution is not in the philosophy of the Eiffel language. One of the goals of Eiffel is to produce software that is reliable and maintainable. If duck typing should be adapted in Eiffel then it would be only reliable if the programmers know exactly which type of objects will passed to the methods and the maintainability would also be tricky. Imagine that the call changes of name in one of the classes, with duck typing it would not be clear that a method is used in a polymorphic call and by changing its name the programmer introduces errors that are difficult to resolve. Thus it is important to be aware of the methods that are used in a polymorphic context. Subtype polymorphism in a statically typed language is a much more reliable mechanism because the polymorphic calls are only possible for a predefined restricted set of types. It is also more easily maintained, because it is checked at compile time that every class implements the method.

2.5 Reflection

3 Language-specific Features

While the first section enumerates differences in general object-oriented concepts, this section focusses more on features that characterize the languages. The aim is not make an exhaustive list of features but more to pick some that really show the purpose and philosophy of the languages.

3.1 Eiffel

The goal of Eiffel is to provide rather a method that guides the programmer in software development than only a language for programming. It focusses on some the whole software development process and on the quality of the software.

3.1.1 Design by Contract

If there is one language specific feature that is essential in Eiffel, then this concept is *Design by Contract*. The idea is that every system has interacting components and that their cooperation should follow some strict specifications (the contract) that settle the obligations and benefits for both client and supplier. The obligations have to be satisfied before feature calls. They are called *preconditions* and are introduced by the *require* keyword. The benefits describe what the result should be if the precondition was met. Benefits are thus *postconditions* and can be specified using the *ensure* keyword. Every contract also include *class invariants*, which are conditions that have to be ensured during the lifetime of an object, including at its creation. Class invariants are specified after the *invariant* keyword. These are the three main catergories of contracts and are implemented using assertions. Each assertion may be tagged, it is not mandatory and does not influence the contract but it is helpful for debugging and provides extra documentation. Since assertions are boolean expressions, it is possible to formulate them in function calls. This enables to express more complex conditions.

There are still three other types of assertions:

- Instruction check: checks if a certain condition is respected at a specific moment during the execution.
- Loop invariants: states that some conditions have to be ensured when exiting the loop.
- Loop variant: make sure the loop is finite by decreasing an integer expression at each loop iteration and check that the integer stays positive.

Even if Design by Contract is not mandatory to use when developing in Eiffel, it is strongly encouraged because it has many benefits. It is a method that helps the developers for designing and implementing correct software in first instance. They push the developers to think about specifications for the code to write. It has already been pointed out that using tags for assertions are useful for code documentation and debugging. Design by Contract is thus a methodology that encourage the programmer to think about the code, to write specifications down about the code and to design the code such that the specifications are fulfilled.

3.2 Void-safety

3.3 Ruby

3.3.1 Open Objects

3.3.2 Meta-class model

4 Conclusion

5 References

Listing 1: Access Control in Ruby

```ruby
# CODE FOR ACCESS IDENTIFIERS

class Lord

  private

  def plot
    puts "I␣plot␣to␣behead␣king␣Joffrey"
  end

  protected

  def mistrust
    puts "I␣want␣to␣conspire,␣but␣hold␣it␣secret"
  end


  public

  def toad
    puts "You␣are␣such␣a␣magnificent␣person,␣my␣grace"
  end

  def publicTalk
    toad
    self.toad
  end

  def protectedTalk
    mistrust # works
    self.mistrust #works

  end

  def privateTalk
    plot #works
    self.plot #does not work
  end


end

l = Lord.new
l.publicTalk
l.protectedTalk
l.privateTalk

class Lord
  public

    def plot
      puts "I␣say␣it␣publicly:␣I␣want␣to␣behead␣king␣Joffrey!"
    end
end

l.privateTalk
```

Listing 2: Access Control in Eiffel

```eiffel
--------------------
-- CLASS LORD --
--------------------

note
  description: "LORD␣diplomacy␣class."

class
  LORD

create
  make

feature {ANY} -- public

  name: STRING assign set_name -- assigner command

  set_name (n : STRING)
    do
      name := n
    end

feature {NONE} --initialization

  make (name_lord: STRING)
    do
      name := name_lord
      print("I␣am␣lord␣")
      print(name)
      print("%N")
    end

feature {NONE} -- private, will not be called outside this scope

  plot
    do
      print ("I␣plot␣to␣behead␣king␣Joffrey%N")
    end



feature -- public, syntactic sugar for feature {ANY}

  toad
    do
      print ("You␣are␣such␣a␣magnificent␣person,␣my␣grace%N")
    end


feature {LORD} -- public for specified classes and subclasses, same as protected in C++ for example

  mistrust
    do
```

```
      print("I␣want␣to␣conspire,␣but␣hold␣it␣secret%N")
    end

feature {LIEGELORD} -- public for specified classes and subclasses, will only work in LIEGELORD class and subclasses

  allegiance (n : STRING)
    do
      print("I␣am␣your␣humble␣subject,␣my␣lord␣")
      print(n)
      print("%N")
    end

end

------------------------------
-- CLASS LIEGELORD --
------------------------------

note
  description: "LIEGELORD␣diplomacy␣class."

class
  LIEGELORD

inherit
  LORD

create
  makeLiege

feature

  subject : LORD

feature {NONE} -- Initialization

  makeLiege (n: STRING man : LORD)
    do
      name := n
      subject := man
      man.allegiance (n) -- works within the scope of LIEGELORD subclasses
      print("Yes␣you␣are,␣lord␣")
      print(subject.name)
      print("%N")
      man.mistrust -- works within the scope of LORD subclasses
      -- man.plot does not work
    end

end

-----------------------
-- ROOT CLASS --
-----------------------

note
  description : "Eiffel-project␣application␣root␣class"

class
  APPLICATION

create
  make

feature {NONE} -- Initialization

  make
      -- Run application.
    local
      lord: LORD
      liege: LIEGELORD
    do
      create lord.make ("Karstark")
      create liege.makeliege ("Stark", lord)

      lord.toad
      liege.toad
    end

end
```

Listing 3: Inheritance in Ruby

```
# CODE FOR INHERITANCE

class Creature
  def initialize name
    @name = name
    puts "Creature␣#{name}"
  end

  def move
    puts "AAArg!!␣cannot␣move␣without␣legs!!"
  end
end

module Winged

  def fly
    puts "Flying␣creature"
  end
end

module Reptile
  def move
    puts "Crawling␣creature"
  end
end

class Dragon < Creature
  include Winged

  include Reptile

  def breatheFire
    puts "Roooooooooooh!"
  end
end

balerion = Dragon.new "Balerion"
balerion.fly
balerion.move
```

Listing 4: Inheritance in Eiffel

```

------------------------
-- CLASS CREATURE --
------------------------
note
  description: "A␣class␣modeling␣a␣mythic␣CREATURE."

deferred class
  CREATURE

feature

  move
    deferred

    end
end

----------------------
-- CLASS REPTILE --
----------------------

note
  description: "REPTILE␣inheriting␣from␣CREATURE."

class
  REPTILE

inherit
  CREATURE

feature
  move
    do
      print ("creature␣crawls␣on␣the␣ground")
        print ("%N")
    end

end

---------------------
-- CLASS WINGED --
---------------------

note
  description: "WINGED␣inheriting␣from␣CREATURE."

class
  WINGED


inherit
  CREATURE

feature
  move
    do
      print ("creature␣flies␣in␣the␣air")
      print ("%N")
    end

end

--------------------
-- CLASS DRAGON --
--------------------

note
  description: "DRAGON␣multiple␣inheritance␣from␣diamond␣problem␣example."

class
  DRAGON

inherit
  WINGED
    rename
      move as fly
      select fly
      end
  REPTILE

create
    make

feature

  name: STRING

feature -- Initialization

    make (dragon_name: STRING)

        do
            name := dragon_name
            print (name)
            print ("%N")
        end

end

------------------
-- ROOT CLASS --
------------------

```

```
note
  description : "Eiffel-project␣application␣root␣class"

class
  APPLICATION

create
  make

feature {NONE} -- Initialization

  make
      -- Run application.
    local
      dragon: DRAGON
    do
      create dragon.make ("Balerion")
      dragon.fly
      dragon.move
    end
end
```

Listing 5: Polymorphism in Ruby

```
class Knight
  def initialize name
    @name = "ser␣" + name
  end

  def fight
    puts "#{@name}␣shouts:␣FOR␣THE␣RIGHTFUL␣QUEEN!!"
  end
end

class Sellsword
  def initialize name
    @name = name
  end

  def fight
    puts "#{@name}␣asks:␣How␣much␣are␣you␣willing␣to␣pay??"
  end
end

def defendQueen knight
  knight.fight
end

barristan = Knight.new "Barristan"
bronn = Sellsword.new "Bronn"
defendQueen barristan
defendQueen bronn
```

Listing 6: Polymorphism in Eiffel

```
------------------------
-- CLASS WARRIOR --
------------------------

note
  description: "Superclass␣WARRIOR."

deferred class
  WARRIOR

feature

  fight
    deferred
    end
end

----------------------------
-- CLASS SELLSWORD --
----------------------------

note
  description: "SELLSWORD␣subclass␣for␣polymorphism."

class
  SELLSWORD

inherit
  WARRIOR

create
  make

feature

  name: STRING

  make (n : STRING)
    do
      name := n
    end

  fight
    do
      print(name)
      print("␣asks:␣How␣much␣are␣you␣willing␣to␣pay??%N")
    end

end

------------------------
-- CLASS KNIGHT --
------------------------
note
  description: "KNIGHT␣subclass␣for␣polymorphism."

class
  KNIGHT

inherit
  WARRIOR

```

```
create
	make

feature

	name: STRING

	make (n : STRING)
		do
			name := n
		end

	fight
		do
			print(name)
			print(" shouts: FOR THE RIGHTFUL QUEEN!!%N")
		end
end

------------------
-- ROOT CLASS --
------------------

class
	APPLICATION

create
	make

feature {NONE} -- Initialization

	defendQueen (warrior: WARRIOR)
		do
			warrior.fight
		end

	make
			-- Run application.
		local
			bronn: SELLSWORD
			barristan: KNIGHT

		do
			create bronn.make ("Bronn")
			create barristan.make ("Barristan")
			defendQueen(bronn)
			defendQueen(barristan)
		end

end
```