

Classes and Methods in R

The Johns Hopkins Data Science Lab

September 21, 2016

Classes and Methods

- ▶ A system for doing object oriented programming
- ▶ R was originally quite interesting because it is both interactive *and* has a system for object orientation.
 - ▶ Other languages which support OOP (C++, Java, Lisp, Python, Perl) generally speaking are not interactive languages

Classes and Methods

- ▶ In R much of the code for supporting classes/methods is written by John Chambers himself (the creator of the original S language) and documented in the book *Programming with Data: A Guide to the S Language*
- ▶ A natural extension of Chambers' idea of allowing someone to cross the user -> programmer spectrum
- ▶ Object oriented programming is a bit different in R than it is in most languages - even if you are familiar with the idea, you may want to pay attention to the details

Two styles of classes and methods

S3 classes/methods - Included with version 3 of the S language. - Informal, a little kludgy - Sometimes called *old-style* classes/methods

S4 classes/methods - more formal and rigorous - Included with S-PLUS 6 and R 1.4.0 (December 2001) - Also called *new-style* classes/methods

Two worlds living side by side

- ▶ For now (and the foreseeable future), S3 classes/methods and S4 classes/methods are separate systems (but they can be mixed to some degree).
- ▶ Each system can be used fairly independently of the other.
- ▶ Developers of new projects (you!) are encouraged to use the S4 style classes/methods.
 - ▶ Used extensively in the Bioconductor project
- ▶ But many developers still use S3 classes/methods because they are “quick and dirty” (and easier).
- ▶ In this lecture we will focus primarily on S4 classes/methods
- ▶ The code for implementing S4 classes/methods in R is in the *methods* package, which is usually loaded by default (but you can load it with `library(methods)` if for some reason it is not loaded)

Object Oriented Programming in R

- ▶ A class is a description of an thing. A class can be defined using `setClass()` in the *methods* package.
- ▶ An *object* is an instance of a class. Objects can be created using `new()`.
- ▶ A *method* is a function that only operates on a certain class of objects.
- ▶ A generic function is an R function which dispatches methods. A generic function typically encapsulates a “generic” concept (e.g. `plot`, `mean`, `predict`, ...)
 - ▶ The generic function does not actually do any computation.
- ▶ A *method* is the implementation of a generic function for an object of a particular class.

Things to look up

- ▶ The help files for the 'methods' package are extensive - do read them as they are the primary documentation
- ▶ You may want to start with ?Classes and ?Methods
- ▶ Check out ?setClass, ?setMethod, and ?setGeneric
- ▶ Some of it gets technical, but try your best for now-it will make sense in the future as you keep using it.
- ▶ Most of the documentation in the *methods* package is oriented towards developers/programmers as these are the primary people using classes/methods

Classes

All objects in R have a class which can be determined by the class function

```
class(1)
```

```
## [1] "numeric"
```

```
class(TRUE)
```

```
## [1] "logical"
```


Classes

```
class(rnorm(100))
```

```
## [1] "numeric"
```

```
class(NA)
```

```
## [1] "logical"
```

```
class("foo")
```

```
## [1] "character"
```

Classes (cont'd)

Data classes go beyond the atomic classes

```
x <- rnorm(100)
y <- x + rnorm(100)
fit <- lm(y ~ x) ## linear regression model
class(fit)
```

```
## [1] "lm"
```

Generics/Methods in R

- ▶ S4 and S3 style generic functions look different but conceptually, they are the same (they play the same role).
- ▶ When you program you can write new methods for an existing generic OR create your own generics and associated methods.
- ▶ Of course, if a data type does not exist in R that matches your needs, you can always define a new class along with generics/methods that go with it

An S3 generic function (in the 'base' package)

The mean and print functions are generic

```
mean
```

```
## function (x, ...)  
## UseMethod("mean")  
## <bytecode: 0x7fe8ecbf13f8>  
## <environment: namespace:base>
```

An S3 generic function (in the 'base' package)

```
print
```

```
## function (x, ...)  
## UseMethod("print")  
## <bytecode: 0x7fe8ebf6f9f8>  
## <environment: namespace:base>
```

S3 methods

The `mean` generic function has a number of methods associated with it.

```
methods("mean")
```

```
## [1] mean.Date      mean.default    mean.difftime  mean.POSIXt  
## see '?methods' for accessing help and source code
```

An S4 generic function

The `show` function is from the `methods` package and is the S4 equivalent of `print`

```
library(methods)
show
```

```
## standardGeneric for "show" defined from package "methods"
##
## function (object)
## standardGeneric("show")
## <bytecode: 0x7fe8ebfaf1b8>
## <environment: 0x7fe8ebc0bbf8>
## Methods may be defined for arguments: object
## Use showMethods("show") for currently available ones.
## (This generic function excludes non-simple inheritance;
```

The `show` function is usually not called directly (much like `print`) because objects are auto-printed.

S4 methods

```
showMethods("show")
```

```
## Function: show (package methods)
## object="ANY"
## object="C++Class"
## object="C++Function"
## object="C++Object"
## object="classGeneratorFunction"
## object="classRepresentation"
## object="envRefClass"
## object="externalRefMethod"
## object="function"
##      (inherited from: object="ANY")
## object="genericFunction"
## object="genericFunctionWithTrace"
## object="MethodDefinition"
## object="MethodDefinitionWithTrace"
## object="MethodSelectionReport"
```


Generic/method mechanism

The first argument of a generic function is an object of a particular class (there may be other arguments)

1. The generic function checks the class of the object.
2. A search is done to see if there is an appropriate method for that class.
3. If there exists a method for that class, then that method is called on the object and we're done.
4. If a method for that class does not exist, a search is done to see if there is a default method for the generic. If a default exists, then the default method is called.
5. If a default method doesn't exist, then an error is thrown.

Examining Code for Methods

- ▶ You cannot just print the code for a method like other functions because the code for the method is usually hidden.
- ▶ If you want to see the code for an S3 method, you can use the function `getMethod`.
- ▶ The call is `getMethod(<generic>, <class>)`
- ▶ For S4 methods you can use the function `getMethod`
- ▶ The call is `getMethod(<generic>, <signature>)` (more details later)

S3 Class/Method: Example 1

What's happening here?

```
set.seed(2)
x <- rnorm(100)
mean(x)
```

```
## [1] -0.03069816
```

1. The class of `x` is “numeric”
2. But there is no `mean` method for “numeric” objects!
3. So we call the default function for `mean`.

S3 Class/Method: Example 1

```
head(getS3method("mean", "default"), 10)
```

```
##
```

```
## 1  function (x, trim = 0, na.rm = FALSE, ...)
```

```
## 2  {
```

```
## 3      if (!is.numeric(x) && !is.complex(x) && !is.logical(x))
```

```
## 4          warning("argument is not numeric or logical: ")
```

```
## 5          return(NA_real_)
```

```
## 6      }
```

```
## 7      if (na.rm)
```

```
## 8          x <- x[!is.na(x)]
```

```
## 9      if (!is.numeric(trim) || length(trim) != 1L)
```

```
## 10         stop("'trim' must be numeric of length one")
```

S3 Class/Method: Example 1

```
tail(getS3method("mean", "default"), 10)
```

```
##  
## 15         if (anyNA(x))  
## 16             return(NA_real_)  
## 17         if (trim >= 0.5)  
## 18             return(stats::median(x, na.rm = FALSE))  
## 19         lo <- floor(n * trim) + 1  
## 20         hi <- n + 1 - lo  
## 21         x <- sort.int(x, partial = unique(c(lo, hi)))  
## 22     }  
## 23     .Internal(mean(x))  
## 24 }
```

S3 Class/Method: Example 2

What happens here?

```
set.seed(3)
df <- data.frame(x = rnorm(100), y = 1:100)
sapply(df, mean)
```

```
##           x           y
## 0.01103557 50.50000000
```

S3 Class/Method: Example 2

1. The class of `df` is “data.frame”; each column can be an object of a different class
2. We `sapply` over the columns and call the `mean` function
3. In each column, `mean` checks the class of the object and dispatches the appropriate method.
4. We have a `numeric` column and an `integer` column; `mean` calls the default method for both

Calling Methods Directly

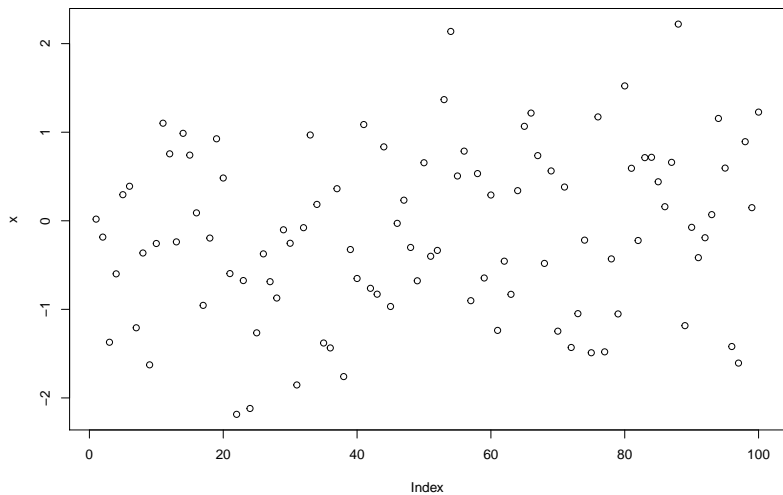
- ▶ Some S3 methods are visible to the user (i.e. `mean.default`),
- ▶ Never call methods directly
- ▶ Use the generic function and let the method be dispatched automatically.
- ▶ With S4 methods you cannot call them directly at all

S3 Class/Method: Example 3

The `plot` function is generic and its behavior depends on the object being plotted.

```
set.seed(10)
x <- rnorm(100)
plot(x)
```

S3 Class/Method: Example 3

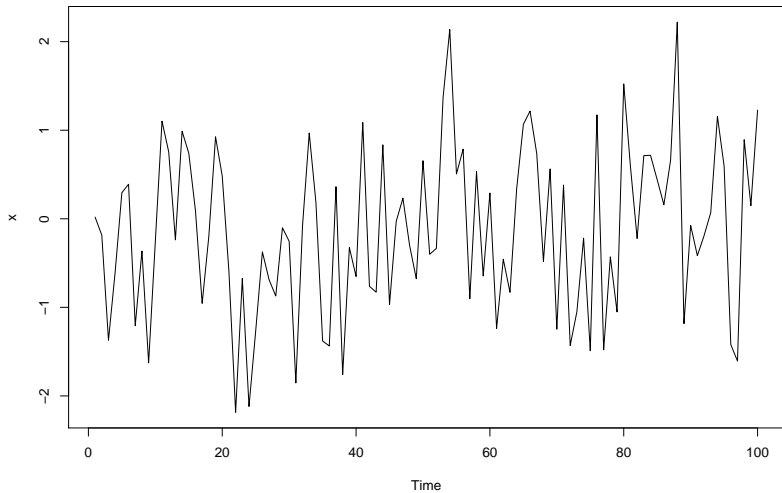


S3 Class/Method: Example 3

For time series objects, `plot` connects the dots

```
set.seed(10)
x <- rnorm(100)
x <- as.ts(x) ## Convert to a time series object
plot(x)
```

S3 Class/Method: Example 3



Write your own methods!

If you write new methods for new classes, you'll probably end up writing methods for the following generics: - `print/show` - `summary` - `plot`

There are two ways that you can extend the R system via classes/methods - Write a method for a new class but for an existing generic function (i.e. like `print`) - Write new generic functions and new methods for those generics

S4 Classes

Why would you want to create a new class? - To represent new types of data (e.g. gene expression, space-time, hierarchical, sparse matrices) - New concepts/ideas that haven't been thought of yet (e.g. a fitted point process model, mixed-effects model, a sparse matrix) - To abstract/hide implementation details from the user I say things are “new” meaning that R does not know about them (not that they are new to the statistical community).

S4 Class/Method: Creating a New Class

A new class can be defined using the `setClass` function - At a minimum you need to specify the name of the class - You can also specify data elements that are called *slots* - You can then define methods for the class with the `setMethod` function Information about a class definition can be obtained with the `showClass` function

S4 Class/Method: Polygon Class

Creating new classes/methods is usually not something done at the console; you likely want to save the code in a separate file

```
library(methods)
setClass("polygon",
        representation(x = "numeric",
                       y = "numeric"))
```

- ▶ The slots for this class are `x` and `y`
- ▶ The slots for an S4 object can be accessed with the `@` operator.

S4 Class/Method: Polygon Class

A plot method can be created with the `setMethod` function.

- ▶ For `setMethod` you need to specify a generic function (`plot`), and a *signature*.
- ▶ A signature is a character vector indicating the classes of objects that are accepted by the method.
- ▶ In this case, the `plot` method will take one type of object, a polygon object.

S4 Class/Method: Polygon Class

Creating a plot method with setMethod.

```
setMethod("plot", "polygon",  
  function(x, y, ...) {  
    plot(x@x, x@y, type = "n", ...)  
    xp <- c(x@x, x@x[1])  
    yp <- c(x@y, x@y[1])  
    lines(xp, yp)  
  })
```

```
## [1] "plot"
```

- Notice that the slots of the polygon (the x- and y-coordinates) are accessed with the @ operator.

S4 Class/Method: Polygon Class

After calling `setMethod` the new `plot` method will be added to the list of methods for `plot`.

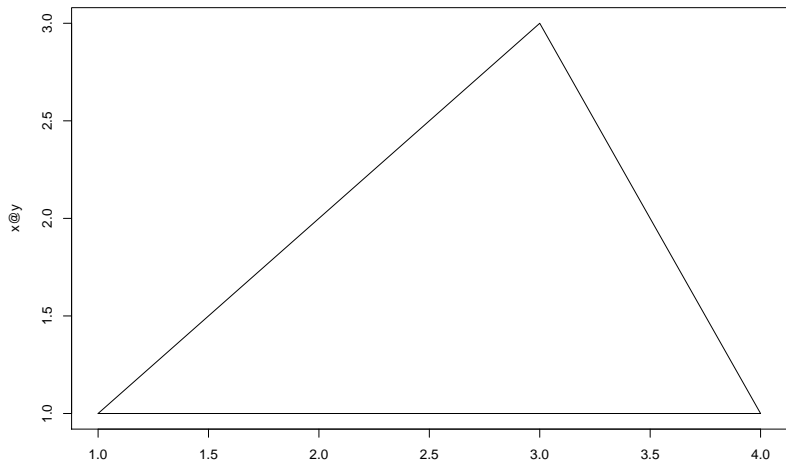
```
library(methods)
showMethods("plot")
```

```
## Function: plot (package graphics)
## x="ANY"
## x="polygon"
```

Notice that the signature for class `polygon` is listed. The method for `ANY` is the default method and it is what is called when now other signature matches

S4 Class/Method: Polygon class

```
p <- new("polygon", x = c(1, 2, 3, 4), y = c(1, 2, 3, 1))  
plot(p)
```



Summary

- ▶ Developing classes and associated methods is a powerful way to extend the functionality of R
- ▶ Classes define new data types
- ▶ Methods extend generic functions to specify the behavior of generic functions on new classes
- ▶ As new data types and concepts are created, classes/methods provide a way for you to develop an intuitive interface to those data/concepts for users

Where to Look, Places to Start

- ▶ The best way to learn this stuff is to look at examples
- ▶ There are quite a few examples on CRAN which use S4 classes/methods. You can usually tell if they use S4 classes/methods if the methods package is listed in the Depends: field
- ▶ Bioconductor (<http://www.bioconductor.org>) - a rich resource, even if you know nothing about bioinformatics
- ▶ Some packages on CRAN (as far as I know) - SparseM, gpclib, flexmix, its, lme4, orientlib, filehash
- ▶ The stats4 package (comes with R) has a bunch of classes/methods for doing maximum likelihood analysis.