

Specification tips and pitfalls

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Specifications tips and pitfalls

1. **Inherited specifications**
2. **Aliasing**
3. **Object invariants**
4. **Inconsistent assumptions**
5. **Exposed references**
6. **\old**
7. **How to write specs**

#1: Specification inheritance and behavioural subtyping

Behavioural subtyping

Suppose `Child` extends `Parent`.

- **Behavioural subtyping** = objects from subclass `Child` “behave like” objects from superclass `Parent`
- **Principle of substitutivity** [Liskov]:
code will behave “as expected” if we provide an `Child` object where a `Parent` object was expected.

Behavioural subtyping

Behavioural subtyping usually enforced by insisting that

- invariant in subclass is **stronger** than invariant in superclass
- for every method,
 - precondition in subclass is **weaker** (!) than precondition in superclass
 - postcondition in subclass is **stronger** than postcondition in superclass

JML achieves behavioural subtyping by **specification inheritance**: any child class **inherits** the specification of its parent.

Specification inheritance for invariants

Invariants are inherited in subclasses. Eg.

```
class Parent {  
    ...  
    //@ invariant invParent;  
    ... }
```

```
class Child extends Parent {  
    ...  
    //@ invariant invChild;  
    ... }
```

the invariant for Child is `invChild && invParent`

Specification inheritance for method specs

```
class Parent {  
    //@ requires i >= 0;  
    //@ ensures  \result >= i;  
    int m(int i){ ... }  
}
```

```
class Child extends Parent {  
    //@ also  
    //@  requires i <= 0  
    //@  ensures  \result <= i;  
    int m(int i){ ... }  
}
```

Keyword **also** indicates there are inherited specs.

Specification inheritance for method specs

Method `m` in `Child` also has to meet the spec given in `Parent` class. So the complete spec for `Child` is

```
class Child extends Parent {  
  
    /*@    requires i >= 0;  
       @    ensures  \result >= i;  
       @ also  
       @    requires i <= 0  
       @    ensures  \result <= i;  
    @*/  
    int m(int i){ ... }  
}
```

What can result of `m(0)` be?

Specification inheritance for method specs

This spec for Child is equivalent with

```
class Child extends Parent {  
  
    /*@    requires i <= 0 || i >= 0;  
      @    ensures  \old(i) >= 0 ==> \result >= i;  
      @    ensures  \old(i) <= 0 ==> \result <= i;  
      @*/  
    int m(int i){ ... }  
}
```

Inherited specifications: trick

Another example: two Objects that are `==` are always also **equals**. But the converse is not necessarily true. But it is true for objects whose dynamic type is Object.

```
public class Object {  
    //@ ensures (this == o) ==> \result;  
    /*@ ensures \typeof(this) == \type(Object)  
        ==> (\result == (this==o));  
    */  
    public boolean equals(Object o);  
}
```

True for all Objects

Not necessarily true for subtypes

Inherited specifications

So

- Base class specifications apply to subclasses
 - that is, ESC/Java2 enforces *behavioral subtyping*
 - Specs from implemented *interfaces* also must hold for implementing classes
- Be thoughtful about how strict the base class specs should be
- Guard them with `\typeof(this) == \type(...)` if need be
- Restrictions on exceptions such as `normal_behavior` or `signals (E e) false;` will apply to derived classes as well.

#2: Aliasing

A common but non-obvious problem that causes violated invariants is aliasing.

```
public class Alias {
    /*@ non_null */ int[] a = new int[10];
    boolean noneg = true;

    /*@ invariant noneg ==>
        (\forall int i; 0<=i && i < a.length; a[i]>=0); */

    //@ requires 0<=i && i < a.length;
    public void insert(int i, int v) {
        a[i] = v;
        if (v < 0) noneg = false;
    }
}
```

produces

```
Alias.java:12: Warning: Possible violation of object invariant (Invariant)
    }
    ^
```

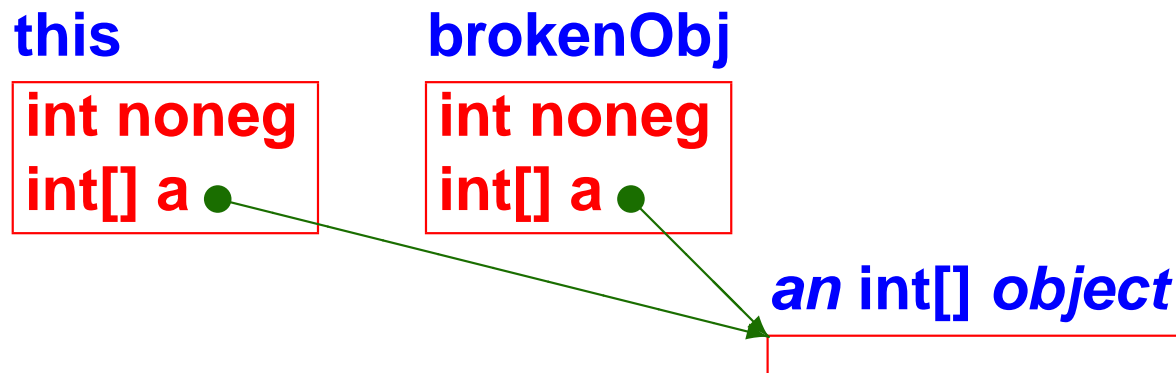
Associated declaration is "Alias.java", line 5, col 6:

```
/*@ invariant (\forall int i; 0<=i && i < a.length;
```

A full counterexample context (**-counterexample** option) produces, among lots of other information:

```
brokenObj%0 != this  
(brokenObj%0).(a@pre:2.24) == tmp0!a:10.4  
this.(a@pre:2.24) == tmp0!a:10.4
```

that is, **this** and some different object (**brokenObj**) share the same **a** object.



Aliasing

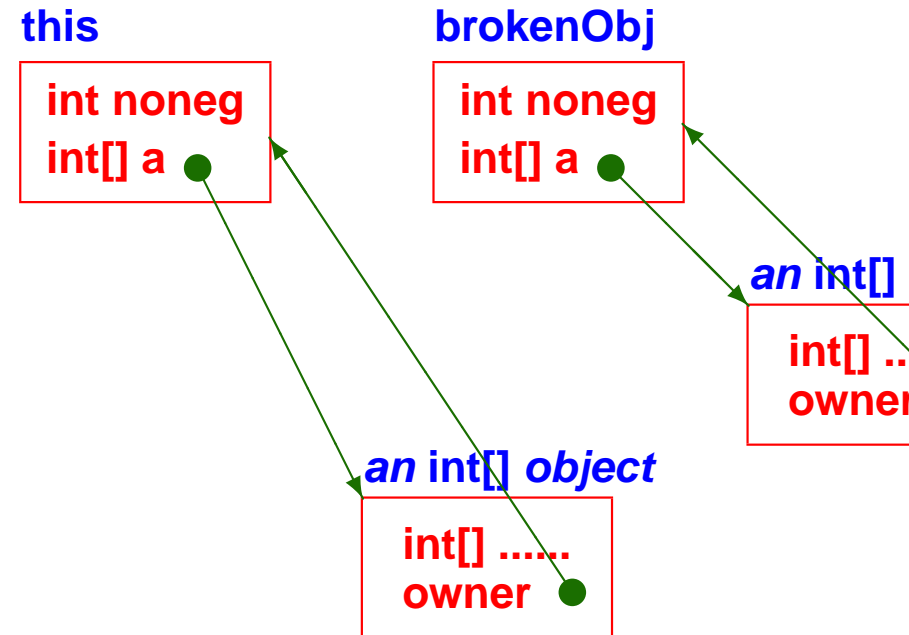
To fix this, declare that **a** is owned only by its parent object:
(**owner** is a ghost field of java.lang.Object)

```
public class Alias {
    /*@ non_null */ int[] a = new int[10];
    boolean noneg = true;

    /*@ invariant (\forall int i; 0<=i && i < a.length;
                    noneg ==> (a[i]>=0)); */
    /*@ invariant a.owner == this;

    /*@ requires 0<=i && i < a.length;
    public void insert(int i, int v) {
        a[i] = v;
        if (v < 0) noneg = false;
    }

    public Alias() {
        /*@ set a.owner = this;
    }
}
```



Another example. This one fails on the postcondition.

```
public class Alias2 {
    /*@ non_null */ Inner n = new Inner();
    /*@ non_null */ Inner nn = new Inner();
    //@ invariant n.owner == this;
    //@ invariant nn.owner == this;

    //@ ensures n.i == \old(n.i + 1);
    public void add() {
        n.i++;
        nn.i++;
    }

    Alias2();
}

class Inner {
    public int i;
    //@ ensures i == 0;
    Inner();
}
```


- The counterexample context shows

```
this.(nn:3.24) == tmp0!n:10.4  
tmp2!nn:11.4 == tmp0!n:10.4
```

- These hint that **n** and **nn** are references to the same object.
- If we add the invariant **//@ invariant n != nn;** to forbid aliasing between these two fields, then all is well.

- Aliasing is a serious difficulty in verification
- Handling aliasing is an active area of research, related to handling frame conditions
- It is all about knowing what is modified and what is not
- These **owner** fields or the equivalent create a form of encapsulation that can be checked by ESC/Java to control what might be modified by a given operation
- There is a proposal to add so-called **universes** to JML to provide a more advanced form of alias control.

#3: Write object invariants

- Be sure that class invariants are about the object at hand.
- Statements about all objects of a class may indeed be true, but they are difficult to prove, especially for automated provers.
- For example, if a predicate P is supposed to hold for objects of type T , then do **not** write

```
//@ invariant (\forall T t; P(t));
```

- Instead, write

```
//@ invariant P(this);
```

- The latter will make a more provable postcondition at the end of a constructor.

#4: Inconsistent assumptions

If you have inconsistent specifications you can prove anything:

```
public class Inconsistent {  
    public void m() {  
        int a,b,c,d;  
        //@ assume a == b;  
        //@ assume b == c;  
        //@ assume a != c;  
        //@ assert a == d; // Passes, but inconsistent  
        //@ assert false;  // Passes, but inconsistent  
    }  
}
```

#4: Inconsistent assumptions

Another example:

```
public class Inconsistent2 {  
    public int a,b,c,d;  
    //@ invariant a == b;  
    //@ invariant b == c;  
    //@ invariant a != c;  
  
    public void m() {  
        //@ assert a == d; // Passes, but inconsistent  
        //@ assert false;  // Passes, but inconsistent  
    }  
}
```

We hope to put in checks for this someday!

#5: Exposed references

Problems can arise when a reference to an internal object is exported from a class:

```
public class Exposed {
    /*@ non_null */ private int[] a = new int[10];
    //@ invariant a.length > 0 && a[0] >= 0;

    //@ ensures \result != null;
    //@ ensures \result.length > 0;
    //@ pure
    public int[] getArray() { return a; }
}

class X {
    void m(/*@ non_null */ Exposed e) {
        e.getArray()[0] = -1; // unchecked invariant violation
    }
}
```

- **ESC/Java does not check that every allocated object still satisfies its invariants.**
- **Similar hidden problems can result if public fields are modified directly.**

#6: \old

\old is used to indicate evaluation in the pre-state in a postcondition expression.

Consider specifying

```
public static native void arraycopy(Object[] src, int srcPos,  
                                   Object[] dest, int destPos, int length)
```

Try:

```
ensures (\forall int i; 0<=i && i<length; dest[destPos+i] == src[srcPos+i])
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Besides exceptions and invalid arguments, don't forget aliasing - **dest** and **src** may be the same array:

```
ensures (\forall int i; 0 <= i && i < length;  
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Besides exceptions and invalid arguments, don't forget aliasing - **dest** and **src** may be the same array:

```
ensures (\forall int i; 0<=i && i<length;  
        dest[destPos+i] == \old(src[srcPos+i]));
```

And don't forget the other elements:

```
ensures (\forall int i; (0<=i && i<destPos) ||  
            (destPos+length <= i && i < destPos.length);  
        dest[i] == \old(dest[i]));
```

In postcondition

```
ensures (\forall int i; 0<=i && i<length;  
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public static native void arraycopy(Object[] src, int srcPos,  
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shouldn't we write `\old(length)` instead of `length`?

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Strictly speaking: yes. But because this is so easy to get forget, any mention of an argument `x` in postcondition means `\old(x)`.

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This means it's impossible to refer to the new value of `length` in postcondition of `arraycopy`. But this value is unobservable for clients anyway.

#7: How to write specs

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- Add **pre-** and **post-conditions** to limit the inputs and outputs of each method.
- Add possible unchecked **exceptions** to throws clauses.
- Start with simple specifications; proceed to complex ones as they have value.

Getting started

- **Separate conjunctions to get information about which conjunct is violated. Use**

`requires A;`

`requires B;`

not

`requires A && B;`

- **Use `assert` statements to find out what is going wrong.**
- **Use `assume` statements *that you KNOW are correct* to help the prover along.**

- Specification is **tricky** - getting it right is hard, even with tools
- **Try it** - a substantial research gap is experience on industrial-scale sets of code
- **Communicate** - we are willing to offer advice
- **Share** your experience - tools will get better and we will all learn better techniques for successful specification (use JML and ESC/Java mailing lists)