Extending Rcpp

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Abstract

This note provides an overview of the steps programmers should follow to extend Rcpp (Eddelbuettel, François, Allaire, Chambers, Bates, and Ushey, 2015; Eddelbuettel and François, 2011) for use with their own classes. This document is based on our experience in extending Rcpp to work with the Armadillo (Sanderson, 2010) classes, available in the separate package RcppArmadillo (François, Eddelbuettel, and Bates, 2014). This document assumes knowledge of Rcpp as well as some knowledge of C++ templates (Abrahams and Gurtovoy, 2004).

1 Introduction

Rcpp facilitates data interchange between R and C++ through the templated functions Rcpp::as (for conversion of objects from R to C++) and Rcpp::wrap (for conversion from C++ to R). In other words, we convert between the so-called S-expression pointers (in type SEXP) to a templated C++ type, and vice versa. The corresponding function declarations are as follows:

```cpp
// conversion from R to C++
template<typename T> T as(SEXP x);

// conversion from C++ to R
template<typename T> SEXP wrap(const T& object);
```

These converters are often used implicitly, as in the following code chunk:

```cpp
// we get a list from R
List input(input_);

// pull std::vector<double> from R list
// this is achieved through an implicit call to Rcpp::as
std::vector<double> x = input["x"];

// return an R list
// this is achieved through implicit call to Rcpp::wrap
return List::create(
    _["front"] = x.front(),
    _["back"] = x.back()
);
```
The Rcpp converter function Rcpp::as and Rcpp::wrap have been designed to be extensible to user-defined types and third-party types.

2 Extending Rcpp::wrap

The Rcpp::wrap converter is extensible in essentially two ways: intrusive and non-intrusive.

2.1 Intrusive extension

When extending Rcpp with your own data type, the recommended way is to implement a conversion to SEXP. This lets Rcpp::wrap know about the new data type. The template meta programming (or TMP) dispatch is able to recognize that a type is convertible to a SEXP and Rcpp::wrap will use that conversion.

The caveat is that the type must be declared before the main header file Rcpp.h is included.

```cpp
#include <RcppCommon.h>

class Foo {
public:
    Foo() ;

    // this operator enables implicit Rcpp::wrap
    operator SEXP() ;
}

#include <Rcpp.h>
```

This is called intrusive because the conversion to SEXP operator has to be declared within the class.

2.2 Non-intrusive extension

It is often desirable to offer automatic conversion to third-party types, over which the developer has no control and can therefore not include a conversion to SEXP operator in the class definition.

To provide automatic conversion from C++ to R, one must declare a specialization of the Rcpp::wrap template between the includes of RcppCommon.h and Rcpp.h.
### 2.3 Templates and partial specialization

It is perfectly valid to declare a partial specialization for the `Rcpp::wrap` template. The compiler will identify the appropriate overload:

```cpp
#include <RcppCommon.h>

// third party library that declares template class Bling<T>
#include <foobar.h>

// declaring the partial specialization
namespace Rcpp {
    namespace traits {
        template <typename T> SEXP wrap( const Bling<T>& ) ;
    }
}

// this must appear after the specialization, // otherwise the specialization will not be seen by Rcpp types
#include <Rcpp.h>
```
3.2 Non intrusive extension

It is also possible to fully specialize Rcpp::as to enable non intrusive implicit conversion capabilities.

```cpp
#include <RcppCommon.h>

// third party library that declares class Bar
#include <foobar.h>

// declaring the specialization
namespace Rcpp { 
    template <> Bar as( SEXP ) ;
}

// this must appear after the specialization,
// otherwise the specialization will not be seen by Rcpp types
#include <Rcpp.h>
```

3.3 Templates and partial specialization

The signature of Rcpp::as does not allow partial specialization. When exposing a templated class to Rcpp::as, the programmer must specialize the Rcpp::traits::Exporter template class. The TMP dispatch will recognize that a specialization of Exporter is available and delegate the conversion to this class. Rcpp defines the Rcpp::traits::Exporter template class as follows :

```cpp
```
namespace Rcpp {
    namespace traits {

        template <typename T> class Exporter{
            public:
                Exporter( SEXP x ) : t(x){}
                inline T get(){ return t ; }

            private:
                T t ;
            }
        }
    }
}

This is the reason why the default behavior of Rcpp::as is to invoke the constructor of the type T taking a SEXP. Since partial specialization of class templates is allowed, we can expose a set of classes as follows:

```cpp
#include <RcppCommon.h>

// third party library that declares template class Bling<T>
#include <foobar.h>

// declaring the partial specialization
namespace Rcpp {
    namespace traits {
        template <typename T> class Exporter< Bling<T> >;
    }
}

// this must appear after the specialization,
// otherwise the specialization will not be seen by Rcpp types
#include <Rcpp.h>
```

Using this approach, the requirements for the Exporter< Bling<T> > class are:
- it should have a constructor taking a SEXP
- it should have a methods called get that returns an instance of the Bling<T> type.

4 Summary

The Rcpp package greatly facilitates the transfer of objects between R and C++. This note has shown how to extend Rcpp to either user-defined or third-party classes via the Rcpp::as and Rcpp::wrap template functions. Both intrusive and non-intrusive approaches were discussed.

References


