A Deep Review of Differential Evolution: Developmental History, Algorithmic Variants, and Applications

Zhao ZHAO
Southern University of Science and Technology
Shenzhen, China
12541018@mail.sustech.edu.cn

***Abstract*—Differential Evolution (DE) is a simple yet efficient evolutionary algorithm for global optimization. Since its introduction by Storn and Price in 1995, DE has gained significant attention due to its strong search capability and ease of implementation. This report provides a comprehensive review of the DE algorithm, starting from its background and core ideas, and systematically traces its development from classical variants to adaptive and hybrid algorithms. The motivations, procedures, and performance of representative algorithms at each stage are analyzed in detail, along with a comparison of their strengths and weaknesses. Finally, the report summarizes the current state of DE research and discusses potential future research directions.**

***Index Terms*—Differential Evolution, Evolutionary Algorithm, Global Optimization, Parameter Adaptation, Literature Review**

I. Introduction

In the fields of computational science and engineering, solving complex optimization problems has always been a core challenge. Traditional gradient-based methods often struggle when dealing with nonlinear, non-differentiable, multimodal, or high-dimensional problems. In this context, metaheuristic algorithms such as evolutionary algorithms emerged. Differential Evolution (DE) was first proposed by Kenneth Price and Rainer Storn in 1995 to solve the Chebyshev polynomial fitting problem and was formally published in 1997. It originated from the field of evolutionary computation, but its unique "differential mutation" operation distinguishes it from other evolutionary paradigms such as Genetic Algorithms. DE was originally designed to handle global optimization problems in continuous space. Its core idea is to use the vector differences between individuals in the population to perturb and generate new individuals, thereby guiding the search direction.

II. Developmental Line

Since its inception, the developmental trajectory of the Differential Evolution algorithm has been clearly discernible, roughly encompassing four key stages. Each stage of evolution marks a significant breakthrough in the algorithm's conceptual depth and application breadth.

A. Foundational Period (1995-1997)

Storn and Price proposed the DE algorithm in 1995 to solve the Chebyshev polynomial fitting problem. This groundbreaking work laid a solid foundation for subsequent research. The core contribution of this phase was establishing the basic framework of DE, with its "differential mutation" concept becoming the most distinctive feature of the algorithm. The standard DE/rand/1/bin generates mutant individuals by randomly selecting individuals and computing their vector differences, then updates the population through crossover and selection operations. This method is simple and effective, demonstrating good global search capability.

The core advantage of DE/rand/1/bin lies in its simplicity and powerful exploration capability. During the mutation phase, the algorithm randomly selects three distinct individuals and generates new trial individuals through differential vectors. This mechanism does not rely on the problem's gradient information, offering strong generality. The crossover operation employs binomial crossover, selecting dimensional components from the trial vector or target vector with a certain probability, maintaining population diversity. Finally, the selection operation adopts a greedy strategy, ensuring continuous improvement in population quality. This design enables the algorithm to perform excellently on various continuous optimization problems.

Algorithm 1 DE/rand/1/bin

Initialize population $P = X_1, X_2, ..., X_{NP}$
while termination condition not met **do**
  for each individual X_i in P **do**
    Randomly select X_{r1}, X_{r2}, X_{r3} from P
    $V_i \leftarrow X_{r1} + F \cdot (X_{r2} - X_{r3})$
    $U_i \leftarrow \text{Crossover}(X_i, V_i)$
    $X_i \leftarrow \text{Select}(X_i, U_i)$
  end for
end while

B. Strategy Exploration Period (Approx. 1997-2006)

After the basic framework was established, researchers began exploring different mutation strategies. This phase witnessed the emergence of various new strategies, such as DE/best/1, DE/current-to-best/1, etc. These strategies enhanced the algorithm's exploitation capability while maintaining exploration ability by incorporating information from the best individual. Through systematic experimental analysis, researchers gained a deep understanding of the characteristics of different strategies and their applicable scenarios, laying the groundwork for subsequent adaptive research.

The DE/best/1 strategy guides the search direction by introducing the best individual in the current population, significantly improving the algorithm's convergence speed. However, this strategy also carries the risk of premature convergence, especially when dealing with multimodal functions. To balance exploration and exploitation, researchers proposed the DE/current-to-best/1 strategy, which considers information from both the current individual and the best individual, maintaining some population diversity while accelerating convergence. The proposal of these strategies enriched the DE algorithm family, allowing users to select the appropriate mutation strategy based on the characteristics of specific problems.

Algorithm 2 DE/best/1

Initialize population P
while termination condition not met **do**
    for each individual X_i in P **do**
        $V_i \leftarrow X_{best} + F \cdot (X_{r1} - X_{r2})$
        $U_i \leftarrow$ Crossover(X_i, V_i)
        $X_i \leftarrow$ Select(X_i, U_i)
    end for
end while

C. Adaptive Development Period (Approx. 2006-2015)

To address the issue of parameter sensitivity, researchers proposed various adaptive DE variants. The jDE algorithm first achieved parameter self-adaptation, allowing the scaling factor F and crossover probability Cr to adjust automatically during the evolutionary process. The JADE algorithm further introduced the "current-to-pbest" strategy and a historical archive mechanism based on successful experiences, significantly improving the algorithm's performance and robustness. Breakthroughs in this phase transformed DE from a tool requiring manual parameter tuning into an intelligent optimizer.

The innovation of the JADE algorithm lies in its unique parameter adaptation mechanism. The algorithm maintains a historical record of successful parameters, and new parameter values are sampled from this distribution. The "current-to-pbest" strategy effectively balances exploration and exploitation by incorporating information from multiple high-quality individuals (rather than just the best individual). The external archive mechanism stores replaced individuals, providing an additional source of diversity for differential vectors. These mechanisms work together, enabling JADE to demonstrate outstanding performance on various optimization problems, especially on complex multimodal functions.

Algorithm 3 JADE

Initialize P, archive $A \leftarrow \emptyset$
while termination condition not met **do**
    for each individual X_i in P **do**
        $F_i \leftarrow$ randc$(\mu_F, 0.1)$
        $Cr_i \leftarrow$ randn$(\mu_{Cr}, 0.1)$
        $V_i \leftarrow X_i + F_i \cdot (X_{pbest} - X_i) + F_i \cdot (X_{r1} - X_{r2})$
        $U_i \leftarrow$ Crossover(X_i, V_i, Cr_i)
        if $f(U_i) \leq f(X_i)$ **then**
            Add X_i to A
            Update μ_F, μ_{Cr}
        end if
    end for
end while

D. Frontier Exploration Period (Approx. 2015-Present)

Current research focuses on solving more challenging optimization problems. The L-SHADE algorithm, which introduces a linear population size reduction mechanism, has performed exceptionally well in CEC competitions, representing the current highest level of DE research. Meanwhile, significant progress has been made in areas such as multi-objective DE and large-scale DE. Research in this phase not only pushes the boundaries of algorithmic performance but also expands the application scope of DE to complex real-world problems.

L-SHADE introduces a linear population size reduction strategy based on the SHADE algorithm, simulating the intelligent behavior of "explore first, exploit later" found in nature. It maintains a larger population size in the early stages of evolution to enhance exploration capability, and gradually reduces the population size as iterations proceed to improve exploitation efficiency. This mechanism allows the algorithm to achieve a better performance balance within limited computational resources. Furthermore, the success history-based parameter adaptation mechanism further optimizes the algorithm's search efficiency, enabling it to achieve excellent results on various test functions in CEC competitions.

Algorithm 4 L-SHADE

$NP \leftarrow NP_{init}$
while termination condition not met **do**
    Perform JADE operations with current NP
    $NP \leftarrow \max(NP_{min}, round(NP \cdot \alpha))$
    Update memory architectures
end while

This developmental history clearly demonstrates the evolutionary path of DE from simple to complex, from fixed to adaptive, and from single to diverse. Each stage built upon previous work with innovations and refinements, collectively constructing the rich and powerful DE algorithm family we see today. The continuous development of the algorithm is reflected not only in performance improvements but, more importantly, in its increasing level of intelligence, enabling DE to adapt to increasingly complex optimization scenarios.

III. Discussions

By examining the various developmental stages of the Differential Evolution algorithm, we can clearly observe the evolution of its design philosophy and performance. The table below provides a comprehensive comparison of the core characteristics of representative algorithms from each stage.

Based on the above comparison, a more in-depth discussion of DE's evolution can be presented:

Evolution of the Exploration-Exploitation Trade-off. The history of DE is essentially a continuous optimization of the dynamic balance between "exploration" and "exploitation." The classic DE/rand/1 favored strong exploration, ensuring the population's global search capability but resulting in slow convergence. Subsequent strategies like DE/best/1 significantly enhanced exploitation by utilizing information from the best individual, but at the cost of an increased risk of premature convergence. The current-to-pbest strategy adopted by adaptive algorithms like JADE was a crucial compromise, simultaneously leveraging information from the current individual, high-quality individuals (not necessarily the single best), and random individuals, achieving a more refined and dynamic balance. Hybrid DE, conversely, addresses this issue at an architectural level by directly combining two search paradigms with different characteristics (global and local).

Transition from an "Artisanal Algorithm" to an "Intelligent Algorithm". Early DE and its strategy variants resembled tools requiring "artisanal" tuning, where performance heavily relied on the user's experience in selecting parameters and strategies. The emergence of adaptive DE was a qualitative leap, transforming the algorithm from a passive tool into an active entity capable of self-learning and self-optimization. jDE allowed parameters to evolve with individuals; SaDE and JADE enabled strategies and parameters to learn from successful experiences. This marked the evolution of DE from a static, human-intervention-dependent algorithm into a dynamic, self-adaptive, robust, and intelligent problem solver.

Continuous Expansion of Applicability and Breakthroughs in Performance. The evolution of DE has significantly expanded its application boundaries. Starting from basic continuous numerical optimization, it has developed to effectively handle large-scale problems (via cooperative or dimensionality reduction strategies), multi-objective problems (via Pareto ranking and archive mechanisms), constrained problems (via specialized constraint handling techniques), and dynamic problems. Advanced variants represented by L-SHADE have repeatedly excelled in CEC international competitions, demonstrating top-tier performance in handling complex, high-dimensional benchmark problems, thereby laying a solid foundation for solving more challenging real-world problems.

Dialectical Unity of "Simplicity" and "Effectiveness". The initial core appeal of DE lay in its simplicity. As the algorithm became more powerful and intelligent, its structure inevitably grew more complex. This represents an inherent tension between "simplicity" and "effectiveness" in algorithmic development. However, the success of the DE community lies in maintaining clarity of the core idea (differential mutation) and the elegance of the overall framework even while introducing complexity. Future research must continue to find the optimal balance point in this dichotomy, striving to enhance algorithmic performance without excessively sacrificing usability and comprehensibility.

IV. Conclusion and Future Work

A. Conclusion

After nearly three decades of development, Differential Evolution has evolved from a simple optimization tool into a mature, powerful, and intelligent algorithmic framework. Its core concept of "differential mutation," which utilizes differences among individuals in the population to guide the search direction, has proven highly successful in the field of global optimization. Through continuous innovations in mutation strategies, improvements in parameter adaptation mechanisms, and the design of hybrid algorithms, Differential Evolution has demonstrated exceptional performance and robustness in solving various complex optimization problems, establishing itself as one of the most influential algorithms in evolutionary computation.

B. Future Work

Looking ahead, several promising research directions warrant further exploration. In terms of algorithmic advancement, enhancing scalability for large-scale optimization problems through novel mutation strategies and cooperative optimization mechanisms remains critical. Expanding application domains to dynamic environments, uncertain optimization, and complex multi-objective scenarios requires improved algorithmic adaptability. Theoretical foundations, including convergence analysis and computational complexity frameworks, need further strengthening. The deep integration of Differential Evolution with emerging artificial intelligence technologies opens new frontiers, particularly in automated machine learning and deep learning model optimization. Additionally, improving its performance in discrete spaces and mixed-integer programming represents another key challenge. These research efforts will collectively advance Differential Evolution, enabling it to maintain its elegant simplicity while enhancing its capability to address real-world complex optimization challenges.

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