

The Completeness of Propositional Resolution

A Simple and Constructive Proof

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Abstract. It is well known that the resolution method (for propositional logic) is complete. However, completeness proofs found in the literature use an argument by contradiction showing that if a set of clauses is unsatisfiable, then it must have a resolution refutation. As a consequence, none of these proofs actually gives an algorithm for producing a resolution refutation from an unsatisfiable set of clauses. In this note, we give a simple and constructive proof of the completeness of propositional resolution which consists of an algorithm together with a proof of its correctness.

1 Introduction

The resolution method for (propositional) logic due to J.A. Robinson [4] (1965) is well-known to be a sound and complete procedure for checking the unsatisfiability of a set of clauses. However, it appears that the completeness proofs that can be found in the literature (for instance, Chang and Lee [1], Lewis and Papadimitriou [3], Robinson [5]) are existence proofs that proceed by contradiction to show that if a set of clauses is unsatisfiable, then it must have a resolution refutation because otherwise a satisfying assignment can be obtained. In particular, none of these proofs yields (directly) an algorithm producing a resolution refutation from an unsatisfiable set of clauses. In that sense, these proofs are nonconstructive. In Gallier [2] (1986), we gave a completeness proof based on an algorithm for converting a Gentzen-like proof (using sequents) into a resolution DAG (see Chapter 4). Such a method is more constructive than the others but, we found later on that it is possible to give a simple and constructive proof of the completeness of propositional resolution which consists of an algorithm together with a proof of its correctness. This algorithm and its correctness are the object of this note.

2 Review of Propositional Resolution

Recall that a *literal*, L , is either a propositional letter, P , or the negation, $\neg P$, of a propositional letter. A *clause* is a finite set of literals, $\{L_1, \dots, L_k\}$, interpreted as the disjunction $L_1 \vee \dots \vee L_k$ (when $k = 0$, this is the empty clause denoted \square). A set of clauses, $\Gamma = \{C_1, \dots, C_n\}$, is interpreted as the conjunction $C_1 \wedge \dots \wedge C_n$. For short, we write $\Gamma = C_1, \dots, C_n$.

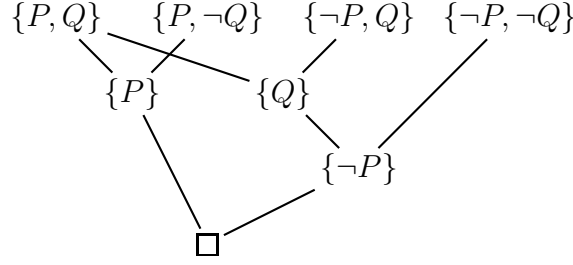
The *resolution method* (J.A. Robinson [4]) is a procedure for checking whether a set of clauses, Γ , is unsatisfiable. The resolution methods consist in building a certain kind of labeled DAG whose leaves are labeled with clauses in Γ and whose interior nodes are labeled according to the *resolution rule*. Given two clauses $C = A \cup \{P\}$ and $C' = B \cup \{\neg P\}$ (where P is a propositional letter, $P \notin A$ and $\neg P \notin B$), the *resolvent of C and C'* is the clause

$$R = A \cup B$$

obtained by cancelling out P and $\neg P$. A *resolution DAG for Γ* is a DAG whose leaves are labeled with clauses from Γ and such that every interior node n has exactly two predecessors, n_1 and n_2 so that n is labeled with the resolvent of the clauses labeling n_1 and n_2 . A *resolution refutation for Γ* is a resolution DAG with a single root whose label is the empty clause. (For more details on the resolution method, resolution DAGs, etc., one may consult Gallier [2], Chapter 4, or any of the books cited in Section 1.)

Here is an example of a resolution refutation for the set of clauses

$$\Gamma = \{\{P, Q\}, \{P, \neg Q\}, \{\neg P, Q\}, \{\neg P, \neg Q\}\} :$$



3 Completeness of Propositional Resolution: An Algorithm and its Correctness

Let Γ be a set of clauses. Thus, Γ is either the empty clause, \square , or it is a conjunction of clauses, $\Gamma = C_1, \dots, C_n$. We define the *complexity*, $c(C)$, of a clause, C , as the number of disjunction symbols in C ; i.e., if C consists of a single literal (i.e., $C = \{L\}$, for some literal, L), then $c(C) = 0$, else if $C = \{L_1, \dots, L_m\}$ (with $m \geq 2$) where the L_i 's are literals, then $c(C) = m - 1$ (we also set $c(\square) = 0$). If Γ is a conjunction of clauses, $\Gamma = C_1, \dots, C_n$, then we set

$$c(\Gamma) = c(C_1) + \dots + c(C_n).$$

We now give a recursive algorithm, **buildresol**, for constructing a resolution DAG from any set of clauses and then prove its correctness, namely, that if the input set of clauses is unsatisfiable, then the output resolution DAG is a resolution refutation. This establishes the completeness of propositional resolution constructively.

Our algorithm makes use of two functions, **percolate**, and **graft**.

1. The function **percolate**(D, A, L)

The inputs are: a resolution DAG, D , some selected leaf of D labeled with a clause, A , and some literal, L . This function adds the literal L to the clause A to form the clause $A \cup \{L\}$ and then “percolates” L down to the root of D . More precisely, we construct the resolution DAG, D' , whose underlying unlabeled DAG is identical to D , as follows: Since D and D' have the same unlabeled DAG we refer to two nodes of D or D' as *corresponding nodes* if they are identical in the underlying unlabeled DAG. Consider any resolution step of D . If both parent clauses are not descendants of the premise A , then the corresponding resolution step of D' is the same. If the parent clauses in D are C and C' where C' is a descendant of the premise A (resp. C is a descendant of the premise A) and if R is the resolvent of C and C' in D , then the corresponding parent nodes in D' are labeled with C and $C' \cup \{L\}$ and their resolvent node with $R \cup \{L\}$ (resp. the corresponding parent nodes in D' are labeled with $C \cup \{L\}$ and C' and their resolvent node with $R \cup \{L\}$). If both parent clauses C and C' in D are descendant of the premise A , then the corresponding parent nodes in D' are labeled with $C \cup \{L\}$ and $C' \cup \{L\}$ and their resolvent node with $R \cup \{L\}$.

Observe that if $\Delta \cup \{A\}$ is the set of premises of D , then $\Gamma = \Delta \cup \{A \cup \{L\}\}$ is the set of premises of $\text{percolate}(D, A, L)$.

For example, if D is the resolution DAG shown below (in fact, a resolution refutation)

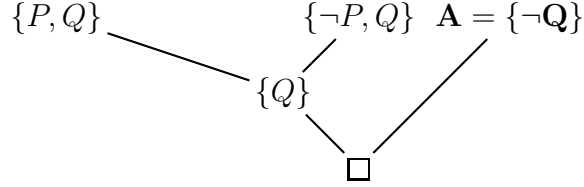


Figure 1: Resolution DAG D

then adding $L = \neg P$ to $A = \{\neg Q\}$ in D yields the resolution DAG D' produced by $\text{percolate}(D, A, L)$:

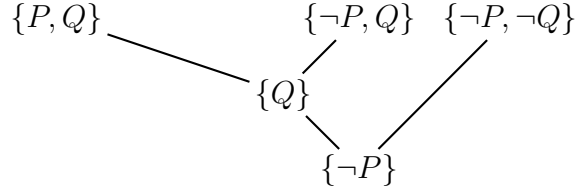


Figure 2: Resolution DAG $D' = \text{percolate}(D, A, L)$

2. The function $\text{graft}(D_1, D_2)$

Its inputs are two resolution DAGs, D_1 and D_2 , where the clause, C , labeling the root of D_1 is identical to one of the premises of D_2 . Then, this function combines D_1 and D_2 by connecting the links to the premise labeled C in D_2 to the root of D_1 , also labeled C , obtaining the resolution DAG $\text{graft}(D_1, D_2)$.

For example, if D_1 and D_2 are the resolution refutation DAGs shown below

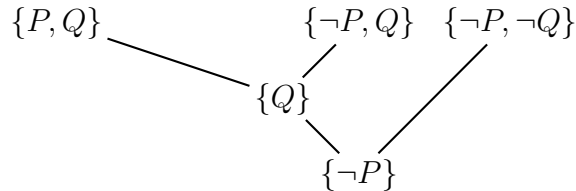


Figure 3: Resolution DAG D_1

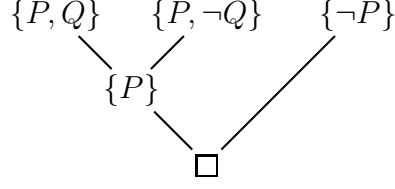


Figure 4: Resolution DAG D_2

we obtain the resolution DAG

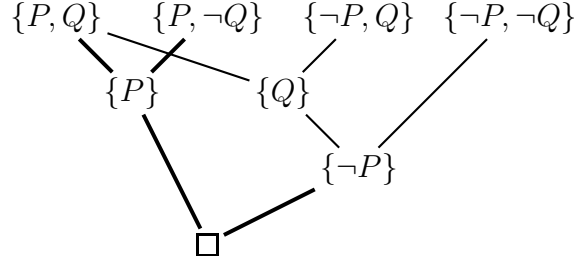


Figure 5: Resolution DAG $\text{graft}(D_1, D_2)$

where the edges coming from D_2 are indicated with thicker lines. The algorithm `buildresol` is shown below.

3. The algorithm `buildresol`(Γ)

The input to `buildresol` is a set of clauses, Γ .

function `buildresol`(Γ)

begin

if all clauses in Γ are literals **then**

if Γ contains complementary literals L and $\neg L$,

then return a resolution refutation with leaves L and $\neg L$

else abort

endif

else select any nonliteral clause, C , in Γ and select any literal, L , in C ;

let $C = A \cup \{L\}$; let $\Gamma = \Delta \cup \{C\}$;

$D_1 = \text{buildresol}(\Delta \cup \{A\})$; $D_2 = \text{buildresol}(\Delta \cup \{L\})$; $D'_1 = \text{percolate}(D_1, A, L)$;

if D'_1 is a resolution DAG

then return D'_1

else $D = \text{graft}(D'_1, D_2)$; return D

endif

endif

end

Finally, we prove the correctness of our recursive algorithm **buildresol**.

Theorem 3.1 *For every conjunction of clauses, Γ , if Γ is unsatisfiable, then the algorithm **buildresol** outputs a resolution refutation for Γ . Therefore, propositional resolution is complete.*

Proof. We prove the correctness of the algorithm **buildresol** by induction on $c(\Gamma)$. Let $\Gamma = C_1, \dots, C_n$. We may assume $\Gamma \neq \square$, since the case $\Gamma = \square$ is trivial. We proceed by induction on $c(\Gamma)$.

If $c(\Gamma) = 0$, then every clause, C_i , contains a single literal and if Γ is unsatisfiable, then there must be two complementary clauses, $C_i = \{P\}$ and $C_j = \{\neg P\}$, in Γ . Thus, we instantly get a resolution refutation by applying the resolution rule to $\{P\}$ and $\{\neg P\}$.

Otherwise, $c(\Gamma) > 0$, so there is some clause in Γ that contains at least two literals. Pick any such clause, C , and pick any literal, L , in C . Write $C = A \cup \{L\}$ with $A \neq \square$ and write $\Gamma = \Delta, C$ (Δ can't be empty since Γ is unsatisfiable). As $\Gamma = \Delta, A \cup \{L\}$ is unsatisfiable, both Δ, A and Δ, L must be unsatisfiable. However, observe that

$$c(\Delta, A) < c(\Gamma) \quad \text{and} \quad c(\Delta, L) < c(\Gamma).$$

Therefore, by the induction hypothesis, the algorithm **buildresol** produces two resolution refutations, D_1 and D_2 , with sets of premises Δ, A and Δ, L , respectively. Now, consider the resolution DAG, $D'_1 = \text{percolate}(D_1, A, L)$, obtained from D_1 by adding L to the clause A and letting L percolate down to the root.

Observe that in D'_1 , every clause that is a descendant of the premise $A \cup \{L\}$ is of the form $C \cup \{L\}$, where C is the corresponding clause in D_1 . Therefore, the root of the new DAG D'_1 obtained from D_1 is either labeled \square (this may happen when the other clause in a resolution step involving a descendent of the clause A already contains L) or L . In the first case, D'_1 is already a resolution refutation for Γ and we are done. In the second case, we can combine D'_1 and D_2 using **graft**(D'_1, D_2) since the root of D'_1 is also labeled L , one of the premises of D_2 . Clearly, we obtain a resolution refutation for Γ . \square

As an illustration of our algorithm, consider the set of clauses

$$\Gamma = \{\{P, Q\}, \{P, \neg Q\}, \{\neg P, Q\}, \{\neg P, \neg Q\}\}$$

as above and pick $C = \{\neg P, \neg Q\}$, $L = \neg P$ and $A = \{Q\}$. After the two calls **buildresol**($\Delta \cup \{A\}$) and **buildresol**($\Delta \cup \{L\}$), we get the resolution refutations D_1 :

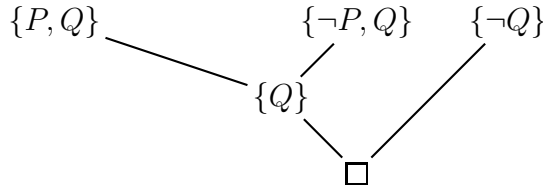


Figure 6: Resolution DAG $D_1 = \text{buildresol}(\Delta \cup \{A\})$

and D_2 :

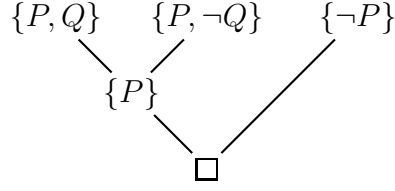


Figure 7: Resolution DAG $D_2 = \text{buildresol}(\Delta \cup \{L\})$

When we add $L = \neg P$ to $A = \{\neg Q\}$ in D_1 , we get the resolution DAG $D'_1 = \text{percolate}(D_1, A, L)$:

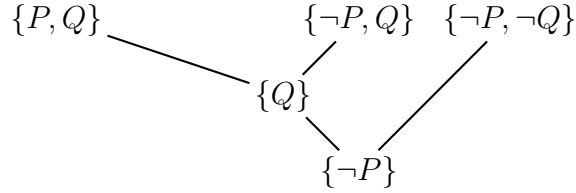


Figure 8: Resolution DAG $D'_1 = \text{percolate}(D_1, A, L)$

Finally, we construct the resolution refutation $D = \text{graft}(D'_1, D_2)$:

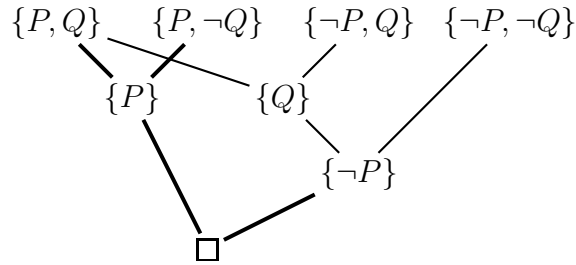


Figure 9: Resolution DAG $D = \text{graft}(D'_1, D_2)$

where the edges coming from D_2 are indicated with thicker lines.

Observe that the proof of Theorem 3.1 proves that if Γ is unsatisfiable, then our algorithm succeeds no matter which clause containing at least two literals is chosen and no matter which literal is picked in such a clause.

References

- [1] Chin-Liang Chang and Richard Char-Tung Lee. *Symbolic Logic and Mechanical Theorem Proving*. Academic Press, first edition, 1973.

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- [4] J.A. Robinson. A machine oriented logic based on the resolution principle. *J.ACM*, 12(1):23–41, 1965.
- [5] J.A. Robinson. *Logic: Form and Function*. North-Holland, first edition, 1979.