Perspectives on Practice and Theory of SAT Solving

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SAT Semester @ Simons Institute, Berkeley
Feb 10th, 2021

Talk Outline

- The central question in SAT/SMT solving – “Unreasonable Effectiveness of SAT/SMT Solvers” for many classes of industrial instances. At the same time, slow for others (e.g., crypto)
- Structural view of industrial instances. Current-best understanding and pitfalls
- Solvers = proof systems + machine learning view
- Separation results for solver configurations (e.g., CDCL with restarts and without restarts)
- From practice to theory – leveraging solvers for theory
- Open problems and directions
- Workshop talks

PART I

Context and Motivation

The Central Question in Solving

The Central Question in Solver Research
Why are Solvers Efficient?

- Why are SAT solvers efficient? After all, the Boolean SAT problem is NP-complete, believed to be intractable.

- Clearly there is a gap between the map (complexity theory) and the territory (algorithm). Can we close this gap between theory and practice in a way that not only deepens our theoretical understanding, but also paves way for better solver design? (We can leverage already well-developed complexity-theoretic tools such as parameterized complexity to close this gap.)

- Finally, we know of classes of instances obtained from applications that are hard for solvers (e.g., Crypto). How do we explain the difficulty of solving such instances?

- Many of these questions have been open for over two decades.

The Generality of the Central Question
This question also applies to SMT, CP,…

- Answering this question for SAT would also impact more general settings, since this phenomena applies to many formal reasoning systems, e.g., CP, QBF, model checkers, SMT solvers, first-order provers,…, where problems range from NP-complete, PSPACE-complete, NEXPTIME-complete,… (Also applies to optimization cousins ILP, MAXSAT,…)

- This phenomenon extends to many other settings, where “practical” algorithms seem to defy theoretical expectations set by worst-case analysis

- Richard Karp and many other researchers have suggested that this gap between the success of “practical” algorithms and the worst-case complexity-theoretic view of algorithms is one of the most important questions in the context of algorithm design and complexity

Sub-questions
Why are Solvers Efficient?

- As has been discussed already during the bootcamp (see talks by Sam Buss and others), CDCL solvers are best modelled as proof search systems
  - Key result: CDCL solvers are polynomially equivalent to general resolution [PD'11, AFT'11]
  - While this equivalence provides a framework for analysis of CDCL solvers, it doesn't answer the question of why solvers are efficient on some classes of instances
- Hence, the question of "why solvers are efficient" can be pared down to:
  - What formula structure/parameters (and range of values for them) result in short proofs (for UNSAT formulas)?
  - Why is it possible for CDCL solvers to find such short proofs efficiently (i.e., automatable under appropriate parameterization)
  - Recent interesting result: Resolution is not automatable, unless P=NP [AM'20]

Target Conjectures and Results
Why are Solvers Efficient?

- Parameterized upper bounds for CDCL algorithm
  - One possibility is $2^{f(p_1,p_2)}.poly(n)$ for appropriate values of "real-world" parameters p_1, p_2
  - Alternatively, similar upper-bound for CDCL as PPSZ, but with "real-world" parameters
  - Parameterized understanding of proof search and proof size

- "Better" practically-inspired lower bounds for Res (e.g., why are crypto instances hard for solvers?)

- Better understanding of solver configurations (e.g., CDCL - restarts < CDCL + restarts,…)

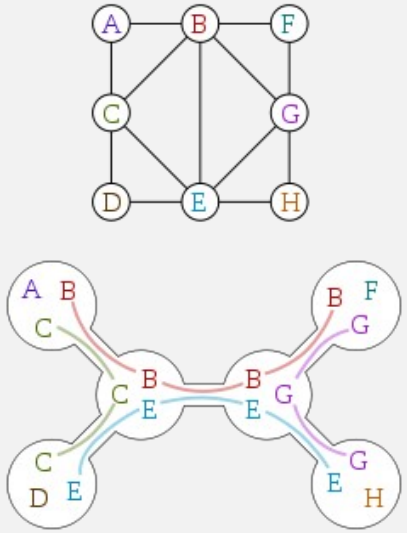
- Better solver design (e.g., stronger proof systems integrated into solvers, better ML-based proof rule sequencing and selecting methods,…)

PART II

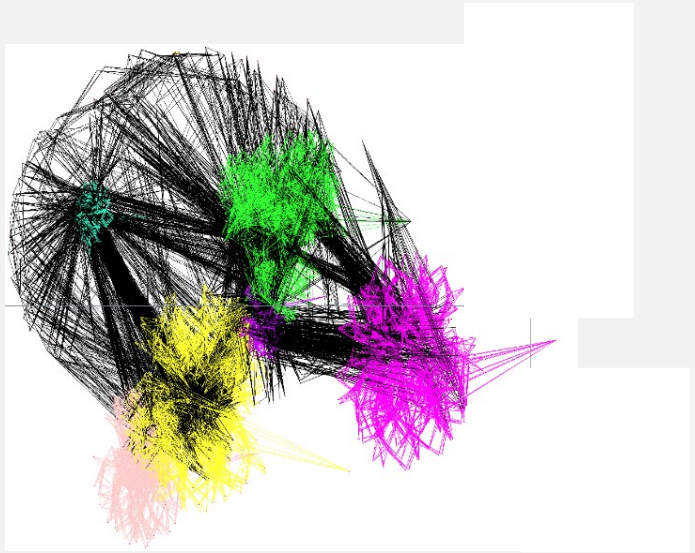
In Search of Empirical Understanding of Solvers via Parameters

Search for Complexity-theoretic Parameters

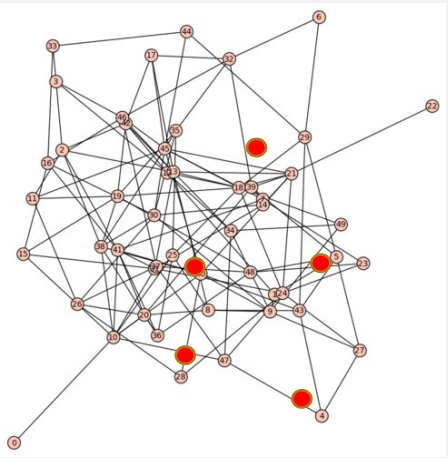
Key Question



Treewidth



Community Structure



Backdoors

Q: Industrial instances have structure that is exploited by solvers. The question then is which of the proposed structural parameters have the best explanatory power, across a wide variety of instances?

The goal of empirical work is to either rule-out or rule-in parameters for further theoretical analysis

Complexity-theoretic Understanding of Solvers
Empirical Approach to Identify Good Parameters

- Final goal: Discover parameters that withstand a battery of well-designed empirical tests and are primed for further theoretical analysis. (it goes without saying that empirical analysis can never be conclusive or complete, because experiments are inherently contingent on a many factors such as sample size, solver settings, tools used, experimental design, etc. Also, the best we can hope for is correlations)

- Parameter must enable us to classify different kinds of SAT formulas into categories such as random, crafted, crypto, verification etc. (i.e., there must be evidence that real-world instance possess the appropriate structure)

- For appropriate range of values, the parameters must correlate well with solver running time (i.e., parameters useful as features in empirical hardness models)

- Instance-generator based scaling studies must validate our hypotheses

Parameters that have been (tentatively) Ruled Out

- CVR – Lots of excitement in the 1990's when the phase transition phenomenon was discovered [CKT'91], followed by the easy-hard-easy pattern [MSL'92]. However, it was later shown that this does not hold up under scaling studies [CDASV'03]
- Treewidth – Unfortunately, empirically treewidth does not correlate with solver runtime [Mateescu'11]
- Pathwidth/branchwidth – These are polynomially related to treewidth and hence unlikely to serve as good parameters (for the same reason treewidth fails)
- Backdoor and many variants – Similar problem as treewidth. Instances with small backdoor hard to solve, large backdoors easy to solve [Zulkoski'18]
- Community structure – While promising empirically, it is easy to show theoretically that formulas with good community structure can be hard for solvers [Zulkoski'18]
- Many of these parameters are very intuitive and easy to work with theoretically. However, they fall apart upon contact with reality.

Parameters that have not yet been Ruled Out

- Merge
  - A generalization of subsumption

- Hierarchical community structure
  - Variant of community structure, but does not have obvious counterexamples (e.g., formulas with “good” hierarchical community structure cannot be expanders)

- Power law
  - Degree of variable occurrences is “highly unbalanced”. A few variables occur very often, but most others occur only a few times

Proof Systems
Proof-complexity of Solvers

General resolution — The rule is form of modus ponens. Proof is a directed acyclic graph (DAG).

$$\frac{(x_1 \vee \cdots \vee x_n) \quad (\neg x_n \vee y_1 \ldots \vee y_m)}{(x_1 \vee \cdots \vee x_{n-1} \vee y_1 \ldots \vee y_m)}$$

Merge resolution — Biased towards deriving clauses that share literals. (In the clauses below, α is a disjunction of literals.)

$$\frac{(\alpha \vee \cdots \vee x_n) \quad (\neg x_n \vee \cdots \alpha)}{(\alpha \vee \cdots \vee x_{n-1})}$$

Unit resolution — One clause must be unit. Proof is a DAG.

$$\frac{(x_n) \quad (\neg x_n \vee y_1 \ldots y_m)}{(y_1 \vee \cdots \vee y_m)}$$

Tree resolution — Same rules as general resolution. Proof is a tree. Not allowed to reuse lemmas unlike DAG proofs.

Resolution and Merges
Mergeability and CDCL SAT Solvers

$$\frac{(\alpha \vee x_n) \quad (\neg x_n \vee \beta)}{(\alpha \vee \beta)} \qquad \frac{(\gamma \vee y_n) \quad (\neg y_n \vee \delta)}{(\gamma \vee \delta)}$$

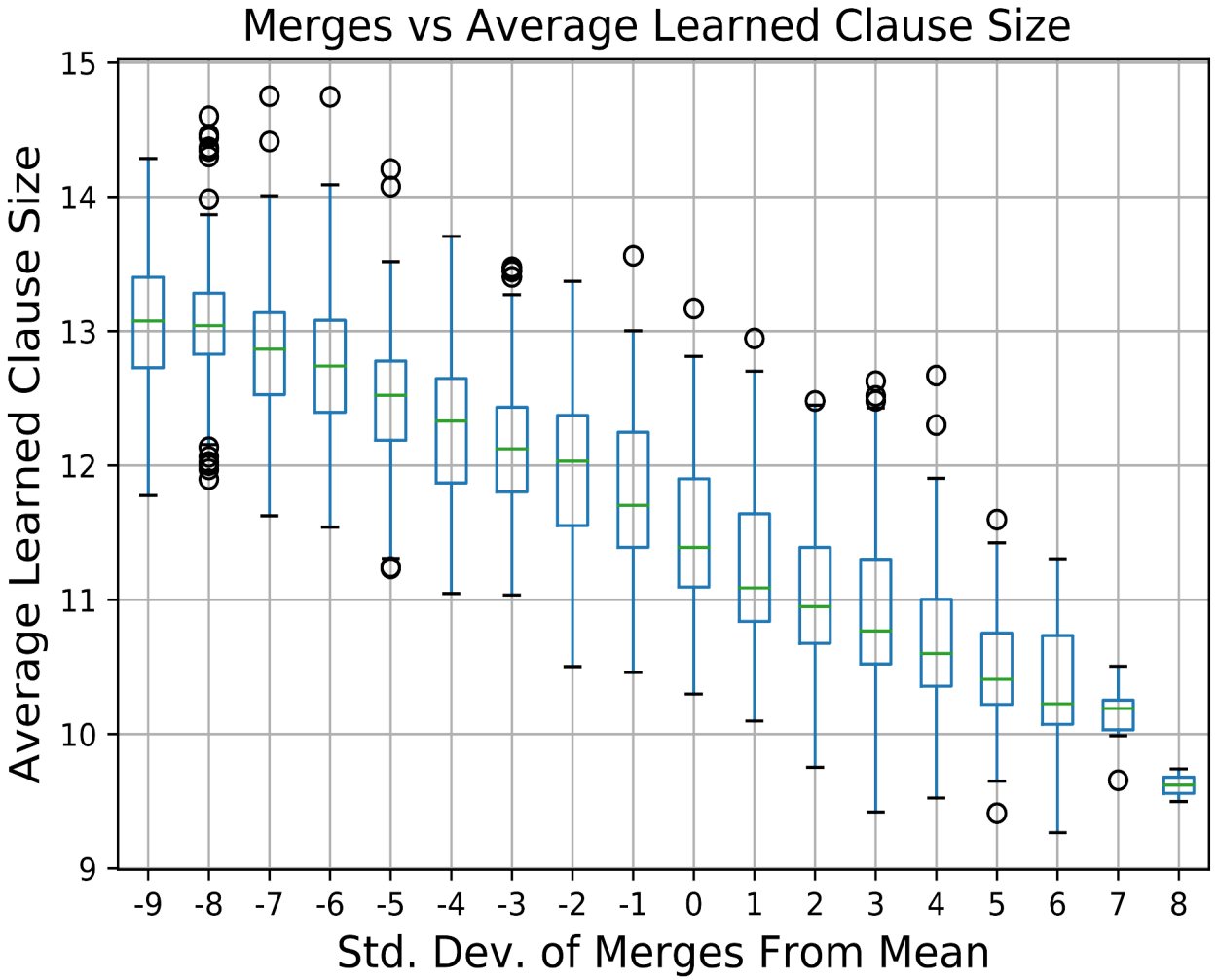
...

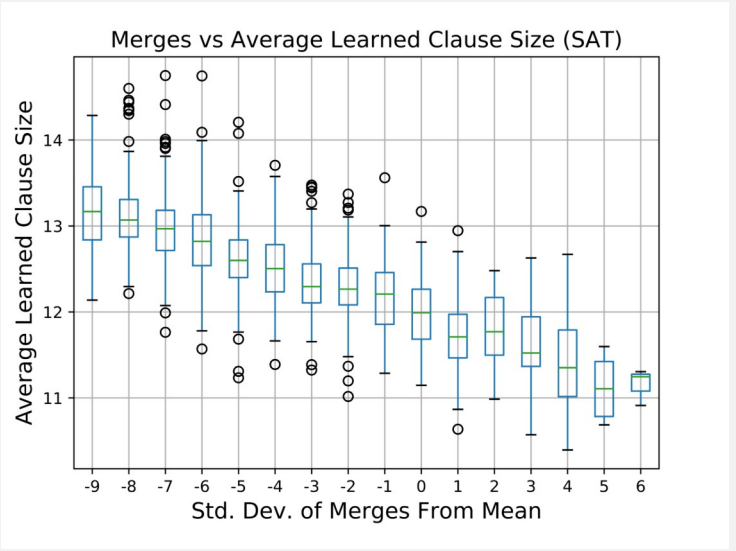
$$\frac{(x_i \vee x_j) \quad (\neg x_j \vee x_i)}{(x_i)} \qquad \frac{(\neg x_i \vee x_k) \quad (\neg x_k \vee \neg x_i)}{(\neg x_i)}$$

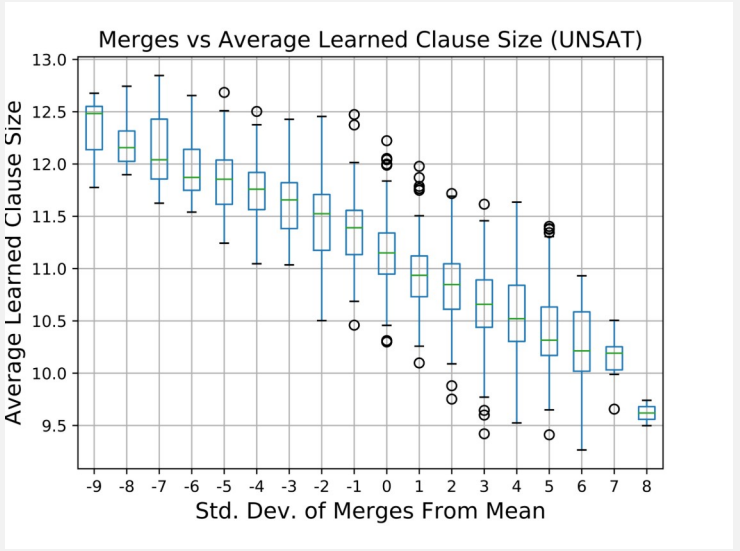
$$\frac{(x_i) \quad (\neg x_i)}{\bot}$$

Mergeability

Number of Merges vs. Learnt Clause Size







PART III

Solvers = Proof Systems + Machine Learning

Solvers = Proof Search Systems+Machine Learning

The Practice of Proof Systems

- "Solvers = Proof Search Systems" is a well-known abstraction of solvers and provers. This is a powerful way to design solvers, although non-symbolic DNN-based SAT solvers do exist (e.g., NeuroSAT)

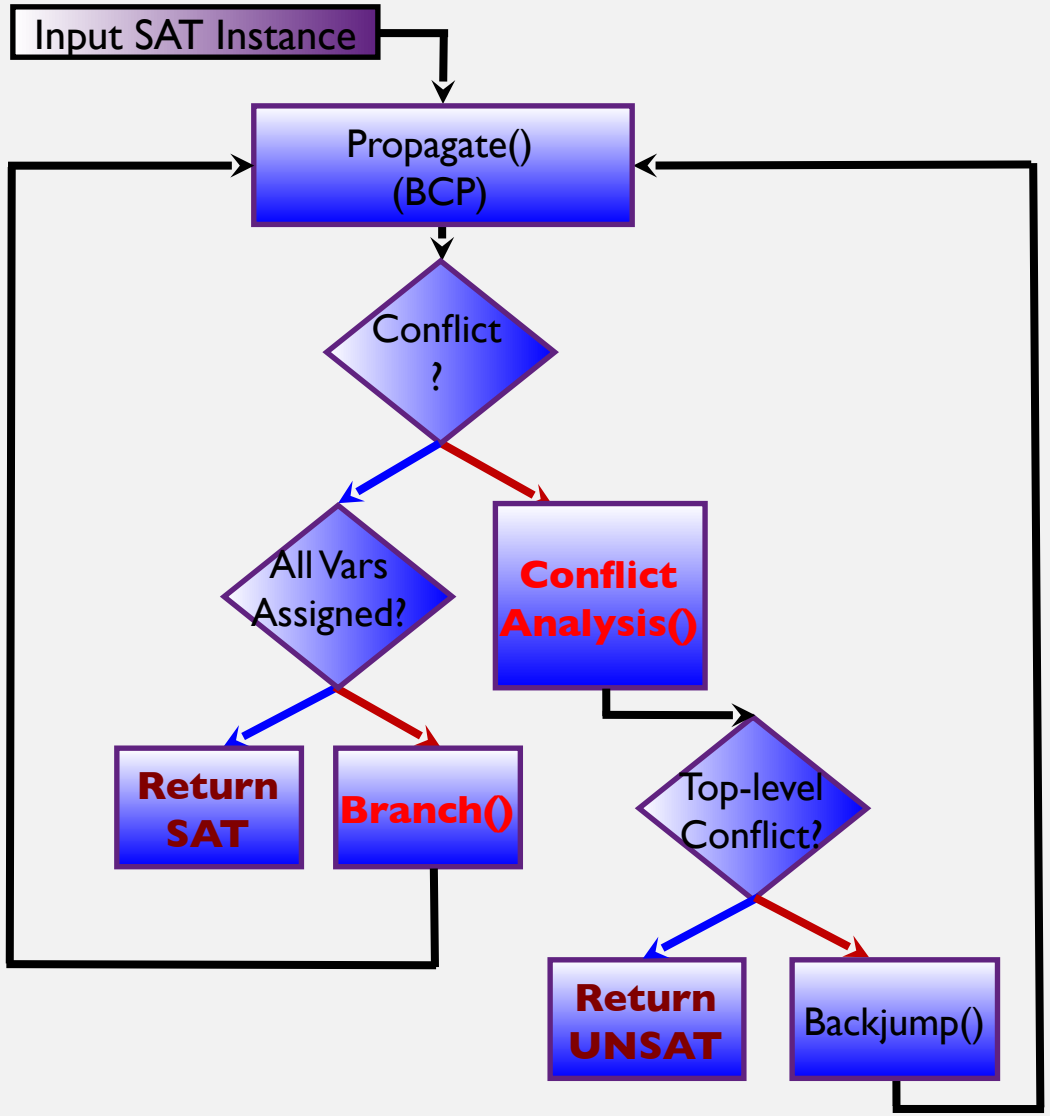
- How can we leverage this abstraction to design better SAT/SMT solvers?

- One way is to strengthen the reasoning engine inside a solver, e.g., CDCL(T) or programmatic SAT

- Another is to design optimization heuristics inside solvers with machine learning (ML) methods. This led to the design of award-winning MapleSAT (and variants). 5 different ML-based heuristics (branching, splitting, restarts, initialization, and algorithm selection). Our work has been widely adopted, adapted, extended [HVC15, SAT16, AAAI16, SAT17, IJCAI18, CP20, ICML20]

Conflict-Driven Clause-Learning SAT Solver

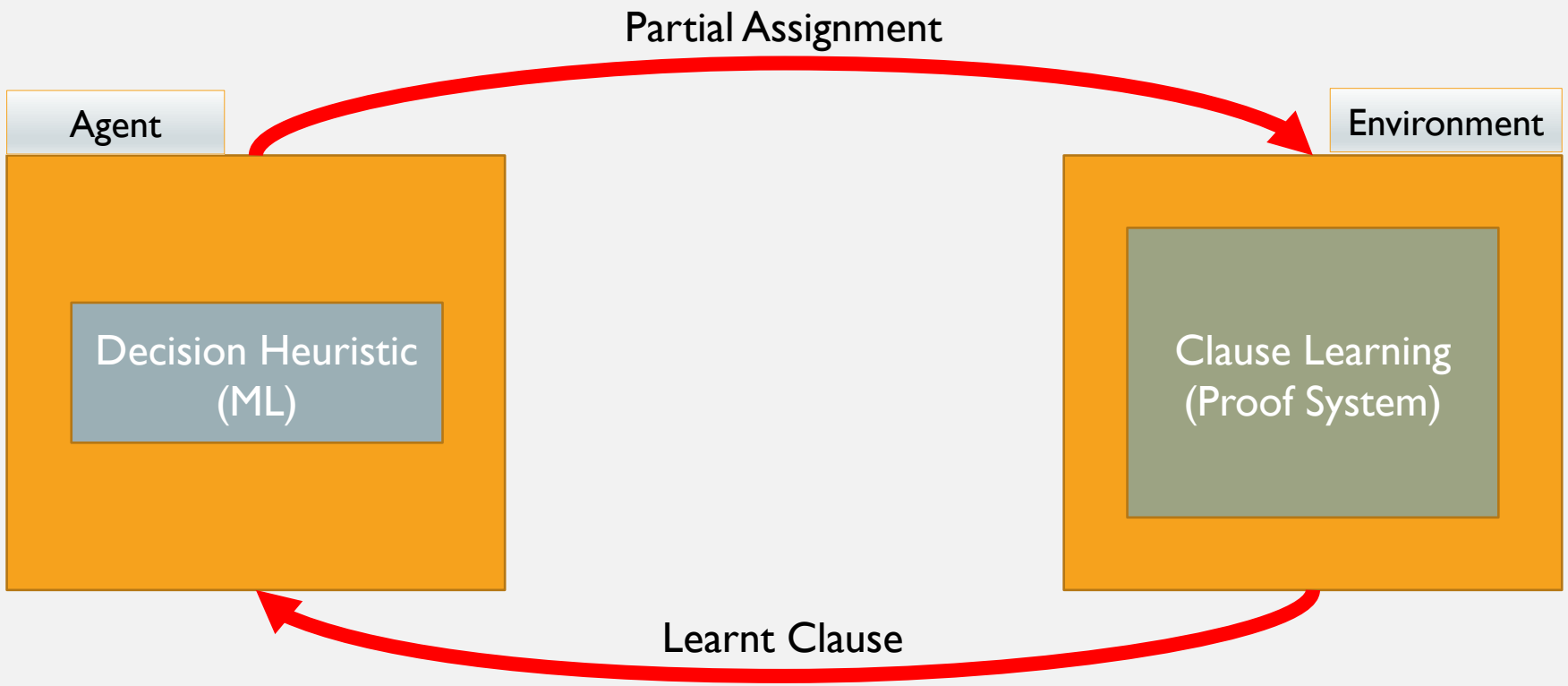
Solver = Proof Search System + ML



GRASP Solver: [MS96]
ZChaff Solver: [MMZZM01]

CDCL with Deductive Feedback Loop

Reinforcement Learning



PART IV

Understanding CDCL Solver Configurations

Restarts

Understanding the Power of Restarts

- Big open question – We know that CDCL + restarts is polynomially equivalent to Res. Does this equivalence also hold for CDCL w/o restarts?

- Theorem 1: The first CDCL configuration (with restarts) below is exponentially faster than the second CDCL configuration (w/o restarts) on a class of satisfiable instances we refer to as Ladder formulas

  1. CDCL + backtracking + non-deterministic variable selection + randomized value selection + restarts
  2. CDCL + backtracking + non-deterministic variable selection + randomized value selection - restarts

- Theorem 2: The first CDCL configuration (with restarts) below is exponentially faster than the second CDCL configuration (w/o restarts) on a class of unsatisfiable instances we refer to as pitfall formulas

  1. CDCL + backjumping + VSIDS variable selection + phase-saving value selection + restarts
  2. CDCL + backjumping + VSIDS variable selection + phase-saving value selection - restarts

PART V

From Practice to Theory

Using Solvers for Solving Complexity Questions

From Practice to Theory

- Solving concrete circuit complexity questions using solver
  - For example, minimum number of multiplications needed for the 3x3 Boolean matrix multiplication problem (Ryan Williams posted this as a polymath problem.)
- Study of novel proof systems inspired by practice (e.g., DRAT or interference-based proof systems)
- Using solvers to test conjectured classes of instances as lower bounds for corresponding proof systems
- Solving combinatorics problems via SAT (e.g., find Ramsey(5))

PART V

Open Problems

Open Problems (Theory and Practice)

- Parameterized upper bound for CDCL – explaining the power of CDCL solvers via parameters
- Crypto hardness – why are crypto problems (e.g., SHA-1 collision/inversion, breaking DES) hard for CDCL SAT solvers? Ideally, construct instances that are "morally" like crypto, and show they are hard for Res?
- Understanding solver configurations – is CDCL w/o restarts polynomially equivalent to Res? Do restart help primarily with proof search and not proof size? How about other configurations such as CDCL with 1UIP vs. CDCL without?
- Tight upper bound on BCP algorithm – not aware of any work on complexity analysis of 2-watched scheme
- ML-based solver heuristics (combining deduction with ML) – can we do better than 1UIP?
- Feedback on encodings – can we design a method to give feedback to the user about how their encodings can be improved?
- Faster solvers for multiplication – multiplication circuits can be hard for SAT. How can we do better?

PART VI

Workshop Talks

Summary of Scheduled Workshop Talks

Date	Theme	Speakers
Feb 10th	Theoretical Foundation of Solvers: Context, Directions and Open Problems	Vijay Ganesh, David Mitchell, Laurent Simon
Feb 17th	Theory and Practice of Structure of SAT Instances	Stefan Szeider, Jordi Levy, Ralf Rothenberger
Feb 24th	Theory and Practice of Encodings – (encoding showcase)	Oliver Kullmann, Ciaran McCreesh, Maria Bonet
Mar 3rd	Proof Complexity Toolbox	Robert Robere, Susanna de Rezende Joanna Ochremiak,..
Mar 10th	Recent Advances in Proof Complexity of Solvers	Marc Vinyals, Noah Fleming, Ian Li,…
Mar 17th	Non-CDCL Solvers	Marijn Heule, Jakob Nordstrom, Zhiwei Zhang
Mar 24th	Theorem Proving Strategies and Decision Procedures for Satisfiability	Maria Paola Bonacina, Daniel Selsam, …
Mar 31st	Richard M. Karp Public Lecture	TBD
Apr 7th	Machine Learning for Solvers	**TBD**

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- [KSM11] Katebi, H., Sakallah, K.A. and Marques-Silva, J.P. Empirical study of the anatomy of modern SAT solvers. SAT 2011
- [AFT11] Atserias, A., Fichte, J., and Thurley, M. Clause Learning Algorithms with Many Restarts and Bounded-width Resolution. JAIR 2011
- [PD11] Pipatsrisawat, K., and Darwiche, A. On the Power of Clause-learning SAT Solvers as Resolution Engines. AI 2011
- [NGFAS14] Newsham, Z., Ganesh, V., Audemard, G. and Simon, L. Impact of community structure on SAT solver performance. SAT 2014
- [LGZC15] Liang, J.H., Ganesh, V., Zulkoski, E., and Czarnecki, K. Understanding VSIDS branching heuristics in SAT solvers. HVC 2015.
- [LGPC16] Liang, J.H., Ganesh, V., Poupart, P., and Czarnecki, K. Learning Rate Based Branching Heuristic for SAT Solvers. SAT 2016
- [LGPC+16] Liang, J.H., Ganesh, V., Poupart, P., and Czarnecki, K. Conflict-history Based Branching Heuristic for SAT Solvers. AAAI 2016
- [RKG18] Robere, R., Kolkolova, A., Ganesh, V. Proof Complexity of SMT Solvers. CAV 2018
- [SPG20] Scott, J., Panju, M., and Ganesh, V. Logic Guided Machine Learning AAAI 2020
- [BBCGKV13] Babka et al. Complexity Issues related to Propagation Completeness. JAIR 2013