Optimization Algorithm Design via Electric Circuits

Tetiana Parshakova Center for Computational Mathematics Flatiron Institute

Alg-ML Seminar, Princeton

10/14/2025

Motivation

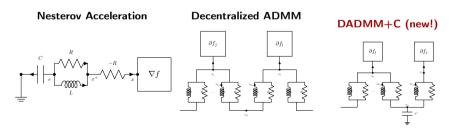
- classical optimization algorithm design: based on worst-case guarantees
 - provably convergent but often conservative and slow in practice
- modern ML optimizers: tuned for fast empirical performance
 - often lack convergence guarantees and may not converge under convexity

goal

• principled way to design algorithms that are fast and provably convergent

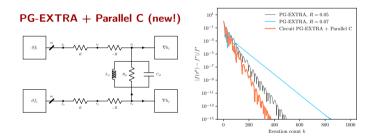
Principled optimization algorithm design

- reframe optimization algorithms as circuit diagrams: RLC circuits composed with nonlinear resistor ∇f
- replace heavy differential relations with modular diagrams governed by local rules
 - similar to how Feynman diagrams make computation in QFT easier
- convergent by construction due to energy dissipation
- equilibrium state representing the primal-dual solution



Principled optimization algorithm design

- vary RLC circuits to create new algorithms with convergence guarantees
- use proof preserving automatic discretization to get implementable algorithm



S. Boyd, T. Parshakova, E. Ryu, and J. Suh. Optimization algorithm design via electric circuits. *NeurIPS Spotlight*, 2024.

Outline

Continuous-time optimization with circuits

Circuits for classical algorithms

Distributed convex optimization problem

$$\begin{array}{ll} \text{minimize} & f(x) \\ \text{subject to} & x \in \mathcal{R}(E^{\mathsf{T}}) \end{array} \qquad \text{(i.e., } x = E^{\mathsf{T}}z \text{ for some } z \text{)}$$

- $f: \mathbf{R}^m \to \mathbf{R} \cup \{\infty\}$ is closed, convex, and proper
- n nets N_1, \ldots, N_n forming a partition of $\{1, \ldots, m\}$
- $E \in \mathbf{R}^{n \times m}$ is a selection matrix

$$E_{ij} = \left\{ \begin{array}{ll} +1 & \text{if } j \in N_i \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{array} \right.$$

 $x \in \mathcal{R}(E^\intercal)$ ensures consistency among components: $x_j = x_{j'}$ if $j, j' \in N_i$

Simple example

•
$$N_1 = \{1,3\}, N_2 = \{2,4\}, N_3 = \{5\}, \text{ and } E^{\mathsf{T}} = \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 1 & 0 \\ 1 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 1 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 \end{bmatrix}$$

Example: Unconstrained problem

- $x \in \mathbf{R}^m$ is the decision variable
- $N_i = \{i\}$ for all $i = 1, \ldots, m$
- $E^{\intercal} = I \in \mathbf{R}^{m \times m}$

Example: Consensus problem

$$\begin{array}{ll} & \underset{x \in \mathbf{R}^m}{\operatorname{minimize}} & f(x) \\ & \underset{\text{subject to}}{\times} & x \in \mathcal{R}(E^{\mathsf{T}}) \end{array}$$

•
$$f(x) = f_1(x_1) + \dots + f_N(x_N)$$
 is block-separable, and $E^\intercal = \begin{bmatrix} I \\ \vdots \\ I \end{bmatrix} \in \mathbf{R}^{m \times m/N}$

Our goal

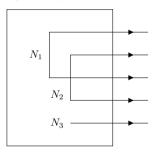
$$\begin{array}{ll} \text{minimize} & f(x) \\ \text{subject to} & x \in \mathcal{R}(E^\intercal) \end{array}$$

our goal is to find a primal-dual solution satisfying the KKT conditions

$$y \in \partial f(x), \qquad x \in \mathcal{R}(E^{\mathsf{T}}), \qquad y \in \mathcal{N}(E)$$

Static interconnect

Static interconnect

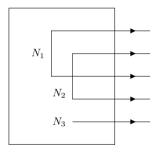


$$m = 5, \quad n = 3$$

- static interconnect is a set of (ideal) wires connecting m terminals and forming n nets
- $x \in \mathbf{R}^m$ is terminal potentials, and $y \in \mathbf{R}^m$ is vector of currents leaving the terminals
- Kirchhoff's voltage law (KVL) is $x \in \mathcal{R}(E^{\intercal})$
- Kirchhoff's current law (KCL) is $y \in \mathcal{N}(E)$
- static interconnect enforces the V-I relationship $(x,y) \in \mathcal{R}(E^\intercal) \times \mathcal{N}(E)$

Static interconnect for simple example

Static interconnect



$$N_1 = \{1,3\}, N_2 = \{2,4\},$$

 $N_3 = \{5\}$

$$E^{\mathsf{T}} = \begin{bmatrix} \mathbf{1} & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 1 & 0 \\ \mathbf{1} & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 1 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 \end{bmatrix}$$

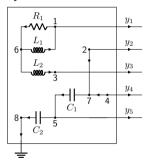
$$x \in \mathcal{R}(E^{\mathsf{T}}) \Leftrightarrow x_1 = x_3, x_2 = x_4$$

$$y \in \mathcal{N}(E) \iff y_1 + y_3 = 0, \ y_2 + y_4 = 0, \ y_5 = 0$$

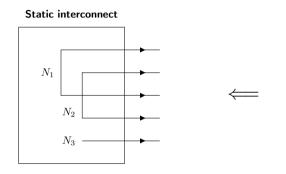
Dynamic interconnect

• dynamic interconnect is an RLC circuit with m terminals and 1 ground node

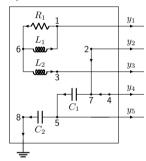
Dynamic interconnect



Admissible dynamic interconnect



Dynamic interconnect



• dynamic interconnect is admissible if it relaxes to the static interconnect at equilibrium

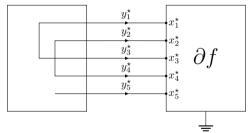
$$\left\{ (x,y) \,\middle|\, Ai = \begin{bmatrix} -y \\ 0 \end{bmatrix}, v = A^{\mathsf{T}} \begin{bmatrix} x \\ e \end{bmatrix}, v_{\mathcal{R}} = D_{\mathcal{R}} i_{\mathcal{R}}, v_{\mathcal{L}} = 0, i_{\mathcal{C}} = 0 \right\} = \mathcal{R}(E^{\mathsf{T}}) \times \mathcal{N}(E)$$

Composing static interconnect with ∂f

- ∂f is interpreted as m-terminal grounded electric device
- ∂f enforces the V-I relation $y \in \partial f(x)$

$$y \in \partial f(x)$$
 (nonlinear resistor) $x \in \mathcal{R}(E^{\mathsf{T}})$ (KVL) $y \in \mathcal{N}(E)$ (KCL)

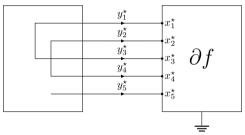
Static interconnect



Composing static interconnect with ∂f

$$\begin{array}{lcl} y & \in & \partial f(x) & \text{(stationarity)} \\ x & \in & \mathcal{R}(E^\intercal) & \text{(primal feasibility)} \\ y & \in & \mathcal{N}(E) & \text{(dual feasibility)} \end{array}$$

Static interconnect



Composing dynamic interconnect with ∂f

$$y(t) \in \partial f(x(t)) \text{ (nonlinear resistor)}$$

$$v(t) = A^{\mathsf{T}} \begin{bmatrix} x(t) \\ e(t) \end{bmatrix} \text{ (KVL)}$$

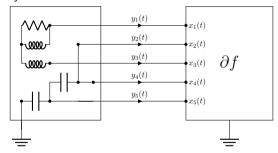
$$Ai(t) = \begin{bmatrix} -y(t) \\ 0 \end{bmatrix} \text{ (KCL)}$$

$$v_{\mathcal{R}}(t) = D_{\mathcal{R}}i_{\mathcal{R}}(t) \text{ (resistor)}$$

$$v_{\mathcal{L}}(t) = D_{\mathcal{L}}\frac{d}{dt}i_{\mathcal{L}}(t) \text{ (inductor)}$$

$$i_{\mathcal{C}}(t) = D_{\mathcal{C}}\frac{d}{dt}v_{\mathcal{C}}(t) \text{ (capacitor)}$$

Dynamic interconnect



Energy dissipation

- $(v^{\star}, i^{\star}, x^{\star}, y^{\star})$ is equilibrium of admissible dynamic interconnect composed with ∂f
- define the energy of the circuit at time t as

$$\mathcal{E}(t) = \frac{1}{2} \|v_{\mathcal{C}}(t) - v_{\mathcal{C}}^{\star}\|_{D_{\mathcal{C}}}^{2} + \frac{1}{2} \|i_{\mathcal{L}}(t) - i_{\mathcal{L}}^{\star}\|_{D_{\mathcal{L}}}^{2}$$

• convexity of f is incremental passivity of ∂f

$$\langle x - x', y - y' \rangle \ge 0, \quad y \in \partial f(x), \ y' \in \partial f(x')$$

energy is a dissipative (non-increasing) quantity

$$\frac{d}{dt}\mathcal{E} = \langle v_{\mathcal{C}} - v_{\mathcal{C}}^{\star}, i_{\mathcal{C}} - i_{\mathcal{C}}^{\star} \rangle + \langle i_{\mathcal{L}} - i_{\mathcal{L}}^{\star} v_{\mathcal{L}} - v_{\mathcal{L}}^{\star} \rangle = -\|i_{\mathcal{R}}\|_{D_{\mathcal{R}}}^{2} - \underbrace{\langle x - x^{\star}, y - y^{\star} \rangle}_{\geq 0} \leq 0$$

Energy dissipation

Theorem

Assume $f: \mathbf{R}^m \to \mathbf{R}$ is strongly convex and smooth. Assume the dynamic interconnect is admissible, and let (x^\star, y^\star) be a primal-dual solution pair. Let (v(t), i(t), x(t), y(t)) be a curve satisfying dynamic interconnect differential algebraic inclusion. Then,

$$\lim_{t \to \infty} (x(t), y(t)) = (x^*, y^*).$$

Outline

Continuous-time optimization with circuits

Circuits for classical algorithms

Moreau envelope

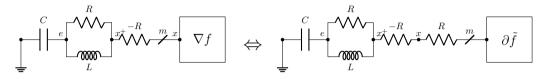
• for R>0, the Moreau envelope of $f\colon \mathbf{R}^m\to \mathbf{R}\cup\{\infty\}$ with parameter R is

$$^{R}f(x) = \inf_{z \in \mathbf{R}^{m}} \left(f(z) + \frac{1}{2R} \|z - x\|_{2}^{2} \right)$$

• ∂f composed with a resistor is equivalent to $\nabla^R f(x)$, i.e., same V-I relation on the m pins of x



Nesterov acceleration



- $f: \mathbf{R}^m \to \mathbf{R}$ is a 1/R-smooth convex function
- V-I relations

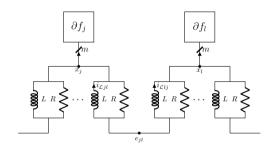
$$y = \nabla f(x), \qquad \frac{x^+ - x}{-R} = \nabla f(x), \qquad v_C = e,$$
$$\frac{d}{dt}i_{\mathcal{L}} = \frac{1}{L}(v_{\mathcal{C}} - x^+), \qquad \frac{d}{dt}v_{\mathcal{C}} = -\frac{1}{C}\nabla f(x)$$

high-resolution ODE of Nesterov acceleration

$$\frac{d^2}{dt^2}x + \frac{R}{L}\frac{d}{dt}x + \left(\frac{1}{C} - \frac{R^2}{L}\right)\frac{d}{dt}\nabla f(x) + \frac{R}{LC}\nabla f(x) = 0$$

Decentralized ADMM

- $f_1, \ldots, f_N \colon \mathbf{R}^m \to \mathbf{R} \cup \{\infty\}$ be CCP functions
- communication graph G over computation nodes
- for every edge (j,l) in graph G the circuit is on the right



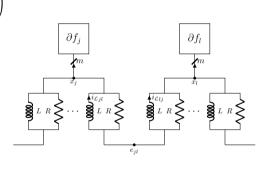
Decentralized ADMM

• V-I relations for $j \in \Gamma_l$

$$\begin{array}{rcl} x_j & = & \mathbf{prox}_{(R/|\Gamma_j|)f_j} \left(\frac{1}{|\Gamma_j|} \sum_{l \in \Gamma_j} (Ri_{\mathcal{L}jl} + e_{jl}) \right) \\ \\ e_{jl} & = & \frac{1}{2} (x_j + x_l) \\ \\ \frac{d}{dt} i_{\mathcal{L}jl} & = & \frac{1}{L} (e_{jl} - x_j) \end{array}$$

ullet L/R stepsize Euler discretization

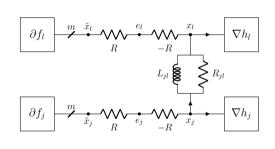
$$\begin{array}{lcl} x_j^{k+1} & = & \mathbf{prox}_{(R/|\Gamma_j|)f_j} \left(\frac{1}{|\Gamma_j|} \sum_{l \in \Gamma_j} (Ri_{\mathcal{L}_jl}^k + e_{jl}^k) \right) \\ \\ e_{jl}^{k+1} & = & \frac{1}{2} (x_j^{k+1} + x_l^{k+1}) \\ \\ i\mathcal{L}_{jl}^{k+1} & = & i\mathcal{L}_{jl}^k + \frac{1}{R} (e_{jl}^{k+1} - x_j^{k+1}) \end{array}$$



PG-EXTRA

- $f_1, \ldots, f_N \colon \mathbf{R}^m \to \mathbf{R} \cup \{\infty\}$ are CCP functions and $h_1, \ldots, h_N \colon \mathbf{R}^m \to \mathbf{R}$ are convex M-smooth functions
- define mixing matrix $W \in \mathbf{R}^{N \times N}$

$$W_{jl} = \begin{cases} 1 - \sum_{l \in \Gamma_j} \frac{R}{R_{jl}} & \text{if } j = l \\ \frac{R}{R_{jl}} & \text{if } j \neq l, \quad l \in \Gamma_j \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \xrightarrow{m} \xrightarrow{\tilde{x}_j} \xrightarrow{R} \xrightarrow{\tilde{e}_j} \xrightarrow{-R} \xrightarrow{x_j}$$



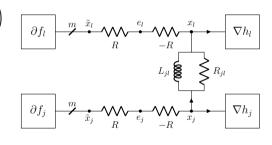
PG-EXTRA

• V-I relations for $j \in \Gamma_l$

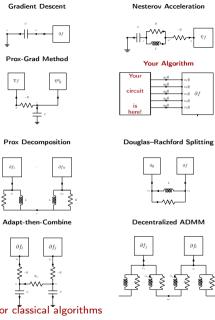
$$\begin{array}{lcl} x_j & = & \mathbf{prox}_{Rf_j} \left(\sum_{l=1}^N W_{jl} x_l - R \nabla h_j(x_j) - w_j \right) \\ \\ \frac{d}{dt} w_j & = & x_j - \sum_{l=1}^N W_{jl} x_l \end{array}$$

• 1/2 stepsize Euler discretization

$$\begin{array}{lcl} \boldsymbol{x}^{k+1} & = & \mathbf{prox}_{Rf} \left(\boldsymbol{W} \boldsymbol{x}^k - R \nabla h(\boldsymbol{x}^k) - \boldsymbol{w}^k \right) \\ \\ \boldsymbol{w}^{k+1} & = & \boldsymbol{w}^k + \frac{1}{2} (I - \boldsymbol{W}) \boldsymbol{x}^k \end{array}$$















Proximal (Moreau)









Davis-Yin Splitting



Decentralized GD



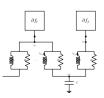
L-^^^ Decentralized ADMM



PG-EXTRA



DADMM+C (new!)



Outline

Continuous-time optimization with circuits

Circuits for classical algorithms

Automatic discretization

Challenges

not every dynamics discretization leads to a convergent algorithm

- in numerical analysis we focus on convergence of x^k to the solution trajectory x(kh) as $h \to 0$
- in optimization we are interested in convergence

$$\lim_{k \to \infty} x^k = x^*, \quad \lim_{k \to \infty} f(x^k) = f(x^*)$$

we provide a novel discretization methodology

- that preserves the proof structure
- is automatic, based on computer-assisted approach

Sufficiently dissipative discretization

- discretize the dynamics of an admissible dynamic interconnect using a two-stage Runge–Kutta method with parameters α, β and stepsize h>0
- $\{(v^k, i^k, x^k, y^k)\}_{k=1}^{\infty}$ the iterates of discretized algorithm

$$(v^{k+1}, i^{k+1}, x^{k+1}, y^{k+1}) = T_{f,\alpha,\beta,h}(v^k, i^k, x^k, y^k)$$

• energy stored in the circuit at time t = kh is

$$\mathcal{E}_{k} = \frac{1}{2} \| v_{\mathcal{C}}^{k} - v_{\mathcal{C}}^{\star} \|_{D_{\mathcal{C}}}^{2} + \frac{1}{2} \| i_{\mathcal{L}}^{k} - i_{\mathcal{L}}^{\star} \|_{D_{\mathcal{L}}}^{2}$$

• discretization is *sufficiently dissipative* if there is an $\eta>0$ such that for all $k=1,2,\ldots$

$$\mathcal{E}_{k+1} - \mathcal{E}_k + \eta \underbrace{\langle x^k - x^*, y^k - y^* \rangle}_{\geq 0} \leq 0$$

Sufficiently dissipative discretization

Lemma

Assume $f: \mathbf{R}^m \to \mathbf{R} \cup \{\infty\}$ is a strictly convex function and the dynamic interconnect is admissible. If the two-stage Runge–Kutta discretization generates a discrete-time sequence $\{(v^k, i^k, x^k, y^k)\}_{k=1}^\infty$ that is sufficiently dissipative, then

$$\lim_{k \to \infty} x^k = x^*.$$

Automatic discretization

• discretization, characterized by (α, β, h) , is dissipative for a given $\eta > 0$ if the objective of the worst-case optimization problem is non-positive

$$\begin{array}{ll} \text{maximize} & \mathcal{E}_2 - \mathcal{E}_1 + \eta \langle x^1 - x^\star, y^1 - y^\star \rangle \\ \text{subject to} & \mathcal{E}_1 = \frac{1}{2} \| v_C^1 - v_C^\star \|_{D_C}^2 + \frac{1}{2} \| i_L^1 - i_L^\star \|_{D_C}^2 \\ & \mathcal{E}_2 = \frac{1}{2} \| v_C^2 - v_C^\star \|_{D_C}^2 + \frac{1}{2} \| i_L^2 - i_L^\star \|_{D_C}^2 \\ & (v^2, i^2, x^2, y^2) = T_{f,\alpha,\beta,h}(v^1, i^1, x^1, y^1) \\ & (v^1, i^1, x^1, y^1) \text{ feasible initial point} \\ & (v^\star, i^\star, x^\star, y^\star) \text{ values at equilibrium} \\ & f \in \mathcal{F} \\ \end{array}$$

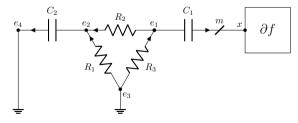
- $f, v^1, i^1, x^1, y^1, v^{\star}, i^{\star}, x^{\star}, y^{\star}$ are the decision variables
- \mathcal{F} is a family of functions (e.g., L-smooth convex)
- can be solved as finite dimensional semidefinite program (SDP) using ideas from performance estimation problem (PEP)

Package ciropt

step 1: create the static interconnect representing the optimality conditions of your problem



step 2: design your algorithm: design RLC circuit that relaxes to the static interconnect in equilibrium



Package ciropt

step 3: write the V-I relations: a convergent dynamics by the construction

$$x = \mathbf{prox}_{(R/2)f}(z)$$

$$y = \frac{2}{R}(z - x)$$

$$\frac{d}{dt}e_2 = -\frac{1}{2CR}(Ry + 3e_2)$$

$$\frac{d}{dt}z = -\frac{1}{4CR}(5Ry + 3e_2)$$

$$z^{k+1} = z^k - \frac{h}{4CR}(5Ry^k + 3e_2^k)$$

$$z^{k+1} = z^k - \frac{h}{4CR}(5Ry^k + 3e_2^k).$$

Package ciropt

step 4: leverage our PEP-based automatic discretization package ciropt and obtain algorithm

```
import ciropt as co
problem = co.CircuitOpt()
f = co.def_function(problem, mu=0, M=np.inf)
...
In [2]: params["eta"], params["h"]
Out[2]: (6.66, 6.66)
```

step 5: your algorithm is ready to use!

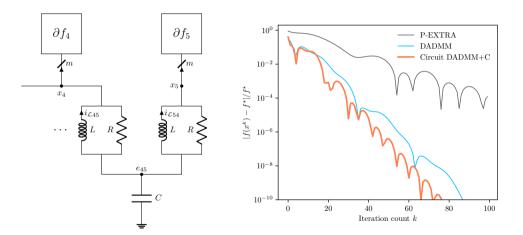
$$x^{k} = \mathbf{prox}_{(1/2)f}(z^{k})$$

$$y^{k} = 2(z^{k} - x^{k})$$

$$w^{k+1} = w^{k} - 0.33(y^{k} + 3w^{k})$$

$$z^{k+1} = z^{k} - 0.16(5y^{k} + 3w^{k})$$

Numerical results: DADMM+C

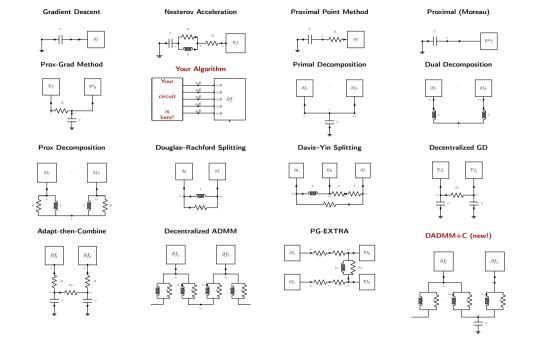


Conclusions

- introduce a framework for designing optimization algorithms via RLC circuits
 - convergent due to energy dissipation
- electric circuits for standard methods
 - Nesterov acceleration, proximal point method, prox-gradient, primal decomposition, dual decomposition, DYS, DRS, decentralized gradient descent, diffusion, DADMM and PG-EXTRA
- PEP-based automated discretization that preserves proof structure
 - https://github.com/cvxgrp/optimization_via_circuits

Future directions

- extending the framework for stochastic programming
- extracting convergence rates
 - energy dissipation over multiple steps
- include methods with time dependent step sizes
 - using time dependent electric components
- key question: how to automate the development of accelerated algorithms?
 - search over admissible circuit designs
 - find circuits which result in fast relaxation, e.g., critical damping
 - guidance on how to design fast optimization method from circuit architecture



O(1/K) convergence rate

- Lagrangian $L(x, z, y) = f(x) + y^{T}(x Ez)$
- by dissipativity,

$$0 \le L(x^k, z^*, y^*) - f(x^*) \le \underbrace{-\langle y^k, x^* - x^k \rangle}_{\ge f(x^k) - f(x^*)} + \langle y^*, x^k - \underbrace{\mathcal{E}z^*}_{=x^*} \rangle$$
$$= \langle y^k - y^*, x^k - x^* \rangle \le \frac{1}{\eta} (\mathcal{E}_k - \mathcal{E}_{k+1})$$

by summability,

$$\min_{k \in \{0, \dots, K\}} L(x^k, z^*, y^*) - f(x^*) \le \frac{1}{\eta(K+1)} \mathcal{E}_0 = O\left(\frac{1}{K}\right)$$

Automatic discretization

capacitor and inductor ODEs are of the form

$$\frac{d}{dt}x(t) = F(x(t))$$

• two-stage Runge–Kutta method for discretization, with coefficients α , β , and stepsize h

$$x^{k+1/2} = x^k + \alpha h F(x^k)$$

$$x^{k+1} = x^k + \beta h F(x^k) + (1-\beta)h F(x^{k+1/2})$$

• interpolation lemma states $f_l \in \mathcal{F}_{\mu_l,M_l}(\mathbf{R}^n)$ if and only if

$$\begin{split} I_K &=& \{1, 1.5, 2, \star\} \\ 0 &\geq& f_l^j - f_l^i + \langle g_l^j, x^i - x^j \rangle + \frac{1}{2M_l} \|g_l^i - g_l^j\|_2^2 \\ &+ \frac{\mu_l}{2(1 - \mu_l/M_l)} \|x^i - x^j - 1/M_l (g_l^i - g_l^j)\|_2^2, \quad i, j \in I_K \end{split}$$

Automatic discretization

decentralized optimization problem

$$\begin{array}{ll} \underset{x_1,\ldots,x_N\in \mathbf{R}^{m/N}}{\text{minimize}} & f_1(x_1)+\cdots+f_N(x_N) \\ \text{subject to} & x_j=x_l, \quad j=1,\ldots,N, \quad l\in \Gamma_j \end{array}$$

computer-assisted discretization

maximize
$$\eta$$
 subject to $\mathcal{E}_2 - \mathcal{E}_1 + \eta \langle x^1 - x^\star, y^1 - y^\star \rangle \leq 0$ $\mathcal{E}_1 = \frac{1}{2} \|v_C^1 - v_C^\star\|_{D_C}^2 + \frac{1}{2} \|i_L^2 - i_L^\star\|_{D_C}^2$ $\mathcal{E}_2 = \frac{1}{2} \|v_C^2 - v_C^\star\|_{D_C}^2 + \frac{1}{2} \|i_L^2 - i_L^\star\|_{D_C}^2$ $(v^2, i^2, x^2, y^2) = T_{f,\alpha,\beta,h}(v^1, i^1, x^1, y^1)$ (v^1, i^1, x^1, y^1) feasible initial point $(v^\star, i^\star, x^\star, y^\star)$ values at equilibrium $f_l \in \mathcal{F}_{\mu_l, M_l}(\mathbf{R}^n)$ $\alpha, \beta \geq 0, \quad h, \eta > 0$