



# Algorithms: COMP3121/9101

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## 3. LARGE INTEGER MULTIPLICATION

# Basics revisited: how do we multiply two numbers?

- The primary school algorithm:

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      X X X X  <- first input integer
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      X X X X  \
    X X X X    \ 0(n^2) intermediate operations:
  X X X X      / 0(n^2) elementary multiplications
X X X X        /   + 0(n^2) elementary additions
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- Can we do it faster than in  $n^2$  many steps??

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# The Karatsuba trick

- Take the two input numbers  $A$  and  $B$ , and split them into two halves:

$$A = A_1 2^{\frac{n}{2}} + A_0 \qquad A = \underbrace{XX \dots X}_{n/2 \text{ bits}} \underbrace{XX \dots X}_{n/2 \text{ bits}}$$

$$B = B_1 2^{\frac{n}{2}} + B_0$$

- $AB$  can now be calculated as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} AB &= A_1 B_1 2^n + (A_1 B_0 + A_0 B_1) 2^{\frac{n}{2}} + A_0 B_0 \\ &= A_1 B_1 2^n + ((A_1 + A_0)(B_1 + B_0) - A_1 B_1 - A_0 B_0) 2^{\frac{n}{2}} + A_0 B_0 \end{aligned}$$

- We have saved one multiplication, now we have only three:  $A_0 B_0$ ,  $A_1 B_1$  and  $(A_1 + A_0)(B_1 + B_0)$ .

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```
1: function MULT( $A, B$ )
2:   if  $|A| = |B| = 1$  then return  $AB$ 
3:   else
4:      $A_1 \leftarrow \text{MoreSignificantPart}(A);$ 
5:      $A_0 \leftarrow \text{LessSignificantPart}(A);$ 
6:      $B_1 \leftarrow \text{MoreSignificantPart}(B);$ 
7:      $B_0 \leftarrow \text{LessSignificantPart}(B);$ 
8:      $U \leftarrow A_0 + A_1;$ 
9:      $V \leftarrow B_0 + B_1;$ 
10:     $X \leftarrow \text{MULT}(A_0, B_0);$ 
11:     $W \leftarrow \text{MULT}(A_1, B_1);$ 
12:     $Y \leftarrow \text{MULT}(U, V);$ 
13:    return  $W 2^n + (Y - X - W) 2^{n/2} + X$ 
14:  end if
15: end function
```

# The Karatsuba trick

- How many steps does this algorithm take? (remember, addition is in linear time!)

- Recurrence: 
$$T(n) = 3T\left(\frac{n}{2}\right) + cn$$

$$a = 3; \quad b = 2; \quad f(n) = cn; \quad n^{\log_b a} = n^{\log_2 3}$$

- since  $1.5 < \log_2 3 < 1.6$  we have

$$f(n) = cn = O(n^{\log_2 3 - \varepsilon}) \quad \text{for any } 0 < \varepsilon < 0.5$$

- Thus, the first case of the Master Theorem applies.
- Consequently,

$$T(n) = \Theta(n^{\log_2 3}) < \Theta(n^{1.585})$$

without going through the messy calculations!

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# Generalizing Karatsuba's algorithm

- Can we do better if we break the numbers in more than two pieces?
- Lets try breaking the numbers  $A, B$  into 3 pieces; then with  $k = n/3$  we obtain

$$A = \underbrace{XXX \dots XX}_{k \text{ bits of } A_2} \underbrace{XXX \dots XX}_{k \text{ bits of } A_1} \underbrace{XXX \dots XX}_{k \text{ bits of } A_0}$$

i.e.,

$$A = A_2 2^{2k} + A_1 2^k + A_0$$

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- So,

$$AB = A_2 B_2 2^{4k} + (A_2 B_1 + A_1 B_2) 2^{3k} + (A_2 B_0 + A_1 B_1 + A_0 B_2) 2^{2k} + (A_1 B_0 + A_0 B_1) 2^k + A_0 B_0$$



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$$AB = \underbrace{A_2B_2}_{C_4} 2^{4k} + \underbrace{(A_2B_1 + A_1B_2)}_{C_3} 2^{3k} + \underbrace{(A_2B_0 + A_1B_1 + A_0B_2)}_{C_2} 2^{2k} + \underbrace{(A_1B_0 + A_0B_1)}_{C_1} 2^k + \underbrace{A_0B_0}_{C_0}$$

- we need only 5 coefficients:

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- Can we get these with 5 multiplications only?
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# The Karatsuba trick: slicing into 3 pieces

- We now look for a method for getting these coefficients without any guesswork!

- Let

$$A = A_2 2^{2k} + A_1 2^k + A_0$$

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- We form the naturally corresponding polynomials:

$$P_A(x) = A_2 x^2 + A_1 x + A_0;$$

$$P_B(x) = B_2 x^2 + B_1 x + B_0.$$

- Note that

$$A = A_2 (2^k)^2 + A_1 2^k + A_0 = P_A(2^k);$$

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$$A = A_2 (2^k)^2 + A_1 2^k + A_0 = P_A(2^k);$$

$$B = B_2 (2^k)^2 + B_1 2^k + B_0 = P_B(2^k).$$

# The Karatsuba trick: slicing into 3 pieces

- We now look for a method for getting these coefficients without any guesswork!

- Let

$$A = A_2 2^{2k} + A_1 2^k + A_0$$

$$B = B_2 2^{2k} + B_1 2^k + B_0$$

- We form the naturally corresponding polynomials:

$$P_A(x) = A_2 x^2 + A_1 x + A_0;$$

$$P_B(x) = B_2 x^2 + B_1 x + B_0.$$

- Note that

$$A = A_2 (2^k)^2 + A_1 2^k + A_0 = P_A(2^k);$$

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# The Karatsuba trick: slicing into 3 pieces

- If we manage to compute somehow the product polynomial

$$P_C(x) = P_A(x)P_B(x) = C_4 x^4 + C_3 x^3 + C_2 x^2 + C_1 x + C_0,$$

with only 5 multiplications, we can then obtain the product of numbers  $A$  and  $B$  simply as

$$A \cdot B = P_A(2^k)P_B(2^k) = P_C(2^k) = C_4 2^{4k} + C_3 2^{3k} + C_2 2^{2k} + C_1 2^k + C_0,$$

- Note that the right hand side involves only shifts and additions.
- Since the product polynomial  $P_C(x) = P_A(x)P_B(x)$  is of degree 4 we need 5 values to **uniquely determine**  $P_C(x)$ .
- We choose **the smallest possible 5 integer values** (smallest by their absolute value), i.e.,  $-2, -1, 0, 1, 2$ .
- Thus, we compute  $P_A(-2), P_A(-1), P_A(0), P_A(1), P_A(2)$   
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# The Karatsuba trick: slicing into 3 pieces

- For  $P_A(x) = A_2x^2 + A_1x + A_0$  we have

$$P_A(-2) = A_2(-2)^2 + A_1(-2) + A_0 = 4A_2 - 2A_1 + A_0$$

$$P_A(-1) = A_2(-1)^2 + A_1(-1) + A_0 = A_2 - A_1 + A_0$$

$$P_A(0) = A_20^2 + A_10 + A_0 = A_0$$

$$P_A(1) = A_21^2 + A_11 + A_0 = A_2 + A_1 + A_0$$

$$P_A(2) = A_22^2 + A_12 + A_0 = 4A_2 + 2A_1 + A_0.$$

- Similarly, for  $P_B(x) = B_2x^2 + B_1x + B_0$  we have

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- These evaluations involve only additions because  $2A = A + A$ ;  $4A = 2A + 2A$ .

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# The Karatsuba trick: slicing into 3 pieces

- Having obtained  $P_A(-2), P_A(-1), P_A(0), P_A(1), P_A(2)$  and  $P_B(-2), P_B(-1), P_B(0), P_B(1), P_B(2)$  we can now obtain  $P_C(-2), P_C(-1), P_C(0), P_C(1), P_C(2)$  with only 5 multiplications of large numbers:

$$\begin{aligned}P_C(-2) &= P_A(-2)P_B(-2) \\ &= (A_0 - 2A_1 + 4A_2)(B_0 - 2B_1 + 4B_2)\end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned}P_C(-1) &= P_A(-1)P_B(-1) \\ &= (A_0 - A_1 + A_2)(B_0 - B_1 + B_2)\end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned}P_C(0) &= P_A(0)P_B(0) \\ &= A_0B_0\end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned}P_C(1) &= P_A(1)P_B(1) \\ &= (A_0 + A_1 + A_2)(B_0 + B_1 + B_2)\end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned}P_C(2) &= P_A(2)P_B(2) \\ &= (A_0 + 2A_1 + 4A_2)(B_0 + 2B_1 + 4B_2)\end{aligned}$$

# The Karatsuba trick: slicing into 3 pieces

- Thus, if we represent the product  $C(x) = P_A(x)P_B(x)$  in the coefficient form as  $C(x) = C_4x^4 + C_3x^3 + C_2x^2 + C_1x + C_0$  we get

$$C_4(-2)^4 + C_3(-2)^3 + C_2(-2)^2 + C_1(-2) + C_0 = P_C(-2) = P_A(-2)P_B(-2)$$

$$C_4(-1)^4 + C_3(-1)^3 + C_2(-1)^2 + C_1(-1) + C_0 = P_C(-1) = P_A(-1)P_B(-1)$$

$$C_40^4 + C_30^3 + C_20^2 + C_1 \cdot 0 + C_0 = P_C(0) = P_A(0)P_B(0)$$

$$C_41^4 + C_31^3 + C_21^2 + C_1 \cdot 1 + C_0 = P_C(1) = P_A(1)P_B(1)$$

$$C_42^4 + C_32^3 + C_22^2 + C_1 \cdot 2 + C_0 = P_C(2) = P_A(2)P_B(2).$$

- Simplifying the left side we obtain

$$16C_4 - 8C_3 + 4C_2 - 2C_1 + C_0 = P_C(-2)$$

$$C_4 - C_3 + C_2 - C_1 + C_0 = P_C(-1)$$

$$C_0 = P_C(0)$$

$$C_4 + C_3 + C_2 + C_1 + C_0 = P_C(1)$$

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- Thus, if we represent the product  $C(x) = P_A(x)P_B(x)$  in the coefficient form as  $C(x) = C_4x^4 + C_3x^3 + C_2x^2 + C_1x + C_0$  we get

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# The Karatsuba trick: slicing into 3 pieces

- Solving this system of linear equations for  $C_0, C_1, C_2, C_3, C_4$  produces (as an exercise solve this system by hand, using the Gaussian elimination)

$$C_0 = P_C(0)$$

$$C_1 = \frac{P_C(-2)}{12} - \frac{2P_C(-1)}{3} + \frac{2P_C(1)}{3} - \frac{P_C(2)}{12}$$

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- Note that these expressions do not involve any multiplications of TWO large numbers and thus can be done in linear time.
- With the coefficients  $C_0, C_1, C_2, C_3, C_4$  obtained, we can now form the polynomial  $P_C(x) = C_0 + C_1x + C_2x^2 + C_3x^3 + C_4x^4$ .
- We can now compute  $P_C(2^k) = C_0 + C_12^k + C_22^{2k} + C_32^{3k} + C_42^{4k}$  in linear time, because computing  $P_C(2^k)$  involves only binary shifts of the coefficients plus  $O(k)$  additions.
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# The Karatsuba trick: slicing into 3 pieces

- Solving this system of linear equations for  $C_0, C_1, C_2, C_3, C_4$  produces (as an exercise solve this system by hand, using the Gaussian elimination)

$$C_0 = P_C(0)$$

$$C_1 = \frac{P_C(-2)}{12} - \frac{2P_C(-1)}{3} + \frac{2P_C(1)}{3} - \frac{P_C(2)}{12}$$

$$C_2 = -\frac{P_C(-2)}{24} + \frac{2P_C(-1)}{3} - \frac{5P_C(0)}{4} + \frac{2P_C(1)}{3} - \frac{P_C(2)}{24}$$

$$C_3 = -\frac{P_C(-2)}{12} + \frac{P_C(-1)}{6} - \frac{P_C(1)}{6} + \frac{P_C(2)}{12}$$

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- Note that these expressions do not involve any multiplications of TWO large numbers and thus can be done in linear time.
- With the coefficients  $C_0, C_1, C_2, C_3, C_4$  obtained, we can now form the polynomial  $P_C(x) = C_0 + C_1x + C_2x^2 + C_3x^3 + C_4x^4$ .
- We can now compute  $P_C(2^k) = C_0 + C_12^k + C_22^{2k} + C_32^{3k} + C_42^{4k}$  in linear time, because computing  $P_C(2^k)$  involves only binary shifts of the coefficients plus  $O(k)$  additions.
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```

1: function MULT(A, B)
2:   obtain  $A_0, A_1, A_2$  and  $B_0, B_1, B_2$  such that  $A = A_2 2^{2^k} + A_1 2^k + A_0$ ;  $B = B_2 2^{2^k} + B_1 2^k + B_0$ ;
3:   form polynomials  $P_A(x) = A_2 x^2 + A_1 x + A_0$ ;  $P_B(x) = B_2 x^2 + B_1 x + B_0$ ;
4:
       $P_A(-2) \leftarrow 4A_2 - 2A_1 + A_0$             $P_B(-2) \leftarrow 4B_2 - 2B_1 + B_0$ 
       $P_A(-1) \leftarrow A_2 - A_1 + A_0$             $P_B(-1) \leftarrow B_2 - B_1 + B_0$ 
       $P_A(0) \leftarrow A_0$                           $P_B(0) \leftarrow B_0$ 
       $P_A(1) \leftarrow A_2 + A_1 + A_0$               $P_B(1) \leftarrow B_2 + B_1 + B_0$ 
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5:
       $P_C(-2) \leftarrow \text{MULT}(P_A(-2), P_B(-2));$     $P_C(-1) \leftarrow \text{MULT}(P_A(-1), P_B(-1));$ 
       $P_C(0) \leftarrow \text{MULT}(P_A(0), P_B(0));$ 
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6:
       $C_0 \leftarrow P_C(0);$             $C_1 \leftarrow \frac{P_C(-2)}{12} - \frac{2P_C(-1)}{3} + \frac{2P_C(1)}{3} - \frac{P_C(2)}{12}$ 
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7:   form  $P_C(x) = C_4 x^4 + C_3 x^3 + C_2 x^2 + C_1 x + C_0$ ; compute
       $P_C(2^k) = C_4 2^{4k} + C_3 2^{3k} + C_2 2^{2k} + C_1 2^k + C_0$ 
8:   return  $P_C(2^k) = A \cdot B$ .
9: end function

```

# The Karatsuba trick: slicing into 3 pieces

- How fast is this algorithm?
- We have replaced a multiplication of two  $n$  bit numbers with 5 multiplications of  $n/3$  bit numbers with an overhead of additions, shifts and the similar, all doable in linear time  $cn$ ;
- thus,

$$T(n) = 5T\left(\frac{n}{3}\right) + cn$$

- We now apply the Master Theorem:  
we have  $a = 5$ ,  $b = 3$ , so we consider  $n^{\log_b a} = n^{\log_3 5} \approx n^{1.465\dots}$
- Clearly, the first case of the MT applies and we get  
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- Recall that the original Karatsuba algorithm runs in time

$$n^{\log_2 3} \approx n^{1.58} > n^{1.47}.$$

- Thus, we got a significantly faster algorithm.
- Then why not slice numbers  $A$  and  $B$  into even larger number of slices? Maybe we can get even faster algorithm?
- The answer is, in a sense, BOTH yes and no!
- One can show that in fact slicing numbers in larger number of slices produces asymptotically faster algorithm, but its constants appearing in the asymptotic estimates explode (they involve  $p^p$  where  $p + 1$  is the number of slices).
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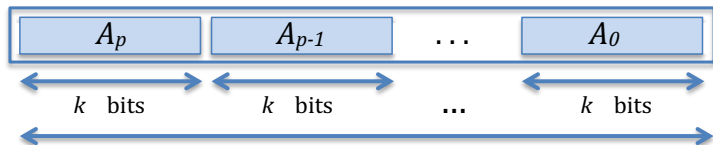
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**The general case** - slicing the input numbers  $A, B$  into  $p + 1$  many slices

- For simplicity, let us assume  $A$  and  $B$  have exactly  $(p + 1)k$  bits (otherwise one of the slices will have to be shorter);
- Note:  $p$  is a fixed (smallish) number, a fixed parameter of our design –  $p + 1$  is the number of slices we are going to make, but  $k$  depends on the input values  $A$  and  $B$  and can be arbitrarily large!
- Slice  $A, B$  into  $p + 1$  pieces each:

$$A = A_p 2^{kp} + A_{p-1} 2^{k(p-1)} + \dots + A_0$$

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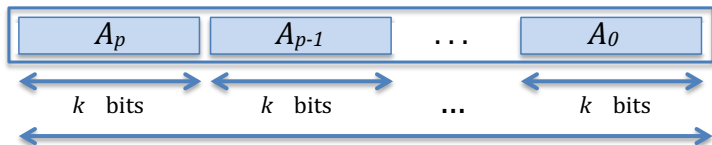
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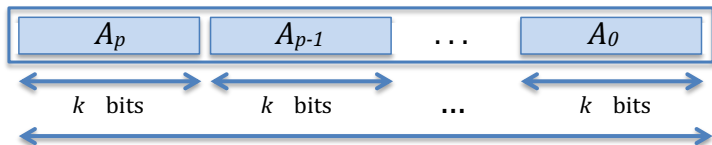
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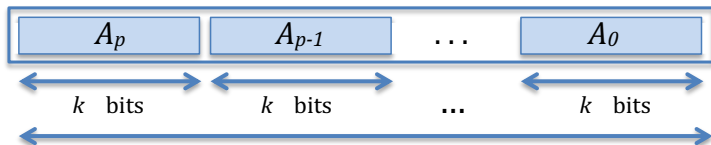
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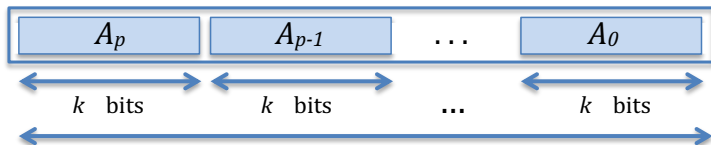
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# Generalizing Karatsuba's algorithm

- We form the naturally corresponding polynomials:

$$P_A(x) = A_px^p + A_{p-1}x^{p-1} + \cdots + A_0$$

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- As before, we have:

$$A = P_A(2^k); \quad B = P_B(2^k); \quad AB = P_A(2^k)P_B(2^k) = (P_A(x) \cdot P_B(x))|_{x=2^k}$$

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- Note that  $P_C(x) = P_A(x) \cdot P_B(x)$  is of degree  $2p$ :

$$P_C(x) = \sum_{j=0}^{2p} C_j x^j$$

# Generalizing Karatsuba's algorithm

- Example:

$$\begin{aligned}(A_3x^3 + A_2x^2 + A_1x + A_0)(B_3x^3 + B_2x^2 + B_1x + B_0) = \\ A_3B_3x^6 + (A_2B_3 + A_3B_2)x^5 + (A_1B_3 + A_2B_2 + A_3B_1)x^4 \\ + (A_0B_3 + A_1B_2 + A_2B_1 + A_3B_0)x^3 + (A_0B_2 + A_1B_1 + A_2B_0)x^2 \\ + (A_0B_1 + A_1B_0)x + A_0B_0\end{aligned}$$

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# A VERY IMPORTANT DIGRESSION:

If you have two sequences  $\vec{A} = (A_0, A_1, \dots, A_{p-1}, A_p)$  and  $\vec{B} = (B_0, B_1, \dots, B_{m-1}, B_m)$ , and if you form the two corresponding polynomials

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then the sequence  $\vec{C} = (C_0, C_1, \dots, C_{p+m})$  of the coefficients of the product polynomial, with these coefficients given by

$$C_j = \sum_{i+k=j} A_i B_k, \quad \text{for } 0 \leq j \leq p+m,$$

is **extremely important** and is called the **LINEAR CONVOLUTION** of sequences  $\vec{A}$  and  $\vec{B}$  and is denoted by  $\vec{C} = \vec{A} \star \vec{B}$ .



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- For example, if you have an audio signal and you want to emphasise the bass sounds, you would pass the sequence of discrete samples of the signal through a digital filter which amplifies the low frequencies more than the medium and the high audio frequencies.
- This is accomplished by computing the linear convolution of the sequence of discrete samples of the signal with a sequence of values which correspond to that filter, called *the impulse response* of the filter.
- This means that the samples of the output sound are simply the coefficients of the product of two polynomials:
  - 1 polynomial  $P_A(x)$  whose coefficients  $A_i$  are the samples of the input signal;
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- Convolutions are bread-and-butter of signal processing, and for that reason it is **extremely important** to find fast ways of multiplying two polynomials of possibly very large degrees.
- In signal processing these degrees can be greater than 1000.
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# Coefficient vs value representation of polynomials

- Every polynomial  $P_A(x)$  of degree  $p$  is uniquely determined by its values at any  $p + 1$  distinct input values  $x_0, x_1, \dots, x_p$ :

$$P_A(x) \leftrightarrow \{(x_0, P_A(x_0)), (x_1, P_A(x_1)), \dots, (x_p, P_A(x_p))\}$$

- For  $P_A(x) = A_p x^p + A_{p-1} x^{p-1} + \dots + A_0$ , these values can be obtained via a matrix multiplication:

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- Equations (1) and (2) show how we can commute between:
  - ① a representation of a polynomial  $P_A(x)$  via its coefficients  $A_p, A_{p-1}, \dots, A_0$ , i.e.  $P_A(x) = A_p x^p + \dots + A_1 x + A_0$
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# Coefficient vs value representation of polynomials - ctd.

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# Our strategy to multiply polynomials fast:

- 1 Given two polynomials of degree at most  $p$ ,

$$P_A(x) = A_px^p + \dots + A_0; \quad P_B(x) = B_px^p + \dots + B_0$$

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# Fast multiplication of polynomials - ctd.

- We now perform  $2p + 1$  **multiplications of large numbers** to obtain

$$P_A(-p)P_B(-p), \dots, P_A(-1)P_B(-1), P_A(0)P_B(0), P_A(1)P_B(1), \dots, P_A(p)P_B(p)$$

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```

1: function MULT( $A, B$ )
2:   if  $|A| = |B| < p + 1$  then return  $AB$ 
3:   else
4:     obtain  $p + 1$  slices  $A_0, A_1, \dots, A_p$  and  $B_0, B_1, \dots, B_p$  such that

```

$$A = A_p 2^{p \cdot k} + A_{p-1} 2^{(p-1) \cdot k} + \dots + A_0$$

$$B = B_p 2^{p \cdot k} + B_{p-1} 2^{(p-1) \cdot k} + \dots + B_0$$

```

5:     form polynomials

```

$$P_A(x) = A_p x^p + A_{p-1} x^{(p-1)} + \dots + A_0$$

$$P_B(x) = B_p x^p + B_{p-1} x^{(p-1)} + \dots + B_0$$

```

6:     for  $m = -p$  to  $m = p$  do
7:       compute  $P_A(m)$  and  $P_B(m)$ ;
8:        $P_C(m) \leftarrow \text{MULT}(P_A(m)P_B(m))$ 
9:     end for
10:    compute  $C_0, C_1, \dots, C_{2p}$  via

```

$$\begin{pmatrix} C_0 \\ C_1 \\ \vdots \\ C_{2p} \end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & -p & (-p)^2 & \dots & (-p)^{2p} \\ 1 & -(p-1) & (-(p-1))^2 & \dots & (-(p-1))^{2p} \\ \vdots & \vdots & \vdots & \vdots & \vdots \\ 1 & p & p^2 & \dots & p^{2p} \end{pmatrix}^{-1} \begin{pmatrix} P_C(-p) \\ P_C(-(p-1)) \\ \vdots \\ P_C(p) \end{pmatrix}.$$

```

11:    form  $P_C(x) = C_{2p}x^{2p} + \dots + C_0$  and compute  $P_C(2^k)$ 
12:    return  $P_C(2^k) = A \cdot B$ 
13:  end if
14: end function

```

# How fast is our algorithm?

- it is easy to see that the values of the two polynomials we are multiplying have at most  $k + s$  bits where  $s$  is a constant which depends on  $p$  but does NOT depend on  $k$ :

$$P_A(m) = A_p m^p + A_{p-1} m^{p-1} + \cdots + A_0 : \quad -p \leq m \leq p.$$

This is because each  $A_i$  is smaller than  $2^k$  because each  $A_k$  has  $k$  bits; thus

$$|P_A(m)| < p^p(p+1) \times 2^k \Rightarrow \log_2 |P_A(m)| < \log_2(p^p(p+1)) + k = s + k$$

- Thus, we have reduced a multiplication of two  $k(p+1)$  digit numbers to  $2p+1$  multiplications of  $k+s$  digit numbers plus a linear overhead (of additions splitting the numbers etc.)
- So we get the following recurrence for the complexity of  $\text{MULT}(A, B)$ :

$$T((p+1)k) = (2p+1)T(k+s) + ck$$

- Let  $n = (p+1)k$ . Then

$$T(n) = \underbrace{(2p+1)}_a T\left(\underbrace{\frac{n}{p+1}}_b + s\right) + \frac{c}{p+1} n$$

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- Thus, by choosing a sufficiently large  $p$ , we can get a run time arbitrarily close to linear time!
- How large does  $p$  have to be, in order to get an algorithm which runs in time  $n^{1.1}$ ?

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- Thus, while evaluations of  $P_A(x)$  and  $P_B(x)$  for  $x = -p \dots p$  can **theoretically** all be done in linear time,  $T(p) = cp$ , the constant  $c$  is absolutely **humongous**.
- Consequently, slicing the input numbers in more than just a few slices results in a hopelessly slow algorithm, despite the fact that the asymptotic bounds improve as we increase the number of slices!
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- **Crucial question:** Are there numbers  $x_0, x_1, \dots, x_p$  such that the size of  $x_i^p$  does not grow uncontrollably?
- Answer: YES; they are the complex numbers  $z_i$  lying on the unit circle, i.e., such that  $|z_i| = 1$ !
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# PUZZLE!

The warden meets with 23 new prisoners when they arrive. He tells them, “You may meet today and plan a strategy. But after today, you will be in isolated cells and will have no communication with one another. In the prison there is a switch room, which contains two light switches labeled A and B, each of which can be in either the on or the off position. I am not telling you their present positions. The switches are not connected to anything. After today, from time to time whenever I feel so inclined, I will select one prisoner at random and escort him to the switch room. This prisoner will select one of the two switches and reverse its position. He must move one, but only one of the switches. He can’t move both but he can’t move none either. Then he will be led back to his cell. No one else will enter the switch room until I lead the next prisoner there, and he’ll be instructed to do the same thing. I’m going to choose prisoners at random. I may choose the same guy three times in a row, or I may jump around and come back. But, given enough time, everyone would eventually visit the switch room many times. At any time anyone of you may declare to me: “We have all visited the switch room. If it is true, then you will all be set free. If it is false, and somebody has not yet visited the switch room, you will be fed to the alligators.”

What is the strategy the prisoners can devise to gain their freedom?