

# Church-Turing Thesis

The Universal Nature of Computation

# The Central Question

What is the most powerful computational model possible?

We've seen:

- DFAs → Limited power (regular languages only)
- PDAs → More powerful (context-free languages)
- TMs → Even more powerful

**Question:** Is there something even MORE powerful than TMs?

# The Remarkable Answer

**NO!**

Turing Machines represent the **pinnacle** of computational power

# Universal Turing Machine (UTM)

**Key Insight:** A TM can be specified as data (a string)

**Notation:** <TM> = string representation of TM

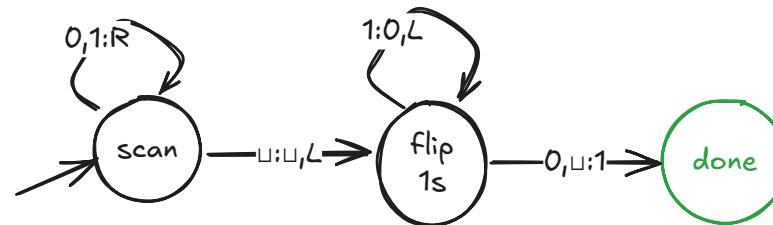
**Universal TM:** A TM that can simulate any other TM

```
public class UTM {  
    /** Simulates the TM on the tape */  
    public boolean simulate(String tmDescription, Tape tape) {...}  
}
```

**Revolutionary Idea:** Programs as data!

- **Stored program concept** (von Neumann architecture)
- Leads to **general-purpose computers**
- Turing conceived this before computers existed!

# Encoding a TM as a String



Many possible formats

Mermaid:

```
```mermaid
stateDiagram-v2
[*] --> scan;
scan --> scan : 0->0,R|1->1,R
scan -> flip1s : □->□,L
flip1s -> flip1s : 1->0,L
flip1s -> done : 0->1,L|□->1,L
done -> [*]
```
```

Custom Encoding Format:

```
start scan
accept done
scan scan 0:0,R
scan scan 1:1,R
scan flip1s □:□,L
flip1s flip1s 1:0,L
flip1s done 0:1
flip1s done □:1
```

The exact format doesn't matter - what matters is that a TM CAN be encoded as a string!

# Programs Processing Programs

Does this seem strange?

It shouldn't! You encounter it constantly:

- **App stores** - process app programs
- **Compilers** - process high-level programs → assembly
- **Java compiler** ( `javac` ) - Java → bytecode
- **JVM** ( `java` ) - bytecode program → execution
- **Interpreters** - Python, JavaScript, etc.

TMs formalized this concept decades before real computers!

# Church-Turing Thesis

A Universal Turing Machine (UTM) can perform any computation that can be done by any physically realizable computing device

In other words:

- TMs are **as powerful as** any possible computer
- No machine can compute **more** than a TM
- TMs represent **maximal computational power**

# What This Means

## Implications:

### 1. Theoretical Simplification

- Study TMs instead of all possible machines
- Proven facts about TMs apply to real computers

### 2. Computational Limits

- If a TM can't do it, **nothing** can
- Defines absolute boundaries of computation

### 3. Universal Applicability

- Results apply to past, present, AND future computers

# Why It's a "Thesis" Not a "Theorem"

**Important Distinction:**

## Mathematical Theorems

- Rigorous formal proof
- Based on axioms
- Absolute certainty

## Church-Turing Thesis

- Statement about nature
- Physical/empirical claim
- Cannot be "proved" mathematically

**Like laws of physics:** Based on overwhelming evidence, not formal proof

# The Evidence is Overwhelming

**Decades of attempts to find something more powerful:**

- ✓ **All** alternative models shown equivalent to TMs
- ✓ **No** counterexample ever found
- ✓ **Every** reasonable computational model studied

**Models proven equivalent to TMs:**

- Lambda calculus (Church)
- Counter machines (Minsky)
- Cellular automata (Conway)
- Your laptop
- Quantum computers

# The Contrapositive

If some computation can't be done on a TM, then it can't be done at all!

This is incredibly powerful for proving impossibility:

- To show problem X is **unsolvable**
- We only need to show **no TM** can solve it
- Then we know **no machine ever** can solve it

# TM Variations (All Equivalent)

Many variations of TMs have been studied:

## Enhanced TMs

- Multiple tapes
- Multiple tape heads
- 2D tape
- Nondeterministic

## Result

- All can be simulated by standard TM
- All equivalent in power (ignoring performance)
- Further evidence for thesis

**Key Insight:** These variations don't add computational power

# Turing Completeness

A computational model is **Turing complete** (or **Turing universal**) if it is equivalent to the Turing machine model

**What this means:**

- Can recognize/decide the **same languages** as TMs
- Can compute the **same functions** as TMs
- Has **maximal computational power**

# Turing Complete Systems

Surprisingly diverse list:

## Expected

- Your computer
- Java, Python, C
- JavaScript

## Unexpected

- Excel spreadsheets
- C++ templates
- PowerPoint
- Magic: The Gathering
- Minecraft redstone

## Theoretical

- Lambda calculus
- Counter machines
- Cellular automata
- Post systems



## Active Learning Challenge

Which of these are Turing complete?

1. Finite State Machines (DFAs)
2. Regular Expressions
3. HTML/CSS (no JavaScript)
4. Conway's Game of Life
5. A simple calculator

# Challenge Answers

| System                   | Turing Complete? | Why/Why Not?                     |
|--------------------------|------------------|----------------------------------|
| DFAs/Regular Expressions | No               | Can't count unboundedly          |
| HTML/CSS                 | No               | Static, no computation           |
| Conway's Game of Life    | Yes              | Can simulate TM                  |
| Simple calculator        | No               | Fixed operations, limited memory |

# Real-World Implications

## 1. Programming Languages

- All general-purpose languages are equivalent in power
- Choice is about convenience, not capability

## 2. Hardware

- Modern computers are Turing complete
- Adding more hardware doesn't increase **what** can be computed

## 3. Algorithms

- If problem solvable on one computer, solvable on all
- Results transfer across systems

# The Universal Nature of Computation

**Profound Insight:**

Computation is a **universal** concept:

- Independent of physical implementation
- Same across all systems
- Governed by mathematical principles

**Like physics:**

- Laws of motion apply to all objects
- Laws of computation apply to all machines

# Limitations Still Exist

## Important Caveat:

The thesis says TMs are **maximally powerful**, but:

- ✓ TMs still have limits
- ✓ Some problems are **undecidable** (no TM can solve)
- ✓ Some decidable problems are **intractable** (too slow)

**The thesis doesn't say everything is computable!**

# Quantum Computing Note

**Common Question:** Don't quantum computers violate this?

**Answer:** No!

## Quantum Computers

- Can be **faster** for some problems
- Can solve some problems **efficiently** that classical computers can't

## But...

- Don't compute **different** decidable problems
- Still bounded by Turing computability
- Turing complete, not "super-Turing"



## Active Learning: Apply the Concept

**Scenario:** Your friend claims they've invented a new programming language that can solve problems no other language can solve.

### Questions:

1. What does the Church-Turing Thesis tell us about this claim?
2. How would you respond to your friend?
3. What might they actually mean?

# Connecting to Earlier Material

Recall our journey:

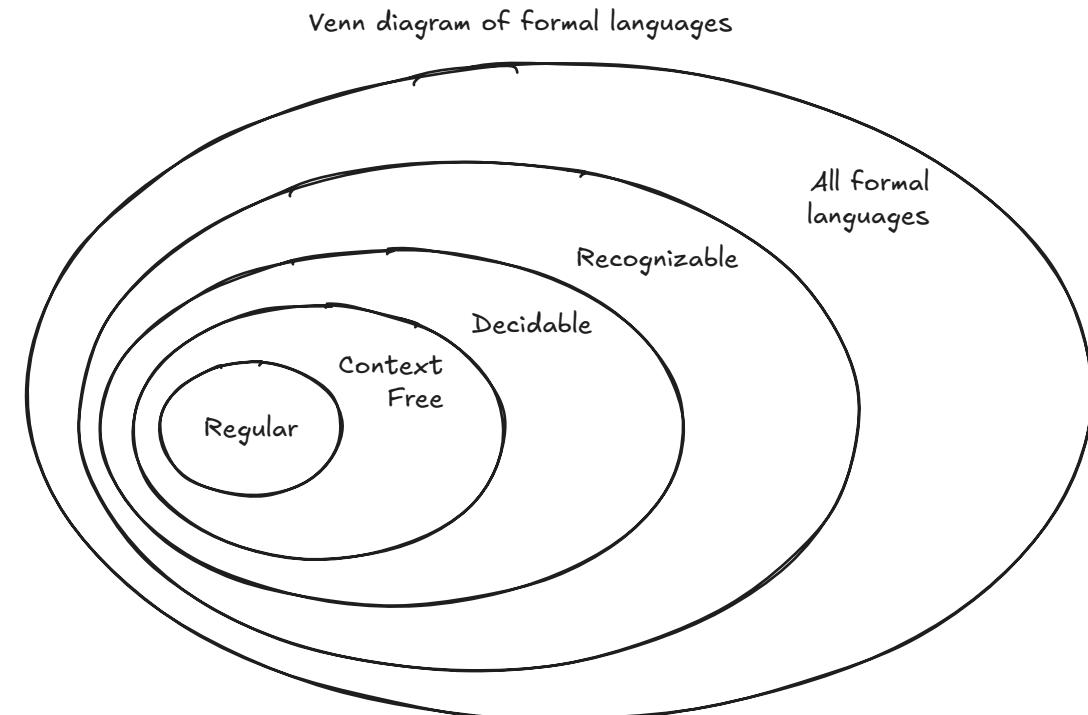
1. DFAs → Recognize regular languages
2. PDAs → Recognize context-free languages
3. TMs → Recognize decidable languages
4. UTMs → Can simulate **any** TM

**Church-Turing Thesis:** UTMs represent the peak of this hierarchy

# The Language Hierarchy Revisited

Complete picture:

- **Regular**  $\subset$  **Context-Free**  $\subset$  **Decidable**  
 $\subset$  **Recognizable**
- TMs can decide all **decidable** languages
- TMs can recognize all **recognizable** languages
- **No machine** can do more



Some languages are unrecognizable  
(we'll see why later)

# Historical Context

## 1930s Parallel Developments:

### Alan Turing (1936)

- Turing Machines
- Mechanical model
- "On Computable Numbers..."

### Alonzo Church (1936)

- Lambda Calculus
- Functional model
- Different approach

**Amazing Result:** Proven equivalent! This convergence strongly supports the thesis.

# Testing the Thesis

**How could the thesis be disproven?**

Find a computational model that:

1. Is clearly "computable" in intuitive sense
2. Cannot be simulated by any TM

**After 90 years:** No such model found

**If you find one:**

- You'll achieve **fame and glory**
- Redefine computer science
- Maybe a homework problem?



# Summary

## The Big Picture:

- **Turing Machines** = Universal computational model
- **Church-Turing Thesis** = No more powerful model exists
- **Turing Completeness** = Equivalent to TM
- **Proven facts about TMs** apply to all computers

**This reduces all of computing to the study of TMs!**

# Final Thought

The Church-Turing Thesis is the foundation that allows computer science to be a science

**It tells us:**

- What **can** be computed (decidable problems)
- What **cannot** be computed (undecidable problems)
- What is **practical** to compute (tractable problems)

**This is why TMs matter beyond being a historical curiosity!**

