The Choice and Agreement Problems of a Random Function

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Abstract

The direct-sum question is a classical question that asks whether performing a task on m independent inputs is m times harder than performing it on a single input. In order to study this question, Beimel et al [BBKW14] introduced the following related problems:

- **The choice problem:** Given m distinct instances, choose one of them and solve it.
- **The agreement problem:** Given m distinct instances, output a solution that is correct for at least one of them.

It is easy to see that these problems are no harder than performing the original task on a single instance, and it is natural to ask *whether it is strictly easier or not*. In particular, proving that the choice problem is not easier is necessary for proving a direct-sum theorem, and is also related to the KRW composition conjecture [KRW95].

In this note, we observe that in a variety of computational models, if f is a random function then with high probability its corresponding choice and agreement problem are not much easier than computing f on a single instance (as long as m is noticeably smaller than 2^n).

1 Introduction

The direct-sum question is a classical question that asks whether performing a task on m independent inputs is m times harder than performing it on a single input. More generally, one may ask whether performing multiple independent tasks in parallel is as hard as performing each of them separately. It will be convenient to use the following notation.

Definition 1. Let $T_1, \ldots, T_m$ be computational tasks. The direct-sum problem $\mathsf{sum}_{T_1,\ldots,T_m}$ is the following task: given m inputs $x_1, \ldots, x_m$ for $T_1, \ldots, T_m$ respectively, output a vector $(y_1, \ldots, y_m)$ such that y_i is a correct solution for T_i on x_i for every i.

The direct-sum question asks whether the complexity of $\mathsf{sum}_{T_1,\ldots,T_m}$ is the sum of the individual complexities of $T_1, \ldots, T_m$. This natural question was studied in a variety of computational models (see, e.g., [Uhl74, Pau76, GF81, Sto86, Bsh89, Bsh98, FKNN95, JKS10, BBCR10]), and the answer turns out to be positive in some models and negative in others. In order to study this question, Beimel et al. [BBKW14] (following Ambainis et al. [ABG+01]) considered the following related problems.

Definition 2 ([BBKW14])**.** Let $T_1, \ldots, T_m$ be computational tasks.

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- The *choice problem* $\mathsf{choose}_{T_1,\ldots,T_m}$ is the following task: Given m inputs $x_1,\ldots,x_m$ for $T_1,\ldots,T_m$ respectively, output a pair (i,y) such that y is a correct solution for T_i on x_i.
- The *agreement problem* $\mathsf{agree}_{T_1,\ldots,T_m}$ is the following task: Given m inputs $x_1,\ldots,x_m$ for $T_1,\ldots,T_m$ respectively, output a value y such that y is a correct solution for T_i on x_i for some $i \in [m]$.

It is easy to see that the agreement task is not harder than the choice task, and that both tasks are not harder than performing the easiest task T_i on a single input. [BBKW14] asked whether we can prove that the choice and agreement problem are *not strictly easier than the easiest task* T_i. In addition to being interesting in its own right, this question has the following motivations:

- Proving that the choice problem $\mathsf{choose}_{T_1,\ldots,T_m}$ is *not* strictly easier than the easiest task T_i is *necessary for proving a direct-sum theorem*: To see it, observe that if the choice problem $\mathsf{choose}_{T_1,\ldots,T_m}$ is strictly easier than the easiest task T_i, then the complexity of $\mathsf{sum}_{T_1,\ldots,T_m}$ is strictly less than the sum of the individual complexities of $T_1,\ldots,T_m$ (since one can solve one of the tasks using the best algorithm for $\mathsf{choose}_{T_1,\ldots,T_m}$, and then solve each of the remaining tasks individually).
- Since the agreement problem $\mathsf{agree}_{T_1,\ldots,T_m}$ is not harder than the choice problem $\mathsf{choose}_{T_1,\ldots,T_m}$, one can prove lower bounds for $\mathsf{choose}_{T_1,\ldots,T_m}$ by proving lower bounds for $\mathsf{agree}_{T_1,\ldots,T_m}$.

In this note, we consider the special case where all the tasks $T_1,\ldots,T_m$ are the same task T. Observe that in this case special case, it is trivial to prove that the choice and agreement problems are not strictly easier than solving T for the following reason: Solving T on an input x reduces to solving $\mathsf{choose}_{T,\ldots,T}$ and $\mathsf{agree}_{T,\ldots,T}$ on m copies of x. In order to avoid this trivial case, we require the m inputs to be distinct, resulting in the following definition.

Definition 3. Let T be a computational task.

- The *m-fold choice problem* choose^m_T is the following task: Given m distinct inputs $x_1,\ldots,x_m$ for T, output a pair (i,y) such that y is a correct solution for T on x_i.
- The *m-fold agreement problem* agree^m_T is the following task: Given m distinct inputs $x_1,\ldots,x_m$ for T, output a value y such that y is a correct solution for T on x_i for some $i \in [m]$.

It is again natural to ask whether choose^m_T and agree^m_T are strictly easier than T on its own. In particular, note that the foregoing motivation still holds: proving that choose^m_T is not easier than T is necessary for proving a direct-sum theorem for T (i.e., that the complexity of $\mathsf{sum}_{T,\ldots,T}$ is m times the complexity of T).

In this note, we observe that in a variety of computational models, the answer to this question is negative when T is the task of computing a *random function* f, with high probability over f. Intuitively, this result holds in every model in which the hardness of a random function can be proved using a counting argument, including Boolean circuits, formulas, decision trees, etc.

In order to make this intuition more precise, consider a computational model that comes with some size measure (e.g., number of wires for circuits, depth for decision trees, etc.). We use the term *computer* to refer to a specific instantiation of this model (e.g. a specific circuit, a specific decision tree, etc.). Let $N(s,n)$ denote the number of distinct Boolean functions over n bits that are computed by a computer of size at most s. Then, the standard counting argument says the

probability that a random function over n bits can be computed by a computer of size at most s is at most

$$\frac{N(s,n)}{2^{2^n}}.$$

We prove the following observation.

Theorem 4. *Fix a computational model that comes with some size measure, and let $N(s,n)$ be defined as above. Let $n, m, s \in \mathbb{N}$, and let $f : \{0,1\}^n \to \{0,1\}$ be a uniformly distributed function. Then, the probability that choose_f^m or agree_f^m can be decided by a computer of size at most s is at most*

$$\frac{N(s, m \cdot n) \cdot \binom{2^n}{\leq 2m-2}}{2^{2^n}}$$

where $\binom{a}{\leq b} \stackrel{\text{def}}{=} \binom{a}{0} + \binom{a}{1} + \binom{a}{2} + \ldots + \binom{a}{b}$ for non-negative integers $a \geq b$.

Observe that the expression $\binom{2^n}{\leq 2m-2}$ in the latter probability is negligible compared to 2^{2^n} unless m is very close to 2^n. Thus, as long as m is not too large, this factor will not affect the probability significantly. On the other hand, the fact that we count the number of computers over $m \cdot n$ variables rather than n variables can affect the probability signficantly, depending on the function $N(s,n)$, and this is the bottleneck in the following application.

The following corollary lists the immediate consequences of Theorem 4 for some important computational models. Essentially, it says that for Boolean circuits, choose_f^m and agree_f^m are as hard as a random function when $m < \varepsilon \cdot 2^n$. For other models (formulas, depth complexity, decision trees), we get a slightly worse lower bound (although we could have gotten the "right" lower bound when $m = \mathrm{poly}(n)$).

Corollary 5. *There exists a universal constant $\varepsilon > 0$ such that the following holds. Let $f : \{0,1\}^n \to \{0,1\}$ be a uniformly distributed function and let $m \leq \varepsilon \cdot 2^n$. Then, each of the following events occurs with probability $1 - o(1)$ (where the $o(1)$ is a decreasing function of n):*

- *The circuit-size complexity of choose_f^m and agree_f^m is $\Omega(\frac{2^n}{n})$.*
- *The formula-size complexity of choose_f^m and agree_f^m is $\Omega(\frac{2^n}{n})$.*
- *The circuit-depth complexity of choose_f^m and agree_f^m is $n - \log n - O(1)$ (for circuits with fan-in 2).*
- *The decision-tree-depth complexity of choose_f^m and agree_f^m is $n - \log n - O(1)$.*

We note that the above result for decision tree complexity also follows from the direct-sum theorem for decision tree complexity due to Jain et al. [JKS10]. On the other hand, for circuit complexity a direct-sum theorem *does not hold for a random function* [Uhl74], and yet Corollary 5 says that the corresponding choice and agreement problems are not easier than a single instance. For formula complexity, it is easy to prove a direct-sum theorem, but curiously in this model this does not imply the result of Corollary 5 for formulas. Finally, we mention that for communication complexity, Chattopadhyay et al. [CDK+17] have recently proved a lower bound on the related "elimination problem" of [ABG+01] for functions based on their discrepancy, and this implies an analog of Corollary 5 for (randomized and deterministic) communication complexity.

Proof of Corollary 5. Let $\varepsilon > 0$ be some sufficiently small constant which will be determined such that the various inequalities in this proof hold. For $0 < p < \frac{1}{2}$, we denote by

$$H(p) = p \cdot \log \frac{1}{p} + (1-p) \cdot \log \frac{1}{1-p}$$

the binary entropy function. We use the following well-known upper bound on the binomial coefficients, which holds for every sufficiently large N, every $0 < p \leq \frac{1}{2}$, and every $K \leq p \cdot N$ (see, e.g., [GRS, Chapter 3, Section 3.3.1]):

$$\binom{N}{\leq K} \leq 2^{H(p) \cdot N}.$$

For circuit-size complexity, it is known that $N(s,n) = (s+n)^{O(s)}$ (see, e.g., [Weg87]). Hence, for $m \leq \varepsilon \cdot 2^n$ and $s \leq \varepsilon \cdot \frac{2^n}{n}$ it holds that

$$N(s, m \cdot n) = \left(\varepsilon \cdot \frac{2^n}{n} + \varepsilon \cdot 2^n \cdot n\right)^{O\left(\varepsilon \cdot \frac{2^n}{n}\right)} = 2^{O(\varepsilon \cdot 2^n)},$$

and therefore

$$\frac{N(s, m \cdot n) \cdot \binom{2^n}{\leq 2m-2}}{2^{2^n}} \leq \frac{2^{O(\varepsilon \cdot 2^n)} \cdot 2^{H(2\varepsilon) \cdot 2^n}}{2^{2^n}} = o(1),$$

where the equality holds for a sufficiently small choice of ε. Hence, for such m and s, with probability at least $1 - o(1)$ the circuit-size complexity of choose_f^m and agree_f^m is at least s.

For formula-size complexity, it is known that $N(s,n) = n^{O(s)}$. Therefore, for $m \leq \varepsilon \cdot 2^n$ and $s \leq \varepsilon \cdot \frac{2^n}{n}$ it holds that

$$N(s, m \cdot n) = (\varepsilon \cdot 2^n \cdot n)^{O\left(\varepsilon \cdot \frac{2^n}{n}\right)} = 2^{O(\varepsilon \cdot 2^n)}.$$

Using the same argument as before, we obtain that for such m and s, with probability at least $1 - o(1)$ the formula-size complexity of choose_f^m and agree_f^m is at least s.

In order to prove a lower bound on the circuit-depth complexity, we recall that if a function has circuit-depth complexity d then it has a formula of size at most 2^d (see, e.g., [Weg87]). Since we know the formula-size complexity of choose_f^m and agree_f^m is at least $\varepsilon \cdot \frac{2^n}{n}$ with probability at least $1 - o(1)$, it follows that the circuit-depth complexity of these problems is $n - \log n - O(1)$ with the same probability.

The argument for decision-tree-depth complexity is similar to the argument for circuit-depth complexity. It is obvious that every decision tree of depth d has at most 2^d leaves. The number of decision trees over n variables with s leaves is at most $n^{O(s)}$ (this can be proved using the same argument that shows this upper bound for formulas, as in [Weg87]). This means that the number of decision trees of depth d over n variables is at most $N(d,n) = n^{O(2^d)}$. From here the argument proceeds as before. ■

The rest of this note is organized as follows: In Section 2, we prove Theorem 4. Then, in Section 3, we discuss a connection of this result to the KRW conjecture [KRW95], which provides an additional motivation for our result.

Remark 6. As noted above, when m is super-polynomial in n, our lower bounds for the three last models do not match the bounds for a random function. It is an interesting question whether our bounds could be improved.

2 Proof of the Theorem 4

In this section we prove Theorem 4. We first observe that it suffices to prove the theorem for the agreement problem agree_f^m, since the choice problem choose_f^m is not easier than agree_f^m. Following [BBKW14], we also observe that when the task T is a Boolean function $f : \{0,1\}^n \to \{0,1\}$, the agreement problem can be rephrased as follows:

- Given $x_1, \ldots, x_m \in \{0,1\}^n$ that satisfy the promise that $f(x_1), \ldots, f(x_m)$ are all equal, decide whether they are equal to 0 or 1.

The reason is that if $f(x_1), \ldots, f(x_m)$ are not all equal, then both 0 and 1 are correct outputs of agree_f^m. This observation is the reason for the name "agreement problem".

Fix a computational model with some associated size measure, and let $N(s,n)$ denote the number of distinct functions that are computed by a computer of size at most s. Let $m, n, s \in \mathbb{N}$. We would like to prove that if $f : \{0,1\}^n \to \{0,1\}$ is a uniformly distributed function, then the probability that its agreement problem agree_f^m is decided by a computer of size at most s is at most

$$\frac{N(s, m \cdot n) \cdot \binom{2^n}{\leq 2m-2}}{2^{2^n}}.$$

To this end, it suffice to prove the following result.

Proposition 7. *Every computer decides the m-fold agreement problem of at most $\binom{2^n}{\leq 2m-2}$ functions from $\{0,1\}^n \to \{0,1\}$.*

The rest of this section is devoted to proving the latter proposition. Let C be a computer, and let $\mathcal{F}$ be the family of functions from $\{0,1\}^n$ to $\{0,1\}$ whose agreement problem is decided by C. We wish to upper bound $|\mathcal{F}|$. The crux of the proof is the following observation.

Claim 8. *Every two functions $f, g \in \mathcal{F}$ differ on at most $2m-2$ inputs.*

Proof. We prove the contrapositive. Suppose that f and g differ on more than $2m-2$ inputs, and let C be a computer. We will prove that the computer C fails to solve either agree_f^m or agree_g^m.

Our assumption implies that there must be at least m inputs $x_1, \ldots x_m$ and some bit $b \in \{0,1\}$ such that $f(x_1) = \cdots = f(x_m) = b$ and $g(x_1) = \cdots = g(x_m) = 1 - b$ — this follows from the pigeonhole principle, by mapping each input x on which f and g differ to the pigeonhole $(f(x), g(x))$. Thus, the output of agree_f^m on $x_1, \ldots, x_m$ is b and the output of agree_g^m on $x_1, \ldots, x_m$ is $1 - b$. Now, suppose we give $x_1, \ldots, x_m$ to the computer C. If C outputs b, then it errs with respect to agree_g^m, and otherwise it errs with respect to agree_f^m. Either way, it fails to solve one of these problems. ■

We turn to upper bound the size of $\mathcal{F}$. We start by fixing an arbitrary function $f \in \mathcal{F}$. Then, in order to choose any function $g \in \mathcal{F}$, we only have to choose on which inputs it disagrees with f. There are at most

$$\binom{2^n}{0} + \binom{2^n}{1} + \binom{2^n}{2} + \ldots + \binom{2^n}{2m-2} = \binom{2^n}{\leq 2m-2}$$

such possibilities, as required.

3 Connection to the KRW composition conjecture

The KRW conjecture. One of the major challenges in the quest for proving circuit lower bounds is to find an explicit function that requires circuits of super-logarithmic depth (here, we consider Boolean circuits with fan-in 2). Karchmer, Raz, and Wigderson [KRW95] proposed to attack this question by considering the composition of Boolean functions: given two functions $f : \{0,1\}^m \to \{0,1\}$, $g : \{0,1\}^n \to \{0,1\}$, their composition $f \diamond g : (\{0,1\}^n)^m \to \{0,1\}$ is defined by

$$(f \diamond g)(x_1, \ldots, x_m) = f(g(x_1), \ldots, g(x_m)).$$

The KRW conjecture says that the depth complexity of $f \diamond g$ is roughly the sum of the depth complexities of f and g, provided that f and g are non-constant functions. [KRW95] showed that if proved, this conjecture will imply the desired super-logarithmic depth lower-bounds. In fact, the conclusion will follow even if the conjecture is proved only for the case where f is a random function, or for the case where g is a random function. We will see that the question of whether the KRW conjecture holds for a random g is related to the complexity of agree_g^m,

Karchmer-Wigderson relations. [KRW95] suggested to study their conjecture using the framework of Karchmer-Wigderson relations: Karchmer and Wigderson [KW90] observed that for every Boolean function f there is a related communication problem KW_f, called the *Karchmer-Wigderson relation of* f, whose (deterministic) communication complexity is exactly equal to the depth complexity of f. Hence, one can prove depth lower-bounds for f by proving communication-complexity lower-bounds for KW_f. In particular, an equivalent formulation of the KRW conjecture says that the communication complexity of $KW_{f \diamond g}$ is roughly equal to the sum of the communication complexities of KW_f and KW_g.

The relation KW_f is defined as follows: Alice gets an input $x \in f^{-1}(0)$, and Bob gets as input $y \in f^{-1}(1)$. Clearly, it holds that $x \neq y$. The goal of Alice and Bob is to find a coordinate i such that $x_i \neq y_i$. Note that there may be more than one possible choice for i, which means that KW_f is a relation rather than a function.

The Karchmer-Wigderson relation of $f \diamond g$. In the relation $KW_{f \diamond g}$, Alice and Bob's inputs are conveniently viewed as $m \times n$ matrices X, Y respectively, such that $g(X) \in f^{-1}(0)$ and $g(Y) \in f^{-1}(1)$, where $g(X) \in \{0,1\}^m$ is obtained by applying g to each row of X and similarly $g(Y)$. Their goal is to find an entry (i,j) such that $X_{i,j} \neq Y_{i,j}$. A naive protocol for Alice and Bob is as follows. Alice computes $a = g(X)$ and Bob computes $b = g(Y)$. In the first stage they solve KW_f on a, b and find an index $i \in [m]$ where $a_i \neq b_i$. Then, in the second stage, they solve KW_g on inputs X_i, Y_i to find j as required. Note that the communication complexity of this protocol is indeed the sum of the communication complexities of KW_f and KW_g, so the KRW conjecture says that this protocol is essentially optimal.

The intuition for why the above protocol should be optimal[1] is the following: It appears that Alice and Bob must solve KW_g on some row in order to find an entry on which X and Y differ, and it seems that the only way to find a row on which they can solve KW_g is to solve KW_f on a and b.

[1] More precisely, close to the optimal protocol, since there are functions for which some savings is possible. One such example is the function T_2^n, the threshold function checking if there are at least 2 ones in an input string of length n. The communication complexity of $T_2^n \diamond T_2^n$ is strictly smaller than twice the communication complexity of T_2^n, but the saving is rather small (an additive $O(\log \log n)$ saving). See [KRW95] for more details.

The choice problem of KW_g. Dinur and Meir [DM16] pointed out one potential weakness in this intuition: when Alice and Bob solve KW_f, they may end up finding *multiple* indices i for which $a_i \neq b_i$. This means that there are now multiple rows on which they can solve KW_g, and they only need to solve KW_g on one of these rows. In other words, Alice and Bob *now face the choice problem of* KW_g. Thus, if we are to prove that the foregoing intuition is correct, it seems that we should prove that the choice problem $\mathsf{choose}^m_{KW_g}$ is not easier than solving KW_g on a single instance.

The connection to our result. We are therefore interested in the communication complexity of $\mathsf{choose}^m_{KW_g}$. Beimel et al. [BBKW14] observed that the communication complexity of the choice problem $\mathsf{choose}^m_{KW_g}$ is exactly equal to the depth complexity of the *agreement* problem agree^m_g (this follows directly from the reasoning of [KW90]). Now, Theorem 4 says that if g is a random function, then agree^m_g is not significantly easier than g. In particular, Corollary 5 implies the following result.

Corollary 9. *There exists a universal constant $\varepsilon > 0$ such that the following holds. Let $g : \{0,1\}^n \to \{0,1\}$ be a uniformly distributed function and let $m \leq \varepsilon \cdot 2^n$. Then, with probability at least $1 - o(1)$, the deterministic communication complexity of $\mathsf{choose}^m_{KW_g}$ is at least $n - O(\log n)$.*

This corollary is interesting, since even if we restrict the KRW conjecture to the case where g is a random function and where $m \leq \varepsilon \cdot 2^n$, the conjecture still implies the desired lower bounds on depth complexity. We therefore hope that Corollary 9 constitutes a small step toward new lower bounds.

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