

# Theory of Computer Science

## D1. Nondeterministic Algorithms, P and NP

Gabriele Röger

University of Basel

April 27, 2026

1 / 49

# Theory of Computer Science

April 27, 2026 — D1. Nondeterministic Algorithms, P and NP

D1.1 Motivation

D1.2 How to Measure Running Time?

D1.3 Decision Problems

D1.4 Nondeterminism

D1.5 P and NP

2 / 49

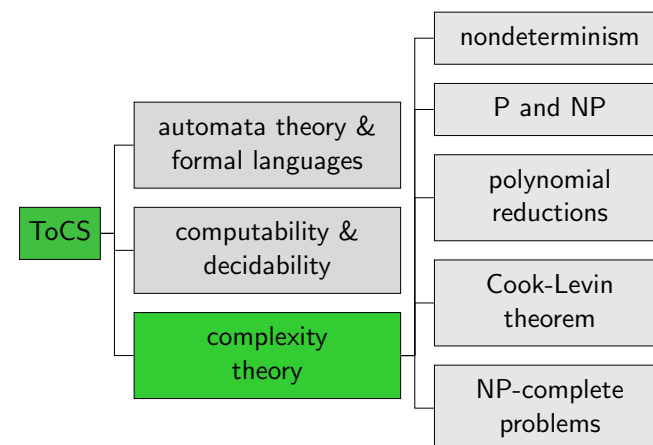
## Overview: Course

contents of this course:

- A. background ✓
  - ▷ mathematical foundations and proof techniques
- B. automata theory and formal languages ✓
  - ▷ What is a computation?
- C. Turing computability ✓
  - ▷ What can be computed at all?
- D. **complexity theory**
  - ▷ What can be computed efficiently?
- E. more computability theory
  - ▷ Other models of computability

3 / 49

## Content of the Course



4 / 49

## D1.1 Motivation

## A Scenario (1)

### Example Scenario

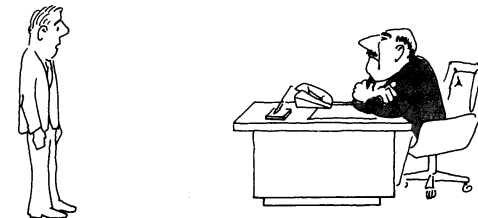
- ▶ You are a programmer at a logistics company.
- ▶ Your boss gives you the task of developing a program to optimize the route of a delivery truck:
  - ▶ The truck begins its route at the company depot.
  - ▶ It has to visit 50 stops.
  - ▶ You know the distances between all relevant locations (stops and depot).
  - ▶ Your program should compute a tour visiting all stops and returning to the depot on a **shortest route**.

## A Scenario (2)

### Example Scenario (ctd.)

- ▶ You work on the problem for weeks, but you do not manage to complete the task.
- ▶ All of your attempted programs
  - ▶ **compute routes that are possibly suboptimal**, or
  - ▶ **do not terminate in reasonable time** (say: within a month).
- ▶ **What do you say to your boss?**

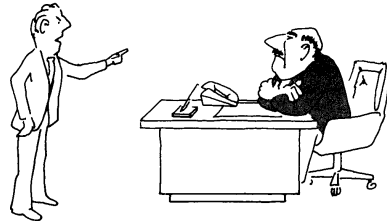
## What You Don't Want to Say



**"I can't find an efficient algorithm,  
I guess I'm just too dumb."**

Source: M. Garey & D. Johnson, Computers and Intractability, Freeman 1979, p. 2

## What You Would Like to Say



"I can't find an efficient algorithm,  
because no such algorithm is possible!"

Source: M. Garey & D. Johnson, Computers and Intractability, Freeman 1979, p. 2

## What Complexity Theory Allows You to Say



"I can't find an efficient algorithm,  
but neither can all these famous people."

Source: M. Garey & D. Johnson, Computers and Intractability, Freeman 1979, p. 3

## Why Complexity Theory?

### Complexity Theory

Complexity theory tells us which problems can be solved **quickly** ("simple problems") and which ones **cannot** ("hard problems").

- ▶ This is useful in practice because simple and hard problems require **different techniques** to solve.
- ▶ If we can show that a problem is hard we do not need to waste our time with the (futile) search for a "simple" algorithm.

## Test Your Intuition! (1)

- ▶ The following slide lists some **graph problems**.
- ▶ The input is always a **directed graph**  $G = \langle V, E \rangle$ .
- ▶ **How difficult** are the problems in your opinion?
- ▶ Sort the problems from **easiest** (= requires least amount of time to solve) to **hardest** (= requires most time to solve)
- ▶ **no justification necessary**, just follow your intuition!
- ▶ **anonymous** and **not graded**

## Test Your Intuition! (2)

- 1 Find a **simple path** (= without cycle) from  $u \in V$  to  $v \in V$  with **minimal length**.
- 2 Find a **simple path** (= without cycle) from  $u \in V$  to  $v \in V$  with **maximal length**.
- 3 Determine whether  $G$  is **strongly connected** (every node is reachable from every other node).
- 4 Find a **cycle** (non-empty path from  $u$  to  $u$  for any  $u \in V$ ; multiple visits of nodes are allowed).
- 5 Find a **cycle** that visits **all** nodes.
- 6 Find a **cycle** that visits a **given node**  $u$ .
- 7 Find a path that **visits all nodes** without repeating a node.
- 8 Find a path that **uses all edges** without repeating an edge.

## D1.2 How to Measure Running Time?

## How to Measure Running Time?

- ▶ **Time complexity** is a way to measure **how much time** it takes to solve a problem.
- ▶ How can we **define** such a measure appropriately?

## Example Statements about Running Time

Example statements about running time:

- ▶ “Running `sort /usr/share/dict/words` on the computer `dakar` takes 0.035 seconds.”
- ▶ “With a 1 MiB input file, `sort` takes at most 1 second on a modern computer.”
- ▶ “Quicksort is faster than sorting by insertion.”
- ▶ “Sorting by insertion is slow.”

↔ Very different statements with different **pros and cons**.

## Precise Statements vs. General Statements

### Example Statement about Running Time

"Running sort /usr/share/dict/words on the computer dakar takes 0.035 seconds."

advantage: very **precise**

disadvantage: not **general**

- ▶ **input-specific:**  
What if we want to sort other files?
- ▶ **machine-specific:**  
What happens on a different computer?
- ▶ **even situation-specific:**  
Will we get the same result tomorrow that we got today?

## General Statements about Running Time

In this course we want to make **general** statements about running time. We accomplish this in three ways:

### 1. General Inputs

Instead of **concrete** inputs, we talk about **general types** of input:

- ▶ **Example:** running time to sort an input of size  $n$  in the **worst case**
- ▶ **Example:** running time to sort an input of size  $n$  in the **average case**

**here:** running time for input size  $n$  in the **worst case**

## General Statements about Running Time

In this course we want to make **general** statements about running time. We accomplish this in three ways:

### 2. Ignoring Details

Instead of **exact formulas** for the running time we specify the **order of magnitude**:

- ▶ **Example:** instead of saying that we need time  $[1.2n \log n] - 4n + 100$ , we say that we need time  $O(n \log n)$ .
- ▶ **Example:** instead of saying that we need time  $O(n \log n)$ ,  $O(n^2)$  or  $O(n^4)$ , we say that we need **polynomial** time.

**here:** What can be computed in **polynomial time**?

## General Statements about Running Time

In this course we want to make **general** statements about running time. We accomplish this in three ways:

### 3. Abstract Cost Measures

Instead of the **running time on a concrete computer** we consider a **more abstract** cost measure:

- ▶ **Example:** count the number of executed **machine code statements**
- ▶ **Example:** count the number of executed **Java byte code statements**
- ▶ **Example:** count the number of **element comparisons** of a sorting algorithms

**here:** count the computation steps of a **Turing machine** (**polynomially equivalent** to other measures)

## D1.3 Decision Problems

## Decision Problems

- ▶ As before, we simplify our investigation by restricting our attention to **decision problems**.
- ▶ More complex computational problems can be solved with multiple queries for an appropriately defined decision problem (“playing 20 questions”).
- ▶ Formally, decision problems are **languages** (as before), but we use an informal “given”/“question” notation where possible.

### Example: Decision vs. General Problem (1)

#### Definition (Hamilton Cycle)

Let  $G = \langle V, E \rangle$  be a (directed or undirected) graph.

A **Hamilton cycle** of  $G$  is a sequence of vertices in  $V$ ,  $\pi = \langle v_0, \dots, v_n \rangle$ , with the following properties:

- ▶  $\pi$  is a **path**: there is an edge from  $v_i$  to  $v_{i+1}$  for all  $0 \leq i < n$
- ▶  $\pi$  is a **cycle**:  $v_0 = v_n$
- ▶  $\pi$  is **simple**:  $v_i \neq v_j$  for all  $i \neq j$  with  $i, j < n$
- ▶  $\pi$  is **Hamiltonian**: all nodes of  $V$  are included in  $\pi$

### Example: Decision vs. General Problem (2)

#### Example (Hamilton Cycles in Directed Graphs)

**$\mathcal{P}$** : general problem DIRHAMILTONCYCLEGEN

- ▶ **Input**: directed graph  $G = \langle V, E \rangle$
- ▶ **Output**: a Hamilton cycle of  $G$  or a message that none exists

**$\mathcal{D}$** : decision problem DIRHAMILTONCYCLE

- ▶ **Given**: directed graph  $G = \langle V, E \rangle$
- ▶ **Question**: Does  $G$  contain a Hamilton cycle?

These problems are **polynomially equivalent**:  
from a polynomial algorithm for one of the problems  
one can construct a polynomial algorithm for the other problem.  
(Without proof.)

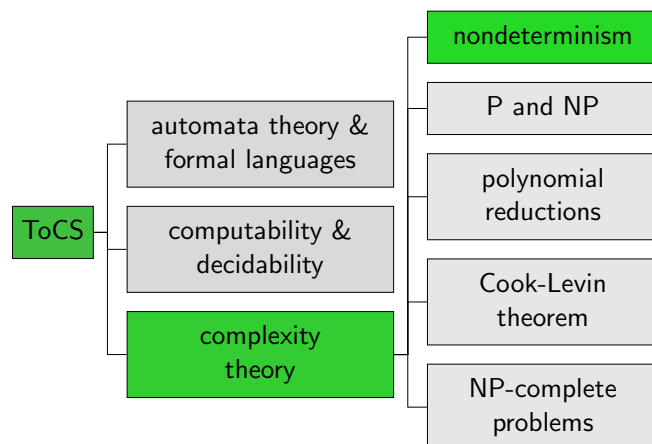
## Algorithms for Decision Problems

### Algorithms for decision problems:

- ▶ Where possible, we specify algorithms for decision problems in **pseudo-code**.
- ▶ Since they are only yes/no questions, we do not have to return a general result.
- ▶ Instead we use the statements
  - ▶ **ACCEPT** to **accept** the given input (“yes” answer) and
  - ▶ **REJECT** to **reject** it (“no” answer).
- ▶ Where we must be more formal, we use **Turing machines** and the notion of accepting from chapter B11.

## D1.4 Nondeterminism

## Content of the Course



## Nondeterminism

- ▶ To develop complexity theory, we need the algorithmic concept of **nondeterminism**.
- ▶ already known for **Turing machines** ( $\rightsquigarrow$  chapter B11):
  - ▶ An NTM can have **more than one possible successor configuration** for a given configuration.
  - ▶ Input  $x$  is accepted if there is **at least one possible computation** (configuration sequence) that leads to the accept state.
- ▶ Here we analogously introduce nondeterminism for pseudo-code.

## Nondeterministic Algorithms

nondeterministic algorithms:

- ▶ All constructs of deterministic algorithms are also allowed in nondeterministic algorithms: **IF**, **WHILE**, etc.
- ▶ Additionally, there is a **nondeterministic assignment**:  
**GUESS**  $x_i \in \{0, 1\}$   
 where  $x_i$  is a program variable.

## Nondeterministic Algorithms: Acceptance

- ▶ Meaning of **GUESS**  $x_i \in \{0, 1\}$ :  
 $x_i$  is assigned **either** the value **0** **or** the value **1**.
- ▶ This implies that the behavior of the program on a given input is no longer uniquely defined: there are multiple possible execution paths.
- ▶ The program accepts a given input if **at least one execution path** leads to an **ACCEPT** statement.
- ▶ Otherwise, the input is rejected.

**Note:** **asymmetry** between accepting and rejecting!  
 (cf. Turing-recognizability)

## More Complex GUESS Statements

- ▶ We will also guess more than one bit at a time:  
**GUESS**  $x \in \{1, 2, \dots, n\}$   
 or more generally  
**GUESS**  $x \in S$   
 for a finite set  $S$ .
- ▶ These are abbreviations and can be split into  $\lceil \log_2 n \rceil$   
 (or  $\lceil \log_2 |S| \rceil$ ) "atomic" **GUESS** statements.

## Example: Nondeterministic Algorithms (1)

```

Example (DIRHAMILTONCYCLE)
input: directed graph  $G = \langle V, E \rangle$ 
start := an arbitrary node from  $V$ 
current := start
remaining :=  $V \setminus \{start\}$ 
WHILE remaining  $\neq \emptyset$ :
    GUESS next  $\in$  remaining
    IF  $\langle current, next \rangle \notin E$ :
        REJECT
    remaining := remaining  $\setminus \{next\}$ 
    current := next
IF  $\langle current, start \rangle \in E$ :
    ACCEPT
ELSE:
    REJECT
  
```

## Example: Nondeterministic Algorithms (2)

- ▶ With appropriate data structures, this algorithm solves the problem in  $O(n \log n)$  program steps, where  $n = |V| + |E|$  is the size of the input.
- ▶ How many steps would a **deterministic** algorithm need?

## Guess and Check

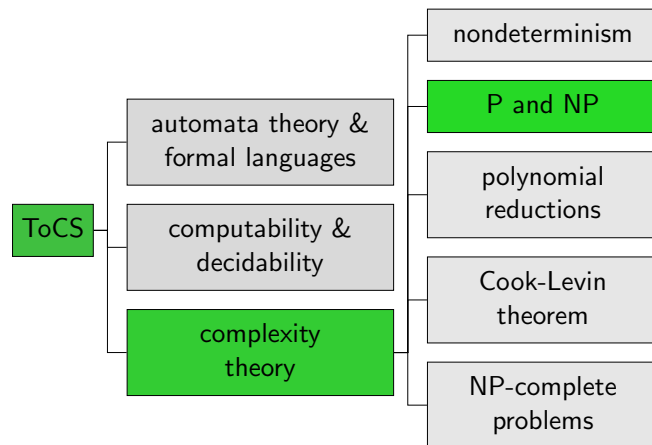
- ▶ The DIRHAMILTONCYCLE example illustrates a general design principle for nondeterministic algorithms:  
**guess and check**
- ▶ In general, nondeterministic algorithms can solve a problem by first guessing a “solution” and then verifying that it is indeed a solution. (In the example, these two steps are interleaved.)
- ▶ If solutions to a problem can be **efficiently verified**, then the problem can also be **efficiently solved** if nondeterminism may be used.

## The Power of Nondeterminism

- ▶ Nondeterministic algorithms are very powerful because they can “guess” the “correct” computation step.
- ▶ Or, interpreted differently: they go through many possible computations “in parallel”, and it suffices if **one** of them is successful.
- ▶ Can they solve problems efficiently (in polynomial time) which deterministic algorithms **cannot** solve efficiently?
- ▶ **This is the big question!**

## D1.5 P and NP

## Content of the Course



## Impact of Nondeterminism?

- ▶ We earlier established that deterministic and nondeterministic Turing machines recognize the same class of languages.  
→ For this aspect, nondeterminism did not make a difference.
- ▶ Now we consider what decision problems can be solved in polynomial time.
- ▶ Does it make a difference whether we allow nondeterminism?

This is the famous P vs. NP question!

## Running Time of a Deterministic Turing Machine

### Definition (Running Time of a DTM)

Let  $M$  be a DTM that halts on all inputs. The **running time** or **time complexity** of  $M$  is the function  $f : \mathbb{N} \rightarrow \mathbb{N}$ , where  $f(n)$  is the maximum number of steps that  $M$  uses on any input of length  $n$ .

We say that

- ▶  $M$  runs in time  $f$  and that
- ▶  $M$  is an  $f$  time Turing machine.

## Big-O

### Definition (Big-O)

Let  $f$  and  $g$  be functions  $f, g : \mathbb{N} \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^+$ .

We say that  $f \in O(g)$  if positive integers  $c$  and  $n_0$  exist such that for every integer  $n \geq n_0$

$$f(n) \leq cg(n).$$

## Complexity Class P

### Definition (Time Complexity Class TIME)

Let  $t : \mathbb{N} \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^+$  be a function.

Define the **time complexity class**  $\text{TIME}(t(n))$  to be the collection of all languages that are decidable by an  $O(t)$  time Turing machine.

### Definition (P)

**P** is the class of languages that are **decidable in polynomial time by a deterministic single-tape Turing machine**. In other words,

$$P = \bigcup_k \text{TIME}(n^k).$$

## Running Time of a Nondeterministic Turing Machine

### Definition (Running Time of a NTM)

Let  $M$  be a NTM that is a decider, i. e. all its computation branches halt on all inputs.

The **running time** or **time complexity** of  $M$  is the function  $f : \mathbb{N} \rightarrow \mathbb{N}$ , where  $f(n)$  is the maximum number of steps that  $M$  uses on **any branch of its computation** on any input of length  $n$ .

## Complexity Class NP

### Definition (Time Complexity Class NTIME)

Let  $t : \mathbb{N} \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^+$  be a function.

Define the time complexity class  $\text{NTIME}(t(n))$  to be the collection of all languages that are decidable by an  $O(t)$  time nondeterministic Turing machine.

### Definition (NP)

**NP** is the class of languages that are decidable in polynomial time by a **nondeterministic** single-tape Turing machine. In other words,

$$\text{NP} = \bigcup_k \text{NTIME}(n^k).$$

## P and NP: Remarks

- ▶ Sets of languages like P and NP that are defined in terms of computation time of TMs (or other computation models) are called **complexity classes**.
- ▶ We know that  $P \subseteq NP$ . (Why?)
- ▶ Whether the converse is also true is an open question: this is the famous **P-NP problem**.

## Example: DIRHAMILTONCYCLE $\in$ NP

### Example (DIRHAMILTONCYCLE $\in$ NP)

The nondeterministic algorithm of the previous section solves the problem and can be implemented on an NTM in polynomial time.

- ▶ Is DIRHAMILTONCYCLE  $\in$  P also true?
- ▶ The answer is unknown.
- ▶ So far, only exponential deterministic algorithms for the problem are known.

## Simulation of NTMs with DTMs

- ▶ Unlike DTMs, NTMs are not a **realistic** computation model: they cannot be directly implemented on computers.
- ▶ But NTMs can be **simulated** by systematically trying all computation paths, e. g., with a **breadth-first search**.

More specifically:

- ▶ Let  $M$  be an NTM that decides language  $L$  in time  $f$ , where  $f(n) \geq n$  for all  $n \in \mathbb{N}_0$ .
- ▶ Then we can specify a DTM  $M'$  that decides  $L$  in time  $f'$ , where  $f'(n) = 2^{O(f(n))}$ .
- ▶ **without proof**  
(cf. "Introduction to the Theory of Computation" by Michael Sipser (3rd edition), Theorem 7.11)

## Summary (1)

- ▶ **Complexity theory** deals with the question which problems can be solved **efficiently** and which ones cannot.
- ▶ **here**: focus on what can be computed **in polynomial time**
- ▶ To formalize this, we use Turing machines, but other formalisms are **polynomially equivalent**.
- ▶ We consider **decision problems**, but the results often directly transfer to general computational problems.

## Summary (2)

important concept: **nondeterminism**

- ▶ **Nondeterministic algorithms** can "guess", i. e., perform multiple computations "at the same time".
- ▶ An input receives a "yes" answer if **at least one computation path** accepts it.
- ▶ in NTMs: with **nondeterministic transitions** ( $\delta(q, a)$  contains multiple elements)
- ▶ in pseudo-code: with **GUESS statements**

## Summary (3)

- ▶ **P**: languages decidable by **DTMs** in polynomial time
- ▶ **NP**: languages decidable by **NTMs** in polynomial time
- ▶  $P \subseteq NP$  but it is an **open question whether  $P = NP$** .