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# Sensitivity, Block Sensitivity, and Certificate Complexity of Unate Functions and Read-Once Functions

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**Abstract.** Sensitivity, block sensitivity, and certificate complexity are complexity measures for Boolean functions. In this paper, we prove that these three complexity measures are equal to each other if a Boolean function is a unate function or a read-once function. We also prove  $\sqrt{n}$  tight lower bounds for the three complexity measures of read-once functions. As an application of our results, the decision tree complexity of unate functions and read-once functions is upper bounded by the square of the sensitivity of the function.

## 1 Introduction

Sensitivity, block sensitivity, and certificate complexity of a Boolean function  $f$ , denoted by  $s(f)$ ,  $bs(f)$  and  $C(f)$ , respectively, are complexity measures for Boolean functions, and related to other complexity measures including the time complexity of CREW PRAMs and decision tree complexity. A long-standing open problem for these measures is whether or not block sensitivity can be polynomially upper bounded by sensitivity:

$$bs(f) \leq \text{poly}(s(f))?$$

Although many efforts have been devoted to the open problem as we see later, it is still open. On the other hand, if a function  $f$  is a monotone function, it is known that  $s(f) = bs(f) = C(f)$  [8]. Our main motivation of this paper is to seek other Boolean function classes such that  $s(f) = bs(f) = C(f)$ .

In this paper, we prove that  $s(f) = bs(f) = C(f)$  for unate functions, which are generalized functions of monotone functions, and for read-once functions over the Boolean operators  $\wedge$ ,  $\vee$  and  $\oplus$ . We also prove that  $\sqrt{n} \leq s(f)$  ( $= bs(f) = C(f)$ ) for read-once functions which have  $n$  input variables, and the lower bound is tight.

## Related works.

Rubinfeld [9] exhibited a Boolean function  $f$  which has  $bs(f) = \frac{1}{2}s(f)^2$ . The result has been improved [10, 2], although the best known gap is still quadratic. Kenyon and Kutin [7] have proved that  $bs(f) \leq \frac{e}{\sqrt{2\pi}} e^{s(f)} \sqrt{s(f)}$ . The upper bound has been improved to  $bs(f) \leq 2^{s(f)-1} s(f)$  by Ambainis et al. [1]. Survey papers [4, 5] include more background for this topic. On the average version of the sensitivity, Impagliazzo and Kabanets [6] have given the tight bound on the average sensitivity of read-once de Morgan formulas.

## 2 Preliminaries

### 2.1 Sensitivity, block sensitivity, and certificate complexity

Let  $f : \{0, 1\}^n \rightarrow \{0, 1\}$  be a Boolean function. For an input  $x = (x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n)$  of  $f$  and  $S \subseteq [n] = \{1, 2, \dots, n\}$ , let  $x^S$  denotes the input obtained from  $x$  by flipping all the bits  $x_i$  such that  $i \in S$ . We abbreviate  $x^{\{i\}}$  to  $x^i$ . Sensitivity, block sensitivity, and certificate complexity are defined as follows, respectively.

**Definition 1.** *The sensitivity of  $f$  on  $x$ , denoted by  $s(f, x)$ , is the number of indices  $i$  such that  $f(x) \neq f(x^i)$ . The sensitivity of  $f$ , denoted by  $s(f)$ , is  $\max_x s(f, x)$ . For  $z \in \{0, 1\}$ , the  $z$ -sensitivity of  $f$ , denoted by  $s_z(f)$ , is  $\max_{x \in f^{-1}(z)} s(f, x)$ .*

**Definition 2.** *The block sensitivity of  $f$  on  $x$ , denoted by  $bs(f, x)$ , is the maximum number of disjoint subsets  $B_1, B_2, \dots, B_b$  of  $[n]$  such that  $f(x) \neq f(x^{B_i})$  for all  $i$ . The block sensitivity of  $f$ , denoted by  $bs(f)$ , is  $\max_x bs(f, x)$ . For  $z \in \{0, 1\}$ , the  $z$ -block sensitivity of  $f$ , denoted by  $bs_z(f)$ , is  $\max_{x \in f^{-1}(z)} bs(f, x)$ .*

**Definition 3.** *A certificate of  $f$  on  $x$  is a subset  $S \subseteq [n]$  such that  $f(y) = f(x)$  whenever  $y_i = x_i$  for all  $i \in S$ . The size of a certificate is  $|S|$ .*

*The certificate complexity of  $f$  on  $x$ , denoted by  $C(f, x)$ , is the size of a smallest certificate of  $f$  on  $x$ . The certificate complexity of  $f$ , denoted by  $C(f)$ , is  $\max_x C(f, x)$ . For  $z \in \{0, 1\}$ , the  $z$ -certificate complexity of  $f$ , denoted by  $C_z(f)$ , is  $\max_{x \in f^{-1}(z)} C(f, x)$ .*

We can easily show the following relation between  $s(f)$ ,  $bs(f)$  and  $C(f)$ .

**Proposition 1.** *For any Boolean function  $f$ ,*

$$s(f) \leq bs(f) \leq C(f).$$

*Proof.* By the definitions of  $s(f)$  and  $bs(f)$ ,  $s(f) \leq bs(f)$ . For all  $x$ , since a certificate on  $x$  have to contain indices of at least one variable of each sensitive block,  $bs(f, x) \leq C(f, x)$ . Thus,  $bs(f) \leq C(f)$ .  $\square$

Let  $x_i, y_i \in \{0, 1\}$  for  $1 \leq i \leq n$ . A Boolean function is called *monotone* if  $f(x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n) \leq f(y_1, y_2, \dots, y_n)$  whenever  $x_i \leq y_i$  for all  $1 \leq i \leq n$ . Nisan [8] showed the following proposition for monotone functions.

**Proposition 2 ([8]).** *If  $f$  is a monotone function, then*

$$s(f) = bs(f) = C(f).$$

## 2.2 Unate functions and read-once functions

A Boolean function  $f : \{0, 1\}^n \rightarrow \{0, 1\}$  is *positive unate* in  $x_i$ ,  $1 \leq i \leq n$ , if

$$\begin{aligned} & f(x_1, \dots, x_{i-1}, 0, x_{i+1}, \dots, x_n) \\ & \leq f(x_1, \dots, x_{i-1}, 1, x_{i+1}, \dots, x_n) \end{aligned}$$

for all  $x_j$ ,  $j \neq i$ , and is *negative unate* in  $x_i$  if

$$\begin{aligned} & f(x_1, \dots, x_{i-1}, 0, x_{i+1}, \dots, x_n) \\ & \geq f(x_1, \dots, x_{i-1}, 1, x_{i+1}, \dots, x_n) \end{aligned}$$

for all  $x_j$ ,  $j \neq i$ . A function  $f$  is called *unate* if  $f$  is positive or negative unate in all  $x_i$  for  $1 \leq i \leq n$ . Monotone functions are a special case of unate functions such that a function is positive unate in all input variables.

A *Boolean formula* is a rooted binary tree in which each internal node is labeled by the Boolean operators  $\wedge$ ,  $\vee$ , or  $\oplus$  and each leaf is labeled by a Boolean variable or its negation. A Boolean formula computes a Boolean function in a natural way. A Boolean formula is called *read-once* if every variable appears exactly once. A *read-once* Boolean function is a Boolean function that can be represented by a read-once Boolean formula. Notice that we define read-once Boolean functions based on Boolean formulas which have the Boolean operator  $\oplus$ .

## 3 Unate functions

In this section, we prove the following theorem.

**Theorem 1.** *If  $f$  is a unate function, then*

$$s(f) = bs(f) = C(f).$$

$s(f)$ ,  $bs(f)$  and  $C(f)$  of a Boolean function  $f$  are not changed even if some input variables of  $f$  are flipped. More precisely, the following lemma holds.

**Lemma 1.** *Let  $f(x)$  be a Boolean function, and let  $S \subseteq [n]$ . For any  $S$ , if  $g(y)$  is defined as  $f(y^S)$ , then,*

$$s(f) = s(g), \quad bs(f) = bs(g), \quad C(f) = C(g).$$

*Proof.* It is obvious by the definitions of  $s(f)$ ,  $bs(f)$  and  $C(f)$ . □

*Proof (of Theorem 1).* Let  $S = \{i | f \text{ is negative unate in } x_i, 1 \leq i \leq n\}$ . We define  $g(y)$  as  $f(y^S)$ , then  $g(y)$  is monotone. By Lemma 1,

$$s(f) = s(g), \quad bs(f) = bs(g), \quad C(f) = C(g).$$

By Proposition 2,

$$s(g) = bs(g) = C(g).$$

Hence,

$$s(f) = bs(f) = C(f).$$

□

## 4 Read-once functions

In this section, we prove that  $s(f) = bs(f) = C(f)$  for any read-once Boolean function (Theorem 2), and prove that  $\sqrt{n} \leq s(f)$  (Corollary 1) and the  $\sqrt{n}$  lower bound is tight.

### 4.1 Lemma

Consider a read-once Boolean formula  $F$  representing a read-once Boolean function. In  $F$ , two subformulas which are connected to a same node have no common input variables, since every variable appears exactly once in a read-once Boolean formula. This fact enables us to analyze the sensitivity and certificate complexity of functions computed at each node in  $F$ .

**Lemma 2.** *Let  $f_1$  and  $f_2$  be Boolean functions such that  $f_1$  and  $f_2$  have no common input variables, and  $f_1$  and  $f_2$  are not constant functions.*

*If  $f = f_1 \wedge f_2$ , then*

$$\begin{aligned} s_0(f) &= \max\{s_0(f_1), s_0(f_2)\}, \\ C_0(f) &= \max\{C_0(f_1), C_0(f_2)\}, \\ s_1(f) &= s_1(f_1) + s_1(f_2), \\ C_1(f) &= C_1(f_1) + C_1(f_2). \end{aligned}$$

*If  $f = f_1 \vee f_2$ , then*

$$\begin{aligned} s_0(f) &= s_0(f_1) + s_0(f_2), \\ C_0(f) &= C_0(f_1) + C_0(f_2), \\ s_1(f) &= \max\{s_1(f_1), s_1(f_2)\}, \\ C_1(f) &= \max\{C_1(f_1), C_1(f_2)\}. \end{aligned}$$

*If  $f = f_1 \oplus f_2$ , then*

$$\begin{aligned} s_0(f) &= \max\{s_0(f_1) + s_0(f_2), s_1(f_1) + s_1(f_2)\}, \\ C_0(f) &= \max\{C_0(f_1) + C_0(f_2), C_1(f_1) + C_1(f_2)\}, \\ s_1(f) &= \max\{s_0(f_1) + s_1(f_2), s_1(f_1) + s_0(f_2)\}, \\ C_1(f) &= \max\{C_0(f_1) + C_1(f_2), C_1(f_1) + C_0(f_2)\}. \end{aligned}$$

*Proof.* Assume that  $f = f_1 \wedge f_2$ . We consider that  $s_0(f) = \max\{s_0(f_1), s_0(f_2)\}$ . If  $s_0(f_1) \geq s_0(f_2)$ , we can assign input variables of  $f_2$  so that  $f_2 = 1$ , and independently we can assign input variables of  $f_1$ . Thus, we can confirm that  $s_0(f) = \max\{s_0(f_1), s_0(f_2)\}$ .

Similarly, we can confirm all equations by the definitions of sensitivity and certificate complexity.  $\square$

## 4.2 Equality

Lemma 2 immediately gives the following lemma.

**Lemma 3.** *Let  $f_1$  and  $f_2$  be Boolean functions such that  $f_1$  and  $f_2$  have no common input variables, and  $f_1$  and  $f_2$  are not constant functions. If*

$$f = f_1 \wedge f_2, \quad f = f_1 \vee f_2, \quad \text{or} \quad f = f_1 \oplus f_2,$$

*and*

$$s_0(f_1) = C_0(f_1), \quad s_1(f_1) = C_1(f_1),$$

$$s_0(f_2) = C_0(f_2), \quad s_1(f_2) = C_1(f_2),$$

then

$$s_0(f) = C_0(f), \quad s_1(f) = C_1(f).$$

Now, we prove the following theorem.

**Theorem 2.** *If  $f$  is a read-once Boolean function, then*

$$s(f) = bs(f) = C(f).$$

*Proof.* Since  $s(f) \leq bs(f) \leq C(f)$  for any Boolean function  $f$  by Proposition 1, we only need to prove  $s(f) = C(f)$ .

Let  $n$  be the number of input variables of  $f$ . We use induction on  $n$  and prove  $s_0(f) = C_0(f)$  and  $s_1(f) = C_1(f)$ .

*Base:*  $n = 1$ . Then,  $f = x_1$  or  $f = \neg x_1$ , and  $s_0(f) = s_1(f) = 1$  and  $C_0(f) = C_1(f) = 1$ . Thus,  $s_0(f) = C_0(f)$  and  $s_1(f) = C_1(f)$ .

*Induction Step:* Suppose  $s_0(f') = C_0(f')$  and  $s_1(f') = C_1(f')$  for every Boolean function  $f'$  such that the number of input variables of  $f'$  is less than  $n$ .

Let  $F$  be a read-once Boolean formula which computes  $f$ . Recall that we define Boolean formulas as rooted binary trees. Let  $f_1$  and  $f_2$  are Boolean functions computed by subformulas which are connected to the root node of  $F$ . Then,  $f = f_1 \wedge f_2$ ,  $f = f_1 \vee f_2$ , or  $f = f_1 \oplus f_2$ , and the number of input variables of  $f_1$  and  $f_2$  is less than  $n$ , respectively. By the supposition,  $s_0(f_1) = C_0(f_1)$ ,  $s_1(f_1) = C_1(f_1)$ ,  $s_0(f_2) = C_0(f_2)$  and  $s_1(f_2) = C_1(f_2)$ . Thus, by Lemma 3,  $s_0(f) = C_0(f)$  and  $s_1(f) = C_1(f)$ , which mean  $s(f) = C(f)$ .  $\square$

### 4.3 Lower bound

Lemma 2 also gives a lower bound for the sensitivity of read-once functions.

**Theorem 3.** *If  $f$  is a read-once Boolean function of  $n$  input variables, then*

$$n \leq s_0(f)s_1(f).$$

*Proof.* We use induction on  $n$ .

*Base:*  $n = 1$ . Then,  $f = x_1$  or  $f = \neg x_1$ , and  $s_0(f)s_1(f) = 1$ . Thus,  $n \leq s_0(f)s_1(f)$ .



*Induction Step:* Suppose  $n' \leq s_0(f')s_1(f')$  for every Boolean function  $f'$  such that the number of input variables of  $f'$ , denoted by  $n'$ , is less than  $n$ .

Let  $F$  be a read-once Boolean formula which computes  $f$ . Recall that we define Boolean formulas as rooted binary trees. Let  $f_1$  and  $f_2$  be Boolean functions computed by subformulas which are connected to the root node of  $F$ , and let  $n_1$  and  $n_2$  be the number of input variables of  $f_1$  and  $f_2$ , respectively. Then,  $f = f_1 \wedge f_2$ ,  $f = f_1 \vee f_2$ , or  $f = f_1 \oplus f_2$ , and  $n_1 < n$ ,  $n_2 < n$ , and  $n_1 + n_2 = n$ . By the supposition,  $n_1 \leq s_0(f_1)s_1(f_1)$  and  $n_2 \leq s_0(f_2)s_1(f_2)$ .

If  $f = f_1 \wedge f_2$ , then, by Lemma 2,

$$\begin{aligned} s_0(f)s_1(f) &= \max\{s_0(f_1), s_0(f_2)\}s_1(f_1) + \max\{s_0(f_1), s_0(f_2)\}s_1(f_2) \\ &\geq s_0(f_1)s_1(f_1) + s_0(f_2)s_1(f_2) \\ &\geq n_1 + n_2 = n. \end{aligned}$$

Similarly, we can prove that  $n \leq s_0(f)s_1(f)$  also for the cases that  $f = f_1 \vee f_2$  and  $f = f_1 \oplus f_2$ .  $\square$

Recall that  $s(f) = \max\{s_0(f), s_1(f)\}$ .

**Corollary 1.** *If  $f$  is a read-once Boolean function of  $n$  input variables, then*

$$\sqrt{n} \leq s(f).$$

The lower bounds in Theorem 3 and Corollary 1 are tight, since we can easily confirm that the following read-once Boolean function  $f$  has  $s_0(f) = n/m$  and  $s_1(f) = m$ . (We assume that  $m$  is a positive integer such that  $n/m$  becomes an integer.)

$$f = \bigvee_{i=1}^{n/m} \bigwedge_{j=1}^m x_{m(i-1)+j}.$$

## 5 Concluding Remarks

In this paper, we investigated the sensitivity, block sensitivity, and certificate complexity of unate functions and read-once functions. As the conclusion of this paper, we show an application of our results to decision tree complexity.

Let  $D(f)$  denote the decision tree complexity of  $f$ , i.e., the depth of an optimal decision tree that computes  $f$ . Beals et al. [3] prove

**Theorem 4 ([3]).** *For any Boolean function  $f$ ,*

$$D(f) \leq C_1(f)bs(f).$$

Recall that we proved that  $s(f) = bs(f) = C(f)$  for any unate function  $f$  (Theorem 1) and for any read-once function  $f$  (Theorem 2), and  $C_1(f) \leq C(f)$  by the definition. Thus, we obtain the following corollary.

**Corollary 2.** *If  $f$  is a unate function or a read-once function, then*

$$D(f) \leq s(f)^2.$$

Although Corollary 2 is meaningful for unate functions, we have to be attentive for read-once functions, since we can easily see that  $D(f) = n$  for every read-once function. Thus, Corollary 2 is an alternating proof of Corollary 1 rather than an upper bound of  $D(f)$ . Notice that the alternating proof depends on Theorem 4 and cannot prove Theorem 3.

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