New heuristic order based on tree-decomposition for solving CSPs

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Abstract. The Constraint Satisfaction Problem (CSP) represents a pivotal area of study within artificial intelligence, offering a broad spectrum of applications from scheduling to resource allocation. Despite significant advancements in the development of algorithms and heuristics, the efficient resolution of large and intricate CSP instances continues to pose a considerable challenge to the research community. Traditional heuristics often fail to efficiently navigate the solution space, struggling to converge on optimal solutions within a reasonable timeframe. This paper introduces a novel heuristic, rooted in tree-decomposition techniques, specifically designed to enhance the efficiency of CSP solvers. Our approach leverages an innovative variable and value ordering strategy, which systematically reduces the search space and the computational demands. We conducted extensive experiments using a set of benchmark CSP instances to validate the efficacy of the proposed heuristic. The results demonstrate a marked improvement in solving efficiency, particularly evidenced in challenging instances from the *modified-renault* benchmark, such as *renault-mod-4_ext* and *renault-mod-32_ext*. These findings underscore the potential of our heuristic to significantly advance the state-of-the-art in CSP solving methodologies.

1 Introduction

The Constraint Satisfaction Problem (CSP) has emerged as a cornerstone of research within the fields of artificial intelligence and operations research. CSPs are mathematical questions defined by a set of variables, where each variable has a domain of possible values and a collection of constraints specifying allowable combinations of these values. Such problems are pervasive in various practical applications, ranging from scheduling, resource allocation, and logistics to complex configuration and decision-making tasks.

Over the years, the CSP community has developed an array of algorithms and heuristics to tackle these problems. These include backtracking algorithms,

which are enhanced by various strategies like forward checking and conflict-driven backjumping, and arc consistency algorithms that aim to reduce the domain sizes by eliminating inconsistent values. Alongside these, heuristic methods that influence the variable and value selection process—such as Minimum Remaining Values (MRV), Degree Heuristic, and domain-specific heuristics—have been employed to improve the efficiency of backtracking algorithms.

Recently, the use of tree-decomposition techniques has come to the forefront as an innovative approach to simplifying the structure of CSP instances. By breaking down the problem into smaller, more manageable components, these methods have shown potential in making complex CSPs more tractable.

Despite significant advancements, efficiently solving large and complex CSP instances remains a daunting challenge. Traditional heuristics, while useful, often fail to effectively guide the search toward an optimal or near-optimal solution within a reasonable timeframe, particularly in densely constrained or large-scale problems.

This paper seeks to bridge this gap by introducing a novel heuristic based on tree-decomposition techniques aimed specifically at enhancing the efficiency of CSP solvers. By providing a more informed variable ordering, the proposed heuristic seeks to reduce the search space and computational time significantly. This approach is particularly beneficial for complex instances where traditional methods falter.

The main contributions of this paper are outlined as follows:

- Introduction of a new heuristic order based on tree-decomposition, designed to improve the performance of CSP solvers.
- Extensive experimental validation of the proposed heuristic, featuring comparisons with traditional heuristics across a range of benchmark CSP instances.

The organization of the rest of the paper is as follows: Section 2 provides a detailed background on the nature of CSPs and reviews existing heuristics. Section 3 describes the new heuristic in detail, elucidating the theoretical and practical aspects of its implementation. Section 4 discusses the experimental setup and presents the results, demonstrating the efficacy of the heuristic. Finally, Section 5 concludes the paper with a summary of findings and potential avenues for future research.

2 Background

2.1 Constraint Satisfaction Problems

The concept of a Constraint Satisfaction Problem (CSP) was introduced by U. Montanari [1]. A CSP instance [1] is represented as a triple $(\mathcal{V}, \mathcal{D}, \mathcal{C})$, where $\mathcal{V} = \{v_1, \ldots, v_n\}$ is a set of n variables, $\mathcal{D} = \{D_1, \ldots, D_n\}$ is a set of finite domains, and $\mathcal{C}$ is a finite set of constraints. Each variable v_i takes its value from its corresponding domain D_i. Each constraint $c_i \in \mathcal{C}$ is defined as a pair

$(S(c_i), R[c_i])$, where $S(c_i)$ is the scope of the constraint and $R(c_i)$ is a relation specifying the set of allowed tuples for the variables in c_i. The arity of c_i is determined by the size of its scope.

The most common method for solving a CSP instance is the Backtracking (BT) algorithm [9]. This algorithm performs chronological backtracking to the previous variable when a conflict is detected. Several improvements over BT have been proposed, including non-chronological backtracking algorithms such as BackJumping (BJ) [10], Graph-based BackJumping [11], and Conflict-Directed BackJumping (CD-BJ) [12]. Additionally, Jegou et al. have introduced a method that involves dynamically decomposing CSPs using separators with bounded size, which optimizes computational efficiency and improves the practical feasibility of solving large-scale problems by limiting space complexity [17].

Other resolution algorithms employ filtering techniques like Forward Checking (FC) [13] and Maintaining Arc Consistency (MAC) [14]. FC enhances BT by applying forward filtering and checking consistency in the neighborhood of the last instantiated variable. MAC maintains arc consistency throughout the search, limiting the consistency checks to the neighborhood of the last instantiated variable. Various types of consistency algorithms exist; some focus on domain filtering [2, 3], while others employ higher-order relational filtering [4–8]. These consistency techniques are integrated into resolution algorithms like MAC3, which is based on Arc Consistency 3 (AC3), and MAC2001, which is based on AC2001.

Example 1. Let be the following CSP:
$V = \{v_0, \ldots, v_3\}$, $\mathcal{D} = \{D_0 \ldots, D_3\}$ where,
$D_0 = D_1 = D_2 = D_3 = \{1, \ldots, 7\}$.
$\mathcal{C} = \{c_0\}$ where, $c_0 = \{(v_0, v_1, v_2, v_3), R(c_0)\}$ and
$R(c_0) = \{(1\ 2\ 1\ 1), (1\ 3\ 1\ 1), (1\ 3\ 2\ 1), (1\ 4\ 2\ 1), (1\ 5\ 2\ 1), (2\ 3\ 1\ 1), (2\ 4\ 2\ 1), (3\ 3\ 1\ 1), (4\ 3\ 1\ 1), (5\ 4\ 2\ 1), (7\ 4\ 2\ 2)\}$.

In the following subsection, we present some recent algorithms for maintaining arc consistency property.

2.2 Arc Consistency

Definition 1 (arc consistency).
A CSP $(\mathcal{V}, \mathcal{D}, \mathcal{C})$ is arc consistency if for any pair of variables (v_i, v_j) of $\mathcal{V}$, and for any value a_i belonging to $D(v_i)$, there exists a value v_j belonging to $D(v_j)$ such that the partial assignment $\{(v_i, a_i), (v_j, a_j)\}$ satisfies all the binary constraints of C.

Example 2. Let be the following CSP: $(\mathcal{V}, \mathcal{D}, \mathcal{C})$, $\mathcal{V} = \{v_1, v_2\}$,$\mathcal{D} = \{D(v_1), D(v_2)\}$ where $D(v_1) = D(v_2) = \{0, 1, 2, 3\}$ and $v_1 + v_2 > 3$ as a constraint.
The CSP is not arc consistent because when $v_1 = 0$ there are no values in $D(v_2)$

which satisfy the unique constraint, so this value can be removed from the two domains. The same operation is done for the other values until it becomes arc-consistent.

The main algorithms presented in the state of the art for this property are presented here.

Definition 2 (GAC). *A value $a_i \in D(v_i)$ is GAC iff for every constraint c s.t. $v_i \in S(c)$, there exists a valid tuple $\tau \in R(c)$ that includes the assignment of a_i to v_i. In this case, τ is called a support of a_i.A variable is GAC iff all its values are GAC. A problem is GAC iff there is no empty domain in D and all the variables in $\mathcal{V}$ are GAC.*

Example 3. Consider the Constraint Satisfaction Problem (CSP) denoted as $P = (\mathcal{V}, \mathcal{D}, \mathcal{C})$, where:

- $\mathcal{V} = \{x, y, z, u, v, w\}$ represents the set of variables.
- $\mathcal{D} = \{D(x), D(y), D(z), D(u), D(v), D(w)\}$ specifies the domains of these variables, with $D(x) = D(y) = D(z) = \{0, 1\}$ indicating that the variables x, y, and z can each take values 0 or 1, and $D(u) = D(v) = D(w) = \{0\}$ meaning that the variables u, v, and w are each constrained to take only the value 0.
- $\mathcal{C} = \{c_0, c_1, c_2\}$ defines the set of constraints with scopes given by $S(c_0) = \{x, y, z, u\}$, $S(c_1) = \{x, y, v\}$, and $S(c_2) = \{x, y, z, w\}$, respectively.

Table 1. Not GAC CSP Instances

c_0

x	y	z	u
0	0	0	0
0	1	0	0
0	1	1	0
0	1	1	1

c_1

x	y	v
0	0	0
0	1	0
1	1	0

c_2

x	y	z	w
0	0	0	0
1	0	0	0
1	0	1	0

The CSP is not arc consistent because when $y = 1$ there is no tuple in Table 1 associated with c_2 which satisfies the constraint then the value is not GAC, we must therefore remove the value 1 from the two domains and do the same operation for other values until it becomes arc consistent.

2.3 Tree Decomposition

Definition 3 (Tree Decomposition [18]). *Let $G = (X, E)$ be a graph. A tree decomposition of G is a pair (C, T), where $T = (I, F)$ is a tree and $C = \{C_i : i \in I\}$ is a family of subsets of X. Each C_i is a node of T and satisfies the following conditions:*

1. $\bigcup_{i \in I} C_i = X$,
2. *For every edge* $\{x, y\} \in E$, *there exists* $i \in I$ *such that* $\{x, y\} \subseteq C_i$,
3. *For all* $i, j, k \in I$, *if* k *is in a path from* i *to* j *in* T, *then* $C_i \cap C_j \subseteq C_k$.

The width of a tree decomposition is $\max(|C_i| - 1)$, and the tree width of a graph is the minimum width over all its tree decompositions. Various methods have been proposed, including the min-fill heuristic defined as follows.

Definition 4 (Min-fill Heuristic). *Min-fill orders the vertices from 1 to n by selecting the next vertex that minimizes the number of edges added when completing the sub-graph induced by its unnumbered neighbors.*

2.4 Heuristic Ordering

Numerous heuristics have been proposed in the literature to facilitate the search for solutions in Constraint Satisfaction Problems (CSPs). These heuristics aim to improve the efficiency of CSP solvers by selecting variables and values that are more likely to lead to a quick solution. Some of the most prevalent CSP heuristics are as follows:

Definition 5 (Minimum Remaining Values (MRV)[20]). *To minimize the search tree and avoid potential failures, this strategy selects the variable with the fewest remaining values in its domain. This allows for the early identification and elimination of variables that are likely to cause problems.*

Example 4. Consider the CSP *hanoi_3*[3] P=($\mathcal{V}$,$\mathcal{D}$,$\mathcal{C}$) where $\mathcal{V}$=$\{x, y, z, u, v, w\}$, $\mathcal{D}$=$\{D(x), D(y), D(z), D(u), D(v), D(w)\}$ where, $D(x) = D_0 = [1..2]$, $D(y) = D(z) = D(u) = D(v) = D_1 = [0..26]$ and $D(w) = D_2 = [24..25]$.
$\mathcal{C}$=$\{c_0, c_1, c_2, c_3, c_4\}$ where, $S(c_0) = \{x, y\}$, $S(c_1) = \{y, z\}$, $S(c_2) = \{z, u\}$, $S(c_3) = \{u, v\}$ and $S(c_4) = \{v, w\}$.

To resolve the CSP, we need to determine the number of possible unassigned values for each variable as follows:

- x: D_0 domain with 2 values (1 and 2) not yet assigned.
- y: D_1 domain with 27 values (0 to 26) not yet assigned.
- z: D_1 domain with 27 values (0 to 26) not yet assigned.
- u: D_1 domain with 27 values (0 to 26) not yet assigned.
- v: D_1 domain with 27 values (0 to 26) not yet assigned.
- w: D_2 domain with 2 values (24 and 25) not yet assigned.

[3] Datasets available at https://www.cril.univ-artois.fr/ lecoutre/benchmarks

According to the MRV heuristic, we will choose the variable that has the fewest possible values not yet instantiated. In this case, the variable x has the fewest possible values so we take x as the next variable to be processed. Now we can start the solving of CSP by trying to find a value for x that satisfies all the constraints associated with it. Once x has been instantiated, we'll repeat the same process, choosing the next variable with the fewest possible values not yet instantiated, until all the variables have been assigned in the case of a satisfiable CSP.

Definition 6 (Degree Heuristic). *The selection process consists of choosing the variable that has the most constraints on the other variables not yet instantiated.This is done to reduce the number of branches in the search tree. Essentially, the variable that is involved in the greatest number of constraints with the unassigned variables is chosen.*

Example 5. Let's continue with the precedent example, for each unassigned variable, count the number of constraints in which it appears.

- x: Involved in 1 constraint (c_0).
- y: Involved in 2 constraints (c_0, c_1).
- z: Involved in 2 constraints (c_1, c_2).
- u: Involved in 2 constraints (c_2, c_3).
- v: Involved in 2 constraint (c_3, c_4).
- w: Involved in 1 constraint (c_4).

The next step is to select the variable with the highest degree. In this case, the variable y has the highest degree (2 constraints).To achieve this, we will select a value for y. As a result, we can choose a value using another heuristic. To make things easier, we'll instantiate the value 0 for y. The next unassigned variable with the highest degree is z, which is involved in two constraints (c_1 and c_2), You can select any value from its range for z, like 0. Until the CSP is solved, repeat this procedure for the remaining variables.

Definition 7 (Maxdeg). *The degree of each variable in the CSP is determined by counting the number of constraints it appears in. The higher the number of constraints a variable appears in, the greater its degree.*

Example 6. Let's continue with example 4 : According to the degree calculated in example 5, we will order variables from the highest to lowest degree and we obtain the following order y, z, u, v, x, w.

Definition 8 (Mindeg). *This heuristic selects the variables with the lowest degree, i.e. the fewest connections.*

Example 7. Continuing with the same previous example, the last part will be different because we're going to order in reverse order (from small to large) and we'll get the following order: x, w, y, z, u, v.

3 Advanced Heuristic Approaches for Constraint Satisfaction Problems: MAC and Tree-Decomposition Methods

3.1 Introduction to Heuristic Methods

In solving Constraint Satisfaction Problems (CSPs), the arrangement and selection of variables critically influence the effectiveness of the solving process. Our methodology incorporates advanced pre-processing steps to optimize variable ordering before the main solving phase. This includes employing the Maintaining Arc Consistency (MAC) algorithm and a heuristic based on Tree Decomposition, specifically Ord_tree_Maxdeg.

Pre-processing Steps The pre-processing involves two key procedures aimed at structuring and reducing the problem complexity:

- **Tree Decomposition:** We apply tree decomposition using Cyril Terioux's TD tool [19], paired with the Min-fill heuristic. This step decomposes the CSP into a tree structure where each node represents a subset of variables that are closely interconnected. This structural simplification is visualized in Figure 1.
- **Variable Ordering:** Variables within each node of the tree are ordered using the maxdeg heuristic, which prioritizes variables based on the number of constraints they participate in. The ordering process starts at the parent node n_0 and proceeds in a depth-first manner. As we navigate from parent to child nodes, variables are stored in the recommended sequence, ensuring no variable is duplicated across nodes.

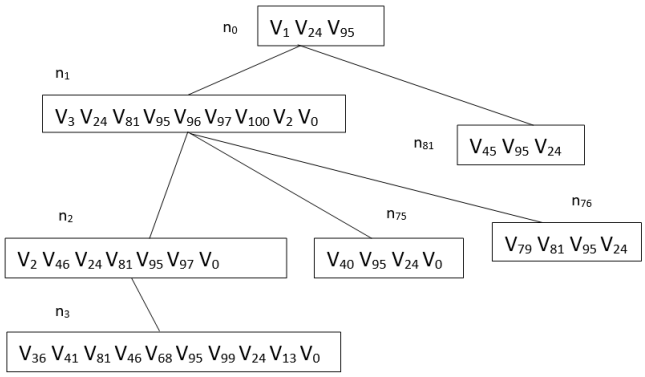

Fig. 1. Example of tree decomposition in a CSP, illustrating structured variable ordering and separation into manageable sub-problems.

3.2 Maintaining Arc Consistency (MAC)

The Maintaining Arc Consistency (MAC) algorithm is pivotal in ensuring that arc consistency is preserved throughout the process of solving Constraint Satisfaction Problems (CSPs). This algorithm begins by initializing the domains of each variable based on their associated constraints, then iteratively eliminates values that lead to inconsistencies. To manage and systematically update constraints and variables, MAC employs a queue mechanism, continually refining the variable domains until all are minimized, thereby optimizing the search space for the solver.

4 Experiments

We conducted a series of experiments to validate the effectiveness of our proposed heuristic methods against established techniques. These tests were performed on a computing system equipped with an Intel Core i7 2.5 GHz processor and 8 GB of RAM. Our experimental setup compares the performance of our heuristic method, which incorporates the MAC algorithm and Maxdeg heuristic, against a Generalized Arc Consistency (GAC) algorithm under various complex scenarios.

4.1 Benchmark Characteristics

The characteristics of the benchmarks used in our experiments are summarized in the following table. These benchmarks help to illustrate the complexity and variety of the problem instances our methods are designed to address:

- nbr_{ins}: Number of instances, representing the count of separate problem cases evaluated.
- V: Maximum number of variables in any instance, indicating the scale of the CSPs.
- $|D|$: Maximum size of domains, reflecting the range of potential values each variable can assume.
- $|nbr_R|$: Total number of relations, providing insight into the interconnectedness of variables.
- $|R_{\max}|$: Maximum size of any single constraint relation, highlighting the complexity of constraint interactions.
- arity: Maximum arity of the constraints, which describes the maximum number of variables involved in a single constraint.
- nbr_C: Total number of constraints, indicating the level of restriction imposed on the variable values.

Table 2. Characteristics of the Renault Benchmark

Benchmark	nbr_{ins}	V	$\lvert D\rvert$	$\lvert nbr_R\rvert$	$\lvert R_{\max}\rvert$	arity	nbr_C
Modified Renault	50	111	42	142	48721	10	159

4.2 Execution Time Comparison

Table 3. Comparison of Execution Times for CSP Solving Methods

Benchmark	**Instance**	**Order_Maxdeg (s)**	**Ord_tree_Maxdeg (s)**	**Observation**
Modified Renault	mod-0	**0.53**	7.41	Consistent
	mod-4	22.14	**0.95**	Consistent
	mod-32	1.61	**0.31**	Consistent
	mod-41	195.30	**0.84**	Consistent
	mod-42	452	**109.86**	Inconsistent
	mod-44	**0.52**	0.57	Consistent
	mod-46	**0.57**	0.93	Consistent
	mod-47	404.19	**82.51**	Inconsistent
	mod-48	0.79	**0.35**	Consistent
	mod-49	70.83	**1.37**	Consistent

This dataset offers a rigorous assessment of two advanced heuristic methods designed for solving Constraint Satisfaction Problems (CSPs) employing the Modified Renault benchmark. The methods evaluated, `Order_Maxdeg` and `Ord_tree_Maxdeg`, are showcased to illustrate their performance variability not only across different instances of the problem but also relative to each other. For instance, `Order_Maxdeg` demonstrates excellent performance on simpler instances such as `mod-0` and `mod-44`, with minimal execution times of 0.53 and 0.52 seconds, respectively. In contrast, this method shows marked performance degradation under more complex problem scenarios, notably in `mod-42` and `mod-47`, where execution times sharply increase to 452 and 404.19 seconds.

The comparative analysis reveals that while `Order_Maxdeg` occasionally achieves the fastest execution times, it suffers from significant performance variability. This variability makes it a less reliable choice for consistently solving all types of CSPs, especially those with higher complexity. Conversely, `Ord_tree_Maxdeg` exhibits more stable performance across a broader spectrum of instances, albeit not without its own challenges in certain demanding problems.

These findings suggest that neither heuristic method is universally superior, highlighting the inherent need for adaptive or hybrid solving strategies. Such strategies could potentially harness the strengths of different algorithms to optimize performance based on the unique characteristics and requirements of each CSP instance. Further research might explore the integration of these methods with other optimization algorithms or machine learning techniques to dynamically select or adjust heuristics based on real-time performance data. This adap-

tive approach could lead to significant improvements in solving efficiency and robustness, particularly for complex CSPs that defy traditional methods.

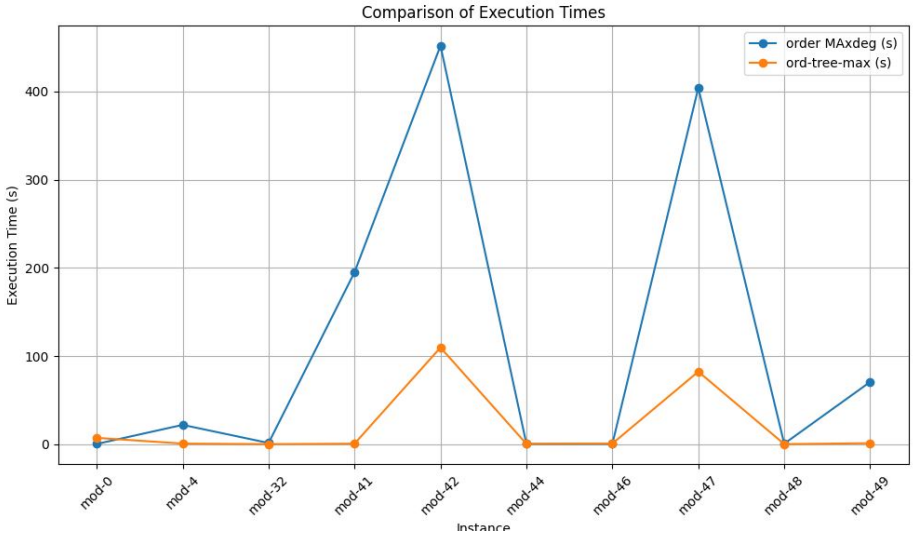

Fig. 2. Graph illustrating the execution times for different CSP solving methods, emphasizing the variability and performance consistency between heuristics.

4.3 Contributions

Our research makes several key contributions to the field of CSP solving:

- **Theoretical Advancements:** We have developed a comprehensive theoretical framework that delineates the benefits of applying tree-decomposition techniques to CSPs. This framework not only supports our heuristic's design but also contributes to a deeper understanding of its operational mechanics.
- **Empirical Validation:** Through rigorous empirical evaluations using a variety of benchmark CSP instances, we have demonstrated the superior performance of our heuristic compared to traditional methods. Our results show marked improvements in solving efficiency, which substantiates the practical value of our approach.

4.4 Future Work

Despite the promising outcomes, our research opens several avenues for future investigation:

- **Hybrid Algorithm Development:** There is potential for enhancing the heuristic by integrating it with other optimization algorithms. This hybrid

approach could leverage the strengths of multiple solving strategies to further improve efficiency and robustness, particularly in more complex CSP scenarios.
- **Real-World Applications:** The practical applicability of our heuristic in real-world contexts, such as scheduling, logistics, and resource allocation, deserves extensive exploration. Future studies could focus on tailoring the heuristic to meet specific industry needs, potentially offering solutions to longstanding operational challenges.

4.5 Conclusion

The development of our heuristic order based on tree decomposition represents a significant advancement in the field of CSP solving. By alleviating computational burdens and streamlining the search process, our heuristic paves the way for addressing more complex and larger-scale CSPs than previously feasible. As we continue to refine this method, we anticipate it will open new frontiers in both theoretical research and practical applications, potentially transforming how complex problems are approached and solved in various domains.

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