On the generalization of learning algorithms that do not converge

Anonymous Author(s)
Affiliation
Address
email

Abstract

Common generalization analyses of deep learning assume that the training converges to a fixed point. But, in practice, the weights of deep neural networks optimized with stochastic gradient descent often oscillate indefinitely. To reduce this discrepancy between theory and practice, we analyze the generalization of algorithms when the weights only converge in distribution. Our main contribution is to propose a notion of *statistical algorithmic stability* (SAS) that extends classical algorithmic stability to non-convergent algorithms and to study its connection to generalization. This ergodic-theoretic approach to learning theory leads to new insights when compared to the traditional optimization and learning theory perspectives. We prove that the stability of the time-asymptotic behavior of a learning algorithm can be used to predict its generalization and empirically demonstrate how loss dynamics can provide clues of overfitting. Our findings provide evidence that networks that "train stably generalize better" even when the training continues indefinitely and the weights do not converge.

1 Introduction

It is common practice that when the training loss of a neural networks converges close to some value, the learning algorithm—typically some variant of Stochastic Gradient Descent (SGD)—is terminated. Perhaps surprisingly, recent works indicate that the network function at termination time is typically not a fixed point of the learning algorithm: if run longer, the gradient norm does not vanish and the learning algorithm outputs functions with significantly different parameters [Cohen et al., 2021, Zhang et al., 2021b, Lobacheva et al., 2021]. This observation stands in contrast to common generalization analyses taking into account the learning algorithm that assume convergence to a fixed point. It also raises the question of when (and why) non-convergent learning algorithms should be expected to generalize.

Standard approaches for obtaining generalization bounds find ways to bound the complexity measure of the function class expressible by a neural network in a data-independent [Vapnik, 1999, Bartlett et al., 2017, Neyshabur et al., 2018, Golowich et al., 2018, Bartlett et al., 2019, Arora et al., 2018] or data-dependent manner [von Luxburg and Bousquet, 2004, Xu and Mannor, 2012, Sokolić et al., 2017]. The list of works is too long to exhaustively cover here. Nevertheless, even with recent technical improvements, these approaches do not explicitly account for the relationship between generalization and the dynamics of the learning algorithm.

A second approach to generalization analysis yields algorithm-dependent bounds by connecting the generalization performance of the trained network to the stability of the training to data perturbations [Bousquet and Elisseeff, 2002, Feldman and Vondrak, 2018, Kuzborskij and Lampert, 2018, Bousquet et al., 2020, Zhang et al., 2021c, Rakhlin, 2006]. However, these bounds do not exploit dynamical information about the learning algorithm and only apply to algorithms that converge to a fixed point.

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One line of inquiry into algorithm-dependent generalization has hence focused on settings where the algorithm provably converges to a fixed point, such as two-layer overparameterized networks, deep linear networks, certain matrix factorization etc. [Frei et al., 2019, Allen-Zhu et al., 2019, Soudry et al., 2018, Arora et al., 2019, Gunasekar et al., 2018, Haeffele and Vidal, 2015]. In a more general setting, Hardt et al. [2016] prove algorithmic stability-based generalization bounds that worsen with increasing training time whereas Loukas et al. [2021] connect stable training dynamics near convergence under Dropout with good generalization. For algorithms that do not converge (close) to a fixed point, the above analyses result in vacuous bounds.

Contributions. We start with the supposition that robustness of the learning algorithm's *fixed points* to small changes in the training set is *not* the mechanism underlying the good generalization properties of deep networks. This is because, as is commonly known and many recent works indirectly remark upon [Cohen et al., 2021, Ahn et al., 2022, Zhang et al., 2021b, Garipov et al., 2018], training can be *linearly unstable*: even if assuming the presence of isolated local minima that the learning algorithm convergences to, the weights encountered in training are not robust to small perturbations. Small perturbations can accumulate over time leading to completely different orbits in weight space. Yet, despite unstable dynamics, the generalization properties of two completely different fixed points (e.g., obtained from two different random initializations or due to a different order of SGD updates) are typically comparable.

Our first contribution entails proposing a generalization of stability that applies to non-converging algorithms. To achieve this, we depart from the typical optimization perspective of analyzing the generalization properties of minima [Keskar et al., 2016, Ge et al., 2015, Sagun et al., 2016]. Instead, we study the generalization performance of the learning algorithm *on average* (see section 2.2). Adopting a statistical viewpoint, in Section 3 we define a new notion of *statistical algorithmic stability* that measures the stability of this average performance to perturbations of the training data, as opposed to stability of individual orbits in the weight space. Section 3 then proves upper bounds for the generalization error based on our new notion of statistical stability.

We then move on to consider how statistical stability connects to the behavior of the loss function. To this end, in Sections 2.2 and 4 we provide conditions such that the spectral gap of a Markov operator associated with the dynamics of the loss function is predictive of statistical algorithmic stability and hence of generalization. Empirically, we estimate this spectral gap based on the rate of convergence of ergodic averages of the loss function. Our numerical results demonstrate that our estimate correlates with generalization for image classification under corruption.

1.1 Related work

Our work builds on previous analyses of the stability of learning algorithms that converge [Bousquet and Elisseeff, 2002, Feldman and Vondrak, 2018, Kuzborskij and Lampert, 2018, Bousquet et al., 2020, Zhang et al., 2021c]. Below, we also briefly discuss connections (beyond the literature on stability) with previous analyses on the dynamics of learning algorithms.

Convergence and generalization of SGD. Exponential convergence rates to global minima are known for SGD in the smooth and convex setting, with decaying learning rates and small constant learning rates (e.g., [Moulines and Bach, 2011, Needell et al., 2014]). In the training of deep neural networks, which is the focus of this paper, the loss function is non-convex and is typically not well-approximated locally by convex functions [Ma et al., 2018]. However, in the overparameterized regime, a Polyak-Lojasiewicz-type inequality is automatically satisfied when the loss is smooth and convex, and can be shown to hold in the non-convex setting as well [Liu et al., 2022, Ma et al., 2018], allowing convergence to a global minimum. In certain non-convex problems, convergence to local minima and even global minima is proved, assuming a strict saddle property [Ge et al., 2015] or local convexity [Kleinberg et al., 2018]. Raginsky et al. [2017] show a favorable convergence for a slightly different version of SGD by approximating the dynamics with a suitable continuous time Langevin diffusion. A number of previous works [Safran and Shamir, 2016, Freeman and Bruna, 2016, Li and Yuan, 2017, Nguyen et al., 2018] have also provided arguments that SGD converges to a solution that generalizes given suitable initialization and significant overparameterization. Another line of work considers the mean field limit of SGD dynamics to show generalization [Mei et al., 2019, Gabrié et al., 2018, Chen et al., 2020]. The ergodic theoretic perspective we adopt here deviates from the optimization perspectives but relates to the mean field perspective in that we implicitly consider (see section 4) the evolution of probability distributions on weight space.

Flat minima. In the generalization literature, flat minima correspond to large connected regions with low empirical error in weight space. Flat minima have been argued to connect with the complexity of the resulting hypothesis and, hence, can imply good generalization Hochreiter and Schmidhuber [1997]. It has also been shown that SGD converges more frequently to flat minima when the batch size is small or the learning rate and the number of iterations are suitably adjusted [Keskar et al., 2016, Hoffer et al., 2017, Jastrzębski et al., 2017, Smith and Le, 2018, Zhang et al., 2018]. Some works consider the flat/sharp dichotomy an oversimplification [Dinh et al., 2017, Sagun et al., 2017, He et al., 2019] using e.g. reparameterization arguments Sagun et al. [2017]. The eigenvalues of the hessian of the loss affect the local linear stability of optimization orbits. However, given that we adopt the time-asymptotic/statistical picture, we do not explicitly make assumptions on local stability (flatness/sharpness) or the global topology of the loss landscape [Montanari and Zhong, 2020, Venturi et al., 2019].

SGD as a Bayesian sampler. The idea of looking at distributions of learners permeates PAC-Bayesian analyses of generalization [McAllester, 1999, Dziugaite and Roy, 2017, Zhou et al., 2019, Pitas, 2020]. In contrast to Bayesian posteriors of the parameters, we study parameter distributions generated by the learning algorithms. Previous empirical work has suggested that SGD operates almost like a Bayesian sampler [Mingard et al., 2021] but the connection remains not fully understood.

2 Local descent algorithms as dynamical systems: a statistical viewpoint

This section lays out the basic definitions and assumptions of our work. We begin in Section 2.1 by introducing the learning problem and discussing the learning algorithms from a dynamical systems perspective. Section 2.2 then puts forth the notions of statistical convergence that give rise to our main results.

2.1 Learning as a dynamical system

We consider the supervised learning setup: a learner is given a training set $S = \{z_1, \dots, z_n\}$ consisting of n pairs $z_i \equiv (x_i, y_i)$ of inputs $x_i \in \mathbb{R}^d$ and their corresponding labels $y_i \in \mathcal{Y}$, drawn i.i.d. from a distribution $\mathcal{D}$. A class of parametric models or *hypotheses* $h : \mathbb{R}^d \times \mathbb{W} \to \mathbb{R}$ on a parameter space $\mathbb{W}$ gives possible input-to-output relationships, $h(w, \cdot) : \mathbb{R}^d \to \mathcal{Y}$. The learner is given a risk or *loss* function $\ell : (\mathbb{R}^d \times \mathcal{Y}) \times \mathbb{W} \to \mathbb{R}^+$ that describes the error of a given hypothesis. A common choice of the loss function is the mean-squared, hinge, or cross-entropy loss. The learner attempts to minimize the population risk $R_S(h(\cdot, w)) = \mathbb{E}_{z\sim\mathcal{D}}\ell(z, w)$, by minimizing the empirical risk

$$\hat{R}_S(h(\cdot, w)) = L_S(w) = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{z_i \in S} \ell(z_i, w). \tag{1}$$

This minimization is achieved using a local descent algorithm given by iterative updates $\phi_S : \mathbb{W} \to \mathbb{W}$ of the form

$$\phi_S(w_t) := w_{t+1} = w_t - \eta_t \, \hat{\nabla} L_S(w_t), \tag{2}$$

where η_t is the learning rate or step size at time t.

In the gradient descent (GD) algorithm, $\hat{\nabla} L_S(w) = \nabla L_S(w)$ is the gradient w.r.t. w, the iterates of ϕ_S represent a deterministic dynamical system. The critical points (including saddle points, local and global minima) of L_S are fixed points of ϕ_S (i.e., points w such that $\phi_S w = w$). For stochastic gradient descent (SGD), $\hat{\nabla} L_S(w)$ is a random variable given by the sample mean of gradients $\nabla \ell(\cdot, w)$ over a batch of samples in S. In this case, ϕ_S is a random dynamical system and critical points of L_S are not necessarily fixed points of ϕ_S.

To unify the definition of ϕ_S for both GD and SGD, we introduce the random variable Ξ that indicates the choice of batch. Suppose the batch size is fixed: $m < n$ for SGD and $m = n$ for GD. Denote by $[n]$ the set $\{1, 2, \cdots, n\}$ and let Ξ_t be a collection of m elements from $[n]$ chosen uniformly at random. Then, we may write ϕ_S as

$$w_{t+1} = \phi_S(w_t) = w_t - \eta_t \hat{\nabla} L_S(w_t | \Xi_t) = w_t - \frac{\eta_t}{m} \sum_{i \in \Xi_t} \nabla \ell(z_i, w_t), \tag{3}$$

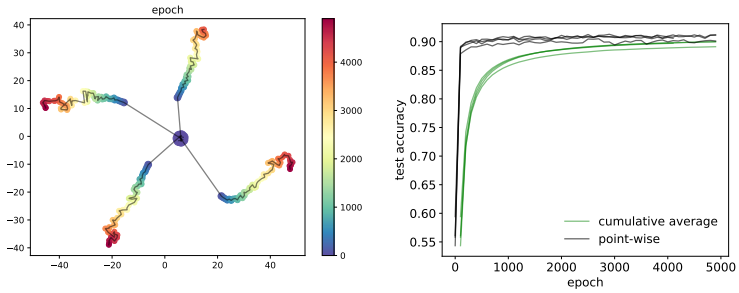

Figure 1: Although the training of neural networks depends on the initialization and does not necessarily converge in the weight space, certain functionals of the learned hypothesis can converge in distribution independently of initial conditions. Left: The orbits of the 2nd layer weights of four different VGG16 models trained on a CIFAR10 dataset using SGD with step size 0.01. We embed the orbits in the plane by performing PCA onto 40 dimensions followed by t-SNE. Colors indicate epoch. Right: Corresponding test accuracy and cumulative average values as a function of epoch.

with Ξ_t being the set $[n]$ in all iterations t for GD.

In our investigation, we opt for simplicity and consider a fixed learning rate $\eta_t = \eta$. More generally, our analysis can be extended to learning rates that eventually converge to η. A rapidly vanishing learning rate can obscure the learning dynamics by enforcing convergence to arbitrary points irrespective of the points' loss. In contrast, learning rates that do not decay to zero can induce interesting transitions between neighborhoods of critical points and the iterates w_t are generally more exploratory of the loss landscape.

2.2 Statistical convergence of the learning algorithm

In deep learning, the choice of w_T is often to some extent arbitrary as the loss landscape is generally non-convex and stochastic learning algorithms are the norm. Hence, rather than focusing on a single hypothesis, it is attractive to consider the average generalization error induced by the stochastic dynamical system ϕ_S. We adopt this *statistical* perspective, rather than focus on a single orbit of ϕ_S. Thus, the setting below applies to any asymptotic behavior of orbits of the (typically nonlinear) dynamics ϕ_S including fixed points, periodic, quasiperiodic and chaotic orbits. To analyze the generalization performance without making assumptions on the global stability properties of individual orbits, we make an assumption about the ergodic properties of ϕ_S that reasonably matches empirical evidence. To describe the assumption, we give a short primer on the relevant concepts from ergodic theory of dynamical systems.

Invariant measures. Denote the Borel sigma algebra on $\mathbb{W}$ by $\mathcal{B}(\mathbb{W})$. A probability measure μ_S is called *invariant* for ϕ_S if $\mu_S(A) = \mu_S \circ \phi_S^{-1}(A)$ for all Borel sets $A \in \mathcal{B}(\mathbb{W})$. Intuitively, for any subset of the weight space, the probability that the dynamical system occupies it does not change. See Liverani [2004] for an introduction to invariant measures.

Can we expect the dynamics of learning algorithms to give rise to invariant measures? If ϕ_S is a deterministic continuous function on the set $\mathbb{W}$ and $\mathbb{W}$ is compact, the Krylov–Bogolioubov theorem (see e.g., Theorem 4.1.1 of Katok and Hasselblatt [1997]) gives the existence of at least one invariant measure for ϕ_S. On the other hand, when ϕ_S is an SGD update, Dieuleveut et al. [2020] show the existence of invariant distributions for convex loss functions, whereas Fort and Pagès [1999] and Mattingly et al. [2002] show the existence of invariant distributions in more general settings under mild assumptions on the gradient noise (in the estimate $\hat{\nabla} L_S$). Several works have analyzed the asymptotic properties of such invariant distributions, e.g., Chee and Toulis [2018] analyze the oscillation of the iterates w_t about a mean that is a critical point, as a *phase* separate from the transient phase of convergence to this invariant distribution.

In general, there are infinitely many invariant measures. A pertinent class of invariant measures in practice is that of ergodic, invariant measures, where we can only understand the statistical properties of a system through evolution of individual orbits. Roughly speaking, for an ergodic, invariant

measure, sets that are invariant under the dynamics ϕ_S (such as a set of periodic points, quasiperiodic or chaotic attractors) are trivial: they have measure 0 or 1.

Ergodicity. When an invariant measure μ_S is ergodic for ϕ_S, time averages converge to ensemble averages according to μ_S. That is, for μ_S-almost every initial state w_0, and for all continuous scalar functions h:

$$\frac{1}{T}\sum_{t=0}^{T-1} h(w_t) \to \mathbb{E}_{w\sim\mu_S} h(w) \tag{4}$$

and the dependence on initial conditions w_0 is forgotten.

Unfortunately, we cannot generally expect the dynamics of the learning algorithm to have a unique ergodic invariant measure on $\mathbb{W}$. Instead, ϕ_S-invariant sets could be smaller subsets of $\mathbb{W}$ with different ergodic invariant measures supported on them. As a result, starting from two different points chosen Lebesgue almost everywhere (or sampled from any probability density on $\mathbb{W}$), we do not expect time averages to converge to the same limit. Indeed, as shown in Figure 1, the weights visited by ϕ_S depend on the initial conditions and can vary significantly across different runs. In other words, the limit of infinite time averages described in Equation (4) does depend on w_0.

Dynamics of the hypothesis. To circumvent the above issues, rather than focusing on the weights directly, we shift perspective and consider the dynamics of the *learned hypothesis* $h(\cdot, w_t)$. Specifically, we posit that the infinite-time averages of the learned hypothesis are ergodic: that is, the time averages of $h(z, w_t)$ converge to the same function irrespective of the initial function $h(z, w_0)$. As a result, functionals that depend only on h and not explicitly on the weights are also ergodic. Our main assumption is that the time averages of loss functions are ergodic, since they depend only on the network functions:

Assumption 1. *Given any $S \sim \mathcal{D}^n$, there exists a map $z \to \langle \ell_z \rangle_S$, such that for Lebesgue-a.e. w_0 and every $z \in \mathbb{R}^d \times \mathbb{R}$, the following holds:*

$$\lim_{T\to\infty} \frac{1}{T}\sum_{t=0}^{T-1} \ell(z, w_t) = \langle \ell_z \rangle_S \in \mathbb{R}, \tag{5}$$

where $\{w_t = \phi_S(w_{t-1})\}$ is an orbit of ϕ_S.

As an intuitive justification for Assumption 1, symmetries may result in several sets of parameters (weights and biases) that represent the same network function h. Hence, assuming that there exists a unique probability on the space of neural network functions that is ergodic is less restrictive and closer to reality than assuming a unique ergodic measure on the parameter space.

Figure 1 provides evidence that Assumption 1 can hold in practice. It shows two observables calculated along 4 different orbits of a VGG16 model trained using SGD with momentum (batches of size 128, learning rate of 0.01, momentum of 0.9). On the left, we can see a low-dimensional projection of the second layer weights obtained by projecting the weights onto 40 dimensions using PCA and then employing t-SNE [Van der Maaten and Hinton, 2008], whereas the observable on the right is the test accuracy, which is a functional of the hypothesis function. Here, the test accuracy can be seen to converge to a distribution independent of the initial conditions, whilst the weight orbits vary significantly across different initializations. This experiment corroborates our hypothesis that time averages of functionals on the loss space converge to distributions independent of the initial condition (i.e., unique ergodic invariant measures), even if time averages of a generic observable on the weight space do not.

Remark 1. *Increasing learning rate may induce ergodicity.* Assumption 1 may hold for all continuous functions for sufficiently large constant learning rates, as long as orbits do not diverge. Intuitively, large learning rates can cause more frequent transitions from the basin of attraction of one local minimum to another. On the other hand, for small learning rates, we may be able to detect the presence of multiple attractors, since different initial conditions lead to different long-time averages. These ideas are illustrated with a toy example in Appendix A.

3 Statistical stability implies generalization

In Section 3.1, we generalize algorithmic stability beyond algorithms that converge to fixed points. Section 3.2 examines the implications of our definition to generalization error.

3.1 Statistical algorithmic stability

Classically, the derivations of algorithmic stability-based generalization (see e.g., Hardt et al. [2016], Chapter 14 of Mohri et al. [2018], Bousquet et al. [2020]) utilize an input perturbation of one element in S by replacing it with a different element from the input distribution $\mathcal{D}$:

Defnition 1 (Algorithmic stability, adapted from [Bousquet and Elisseeff, 2002])**.** *Consider the weights w_S^* and $w_{S'}^*$ obtained by running the learning algorithm on two training sets S, S' sampled from $\mathcal{D}$ that differ by exactly one sample. We say that the learning algorithm is algorithmically stable (AS) with a stability coefficient $\beta \geq 0$ if*

$$\beta = \sup \left\{ |\ell(z, w_S^*) - \ell(z, w_{S'}^*)| : z \in \mathbb{R}^d \times \mathbb{R} \right\}. \tag{6}$$

We refer to this type of perturbation as a *stochastic* perturbation. Algorithmic stability does not directly apply to learning algorithms that do not converge to a fixed point. Hence, next, we extend algorithmic stability to loss *statistics*. The resulting notion of *statistical algorithmic stability (SAS)* extends algorithmic stability to algorithms whose loss statistics converge as prescribed by Assumption 1, even if the weights do not converge.

Defnition 2 (Statistical algorithmic stability)**.** *We say that a learning algorithm with loss statistics denoted by $\langle \ell_z \rangle_S$ is statistically algorithmically stable (SAS) with a stability coefficient $\beta \geq 0$ if*

$$\beta = \sup \left\{ |\langle \ell_z \rangle_S - \langle \ell_z \rangle_{S'}| : z \in \mathbb{R}^d \times \mathbb{R} \right\}, \tag{7}$$

for all S, S' sampled from $\mathcal{D}$ that differ by exactly one point.

In the above definition, $\langle \ell_z \rangle_{S'}$ refers to the ergodic average of $\ell(z, \cdot)$ observed along almost every orbit of $\phi_{S'}$. The definition of SAS differs from Definition 1 as we do not assume convergence of the learning algorithm. Nevertheless, when every orbit of ϕ_S converges to a fixed point w_S^*, for almost every S, then Definition (7) reduces to the standard notion of algorithmic stability since ergodic averages of $\langle \ell_z \rangle_S$ along almost every orbit converge to $\ell(z, w_S^*)$.

Crucially, and in line with the observations in Figure 1, we quantify stability based on the statistics of the *loss function* after it has statistically converged to some ergodic ϕ_S-invariant measure μ_S and not the ensemble mean or any one point in the weight space $\mathbb{W}$. In other words, the definition of SAS does not use or provide information about the algorithmic stability of $\mathbb{E}_{w \in \mu_S} w$ for any μ_S.

3.2 Learning theoretic implications

It is well-known that Definition 1 leads to generalization bounds (see [Hardt et al., 2016, Bousquet et al., 2020] and references therein). Next, we show that the more general statistical algorithmic stability from Definition 2 also can imply a notion of generalization.

To obtain generalization bounds, we first redefine the empirical and population risk to use the ergodic average loss statistics rather than fixed points:

$$\hat{R}_S = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{z \in S} \langle \ell_z \rangle_S \quad \text{and} \quad R_S = \mathbb{E}_{z \sim D} \langle \ell_z \rangle_S. \tag{8}$$

Although the definitions above appear deceivingly similar with the standard ones introduced in Section 2.1, the two notions of risk are defined on different spaces, with the standard ones being maps from the *hypothesis space* $\mathcal{H}$ to scalar values and (8) being maps from the space of *learning algorithms*. Using these definitions, the following generalization bound holds:

Theorem 1. *Given a β-statistically algorithmically stable algorithm ϕ_S (see Definition 2), for any $\delta \in (0, 1)$, with probability greater than $1 - \delta$,*

$$R_S \leq \hat{R}_S + \beta + 2\left(n\beta + L\right)\sqrt{\frac{\log(2/\delta)}{2n}}, \tag{9}$$

where $L := \sup_z \sup_{w \in \mathbb{W}} |\ell(z, w)|$ is an upper bound on the loss.

The proof can be found in Appendix B. Like [Bousquet and Elisseeff, 2002]'s bound, the stability coefficient needs to grow at most like $\beta \sim \mathcal{O}(1/\sqrt{n})$ for the generalization bound to be non-vacuous. Note that our proof is also naturally coupled with [Bousquet and Elisseeff, 2002, Feldman and Vondrak, 2018]'s improved technique, which provides tighter bounds when $\beta \sim \mathcal{O}(1/\sqrt{n})$. (see Appendix B).

4 Dynamical interpretation of SAS

Having defined the notion of statistical algorithmic stability, the natural next question is when an algorithm ϕ_S is SAS. Moreover, with computable timeseries data, can we determine SAS? The latter question is, of course, of immense practical importance because S-SAS is sufficient for generalization (via Theorem 1). We now delineate one route, taking an operator-theoretic perspective to provide a mechanistic understanding of what makes an algorithm SAS. The theoretical explanation we develop yields a rough heuristic – albeit not a definitive predictor of generalization – that relates a given training dynamics to the SAS coefficient β. Since ergodic, invariant measures on the weight space are not unique, it may seem daunting at first to obtain an estimate of the SAS coefficient. However, assuming that we have a unique ergodic, invariant measure on the loss space leads us naturally to a computable proxy for β, as we show below:

Lemma 1. *(A Markov loss process) Let μ_S be an ergodic, invariant measure for ϕ_S. Assume that a loss function $\ell(z,\cdot) : \mathbb{W} \to I_z \subseteq [0, L]$ is such that its level sets form a smooth foliation of the support of μ_S. Let $\nu_S^z = \ell(z,\cdot)_\sharp \mu_S$ be the pushforward measure on the loss space, i.e., $\nu_S^z : \mathcal{B}(I_z) \to \mathbb{R}^+$, where $\mathcal{B}(I_z)$ is the Borel sigma algebra on I_z. Then, there exists a mixing Markov operator $\mathcal{P}^z_{\mu_S}$ on the space of probability measures on $\mathcal{B}(I_z)$, with an invariant measure ν_S^z.*

This lemma parallels Chekroun et al. [2014]'s Theorem A, but in a quite different setting, without using existence of a unique physical measure. The proof, deferred to Appendix C, involves using the assumptions to define a transition probability operator on the loss space using the transition probability between level sets of $\ell(z,\cdot)$ on the weight space. The main consequence of this lemma is that the Markov process on the loss space associated with the operator $\mathcal{P}^z_{\mu_S}$ gives us a mechanistic understanding of SAS, as we discuss below.

First, using Assumption 1, it is clear that the pushforward measure ν_S defined in Lemma 1 is independent of μ_S. In other words, for any ergodic, invariant measure μ_S, we have a unique ergodic, invariant measure $\nu_S^z = \ell(z,\cdot)_\sharp \mu_S$. Since this measure is unique, by construction in Lemma 1, it is also the stationary distribution associated with the loss process $\{\ell(z, w_t)\}_t$. Note that the loss process is, in general, non-Markovian. But, we are able to leverage the perturbation theory of Markov processes to study the effect of stochastic perturbations on ν_S^z, thanks to Lemma 1.

Theorem 2. *If the mixing operator $\mathcal{P}^z_{\mu_S}$ constructed in Lemma 1 is uniformly ergodic, and the Lipschitz constant of $\nabla\ell(\cdot, w)$ on $\mathbb{R}^d$ is bounded above by L_D for all $w \in \mathbb{W}$, then ϕ_S is SAS with stability coefficient*

$$\beta = \mathcal{O}\left(\frac{1}{n}\frac{\lambda^\alpha}{1-\lambda}L_D\right),$$

where $\lambda = \sup_z \lambda_z$ is the supremum over z of the mixing rates of $\mathcal{P}^z_{\mu_S}$ and $\alpha = \mathcal{O}(1)$.

Proof. (Sketch) Following Chekroun et al. [2014], the proof relies on the perturbation bounds of Mitrophanov [2005]. If $\mathcal{P}^z_{\mu_S}$ is uniformly ergodic [Mitrophanov, 2005], there exists a $\lambda_z < 1$ and $C > 0$ such that for all $\xi \in I_z$,

$$\|(\mathcal{P}^z_{\mu_S})^t \delta_\xi - \nu_S^z\|_{\mathrm{TV}} \leq C\lambda_z^t. \tag{10}$$

Further, if a stochastic perturbation S' introduces a change $\delta\mathcal{P}^z_{\mu_S}$ to $\mathcal{P}^z_{\mu_S}$, the perturbation bound from [Mitrophanov, 2005] gives

$$\|\nu_S^z - \nu_{S'}^z\|_{\mathrm{TV}} \leq (\alpha + C\lambda_z^\alpha/(1-\lambda_z))\,\|\delta\mathcal{P}^z_{\mu_S}\|, \tag{11}$$

where $\alpha := \lfloor \log_{1/\lambda_z} C \rfloor$ and $\|\delta\mathcal{P}^z_{\mu_S}\|$ is the operator norm of $\delta\mathcal{P}^z_{\mu_S}$ induced by TV distance. Now, since $|\langle \ell_z\rangle_S - \langle \ell_z\rangle_{S'}| = \left|\mathbb{E}_{\nu_S^z}\xi - \mathbb{E}_{\nu_{S'}^z}\xi\right| \leq L\,\|\nu_S^z - \nu_S^z\|_{\mathrm{TV}}$, we obtain

$$|\langle \ell_z\rangle_S - \langle \ell_z\rangle_{S'}| \leq L(\alpha + C\lambda_z^\alpha/(1-\lambda_z))\|\delta\mathcal{P}^z_{\mu_S}\|. \tag{12}$$

Since this holds for all z, the right hand side of (12) is an upper bound for the stability coefficient β in Definition (2), by taking the supremum over z. It is easy to see that if Ξ_t is uniform, the change in the Markov operator on the weight space can be bounded above by m/n in the TV-induced norm. This bound means that the stability upper bound (12) is $\mathcal{O}(1/n)$ for small batch sizes. For GD, the upper bound on $\left\|\delta\mathcal{P}^z_{\mu_S}\right\|$ is vacuous. However, when the Lipschitz constant of $\nabla\ell(\cdot, w)$ is uniformly (in w) small on $\mathbb{R}^d$ (discussed further in Appendix C), the size of $\delta\mathcal{P}^z_{\mu_S}$ can still be controlled such that $\beta = \mathcal{O}(1/n)$. □

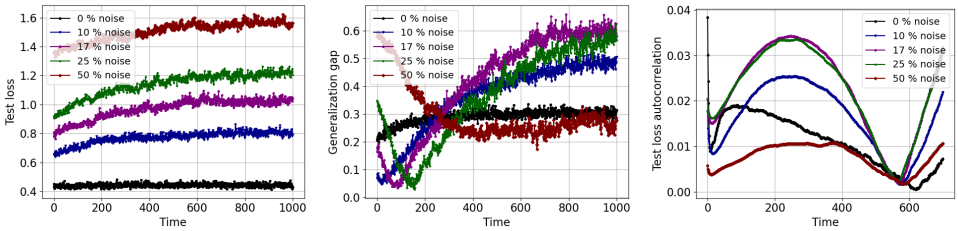

Figure 2: Predictors of generalization gaps computed on the ResNet18 model. Left: Time series of the test loss. Center: Timeseries of the generalization gap. Right: Normalized autocorrelation of the test loss timeseries on the left. The magnitude of the autocorrelation in the test loss is suggestive of the generalization gap(left).

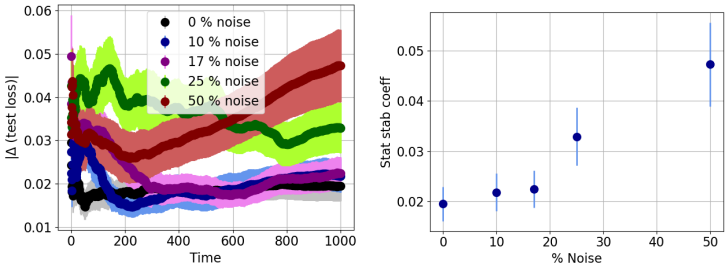

Figure 3: SAS computed from the VGG16 model. Left: The change in cumulative time averages of the test loss upon stochastic perturbation of the CIFAR10 dataset. Right: Lower bound on the statistical stability coefficient β (Definition 2) computed using the test loss.

Theorem 2 implies that *an algorithm that exhibits faster convergence to the stationary measure on the loss space generalizes better*. The bound in Theorem 2 is sensitive to changes in λ, when the latter is close to 1. This implies that smaller λ (faster convergence of the loss to the ergodic invariant measure) yield smaller upper bounds on β (more statistically stable algorithm) and better generalization.

Strictly speaking, to determine λ_z, we must consider finite-dimensional approximations of the operator $\mathcal{P}^z_{\mu_S}$ (as done in the setting of chaotic systems in e.g., [Crimmins and Froyland, 2020, Chekroun et al., 2014]) and compute its spectral decomposition. However, in our setting, it is difficult in practice to generate samples in the loss space that obey the Markov process defined in Lemma 1. Instead, we argue for using the readily available non-Markovian loss process to estimate convergence to the equilibrium distribution. In particular, we hypothesize below that the auto-correlation function of the test loss can separate algorithms based on their SAS.

Dropping the superscripts z, we define the auto-correlation $C_\ell(\tau)$ in a loss function ℓ by $\left|(1/T)\sum_{t<=T}\ell(w_t)\ell(w_{t+\tau}) - \langle\ell\rangle^2\right|/\langle\ell\rangle^2$, in the limit $T \to \infty$. That is, $C_\ell(\tau)$ gives the correlation between the random variables $\ell(w_t)/\langle\ell\rangle$ and $\ell(w_{t+\tau})/\langle\ell\rangle$, where the randomness comes from Ξ_t and the initialization of weights in SGD and only from the latter in GD. Once the distribution on the space of ℓ has converged to ν_S, i.e., for sufficiently large τ, $C_\ell(\tau)$ gives the correlation between two dependent samples from ν_S. This dependence is not lost since the process is non-Markovian. Now, for small times τ, even the Markov process from Lemma 1 on loss space has not mixed completely. This also makes $C_\ell(\tau)$ larger because the loss process mixes at least as slowly as the Markov process. In short, C_ℓ encodes information both about speed of convergence to equilibrium distribution and the time-dependence that arises due to the dynamics (non-Markovian effect). Thus, if the non-Markovian effects in the loss are comparable between two different algorithms, higher values of C_ℓ indicate larger λ, and hence less statistical stability.

5 Numerical results

We numerically validate the main ideas of section 3 and 4 on VGG16 and ResNet18 models trained on a CIFAR10 dataset (see Appendix D for further numerical results). For all our experiments, ϕ_S is

an SGD update with momentum 0.9, fixed learning rate 0.01 and batch size of 128. In all figures, time indicates number of epochs. We generate different choices of the training set S_p by corrupting CIFAR10's labels with probability p, with S_0 being the original CIFAR10 dataset. Figures 2 and 3 show results corresponding to $p = 0, 0.1, 0.17, 0.25$ and 0.5. As expected, the greater the noise corruption p, the larger is the generalization error, as also reported by previous studies Zhang et al. [2021a], Loukas et al. [2021]). The phenomenon is shown in Figure 2 (left), where the test loss timeseries (an estimate of the generalization error) is plotted for these different cases. Each line in Figure 2 is a sample mean over 10 random initializations.

In Figure 3, we depict also (lower bounds of) the SAS coefficient β (see Definition 2). The cumulative time average along orbits of ϕ_{S_p} of length 1200 epochs are used as estimators for statistics. Figure 3 shows the difference in the test loss cumulative averages between random orbits of ϕ_{S_p} and $\phi_{S'_p}$, with S'_p being a stochastic perturbation of S_p. The errorbars indicate the standard error over 45 pairs of orbits. In Figure 3(right), we compute an estimate of the stability coefficient as the difference of the (estimated) test loss statistics at different values of p using 45 pairs of orbits for each p. This is an estimate on the lower bound of β, and clearly increases with p, illustrating that cases with worse generalization errors (Figure 2(left)) have larger β.

In Figure 2(right), we plot $C_\ell(\tau)$ (section 4) where ℓ is taken as the test loss. The test loss statistic $\langle \ell \rangle$ is estimated as a time average over 1200 epochs. At each p, we show the sample average of the normalized autocorrelations over 10 independent runs. Since we have normalized by $\langle \ell \rangle$, the y-axis truly extracts correlations over a long time range (up to 700 epochs) in a function of L^1 norm 1 at all p. Thus, Figure 2 (right) illustrates that the correlations at $p = 0$ are smaller when compared to higher p's not because the loss itself has smaller magnitude, but because the convergence to equilibrium distribution on the loss space is faster. We see that the magnitude of the test loss autocorrelations correlates well with the generalization gap (absolute difference in test and training losses) shown in Figure 2(center). Overall, the loss process does indeed codify the phenomenological explanation for SAS that is expressed in 12.

6 Discussion and conclusion

Predicting generalization is an active area of research and has implications for more reliable use of machine learning. In this work, we introduce statistical algorithmic stability (SAS) and show how it implies generalization bounds. Here, we add a few important remarks.

Statistical stability only requires robustness of statistics on loss space. A central challenge in the analyses of non-convergent algorithms is the fact that there may be multiple, very different invariant measures μ_S. For this reason, our stability criterion focuses on statistics of the loss function. This way, an algorithm can be stable even if the measures μ_S and $\mu_{S'}$ are not close in the total variation norm. In fact, an algorithm can be stable even if μ_S and $\mu_{S'}$ are mutually singular, if the loss functions have similar statistics. Since our SAS analysis hinges on a reasonable yet nonrestrictive assumption on ergodic properties of the algorithm, we believe it is broadly applicable.

Algorithms that converge are special cases of the above analysis. In Appendix E, we show that the proposed relationship (section 4) between statistical stability and convergence rates to stationary measures can also be observed in the Neural Tangent Kernel (NTK) regime [Jacot et al., 2018]. In this case, the training dynamics, ϕ_S, can be approximated by a linear function of the weights, which converges to a fixed point. Thus, this provides an alternative, ergodic theoretic, interpretation of generalization in the NTK regime [Arora et al., 2019, Montanari and Zhong, 2020, Bartlett et al., 2021].

Broader view. While our focus is on algorithmic stability-based generalization, this work gathers more evidence to support the broader view [Wojtowytsch, 2021, Zhang et al., 2021b] that exploiting theoretically and empirically available dynamical information about the training algorithm is a fruitful complement to understanding generalization from the optimization landscape and learning theory perspectives.

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