

Parallel Ant Algorithms for the Minimum Tardy Task Problem

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Abstract. Ant Colony Optimization algorithms are intrinsically distributed algorithms where independent agents are in charge of building solutions. *Stigmergy* or indirect communication is the way in which each agent learns from the experience of the whole colony. However, explicit communication and parallel models of ACO can be implemented directly on different parallel platforms. We do so, and apply the resulting algorithms to the Minimum Tardy Task Problem (MTTP), a scheduling problem that has been faced with other metaheuristics, e.g., evolutionary algorithms and canonical ant algorithms. The aim of this article is twofold. First, it shows a new instance generator for MTTP to deal with the concept of “problem class”; second, it reports some preliminary results of the implementation of two type of parallel ACO algorithms for solving novel and larger instances of MTTP.

keywords: *ant colony optimization, parallel models, minimum tardy task problem*

1 Introduction

The ant colony optimization technique (Dorigo et al. [6]) is a new meta-heuristic for hard combinatorial optimization problems. An ant algorithm, that is, an instance of the ant colony optimization meta-heuristic, is basically a multi-agent system where low level interactions among simple agents (called *artificial ants*) result in a complex behavior of the whole system. Ant algorithms have been inspired by colonies of real ants, which deposit a chemical substance (called *pheromone*) on the ground. This substance influences the choices they make: the larger the amount of pheromone on a particular path, the larger the probability that an ant selects the path. Artificial ants, in ant algorithms, are stochastic construction procedures that probabilistically build a solution by iteratively adding problem components to partial solutions by taking into account (i) heuristic information from the problem instances being solved, if available, and (ii) pheromone trails which change dynamically at run-time to reflect the acquired search experience.

Traditional applications of the ACO approach in combinatorial optimization problems include the Traveling Salesperson Problem, the Quadratic Assignment Problem, as well as the Job Shop Scheduling, Vehicle Routing, Graph Coloring and Telecommunication Network Problem [6]. More recently, promising results were reported in [10, 9] from the application of a new version of an Ant System to the Multiple Knapsack and to the Maximum Independent Set Problems, two examples of subset problems with constraints, for which an ant colony algorithm was first applied. Also, the ant approach for subset problems was successfully applied to the Minimum Tardy Task Problem in the past [8].

Like many other meta-heuristic approaches, the ACO meta-heuristic admits direct parallelization schemes. A discussion of the many levels for exploiting parallelism can be found in [18]. Here we

just summarize some parallel implementations and models found in the literature (not in an exhaustive manner, of course). Additional revisions of this topic for interested readers are [16], [17], and [7].

Up to now, a few papers deal with parallel ACO. Some parallel models can be found in [3] (parallel AS for TSP), or in [4, 5] (sync master-slave models and async distributed AS search). Also, there exist general works on parallel strategies like the one in [21] (independent versus coupled search), and several parallel models targeted to solve a complex application, like references [15], [22] and [11].

This work aims at evaluating the application of two main parallel ant algorithms to the minimum tardy task problem. Some variations on the model and a detailed discussion on the problem instances are used to achieve the main aim of this article.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes the minimum tardy task problem. The proposed generator of MTTP instances is presented in Section 3 including a brief discussion about the difficulty of the set of instances generated and used here. Section 4 features the main characteristics of the ant algorithms for subset problems, and a small example of the process for building a solution for MTTP. In Section 5 the parallel algorithms implemented for our experiments are described. The experiments and their results are discussed in Section 6. Finally, conclusions and further work are drawn in Section 7.

2 The Minimum Tardy Task Problem (MTTP)

The minimum tardy task problem (MTTP) is an NP-hard task-scheduling problem [13]. It follows a formal definition of MTTP [20]:

Problem instance:

Tasks: $1 \ 2 \ \dots \ n$, $i > 0$
 Lengths: $l_1 \ l_2 \ \dots \ l_n$, $l_i > 0$
 Deadlines: $d_1 \ d_2 \ \dots \ d_n$, $d_i > 0$
 Weights: $w_1 \ w_2 \ \dots \ w_n$, $w_i > 0$

Feasible solution: A one-to-one scheduling function g defined on $S \subseteq T$, $g : S \rightarrow Z^+ \cup \{0\}$ that satisfies the following conditions for all $i, j \in S$:

1. If $g(i) < g(j)$ then $g(i) + l_i \leq g(j)$ which insures that a task is not scheduled before the completion of an earlier scheduled one.
2. $g(i) + l_i \leq d_i$ which ensures that a task is completed within its deadline.

Objective function: The tardy task weight

$W = \sum_{i \in T-S} w_i$, which is the sum of the weights of unscheduled tasks.

Optimal solution: The schedule S with the minimum tardy task weight W .

A subset S of T is feasible if and only if the tasks in S can be scheduled in increasing order by deadline without violating any deadline [20]. If the tasks are not sorted in that order, one needs to perform a previous polynomially executable preprocessing step in which the tasks are ordered in increasing order of deadlines, and renamed such that $d_1 \leq d_2 \leq \dots \leq d_n$.

The following example is from [19].

Example: Consider the following problem instance of the minimum tardy task problem:

Tasks:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Lengths:	2	4	1	7	4	3	5	2
Deadlines:	3	5	6	8	10	15	16	20
Weights:	15	20	16	19	10	25	17	18

- a) $S = \{1, 3, 5, 6\}$ is a feasible solution and the schedule is given by: $g(1) = 0$, $g(3) = 2$, $g(5) = 3$ and $g(6) = 7$. The objective function value amounts to $\sum_{i \in T-S} w_i = w_2 + w_4 + w_7 + w_8$.
- b) $S' = \{2, 3, 4, 6, 8\}$ is infeasible. We define $g(2) = 0$, and task 2 finishes at time $0 + l_2 = 4$ which is within its deadline $d_2 = 5$. We schedule tasks 3 at 4, i.e. $g(3) = 4$, which finishes at $g(3) + l_3 = 5$ which is within its deadline $d_3 = 6$. But task 4 cannot be scheduled since $g(4) + l_4 = 5 + 7 = 12$ and will thus finish after its deadline $d_4 = 8$.

3 A New Generator of MTTP Instances

A serial version of an ant algorithm for subset problems was applied successfully in [8] to several instances of MTTP. These instances have been previously used in the associated literature. This ant algorithm, called ACAsp, showed a very good performance for several instances of different sizes which were generated following the scalable procedure described in [1]. This procedure assigns the respective weight value to each task in a manner that is possible to know the optimal solution in advance. However, the resulting instances could be easily solved by constructive methods³ guided by a subordinate heuristic that takes into account the benefit (given by w_i/l_i) of including a task i in the solution under construction.

In order to obtain arbitrarily sized and hard MTTP instances we developed a new problem generator from which it is possible to tune in a controlled manner the size of the feasible search space in comparison to the whole search space⁴.

The interest in using problem generators in evaluating metaheuristics is of a capital importance nowadays. By using a problem generator, each time the algorithm is run it solves a *different* instance of the problem (i.e., different numerical values are used given birth to different instances of the same complexity). Using a generator removes the opportunity to hand-tune the algorithms or to bias the results in any way to favor the evaluated algorithm. In addition, because a great deal of instances are solved in any such analysis, the conclusions can be really said to affect the problem class, not to solve individual instances, whatever their difficulty happen to be. As a conclusion, using problem generators is an important step towards a serious evaluation of new algorithms.

Our proposed procedure (see figure 1) is based on the algorithm used to generate instances of the Weighted Tardiness Problem found in [2]. This procedure needs four parameters: the size of the instance or number of tasks, an integer number to seed the random generator, and two additional parameters to control the tightness of the deadlines. The respective values l_i (Task[i].length) and w_i (Task[i].weight) are randomly obtained by using a uniform distribution from the continuous intervals $[1, 100]$ and $[1, 10]$ respectively. Similarly, d_i (Task[i].deadline) is obtained from the interval⁵ $[A_i \times$

³ For example, greedy, random-greedy, ACO algorithms, etc.

⁴ e.g., the more constrained are the deadlines, the smaller is the feasible search space.

⁵ A_i represents variable Accumulated_length in function 'Generate_Instance()'.

```

Generate_Instance (size, seed, tf, rdd )
{
    srand(seed);
    Accumulated_lenght=0;
    for(i=0;i<size;i++)
    {
        Task[i].lenght = Random [1,100);
        Task[i].weight = Random [1,10);
        Accumulated_lenght += Task[i].lenght;
        Task[i].deadline = Random (Accumulated_lenght * (tf - rdd/2),
                                   Accumulated_lenght * (tf + rdd/2));
        if ( Task[i].deadline < Task[i].lenght )
            Task[i].deadline = Task[i].lenght;
    }
    Sort the tasks according to deadlines
}

```

Fig. 1. Procedure 'Generate_Instance()'. Parameters *tf* and *rdd* let us control the difficulty of the instance to be generated.

$(tf - rdd)/2, A_i \times (tf + rdd)/2]$, where $A_i = \sum_{j=1}^i l_j$, i.e., the accumulated length of the tasks already generated including l_i ; *tf* and *rdd* are two parameters of the procedure which represent respectively the average tardiness factor and the relative ranges of due dates. Parameter *tf* is used to calculate the center of the above interval. More precisely, the center of the interval is $A_i \times tf$. Similarly, the interval size is obtained by using parameter *rdd* in the expression $A_i \times rdd$.

According to the setting of parameters *tf* and *rdd*, instances of four types can be generated (see figure 2):

1. $tf + (rdd/2) < 1$, i.e., a percentage of tasks can not be scheduled due to the highly constrained deadlines (the lower *tf* the higher is that percentage);
2. $tf < 1$ and $tf + (rdd/2) > 1$, is similar to the first case, however, with a less constrained deadlines;
3. $tf - (rdd/2) \geq 1$, i.e., all tasks can be scheduled since all of them will have a deadline larger than the respective A_i ; and
4. $tf > 1$ and $tf - (rdd/2) < 1$, this case is similar to case 2 but even less constrained. That is, almost all tasks can be scheduled before their respective deadlines.

Clearly, the instances of type three are not worthwhile to be considered since the search space for these instances will be entirely feasible (trivial solution), i.e., the whole set of tasks can be scheduled for sure.

After l_i, w_i, d_i have been generated for $i = 1, \dots, n$, the tasks of the instance are rearranged according the increasing values of the respective deadlines, i.e., $d_1 \leq d_j \leq \dots \leq d_n$, where n represents the size of the instance (last sentence in procedure 'Generate_Instance()').

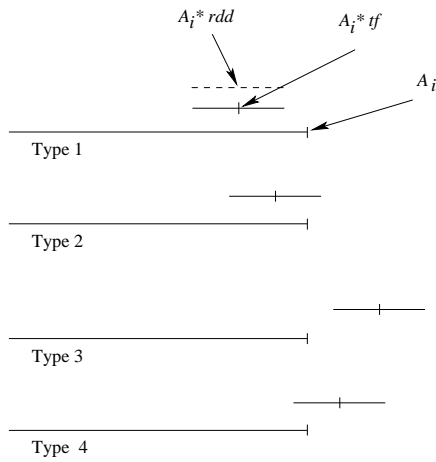


Fig. 2. Four cases for deadlines generation according to the setting of parameters tf and rdd .

3.1 Problem Complexity and Parameters tf - rdd

Since parameters tf and rdd control the resulting MTTP instances, we first include a preliminary analysis of their actual effects in the resulting instance complexity. We evaluate a simple ACO on instances obtained by using different values of such parameters on problems of the same size. The performance is measure by computing the success rate and the number of steps to locate the best known optima.

We created 10 instances by merging different values of tf and rdd and performed 20 independent runs for each one. We used a single value $rdd = 0.2$ and tested ten values of tf (0.1, 0.2, 0.3, 0.4, 0.5, 0.6, 0.7, 0.8, 0.9). In figure 3 we plot the results for the effort in solving (best known value as stopping criterion) instances of size 100 and 200.

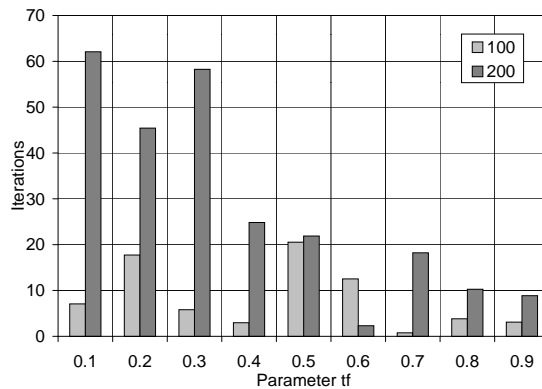


Fig. 3. Values of tf versus number of steps to optimum (average values).

We can notice that small values of tf provoke the hardest instances. This scenario is not that clear for instances of size 100. A similar conclusion can be drawn when analyzing figure 4. In this figure, the X axis represents the complement of the percentage of hits ($100\% - (\#hits)\%$).

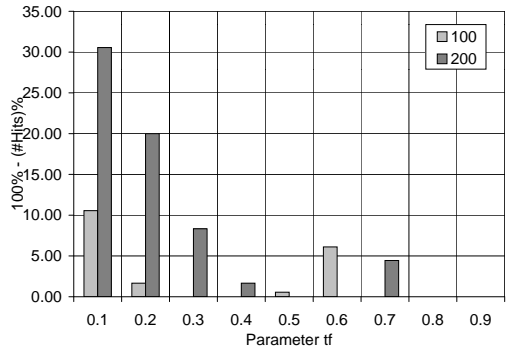


Fig. 4. Values of tf versus $100\% - (\#hits)\%$.

To analyze the influence of rdd (0.1, 0.2, 0.4) only three values of tf were considered to avoid the cartesian product explosion of possibilities: (0.1, 0.2, 0.3). In figure 5 we can see that $tf = 0.1$ for instances of size 200 provokes easier instances (in terms of number of steps to locate a solution) as rdd increases, i.e., the larger the interval the easiest the resulting problem instances. A similar conclusion was drawn for instances of size 100 (not shown here for room constraints).

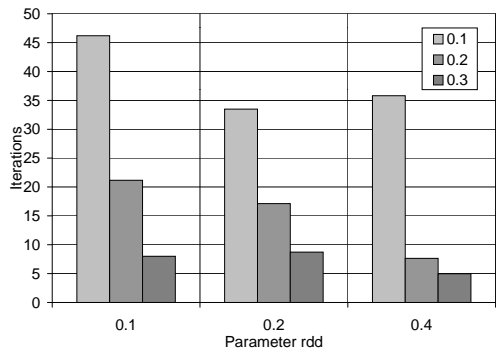


Fig. 5. Values of rdd versus effort to locate an optimum.

In summary, the complexity of the generated instances can be tuned by using small values of tf and rdd . If we compare all these instances with respect existing ones (for example see [8]) our new instances are much more complex in general. However, although the mentioned trends are clear for instances of size 200 and larger, easiest instances of size 100 or lower are unclear about such conclusions. It is not a real problem since we plan to use even larger instances in the future to challenge our algorithmic proposals. A further analysis of the generator is needed, but we cannot include it in this article because it deserves an in depth separate study.

4 Outline of an Ant algorithm for Subset Problems

Our ant colony algorithm for a general subset problem works as follows (see [10, 9, 8] for further details). In each cycle of the algorithm m ants are released to build a new solution. Each ant in the colony builds a solution independently from the other ants. At this initial stage, all problem components are feasible⁶. Each new component is selected from the set of feasible components. After that, the selected component is incorporated into the solution under construction. At the same time, the set of feasible components is updated in order to eliminate all components that became infeasible after the addition of a new component to the solution. This procedure is repeated until the set of feasible components is empty. The pheromone trail levels are updated accordingly to the type of ant algorithm used.

The Ant System (AS) was the first example of an ant colony optimization algorithm to be proposed in the literature. However, AS was not competitive with state-of-the-art algorithms for TSP, the problem to which the original AS was applied. There exist several improvements to the original version of AS, much of them applied to the TSP. The more important improvements are: AS with an *elitist strategy* for updating the pheromone trail levels, AS_{rank} (a rank-based version of Ant System), $MAX-MIN$ Ant System ($MMAS$), and the Ant Colony System (ACS)⁷.

For this work we implemented an Ant Colony System (ACS). Basically, an ACS algorithm is an improved version of an AS. The ACS increases the exploitation of the information collected by the ant colony in order to guide the exploration of the search space. There exist two mechanisms to achieve such a goal. The first one uses a strongly elitist strategy to update the trail. The second one changes the original mechanism for item selection (next component to be included in the solution) by using a pseudo-random proportional rule which works as follows: with probability q_0 an ant chooses the next component $j \in \mathcal{F}$ such as $j = \arg \max_{j \in \mathcal{F}} \{\tau_j(t) \cdot \eta_j^\beta(t)\}$, otherwise, the next component is chosen according to eq.1 (similar to that used in Ant Systems).

$$p_j^k(t) = \frac{\tau_j(t) \cdot \eta_j(t)^\beta}{\sum_{h \in \mathcal{F}} \tau_h(t) \cdot \eta_h(t)^\beta} \quad (1)$$

where η_j is a heuristic value associated to component j ; β that controls the importance of the above value in the respective formula, and τ_j ensures that preference is given to components (tasks in the case of MTTP) that belong to solutions of high quality. \mathcal{F} represents the set of feasible components with respect to the problem constraints. When q_0 is close to 1, the ACS is highly greedy, thus favoring components which posse the best combination of large pheromone levels and heuristic values. On the other side, setting $q_0 = 0$ implies that the ACS behaves similarly to an AS concerning the selection of the next component. Therefore, the value given to q_0 determines the balance between a greedy and a probabilistic selection of the next component. Additionally, there exist local and global rules for updating the pheromone levels. The local rule (which uses a constant value) is executed after each ant makes a selection on the next component, whereas the global one is applied at the end of each iteration by using the objective value of the best solution so far[12].

Let us now present the process by which our ant algorithm builds a solution for MTTP with a particular ant. The instance considered is taken from the example of size 8 on page 3. Initially

⁶ We assume a constrained optimization problem.

⁷ A detailed description of these versions can be found in [12].

$S = \emptyset$ and $F = \{1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8\}$, i.e., the solution under construction and the set of allowed tasks to schedule next (at the beginning, all tasks are schedulable). Next, the 'repeat' loop starts: let us suppose that $i = 1^8$ is the next task⁹ selected from F . Then, $S = S \cup \{1\} = \{1\}$, $g(1) = 0$, and $A = \{3, 5, 6, 7, 8\}$, since $g(2) + l_2 > d_2$, $g(4) + l_4 > d_4$ and task 1 is already in the solution. Iteration two, $i = 5$, $S = S \cup \{5\} = \{1, 5\}$, $g(1) = 0$, $g(5) = 2$, and $F = \{3, 6, 7, 8\}$ since 5 has been selected. Iteration three, $i = 6$, $S = S \cup \{6\} = \{1, 5, 6\}$, $F = \{3, 7, 8\}$, and $g(1) = 0$, $g(5) = 2$, and $g(6) = 6$. Iteration four, $i = 3$, $S = S \cup \{3\} = \{1, 3, 5, 6\}$. In this case the number of task selected is in between tasks 1 and 5, therefore the values $g(j)$ for $j \in \{5, 6\}$, will change after the re-scheduling process takes place, thus $g(1) = 0$, $g(3) = 2$, $g(5) = 3$, $g(6) = 7$, and $F = \{7, 8\}$. Iteration five, $i = 8$, $S = S \cup \{8\} = \{1, 3, 5, 6, 8\}$, $g(1) = 0$, $g(3) = 2$, $g(5) = 3$, $g(6) = 7$, $g(8) = 10$, and $F = \{7\}$. Finally, $i = 7$, $S = S \cup \{1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8\}$, $F = \emptyset$, $g(1) = 0$, $g(3) = 2$, $g(5) = 3$, $g(6) = 7$, $g(7) = 10$, and $g(8) = 15$.

The feasible solution obtained is $S = \{1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8\}$ with an objective value of $\sum_{i \in T-S} w_i = w_2 + w_4 = 20 + 19 = 39$. Solution S is equivalent to 10101111 if represented as a binary string.

5 Parallel Strategies for ACO Metaheuristic

In section 1 we enumerated several parallel implementations of ACO algorithms. Most of them belong to the general purpose parallelization strategies given by Randall et al.[18] according to the level at which the parallelism is exploited. For example, at a large scale, the entire search could be performed concurrently. Alternatively, parallelism can sometimes be used for the evaluation of solution elements, particularly when this evaluation is computationally expensive. However, it must be said that parallel performances can suffer when there is a large communication overhead among the processors.

Randall et al.[18] proposed an interesting classification of parallelization strategies for ACO metaheuristic. These are: *Parallel Independent Ant Colonies*, *Parallel Interacting Ant Colonies*, *Parallel Ants*, *Parallel Evaluation of Solution Elements*, and *A Combination of the two strategies mentioned above*.

For our work we considered the first and second strategies, that are described in the following. Parallel Independent Ant Colonies (Strategy A or S_A) is an approach in which a number a sequential ACO searches are run across the available set of processors. Each colony is differentiated in the values of key parameters. In this method, no communication is required between processors. Parallel Interacting Ant Colonies (Strategy B or S_B) is similar to the method above, except that an exchange of information between colonies occurs at preset iterations. Although the description in [18] implies sharing of the pheromone trail structure of the best performing colony among all the colonies, it is possible to exchange in some way the best solutions found in each colony. Therefore, the exchange of solutions between colonies can be considered as a class of interaction between parallel ant colonies.

Strategy S_A can be easily implemented and no additional explanation is required. However, strategy S_B admits different implementations according to a particular parallel model. In this work we considered the *Island Model*, called S_B^I .

The two parallel strategies studied in this paper for the ACO algorithm, i.e., S_A and S_B^I ; were implemented using the MALLBA project library which includes two family of classes according

⁸ The values of i are given arbitrarily in order to proceed with the example.

⁹ The tasks are the problem components for MTTP

to their purpose in the system. They are called *provided* and *required* respectively. The *provided* classes conform the skeleton of the ACO metaheuristic, i.e., those classes that are independent of the problem at hands. On the other hand, the *required* classes are specific for a particular problem (e.g., the heuristic value η).

5.1 Strategy S_B^I

This strategy is implemented by using the unidirectional ring topology for communications of the best-so-far solution which is used in MALLBA for many other EAs implemented under the island model (see figure 6). This kind of communications let us reuse many object classes already defined in MALLBA regarding a particular similarity between evolutionary and ant algorithms: they are two population based techniques.

In this island approach, the whole colony is split into n sub-colonies which are distributed onto the processors available in the network. Each sub-colony searches for solutions independently of the remaining sub-colonies by using a local pheromone trail structure. The interaction among the colonies comprises the migrations of some partial solutions in order to share the learning experience with the other sub-colonies. Although EAs and ACO metaheuristic are population based techniques, EAs pro-

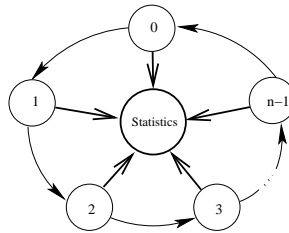


Fig. 6. Topology of communication between the sub-colonies. Additionally, there exists a node in charge of collecting the results from each sub-colony.

cess a population of solutions, whereas ant algorithms deal with a population of agents (ants) headed to build solutions. In this sense EAs are instance oriented approaches, while ant algorithms exhibit a model oriented approach[14]. Consequently, the solutions arriving to a target sub-colony are used in the local trail updating process under certain conditions, or they would be ignored. The rationale behind this mechanism is that the pheromone trail is the main *building block* of ACO algorithms. Therefore, the sub-colonies influence the local trail of a particular sub-colony by sending their best-so-far solutions. The migrations of solutions can be synchronous or asynchronous (both approaches can be used inside the MALLBA library). More precisely, according to the ring topology, sub-colony i tries to influence the respective pheromone trail levels of the sub-colony $(i + 1) \bmod n$ by sending its best solutions (n is the number of sub-colonies in the network).

6 Experimental Evaluation of the Proposed Parallel Ant Algorithms

The set of instances considered here belongs to Types 1 and 2 (see section 3) of size 100 and 200. For the two considered strategies (S_A and S_B) the colony is divided into 8 islands (sub-colonies), each

(tf, rdd)	Greedy	S_A			S_B		
		%hits	BestIt	σ_{BestIt}	%hits	BestIt	σ_{BestIt}
(0.1,0.1)	11.51%	100.00	25.54	65.50	99.50	19.80	49.57
(0.1,0.2)	11.21%	90.50	5.28	29.76	90.00	2.96	5.92
(0.2,0.1)	19.11%	100.00	5.02	18.16	100.00	6.09	24.21
(0.2,0.2)	22.25%	100.00	13.83	45.12	100.00	19.47	60.17

Table 1. Instances of size 100.

one with 16 agents performing the corresponding cycle of the ant algorithm in parallel. Strategy S_B includes a migration operation which will occur in a unidirectional ring topology, sending the best local solution to the neighboring sub-colony. The target sub-colony uses all the incoming solutions arrived so far plus the current local solutions for updating the pheromone trail structure. After this updating step, all the immigrants solutions are deleted.

The migration step is asynchronously performed every 5 cycles of the algorithm running on every island. We are using a network of Pentium IV processors at 2,6 GHz linked by a Fast Ether network at 100 Mbps.

Tables 1 and 2 display the results for strategies S_A and S_B on instances of size 100 and 200, respectively. Columns #hits, BestIt, and σ_{BestIt} indicate (respectively) the average of the percentage of hits over all runs, the minimum number of iteration to obtain the best value, and the associated standard deviation. Additionally, we included a column (named Greedy) which indicates the average of percentile distance from the best found, that is $(Value_{Greedy} - BestValue_{ACO})/BestValue_{ACO}$. Clearly, the values obtained by the greedy heuristic are far from the corresponding best values from the two strategies considered. However, this preliminary results do not show any statistically significant difference between S_A and S_B , i.e., without and with migration, respectively. A future study should be devoted to locate what are the exact differences between these two approaches, if any.

(tf, rdd)	Greedy	S_A			S_B		
		%hits	BestIt	σ_{BestIt}	%hits	BestIt	σ_{BestIt}
(0.1,0.1)	12.15%	90.50	8.35	14.65	90.00	7.33	12.56
(0.1,0.2)	12.78%	70.50	50.76	99.17	75.50	66.38	116.10
(0.2,0.1)	22.05%	94.00	35.10	81.78	93.00	38.15	96.24
(0.2,0.2)	23.37%	90.50	38.86	94.35	88.50	35.16	87.21

Table 2. Instances of size 200.

We carried out an additional experiment by changing the way in which the updating process of pheromone trail is achieved in S_B . In this case, the only incoming solutions that are included in the updating process are those solutions having a better objective value compared to that of the best local value found in the target sub-colony. By this, we consider only solutions that could improve the local behavior at their reception.

An additional experiment is also analyzed in which we launched a smaller number of ants on each sub-colony. In this case, we changed the size of the sub-colony from 8 to 4. Figure 7 shows the behavior of strategies S_A and S_B under this condition, and some variations: S_{A1} , S_{B1} , and S_{B2} . This figure shows the complementary percentage of hits (averaged on all instances tested of size 100 and 200). S_{A1} is similar to S_A except in that the size of each sub-colony is 4; S_{B1} (8 ants for each sub-colony) and S_{B2} (4 ants for each sub-colony) are the versions of S_B in which are only considered in the updating process the incoming solutions that are better than the best so far local solution.

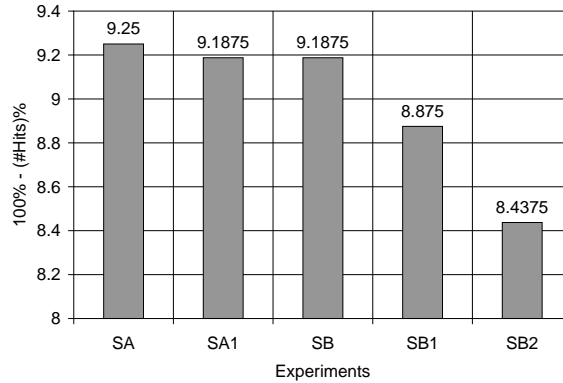


Fig. 7. Comparison of strategies S_A and S_B , and some variations of them.

When comparing S_A against S_{A1} we can observe a slight increment in the number of hits. On the other hand, strategies S_{B1} and S_{B2} performed more efficiently than S_B due to the change in the policy in which we only use incoming solutions if they are better than the best local ones (elitism is worth while in replacement). Additionally, it can be observed a further improvement when comparing S_{B2} against S_{B1} , i.e., when the number of ants in each sub-colony is reduced.

7 Conclusions

In this article we have included a detailed study of a problem generator for the MTTP scheduling problem as well as we analyzed several strategies for developing new parallel models of search with ACO algorithms. Our conclusions show that the resulting complexity of instances can be tuned at will, what allows us to perform meaningful tests on the class family of problems like MTTP. We have explained and modelled the behavior of the generator in terms of two parameters to clearly guide future research in this field.

The conclusions on the different models are more significant for problems of large complexity (above 200 tasks). The many parallel variants of the algorithms are mean to be used in a further work as baselines for developing more efficient algorithms. It should be noticed that our parallel models are new search algorithms, and not only faster implementations of existing algorithms. Since parallelism and ACO metaheuristics are not a developed subfield of research at present, we hope these results can be valuable for a large community of researchers interested in using very efficient algorithms outperforming state of the art solutions.

Future works will surely include a more detailed analysis of the new instances generator, as well as characterizing the behavior of the parallel strategies already implemented here. Also, new parallel models such as a Master/Slave algorithm is of interest in the quest for more efficient optimization tools for complex problems.

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