6.3000: Signal Processing

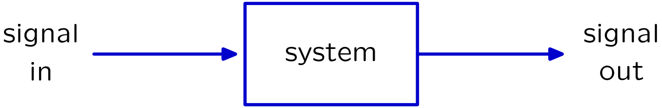
Systems

- System Abstraction
- Linearity and Time Invariance

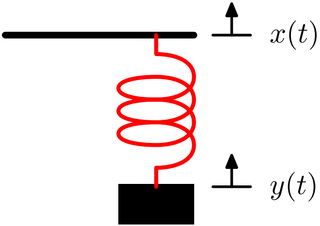
March 10, 2026

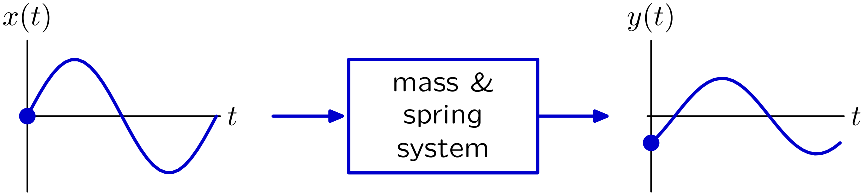
From Signals to Systems: The System Abstraction

Represent a **system** (physical, mathematical, or computational) by the way it transforms an **input signal** into an **output signal**.

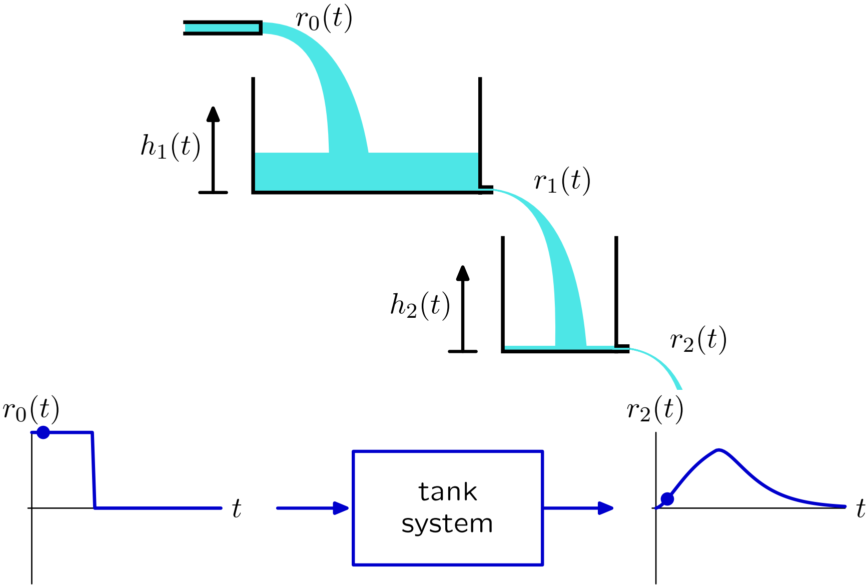


Example: Mass and Spring

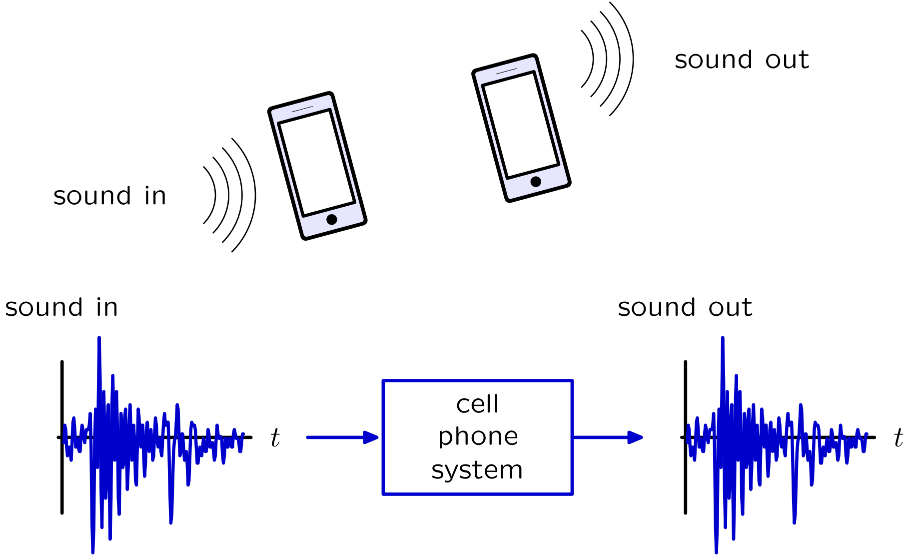




Example: Tanks

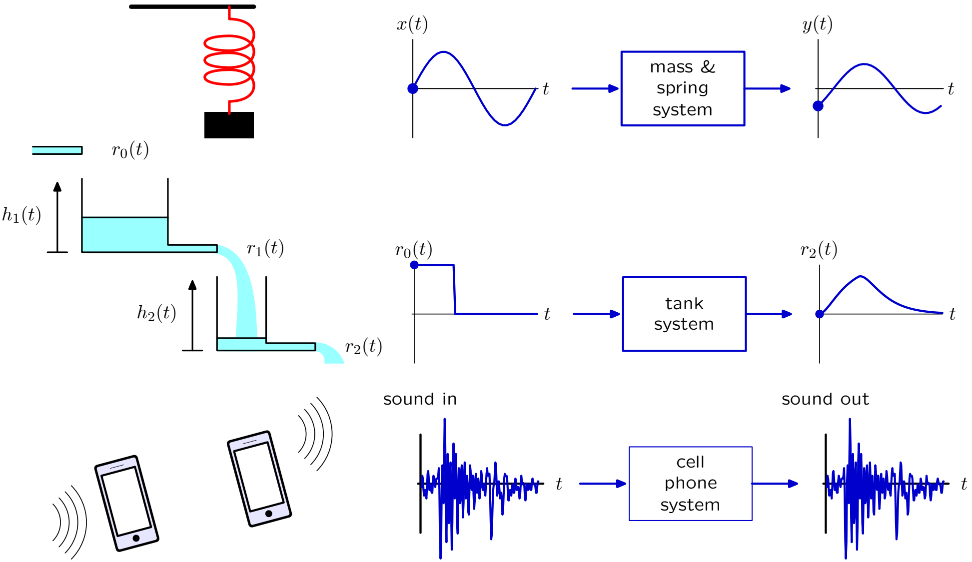


Example: Cell Phone System



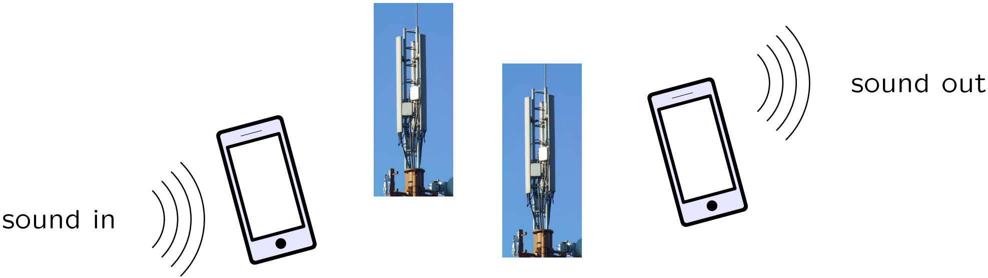
Signals and Systems: Widely Applicable

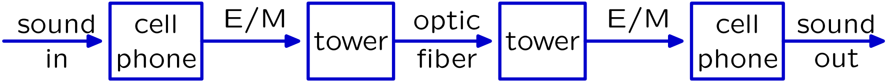
The Signals and Systems approach has broad application: electrical, mechanical, optical, acoustic, biological, financial, ...



Signals and Systems: Modular

The representation does not depend upon the physical substrate.

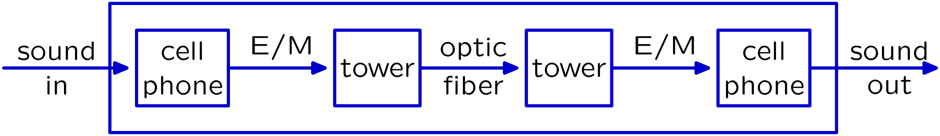




Signals and Systems: Hierarchical

Representations of component systems are easily combined.

Example: cascade of component systems

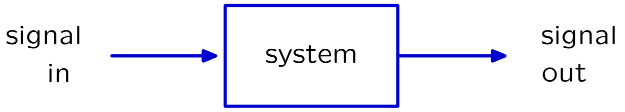


Composite system

Component and composite systems have the same form, and are analyzed with same methods.

System Abstraction

The system abstraction builds on and extends our work with signals.



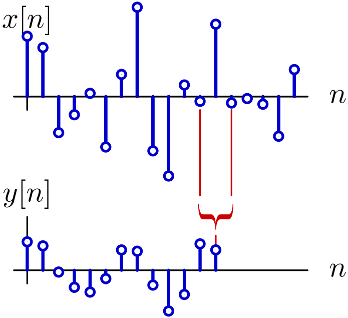
Over the next week, we will look at **three representations** for systems:

- **Difference Equation:** algebraic **constraint** on samples
- **Convolution:** represent a system by its **unit-sample response**
- **Filter:** represent a system by its **frequency response**

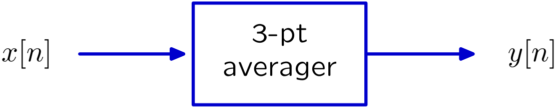
Example: Three-Point Averaging

The output at time n is average of inputs at times $n-1$, n, and $n+1$.

$$y[n] = \frac{1}{3}\Big(x[n-1] + x[n] + x[n+1]\Big)$$



Think of this process as a system with input $x[n]$ and output $y[n]$.



Properties of Systems

We will focus primarily on systems that have two important properties:

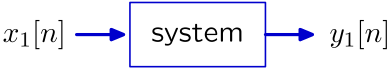
- **linearity**
- **time invariance**

Such systems are both **useful** and mathematically **tractable**.

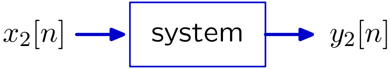
Additivity

A system is additive if its response to a **sum of signals** is equal to the **sum of the responses** to each signal taken one at a time.

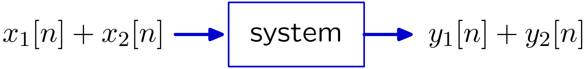
Given



and



the **system is additive** if



for all possible inputs and all times n.

Additivity

Example: The three-point averager is additive.

If

$$x_1[n] \to y_1[n] = \tfrac{1}{3}\Big(x_1[n-1] + x_1[n] + x_1[n+1]\Big)$$

$$x_2[n] \to y_2[n] = \tfrac{1}{3}\Big(x_2[n-1] + x_2[n] + x_2[n+1]\Big)$$

and

$$x_3[n] = x_1[n] + x_2[n]$$

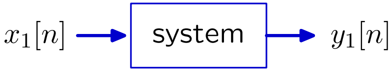
then

$$\begin{aligned} x_3[n] &\to \tfrac{1}{3}\Big(x_3[n-1] + x_3[n] + x_3[n+1]\Big) \\ x_1[n] + x_2[n] &\to \tfrac{1}{3}\Big((x_1[n-1] + x_2[n-1]) + (x_1[n] + x_2[n]) + (x_1[n+1] + x_2[n+1])\Big) \\ &= \tfrac{1}{3}\Big(x_1[n-1] + x_1[n] + x_1[n+1]\Big) + \tfrac{1}{3}\Big(x_2[n-1] + x_2[n] + x_2[n+1]\Big) \\ &= y_1[n] + y_2[n] \end{aligned}$$

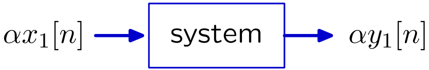
Homogeneity

A system is homogeneous if multiplying its input signal by a constant multiplies the output signal by the same constant.

Given



the **system is homogeneous** if



for all α and all possible inputs and all times n.

Homogeneity

Example: The three-point averager is homogeneous.

If

$$x_1[n] \rightarrow y_1[n] = \tfrac{1}{3}\Big(x_1[n-1] + x_1[n] + x_1[n+1]\Big)$$

and

$$x_2[n] = \alpha x_1[n]$$

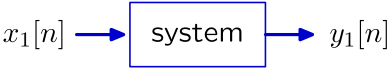
then

$$\begin{aligned} x_2[n] &\rightarrow \tfrac{1}{3}\Big(x_2[n-1] + x_2[n] + x_2[n+1]\Big) \\ \alpha x_1[n] &\rightarrow \tfrac{1}{3}\Big(\alpha x_1[n-1] + \alpha x_1[n] + \alpha x_1[n+1]\Big) \\ &= \alpha \tfrac{1}{3}\Big(x_1[n-1] + x_1[n] + x_1[n+1]\Big) \\ &= \alpha y_1[n] \end{aligned}$$

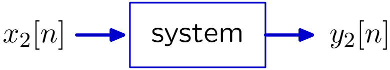
Linearity

A system is linear if its response to a **weighted sum of input signals** is equal to the **weighted sum of its responses** to each of the input signals.

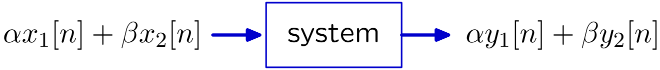
Given



and



the **system is linear** if



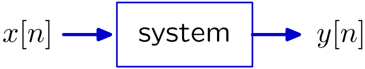
for all α and β and all possible inputs and all times n.

A system is linear if it is both additive and homogeneous.

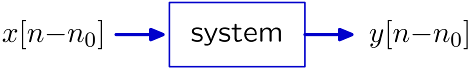
Time-Invariance

A system is time-invariant if delaying the input signal simply delays the output signal by the same amount of time.

Given



the **system is time invariant** if



for all n_0 and for all possible inputs and all times n.

Time-Invariance

Example: The three-point averager is time invariant.

If

$$x_1[n] \to y_1[n] = \frac{1}{3}\Big(x_1[n-1] + x_1[n] + x_1[n+1]\Big)$$

and

$$x_2[n] = x_1[n - n_o]$$

then

$$x_2[n] \to \frac{1}{3}\Big(x_2[n-1] + x_2[n] + x_2[n+1]\Big)$$

$$x_1[n-n_o] \to \frac{1}{3}\Big(x_1[n-n_o-1] + x_1[n-n_o] + x_1[n-n_o+1]\Big)$$

$$= y_1[n-n_o]$$

Representing Systems with Difference Equations

Consider a system represented by the following difference equation:

$$y[n] = x[n] + x[n-1]$$

for all n.

Is this system **linear**?

Representing Systems with Difference Equations

Determining linearity from a difference equation representation.

Example 2.

$$y[n] = x[n] \times x[n-1]$$

for all n.

Is this system **linear**?

Representing Systems with Difference Equations

Determining linearity from a difference equation representation.

Example 3:

$$y[n] = nx[n]$$

for all n.

Is the system **linear**?

Representing Systems with Difference Equations

Determining time invariance from a difference equation.

Example 3:

$$y[n] = nx[n]$$

for all n.

Is the system **time-invariant**?

Check Yourself

Assume that a system can be represented by a linear difference equation with constant coefficients.

$$\sum_l c_l y[n-l] = \sum_m d_m x[n-m]$$

Is such a system linear?

Is such a system time invariant?

Linear Difference Equations with Constant Coefficients

If it is initially at rest,[1] a system whose input/output relation obeys a linear difference equation with constant coefficients is linear and time-invariant.

General form:

$$\sum_l c_l y[n-l] = \sum_m d_m x[n-m]$$

Additivity: output of sum of inputs is the sum of corresponding outputs

$$\sum_l c_l (y_1[n-l] + y_2[n-l]) = \sum_m d_m (x_1[n-m] + x_2[n-m]) \qquad \checkmark$$

Homogeneity: scaling the input scales the resulting output

$$\sum_l \alpha c_l y[n-l] = \sum_m \alpha d_m x[n-m] \qquad \checkmark$$

Time invariance: delaying an input delays the resulting output

$$\sum_l c_l y[(n-n_0)-l] = \sum_m d_m x[(n-n_0)-m] \qquad \checkmark$$

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1 so that the homogeneous part of the output signal is zero

Check Yourself

Consider a system that is defined by

$$y[n] = x[n] + 1$$

Is this system linear?

Is this system time invariant?

Check Yourself

Consider the relation between homogeneity and additivity.

Which (if any) of the following are true?

1. Homogeneity and additivity are basically the same property.
2. Homogeneity is a special case of additivity.
3. Additivity is a special case of homogeneity.
4. All of the above.
5. None of the above.

Check Yourself

Consider a system whose output $y[n]$ is related to its input $x[n]$ as follows:

$$x[n] \quad \rightarrow \quad y[n] = \begin{cases} x[n] & \text{if } x[0] \neq x[1] \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$

Is this system homogeneous?

Is this system additive?

Is this system linear?

Check Yourself

Consider a system whose output $y[n]$ is the complex conjugate of its input.

$$y[n] = x^*[n]$$

Is this system homogeneous?

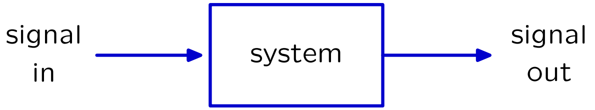
Is this system additive?

Is this system linear?

Summary: System Abstraction

The system abstraction builds on and extends our work with signals.

Goal: characterize a **system** to better understand the relation between two signals.

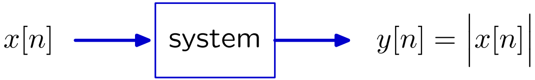


Three representations for systems:

- **Difference Equation:** algebraic **constraint** on samples $\surd$
- **Convolution:** represent a system by its **unit-sample response**
- **Filter:** represent a system by its **frequency response**

Question of the Day

Consider the following system:



1. Is the system homogeneous?

2. Is the system additive?

3. Is the sysem time-invariant?