

# Synthesis of Bias-scalable CMOS Analog Computational Circuits Using Margin Propagation

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**Abstract**—Approximation techniques are useful for implementing pattern recognizers, communication decoders and sensory processing algorithms where computational precision is not critical to achieve the desired system level performance. In our previous work, we had proposed margin propagation (MP) as an efficient piece-wise linear (PWL) approximation technique to a log-sum-exp function and had demonstrated its advantages for implementing probabilistic decoders. In this paper, we present a systematic and a generalized approach for synthesizing analog piecewise-linear (PWL) computing circuits using the MP principle. MP circuits use only addition, subtraction and threshold operations and hence can be implemented using universal conservation principles like the Kirchoff's current law. Thus, unlike the conventional translinear CMOS current-mode circuits, the operation of the MP circuits are functionally similar in weak, moderate and strong inversion regimes of the MOS transistor making the design approach bias-scalable. This paper presents measured results from MP circuits prototyped in a  $0.5\mu\text{m}$  standard CMOS process verifying the bias-scalable property. As an example, we apply the synthesis approach towards designing linear classifiers and we verify its performance using measured results.

**Index Terms**—Piecewise-linear (PWL) circuit, margin propagation (MP), analog computation, translinear, current-mode circuits, moderate-inversion circuits.

## I. INTRODUCTION

FOR applications that do not require high computational precision (e.g. pattern matching), current-mode analog signal processing (ASP) offers several advantages over digital signal processing techniques in terms of energy efficiency and speed [1], [2]. By exploiting the computational primitives inherent in the device physics, complicated mathematical functions can be implemented in analog, using significantly lower number of transistors as compared to its digital counterparts [2], [3]. The most popular approach for synthesizing current-mode analog computational circuits is based on the translinear principle which exploits the exponential current-to-voltage relationship observed in bipolar transistors [4], [5] and metal-oxide-semiconductor (MOS) transistors biased in weak-inversion [6]–[8]. In [9], [10], the translinear principle has also been extended towards synthesizing current-mode circuits using MOS transistors biased in strong-inversion.

All CMOS based translinear synthesis techniques share one common property: they rely on the physical response of the

MOS transistor operating either in strong or weak inversion. Hence, translinear circuits designed to operate in one biasing regime are generally not portable to the other. Also, while operating in weak-inversion is beneficial for achieving superior energy-efficiency and while operating in strong-inversion is beneficial for achieving higher-speed, it has been argued that a better speed-energy trade-off is achievable when the transistors are biased in the moderate inversion regime [11], [12]. Currently, no current-mode synthesis technique exists for implementing mathematical functions using MOS transistors biased in moderate inversion. However, if we can design circuits that operate using only universal conservation laws (e.g. current or charge conservation), the circuits should be portable across different biasing conditions.

In this paper we propose a bias-scalable framework for synthesizing analog computational circuits based on a margin propagation (MP) principle which uses only thresholding operations and the Kirchoff's current conservation principle. MP principle was introduced in [13] as a piece-wise linear (PWL) approximation to the log-sum-exp function which is extensively used in communications [14], optimization [15] and learning [13] algorithms. In this paper we show that the MP principle can be used to implement a wide-range of linear and non-linear mathematical functions. An important attribute of MP based synthesis is that all computations are performed in the logarithmic domain, as a result of which multiplications map into additions, divisions map into subtractions and power computations map into multiplications. This simplifies the implementation of many complicated non-linear functions.

We illustrate the basic synthesis procedure using a simple example. Consider a function  $f$  given by

$$f = a_1 \cdot b_1 + a_2 \cdot b_2 \quad (1)$$

where  $a_1, a_2, b_1, b_2 \in \mathbb{R}$  are the operands and  $\cdot$  denotes a multiplication operator. The operands can be converted into their differential form according to

$$\begin{aligned} a_1 &= a_1^+ - a_1^-, & a_2 &= a_2^+ - a_2^-, \\ b_1 &= b_1^+ - b_1^-, & b_2 &= b_2^+ - b_2^-, \end{aligned}$$

where  $a_1^+, a_1^-, a_2^+, a_2^-, b_1^+, b_1^-, b_2^+, b_2^- > 0$  are positive differential components. Each of these positive components can be converted into its logarithmic form as:

$$\begin{aligned} L_{a_1}^+ &= \log a_1^+, & L_{a_1}^- &= \log a_1^-, \\ L_{a_2}^+ &= \log a_2^+, & L_{a_2}^- &= \log a_2^-, \\ L_{b_1}^+ &= \log b_1^+, & L_{b_1}^- &= \log b_1^-, \\ L_{b_2}^+ &= \log b_2^+, & L_{b_2}^- &= \log b_2^-. \end{aligned}$$

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Accordingly, (1) can be converted into

$$f = e^{z^+} - e^{z^-}, \quad (2)$$

where  $z^+$  and  $z^-$  are expressed as

$$\begin{aligned} z^+ &= \log \left( e^{L_{a_1}^+ + L_{b_1}^+} + e^{L_{a_1}^- + L_{b_1}^-} + e^{L_{a_2}^+ + L_{b_2}^+} + e^{L_{a_2}^- + L_{b_2}^-} \right) \\ z^- &= \log \left( e^{L_{a_1}^+ + L_{b_1}^-} + e^{L_{a_1}^- + L_{b_1}^+} + e^{L_{a_2}^+ + L_{b_2}^-} + e^{L_{a_2}^- + L_{b_2}^+} \right) \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

Thus, evaluation of the function  $f$  can be decomposed into three steps: (a) input processing step which computes the log-likelihoods  $L_x^+$  and  $L_x^-$  based on the input  $x$ ; (b) log-sum-exp computation step given by equations (3); and (c) output processing step which computes  $f$  based on equation (2). We will show in this paper that for most functions, the input and the output processing steps are similar to equations shown above. The only difference in processing lies in the form of the log-sum-exp functions as shown in equation (3).

In MP based synthesis the objective will be to approximate the log-sum-exp functions and in the process generate different forms of linear and non-linear functions. Fig. 1 shows the architecture of a generic MP-based analog signal processor. The input differential signals  $a = a^+ - a^-$ ,  $b = b^+ - b^-$  are converted into their logarithmic form, processed by an MP circuit and the differential outputs  $z^+$  and  $z^-$  are used to compute the final output according to (2). For many applications, for instance in pattern recognition, only the sign of  $z^+ - z^-$  is important, so the output stage could potentially be replaced by just a comparator.

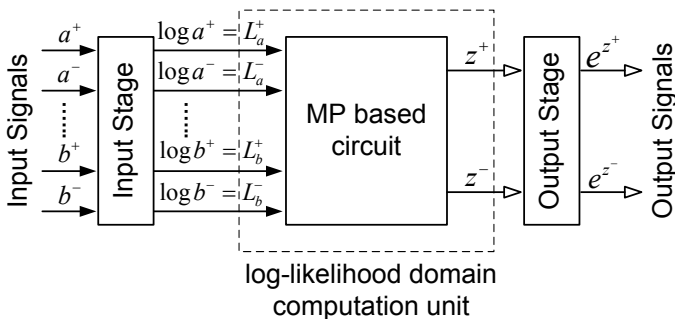


Fig. 1. Generic architecture of an MP-based analog processor

The paper is organized as follows: Section II briefly describes the mathematical concepts underlying the MP based approximation followed by section III which presents examples of MP circuits implementing the basic mathematical functions. We juxtapose the theoretical and measured results in this section to demonstrate the bias-scalable property of the MP circuits. All the measured results presented in this paper have been obtained from circuits prototyped in a standard  $0.5\mu\text{m}$  CMOS technology. Section IV analyzes the scalability of MP circuits with respect to fundamental noise, transistor mismatch and speed. In section V, we illustrate the synthesis procedure by designing an MP based linear pattern classifier. In section VI, we conclude the paper by describing some extensions of the proposed work.

## II. LOG-SUM-EXP APPROXIMATION USING MARGIN PROPAGATION

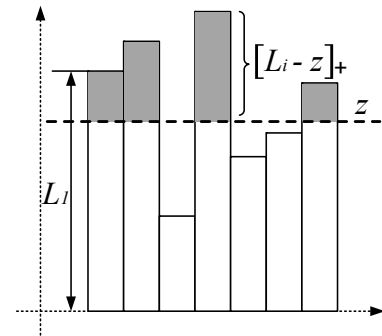


Fig. 2. Illustration of reverse water-filling procedure

Given a set of likelihood scores  $L_i$ ,  $i = 1, \dots, N$ , a general form of log-sum-exp function is given by

$$z_{\log} = \log \left( \sum_{i=1}^N e^{L_i} \right). \quad (4)$$

In MP approximation,  $z_{\log}$  is estimated using  $z$  which is computed according to a reverse water-filling constraint [16] expressed as:

$$\sum_{i=1}^N [L_i - z]_+ = \gamma, \quad (5)$$

where  $[\cdot]_+ = \max(\cdot, 0)$  denotes a threshold operation and  $\gamma \geq 0$  represents a parameter of the algorithm. The solution to equation (5) can be visualized using Fig. 2, where the cumulative score beyond  $z$  (shown by the shaded area) equals  $\gamma$ . It can be shown that  $z$  is a PWL approximation to  $z_{\log}$  and the sketch of the proof is summarized in Appendix I. For the rest of this paper, we will denote the MP function as

$$z = M(L_1, \dots, L_N, \gamma). \quad (6)$$

The MP based PWL approximation is illustrated graphically for the following function

$$\phi(L_1, L_2) = \log \left( \frac{1 + e^{L_1 + L_2}}{e^{L_1} + e^{L_2}} \right), \quad (7)$$

which is commonly used for implementing communication decoders [17], [18]. First, similar to our example in section I, we express  $\phi(\cdot)$  in terms of the differential components of its arguments, i.e.,  $L_1 = L_1^+ - L_1^-$ ,  $L_2 = L_2^+ - L_2^-$  as

$$\begin{aligned} \phi(L_1, L_2) &= \log \left( \frac{e^{L_1^- + L_2^-} + e^{L_1^+ + L_2^+}}{e^{L_1^- + L_2^+} + e^{L_1^+ + L_2^-}} \right), \\ &= \log \left( e^{L_1^- + L_2^-} + e^{L_1^+ + L_2^+} \right) - \log \left( e^{L_1^- + L_2^+} + e^{L_1^+ + L_2^-} \right). \end{aligned} \quad (8)$$

Thus,  $\phi(L_1, L_2)$  is represented as a difference of two ‘‘log-sum-exp’’ functions, each of which is approximated by its MP equivalent as:

$$\phi(L_1, L_2) \approx M(L_1^- + L_2^-, L_1^+ + L_2^+, \gamma) - M(L_1^+ + L_2^-, L_1^- + L_2^+, \gamma). \quad (9)$$



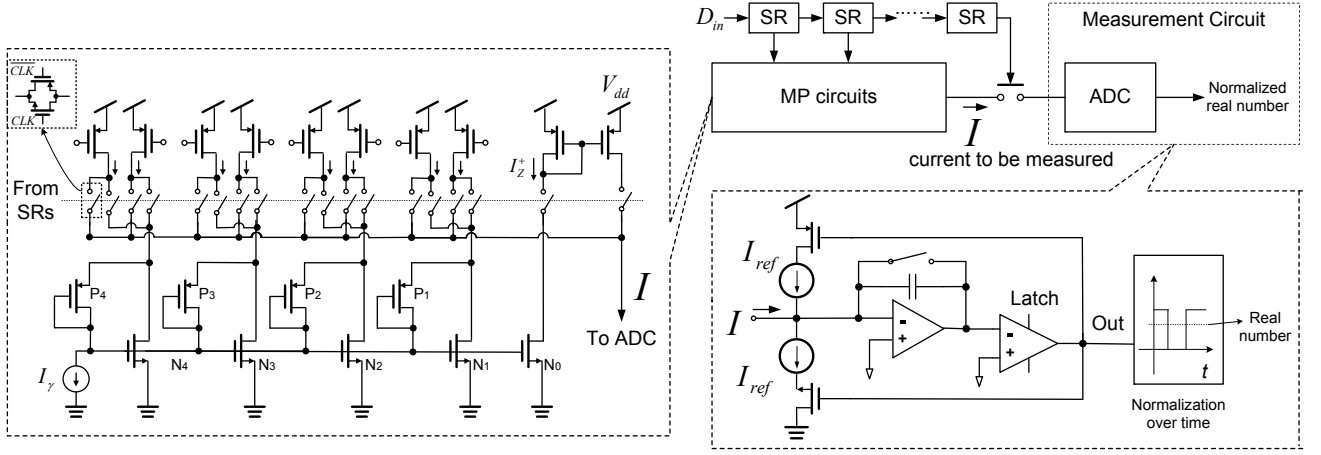


Fig. 6. System architecture of the chip

modulator as an analog-to-digital converter for measurement and calibration of the output currents. Because the circuits used for implementing the  $\Sigma\Delta$  modulator have been reported elsewhere [22] we have omitted its implementation details in this paper. The input currents and hence the operating region (weak, moderate and strong inversion) of all the transistors are adjusted by controlling the gate voltages of the PMOS transistors. For each of the operating regions, the ADC is recalibrated to the maximum current and the measured results (presented in the next sections) are normalized with respect to the maximum current.

### B. MP based Addition

To compute  $a + b$  with respect to the two input variables  $a$  and  $b$ ,  $a \in \mathbb{R}, b \in \mathbb{R}$  the operands are first represented in their differential forms  $a = a^+ - a^-$  and  $b = b^+ - b^-$  with  $a^+, a^-, b^+, b^- \in \mathbb{R}^+$ . Then, the operation is rewritten as in Fig. 1

$$\begin{aligned} a + b &= a^+ - a^- + b^+ - b^- \\ &= (a^+ + b^+) - (a^- + b^-) \\ &= e^{\log(a^+ + b^+)} - e^{\log(a^- + b^-)}. \end{aligned} \quad (11)$$

All the operands are then mapped into a log-likelihood domain according to

$$\begin{aligned} L_a^+ &= \log a^+, & L_a^- &= \log a^-, \\ L_b^+ &= \log b^+, & L_b^- &= \log b^-, \end{aligned}$$

where  $L_a^+ \in \mathbb{R}, L_a^- \in \mathbb{R}, L_b^+ \in \mathbb{R}, L_b^- \in \mathbb{R}$ . Since, our circuit implementation uses only unipolar current sources, we impose additional constraints  $a^+, a^-, b^+, b^- > 1$ . Due to the differential representation, this additional constraint will not affect the final output. Let  $z^+$  denote  $\log(a^+ + b^+)$  and  $z^-$  denote  $\log(a^- + b^-)$ . Then, (11) can be written as

$$a + b = e^{z^+} - e^{z^-}. \quad (12)$$

and  $z^+$  can be expanded as

$$z^+ = \log(a^+ + b^+)$$

$$\begin{aligned} &= \log(e^{\log a^+} + e^{\log b^+}) \\ &= \log(e^{L_a^+} + e^{L_b^+}). \end{aligned} \quad (13)$$

We now apply the MP approximation to the log-sum-exp functions to obtain

$$z^+ \approx M(L_a^+, L_b^+, \gamma). \quad (14)$$

Similarly,

$$\begin{aligned} z^- &= \log(a^- + b^-) \\ &= \log(e^{\log a^-} + e^{\log b^-}) \\ &= \log(e^{L_a^-} + e^{L_b^-}) \\ &\approx M(L_a^-, L_b^-, \gamma) \end{aligned} \quad (15)$$

Since the equation (14) and the equation (15) uses only two operands, its circuit level implementation is identical to Fig. 4 except that it has only two input branches instead of four. The single-ended circuit for addition is shown in Fig. 7.  $I_{z^+}$ , the current through  $N_0$ , represents the value of  $z^+$ .  $I_{L_a^+}$ ,  $I_{L_b^+}$  and  $I_\gamma$  represents  $L_a^+$ ,  $L_b^+$  and  $\gamma$  respectively.

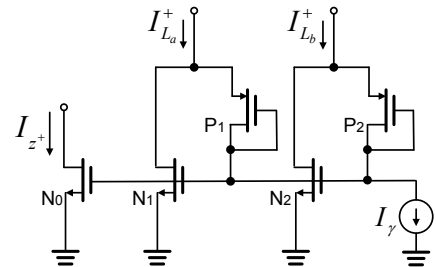


Fig. 7. MP circuit for implementing two operand addition

Fig. 8a (a)-(c) compares the output  $z^+ - z^-$  obtained using floating-point implementation of the “log-sum-exp” functions, using floating-point implementation of the MP approximation and from measurements (normalized currents) using the fabricated prototype.

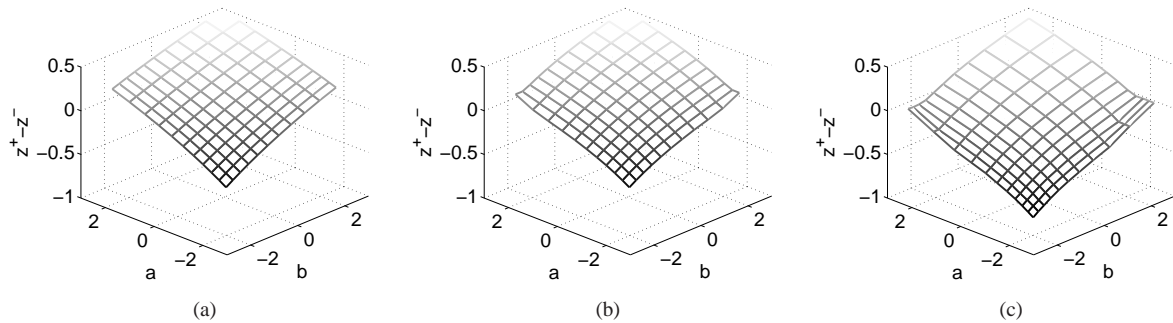


Fig. 8. Addition:  $z^+ - z^-$  computed according to (a) the original log-sum-exp function; (b) MP approximations (simulation); and (c) MP circuits (measurement).

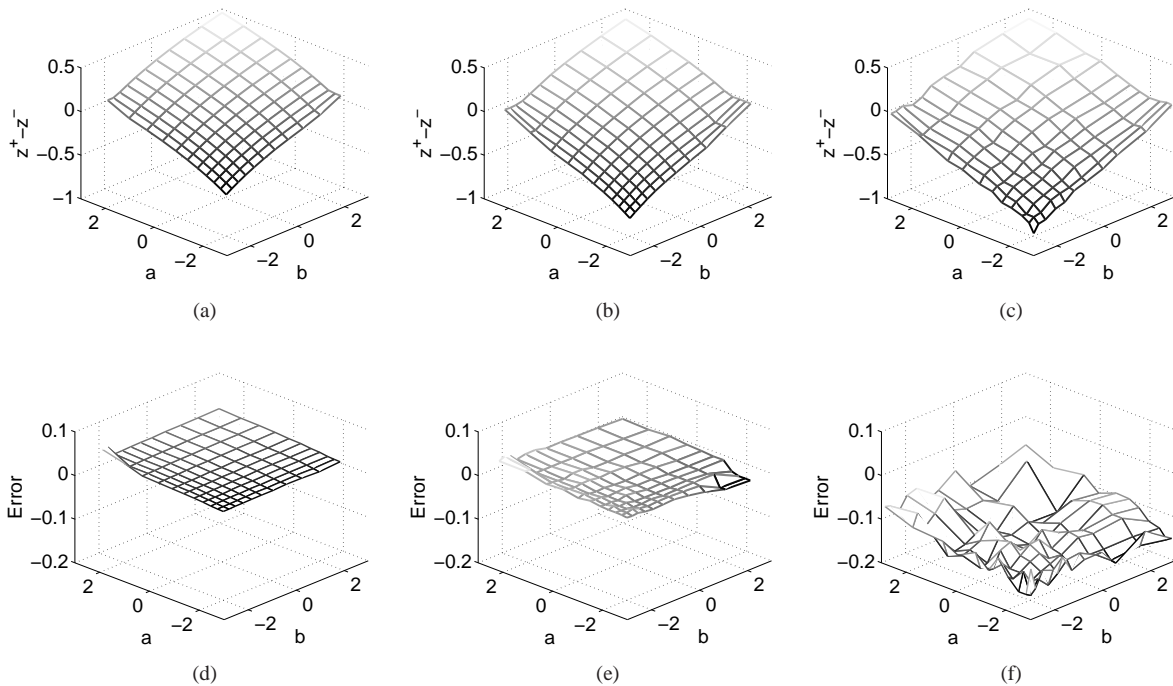


Fig. 9. Addition: measurement results for  $z^+ - z^-$  with transistors biased in (a) strong inversion; (b) moderate inversion; (c) weak inversion; (d)-(f) computation errors for (a)-(c).

Fig. 9 (a)-(c) show the measurement results when the transistors are biased in (a) strong inversion; (b) moderate inversion; and (c) weak inversion. Fig. 9 (d)-(f) show the approximation error between the measured response and the software model. The results validate our claim for the addition operation that MP approximation is scalable across different biasing regions and the circuit in Fig. 7 approximates the "log-sum-exp" function with a reasonable error. The error increases when the circuit is biased in the weak inversion and as with any sub-threshold analog VLSI circuit, which we attribute to transistor mismatch, flicker-noise, and errors introduced in mapping floating-point operands into analog operands (currents).

### C. MP based Subtraction

Synthesizing an MP circuit for subtraction  $a - b$ , with  $a$  and  $b$  being the two operands is similar to the addition operation. The operation can be written in a differential form as  $a = a^+ - a^-$  and  $b = b^+ - b^-$ , with  $a^+, a^-, b^+, b^- \in \mathbb{R}^+$  and satisfying  $a^+, a^-, b^+, b^- > 1$ . Thus,  $a - b$  is written as

$$\begin{aligned} a - b &= (a^+ - a^-) - (b^+ - b^-) \\ &= (a^+ + b^-) - (a^- + b^+) \\ &= e^{\log(a^+ + b^-)} - e^{\log(a^- + b^+)} \end{aligned} \quad (16)$$

which after conversion into a log-likelihood domain

$$\begin{aligned} L_a^+ &= \log a^+, & L_a^- &= \log a^-, \\ L_b^+ &= \log b^+, & L_b^- &= \log b^-, \end{aligned}$$

leads to

$$\begin{aligned}
z^+ &= \log(a^+ + b^-) \\
&= \log\left(e^{\log a^+} + e^{\log b^-}\right) \\
&= \log\left(e^{L_a^+} + e^{L_b^-}\right) \\
&\approx M(L_a^+, L_b^-, \gamma)
\end{aligned} \tag{17}$$

and

$$\begin{aligned}
z^- &= \log(a^- + b^+) \\
&= \log\left(e^{\log a^-} + e^{\log b^+}\right) \\
&= \log\left(e^{L_a^-} + e^{L_b^+}\right) \\
&\approx M(L_a^-, L_b^+, \gamma)
\end{aligned} \tag{18}$$

where  $z^+$  and  $z^-$  are differential forms of the output log-likelihoods as described in (2). The circuit implementation of subtraction is identical to that of addition, except that the input differential currents are now permuted. Fig. 10 compares the measured response with software based “log-sum-exp” and MP implementation. Also, Fig. 11 (a)-(c) shows the measured results when the transistors are biased in the three different operating regimes. Similar to the results obtained for the addition operation, the measured result show the bias-scalable operation of the MP circuits.

#### D. Four quadrant multiplication

Implementing a single quadrant multiplier using MP circuit is straight-forward because  $z = a \cdot b$  in its logarithmic form can be expressed as a sum of likelihoods  $L_z = L_a + L_b$ , where  $L_x$  denotes the logarithm of the operand  $x$ . Thus, a single quadrant multiplier requires only a current summation and can be implemented using KCL. For an MP-based four-quadrant multiplier the operation  $a \cdot b$  is again expressed in terms of the differential operands as:

$$\begin{aligned}
a \cdot b &= (a^+ - a^-) \cdot (b^+ - b^-) \\
&= (a^+ \cdot b^+ + a^- \cdot b^-) - (a^- \cdot b^+ + a^+ \cdot b^-) \\
&= e^{\log(a^+ \cdot b^+ + a^- \cdot b^-)} - e^{\log(a^- \cdot b^+ + a^+ \cdot b^-)}.
\end{aligned} \tag{19}$$

After log-likelihood mapping, the following differential forms are obtained

$$\begin{aligned}
z^+ &= \log(a^+ \cdot b^+ + a^- \cdot b^-) \\
&= \log\left(e^{\log(a^+ \cdot b^+)} + e^{\log(a^- \cdot b^-)}\right) \\
&\approx M(L_a^+ + L_b^+, L_a^- + L_b^-, \gamma)
\end{aligned} \tag{20}$$

and

$$\begin{aligned}
z^- &= \log(a^- \cdot b^+ + a^+ \cdot b^-) \\
&= \log\left(e^{\log(a^- \cdot b^+)} + e^{\log(a^+ \cdot b^-)}\right) \\
&\approx M(L_a^- + L_b^+, L_a^+ + L_b^-, \gamma)
\end{aligned} \tag{21}$$

The circuit implementing an MP based four-quadrant multiplier is shown in Fig. 12.  $I_{z^+}$  denotes the value of  $z^+$ .  $I_\gamma$

represents  $\gamma$ .  $I_{L_a^+}(I_{L_a^-})$ ,  $I_{L_b^+}(I_{L_b^-})$  represent  $L_a^+(L_a^-)$ ,  $L_b^+(L_b^-)$  respectively.

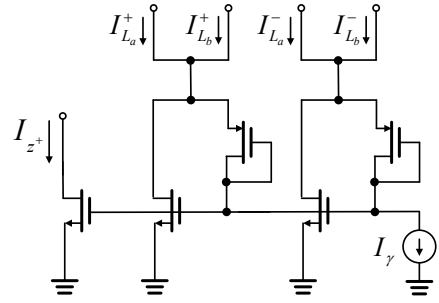


Fig. 12. MP circuit for implementing four quadrant operand multiplication

Fig. 13 compares the measured output  $z^+ - z^-$  with the ideal implementation of the model (20) and (21). Fig. 14 (a)-(c) shows the measurement results when the transistors are biased in: (a) strong; (b) moderate and (c) weak inversion along with the respective approximation error. Again, the measured results show the bias-scaling property of MP circuits.

#### E. Single Quadrant Division

Like the implementation of a single quadrant multiplication, implementing a single quadrant division in logarithmic domain is straight-forward. For operands  $a, b > 0$ , division in the logarithmic domain is equivalent to a subtraction operation  $L_a - L_b$  which can be implemented using KCL. To implement four quadrant division, the operation first requires extracting the sign of the operand as  $x = \text{sgn}(x) \cdot |x|$ , where  $|x|$  is the absolute value of  $x$ . A single quadrant division can now be used for the absolute values and the sign of the final output can be computed using only comparators.

#### F. Power and Polynomial Computation

For positive operands satisfying  $a \in \mathbb{R}^+$ ,  $a > 1$ , computing  $a^n$ ,  $n \in \mathbb{Z}^+$  in the logarithmic domain is equivalent to

$$\begin{aligned}
\log(a^n) &= n \cdot \log(a), \\
&= n \cdot L_a.
\end{aligned} \tag{22}$$

which can be implemented using a simple current mirror as shown in Fig. 15. Thus, in MP-based synthesis, power functions like square-root or cube-root can be implemented using current mirrors which significantly simplifies the implementation compared to translinear based synthesis [7]. However, for a four-quadrant implementation of power and polynomial function would require evaluating a Taylor expansion using multiplication and addition operations. Details of the implementation is provided in the Appendix II.

As an example, a four quadrant square function  $a^2$  can be implemented by expressing it as a product of two differential operands as  $(a^+ - a^-) \cdot (a^+ - a^-)$  which has an architecture similar to the four-quadrant multiplier described in section III-D. The differential output  $z^+$  and  $z^-$  corresponding to the

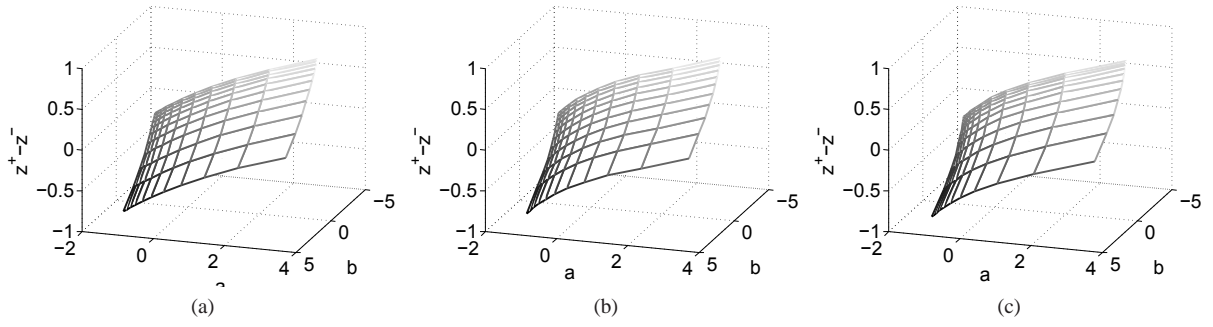


Fig. 10. Subtraction:  $z^+ - z^-$  computed by (a) original functions; (b) MP approximations (simulation); and (c) MP circuits (measurement).

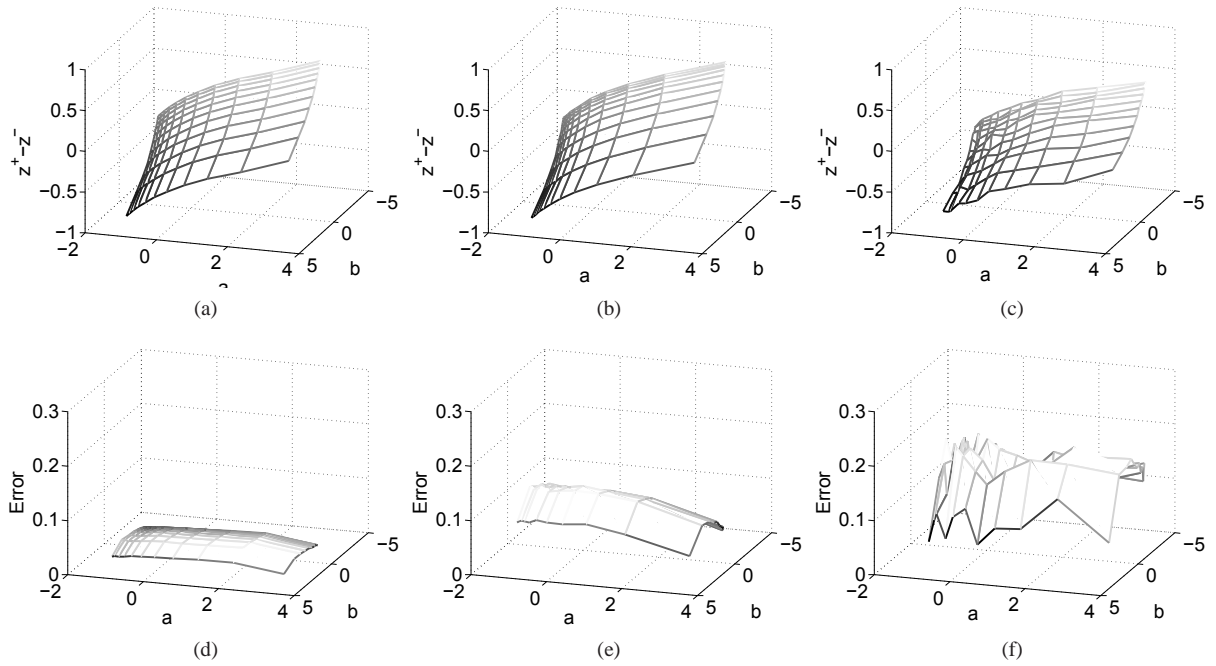


Fig. 11. Subtraction: measurement results for  $z^+ - z^-$  with transistors biased in (a) strong inversion; (b) moderate inversion; (c) weak inversion; and (d)-(f) show respective approximation errors.

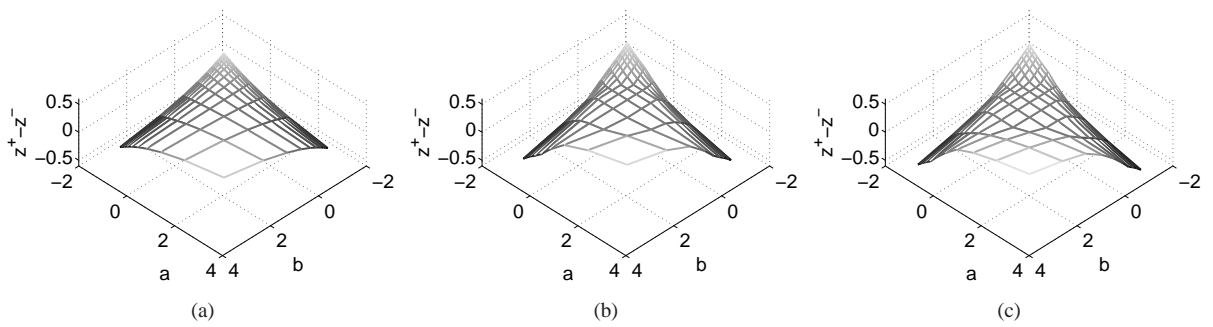


Fig. 13. Multiplication:  $z^+ * z^-$  computed according to the (a) original function; (b) MP approximations (simulation); and (c) MP circuits (measurement).

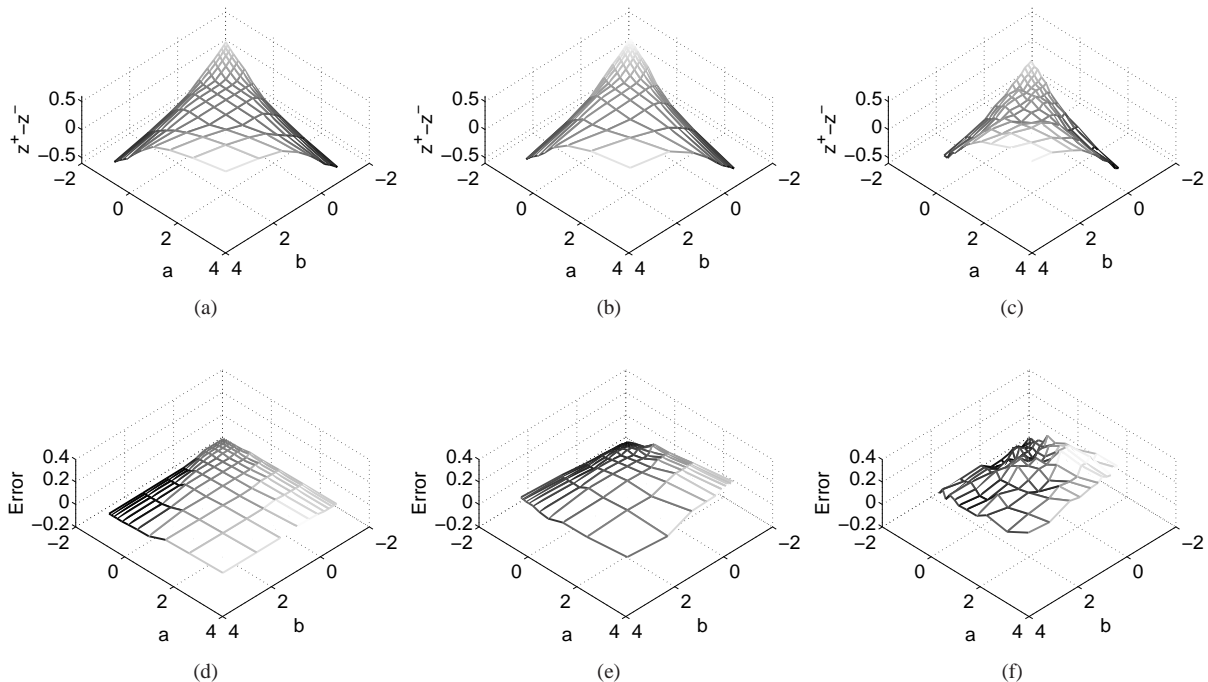


Fig. 14. Multiplication: measurement results for  $z^+ - z^-$  with transistors biased in (a) strong inversion; (b) moderate inversion; (c) weak inversion; and (d)-(f) the respective approximation errors .

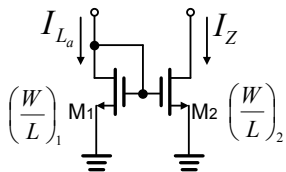


Fig. 15. A current mirror implementing the power function in logarithmic domain.

square operation can be expressed in terms of differential log-likelihood inputs  $L_a^+, L_a^-$  as

$$z^+ \approx M(2L_a^+, 2L_a^-, \gamma) \quad (23)$$

$$z^- = \log 2 + L_a^+ + L_a^- \quad (24)$$

Fig.16 shows the measured results when the circuit in Fig. 12 has been configured to compute a four-quadrant square function. Again, the circuit is shown to approximate the “log-sum-exp” function for strong-inversion, moderate-inversion and weak-inversion biasing conditions.

#### IV. SCALABILITY ANALYSIS OF MP CIRCUIT

In Fig. 3, we showed that the accuracy of the PWL approximation improves when the number of operands in the margin function increases. In this section, we analyze the effect of hardware artifacts (noise, mismatch, speed and input/output impedance) on the performance and scalability of MP circuits.

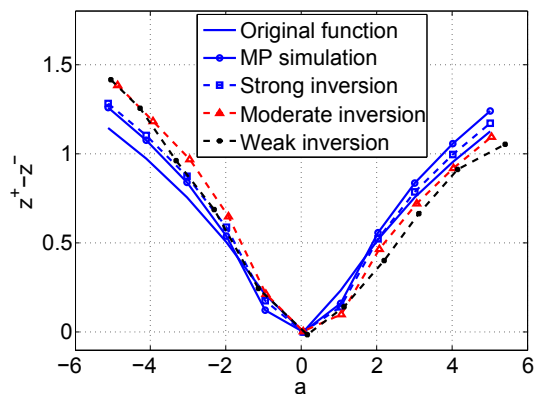


Fig. 16. Power:  $z^+ - z^-$  computed according to the log-sum-exp function, the MP approximation simulation and the MP circuit measurement.

##### A. Noise and Mismatch Analysis of MP circuit

The noise model for the basic MP circuit in Fig. 4 is shown in Fig. 17. For the following analysis we will assume that the number of input current branches in the MP circuit equals  $K$ . Due to the MP constraint (5) we will assume that the noise in only  $K - 1$  of the parallel branches are uncorrelated (due to KCL constraints). The total output noise power  $I_{n,z}^2$  can therefore be expressed as:

$$I_{n,z}^2 = \sum_{i=1}^K \left[ \frac{I_{n,source_i}^2}{(K-2)^2} + \frac{I_{n,N_i}^2}{(K-2)^2} + \frac{I_{n,P_i}^2}{g_m^2 R_{source}^2 (K-2)^2} \right] + \frac{I_{n,sink}^2}{K^2} + I_{n,N_0}^2 \quad (25)$$

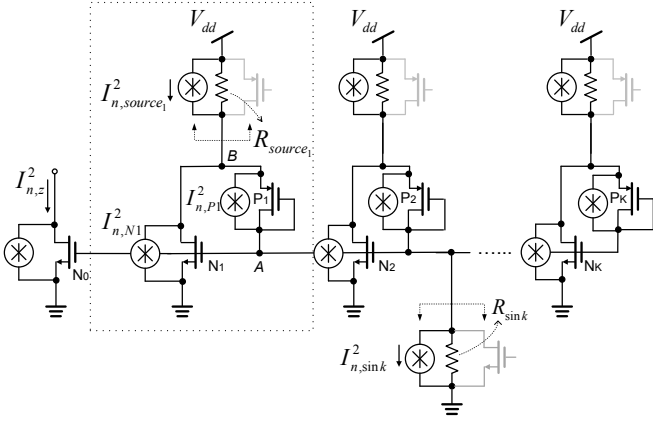


Fig. 17. Noise model for MP circuit in Fig. 4.

where  $I_{n,source_i}$ ,  $I_{n,N_i}$ ,  $I_{n,P_i}$ , and  $I_{n,sink}$  are noise currents as shown in Fig. 17 and  $R_{source}$  is the output impedance of the current sources. We have simplified the expression in (25) by assuming  $K$  to be large and by assuming that the small-signal parameters  $g_m$ ,  $R_{source}$  for all the transistors are approximately equal. Equation (25) can be written as

$$I_{n,z,thermal}^2 = \left[ 1 + \frac{2}{K} + \frac{1}{g_m^2 R_{source}^2 K} \right] \frac{8}{3} kT g_m, \quad (26)$$

where we have considered only the effect of thermal noise as given by  $I_n^2 = 8/3kTg_m$  [23]. The effect of the flicker-noise has been ignored in equation (26), because it exhibits a similar dependency on  $K$  as the thermal-noise. Equation (26) shows that as the number of branches (or operands)  $K$  increases, the output noise reduces and in the limit  $K \rightarrow \infty$ , the output noise is just equal to the noise due to transistor  $N_0$ . The reduction in the output noise with the increase in  $K$  can be attributed to the attenuation and averaging effect of the  $K$  stage current mirrors formed by  $N_1 \sim N_K$ . Also, it is important that  $g_m R_{source} \gg 1$ , not only for reducing the effect of noise but also to ensure that the input impedance of the MP circuit is much lower than the output impedance of the current sources (see Fig. 17).

The mismatch analysis for the MP circuit follows a similar procedure as the noise analysis. The MOS transistor mismatch models used in the analysis are based on the work reported in [24] which uses two technology dependent constants  $A_{V_T}$  and  $A_\beta$  that determine the mismatch variance as:

$$\sigma^2(\Delta V_T) = \frac{A_{V_T}^2}{WL} \quad (27)$$

$$\left( \frac{\sigma(\Delta\beta)}{\beta} \right)^2 = \frac{A_\beta^2}{WL} \quad (28)$$

$V_T$  denotes the threshold voltage,  $\beta = \mu C_{ox} W/L$ ,  $W$  and  $L$  represent the width and length of the MOS transistor. It is also claimed in [24] that for MOS transistors the mismatch in  $V_T$  dominates the mismatch in  $\beta$ . Therefore, in this paper, our analysis is only based on the  $V_T$  mismatch. The error variance  $\sigma^2(\Delta V_T)$  can be converted into an equivalent noise

current source in Fig. 17 according to

$$\sigma^2(I) \simeq g_m^2 \sigma^2(\Delta V_T) = g_m^2 \frac{A_{V_T}^2}{WL} \quad (29)$$

Hence, similar to the noise analysis, the error variance in the output current  $\sigma^2(I_z)$  is given by:

$$\sigma^2(I_z) \simeq \left( 1 + \frac{1}{K} + \frac{1}{g_m^2 R_{source}^2 K} \right) g_m^2 \frac{A_{V_T}^2}{WL}. \quad (30)$$

Equation (30) shows that for a large  $K$  the accuracy of the MP circuit is limited by the mismatch due to the output current mirror stage  $N_0$ . Thus, all layout and impedance transformation methods which are used for improving the accuracy of current mirrors, like centroid layout and cascoding techniques, can be used to improve the accuracy of MP circuits. The use of cascoding at the output stage transistor  $N_0$  increases the output impedance and makes the core MP module scalable to implement large networks.

### B. Speed and Bandwidth Analysis

As with other current-mode circuits, the transient response of the MP circuits is determined by its: (a) slew-rate which determines the large-signal response; and (b) bandwidth which determines the small-signal response. The node  $A$  in Fig. 4 has the largest capacitance and is discharged by the current  $I_\gamma$ . Therefore, the slew-rate of the MP circuit can be expressed as:

$$SR_A = \frac{I_\gamma}{K(C_{GS,N} + C_{GS,P} + C_{DB,P})} \quad (31)$$

where  $C_{GS,N}$  represents the gate-to-source capacitance of NMOS transistor  $N_1$  through  $N_K$ , and  $C_{GS,P}/C_{DB,P}$  denotes the gate-to-source/drain-to-body capacitance of the PMOS transistor  $P_1$  through  $P_K$ . Equation (31) shows that the slew-rate will reduce when the number of input branches  $K$  increase. However, the small-signal bandwidth of the circuit remains invariant with respect  $K$  and is determined by the frequency of the pole located at node  $A$  and is given by

$$f_{-3dB,A} = \frac{g_{m,P}}{2\pi(C_{GS,N} + C_{GS,P} + C_{DB,P})}. \quad (32)$$

$g_{m,P}$  represents the small-signal gate referred transconductance for the PMOS transistors  $P_1 \sim P_K$ . The slew-rate and bandwidth analysis show that scaling of MP circuit is limited by the application specific speed requirements which is controlled by the current  $I_\gamma$ . However, unlike translinear synthesis this limitation can be overcome in MP circuit by re-biasing the circuit in strong-inversion.

### C. Performance comparison with Translinear synthesis

In this section, we summarize and compare the performance of CMOS circuits designed using MP based synthesis with circuits designed using translinear synthesis. The comparisons made here are qualitative in nature because many of the performance metrics (silicon area and power dissipation) are dependent on the topology and complexity of the translinear (TL) circuit.

- **Accuracy:** MP based synthesis relies on PWL approximations at the algorithmic level. However, the accuracy of its circuit level implementation using CMOS current-mode circuit is only limited by mismatch. Our analysis in the previous section showed that the techniques used for designing precision current-mirrors can also be used to improve the accuracy of the MP circuits. TL based synthesis, on the other hand, are precise at the algorithmic level. However, their mapping to CMOS current-mode circuits is approximate due to the effect of sub-threshold slope (unlike bipolar transistors) and finite drain impedance. These artifacts also introduce temperature dependency in TL circuits, whereas MP circuits are theoretically temperature invariant. Also, due to their operation in weak-inversion, CMOS TL circuits are more prone to errors due to mismatch, whereas the MP circuits can be re-biased in strong-inversion if higher precision is desired, but at the expense of higher power dissipation.
- **Dynamic range:** The bias-scalable property of the MP circuit enables it to achieve a larger dynamic range compared to a TL circuit. Also, MP synthesis uses currents to represent log-likelihoods which can also achieve a larger dynamic range.
- **Speed:** For an MP circuit higher speed can be achieved by re-biasing the circuit in strong-inversion, without changing the circuit topology. For CMOS translinear circuits higher speed can be achieved by the use of large currents which implies using large size transistors to maintain their operation in the weak inversion. This will increase the silicon area when compared to an equivalent MP circuit.

## V. APPLICATION EXAMPLE: PATTERN CLASSIFIER

One of the applications where ultra-low power analog computing is attractive is pattern classification [2], [25]. Most pattern classifiers do not require high precision and any analog artifacts (like mismatch and non-linearity) can be calibrated using an offline training procedure. In this example, we use the MP circuits to design a bias-scalable linear classifier. A linear classifier implements an inner-product computation between a weight vector  $\mathbf{w} \in \mathbf{R}^n$  and the classifier input  $\mathbf{x} \in \mathbf{R}^n$  and is given by

$$f = \mathbf{w}^T \mathbf{x} \quad (33)$$

The weight vector  $\mathbf{w}$  is determined by an offline training procedure [2] using a labeled training dataset. The two vectors  $\vec{\mathbf{w}}$  and  $\vec{\mathbf{x}}$  are expressed in differential form as

$$\begin{aligned} \vec{\mathbf{w}} &= \vec{\mathbf{w}}^+ - \vec{\mathbf{w}}^- \\ &= [w_1^+, w_2^+, \dots, w_N^+]^T - [w_1^-, w_2^-, \dots, w_N^-]^T \\ \vec{\mathbf{x}} &= \vec{\mathbf{x}}^+ - \vec{\mathbf{x}}^- \\ &= [x_1^+, x_2^+, \dots, x_N^+]^T - [x_1^-, x_2^-, \dots, x_N^-]^T \end{aligned} \quad (34)$$

with all the  $w_i^+(w_i^-)$  and  $x_i^+(x_i^-) \in \mathbf{R}^+$ . Then equation (33) can be rewritten as

$$\begin{aligned} \vec{\mathbf{w}}^T \cdot \vec{\mathbf{x}} &= \sum_{i=1}^N (w_i^+ x_i^+ + w_i^- x_i^-) - \sum_{i=1}^N (w_i^+ x_i^- + w_i^- x_i^+) \\ &= e^{\log \sum_{i=1}^N (w_i^+ x_i^+ + w_i^- x_i^-)} - e^{\log \sum_{i=1}^N (w_i^+ x_i^- + w_i^- x_i^+)} \end{aligned}$$

$$= e^{z^+} - e^{z^-}. \quad (35)$$

when  $z^+$  and  $z^-$  are expressed as

$$\begin{aligned} z^+ &= \log \sum_{i=1}^N (w_i^+ x_i^+ + w_i^- x_i^-) \\ &\approx M(L_{w_1^+} + L_{x_1^+}, L_{w_1^-} + L_{x_1^-}, \dots, \\ &\quad L_{w_N^+} + L_{x_N^+}, L_{w_N^-} + L_{x_N^-}, \gamma) \\ z^- &= \log \sum_{i=1}^N (w_i^+ x_i^- + w_i^- x_i^+) \\ &\approx M(L_{w_1^+} + L_{x_1^-}, L_{w_1^-} + L_{x_1^+}, \dots, \\ &\quad L_{w_N^+} + L_{x_N^-}, L_{w_N^-} + L_{x_N^+}, \gamma). \end{aligned} \quad (36)$$

$L_{w_i^+}(L_{w_i^-})$  and  $L_{x_i^+}(L_{x_i^-})$  denote the logarithms of  $w_i^+(w_i^-)$  and  $x_i^+(x_i^-)$  in equation (35). For a binary classifier, only the sign of  $z^+ - z^-$  is important, implying that the output stage in the architecture (Fig. 1) could be implemented using a comparator (instead of  $e^{z^+} - e^{z^-}$ ). The system architecture and circuit diagram for the pattern classifier is shown in Fig. 18.

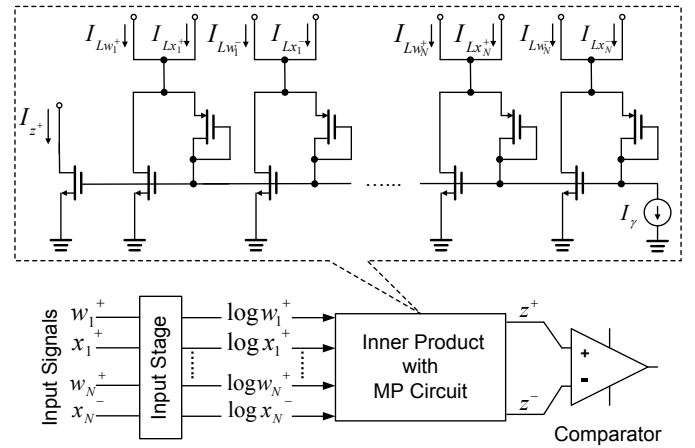


Fig. 18. System architecture and circuit diagram of the MP-based pattern classifier.

In this example, we generated a synthetic linearly separable dataset corresponding to classes: class I and class II. We used a linear support vector machine training algorithm [13] to determine weight  $\mathbf{w}$ . The parameter vector  $\mathbf{w}$  is then programmed as currents on the prototype chip. Test vectors  $\mathbf{x}$  were selected randomly and were then applied as input to the chip. For the sake of visualization, we show only results from a two-dimensional dataset. In this special case, the classifier equation (33) reduces to a two-dimensional inner product formulation as described in the example in section I. The circuit implementation is therefore identical to that of a full quadrant multiplier in Fig. 12. Fig. 19 shows the classification boundary and the classifier scores (negative values are represented by darker shades, whereas positive values are represented by lighter shades) obtained from software simulations and from the fabricated prototype under different biasing conditions. Again, the results show that the operation of the prototype is bias-scalable and the classification performance has been

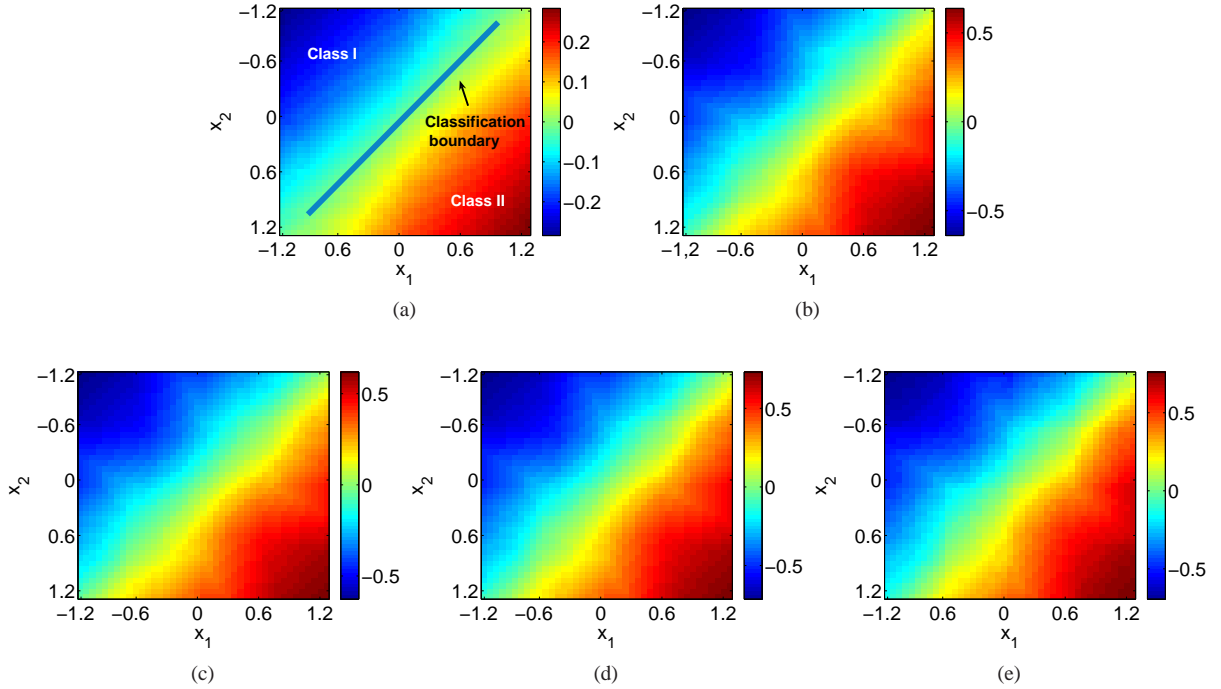


Fig. 19. Classifier:  $z^+ - z^-$  simulated by (a) log-sum-exp function (simulation); (b) MP approximation (simulation); and measured  $z^+ - z^-$  when the transistors are biased in (c)strong inversion (measurement); (d)moderate inversion (measurement); (e)weak inversion (measurement).

verified to be similar to that of the software model.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

Unlike translinear circuits, current-mode circuits which rely only on universal conservation principles like the KCL are portable across different biasing regions of a MOS transistor. In this paper, we proposed an MP based synthesis technique which can be used to design analog circuits that are bias scalable. At the core of MP synthesis is a PWL approximation of the log-sum-exp function and in this paper we have shown that many mathematical functions can be derived in terms of log-sum-exp and hence MP functions. MP circuits use only addition, subtraction and threshold operations to approximate log-sum-exp functions and hence can be implemented using a few transistors. The main advantages of the proposed MP synthesis technique are summarized as follows:

- The circuits can operate over a wider dynamic range as the transistors can span different biasing regions.
- MP synthesis provide a systematic approach for designing MOS circuits operating in the moderate inversion region.
- The use of KCL and thresholding ensures that MP circuits are insensitive to temperature variations.
- MP circuits operate in the log-likelihood domain where complex functions such as multiplication, division, square-root operations are mapped into simpler operations like addition, subtraction or scaling, making circuit design less complex. Thus, large-scale analog systems which use non-linear functions (e.g. support vector machines [2]) can be easily implemented using MP circuits.
- The operation of the MP circuits in the log-likelihood domain enhances the dynamic range of the circuit which

is important for analog recursive computations like the ones used in Hidden Markov Model (HMM) decoding.

However, there are several open challenges which we envision will be a part of the future work in this area. The role of the hyper-parameter  $\gamma$  in the circuit synthesis has not been fully explored. It is anticipated that  $\gamma$  will play a key role in controlling the trade-off between the approximation error and the power dissipation of the MP circuit. Also, the application of MP-based synthesis can be extended to other types of analog circuits like charge-mode or time-domain circuits by using other universal conservation principles like charge conservation. Like translinear synthesis, MP synthesis could potentially be extended towards designing dynamic analog circuits like filters. Also, extending this work to operate with real and imaginary quantities would also form a part of the future work.

## APPENDIX I

### PROOF: MP AS PWL APPROXIMATION OF THE LOG-SUM-EXP FUNCTION

*Proof:*

Given a set of operands  $L_1, \dots, L_N$ ,  $L_i \in \mathbb{R}$ ,  $i = 1, \dots, N$ , the generalized form of log-sum-exp function is given by

$$z_{\log} = \log \left( \sum_{i=1}^N e^{L_i} \right). \quad (37)$$

The derivative of  $z_{\log}$  with respect to one of the operands  $L_k$ ,  $1 \leq k \leq N$  is given by

$$\frac{\partial z_{\log}}{\partial L_k} = \frac{e^{L_k}}{\sum_{i=1}^N e^{L_i}} = \frac{e^{L_k - z_{\log}}}{\sum_{i=1}^N (e^{L_i - z_{\log}})}. \quad (38)$$

We introduce a variable  $z$  and define a step function  $u(L_i, z)$  according to

$$u(L_i, z) = \begin{cases} 1, & L_i \geq z, \\ 0, & L_i < z, \end{cases} \quad 1 \leq i \leq N.$$

It can be readily verified (shown in Fig. 20) that  $u(L_i, z_{\log})$  is a lower-bound for the function  $e^{(L_i - z_{\log})}$ . Also, the use of step-functions to approximate gradients will lead to a piecewise linear functions when integrated. Equation (38) can be approximated as

$$\frac{\partial z_{\log}}{\partial L_k} \approx \frac{\partial z}{\partial L_k} = \frac{u(L_k, z)}{\sum_{i=1}^N u(L_i, z)}. \quad (39)$$

Because the differential equation (39) consists of discontinuities, we will find its solution only in the continuous regions. For instance, we will assume that the integral is computed in the region where  $\sum_{i=1}^N u(L_i, z)$  which is constant. The solution to equation (39) can be written as

$$z = \frac{\sum_i [L_i u(L_i, z)] - \gamma}{\sum_{i=1}^N u(L_i, z)} \quad (40)$$

where  $\gamma$  is a constant of integration. Equation (40) leads to

$$\sum_{i=1}^N [L_i - z] u(L_i, z) = \gamma \quad (41)$$

$$\sum_{i=1}^N [L_i - z]_+ = \gamma \quad (42)$$

which is the MP function  $z = M(L_1, \dots, L_N, \gamma)$ .

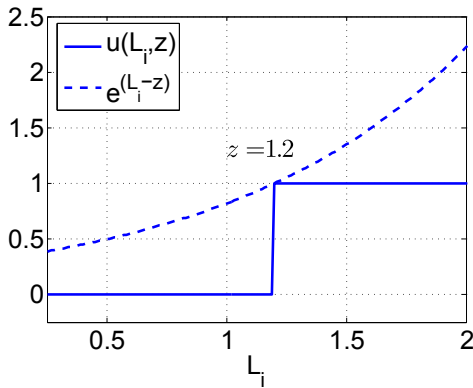


Fig. 20. The curve of  $e^{(L_i - z)}$  and its PWL approximation curve of  $u(L_i, z)$

## APPENDIX II MP SYNTHESIS OF POWER FUNCTIONS

For an operand  $a$ ,  $a \in \mathbb{R}$ , its power function is expressed as  $a^n$ ,  $n \in \mathbb{Z}^+$ . As illustrated in section III,  $a$  is expressed in its differential form  $a = a^+ - a^-$ ,  $a^+(a^-) \in \mathbb{R}^+$  and  $a^+(a^-) > 1$ .

For arbitrary  $n$ ,  $a^n$  can be written as

$$\begin{aligned} & (a^+ - a^-)^n \\ &= \sum_i (-1)^i C_n^i (a^+)^{n-i} (a^-)^i \\ &= \sum_{i: \text{even}} C_n^i (a^+)^{n-i} (a^-)^i - \sum_{i: \text{odd}} C_n^i (a^+)^{n-i} (a^-)^i \\ &= e^{\log(\sum_{i: \text{even}} C_n^i (a^+)^{n-i} (a^-)^i)} - e^{\log(\sum_{i: \text{odd}} C_n^i (a^+)^{n-i} (a^-)^i)}. \end{aligned} \quad (43)$$

Designate  $z^+$  as  $\log(\sum_{i: \text{even}} C_n^i (a^+)^{n-i} (a^-)^i)$  and  $z^-$  to represent  $\log(\sum_{i: \text{odd}} C_n^i (a^+)^{n-i} (a^-)^i)$  in (43). Then

$$\begin{aligned} z^+ &\approx M(\mathcal{L}^+, \gamma), \\ z^- &\approx M(\mathcal{L}^-, \gamma). \end{aligned} \quad (44)$$

$\mathcal{L}^+(\mathcal{L}^-)$  is a group of  $L_i$ s satisfying

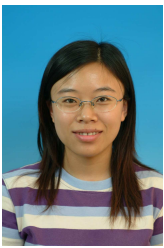
$$L_i = \log C_n^i + (n - i) \log a^+ + i \log a^-, \quad (45)$$

$i \in [0, n]$  and  $i$  is even(odd).

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