LIE ALGEBRAS AND THE FOUR COLOR THEOREM

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Abstract. We present a statement about Lie algebras that is equivalent to the Four Color Theorem.

Contents

1. Introduction

Let us start by recalling a well-known construction that associates to any finite dimensional metrized Lie algebra L a numerical-valued functional W_L defined on the set of all oriented trivalent graphs G (that is, trivalent graphs in which every vertex is endowed with a cyclic ordering of the edges emanating from it). This construction underlies the gauge-group dependence of gauge theories in general and of the Chern-Simons topological field theory in particular (see e.g. [B-N1, AS1, AS2]) and plays a prominent role in the theory of finite type (Vassiliev) invariants of knots ([B-N2, B-N3, B-N4]) and most likely also in the theory of finite type invariants of 3-manifolds ([O, GO, R]).

Fix a finite dimensional metrized Lie algebra L (that is, a finite dimensional Lie algebra with an *ad*-invariant symmetric non-degenerate bilinear form), choose some basis $\{L_a\}_{a=1}^{\dim L}$ of L, let $t_{ab} = \langle L_a, L_b\rangle$ be the metric tensor, let t^{ab} be the inverse matrix of t_{ab}, and let f_{abc} be the structure constants of L relative to $\{L_a\}$:

$$f_{abc} = \langle L_a, [L_b, L_c]\rangle.$$

Let G be some oriented trivalent graph. To define W_L, label all half-edges of G by symbols from the list $a, b, c, \dots, a_1, b_1, \dots$, and sum over $a, b, \dots, a_1, \dots \in \{1, \dots, \dim L\}$ the product over the vertices of G of the structure constants "seen" around each vertex times the product over the edges of the $t^{\cdot\cdot}$'s seen on each edge. This definition is much better explained by an example, as in figure 1.

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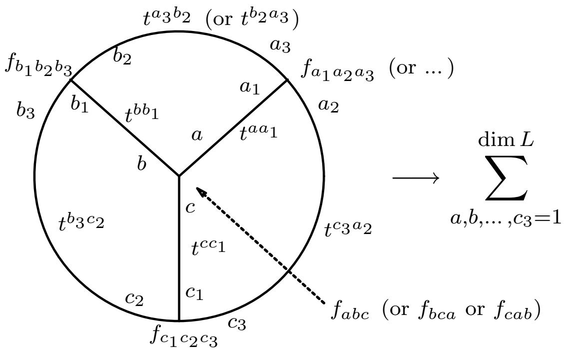

$$\longrightarrow \sum_{a,b,\dots,c_3=1}^{\dim L} f_{abc}f_{a_1a_2a_3}f_{b_1b_2b_3}f_{c_1c_2c_3}t^{aa_1}t^{bb_1}t^{cc_1}t^{b_3c_2}t^{c_3a_2}t^{a_3b_2}$$

Figure 1. An example illustrating the construction of $W_L(G)$. Notice that when G is drawn in the plane, we assume counterclockwise orientation for all vertices (unless noted otherwise), and that the cyclic symmetry $f_{abc} = f_{bca} = f_{cab}$ of the structure constants and the symmetry $t^{ab} = t^{ba}$ of the inverse metric ensures that $W_L(G)$ is well defined.

By introducing an explicit change-of-basis matrix as in [B-N2] or by re-interpreting $W_L(G)$ in terms of abstract tensor calculus as in [B-N3], one can verify that $W_L(G)$ does not depend on the choice of the basis $\{L_a\}$. Typically one chooses a "nice" orthonormal (or almost orthonormal) basis $\{L_a\}$, so that most of the constants t^{ab} and f_{abc} vanish, thus greatly reducing the number of summands in the definition of $W_L(G)$.

Unless otherwise stated, whenever dealing with a Lie algebra of matrices, we will take the metric to be the matrix trace in the defining representation: $\langle L_a, L_b\rangle = \operatorname{tr}(L_aL_b)$.

Lemma-Definition 1.1. (proof in section 2) If a connected G has v vertices, then $W_{sl(N)}(G)$ is a polynomial in N of degree at most $\frac{v}{2}+2$ in N. Thus we can set $W^{\text{top}}_{sl(N)}(G)$ to be the coefficient of $N^{\frac{v}{2}+2}$ in $W_{sl(N)}(G)$.

The following statement sounds rather reasonable; it just says that if G is "$sl(2)$-trivial", then it is at least "$sl(N)$-degenerate". For us who grew up thinking that all that there is to learn about $sl(N)$ is already in $sl(2)$, this is not a big surprise:

Statement 1. *For a connected oriented trivalent graph G, $W_{sl(2)}(G) = 0$ implies $W^{top}_{sl(N)}(G) = 0$.*

Lie-theoretically, there is much to say about $sl(2)$ and $sl(N)$. There are representations of $sl(2)$ into $sl(N)$, there is an "almost decomposition" of $sl(N)$ into a product of $sl(2)$'s[1], and there are many other similarities. A-priori, the above statement sounds within reach. The purpose of this note is to explain why statement 1 is equivalent to the Four Color Theorem[2].

This equivalence follows from the following two propositions, proven in sections 2 and 3, respectively:

Proposition 1.2. *Let G be a connected oriented trivalent graph. If G is 2-connected, $|W^{top}_{sl(N)}(G)|$ is equal to the number of embeddings of G in an oriented sphere. Otherwise, $W^{top}_{sl(N)}(G) = 0$.*

[1] See [B-NG] for a similar context in which the different $sl(2)$'s "decouple".

[2] The Four Color Theorem was conjectured by Francis Guthrie in 1852 and proven by K. I. Appel and W. Haken [AH] in 1976. See also [SK].

Proposition 1.3. *(Penrose* [P]*. See also* [Ka1, Ka2, KS]*.) If G is planar with v vertices and G^c is the map defined by its complement, then $|W_{sl(2)}(G)|$ is $2^{\frac{v}{2}-2}$ times the total number of colorings of G^c with four colors so that adjacent states are colored with different colors.*

Indeed, statement 1 is clearly equivalent to

$$|W^{\text{top}}_{sl(N)}(G)| \neq 0 \quad \Rightarrow \quad |W_{sl(2)}(G)| \neq 0,$$

which by propositions 1.2 and 1.3 is the same as saying

$$\begin{pmatrix} G \text{ has a planar embedding} \\ \text{with } G^c \text{ a map} \end{pmatrix} \quad \Rightarrow \quad (G^c \text{ has a 4-coloring}).$$

Notice that if G is connected, G^c is a map (does not have states that border themselves) iff G is 2-connected.

Remark 1.4. We've chosen the formulation of statement 1 that we felt was the most appealing. With no change to the end result, one can replace $sl(N) = A_{N-1}$ by B_N, C_N, D_N, or $gl(N)$ and $sl(2)$ by $so(3)$ in the formulation of statement 1. In fact, in the proofs we actually work with $gl(N)$ and $so(3)$ rather than with $sl(N)$ and $sl(2)$.

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2. Understanding $W_{sl(N)}$

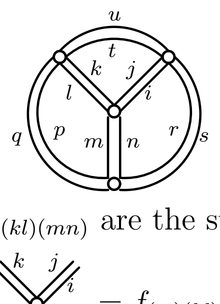
As Lie algebras, $gl(N)$ is just $sl(N)$ plus an Abelian factor. As Abelian Lie algebras have vanishing structure constants, $W_{sl(N)}(G) = W_{gl(N)}(G)$ for any oriented trivalent graph G. So let us concentrate on computing $W_{gl(N)}(G)$ for such G. For the basis of $gl(N)$, we pick the matrices $\{L_a\}_{a=1}^{N^2} = \{L_{ij}\}_{i,j=1}^{N}$, where L_{ij} is the matrix with 1 in the ij entry and 0 everywhere else. As the basis is indexed by a double index rather than by a single index, it is convenient to label every half-edge of G by two symbols from the list $i, j, \dots, i_1, \dots$ and double all the edges:

. (1)

The metric $t_{ab} = t_{(ij)(kl)}$ of $gl(N)$ is given by $t_{(ij)(kl)} = \operatorname{tr} L_{ij} L_{kl} = \delta_{jk}\delta_{il}$, and its inverse is given by the same formula:

$$t^{(ij)(kl)} = \delta_{jk}\delta_{li}.$$

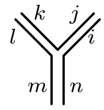
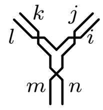
This formula means that in the summation defining $W_{gl(N)}(G)$ we can assume the equalities $j = k$ and $l = i$ along each edge as in (1). In other words, it is enough to label every doubled edge with just one pair of indices, getting an overall picture like



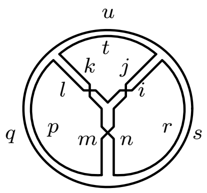
$$\longrightarrow \sum_{i,j,\dots,u=1}^{N} f_{(ij)(kl)(mn)} f_{(ji)(rs)(ut)} f_{(lk)(tu)(qp)} f_{(nm)(pq)(sr)},$$

where $f_{(ij)(kl)(mn)}$ are the structure constants in our basis:

$$= f_{(ij)(kl)(mn)} = \langle L_{ij}, [L_{kl}, L_{mn}] \rangle = \operatorname{tr}(L_{ij} L_{kl} L_{mn}) - \operatorname{tr}(L_{mn} L_{kl} L_{ij})$$

$$= \delta_{jk}\delta_{lm}\delta_{ni} - \delta_{nk}\delta_{li}\delta_{jm} =$$  $-$  . (2)

In the last equation, indices connected by a line can be assumed to be equal in the summation defining $W_{gl(N)}(G)$. Once the edges and vertices of G are "thickened" as in (1) and (2), the summation over $i, j, \dots$ becomes the counting of the number of solutions of the equalities determined by the connected components of the thickened G. This number is simply N raised to the number of connected components:



$$\longrightarrow \sum_{i,j,\dots,u=1}^{N} \delta_{il}\delta_{lp}\cdots$$

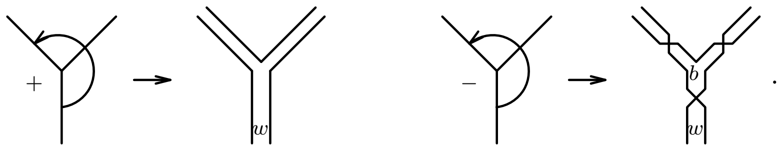
$$= \# \left\{ 1 \le i, j, \dots \le N : \begin{array}{c} i = l = p = m = j = t = k = n = r \\ u = q = s \end{array} \right\} = N^2.$$

Summarizing, we find the formula[3]

$$W_{gl(N)}(G) = \sum_{\text{markings } M \text{ of } G} \operatorname{sign}(M) N^{b(T_M)}, \tag{3}$$

where:

- A markings M of G is a marking of each vertex of G by a sign in $\{+, -\}$, and $\operatorname{sign}(M)$ is the product of these signs.
- The thickening T_M corresponding to a marking M is the oriented surface with boundary obtained from G as follows:
  - Replace the vertices marked by a "+" with "joints" and the vertices marked by a "−" with "twisted joints" as in (2).
  - Orient these surface pieces using the following black(b)/white(w) convention for the thickening of vertices:

    In other words, "+"-vertices are embedded in the thickening of G so that they are seen as oriented counterclockwise from the white side of the thickening, while "-"-vertices are seen as oriented clockwise from the white side of the thickening.
  - Finally, connect the joints together along the edges of G by bands, in the only way consistent with the orientations of the joints.
- $b(T_M)$ is the number of boundary components of T_M.

If M is a marking of G, let S_M be the closed oriented surface obtained by gluing a disk into each boundary component of the thickening T_M. With χ denoting Euler characteristic and g denoting genus, we have

$$2 - 2g(S_M) = \chi(S_M) = \chi(T_M) + b(T_M) = \chi(G) + b(T_M).$$

[3]Compare with [B-N3, equation (36)]; for similar formulas in the cases of $so(N)$ and $sp(N)$, see [B-N3, equation (33)] and [B-N3, exercise 6.37].

Remembering that G is trivalent and thus $\chi(G) = -\frac{v}{2}$, we get

$$b(T_M) = -\chi(G) + 2 - 2g(S_M) = \frac{v}{2} + 2 - 2g(S_M).$$

Thus $b(T_M)$ is maximal when $g(S_M) = 0$ and in that case $b(T_M) = \frac{v}{2} + 2$. With (3), this proves lemma 1.1. Furthermore, calling a marking M *spherical* when S_M is a sphere, we get the formula

$$W^{\mathrm{top}}_{sl(N)}(G) = W^{\mathrm{top}}_{gl(N)}(G) = \sum_{\text{spherical markings } M \text{ of } G} \operatorname{sign}(M).$$

Proof of proposition 1.2. Let G be 2-connected, and consider the map

$$\Theta : \{\text{spherical markings } M \text{ of } G\} \longrightarrow \{\text{embeddings of } G \text{ in an oriented sphere}\}$$

defined by mapping M to the natural embedding of G in S_M. It is clear that Θ is a bijection. Indeed, if an embedding of G in an oriented sphere S^2 is given, one can reconstruct M by marking the vertices that are oriented counterclockwise within S_M (as seen from the white side of S_M) by a "+" sign, and marking all other vertices by a "−".

To conclude the proof, it is enough to show that for spherical markings, sign(M) is independent of the marking. Clearly, sign(M) is also equal to $(-1)^{v_-}$, where v_- is the number of vertices of G that are embedded clockwise in S_M by $\Theta(M)$ (with S_M viewed from its white side). By a theorem of H. Whitney [W1, W2][4], one can get from any spherical embedding of a trivalent 2-connected graph G to any other such embedding by a sequence of flips as in figure 2. Such flips do not change the parity of v_-, since the number of vertices that is flipped is even. □

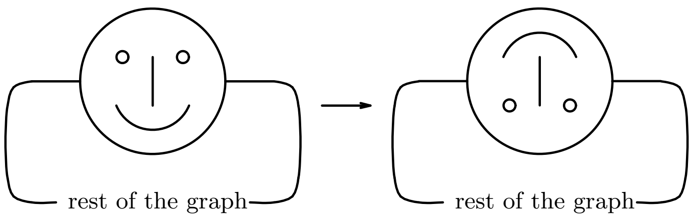


Figure 2. A flip takes a part of a graph that connects to the rest via only two edges, and flips it over.

3. Understanding $W_{sl(2)}$

Proposition 1.3 is due to Penrose [P] (see also [Ka1, Ka2, KS]). For completeness, we reproduce its proof in this section.

As Lie algebras, $sl(2)$ is isomorphic to $so(3)$, so let us work with $so(3)$ instead. The standard basis of $so(3)$ is given by the matrices

$$L_1 = \begin{pmatrix} 0 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & -1 \\ 0 & 1 & 0 \end{pmatrix}, \quad L_2 = \begin{pmatrix} 0 & 0 & 1 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 \\ -1 & 0 & 0 \end{pmatrix} \quad \text{and} \quad L_3 = \begin{pmatrix} 0 & -1 & 0 \\ 1 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 \end{pmatrix}.$$

[4]Check [L, corollary 6] for a version closer to what we need, and remember that our graph is 2-connected and hence some of the moves in [L] are irrelevant for us.

Let us pick the scalar product $\langle\cdot,\cdot\rangle$ on $so(3)$ to be the one that makes this basis orthonormal, and let us denote the corresponding functional on graphs by $W_{\widetilde{so(3)}}$, with the "$\sim$" on top of the $so(3)$ to remind us that we are not using the standard matrix-trace scalar product.

One can easily verify that $\frac{1}{2}\langle\cdot,\cdot\rangle$ is the scalar product induced on $so(3)$ from matrix-trace in $sl(2)$. Thus, remembering that in the construction of W_L vertices scale with the scalar product and edges scale with its inverse, we find that

$$W_{sl(2)}(G) = \left(\frac{1}{2}\right)^{v-e} W_{\widetilde{so(3)}}(G) = 2^{\frac{v}{2}} W_{\widetilde{so(3)}}(G), \tag{4}$$

where G is an oriented trivalent graph with v vertices and e edges. Let us fix such a G once and for all, and let us assume that it is planar and that all the vertices of G are oriented counterclockwise in the plane. Flipping the orientation of any given vertex just reverses the sign of $W_{\widetilde{so(3)}}(G)$, and so the latter assumption does not limit the generality of our arguments.

Proof of proposition 1.3. With (4) in mind, proposition 1.3 clearly follows from the following two lemmas. □

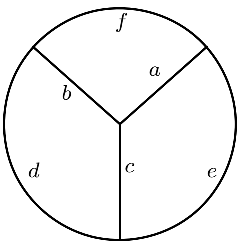
Lemma 3.1. *(Penrose* [P]. *See also* [Ka1, Ka2, KS].*) For a planar G as above, $|W_{\widetilde{so(3)}}(G)|$ is the number of colorings of the edges of G with three colors $\{1,2,3\}$, so that the edges emanating from any single vertex are of different colors.*

Lemma 3.2. *(Tait's theorem* [T]*) Edge-3-colorings as in the previous lemma are in a bijective correspondence with 4-colorings of the map G^c that fix the color of the "state at infinity".*

Proof of lemma 3.1. In the basis $\{L_a\}$, the structure constants of $so(3)$ are given by

$$f_{abc} = \epsilon_{abc} = \begin{cases} \mathrm{sign}(abc) & \text{if } abc \text{ is a permutation,} \\ 0 & \text{otherwise.} \end{cases}$$

Remembering also that $\{L_a\}$ is orthonormal by choice, the computation of $W_{\widetilde{so(3)}}(G)$ is given (on a simple example) by:



$$\longrightarrow \sum_{a,b,c,d,e,f=1}^{3} \epsilon_{abc}\epsilon_{aef}\epsilon_{bfd}\epsilon_{cde}.$$

The ϵ symbols force the indices coming into each vertex to be different, and hence clearly

$$W_{\widetilde{so(3)}}(G) = \sum_{\text{edge-3-colorings of } G} \prod (\text{a sign per vertex}), \tag{5}$$

where the sign at each vertex is the sign of the permutation of $\{1,2,3\}$ induced by an edge-3-coloring, as read counterclockwise around the vertex.

The only thing left to show is that the product of signs in (5) is independent of the edge-3-coloring. A clever way to do that, discovered by L. H. Kauffman, is to replace every edge colored by a "3" by a pair of edges colored "1" and "2" (in symbols, $1+2=3$). This defines two families of circles in the plane, labeled by "1" and by "2" (see figure 3). By lumping together the signs on each end of a "3" edge and taking the product over all of those edges, one sees that the overall sign depends only on the parity of the number of "3" edges (always $\frac{e}{3}$), and the $\mathbf{Z}/2\mathbf{Z}$ intersection number of the "1" family of circles with the "2" family of circles. By the Jordan curve theorem, the latter is always 0. □

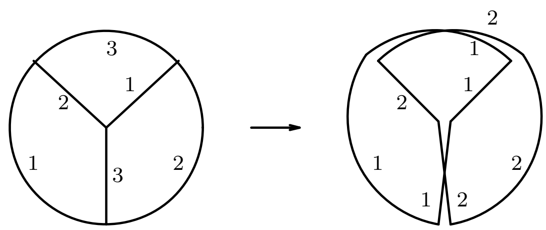


Figure 3. The two families of circles obtained by splitting every "3" edge.

Proof of lemma 3.2. This is a well known result (see e.g. [BM, theorem 9.12]), so let us only sketch the proof. Consider the group $H = \mathbf{Z}/2\mathbf{Z} \times \mathbf{Z}/2\mathbf{Z}$. Given any 4-coloring of G^c by elements of H, one may associate to it an edge-3-coloring of G by the non-zero elements of H, by coloring every edge by the difference of the colors in the two faces adjacent to it. One then verifies that this edge 3-coloring is well defined and that we get a bijection between the set of 4-colorings of G^c that color the state at infinity with 0 and the set of edge-3-coloring of G. □

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