Representation Theory of Finite Groups

Alex Rutar*
University of Waterloo

Fall 2019†

*arutar@uwaterloo.ca
†Last updated: September 9, 2019

Contents

I. Introduction

Let G be a finite group of order n, and write $G = \{g_1, \dots, g_n\}$. Fix $g \in G$; then $gg_i = gg_j$ if and only if $i = j$. Thus there exists some $\sigma_g \in S_i$ such that $gg_i = g_{\sigma_g(i)}$ for all $i \in \{1, 2, \dots, n\}$. In particular, $\phi : G \to S_n$ by $\phi(g) = \sigma_g$ is an embedding (injective group homomorphism). This observation is usually referred to as Cayley's Theorem.

Now let V be an n–dimensional complex vector space. We then denote $\mathrm{GL}(V)$ as the group of invertible linear operators $T : V \to V$. Now define $\psi : S_n \to \mathrm{GL}_n(V)$ by $\psi(\sigma) = T_\sigma$ where if $\{b_1, \dots, b_n\}$ is a basis for V and $T_\sigma(b_i) = b_{\sigma(i)}$. This is an injective group homomorphism, so $\psi \circ \phi : G \to \mathrm{GL}(V)$ is an embedding of G into $\mathrm{GL}(V)$.

Definition. Let G be a finite group, and V a finite dimensional $\mathbb{C}$–vector space. A **representation** of G is a group homomorphism $\rho : G \to \mathrm{GL}(V)$. We call $\dim(V)$ the **degree** of the representation.

In particular, if V is n–dimensional, then $\mathrm{GL}(V) \cong \mathrm{GL}_n(\mathbb{C})$.

Example.

1. Consider $\rho : G \to \mathrm{GL}(\mathbb{C}) \cong \mathbb{C}^\times$ given by $\rho(g) = 1$ for all $g \in G$. This is called the *trivial representation*.
2. Consider $\rho : S_n \to \mathbb{C}^\times$ given by $\rho(\sigma) = \mathrm{sgn}(\sigma)$, which is called the *sign representation*.
3. The representation fo G afforded by Cayley's theorem is called the *regular representation* of G. The next example is a good way to understand the regular rep of G.
4. Consider G, $X = \{x_1, \dots, x_n\}$, and $V = \mathrm{Free}(X)$. Suppose G acts on X. Then $\rho : G \to \mathrm{GL}(V)$ given by $\rho(g)(x_i) = gx_i$. In particular, if we take $X = G$, then this is the regular representation of G
5. Consider the 4–gon, with vertices labelled a, b, c, d. Take $X = \{a, b, c, d\}$ and the regular representation $\rho : D_4 \to \mathrm{GL}(V)$. This action has a geometric notion.
6. Let C_n be a cyclic group of order n; let us define some $\rho : C_n \to \mathrm{GL}(V)$. Say $\rho(x) = T$ where $t \in \mathrm{GL}(V)$; then this is a representation if and only if $T^n = I$.

Definition. We say that two representations $\rho : G \to \mathrm{GL}(V)$ and $\tau : G \to \mathrm{GL}(W)$ are **isomorphic** if there exists an isomorphism $T : V \to W$ such that for all $g \in G$,

$$T \circ \rho(g) = \tau(g) \circ T$$

Suppose $\rho : G \to \mathrm{GL}(V)$ and $T : V \to W$ is an isomorphism. Then we can define $\tau : G \to \mathrm{GL}(W)$ by $\tau(G) = T \circ \rho(g) \circ T^{-1}$; this $\rho \cong \tau$. In other words, the representation is unique up to isomorphism under change of basis.

Example. Consider $G = \{g_1, \dots, g_n\} = \{h_1, \dots, h_n\}$, and fix $g \in G$. Let $gg_i = g_{\alpha(i)}$ and $gh_i = h_{\beta(i)}$ where $\alpha, \beta \in S_n$. Fix an n–dimensional vector space V with basis $\{b_1, \dots, b_n\}$. Then two regular representations are given by

$$\rho_1 : G \to \mathrm{GL}(V), \rho(g)(b_i) = b_{\alpha(i)}$$
$$\rho_2 : G \to \mathrm{GL}(V), \rho(g)(b_i) = b_{\beta(i)}$$

Let $\gamma \in S_n$ be such that $h_{\gamma(i)} = g_i$, and define $T : V \to V$ by $T(v_i) = b_{\gamma(i)}$. Then

$$gg_i = g_{\alpha(i)} = gh_{\gamma(i)} = h_{\beta\gamma(i)} = g_{\gamma^{-1}\beta\gamma(i)}$$

so that $\alpha = \gamma^{-1}\beta\gamma$. Thus for each b_i,

$$\begin{aligned} T \circ \rho_1(g) \circ T^{-1}(b_i) &= T \circ \rho_1(g)(b_{\gamma^{-1}(i)}) \\ &= T(b_{\alpha\gamma^{-1}(i)}) b_{\gamma\alpha\gamma^{-1}(i)} \\ &= b_{\beta(i)} = \rho_2(g)(b_i) \end{aligned}$$

so that $T \circ \rho_1(g) \circ T^{-1} = \rho_2(g)$.
Note: conjugate elements have the same cycle type.

Subrepresentations

What should a subrepresentation of $\rho : G \to \mathrm{GL}(V)$ mean?

We would like a subspace $W \leq V$ such that $\tau : G \to \mathrm{GL}(W)$ is a representation given by $\tau(g)(w) = \rho(g)(w)$ for all $w \in W$. Moreover, to make this well-defined, we need W to b4 $\rho(g)$–invariant for every $g \in G$ ($\rho(g)(W) \subseteq W$).

Suppose $T : V \to V$ is a linear operator, and $W \leq V$ is a T–invariant subspace; i.e. $T(W) \subseteq W$. In particular, the restriction operator $T_W : W \to W$ is well-defined.

Definition. Let $\rho : G \to \mathrm{GL}(V)$ be a representation. A subspqce $W \subseteq V$ is said to be ***G*–stable** if W is $\rho(g)$–invariant for all $g \in G$. A **subrepresentation** of ρ is a representation $\rho_W : G \to \mathrm{GL}(W)$ where for all $g \in G$ and $w \in W$, $\rho_W(g)(w) = \rho(g)(w)$ where W is a G–stable subspace of V.

Example. Suppose $\rho : G \to \mathrm{GL}(V)$ be the regular representation. Take $W = \mathrm{span}\{\sum_{g \in G} v_g\}$, which is clearly G–stable, and $\rho_W : G \to \mathrm{GL}(W)$ is isomorphic to the trivial representation.

Similarly, let $\rho : S_n \to \mathrm{GL}(V)$ be the regular representation, $W = \mathrm{span}\{\sum_{\sigma \in S_n} \mathrm{sgn}(\sigma) v_\sigma\}$; this is isomorphic to the sign representation.

0.1 Theorem. *Let $\rho : G \to \mathrm{GL}(V)$ be a representation, $W \leq V$ G–stable. Then there exists a G–stable subspace W' such that $V = W \oplus W'$.*

Proof Take any inner product $\langle x, y \rangle$ on V. Then for any $x, y \in V$, define

$$\langle x, y \rangle^* = \sum_{g \in G} \langle \rho(g)(x), \rho(g)(y) \rangle$$

This is also an inner product. Let $x, y \in V$ and let $h \in G$. Then

$$\begin{aligned} \langle \rho(h)(x), \rho(h)(y) \rangle^* &= \sum_{g \in G} \langle \rho(g)\rho(h)(x), \rho(g)\rho(h)(y) \rangle \\ &= \sum_{g \in G} \langle \rho(gh)(x), \rho(gh)(y) \rangle \\ &= \sum_{g \in G} \langle \rho(g)(x), \rho(g)(y) \rangle \end{aligned}$$

Thus every $\rho(h)$ is unitary with respect to $\langle \cdot, \cdot \rangle^*$. Let $W \leq V$ be G–stable, and take $W' = W^\perp$ with respect to $\langle \cdot, \cdot \rangle^*$. Then $V = W \oplus W'$. Let's see that $W^\perp$ is G–stable. Let $x \in W^\perp$, $w \in W$, and $g \in G$, so that

$$\begin{aligned}\langle \rho(g)(x), w\rangle^* &= \langle x, \rho(g)^*(w)^*\rangle = \langle x, \rho(g)^{-1}(w)\rangle^* \\ &= \langle x, \underbrace{\rho(g^{-1})(w)}_{\in W}\rangle^* \\ &= 0\end{aligned}$$

and $\rho(g)(W^\perp) \subseteq W^\perp$ as required. ∎

Definition. Let $\rho : G \to \mathrm{GL}(V)$ be a representation, and $V = W_1 \oplus W_2 \oplus \cdots \oplus W_k$ where each W_i is G–stable. For each i, let $\rho_i = \rho_{w_i}$. For each $v = \sum w_i \in V$, we have $\rho(g)(v) = \sum \rho(g)(w_i) = \rho_i(g)(w_i)$. In this case, we write

$$\rho = \rho_1 \oplus \rho_2 \oplus \cdots \oplus \rho_k$$

and call ρ a direct sum of the ρ_i's.

The previous definition is written as an internal direct sum of V. Externally, given vector spaces $W_1, \ldots, W_k$ and representations $\rho_i : G \to \mathrm{GL}(W_i)$, we can define

$$(\rho_1 \oplus \cdots \oplus \rho_k) : G \to \mathrm{GL}(W_1 \oplus \cdots \oplus W_k)$$

by $(\rho_1 \oplus \cdots \oplus \rho_k)(g)(w_1, \ldots, w_k) = (\rho_1(g)(w_1), \ldots, \rho_k(g)(w_k))$.