

*A brief, terse combinatorial excursion,
also a small experiment in pedagogy and notation*

ho boon suan

April 27, 2021

We fill in some details in the derivation of the combinatorial identity

$$\sum_{k \geq 0} \binom{n+k}{k} \binom{n}{k} \frac{(-1)^k}{k+1+m} = (-1)^n m^n m^{-n-1}, \quad \text{integers } m, n \geq 0,$$

as it appears in Graham, Knuth and Patashnik's *Concrete Mathematics*, pp. 184–185.

Since

$$\begin{aligned} \binom{j+k}{j} &= \binom{j+k}{k} \\ &= \frac{k+1}{j+k+1} \binom{j+k+1}{k+1} \\ &= \frac{k+1}{j+k+1} \binom{j+k+1}{j} \\ &= \frac{k+1}{j+k+1} (-1)^j \binom{-k-2}{j}, \end{aligned}$$

we have

$$\frac{1}{k+1} \binom{-k-2}{j}^{-1} = \frac{(-1)^j}{j+k+1} \binom{j+k}{j}^{-1} = (-1)^j \frac{j!k!}{(j+k+1)!}. \quad (1)$$

It follows that

$$\begin{aligned} &\sum_{k \geq 0} \binom{n+k}{k} \binom{n}{k} \frac{(-1)^k}{k+1} \sum_{j \geq 0} \binom{m}{j} \binom{-k-2}{j}^{-1} \\ &= \sum_{j \geq 0} \sum_k \binom{n}{k} \binom{m}{j} (-1)^j \frac{j!k!}{(j+k+1)!} (-1)^k \binom{n+k}{k} \\ &= \sum_{j \geq 0} \sum_k \frac{n!}{k!(n-k)!} \frac{m!}{j!(m-j)!} (-1)^j \frac{j!k!}{(j+k+1)!} \binom{-n-1}{k} && \text{by (1)} \\ &= \sum_{j \geq 0} \sum_k \frac{n!}{k!(n-k)!} \frac{m!}{j!(m-j)!} (-1)^j \frac{1}{(j+k+1)!} \binom{-n-1}{k} && \text{negate upper index and} \\ & && \text{expand binomial coefficients} \\ &= m!n! \sum_{j \geq 0} (-1)^j \frac{1}{(m-j)!} \sum_k \frac{1}{(n-k)!(j+k+1)!} \binom{-n-1}{k} \\ &= \frac{m!n!}{(m+n+1)!} \sum_{j \geq 0} (-1)^j \frac{(m+n+1)!}{(n+1+j)!(m-j)!} \sum_k \frac{(n+1+j)!}{(n-k)!(j+k+1)!} \binom{-n-1}{k} \\ & && \text{multiply by appropriate terms to} \\ & && \text{create new binomial coefficients} \\ &= \frac{m!n!}{(m+n+1)!} \sum_{j \geq 0} (-1)^j \binom{m+n+1}{n+1+j} \sum_k \binom{n+1+j}{k+j+1} \binom{-n-1}{k}. \end{aligned}$$