

# Applied Category Theory

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# 9/3/2025

## Why?

Why should you care about studying the coming content and applying it to your field?

Physicists:

- The particles in the standard model *are* irreducible representations. So rep theory is crucial to you.
- Monoidal categories give a good framework for understanding QM.

Computer scientists:

- It gives a framework for the Curry-Howard correspondence (proofs are programs).

Me:

- Began as a study of “analogies” and turned into a study of nifty algebraic gadgets.
- It’s written in a *wild* language, and learning languages is fun.

As a great motivation, see <https://arxiv.org/abs/0903.0340>

## Plan

The **first goal** is to define monoidal categories with some context. The **second goal** is to describe a “skeletal” category defined by diagrammatics. To accomplish the first goal, we will study things including:

- Algebraic objects (groups, vector spaces, ...) and maps between them
- Subobjects, images, combining objects ( $\times$ ,  $\otimes$ ,  $\oplus$ , ...)
- Categories ( $Grp$ ,  $Set$ ,  $PoSet$ ,  $\mathbb{N}$ ,  $Vec$ , ...)

I’d like to have as little fat on this as necessary. That is, not get sidetracked studying, for instance, too much of the internal structure of these objects. I want to give many examples and try to build intuition. For the second goal we’ll study things including:

- Representations and maps ( $T(gv) = gT(v)$ )
- $\text{Rep}(D_3)$  in detail

Up to this point I have a strong vision of where we’re going. After this we can go where the interest steers us.

This plan is incomplete and non-exhaustive.

## Groups

This is the best onramp to categories I know of, so bear with me through some basics.

**Definition 1.** A **group** is a triple

$$(G, \mu, e)$$

where  $G$  is a set,  $\mu : G \times G \rightarrow G$  is a function, and  $e \in G$ , such that

$$\forall a, b, c \in G, \quad \mu(\mu(a, b), c) = \mu(a, \mu(b, c)) \quad (\text{Associativity})$$

$$\forall a \in G, \quad \mu(a, e) = \mu(e, a) = a \quad (\text{Identity})$$

$$\forall a \in G, \exists b \in G, \quad \text{such that } \mu(a, b) = \mu(b, a) = e \quad (\text{Inverse})$$

We often call the element  $b$  from 1 by  $a^{-1}$ . We also often use the following shorthands:

- $\mu(a, b) = a \cdot b = a \star b = ab$

$$\bullet \underbrace{a \cdot a \cdots a}_{n \text{ copies}} = a^n$$

**Exercise 1.** Translate the three axioms above into the  $ab$  notation.

**Exercise 2.** Prove the identity element in a group is unique. That is, if  $e$  and  $e'$  both satisfy Axiom 1, show that  $e' = e$ .

Now some examples. As an exercise, prove that each of the following is a group. The notation  $:=$  reads as “is defined to be.”

**Example 1** (General linear group).  $(G, \mu, e)$ , where

- $G = \text{GL}_2(\mathbb{C}) := \{\text{invertible } 2 \times 2 \text{ matrices with entries in } \mathbb{C}\}$
- $\mu(A, B) := AB$
- $e = I_2 = \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 0 \\ 0 & 1 \end{bmatrix}$

**Example 2** (General linear group).  $(G, \mu, e)$ , where

- $G = \text{GL}_n(\mathbb{C}) := \{\text{invertible } n \times n \text{ matrices with entries in } \mathbb{C}\}$
- $\mu(A, B) := AB$
- $e = I_n$  (the  $n \times n$  identity matrix)

**Example 3** (Integers).  $(G, \mu, e)$ , where

- $G = \mathbb{Z}$
- $\mu(a, b) := a + b$
- $e = 0$

**Example 4** (Not a group! Why?).  $(G, \mu, e)$ , where

- $G = \mathbb{Z}$
- $\mu(a, b) := a \times b$
- $e = 1$

**Example 5** (Braid group).  $B_n := (G, \mu, e)$ , where

- $G = n\text{-strand braid diagrams (up to isotopy/wiggling)}$
- $\mu = \text{vertical concatenation}$
- $e = n \text{ unbraided strands}$

Steve pointed out that when  $n = 2$ ,  $B_n$  is isomorphic to  $\mathbb{Z}$ . We'll get to that in the next lecture I hope.

## Things that came up

- Generators and relations presentations
- Free group/group of words
- Symmetric group/permutation groups
- The natural numbers game:  
[https://www.ma.imperial.ac.uk/~buzzard/xena/natural\\_number\\_game/index2.html](https://www.ma.imperial.ac.uk/~buzzard/xena/natural_number_game/index2.html)
- Peano arithmetic:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peano\\_axioms](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peano_axioms)

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## More groups

Recall that, loosely, a group is a set endowed with a binary operation (multiplication), with some associativity, identity, and inversion constraints. Henceforth we will refer to a group  $(G, \mu, e)$  almost exclusively as  $G$ . Usually,  $\mu$  and  $e$  will be understood from context. For some of the following examples we might also write  $\mu_G$  to refer specifically to multiplication in  $G$ .

**Example 6** (Nonzero field elements). *The set  $\mathbb{C}^\times = \mathbb{C} - \{0\}$  is a group under multiplication. Associativity is known. Its identity element is  $1 \in \mathbb{C}$ . This is true for any field, i.e.  $\mathbb{R}^\times$ ,  $\mathbb{Q}^\times$ , and  $\mathcal{F}_{p^n}^\times$  are all groups.*

**Example 7** (Symmetric groups). *Let  $X$  be a set. Then  $(G, \mu, e)$  is a group, where*

- $G = \{\sigma : X \rightarrow X \mid \sigma \text{ is bijective}\}$
- $\mu(\sigma_1, \sigma_2) := \sigma_1 \circ \sigma_2$
- $e = id_X$ , defined by  $\forall x \in X, id_X(x) = x$

**Example 8.** *If  $X = \{1, \dots, n\}$ , then we denote the group  $S_X$  by  $S_n$ . If  $\sigma \in S_n$  then we often denote  $\sigma$  as*

$$\sigma = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 2 & \cdots & n \\ \sigma(1) & \sigma(2) & \cdots & \sigma(n) \end{pmatrix}$$

**Example 9** (Dihedral group). *Let  $G$  consist of the following six matrices:*

These matrices permute the points

$$\left\{ (1, 0), \left(-\frac{1}{2}, \frac{\sqrt{3}}{2}\right), \left(-\frac{1}{2}, -\frac{\sqrt{3}}{2}\right) \right\}$$

So we can see that it's "the same as" a certain permutation group. There are really 3 things at play in this last example:

- Dihedral groups: 3 wasn't special. We could divide by any positive  $n$  and get a group of  $2n$  matrices.
- Generators and relations: We could equally express this group as

$$\langle r, s \mid r^3 = e, s^2 = e, rs = sr^2 \rangle.$$

In fact, that's usually how dihedral groups are presented.

- Isomorphism: That group of matrices "is" a permutation group.

## Homomorphisms

We'll start by define how two groups can be similar, or the same.

**Definition 2.** *Let  $G$  and  $H$  be two groups. Let  $f : G \rightarrow H$  be a function.*

- We call  $f$  a **homomorphism** if

$$\forall a, b \in G, f(ab) = f(a)f(b)$$

- We call  $f$  an **isomorphism** if it is a bijective homomorphism
- If  $f$  is a homomorphism, the **kernel** of  $f$  is the set

$$\ker(f) := \{x \in G \mid f(x) = e_H\}$$

- If  $f$  is a homomorphism, the **image** of  $f$  is the set

$$f(G) := \{f(x) \mid x \in G\} \subseteq H$$

Here are many examples. It would be useful to prove those you don't see immediately. Well, it would probably be good to prove all of them...

**Example 10** (Modular arithmetic).  $f : \mathbb{Z} \rightarrow \mathbb{Z}_n$ , given by  $f(x) := x \pmod{n}$

**Example 11** (Multiplication).  $f : \mathbb{Z} \rightarrow \mathbb{Z}$ , given by  $f(x) := 4x$ . What is special about 4 here? Anything?

**Example 12** (Trivial). Let  $G$  and  $H$  be any two groups. Define  $f : G \rightarrow H$  by  $f(x) = e$ .

**Example 13** (Identity). Let  $G$  be any group. Define  $f : G \rightarrow G$  by  $f(x) := x$ .

**Example 14** (Symmetric group inclusion). Define  $f : S_n \rightarrow S_{n+1}$  by declaring

$$f(\sigma) := \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 2 & \cdots & n & n+1 \\ \sigma(1) & \sigma(2) & \cdots & \sigma(n) & n+1 \end{pmatrix}$$

In particular, since this homomorphism is injective, this means we can think of  $S_n$  as “sitting inside of”  $S_{n+1}$ . This actually holds more generally. If a homomorphism  $f : G \rightarrow H$  is injective, then there is an isomorphic copy of  $G$  inside of  $H$ , in the form of the image  $f(G)$ . We'll define this more precisely in the next subsection.

**Example 15** (Linear maps). Let  $V$  and  $W$  be vector spaces over  $\mathbb{C}$ . The definition of vector spaces says that  $(V, +)$  and  $(W, +)$  are, in particular, abelian groups. Let  $T : V \rightarrow W$  be a linear map. The condition

$$T(x + y) = T(x) + T(y)$$

implies that  $T$  is a homomorphism of (abelian) groups.

**Example 16** (All linear maps).  $f : \mathbb{Z} \rightarrow \mathbb{Z}_n$ , given by  $f(x) := x \pmod{n}$

Here's a fact that we'll have uses for.

**Exercise 3.** Let  $f : G \rightarrow H$  be a homomorphism of groups. For every  $a \in G$ , the inverse of  $f(a)$  is  $f(a^{-1})$ . In equation form, that's

$$[f(a)]^{-1} = f(a^{-1}).$$

## Subgroups

As we saw above,  $S_n$  “sits inside of”  $S_{n+1}$ . Here's how we say that precisely.

**Definition 3.** Let  $G$  be a group. A nonempty subset  $A \subseteq G$  is called a subgroup of  $G$  if

$$\forall a, b \in A, \quad ab \in A \quad (\text{Closure})$$

$$\forall a \in A, \quad a^{-1} \in A \quad (\text{Inversion})$$

The first consequence of this definition is that if  $A$  is a subgroup of  $G$ , then  $e \in A$ . Why? Well, take any element  $a \in A$ . Its inverse,  $a^{-1}$  also is in  $A$  by definition. Their product also must be in  $A$ . But their product is  $e$ .

Here's a fact that will be of use.

**Proposition 1.** Let  $f : G \rightarrow H$  be a homomorphism. Then

1. The kernel  $\ker(f)$  is a subgroup of  $G$ .
2. The image  $f(G)$  is a subgroup of  $H$ .

Let's see some examples of subgroups in action.

**Example 17** (Dihedral groups). Let  $n \geq 1$  be a positive integer. The set of  $2n$  matrices of the forms

$$\begin{bmatrix} \cos 2\pi \frac{k}{3} & -\sin 2\pi \frac{k}{3} \\ \sin 2\pi \frac{k}{3} & \cos 2\pi \frac{k}{3} \end{bmatrix} \quad \text{and} \quad \begin{bmatrix} \cos 2\pi \frac{k}{3} & \sin 2\pi \frac{k}{3} \\ \sin 2\pi \frac{k}{3} & -\cos 2\pi \frac{k}{3} \end{bmatrix}$$

for  $k = 0, 1, \dots, n-1$  is a subgroup of  $\text{GL}_2(\mathbb{C})$ .

**Example 18** (Special linear group). The set  $SL_N(\mathbb{C}) := \{M \in \text{GL}_N(\mathbb{C}) \mid \det(M) = 1\}$  is a subgroup of the general linear group  $\text{GL}_N(\mathbb{C})$ .

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UNSTABLE