

The Steenrod Algebra and Its Dual

David Wiedemann

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These are notes for the seminar "Advanced Topics in Homotopy Theory" given by Prof. Stefan Schwede and Dr. Jack Davies in Bonn during the WS2023/24. Our goal is to present the main results of Milnor's paper "The Steenrod Algebra and its Dual" [Mil58].

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1 Hopf Algebras

1.1 Bi-Algebras

We start by studying Hopf algebras independently. Throughout, let k be a field.

Definition 1 (Algebra) An *Algebra* is a triple (\mathcal{A}, μ, η) with \mathcal{A} a k -vector space together with two maps $\mu: \mathcal{A} \otimes \mathcal{A} \rightarrow \mathcal{A}$ (multiplication), $\eta: k \rightarrow \mathcal{A}$ (unit) making the following diagrams commute

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \mathcal{A} \otimes \mathcal{A} \otimes \mathcal{A} & \xrightarrow{\text{Id} \otimes \mu} & \mathcal{A} \otimes \mathcal{A} \\ \mu \otimes \text{Id} \downarrow & & \downarrow \mu \\ \mathcal{A} \otimes \mathcal{A} & \xrightarrow{\mu} & \mathcal{A} \end{array}$$

$$\begin{array}{ccccc}
k \otimes \mathcal{A} & \xrightarrow{i \otimes \eta} & \mathcal{A} \otimes \mathcal{A} & \xleftarrow{\eta \otimes i} & \mathcal{A} \otimes k \\
& \searrow & \downarrow \mu & \swarrow & \\
& & \mathcal{A} & &
\end{array}$$

Dualizing these definitions, we unsurprisingly obtain

Definition 2 (Coalgebra) A *coalgebra* is a triple (C, Δ, ϵ) where C is a k -vector space together with two maps $\Delta: C \rightarrow C \otimes C$ (comultiplication) and $\epsilon: C \rightarrow k$ (augmentation) making the following diagrams commute

$$\begin{array}{ccc}
C & \xrightarrow{\Delta} & C \otimes C \\
\Delta \downarrow & & \downarrow \text{Id} \otimes \Delta \\
C \otimes C & \xrightarrow{\Delta \otimes \text{Id}} & C \otimes C \otimes C
\end{array}$$

$$\begin{array}{ccccc}
& & C & & \\
& \swarrow & \downarrow \Delta & \searrow & \\
k \otimes C & \xleftarrow{\epsilon \otimes \text{Id}} & C \otimes C & \xrightarrow{\text{Id} \otimes \epsilon} & C \otimes k
\end{array}$$

Since taking duals commutes with tensor products, notice that the dual C^\vee naturally gets an algebra structure.

We define (co-)algebra morphisms in the obvious way.

Definition 3 (Bialgebra) A *bialgebra* is a tuple $(\mathcal{A}, \mu, \eta, \Delta, \epsilon)$ such that $(\mathcal{A}, \mu, \epsilon)$ is an algebra, $(\mathcal{A}, \Delta, \epsilon)$ is a coalgebra and such that Δ and ϵ are algebra morphisms

Equivalently, one can also require μ and ϵ to be coalgebra morphisms.

If $\mathcal{A} = \bigoplus_{n \in \mathbb{N}} \mathcal{A}_n$ is a graded algebra, we define the **dual algebra** by

$$\mathcal{A}^* := \mathcal{A}_n^*, \text{ with } \mathcal{A}_n^* = \text{hom}(\mathcal{A}_{-n}, k)$$

We call a graded algebra \mathcal{A} **graded commutative** if for all homogeneous elements $\alpha, \beta \in \mathcal{A}$, we have $\alpha\beta = (-1)^{\dim \alpha \dim \beta} \beta\alpha$. (omitting μ for sanity reasons) The graded algebra \mathcal{A} is **connected** if \mathcal{A}_0 is generated by 1, equivalently $\eta: k \rightarrow \mathcal{A}_0$ is an isomorphism.

We can similarly define the notion of a graded coalgebra and of a connected coalgebra.

1.2 Antipode maps

Let C be a bi-algebra as above and let $f, g: C \rightarrow C$ be linear maps, we define the convolution $f * g$ of f with g as the composition

$$C \xrightarrow{\Delta} C \otimes C \xrightarrow{f \otimes g} C \otimes C \xrightarrow{\mu} C.$$

Definition 4 (Antipode) An antipode $S: C \rightarrow C$ is an endomorphism such that

$$S * \text{Id} = \text{Id} * S = \eta \circ \epsilon.$$

Definition 5 (Hopf Algebra) A Hopf Algebra is a bi-algebra with an antipode

For specific classes of bialgebras, there is a way of constructing an antipode map.

Theorem 1 Let \mathcal{A} be a graded bialgebra such that $\Delta(x) = x \otimes 1 + 1 \otimes x + \sum_i a_i \otimes b_i$ with $\dim a_i, \dim b_i > 0$, then \mathcal{A} admits an antipode map.

Proof Let $x \in \mathcal{A}$, to define S , we proceed inductively on the degree of x . If $\dim x = 0$, we define $S(x) = x$.

Inductively, suppose we've defined S for all x of degree $< n$ and write $\Delta(x) = x \otimes 1 + 1 \otimes x + \sum_i a_i \otimes b_i$ as above. Since Δ respects the grading, we may suppose that $\dim b_i < n$, we let

$$S(x) := -x - \sum_i a_i S(b_i)$$

One now easily checks that S is an antipode. □

2 The Steenrod Algebra

Let p be a prime.

Definition 6 (Stable Cohomology operation) A stable mod p cohomology operation θ of type $r \in \mathbb{Z}$ is a family of natural transformations $(\theta_n)_{n \in \mathbb{N}}$

$$\theta_n: H^n(-, \mathbb{F}_p) \rightarrow H^{n+r}(-, \mathbb{F}_p)$$

such that the following diagram commutes for every space X

$$\begin{array}{ccc} H^n(X, \mathbb{F}_p) & \xrightarrow{\theta_n} & H^{n+r}(X, \mathbb{F}_p) \\ \downarrow & & \downarrow \\ H^{n+1}(\Sigma X, \mathbb{F}_p) & \xrightarrow{\theta_{n+1}} & H^{n+r+1}(\Sigma X, \mathbb{F}_p) \end{array}$$

We can trivially compose two cohomology operations θ, θ' of type r (resp. r') to obtain a cohomology operation of type $r + r'$, this motivates the following definition.

Definition 7 (Steenrod Algebra) The mod p Steenrod Algebra \mathcal{A}_p is the ring freely generated by the stable cohomology operations. This ring comes with a natural grading coming from the type of the cohomology operation.

For those familiar with (maps of) spectra, the most natural way to define the Steenrod algebra is by the formula $\mathcal{A}_p = \text{H}\mathbb{F}_p^*(\text{H}\mathbb{F}) = \bigoplus_n \text{H}\mathbb{F}_p^n(\text{H}\mathbb{F}_p)$.

Remark 2 Notice that if θ and θ' are two cohomology operations of different types, their sum $\theta + \theta'$ in \mathcal{A}_p does **not** define a cohomology operation in any natural way. Despite this, \mathcal{A}_p still naturally acts on the **full** cohomology $H^*(X)$ of a space, when viewed as an abelian group.

As we will establish in the next section, \mathcal{A}_p carries a Hopf algebra structure which makes $H^*(X)$ into a (Hopf-)module. Before showing this, we present structural results about the Steenrod algebra.

2.1 Steenrod Powers

From now on, $H^*(-)$ will always denote mod p cohomology for a fixed prime p .

Definition 8 (Steenrod Powers) Suppose $p > 2$, the **Steenrod powers** are the stable cohomology operations

$$P^i: H^q(-, \mathbb{F}_p) \rightarrow H^{q+2i(p-1)}(-, \mathbb{F}_p)$$

uniquely determined by the following properties

1. $P^0 = \text{Id}$
2. if $x \in H^{2n}(X, A, \mathbb{F}_p)$, then $P^n x = x^p$
3. if $x \in H^n(X, A)$, then $P^i x = 0$ for all $2i > n$
4. $\delta P^i = P^i \delta$ where δ is the boundary homomorphism
5. $P^i(xy) = \sum_{j+k=i} P^j x P^k y$

Definition 9 (Steenrod Squares) The **Steenrod squares** are the unique stable mod 2 cohomology operations

$$Sq^i: H^q(-, \mathbb{F}_2) \rightarrow H^{q+i}(-, \mathbb{F}_2)$$

uniquely determined by

1. $P^0 = \text{Id}$
2. if $x \in H^n(X, A, \mathbb{F}_2)$, then $Sq^n(x) = x^2$
3. if $x \in H^n(X, A, \mathbb{F}_2)$, then $Sq^i x = 0$ for all $i > n$
4. $Sq^n(xy) = \sum_{i+j=n} Sq^i x Sq^j y$
5. $\delta Sq^i = Sq^i \delta$

The natural transformation $\beta: H^n(-) \rightarrow H^{n+1}(-)$ induced by the short exact sequence $0 \rightarrow \mathbb{Z}_p \rightarrow \mathbb{Z}_{p^2} \rightarrow \mathbb{Z}_p \rightarrow 0$ is also stable, we call it the **Bockstein morphism**. For $p = 2$, the Bockstein coincides with Sq^1 . It is a famed result of Steenrod that these operations generate the Steenrod algebra.

Theorem 3 (Structure of the Steenrod Algebra) [SE62, Ch. VI, Sec. 2] Let p be an odd prime. Call a sequence $I = (\epsilon_0, s_1, \epsilon_1, s_2, \dots)$ **admissible** if it is finite, $s_i \geq 1, \epsilon = 0, 1$ and $s_i \geq p s_{i+1} + \epsilon_i$. The set

$$P^I := \beta^{\epsilon_0} P^{s_1} \beta^{\epsilon_1} P^{s_2}, \quad I \text{ admissible}$$

is a basis for the Steenrod algebra.

There is a similar result for $p = 2$, which we do not make explicit.

3 The Diagonal Morphism

From now on, p is a prime different from 2 and $\mathcal{A} := \mathcal{A}_p$.

The main goal of this talk is to present a proof that \mathcal{A}_p has the structure of a Hopf algebra and to make its structure more explicit.

Throughout, let X be a space. We start by constructing the diagonal morphism $\psi^*: \mathcal{A}^* \rightarrow \mathcal{A}^* \otimes \mathcal{A}^*$.

Proposition 4 *There is a unique diagonal morphism $\psi^*: \mathcal{A}^* \rightarrow \mathcal{A}^* \otimes \mathcal{A}^*$ such that*

1. *For all $\theta \in \mathcal{A}^*$, $\psi^*(\theta) = \sum_i \theta'_i \otimes \theta''_i$ and $\alpha, \beta \in H^*(X)$ we have*

$$\theta(\alpha \smile \beta) = \sum (-1)^{\dim \theta'_i \dim \alpha} \theta'_i(\alpha) \smile \theta''_i(\beta)$$

2. *The morphism ψ^* is a ring morphism.*

Proof Let $\mathcal{A}^* \otimes \mathcal{A}^*$ act on $H^*(X) \otimes H^*(X)$ by

$$(\theta' \otimes \theta'')(\alpha \otimes \beta) = (-1)^{\dim \theta'' \dim \alpha} \theta'(\alpha) \otimes \theta''(\beta)$$

and we let $c: H^*(X) \otimes H^*(X) \rightarrow H^*(X)$ denote the cup product.

ψ^* **exists**

Let $R \subset \mathcal{A}^*$ be the set of all θ such that

$$\theta(\alpha \smile \beta) = c\rho(\alpha \otimes \beta)$$

for some $\rho \in \mathcal{A}^* \otimes \mathcal{A}^*$. We want to show that $R = \mathcal{A}^*$.

Notice that R is closed under multiplication and addition. If $\theta_1, \theta_2 \in R$, then

$$\theta_1 \theta_2(\alpha \smile \beta) = c\rho_1 \rho_2(\alpha \otimes \beta) \text{ and } (\theta_1 + \theta_2)(\alpha \smile \beta) = c((\rho_1 + \rho_2)(\alpha \otimes \beta))$$

Hence, it suffices to show that R contains the Bockstein and the Steenrod powers which follows from the formulas

$$\begin{aligned} \delta(\alpha \smile \beta) &= \delta\alpha \smile \beta + (-1)^{\dim \alpha} \alpha \smile \delta(\beta) \\ P^n(\alpha \smile \beta) &= \sum_{i+j=n} P^i(\alpha) \smile P^j(\beta) \end{aligned}$$

ψ^* is unique

Let $K := K(\mathbb{F}_p, n+1)$ and $\gamma \in H^{n+1}(K)$ correspond to the identity map, the map

$$\begin{aligned} \text{ev}_\gamma: \mathcal{A}_i^* &\rightarrow H^{n+1+i}(K) \\ \theta &\mapsto \theta\gamma \end{aligned}$$

is an isomorphism for all $i \leq n$, it follows that

$$\begin{aligned} j: (\mathcal{A}^* \otimes \mathcal{A}^*)_i &\rightarrow H^{2n+2+i}(K \times K) \\ \theta \otimes \theta' &\mapsto (-1)^{\dim \theta' \dim \gamma} \theta(\gamma) \otimes \theta'(\gamma) \end{aligned}$$

is too.

Let $\theta \in \mathcal{A}_i^*$, suppose ρ, ρ' both satisfy the required equality, then

$$j(\rho) = c\rho((\gamma \otimes 1) \otimes (1 \otimes \gamma)) = c\rho'((\gamma \otimes 1) \otimes (1 \otimes \gamma)) = j(\rho')$$

The unicity of ψ^* implies that it is a ring morphism. □

Remark 5 From this proof, we can in particular single out the action of ψ^* on generators, namely, it follows that

$$\begin{aligned} \psi^*(\delta) &= \delta \otimes 1 + 1 \otimes \delta \\ \psi^*(P^n) &= \sum_{i+j=n} P^i \otimes P^j. \end{aligned}$$

Theorem 6 (The Steenrod Algebra is a Hopf Algebra) The maps

$$\mathcal{A} \xrightarrow{\psi^*} \mathcal{A} \otimes \mathcal{A} \xrightarrow{\phi^*} \mathcal{A}$$

Give \mathcal{A} the structure of a Hopf algebra. Furthermore ϕ^* is associative and ψ^* is associative and commutative.

Proof It suffices to show that ψ^* is associative and commutative.

Associativity

It suffices to check the identity

$$(\psi^* \otimes 1)\psi^* = (1 \otimes \psi^*)\psi^*$$

This identity clearly holds on generators, namely

$$\begin{aligned} (\psi^* \otimes 1)(\delta \otimes 1 + 1 \otimes \delta) &= \delta \otimes 1 \otimes 1 + 1 \otimes \delta \otimes 1 + 1 \otimes 1 \otimes \delta \\ &= (1 \otimes \psi^*)(\delta \otimes 1 + 1 \otimes \delta) \end{aligned}$$

and

$$\begin{aligned}
(\psi^* \otimes 1) \left(\sum_{i+j=n} p^i \otimes p^j \right) &= \sum_{i+j=n} \left(\sum_{i'+j'=i} p^{i'} \otimes p^{j'} \right) \otimes p^j \\
&= \sum_{i+j+k=n} p^i \otimes p^j \otimes p^k \\
&= (1 \otimes \psi^*) \left(\sum_{i+j=n} p^i \otimes p^j \right).
\end{aligned}$$

(Graded) Commutativity

Let

$$\begin{aligned}
T: \mathcal{A} \otimes \mathcal{A} &\rightarrow \mathcal{A} \otimes \mathcal{A} \\
\theta \otimes \theta' &\mapsto (-1)^{\dim \theta \dim \theta'} \theta' \otimes \theta.
\end{aligned}$$

We have to check that $\psi^* = T\psi^*$, which one can check again on generators:

$$T(1 \otimes \delta + \delta \otimes 1) = 1 \otimes \delta + \delta \otimes 1$$

and

$$T\left(\sum_{i+j=n} p^i \otimes p^j\right) = \sum_{i+j=n} (-1)^{4ij(p-1)^2} p^j \otimes p^i \quad \square$$

4 The dual Steenrod Algebra

For the rest of this talk, we focus on the dual Steenrod algebra $\mathcal{A}_* := \mathcal{A}^\vee$, whose multiplication is induced by ψ^* . Our goal is to fully determine the structure of \mathcal{A}_* .

To single out an appropriate set of generators for \mathcal{A}_* , we analyze how \mathcal{A}_* (co-)acts on the cohomology ring of a specific space. We start by describing this co-action formally and then introduce the relevant space.

4.1 The coaction of \mathcal{A}_*

Given that we are working over a vector space, cohomology and homology are dual. Hence, given $\theta \in \mathcal{A}$ and $\mu \in H_*$, the rule

$$\theta \cdot \mu(\alpha) := \mu(\theta(\alpha)) \text{ for all } \alpha \in H^*$$

gives a well defined action

$$\lambda_*: \mathcal{A} \otimes H_* \rightarrow H_*$$

We denote the dual of this action by $\lambda^*: H^* \rightarrow \mathcal{A}_* \otimes H^*$. The restriction of λ_*

$$\lambda_i: \mathcal{A} \otimes H^{n+i} \rightarrow H^n$$

also gives rise to dual morphisms $\lambda^i: H^n \rightarrow \mathcal{A}_* \otimes H^{n+i}$ which satisfy

$$\lambda^* = \lambda^1 + \lambda^2 + \dots^1$$

We can also understand the action of \mathcal{A} better in terms of λ^* .

Lemma 7 *Let $\lambda^*(\alpha) = \sum_i \alpha_i \otimes \omega_i$ and $\theta \in \mathcal{A}$, then*

$$\theta\alpha = \sum_i (-1)^{\dim \alpha_i \dim \omega_i} \langle \theta, \omega_i \rangle \alpha_i$$

Proof By definition of the action, we have

$$\begin{aligned} \langle \mu, \theta\alpha \rangle &= \langle \mu\theta, \alpha \rangle \\ &= \langle \mu \otimes \theta, \lambda^* \alpha \rangle \\ &= \sum_i (-1)^{\dim \alpha_i \dim \omega_i} \langle \mu, \alpha_i \rangle \langle \theta, \omega_i \rangle \end{aligned} \quad \square$$

And the general equality follows.

4.2 Generators for \mathcal{A}_*

Fix some large integer N and let $X = S^{2N+1}/\mathbb{Z}_p = \text{sk}_{2N+1}K(\mathbb{F}_p, 1)$. The $(\text{mod } p)$ cohomology ring of X has the following properties

$$H^1(X) = \langle \alpha \rangle, H^2(X) = \langle \beta \rangle, H^{2i}(X) = \langle \beta^i \rangle, H^{2i+1}(X) = \langle \alpha\beta^i \rangle,$$

where $\beta = \delta\alpha$ and $i \leq N$

Notation 8 *We define*

$$M^k := p^{p^{k-1}} \dots p^p p^1$$

Lemma 9 *For all $\theta \in \mathcal{A}$*

$$\theta\beta = \begin{cases} \beta^{p^k} & \text{if } \theta = M_k \\ 0 & \text{else.} \end{cases}$$

Proof Let $\mathcal{P} = 1 + p^1 + p^2 + \dots$, from the properties of the Steenrod powers, we notice that

$$\mathcal{P}\beta = \beta + \beta^p \text{ thus } \mathcal{P}(\beta^{p^r}) = \beta^{p^r} + \beta^{p^{r+1}}.$$

Hence $p^{p^r}(\beta^{p^r}) = \beta^{p^{r+1}}$ and $p^j(\beta^{p^r})$ for $j \neq p^r$ and $j > 0$. From this, we deduce the statement. \square

¹Elements in H^* are always finite sums, so this sum should be understood as $\bigoplus_i \lambda^i$

We will now explicitly determine a basis for \mathcal{A}_* .

Lemma 10 *There exist elements $\tau_i \in \mathcal{A}_*^{2p^k-1}$ such that*

$$\lambda^* \alpha = \alpha \otimes 1 + \beta \otimes \tau_0 + \dots + \beta^{p^r} \otimes \tau_r.$$

Similarly, there exist elements $\xi_i \in \mathcal{A}_^{2p^i-2}$ with $\xi_0 = 1$ such that*

$$\lambda^* \beta = \beta \otimes \xi_0 + \beta^p \otimes \xi_1 + \dots + \beta^{p^r} \otimes \xi_r$$

Proof From the above, it follows that

$$\lambda^* \beta = \lambda^0 \beta + \lambda^{2p-2} \beta + \dots + \lambda^{2p^k-2} \beta.$$

As the cohomology of X is one-dimensional in all degrees, we deduce that $\lambda^{2p^k-2}(\beta) = \beta^{p^k} \otimes \xi^k$. The exact same argument works for $\lambda^* \alpha$. \square

We now study the evaluation pairing $\mathcal{A}_* \times \mathcal{A} \rightarrow \mathbb{F}_p$. We easily establish the following lemma

Lemma 11 *We have $\xi_k(M_k) = 1$ but $\xi_k(\theta) = 0$ for any other monomial. Furthermore*

$$\langle M_k \delta, \tau_k \rangle = 1$$

and $\langle \theta, \tau_k \rangle$ for any other monomial.

Proof We know that

$$M_k \beta = \beta^{p^k} = \sum_i (-1)^{2p^i \dim \xi^i} \langle M_k, \xi_i \rangle \beta^{p^i}$$

Proving the equality. The second equality follows from the same argument applied to α and $M_k \delta$. \square

We are ready to prove the main structure theorem for the dual Hopf algebra.

Theorem 12 *There is a graded isomorphism*

$$\mathcal{A}_* \simeq \Lambda[\tau_0, \tau_1, \dots] \otimes \mathbb{F}_p[\xi_1, \xi_2, \dots], \quad \text{where } \dim \tau_i = 2p^i - 1, \dim \xi_i = 2p^i - 2.$$

Here $\Lambda[\tau_0, \dots]$ denotes the exterior algebra and $\mathbb{F}_p[\xi_1, \xi_2, \dots]$ is the polynomial algebra. This isomorphism is graded

Proof Let \mathcal{I} be the set of finite sequences $(\epsilon_0, r_1, \epsilon_1, \dots)$ with $\epsilon_i = 0, 1$ and $r_i \in \mathbb{N}$. Given $I \in \mathcal{I}$, we define

$$\omega(I) := \tau_0^{\epsilon_0} \xi_1^{r_1} \tau_1^{\epsilon_1} \xi_2^{r_2} \dots$$

We claim it is sufficient to show that the set of $\omega(I)$ form a basis for \mathcal{A}_* . Indeed, the τ_i, ξ_j then don't observe any additional identities and the graded commutativity gives

the desired isomorphism.

We may order the set \mathcal{I} colexicographically, ie. $(a_1, \epsilon_1, a_2, \dots) < (b_1, \epsilon'_1, b_2, \dots)$ if $a_i < b_i$ for the largest i such that a_i and b_i differ (remember that the sequences are finite).

We also associated to a $J = (\epsilon_0, r_1, \epsilon_1, \dots) \in \mathcal{I}$ an element of \mathcal{A} .

$$\theta(J) = \delta^{\epsilon_0} p^{s_1} \delta^{\epsilon_1} p^{s_2} \dots,$$

where $s_j = \sum_{i=k}^{\infty} (\epsilon_i + r_i) p^{i-k}$.

One can check that the $\theta(J)$ are the basic monomials of the Cartan basis for \mathcal{A} .

To show the isomorphism, we show that the basic monomials in \mathcal{A} form an “almost dual” basis to the set of $\omega(I)$.

More precisely, we will show the following lemma.

Let $I < J \in \mathcal{I}$, then $\langle \theta(J), \omega(I) \rangle = 0$ if $I < J$, furthermore $\langle \theta(I), \omega(I) \rangle = \pm 1$. (★)

The proof of (★) will constitute the main part of the proof, let us see how to conclude given (★).

Let $\mathcal{I}_n \subset \mathcal{I}$ be the set of sequences such that $\dim \omega(I) = \dim \theta(I) = n$. The matrix $(\langle \theta(J), \omega(I) \rangle)_{I, J \in \mathcal{I}_n}$ is upper-triangular with ± 1 on the diagonal, hence, the pairing is non-degenerate and the $\omega(I)$ generate the n -th graded part of \mathcal{A}_* . □

References

- [Mil58] John Milnor. “The Steenrod Algebra and its Dual”. **in**(1958).
- [SE62] Norman Earl Steenrod **and** David Bernard Alper Epstein. “Cohomology Operations”. **in***Ann. of Math. Stud.*: (1962).