

# Year 2 — Arithmetic and combinatorics of Conway-Coxeter frieze patterns

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These notes are not endorsed by the lecturers, and I have modified them (often significantly) after lectures. They are nowhere near accurate representations of what was actually lectured, and in particular, all errors are almost surely mine.

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# 1 Overview and

## 1.1 Continued fraction

Let's take  $x \in \mathbb{R}$  and we can say,  $a < x < a + 1$  where  $a \in \mathbb{Z}$ . Now we write,  $x = a + \frac{1}{x'}$ ,  $x' > 1$ .

$$\begin{aligned} x &= a + \frac{1}{x'} \\ &= a + \frac{1}{a' + \frac{1}{x''}} \\ &\vdots \\ &= a_1 + \frac{1}{a_2 + \frac{1}{a_3 + \frac{1}{\ddots}}} \end{aligned}$$

where  $a_1 \in \mathbb{Z}$  and  $a_i \geq 1$  for  $\forall i \geq 2$ .

**Lemma 1.1.** The sequence of  $a_i$ 's are finite if and only if  $x \in \mathbb{Q}$ .

*Proof.* If it's finite, it's obvious that it's rational.

Conversely, this is due to Euclid's algorithm. Take  $\frac{p}{q} \in \mathbb{Q}$  and then write,

$$\begin{aligned} p &= a_1 q + r_1 & 0 \leq r_1 < q \\ q &= a_2 r_1 + r_2 & 0 \leq r_2 < r_1 \end{aligned}$$

□

or we can form them by subtracting instead of adding, these make negative expansion (or Hirzebruch-Sung),

$$x = a_1 - \frac{1}{a_2 - \frac{1}{a_3 - \frac{1}{\ddots}}}$$

**Notation.**  $x = [a_1, a_2, \dots]$  means  $x$  is a regular continued fraction and  $x = [[a_1, a_2, \dots]]$  means a negative expansion.

Let's take  $x \notin \mathbb{Q}$  and consider the golden ratio,

$$\varphi = [1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, \dots]$$

and now  $e$ , there is some regularity,

$$e = [2, 1, 2, 1, 1, 4, 1, 1, 6, 1, 1, 8, 1, \dots]$$

and now  $\pi$ , there is no regularity,

$$\pi = [3, 7, 15, 1, 292, 1, 1, \dots]$$

Now consider the generalised continued fraction,

$$\pi = \frac{4}{1 + \frac{1^2}{2 + \frac{3^2}{2 + \frac{5^2}{\ddots}}}}$$

Now consider the negative expansion,

$$[2, 2, 2, 2, 2, \dots]$$

This is just one. It may be represented with an infinite sequence.

Here are some more examples,

$$\begin{aligned}\frac{5}{2} &= [2, 2] = [3, 2] \\ \frac{10}{3} &= [3, 3] = [4, 2, 2] \\ \frac{14}{5} &= [2, 1, 3, 1] = [3, 5] \\ \frac{43}{16} &= [2, 1, 2, 5] = [3, 4, 2, 2, 2, 2]\end{aligned}$$

**Remark.** To make it unique one can always choose an even number for the length of the sequence. For a regular expansion, we can always assume that it's of even length.

There is a very natural question, given  $x = [a_1, \dots, a_{2m}] = [c_1, c_2, \dots, c_k]$ , what is the relationship between  $a_i$ 's and  $c_i$ 's?

## 1.2 Friezes

Friezes are from Coxeter in the 1970's. We have the first and last row as 1's. When you have a diamond of numbers,

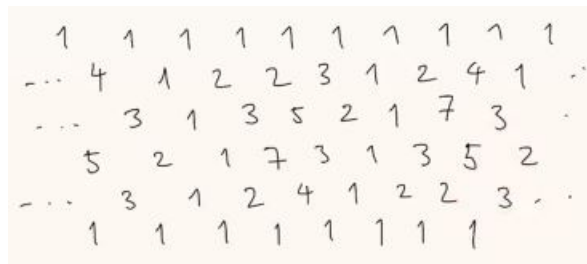


Figure 1: A frieze pattern

**Theorem 1.2** (Coxeter). Friezes are periodic!

We shall consider the width of the frieze, don't count the ones. The example has width of 4 and we can look at the width + 4, we get some periodic notion. This means we just need the first 'row' to fill the frieze.

Furthermore, we now have some sort of glide symmetry. We can form triangles and they repeat themselves. Let's finish the statement

**Theorem 1.3** (Coxeter). Friezes are periodic!

- Width  $w \rightarrow (w + 3)$  is a period.
- Invariant under a glide symmetry.

**Exercise.** Exercises 1,2,3 and 4.

**Question 2:** How to get frieze containing only positive integers?

### 1.3 Triangulation of n-gons

**Definition 1.4** (Diagonal). A line that joins two non-consecutive vertices.

**Definition 1.5** (Triangulation). The maximum number of non-intersecting diagonals.

The triangulation is not unique. The number of triangulations is related to the Catalan numbers. For every triangulation, you may have two or more triangles on the exterior. We will consider exactly two exterior triangles for the minute,

Fix a triangulation with two exterior triangles, if you join two external vertices of these external triangles, then you will intersect every other triangle.

If you consider the triangles layed next to eachother like this, We can count how many triangles are

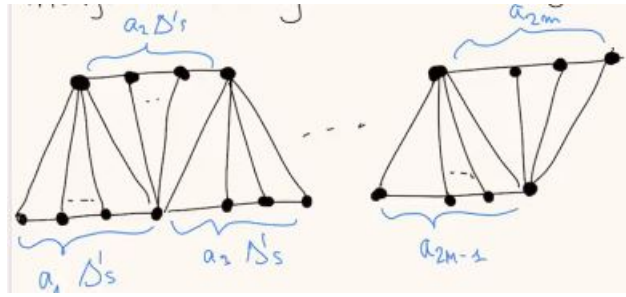


Figure 2

incidence to the vertex. We shall call this  $c_i$  where  $i$  is the number of the vertex. If we do this for the 7-gon, The sequence  $(a_1, a_2, \dots, a_{2n})$  determines the triangulation and the so does the sequence,  $(c_1, c_2, \dots)$ .

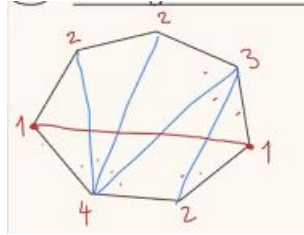


Figure 3

**Theorem 1.6.** With this data, we can say that,

- $[a_1, a_2, \dots, a_{2m}] = [c_1, c_2, \dots, c_k]$
- $(c_1, c_2, \dots, c_n)$  determines a frieze of width  $n - 3$  containing only positive integers.

**Remark.** On 1) this is called this Hirzebruch Formula,

$$[a_1, a_2, a_3, \dots, a_{2m}] = [a_1 + 1, 2, 2, \dots, 2, a_3 + 2, 2, \dots]$$

**Remark.** On 2) It works with any kind of triangulations and all friezes arise this way. (This is Conway-Coxeter Theorem) and a Conway-Coxeter Frieze is a frieze with positive integers.

## 2 Proving Conway-Coxeter Theorem

Our main theorem is,

**Theorem 2.1** (Conway-Coxeter). There is a bijection,

$$\{\text{friezes of } \mathbb{Z}_{>0}\} \longleftrightarrow \{\text{Triangulations of polygons with } w + 3 \text{ polygons}\}$$

This is given by,

$$(c_1, c_2, \dots, c_{w+3}) \longleftrightarrow c_i = \# \text{ of triangles incident to } i$$

**Definition 2.2** (Quiddity Sequence). We call a quiddity sequence of a polygon, just the  $c_i$ 's

This theorem is from 'Triangulated Polygons and Frieze patterns', it is a two part paper. The first asks questions about friezes, 33 of them. then they give the questions later. The result is lost in the questions. Coxeter gave all credit to Conway. Conway was a victim to the pandemic, RIP. <sup>1</sup> Conway called the friezes and the result a miracle and doesn't quite know how he came up with them.

**Example.** We can look at the following for  $w = 1$ , It has two solutions of  $x = 1$  and  $x = \frac{1}{2}$ , hence we have

two friezes,

$$1 \quad 2 \quad 1 \quad 2$$

and,

$$2 \quad 1 \quad 2 \quad 1$$

These are two different triangulations. One with vertex 2 and 4 connected and the other 1 and 3 connected.

and for  $w = 2$ , we have

**Example.** We have a different constraint because we want positive integers, this is exercise 2 and it has 5 solutions. If we look at pentagons we have the same thing by cyclic permutations up to quiddity.

$$(x_1, x_2) = (1, 1), (1, 2), (2, 1), (2, 3), (3, 2)$$

If we consider the possible case where  $w = 0$ , we get a degenerate frieze.

**Example.** This produces a frieze of 'no filling'.

**Theorem 2.3** (Thm 1). — Friezes of width  $w$  are  $(w + 3)$ -periodic

<sup>1</sup>I loved Conway's work, what a legend. I missed meeting him once, by five minutes.



**Lemma.**  $\frac{f_i + h_i}{g_i} = K$

*Proof.* Apply the frieze rule round these values and get,

$$\begin{aligned} 1 &= g_i f_{i+1} - f_i g_{i+1} \\ 1 &= h_i g_{i+1} - g_i h_{i+1} \\ g_i f_{i+1} + g_i h_{i+1} &= h_i g_{i+1} + f_i g_{i+1} \\ \frac{f_{i+1} h_{i+1}}{g_{i+1}} &= \frac{f_i h_i}{g_i} \end{aligned}$$

and so we can see,

$$\begin{aligned} \frac{f_0 + h_0}{g_0} &= \frac{f_{w+1} + h_{w+1}}{g_{w+1}} \\ c_0 &= f_{w+1} \end{aligned}$$

and so we have that we have a type of glide symmetry.  $\square$

Now using identical argument, we can start to determine more of the frieze. Hence, we have proved the glide symmetry. Now, we have also proved (1), which is implied by (2).

We are going to take diagonals in the other direction and use similar arguments, we will find that,

$$\frac{h_0 + h_2}{h_1} = \frac{g_0 + g_2}{g_1} = \frac{f_0 + f_2}{f_1} = c_2$$

and hence, we obtain the recurrence relation of,

$$g_i = c_i g_{i-1} - g_{i-2}$$

This is the key lemma for the big proof. If  $g_{i-1}$  and  $g_{i-2}$  are polynomials in  $c$ , then so is  $g_i$ . Now, we have proved (3).

Finally, for (4), exercise 4 gives a proof and an explicit formula in the particular case of a diagonal. In the case of an arbitrary zig-zag, we don't know any elementary proof, the one I know is based on Cluster Algebra and Cluster Algebra. You can focus on elements of the frieze as cluster elements.  $\square$