14 Partial Derivatives

14.2 Limits and Continuity

Limits and Continuity

Let's compare the behavior of the functions

$$f(x, y) = \frac{\sin(x^2 + y^2)}{x^2 + y^2}$$

and

$$g(x, y) = \frac{x^2 - y^2}{x^2 + y^2}$$

as x and y both approach 0 [and therefore the point (x, y) approaches the origin].

Limits and Continuity

Tables 1 and 2 show values of $f(x, y)$ and $g(x, y)$, correct to three decimal places, for points (x, y) near the origin. (Notice that neither function is defined at the origin.)

x \ y	−1.0	−0.5	−0.2	0	0.2	0.5	1.0
−1.0	0.455	0.759	0.829	0.841	0.829	0.759	0.455
−0.5	0.759	0.959	0.986	0.990	0.986	0.959	0.759
−0.2	0.829	0.986	0.999	1.000	0.999	0.986	0.829
0	0.841	0.990	1.000		1.000	0.990	0.841
0.2	0.829	0.986	0.999	1.000	0.999	0.986	0.829
0.5	0.759	0.959	0.986	0.990	0.986	0.959	0.759
1.0	0.455	0.759	0.829	0.841	0.829	0.759	0.455

Values of $f(x, y)$

Table 1

Limits and Continuity

x \ y	−1.0	−0.5	−0.2	0	0.2	0.5	1.0
−1.0	0.000	0.600	0.923	1.000	0.923	0.600	0.000
−0.5	−0.600	0.000	0.724	1.000	0.724	0.000	−0.600
−0.2	−0.923	−0.724	0.000	1.000	0.000	−0.724	−0.923
0	−1.000	−1.000	−1.000		−1.000	−1.000	−1.000
0.2	−0.923	−0.724	0.000	1.000	0.000	−0.724	−0.923
0.5	−0.600	0.000	0.724	1.000	0.724	0.000	−0.600
1.0	0.000	0.600	0.923	1.000	0.923	0.600	0.000

Values of $g(x, y)$

Table 2

Limits and Continuity

It appears that as (x, y) approaches $(0, 0)$, the values of $f(x, y)$ are approaching 1 whereas the values of $g(x, y)$ aren't approaching any number. It turns out that these guesses based on numerical evidence are correct, and we write

$$\lim_{(x, y)\to(0, 0)} \frac{\sin(x^2 + y^2)}{x^2 + y^2} = 1 \quad \text{and}$$

$$\lim_{(x, y)\to(0, 0)} \frac{x^2 - y^2}{x^2 + y^2} \quad \text{does not exist}$$

Limits and Continuity

In general, we use the notation

$$\lim_{(x,\,y)\to(a,\,b)} f(x, y) = L$$

to indicate that the values of $f(x, y)$ approach the number L as the point (x, y) approaches the point (a, b) along any path that stays within the domain of f.

Limits and Continuity

In other words, we can make the values of $f(x, y)$ as close to L as we like by taking the point (x, y) sufficiently close to the point (a, b), but not equal to (a, b). A more precise definition follows.

1 Definition Let f be a function of two variables whose domain D includes points arbitrarily close to (a, b). Then we say that the **limit of $f(x, y)$ as (x, y) approaches (a, b)** is L and we write

$$\lim_{(x,\,y)\to(a,\,b)} f(x, y) = L$$

if for every number $\varepsilon > 0$ there is a corresponding number $\delta > 0$ such that

if $(x, y) \in D$ and $0 < \sqrt{(x-a)^2 + (y-b)^2} < \delta$ then $|f(x, y) - L| < \varepsilon$

Limits and Continuity

Other notations for the limit in Definition 1 are

$$\lim_{\substack{x\to a\\ y\to b}} f(x, y) = L \qquad \text{and}$$

$$f(x, y) \to L \text{ as } (x, y) \to (a, b)$$

For functions of a single variable, when we let x approach a, there are only two possible directions of approach, from the left or from the right.

We recall that if $\lim_{x\to a^-} f(x) \neq \lim_{x\to a^+} f(x)$, then $\lim_{x\to a} f(x)$ does not exist.

Limits and Continuity

For functions of two variables the situation is not as simple because we can let (x, y) approach (a, b) from an infinite number of directions in any manner whatsoever (see Figure 3) as long as (x, y) stays within the domain of f.

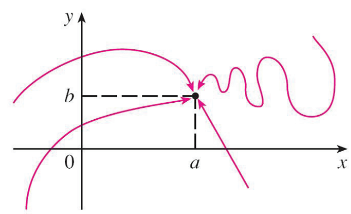

Figure 3

Limits and Continuity

Definition 1 says that the distance between $f(x, y)$ and L can be made arbitrarily small by making the distance from (x, y) to (a, b) sufficiently small (but not 0).

The definition refers only to the *distance* between (x, y) and (a, b). It does not refer to the direction of approach.

Therefore, if the limit exists, then $f(x, y)$ must approach the same limit no matter how (x, y) approaches (a, b).

Limits and Continuity

Thus, if we can find two different paths of approach along which the function $f(x, y)$ has different limits, then it follows that $\lim_{(x,\,y)\to(a,\,b)} f(x, y)$ does not exist.

If $f(x, y) \to L_1$ as $(x, y) \to (a, b)$ along a path C_1 and $f(x, y) \to L_2$ as $(x, y) \to (a, b)$ along a path C_2, where $L_1 \neq L_2$, then $\lim_{(x,\,y)\to(a,\,b)} f(x, y)$ does not exist.

Example 1

Show that $\lim_{(x, y) \to (0, 0)} \frac{x^2 - y^2}{x^2 + y^2}$ does not exist.

Solution:

Let $f(x, y) = (x^2 - y^2)/(x^2 + y^2)$.

First let's approach (0, 0) along the x-axis.

Then $y = 0$ gives $f(x, 0) = x^2/x^2 = 1$ for all $x \neq 0$, so

$f(x, y) \to 1$ as $(x, y) \to (0, 0)$ along the x-axis

Example 1 – *Solution*

cont'd

We now approach along the y-axis by putting $x = 0$.

Then $f(0, y) = \frac{-y^2}{y^2} = -1$ for all $y \neq 0$, so

$f(x, y) \to -1$ as $(x, y) \to (0, 0)$ along the y-axis

(See Figure 4.)

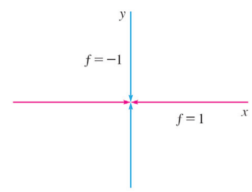

Figure 4

Example 1 – *Solution*

cont'd

Since f has two different limits along two different lines, the given limit does not exist. (This confirms the conjecture we made on the basis of numerical evidence at the beginning of this section.)

Limits and Continuity

Now let's look at limits that *do* exist. Just as for functions of one variable, the calculation of limits for functions of two variables can be greatly simplified by the use of properties of limits.

The Limit Laws can be extended to functions of two variables: The limit of a sum is the sum of the limits, the limit of a product is the product of the limits, and so on.

In particular, the following equations are true.

$$\boxed{2} \quad \lim_{(x, y) \to (a, b)} x = a \qquad \lim_{(x, y) \to (a, b)} y = b \qquad \lim_{(x, y) \to (a, b)} c = c$$

The Squeeze Theorem also holds.

Continuity

Continuity

Recall that evaluating limits of *continuous* functions of a single variable is easy.

It can be accomplished by direct substitution because the defining property of a continuous function is $\lim_{x \to a} f(x) = f(a)$.

Continuous functions of two variables are also defined by the direct substitution property.

$\boxed{4}$ **Definition** A function f of two variables is called **continuous at** (a, b) if

$$\lim_{(x, y) \to (a, b)} f(x, y) = f(a, b)$$

We say f is **continuous on** D if f is continuous at every point (a, b) in D.

Continuity

The intuitive meaning of continuity is that if the point (x, y) changes by a small amount, then the value of $f(x, y)$ changes by a small amount.

This means that a surface that is the graph of a continuous function has no hole or break.

Using the properties of limits, you can see that sums, differences, products, and quotients of continuous functions are continuous on their domains.

Let's use this fact to give examples of continuous functions.

Continuity

A **polynomial function of two variables** (or polynomial, for short) is a sum of terms of the form cx^my^n, where c is a constant and m and n are nonnegative integers.

A **rational function** is a ratio of polynomials.

For instance,

$$f(x, y) = x^4 + 5x^3y^2 + 6xy^4 - 7y + 6$$

is a polynomial, whereas

$$g(x, y) = \frac{2xy + 1}{x^2 + y^2}$$

is a rational function.

Continuity

The limits in $\boxed{2}$ show that the functions $f(x, y) = x$, $g(x, y) = y$, and $h(x, y) = c$ are continuous.

Since any polynomial can be built up out of the simple functions f, g, and h by multiplication and addition, it follows that *all polynomials are continuous on* $\mathbb{R}^2$.

Likewise, any rational function is continuous on its domain because it is a quotient of continuous functions.

Example 5

Evaluate $\lim_{(x, y)\to(1, 2)} (x^2y^3 - x^3y^2 + 3x + 2y)$.

Solution:

Since $f(x, y) = x^2y^3 - x^3y^2 + 3x + 2y$ is a polynomial, it is continuous everywhere, so we can find the limit by direct substitution:

$$\lim_{(x, y)\to(1, 2)} (x^2y^3 - x^3y^2 + 3x + 2y) = 1^2 \cdot 2^3 - 1^3 \cdot 2^2 + 3 \cdot 1 + 2 \cdot 2$$

$$= 11$$

Continuity

Just as for functions of one variable, composition is another way of combining two continuous functions to get a third.

In fact, it can be shown that if f is a continuous function of two variables and g is a continuous function of a single variable that is defined on the range of f, then the composite function $h = g \circ f$ defined by $h(x, y) = g(f(x, y))$ is also a continuous function.

Functions of Three or More Variables

Functions of Three or More Variables

Everything that we have done in this section can be extended to functions of three or more variables.

The notation

$$\lim_{(x, y, z) \to (a, b, c)} f(x, y, z) = L$$

means that the values of $f(x, y, z)$ approach the number L as the point (x, y, z) approaches the point (a, b, c) along any path in the domain of f.

Functions of Three or More Variables

Because the distance between two points (x, y, z) and (a, b, c) in $\mathbb{R}^3$ is given by $\sqrt{(x - a)^2 + (y - b)^2 + (z - c)^2}$, we can write the precise definition as follows: For every number $\varepsilon > 0$ there is a corresponding number $\delta > 0$ such that

if (x, y, z) is in the domain of f and
$0 < \sqrt{(x - a)^2 + (y - b)^2 + (z - c)^2} < \delta$

then $|f(x, y, z) - L| < \varepsilon$

Functions of Three or More Variables

The function f is **continuous** at (a, b, c) if

$$\lim_{(x, y, z) \to (a, b, c)} f(x, y, z) = f(a, b, c)$$

For instance, the function

$$f(x, y, z) = \frac{1}{x^2 + y^2 + z^2 - 1}$$

is a rational function of three variables and so is continuous at every point in $\mathbb{R}^3$ except where $x_2 + y_2 + z_2 = 1$. In other words, it is discontinuous on the sphere with center the origin and radius 1.

Functions of Three or More Variables

We can write the definitions of a limit for functions of two or three variables in a single compact form as follows.

$\boxed{5}$ If f is defined on a subset D of $\mathbb{R}^n$, then $\lim_{\mathbf{x} \to \mathbf{a}} f(\mathbf{x}) = L$ means that for every number $\varepsilon > 0$ there is a corresponding number $\delta > 0$ such that

$$\text{if} \quad \mathbf{x} \in D \quad \text{and} \quad 0 < |\mathbf{x} - \mathbf{a}| < \delta \quad \text{then} \quad |f(\mathbf{x}) - L| < \varepsilon$$