

Dummit & Foote Ch. 3.5: Transpositions and the Alternating Group

Scott Donaldson

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1. (12/6/23)

In Exercises 1 and 2 of Section 1.3 you were asked to find the cycle decompositions of some permutations. Write each of these permutations as a product of transpositions. Determine which of these is an even permutation and which is an odd permutation.

In Exercise 1,

$$\sigma = (1, 3, 5)(2, 4) = (1, 3)(1, 5)(2, 4), \text{ odd.}$$

$$\tau = (1, 5)(2, 3), \text{ even.}$$

$$\sigma^2 = (1, 5, 3) = (1, 3)(1, 5), \text{ even.}$$

$$\sigma\tau = (2, 5, 3, 4) = (2, 4)(2, 3)(2, 5), \text{ odd.}$$

$$\tau^2\sigma = (1, 3, 5)(2, 4) = (1, 5)(1, 3)(2, 4), \text{ odd.}$$

In Exercise 2,

$$\begin{aligned}\sigma &= (1, 13, 5, 10)(3, 15, 8)(4, 14, 11, 7, 12, 9) \\ &= (1, 10)(1, 5)(1, 13)(3, 8)(3, 15)(4, 9)(4, 12)(4, 7)(4, 11)(4, 14), \text{ even.}\end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned}\tau &= (1, 14)(2, 9, 15, 13, 4)(3, 10)(5, 12, 7)(8, 11) \\ &= (1, 14)(2, 4)(2, 13)(2, 15)(2, 9)(3, 10)(5, 7)(5, 12)(8, 11), \text{ odd.}\end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned}\sigma^2 &= (1, 5)(3, 8, 15)(4, 11, 12)(7, 9, 4)(10, 13) \\ &= (1, 15)(3, 15)(3, 8)(4, 12)(4, 11)(7, 4)(7, 9)(10, 13), \text{ even.}\end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned}\sigma\tau &= (1, 11, 3)(2, 4)(5, 9, 8, 7, 10, 15)(13, 14) \\ &= (1, 3)(1, 11)(2, 4)(5, 15)(5, 10)(5, 7)(5, 8)(5, 9)(13, 14), \text{ odd.}\end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned}\tau\sigma &= (1, 4)(2, 9)(3, 13, 12, 15, 11, 5)(8, 10, 14) \\ &= (1, 4)(2, 9)(3, 5)(3, 11)(3, 15)(3, 12)(3, 13)(8, 14)(8, 10), \text{ odd.}\end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned}\tau^2\sigma &= (1, 2, 15, 8, 3, 4, 14, 11, 12, 13, 7, 5, 10) \\ &= (1, 10)(1, 5)(1, 7)(1, 13)(1, 12)(1, 11)(1, 14)(1, 4)(1, 3)(1, 8)(1, 15)(1, 2), \\ &\text{ even.}\end{aligned}$$

2. (12/6/23)

Prove that σ^2 is an even permutation for every permutation σ .

Proof. We take as given the homomorphism $\epsilon : S_n \rightarrow \{\pm 1\}$ defined in this chapter, which determines the sign of every permutation $\sigma \in S_n$.

If σ is an even permutation, then $\epsilon(\sigma) = 1$. It follows that:

$$\epsilon(\sigma^2) = \epsilon(\sigma)\epsilon(\sigma) = 1 \cdot 1 = 1,$$

and so σ^2 is an even permutation.

If σ is an odd permutation, then $\epsilon(\sigma) = -1$. It follows that:

$$\epsilon(\sigma^2) = \epsilon(\sigma)\epsilon(\sigma) = -1 \cdot -1 = 1,$$

and so σ^2 is an even permutation.

Since for every $\sigma \in S_n$, σ is either an even or an odd permutation, this proves that σ^2 is an even permutation for every permutation σ . \square

3. (12/6/23)

Prove that S_n is generated by $\{(i, i+1) \mid 1 \leq i \leq n-1\}$.

Proof. Since any element of S_n may be written as a product of transpositions, it suffices to show that the set $\{(i, i+1) \mid 1 \leq i \leq n-1\}$ can generate any transposition. Writing an arbitrary transposition in S_n as $(i, i+a)$, we will prove this by strong induction on a (where $1 \leq a \leq n-i$).

The base case $a = 1$ is given, since $(i, i+1)$ is a member of the generating set for all $i \in \{1, \dots, n-1\}$.

Next, suppose that for all $i \in \{1, \dots, n-1\}$ and $a \in \{1, \dots, n-i\}$, the transposition $(i, i+a-1)$ can be obtained from the generating set. So we have the transpositions $(i+a-1, i+a)$ (in the generating set) and $(i, i+a-1)$ (from the inductive hypothesis). Then:

$$(i+a-1, i+a)(i, i+a-1)(i+a-1, i+a) = (i, i+a),$$

so we can obtain the transposition $(i, i+a)$. This concludes the proof that the set $\{(i, i+1) \mid 1 \leq i \leq n-1\}$ can generate any transposition, and therefore generates all of S_n . \square

4. (12/7/23)

Show that $S_n = \langle (1, 2), (1, 2, 3, \dots, n) \rangle$ for all $n \geq 2$.

Proof. Note that:

$$\begin{aligned} & (1, 2, 3, \dots, n)(1, 2)(1, 2, 3, \dots, n)^{-1} \\ &= (1, 2, 3, \dots, n)(1, 2)(1, n, n-1, \dots, 2) \\ &= (2, 3), \end{aligned}$$

and in general,

$$\begin{aligned} & (1, 2, 3, \dots, n)(i, i+1)(1, 2, 3, \dots, n)^{-1} \\ &= (1, 2, 3, \dots, n)(i, i+1)(1, n, n-1, \dots, 2) \\ &= (i+1, i+2) \end{aligned}$$

for $1 \leq i \leq n-1$ (if $i = n-1$, then the resulting transposition is equal to $(1, n)$).

This shows that every transposition of adjacent integers can be obtained from $\langle (1, 2), (1, 2, 3, \dots, n) \rangle$, and from the results of Exercise 3, it therefore generates all of S_n . \square

5. (12/7/23)

Show that if p is prime, $S_p = \langle \sigma, \tau \rangle$ where σ is any transposition and τ is any p -cycle.

Proof. Let $\tau = (a_1, a_2, \dots, a_p)$ and $\sigma = (a_i, a_{i+k})$, where $1 \leq i < p$ and $i < k \leq p-i$. Note that:

$$\begin{aligned} \tau\sigma\tau^{-1} &= (a_1, a_2, \dots, a_p)(a_i, a_{i+k}) \\ &\quad (a_1, a_p, a_{p-1}, \dots, a_2) \\ &= (a_{i+1}, a_{i+k+1}), \text{ and so:} \\ (\tau^2)\sigma(\tau^2)^{-1} &= \tau(\tau\sigma\tau^{-1})\tau^{-1} = (a_1, a_2, \dots, a_p)(a_{i+1}, a_{i+k+1}) \\ &\quad (a_1, a_p, a_{p-1}, \dots, a_2) \\ &= (a_{i+2}, a_{i+k+2}), \text{ and in general:} \\ (\tau^n)\sigma(\tau^n)^{-1} &= \tau((\tau^{n-1})\sigma(\tau^{n-1})^{-1})\tau^{-1} = (a_1, a_2, \dots, a_p)(a_{i+n-1}, a_{i+k+n-1}) \\ &\quad (a_1, a_p, a_{p-1}, \dots, a_2) \\ &= (a_{i+n}, a_{i+k+n}), \end{aligned}$$

where all subscripts are taken mod p if they are greater than p .

Next, we define a set:

$$\begin{aligned} \Sigma &= \{(\tau^n)\sigma(\tau^n)^{-1} \mid 0 \leq n < p\} \\ &= \{(a_j, a_{j+k}) \mid 1 \leq j \leq p\}. \end{aligned}$$

Clearly Σ is generated by σ and τ . We claim that Σ generates any transposition of the form (a_j, a_{j+nk}) , where $1 \leq j \leq p$, $n \geq 1$. We will show this by strong induction on n .

The base case $n = 1$ is given by the construction of Σ , since it contains all transpositions of the form (a_j, a_{j+k}) .

Next, suppose that Σ can generate any transposition of the form (a_j, a_{j+mk}) , where $1 \leq m < n$. Then:

$$\underbrace{(a_j, a_{j+(n-1)k})}_{m=n-1} \underbrace{(a_{j+(n-1)k}, a_{j+nk})}_{m=1} \underbrace{(a_j, a_{j+(n-1)k})}_{m=n-1} = (a_j, a_{j+nk}),$$

which shows that we can generate any transposition of the form (a_j, a_{j+nk}) .

Now since p is prime, for any transposition (a_j, a_{j+q}) , we can write $q = nk \pmod p$ for some $n \geq 1$. Therefore Σ can generate any transposition in S_p , and it therefore generates all of S_p . \square

6. (12/7/23)

Show that $\langle (1, 3), (1, 2, 3, 4) \rangle$ is a proper subgroup of S_4 . What is the isomorphism type of this subgroup?

Proof. First, we will define a map $\varphi : D_8 \rightarrow \langle (1, 3), (1, 2, 3, 4) \rangle$ and show that it is an isomorphism. Since the order of D_8 is strictly less than S_4 , we will conclude that $\langle (1, 3), (1, 2, 3, 4) \rangle$ is a proper subgroup of S_4 .

Define φ such that $\varphi(s) = (1, 3)$ and $\varphi(r) = (1, 2, 3, 4)$. We will first show that φ is a homomorphism. The orders of s and r hold under φ , since $s^2 = 1$ and $(1, 3)^2 = (1)$, and $r^4 = 1$ and $(1, 2, 3, 4)^4 = (1)$. Also, the relation in D_8 that $sr = r^{-1}s$ holds under φ :

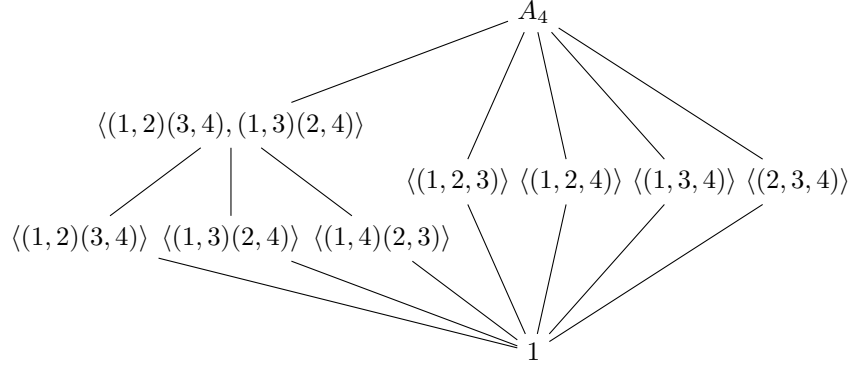
$$\varphi(s)\varphi(r) = (1, 3)(1, 2, 3, 4) = (1, 2)(3, 4) = (1, 4, 3, 2)(1, 3) = \varphi(r)^{-1}\varphi(s).$$

Since φ is defined on the generators of D_8 to the generators $(1, 3)$ and $(1, 2, 3, 4)$, φ is surjective.

We next show that $\langle (1, 3), (1, 2, 3, 4) \rangle$ contains 8 elements. The cyclic group generated by $(1, 2, 3, 4)$ contains 4 elements. Its left and right cosets with $(1, 3)$ are equal to each other, so there are therefore no other elements that can be generated. Since $|\langle (1, 3), (1, 2, 3, 4) \rangle| = |D_8|$ and there exists a surjective homomorphism between them, φ is necessarily an isomorphism, so $\langle (1, 3), (1, 2, 3, 4) \rangle \cong D_8$. We conclude that it is a proper subgroup of S_4 . \square

8. (12/8/23)

Prove the lattice of subgroups of A_4 given in this text is correct.



Proof. The alternating group A_4 has order $|S_4|/2 = 12$. By Lagrange's Theorem, its proper subgroups must have order 2, 3, 4, or 6.

It contains no subgroups generated by a single transposition, e.g. $\langle(1,2)\rangle$, since these contain odd permutations. The other subgroups generated by an element of order 2 are all shown above.

The lattice also contains all subgroups generated by a single 3-cycle, e.g. $\langle(1,2,3)\rangle$. There might be a proper subgroup of order 6 containing one of these. However, as we will show in Exercises 14 and 15, the join of $\langle(1,2,3)\rangle$ with another 3-cycle or with a pair of disjoint transpositions produces all of A_4 . Since there are no other permutations in A_4 , this implies that there is no proper subgroup containing the cyclic group generated by a 3-cycle.

Finally, the join of two order 2 subgroups produces $\langle(1,2)(3,4), (1,3)(2,4)\rangle$. Since this subgroup is of index 3 in A_4 , there are no other subgroups of A_4 , and thus the lattice displayed above is correct and complete. \square

9. (12/8/23)

Prove that the (unique) subgroup of order 4 in A_4 is normal and is isomorphic to V_4 .

Proof. From above, the subgroup $\langle(1,2)(3,4), (1,3)(2,4)\rangle$ is the only subgroup of order 4 in A_4 . Its generators are both elements of order 2. Since the cyclic group Z_4 contains only one element of order 2, it is not isomorphic to Z_4 . There are only two groups of order 4 up to isomorphism, and therefore it is isomorphic to V_4 .

Next, it is normal in A_4 . We consider the conjugate of its generators by (without loss of generality) the permutation $(1,2,3)$:

$$\begin{aligned} (1,2,3)(1,2)(3,4)(1,3,2) &= (1,4)(2,3), \text{ and} \\ (1,2,3)(1,3)(2,4)(1,3,2) &= (1,2)(3,4), \end{aligned}$$

both of which lie in $\langle(1,2)(3,4), (1,3)(2,4)\rangle$. Thus $\langle(1,2)(3,4), (1,3)(2,4)\rangle$ is normal in A_4 . \square

10. (12/8/23)

Find a composition series for A_4 . Deduce that A_4 is solvable.

Solution.

$$1 \leq \langle (1, 2)(3, 4) \rangle \leq \langle (1, 2)(3, 4), (1, 3)(2, 4) \rangle \leq A_4$$

is a composition series for A_4 . The lower two quotient groups are isomorphic to Z_2 , a simple group, and $|A_4 : \langle (1, 2)(3, 4), (1, 3)(2, 4) \rangle| = 3$, which implies that the last quotient group is isomorphic to Z_3 , also simple. Since these quotient groups are also abelian, this implies that A_4 is solvable. \square

11. (12/12/23)

Prove that S_4 has no subgroup isomorphic to Q_8 .

Proof. Suppose that $A \leq S_4$ and that $\varphi : Q_8 \rightarrow A$ is an isomorphism. In Q_8 , $|i| = 4$, so φ must assign i to a permutation whose cycle decomposition is a 4-cycle. Without loss of generality, suppose that $\varphi(i) = (1, 2, 3, 4)$.

Because φ is injective, we cannot have $\varphi(j) = (1, 2, 3, 4)$. Also, $(1, 4, 3, 2) = (1, 2, 3, 4)^{-1}$, and since $j \neq -i$, we cannot have $\varphi(j) = (1, 4, 3, 2)$, so $\varphi(j)$ must equal some other 4-cycle in S_4 . The remaining options are:

$$\varphi(j) = (1, 2, 4, 3), (1, 3, 2, 4), (1, 3, 4, 2), \text{ or } (1, 4, 2, 3).$$

Note that, in Q_8 , $i^2 = j^2 = -1$. Under φ , we have $\varphi(i)^2 = (1, 3)(2, 4)$. However, for none of the remaining 4-cycles we might assign j to do we have $\varphi(j)^2 = (1, 3)(2, 4)$. Thus there is no element to which we can assign j and have φ be an isomorphism. Therefore there S_4 has no subgroup isomorphic to Q_8 . \square

12. (12/12/23)

Prove that A_n contains a subgroup isomorphic to S_{n-2} for each $n \geq 3$.

Proof. We define a map $\varphi : S_{n-2} \rightarrow A_n$ by:

$$\varphi(\sigma) = \begin{cases} \sigma & \text{if } \sigma \text{ is even} \\ \sigma \cdot (n-1, n) & \text{if } \sigma \text{ is odd} \end{cases}.$$

Now noting that $\frac{1}{2}n(n-1) > 1$ for all $n \geq 3$, we conclude that:

$$\begin{aligned} \frac{1}{2}n(n-1) &> 1 \\ \frac{1}{2}n(n-1)(n-2) \cdot \dots \cdot 2 \cdot 1 &> (n-2) \cdot \dots \cdot 2 \cdot 1 \\ \frac{1}{2}(n!) &> (n-2)! \\ |A_n| &> S_{n-2}. \end{aligned}$$

Since the order of A_n is strictly greater than that of S_{n-2} , φ cannot be surjective. It is trivial to show that it is injective, and so if φ is a homomorphism, then its image is a proper subgroup of A_n isomorphic to S_{n-2} .

Let $\sigma_1, \sigma_2 \in S_{n-2}$ and consider the different cases:

- Both even permutations. Then $\sigma_1\sigma_2$ is even, so:

$$\varphi(\sigma_1\sigma_2) = \sigma_1\sigma_2 = \varphi(\sigma_1)\varphi(\sigma_2)$$

- Both odd permutations. Then $\sigma_1\sigma_2$ is even. Note that each $\sigma \in S_{n-2}$ is disjoint with the transposition $(n-1, n)$, and so commutes with it in A_n . Therefore:

$$\begin{aligned}\varphi(\sigma_1)\varphi(\sigma_2) &= \sigma_1 \cdot (n-1, n) \cdot \sigma_2 \cdot (n-1, n) \\ &= \sigma_1\sigma_2(n-1, n)(n-1, n) \\ &= \sigma_1\sigma_2, \text{ and} \\ \varphi(\sigma_1\sigma_2) &= \sigma_1\sigma_2.\end{aligned}$$

- One even, one odd. Let σ_1 be an even permutation and σ_2 be odd (and their product is odd). Then:

$$\begin{aligned}\varphi(\sigma_1\sigma_2) &= \sigma_1\sigma_2 \cdot (n-1, n), \text{ and} \\ \varphi(\sigma_1)\varphi(\sigma_2) &= \sigma_1\sigma_2 \cdot (n-1, n).\end{aligned}$$

This proves that φ is a homomorphism, and since it is injective but not surjective, its image is a subgroup of A_n that is isomorphic to S_{n-2} . \square

13. (12/13/23)

Prove that every element of order 2 in A_n is the square of an element of order 4 in S_n . [An element of order 2 in A_n is a product of $2k$ commuting transpositions.]

Proof. From Chapter 1.3, Exercise 15, the order of a permutation is equal to the least common multiple of the lengths of cycles in its cycle decomposition. Therefore an element of order 2 in $A_n \leq S_n$ must have a cycle decomposition with only 2-cycles, that is, it must be the product of disjoint transpositions.

Let $\sigma \in A_n$ have order 2 with the cycle decomposition:

$$(a_1, b_1)(c_1, d_1)\dots(a_k, b_k)(c_k, d_k).$$

Then σ is the square of the permutation in S_n with the cycle decomposition:

$$(a_1, c_1, b_1, d_1)\dots(a_k, c_k, b_k, d_k).$$

Since all of these cycles are disjoint, the permutation has order 4, so every element of order 2 in A_n is the square of an element of order 4 in S_n . \square