

THE NASH C^1 ISOMETRIC EMBEDDING THEOREM

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ABSTRACT. The goal of this expository talk is to present a proof of the remarkable Nash(–Kuiper) C^1 embedding theorem, which states that the unit sphere \mathbb{S}^2 can be ‘crumpled’ in a C^1 fashion into an arbitrarily small ball in \mathbb{R}^3 . Note that such a statement is obviously false if one replaces C^1 by ‘smooth’, by consideration of curvature! This theorem turned out to be more than a mere curiosity; its proof foreshadowed an important technique called ‘convex integration’, which found remarkable applications in a wide array of fields, such as symplectic topology, calculus of variations and fluid dynamics.

1. INTRODUCTION

This talk will concern the following startling result:

Theorem 1.1 (Nash [8], Kuiper [6]). *Let (M, g) be any 2-surface, $N \geq \dim M + 1$ and $u : M \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^N$ an embedding which is strictly short, i.e., the length of every vector in M (strictly) shrinks under ∇u . Then u can be uniformly approximated by C^1 isometric embeddings.*

An example of a short map is the homothety $\mathbb{S}^2 \rightarrow \epsilon \mathbb{S}^2$ for any $0 < \epsilon < 1$. In particular, this theorem tells us that there exist C^1 isometric embedding of the standard sphere into a ball of any radius B_ϵ .

Remark 1.2. In fact, more strikingly, it is a classical result that any C^2 isometric embedding $u : \mathbb{S}^2 \hookrightarrow \mathbb{R}^3$ must agree with the standard embedding $\mathbb{S}^2 \hookrightarrow \{x \in \mathbb{R}^3 : |x| = 1\}$ up to a translation and a rotation.

This theorem is proved using an iteration scheme introduced by Nash, now often called *convex integration*, which has found surprising applications in different contexts. Examples include symplectic topology [4], calculus of variations [7], and incompressible Euler equations [2, 3, 5].

The foremost goal of today’s talk is to explain in detail the proof of a simpler version of Theorem 1.1 (namely Theorem 2.1); see Section 2. The outline of the proof follows the excellent lecture notes [9] of Székelyhidi, except we try to motivate the steps of the argument differently. Various extensions of this proof, including the proof of Theorem 1.1, will be sketched in Section 3.

2. A MODEL RESULT

Let $D = \{x \in \mathbb{R}^2 : |x| < 1\}$ be the unit 2-disk, and let $g = g_{ij}(x)$ be a metric on D (i.e., for every $x \in D$, $g_{ij}(x)$ is a positive definite matrix). Recall that a map $u : D \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^n$ for is

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an *immersion* if the linear map $\nabla u(x)$ (viewed as an $n \times 2$ matrix) is injective for every x . The metric on D induced by u takes the form

$$\nabla u^\top(x) \nabla u(x) = \begin{pmatrix} \nabla_1 u \cdot \nabla_1 u & \nabla_1 u \cdot \nabla_2 u \\ \nabla_2 u \cdot \nabla_1 u & \nabla_2 u \cdot \nabla_2 u \end{pmatrix}.$$

When $\nabla u^\top \nabla u = g$ at every point $x \in D$, then the map u is *isometric*. The map u is *short* [resp. strictly short] if

$$\nabla u^\top \nabla u - g \leq 0 \quad [\text{resp. } < 0]$$

at every point $x \in D$.

Our goal will be to give a (more-or-less) complete proof of the following result:

Theorem 2.1 (Baby Nash). *Let $n \geq 4$ ($= 2 + 2$) and $u : D \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^n$ be a strictly short immersion. Then for any $\epsilon > 0$, there exists a C^1 isometric immersion $\tilde{u} : D \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^n$ such that $\|u - \tilde{u}\|_{C^0(D)} < \epsilon$.*

Remark 2.2. Note that Theorem 2.1 requires the ambient Euclidean space to have codimension at least 2; it is essentially the version proved by Nash [8]. Refinement to codimension 1, as stated in Theorem 1.1, is the contribution of Kuiper [6] (see Section 3.2).

We will achieve this by an iteration procedure, where each step consists of adding a highly oscillating(!) correction to u , designed to make the deviation from being an isometry smaller. To motivate this procedure, we start with some basic computation.

Let $u_1 = u + U$, where

$$U = \sum_{I \in \mathcal{I}} U_I$$

where I runs over an index set \mathcal{I} . We allow each component U_I^j to be complex-valued, as we would like them to oscillate like $e^{ix \cdot \xi}$; in order to ensure that U is real, we require that for every $I \in \mathcal{I}$, there exists $\bar{I} \in \mathcal{I}$ and

$$U_{\bar{I}} = \overline{U_I}, \quad \bar{\bar{I}} = I.$$

The new metric error $h_1 = g - \nabla u_1^\top \nabla u_1$ takes the form

$$h_1 = \underbrace{\left(h - \sum_I \nabla \bar{U}_I^\top \nabla U_I \right)}_{q_{\text{met}}} - \underbrace{\sum_I (\nabla u^\top \nabla U_I + \nabla U_I^\top \nabla u)}_{q_{\text{lin}}} - \underbrace{\sum_{I, J: J \neq \bar{I}} \nabla U_I^\top \nabla U_J}_{q_{\text{high}}}.$$

- **General form of a correction.** We will attempt to find a correction which oscillates in a fixed, single direction $\xi \in \mathbb{R}^2$, $|\xi| = 1$. Let us take

$$U_I = W = \frac{1}{\lambda} a(x) \mathbf{n}(x) e^{\lambda i x \cdot \xi},$$

where $a : D \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ and $\mathbf{n} : D \rightarrow \mathbb{C}^n$ such that $\bar{\mathbf{n}} \cdot \mathbf{n} = 1$. To ensure reality, we also need to add $\bar{I} \in \mathcal{I}$ and define

$$U_{\bar{I}} = \overline{W} = \frac{1}{\lambda} a(x) \bar{\mathbf{n}}(x) e^{-\lambda i x \cdot \xi}.$$

- **Eliminating the metric error q_{met} .** Note the basic computation:

$$\begin{aligned}\nabla_j W &= i\xi_j a(x) \mathbf{n}(x) e^{\lambda i x \cdot \xi} + \frac{1}{\lambda} \nabla_j (a(x) \mathbf{n}(x)) e^{\lambda i x \cdot \xi} \\ &= i\xi_j a(x) \mathbf{n}(x) e^{\lambda i x \cdot \xi} + O\left(\frac{1}{\lambda}\right).\end{aligned}$$

Therefore, we have

$$\begin{aligned}\nabla_i W^*(x) \nabla_j W(x) &= (-i\xi_i a(x) e^{-\lambda i x \cdot \xi}) (i\xi_j a(x) e^{\lambda i x \cdot \xi}) \bar{\mathbf{n}}(x) \cdot \mathbf{n}(x) + O\left(\frac{1}{\lambda}\right) \\ &= a^2(x) \xi_i \xi_j + O\left(\frac{1}{\lambda}\right)\end{aligned}$$

where $(\cdot)^* = \overline{(\cdot)}^\top$. Observe that in this interaction, high oscillation cancelled to give a slowly-varying main term $a^2(x) \xi_i \xi_j$!

For simplicity, fix $x \in D$ for a moment, and imagine that the metric error h were of the form

$$h(x) = a^2(x) \xi \otimes \xi + b^2(x) \xi' \otimes \xi' + c^2(x) \xi'' \otimes \xi''.$$

Then the above will eliminate the $\xi \otimes \xi$ component of h ! Repeating this construction for ξ' and ξ'' , one can imagine reducing $h(x)$ to of size $O(1/\lambda)$.

Remark 2.3. Observe that the *short* property of h is crucial, as $\nabla_i W^*(x) \nabla_j W(x)$ gives rise to a non-negative main term. As we will see soon below, in order to ensure that the new metric error h_1 is short, it is important to have some room and assume *strict shortness* of h .

However, a problem with this argument is that the eigenvectors ξ would in general depend on x . This problem can be fixed by the following lemma:

Lemma 2.4 (Decomposing the metric error). *Let \mathcal{P} be the space of all positive-definite matrices. There exists a sequence $\xi^{(k)}$ of unit vectors in \mathbb{R}^n and a sequence $\Gamma_{(k)} \in C_c^\infty(\mathcal{P}; [0, \infty))$ such that*

$$A_{ij} = \sum_k \Gamma_{(k)}^2(A) \xi_i^{(k)} \xi_j^{(k)},$$

and the sum is locally finite, i.e., there exists $N \in \mathbb{N}$ such that for each $A \in \mathcal{P}$, at most N of $\Gamma_{(k)}(A)$ are non-zero.

The idea of the proof is to:

- (1) Construct a locally finite covering of neighborhoods $\mathcal{O} \subseteq \mathcal{P}$, in each of which matrices $A \in \mathcal{O}$ is the linear combination of $\xi \otimes \xi$'s with positive coefficients;
- (2) Construct global functions $\Gamma_{(k)}^2$ on \mathcal{P} by a partition of unity argument.

We postpone the detailed proof until the end of this section, as it is not too much related to the remainder of the argument

- **Interlude.** So far, observe that we have not specified our choice of the complex vector \mathbf{n} . Our goal is to show that by choosing \mathbf{n} wisely, the error terms q_{lin} and q_{high} vanish up to terms of order $O(1/\lambda)$.
- **Linearization error.** We compute

$$\nabla_i u^\top \nabla_j W = i\xi_j a(x) e^{i x \cdot \xi} \nabla_i u \cdot \mathbf{n} + O\left(\frac{1}{\lambda}\right)$$

To cancel the first term, we are motivated to choose $\mathbf{n}(x) \perp \nabla_j u(x) = 0$, or equivalently,

$$\mathbf{n}(x) \perp T_{u(x)}u(D).$$

This property is not difficult to satisfy, since the immersion has co-dimension 1. A similar computation applies to $\nabla_i W^\top \nabla_j u$, and we obtain

$$(2.1) \quad \nabla_i u^\top \nabla_j W + \nabla_i W^\top \nabla_j u = O\left(\frac{1}{\lambda}\right).$$

- **High-high interference.** In the present case, these are $\nabla W^\top \nabla W$ and $\nabla \overline{W}^\top \nabla \overline{W}$.

$$\nabla_i W^\top \nabla_j W = (-a^2(x) \xi_i \xi_j e^{2ix \cdot \xi}) \mathbf{n} \cdot \mathbf{n} + O\left(\frac{1}{\lambda}\right)$$

Here the idea is to use the fact that (1) \mathbf{n} is a complex-valued vector and (2) the immersion has co-dimension ≥ 2 , to cook up \mathbf{n} such that

$$\mathbf{n}(x) \cdot \mathbf{n}(x) = 0.$$

The following choice would work:

$$\mathbf{n}(x) = \frac{1}{i\sqrt{2}} \zeta(x) + \frac{1}{\sqrt{2}} \eta(x),$$

where $\eta(x), \zeta(x)$ are unit (real-)vectors which are normal to $T_{u(x)}u(D)$.

- **Final form of a correction.** At the end, we arrive at the vector

$$(2.2) \quad W(x) = \frac{a(x)}{\lambda} \left(\sin(\lambda x \cdot \xi) \zeta(x) + \cos(\lambda x \cdot \xi) \eta(x) \right).$$

obeying the following properties:

(1) *Small C^0 norm*

$$(2.3) \quad \|W\|_{C^0} \leq C \frac{\|a\|_{C^0}}{\lambda},$$

(2) *Main term in ∇W .*

$$(2.4) \quad \nabla W = a(x) (\cos(\lambda x \cdot \xi) \zeta(x) + \sin(\lambda x \cdot \xi) \eta(x)) + O_{\|a\|_{C^0}, \|\nabla a\|_{C^0}, \|\nabla \zeta\|_{C^0}, \|\nabla \eta\|_{C^0}} \left(\frac{1}{\lambda} \right)$$

(3) *Small metric error.*

$$(2.5) \quad \nabla_i W^\top \nabla_j W(x) - a^2(x) \xi_i \xi_j = O\left(\frac{1}{\lambda}\right).$$

(4) *Small linearization error.*

$$(2.6) \quad \nabla_i u^\top \nabla_j W + \nabla_i W^\top \nabla_j u = O\left(\frac{1}{\lambda}\right).$$

(5) *Small high-high interference.*

$$(2.7) \quad \nabla_i W^\top \nabla_j W = O\left(\frac{1}{\lambda}\right).$$

Remark 2.5. Here is another way of arriving at (2.2). For $\gamma = (\gamma_1, \gamma_2) : D \times \mathbb{T} \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^2$, where $\mathbb{T} = \mathbb{R}/2\pi\mathbb{Z}$, define

$$W(x) = \frac{1}{\lambda} \left(\gamma_1(x, \lambda x \cdot \xi) \zeta(x) + \gamma_2(x, \lambda x \cdot \xi) \eta(x) \right).$$

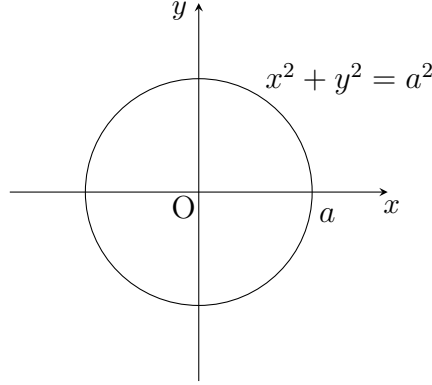
Denote by $\dot{\gamma}$ the derivative with respect to t . Then

$$\nabla W^\top(x) \nabla W(x) = \left(\dot{\gamma}_1^2(x, \lambda x \cdot \xi) + \dot{\gamma}_2^2(x, \lambda x \cdot \xi) \right) \xi \otimes \xi + O\left(\frac{1}{\lambda}\right)$$

For each fixed x , we need to find $\gamma(x, \cdot)$ such that

- (1) $\dot{\gamma}_1^2 + \dot{\gamma}_2^2 = a^2$,
- (2) $t \mapsto \dot{\gamma}(x, t)$ is 2π -periodic and $\int \dot{\gamma} dt = 0$.

Note that the latter condition is equivalent to $t \mapsto \gamma(x, t)$ is 2π -periodic. Note that $\dot{\gamma}$ is required to solve an inclusion with average zero. In particular, the origin *must* lie on the *convex hull* of the circle of radius a ; this is where the term convex integration originated.



Following the language of Nash '54, adding a correction is called a *step*; as we have seen, each step eliminates one component of h up to an error of size $O(1/\lambda)$. Invoking Lemma 2.4 and iterating steps, we can reduce the $C^0(D)$ norm of the metric error; this is called a *stage*, and forms a main ‘atom’ for iteration. The precise statement we need is as follows:

Lemma 2.6 (Stage: Main iteration lemma). *Let $u : D \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^n$ be a smooth strictly short immersion, such that $h := g - \nabla u^\top \nabla u$ obeys*

$$\|h\|_{C^0(D)} \leq e_h$$

for some $e_h > 0$. Then for any $\varepsilon > 0$, there exists a smooth strictly short immersion $u_{[1]}$ of the form $u_{[1]} = u + U$, where

$$(2.8) \quad \|\nabla U\|_{C^0(D)} \leq C e_h^{1/2},$$

$$(2.9) \quad \|U\|_{C^0(D)} \leq \varepsilon,$$

and $h_{[1]} := g - \nabla u_{[1]}^\top \nabla u_{[1]}$ obeys

$$(2.10) \quad \|h_{[1]}\|_{C^0(D)} \leq \varepsilon.$$

Proof. By Lemma 2.4, we have

$$h(x) = \sum_k \Gamma_{(k)}^2(h(x)) \xi^{(k)} \otimes \xi^{(k)}.$$

where for each $h(x)$, there are at most K many summands which are nonzero.

By compactness of $h(D) \subseteq \mathcal{P}$, there exist only finitely many summands which are nonvanishing functions. We re-enumerate these summands as

$$\Gamma_{(1)}^2(h(x))\xi^{(1)} \otimes \xi^{(1)}, \dots, \Gamma_{(N)}^2(h(x))\xi^{(N)} \otimes \xi^{(N)}.$$

By taking the trace, we see that

$$\|\Gamma_{(j)}(h)\|_{C^0} \leq \|h\|_{C^0}^{1/2} \leq e_h^{1/2}.$$

We now add N corrections (i.e., N steps) of the form (2.2) to u , oscillating in the directions $\xi^{(1)}, \dots, \xi^{(N)}$, to cancel these errors. More precisely, given a small parameter $\delta > 0$ (to be fixed soon), we recursively define $u_j = u_{j-1} + (1 - \delta)^{1/2} U_j$, where $u_0 = u$ and

$$U_j = \frac{\Gamma_{(j)}(h(x))}{\lambda_j} \left(\sin(\lambda_j x \cdot \xi^{(j)}) \zeta_j(x) + \cos(\lambda_j x \cdot \xi^{(j)}) \eta_j(x) \right).$$

Here, ζ_j, η_j are defined with respect to u_j , and λ_j will also be chosen depending on u_j .

The purpose of $\delta > 0$ is to preserve strict shortness, so that we may iterate stages. We fix $0 < \delta < \frac{\varepsilon}{2(1+e_h)}$ so that $h \geq \delta I$, which is possible since u is assumed to be strictly short.

Later, we will verify that $h_{[1]} \geq \frac{1}{2}\delta^2 I$.

Recall the estimates (2.3)–(2.7). For any fixed $\varepsilon > 0$, by choosing λ_j sufficiently large depending¹ on u_{j-1} , e_h and $\varepsilon > 0$, we may ensure that

$$(2.11) \quad \|U_j\|_{C^0} \ll \varepsilon,$$

$$(2.12) \quad \nabla U_j = \Gamma_{(j)}(h)(\cos(\lambda_j x \cdot \xi^{(j)})\zeta - \sin(\lambda_j x \cdot \xi^{(j)})\eta) + \text{err}_j, \quad \|\text{err}_j\|_{C^0} \ll \varepsilon,$$

$$(2.13) \quad h_j = h_{j-1} - (1 - \delta)\Gamma_{(k)}^2(h)\xi^{(j)}\xi^{(j)} + \text{err}'_j, \quad \|\text{err}'_j\|_{C^0} \ll \delta^2.$$

where $h_j = g - \nabla u_j^\top \nabla u_j$. The implicit constants in \ll may be chosen depending on N .

To conclude the proof, we now verify that $U = U_1 + \dots + U_N$ and $u_{[1]} = u_N = u + U$ obey the desired conclusions. Summing up (2.11), we clearly have (2.9). To obtain (2.8) with a constant C independent of N , we recall from Lemma 2.4 that for each x , there are at most finitely many (say K) terms $\Gamma_{(j)}(h(x))$ which are nonzero. It follows that

$$|\nabla U(x)| \leq K e_h^{1/2} + \sum_{j=1}^N \|\text{err}_j\|_{C^0} \leq 2K e_h^{1/2},$$

if the small implicit constants are chosen appropriately. Finally, summing up (2.13), we see that

$$h_N = h - (1 - \delta) \sum_j \Gamma_{(k)}^2(h)\xi^{(j)}\xi^{(j)} + \sum_{j=1}^N \text{err}'_j = \delta h + \sum_{j=1}^N \text{err}'_j.$$

Fixing the small implicit constants appropriately, we may ensure that $u_{[1]} = u_N$ is still strictly short, i.e., $h_{[1]} = h_N \geq \frac{1}{2}\delta^2 I$ as desired, whereas (2.10) also hold. \square

We are now ready to iterate stages (Lemma 2.4) to conclude the proof of Theorem 2.1.

¹In addition to $\|u_{j-1}\|_{C^1}$, whose size is kept in track in the iteration, we note that the choice of λ_j depends on the higher order norm $\|u_{j-1}\|_{C^2}$, in order to control $\nabla \zeta_j$ and $\nabla \eta_j$. While this is not an issue for the present construction, this ‘loss of derivative’ necessitates a careful smoothing procedure if one is interested in the constructing a Hölder regular isometric immersion.

Proof of Theorem 2.1 using Lemma 2.6. Let $e_{h,[k]} > 0$ be a sequence such that

$$\sum_k e_{h,[k]} \leq \epsilon, \quad \sum_k e_{h,[k]}^{1/2} < \infty.$$

By Lemma 2.6, we obtain a sequence of smooth, strictly short maps $u_{[k]}$ such that $u_{[0]} = u$ and

$$\begin{aligned} \|g - \nabla u_{[k]}^\top \nabla u_{[k]}\|_{C^0} &\leq e_{h,[k]} \\ \|\nabla u_{[k+1]} - \nabla u_{[k]}\|_{C^0} &\leq C e_{h,[k]}^{1/2} \\ \|u_{[k+1]} - u_{[k]}\|_{C^0} &\leq e_{h,[k+1]}, \end{aligned}$$

from which the theorem is obvious. \square

Appendix: Proof of Lemma 2.4. We proceed in two steps, following the ideas outlined earlier.

- Note that \mathcal{P} is a convex open subset of $\mathbb{R}_{sym}^{n \times n}$, which is a vector space of dimension $N = \frac{n(n+1)}{2}$. Recall Carathéodory's theorem:

Any point x in the convex hull of $K \subseteq \mathbb{R}^N$ may be written as the convex combination of a subset $K' \subseteq K$ consisting of at most $N + 1$ many points.

Using this theorem, we may easily construct a locally finite covering of \mathcal{P} by neighborhoods \mathcal{O}_i , each which is the convex hull of an $(N + 1)$ -point set $\{A_{i,1}, \dots, A_{i,N+1}\}$. Since each $A_{i,j}$ is symmetric and positive-definite, it admits a decomposition of the form $A_{i,j} = \sum_{k=1}^n c_{i,j,k}^2 \xi_{i,j,k} \otimes \xi_{i,j,k}$. It follows that every element $A \in \mathcal{O}_i$ admits a decomposition of the form

$$A = \sum_{j,k} d_{j,k}^2 \xi_{i,j,k} \otimes \xi_{i,j,k}$$

where $d_{j,k}$ can be chosen to depend smoothly on $A \in \mathcal{O}_i$.

- To find global functions $\Gamma_k(A)$, consider a quadratic partition of unity ψ_i subordinate to $\{\mathcal{O}_i\}$ (i.e., $\sum \psi_i^2 = 1$). Applying the above decomposition for each $\psi_i A$, we see that

$$A = \sum_{i,j,k} (\psi_i(A) d_{j,k}(A))^2 \xi_{i,j,k} \otimes \xi_{i,j,k},$$

which is the desired decomposition (note that the i -sum is locally finite, where as the j, k -sums are finite).

3. EXTENSIONS

Finally, we sketch some extensions of Theorem 2.1.

3.1. Extension to embedding of manifolds. It is not difficult to extend Theorem 2.1 in the following ways.

To immersions from a general surface: Reduce to coordinate patches by a partition of unity.

From immersions to embeddings: Since M is compact, we can find $\epsilon > 0$ such that

$$\inf_{x,y} \text{dist}(u(x), u(y)) \geq \epsilon.$$

Now perform the construction within a $\frac{1}{100}\epsilon$ neighborhood.

3.2. Kuiper's refinement: Codimension 1 embedding. By modifying the form of the correction, we can achieve the same construction in the codimension 1 setting. Let $\eta : D \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^3$ be the unit normal vector field on $u(D)$, and let

$$\zeta = \nabla u (\nabla u^\top \nabla u)^{-1} \xi.$$

Take

$$U = \frac{1}{\lambda} \left(\gamma_1(x, \lambda x \cdot \xi) \tilde{\zeta}(x) + \gamma_2(x, \lambda x \cdot \xi) \tilde{\eta}(x) \right)$$

where

$$\tilde{\zeta} = \frac{\zeta}{|\zeta|^2}, \quad \tilde{\eta} = \frac{\eta}{|\zeta|}.$$

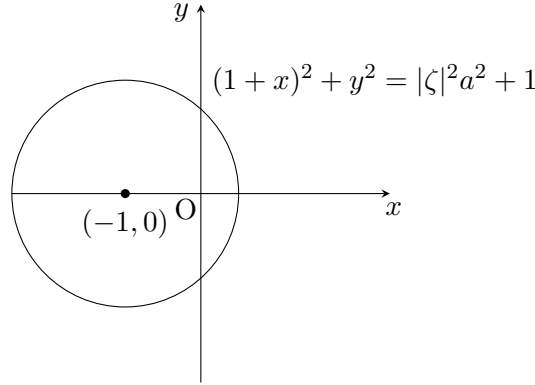
and let $u_1 = u + U$. This leads to

$$\nabla u_1^\top \nabla u_1 = \nabla u^\top \nabla u + \frac{1}{|\zeta|^2} (2\dot{\gamma}_1 + \dot{\gamma}_1^2 + \dot{\gamma}_2^2) \xi \otimes \xi + O\left(\frac{1}{\lambda}\right)$$

Hence for each x and $a = a(x) \in \mathbb{R}$, we now need γ to obey

- (1) $(1 + \dot{\gamma}_1)^2 + \dot{\gamma}_2^2 = |\zeta|^2 a^2 + 1$,
- (2) $t \mapsto \dot{\gamma}(x, t)$ is 2π -periodic and $\int \dot{\gamma} \, dt = 0$.

and such that $|\dot{\gamma}| \leq C|a|$. This is possible since the *convex* hull of $\{(x, y) : (1 + x)^2 + y^2 = |\zeta|^2 a^2 + 1\}$ contains 0 (**Exercise:** Construct such $\dot{\gamma}$!). This feature in the design of the correction is one of the reasons why Nash's technique became known as *convex integration*.



3.3. Hölder continuous embeddings. Finally, for refinement of the convex integration techniques to produce a Hölder $C^{1,\alpha}$ -continuous immersion, see [1].

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