

Nonfibered knots and representation shifts

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Abstract

A conjecture of [13] states that a knot is nonfibered if and only if its infinite cyclic cover has uncountably many finite covers. We prove the conjecture for a class of knots that includes all knots of genus 1, using techniques from symbolic dynamics.

Keywords: Knot, knot group, representation shift. ¹

1 Introduction

Let G be a finitely presented group with epimorphism $\chi : G \rightarrow \mathbb{Z}$. The kernel K of χ need not be finitely generated. However, K is finitely presented as a \mathbb{Z} -operator group [11]. In [12] [13] the authors exploited this structure to show that the representations of K into a fixed finite group Σ form a *shift of finite type*, a simple dynamical system described by a finite directed graph. We call this dynamical system the *representation shift* of K in Σ . When G is a knot or link group, representation shifts inform us about the algebraic topology of finite covering spaces from a purely dynamical perspective.

We review basic definitions of representation shifts and give a partial solution to Conjecture 4.4 of [13]. The complete solution would characterize nonfibered knots as knots with complicated representation shifts, where complexity is measured by topological entropy.

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2 Review of Representation Shifts

An *augmented group system* [7] is a triple $\mathcal{G} = (G, \chi, x)$ consisting of a finitely presented group G , epimorphism $\chi : G \rightarrow \mathbb{Z}$ and distinguished element $x \in G$ such that $\chi(x) = 1$. Two such systems $\mathcal{G}_i = (G_i, \chi_i, x_i)$, $i = 1, 2$ are *equivalent* (and regarded as the same) if there exists an isomorphism $f : G_1 \rightarrow G_2$ such that $f(x_1) = x_2$ and $\chi_1 = \chi_2 \circ f$.

Example 2.1. An augmented group system is associated to an oriented knot $k \subset \mathbb{S}^3$ in a canonical manner. Let $G = \pi_1(\mathbb{S}^3 \setminus k, p)$, where the base point p is contained on the boundary $\partial N(k)$ of a tubular neighborhood $N(k) = \mathbb{S}^1 \times \mathbb{D}^2$ of k . Let x be the homotopy class of a meridian $m \subset \partial N(k)$, with orientation acquired from k . Finally, let $\chi : G \rightarrow \mathbb{Z}$ be the abelianization homomorphism that sends x to 1. It follows from the uniqueness of tubular neighborhoods that $\mathcal{G} = (G, \chi, x)$ is well defined.

We denote the kernel of χ by K . Given any finite group Σ , we consider the space $\text{Hom}(K, \Sigma)$ of representations $\rho : K \rightarrow \Sigma$. The basis for its topology is given by the sets

$$\mathcal{N}_{a_1, \dots, a_s}(\rho) = \{\rho' \mid \rho'(a_i) = \rho(a_i), i = 1, \dots, s\},$$

where a_1, \dots, a_s varies over all finite collections of elements of K . The topology is the compact-open topology where K and Σ are discrete spaces. Roughly speaking, representations are close in $\text{Hom}(K, \Sigma)$ if they agree on large finitely generated subgroups of K . The distinguished element x induces a self-map σ_x of $\text{Hom}(K, \Sigma)$ defined by

$$\sigma_x \rho(a) = \rho(x^{-1}ax) \quad \forall a \in K.$$

It is easily seen that σ_x is a homeomorphism.

The *representation shift* associated to $\mathcal{G} = (G, \chi, x)$ and Σ is the pair $(\text{Hom}(K, \Sigma), \sigma_x)$. We denote it by $\Phi_\Sigma(\mathcal{G})$. It is a dynamical system well defined up to topological conjugacy [11]. More precisely, if \mathcal{G}_i , $i = 1, 2$, are equivalent augmented group systems, then there exists a homeomorphism F of the underlying spaces of $\Phi_\Sigma(\mathcal{G}_i)$ such that $F \circ \sigma_{x_1} = \sigma_{x_2} \circ F$.

The representation shift $\Phi_\Sigma(\mathcal{G})$ is an example of a *shift of finite type*, a special type of expansive 0-dimensional dynamical system, one that can be described by a finite directed graph. (See [4].) We use combinatorial group theory to construct such a graph for a representation shift.

Given an augmented group system $\mathcal{G} = (G, \chi, x)$, we can describe G as an HNN extension $\langle x, B \mid x^{-1}ax = \phi(a), \forall a \in U \rangle$, where B is a finitely

generated subgroup of K , and U, V are isomorphic finitely generated subgroups of B with isomorphism $\phi : U \rightarrow V$ (see [6]). The subgroup B is an *HNN base*. One can choose B so that it contains any prescribed finite subset of K (see [10]).

Example 2.2. Let $\mathcal{G} = (G, \chi, x)$ be an augmented group system associated to a knot, as in Example 2.1. An HNN decomposition for G can be obtained in a natural way. Begin with a π_1 -incompressible Seifert surface for k meeting the exterior $E(k) = \mathbb{S}^3 \setminus \text{int } N(k)$ in a connected surface S . Let $(W; S_0, S_1)$ be the resulting cobordism, with boundary comprising two copies S_0, S_1 of S joined by an annulus $\partial S \times I$. Let $B = \pi_1(W, p)$, where the basepoint p lies on the boundary of S_0 . Let $U = \pi_1(S_0, p)$. The meridian m appears as a path from $p \in S_0$ to a point $p_1 \in S_1$. Use the path to regard $\pi_1(S_1, p_1)$ as a subgroup V of B . Clearly G is described as $(B; U, V, \phi)$, where ϕ is induced by the gluing of S_0 to S_1 when recovering the exterior $E(k)$.

Conjugation by x induces an automorphism of K . Let $B_j = x^{-j} B x^j$, $U_j = x^{-j} U x^j$ and $V_j = x^{-j} V x^j$, for $j \in \mathbb{Z}$. Then K is described as an infinite amalgamated free product

$$K = \langle B_j \mid V_j = U_{j+1}, \forall j \in \mathbb{Z} \rangle.$$

The vertex set of the graph Γ consists of all representations $\rho_0 : U \rightarrow \Sigma$, a finite set since U is finitely generated. If $\bar{\rho}_0$ is a representation from B to Σ , then we draw a directed edge labeled $\bar{\rho}_0$ from the vertex $\rho_0 = \bar{\rho}_0|_U$ to the vertex $\rho'_0 = \bar{\rho}_0|_V \circ \phi$. (Γ may have parallel edges.) Consider a bi-infinite path in Γ given by an edge sequence

$$\cdots \bar{\rho}_{-2} \bar{\rho}_{-1} \bar{\rho}_0 \bar{\rho}_1 \bar{\rho}_2 \cdots$$

The representations $B_j \rightarrow \Sigma$ given by $a \mapsto \bar{\rho}_j(x^j a x^{-j})$ have a unique common extension $\rho : K \rightarrow \Sigma$. Conversely, any representation $\rho : K \rightarrow \Sigma$ arises from such a path, and uniquely. Thus bi-infinite paths of the graph Γ correspond bijectively to elements of $\text{Hom}(K, \Sigma)$. The map σ_x acts as the left coordinate shift on the sequence of edges.

We may “prune” Γ by removing any vertex or edge that is not contained in a bi-infinite path. The resulting graph has finitely many bi-infinite paths iff it consists of a collection of disjoint cycles. It contains uncountably many bi-infinite paths iff it contains two cycles with at least one common vertex.

A representation $\rho \in \Phi_\Sigma(\mathcal{G})$ has *period* r if $\sigma_x^r(\rho) = \rho$. Such representations correspond to closed paths in Γ with length dividing r . The set of

representations with period r is denoted by $\text{Fix}(\sigma_x^r)$. If M_r is the r -fold cyclic cover of \mathbb{S}^3 branched over a knot k , then $\text{Fix}(\sigma_x^r)$ is in natural bijective correspondence with $\text{Hom}(\pi_1 M_r, \Sigma)$ [13]. This correspondence connects dynamical properties of the representation shift with topological properties of k .

Topological entropy is one measure of complexity for a dynamical system. For a shift of finite type, it can be computed as the log of the spectral radius of the adjacency matrix A of any directed graph that describes the shift. (Here $A_{i,j}$ is the number of edges from the i th vertex to the j th.) Consequently, the topological entropy of $\Phi_\Sigma(\mathcal{G})$, denoted by $h_\Sigma(\mathcal{G})$, is the exponential growth rate of $|\text{Hom}(\pi_1 M_r, \Sigma)|$ (see [13]). Notice that if K is finitely generated, then $\Phi_\Sigma(\mathcal{G})$ is finite for all Σ , and so in this case $h_\Sigma(\mathcal{G})=0$.

Let S_N denote the symmetric group on $\{1, \dots, N\}$. It is well known that elements $\rho \in \text{Hom}(K, S_N)$ correspond in a finite-to-one manner with subgroups $H \leq K$ with index no greater than N . The correspondence is

$$\rho \mapsto \{g \in K \mid \rho(g)(1) = 1\}.$$

The preimage of a subgroup of index N consists of $(N-1)!$ transitive representations. (A representation ρ is transitive if $\rho(K)$ operates transitively on $\{1, \dots, N\}$.) Note that if $\Phi_{S_N}(\mathcal{G})$ is uncountable, then K contains uncountably many subgroups of some index no greater than N . Hence the infinite cyclic cover of k has uncountably many finite covers.

We summarize the results of this section. Recall that any finite group embeds in a sufficiently large symmetric group.

Proposition 2.3. *Let $k \subset \mathbb{S}^3$ be a knot with associated augmented group system \mathcal{G} . Then the following statements are equivalent.*

- (1) *The infinite cyclic cover of k has uncountably many finite covers.*
- (2) *The representation shift $\Phi_\Sigma(\mathcal{G})$ is uncountable, for some finite group Σ .*
- (3) *The topological entropy $h_\Sigma(\mathcal{G})$ is positive, for some finite group Σ .*
- (4) *$\lim_{r \rightarrow \infty} \frac{1}{r} \log |\text{Hom}(\pi_1 M_r, \Sigma)|$ is positive, for some finite group Σ .*

3 Nonfibered knots

We recall that a knot $k \subset \mathbb{S}^3$ is fibered if its exterior $E(k) = \mathbb{S}^3 \setminus \text{int } N(k)$ fibers over the circle. It is no loss of generality to assume that the fibration restricts to the standard projection $\partial N(k) \simeq k \times \mathbb{S}^1 \rightarrow \mathbb{S}^1$. Hence $E(k)$ is

seen to be homeomorphic to a mapping torus $S \times I/F$, where $F : S \rightarrow S$ is a homeomorphism of a minimal-genus Seifert surface S of k .

If k is fibered, then the commutator subgroup G' of its group is finitely generated and free, isomorphic to $\pi_1 S$. Conversely, a theorem of J. Stallings [15] implies that if k is a knot such that G' is finitely generated, then in fact G' is free and k is fibered.

If k is fibered and \mathcal{G} is its associated augmented group system, then for any finite group Σ , the representation shift $\Phi_\Sigma(\mathcal{G})$ is finite. Its order is $|\Sigma|^{2g}$, where g is the genus of k (equal to the genus of its fiber). The trefoil and figure-eight knots are the only fibered knots of genus 1.

Conjecture 4.4 of [13] proposes a characterization of nonfibered knots. It states that k is nonfibered iff the entropy $h_\Sigma(\mathcal{G})$ is positive for some finite group Σ .

Remark 3.1. (1) In terms of the HNN base B described above, the condition that k is not fibered is equivalent to the condition that U is a proper subgroup of B . Lemma 2.3 (Substitution Lemma) of [12] provides a strategy for showing that some $\Phi_{S_n}(\mathcal{G})$ is uncountable: Find a periodic element of $\Phi_{S_N}(\mathcal{G})$ such that some symbol, say N , is fixed by every permutation in the image of U but moved by some element of $\rho(K)$. Recall that periodic representations correspond to cycles in the graph Γ . By introducing a new symbol (enlarging S_N to S_{N+1}), we can construct another periodic representation corresponding to a second cycle, one that branches from the first. Then $\Phi_{S_{N+1}}(\mathcal{G})$ is uncountable.

(2) For our strategy, it suffices to find any representation $\tilde{\rho} : G \rightarrow \Sigma$ such that $\rho(U)$ is a proper subgroup of $\rho(K)$. For given such a representation, and letting $\rho : K \rightarrow \Sigma$ be the restriction, we enumerate the cosets of $\rho(U)$ in $\rho(K)$, say $1, \dots, N$ ($N > 1$). In a natural way, ρ determines an element of $\Phi_{S_N}(\mathcal{G})$: $a \in K$ is sent to the transitive permutation of cosets given by right multiplication by $\rho(a)$. Note that if $a \in U$, then such a permutation fixes the symbol corresponding to $\rho(U)$. Finally, we note that if r is the order of $\tilde{\rho}(x)$ in Σ , then $\sigma_x^r \rho = \rho$, since $(\sigma_x^r \rho)(a) = \rho(x^{-r} a x^r) = \tilde{\rho}(x^{-1})^r \rho(a) \tilde{\rho}(x)^r = \rho(a)$, for all $a \in K$.

The representation $\tilde{\rho}$ in the Remark 3.1 (2) “separates” the subgroup U from some element $a \in K$.

In general, a subgroup U of a group G is *separable* if for any element $a \in G \setminus U$, there exists a finite-index subgroup of G that contains U but not a . Equivalently, there exists a finite-image representation $\tilde{\rho} : G \rightarrow \Sigma$ such that $\tilde{\rho}(a) \notin \tilde{\rho}(U)$. The strategy outlined in Remark 3.1(2) requires only that U can be separated from *some* element of $K \setminus U$.

Definition 3.2. An element $a \in G \setminus U$ is *separable from U* if there exists a subgroup H of finite index in G containing U but not a .

Question 15 of [16] asks if any finitely generated subgroup of a finitely-generated Kleinian group is separable. An affirmative answer would establish Theorem 3.4 for all hyperbolic knots. Although Thurston's question remains open, a result of D. Long and G. Niblo [5] enables us to apply our strategy in the case of genus-1 knots (see also remarks that follow).

The theorem of Long and Niblo has been used by S. Friedl and S. Vidussi in [1] to show that twisted Alexander polynomials corresponding to finite-image representations decide if a genus-1 knot is fibered.

Theorem 3.3. (D. Long and G. Niblo [5]) *Let M be an orientable Haken 3-manifold. If $i : T \hookrightarrow M$ is an incompressibly embedded torus, then $i_*(\pi_1 T)$ is separable in $\pi_1 M$.*

Theorem 3.4. *Let k be a knot of genus 1. Then k is nonfibered iff the conclusions of Proposition 2.3 hold.*

Proof. One implication of the theorem is clear: if the conclusion of Proposition 2.3 holds, then k is nonfibered.

Assume that k is nonfibered. Consider the 3-manifold M obtained by 0-framed surgery on k ; that is, by removing and replacing a tubular neighborhood $N(k) \cong k \times \mathbb{D}^2$ in such a way that each disk $* \times \mathbb{D}^2$ bounds a longitude of k . By results of [3], M is irreducible. We denote the fundamental group of M by \hat{G} .

The addition of a meridional disk converts a genus-1 Seifert surface S for k to a torus \hat{S} in M . Since \hat{S} is dual to a nontrivial cohomology class and M is irreducible, we see that \hat{S} is incompressible. Note in particular that M is Haken.

Obtain an HNN decomposition $(\hat{B}; \hat{U}, \hat{V})$ for \hat{G} much as we did for G , by splitting M along \hat{S} . Here $\hat{U} = \pi_1 \hat{S}$. Since k is not fibered, neither is M [2]. Hence \hat{U} must be a proper subgroup of \hat{B} . Select an element $\hat{a} \in \hat{B} \setminus \hat{U}$. By Theorem 3.3 there exists a finite group Σ and homomorphism $\hat{\rho} : \hat{G} \rightarrow \Sigma$ such that $\hat{\rho}(\hat{a}) \notin \hat{U}$.

The group \hat{G} is a quotient of G . Let p be the natural projection. Note that $p(U) = \hat{U}$. Choose $a \in K$ such that $p(a) = \hat{a}$. Define $\rho = \hat{\rho} \circ p : G \rightarrow \Sigma$.

Remark 3.1(2) completes the proof. \square

Genus-1 knots are plentiful, the simplest examples being the twist knots (e.g. the knots $5_2, 6_1$) and doubled knots (obtained from a knot and any push-off by joining with a clasp). We extend the collection of nonfibered

knots with uncountable representation shifts by considering also any knot k with group G that maps homomorphically onto the group \bar{G} of a nonfibered genus-1 knot \bar{k} . Examples of such knots k include satellite knots with genus-1 pattern knot [8].

Corollary 3.5. *Let k be a knot. Assume that the group of k maps onto the group of a nonfibered knot \bar{k} of genus 1. Then k is nonfibered and the conclusions of Proposition 2.3 hold.*

Proof. Assume that $h : G \rightarrow \bar{G}$ is an epimorphism, where G, \bar{G} are the groups of k, \bar{k} , respectively. Let K, \bar{K} denote the respective commutator subgroups, and x, \bar{x} the meridional generators of k, \bar{k} .

Since $h(K) = \bar{K}$ and \bar{K} is not finitely generated, we see at once that K is not finitely generated. Hence k is nonfibered.

If $h(x) = \bar{x}$, then for any finite group Σ , the representation shift $\Phi_\Sigma(\bar{\mathcal{G}})$ corresponding to \bar{k} is a subshift of the representation shift $\Phi_\Sigma(\mathcal{G})$ corresponding to k ; that is, $\text{Hom}(\bar{K}, \Sigma)$ is a subspace of $\text{Hom}(K, \Sigma)$ with the shift map σ_x restricting to $\sigma_{\bar{x}}$. The epimorphism h induces an embedding: $h^*\rho = \rho \circ h$. It follows that the topological entropy $h_\Sigma(\mathcal{G})$ is no less than $h_\Sigma(\bar{\mathcal{G}})$. By theorem 3.4, $h_\Sigma(\bar{\mathcal{G}}) > 0$ for some finite group Σ . Hence for such a group, $h_\Sigma(\mathcal{G})$ is also positive.

If $h(x) \neq \bar{x}$, then there exists $a \in K$ such that $h(ax) = \bar{x}^\epsilon$, where $\epsilon = \pm 1$. We may assume without loss of generality that $\epsilon = 1$. In this case, we replace x by ax . Of course the augmented group system \mathcal{G} and associated representation shifts $\Phi_\Sigma(\mathcal{G})$ change. However, by a result of [11], the topological entropy of the representation shift remains unchanged. As in the case in which $h(x) = \bar{x}$, there exists a finite group Σ such that $h_\Sigma(\mathcal{G}) > 0$. \square

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