

Geometric Complexity Theory III: On deciding nonvanishing of a Littlewood-Richardson coefficient

Dedicated to Sri Ramakrishna

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(Appears in Journal of Algebraic Combinatorics, Nov. 2011.)

April 3, 2012

Abstract

We point out that the positivity of a Littlewood-Richardson coefficient $c_{\alpha,\beta}^{\gamma}$ for sl_n can be decided in strongly polynomial time. This means that the number of arithmetic operations is polynomial in n and independent of the bit lengths of the specifications of the partitions α, β and γ , and each operation involves numbers whose bitlength is polynomial in n and the bit lengths α, β and γ .

Secondly, we observe that non-vanishing of a generalized Littlewood-Richardson coefficient of any type can be decided in strongly polynomial time assuming an analogue of the saturation conjecture for other types, and that for weights α, β, γ the positivity of $c_{2\alpha, 2\beta}^{2\gamma}$ can (unconditionally) be decided in strongly polynomial time.

*Supported by NSF grant CCF-1017760.

1 Introduction

The fundamental Littlewood-Richardson rule in representation theory [4] states that the tensor product of two irreducible representations (Weyl modules) V_α and V_β of a complex semisimple Lie algebra \mathcal{G} decomposes as follows:

$$V_\alpha \otimes V_\beta = \bigoplus_\gamma C_{\alpha,\beta}^\gamma V_\gamma, \quad (1)$$

where $C_{\alpha,\beta}^\gamma$ are generalized Littlewood-Richardson coefficients. Here α, β and γ denote highest weights of \mathcal{G} . When $\mathcal{G} = sl_n(\mathbb{C})$ (type A), α and β are partitions (Young diagrams) with at most n rows, and the sum is over all Young diagrams γ of height at most n and size equal to the sum of the sizes of α and β .

We are interested in finding an efficient algorithm to decide if $C_{\alpha,\beta}^\gamma$ is nonvanishing (positive). As will be explained below (Section 1.1), this problem arises naturally in the geometric complexity theory approach [14, 15, 16] towards the P vs. NP and related problems.

It has been observed in [12, 11, 17] independently that when $\mathcal{G} = sl_n(\mathbb{C})$ (type A) nonvanishing of $C_{\alpha,\beta}^\gamma$ can be decided in polynomial time; i.e., in time that is polynomial in n and the bitlengths of the specifications of the partitions α, β and γ . Furthermore, the algorithm in [17] is strongly polynomial in the sense of [13]. We say that an algorithm is strongly polynomial if the number of arithmetic steps in the algorithm is polynomial in the number of input parameters, independent of their total bitlength, and the bit length of each intermediate operand that arises in the algorithm is polynomial in the total bitlength of the input. We shall also use slight variants of this definition as per the problem. In particular, strong polynomiality here means: (1) the number of arithmetic steps in the algorithm is polynomial in n . It does not depend on the bit lengths of α_i, β_j , and γ_k 's. (2) The bit length of every intermediate operand that arises in the algorithm is polynomial in n and the total bit length of α, β and γ . One crucial ingredient in this algorithm is the saturation theorem in [10], which does not hold for simple Lie algebras of type B, C or D [26]. The result in [17] was extended to other types in [18] assuming a positivity conjecture in [12]. This article combines the results of [17] and [18]. We now state these results in more detail.

First, we consider type A , i.e., when $\mathcal{G} = sl_n(\mathbb{C})$. Let $\lambda = (\lambda_1, \dots, \lambda_n)$, $\lambda_1 \geq \lambda_2 \geq \dots \geq \lambda_n \geq 0$, be a partition (Young diagram); here each λ_i is integral and $\lambda_i = 0$ for i higher than the height of λ . By the bit length $\langle \lambda \rangle$ of λ , we mean the total bit length of its specification.

Theorem 1.1 *Given partitions α, β and γ , whether $C_{\alpha, \beta}^\gamma$ is positive can be decided in polynomial time, and in fact, in strongly polynomial time.*

For general types, we have:

Theorem 1.2 *The positivity of a generalized Littlewood-Richardson coefficient $C_{\lambda, \mu}^\nu$ for any complex semi-simple Lie algebra \mathcal{G} can be decided in strongly polynomial time, assuming the following positivity conjecture made in [12].*

Let $\tilde{C}(n) = \tilde{C}_{\lambda, \mu}^\mu(n) = C_{n\lambda, n\mu}^{n\nu}$ denote the stretching function associated with $C_{\lambda, \mu}^\nu$. Assume that the type of \mathcal{G} is B, C or D . Then $\tilde{C}(n)$ is a quasi-polynomial of period at most two [12]. That is, there exist polynomials $\tilde{C}_1(n)$ and $\tilde{C}_2(n)$ such that

$$C_{n\lambda, n\mu}^{n\nu} = \begin{cases} \tilde{C}_1(n), & \text{if } n \text{ is odd;} \\ \tilde{C}_2(n), & \text{if } n \text{ is even.} \end{cases}$$

Conjecture 1.3 (Positivity conjecture) [12]

The quasi-polynomial $\tilde{C}(n) = \tilde{C}_{\lambda, \mu}^\nu(n)$ is positive-i.e., the coefficients of $\tilde{C}_i(n)$, $i = 1, 2$, are nonnegative.

This is an extension of an analogous earlier conjecture in [9] for type A . Considerable experimental evidence for these conjectures has been given in these papers.

Here it is assumed that each highest weight is specified by giving its coordinates in the basis of fundamental weights. The bitlength $\langle \lambda \rangle$ is defined to be the total bitlength of all coordinates.

Remark 1.4 *For Theorem 1.2 to hold, we do not need the full statement of the Positivity Conjecture, but only the following analogue of saturation for Lie groups of types B, C, D :*

$$C_{\lambda\mu}^\nu = 0 \implies \forall \text{ odd } n, C_{n\lambda, n\mu}^{n\nu} = 0.$$

In fact the following weaker hypothesis suffices: A generalized Littlewood-Richardson coefficient is non-zero if the affine span of the corresponding BZ-polytope [1] contains an integer point.

Finally, we observe that the proof of Theorem 1.1 can be extended to general types using the recent results in [2] and [22]:

Theorem 1.5 *The positivity of a generalized Littlewood-Richardson coefficient $C_{2\lambda, 2\mu}^{2\nu}$ for any complex semi-simple Lie algebra \mathcal{G} can be decided in strongly polynomial time.*

1.1 Significance in geometric complexity theory

Now we explain the significance of the results in this paper in the context of the geometric complexity theory (GCT) [14, 15, 16] approach to the permanent vs. determinant problem [25], an algebraic prototype of the P vs. NP problem.

The problem is to show that $\text{perm}(X)$, the permanent of the n times n variable matrix, cannot be represented as the determinant of an $m \times m$ matrix Y whose each entry is a rational (or complex) affine combination of the entries of X , if $m = \text{poly}(n)$. The articles [15, 16] reduce this problem to the problem of proving existence of a *geometric obstruction* (proof certificate of hardness) when $m = \text{poly}(n)$. A geometric obstruction is a Weyl module $V_\lambda(G)$, $G = GL_{m^2}(\mathbb{C})$, that occurs as a G -subrepresentation of the (dual of the) homogeneous coordinate ring of a certain G -variety $\Delta[\text{perm}, n, m]$ associated with the permanent but not in the (dual of the) homogeneous coordinate ring of a similar G -variety $\Delta[\text{det}, m]$ associated with the determinant. The goal (cf. [19]) is to construct the labelling partition λ of some geometric obstruction *explicitly* in $\text{poly}(n, m)$ time when $m = \text{poly}(n)$. The reason we are going for explicit construction, when proving existence of an obstruction even nonconstructively suffices in principle, is the Flip theorem (cf. [14, 20]) which says that we are essentially *forced* to construct some proof certificate of hardness explicitly in the problem under consideration.

In more detail, the explicit proof strategy, called the flip [19, 20], is the following: (1)[Verification]: Find a (strongly) polynomial time algorithm for verifying if a given λ is a geometric obstruction label for given n and m . Strongly polynomial here means the number of arithmetic steps in the algorithm is $\text{poly}(n, m)$, independent of the bitlength of λ , and the bitlengths of the intermediate operands are $\text{poly}(n, m, \langle \lambda \rangle)$. (2) [Discovery]: Use this efficient verification criterion to decide if a geometric obstruction exists for given n and m in $\text{poly}(n, m)$ time. If it does, construct one such geometric obstruction label explicitly in the same time. (3) [Program correctness]: Show that the discovery algorithm in (2) always succeeds if $m = \text{poly}(n)$.

The upper bound problems in algebraic geometry and representation theory that arise in (1) and (2) seem well beyond the reach of the existing techniques. The article [19], in conjunction with [15] and [16], describes an approach to these problems based on some intermediate upper bound problems in representation theory, such as the problem of deciding nonvanishing of the Kronecker coefficients [4] in (strongly) polynomial time. Since the Littlewood-Richardson coefficient is a special case of the Kronecker coefficient, the problem of deciding its nonvanishing is a basic prototype of the far harder decision problems in algebraic geometry and representation theory that arise in GCT. This is the main motivation for studying this problem in this paper. The (strongly) polynomial time algorithm for this problem in this paper serves as a basic prototype for the approach in [19] to the harder upper bound problems in algebraic geometry and representation theory that arise in GCT.

We should also explain why we are going for strongly polynomial time algorithms instead of just polynomial time algorithms. For the step (3) above to succeed, it is not enough if the algorithms in the steps (1) and (2) are just efficient in theory. They also have to be simple enough so that they can be used to carry out the step (3) successfully. The notion of a strongly polynomial time algorithm was proposed [13] in complexity theory to develop polynomial time algorithms that are simple in practice. As was pointed out in [13], most problems that have strongly polynomial time algorithms eventually turn out to have strongly polynomial time algorithms that are combinatorial in nature, simple in practice, and do not depend on complicated numerical procedures such as linear programming. In the same spirit, the strategy here is to find strongly polynomial time algorithms for the various decision problems that arise in GCT first and eventually find simpler combinatorial algorithms (not based on linear programming) that can be used to carry out the step (3) successfully.

Since this paper gives a strongly polynomial time algorithm for deciding nonvanishing of Littlewood-Richardson coefficient, we expect, as per this general paradigm, a simpler combinatorial strongly polynomial time algorithm that does not use linear programming. The recent article [3] takes an important step in this direction. Motivated by the result in this article, it gives a polynomial time combinatorial algorithm based on max-flows for deciding nonvanishing of Littlewood-Richardson coefficients in type A . But it is still not strongly polynomial.

The rest of this article is organized as follows. Theorem 1.1 is proved in Section 2, Theorem 1.2 in Section 3 and Theorem 1.5 in Section 4.

2 Littlewood-Richardson coefficient of type A

Here we prove Theorem 1.1. The proof follows easily from the following three results:

1. Littlewood-Richardson rule: specifically, a polyhedral interpretation of the Littlewood-Richardson coefficients based on the Hive polytope [10]; one could also use the BZ-polytope [1] instead.
2. Saturation Theorem [10].
3. Polynomial time algorithm for linear programming: e.g. the ellipsoid or the interior point method, and the related strongly polynomial time algorithm for combinatorial linear programming in [13].

As per the polyhedral interpretation of the Littlewood-Richardson rule in [10], the Littlewood-Richardson coefficient $C_{\alpha,\beta}^\gamma$ can be expressed as the number of integer points in a hive polytope $P = P_{\alpha,\beta}^\gamma$ which can be specified by an explicit linear program of the form

$$Ax \leq b \tag{2}$$

such that: (1) Given α, β and γ , this specification can be computed in strongly polynomial time. (2) The linear program is combinatorial in the terminology of [24]. This means the entries of A have constant bit lengths (in fact, they are just 0, 1 or -1). (3) The entries of b are homogeneous integral linear forms in α_i, β_j and γ_k 's.

Claim 2.1 *The polytope P contains an integer point iff it is nonempty.*

Proof: One direction is trivial.

Suppose P is nonempty. Since b is homogeneous in α, β and γ , it follows that, for any positive integer q , $C_{q\alpha, q\beta}^{q\gamma}$ is the number of integer points in the scaled polytope qP . All vertices of P have rational coefficients. Hence, for some positive integer q , the scaled polytope qP has an integer point. It follows that, for this q , $C_{q\alpha, q\beta}^{q\gamma}$ is positive. Saturation Theorem [10] says that, in this case, $C_{\alpha,\beta}^\gamma$ is positive. Hence, P contains an integer point. Q.E.D.

Whether P is nonempty can be determined in polynomial time using either the ellipsoid or the interior point algorithm for linear programming. Since the linear program (2) is combinatorial, this can also be done in strongly polynomial time using the combinatorial linear programming algorithm in [24]. This proves Theorem 1.1.

3 Generalized Littlewood-Richardson Coefficients

In this section we prove Theorem 1.2.

Let $P = P_{\lambda, \mu}^\nu$ denote the BZ-polytope [1] whose Ehrhart quasi-polynomial coincides with $\tilde{C}_{\lambda, \mu}^\nu(n)$.

Definition 3.1 For any subset B of \mathbb{Q}^n , its affine span over rationals, $\text{Aff}(B)$, is

$$\left\{ v \mid \exists (\{v_i\} \subseteq B, \{\alpha_i\} \subseteq \mathbb{Q}), \text{ such that } \sum_{i=1}^n \alpha_i = 1 \text{ and } v = \sum_{i=1}^n \alpha_i v_i \right\}.$$

Let $\mathbb{Z}_{\langle 2 \rangle}$ denote the subring of \mathbb{Q} obtained by localizing \mathbb{Z} at 2—i.e., the subring of fractions with odd denominators. We will call a point in \mathbb{R}^d rational if all its co-ordinates are rational.

Lemma 3.2 Assume that \mathcal{G} is simple of type B, C or D . If the positivity conjecture is true, the following are equivalent:

- (1) $C_{\lambda\mu}^\nu \geq 1$.
- (2) There exists an odd integer n such that $C_{n\lambda n\mu}^{n\nu} \geq 1$.
- (3) P contains a point in $\mathbb{Z}_{\langle 2 \rangle}^d$.
- (4) $\text{Aff}(P)$ contains a point in $\mathbb{Z}_{\langle 2 \rangle}^d$.

Proof: Clearly, the first three statements are equivalent, and (3) implies (4). It remains to show that (4) implies (3). Let $z \in \mathbb{Z}_{\langle 2 \rangle}^d \cap \text{Aff}(P)$.

The 0-dimensional case is trivial since $\{z\} = P$. Suppose that the dimension of P is greater or equal to 1. Since z has rational coordinates and is contained in $\text{Aff}(P)$, $z = ax + (1 - a)y$ for some distinct rational points $x, y \in P$, and $a \in \mathbb{Q}$. Let q be a positive integer such that $2^q(x - y) \in \mathbb{Z}_{\langle 2 \rangle}^d$.

The set $\{z + \lambda 2^q(x - y) \mid \lambda \in \mathbb{Z}_{\langle 2 \rangle}\}$ is a dense subset of $\text{Aff}(\{x, y\})$ in the topology induced by the standard topology of \mathbb{R}^n , and is therefore nonempty. Thus $P \cap \mathbb{Z}_{\langle 2 \rangle}^d \cap \{z + \lambda 2^q(x - y) \mid \lambda \in \mathbb{Z}_{\langle 2 \rangle}\} \neq \emptyset$. Q.E.D.

Now we turn to the proof of Theorem 1.2. First, let us assume that \mathcal{G} is simple of type B, C , or D .

The specification of an explicit linear program of the form $Ax \leq b$ defining the BZ-polytope $P = P_{\lambda, \mu}^\nu$ can be computed in strongly polynomial time using its description in [1]. It is also clear from [1] that the entries of A here have constant bit lengths. In the terminology of [24], this linear program is combinatorial. Hence, we can determine if P is nonempty in strongly polynomial time by the combinatorial linear programming algorithm in [24]. If P is nonempty, this algorithm can also be extended to find an integral matrix C and an integral vector D so that $\text{Aff}(P)$ is defined by the linear system $Cx = D$. One way of achieving this is the following. Find, for every constraint hyperplane h of P , a vertex v_h of P that is the farthest to h . The affine span is the intersection of all constraint hyperplanes h such that $v_h \in h$. Usual linear programming algorithms [7, 8] here, in place of the algorithm in [24], will yield a polynomial time algorithm, instead of a strongly polynomial time algorithm.

By Lemma 3.2 (4), it remains to check if $\text{Aff}(P)$ contains a point in $\mathbb{Z}_{<2>}^d$. This can be done as follows. By padding, if necessary, we can assume that C is square. Using [5], we find the Smith normal form S of C and unimodular matrices U and V such that $C = USV$; here S is a diagonal integer matrix, whose i -th diagonal entry divides the $(i + 1)$ -st diagonal entry. Since the entries of C have constant bit lengths, the algorithm in [5] works in strongly polynomial time. The question now reduces to checking if $USVx = D$ has a solution $x \in \mathbb{Z}_{<2>}^d$. This is so iff $Sy = U^{-1}D$ has a solution $y \in \mathbb{Z}_{<2>}^d$. Since S is diagonal, this can be verified in (strongly) polynomial time by checking each coordinate.

This proves Theorem 1.2 for types B, C, D .

Now let \mathcal{G} be any semisimple algebra. A generalized Littlewood-Richardson coefficient for \mathcal{G} is the product of corresponding generalized Littlewood-Richardson coefficients for each of its simple factors. Hence, without loss of generality, we can assume that \mathcal{G} is simple. If it is of type A , then Theorem 1.2 holds unconditionally by Theorem 1.1. If it is an exceptional simple Lie algebra, then a Littlewood-Richardson coefficient can be computed in $O(1)$ arithmetic steps. This is because, when the rank of \mathcal{G} is constant, the chambers of quasi-polynomiality [23] of the generalized Littlewood-Richardson coefficient, considered as a vector partition function, are generated by $O(1)$ constraints.

This proves Theorem 1.2.

4 Proof of Theorem 1.5

Suppose first that \mathcal{G} is of type B, C , or D . By [2] and [22], it follows that if there exists an integer n such that $C_{n\lambda, n\mu}^{n\nu} \geq 1$, then, $C_{2\lambda, 2\mu}^{2\nu} \geq 1$. A weaker form of this result (with 4 in place of 2) was proven in [6]. By the argument in Section 3, $C_{2\lambda, 2\mu}^{2\nu} \geq 1$ if and only if the BZ polytope $P_{\lambda, \mu}^{\nu}$ is nonempty, which can be checked in strongly polynomial time. The argument towards the end of subsection 3 allows the algorithm to be extended to arbitrary semisimple groups. Q.E.D.

Acknowledgement: We are grateful to T. McAllister for bringing the positivity conjecture in [12] to our attention, and to Apoorva Khare for helpful discussions.

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