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A SHORT PROOF OF ISBELL'S ZIGZAG THEOREM

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Isbell's Zigzag Theorem, which characterizes semigroup dominions (defined below) by means of equations, has several proofs. We give a short proof of the theorem from first principles.

The original proof Isbell [4] and that of Philip [6] are topological in flavour. The algebraic proofs of Howie [2] and Storrer [8] are based on work by Stenstrom [7] on tensor products of monoids. Yet another proof, using the geometric approach of regular diagrams, is due to David Jackson [5]. This latter approach also employs HNN extensions of semigroups to solve the problem. In this note we follow Jackson's lead in using what is essentially a HNN extension for our embedding (instead of the more intractable free product with amalgamation) to derive a short and direct proof of the Zigzag Theorem.

Following Howie and Isbell [3] we say that a subsemigroup U of a semigroup S *dominates* an element $d \in S$ if for every semigroup T and all morphisms $\phi_1: S \rightarrow T$, $\phi_2: S \rightarrow T$, $\phi_1|_U = \phi_2|_U$ implies that $d\phi_1 = d\phi_2$. The set of all elements in S dominated by U is called the *dominion* of U in S ; it is obviously a subsemigroup of S containing U , and we denote it by $\text{Dom}(U, S)$. Dominions are connected with epimorphisms (pre-cancellable morphisms) by the fact that a morphism $\alpha: S \rightarrow T$ is epi iff $\text{Dom}(S\alpha, T) = T$.

ISBELL'S ZIGZAG THEOREM. *Let U be a subsemigroup of S . Then $d \in \text{Dom}(U, S)$ if and only if $d \in U$ or there exists a sequence of factorizations of d as follows:*

$$d = u_0y_1 = x_1u_1y_1 = x_1u_2y_2 = x_2u_3y_2 = \cdots = x_mu_{2m-1}y_m = x_mu_{2m},$$

where

$$u_i \in U, \quad x_i, y_i \in S, \quad u_0 = x_1u_1, \quad u_{2i-1}y_i = u_{2i}y_{i+1}, \\ x_iu_{2i} = x_{i+1}u_{2i+1} \quad (1 \leq i \leq m-1) \quad \text{and} \quad u_{2m-1}y_m = u_{2m}.$$

Such equations are known as a *zigzag* in S over U with *value* d , *length* m , and *spine* the list u_0, u_1, \dots, u_{2m} . For a survey on

epimorphisms and semigroup amalgams featuring applications of the Zigzag Theorem see Higgins [1].

We give a new proof of the forward implication in the theorem; the reverse implication follows by a straightforward manipulation of the zigzag.

Suppose that $d \in \text{Dom}(U, S) \setminus U$. Form a semigroup H by adjoining a new element t to S subject to the relations $t^2 = 1$, $tu = ut$, $tut = u$ for all $u \in U$. Define the morphisms $\phi_1, \phi_2: S \rightarrow H$ by $s\phi_1 = s$ and $s\phi_2 = tst$ (indeed ϕ_1 and ϕ_2 are embeddings). Clearly $\phi_1|U = \phi_2|U$ so that $t\phi_1 = \phi_2|U$, or what is the same, $td = dt$ in H . We prove that this latter equation implies that d is the value of some zigzag in S over U .

Since $td = dt$ there is a sequence of transitions of minimal length $I: td \rightarrow \dots \rightarrow dt$ where each transition $pwq \rightarrow pw'q$ ($p, w, w', q \in H$) is either a *t-transition*, i.e., involves a relation in which t occurs, or is a *refactorization*, i.e., $w = w'$ in S . We claim that no transition in I involves any of the relations $t^2 = 1$ or $tut = u$ ($u \in U$). Suppose to the contrary that I has a transition $\alpha: pq \rightarrow pt^2q$ ($p, q \in H$). Clearly α is not the final transition of I , so consider the next transition $\beta: pt^2q \rightarrow \dots$. Suppose that the right-hand side of β has one of the forms

$$(i) pq; \quad (ii) p't^2q; \quad (iii) pt^2q'.$$

In the first case the two transitions cancel, while in cases (ii) and (iii) α and β can be performed in the opposite order without changing the net effect. If β does not have one of these forms then either (iv) the product p has the form $p = p'u$ or $p'tu$ ($u \in U$) and the right side has the form $p'tutq$ or $p'utq$ or (v) a similar remark applies to q . In this case the pair of transitions α, β could be replaced by the single transition $p'uq \rightarrow p'tutq$ or $p'tuq \rightarrow p'utq$ (with a similar remark applying to case (v)). Therefore cases (i), (iv) and (v) contradict our minimum length assumption, whence it follows that all transitions of I of the form $pq \rightarrow pt^2q$ can be taken to appear at the end of I , and thus there are none.

Next suppose that α has the form $puq \rightarrow ptutq$, and once again consider the following transition β . If p has the form $p'v$ or $p'tv$ ($v \in U$) then β could have the form $p'vtutq \rightarrow p'tvutq$ or $p'tvtutq \rightarrow p'vutq$; but in that case the pair α, β could be replaced by the single transition $p'vuq \rightarrow p'tvutq$ or $p'tvuq \rightarrow p'vutq$. A similar remark applies if q has the form vq' or vtq' . If p has the form $p't$ then β could have the form $p'ttutq \rightarrow p'utq$; but again it would then

be possible to shorten I by replacing our pair α, β with the single transition $p'tuq \rightarrow p'utq$; and again a similar remark applies to q . Another possibility for β is $ptutq \rightarrow put^2q$ or $ptutq \rightarrow pt^2uq$, but here again α and β could be replaced by just one transition. The remaining possibilities for β (β cancels α , or β involves only the product p or only the product q) are disposed of as in the previous paragraph, thus establishing the claim.

Call a t -transition of the form $putq \rightarrow ptuq$ [$ptuq \rightarrow putq$] a *left* [*right*] transition, so that our sequence I consists entirely of refactorizations and left and right transitions with exactly one occurrence of the symbol t in each word of I . Suppose that ptq is a product occurring in I , and that the next t -transition in the sequence is a left transition. We claim that we may assume that this left transition occurs immediately, or is preceded by just one refactorization of the form $ptq \rightarrow p'utq$, for it is clear that any refactorization of p can be performed in one step, while any refactorization of q can be delayed until after the left transition. Next suppose that I contains two left transitions with no intervening right transition, which we may assume have the form $putq \rightarrow ptuq \rightarrow p'vtuq \rightarrow p'tvuq$ ($u, v \in U$), or simply the form $p'vutq \rightarrow p'vtuq \rightarrow p'tvuq$. In the latter case the pair of transitions can be replaced by a single left transition, while the three transitions of the first case can be replaced by two: $putq \rightarrow p'vutq \rightarrow p'tvuq$. Coupling all this with similar arguments for right transitions allows us to conclude that I consists of alternate left and right transitions, separated by single refactorizations; furthermore the first t -transition is right and the final t -transition is right. The sequence I therefore implies equalities in H of the form:

$$\begin{aligned} td &= tu_0y_1 = u_0ty_1 = x_1u_1ty_1 = x_1tu_1y_1 = x_1tu_2y_2 = x_1u_2ty_2 \\ &= x_2u_3ty_2 = \cdots = x_{m-1}u_{2m-2}ty_m = x_mu_{2m-1}ty_m \\ &= x_mt u_{2m-1}y_m = x_mt u_{2m} = x_mu_{2m}t = dt, \end{aligned}$$

for some $m \geq 1$, $u_i \in U$ ($1 \leq i \leq 2m$) $x_i, y_i \in S^1$, and $u_0 = x_1u_1$,

$$\begin{aligned} u_{2i-1}y_i &= u_{2i}y_{i+1} & x_iu_{2i} &= x_{i+1}u_{2i+1}, & (1 \leq i \leq m-1) & \text{ and} \\ & & u_{2m-1}y_m &= u_{2m}. \end{aligned}$$

In fact $x_i, y_i \in S$ for if $x_i = 1$ then in S we have

$$d = u_0y_1 = x_1u_1y_1 = x_1u_2y_2 = \cdots = u_{2i}y_{i+1} = \cdots = x_mu_{2m};$$

and so I could be shortened by beginning with $td \rightarrow tu_{2i}y_{i+1}$, with a similar remark applying if some $y_i = 1$. Hence d is the value of a zigzag in S over U , thus completing the proof.

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