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We study representations of the knot groups of twist knots into $SL_2(\mathbb{C})$. The set of nonabelian $SL_2(\mathbb{C})$ representations of a twist knot K is described as the zero set in $\mathbb{C} \times \mathbb{C}$ of a polynomial $P_K(x, y) = Q_K(y) + x^2 R_K(y) \in \mathbb{Z}[x, y]$, where x is the trace of a meridian. We prove some properties of $P_K(x, y)$. In particular, we prove that $P_K(2, y) \in \mathbb{Z}[y]$ is irreducible over \mathbb{Q} . As a consequence, we obtain an alternative proof of a result of Hoste and Shanahan that the degree of the trace field is precisely two less than the minimal crossing number of a twist knot.

1. Introduction

Let $J(k, l)$ be the two-bridge knot/link in [Figure 1](#), where $k, l \neq 0$ denote the numbers of half-twists in the boxes. Positive (resp. negative) numbers correspond to right-handed (resp. left-handed) twists. Note that $J(k, l)$ is a knot if and only if kl is even. The knots $J(2, 2n)$, where $n \neq 0$, are known as twist knots. Moreover, $J(2, 2)$ is the trefoil knot and $J(2, -2)$ is the figure-eight knot. For more information about $J(k, l)$, see [\[Hoste and Shanahan 2004\]](#).

We study representations of the knot groups of twist knots into $SL_2(\mathbb{C})$, where $SL_2(\mathbb{C})$ denotes the set of all 2×2 matrices with determinant 1. From now on we fix a twist knot $J(2, 2n)$. By [\[Hoste and Shanahan 2001\]](#) the knot group of $J(2, 2n)$ has a presentation $\pi_1(J(2, 2n)) = \langle c, d \mid cu = ud \rangle$, where c, d are meridians and $u = (cd^{-1}c^{-1}d)^n$. This presentation is closely related to the standard presentation of the knot group of a two-bridge knot. Note that $J(2, 2n)$ is the twist knot K_{2n} in [\[Hoste and Shanahan 2001\]](#). In this note we will follow [\[Tran 2015b, Lemma 1.1\]](#) and use a different presentation,

$$\pi_1(J(2, 2n)) = \langle a, b \mid aw = wb \rangle,$$

where a, b are meridians and $w = (ab^{-1})^{-n}a(ab^{-1})^n$. This presentation has been shown to be useful for studying invariants of twist knots; see [\[Nagasato and Tran 2013; Tran 2013a; 2015a; 2015b\]](#).

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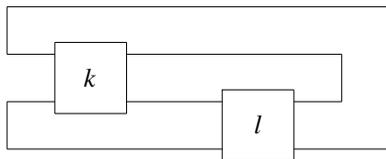


Figure 1. The two-bridge knot/link $J(k, l)$.

A representation $\rho : \pi_1(J(2, 2n)) \rightarrow \text{SL}_2(\mathbb{C})$ is called nonabelian if the image of ρ is a nonabelian subgroup of $\text{SL}_2(\mathbb{C})$. Suppose $\rho : \pi_1(J(2, 2n)) \rightarrow \text{SL}_2(\mathbb{C})$ is a nonabelian representation. Up to conjugation, we may assume that

$$\rho(a) = \begin{bmatrix} s & 1 \\ 0 & s^{-1} \end{bmatrix} \quad \text{and} \quad \rho(b) = \begin{bmatrix} s & 0 \\ 2 - y & s^{-1} \end{bmatrix},$$

where $s \neq 0$ and $y \neq 2$ satisfy a polynomial equation $P_n(s, y) = 0$. The polynomial P_n can be chosen so that $P_n(s, y) = P_n(s^{-1}, y)$, and hence it can be considered as a polynomial in the variables $x := s + s^{-1}$ and y . Note that $x = \text{tr } \rho(a) = \text{tr } \rho(b)$ and $y = \text{tr } \rho(ab^{-1})$. An explicit formula for $P_n(x, y)$ will be derived in Section 2 and it is given by

$$P_n(x, y) = 1 - (y + 2 - x^2)S_{n-1}(y)(S_{n-1}(y) - S_{n-2}(y)),$$

where the $S_k(z)$ are the Chebychev polynomials of the second kind defined by $S_0(z) = 1$, $S_1(z) = z$ and $S_k(z) = zS_{k-1}(z) - S_{k-2}(z)$ for all integers k . Note that $P_n(x, y)$ is different from the Riley polynomial [1984] of the two-bridge knot $J(2, 2n)$; see, e.g., [Nagasato and Tran 2013]. Moreover, $P_n(2, y)$ is also different from the polynomial $\Phi_{-n}(y)$ studied in [Hoste and Shanahan 2001].

In this note we prove the following two properties of $P_n(x, y)$.

Theorem 1. *Suppose $x_0^2 \in \mathbb{R}$ such that $4 - 1/|n| < x_0^2 \leq 4$. Then the polynomial $P_n(x_0, y)$ has no real roots y if $n < 0$, and has exactly one real root y if $n > 0$.*

Theorem 2. *The polynomial $P_n(2, y) \in \mathbb{Z}[y]$ is irreducible over \mathbb{Q} .*

A nonabelian representation $\rho : \pi_1(J(2, 2n)) \rightarrow \text{SL}_2(\mathbb{C})$ is called parabolic if the trace of a meridian is equal to 2. The zero set in \mathbb{C} of the polynomial $P_n(2, y)$ describes the set of all parabolic representations of the knot group of $J(2, 2n)$ into $\text{SL}_2(\mathbb{C})$. Theorem 1 is related to the problem of determining the existence of real parabolic representations in the study of the left-orderability of the fundamental groups of cyclic branched covers of two-bridge knots; see [Hu 2015; Tran 2015a].

As in the proof of [Hoste and Shanahan 2001, Theorem 1], Theorem 2 gives an alternative proof of a result of Hoste and Shanahan that the degree of the trace field is precisely two less than the minimal crossing number of a twist knot. Indeed, by definition the trace field of a hyperbolic knot K is the extension field

$\mathbb{Q}(\text{tr } \rho_0(g) : g \in \pi_1(K))$, where $\rho_0 : \pi_1(K) \rightarrow \text{SL}_2(\mathbb{C})$ is a discrete faithful representation. The representation ρ_0 is a parabolic representation. Since $P_n(2, y)$ is irreducible over \mathbb{Q} , the trace field of the twist knot $J(2, 2n)$ is $\mathbb{Q}(y_0)$, where y_0 is a certain complex root of $P_n(2, y)$ corresponding to the presentation ρ_0 . Consequently, the degree of $P_n(2, y)$ gives the degree of the trace field. The conclusion follows, since the minimal crossing number of $J(2, 2n)$ is $2n + 1$ if $n > 0$ and is $2 - 2n$ if $n < 0$.

The rest of this note is devoted to the proofs of Theorems 1 and 2.

2. Proofs of Theorems 1 and 2

In this section we first recall some properties of the Chebychev polynomials $S_k(z)$. We then compute the polynomial $P_n(x, y)$. Finally, we prove Theorems 1 and 2.

Chebychev polynomials. Recall that the $S_k(z)$ are the Chebychev polynomials defined by $S_0(z) = 1$, $S_1(z) = z$ and $S_k(z) = zS_{k-1}(z) - S_{k-2}(z)$ for all integers k . Note that $S_k(2) = k + 1$ and $S_k(-2) = (-1)^k(k + 1)$. Moreover, if $z = t + t^{-1}$, where $t \neq \pm 1$, then

$$S_k(z) = \frac{t^{k+1} - t^{-(k+1)}}{t - t^{-1}}.$$

It is easy to see that $S_{-k}(z) = -S_{k-2}(z)$ for all integers k .

The following lemma is elementary; see, e.g., [Tran 2013b, Lemma 1.4].

Lemma 2.1. *One has*

$$S_k^2(z) - zS_k(z)S_{k-1}(z) + S_{k-1}^2(z) = 1$$

for all integers k .

Lemma 2.2. *For all $k \geq 1$ one has*

$$S_k(z) = \prod_{j=1}^k \left(z - 2 \cos \frac{j\pi}{k+1} \right),$$

$$S_k(z) - S_{k-1}(z) = \prod_{j=1}^k \left(z - 2 \cos \frac{(2j-1)\pi}{2k+1} \right).$$

Proof. We prove the second formula. The first one can be proved similarly.

Since $S_k(z) - S_{k-1}(z)$ is a polynomial of degree k , it suffices to show that its roots are

$$2 \cos \frac{(2j-1)\pi}{2k+1},$$

where $1 \leq j \leq k$. Let

$$\theta_j = \frac{(2j-1)\pi}{2k+1}.$$

Then $e^{i(2k+1)\theta_j} = -1$. Hence, if $z = 2 \cos \theta_j = e^{i\theta_j} + e^{-i\theta_j}$ then we have

$$S_k(z) = \frac{e^{i(k+1)\theta_j} - e^{-i(k+1)\theta_j}}{e^{i\theta_j} - e^{-i\theta_j}} = \frac{-e^{-ik\theta_j} + e^{ik\theta_j}}{e^{i\theta_j} - e^{-i\theta_j}} = S_{k-1}(z).$$

This means that $z = 2 \cos \theta_j$ is a root of $S_k(z) - S_{k-1}(z)$. □

Lemma 2.3. *Suppose $z \in \mathbb{R}$ such that $-2 \leq z \leq 2$. Then*

$$|S_{k-1}(z)| \leq |k|$$

for all integers k .

Proof. See [Tran 2015a, Lemma 2.6]. □

Lemma 2.4. *Suppose $M \in \text{SL}_2(\mathbb{C})$. Then*

$$M^k = S_{k-1}(z)M - S_{k-2}(z)I$$

for all integers k , where I is the 2×2 identity matrix and $z := \text{tr } M$.

Proof. Since $\det M = 1$, by the Cayley–Hamilton theorem we have $M^2 - zM + I = 0$. This implies that $M^k - zM^{k-1} + M^{k-2} = 0$ for all integers k . Then, by induction on k we have $M^k = S_{k-1}(z)M - S_{k-2}(z)I$ for all $k \geq 0$.

For $k < 0$, since $\text{tr } M^{-1} = \text{tr } M = z$ we have

$$\begin{aligned} M^k &= (M^{-1})^{-k} = S_{-k-1}(z)M^{-1} - S_{-k-2}(z)I \\ &= -S_{k-1}(z)(zI - M) + S_k(z)I. \end{aligned}$$

The lemma follows, since $zS_{k-1}(z) - S_k(z) = S_{k-2}(z)$. □

The polynomial P_n . Recall that the knot group of $J(2, 2n)$ has the presentation

$$\pi_1(J(2, 2n)) = \langle a, b \mid aw = wb \rangle,$$

where a, b are meridians and $w = (ab^{-1})^{-n}a(ab^{-1})^n$. See [Tran 2015b, Lemma 1.1].

Suppose $\rho : \pi_1(J(2, 2n)) \rightarrow \text{SL}_2(\mathbb{C})$ is a nonabelian representation. Up to conjugation, we may assume that

$$\rho(a) = \begin{bmatrix} s & 1 \\ 0 & s^{-1} \end{bmatrix} \quad \text{and} \quad \rho(b) = \begin{bmatrix} s & 0 \\ 2 - y & s^{-1} \end{bmatrix},$$

where $s \neq 0$ and $y \neq 2$ satisfy a polynomial equation $P_n(s, y) = 0$. We now compute the polynomial P_n from the matrix equation $\rho(aw) = \rho(wb)$.

Since

$$\rho(ab^{-1}) = \begin{bmatrix} y - 1 & s \\ s^{-1}(y - 2) & 1 \end{bmatrix},$$

by [Lemma 2.4](#) we have

$$\begin{aligned} \rho((ab^{-1})^n) &= S_{n-1}(y)\rho(ab^{-1}) - S_{n-2}(y)I \\ &= \begin{bmatrix} (y-1)S_{n-1}(y) - S_{n-2}(y) & sS_{n-1}(y) \\ s^{-1}(y-2)S_{n-1}(y) & S_{n-1}(y) - S_{n-2}(y) \end{bmatrix}. \end{aligned}$$

Hence, by a direct (but lengthy) calculation we have

$$\begin{aligned} \rho(aw) - \rho(wb) &= \rho(a(ab^{-1})^{-n}a(ab^{-1})^n) - \rho((ab^{-1})^{-n}a(ab^{-1})^nb) \\ &= \begin{bmatrix} (y-2)P_n(s, y) & sP_n(s, y) \\ -s^{-1}(y-2)P_n(s, y) & 0 \end{bmatrix}, \end{aligned}$$

where

$$P_n(s, y) = (s^2 + s^{-2} + 1 - y)S_{n-1}^2(y) - (s^2 + s^{-2})S_{n-1}(y)S_{n-2}(y) + S_{n-2}^2(y).$$

By [Lemma 2.1](#) we have $S_{n-1}^2(y) - yS_{n-1}(y)S_{n-2}(y) + S_{n-2}^2(y) = 1$. Hence

$$P_n(s, y) = 1 - (y - s^2 - s^{-2})S_{n-1}(y)(S_{n-1}(y) - S_{n-2}(y)).$$

Since $P_n(s, y) = P_n(s^{-1}, y)$, from now on we consider P_n as a polynomial in the variables $x = s + s^{-1}$ and y . With these new variables we have

$$P_n(x, y) = 1 - (y + 2 - x^2)S_{n-1}(y)(S_{n-1}(y) - S_{n-2}(y)).$$

Proof of Theorem 1. We first prove the following lemma.

Lemma 2.5. *Suppose $x_0^2 \in \mathbb{R}$ such that $4 - 1/|n| < x_0^2 \leq 4$. If $y \in \mathbb{R}$ satisfies $P_n(x_0, y) = 0$, then $y > 2$.*

Proof. Since $P_n(x_0, y) = 0$, we have $S_{n-1}(y)(S_{n-1}(y) - S_{n-2}(y)) = (y + 2 - x_0^2)^{-1}$. Hence

$$\begin{aligned} ((y + 2 - x_0^2)S_{n-1}(y))^{-2} &= (S_{n-1}(y) - S_{n-2}(y))^2 \\ &= 1 + (y - 2)S_{n-1}(y)S_{n-2}(y) \\ &= 1 + (y - 2)(S_{n-1}^2(y) - (y + 2 - x_0^2)^{-1}), \end{aligned}$$

which implies that

$$1 = (y + 2 - x_0^2)(4 - x_0^2)S_{n-1}^2(y) + (y - 2)(y + 2 - x_0^2)^2S_{n-1}^4(y).$$

Assume $y \leq 2$. Then it follows from the above equation that

$$1 \leq (y + 2 - x_0^2)(4 - x_0^2)S_{n-1}^2(y). \tag{2-1}$$

In particular, $y > x_0^2 - 2 > -2$. Since $-2 < y \leq 2$, by [Lemma 2.3](#) we have $S_{n-1}^2(y) \leq n^2$. Hence

$$(y + 2 - x_0^2)(4 - x_0^2)S_{n-1}^2(y) \leq (4 - x_0^2)^2n^2 < 1.$$

This contradicts [\(2-1\)](#). □

We now complete the proof of [Theorem 1](#). Suppose $x_0^2 \in \mathbb{R}$ and $4 - 1/|n| < x_0^2 \leq 4$. By [Lemma 2.5](#), it suffices to consider $P_n(x_0, y)$, where y is a real number greater than 2. The equation $P(x_0, y) = 0$ is equivalent to

$$x_0^2 - 4 = y - 2 - \frac{1}{S_{n-1}(y)(S_{n-1}(y) - S_{n-2}(y))}. \tag{2-2}$$

Denote by $f_n(y)$ the right-hand side of (2-2), where $y > 2$. We now use the factorizations of $S_{n-1}(y)$ and $S_{n-1}(y) - S_{n-2}(y)$ in [Lemma 2.2](#).

If $n = -1$ then

$$f_n(y) = y - 2 + \frac{1}{y-1} > 0 \geq x_0^2 - 4.$$

Hence $f_n(y) = x_0^2 - 4$ has no solutions on $(2, \infty)$.

If $n < -1$ then, by letting $m = -n > 1$, we have

$$\begin{aligned} f_n(y) &= y - 2 + \frac{1}{S_{m-1}(y)(S_m(y) - S_{m-1}(y))} \\ &= y - 2 + \frac{1}{\prod_{k=1}^{m-1} (y - 2 \cos \frac{k\pi}{m}) \prod_{l=1}^m (y - 2 \cos \frac{(2l-1)\pi}{2m+1})} > 0 \geq x_0^2 - 4. \end{aligned}$$

Hence $f_n(y) = x_0^2 - 4$ has no solutions on $(2, \infty)$.

If $n = 1$ then $f_n(y) = y - 3$. Since $x_0^2 > 3$, the equation $f_n(y) = x_0^2 - 4$ has a unique solution $y = x_0^2 - 1$ on $(2, \infty)$.

If $n > 1$ then we have

$$f_n(y) = y - 2 - \frac{1}{\prod_{k=1}^{n-1} (y - 2 \cos \frac{k\pi}{n}) \prod_{l=1}^{n-1} (y - 2 \cos \frac{(2l-1)\pi}{2n-1})}.$$

It is easy to see that $f_n(y)$ is increasing on $(2, \infty)$. Moreover, $\lim_{y \rightarrow \infty} f_n(y) = \infty$ and $\lim_{y \rightarrow 2} f_n(y) = -1/n < x_0^2 - 4$. Hence $f_n(y) = x_0^2 - 4$ has a unique solution on $(2, \infty)$.

The proof of [Theorem 1](#) is complete.

Proof of Theorem 2. We write $P_n(y)$ for $P_n(2, y)$. Let $y = t^2 + t^{-2}$. Then

$$\begin{aligned} P_n(y) &= (S_{n-1}(y) - S_{n-2}(y))^2 - (y - 2)S_{n-1}^2(y) \\ &= \frac{(t^{2n} + t^{2-2n})^2 - t^2(t^{2n} - t^{-2n})^2}{(t^2 + 1)^2} \\ &= \frac{(t^{2n} + t^{2-2n} + t^{2n+1} - t^{1-2n})(t^{2n} + t^{2-2n} - t^{2n+1} + t^{1-2n})}{(t^2 + 1)^2}. \end{aligned}$$

Up to a factor t^k , each of $t^{2n} + t^{2-2n} + t^{2n+1} - t^{1-2n}$ and $t^{2n} + t^{2-2n} - t^{2n+1} + t^{1-2n}$ is obtained from the other by replacing t by t^{-1} . To show that $P_n(y)$ is irreducible

over \mathbb{Q} , it suffices to show that

$$t^{4n} + t^{4n-1} + t - 1 = (t^2 + 1)Q_n(t), \quad (2-3)$$

where $Q_n(t) \in \mathbb{Z}[t]$ is irreducible over \mathbb{Q} .

As in the proof of [Baker and Petersen 2013, Lemma 6.8], we will use the following theorem of Ljunggren [1960]. Consider a polynomial of the form $R(t) = t^{k_1} + \varepsilon_1 t^{k_2} + \varepsilon_2 t^{k_3} + \varepsilon_3$, where $\varepsilon_j = \pm 1$ for $j = 1, 2, 3$. Then, if R has $r > 0$ roots of unity as roots then R can be decomposed into two factors, one of degree r which has these roots of unity as zeros and the other which is irreducible over \mathbb{Q} . Hence, to prove (2-3) it suffices to show that $\pm i$ are the only roots of unity which are roots of $t^{4n} + t^{4n-1} + t - 1$ and these occur with multiplicity 1.

Let t be a root of unity such that $t^{4n} + t^{4n-1} + t - 1 = 0$. Write $t = e^{i\theta}$, where $\theta \in \mathbb{R}$. Since $t^{2n-1} + t^{1-2n} + t^{2n} - t^{-2n} = 0$, we have

$$2 \cos(2n - 1)\theta + 2i \sin 2n\theta = 0,$$

which implies that both $\cos(2n - 1)\theta$ and $\sin 2n\theta$ are equal to zero. There exist integers k, l such that $(2n - 1)\theta = (k + \frac{1}{2})\pi$ and $2n\theta = l\pi$. This implies that $(2k + 1)/l = (2n - 1)/n$. Since $(2n - 1)/n$ is a reduced fraction, there exists an odd integer m such that $2k + 1 = m(2n - 1)$ and $l = mn$. Hence $\theta = \frac{1}{2}m\pi$, which implies that $t = e^{i\theta} = \pm i$. It is easy to verify that $\pm i$ are roots of $t^{4n} + t^{4n-1} + t - 1 = 0$ with multiplicity 1.

Ljunggren's theorem then completes the proof of Theorem 2.

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no. 5

An iterative strategy for Lights Out on Petersen graphs	721
BRUCE TORRENCE AND ROBERT TORRENCE	
A family of elliptic curves of rank ≥ 4	733
FARZALI IZADI AND KAMRAN NABARDI	
Splitting techniques and Betti numbers of secant powers	737
REZA AKHTAR, BRITTANY BURNS, HALEY DOHRMANN, HANNAH HOGANSON, OLA SOBIESKA AND ZEROTTI WOODS	
Convergence of sequences of polygons	751
ERIC HINTIKKA AND XINGPING SUN	
On the Chermak–Delgado lattices of split metacyclic p-groups	765
ERIN BRUSH, JILL DIETZ, KENDRA JOHNSON-TESCH AND BRIANNE POWER	
The left greedy Lie algebra basis and star graphs	783
BENJAMIN WALTER AND AMINREZA SHIRI	
Note on superpatterns	797
DANIEL GRAY AND HUA WANG	
Lifting representations of finite reductive groups: a character relation	805
JEFFREY D. ADLER, MICHAEL CASSEL, JOSHUA M. LANSKY, EMMA MORGAN AND YIFEI ZHAO	
Spectrum of a composition operator with automorphic symbol	813
ROBERT F. ALLEN, THONG M. LE AND MATTHEW A. PONS	
On nonabelian representations of twist knots	831
JAMES C. DEAN AND ANH T. TRAN	
Envelope curves and equidistant sets	839
MARK HUIBREGTSE AND ADAM WINCHELL	
New examples of Brunnian theta graphs	857
BYOUNGWOOK JANG, ANNA KRONAEUR, PRATAP LUITEL, DANIEL MEDICI, SCOTT A. TAYLOR AND ALEXANDER ZUPAN	
Some nonsimple modules for centralizer algebras of the symmetric group	877
CRAIG DODGE, HARALD ELLERS, YUKIHIDE NAKADA AND KELLY POHLAND	
Acknowledgement	899