Pacific Journal of Mathematics

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Vol. 13, No. 4 June 1963

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Let G be a multiply connected domain bounded by an outer boundary Γ_0, inner boundaries $\Gamma_1, \Gamma_2, \cdots$, and possibly some other inner boundaries $\gamma_1, \gamma_2, \cdots$. Let u be the eigenfunction corresponding to the lowest eigenvalue λ_1 of the membrane problem

$$(1) \qquad \Delta u + \lambda_1 u = 0 \quad \text{in } G$$

with

$$(2) \qquad u = 0 \quad \text{on } \Gamma_0, \Gamma_1, \cdots$$

$$\frac{\partial u}{\partial n} = 0 \quad \text{on } \gamma_1, \gamma_2, \cdots .$$

We shall show that there exists a cut $\tilde{\gamma}$ consisting of a finite set of analytic arcs along which $(\partial u/\partial n) = 0$ which separates any given one of the fixed holes, say Γ_1, from the outer boundary Γ_0 and the other holes $\Gamma_2, \Gamma_3, \cdots$. This means that the membrane G may be cut in two along $\tilde{\gamma}$ without lowering its lowest eigenvalue. This fact is used in the preceding paper of J. Hersch to establish an upper bound for λ_1.

We assume that $\Gamma_0, \Gamma_1, \cdots$ have continuous normals and that $\gamma_1, \gamma_2, \cdots$ are analytic. Then it is well-known that u has the following properties:

(3) (a) $u > 0$ in G, and $\dfrac{\partial u}{\partial n} < 0$ on $\Gamma_0, \Gamma_1, \cdots$.

(b) u is analytic in $G + \gamma_1 + \gamma_2 + \cdots$.

(c) u_{xx} and u_{yy} do not vanish simultaneously.

(The last property follows from (3a) and (1)).

We define G_1 to be the set of points of G from which the fall lines, i.e. the trajectories of

$$(4) \qquad \frac{dx}{dt} = -u_x$$

$$\frac{dy}{dt} = -u_y$$

reach Γ_1. By property (3a) G_1 contains a neighborhood in G of Γ_1, and its exterior contains neighborhoods in G of $\Gamma_0, \Gamma_2, \cdots$. Since u_x

Received August 23, 1962. Prepared under Contract Nonr 710 (16) between the Office of Naval Research and the University of Minnesota.

and u_y are continuous, G_1 is open.

Let $\tilde{\gamma}$ be the part of the boundary of G_1 that lies in G. Let P be a point of $\tilde{\gamma}$ where the gradient of u does not vanish. Then there is a trajectory γ satisfying (4) through P. Let Q be any other point on γ. Since P is not in G_1, it follows from the definition that Q is not in G_1. On the other hand, if a whole neighborhood of Q were not in G_1, it would follow from the continuity of the trajectories with respect to their initial points that a whole neighborhood of P would be outside G_1. This would contradict the fact that P is a boundary point of G_1.

Thus we have shown that the whole trajectory γ lies in $\tilde{\gamma}$. It cannot go to Γ_1. Since the set of points from which trajectories go to $\Gamma_0, \Gamma_2, \cdots$ is also open, γ cannot go to these boundary components.

We note that u is monotone on γ, and

$$\left| \frac{du}{ds} \right| = | \operatorname{grad} u | . \tag{5}$$

Thus γ is either of finite length, or it must contain a sequence of points $Q_1, Q_2, \cdots$ on which grad u approaches zero. These will have a limit point Q at which grad $u = 0$. (It may be that Q lies on one of the γ_i. In this case we think of u extended across γ_i as an analytic function by reflection).

There is a neighborhood of Q in which the trajectories can be determined by examining the first few terms of the power series for u. Using property (3c), we find that γ is of finite length. This is, of course, true in both the t and $-t$ directions.

The free boundary curves γ_i are composed of trajectories of (4) and critical points, i.e., points where grad $u = 0$. Hence it follows from the uniqueness of the initial value problem for (4) that if γ ends on γ_i, the end point must again be a critical point. Thus, each trajectory γ in $\tilde{\gamma}$ connects two critical points.

It follows from properties (3b) and (3c) and the implicit function theorem that a critical point Q is either an isolated critical point or lies on an analytic arc of critical points. These arcs are again isolated.

Thus we have shown that $\tilde{\gamma}$ is composed of a finite number of analytic arcs of finite length along which $(\partial u/\partial n) = 0$, and a finite number of critical points. We delete any isolated points of $\tilde{\gamma}$.

The fact that $\tilde{\gamma}$ separates Γ_1 from $\Gamma_0, \Gamma_2, \cdots$ is clear from the definition of G_1.

The above considerations apply to any function with properties (3).

The author wishes to thank J. Hersch and D. Ludwig for helpful discussions of this problem.

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PACIFIC JOURNAL OF MATHEMATICS

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50 reprints per author of each article are furnished free of charge; additional copies may be obtained at cost in multiples of 50.

The *Pacific Journal of Mathematics* is published quarterly, in March, June, September, and December. Effective with Volume 13 the price per volume (4 numbers) is $18.00; single issues, $5.00. Special price for current issues to individual faculty members of supporting institutions and to individual members of the American Mathematical Society: $8.00 per volume; single issues $2.50. Back numbers are available.

Subscriptions, orders for back numbers, and changes of address should be sent to Pacific Journal of Mathematics, 103 Highland Boulevard, Berkeley 8, California.

Printed at Kokusai Bunken Insatsusha (International Academic Printing Co., Ltd.), No. 6, 2-chome, Fujimi-cho, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo, Japan.

PUBLISHED BY PACIFIC JOURNAL OF MATHEMATICS, A NON-PROFIT CORPORATION

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