RATIONAL FORMAL GROUP LAWS

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In this paper we determine the rational formal groups defined over a field of characteristic zero. This answers a question originally posed by Robert MacPherson.

While one can answer this question using Weil's theorem which asserts that every birational group is birationally isomorphic to an actual algebraic group [W1], below we give an elementary argument using methods similar to those used in [C].

THEOREM. Every rational formal group law over an algebraically closed field $K$ of characteristic zero is of the form

$$L^{-1}G(L(x), L(y))$$

where $G(x, y)$ is either $x+y$ or $x+y+xy$ and $L$ is a linear functional transformation over $K$ such that $L(0) = 0$.

One deduces easily from this that

COROLLARY. The rational formal group laws over a field $K$ of characteristic zero are the rational functions

$$(x + y + cxy)/(1 - dxy)$$

where $c$ and $d$ are elements of $K$. Moreover, this formal group is rationally isomorphic to $x+y$ over $K$ if $c^2 - 4d = 0$ and to $x+y+xy$ over $K(\sqrt{c^2 - 4d})$ otherwise.

Proof of theorem. Recall that now $K$ is algebraically closed. Suppose $F(x, y)$ is a rational formal group.

Let $\omega = dx/F_2(x, 0)$ and $g(x) = F(x, x)$ (the rational function giving multiplication by 2 on $F$). Then $\omega$ and $g$ satisfy the hypothesis of the following proposition:

PROPOSITION. Suppose $\omega \in K(x)dx$ and $g \in K(x)$, $\omega \neq 0$, $\text{ord}_0 \omega = 0$, $g(0) = 0$ and $g^*\omega = 2\omega$. Then $\omega = L^*(dx)$ or $L^*(c dx/(x+1))$
where $L$ is a linear fractional transformation defined over $K$ such that $L(0) = 0$ and $c \in K^*$. 

Proof. Let $Y$ denote the set of poles and $Z$ the set of zeros of $\omega$. It follows from the hypothesis that $g^{-1}Y = Y$ and $g^{-1}Z = Z$.

The equation $g^*\omega = 2\omega$ implies that

$$\sum \text{ord}_Q g^*\omega = \sum \text{ord}_Q \omega$$

where the sums run over $Q \in Y = g^{-1}Y$. Suppose $Q \in \mathbb{P}^1(K)$. Then we also have the formula

$$\sum \text{ord}_P g^*\omega = \deg(g) \cdot \text{ord}_Q \omega + (\deg(g) - \#g^{-1}(Q))$$

where the sum runs over $P \in g^{-1}(Q)$. Suppose now $Q$ is a pole of $\omega$. The right-hand side of this formula is less than or equal to $\text{ord}_Q \omega$. Hence the last two formulas imply that

$$\deg(g) \cdot \text{ord}_Q \omega + (\deg(g) - \#g^{-1}(Q)) = \text{ord}_Q \omega$$

for all $Q \in Y$. This occurs for a given $Q \in Y$ iff $\deg(g) = 1$ or $\text{ord}_Q \omega = -1$ (in which case $\#g^{-1}(Q) = 1$).

Suppose first that $\deg(g) = 1$ and $\omega$ has a pole of order greater than one. Since $g^*\omega = 2\omega$, no iterate of $g$ is the identity. As $g(0) = 0$ it follows that there exists exactly one non-zero point fixed by some iterate of $g$. Since $g^{-1}Y = Y$, $g^{-1}Z = Z$ and $\text{ord}_0 \omega = 0$, we see that $\omega$ has only one pole and no zeros. It follows that $\omega = L^*(dx)$ for some linear fractional transformation $L$ which we may assume vanishes at the origin.

Suppose now that $\omega$ has only simple poles. If $Q$ is a pole of $\omega$ we know that $g^{-1}(Q)$ consists of exactly one point, $P$ say, and we have the formula

$$\text{Res}_P g^*\omega = \deg(g) \text{Res}_Q \omega$$

by a local computation. Since $g^*(\omega) = 2\omega$, this becomes

$$\text{Res}_P \omega = (\deg(g)/2) \text{Res}_Q \omega.$$ 

Now we know that $g^{-1}Y = Y$. Hence, there exists a $Q$ in $Y$ and a positive integer $n$ such that $\{Q\} = g^{-n}(Q)$. By iterating the previous equation we deduce that

$$(\deg(g)/2)^n \text{Res}_Q \omega = \text{Res}_Q \omega.$$ 

Hence, as $\text{Res}_Q \omega \neq 0$ and $\deg(g) \in \mathbb{Z}_{>0}$, $\deg(g) = 2$. 

The facts that $g^{-1}Y = Y$ and $g^{-1}Z = Z$ imply that the zeros and poles of $\omega$ lie among the branch points of $g: \mathbb{P}^1 \to \mathbb{P}^1$. Since $g$ has degree 2 it has only two branch points. Since $\omega$ is not equal to zero, has only simple poles and its residues sum to zero it must have exactly two poles and no zeros. Hence $\omega = L^*(cdx/(x+1))$ for some linear fractional transformation $L$ and some constant $c \in K^*$. Since $\text{ord}_0 \omega = 0$, we may assume $L(0) = 0$. This proves the proposition.

The theorem follows from the proposition noting that $F(x, y) = L^{-1}G(L(x), L(y))$ where $G(x, y) = x + y$ if $\omega = L^*(dx)$ and $G(x, y) = x + y + xy$ if $\omega = L^*(cdx/(x+1))$.

**Remark.** The only place in the above argument where the algebraic closedness of $K$ was used in a serious manner was in the last step which required finding a linear fractional transformation which moved one pole of $\omega$ to 0 and the other to $\infty$.

**References**


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