17. Permutation (symmetric) groups

Fix an integer $n > 1$, and let S_n be the set of all bijective functions $f : \{1, \ldots, n\} \to \{1, \ldots, n\}$. As discussed in Lecture 10, S_n is a group with respect to composition. The groups S_n are called *permutation groups* or *symmetric groups.*

We begin by computing the order of S_n. By definition $|S_n|$ is the number of ways to choose a bijective function $f : \{1, \ldots, n\} \to \{1, \ldots, n\}$.

Note that $f(1)$ could be any natural number from 1 to n, so there are n ways to choose $f(1)$; once $f(1)$ is chosen, $f(2)$ can be any number distinct from $f(1)$, so there are $n - 1$ choices for $f(2)$, then $n - 2$ choices for $f(3)$ etc. Finally, we have just 1 choice for the last element $f(n)$. Overall we have $n(n - 1) \cdot \ldots \cdot 2 \cdot 1 = n!$ choices. Thus, $|S_n| = n!$.

17.1. **Cycle decompositions.** There are two standard ways to represent elements of S_n. The first one is two-line notation introduced in Lecture 10. For instance, the element of S_6 defined by $f(1) = 4$, $f(2) = 6$, $f(3) = 3$, $f(4) = 5$, $f(5) = 1$ and $f(6) = 2$ has the following representation by two-line notation:

$$f = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 & 6 \\ f(1) & f(2) & f(3) & f(4) & f(5) & f(6) \end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 & 6 \\ 4 & 6 & 3 & 5 & 1 & 2 \end{pmatrix}.$$

The second representation is the cycle decomposition which we now define. Given $f \in S_n$, the set $\{1, 2, \ldots, n\}$ can be decomposed as a disjoint union of subsets such that f cyclically permutes elements of each subset. For instance, for the above element $f \in S_6$ there will be three such subsets: $\{1, 4, 5\}$, $\{2, 6\}$ and 3 since f permutes elements $1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6$ as follows: $1 \xrightarrow{f} 4 \xrightarrow{f} 5 \xrightarrow{f} 1$; $2 \xrightarrow{f} 6 \xrightarrow{f} 2$ and $3 \xrightarrow{f} 3$.

Symbolically we write $f = (1, 4, 5)(2, 6)(3)$. The expression $(1, 4, 5)(2, 6)(3)$ is called the cycle decomposition of f, and the "parts" of this decomposition, namely $(1, 4, 5)$, $(2, 6)$ and (3), are called the cycles of f.

Each element f can be recovered from its cycle decomposition: if we are given the cycle decomposition of some $f \in S_n$ and $i \in \{1, \ldots, n\}$, and we want to compute $f(i)$, we first find the cycle which contains i. If i is not the last element in its cycle (counting from left to right), then $f(i)$ is the next element in the same cycle, and if i is the last element in its cycle, then $f(i)$ is the first element in the same cycle.

Note that the order of cycles in a cycle decomposition of a given element does not matter: for instance $(1, 4, 5)(2, 6)(3) = (2, 6)(1, 4, 5)(3)$. Also we can cyclically permute elements within each cycle, e.g. $(1,4,5) = (4,5,1) = (5,1,4)$. However, $(1,4,5) \neq (1,5,4)$.

Cycles of length 1 are called fixed points. For instance, the above f has one fixed point, namely 3. It is a standard convention to omit fixed points from the cycle decomposition, that is, write $(1,4,5)(2,6)$ instead of $(1,4,5)(2,6)(3)$ (it is assumed that the missing elements are fixed).

17.2. **Products of disjoint cycles.** The expression like $(1,4,5)(2,6)$ for an element of S_6 can be interpreted in two a priori different ways. First, we can think of it precisely as described above: $(1,4,5)(2,6)$ is the element $f \in S_6$ whose cycle decomposition is $(1,4,5)(2,6) = (1,4,5)(2,6)(3)$. On the other hand, we can consider two other elements $g, h \in S_6$:

$$g = (1,4,5) = (1,4,5)(2)(3)(6) \text{ and } h = (2,6) = (2,6)(1)(4)(3)(5).$$

Then one can also interpret $(1,4,5)(2,6)$ as the product of g and h in S_6 (that is, the composition of g and h). A natural question is whether these two interpretations are the same, that is, whether $f = gh$.

Fortunately, the answer to this question is yes, as one can check by straightforward verification in the above example (the proof in the general case is essentially the same).

Definition. An element $f \in S_n$ is called a cycle if the cycle decomposition of f has just one cycle (excluding fixed points).

For instance, $(1,4,5) \in S_6$ is a cycle of length 3 and $(2,6) \in S_6$ is a cycle of length 2 in S_6, while $(1,4,5)(2,6)$ is not a cycle.

Definition. Two cycles $u = (i_1, \ldots, i_k)$ and $v = (j_1, \ldots, j_l)$ are called disjoint if no integer appears in both u and v.

Equivalence of two possible interpretations of a cycle decomposition yields the following theorem:

Theorem 17.1. *Any element of S_n can be written as a product of disjoint cycles.*

Remark: Here we allow the empty product which by convention represents the identity element $e \in S_n$.

Let us now see how to multiply two non-disjoint cycles.

Example 1. *Let $f = (1,2,3,5,6)$ and $g = (1,2,3,6,4)$ be elements of S_6. Write fg as a product of disjoint cycles (equivalently, find the cycle decomposition of fg).*

We track the image of each element of $\{1,2,3,4,5,6\}$ under the composition fg (recall that we first apply g and then f). We have $1 \xrightarrow{g} 2 \xrightarrow{f} 3$; $4 \xrightarrow{g} 6 \xrightarrow{f} 1$. This completes the first cycle of fg, namely $(1,3)$.

$2 \xrightarrow{g} 3 \xrightarrow{f} 5$; $5 \xrightarrow{g} 5 \xrightarrow{f} 6$; $6 \xrightarrow{g} 4 \xrightarrow{f} 4$; $4 \xrightarrow{g} 1 \xrightarrow{f} 2$. Thus, the second cycle of fg is $(2,5,6,4)$, and the final answer is $fg = (1,3)(2,5,6,4)$.

17.3. **Orders of elements in S_n.**

Claim 17.2. *A cycle of length k has order k (as an element of S_n)*

We do not give a formal proof of this result, but illustrate it using two examples (the second example essentially shows why the result is true in general).

Let $f = (1,3) \in S_4$. Then $f \neq e$, but $f^2 = (1,3)(1,3)$. Thus, $1 \xrightarrow{f} 3 \xrightarrow{f} 1$ and $3 \xrightarrow{f} 1 \xrightarrow{f} 3$, so f^2 fixes 1 and 3, and clearly f^2 must fix 2 and 4 (since f fixes 2 and 4). Thus f^2 fixes every element of $\{1,2,3,4\}$, so $f^2 = e$.

Let $f = (1,3,4,6) \in S_6$. Note that f^k will send each $i \in \{1,3,4,6\}$ to the element which appears k positions to the right of i (in the "cyclic sense"). Thus $f^2 = (1,4)(3,6)$, $f^3 = (1,6,3,4)$ and $f^4 = e$.

Now let us see compute the order of an element which is not a cycle.

Example 2. *Let $f = f_1 f_2 f_3 \in S_9$ where $f_1 = (1,3,4,6)$, $f_2 = (2,7)$ and $f_3 = (5,8,9)$. Compute $o(f)$.*

By definition of order, we need to find the smallest positive n s.t. $f^n = e$. We know by Claim 17.2 that $o(f_1) = 4$, $o(f_2) = 2$ and $o(f_3) = 3$.

Since f_1, f_2 and f_3 are disjoint cycles, it is clear that they commute with each other, so $f^n = (f_1 f_2 f_3)^n = f_1^n f_2^n f_3^n$ for every $n \in \mathbb{N}$. Also since f_1, f_2 and f_3 move different elements, it is clear that $f^n = e \iff f_1^n = f_2^n = f_3^n = e$. Thus, we are looking for the smallest positive n such that $f_1^n = f_2^n = f_3^n = e$.

The following result is an immediate consequence of Theorem 13.1: if g is an element of some group G and $d = o(g)$ is finite, then for any $k \in \mathbb{N}$ we have $g^k = e \iff d \mid k$ (that is, a power of g is equal to $e \iff$ the exponent is a multiple of the order of g). Applying this result in our situations, we get that $f_1^n = f_2^n = f_3^n = e \iff 4 = o(f_1) \mid n$, $2 = o(f_2) \mid n$ and $3 = o(f_3) \mid n$. By definition, the smallest n with this property is $LCM(2,3,4) = 12$.

Applying the same logic to an arbitrary element of S_n, we obtain the following theorem:

Theorem 17.3. *Let $f \in S_n$, and suppose f is a product of disjoint cycles of lengths $n_1, \ldots, n_r$. Then $o(f) = LCM(n_1, \ldots, n_r)$.*