

Polyhedral products and commutator subgroups of
right-angled Artin and Coxeter groups
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1. Preliminaries

Polyhedral product

$(\mathbf{X}, \mathbf{A}) = \{(X_1, A_1), \dots, (X_m, A_m)\}$ a sequence of pairs of spaces, $A_i \subset X_i$.

\mathcal{K} a simplicial complex on $[m] = \{1, 2, \dots, m\}$, $\emptyset \in \mathcal{K}$.

Given $I = \{i_1, \dots, i_k\} \subset [m]$, set

$$(\mathbf{X}, \mathbf{A})^I = Y_1 \times \dots \times Y_m \quad \text{where } Y_i = \begin{cases} X_i & \text{if } i \in I, \\ A_i & \text{if } i \notin I. \end{cases}$$

The \mathcal{K} -polyhedral product of (\mathbf{X}, \mathbf{A}) is

$$(\mathbf{X}, \mathbf{A})^{\mathcal{K}} = \bigcup_{I \in \mathcal{K}} (\mathbf{X}, \mathbf{A})^I = \bigcup_{I \in \mathcal{K}} \left(\prod_{i \in I} X_i \times \prod_{j \notin I} A_j \right).$$

Notation: $(X, A)^{\mathcal{K}} = (\mathbf{X}, \mathbf{A})^{\mathcal{K}}$ when all $(X_i, A_i) = (X, A)$;

$\mathbf{X}^{\mathcal{K}} = (\mathbf{X}, pt)^{\mathcal{K}}$, $X^{\mathcal{K}} = (X, pt)^{\mathcal{K}}$.

Categorical approach

Category of faces $\text{CAT}(\mathcal{K})$.

Objects: simplices $I \in \mathcal{K}$. Morphisms: inclusions $I \subset J$.

TOP the category of topological spaces.

Define the $\text{CAT}(\mathcal{K})$ -diagram

$$\begin{aligned} \mathcal{D}_{\mathcal{K}}(\mathbf{X}, \mathbf{A}) : \text{CAT}(\mathcal{K}) &\longrightarrow \text{TOP}, \\ I &\longmapsto (\mathbf{X}, \mathbf{A})^I, \end{aligned}$$

which maps the morphism $I \subset J$ of $\text{CAT}(\mathcal{K})$ to the inclusion of spaces $(\mathbf{X}, \mathbf{A})^I \subset (\mathbf{X}, \mathbf{A})^J$.

Then we have

$$(\mathbf{X}, \mathbf{A})^{\mathcal{K}} = \text{colim } \mathcal{D}_{\mathcal{K}}(\mathbf{X}, \mathbf{A}) = \text{colim}_{I \in \mathcal{K}} (\mathbf{X}, \mathbf{A})^I.$$

Example

Let $(X, A) = (S^1, pt)$, where S^1 is a circle. Then

$$(S^1)^{\mathcal{K}} = \bigcup_{I \in \mathcal{K}} (S^1)^I \subset (S^1)^m.$$

When $\mathcal{K} = \{\emptyset, \{1\}, \dots, \{m\}\}$ (m disjoint points), the polyhedral product $(S^1)^{\mathcal{K}}$ is the wedge $(S^1)^{\vee m}$ of m circles.

When \mathcal{K} consists of all proper subsets of $[m]$ (the boundary $\partial\Delta^{m-1}$ of an $(m-1)$ -dimensional simplex), $(S^1)^{\mathcal{K}}$ is the **fat wedge** of m circles; it is obtained by removing the top-dimensional cell from the m -torus $(S^1)^m$.

For a general \mathcal{K} on m vertices, $(S^1)^{\vee m} \subset (S^1)^{\mathcal{K}} \subset (S^1)^m$.

Example

Let $(X, A) = (\mathbb{R}, \mathbb{Z})$. Then

$$\mathcal{L}_{\mathcal{K}} := (\mathbb{R}, \mathbb{Z})^{\mathcal{K}} = \bigcup_{I \in \mathcal{K}} (\mathbb{R}, \mathbb{Z})^I \subset \mathbb{R}^m.$$

When \mathcal{K} consists of m disjoint points, $\mathcal{L}_{\mathcal{K}}$ is a grid in \mathbb{R}^m consisting of all lines parallel to one of the coordinate axis and passing through integer points.

When $\mathcal{K} = \partial\Delta^{m-1}$, the complex $\mathcal{L}_{\mathcal{K}}$ is the union of all integer hyperplanes parallel to coordinate hyperplanes.

Example

Let $(X, A) = (\mathbb{R}P^\infty, pt)$, where $\mathbb{R}P^\infty = B\mathbb{Z}_2$. Then

$$(\mathbb{R}P^\infty)^{\mathcal{K}} = \bigcup_{I \in \mathcal{K}} (\mathbb{R}P^\infty)^I \subset (\mathbb{R}P^\infty)^m.$$

Example

Let $(X, A) = (D^1, S^0)$, where $D^1 = [-1, 1]$ and $S^0 = \{1, -1\}$. The **real moment-angle complex** is

$$\mathcal{R}_{\mathcal{K}} := (D^1, S^0)^{\mathcal{K}} = \bigcup_{I \in \mathcal{K}} (D^1, S^0)^I.$$

It is a cubic subcomplex in the m -cube $(D^1)^m = [-1, 1]^m$.

When \mathcal{K} consists of m disjoint points, $\mathcal{R}_{\mathcal{K}}$ is the 1-dimensional skeleton of the cube $[-1, 1]^m$. When $\mathcal{K} = \partial\Delta^{m-1}$, $\mathcal{R}_{\mathcal{K}}$ is the boundary of the cube $[-1, 1]^m$. Also, $\mathcal{R}_{\mathcal{K}}$ is a topological manifold when $|\mathcal{K}|$ is a sphere.

The four polyhedral products above are related by the two homotopy fibrations

$$(\mathbb{R}, \mathbb{Z})^{\mathcal{K}} = \mathcal{L}_{\mathcal{K}} \longrightarrow (S^1)^{\mathcal{K}} \longrightarrow (S^1)^m,$$

$$(D^1, S^0)^{\mathcal{K}} = \mathcal{R}_{\mathcal{K}} \longrightarrow (\mathbb{R}P^{\infty})^{\mathcal{K}} \longrightarrow (\mathbb{R}P^{\infty})^m.$$

By analogy with the polyhedral product of spaces $\mathbf{X}^{\mathcal{K}} = \operatorname{colim}_{I \in \mathcal{K}} \mathbf{X}^I$, we may consider the following construction of a discrete group.

Graph product

$\mathbf{G} = (G_1, \dots, G_m)$ a sequence of m discrete groups, $G_i \neq \{1\}$.

Given $I = \{i_1, \dots, i_k\} \subset [m]$, set

$$\mathbf{G}^I = \{(g_1, \dots, g_m) \in \prod_{k=1}^m G_k : g_k = 1 \text{ for } k \notin I\}.$$

Then consider the following $\operatorname{CAT}(\mathcal{K})$ -diagram of groups:

$$\mathcal{D}_{\mathcal{K}}(\mathbf{G}) : \operatorname{CAT}(\mathcal{K}) \longrightarrow \operatorname{GRP}, \quad I \longmapsto \mathbf{G}^I,$$

which maps a morphism $I \subset J$ to the canonical monomorphism $\mathbf{G}^I \rightarrow \mathbf{G}^J$.

The **graph product** of the groups G_1, \dots, G_m is

$$\mathbf{G}^{\mathcal{K}} = \operatorname{colim}^{\operatorname{GRP}} \mathcal{D}_{\mathcal{K}}(\mathbf{G}) = \operatorname{colim}_{I \in \mathcal{K}}^{\operatorname{GRP}} \mathbf{G}^I.$$

The graph product $\mathbf{G}^{\mathcal{K}}$ depends only on the 1-skeleton (graph) of \mathcal{K} .
Namely,

Proposition

The is an isomorphism of groups

$$\mathbf{G}^{\mathcal{K}} \cong \bigstar_{k=1}^m G_k / (g_i g_j = g_j g_i \text{ for } g_i \in G_i, g_j \in G_j, \{i, j\} \in \mathcal{K}),$$

where $\bigstar_{k=1}^m G_k$ denotes the free product of the groups G_k .

Example

Let $G_i = \mathbb{Z}$. Then $\mathbf{G}^{\mathcal{K}}$ is the **right-angled Artin group**

$$RA_{\mathcal{K}} = F(g_1, \dots, g_m) / (g_i g_j = g_j g_i \text{ for } \{i, j\} \in \mathcal{K}),$$

where $F(g_1, \dots, g_m)$ is a free group with m generators.

When \mathcal{K} is a full simplex, we have $RA_{\mathcal{K}} = \mathbb{Z}^m$. When \mathcal{K} is m points, we obtain a free group of rank m .

Example

Let $G_i = \mathbb{Z}_2$. Then $\mathbf{G}^{\mathcal{K}}$ is the **right-angled Coxeter group**

$$RC_{\mathcal{K}} = F(g_1, \dots, g_m) / (g_i^2 = 1, g_i g_j = g_j g_i \text{ for } \{i, j\} \in \mathcal{K}).$$

2. Classifying spaces

The homotopy fibrations $\mathcal{L}_{\mathcal{K}} \rightarrow (S^1)^{\mathcal{K}} \rightarrow (S^1)^m$ and $\mathcal{R}_{\mathcal{K}} \rightarrow (\mathbb{R}P^\infty)^{\mathcal{K}} \rightarrow (\mathbb{R}P^\infty)^m$ are generalised as follows.

Proposition

There is a homotopy fibration

$$(EG, G)^{\mathcal{K}} \longrightarrow (BG)^{\mathcal{K}} \longrightarrow \prod_{k=1}^m BG_k.$$

A **missing face** (a **minimal non-face**) of \mathcal{K} is a subset $I \subset [m]$ such that $I \notin \mathcal{K}$, but $J \in \mathcal{K}$ for each $J \subsetneq I$.

\mathcal{K} a **flag complex** if each of its missing faces consists of two vertices. Equivalently, \mathcal{K} is flag if any set of vertices of \mathcal{K} which are pairwise connected by edges spans a simplex.

Every flag complex \mathcal{K} is determined by its 1-skeleton \mathcal{K}^1 .

Theorem

Let $\mathbf{G}^{\mathcal{K}}$ be a graph product group.

- 1 $\pi_1((B\mathbf{G})^{\mathcal{K}}) \cong \mathbf{G}^{\mathcal{K}}$.
- 2 Both spaces $(B\mathbf{G})^{\mathcal{K}}$ and $(E\mathbf{G}, \mathbf{G})^{\mathcal{K}}$ are aspherical if and only if \mathcal{K} is flag. Hence, $B(\mathbf{G}^{\mathcal{K}}) = (B\mathbf{G})^{\mathcal{K}}$ whenever \mathcal{K} is flag.
- 3 $\pi_i((B\mathbf{G})^{\mathcal{K}}) \cong \pi_i((E\mathbf{G}, \mathbf{G})^{\mathcal{K}})$ for $i \geq 2$.
- 4 $\pi_1((E\mathbf{G}, \mathbf{G})^{\mathcal{K}})$ is isomorphic to the kernel of the canonical projection $\mathbf{G}^{\mathcal{K}} \rightarrow \prod_{k=1}^m G_k$.

Proof

(1) Proceed inductively by adding simplices to \mathcal{K} one by one and use van Kampen's Theorem. The base of the induction is \mathcal{K} consisting of m disjoint points. Then $(B\mathbf{G})^{\mathcal{K}}$ is the wedge $BG_1 \vee \cdots \vee BG_m$, and $\pi_1((B\mathbf{G})^{\mathcal{K}})$ is the free product $G_1 \star \cdots \star G_m$.

Proof

(2) To see that $B(\mathbf{G}^{\mathcal{K}}) = (B\mathbf{G})^{\mathcal{K}}$ when \mathcal{K} is flag, consider the map

$$\operatorname{colim}_{I \in \mathcal{K}} B\mathbf{G}^I = (B\mathbf{G})^{\mathcal{K}} \rightarrow B(\mathbf{G}^{\mathcal{K}}). \quad (1)$$

According to [PRV], the homotopy fibre of (1) is $\operatorname{hocolim}_{I \in \mathcal{K}} \mathbf{G}^{\mathcal{K}} / \mathbf{G}^I$, which is homeomorphic to the identification space

$$(B_{\text{CAT}}(\mathcal{K}) \times \mathbf{G}^{\mathcal{K}}) / \sim. \quad (2)$$

Here $B_{\text{CAT}}(\mathcal{K})$ is homeomorphic to the cone on $|\mathcal{K}|$. The equivalence relation \sim is defined as follows: $(x, gh) \sim (x, g)$ whenever $h \in \mathbf{G}^I$ and $x \in B(I \downarrow_{\text{CAT}}(\mathcal{K}))$, where $I \downarrow_{\text{CAT}}(\mathcal{K})$ is the *undercategory*, and $B(I \downarrow_{\text{CAT}}(\mathcal{K}))$ is homeomorphic to the star of I in \mathcal{K} .

When \mathcal{K} is a flag complex, the identification space (2) is contractible by [PRV]. Therefore, the map (1) is a homotopy equivalence, which implies that $(B\mathbf{G})^{\mathcal{K}}$ is aspherical when \mathcal{K} is flag.

Proof

Assume now that \mathcal{K} is not flag. Choose a missing face

$J = \{j_1, \dots, j_k\} \subset [m]$ with $k \geq 3$ vertices. Let $\mathcal{K}_J = \{I \in \mathcal{K} : I \subset J\}$.

Then $(B\mathbf{G})^{\mathcal{K}_J}$ is the fat wedge of the spaces $\{BG_j, j \in J\}$, and it is a retract of $(B\mathbf{G})^{\mathcal{K}}$.

The homotopy fibre of the inclusion $(B\mathbf{G})^{\mathcal{K}_J} \rightarrow \prod_{j \in J} BG_j$ is $\Sigma^{k-1} G_{j_1} \wedge \dots \wedge G_{j_k}$, a wedge of $(k-1)$ -dimensional spheres.

Hence, $\pi_{k-1}((B\mathbf{G})^{\mathcal{K}_J}) \neq 0$ where $k \geq 3$.

Thus, $(B\mathbf{G})^{\mathcal{K}_J}$ and $(B\mathbf{G})^{\mathcal{K}}$ are non-aspherical.

The rest of the proof (the asphericity of $(E\mathbf{G}, \mathbf{G})^{\mathcal{K}}$ and statements (3) and (4)) follow from the homotopy exact sequence of the fibration $(E\mathbf{G}, \mathbf{G})^{\mathcal{K}} \rightarrow (B\mathbf{G})^{\mathcal{K}} \rightarrow \prod_{k=1}^m BG_k$.

Specialising to the cases $G_k = \mathbb{Z}$ and $G_k = \mathbb{Z}_2$ respectively we obtain:

Corollary

Let $RA_{\mathcal{K}}$ be a right-angled Artin group.

- 1 $\pi_1((S^1)^{\mathcal{K}}) \cong RA_{\mathcal{K}}$.
- 2 Both $(S^1)^{\mathcal{K}}$ and $\mathcal{L}_{\mathcal{K}} = (\mathbb{R}, \mathbb{Z})^{\mathcal{K}}$ are aspherical iff \mathcal{K} is flag.
- 3 $\pi_i((S^1)^{\mathcal{K}}) \cong \pi_i(\mathcal{L}_{\mathcal{K}})$ for $i \geq 2$.
- 4 $\pi_1(\mathcal{L}_{\mathcal{K}})$ is isomorphic to the commutator subgroup $RA'_{\mathcal{K}}$.

Corollary

Let $RC_{\mathcal{K}}$ be a right-angled Coxeter group.

- 1 $\pi_1((\mathbb{R}P^\infty)^{\mathcal{K}}) \cong RC_{\mathcal{K}}$.
- 2 Both $(\mathbb{R}P^\infty)^{\mathcal{K}}$ and $\mathcal{R}_{\mathcal{K}} = (D^1, S^0)^{\mathcal{K}}$ are aspherical iff \mathcal{K} is flag.
- 3 $\pi_i((\mathbb{R}P^\infty)^{\mathcal{K}}) \cong \pi_i(\mathcal{R}_{\mathcal{K}})$ for $i \geq 2$.
- 4 $\pi_1(\mathcal{R}_{\mathcal{K}})$ is isomorphic to the commutator subgroup $RC'_{\mathcal{K}}$.

Example

Let \mathcal{K} be an m -cycle (the boundary of an m -gon).

A simple argument with Euler characteristic shows that $\mathcal{R}_{\mathcal{K}}$ is homeomorphic to a closed orientable surface of genus $(m-4)2^{m-3} + 1$. (This observation goes back to a 1938 work of Coxeter.)

Therefore, the commutator subgroup of the corresponding right-angled Coxeter group $RC_{\mathcal{K}}$ is a surface group.

Similarly, when $|\mathcal{K}| \cong S^2$ (which is equivalent to \mathcal{K} being the boundary of a 3-dimensional simplicial polytope), $\mathcal{R}_{\mathcal{K}}$ is a 3-dimensional manifold. Therefore, the commutator subgroup of the corresponding $RC_{\mathcal{K}}$ is a 3-manifold group.

3. The structure of the commutator subgroups

We have

$$\text{Ker}\left(\mathbf{G}^{\mathcal{K}} \rightarrow \prod_{k=1}^m G_k\right) = \pi_1((E\mathbf{G}, \mathbf{G})^{\mathcal{K}}).$$

In the case of right-angled Artin or Coxeter groups (or when each G_k is abelian), the group above is the commutator subgroup $(\mathbf{G}^{\mathcal{K}})'$.

We want to study the group $\pi_1((E\mathbf{G}, \mathbf{G})^{\mathcal{K}})$, identify the class of simplicial complexes \mathcal{K} for which this group is free, and describe a generator set.

A graph Γ is called **chordal** (in other terminology, **triangulated**) if each of its cycles with ≥ 4 vertices has a chord.

By a result of Fulkerson–Gross, a graph is chordal if and only if its vertices can be ordered in such a way that, for each vertex i , the lesser neighbours of i form a complete subgraph. (A **perfect elimination order**.)

Theorem

The following conditions are equivalent:

- 1 $\text{Ker}(\mathbf{G}^{\mathcal{K}} \rightarrow \prod_{k=1}^m G_k)$ is a free group;
- 2 $(E\mathbf{G}, \mathbf{G})^{\mathcal{K}}$ is homotopy equivalent to a wedge of circles;
- 3 \mathcal{K}^1 is a chordal graph.

Proof

(2) \Rightarrow (1) Because $\text{Ker}(\mathbf{G}^{\mathcal{K}} \rightarrow \prod_{k=1}^m G_k) = \pi_1((E\mathbf{G}, \mathbf{G})^{\mathcal{K}})$.

(3) \Rightarrow (2) Use induction and perfect elimination order.

(1) \Rightarrow (3) Assume that \mathcal{K}^1 is not chordal. Then, for each chordless cycle of length ≥ 4 , one can find a subgroup in $\text{Ker}(\mathbf{G}^{\mathcal{K}} \rightarrow \prod_{k=1}^m G_k)$ which is a surface group. Hence, $\text{Ker}(\mathbf{G}^{\mathcal{K}} \rightarrow \prod_{k=1}^m G_k)$ is not a free group.

Corollary

Let $RA_{\mathcal{K}}$ and $RC_{\mathcal{K}}$ be the right-angled Artin and Coxeter groups corresponding to a simplicial complex \mathcal{K} .

- (a) The commutator subgroup $RA'_{\mathcal{K}}$ is free if and only if \mathcal{K}^1 is a chordal graph.
- (b) The commutator subgroup $RC'_{\mathcal{K}}$ is free if and only if \mathcal{K}^1 is a chordal graph.

Part (a) is the result of Servatius, Droms and Servatius.

The difference between (a) and (b) is that the commutator subgroup $RA'_{\mathcal{K}}$ is infinitely generated, unless $RA_{\mathcal{K}} = \mathbb{Z}^m$, while the commutator subgroup $RC'_{\mathcal{K}}$ is finitely generated. We elaborate on this in the next theorem.

Let $(g, h) = g^{-1}h^{-1}gh$ denote the group commutator of g, h .

Theorem

The commutator subgroup $RC'_{\mathcal{K}}$ has a finite minimal generator set consisting of $\sum_{J \subset [m]} \text{rank } \tilde{H}_0(\mathcal{K}_J)$ iterated commutators

$$(g_j, g_i), \quad (g_{k_1}, (g_j, g_i)), \quad \dots, \quad (g_{k_1}, (g_{k_2}, \dots (g_{k_{m-2}}, (g_j, g_i)) \dots)),$$

where $k_1 < k_2 < \dots < k_{\ell-2} < j > i$, $k_s \neq i$ for any s , and i is the smallest vertex in a connected component not containing j of the subcomplex

$$\mathcal{K}_{\{k_1, \dots, k_{\ell-2}, j, i\}}.$$

Idea of proof

First consider the case $\mathcal{K} = m$ points. Then $\mathcal{R}_{\mathcal{K}}$ is the 1-skeleton of an m -cube and $RC'_{\mathcal{K}} = \pi_1(\mathcal{R}_{\mathcal{K}})$ is a free group of rank $\sum_{\ell=2}^m (\ell-1) \binom{m}{\ell}$. It agrees with the total number of nested commutators in the list.

Then eliminate the extra nested commutators using the commutation relations $(g_i, g_j) = 1$ for $\{i, j\} \in \mathcal{K}$.

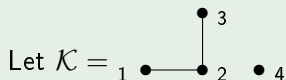
Idea of proof

To see that the given generating set is minimal, argue as follows. The first homology group $H_1(\mathcal{R}_{\mathcal{K}})$ is $RC'_{\mathcal{K}}/RC''_{\mathcal{K}}$. On the other hand,

$$H_1(\mathcal{R}_{\mathcal{K}}) \cong \sum_{J \subset [m]} \tilde{H}_0(\mathcal{K}_J).$$

Hence, the number of generators in the abelian group $H_1(\mathcal{R}_{\mathcal{K}}) \cong RC'_{\mathcal{K}}/RC''_{\mathcal{K}}$ is $\sum_{J \subset [m]} \text{rank } \tilde{H}_0(\mathcal{K}_J)$, and the latter number agrees with the number of iterated commutators in the in generator set for $RC'_{\mathcal{K}}$ constructed above.

Example



Then the commutator subgroup $RC'_{\mathcal{K}}$ is free with the following basis:

$$\begin{aligned} & (g_3, g_1), (g_4, g_1), (g_4, g_2), (g_4, g_3), \\ & (g_2, (g_4, g_1)), (g_3, (g_4, g_1)), (g_1, (g_4, g_3)), (g_3, (g_4, g_2)), \\ & (g_2, (g_3, (g_4, g_1))). \end{aligned}$$

Example

Let \mathcal{K} be an m -cycle with $m \geq 4$ vertices.

Then \mathcal{K}^1 is not a chordal graph, so the group $RC'_{\mathcal{K}}$ is not free.

In fact, $\mathcal{R}_{\mathcal{K}}$ is an orientable surface of genus $(m-4)2^{m-3} + 1$, so $RC'_{\mathcal{K}} \cong \pi_1(\mathcal{R}_{\mathcal{K}})$ is a one-relator group.

There are similar results of Grbic, P., Theriault and Wu describing the commutator subalgebra of the graded Lie algebra given by

$$L_{\mathcal{K}} = FL\langle u_1, \dots, u_m \rangle / ([u_i, u_j] = 0, [u_i, u_j] = 0 \text{ for } \{i, j\} \in \mathcal{K}),$$

where $FL\langle u_1, \dots, u_m \rangle$ is the free graded Lie algebra on generators u_i of degree one, and $[a, b] = -(-1)^{|a||b|}[b, a]$ denotes the graded Lie bracket.

The commutator subalgebra is the kernel of the Lie algebra homomorphism $L_{\mathcal{K}} \rightarrow CL\langle u_1, \dots, u_m \rangle$ to the commutative (trivial) Lie algebra.

The graded Lie algebra $L_{\mathcal{K}}$ is a graph product similar to the right-angled Coxeter group $RC_{\mathcal{K}}$.

It has a similar colimit decomposition, with each $G_i = \mathbb{Z}_2$ replaced by the trivial Lie algebra $CL\langle u \rangle = FL\langle u \rangle / ([u, u] = 0)$ and the colimit taken in the category of graded Lie algebras.

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