ALGEBRAIC
COMBINATORICS

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To Gillian
Preface

There are people who feel that a combinatorial result should be given a "purely combinatorial" proof, but I am not one of them. For me the most interesting parts of combinatorics have always been those overlapping other areas of mathematics. This book is an introduction to some of the interactions between algebra and combinatorics. The first half is devoted to the characteristic and matchings polynomials of a graph, and the second to polynomial spaces. However anyone who looks at the table of contents will realise that many other topics have found their way in, and so I expand on this summary.

The characteristic polynomial of a graph is the characteristic polynomial of its adjacency matrix. The matchings polynomial of a graph $G$ with $n$ vertices is

$$
\sum_{k=0}^{\lfloor n/2 \rfloor} (-1)^k p(G, k) x^{n-2k},
$$

where $p(G, k)$ is the number of $k$-matchings in $G$, i.e., the number of subgraphs of $G$ formed from $k$ vertex-disjoint edges. These definitions suggest that the characteristic polynomial is an algebraic object and the matchings polynomial a combinatorial one. Despite this, these two polynomials are closely related and therefore they have been treated together. In developing their theory we obtain as a by-product a number of results about orthogonal polynomials. The number of perfect matchings in the complement of a graph can be expressed as an integral involving the matchings polynomial. This motivates the study of moment sequences, by which we mean sequences of combinatorial interest which can be represented as the sequence of moments of some measure.

To be brief, if not cryptic, a polynomial space is obtained by associating an inner product space of "polynomials" to a combinatorial structure. The combinatorial structure might be the set of all $k$-subsets of a set of $v$ elements, the symmetric group on $n$ letters or, if the reader will be generous, the unit sphere in $\mathbb{R}^n$. Given this set-up it is possible to derive bounds on the sizes of "codes" and "designs" in the structure. The derivations are very simple and apply to a wide range of structures. The resulting bounds are often classical—the simplest and best known is Fisher's inequality from design theory.
Polynomial spaces are perhaps impossibly general. We distinguish one important family which corresponds, when the underlying set is finite, to \( Q \)-polynomial association schemes. The latter have a well-developed theory, thanks chiefly to work of Delsarte. Our approach enables us to rederive and extend much of this work. In summary, the theory of polynomial spaces provides an axiomatisation of many of the applications of linear algebra to combinatorics, along with a natural way of extending the theory of \( Q \)-polynomial association schemes to the case where the underlying set is infinite.

From this discussion it is clear that to make sense of polynomial spaces, some feeling for association schemes is required. Hence I have included a reasonably thorough introduction to this topic. To motivate this in turn, I have also included chapters on strongly regular and distance-regular graphs. Orthogonal polynomials arise naturally in connection with polynomial spaces and distance-regular graphs, and thus form a connecting link between the two parts of this book.

My aim has been to write a book which would be accessible to beginning graduate students. I believe it could serve as a text for a number of different courses in combinatorics at this level, and I also hope that it will prove interesting to browse in. The prerequisites for successful digestion of the material offered are:

**Linear algebra:** Familiarity with the basics is taken for granted. The spectral decomposition of a Hermitian matrix is used more than once. The theory is presented in Chapter 2. Positive semi-definite matrices appear. A brief summary of the relevant material is included in the appendix.

**Combinatorics:** The basic language of graph theory is used without preamble, e.g., spanning trees, bipartite graphs and chromatic number. Once again some of this is included in the appendix. Generating functions and formal power series are used extensively in the first half of the book, and so there is a chapter devoted to them.

**Group theory:** The symmetric group creeps in occasionally, along with automorphism groups of graphs. The orthogonal group is mentioned by name at least once.

**Ignorance:** By which I mean the ability to ignore the odd paragraph devoted to unfamiliar material, in the trust that it will all be fine at the end.

I have not been able to draw up a dependence diagram for the chapters which would not be misleading. This is because there are few chains of argument extending across chapter boundaries, but many cases where the
material in one chapter motivates another. (For example it should be possible to get through the chapter on association schemes without reading the preceding chapter on distance-regular graphs. However these graphs provide one of the most important classes of association schemes.)

By way of compensation for the lack of this traditional diagram, I include some suggestions for possible courses.

1. The matchings polynomial and moment sequences:
   1–3, 4.1–2, 4.4, 5.1–2, 5.6, 6, 7, 8.1–3, 9.

2. The characteristic polynomial:
   1.1, 2, 3, 4.1–4, 5.1–4, 5.6, 6, 8.

3. Strongly regular graphs, distance-regular graphs and association schemes:
   2, 5.1–2, 8, 10–13.

4. Equitable partitions and codes in distance-regular graphs:
   2, 5.1–2, 5.6, 8.1–2, 11, 12.

5. Polynomial spaces:
   2, 8.1–2, 10, 12.1–4, 13.1, 13.6, 14–16.

In making these suggestions I have made no serious attempt to consider the time it would take to cover the material indicated. On the basis of my own experience, I think it would be possible to cover at most three pages per hour of lectures. On the other hand, it would be easy enough to pare down the suggestions just made. For example, Chapter 3 covers formal power series and generating functions and depending on the backgrounds of one's victims, this might not be essential in (1) and (2).

I have been helped by advice and comments from Ed Bender, Andries Brouwer, Dom de Caen, Michael Doob, Mark Ellingham, Tony Gardiner, Bill Martin, Brendan McKay, Gillian Nonay, Jack Koolen, Gordon Royle, J. J. Seidel and Ákos Seress. Dom in particular has made heroic efforts to protect me from my own stupidity. I am very grateful for all this assistance. I would also like to thank John Kimmel and Jim Geronimo of Chapman and Hall for their part in the production of this book.
Contents

Preface vii

Contents xi

1 The Matchings Polynomial 1
  1.1 Recurrences 1
  1.2 Integrals 4
  1.3 Rook Polynomials 7
  1.4 The Hit Polynomial 16
  1.5 Stirling and Euler Numbers 11
  1.6 Hit Polynomials and Integrals 13
      Exercises 14
      Notes and References 16

2 The Characteristic Polynomial 19
  2.1 Coefficients and Recurrences 19
  2.2 Walks and the Characteristic Polynomial 22
  2.3 Eigenvectors 23
  2.4 Regular Graphs 25
  2.5 The Spectral Decomposition 27
  2.6 Some Further Matrix Theory 30
      Exercises 33
      Notes and References 36

3 Formal Power Series and Generating Functions 37
  3.1 Formal Power Series 37
  3.2 Limits 38
  3.3 Operations on Power Series 40
  3.4 Exp and Log 41
  3.5 Non-linear Equations 43
  3.6 Applications and Examples 45
      Exercises 48
      Notes and References 49
## 4 Walk Generating Functions

4.1 Jacobi's Theorem 51  
4.2 Walks and Paths 55  
4.3 A Decomposition Formula 57  
4.4 The Christoffel-Darboux Identity 59  
4.5 Vertex Reconstruction 61  
4.6 Cospectral Graphs 65  
4.7 Random Walks on Graphs 68  
  Exercises 70  
  Notes and References 72

## 5 Quotients of Graphs

5.1 Equitable Partitions 75  
5.2 Eigenvalues and Eigenvectors 77  
5.3 Walk-Regular Graphs 79  
5.4 Generalised Interlacing 82  
5.5 Covers 84  
5.6 The Spectral Radius of a Tree 86  
  Exercises 87  
  Notes and References 90

## 6 Matchings and Walks

6.1 The Path-Tree 93  
6.2 Tree-Like Walks 98  
6.3 Consequences of Reality 100  
6.4 Christoffel-Darboux Identities 104  
  Exercises 108  
  Notes and References 109

## 7 Pfaffians

7.1 The Pfaffian of a Skew Symmetric Matrix 113  
7.2 Pfaffians and Determinants 114  
7.3 Row Expansions 117  
7.4 Oriented Graphs 119  
7.5 Orientations 121  
7.6 The Difficulty of Counting Perfect Matchings 123  
  Exercises 125  
  Notes and References 127
Contents

8 Orthogonal Polynomials  131
  8.1 The Definitions  131
  8.2 The Three-Term Recurrence  133
  8.3 The Christoffel-Darboux Formula  135
  8.4 Discrete Orthogonality  137
  8.5 Sturm Sequences  140
  8.6 Some Examples  144
    Exercises  145
    Notes and References  146

9 Moment Sequences  149
  9.1 Moments and Walks  150
  9.2 Moment Generating Functions  153
  9.3 Hermite and Laguerre Polynomials  156
  9.4 The Chebyshev Polynomials  158
  9.5 The Charlier Polynomials  160
  9.6 Sheffer Sequences of Polynomials  164
  9.7 Characterising Polynomials of Meixner Type  165
  9.8 The Polynomials of Meixner Type  167
    Exercises  171
    Notes and References  174

10 Strongly Regular Graphs  177
  10.1 Basic Theory  177
  10.2 Conference Graphs  180
  10.3 Designs  184
  10.4 Orthogonal Arrays  187
    Exercises  188
    Notes and References  192

11 Distance-Regular Graphs  195
  11.1 Some Families  195
  11.2 Distance Matrices  197
  11.3 Parameters  198
  11.4 Quotients  200
  11.5 Imprimitive Distance-Regular Graphs  201
  11.6 Codes  205
  11.7 Completely Regular Subsets  208
  11.8 Examples  212
    Exercises  215
    Notes and References  217
## Contents

### 12 Association Schemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12.1 Generously Transitive Permutation Groups</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.2 p's and q's</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.3 P- and Q-Polynomial Association Schemes</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.4 Products</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.5 Primitivity and Imprimitivity</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.6 Codes and Anticodes</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.7 Equitable Partitions of Matrices</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.8 Characters of Abelian Groups</td>
<td>243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.9 Cayley Graphs</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.10 Translation Schemes and Duality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercises</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes and References</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 13 Representations of Distance-Regular Graphs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13.1 Representations of Graphs</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.2 The Sequence of Cosines</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.3 Injectivity</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.4 Eigenvalue Multiplicities</td>
<td>267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.5 Bounding the Diameter</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.6 Spherical Designs</td>
<td>272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.7 Bounds for Cliques</td>
<td>276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.8 Feasible Automorphisms</td>
<td>278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercises</td>
<td>279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes and References</td>
<td>282</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 14 Polynomial Spaces

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14.1 Functions</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.2 The Axioms</td>
<td>287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.3 Examples</td>
<td>289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.4 The Degree of a Subset</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.5 Designs</td>
<td>293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.6 The Johnson Scheme</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.7 The Hamming Scheme</td>
<td>297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.8 Coding Theory</td>
<td>299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.9 Group-Invariant Designs</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.10 Weighted Designs</td>
<td>301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercises</td>
<td>302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes and References</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
15 Q-Polynomial Spaces 307
15.1 Zonal Orthogonal Polynomials 307
15.2 Zonal Orthogonal Polynomials: Examples 309
15.3 The Addition Rule 311
15.4 Spherical Polynomial Spaces 313
15.5 Harmonic Polynomials 315
15.6 Association Schemes 316
15.7 Q-Polynomial Association Schemes 319
15.8 Incidence Matrices for Subsets 323
15.9 \( J(v, k) \) is Q-Polynomial 326
   Exercises 328
   Notes and References 330

16 Tight Designs 333
16.1 Tight Bounds 333
16.2 Examples and Non-Examples 336
16.3 The Grassman Space 338
16.4 Linear Programming 341
16.5 Bigger Bounds 343
16.6 Examples 345
   Exercises 347
   Notes and References 349

Appendix: Terminology 353

Index of Symbols 355

Index 359