

# TRANSITIVE GROUP ACTIONS

KEITH CONRAD

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Every action of a group on a set decomposes the set into disjoint orbits. The group acts on each of the orbits and an orbit does not have sub-orbits because unequal orbits are disjoint, so the decomposition of a set into orbits could be considered as a “factorization” of the set into “irreducible” pieces for the group action. Our focus here is on these irreducible parts, namely group actions with a single orbit.

**Definition 1.1.** An action of a group on a set is called *transitive* when the set is nonempty and there is exactly one orbit.

**Example 1.2.** For  $n \geq 1$ , the usual action of  $S_n$  on  $\{1, 2, \dots, n\}$  is transitive since there is a permutation sending 1 to every other number. The orbit of 1 is  $\{1, 2, \dots, n\}$ .

**Example 1.3.** For  $n \geq 3$ , the usual action of  $A_n$  on  $\{1, 2, \dots, n\}$  is transitive since the 3-cycles  $(12n), (13n), \dots, (1\ n-1\ n), (1n2)$  send 1 to every other number, so the orbit of 1 is  $\{1, 2, \dots, n\}$ . Notice  $A_2$  does not act transitively on  $\{1, 2\}$ , since  $A_2$  is trivial.

**Example 1.4.** For  $n \geq 3$ , the usual action of  $D_n$  on the vertices of a regular  $n$ -gon is transitive since each vertex of the  $n$ -gon can be carried to all the other vertices by the rotations in  $D_n$ .

In Section 2 we give some further examples (and non-examples) of transitive actions. Section 3 gives a few general properties of transitive actions. Doubly transitive actions are the subject of Section 4 and they are applied in Section 5 to prove simplicity of most of the groups  $\mathrm{PSL}_2(F)$ . Highly transitive actions are used in Section 6 to prove most alternating groups are simple. In Section 7 we look at equivalence relations preserved by a group action, which leads to a concept lying between transitivity and double transitivity, called primitivity. For further reading, see [1] and [3].

## 2. MORE EXAMPLES

**Example 2.1.** Let the group  $\mathbf{R}^n$  act on itself by translations: for  $\mathbf{v} \in \mathbf{R}^n$ ,  $T_{\mathbf{v}}: \mathbf{R}^n \rightarrow \mathbf{R}^n$  by  $T_{\mathbf{v}}(\mathbf{w}) = \mathbf{w} + \mathbf{v}$ . Since  $\mathbf{v} = T_{\mathbf{v}}(\mathbf{0})$ , every vector is in the orbit of  $\mathbf{0}$ , so this action is transitive. Concretely, this just means you can move to each point in  $\mathbf{R}^n$  from  $\mathbf{0}$  by a suitable translation.

**Example 2.2.** The usual action of  $\mathrm{GL}_2(\mathbf{R})$  on  $\mathbf{R}^2$  is not transitive, since  $\mathbf{0}$  is in its own orbit. However, the action of  $\mathrm{GL}_2(\mathbf{R})$  on  $\mathbf{R}^2 - \{\mathbf{0}\}$  is transitive. To see why, pick a non-zero vector  $\mathbf{v} = \begin{pmatrix} a \\ b \end{pmatrix}$ . We will find an  $A \in \mathrm{GL}_2(\mathbf{R})$  such that  $A \begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix} = \mathbf{v}$ , which means every  $\mathbf{v} \neq \mathbf{0}$  is in the  $\mathrm{GL}_2(\mathbf{R})$ -orbit of  $\begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix}$ . If  $a \neq 0$ , let  $A = \begin{pmatrix} a & 0 \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}$ . If  $b \neq 0$ , let  $A = \begin{pmatrix} a & 1 \\ 0 & 0 \end{pmatrix}$ . These matrices are invertible in each case, and they send  $\begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix}$  to  $\begin{pmatrix} a \\ b \end{pmatrix} = \mathbf{v}$ .

**Example 2.3.** The action of  $\mathrm{SL}_2(\mathbf{R})$  on  $\mathbf{R}^2 - \{\mathbf{0}\}$  is also transitive. Indeed, in the previous example replace the choice of  $\begin{pmatrix} a & 0 \\ b & 1 \end{pmatrix}$  with  $\begin{pmatrix} a & 0 \\ b & 1/a \end{pmatrix}$  when  $a \neq 0$  and  $\begin{pmatrix} a & 1 \\ b & 0 \end{pmatrix}$  with  $\begin{pmatrix} a & -1/b \\ b & 0 \end{pmatrix}$  when  $b \neq 0$ . We've found a matrix with determinant 1 that sends  $\begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix}$  to  $\begin{pmatrix} a \\ b \end{pmatrix}$  when  $\begin{pmatrix} a \\ b \end{pmatrix} \neq \mathbf{0}$ .

**Example 2.4.** The action of the orthogonal group  $\mathrm{O}_2(\mathbf{R})$  on  $\mathbf{R}^2 - \{\mathbf{0}\}$  is not transitive. Its orbits are the circles centered at  $(0, 0)$ . If we pick a particular circle centered at  $(0, 0)$ , such as the unit circle, then the action of  $\mathrm{O}_2(\mathbf{R})$  on that circle is transitive.

Now we turn to examples (and non-examples) of transitive actions using abstract groups.

**Example 2.5.** Let a group  $G$  act on itself by left multiplication. Since  $g = g \cdot e$ , every element is in the orbit of  $e$ , so there is one orbit. When  $G = \mathbf{R}^n$ , this is exactly Example 2.1.

**Example 2.6.** Let  $G$  be a group with a subgroup  $H$ . The action of  $G$  by left multiplication on the coset space  $G/H$  has one orbit, since  $gH = g \cdot H$ : the orbit of  $H \in G/H$  is the whole coset space. Example 2.5 is the special case where  $H$  is the trivial subgroup.

**Example 2.7.** The action of  $G$  on itself by conjugation is not transitive if  $|G| > 1$ . Indeed, the orbits of the conjugation action are the conjugacy classes of  $G$  and  $\{e\}$  is its own conjugacy class. What about the conjugation action of  $G$  on  $G - \{e\}$ ? This is not transitive if  $G$  is finite and  $|G| > 2$  since finite groups with at least three elements have at least three conjugacy classes.<sup>1</sup> (There are infinite groups where the non-identity elements form a single conjugacy class.)

**Example 2.8.** The conjugation action of  $G$  on its subgroups of a fixed size may or may not be transitive. If the size is a maximal prime power dividing  $|G|$  then the action is transitive (conjugacy of  $p$ -Sylow subgroups), but otherwise it need not be. For instance, there could be a normal subgroup of some size and other subgroups of the same size.

### 3. PROPERTIES OF TRANSITIVE ACTIONS

Our first theorem about transitive actions is an equivalence between its definition and two other descriptions.

**Theorem 3.1.** *Let  $G$  act on a nonempty set  $X$ . The following conditions are equivalent:*

- (1) *the action of  $G$  on  $X$  is transitive (there is one  $G$ -orbit in  $X$ ),*
- (2) *for some  $x \in X$ , every element of  $X$  has the form  $gx$  for some  $g \in G$ ,*
- (3) *for all  $x \in X$ , every element of  $X$  has the form  $gx$  for some  $g \in G$ .*

*Proof.* (1)  $\Rightarrow$  (2) If the action is transitive then  $X$  is a  $G$ -orbit, say the orbit of  $x$ . All elements of this orbit are  $gx$  for some  $g \in G$ .

(2)  $\Rightarrow$  (3) All elements in an orbit have the same orbit, so if  $X$  is the  $G$ -orbit of some point in  $X$  then  $X$  is the  $G$ -orbit of every point in  $X$ .

(2) or (3)  $\Rightarrow$  (1): from either (2) or (3), all elements of  $X$  lie in the same  $G$ -orbit, so the action of  $G$  on  $X$  is transitive.  $\square$

A convenient way of describing (3) is: for each  $x$  and  $y$  in  $X$ ,  $y = gx$  for some  $g \in G$ . This puts the initial element  $x$  and target element  $y$  on the same footing (since  $x = g^{-1}y$ ).

**Theorem 3.2.** *If a finite group  $G$  acts transitively on  $X$  then  $|X| \mid |G|$ .*

<sup>1</sup>See Example B.2 in <https://kconrad.math.uconn.edu/blurbs/grouptheory/conjclass.pdf>.

*Proof.* Pick  $x \in X$ . Since the  $G$ -orbit of  $x$  is  $X$ , the set  $X$  is finite and the orbit-stabilizer formula tells us  $|X| = [G : \text{Stab}_x]$ , so  $|X| \mid |G|$ .  $\square$

**Example 3.3.** Let  $p$  be prime. If  $G$  is a subgroup of  $S_p$  and its natural action on  $\{1, 2, \dots, p\}$  is transitive then  $p \mid |G|$  by Theorem 3.2, so  $G$  contains an element of order  $p$  by Cauchy's theorem. The only elements of order  $p$  in  $S_p$  are  $p$ -cycles, so every subgroup of  $S_p$  whose natural action on  $\{1, 2, \dots, p\}$  is transitive contains a  $p$ -cycle.

**Theorem 3.4.** *Suppose  $G$  acts on two finite sets  $X$  and  $Y$  and there is a function  $f: X \rightarrow Y$  that respects the  $G$ -actions:  $f(gx) = gf(x)$  for all  $g \in G$  and  $x \in X$ . If the action is transitive on  $Y$  then  $|Y| \mid |X|$ .*

*Proof.* The set  $X$  can be decomposed into disjoint subsets according to the  $f$ -values of the elements. That is,

$$X = \bigcup_{y \in Y} f^{-1}(y),$$

and the sets  $f^{-1}(y)$  are disjoint. We will show  $|f^{-1}(y)| = |f^{-1}(y')|$  for  $y$  and  $y'$  in  $Y$ , and therefore  $|X|$  equals  $|Y|$  times the common size of the inverse images.

For  $y$  and  $y'$  in  $Y$ , write  $y' = g_0y$ . Then we get maps  $f^{-1}(y) \mapsto f^{-1}(y')$  and  $f^{-1}(y') \mapsto f^{-1}(y)$  by  $x \mapsto g_0x$  and  $x' \mapsto g_0^{-1}x'$ . These maps are inverses of each other, so  $|f^{-1}(y)| = |f^{-1}(y')|$ .  $\square$

As an exercise, show Theorem 3.2 is a special case of Theorem 3.4.

Here is a cute application of Theorem 3.4 to counting Sylow subgroups. For a group  $G$ ,  $n_p(G)$  denotes the size of  $\text{Syl}_p(G)$ . If  $H \subset G$  and  $N \triangleleft G$ , then  $n_p(H) \leq n_p(G)$  and  $n_p(G/N) \leq n_p(G)$ . Might these inequalities really be divisibilities? Not always. There are several copies of  $A_4$  in  $A_5$ , and  $n_3(A_4) = 4$  while  $n_3(A_5) = 10$ . However, if we stick to normal subgroups only, then we do get a divisibility relation on the Sylow counts.

**Corollary 3.5.** *When  $G$  is a finite group and  $N \triangleleft G$ ,  $n_p(N) \mid n_p(G)$  and  $n_p(G/N) \mid n_p(G)$ .*

*Proof.* Let  $X = \text{Syl}_p(G)$  and  $Y = \text{Syl}_p(N)$ . The group  $G$  acts on both  $X$  and  $Y$  by conjugation. By the Sylow theorems, the action of  $N$  on  $Y$  is transitive, so the action of  $G$  on  $Y$  is transitive. (Also the action of  $G$  on  $X$  is transitive, but we won't need this.) There is a natural map  $f: X \rightarrow Y$  given by  $f(P) = P \cap N$ . (That  $P \cap N$  is a  $p$ -Sylow subgroup of  $N$  is the first part of Theorem A.1.) Since  $g(P \cap N)g^{-1} = gPg^{-1} \cap gNg^{-1} = gPg^{-1} \cap N$ ,  $f$  respects the conjugation action of  $G$  on  $X$  and  $Y$ . Now use Theorem 3.4 to see  $|Y| \mid |X|$ , so  $n_p(N) \mid n_p(G)$ .

To show  $n_p(G/N) \mid n_p(G)$ , use  $X = \text{Syl}_p(G)$  again but now let  $Y = \text{Syl}_p(G/N)$ . Once again  $G$  acts on both  $X$  and  $Y$  by conjugation, and the action on  $Y$  (and on  $X$ ) is transitive. Let  $f: X \rightarrow Y$  by  $f(P) = PN/N$  (that this is  $p$ -Sylow subgroup of  $G/N$  is the second part of Theorem A.1) and check  $f$  respects the action of  $G$  on the two sets.  $\square$

Our next theorem about transitive actions is fundamental. It says that Example 2.6 is actually the most general example: every transitive action can be viewed as a left multiplication action on cosets of a subgroup, even though it may not appear that way at first.

**Theorem 3.6.** *A transitive action of a group  $G$  is equivalent to an action of  $G$  by left multiplication on some coset space  $G/H$ .*

*Proof.* Let  $G$  act transitively on  $X$ . We want to show this action is the same as the left multiplication action of  $G$  on some coset space  $G/H$ .

Pick  $x_0 \in X$ . Every element of  $X$  has the form  $gx_0$  for some  $g \in G$ . Consider the map  $G \rightarrow X$  by  $g \mapsto gx_0$ . This is onto by transitivity. Let  $H = \text{Stab}_{x_0}$ . For  $g$  and  $g'$  in  $G$ ,

$$gx_0 = g'x_0 \iff g^{-1}g' \in H \iff gH = g'H.$$

This shows there is a bijection  $G/H \rightarrow X$  by  $gH \mapsto gx_0$ . (Concretely, since  $(gh)x_0 = gx_0$  for all  $h \in H$ , it makes sense to associate the whole coset  $gH$  with the point  $gx_0$ .) This bijection between  $G/H$  and  $X$  respects the  $G$ -actions on both sides. To see this, pick  $x \in X$  and  $g \in G$ , and set  $y = gx$ . What coset in  $G/H$  corresponds to  $x$ ? Writing  $x = g_0x_0$ , the coset corresponding to  $x$  is  $g_0H$ . Similarly, since  $y = g(g_0x_0) = (gg_0)x_0$ , the coset corresponding to  $y$  is  $(gg_0)H = gg_0H$ . Thus, when  $x \mapsto g_0H$ , we see that  $gx \mapsto gg_0H$ , so the  $G$ -actions on  $X$  and  $G/H$  correspond to each other by the bijection between them.  $\square$

To summarize the above proof, when  $G$  acts transitively on  $X$  fix an  $x_0 \in X$  and let  $H = \text{Stab}_{x_0}$ . Then  $G/H$  is in bijection with  $X$  by letting  $gH$  correspond to  $gx_0$ , and this bijection identifies left multiplication of  $G$  on  $G/H$  with the action of  $G$  on  $X$ .

**Example 3.7.** Let's look at a transitive action that does not appear to be a coset action at first, and understand why it really is. We consider the action of  $\text{GL}_2(\mathbf{R})$  on  $\mathbf{R}^2 - \{\mathbf{0}\}$  by matrix-vector multiplication. We saw in Example 2.2 that the orbit of  $\begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix}$  takes us through the whole space.

Following the idea in the proof of Theorem 3.6, we are going to show this action of  $\text{GL}_2(\mathbf{R})$  on  $\mathbf{R}^2 - \{\mathbf{0}\}$  is the same as the action of  $\text{GL}_2(\mathbf{R})$  on a certain left coset space  $\text{GL}_2(\mathbf{R})/H$ .

Define  $H = \text{Stab}_{\begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix}} = \{A \in \text{GL}_2(\mathbf{R}) : A\begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix}\}$ . Carrying out the matrix-vector multiplication explicitly, the stabilizing condition  $A\begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix}$  means the first column of  $A$  is  $\begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix}$ , so

$$H = \left\{ \begin{pmatrix} 1 & x \\ 0 & y \end{pmatrix} : y \neq 0 \right\}.$$

(Note  $H \cong \text{Aff}(\mathbf{R})$  by  $\begin{pmatrix} 1 & x \\ 0 & y \end{pmatrix} \mapsto \begin{pmatrix} y & x \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}^{-1}$ .)

Theorem 3.6 tells us the coset space  $\text{GL}_2(\mathbf{R})/H$  looks like  $\mathbf{R}^2 - \{\mathbf{0}\}$ . Let's try to understand how this works. For a typical matrix  $\begin{pmatrix} a & b \\ c & d \end{pmatrix}$  in  $\text{GL}_2(\mathbf{R})$ , which matrices belong to the left coset  $\begin{pmatrix} a & b \\ c & d \end{pmatrix}H$ ? For all  $\begin{pmatrix} 1 & x \\ 0 & y \end{pmatrix}$  in  $H$  ( $x$  and  $y$  vary, except  $y \neq 0$ ),

$$\begin{pmatrix} a & b \\ c & d \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} 1 & x \\ 0 & y \end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix} a & ax + by \\ c & cx + dy \end{pmatrix}.$$

The second column in the matrix on the right is the vector  $\begin{pmatrix} a & b \\ c & d \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} x \\ y \end{pmatrix}$ . As  $\begin{pmatrix} x \\ y \end{pmatrix}$  runs through all vectors with  $y \neq 0$ ,  $\begin{pmatrix} ax+by \\ cx+dy \end{pmatrix}$  runs through all vectors except the scalar multiples of  $\begin{pmatrix} a \\ c \end{pmatrix}$ , so symbolically

$$\begin{pmatrix} a & b \\ c & d \end{pmatrix} H = \begin{pmatrix} a & * \\ c & * \end{pmatrix},$$

where the  $*$  means "put anything here, keeping the matrix invertible." (A matrix  $\begin{pmatrix} a & * \\ c & * \end{pmatrix}$  is invertible if and only if the second column is not a scalar multiple of  $\begin{pmatrix} a \\ c \end{pmatrix}$ .) Thus, the essential data in a left coset of  $H$  is just the *common first column* of all the matrices of the coset. We can see now how cosets in  $\text{GL}_2(\mathbf{R})/H$  naturally correspond to non-zero vectors of  $\mathbf{R}^2$ : associate to a left coset the common first column of the matrices in that coset.

Now we check that the  $\mathrm{GL}_2(\mathbf{R})$ -action on non-zero vectors in  $\mathbf{R}^2$  matches the left multiplication action of  $\mathrm{GL}_2(\mathbf{R})$  on  $\mathrm{GL}_2(\mathbf{R})/H$  under our “first column” correspondence  $\mathrm{GL}_2(\mathbf{R})/H \rightarrow \mathbf{R}^2 - \{\mathbf{0}\}$ .

Pick a left coset  $\left\{ \begin{pmatrix} \alpha & * \\ \beta & * \end{pmatrix} \in \mathrm{GL}_2(\mathbf{R}) \right\}$  of  $H$ , where  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  are fixed. Let  $\mathbf{v} = \begin{pmatrix} \alpha \\ \beta \end{pmatrix}$ . For all  $\begin{pmatrix} a & b \\ c & d \end{pmatrix}$  in  $\mathrm{GL}_2(\mathbf{R})$ , we have  $\begin{pmatrix} a & b \\ c & d \end{pmatrix} \mathbf{v} = \begin{pmatrix} a\alpha + b\beta \\ c\alpha + d\beta \end{pmatrix}$ . On the coset side, write a typical  $\begin{pmatrix} \alpha & * \\ \beta & * \end{pmatrix}$  in explicit form, say as  $\begin{pmatrix} \alpha & \gamma \\ \beta & \delta \end{pmatrix}$ . Then

$$\begin{pmatrix} a & b \\ c & d \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} \alpha & \gamma \\ \beta & \delta \end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix} a\alpha + b\beta & a\gamma + b\delta \\ c\alpha + d\beta & c\gamma + d\delta \end{pmatrix}.$$

Passing back to the cosets by ignoring the second columns, we have

$$\begin{pmatrix} a & b \\ c & d \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} \alpha & * \\ \beta & * \end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix} a\alpha + b\beta & * \\ c\alpha + d\beta & * \end{pmatrix}.$$

This matches the way  $\begin{pmatrix} a & b \\ c & d \end{pmatrix}$  multiplies the vector  $\begin{pmatrix} \alpha \\ \beta \end{pmatrix}$ , so the actions of  $\mathrm{GL}_2(\mathbf{R})$  on  $\mathbf{R}^2 - \{\mathbf{0}\}$  by matrix-vector multiplication and on  $\mathrm{GL}_2(\mathbf{R})/H$  by left multiplication agree.

It is left to the reader to examine how  $\mathbf{R}^2 - \{\mathbf{0}\}$  can be viewed as a left coset space of  $\mathrm{SL}_2(\mathbf{R})$  using Example 2.3.

**Example 3.8.** Consider the usual action of  $S_n$  on  $\{1, 2, \dots, n\}$ , which is transitive. We will interpret this as a left coset action in the spirit of Theorem 3.6. The stabilizer of the last number  $n$  is naturally identified with  $S_{n-1} \subset S_n$ . All elements in a left coset  $\sigma S_{n-1}$  in  $S_n$  have a common value at  $n$  since  $S_{n-1}$  fixes  $n$ . That is, for all  $\pi \in S_{n-1}$  we have  $(\sigma\pi)(n) = \sigma(n)$ . Conversely, if  $\sigma_1(n) = \sigma_2(n)$  then  $\sigma_1^{-1}\sigma_2(n) = n$ , so  $\sigma_1^{-1}\sigma_2 \in S_{n-1}$ . Thus  $\sigma_1 S_{n-1} = \sigma_2 S_{n-1}$ . Associating each left coset of  $S_{n-1}$  in  $S_n$  to the common value of its members at  $n$  (a number in  $\{1, 2, \dots, n\}$ ) converts the multiplication action of  $S_n$  on the left coset space  $S_n/S_{n-1}$  into the usual action of  $S_n$  on  $\{1, 2, \dots, n\}$ .

**Theorem 3.9.** *Let  $G$  act transitively on  $X$ . If  $N \triangleleft G$  then all orbits of  $N$  on  $X$  have the same cardinality.*

*Proof.* Pick two points  $x$  and  $y$  in  $X$ . By transitivity of  $G$ , we can write  $y = gx$  for some  $g \in G$ . A bijection between the orbits  $Nx$  and  $Ny = Ngx = gNx$  is  $t \mapsto gt$ . (This bijection depends on the choice of  $g$  such that  $y = gx$ .)  $\square$

**Example 3.10.** Let  $G = D_4$  act on the four vertices of a square in the natural way and let  $N = Z(G) = \{1, r^2\}$ . The  $N$ -orbits on the four vertices are two orbits of length 2, namely pairs of opposite vertices. On the other hand, the subgroup  $\{1, s\}$  is not normal, where  $s$  is reflection across a diagonal of the square, and the orbits of the vertices under this subgroup do not all have equal size: there are two orbits of length 1 and one orbit of length 2.

**Example 3.11.** Let  $p$  be prime. If  $G$  is a subgroup of  $S_p$  and its natural action on  $\{1, 2, \dots, p\}$  is transitive then the action of a nontrivial normal subgroup  $N \triangleleft G$  on  $\{1, 2, \dots, p\}$  is also transitive! Indeed, the  $N$ -orbits on  $\{1, 2, \dots, p\}$  all have the same size by Theorem 3.9, say  $m$ , so  $m > 1$  since *some*  $N$ -orbit is not a point (because  $N$  is nontrivial in  $S_p$ ). Then counting  $\{1, 2, \dots, p\}$  by counting the orders of different  $N$ -orbits, we get  $p = m \cdot |\{N\text{-orbits}\}|$  with  $m > 1$ , so  $m = p$ , which means there is only one  $N$ -orbit.

By Example 3.3,  $N$  contains a  $p$ -cycle.

**Theorem 3.12** (Frattini). *If  $G$  acts on  $X$  and  $H$  is a subgroup of  $G$ , then the following are equivalent:*

- (1)  $H$  acts transitively on  $X$ ,
- (2)  $G$  acts transitively on  $X$  and  $G = H \text{Stab}_x$  for some  $x \in X$ .

When this occurs,  $G = H \text{Stab}_x$  for every  $x \in X$ .

*Proof.* Suppose  $H$  acts transitively on  $X$ . Then obviously  $G$  acts transitively on  $X$ . Fix an  $x \in X$ . For  $g \in G$ ,  $gx = hx$  for some  $h \in H$ , so  $h^{-1}g \in \text{Stab}_x$ . Thus  $g \in H \text{Stab}_x$ , so  $G = H \text{Stab}_x$ . Conversely, if  $G$  acts transitively on  $X$  and  $G = H \text{Stab}_x$  for some  $x \in X$  then  $X = Gx = H \text{Stab}_x x = Hx$ , so  $H$  acts transitively on  $X$ .  $\square$

**Example 3.13.** Let  $G$  be a finite group and  $N \triangleleft G$ . Since  $G$  acts by conjugation on  $N$ , it acts on  $\text{Syl}_p(N)$  (for each prime  $p$ ). The conjugation action of  $N$  on  $\text{Syl}_p(N)$  is transitive by the Sylow theorems, so for each  $P \in \text{Syl}_p(N)$  we have  $G = N \text{Stab}_P = N N_G(P)$ .

**Corollary 3.14.** *Let  $G$  act on  $X$ . If  $H$  is a subgroup of  $G$  such that  $H$  acts transitively on  $X$  and  $\text{Stab}_x \subset H$  for some  $x \in X$  then  $H = G$ .*

*Proof.* In Theorem 3.12, use for  $x$  the point such that  $\text{Stab}_x \subset H$ . Then Theorem 3.12 becomes  $G = H \text{Stab}_x = H$ .  $\square$

For a group  $G$ , consider the natural action of the group  $\text{Aut}(G)$  on  $G$ : an automorphism  $\varphi$  sends  $g \in G$  to  $\varphi(g) \in G$ . The identity element in  $G$  is a fixed point:  $\varphi(e) = e$  for all  $\varphi \in \text{Aut}(G)$ . Could the action of  $\text{Aut}(G)$  on  $G - \{e\}$  be transitive? That is, could all pairs of non-identity elements of a group be linked by an automorphism of the group? One case where this happens is  $G = (\mathbf{Z}/(p))^n$ :  $\text{Aut}(G)$  equals  $\text{GL}_n(\mathbf{Z}/(p))$  and the transitivity of  $\text{GL}_n(\mathbf{Z}/(p))$  on  $(\mathbf{Z}/(p))^n$  follows from the fact that each nonzero vector can be extended to a basis. We now show this is the only situation where  $\text{Aut}(G)$  acts transitively on  $G - \{e\}$  and  $G$  is finite.

**Theorem 3.15.** *Let  $G$  be finite with  $|G| > 1$ . If  $\text{Aut}(G)$  acts transitively on  $G - \{e\}$  then  $G \cong (\mathbf{Z}/(p))^n$  for some prime  $p$ .*

*Proof.* Elements that are linked by an automorphism have the same order, so the hypothesis in the theorem implies all non-identity elements of  $G$  have the same order. Let  $p$  be a prime factor of  $|G|$ . Cauchy's theorem gives us an element with order  $p$ , so all non-identity elements have order  $p$ . Thus  $|G|$  is a power of  $p$ . Since  $G$  is a non-trivial  $p$ -group, it has a non-trivial center. Elements that are linked by an automorphism are both in or both not in the center, so by the hypothesis of the theorem every non-identity element of  $G$  is in the center. Thus  $G$  is abelian. Since each non-zero element has order  $p$ , we can view  $G$  as a vector space over  $\mathbf{Z}/(p)$ , necessarily finite-dimensional since  $G$  is finite. Picking a basis shows  $G \cong (\mathbf{Z}/(p))^n$  for some  $n$ .  $\square$

#### 4. DOUBLY TRANSITIVE GROUP ACTIONS

Some group actions don't just take every element to every other element, but can do so in pairs. Of course, we have to assume our set has at least two elements.

**Definition 4.1.** An action of a group  $G$  on a set  $X$ , with  $|X| \geq 2$ , is called *doubly transitive* when, for all ordered pairs of distinct elements  $(x, x')$  and  $(y, y')$  in  $X$ , there is a  $g \in G$  such that  $y = gx$  and  $y' = gx'$ .

The distinctness of elements means  $x \neq x'$  and  $y \neq y'$ . We say  $g$  takes the pair  $(x, x')$  to the pair  $(y, y')$ .



**Example 4.2.** When  $|X| = 2$ , every non-trivial action of  $G$  on  $X$  is doubly transitive. Writing  $X = \{x_1, x_2\}$ , the only ordered pairs of distinct elements are  $(x_1, x_2)$  and  $(x_2, x_1)$ . The identity in  $G$  sends each pair to itself, and an element of  $G$  that acts non-trivially on  $X$  must send the pair  $(x_1, x_2)$  to  $(x_2, x_1)$  and *vice versa*.

**Example 4.3.** Let  $F$  be a field and let  $\text{Aff}(F)$  act on  $F$  by  $\begin{pmatrix} a & b \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix} \cdot x = ax + b$ . (Such an action on  $F$  by matrices is exactly the effect of linear polynomials on  $F$  under composition.) This is doubly transitive: for ordered pairs  $(x, x')$  and  $(y, y')$  of distinct elements in  $F$ , finding  $a \in F^\times$  and  $b \in F$  such that  $ax + b = y$  and  $ax' + b = y'$  amounts to solving for  $a$  and  $b$  in the equation  $\begin{pmatrix} x & 1 \\ x' & 1 \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} a \\ b \end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix} y \\ y' \end{pmatrix}$ , which can be done since the matrix is invertible. We have  $a \neq 0$  since  $y \neq y'$ .

**Remark 4.4.** The possibility  $x = y$  (or  $y'$ ) or  $x' = y'$  (or  $y$ ) in Definition 4.1 is allowed. For instance, if  $|X| \geq 3$  and  $x, y$ , and  $z$  are different elements of  $X$  then  $(x, y)$  and  $(x, z)$  are ordered pairs of distinct elements in  $X$ , so a doubly transitive action admits a  $g \in G$  such that  $gx = x$  and  $gy = z$ . In particular, every doubly transitive action is transitive (this is obvious when  $|X| = 2$ ).

**Example 4.5.** For  $n \geq 2$ ,  $S_n$  acts doubly transitively on  $\{1, 2, \dots, n\}$ . When  $n = 2$  this follows from Example 4.2. When  $n \geq 3$  it is easy to see that the action of  $S_n$  can take the ordered pair  $(1, 2)$  to every other ordered pair of distinct numbers from 1 to  $n$ .

**Example 4.6.** For  $n \geq 4$ ,  $A_n$  acts doubly transitively on  $\{1, 2, \dots, n\}$ . Indeed, if two ordered pairs of distinct numbers have no elements in common then we might as well write the ordered pairs as  $(1, 2)$  and  $(3, 4)$ . Then the even permutation  $(13)(24)$  takes the first pair to the second: 1 goes to 3 and 2 goes to 4. (Don't confuse the notation for ordered pairs with the notation for transpositions!) If the ordered pairs have one element in common then they might as well be  $(1, 2)$  and  $(1, 3)$ . Then the 3-cycle  $(234)$  sends the first pair to the second. However,  $A_3$  does not act doubly transitively on  $\{1, 2, 3\}$ : there is no  $\sigma \in A_3$  taking the pair  $(1, 2)$  to the pair  $(2, 1)$ . Similarly,  $A_2$  does not act doubly transitively on  $\{1, 2\}$  since  $A_2$  is trivial.

**Example 4.7.** The action of  $D_n$  on the  $n$  vertices of a regular  $n$ -gon is *not* doubly transitive for  $n \geq 4$  (it is for  $n = 3$ ). For instance, a nonidentity element of  $D_n$  that fixes a vertex  $v$  is not a rotation and thus has to be the reflection across the line through  $v$  and the center of the  $n$ -gon. That reflection acts on the vertices other than  $v$  with orbits of size 2, which is less than  $n - 1$  when  $n \geq 4$ .

**Example 4.8.** Although  $\text{GL}_2(\mathbf{R})$  acts transitively on  $\mathbf{R}^2 - \{\mathbf{0}\}$  (Example 2.2), it does *not* act doubly transitively. The reason has to do with linear dependence. For  $A \in \text{GL}_2(\mathbf{R})$  and  $\mathbf{v} \in \mathbf{R}^2 - \{\mathbf{0}\}$ ,  $A$  takes the pair  $(\mathbf{v}, -\mathbf{v})$  to the pair  $(A\mathbf{v}, -A\mathbf{v})$ , which are negatives of each other. In particular, given linearly independent vectors  $\mathbf{v}_1$  and  $\mathbf{v}_2$ , it is impossible for a matrix in  $\text{GL}_2(\mathbf{R})$  to take a pair  $(\mathbf{v}, -\mathbf{v})$  to the pair  $(\mathbf{v}_1, \mathbf{v}_2)$ .

Theorem 3.9 tells us the orbits of a normal subgroup of a group acting transitively share the same cardinality. We can say more about orbits of a normal subgroup when the action of the original group is doubly transitive.

**Theorem 4.9.** *Suppose  $G$  acts doubly transitively on a set  $X$ . Each normal subgroup  $N \triangleleft G$  acts on  $X$  either trivially or transitively.*

*Proof.* Suppose  $N$  does not act trivially:  $nx \neq x$  for some  $x \in X$  and  $n \neq 1$  in  $N$ . Pick  $y$  and  $y'$  in  $X$  with  $y \neq y'$ . There is  $g \in G$  such that  $y = gx$  and  $y' = g(nx)$ . Then  $y' = (gng^{-1})(gx) = (gng^{-1})(y)$  and  $gng^{-1} \in N$ , so  $N$  acts transitively on  $X$ .  $\square$

**Example 4.10.** The action of  $A_4$  on  $\{1, 2, 3, 4\}$  is doubly transitive and the normal subgroup  $\{(1), (12)(34), (13)(24), (14)(23)\} \triangleleft A_4$  acts transitively on  $\{1, 2, 3, 4\}$ .

**Example 4.11.** Let  $\text{Aff}(F)$  act on  $F$  by  $\begin{pmatrix} a & b \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}x = ax + b$ . This is doubly transitive and the normal subgroup  $N = \{\begin{pmatrix} 1 & b \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix} : b \in F\}$  acts transitively (by translations) on  $F$ .

**Example 4.12.** We noted in Example 4.7 that the action of  $D_4$  on the 4 vertices of a square is not doubly transitive. Consistent with Theorem 4.9, recall from Example 3.10 that the normal subgroup  $\{1, r^2\}$  of  $D_4$  acts on the vertices neither trivially nor transitively.

In Remark 4.4, we observed that a doubly transitive action on a set  $X$  with  $|X| \geq 3$  has to be able to fix an arbitrary element  $x$  while sending each element  $\neq x$  to every other element  $\neq x$ . This reflects a transitivity of the action of the stabilizer subgroup of  $x$  on the set  $X - \{x\}$ . (For each  $g \in \text{Stab}_x$  and  $y \in X - \{x\}$ ,  $y \neq x \implies gy \neq gx = x$ , so  $\text{Stab}_x$  acts on  $X - \{x\}$ .) In fact, this transitivity of  $\text{Stab}_x$  on  $X - \{x\}$  is equivalent to double transitivity of  $G$  on  $X$ :

**Theorem 4.13.** *Let  $G$  act on  $X$  with  $|X| \geq 3$ . The action is doubly transitive if and only if, for each  $x \in X$ , the group  $\text{Stab}_x$  acts transitively on  $X - \{x\}$ .*

The if direction is false if  $|X| = 2$  and  $G$  acts trivially on  $X$ : the action is not doubly transitive but  $\text{Stab}_x$  is transitive on the one element set  $X - \{x\}$ .

*Proof.* If  $G$  acts doubly transitively on  $X$  and  $x \in X$  then  $\text{Stab}_x$  acts transitively on  $X - \{x\}$  by Remark 4.4.

To prove the converse, assume for each  $x \in X$  that the action of  $\text{Stab}_x$  on  $X - \{x\}$  is transitive. We consider two ordered pairs  $(x_1, x_2)$  and  $(y_1, y_2)$  in  $X \times X$ , with  $x_1 \neq x_2$  and  $y_1 \neq y_2$ . Our goal is to find an element of  $G$  taking the first pair to the second.

Usually we can do this in two steps. Use elements of  $\text{Stab}_{x_1}$  and  $\text{Stab}_{y_2}$  with the successive effects

$$(x_1, x_2) \mapsto (x_1, y_2) \mapsto (y_1, y_2).$$

The only time this recipe doesn't work is when  $x_1 = y_2$  (why?).

If  $x_1 = y_2$ , choose some  $z \neq x_1, y_1$  in  $X$ . (There is such a  $z$  since  $|X| \geq 3$ .) Now use elements of  $\text{Stab}_{x_1}$ ,  $\text{Stab}_z$ , and  $\text{Stab}_{y_1}$  to obtain

$$(x_1, x_2) \mapsto (x_1, z) \mapsto (y_1, z) \mapsto (y_1, y_2). \quad \square$$

**Example 4.14.** We can use Theorem 4.13 to give alternate explanations of Examples 4.5 and 4.6. Taking  $G = S_n$  for  $n \geq 2$ , the stabilizer of a point in  $\{1, 2, \dots, n\}$  acts on the complement of that point just like  $S_{n-1}$  in its natural action. Since we already know the natural action of  $S_{n-1}$  is transitive, Theorem 4.13 tells us  $S_n$  acts doubly transitively for  $n \geq 3$  (and it is obvious for  $n = 2$ ). A similar argument shows  $A_n$  acts doubly transitively for  $n \geq 4$ . (We need  $n - 1 \geq 3$  in order for  $A_{n-1}$  to act transitively on  $\{1, 2, \dots, n - 1\}$ , by Example 1.3.) Note  $A_3$  acts transitively but not doubly transitively on  $\{1, 2, 3\}$ .

**Corollary 4.15.** *If a finite group acts doubly transitively on a set then the group has even size.*



*Proof.* Let  $G$  act doubly transitively on  $X$ , with  $|X| = n \geq 2$ . Pick  $x_1 \in X$  and  $x_2 \in X - \{x_1\}$ . Set  $H = \text{Stab}_{x_1}$ , so  $[G : H] = n$  (Theorem 3.2). Since  $n \mid |G|$ , we may assume  $n \geq 3$ . Then  $H$  acts transitively on  $X - \{x_1\}$  by Theorem 4.13. Set  $K = H \cap \text{Stab}_{x_2}$ , so  $[H : K] = |X - \{x_1\}| = n - 1$ . Thus

$$|G| = [G : H][H : K]|K| = n(n - 1)|K|.$$

Either  $n$  or  $n - 1$  is even, so  $2 \mid |G|$ .  $\square$

Note it is the group in Corollary 4.15 that has to have even size, not the set. For instance,  $\text{Aff}(F)$  acts doubly transitively on  $F$  for every field  $F$  and for finite  $F \mid \text{Aff}(F)| = |F|(|F| - 1)$  has even size but  $F$  can have odd size.

Theorem 4.13 leads to two other characterizations of double transitivity.

**Corollary 4.16.** *Let  $G$  act on  $X$  with  $|X| \geq 2$ . Fix  $x_0 \in X$ . The action is doubly transitive if and only if it is transitive and  $\text{Stab}_{x_0}$  acts transitively on  $X - \{x_0\}$ .*

*Proof.* The result is clear when  $|X| = 2$  (Example 4.2), so take  $|X| \geq 3$ .

The “only if” direction follows from Theorem 4.13. Conversely, assume the “if” hypothesis holds. We will show for each  $y \in X$  that  $\text{Stab}_y$  acts transitively on  $X - \{y\}$ . Then  $G$  acts doubly transitively by Theorem 4.13.

Write  $y = gx_0$ . Then  $\text{Stab}_y = g\text{Stab}_{x_0}g^{-1}$ . For  $z_1, z_2 \neq y$  we have  $g^{-1}z_1$  and  $g^{-1}z_2$  not equal to  $g^{-1}y = x_0$ . Then by hypothesis, some  $h \in \text{Stab}_{x_0}$  satisfies  $hg^{-1}z_1 = g^{-1}z_2$ , so  $ghg^{-1}z_1 = z_2$ . Since  $ghg^{-1} \in \text{Stab}_{gx_0} = \text{Stab}_y$ , the group  $\text{Stab}_y$  acts transitively on  $X - \{y\}$ .  $\square$

**Corollary 4.17.** *Let  $G$  act on  $X$  with  $|X| \geq 2$  and let  $H$  be the stabilizer subgroup of a point in  $X$ . Then the action of  $G$  on  $X$  is doubly transitive if and only if it is transitive and*

$$G = H \cup HgH$$

for some  $g \notin H$ , in which case this is true for every  $g \notin H$ .

*Proof.* If  $|X| = 2$  then  $G$  acts doubly transitively if and only if  $G$  acts transitively. When the action is transitive  $H$  has index 2. Subgroups of index 2 are normal, so the decomposition in the theorem holds because  $HgH = gH$ ; we get the decomposition of  $G$  into two (left)  $H$ -cosets.

Now let  $|X| \geq 3$ . Let  $x$  be a point having  $H$  as its stabilizer. Pick  $g \notin H$ , so  $gx \neq x$ . If the action is doubly transitive then it is transitive and by Theorem 4.13  $X - \{x\} = Hg\tilde{x}$ . For all  $g' \in G$ , if  $g' \notin H$  then  $g'x = hg\tilde{x}$  for some  $h \in H$ , so  $g' = hg\tilde{h}$  for some  $\tilde{h} \in H$ . Thus  $G = H \cup HgH$ . This union is disjoint since  $H$  fixes  $x$  and no element of  $HgH$  fixes  $x$ .

Conversely, if  $G$  acts transitively and we have a decomposition  $G = H \cup HgH$  for some  $g \notin H$  then the union is disjoint and  $H$  sends  $gx$  to all of  $X - \{x\}$  (because  $X = Gx$ ). Therefore  $G$  acts doubly transitively by Corollary 4.16.  $\square$

**Remark 4.18.** There is another way (besides Theorem 4.13 and Corollaries 4.16 and 4.17) to characterize double transitivity. When  $G$  acts on  $X$  it also acts on  $X \times X$  in a natural way, by  $g \cdot (x, y) = (gx, gy)$ . This is easily checked to be a group action. Since  $gx = gy$  if and only if  $x = y$ ,  $G$  acts separately on the diagonal  $\Delta = \{(x, x) : x \in X\}$  and on its complement  $X \times X - \Delta = \{(x, y) : x \neq y\}$ . The action of  $G$  on  $X$  is doubly transitive if and only if  $G$  acts transitively on  $X \times X - \Delta$ .

Note Theorem 4.13, Corollaries 4.16 and 4.17, and Remark 4.18 give characterizations of doubly transitive actions. The following theorem gives only a necessary (not a sufficient) condition for double transitivity.

**Theorem 4.19.** *If  $G$  acts doubly transitively on  $X$  then the stabilizer subgroup of each point in  $X$  is a maximal subgroup of  $G$ .*

A maximal subgroup is a proper subgroup contained in no other proper subgroup.

*Proof.* Pick  $x_0 \in X$  and let  $H = \text{Stab}_{x_0}$ . Assume  $K$  is a subgroup strictly containing  $H$ . By Corollary 4.17,  $G = H \cup HgH$  for each  $g \notin H$ . Pick  $g \in K - H$ . Then  $G = H \cup HgH \subset K$ , so  $K = G$ .  $\square$

**Example 4.20.** According to Example 4.5 and Theorem 4.19,  $S_{n-1}$  is a maximal subgroup of  $S_n$  (with index  $n$ ) for  $n \geq 2$ .

The converse of Theorem 4.19 is false: by Corollary 4.15 a finite group of odd size has no doubly transitive actions, but it does have actions where all the stabilizer subgroups are maximal subgroups (consider left multiplication of  $G$  on  $G/H$  with  $H$  a maximal subgroup of  $G$ ).

Let  $F$  be a field. The action of  $\text{GL}_2(F)$  on  $F^2 - \left\{ \begin{pmatrix} 0 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix} \right\}$  is not doubly transitive since linearly dependent vectors can't be sent to linearly independent vectors by a matrix. Since linearly dependent vectors in  $F^2$  lie along the same line through the origin, consider the action of  $\text{GL}_2(F)$  on the one-dimensional subspaces of  $F^2$ :  $A \in \text{GL}_2(F)$  sends the line  $L = Fv$  to the line  $A(L) = F(Av)$ . (Equivalently, we are letting  $\text{GL}_2(F)$  act on  $\mathbf{P}^1(F)$ , the projective line over  $F$ .) Not only does this action of  $\text{GL}_2(F)$  turn out to be doubly transitive, but the restriction of this action to  $\text{SL}_2(F)$  is doubly transitive.

**Theorem 4.21.** *For every field  $F$ , the action of  $\text{SL}_2(F)$  on the one-dimensional subspaces of  $F^2$  is doubly transitive. In particular, the action of  $\text{GL}_2(F)$  is also doubly transitive.*

*Proof.* The action of  $\text{SL}_2(F)$  on  $F^2 - \left\{ \begin{pmatrix} 0 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix} \right\}$  is transitive (Example 2.3 for  $F = \mathbf{R}$ ), so its action on the one-dimensional subspaces of  $F^2$  is also transitive. Thus, to show the action of  $\text{SL}_2(F)$  on the one-dimensional subspaces of  $F^2$  is doubly transitive we will follow Corollary 4.16 and show the stabilizer subgroup of the one-dimensional subspace  $F \begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix}$  acts transitively on the other one-dimensional subspaces.

The stabilizer subgroup of  $F \begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix}$  in  $\text{SL}_2(F)$  is

$$\begin{aligned}
 \text{Stab}_{F \begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix}} &= \left\{ A \in \text{SL}_2(F) : A \begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix} \in F \begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix} \right\} \\
 &= \left\{ \begin{pmatrix} a & b \\ 0 & d \end{pmatrix} \in \text{SL}_2(F) \right\} \\
 (4.1) \qquad &= \left\{ \begin{pmatrix} a & b \\ 0 & 1/a \end{pmatrix} : a \in F^\times, b \in F \right\}.
 \end{aligned}$$

Pick one-dimensional subspaces  $Fv$  and  $Fw$  with neither equal to  $F \begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix}$ . That means the lines  $Fv$  and  $Fw$  each contain a vector with a non-zero second coordinate, so each of these lines contains a vector with second coordinate 1, say  $Fv = F \begin{pmatrix} x \\ 1 \end{pmatrix}$  and  $Fw = F \begin{pmatrix} y \\ 1 \end{pmatrix}$ . Since  $\begin{pmatrix} 1 & y-x \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} x \\ 1 \end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix} y \\ 1 \end{pmatrix}$ ,  $\begin{pmatrix} 1 & y-x \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}$  sends  $Fv$  to  $Fw$ . Thus  $\text{SL}_2(F)$  acts doubly transitively.  $\square$

One can formulate the idea of a triply-transitive action, and more generally a  $k$ -fold transitive action for an integer  $k \geq 1$ : for all ordered  $k$ -tuples  $(x_1, \dots, x_k)$  and  $(y_1, \dots, y_k)$

of distinct elements in the set, some element of the group sends  $x_i$  to  $y_i$  for all  $i$ . For instance,  $S_n$  is  $n$ -fold transitive on  $\{1, 2, \dots, n\}$  for all  $n$  and  $A_n$  is  $(n-2)$ -fold transitive on  $\{1, 2, \dots, n\}$  for  $n \geq 3$ . An action that is  $k$ -fold transitive is  $\ell$ -fold transitive for  $\ell < k$ , so a triply transitive action is doubly transitive and transitive.

**Example 4.22.** Let  $F$  be a field. The action of  $\mathrm{GL}_2(F)$  on the one-dimensional subspaces of  $F^2$  is triply transitive.

It is enough to show the particular one-dimensional subspaces  $F\begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix}$ ,  $F\begin{pmatrix} 0 \\ 1 \end{pmatrix}$ , and  $F\begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 1 \end{pmatrix}$  can be sent by some matrix in  $\mathrm{GL}_2(F)$  to every other triple of distinct one-dimensional subspaces  $Fu, Fv, Fw$  (in this order). We need to find an  $A \in \mathrm{GL}_2(F)$  such that  $A\begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix} \in Fu$ ,  $A\begin{pmatrix} 0 \\ 1 \end{pmatrix} \in Fv$ , and  $A\begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 1 \end{pmatrix} \in Fw$ . Since  $Fu \neq Fv$ ,  $u$  and  $v$  are linearly independent and thus are a basis of  $F^2$ . Write  $w = \alpha u + \beta v$  with  $\alpha, \beta \in F$ . We have  $\alpha, \beta \neq 0$  since  $Fw$  is not  $Fu$  or  $Fv$ . Let  $A$  be the  $2 \times 2$  matrix  $\begin{pmatrix} \alpha & \beta \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}$ , which is invertible since the columns are linearly independent. Then  $A\begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix} = \alpha u$ ,  $A\begin{pmatrix} 0 \\ 1 \end{pmatrix} = \beta v$ , and  $A\begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 1 \end{pmatrix} = w$ .

**Example 4.23.** Let  $F$  be a field. The action of  $\mathrm{SL}_2(F)$  on the one-dimensional subspaces of  $F^2$  is triply transitive if and only if  $F^\times = F^{\times 2}$ .

Generalizing Corollary 4.16, a group  $G$  acting transitively on a set  $X$  acts triply transitively if and only if  $\mathrm{Stab}_x \cap \mathrm{Stab}_y$  acts transitively on  $X - \{x, y\}$  for some distinct pair  $x$  and  $y$  in  $X$ . Taking  $G = \mathrm{SL}_2(F)$  acting on the one-dimensional subspaces of  $F^2$ ,

$$\mathrm{Stab}_{F\begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix}} \cap \mathrm{Stab}_{F\begin{pmatrix} 0 \\ 1 \end{pmatrix}} = \left\{ \begin{pmatrix} a & 0 \\ 0 & 1/a \end{pmatrix} : a \in F^\times \right\}.$$

For all  $t \neq 0$  or  $1$  in  $F$ , there is an  $a$  such that  $\begin{pmatrix} a & 0 \\ 0 & 1/a \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 1 \end{pmatrix} \in F\begin{pmatrix} t \\ 1 \end{pmatrix}$  if and only if  $\begin{pmatrix} a \\ 1/a \end{pmatrix} \in F\begin{pmatrix} t \\ 1 \end{pmatrix}$ , i.e.,  $t = a^2$ .

The condition  $F^\times = (F^\times)^2$  holds when  $F$  is algebraically closed (e.g.,  $F = \mathbf{C}$ ). When  $F$  is finite,  $F^\times = (F^\times)^2$  if and only if  $F$  has characteristic 2.

**Example 4.24.** Let  $F$  be a field. The action of  $\mathrm{Aff}(F)$  on  $F$  is doubly transitive (Example 4.3) but it is not triply transitive when  $|F| \geq 3$ : for  $t \neq 0, 1$  in  $F$  there is no  $\begin{pmatrix} a & b \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}$  in  $\mathrm{Aff}(F)$  that sends  $0$  to  $0$ ,  $1$  to  $1$ , and  $t$  to  $t+1$  since the first two conditions force the matrix to be  $\begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}$ , which sends  $t$  to  $t$ . More generally, for  $x \neq y$  in  $F$  the two-point stabilizer  $\mathrm{Stab}_{x,y} := \mathrm{Stab}_x \cap \mathrm{Stab}_y$  in  $\mathrm{Aff}(F)$  is trivial. This action is also faithful; for instance, a matrix in  $\mathrm{Aff}(F)$  is determined by where it sends  $0$  and  $1$ .

Conversely, every faithful doubly transitive action on a finite set with trivial two-point stabilizers is equivalent to the natural action of the affine group of a finite *near field* [3, §7.6]. The set of all finite faithful doubly transitive actions (with no assumptions on the two-point stabilizers) is described in [3, §7.7].

**Remark 4.25.** Examples of faithful  $k$ -fold transitive actions with  $k \geq 4$  other than the natural actions of  $S_n$  ( $n \geq 4$ ) and  $A_n$  ( $n \geq 6$ ) are rare: the only others are related to four of the five Mathieu groups (we do not define them here, but will meet them again in Appendix 6). Two are 4-fold transitive and two are 5-fold transitive.

Here is the doubly transitive refinement of Theorem 3.15.

**Theorem 4.26.** *Let  $G$  be finite with  $|G| > 1$ . If  $\mathrm{Aut}(G)$  acts doubly transitively on  $G - \{e\}$  then  $G \cong (\mathbf{Z}/(2))^n$  or  $G \cong \mathbf{Z}/(3)$ .*

*Proof.* By Theorem 3.15,  $G \cong (\mathbf{Z}/(p))^n$ . If  $n \geq 2$ , pick linearly independent  $v$  and  $w$  in  $G$ . If  $p > 2$  then  $v, -v$ , and  $w$  are distinct elements of  $G$  and there is no  $A \in \mathrm{Aut}(G) \cong \mathrm{GL}_n(\mathbf{Z}/(p))$

such that  $Av = v$  while  $A(-v) = w$ . So if  $\text{Aut}(G)$  acts doubly transitively on  $G$  then  $p = 2$  or  $n = 1$ . If  $n = 1$  then an automorphism of  $G \cong \mathbf{Z}/(p)$  that fixes a non-zero element fixes all elements, so by double transitivity there can be at most 2 non-zero elements. Thus if  $n = 1$  we have  $p - 1 \leq 2$ , so  $p \leq 3$ .  $\square$

The converse is true. To see that  $\text{GL}_n(\mathbf{Z}/(2))$  acts doubly transitively on  $(\mathbf{Z}/(2))^n - \{\mathbf{0}\}$ , pick  $x \neq x'$  and  $y \neq y'$  in  $(\mathbf{Z}/(2))^n - \{\mathbf{0}\}$ . Then, letting  $F = \mathbf{Z}/(2)$ ,

$$G \cong F^n = Fx + Fx' + U = Fy + Fy' + V$$

for suitable subspaces  $U$  and  $V$ . Let  $A : F^n \rightarrow F^n$  be a linear map such that  $Ax = y$ ,  $Ax' = y'$ , and  $A$  identifies a basis of  $U$  with a basis of  $V$ . Then  $A \in \text{GL}_n(\mathbf{Z}/(2))$ , so the action of  $\text{Aut}(G)$  on  $G - \{e\}$  is doubly transitive. The group  $\text{Aut}(\mathbf{Z}/(3)) = (\mathbf{Z}/(3))^\times$  acts doubly transitively on  $\mathbf{Z}/(3) - \{0\}$  since it is a non-trivial action on a set of size 2.

**Corollary 4.27.** *Let  $G$  be finite with  $|G| > 1$ . If  $\text{Aut}(G)$  acts triply transitively on  $G - \{e\}$  then  $G \cong (\mathbf{Z}/(2))^2$ .*

*Proof.* Since  $|G - \{e\}| \geq 3$ , by Theorem 4.26 we have  $G \cong (\mathbf{Z}/(2))^n$  for some  $n \geq 2$ .

Let  $v$  and  $w$  be linearly independent in  $(\mathbf{Z}/(2))^n$ . Then by triple transitivity  $\text{Stab}_v \cap \text{Stab}_w$  acts transitively on the remaining non-zero vectors. Since a linear map fixing  $v$  and  $w$  also fixes  $v + w$ , the whole group is just  $\{0, v, w, v + w\}$ . Therefore  $n = 2$ .  $\square$

## 5. SIMPLICITY OF $\text{PSL}_2(F)$

The goal of this section is to use the doubly transitive action of  $\text{SL}_2(F)$  on the one-dimensional subspaces of  $F^2$  to prove the simplicity of most groups  $\text{PSL}_2(F)$  from the following criterion of Iwasawa.

**Theorem 5.1** (Iwasawa). *Let  $G$  be a group that acts doubly transitively on a set  $X$ . Suppose for some  $x \in X$  that  $\text{Stab}_x$  has an abelian normal subgroup whose conjugate subgroups generate  $G$ . If  $[G, G] = G$  then  $G/K$  is a simple group, where  $K$  is the kernel of the action of  $G$  on  $X$ .*

The kernel of an action is the kernel of the homomorphism  $G \rightarrow \text{Sym}(X)$ ; it's those  $g$  that act like the identity permutation on  $X$ . An action is faithful if and only if it has a trivial kernel.

*Proof.* To show  $G/K$  is simple we will show the only normal subgroups of  $G$  lying between  $K$  and  $G$  are  $K$  and  $G$ . Let  $K \subset N \subset G$  with  $N \triangleleft G$ . Let  $H = \text{Stab}_x$ , so  $H$  is a maximal subgroup of  $G$  (Theorem 4.19). Since  $NH$  is a subgroup of  $G$  containing  $H$ , either  $NH = H$  or  $NH = G$ . By Theorem 4.9,  $N$  acts trivially or transitively on  $X$ , so  $N \subset K$  or  $NH = G$  (check!). If  $N \subset K$  then  $N = K$  by hypothesis.

Now suppose  $NH = G$ . Let  $U$  be the abelian normal subgroup of  $H$  in the hypothesis: its conjugate subgroups generate  $G$ . Since  $U \triangleleft H$ ,  $NU \triangleleft NH = G$ . Then for  $g \in G$ ,  $gUg^{-1} \subset g(NU)g^{-1} = NU$ , which shows  $NU$  contains all the conjugate subgroups of  $U$ . By hypothesis it follows that  $NU = G$ .

Thus  $G/N = (NU)/N \cong U/(N \cap U)$  is abelian, so  $[G, G] \subset N$ . Since  $G = [G, G]$  by hypothesis, we have  $N = G$ .  $\square$

**Example 5.2.** We can use Theorem 5.1 to show  $A_5$  is a simple group. Its natural action on  $\{1, 2, 3, 4, 5\}$  is doubly transitive and faithful. Let  $x = 5$ , so  $\text{Stab}_x \cong A_4$ , which has the

abelian normal subgroup

$$\{(1), (12)(34), (13)(24), (14)(23)\}.$$

The  $A_5$ -conjugates of this subgroup generate  $A_5$  since the (2,2)-cycles in  $A_5$  are all conjugate and generate  $A_5$ . It remains to show  $[A_5, A_5] = A_5$ . The commutator subgroup  $[A_5, A_5]$  contains every (2,2)-cycle:

$$(abc)(abd)(abc)^{-1}(abd)^{-1} = (ab)(cd).$$

Therefore  $[A_5, A_5] = A_5$ , so  $A_5$  is simple.

We will apply Theorem 5.1 to  $G = \mathrm{SL}_2(F)$  acting doubly transitively on the set of one-dimensional subspaces of  $F^2$ . What is the kernel  $K$  of this action? That is, which matrices  $A \in \mathrm{SL}_2(F)$  carry each one-dimensional subspace of  $F^2$  back to itself? If  $\begin{pmatrix} a & b \\ c & d \end{pmatrix}$  preserves the lines  $F\begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix}$  and  $F\begin{pmatrix} 0 \\ 1 \end{pmatrix}$  then  $c = 0$  and  $b = 0$ , so  $\begin{pmatrix} a & b \\ c & d \end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix} a & 0 \\ 0 & d \end{pmatrix}$ . The determinant is 1, so  $d = 1/a$ . If  $\begin{pmatrix} a & 0 \\ 0 & 1/a \end{pmatrix}$  preserves the line  $F\begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 1 \end{pmatrix}$  then  $a = 1/a$ , so  $a = \pm 1$ . This means the matrix  $\begin{pmatrix} a & b \\ c & d \end{pmatrix}$  equals  $\pm \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}$ , which is the center of  $\mathrm{SL}_2(F)$ . Thus  $G/K = \mathrm{PSL}_2(F)$ .

Let  $x = F\begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix}$ . Its stabilizer subgroup in  $\mathrm{SL}_2(F)$  is given in (4.1). This subgroup has an abelian normal subgroup

$$U = \left\{ \begin{pmatrix} 1 & * \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix} \right\} = \left\{ \begin{pmatrix} 1 & \lambda \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix} : \lambda \in F \right\}.$$

Note  $U \cong F$  by  $\begin{pmatrix} 1 & \lambda \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix} \mapsto \lambda$ . For example,  $\begin{pmatrix} 1 & \lambda \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}^{-1} = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & -\lambda \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}$ .

**Theorem 5.3.** *The subgroup  $U$  and its conjugates generate  $\mathrm{SL}_2(F)$ . More precisely, every element of  $\mathrm{SL}_2(F)$  is the product of at most 3 elements from  $U$  and its conjugates.*

We will arrive at a proof of Theorem 5.3 after a definition and a lemma.

**Definition 5.4.** Each matrix in  $\mathrm{SL}_2(F)$  that is conjugate to a matrix in  $U$  is called a *transvection*.

If  $F = \mathbf{R}$ , then  $U$  consists of *horizontal shears*: each vector is moved to another vector on the same horizontal line and the  $x$ -axis is fixed pointwise. Intuitively, a transvection is a shear transformation in some (not necessarily horizontal) direction.

**Example 5.5.** Since  $\begin{pmatrix} 0 & -1 \\ 1 & 0 \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} 1 & \lambda \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} 0 & -1 \\ 1 & 0 \end{pmatrix}^{-1} = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 \\ -\lambda & 1 \end{pmatrix}$ , the matrices  $\begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 \\ * & 1 \end{pmatrix}$  are all transvections. A general transvection looks like

$$\begin{pmatrix} \alpha & \beta \\ \gamma & \delta \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} 1 & \lambda \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} \alpha & \beta \\ \gamma & \delta \end{pmatrix}^{-1} = \begin{pmatrix} 1 - \alpha\gamma\lambda & \alpha^2\lambda \\ -\gamma^2\lambda & 1 + \alpha\gamma\lambda \end{pmatrix},$$

where  $\alpha\delta - \beta\gamma = 1$ . Notice there is no dependence on  $\beta$  or  $\delta$  on the right side.

**Lemma 5.6.** *For each nonzero vector  $v$  in  $F^2$ , there is a transvection or a product of two transvections taking  $\begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix}$  to  $v$ .*

*Proof.* The basic idea is this: if  $v$  is not on the line  $F\begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix}$  then a shear in some direction will take  $\begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix}$  to  $v$ . If  $v$  is on the line  $F\begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix}$ , then we can move  $\begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix}$  off that line by some shear and then move it back onto that line to land on  $v$  by another shear. This is where the one or two transvections in the lemma come from.

Write  $v = \begin{pmatrix} x \\ y \end{pmatrix}$ . We look for  $\begin{pmatrix} \alpha & \beta \\ \gamma & \delta \end{pmatrix}$  in  $\mathrm{SL}_2(F)$  and  $\lambda \in F$  such that

$$\begin{pmatrix} 1 - \alpha\gamma\lambda & \alpha^2\lambda \\ -\gamma^2\lambda & 1 + \alpha\gamma\lambda \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix} 1 - \alpha\gamma\lambda \\ -\gamma^2\lambda \end{pmatrix} \stackrel{?}{=} \begin{pmatrix} x \\ y \end{pmatrix}.$$

We want  $1 - \alpha\gamma\lambda = x$ ,  $-\gamma^2\lambda = y$ , and  $\alpha\delta - \beta\gamma = 1$ . Use  $\lambda = -y$ ,  $\gamma = 1$  and  $\alpha = (x-1)/y$ ; we need  $y \neq 0$ . In this case, we can get  $\alpha\delta - \beta\gamma = 1$  with  $\beta = -1$  and  $\delta = 0$ . The transvection  $\begin{pmatrix} (x-1)/y & -1 \\ 1 & 0 \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} 1 & -y \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} (x-1)/y & -1 \\ 1 & 0 \end{pmatrix}^{-1} = \begin{pmatrix} x & -(x-1)^2/y \\ y & 2-x \end{pmatrix}$  sends  $\begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix}$  to  $\begin{pmatrix} x \\ y \end{pmatrix} = v$ .

What if  $y = 0$ ? Then  $x \neq 0$ . The transvection  $t_1 = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 \\ 1 & 1 \end{pmatrix}$  sends  $v = \begin{pmatrix} x \\ 0 \end{pmatrix}$  to  $\begin{pmatrix} x \\ x \end{pmatrix}$ , whose second coordinate is non-zero. Therefore, by the previous paragraph there is a transvection  $t_2$  sending  $\begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix}$  to  $\begin{pmatrix} x \\ x \end{pmatrix}$ , so  $t_1^{-1}t_2$  sends  $\begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix}$  to  $\begin{pmatrix} x \\ 0 \end{pmatrix} = v$ .  $\square$

Now we prove Theorem 5.3.

*Proof.* Pick  $M \in \mathrm{SL}_2(F)$  and set  $v = M\begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix}$ . By Lemma 5.6 there is a product  $h$  of 1 or 2 transvections such that  $h\begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix} = v$ . Then  $(h^{-1}M)\begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix}$ , so  $h^{-1}M = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & * \\ 0 & * \end{pmatrix}$ . Since the determinant of  $h^{-1}M$  is 1,  $h^{-1}M = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & \mu \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}$  for some  $\mu$ . This last matrix is a transvection, so  $M = h\begin{pmatrix} 1 & \mu \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}$  is a product of at most 3 transvections.  $\square$

**Remark 5.7.** Here is a second proof of Theorem 5.3. Given a matrix  $\begin{pmatrix} a & b \\ c & d \end{pmatrix}$  in  $\mathrm{SL}_2(F)$  we can write it as a product of three matrices of type  $\begin{pmatrix} 1 & * \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}$  or  $\begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 \\ * & 1 \end{pmatrix}$  when  $b$  or  $c$  is non-zero. If  $b \neq 0$  then

$$\begin{pmatrix} a & b \\ c & d \end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 \\ (d-1)/b & 1 \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} 1 & b \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 \\ (a-1)/b & 1 \end{pmatrix}.$$

If  $c \neq 0$  then

$$\begin{pmatrix} a & b \\ c & d \end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & (a-1)/c \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 \\ c & 1 \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} 1 & (d-1)/c \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}.$$

If  $b = 0$  and  $c = 0$  then the matrix is  $\begin{pmatrix} a & 0 \\ 0 & 1/a \end{pmatrix}$ . We can conjugate this to a matrix with non-zero upper-right entry as  $\begin{pmatrix} 1 & 1 \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} a & 0 \\ 0 & 1/a \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 1 \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}^{-1} = \begin{pmatrix} a & a-1/a \\ 0 & 1/a \end{pmatrix}$ , provided  $a^2 \neq 1$ . Then the explicit calculations above express  $\begin{pmatrix} a & a-1/a \\ 0 & 1/a \end{pmatrix}$  as a product of three matrices of type  $\begin{pmatrix} 1 & * \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}$  or  $\begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 \\ * & 1 \end{pmatrix}$  so we can conjugate back to express  $\begin{pmatrix} a & 0 \\ 0 & 1/a \end{pmatrix}$  as a product of three transvections. The remaining cases are  $\begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}$  and  $\begin{pmatrix} -1 & 0 \\ 0 & -1 \end{pmatrix}$ . The identity matrix is  $\begin{pmatrix} 1 & 1 \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} 1 & -1 \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}$  and its negative is  $\begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 \\ -1 & 1 \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} -1 & 4 \\ -1 & 3 \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 4 \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}$ , where  $\begin{pmatrix} -1 & 4 \\ -1 & 3 \end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix} 2 & -1 \\ 1 & 0 \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 1 \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} 2 & -1 \\ 1 & 0 \end{pmatrix}^{-1}$  is a transvection.

Allowing four transvections, we can write all the diagonal matrices in  $\mathrm{SL}_2(F)$  explicitly in terms of matrices of type  $\begin{pmatrix} 1 & * \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}$  and  $\begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 \\ * & 1 \end{pmatrix}$ :

$$\begin{pmatrix} a & 0 \\ 0 & 1/a \end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 \\ (1-a)/a & 1 \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 1 \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 \\ a-1 & 1 \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} 1 & -1/a \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}.$$

So far  $F$  can be an arbitrary field. Now we reach a result where we need  $|F| \geq 4$ .

**Theorem 5.8.** *If  $|F| \geq 4$  then  $[\mathrm{SL}_2(F), \mathrm{SL}_2(F)] = \mathrm{SL}_2(F)$ .*

*Proof.* We compute an explicit commutator:

$$\begin{pmatrix} a & 0 \\ 0 & 1/a \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} 1 & b \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} a & 0 \\ 0 & 1/a \end{pmatrix}^{-1} \begin{pmatrix} 1 & b \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}^{-1} = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & b(a^2-1) \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}.$$

Since  $|F| \geq 4$ , there is an  $a \neq 0, 1, \text{ or } -1$  in  $F$ , so  $a^2 \neq 1$ . Using this value of  $a$  and letting  $b$  run over  $F$  shows  $[\mathrm{SL}_2(F), \mathrm{SL}_2(F)]$  contains  $U$ . Since the commutator subgroup is normal, it contains every subgroup conjugate to  $U$ , so  $[\mathrm{SL}_2(F), \mathrm{SL}_2(F)] = \mathrm{SL}_2(F)$  by Theorem 5.3.  $\square$



Theorem 5.8 is false when  $|F| = 2$  or  $3$ :  $\mathrm{SL}_2(\mathbf{Z}/(2)) = \mathrm{GL}_2(\mathbf{Z}/(2))$  is isomorphic to  $S_3$  and  $[S_3, S_3] = A_3$ . In  $\mathrm{SL}_2(\mathbf{Z}/(3))$  the 2-Sylow subgroup is normal with index 3, so the quotient by it is abelian. Therefore the commutator subgroup of  $\mathrm{SL}_2(\mathbf{Z}/(3))$  lies inside the 2-Sylow subgroup (in fact, the commutator subgroup is the 2-Sylow subgroup).

**Corollary 5.9.** *If  $|F| \geq 4$  then the group  $\mathrm{PSL}_2(F)$  is simple.*

*Proof.* The action of  $\mathrm{SL}_2(F)$  on the one-dimensional subspaces of  $F^2$  satisfies the hypotheses of Iwasawa's theorem with  $K$  equal to the center of  $\mathrm{SL}_2(F)$ .  $\square$

Since  $\mathrm{PSL}_2(\mathbf{Z}/(2)) \cong S_3$  and  $\mathrm{PSL}_2(\mathbf{Z}/(3)) \cong A_4$  are not simple, the constraint on  $|F|$  in Corollary 5.9 is necessary.

By similar arguments, if  $n \geq 3$  then  $\mathrm{PSL}_n(F)$  is a simple group for every field  $F$ . This is proved by studying the action of  $\mathrm{SL}_n(F)$  on the one-dimensional subspaces of  $F^n$  (i.e., on the projective space  $\mathbf{P}^{n-1}(F)$ ). The restriction  $|F| \geq 4$  from the  $n = 2$  case does not arise when  $n \geq 3$  since  $[\mathrm{SL}_n(F), \mathrm{SL}_n(F)] = \mathrm{SL}_n(F)$  for every  $F$ . Once  $n \geq 3$  there is enough room to move around even when  $|F| < 4$ .

By comparison to  $\mathrm{PSL}_2(F)$ , the groups  $\mathrm{PGL}_2(F)$  are never simple, although it is instructive to run through the above proof with  $\mathrm{GL}_2(F)$  in place of  $\mathrm{SL}_2(F)$  to see where things go wrong with the application of Iwasawa's theorem. They start off well, since the action of  $\mathrm{GL}_2(F)$  on the one-dimensional subspaces of  $F^2$  is doubly transitive (even triply transitive). But we run into a problem with the  $\mathrm{GL}_2$ -analogue of Theorem 5.8: the commutator subgroup of  $\mathrm{GL}_2(F)$  is not  $\mathrm{GL}_2(F)$  but is  $\mathrm{SL}_2(F)$  for  $|F| \geq 4$ . (All commutators in  $\mathrm{GL}_2(F)$  have determinant 1; now use Theorem 5.8.) The commutator subgroup of  $\mathrm{GL}_2(F)$  is a proper subgroup of  $\mathrm{GL}_2(F)$  even when  $|F| < 4$ .

## 6. SIMPLICITY OF $A_n$

Exploiting the highly transitive action of  $A_{n-1}$  on  $\{1, 2, \dots, n-1\}$ , we will prove  $A_n$  is simple for  $n \geq 5$ .

A group action is called *regular* when the action is equivalent to the left multiplication action of the group on itself.

**Lemma 6.1.** *If a group  $G$  admits a faithful doubly transitive action on a set  $X$  and  $\mathrm{Stab}_x$  is a simple group for some  $x \in X$  then every non-trivial proper normal subgroup of  $G$  acts regularly on  $X$ .*

*Proof.* Set  $H_x = \mathrm{Stab}_x$  for each  $x \in X$ . Then all the  $H_x$ 's are conjugate (so isomorphic) to each other and therefore are simple groups by hypothesis. Since  $G$  acts doubly transitively,  $H_x$  is a maximal subgroup of  $G$  (Theorem 4.19).

Assume there is a normal subgroup  $N$  not equal to  $\{e\}$  or  $G$ . Since  $N$  is non-trivial and the action of  $G$  on  $X$  is faithful,  $N$  does not act trivially on  $X$ . Therefore  $N$  acts transitively on  $X$  (Theorem 4.9). Pick  $x \in X$ . Since  $N \triangleleft G$ , we have  $N \cap H_x \triangleleft H_x$ . Since  $H_x$  is a simple group,  $N \cap H_x = \{e\}$  or  $N \cap H_x = H_x$ . Let's eliminate the second possibility. If  $N \cap H_x = H_x$  for some  $x$  then  $H_x \subset N$ , so  $N = H_x$  or  $N = G$  because  $H_x$  is a maximal subgroup of  $G$ . As  $N \neq G$  we get  $N = H_x$ , but then  $N$  does not act transitively. This is a contradiction, so  $N \cap H_x = \{e\}$  for each  $x$ . Hence  $N$  acts transitively on  $X$  with trivial stabilizers, so  $N$  acts regularly on  $X$ .  $\square$

**Theorem 6.2.** *Let  $G$  be a group with a faithful triply transitive action on a finite set  $X$  and assume  $\mathrm{Stab}_x$  is a simple group for some  $x \in X$ . Then  $G$  is simple or  $|X|$  is a power of 2 or is 3. If the action is 4-fold transitive then  $G$  is simple.*

Before proving Theorem 6.2 we note the primary consequence.

**Corollary 6.3.** *For  $n \geq 5$ ,  $A_n$  is a simple group.*

*Proof.* We argue by induction on  $n$ . The case  $n = 5$  was handled in Example 5.2 using Iwasawa's simplicity criterion (Theorem 5.1).

Now we take  $n \geq 6$  and assume  $A_{n-1}$  is simple. In Theorem 6.2 let  $G = A_n$  in its natural action on  $X = \{1, 2, \dots, n\}$ . The action is faithful and is  $(n-2)$ -fold transitive, so 4-fold transitive since  $n \geq 6$ . Thus  $A_n$  is a simple group.  $\square$

Theorem 6.2 is also applicable to four of the five Mathieu groups. The five Mathieu groups are denoted  $M_{11}, M_{12}, M_{22}, M_{23}$ , and  $M_{24}$ . We will not define these groups, but each  $M_n$  has a highly (*i.e.*, at least triply) transitive faithful action on a set of size  $n$ . The groups  $M_{11}$  and  $M_{23}$  act 4-fold transitively,  $M_{12}$  and  $M_{24}$  act 5-fold transitively, and  $M_{22}$  acts triply transitively. The simplicity of  $M_{11}$  is proved in [2]. The action of  $M_{22}$  has point stabilizer isomorphic to  $\mathrm{PSL}_3(\mathbf{F}_4)$ , which is simple, so  $M_{22}$  is simple by Theorem 6.2. For  $n = 12, 23$ , and  $24$ , the point stabilizer of  $M_n$  is  $M_{n-1}$ . None of these  $n$ 's is a power of 2 or is 3, so Theorem 6.2 implies simplicity of  $M_{12}, M_{23}$ , and  $M_{24}$  from simplicity of  $M_{11}$  and  $M_{22}$ .

**Remark 6.4.** The only finite simple groups admitting a 4-fold transitive action are the Mathieu groups except  $M_{22}$  and the alternating groups  $A_n$  for  $n \geq 6$ . Therefore Theorem 6.2 has no applications to proving groups are simple beyond the ones we have already made.

Now we prove Theorem 6.2.

*Proof.* Let  $n = |X| \geq 3$ . Assume  $G$  is not simple and let  $N$  be a non-trivial proper normal subgroup. From Lemma 6.1,  $N$  acts regularly on  $X$ , so  $|N| = n$ . We are going to show  $N \cong (\mathbf{Z}/(2))^m$  for some  $m$  or  $N \cong \mathbf{Z}/(3)$ , so  $n = 2^m$  or  $n = 3$ . Then we will get a contradiction if  $G$  acts 4-fold transitively, so  $G$  is simple in that case.

Fix a point  $x_0 \in X$ . Let

$$H = \mathrm{Stab}_{x_0} \subset G.$$

Then  $|G| = |H| \cdot n = |H||N|$ . The subgroup  $H$  acts on  $X - \{x_0\}$ . We can also make  $H$  act on  $N$  by conjugation. Conjugations on  $N$  fix the identity, so we will think about the conjugation action of  $H$  on the set  $N - \{e\}$ . These two actions of  $H$ , on  $X - \{x_0\}$  in the natural way and on  $N - \{e\}$  by conjugation, are equivalent to each other. Let's see why.

First, we can set up a bijection between  $X - \{x_0\}$  and  $N - \{e\}$ . Since  $N$  acts regularly on  $X$ , for each  $x \in X$  (even  $x = x_0$ ) there is a unique  $g \in N$  such that  $gx_0 = x$ . Set  $\varphi(x) = g$ . Then  $\varphi(x_0) = e$ , so  $\varphi: X - \{x_0\} \rightarrow N - \{e\}$  is a bijection. For  $h \in H$ , how are the effects of  $h$  on  $x \in X - \{x_0\}$  and on  $\varphi(x) \in N - \{e\}$  related? Its effect on  $\varphi(x)$  is by conjugation:

$$h \cdot \varphi(x) = h\varphi(x)h^{-1}.$$

This element of  $N - \{e\}$  sends  $x_0$  to

$$(h\varphi(x)h^{-1})(x_0) = h(\varphi(x)(h^{-1}(x_0))) = h(\varphi(x)(x_0)) = h(x),$$

so  $\varphi(h(x)) = h \cdot \varphi(x)$  by the definition of  $\varphi$  (check!). Thus  $\varphi$  respects the  $H$ -actions on  $X - \{x_0\}$  and on  $N - \{e\}$ . It shows how the actions of  $H$  on these two sets are equivalent.

Since  $G$  acts on  $X$  triply transitively,  $H$  acts on  $X - \{x_0\}$  doubly transitively and therefore its action on  $N - \{e\}$  is doubly transitive. The (conjugation) action of  $H$  on  $N$  is a homomorphism  $H \rightarrow \mathrm{Aut}(N)$ , so  $\mathrm{Aut}(N)$  acts doubly transitively on  $N - \{e\}$ . By Theorem 4.26,  $N \cong (\mathbf{Z}/(2))^m$  or  $N \cong \mathbf{Z}/(3)$ . Thus  $|X| = |N| = 2^m$  or  $3$ .

Assume  $G$  acts 4-fold transitively on  $X$ . Then the action of  $H$  on  $X - \{x_0\}$  is 3-fold transitive, so the conjugation action of  $H$  on  $N - \{e\}$  is triply transitive. Therefore  $\text{Aut}(N)$  acts triply transitively on  $N - \{e\}$ , so  $N \cong (\mathbf{Z}/(2))^2$  by Corollary 4.27. Since  $H$  is simple and acts non-trivially on  $N$ , the homomorphism  $H \rightarrow \text{Aut}(N) \cong \text{GL}_2(\mathbf{Z}/(2)) \cong S_3$  is injective. Therefore  $H \cong \mathbf{Z}/(2)$  or  $H \cong \mathbf{Z}/(3)$ , so  $|G| = |H| \cdot 4 = 8$  or  $12$ . Since  $H$  is a maximal subgroup of  $G$ , the possibility  $|H| = 2$  (and  $|G| = 8$ ) can't occur. Thus  $|H| = 3$  and  $|G| = 12$ . There are 5 groups of size 12, up to isomorphism. In all of them except  $A_4$ , the subgroup of size 3 is a normal subgroup. A normal subgroup of size 3 and an element of order 2 generate a subgroup of size 6. Thus, since  $H$  is maximal in  $G$ , we have  $G \cong A_4$ . But a calculation of the subgroups of size 3 in  $A_4$  shows the action of  $G$  on  $G/H$  is equivalent to the natural action of  $A_4$ , which is not 4-fold transitive. We have a contradiction.  $\square$

## 7. $G$ -EQUIVALENCE RELATIONS AND PRIMITIVITY

Some useful properties of doubly transitive actions, such as Theorem 4.9, are true for a broader class of group actions that are called primitive actions. The relation looks like this:

doubly transitive actions  $\subset$  primitive actions  $\subset$  transitive actions.

We will approach the definition of primitivity (Definition 7.12) as an outgrowth of the consideration of equivalence relations preserved by a group action.

Let  $G$  act transitively on  $X$ . For a (nonempty) subset  $Y \subset X$  the subsets  $gY$  (as  $g$  runs over  $G$ ) share the same cardinality and cover  $X$ :

$$X = \bigcup_{g \in G} gY.$$

For instance, if  $Y$  is a one-point set then the fact that the union is  $X$  is exactly the condition of transitivity of the action. If  $|Y| > 1$ , the different  $gY$ 's may or may not partially overlap. (When we speak of "different"  $gY$ 's we mean different subsets, not just different  $g$ 's.)

**Example 7.1.** Let  $\text{GL}_2(\mathbf{R})$  act on  $\mathbf{R}^2 - \{\mathbf{0}\}$  by matrix-vector multiplication. If  $Y$  is a one-dimensional subspace without the origin then  $gY$  is also a one-dimensional subspace without the origin and the different  $gY$ 's do not overlap.

**Example 7.2.** Let  $D_n$  for  $n \geq 3$  act on the vertices of a regular  $n$ -gon and label the vertices  $1, 2, \dots, n$  in counterclockwise order (so 1 and 2 are adjacent vertices, for instance). If we take  $Y = \{1, 2\}$  then  $rY = \{2, 3\}$ , so  $Y \cap rY = \{2\}$ . The different sets  $gY$  cover the vertex set as  $g$  runs over  $D_n$ , but there are some proper nonempty overlaps between them.

For composite  $n$  there are subsets  $Y$  of the vertex set of a regular  $n$ -gon such that the different  $gY$ 's for  $g \in D_n$  don't partially overlap:  $d$  equally spaced vertices of a regular  $n$ -gon forming regular  $d$ -gons where  $d \mid n$  and  $1 < d < n$ . See Figure 1.

For prime  $n \geq 3$ , the only proper subsets  $Y$  of the vertex set such that the  $gY$ 's don't overlap are individual vertices: if the  $gY$ 's don't overlap then the size of the vertex set is  $|Y|$  times the number of different  $gY$ 's, so  $|Y| \mid n$ . Therefore  $|Y| = 1$ .

To say, back in the general setting of a transitive action, that different  $gY$ 's do not overlap is the same as saying they form a partition of  $X$ . A partition of a set is the same as equivalence classes for an equivalence relation on the set, so when the  $gY$ 's form a partition of  $X$  they provide us with an equivalence relation on  $X$  that is preserved by  $G$ :  $x \sim x' \implies gx \sim gx'$  for all  $g \in G$ , so in fact  $x \sim x' \iff gx \sim gx'$  for all  $g \in G$ . Conversely, each equivalence relation on  $X$  that is preserved by  $G$  will have equivalence classes that

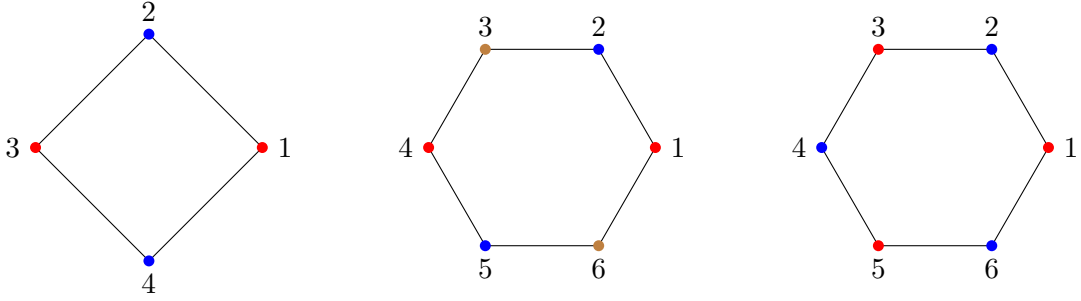


FIGURE 1. Equally spaced vertices as equivalence relations for  $n = 4, 6$ .

partition  $X$  and if  $Y$  is one of the equivalence classes then the rest are  $gY$  as  $g$  varies since  $G$  acts transitively on  $X$ . For example, vertices of regular  $d$ -gons in the vertices of a regular  $n$ -gon for a fixed divisor  $d$  of  $n$  form a basic example of a partition of the vertices that is preserved by the action of  $D_n$ .

**Definition 7.3.** When  $G$  acts on  $X$ , a  $G$ -equivalence relation on  $X$  is an equivalence relation satisfying  $x \sim x' \Rightarrow gx \sim gx'$  for all  $g \in G$  and  $x, x' \in X$ .

If  $|X| > 1$  then there are always at least two  $G$ -equivalence relations on  $X$ : the equivalence relation whose equivalence classes are individual points of  $X$  and the equivalence relation having all of  $X$  as a single equivalence class. Can there be others?

**Lemma 7.4.** Let  $G$  act transitively on  $X$  and  $Y \subset X$  be a non-empty subset. The following conditions are equivalent:

- (1) for all  $g_1$  and  $g_2$  in  $G$ , the subsets  $g_1Y$  and  $g_2Y$  are either equal or are disjoint,
- (2) for each  $g \in G$ , the subset  $gY$  either equals  $Y$  or is disjoint from  $Y$ .

*Proof.* The second condition is clearly a special case of the first. Since  $g_1Y \cap g_2Y = g_2(g_2^{-1}g_1Y \cap Y)$ , the first condition follows from the second.  $\square$

**Theorem 7.5.** Let  $G$  act transitively on  $X$  and let  $H$  be the stabilizer subgroup of a point in  $X$ . The  $G$ -equivalence relations on  $X$  are in bijection with the intermediate subgroups  $H \subset K \subset G$ . Moreover, in the equivalence relation corresponding to  $K$  each equivalence class has size  $[K : H]$ .

*Proof.* Say  $H = \text{Stab}_y$ , for some  $y \in X$ . Suppose there is a  $G$ -equivalence relation on  $X$ . Let  $Y \subset X$  be the equivalence class containing  $y$ . Every equivalence class has the form  $gY$  for some  $g \in G$ , so all equivalence classes have the same size. What is it?

Set

$$K = \text{Stab}_Y = \{g \in G : gY = Y\}.$$

Since the  $gY$ 's partition  $X$ , we can also say

$$(7.1) \quad K = \{g \in G : gY \cap Y \neq \emptyset\}.$$

(That is, as soon as  $gY$  and  $Y$  overlap they coincide because equivalence classes partition  $X$ .) So  $gy \in Y$  if and only if  $g \in K$ . In particular,  $H \subset K$ : if  $h \in H$  then  $hy = y \in Y$ , so  $h \in K$ . Since every element of  $X$  has the form  $gy$  for some  $g \in G$ ,  $Y = Ky$ . Thus  $|Y| = |Ky| = [K : H]$ .

Given a  $G$ -equivalence relation on  $X$ , (7.1) gives us a subgroup between  $H$  and  $G$ . Conversely, suppose  $K$  is a subgroup between  $H$  and  $G$ . Define  $Y = Ky$ . The sets  $gY$  ( $g \in G$ ) partition  $X$ . To see this, it suffices by Lemma 7.4 to check that  $gY \cap Y \neq \emptyset \implies gY = Y$ . Suppose  $g(ky) = k'y$ , so  $k'^{-1}gky = y$ . Then  $k'^{-1}gk \in H$ , so  $g \in k'Hk^{-1} \subset K$ , so  $gY = gKy = Ky = Y$ . We have produced a partition  $\{gY : g \in G\}$  of  $X$  where  $Y$  is the equivalence class of  $y$  and  $K = \{g : gy \in Y\}$ .

This work provides a bijection between the subgroups between  $H$  and  $G$  and the  $G$ -equivalence relations on  $X$ , where the equivalence relation  $\sim$  leads to the intermediate subgroup  $\{g \in G : gy \sim y\}$  and the intermediate subgroup  $K$  leads to the equivalence relation  $gy \sim g'y \iff gK = g'K$ .  $\square$

Letting  $X = G/H$ ,  $G$ -equivalence relations on  $X$  are the same as fibers of the natural maps  $G/H \rightarrow G/K$  where  $H \subset K \subset G$ .

**Example 7.6.** If  $G = D_n$  acts in the usual way on the vertices of a regular  $n$ -gon,  $H = \{1, s\}$  for a reflection  $s$  across a line through a vertex, and  $d \mid n$  then the equivalence relation of vertices lying on a regular  $d$ -gon inside the  $n$ -gon corresponds to the subgroup  $K = D_d$  containing  $H$ . Note  $[K : H] = 2d/2 = d$  is the size of each equivalence class.

If we apply Theorem 7.5 to the action of  $G$  on itself by left multiplication, whose stabilizer subgroups are trivial, then it tells us that the  $G$ -equivalence relations on  $G$  that are preserved by the left multiplication action are precisely the left coset decompositions of  $G$  by different subgroups of  $G$ . Each left coset decomposition comes from a particular subgroup, and that is how the subgroups of  $G$  match up with the  $G$ -equivalence relations on  $G$ .

**Corollary 7.7.** *When a finite cyclic group  $G$  acts transitively on a set  $X$ , for each divisor  $d$  of  $|X|$  there is one  $G$ -equivalence relation on  $X$  whose equivalence classes have size  $d$ .*

*Proof.* Let  $H$  be the stabilizer of a point of  $X$ , so  $|X| = [G : H]$  and  $d \mid [G : H]$ . Since  $G$  is cyclic, there is exactly one subgroup  $K$  between  $H$  and  $G$  such that  $[K : H] = d$ .  $\square$

**Remark 7.8.** In the literature, the equivalence classes in a  $G$ -equivalence relation on  $X$  are called *blocks* and the totality of equivalence classes for a given equivalence relation is called a *block system*. If we view  $X$  as  $G/H$ , a block system is simply the left cosets of a subgroup  $K$  lying between  $H$  and  $G$ ; a block is one of those cosets.

As a nice application of  $G$ -equivalence relations to group theory, we will prove an extension of part of Sylow's third theorem due to Weisner [4]. Our argument is based on some notes of H. Lenstra (which in turn are based on an argument of H. Wielandt.)

**Theorem 7.9** (Weisner). *Let  $G$  be a finite group and  $p$  be a prime dividing  $|G|$ . For every  $p$ -subgroup  $H \subset G$ , the number of intermediate  $p$ -subgroups  $H \subset K \subset G$  with a fixed size is  $\equiv 1 \pmod{p}$ .*

The case of Theorem 7.9 where  $H$  is trivial and the subgroups have maximal  $p$ -power size is part of Sylow's third theorem. The case when  $H$  is trivial and the fixed size is an arbitrary  $p$ -power dividing  $|G|$  is due to Frobenius (1895).

We will derive Theorem 7.9 from the following result about group actions.

**Theorem 7.10.** *Let  $G$  be a finite group acting transitively on a set  $X$ . Assume the stabilizer subgroup of a point of  $X$  is a  $p$ -subgroup of  $G$ , where  $p$  is a prime. If  $p^m \mid |X|$  then the number of  $G$ -equivalence relations on  $X$  whose equivalence classes each have size  $p^m$  is  $\equiv 1 \pmod{p}$ .*

To deduce Theorem 7.9 from Theorem 7.10, apply Theorem 7.5 to the usual action of  $G$  on  $G/H$ : it shows the  $G$ -equivalence relations on  $G/H$  are in bijection with the subgroups between  $H$  and  $G$ , with the size of an equivalence class in an equivalence relation being equal to the index of  $H$  in the subgroup corresponding to that equivalence relation. Since  $H$  is a  $p$ -subgroup of  $G$ , an intermediate subgroup  $H \subset K \subset G$  is a  $p$ -subgroup if and only if  $[K : H]$  is a  $p$ -power.

Theorems 7.9 and 7.10 are equivalent to each other. They are saying the same thing in different languages.

Now we prove Theorem 7.10.

*Proof.* Write  $|X| = rp^m$ . Fix a point  $x \in X$ . Set  $T = \{Y \subset X : |Y| = p^m\}$ , on which  $G$  acts from the left. Note  $|T| = \binom{rp^m}{p^m}$ .

For  $Y \in T$ , the sets  $gY$  as  $g$  varies cover  $X$  ( $G$  acts transitively on  $X$ ) and each has size  $p^m$ , so

$$|X| \leq |\{gY : g \in G\}| \cdot |Y|$$

with equality precisely when  $\{gY : g \in G\}$  is a partition of  $X$ . Writing out the sizes of  $X$  and  $Y$  explicitly, this becomes

$$(7.2) \quad r \leq |\{gY : g \in G\}|$$

with equality if and only if  $\{gY : g \in G\}$  is a partition of  $X$ .

Set

$$K_Y = \{g \in G : gY = Y\}.$$

This is the stabilizer subgroup of  $Y$  for the action of  $G$  on  $T$ .

Choose  $y \in Y$  and let  $H_y = \text{Stab}_y = \{g : gy = y\}$ . By hypothesis this is a  $p$ -subgroup of  $G$ . Write

$$\tilde{Y} = \{g \in G : gy \in Y\}.$$

This is a subset of  $G$ . (There is no reason to expect it is closed under inversion, so it need not be a subgroup of  $G$ .) Easily  $H_y \subset \tilde{Y}$  and  $K_Y \subset \tilde{Y}$ . For  $g$  and  $g'$  in  $\tilde{Y}$ ,  $gy = g'y$  if and only if  $gH_y = g'H_y$ . Since  $H_y \subset \tilde{Y}$ ,  $\tilde{Y}$  is a union of as many left  $H_y$ -cosets as there are elements of  $Y$ , so

$$(7.3) \quad |\tilde{Y}| = |Y||H_y|,$$

which is a power of  $p$ .

If  $k \in K_Y$  and  $g \in \tilde{Y}$  then  $kgY \in kY = Y$ , so  $kg \in \tilde{Y}$ . Thus  $K_Y$  acts by left multiplication on  $\tilde{Y}$ . Since  $\tilde{Y}$  is a subset of  $G$ , its  $K_Y$ -orbits are right  $K_Y$ -cosets, so  $|K_Y| \mid |\tilde{Y}|$ . Therefore by (7.3)  $K_Y$  is a  $p$ -subgroup of  $G$ .

Since  $\{gY : g \in G\}$  is a  $G$ -orbit in  $T$  and the stabilizer of  $Y$  is  $K_Y$ ,

$$|\{gY : g \in G\}| = [G : K_Y] = \frac{|G|}{|K_Y|} = \frac{[G : H_y]|H_y|}{|K_Y|} = \frac{rp^m|H_y|}{|K_Y|} = rp^{i(Y)}$$

for some integer  $i(Y)$ . By (7.2)  $rp^{i(Y)} \geq 1$ , so  $i(Y) \geq 0$ . (If  $p$  does not divide  $r$  then we could say  $i(Y) \geq 0$  because  $rp^{i(Y)} \in \mathbf{Z}$ .)

Now we apply the orbit-stabilizer formula to the  $G$ -action on  $T$ . Fix an element  $y \in X$ . Each  $G$ -orbit in  $T$  is a collection of sets  $\{gY : g \in G\}$ ; it covers  $X$  so we can choose  $Y$  to contain  $y$ . (At least one of the sets  $gY$  contains  $y$  and we can relabel one of those as  $Y$  by



the transitivity of  $G$  on  $X$ .) Let  $Y_1, \dots, Y_d$  be representatives for the different  $G$ -orbits in  $T$ . Then

$$|T| = \sum_{j=1}^d |\{gY_j : g \in G\}|,$$

so

$$\binom{rp^m}{p^m} = \sum_{j=1}^d rp^{i(Y_j)}.$$

Since  $\binom{rp^m}{p^m} = r \binom{rp^m - 1}{p^m - 1}$ ,

$$(7.4) \quad \binom{rp^m - 1}{p^m - 1} = \sum_{j=1}^d p^{i(Y_j)} \equiv |\{j : i(Y_j) = 0\}| \pmod{p}.$$

When does a  $Y \in T$  have  $i(Y) = 0$ ? From the definition of  $i(Y)$ , its vanishing is equivalent to  $|\{gY : g \in G\}| = r$ , which is equivalent to the sets  $\{gY : g \in G\}$  forming a partition of  $X$ . (See (7.2) and the surrounding text.) This partition contains equivalence classes for a  $G$ -equivalence relation on  $X$  where the classes have size  $p^m$ . Therefore

$$(7.5) \quad |\{j : i(Y_j) = 0\}| = |\{G\text{-equiv. relns. with classes of size } p^m\}|.$$

Notice the binomial coefficient on the left side of (7.4) is determined entirely by  $r$  and  $p^m$ , not by the finer group structure of  $G$ . So far,  $G$  has been an arbitrary group admitting a transitive action on some set with size  $rp^m$  and having  $p$ -subgroups as its point-stabilizers. A particular example of this is the group  $G = \mathbf{Z}/(p^m r)$  acting on itself from the left (trivial stabilizers). With this choice, Corollary 7.7 implies (7.5) equals 1, so the left side of (7.4) is 1 modulo  $p$ . Therefore by (7.4), (7.5) is 1 mod  $p$  for each  $G$  fitting the hypotheses of the theorem.  $\square$

**Remark 7.11.** The trick at the end of the proof with the switch to the cyclic group can be avoided. The left side of (7.4) can be calculated directly modulo  $p$  using a result of Lucas: if  $a = a_0 + a_1p + \dots + a_n p^n$  and  $b = b_0 + b_1p + \dots + b_n p^n$  where  $0 \leq a_i, b_i \leq p - 1$  for  $i < n$  and  $a_n, b_n \geq 0$ , then  $\binom{a}{b} \equiv \binom{a_0}{b_0} \binom{a_1}{b_1} \dots \binom{a_n}{b_n} \pmod{p}$ . In particular, since

$$\begin{aligned} rp^m - 1 &= (p - 1) + (p - 1)p + \dots + (p - 1)p^{m-1} + (r - 1)p^m, \\ p^m - 1 &= (p - 1) + (p - 1)p + \dots + (p - 1)p^{m-1}, \end{aligned}$$

the congruence of Lucas shows  $\binom{rp^m - 1}{p^m - 1} \equiv \prod_{i=0}^{m-1} \binom{p-1}{p-1} \cdot \binom{r-1}{0} \equiv 1 \pmod{p}$ .

**Definition 7.12.** Let  $G$  act transitively on  $X$  with  $|X| > 1$ . The action is called *primitive* if there are no  $G$ -equivalence relations on  $X$  other than the two equivalence relations of individual points and the whole set.

If an action of  $G$  on  $X$  is not transitive then the action has a  $G$ -equivalence relation on  $X$  other than the two trivial relations: its orbits! (Well, the orbits are a trivial equivalence relation when the action is trivial, but in that case every partition of  $X$  is a  $G$ -equivalence relation). Therefore it is natural to include transitivity in the definition of a primitive action: only transitive actions could have no non-trivial  $G$ -equivalence relations. Let's look at some examples and nonexamples.

**Example 7.13.** For  $n \geq 2$ , the action of  $\mathrm{GL}_n(\mathbf{R})$  on  $\mathbf{R}^n - \{\mathbf{0}\}$  is transitive but *not* primitive: a non-trivial  $\mathrm{GL}_n(\mathbf{R})$ -equivalence relation on  $\mathbf{R}^n - \{\mathbf{0}\}$  that respects the group action is  $v \sim v'$  when  $v' = cv$  for some  $c \in \mathbf{R}^\times$ . This is saying the one-dimensional subspaces of  $\mathbf{R}^n$  with the origin excluded are equivalence classes in  $\mathbf{R}^n - \{\mathbf{0}\}$  for a relation preserved by the usual action of  $\mathrm{GL}_n(\mathbf{R})$ .

**Example 7.14.** When  $n \geq 3$  is a composite number, the action of  $D_n$  on the vertices of a regular  $n$ -gon is transitive but *not* primitive: if  $d \mid n$  and  $1 < d < n$  then the vertices of the regular  $d$ -gons inside the  $n$ -gon are the equivalence classes for a non-trivial  $D_n$ -equivalence relation on the vertex set.

**Example 7.15.** If  $|X|$  is prime then every transitive action of  $G$  on  $X$  is primitive because a subset  $Y \subset X$  such that the  $gY$ 's partition  $X$  has size dividing a prime, so  $|Y|$  is 1 or  $|X|$ . In particular, when  $p$  is an odd prime the natural action of  $D_p$  is primitive.

To show a transitive action on a set of non-prime size is primitive it is useful to reformulate the condition. Then more examples of primitive actions will easily follow.

**Theorem 7.16.** *Let  $G$  act transitively on  $X$ . The following conditions are equivalent:*

- (1) *the action is primitive,*
- (2) *for some  $x \in X$ ,  $\mathrm{Stab}_x$  is a maximal subgroup of  $G$ ,*
- (3) *for every  $x \in X$ ,  $\mathrm{Stab}_x$  is a maximal subgroup of  $G$ .*

*Proof.* Since  $G$  acts transitively, stabilizer subgroups of different points in  $X$  are conjugate, so (2) and (3) are equivalent to each other. Properties (1) and (2) are equivalent by Theorem 7.5.  $\square$

Concretely, a primitive  $G$ -action is equivalent to the left multiplication action of  $G$  on  $G/H$  where  $H$  is a *maximal* subgroup of  $G$ .

**Example 7.17.** In Example 7.13 we saw that for  $n \geq 2$ , the natural transitive action of  $\mathrm{GL}_n(\mathbf{R})$  on  $\mathbf{R}^n - \{\mathbf{0}\}$  is not primitive. The stabilizer subgroup of  $\mathbf{e}_1 = (1, 0, \dots, 0)$  (viewed as a column vector) is the group of invertible  $n \times n$  matrices

$$(7.6) \quad \begin{pmatrix} 1 & * & \cdots & * \\ 0 & * & \cdots & * \\ \vdots & \vdots & \ddots & \vdots \\ 0 & * & \cdots & * \end{pmatrix}$$

which is not a maximal subgroup in  $\mathrm{GL}_n(\mathbf{R})$  since it is strictly contained in the subgroup of matrices that are like (7.6) but have a nonzero entry in the upper left. That is the subgroup of invertible  $n \times n$  matrices that preserve the subspace  $\mathbf{R}\mathbf{e}_1$  rather than fix each element of it, which is what matrices in (7.6) do.

**Example 7.18.** We already saw that the natural action of  $D_n$  is not primitive when  $n$  is composite (Example 7.14). In terms of maximal subgroups, the stabilizer subgroup of the vertex 1 is  $\mathrm{Stab}_1 = \{1, s\} = \langle s \rangle$ , and if  $n$  is composite this subgroup is not maximal: letting  $d \mid n$  and  $1 < d < n$  we have  $\langle s \rangle \subset \langle r^{n/d}, s \rangle \subset \langle r, s \rangle$ . When  $n = p$  is an odd prime, the natural action of  $D_p$  is primitive since the vertex set has prime size (or the subgroup  $\langle s \rangle$  has index  $p$  in  $D_p$  so it is maximal).

**Corollary 7.19.** *A doubly transitive group action is primitive.*

*Proof.* Use Theorems 4.19 and 7.16. □

**Example 7.20.** The natural actions of  $S_n$  ( $n \geq 3$ ) and  $A_n$  ( $n \geq 4$ ) on  $\{1, 2, \dots, n\}$  are primitive, as is the action of  $\text{Aff}(F)$  on  $F$  and the actions of  $\text{GL}_2(F)$  and  $\text{SL}_2(F)$  on the one-dimensional subspaces of  $F^2$ .

By Corollary 7.19, doubly transitive actions are special cases of primitive actions. Primitive actions are transitive, so primitivity lies between special transitivity and double transitivity. The inclusions are strict, *e.g.*, the natural action of  $D_n$  on a regular  $n$ -gon ( $n \geq 3$ ) is transitive but not primitive for composite  $n$  and is primitive but not doubly transitive for prime  $n$ . The natural action of  $A_3$  is primitive (Example 7.15) but not doubly transitive. Table 1 summarizes the situation.

Type	Space
transitive	$G/H$
primitive	$G/H, H$ maximal
doubly transitive	$G/H, G = H \cup HgH$

TABLE 1. Levels of Transitivity

In a sense, transitive and primitive  $G$ -actions are almost “dual” concepts. If  $G$  acts on the sets  $S$  and  $T$ , let a  $G$ -map from  $S$  to  $T$  be a function  $f: S \rightarrow T$  that respects the actions:  $f(gs) = gf(s)$  for all  $g \in G$  and  $s \in S$ . Then the action of  $G$  on a set  $X$  is transitive if and only if every  $G$ -map to  $X$  is surjective, while the action on  $X$  is primitive if and only if the action is non-trivial and every (nonconstant)  $G$ -map out of  $X$  is injective. (We met  $G$ -maps in a concrete setting in Corollary 3.5.)

Theorem 4.9 and Theorem 5.1 (Iwasawa’s theorem) generalize from doubly transitive actions to primitive actions, as follows.

**Theorem 7.21.** *Suppose  $G$  acts primitively on a set  $X$ . Every normal subgroup  $N \triangleleft G$  acts on  $X$  either trivially or transitively.*

*Proof.* Let  $H = \text{Stab}_x$  be the stabilizer of a point in  $X$ . Then  $H \subset NH \subset G$ . Since  $H$  is maximal,  $NH = H$  or  $NH = G$ . If  $NH = H$  then  $N \subset H$ , so  $N \subset gHg^{-1}$  for all  $g$ . Since the stabilizer subgroup of each point in  $X$  is conjugate to  $H$ , we conclude that  $N$  acts trivially on  $X$ . Now suppose  $NH = G$ . Then

$$X = Gx = NHx = Nx,$$

so  $N$  acts transitively on  $X$ . □

**Remark 7.22.** Using Theorem 7.21 in place of Theorem 4.9, Lemma 6.1 remains true if the doubly transitive hypothesis is replaced with primitivity, as the reader can check.

**Theorem 7.23** (Iwasawa). *Suppose  $G$  acts primitively on a set  $X$  and, for some  $x \in X$ ,  $\text{Stab}_x$  has an abelian normal subgroup whose conjugate subgroups generate  $G$ . If  $[G, G] = G$  then  $G/K$  is a simple group, where  $K$  is the kernel of the action of  $G$  on  $X$ .*

*Proof.* The proof is just like the proof of Theorem 5.1; replace the reference to Theorem 4.9 with Theorem 7.21. □

There are groups whose simplicity is proved using a primitive action that is not doubly transitive, *e.g.*, simplicity of most projective symplectic groups.

## APPENDIX A. SYLOW SUBGROUPS UNDER INTERSECTION AND QUOTIENT

We prove here a theorem about Sylow subgroups needed in the proof of Corollary 3.5.

**Theorem A.1.** *Let  $G$  be a finite group and  $N$  be a normal subgroup.*

- (1) *If  $P$  is a  $p$ -Sylow subgroup of  $G$  then  $P \cap N$  is a  $p$ -Sylow subgroup of  $N$ .*
- (2)  *$PN/N$  is a  $p$ -Sylow subgroup of  $G/N$ .*

*Proof.* (1): The group  $P \cap N$  is a  $p$ -group since it is contained in  $P$ . To show it is a  $p$ -Sylow subgroup of  $N$  we will show the index  $[N : P \cap N]$  is not divisible by  $p$ . The set  $PN$  is a subgroup of  $G$  since  $N \triangleleft G$  and  $|PN| = |P||N|/|P \cap N|$ , so  $[N : P \cap N] = |N|/|P \cap N| = |PN|/|P| = [PN : P]$ , which is a factor of  $[G : P]$  and thus is not divisible by  $p$ . (Here is an alternate proof. By the Sylow theorems  $P \cap N$  is contained in a  $p$ -Sylow subgroup of  $N$ , say  $K$ . Then  $K$ , being a  $p$ -subgroup of  $G$ , is contained in a conjugate of  $P$ :  $K \subset gPg^{-1}$ . Thus  $g^{-1}Kg \subset P$ . Also  $g^{-1}Kg \subset g^{-1}Ng = N$ , so  $g^{-1}Kg \subset P \cap N \subset K$ . Since  $|K| = |g^{-1}Kg|$ , we get  $|P \cap N| = |K|$ , so  $P \cap N = K$  is a  $p$ -Sylow subgroup of  $N$ .)

(2): First observe that  $PN/N$  is a  $p$ -group (either because every element has  $p$ -power order or because  $PN/N \cong P/(P \cap N)$ ). Using the inclusions

$$G \supset PN \supset N, \quad G \supset PN \supset P,$$

the first one shows  $[G/N : PN/N] = [G : PN]$  and the second one shows  $[G : PN] \not\equiv 0 \pmod{p}$ . Therefore  $PN/N$  is a  $p$ -subgroup of  $G/N$  whose index is not divisible by  $p$ , so  $PN/N$  is a  $p$ -Sylow subgroup of  $G/N$ .  $\square$

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