KNOTS AND CONTACT GEOMETRY II: CONNECTED SUMS

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ABSTRACT. We study the behavior of Legendrian and transverse knots under the operation of connected sums. As a consequence we show that there exist Legendrian knots that are not distinguished by any known invariant. Moreover, we classify Legendrian knots in some non-Legendrian simple knot types.

1. INTRODUCTION

The last few years have brought forth several advances in our understanding of Legendrian and transverse knots. Roughly speaking, our knowledge has advanced on two fronts: via the holomorphic theory and via 3-dimensional topology. The most concrete realization of the holomorphic theory is the theory of Chekanov-Eliashberg contact homology invariants \cite{Ch, EGH}. This theory yielded the first examples of nonisotopic Legendrian knots with the same classical invariants: the topological type, the Thurston-Bennequin invariant, and the rotation number. (There are also more computable variants derived from contact homology, such as the characteristic algebra of Ng \cite{Ng}.) The purpose of these holomorphic invariants is to distinguish. Their counterpart is 3-dimensional contact topology, which has the flavor of classical 3-dimensional cut-and-paste topology with a slight twist. The main tool here is convex surface theory, introduced by Giroux \cite{Gi}. Using recent advances in convex surfaces, the authors completely classified Legendrian torus knots and Legendrian figure eight knots \cite{EH}. A complete classification of Legendrian knots of a certain topological type implies the complete classification of transverse knots of the same topological type \cite{EH} (although not vice versa); hence transverse torus knots and transverse figure eight knots are classified (the predecessor to this result is \cite{Et1}). More recently, Menasco \cite{Me} classified all transverse iterated torus knots by using the work of Birman-Wrinkle \cite{BW} which rephrased the classification question into a question in braid theory.

The goal of this paper is to prove a structure theorem for Legendrian knots, namely the behavior of Legendrian and transverse knots under the connected sum operation. Our main theorem (Theorem 3.4) classifies Legendrian knots in a non-prime knot type, provided we understand the classification for the prime summands. Theorem 3.4, in essence, is the relative version of Colin's gluing theorem for connected sums of tight contact manifolds \cite{Co}. One corollary of our main theorem is the existence of Legendrian knots which are not contact isotopic but are indistinguishable by all known invariants (including the holomorphic invariants). Moreover, for any integer \(m\), there exist Legendrian knots with identical invariants that are non-Legendrian-isotopic even after \(m\) stabilizations. Previously it was not known whether Legendrian knots (with identical invariants)

Date: May 28, 2002.
1991 Mathematics Subject Classification. Primary 53C15; Secondary 57M50.
Key words and phrases. tight, contact structure, Legendrian, connected sums, cabling.
became isotopic after one stabilization, largely due to the fact that the Chekanov-Eliashberg invariants vanish on stabilized Legendrian knots. Theorem 8.4 also implies the following: the connected sum of transversally simple knot types is transversally simple (see Section 3 for definitions).

The plan for the paper is as follows. After reviewing some background (especially on connected sums of knots) in Section 2, we give precise statements of the main theorem in Section 3 and its applications in Section 4. The main theorem is proved in Sections 5 and 6.

2. SOME BACKGROUND AND NOTATION

We assume familiarity with basic notions in contact geometry, such as characteristic foliations and convex surface theory. This can be found in [EH2] (see also [AD, EL, GI]). As this paper is a sequel to [EH1] we assume the reader is familiar with its contents. In particular, Sections 2 and 3 of [EH1] are foundational and develop the necessary terminology and background on Legendrian knots and transversal knots.

In this paper, our ambient 3-manifolds and knots are oriented, and “knot types” are oriented knot types. Let $M_1$ and $M_2$ be 3-manifolds. We first describe the connected sum of two (topological) knots $K_1 \subset M_1$ and $K_2 \subset M_2$. Let $B_i$ be an open ball in $M_i$ that intersects $K_i$ in an unknotted arc $\alpha_i$. Let $f : \partial(M_1 \setminus B_1) \to \partial(M_2 \setminus B_2)$ be an orientation-reversing diffeomorphism which sends $K_1 \cap \partial(M_1 \setminus B_1)$ to $K_2 \cap \partial(M_2 \setminus B_2)$. (Here, $X \setminus Y$ denotes the metric closure of the complement of $Y$ in $X$.) Now the connected sum of $M_1$ and $M_2$ is

$$M_1 \# M_2 = (M_1 \setminus B_1) \cup_f (M_2 \setminus B_2)$$

and the connected sum of $K_1$ and $K_2$ in $M_1 \# M_2$ is

$$K_1 \# K_2 = (K_1 \setminus \alpha_1) \cup (K_2 \setminus \alpha_2).$$

Note that there are two possible identifications of $K_1 \cap \partial(M_1 \setminus B_1)$ with $K_2 \cap \partial(M_2 \setminus B_2)$ — we choose the one which induces a coherent orientation on $K_1 \# K_2$. It is an easy exercise to see that $K_1 \# K_2$ is well-defined and its topological type is independent of the choices of $B_i$ and $f$.

If $K_1, K_2 \subset S^3$, we can interpret the connected sum operation as happening entirely in $S^3$, since $S^3 \# S^3 = S^3$. In particular, fix a 2-sphere $S$ in $S^3$ that splits $S^3$ into two balls $B_1$ and $B_2$. Then isotop $K_1$ so that it intersects $B_2$ in an unknotted arc and isotop $K_2$ so that it intersects $B_1$ in an unknotted arc. Moreover, we can arrange for $K_1$ and $K_2$ to intersect $S$ at the same points. We then define $K_1 \# K_2 = (K_1 \cap B_1) \cup (K_2 \cap B_2)$. This clearly is an equivalent definition of the connected sum in $S^3$. From this definition it is easy to arrive at the familiar diagrammatic picture of a connected sum. See Figure [11].

A knot $K$ in $S^3$ is prime if $K = K_1 \# K_2$ implies that either $K_1$ or $K_2$ is the unknot. Any knot $K \subset S^3$ admits a unique (minimal) decomposition into prime pieces, i.e., $K = K_1 \# \ldots \# K_n$ with $K_i, i = 1, \ldots, n$, prime. This decomposition can be achieved by finding a collection $\{S_1, \ldots, S_{n-1}\}$ of disjoint 2-spheres in $S^3$ that each intersects $K$ in two points. Given such a separating sphere $S_i$, we may reverse the procedure described in the preceding paragraph to write the knot as the connected sum of two other knots.

Although the collection $\{K_1, \ldots, K_n\}$ is unique up to isotopy, the collection $\{S_1, \ldots, S_{n-1}\}$ of separating spheres is not. To avoid confusion in what follows, whenever we decompose a knot in $S^3$, we will be doing so with respect to a fixed collection of separating spheres $\{S_1, \ldots, S_{n-1}\}$. Moreover, we take $K = K_1 \# \ldots \# K_n$ to mean the following: using the same notation from the
second paragraph of this section, we glue the $K_i \backslash \alpha_i$ together so that the endpoint of $K_i \backslash \alpha_i$ connects to the initial point of $K_{i+1} \backslash \alpha_{i+1}$ modulo $n$. (This makes sense since the $K_i$ are oriented.) This way, the $K_1, \ldots, K_n$ are cyclically strung together in order.

Let $K$ be a topological knot type in a 3-manifold $M$, i.e., an equivalence class of (topologically) isotopic knots. Define $L(K, M, \xi)$ to be the set of isotopy classes of Legendrian knots in $(M, \xi)$ of type $K$. If the contact manifold $(M, \xi)$ is implicit, then we write $L(K)$ instead of $L(K, M, \xi)$.

3. THE MAIN THEOREM

We first explain Colin’s gluing theorem [Co]. Denote the space of tight contact 2-plane fields on a 3-manifold $M$ by $\text{Tight}(M)$. Then we have the following:

**Theorem 3.1** (Colin). Given two 3-manifolds $M_1, M_2$, there is an isomorphism

$$\pi_0(\text{Tight}(M_1)) \times \pi_0(\text{Tight}(M_2)) \sim \pi_0(\text{Tight}(M_1 \# M_2)).$$

Let $(M_i, \xi_i), i = 1, 2$, be two tight contact manifolds. Choose $p_i \in M_i$ as well as a standard contact 3-ball $B_i$ with coordinates $(x, y, z)$ about $p_i$ so that the contact structure is given by $dz + xdy = 0$. After possibly perturbing the boundary of $B_i$, there is an orientation-reversing map $f$ from $S_1 = \partial(M_1 \backslash B_1)$ to $S_2 = \partial(M_2 \backslash B_2)$ that takes the characteristic foliation of $S_1$ to that of $S_2$. According to Colin’s theorem, the contact structure $\xi$ induced on

$$M = M_1 \# M_2 = (M_1 \backslash B_1) \cup_f (M_2 \backslash B_2)$$

is tight, and is independent of the choice of $B_i$, $p_i$, and $f$, up to isotopy. Moreover, every tight $\xi$ on $M$ arises, up to isotopy, from a unique pair $(\xi_1, \xi_2)$ of tight contact structures.

Let us now explain the Legendrian connected sum operation, which is a relativized version of Colin’s connected sum operation. In each $(M_i, \xi_i)$, choose an oriented Legendrian knot $L_i$ and
a point \( p_i \in L_i \). Normalize the standard contact 3-ball \( B_i \) so that \( L = B_i \cap y\text{-axis} \), and further require that \( f \) maps \( L_1 \cap S_1 \) to \( L_2 \cap S_2 \) as oriented manifolds. Then we obtain the Legendrian knot \( L = L_1 \# L_2 \subset M \), which is called the connected sum \( L_1 \# L_2 \) of \( L_1 \) and \( L_2 \).

**Lemma 3.2.** The connected sum of two Legendrian knots does not depend on the points \( p_i \), the balls \( B_i \), or \( f \) used in the definition.

Although this lemma is not difficult to prove, we defer the proof until Section \( \mathcal{F} \). See \([\mathcal{C}]\) for a diagrammatic proof.

Given a nullhomologous Legendrian knot \( L \), we can define its Thurston-Bennequin invariant \( \text{tb}(L) \) and it rotation number \( r(L) \). (For more details, consult \([\mathcal{E}]\) and \([\mathcal{E}\mathcal{H}]\), for example.) We then have:

**Lemma 3.3.** If \( L_1 \) and \( L_2 \) are two nullhomologous Legendrian knots, then

1. \( \text{tb}(L_1 \# L_2) = \text{tb}(L_1) + \text{tb}(L_2) + 1 \),

and

2. \( r(L_1 \# L_2) = r(L_1) + r(L_2) \).

This lemma easily follows from the facts that \( \text{tb} \) and \( r \) can be computed from the characteristic foliation of a Seifert surface of a knot (see \([\mathcal{E}\mathcal{F}]\)) and that we can control the characteristic foliation on the Seifert surface for \( L_1 \# L_2 \) in terms of the foliations on the surfaces for \( L_1 \) and \( L_2 \).

We denote by \( S_\pm(L) \) the \( \pm \) stabilization of the Legendrian knot \( L \). Recall that this is a procedure to reduce \( \text{tb} \) of a Legendrian knot by 1 (see \([\mathcal{E}\mathcal{H}]\)) and diagrammatically corresponds to “adding kinks” to \( L \). The following is our main theorem.

**Theorem 3.4.** Let \( K = K_1 \# \ldots \# K_n \) be a connected sum decomposition of a topological knot type \( K \subset (M, \xi) \) into prime pieces \( K_i \subset (M_i, \xi_i) \), where \( (M, \xi) = (M_1, \xi_1) \# \ldots \# (M_n, \xi_n) \) is tight. Then the map

\[
C: \left( \frac{\mathcal{L}(K_1) \times \cdots \times \mathcal{L}(K_n)}{\sim} \right) \to \mathcal{L}(K_1 \# \ldots \# K_n)
\]

given by \( (L_1, \ldots, L_n) \mapsto L_1 \# \ldots \# L_n \) is a bijection. Here the equivalence relation \( \sim \) is of two types:

1. \( (L_1, \ldots, S_\pm(L_i), L_{i+1}, \ldots, L_n) \sim (L_1, \ldots, L_i, S_\pm(L_{i+1}), \ldots, L_n) \),
2. \( (L_1, \ldots, L_n) \sim \sigma(L_1, \ldots, L_n) \), where \( \sigma \) is a permutation of the \( K_i \subset (M_i, \xi_i) \) such that \( \sigma(M_i, \xi_i) \) is isotopic to \( (M_i, \xi_i) \) and \( \sigma(K_i) = K_i \).

Theorem 3.4 will be proved in Section \( \mathcal{F} \). We now discuss its consequences. Let \( \overline{\text{tb}}(K) \) denote the maximal Thurston-Bennequin invariant over elements in \( \mathcal{L}(K) \). Then,

**Corollary 3.5.** \( \overline{\text{tb}}(K_1 \# K_2) = \overline{\text{tb}}(K_1) + \overline{\text{tb}}(K_2) + 1 \).

This corollary was independently proven by Torisu in \([\mathcal{T}]\).

**Theorem 3.4** takes on a particularly simple form when one restricts attention to maximal Thurston-Bennequin knots.

**Corollary 3.6.** If \( L \) is a Legendrian knot which is a maximal \( \text{tb} \) representative of \( \mathcal{L}(K) \), then \( L \) admits a unique prime decomposition (modulo potential permutations).
Recall the strategy described in [EH] for classifying Legendrian knots of a given a topological knot type. The idea was to (1) prove that Legendrian knots in a particular knot type would always destabilize to a knot with maximal $tb$ and then (2) classify all Legendrian knots of this type with maximal $tb$. When executing the final stage of this strategy, Corollary 3.6 is useful because it allows us to concentrate on prime knots.

4. APPLICATIONS

In discussing the applications of Theorem 3.4, we restrict our attention to Legendrian knots in the standard tight contact $(S^3, \xi_{S^3})$ or $(\mathbb{R}^3, \xi_{\mathbb{R}^3})$. Similar results hold in other manifolds.

First we reformulate the connected sum operation. Let $K_1$ and $K_2$ be two topological knot types. Given $L_i \in \mathcal{L}(K_i)$, $i = 1, 2$, we define their connected sum as follows: let $B_i$ be a standard contact 3-ball about a point $p_i$ on $L_i$. By Eliashberg’s classification theorem of tight contact structures on the 3-ball [E], there is a contact isotopy $\phi_t : S^3 \to S^3$, $t \in [0, 1]$, from $\phi_0 = \text{id}_{S^3}$ to $\phi_1$ which takes $B_1$ to $S^3 \setminus B_2$. Moreover, it is easy to arrange $L_2$ and $\phi_1(L_1)$ to intersect $\partial B_2$ in the same two points. We may now define $L_1 \# L_2$ to be the Legendrian knot $(L_2 \cap (S^3 \setminus B_2)) \cup (\phi_1(L_1) \cap B_2)$. We leave it as a simple exercise to check that this definition of the connected sum of knots is equivalent to the one given above. It has the advantage of being done ambienly, i.e., we do not take connected sums of the ambient manifolds, only of the knots.

Since any Legendrian isotopy can be assumed to miss a preassigned point, the classification of Legendrian knots in $(S^3, \xi_{S^3})$ and in $(\mathbb{R}^3, \xi_{\mathbb{R}^3})$ are equivalent. Moreover, there is a convenient diagrammatic description of Legendrian knots in $\mathbb{R}^3$ in terms of front projections (for example, see [EH]). Figure 2 indicates two ways in which the ambient connected sum (described in the previous paragraph) can be done in terms of the front projections of Legendrian knots.

Perhaps the most interesting application of Theorem 3.4 is towards the construction of topological knot types which are not Legendrian simple. Recall that a topological knot type $\mathcal{K}$ is said to be Legendrian simple if Legendrian knots in $\mathcal{K}$ are classified by the Thurston-Bennequin invariant.
and the rotation number. The first non-Legendrian-simple knot type was discovered in [CR] and, since then, many similar examples have been found. All examples to date have used contact homology (in one form or another) to distinguish the Legendrian knots. Although contact homology provides an intriguing way of distinguishing Legendrian knots, it currently does not provide much geometric insight into why Legendrian knots are different.

**Theorem 4.1.** Given two positive integers $m$ and $n$, there is a knot type $\mathcal{K}$ and distinct Legendrian knots $L_1, \ldots, L_n$ in $\mathcal{L}(\mathcal{K})$ which have the same Thurston-Bennequin invariant and rotation number, and remain distinct even after $m$ stabilizations (of any type).

Theorem 4.1 follows from Theorem 3.4 and the classification of Legendrian torus knots (Theorem 4.2 below) from [EH]. Recall that $\mathcal{K}_{p,q}$ is a $(p, q)$-torus knot if any element of $\mathcal{K}_{p,q}$ can be isotoped to sit on a standardly embedded torus $T$ in $S^3$ as a $(p, q)$-curve. Here we say a torus $T \subset S^3$ is standardly embedded if it is oriented and $S^3 \setminus T = N_1 \cup N_2$, where $N_i$, $i = 1, 2$, are solid tori with $\partial N_1 = T$ and $\partial N_2 = -T$. Now, there exists an oriented identification $T \simeq \mathbb{R}^2/\mathbb{Z}^2$ where the meridian of $N_1$ corresponds to $\pm (1, 0)$ and the meridian of $N_2$ to $\pm (0, 1)$.

**Theorem 4.2.** Legendrian knots in $\mathcal{L}(\mathcal{K}_{p,q})$ are determined by their knot type, Thurston-Bennequin invariant and rotation number. If $p < 0$ and $-p > q > 0$, then $\overline{tb}(\mathcal{K}_{p,q}) = pq$ and the corresponding values of $r$ are

$$r(K) \in \{\pm(|p| - |q| - 2qk) : k \in \mathbb{Z}, 0 \leq k < \frac{|p| - |q|}{|q|}\}.$$

Moreover, all other Legendrian knots in this knot type are obtained by stabilization.

If we plot the possible values of $tb$ and $r$ for a negative torus knot, we obtain a picture similar to that of Figure 3.

![Figure 3](image-url)  

**Figure 3.** Some possible $tb$ and $r$’s for the $(-7, 3)$ torus knot.

**Proof of Theorem 4.1.** Let $p = -(4n + 1)s - 1$ and $q = 2s$, with $s$ an even number greater than $m + 1$. Then, according to Theorem 4.2, there are $4n$ Legendrian knots in $\mathcal{L}(\mathcal{K}_{p,q})$ with maximal $tb = pq$ and distinct rotation numbers $-(4n - 3)s + 1, \ldots, (4n - 5)s + 1, (4n - 1)s + 1$ and $-(4n - 1)s - 1, -(4n - 5)s - 1, \ldots, (4n - 3)s - 1$. Let $L_r \in \mathcal{L}(\mathcal{K}_{p,q})$ with $tb = pq$ and rotation number $r$. For $k = 0, \ldots, 2n - 1$, let $L^k = L_{(4(n-k)-1)s+1} \# L_{-(4(n-k)-1)s-1}$. Note that all the $L^k$ are topologically isotopic, have the same $tb = 2pq + 1$ and $r = 0$, yet are not Legendrian isotopic by Theorem 3.4. See Figure 4. Since the spacings in $r$ between adjacent maximal $tb$ representatives are at least $2m$ by our choice of $p$ and $q$, the $L^k$ remain distinct even after $m$ stabilizations.
Remark 4.3. The Legendrian knots $L^k$ appearing in the proof of Theorem 4.1 remain distinct after $m$ stabilizations. However, it is well-known that the Chekanov-Eliashberg contact homology invariants are unable to distinguish knots (because the invariants vanish). Thus these are the first examples of Legendrian knots which are not distinguished by the known holomorphic invariants. We also note that the examples in Theorem 4.1 have nontrivial contact homology. We are unable to determine if these invariants are the same or not, but all easily computable invariants derived from contact homology are the same for these examples.

Remark 4.4. Using Theorems 3.4 and 4.2, we can classify Legendrian knots isotopic to (multiple) connected sums of torus knots. This is the first classification of Legendrian knots in a non-Legendrian-simple knot type.

Remark 4.5. Observe that the connected sums of torus knots are fibered knots. Thus we have examples of non-Legendrian-simple fibered knots, contrary to a (perhaps overly optimistic) conjecture that fibered knots are Legendrian simple.

We end by observing that, while the connected sum of Legendrian simple knot types need not be Legendrian simple, the connected sum of transversally simple knot types is always transversally simple. Here a knot type $\mathcal{K}$ is transversally simple if transversal knots in $\mathcal{K}$ are determined by their self-linking number.

Theorem 4.6. The connected sum of transversally simple knot types is transversally simple.

Proof. Recall that, according to Theorem 2.10 of [EH], a knot type is transversally simple if and only if it is stably simple. A knot type $\mathcal{K}$ is stably simple if any two knots in $\mathcal{L}(\mathcal{K})$ for which $s = \text{tb} - r$ agree are Legendrian isotopic after some number of negative stabilizations.

Now assume that $\mathcal{K}_1$ and $\mathcal{K}_2$ are stably simple knot types. Let $L_1, L'_1 \in \mathcal{L}(\mathcal{K}_1)$ and $L_2, L'_2 \in \mathcal{L}(\mathcal{K}_2)$ such that $s(L_1 \# L_2) = s(L'_1 \# L'_2)$. It follows that $s(L_1) = s(L'_1) + 2n$ and $s(L_2) = s(L'_2) - 2n$ for some integer $n$, which we may take to be $\geq 0$. Since $\mathcal{K}_1$ and $\mathcal{K}_2$ are stably simple, there exist $m_1$ and $m_2$ such that $S^{m_1}_- \circ S^n_+(L_1)$ is Legendrian isotopic to $S^{m_1}_-(L'_1)$ and $S^{m_2}_- \circ S^n_+(L_2)$ is Legendrian isotopic to $S^{m_2}_-(L'_2)$. Thus

$$S^{m_1+m_2}_-(L_1 \# L_2) = (S^{m_1}_-(L_1)) \# (S^{m_2}_-(L_2)) = (S^{m_1}_-(L_1)) \# (S^{m_2}_- \circ S^n_+(L'_2))$$
$$= (S^{m_1}_- \circ S^n_+(L_1)) \# (S^{m_2}_-(L'_2)) = (S^{m_1}_-(L'_1)) \# (S^{m_2}_-(L'_2))$$
$$= S^{m_1+m_2}_-(L'_1 \# L'_2).$$

This proves that $\mathcal{K}_1 \# \mathcal{K}_2$ is stably simple. 

\[\square\]
Remark 4.7. In contrast to the situation for Legendrian knots discussed in Remark 4.5, it still does not seem unreasonable to believe that fibered knots are transversely simple. See also [BW, Me].

5. The main technical result

Given a Legendrian knot $L$ in a tight contact manifold $(M, \xi)$, we may always find a sufficiently small tubular neighborhood $N$ of $L$ such that $T = \partial N$ is a convex torus with dividing set $\Gamma_T$ consisting of two parallel, homotopically nontrivial dividing curves. We make an oriented identification $T \simeq \mathbb{R}^2 / \mathbb{Z}^2$ with coordinates $(\mu, \lambda)$, so that the $\mu$-direction is the meridional direction and the $\lambda$-direction is the longitudinal direction given by a Seifert surface. (Note that this convention is different from the usual Dehn surgery convention.) The slope of a homotopically nontrivial closed curve on $T$ will be given in the $\mu \lambda$-coordinates. With respect to these coordinates, the slope of $\Gamma_T$ is $\frac{1}{16(L)}$. Using the Legendrian Realization Principle we may arrange, and shall always assume, that $T$ is in standard form and the ruling slope on $T$ is 0.

An embedded sphere $S$ in $M$ that intersects $L$ transversely in exactly two points and separates $M$ will be called a separating sphere for $(M, L)$. Given a separating sphere $S$, let $M \setminus S = M_0^o \sqcup M_1^o$ and $L_i^o = (L \setminus S) \cap M_i^o$, $i = 1, 2$. We call $S$ a trivial separating sphere if one of the $M_i^o$ is a 3-ball and $L_i^o$ is an unknotted arc in $M_i^o = B^3$. The separating sphere $S$ can be isotoped so that $S \cap T$ $(T = \partial N)$ consists of two ruling curves. We may further isotop $S$, relative to $S \cap T$, so that $S$ becomes convex and the annular component of $S \setminus T$ admits a ruling by closed Legendrian curves parallel to the boundary of the annulus. Such an $S$ will be called a standard convex separating sphere.

We now introduce a standard object to cap off our cut-open manifold/knot pairs $(M_i^o, L_i^o)$. To this end, let $N_\delta$ be a convex tubular neighborhood of the $y$-axis in the standard tight contact $(\mathbb{R}^3, \xi_{std})$ given by the 1-form $dz + xdy$. We can assume the dividing curves on $N_\delta$ consist of two lines parallel to the $y$-axis and arrange the ruling curves to be all meridional. Now let $B_\delta$ be a 3-ball about the origin with convex $\partial B_\delta$, such that $\partial B_\delta \cap \partial N_\delta$ consists of two ruling curves. Finally, let $L_s = y$-axis $\cap B_\delta$. We call the pair $((B_\delta, \xi_{std}|_{B_\delta}), L_s)$, consisting of the tight contact manifold $(B_\delta, \xi_{std}|_{B_\delta})$ and the Legendrian arc $L_s$, the standard trivial pair.

Given a convex separating sphere $S$ as above, we can apply the Giroux Flexibility Theorem so that the characteristic foliations on $S$ and $\partial B_s$ agree. For each $i = 1, 2$, we then glue $(B_s, L_s)$ to $(M_i^o, L_i^o)$ to get a closed contact manifold $(M_i, \xi_i)$ and a Legendrian knot $L_i \subset M_i$. The following is a consequence of Theorem 4.1.

Corollary 5.1. $(M_i, \xi_i)$ is tight, and, up to isotopy, does not depend on the choice of convex separating sphere $S$ (provided the topological type is preserved) or on the gluing map.

We now consider the relative version of the corollary which takes into account the splitting of the Legendrian knot $L \subset M$. We then have:

Theorem 5.2. Let $((M, \xi), L)$ be a tight contact manifold together with a Legendrian knot $L \subset M$, and let $S, S'$ be (smoothly) isotopic standard convex separating spheres. Let $((M_i, \xi_i), L_i)$ (resp. $((M_i, \xi_i), L_i')$, $i = 1, 2$, be the glued-up manifolds together with Legendrian knots, obtained by cutting $M$ along $S$ (resp. $S'$) and gluing in copies of the standard trivial pair. Then there exists a sequence $(L_0^0, L_2^0) = (L_1, L_2), (L_1^1, L_2^1), \ldots, (L_1^k, L_2^k) = (L_1', L_2')$,
1. $L^+_i$ is a Legendrian knot in $(M_i, \xi_i)$ isotopic to, but not necessarily contact isotopic to, $L_i$, $i = 1, 2$.

2. $(L_1^{j+1}, L_2^{j+1})$ is obtained from $(L_1^{j}, L_2^{j})$ by performing one of the following:
   (i) Legendrian isotopy,
   (ii) $L_1^{j+1} = S_{\pm}(L_1^j)$ and $L_2^{j+1} = (S_{\pm})^{-1}(L_2^j)$, or
   (iii) $L_1^{j+1} = (S_{\pm})^{-1}(L_1^j)$ and $L_2^{j+1} = S_{\pm}(L_2^j)$.
   Here, $(S_{\pm})^{-1}$ indicates destabilization.

In other words, the Legendrian knots $L_i$ and $L'_i$ which arise from isotopic but not contact isotopic separating spheres differ only by successively shifting Legendrian stabilizations from one side to the other.

The remainder of this section is devoted to the proof of Theorem 5.2. The proof is essentially a concrete application of the state traversal technique.

**Step 1.** Let $\xi$ be a $[0, 1]$-invariant tight contact structure on $A = S^2 \times [0, 1]$, viewed as a neighborhood of $\partial B_s$ sitting in $(\mathbb{R}^3, \xi_{std})$. It follows from the proof of Eliashberg’s classification of tight contact structures on the 3-ball [El] that $\xi$ is the unique (up to isotopy rel boundary) tight contact structure on $A$, with the given characteristic foliation on the boundary.

The intersection of $A$ with the $y$-axis has two components $L_+$ and $L_-$; these are Legendrian arcs running between the two boundary components of $A$. Let $L_{m,n}^\pm = S_m^\pm \circ S_n^\pm (L_\pm)$.

**Lemma 5.3.** Let $L'_+$ and $L'_-$ be Legendrian arcs in $A$ which have the same endpoints as $L_+$ and $L_-$, respectively, and such that $L'_+ \cup L'_-$ is (smoothly) isotopic to $L_+ \cup L_-$ inside $A$, rel $\partial A$. Then, after applying a contactomorphism which is isotopic to the identity through an isotopy which fixes only one of the boundary components, $L'_+ \cup L'_-$ is Legendrian isotopic to $L_- \cup L_{m,n}^\pm$ for some uniquely determined $m$ and $n$.

**Proof of Lemma 5.3.** We define the twisting number (or the relative Thurston-Bennequin invariant) $tw(L'_\pm)$ to be the difference between the contact framings of $L'_\pm$ and $L_\pm$. Note that the well-definition of $tw(L'_\pm)$ follows from the fact that $L'_\pm$ and $L_\pm$ have the same endpoints.

Now, let $g$ be the diffeomorphism of $A = S^2 \times [0, 1]$ which rotates the sphere $S^2 \times \{t\}$ around the axis provided by $L_+ \cup L_-$ (i.e., the $y$-axis) by $2\pi kt$, where $k$ is chosen so that $tw(g(L'_-)) = 0$ with
respect to $g_*\xi$. Here $g_*\xi$ is isotopic to $\xi$ rel boundary by the uniqueness of tight contact structures on $A$ with fixed boundary.

Observe that $tw(L'_+) \leq 0$, since otherwise we could use $L'_-, L'_+$ and arcs on $\partial A$ to construct a Legendrian unknot in $A$ with nonnegative Thurston-Bennequin invariant, which would contradict tightness. Let $m$ and $n$ be nonnegative integers which satisfy $m + n = -tw(L'_+)$. (The precise values of $m$ and $n$ are to be determined later.) Hence $tw(L'^{m,n}_+) = tw(L'_+)$. Next, there exists an isotopy $f$ of $A$ rel $\partial A$ which takes $L'_- \sqcup L'_+$ to $L_- \sqcup L'^{m,n}_+$. Since Legendrian curves and their standard tubular neighborhoods are interchangeable for all practical purposes, we may assume that $f$ is a contactomorphism from the neighborhood $U$ of $L'_- \sqcup L'_+$ onto its image.

It remains to extend $f$ to a contactomorphism on all of $A$ or, equivalently, match up two tight contact structures on the solid torus $A \setminus U$. For this, we apply the classification of tight contact structures on solid tori [Gi2, H]. The boundary slope for both tight contact structures on the solid torus $A \setminus U$ is $-(m + n) - 1$. By the classification, there exists a bijection between nonnegative integer pairs $(m, n)$ with $m + n = -tw(L'_+)$ and tight contact structures on $A \setminus U$ with slope $tw(L'_+) - 1$ and two dividing curves on the boundary. Hence there is a unique choice of $m, n$ so that the two tight contact structures on $A \setminus U$ are contact isotopic rel boundary.

\[ \square \]

**Step 2.** We now establish Theorem 5.2 under an extra hypothesis on the spheres $S$ and $S'$.

**Claim 5.4.** Theorem 5.2 holds if $S$ and $S'$ are disjoint and cobound a region diffeomorphic to $S^2 \times [0, 1]$.

**Proof of Claim 5.4.** Let $A' \subset M$ be the region between $S$ and $S'$, and let $M^c_1$ and $M^s_2$ be components of $M \setminus A'$ so that:

\[
\begin{align*}
M_1 &= M^c_1 \cup B_s, \\
M_2 &= M^c_2 \cup A' \cup B_s, \\
M'_1 &= M^c_1 \cup A' \cup B_s, \text{ and} \\
M'_2 &= M^c_2 \cup B_s,
\end{align*}
\]

where $B_s$ is the standard contact 3-ball.

Let $L^c_i = L \cap M^c_i$, $i = 1, 2$ and $L' = L \cap A'$. Thus the Legendrian arcs under consideration are:

\[
\begin{align*}
L_1 &= L^c_1 \cup L_s, \\
L_2 &= L^c_2 \cup L' \cup L_s, \\
L'_1 &= L^c_1 \cup L' \cup L_s, \text{ and} \\
L'_2 &= L^c_2 \cup L_s,
\end{align*}
\]

where $L_s$ is the standard Legendrian arc in $B_s$.

Observe that $B_s$ is contactomorphic to $B_s \cup A$, where $A = S^2 \times [0, 1]$ with the $[0, 1]$-invariant tight contact structure. Therefore we may think of $M_1$ and $M'_2$ as composed of the appropriate $M^c_i, B_s$ and $A$. Let $f : M_1 \xrightarrow{\sim} M'_1$ be the diffeomorphism which sends $M^c_1 \subset M_1$ to $M^c_1 \subset M'_1$ by the identity, $B_s \subset M_1$ to $B_s \subset M'_1$ by the identity, and $A$ to $A'$ by a diffeomorphism preserving the characteristic foliation on the boundary. It is easy to arrange for the diffeomorphism from $A$ to $A'$ to take the endpoints of the standard arcs $L'_+ \sqcup L'_-$ (described in Step 1) to the endpoints of
there is no ambiguity in the connected sum operation. The isotopy is fixed on \( M'_c \) and might move one of the boundary components of \( A \), but this can be extended over \( B_s \). Thus we can identify the tight contact manifolds \( M_1 \) and \( M'_1 \). Moreover, according to Lemma 5.3, \( S^m_+ \circ S^n_-(L_1) \) is Legendrian isotopic to \( L'_1 \) and \( S^m_- \circ S^n_-(L_2) \) is Legendrian isotopic to \( L'_2 \), where \( m, n \) are nonnegative integers.

**Step 3.** We now finish the proof of Theorem 5.1 by using the following Lemma 5.5 to reduce to the previous step.

**Lemma 5.5.** Let \( S, S' \) be (smoothly) isotopic standard convex separating spheres for \( (M, L) \), with \( S \cap N = S' \cap N \). Then there exists a finite sequence \( S_0 = S, S_1, \ldots, S_l = S' \) of standard convex separating spheres where, for \( i = 0, \ldots, k-1 \), the pair \( (S_i, S_{i+1}) \) cobounds a region diffeomorphic to \( S^2 \times [0, 1] \).

**Proof of Lemma 5.5.** We use Colin’s isotopy discretization technique [Co]. Let \( \Sigma_t, t \in [0, 1] \), be the images of a smooth isotopy which takes \( \Sigma_0 = S \) to \( \Sigma_1 = S' \). We may additionally assume that each \( \Sigma_t \) intersects the standard neighborhood \( N \) of \( L \) in meridional ruling curves and that each \( \Sigma_t \cap N \) is a standard convex meridional disk. For each \( t \), there exists a tubular neighborhood \( N(\Sigma_t) \) of \( \Sigma_t \) and an interval \([t-\epsilon, t+\epsilon]\) such that \( \Sigma_s \subset N(\Sigma_t) \) for all \( s \in [t-\epsilon, t+\epsilon] \). By the compactness of \([0, 1]\), there exist \( t_0 = 0 < t_1 < \cdots < t_k = 1 \) such that each \( \Sigma_{t_i+1} \) is contained in a tubular neighborhood \( N(\Sigma_{t_i}) \) of \( \Sigma_{t_i} \). Since convex surfaces are \( C^\infty \)-dense in the space of closed embedded surfaces [Gi], we may assume that the \( \Sigma_{t_i} \) and \( \partial(N(\Sigma_{t_i})) = \Sigma_{t_i}' - \Sigma_{t_i}'' \) are convex. Now simply take the sequence

\[ \Sigma_{t_0}, \Sigma_{t_0}', \Sigma_{t_1}, \Sigma_{t_1}', \ldots. \]

It is easily verified that this sequence satisfies the cobounding condition. \( \square \)

6. PROOF OF THEOREM 3.4

In this section we complete the proof of Theorem 3.4. For simplicity we assume that \( \mathcal{K} = \mathcal{K}_1 \# \mathcal{K}_2 \) and there are no equivalence relations of type 2 in Theorem 3.4, i.e., there are no extra symmetries. We show that

\[ C : \left( \frac{\mathcal{L}(\mathcal{K}_1) \times \mathcal{L}(\mathcal{K}_2)}{\sim} \right) \to \mathcal{L}(\mathcal{K}_1 \# \mathcal{K}_2) \]

given by \((L_1, L_2) \mapsto L_1 \# L_2\) is a bijection. The proof is broken down into the following three claims.

**Claim 6.1.** The connect sum operation is well-defined.

**Proof.** Theorem 5.2 indicates the ambiguity in splitting a manifold along different standard convex separating spheres. Since we are always removing a standard trivial pair \((B_s, L_s)\) from a manifold/knot pair when taking a connected sum, and \( L_s \) is not stabilized, the only state transition that actually occurs (among the possibilities listed in Theorem 5.2) is Legendrian isotopy. Hence there is no ambiguity in the connected sum operation. \( \square \)

It is clear that \( C(S_\pm(L_1), L_2) \) and \( C(L_1, S_\pm(L_2)) \) are isotopic Legendrian knots, since stabilizations of a knot can be transferred from one side of the separating sphere to the other. Therefore the map \( C \) is well-defined.
Claim 6.2. The map $C$ is surjective.

Proof. Let $L$ be a Legendrian knot in $\mathcal{L}(\mathcal{K}_1 \# \mathcal{K}_2)$ and $S$ be a 2-sphere in $M^3$ that intersects $L$ transversely in exactly two points and topologically divides the knot into the appropriate knot types. Also let $N$ be a standard convex neighborhood of $L$, where we arrange the ruling curves on $\partial N$ to be meridional. First isotop $S$ so that $S \cap \partial N$ consists of precisely two ruling curves, and then apply a further isotopy of $S$ rel $S \cap \partial N$ so that $S$ becomes convex. Denote by $(M_i^o, L_i^o)$ and $(M_2^o, L_2^o)$ the components of the cut-open manifold $M \setminus S$ together with the cut-open Legendrian knot $L \setminus S$. Let $L_s$ be a trivial Legendrian arc in $B_s$. We now glue the standard contact 3-ball $B_s$ (with convex boundary) onto $M_i^o$, $i = 1, 2$, to form a closed tight contact manifold $M_i$; at the same time we glue $L_s$ and $L_i^o$ into a Legendrian knot $L_i \subset M_i$ with $L_i \in \mathcal{L}(\mathcal{K}_i)$. Moreover, since we formed the connected sum of $L_1$ and $L_2$ by removing $B_s$ from each of $M_1$ and $M_2$ and gluing the resulting boundaries together, it is also clear that $L = L_1#L_2$. □

Claim 6.3. If $C(L_1, L_2) = C(L_1, L_2')$, then $(L_1, L_2) \sim (L_1', L_2)$.

Proof. Assume that $L_1#L_2 = L_1#L_2'$, and let $S$ (resp. $S'$) be a standard convex separating sphere for $L_1#L_2$ (resp. $L_1'#L_2'$). Since $S$ and $S'$ are smoothly isotopic, Theorem 5.2 implies that $(L_1, L_2) \sim (L_1', L_2')$. □

Acknowledgments. Much of this work was done during the Workshop on Contact Geometry in the fall of 2000. The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of Stanford University and the American Institute of Mathematics during this workshop. The first author was supported by an NSF Postdoctoral Fellowship (DMS-9705949) and by NSF Grand # DMS-0203941, and the second by NSF Grant # DMS-0072853 and an Alfred P. Sloan Research Fellowship. The first author also expresses his gratitude for the hospitality and generosity of Professor T. Tsuboi and University of Tokyo during the completion of this paper.

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