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Endomorphisms and bijections of the character variety $\chi(F_2, SL_2(\mathbb{C}))$

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Endomorphisms and bijections of the character variety
\( \chi(F_2, SL_2(\mathbb{C})) \) (*)

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ABSTRACT. — We answer a question of Gelander and Souto in the special case of the free group of rank 2. The result may be stated as follows. If \( F \) is a free group of rank 2, and \( G \) is a proper subgroup of \( F \), the restriction of homomorphisms \( F \to SL_2(\mathbb{C}) \) to the subgroup \( G \) defines a map from the character variety \( \chi(F, SL_2(\mathbb{C})) \) to the character variety \( \chi(G, SL_2(\mathbb{C})) \); this algebraic map never induces a bijection between these two character varieties.

RÉSUMÉ. — Le résultat suivant, qui répond à une question de Gelander et Souto dans un cas particulier, est démontré : si \( F \) est le groupe libre de rang 2 et \( G \) est un sous-groupe de \( F \), la restriction des homomorphismes \( F \to SL_2(\mathbb{C}) \) au sous-groupe \( G \) fournit une application de la variété des caractères \( \chi(F, SL_2(\mathbb{C})) \) vers la variété des caractères \( \chi(G, SL_2(\mathbb{C})) \); cette application algébrique n’est bijective que si \( G \) coïncide avec \( F \).

1. Representations and character varieties

Consider the free group of rank 2,
\[ F = \langle a, b \mid \emptyset \rangle, \]
and an algebraic group \( H \). Every representation \( \rho: F \to H \) is defined by prescribing the images of the generators \( A = \rho(a) \) and \( B = \rho(b) \) in \( H \). Thus, the variety of representations \( Rep(F, H) \) is just the product \( H \times H \). The group \( H \) acts on this variety by conjugation, and the quotient, in the sense of geometric invariant theory, is called the character variety of \( (F, H) \); we shall denote it \( \chi(F, H) \).

Assume now that \( H \) is the special linear group \( SL_2 \) (the field of definition will be specified later). Since traces of matrices are polynomial functions in

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the coefficients of the matrices and are invariant under conjugacy, the three functions

\[ x = \text{tr}(A), \quad y = \text{tr}(B), \quad z = \text{tr}(AB) \quad (1.2) \]

provide regular functions on the character variety \( \chi(\mathbb{F}, \text{SL}_2) \). The following result, due to Fricke, is proven in details in [5].

**Fricke’s Theorem.** — The character variety \( \chi(\mathbb{F}, \text{SL}_2) \) is the affine space of dimension 3; its ring of regular functions are the polynomial functions in the coordinates \((x, y, z) = (\text{tr}(A), \text{tr}(B), \text{tr}(AB))\).

We did not specify the field because this theorem works for any algebraically closed field. Examples of invariant functions are given by traces of words in the matrices \( A \) and \( B \), for instance by the function \( \text{tr}(A^3B^{-2}AB) \); in fact, the theorem of Fricke is based on the fact that these traces can be expressed as polynomial functions of \( x, y, \) and \( z \) with integer coefficients. This follows easily from Cayley-Hamilton theorem. For instance \( A - \text{tr}(A) \text{Id} + A^{-1} = 0 \), which shows that \( \text{tr}(A^{-1}B) = xy - z \). A classical example is given by the trace of the commutator of \( A \) and \( B \):

\[ \text{tr}(ABA^{-1}B^{-1}) = x^2 + y^2 + z^2 - xyz - 2. \quad (1.3) \]

The level sets of this polynomial function are the cubic surfaces

\[ S_\kappa = \{(x, y, z) ; x^2 + y^2 + z^2 = xyz + \kappa\}. \quad (1.4) \]

The surface \( S_0 \) is known as the Markoff surface, and \( S_4 \) as the Cayley cubic (see [1, §2.8] and [2, §1.5]).

### 2. Restrictions

Now, consider a subgroup \( G \) of \( \mathbb{F} \). It is a free group, and we assume that \( G \) has rank two, as \( \mathbb{F} \). Fixing a basis \((u, v)\) of \( G \), we have:

1. \( u \) and \( v \) are elements of \( \mathbb{F} \), hence they are words \( u = u(a, b) \) and \( v = v(a, b) \) in the generators \( a \) and \( b \) and their inverses;
2. \( G = \langle u, v \rangle \), with no relations between \( u \) and \( v \).

Since \( u \) is a word in \( a \) and \( b \), we know from the theorem of Fricke that there is a polynomial function \( P \in \mathbb{Z}[X, Y, Z] \) with the following property. For every pair \((A, B)\) of elements of \( \text{SL}_2 \),

\[ P(x, y, z) = \text{tr}(u(A, B)) \quad \text{where} \quad (x, y, z) = (\text{tr}(A), \text{tr}(B), \text{tr}(AB)). \quad (2.1) \]

Similarly, there are polynomial functions \( Q \) and \( R \) such that

\[ Q(x, y, z) = \text{tr}(v(A, B)) \quad \text{and} \quad R(x, y, z) = \text{tr}(u(A, B)v(A, B)). \quad (2.2) \]
Every representation $\rho$ of $F$ into $\text{SL}_2$ gives a representation of $G$: the restriction of $\rho$ to $G$. Thus, we get a map $\text{res}: \chi(F, \text{SL}_2) \rightarrow \chi(G, \text{SL}_2)$. Once these character varieties have been identified to affine spaces of dimension 3 using the coordinates $(x, y, z) = (\text{tr}(A), \text{tr}(B), \text{tr}(AB))$ and $(r, s, t) = (\text{tr}(U), \text{tr}(V), \text{tr}(UV))$, this map $\text{res}$ corresponds to the algebraic endomorphism $\mathbb{A}^3 \rightarrow \mathbb{A}^3$ defined by

$$(x, y, z) \mapsto (P(x, y, z), Q(x, y, z), R(x, y, z)). \quad (2.3)$$

Our goal is to understand whether this map can be a bijection (resp. an isomorphism of algebraic varieties) when $G$ is a strict subgroup of $F$. This was the question raised by Gelander and Souto, in its simpler form.

To restate this question more precisely, we adopt another equivalent viewpoint. Consider the endomorphism $\varphi: F \rightarrow F$ that maps $a$ to $u(a, b)$ and $b$ to $v(a, b)$. Its image is $G$. Given any representation $\rho$ of $F$, $\varphi \ast \rho = \rho \circ \varphi$ is a new representation of $F$; this determines an algebraic endomorphism

$$\Phi: \chi(F, \text{SL}_2) \rightarrow \chi(F, \text{SL}_2). \quad (2.4)$$

Then, $\text{res}$ is a bijection if and only if $\Phi$ is a bijection (these two maps are actually the same maps in affine coordinates). Thus, the question may be stated as follows.

Questions. — Given an endomorphism $\varphi: F \rightarrow F$ of the free group $F$, under what condition does it induce an automorphism $\Phi: \chi(F, \text{SL}_2) \rightarrow \chi(F, \text{SL}_2)$ of the algebraic variety $\chi(F, \text{SL}_2)$? Given an endomorphism $\varphi: F \rightarrow F$, and a field $k$, under what condition does $\varphi$ induce a bijection $\Phi: \mathbb{A}^3(k) \rightarrow \mathbb{A}^3(k)$ of the set of $k$ points of $\chi(F, \text{SL}_2) = \mathbb{A}^3$?

For the second version of the question, it is crucial to indicate over which field one works. If the field is too small, for instance if it is a finite field, there are many endomorphisms $\varphi$ that induce bijections on the set of representations into $\text{SL}_2(k)$. Indeed, consider a finite group $H$, for example $H = \text{SL}_2(k)$ for some finite field $k$, and denote by $n$ the number of elements of $H$. Then, every element $h \in H$ satisfies $h^n = e_H$. Now, pick positive integers $\ell$ and $\ell'$ and consider the endomorphism $\varphi$ of $F$ that maps $a$ to $a^{\ell n+1}$ and $b$ to $b^{\ell' n+1}$. Then, $\rho(\varphi(a)) = \rho(a)$ and $\rho(\varphi(b)) = \rho(b)$ for every representation $\rho: F \rightarrow H$; thus, $\varphi$ induces an injection (hence a bijection) of the finite set of representations of $F$ into $H$.

If we assume that $k$ is algebraically closed and of characteristic 0, the two questions are actually equivalent, as the following classical statement shows.

Bijectivity Theorem. — Let $\Phi: \mathbb{A}^d \rightarrow \mathbb{A}^d$ be a regular endomorphism of an affine space, defined over an algebraically closed field $k$ of characteristic 0. If $\Phi$ is an injective transformation of $\mathbb{A}^d(k)$ then $\Phi$ is an automorphism of $\mathbb{A}^d$: it is bijective and its inverse is also defined by polynomial formulas.
This theorem fails over the field of real numbers, as $x \mapsto x + x^3$ shows. It also fails in positive characteristic, as the Frobenius morphism shows. For a proof of the Bijectivity Theorem see the book [4]. Note also that this result holds in much greater generality, and can therefore be applied to character varieties of higher rank free groups.

3. The main theorem

THEOREM A. — Let $\mathbf{F}$ be the free group of rank 2, and $\varphi: \mathbf{F} \to \mathbf{F}$ be an endomorphism of $\mathbf{F}$. If the algebraic endomorphism

$$\Phi: \chi(\mathbf{F}, \text{SL}_2(\mathbb{C})) \to \chi(\mathbf{F}, \text{SL}_2(\mathbb{C}))$$

induced by $\varphi$ is injective, then $\varphi: \mathbf{F} \to \mathbf{F}$ is an automorphism of the free group $\mathbf{F}$.

COROLLARY 3.1. — Let $\mathbf{F}$ be the free group of rank 2. If $\mathbf{G}$ is a proper subgroup of $\mathbf{F}$, the restriction $\text{res}: \rho \mapsto \rho|_{\mathbf{G}}$ does not induce a bijection from the character variety $\chi(\mathbf{F}, \text{SL}_2(\mathbb{C}))$ to the character variety $\chi(\mathbf{G}, \text{SL}_2(\mathbb{C}))$.

Proof of the corollary. — For $\text{res}$ to be a bijection, $\mathbf{G}$ should have rank 2 (the dimension of $\chi(\mathbf{G}, \text{SL}_2(\mathbb{C}))$ is $3\text{rk}(\mathbf{G}) - 3$). The previous section shows that $\text{res}$ is a bijection if and only if the endomorphism $\varphi: \mathbf{F} \to \mathbf{F}$ determined by any isomorphism between $\mathbf{F}$ and $\mathbf{G}$ induces a bijection on the character variety of $\mathbf{F}$. Theorem A shows that $\varphi$ must be an isomorphism, hence $\mathbf{G} = \mathbf{F}$. □

4. The proof

To prove Theorem A, one first makes use of the Bijectivity Theorem, and deduce that the polynomial endomorphism $\Phi$ which is determined by $\varphi$ is a polynomial automorphism of the character variety $\chi(\mathbf{F}, \text{SL}_2(\mathbb{C}))$. In what follows, $S_\kappa$ is the complex affine surface defined by Equation (1.4) (it may be better to denote it $S_\kappa(\mathbb{C})$).

4.1. Automorphisms of the surfaces $S_\kappa$

In what follows, we denote by $\text{Aut}(W)$ the group of automorphisms of the algebraic variety $W$. (Note that we play with two distinct notions of automorphisms and endomorphisms, one for groups, one for algebraic varieties.)
One can identify the group Out(F) with GL_2(Z) (see [7, Prop. I.4.5]). This group acts on the character variety \( \chi(F, SL_2) \). The function tr([A, B]) is invariant under this action because every automorphism of the group F maps \( aba^{-1}b^{-1} \) to a conjugate of itself or its inverse (see [7, Prop. I.5.1] for instance). This gives an embedding
\[
GL_2(Z) \to \text{Aut}(\chi(F, SL_2)),
\]
i.e. in Aut(\( \mathbb{A}^3 \)), that preserves the polynomial function \( x^2 + y^2 + z^2 - xyz - 2 \) and its level sets \( S_\kappa \).

**El’Huti’s Theorem.** — Let \( \kappa \) be a complex number. The group \( GL_2(Z) = \text{Out}(F) \) provides a subgroup of index 4 in the group of all automorphisms of the complex affine surface \( S_\kappa \); every automorphism of \( S_\kappa \) is the composition of an element of \( \text{Out}(F) \) and a linear map \( (x, y, z) \mapsto (\epsilon_1 x, \epsilon_2 y, \epsilon_3 z) \) where each \( \epsilon_i = \pm 1 \) and \( \epsilon_1 \epsilon_2 \epsilon_3 = 1 \).

Let us explain how this result follows from the main theorems of [3]. First, note that the image of the homomorphism \( GL_2(Z) \to \text{Aut}(S_\kappa) \) contains the finite group of permutations of the coordinates. For instance, the permutation \( (x, y, z) \mapsto (z, y, x) \) is induced by the automorphism of \( F \) mapping \( a \) and \( b \) to \( (ab)^{-1} \) and \( b \).

To describe more precisely El’Huti’s work, we compactify \( S_\kappa \) by taking its closure \( \overline{S_\kappa} \) in the projective space \( \mathbb{P}^3_\mathbb{C} \). In homogeneous variables \( [x : y : z : w] \), this surface is defined by the cubic equation
\[
(x^2 + y^2 + z^2)w = xyz + \kappa w^3.
\]
It intersects the plane at infinity \( \{w = 0\} \) into a triangle \( \{xyz = 0\} \). If \( f \) is an automorphism of \( S_\kappa \), it extends as a birational map \( \tilde{f} \) of \( \overline{S_\kappa} \), typically with indeterminacy points on the triangle at infinity.

There are three obvious involutions on \( S_\kappa \). Indeed, if one projects \( S_\kappa \) onto the \( (x, y) \)-plane one gets a 2-to-1 cover because the equation of \( S_\kappa \) has degree 2 with respect to the \( z \)-variable; the deck transformation of this cover is the involution
\[
\sigma_z(x, y, z) = (x, y, xy - z).
\]
Geometrically, \( \sigma_z \) is the following birational transformation of \( \overline{S_\kappa} \): if \( [x : y : z : w] \) is a point of \( \overline{S_\kappa} \), draw the line joining this point to the point “at infinity” \( [0 : 0 : 1 : 0] \in \overline{S_\kappa} \); this line intersects \( \overline{S_\kappa} \) in exactly three points, and the third point of intersection is precisely \( \sigma_z[x : y : z : w] \). Permuting the variables, we obtain three involutions \( \sigma_x, \sigma_y, \sigma_z \) and Theorem 1 of [3] says that the group generated by those three involutions is a free product
$\mathbb{Z}/2\mathbb{Z} \ast \mathbb{Z}/2\mathbb{Z} \ast \mathbb{Z}/2\mathbb{Z}$. Now, note that the element
\[
\begin{pmatrix}
1 & 0 \\
0 & -1
\end{pmatrix} \in \text{GL}_2(\mathbb{Z})
\] is represented by the automorphism of $F$ mapping the generators $a$ and $b$ to $a$ and $b^{-1}$, and its action on traces corresponds to $\sigma_z$ because $\text{tr}(B^{-1}) = \text{tr}(B)$ and $\text{tr}(AB^{-1}) = -\text{tr}(AB) + \text{tr}(A)\text{tr}(B)$ for elements of $\text{SL}_2$ (see Section 1).

Using permutations of coordinates, we see that the image of $\text{GL}_2(\mathbb{Z})$ in $\text{Aut}(S_\kappa)$ contains the three involutions $\sigma_x$, $\sigma_y$, and $\sigma_z$, hence the group $\langle \sigma_x, \sigma_y, \sigma_z \rangle$ that they generate.

Theorem 2 of [3] states that the automorphism group $\text{Aut}(S_\kappa)$ is generated by two groups: the group $\langle \sigma_x, \sigma_y, \sigma_z \rangle \simeq \mathbb{Z}/2\mathbb{Z} \ast \mathbb{Z}/2\mathbb{Z} \ast \mathbb{Z}/2\mathbb{Z}$, and the group $W(S_\kappa)$ of projective transformations of $\mathbb{P}^3_C$ preserving the compact surface $\overline{S_\kappa}$ and its open surface $S_\kappa \subset \overline{S_\kappa}$. The following lemma concludes the proof of what we called El'Huti’s theorem.

**Lemma 4.1.** — The group $W(S_\kappa)$ is the group generated by

1. the group of permutations of the coordinates $(x, y, z)$, and
2. the changes of sign of pairs of coordinates (such as $(x, y, z) \mapsto (-x, -y, z)$).

**Proof.** — Let $f$ be a linear projective transformation preserving $S_\kappa \subset \overline{S_\kappa}$. Then, $f$ preserves the triangle $\overline{S_\kappa} \setminus S_\kappa$, of equation $\{w = 0, xyz = 0\}$. Composing $f$ by a permutation of the coordinates, we may assume that (i) $f$ induces an affine transformation of the affine space $\mathbb{A}^3_C$ and (ii) $f$ fixes the three points $[1 : 0 : 0 : 0]$, $[0 : 1 : 0 : 0]$ and $[0 : 0 : 1 : 0]$ at infinity. Thus, $f$ becomes an affine transformation whose linear part is diagonal, i.e. $f(x, y, z) = (\alpha x + a, \beta y + b, \gamma z + c)$ for some complex numbers $\alpha$, $\beta$, $\gamma$, $a$, $b$, and $c$ with $\alpha \beta \gamma \neq 0$. Now, if one writes that $S_\kappa$ is invariant, and look at the quadratic terms $xy$, $yz$, and $zx$, one sees that $a = b = c = 0$; then, $\alpha$, $\beta$, and $\gamma$ are all equal to $+1$ or $-1$. \hfill $\square$

**4.2. Invariance of $S_4$**

Reducible representations correspond to the surface $S_4$: both $A$ and $B$ preserve a one dimensional subspace of $\mathbb{C}^2$, so that $A$ and $B$ can be written simultaneously as upper triangular matrices; there commutator $ABA^{-1}B^{-1}$ is upper triangular, with 1’s on the diagonal, and $\text{tr}(ABA^{-1}B^{-1}) = 2$.

If $\rho$ is a reducible representation of $F$, so is $\varphi_* \rho$; thus $\Phi$ induces an automorphism of $S_4$. Since $\text{GL}_2(\mathbb{Z})$ generates a subgroup of $\text{Aut}(S_4)$ of finite index, we obtain the following lemma.
**Lemma 4.2.** — The endomorphism $\Phi$ is an automorphism of the complex algebraic variety $\chi(F, SL_2) = \mathbb{A}^3$ that preserves $S_4$. It induces an automorphism of $S_4$. There is an integer $k > 0$ and an element $\psi$ of $Out(F)$ such that $\Phi^k = \Psi$ on $S_4$.

Here $\Psi$ denotes the automorphism of $\chi(F, SL_2)$ which is defined by $\psi^*$.

**Remark 4.3.** — This remark is not needed in the proof, but illustrates the nice geometry of $S_4$. One can “uniformize” $S_4$ by $C^* \times C^*$, as follows. Given a pair $(z_1, z_2) \in C^* \times C^*$, consider two upper triangular matrices $A$ and $B$ whose diagonal coefficients are respectively $(z_1, 1/z_1)$ and $(z_2, 1/z_2)$. Then,

$$(\text{tr}(A), \text{tr}(B), \text{tr}(AB)) = (z_1 + 1/z_1, z_2 + 1/z_2, z_1z_2 + 1/(z_1z_2)). \quad (4.5)$$

Then,

- the map $\pi: (z_1, z_2) \mapsto (z_1 + 1/z_1, z_2 + 1/z_2, z_1z_2 + 1/(z_1z_2))$ is invariant under the involution $\eta(z_1, z_2) = (1/z_1, 1/z_2)$ of $C^* \times C^*$;
- the image $\pi(C^* \times C^*)$ is $S_4$;
- the projection $\pi: C^* \times C^* \to S_4$ realizes $S_4$ as the quotient $(C^* \times C^*)/\eta$;
- the four fixed points $(\pm 1, \pm 1)$ of $\eta$ give rise to the four singularities of $S_4$.

The group $GL_2(\mathbb{Z})$ acts by automorphisms on the algebraic group $C^* \times C^*$; in coordinates $(z_1, z_2)$, this action is given by monomial transformations $(z_1, z_2) \mapsto (z_1^a z_2^b, z_1^c z_2^d)$. From El'Huti's theorem, or by a direct computation, one easily deduces that this copy of $GL_2(\mathbb{Z})$ in $Aut(S_4)$ coincides with the one given by $Out(F)$ and has finite index in $Aut(S_4)$. (see [2, §1.2] for details)

### 4.3. Invariance of $E_4$

We replace $\Phi$ by $\Phi^k$ and compose it with $\Psi^{-1}$; after such a modification $\Phi$ is the identity on $S_4$.

Our goal is to show that, under this extra hypothesis, $\Phi$ is the identity. For this, note that the equation

$$E_4(x, y, z) = x^2 + y^2 + z^2 - xyz - 4 \quad (4.6)$$

of $S_4$ is transformed by the automorphism $\Phi: \mathbb{A}^3 \to \mathbb{A}^3$ into another (reduced) equation of the same (hyper)surface. Thus, there is a non-zero constant $\alpha$ such that

$$E_4 \circ \Phi = \alpha E_4. \quad (4.7)$$
Lemma 4.4. — The constant $\alpha$ is equal to 1. Hence, $E_4$ is $\Phi$-invariant, and each of the surfaces $S_\kappa$ is $\Phi$ invariant.

Proof. — Since $E_4 \circ \Phi = \alpha E_4$, the level sets $S_\kappa$ of $E_4$ are permuted by the automorphism $\Phi$. Among them, exactly two are singular surfaces. The surface $S_4$, and the Markov surface $S_0$. Indeed, the differential of $E_4$ is

$$(2x - yz)dx + (2y - zx)dy + (2z - xy)dz;$$

if it vanishes, we obtain $x^2 = y^2 = z^2 = xyz/2 = \kappa$, and we deduce that $\kappa = 0$ or $4$. Since $S_4$ is $\Phi$-invariant, the singular surface $S_0$ (and its singularity at the origin) must also be $\Phi$-invariant. This implies $\alpha E_4(0,0,0) = E_4(0,0,0)$ and $\alpha = 1$. □

Remark 4.5. — Instead of looking at singularities of the surfaces $S_\kappa$, we could have considered the subset $F$ of $\chi(F, SL_2)$ given by irreducible representations with finite image. This set is $\Phi$-invariant, and it is finite. Thus, there exists $\ell > 0$ such that $\Phi^\ell$ fixes $F$ pointwise. This implies $E_4 \circ \Phi^\ell = E_4$; looking at the different possibilities for the finite images, one can even deduce that $\ell = 1$.

4.4. Conclusion

From Lemma 4.4 we get $E_4 \circ \Phi = E_4$. Thus, $\Phi$ is an automorphism of the complex affine space $\chi(F, SL_2)$ that preserves every level set $S_\kappa$ of $E_4$. Fix such a constant $\kappa$, and consider the restriction of $\Phi$ to $S_\kappa$. This is an automorphism of $S_\kappa$ and we denote by $\overline{\Phi}$ its extension, as a birational transformation, to the compactification $\overline{S_\kappa}$ of $S_\kappa$ in $\mathbb{P}_3(\mathbb{C})$. The trace of $\overline{S_\kappa}$ at infinity is the triangle given by $xyz = 0$ (see Section 4.1). This triangle does not depend on $\kappa$, and one verifies that the action of $\overline{\Phi}$ at infinity does not depend on $\kappa$ either: indeterminacy points, and exceptional curves are the same for all values of $\kappa$ (see [1, §2.4 and 2.6]). But for $\kappa = 4$, we know that this action is just the identity map. Thus, $\overline{\Phi}$ is in fact an automorphism of $\overline{S_\kappa}$ for all values of $\kappa$. From Section 4.1, we know this automorphism $\Phi$ is a composition of a permutation of the coordinates $(x,y,z)$ with a diagonal linear map whose diagonal coefficients are $\pm 1$. Since $\Phi$ is the identity on $S_4$, we deduce that $\Phi$ is the identity.

Thus, we have shown that there is an automorphism $\psi$ of $F$ and a positive integer $k$ such that $\Phi^k \circ \psi^{-1}$ is the identity map. In other words, $\Phi^k = \psi$ on $\chi(F, SL_2)$. To conclude, one needs to show that an endomorphism $\varphi$ of $F$ that induces the identity map on $\chi(F, SL_2)$ is in fact an inner automorphism of the group $F$. To prove it, fix a faithful representation $\rho: F \to SL_2(\mathbb{C})$; its image is automatically Zariski dense in the complex algebraic group $SL_2(\mathbb{C})$. For instance, take

$$
\rho(a) = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & z \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix} \quad \text{and} \quad \rho(b) = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 \\ z & 1 \end{pmatrix}
$$

(4.8)
for \( z = 2 \) or even for a generic \( z \in \mathbb{C} \) (see [6, §II.B.25]). Then, the fiber of \( \rho \) for the quotient map \( \text{Rep}(F, \text{SL}_2(\mathbb{C})) \to \chi(F, \text{SL}_2(\mathbb{C})) \) is an orbit for the action of \( \text{SL}_2(\mathbb{C}) \) by conjugation on

\[
\text{Rep}(F, \text{SL}_2(\mathbb{C})) \simeq \text{SL}_2(\mathbb{C}) \times \text{SL}_2(\mathbb{C}).
\]  

(4.9)

Since \( \varphi \) induces the identity map on \( \chi(F, \text{SL}_2) \), \( \rho \) and \( \rho \circ \varphi \) are in the same conjugacy class, there is an element \( c \in F \) such that \( \rho \circ \varphi(w) = \rho(cwc^{-1}) \) for every \( w \in F \), and \( \varphi \) coincides with the conjugation by \( c \) because \( \rho \) is faithful.

**Remark 4.6.** — It may also be possible to conclude the proof by showing that \( \varphi \) preserves the conjugacy classes of \( aba^{-1}b^{-1} \) and its inverse (because \( \Phi \) preserves the polynomial function \( E_4 \)). And this property is sufficient to imply that \( \varphi \) is an automorphism of \( F \).

### 5. Two open problems

Theorem A leaves many natural questions open. One may, for instance, replace the free group of rank 2 by a free group of rank \( n > 1 \) (or by fundamental groups of closed surfaces) and the group \( \text{SL}_2 \) by other algebraic groups. One may also replace the field \( \mathbb{C} \) by other fields, for instance by \( \mathbb{Q}, \mathbb{R} \) or \( \mathbb{Q}_p \). Let us now state two open problems that concern \( \chi(F, \text{SL}_2) \).

#### 5.1. Real coefficients

The proof makes use of the fact that \( \mathbb{C} \) is algebraically closed in order to get the equivalence “\( \Phi \) is a bijection if and only if it is an automorphism”. Let us replace \( \mathbb{C} \) by the field \( \mathbb{R} \) of real numbers, and simply assume that \( \Phi \) is a bijection of the real part \( \mathbb{A}^3(\mathbb{R}) \) of the character variety. The difficulty is that there are algebraic bijections of \( \mathbb{R} \) which are not isomorphisms, for instance \( t \mapsto t + t^3 \).

There are two parts in \( \mathbb{A}^3(\mathbb{R}) \), corresponding respectively to representations of \( F \) in \( \text{SL}_2(\mathbb{R}) \) and in \( \text{SU}_2 \). There common boundary is the surface \( S_4(\mathbb{R}) \). These subsets are \( \Phi \)-invariant; in particular, \( S_4(\mathbb{R}) \) is invariant, as a subset or \( \mathbb{A}^3(\mathbb{R}) \) (this does not imply that its equation \( E_4 \) is invariant). I haven’t been able to use this invariance to prove that \( \Phi \) is a bijection of \( \mathbb{A}^3(\mathbb{R}) \) if and only if \( \varphi \) is an automorphism of \( F \). Thus, Theorem A remains an open problem if one replaces the field \( \mathbb{C} \) by \( \mathbb{R} \).
5.2. Topological degree

A better result than Theorem A would be to compute the topological
degree of $\Phi: \mathbb{A}^3(\mathbb{C}) \to \mathbb{A}^3(\mathbb{C})$ given by any injective endomorphism $\varphi$ of $F$, or at least to estimate it from below. Theorem A just says that it cannot be equal to 1.

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