Simple factorization of unitary transformations

Hubert de Guise,1 Olivia Di Matteo,2,3 and Luis L. Sánchez-Soto4,5
1Department of Physics, Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Ontario P7B 5E1, Canada
2Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 3G1
3Institute for Quantum Computing, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, N2L 3G1
4Departamento de Óptica, Facultad de Física, Universidad Complutense, E-28040 Madrid, Spain
5Max-Planck-Institut für die Physik des Lichts, Staudtstraße 2, D-91058 Erlangen, Germany

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We demonstrate a method for general linear optical networks that allows one to factorize any SU(n) matrix in terms of two SU(n−1) blocks coupled by an SU(2) entangling beam splitter. The process can be recursively continued in a straightforward way, ending in a tidy arrangement of SU(2) transformations. The method hinges only on a linear relationship between input and output states, and can thus be applied to a variety of scenarios, such as microwaves, acoustics, and quantum fields.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Linear optics constitutes an outstanding setting for information processing. The Knill-Laflamme-Milburn [1] protocol for scalable quantum computing, experimental boson sampling [2–5], or the generation of quantum random walks [6–11], are good examples of how the growing capabilities of fabrication technologies are transforming the field of quantum photonics [12]. In addition, these capabilities are altering classical areas, such as microwave photonics [13] or optical networking [14,15].

A basic ingredient for all these developments is the design of reconfigurable setups that can perform any linear operation. The influential work by Reck et al. [16], which can be traced back to the elegant results of Murnaghan [17], established that a specific array of basic two-mode operations is sufficient to implement any unitary in U(n). In this way, it is indeed possible to construct a single device with ample versatility to implement any possible unitary operation up to the specified number of modes. Recently, demonstrations of large-scale linear networks have appeared [18,19].

Continued interest in these universal processors for classical and quantum applications has led to new designs [20,21]. In particular, an intriguing proposal came out [22] requiring roughly half the optical depth of the original Reck et al. design [16]. This is important for minimizing optical losses and reducing fabrication resources.

We discuss here a decomposition of any n × n unitary in terms of two (n−1) × (n−1) unitaries coupling the same n−1 modes, and a single 2 × 2 unitary coupling one of those n−1 to the remaining mode [23]. The scheme is recursive; it can be halted at any dimensionality of subtransformations or performed in its end, resulting in a tidy arrangement of SU(2) gadgets. The structure is thus

\[ R^n(Ω) = R^{n-1}(Ω') R_{12}(α, β, α) R^{n-1}(Ω') \]  

This factorization is economical from a computational perspective: It requires the evaluation of fewer matrices than that of Reck et al. [16] and this advantage increases with n. This economy is particularly relevant as multiparticle scattering by large unitary arrays are now within the realm of experimental feasibility. Finally, with the transformations \( R^{n-1}(Ω) \) and \( R^{n-1}(Ω') \) in the same subgroup, the scheme is well adapted to calculations using the Gelfand-Tseitlin machinery [24–27].

We demonstrate the universality of the design and explain in detail some pertinent examples that reveal the directness of the procedure.

As a byproduct, the Haar measure of U(n) can easily be factorized according to our scheme. There is a fresh interest in realizing Haar random unitary matrices [28], because of the important role they play in various tasks for quantum cryptography [29] and quantum protocols [30]. From this viewpoint, our analysis, which is reminiscent of the ideas sketched in Ref. [23], might be instrumental for a simpler implementation of these operations [31,32].

Finally, it is important to note that, while our scheme is generally versatile, it applies to any n, and can be used for arbitrary representations of SU(n), there exist other algorithms in dimension 2^m (see, e.g., Refs. [33–35]) that achieve more efficient decompositions with respect to the quantum circuit model. Our decomposition does not improve on the bounds presented in this other work, but instead offers a convenient and experiment-driven parametrization that retains the same scaling with n regardless of the internal tensor-product structure of the system.

II. RECURSIVE FACTORIZATION OF UNITARY TRANSFORMATIONS

An ideal, lossless linear optical circuit with n input channels and n output channels performs an optical transformation which can be described by an n × n matrix; i.e., it belongs to the group U(n). We can always factor an overall phase to the group U(n) [17], which has \( n^2 - 1 \) independent parameters.
Our goal is to explore an intuitive factorization of SU(n) transformations, which is especially germane for our purposes here and has the additional advantage of being highly recursive. To be more precise, our method can be symbolically stated in the following way: Any $R^n(\Omega) \in \text{SU}(n)$ can be written as in Eq. (1), where $R^{n-1}(\Omega)$, $R^{n-1}(\Omega') \in \text{SU}(n-1)$. Here, $R_{ij}$ is a matrix of the form,

$$
R_{ij} = \begin{pmatrix}
1 & 0 & \cdots & \cdots & 0 \\
0 & 1 & \cdots & \cdots & 0 \\
\vdots & \ddots & \ddots & \ddots & \vdots \\
\vdots & \ddots & \ddots & \ddots & \ddots \\
\vdots & \ddots & \ddots & \ddots & 1 \\
0 & \cdots & \cdots & 0 & 1
\end{pmatrix},
$$

(2)
coupling adjacent modes $i$ and $j$ (with $j = i + 1$) via an SU(2) transformation $\mathcal{R}_{ij}(\alpha,\beta,\gamma)$ acting on them.

We recall that any $\mathcal{R}(\alpha,\beta,\gamma) \in \text{SU}(2)$, parametrized by the Euler angles, can be always written as

$$
\mathcal{R}(\alpha,\beta,\gamma) = \mathcal{R}_z(\alpha) \mathcal{R}_y(\beta) \mathcal{R}_z(\gamma) = \begin{pmatrix}
e^{i\alpha/2} & 0 \\
0 & e^{-i\alpha/2}
\end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix}
cos(\beta/2) & -\sin(\beta/2) \\
\sin(\beta/2) & \cos(\beta/2)
\end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix}
e^{i\gamma/2} & 0 \\
0 & e^{-i\gamma/2}
\end{pmatrix},
$$

(3)
where we follow the standard notation of Ref. [36]. This factorization is in turn a prescription for how to construct the SU(2) device: When the information is encoded in the polarization, a set of three wave plates is enough [37]; for path encoding, this can be mapped to a beam splitter of transmittance $\cos^2(\beta/2)$ and phase shift $\gamma$, plus a phase shifter that gives the required extra phase $\alpha$. The action of $R_{ij}$ can also be devised for more complex systems, such as ion traps [38] and superconducting circuits [39].

Let us illustrate our scheme in a constructive way, starting with the simplest case of SU(3). Of course, other parametrizations of SU(3) elements are possible [40–42], but one that is particularly useful [43] is a sequence of adjacent SU(2)$_{i+1}$ transformations mixing channels $i$ and $i+1$. More explicitly, with $R^3(\Omega) \in \text{SU}(3)$, we have

$$
R^3(\Omega) = R_{23}(\alpha_1,\beta_1,\gamma_1) R_{12}(\alpha_2,\beta_2,\alpha_2) R_{23}(\alpha_3,\beta_3,\gamma_3).
$$

(4)
The middle transformation in the sequence depends only on two parameters (so, it is just a pure beam splitter), and the whole $R^3(\Omega)$ depends on eight, as it should. This factorization is symbolically denoted by a sequence of 2 x 2 squares representing SU(2) transformations, as illustrated in Fig. 1. To lighten the notation, we write $R_{ij}(k)$ where $k$ denotes the number of parameters in the transformation. For example,

$$
R_{ij}(2) := R_{ij}(\alpha,\beta,\alpha), \quad R_{ij}(3) := R_{ij}(\alpha,\beta,\gamma)
$$

(5)
is used throughout. In addition, the parameters in the first and last $R_{23}$ operations are understood to be different even if this is not indicated in the boxes. For completeness we recall that finite transformations of the $R_{ij}$ type are obtained by exponentiation of generator matrix elements:

$$
R_{ij}(\alpha,\beta,\gamma) = e^{-i\frac{\pi}{2}(C_{ii} - C_{ij})} e^{-i\frac{\pi}{2}(C_{ij} - C_{jj})} e^{-i\frac{\pi}{2}(C_{ji} - C_{jj})},
$$

(6)
where $C_{ij}$, with $i, j = 1, \ldots, n$, are generators of U(n) mixing modes (ij) when $i \neq j$ or measuring the population i when $i = j$.

To proceed further, we next factorize an SU(4) matrix. We start with a 4 x 4 special unitary matrix $M$ which we write generically as

$$
M = \begin{pmatrix}
x & * & * & * \\
y & * & * & * \\
z & * & * & * \\
w & * & * & *
\end{pmatrix},
$$

(7)
Apply $R^{-1}_{34}(\alpha_1,\beta_1,\gamma_1)$ indicated in Eq. (2), namely

$$
R^{-1}_{34}(\alpha_1,\beta_1,\gamma_1) = \begin{pmatrix}1_{2\times 2} & 0_{2\times 2} \\ 0_{2\times 2} & \mathcal{R}^{-1}_{34}(\alpha_1,\beta_1,\gamma_1)\end{pmatrix}.
$$

(8)
Choose now the Euler angles as

$$
e^{-i\frac{\pi}{2}(\alpha_1 + \gamma_1)} \cos \left( \frac{i}{2} \beta_1 \right) = \frac{z}{\sqrt{1 - |x|^2 - |y|^2}},
e^{-i\frac{\pi}{2}(\alpha_1 - \gamma_1)} \sin \left( \frac{i}{2} \beta_1 \right) = \frac{w}{\sqrt{1 - |x|^2 - |y|^2}},
$$

(9)
to obtain

$$
R^{-1}_{34}(\alpha_1,\beta_1,\gamma_1) M = \begin{pmatrix}x & * & * & * \\
y & * & * & * \\
\sqrt{1 - |x|^2 - |y|^2} & * & * & * \\
0 & * & * & *
\end{pmatrix}.
$$

(10)
that is, we make a 0 appear at position (4,1). The second step
is to apply $R_{ij}^{-1}$ to make a 0 appear at position $(3, 1)$, and finally $R_{12}$ to produce a 0 in position $(2, 1)$:

$$
M = R_{12} R_{23}^{-1} R_{34} M = \begin{pmatrix}
1 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\
0 & * & * & * \\
0 & * & * & * \\
0 & * & * & *
\end{pmatrix}, \quad (11)
$$

$$
M = R_{13} R_{23}^{-1} R_{34} R_{12} \begin{pmatrix}
1 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\
0 & * & * & * \\
0 & * & * & * \\
0 & * & * & *
\end{pmatrix}, \quad (12)
$$

with the phases chosen so that 1 occurs in position $(1, 1)$. Since $\sum_{j=1}^{4} |a_{ij}|^2 = 1$ for any row of a unitary matrix, the last step also forces 0s on the first row. As all the $R_{ij}$s are unitary, the result of $R_{12}^{-1} R_{23}^{-1} R_{34}^{-1}$ acting on the original matrix is a $3 \times 3$ unitary submatrix, for which the original decomposition in Eq. (4) can be applied.

Parameter counting (after suitable relabeling of the modes) can be neatly understood graphically. First, consider an SU(4) transformation obtained from an SU(2) one of the type $R_{12}(\alpha, \beta, \alpha)$, sandwiched between two SU(3) transformations, as illustrated in Fig. 2. Each SU(3) transformation is of the type given in Fig. 1, and they are indicated by shaded squares.

Closer inspection of Fig. 2 shows that there are two adjacent $R_{34}$, joined by a red arrow, that commute with the middle $R_{12}$, as they mix completely disjoint channels. One can thus “push together” or combine these transformations, as they are of the same SU(2) type, so their combination is a single SU(2) matrix of the $R_{34}$ type. This is symbolically indicated by a box of different color. The resulting system is in a green shaded triangle, which represents just a full SU(3) transformation. The total number of parameters is 15, as it should be. Moreover, as a result of pushing together boxes, the partial SU(3) sequence $R_{23} R_{34}$ in Eq. (12) is an SU(3)/SU(2) transformation obtained from Eq. (4) by setting the second $R_{23}$ to 1.

We can now immediately generalize the scheme to construct an SU(5) transformation as an SU(2) sandwiched in between two SU(4) transformations, represented as green boxes (with 15 parameters) in Fig. 3. Again, boxes can be combined into a single SU(3) following the same pushing procedure. The final result is just a SU(4) transformation (indicated again by the shaded triangle) and the total number of parameters is 24. We have written a PYTHON software package capable of generating the entire set of parameters, which we make available online [44].

At this time it would be useful to compare our decomposition to other existing schemes. We recall that factorizations are representation independent: Even if a scheme is found using the fundamental $n \times n$ representation of SU($n$), it remains valid for any other representation of SU($n$). Any general SU($n$) transformation must also depend on $n^2 - 1$ parameters: The number of exponentiations in any scheme must always amount to $n^2 - 1$ else the transformation is not general.

In Fig. 4 we illustrate the designs of Reck et al. [16] and Clements et al. [22] for four modes. Both exclusively employ two-parameter SU(2) transformations; i.e., the mesh is made only of beam splitters. The single-mode phase shifts are programmed at the output of the channels. This is in contradistinction with our results displayed in Fig. 2.

The decomposition of Reck et al. [16] uses transformations on both adjacent and nonadjacent modes, for which the evaluation of $R_{ij}$ transformations for every possible $(ij)$ pair of the network is necessary. The scheme is recursive with SU($n - 1$) transformations easily identifiable as a subblock of the full SU($n$).
Our scheme is also recursive, but with the same type of SU(n−1) transformations appearing twice in Eq. (1), and mixes only adjacent modes. It achieves computational economy over Reck et al. [16] because some generators are used multiple times, so that fewer of them need to be computed. For instance, our SU(4) transformation uses a (34) block three times, (23) twice, and (12) once (in general, R_{i,i+1} is used i times so C_{i,i+1} and its transpose conjugate are used i times).

Then our scheme requires nine types of matrix elements: six of the type C_{34}, C_{43}, C_{23}, C_{32}, C_{22}, C_{33}, C_{44} for SU(3) transformations of modes (234), plus three more C_{12}, C_{21}, C_{11} for the SU(2) transformation of modes (12). Taking into account the fact that C_{ji} = C^\dagger_{ij}, this generalizes to n − 1 matrices of the type C_{i,i+1} and n diagonal matrices C_{ii} for SU(n). Reck et al., on the other hand, require the evaluation of three additional matrices for the nonadjacent transformations of the type R_{13}, R_{14}, or R_{24}, which entails the computation of \frac{1}{2}(n^2−n) generators of the C_{ij} type with j > i, and n diagonal matrices C_{ii} for SU(n). Our scheme thus saves the evaluation of\frac{1}{2}(n−1)(n−2) generators over Reck et al. [16], with the additional advantage that the associated scaling in the number of C_{i,i+1} needed is linear rather than polynomial. In fact one can see that, by reusing (i,i+1) blocks, our scheme minimizes the number of matrix elements to be computed, as one cannot construct a general transformation by using fewer types of blocks.

This economy becomes very relevant in large networks containing many particles, as the following pertinent example confirms. Consider the scattering of p indistinguishable photons by an n × n interferometer. This system, which is very popular in the context of boson sampling, is described by an (p^n−p−1)-dimensional representation of SU(n) obtained by exponentiating generators using the same factorization as the fundamental n × n representation, with each SU(n−1) a block diagonal submatrix. Thus for n = 9 and p = 5 [45], one must exponentiate a sequence of matrices of size 1287 × 1287. Permanents are entries of the full 1287 × 1287 matrix; i.e., D functions for this irreducible representation [46]. Whereas the decomposition of Reck et al. [16] (or its primal version by Murnaghan [23]) requires the evaluation of 36 nondiagonal C_{ij} with j > i, their transpose conjugates, and nine C_{ii}, our scheme requires the evaluation of only eight C_{i,i+1} matrices, their transpose conjugates, and nine C_{ii}. As the size of practical interferometers increases, the linear scaling of this scheme thus stands to offer substantial computational savings. For boson sampling, where the number of modes n is ideally expected to scale like the square of the number p of photons, the matrices of the symmetric representation are of size \sim 10^9 \times 10^5 for p = 5. Clearly, minimizing the number of C_{ii} to evaluate becomes an issue important from a resource and accuracy perspective.

Note that the factorization of Eq. (1) is also very natural as the canonical set of basis states, enumerated in terms of Gelfand’–Tsetlin patterns |(m)_n⟩, also follow the SU(n) \downarrow SU(n−1) subgroup chain [24–27]. Thus the group functions,

\langle (m)_n|R^{n−1}(\Omega)|R_{12}(a,\beta,\alpha)R^{n−1}(\Omega')|(m')_n⟩,

are naturally expressed as a sum of products of SU(n−1) \times SU(2) \times SU(n−1) group functions. A byproduct of this form is that the SU(n−1) subgroup transformations are block-diagonal in the Gelfand’–Tsetlin basis, a useful feature to check calculations.

The scheme of Clements et al. [22] has a different structure, corresponding instead to a rectangular mesh of beam splitters. One might expect the triangular scheme to be more resilient to losses in experiments in which only a small proportion of its input ports are accessed, whereas the rectangular scheme is likely to be beneficial for experiments that involve accessing most of its inputs.

Algorithmically, our scheme differs from the scheme of Clements et al. [22] in the order in which 0s are made to appear when working on the original matrix M. As a result (and by design), the scheme mixes channels “as early as possible” and achieves depth of n. In contradistinction our scheme mixes channels “as late as possible”: This is necessary to achieve the highly recursive factorization structure of Eq. (1), but the tradeoff is a scheme of depth 2n − 3, on par with Reck et al. [16].

This difference in optical depth is the reason why, in a simple loss model that assumes equal insertion loss for every beam splitter, Clements et al. [22] always has better performance. A careful analysis can be found in Ref. [22]. In other words, in Clements et al. [22] all the modes encounter roughly the same number of beam splitters; in the triangle, transformation R_{ij} occurs i times, then modes experiencing more beam splitters experience more loss and so the lower modes get more scrambled than those at the top of the triangle.

Finally, we stress that in our scheme the rightmost R^{n−1} transformation is a full subgroup transformation, while the leftmost is a partial subgroup transformation. Pushing and combining boxes show how an SU(n) device can be constructed from two SU(n−1) devices and a single SU(2) device. In this respect, it is worth mentioning that the recent interest in networks of multipart devices instead or beam splitters [47,48] makes our algorithm especially relevant, as we can decompose a unitary as coupled SU(d) devices, with d chosen at will. This makes the difference with the well-known decompositions of quantum gates [35,49,50].
III. RECURSIVE HAAR MEASURES

The recursive factorization in Eq. (1) also implies a recursive form of the Haar measure. We just briefly recall that a Haar measure is an invariant measure on the group manifold. It thus provides a natural probability distribution over the group, in the sense that it equally weighs different regions, thus behaving like a uniform distribution on SU(n). This is of utmost importance for the generation of statistical ensembles of unitary matrices [28], which is a useful tool in many fields of physics, as heralded in the Introduction.

For SU(2) we have

$$d\Omega_2 = \sin \beta d\beta d\alpha d\gamma.$$  \hspace{1cm} (14)

Simple application of the usual method yields [51] the SU(3) measure, namely,

$$d\Omega_3 = d\Omega_2(1) \left[ \sin \beta_2 \sin^2 \left(\frac{1}{2} \beta_2\right) d\alpha_2 d\beta_2 \right] d\Omega_2(3),$$  \hspace{1cm} (15)

with \(d\Omega_2(k) = \sin \beta_k d\beta_k d\alpha_k d\gamma_k\) an SU(2) measure.

For SU(4), we find

$$d\Omega_4 = d\Omega_3(1,2) \left[ \sin^2 \left(\frac{1}{2} \beta_3\right) \sin \beta_3 \right] d\Omega_3(4,5,6),$$  \hspace{1cm} (16)

where \(d\Omega_3(i,j,k)\) is an SU(3) measure of the arguments in parentheses and

$$d\Omega_3(1,2) = d\Omega_2(1) \left[ \sin \beta_2 \sin^2 \left(\frac{1}{2} \beta_2\right) d\alpha_2 d\beta_2 \right]$$  \hspace{1cm} (17)

is a coset measure, with fewer parameters compared to the full measure. The effect of combining \(R_{34}\) transformations by pushing an \(R_{34}\) transformation under \(R_{12}\), which we discussed in the previous section, results in the removal of one \(d\Omega_2\) factor in \(d\Omega_2(1,2)\).

In SU(5) we find

$$d\Omega_5 = d\Omega_4(1,2,3) \left[ \sin^6 \left(\frac{1}{2} \beta_4\right) \sin \beta_4 \right] d\Omega_4(5,6,7,8,9,10),$$  \hspace{1cm} (18)

with \(d\Omega_4\) and \(d\Omega_4(1,2,3)\) having the same meaning as before. The recursion steps to higher \(n\) are clear. Quite clearly the middle factor is conveniently found to be of the form,

$$\sin \beta_{n-1} \sin^{2(n-2)} \left(\frac{1}{2} \beta_{n-1}\right),$$  \hspace{1cm} (19)

with maximum at \(\cos \beta_{n-1} = -(n-2)/(n-1)\). This is in agreement with the result of [23] and other results obtained from different perspectives [32,52] and it is very useful in many instances, e.g., for the parametrization of the families of most probable matrices.

The parametrization of Eq. (1) and the examples above also neatly illustrate how to isolate from the full measure the coset measure \(d\Omega_{n-1}/\Omega(n-1)\): It is obtained by removing the full SU\((n-1)\) part containing \((n-1)^2 - 1\) factors from full measure. The usefulness of this coset measure comes from applications to coherent states [53]; these states “live” in the coset space SU\((n)/\Omega(n-1)\) so the coset measure is what is required for integration over these states.

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In conclusion, we have discussed the design for universal linear \(n \times n\) optical networks which arises very naturally by recycling as much as possible the elements already present in a network of size \((n-1) \times (n-1)\). Our algorithm decomposes unitary matrices into a sequence of unitary matrices of one dimension less, entangled by a beam splitter. We expect that our compact method will play an important role in the development of optical processors for both classical and quantum applications.

In a more technical context, our method allows one to write SU\((n)\) group functions in terms of SU\((n-1)\) group functions, thereby extending the result of Ref. [43] and the parametrization of coherent states in SU\((n)/\Omega(m)\) for arbitrary representations of SU\((n)\) when the highest weight state is U\((m)\) invariant. Work along these lines is now in progress.

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