Maximal Thurston-Bennequin Number of Two-Bridge Links

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Abstract We compute the maximal Thurston-Bennequin number for a Legendrian two-bridge knot or oriented two-bridge link in standard contact $\mathbb{R}^3$, by showing that the upper bound given by the Kauffman polynomial is sharp. As an application, we present a table of maximal Thurston-Bennequin numbers for prime knots with nine or fewer crossings.

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1 Introduction

A Legendrian knot or link in standard contact $\mathbb{R}^3$ is a knot or link which is everywhere tangent to the two-plane distribution induced by the contact one-form $dz - y\,dx$. Given either a Legendrian knot or an oriented Legendrian link, we may define its Thurston-Bennequin number, abbreviated $tb$, which is a Legendrian isotopy invariant; see, e.g., [1] or [6]. (Henceforth, we will use the word “link” to denote either a knot or an oriented link.) For a fixed smooth link type $K$, the set of possible Thurston-Bennequin numbers of Legendrian links in $\mathbb{R}^3$ isotopic to $K$ is bounded above; it is then natural to try to compute the maximum $\overline{tb}(K)$ of $tb$ over all such links. Note that we distinguish between a link and its mirror; $\overline{tb}$ is often different for the two.

Bennequin [1] proved the first upper bound on $\overline{tb}(K)$, in terms of the (three-ball) genus of $K$. Since then, other upper bounds have been found in terms of the HOMFLY and Kauffman polynomials of $K$. The strongest upper bound, in general, seems to be the Kauffman bound first discovered by Rudolph [11], with alternative proofs given by several authors; see [5] for a more detailed history of the subject.
Let $F_K(a, x)$ be the Kauffman polynomial of a link $K$, and let $\text{min-deg}_a$ denote the minimum degree in the framing variable $a$. With the normalizations of [6], the Kauffman bound states that

$$\overline{tb}(K) \leq \text{min-deg}_a F_K(a, x) - 1.$$ 

The Kauffman inequality is not sharp in general; see, e.g., [4, 5]. Sharpness has been established, however, for some small classes of knots, including positive knots [13], most torus knots [3, 4], and most three-stranded pretzel knots [9]. In this note, we will establish sharpness for a somewhat “larger” class of links, the 2-bridge (rational) links. (We remark that the HOMFLY bound is not sharp in general for this class.)

**Theorem 1** If $K$ is a 2-bridge link, then $\overline{tb}(K) = \text{min-deg}_a F_K(a, x) - 1$.

Theorem 1 will be proved in Section 2.

Recall that a 2-bridge link is any nontrivial link which admits a diagram with four vertical tangencies (two on the left, two on the right). This class of links includes many prime knots with a small number of crossings. More precisely, all prime knots with seven or fewer crossings are 2-bridge, as are all prime knots with eight or nine crossings except the following: $8_5, 8_{10}, 8_{15} - 8_{21}, 9_{16}, 9_{22}, 9_{24}, 9_{25}, 9_{28}, 9_{29}, 9_{30}$, and $9_{32} - 9_{49}$.

Hand-drawn examples by N. Yufa and the author [14] show that the Kauffman bound is sharp for all of the above non-2-bridge 8-crossing knots, except for $8_{19}$ (more precisely, the mirror image of the version drawn in [10]). Since $8_{19}$ is the $(4, -3)$ torus knot, a result of [4] yields $\overline{tb} = -12$ in this case, while the Kauffman bound gives $\overline{tb} \leq -11$. Inspection of the non-prime knots with eight or fewer crossings shows that the Kauffman bound is sharp for all such knots. We thus have the following result.

**Theorem 2** The Kauffman bound is sharp for all knots with eight or fewer crossings, except the $(4, -3)$ torus knot $8_{19}$.

Further drawings show that the Kauffman bound is sharp for all of the 9-crossing prime knots which are not 2-bridge, except possibly for $9_{42}$ (more precisely, the mirror of the $9_{42}$ diagram in [10]). For this last knot, we believe that $\overline{tb} = -5$, while Kauffman gives $\overline{tb} \leq -3$.

An appendix to this note provides a table of $\overline{tb}$ for prime knots with nine or fewer crossings. Note that this table improves on the one from [13], which
only considers one knot out of each mirror pair, and which does not achieve sharpness in a number of cases.

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## 2 Proof of Theorem 1

Let $K$ be a 2-bridge link; we first need to find a suitable Legendrian embedding of $K$. Say that a link diagram is in *rational form* if it is in the form $T(a_1, \ldots, a_n)$ illustrated by Figure 1 for some $a_1, \ldots, a_n$. Clearly any rational-form diagram corresponds to either the trivial knot or a 2-bridge link; by the classification of 2-bridge links [12], any 2-bridge link has a rational-form diagram.

![Figure 1: The rational-form diagram $T(a_1, \ldots, a_n)$. Each box contains the specified number of half-twists; positive and negative twists are shown.](image-url)
Figure 2: The correspondence between a diagram in Legendrian rational form (in this case, $T(2,2,3)$, or $5_2$) and the front of a Legendrian link of the same ambient type.

To each $T(a_1, \ldots, a_n)$, we may associate a rational number (or $\infty$), the continued fraction

$$[a_1, \ldots, a_n] = a_1 + \frac{1}{-a_2 + \frac{1}{a_3 - \frac{1}{a_4 + \cdots + \frac{1}{(-1)^{n-1}a_n}}}.$$ 

Note that our convention is the opposite of the convention in [8], and differs by alternating signs from the standard convention from, e.g., [2]. The classification of 2-bridge links further states that if $1/[a_1, \ldots, a_n] - 1/[b_1, \ldots, b_n] \in \mathbb{Z}$, then $T(a_1, \ldots, a_n)$ and $T(b_1, \ldots, b_n)$ are ambient isotopic. (The criterion stating precisely when two such links are isotopic is only slightly more complicated, but will not concern us here.)

Now define $T(a_1, \ldots, a_n)$ to be in Legendrian rational form if $a_i \geq 2$ for all $i$. Although $T(a_1, \ldots, a_n)$ corresponds to a Legendrian link whenever $a_i \geq 1$ for all $i$, it is crucial to the proof of Lemma 4 below that $a_i \geq 2$ for $2 \leq i \leq n-1$. Indeed, if one of these $a_i$ is 1, then it is straightforward to see, by drawing the front, that the resulting Legendrian link does not maximize Thurston-Bennequin number.

Any link diagram in Legendrian rational form is easily converted into the front (i.e., projection to the $xz$ plane) of a Legendrian link by replacing the four vertical tangencies by cusps; see Figure 2. Since the crossings in a front are resolved locally so that the strand with more negative slope always lies over
the strand with more positive slope, a link diagram in Legendrian rational form is ambient isotopic to the corresponding front. (This observation explains our choice of convention for positive versus negative twists.)

**Lemma 3** Any 2-bridge link can be expressed as a diagram in Legendrian rational form.

**Proof** Let $K$ be a 2-bridge link; let $T(a_1, \ldots, a_n)$ be a rational-form diagram for $K$, and write $[a_1, \ldots, a_n] = p/q$ for $p, q \in \mathbb{Z}$. The classification of 2-bridge links implies that $K$ is isotopic to any rational-form diagram associated to the fraction $r = p/(q - \lfloor q/p \rfloor p) > 1$. (If $q/p$ is an integer, then it is easy to see that $K$ is the trivial knot, which is not 2-bridge.)

Define a sequence $x_1, x_2, \ldots$ of rational numbers by $x_1 = r$, $x_{i+1} = 1/(\lfloor x_i \rfloor - x_i)$. This sequence terminates at, say, $x_m$, where $x_m$ is an integer. Write $b_i = \lfloor x_i \rfloor$. It is easy to see that $b_i \geq 2$ for all $i$, and that $r = [b_1, \ldots, b_m]$. Then $K$ is isotopic to $T(b_1, \ldots, b_m)$, which is in Legendrian rational form. □

Consider a link diagram $T = T(a_1, \ldots, a_n)$ in Legendrian rational form, and let $K$ be the (Legendrian link given by the) front obtained from $T$. We claim that the Thurston-Bennequin number of $K$ agrees precisely with the Kauffman bound. Recall that the Kauffman polynomial $F_T(a, x)$ of $T$ is $a^{w(T)}$ times the unoriented Kauffman polynomial (or L-polynomial) $L_T(a, x)$, where $w(T)$ is the writhe of the diagram $T$. (Here we use Kauffman’s original notation [7], except with $a$ replaced by $1/a$.)

We will need a matrix formula for $L_T(a, x)$ due to [8]. Write

$$M = \begin{pmatrix} 0 & -1 & 0 \\ 1/a & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 \\ \end{pmatrix}, \quad S = \begin{pmatrix} 0 & 0 & 1 \\ 1/a & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 \\ \end{pmatrix}, \quad v = \begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \\ \end{pmatrix}, \quad w = \begin{pmatrix} a \\ a^2 + 1/x - a \\ \end{pmatrix};$$

then

$$L_T(a_1, \ldots, a_n)(a, x) = \frac{1}{a} v^t M^{-a_1-1} S M^{-a_2-1} S \cdots M^{-a_{n-1}} S w,$$

where $t$ denotes transpose.

**Lemma 4** If $a_1, a_n \geq 1$ and $a_i \geq 2$ for $2 \leq i \leq n - 1$, then we have $\min \deg_a L_T(a_1, \ldots, a_n)(a, x) = -1$.

**Proof** None of $M^{-1}$, $M^{-1} S$, and $w$ contains negative powers of $a$; the lemma will be proved if we can show that $f(x) \neq 0$, where

$$f(x) = \left( v^t M^{-a_1}(M^{-1} S) M^{-a_2}(M^{-1} S) \cdots M^{-a_n}(M^{-1} S) w \right) \big|_{a=0}. $$
Define the auxiliary matrices
\[
A = M^{-1}|_{a=0} = \begin{pmatrix} 0 & 1 & 0 \\ -1 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 \end{pmatrix}, \quad B = (M^{-2}SM^{-1})|_{a=0} = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 & 0 \\ 2 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 \end{pmatrix}, \quad u = \begin{pmatrix} 0 \\ 1 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix}.
\]

Then \((ASw)|_{a=0} = 1\) and \(BAu\), and so
\[
f(x) = v^t A^{a_1} - 1 B A^{a_2} - 2 B A^{a_3} - 2 B \cdots A^{a_n} - 1 (ASw)|_{a=0} - 2 A^{a_n} u.
\]

But if we define a sequence of functions \(f_k(x) = v^t A^k u\), then an easy induction yields the recursion
\[
f_{k+2}(x) = xf_{k+1}(x) - f_k(x)\quad\text{with} \quad f_1(x) = 1\quad\text{and} \quad f_2(x) = x.
\]

In particular, for all \(k \geq 1\), \(f_k(x)\) has degree \(k - 1\) and is thus nonzero. From the given conditions on \(a_i\), it follows that \(f(x) \neq 0\), as desired.

**Proof of Theorem 1**  Let \(T\) be a Legendrian rational form for a 2-bridge link \(K\). The crossings of \(T\) are counted, with the same signs, by both the writhe of \(T\) and the Thurston-Bennequin number of the Legendrian link \(K'\) obtained from \(T\); \(tb(K')\), however, also subtracts half the number of cusps. Hence
\[
tb(K') = w(T) - 2 = (\min\deg_a F_T(a, x) - \min\deg_a L_T(a, x)) - 2 = \min\deg_a F_T(a, x) - 1
\]
by Lemma 4. Since \(K'\) is ambient isotopic to \(K\), we conclude that \(\overline{tb}(K)\) is at least \(\min\deg_a F_T(a, x) - 1\); by the Kauffman bound, equality must hold.

**Appendix: Maximal Thurston-Bennequin number for small knots**

The following table gives the maximal Thurston-Bennequin invariant for all prime knots with nine or fewer crossings. We distinguish between mirrors by using the diagrams in [10]: the knots \(K\) are the ones drawn in [10], with mirrors \(\tilde{K}\). A dagger next to a knot indicates that it is not two-bridge; a double dagger indicates that the knot is amphicheiral (identical to its unoriented mirror). For the interested reader, two-bridge descriptions of the two-bridge knots in the table can be deduced from the tables in [2].

The boldfaced numbers indicate the knots for which the Kauffman bound is not sharp (for \(8_{19}\), or probably not sharp (for \(9_{42}\)). As mentioned in the Introduction, it is believed that \(\overline{tb} = -5\) for the mirror \(9_{42}\) knot; the best known bound, however, is the Kauffman bound \(\overline{tb} \leq -3\).
### Maximal Thurston-Bennequin Number of Two-Bridge Links

| $K$ | $\overline{b}(K)$ | $\overline{b}(\tilde{K})$ | $K$ | $\overline{b}(K)$ | $\overline{b}(\tilde{K})$ | $K$ | $\overline{b}(K)$ | $\overline{b}(\tilde{K})$ |
|-----|------------------|------------------|-----|------------------|------------------|-----|------------------|------------------|
| $0_1$ | $-1$ | $\frac{3}{8}$ | $8_{15}$ | $-13$ | $3$ | $9_{22}$ | $-3$ | $-8$ |
| $3_1$ | $-6$ | $1$ | $8_{16}$ | $-8$ | $-2$ | $9_{23}$ | $-14$ | $3$ |
| $4_1$ | $-3$ | $\frac{5}{8}$ | $8_{17}$ | $-5$ | $\frac{1}{3}$ | $9_{24}$ | $-6$ | $-3$ |
| $5_1$ | $-10$ | $3$ | $8_{18}$ | $-5$ | $\frac{1}{3}$ | $9_{25}$ | $-10$ | $-1$ |
| $5_2$ | $-8$ | $1$ | $8_{19}$ | $5$ | $-12$ | $9_{26}$ | $-2$ | $-9$ |
| $6_1$ | $-5$ | $-3$ | $8_{20}$ | $-6$ | $-2$ | $9_{27}$ | $-6$ | $-5$ |
| $6_2$ | $-7$ | $-1$ | $8_{21}$ | $-9$ | $1$ | $9_{28}$ | $-9$ | $2$ |
| $6_3$ | $-4$ | $\frac{5}{8}$ | $9_1$ | $-18$ | $7$ | $9_{29}$ | $-8$ | $3$ |
| $7_1$ | $-14$ | $5$ | $9_2$ | $-12$ | $1$ | $9_{30}$ | $-6$ | $5$ |
| $7_2$ | $-10$ | $1$ | $9_3$ | $5$ | $-16$ | $9_{31}$ | $-9$ | $2$ |
| $7_3$ | $3$ | $-12$ | $9_4$ | $-14$ | $3$ | $9_{32}$ | $-2$ | $-9$ |
| $7_4$ | $1$ | $-10$ | $9_5$ | $1$ | $-12$ | $9_{33}$ | $-6$ | $5$ |
| $7_5$ | $-12$ | $3$ | $9_6$ | $-16$ | $5$ | $9_{34}$ | $-6$ | $5$ |
| $7_6$ | $-8$ | $-1$ | $9_7$ | $-14$ | $3$ | $9_{35}$ | $-12$ | $1$ |
| $7_7$ | $-4$ | $-5$ | $9_8$ | $-8$ | $-3$ | $9_{36}$ | $1$ | $-12$ |
| $8_1$ | $-7$ | $-3$ | $9_9$ | $-16$ | $5$ | $9_{37}$ | $-6$ | $5$ |
| $8_2$ | $-11$ | $1$ | $9_{10}$ | $3$ | $-14$ | $9_{38}$ | $-14$ | $3$ |
| $8_3$ | $-5$ | $\frac{5}{8}$ | $9_{11}$ | $1$ | $-12$ | $9_{39}$ | $-1$ | $-10$ |
| $8_4$ | $-7$ | $-3$ | $9_{12}$ | $-10$ | $-1$ | $9_{40}$ | $-9$ | $2$ |
| $8_5$ | $1$ | $-11$ | $9_{13}$ | $3$ | $-14$ | $9_{41}$ | $-7$ | $4$ |
| $8_6$ | $-9$ | $-1$ | $9_{14}$ | $-4$ | $-7$ | $9_{42}$ | $-3$ | $-10$ |
| $8_7$ | $-2$ | $-8$ | $9_{15}$ | $-10$ | $-1$ | $9_{43}$ | $1$ | $-10$ |
| $8_8$ | $-4$ | $-6$ | $9_{16}$ | $5$ | $-16$ | $9_{44}$ | $-6$ | $3$ |
| $8_9$ | $-5$ | $\frac{5}{8}$ | $9_{17}$ | $-8$ | $-3$ | $9_{45}$ | $-10$ | $1$ |
| $8_{10}$ | $-2$ | $-8$ | $9_{18}$ | $-14$ | $3$ | $9_{46}$ | $-7$ | $1$ |
| $8_{11}$ | $-9$ | $-1$ | $9_{19}$ | $-6$ | $-5$ | $9_{47}$ | $-2$ | $-7$ |
| $8_{12}$ | $-5$ | $\frac{5}{8}$ | $9_{20}$ | $-12$ | $1$ | $9_{48}$ | $-1$ | $-8$ |
| $8_{13}$ | $-4$ | $-6$ | $9_{21}$ | $-10$ | $-1$ | $9_{49}$ | $3$ | $-12$ |
| $8_{14}$ | $-9$ | $-1$ | | | | | | |

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