A Short Proof of the Rank Formula for Inclusion Matrices using the Representation Theory of the Symmetric Group

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Abstract

We present a new proof of the well known formula for the rank of the inclusion matrix by constructing a $kS_n$-module spanned by the columns of this matrix and calculating its dimension.

1 Introduction

The inclusion matrix, $A^n_i(m)$, where $i \leq n \leq m$, is the $\binom{m}{i} \times \binom{m}{n}$ matrix whose rows are indexed by subsets of $[m] := \{1, 2, \ldots, m\}$ of size $i$ and whose columns are indexed by subsets of $[m]$ of size $n$. The entry corresponding to position $X, Y$ is 1 if $X \subseteq Y$ and 0 otherwise. This matrix arises in a number of combinatorial investigations. Gottlieb proved that over a field of characteristic 0 this matrix has full rank [3]. Linial and Rothschild then determined a formula for the rank of this matrix over the field of two elements, as well the special case when $n = i + 1$ over the field of three elements [6]. Wilson solved the problem over any field by proving the following [7]:

**Theorem 1.** Let $k$ be a field of characteristic $p$ and suppose $i \leq \min\{n, m-n\}$. Then

$$\text{rank}_k(A^n_i(m)) = \sum_{p|\binom{n}{j}} \binom{m}{j} - \binom{m}{j-1},$$

where $\binom{m}{j}$ is interpreted as 0.

Wilson also gives a characterisation of those vectors which are in the $\mathbb{Z}$-span of the columns of $A^n_i(m)$. Another proof of Theorem 1 is given by Frankl [2]. Observe that there is nothing lost by the assumption that $i \leq \min\{n, m-n\}$, because $A^n_i(m)^T = A^{m-n}_{m-n}(m)$, and so this assumption shall be made throughout.

We shall give a new proof of Theorem 1 by constructing a $kS_n$-module spanned by the columns of $A^n_i(m)$ which, of course, has dimension $\text{rank}_k(A^n_i(m))$. This proof shall make use of the representation theory of the symmetric group, which we review in the next section. The reader is referred to James’ book [4], from which our notation is taken, for more details.
2 Representation Theory of $S_n$

Recall, a partition of an integer, $n > 0$, is a non-increasing sequence of positive integers $\lambda = (\lambda_1, \lambda_2, \ldots, \lambda_r)$ with $\sum_{i \geq 1} \lambda_i = n$. If $\lambda$ is a partition of $n$ we write $\lambda \vdash n$ and identify $\lambda$ with its corresponding Young diagram: a left justified array of boxes with $\lambda_i$ boxes in the $i$th row. Partitions of $n$ index a number of important classes of $kS_n$-modules; we shall now describe two such classes of modules: the permutation modules $M^\lambda$ and the Specht modules $S^\lambda$. To do so we will need some more combinatorial definitions.

Given a partition $\lambda$, we define a $\lambda$-tableau to be a bijection between the set $[n]$ and the boxes of (the Young diagram of) $\lambda$. We can define an equivalence relation $\sim_r$ on the set of $\lambda$-tableaux by calling $t$ and $s$ row-equivalent if the set of elements which appear in each row of $t$ and $s$ are the same. For example; the following two $(4,3,3,1)$-tableaux are row equivalent.

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 \\
5 & 6 & 7 &  \\
8 & 9 & 10 &  \\
11 & \\
\end{array} \sim_r \\
\begin{array}{cccc}
2 & 4 & 3 & 1 \\
6 & 5 & 7 &  \\
9 & 10 & 8 &  \\
11 & \\
\end{array}
\]

We call an equivalence class of $\lambda$-tableaux a $\lambda$-tabloid, and denote the tabloid corresponding to the tableaux $t$ by $\{t\}$, or by drawing the Young diagram without the vertical lines,

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 \\
5 & 6 & 7 &  \\
8 & 9 & 10 &  \\
11 & \\
\end{array}
\]

There is an obvious action of $S_n$ on both the sets of $\lambda$-tableaux and $\lambda$-tabloids, obtained by permuting the positions in which elements appear. Thus, the vector space consisting of formal sums of $\lambda$-tabloids is a $kS_n$-module, which we denote $M^\lambda$. Throughout this paper we shall only be interested in such a module when $\lambda$ is a two-part partition, that is $\lambda = (\lambda_1, \lambda_2)$, in which case we can identify the tabloid $\{t\}$ with the set of elements appearing in the second row of $\{t\}$. We then see that $M^{(m-i,i)}$ has a basis consisting of all the $i$ subsets $X \subseteq [m]$, that is subsets of size $i$. We shall frequently alternate between these two notations depending on notational convenience.

An important submodule of this permutation module $M^\lambda$ is the Specht module $S^\lambda$, which is spanned by the polytabloids in $M^\lambda$. We shall take a slightly unusual step here, and define the Specht module as a special case in a larger family of submodules. We will specialise here to two part partitions, but the general definitions can be found in James’ book [4].

Let $t$ be a $(m-i,i)$-tableau and let $j \leq i$. The $j$-column stabiliser of $t$, denoted $C_j(t)$ is the set of permutations that fix all but the first $j$ rows of $t$ and only permute elements that appear in the same column of $t$. In particular $C_j(t)$ is generated by the $j$ transpositions which swap an element of the first $j$ entries in the first row of $t$ with the element appearing below it.
The *j-column symmetriser* is the element of the group algebra

\[ \kappa_j(t) := \sum_{\sigma \in \mathcal{C}_j(t)} (-1)^\sigma \sigma, \]

and the *j-polytabloid* is

\[ e^j_t = \kappa_j(t)\{t\} \in M^{(m-i,i)}. \]

We define the \( kS_n \)-module \( S^{(m-i,j)}(m-i,i) \subseteq M^{(m-i,i)} \) to be the submodule spanned by the \( j \)-polytabloids. The Specht-module \( S^{(m-i,i)} \) is just the module obtained when \( j = i \). This gives us a chain of submodules

\[ M^{(m-i,i)} \supseteq S^{(m-i,1)}(m-i,i) \supseteq \cdots \supseteq S^{(m-i,i-1)}(m-i,i) \supseteq S^{(m-i,i)} \supseteq 0. \]

It can be shown that the successive quotients \( S^{(m-i,j)}(m-i,i)/S^{(m-i,j+1)}(m-i,i) \) are isomorphic as \( kS_n \)-modules to the Specht module \( S^{(m-j,j)} \), and so we write

\[ M^{(m-i,i)} \sim S^{(m-1,1)} \]

\[ \vdots \]

\[ S^{(m-i,i)} \]

to indicate that \( M^{(m-i,i)} \) has a chain of submodules whose successive quotients are \( S^{(m)}, S^{(m-1,1)}, \ldots, S^{(m-i,i-1)} \) and \( S^{(m-i,i)} \). To see that these quotients are indeed the Specht modules we follow [5] and define a \( kS_n \)-homomorphism

\[ \psi_j : M^{(m-i,i)} \rightarrow M^{(m-j,j)} \]

by

\[ \psi_j(X) = \sum_{Z \subseteq_j X} \sigma, \]

for \( X \subseteq_i [m] \). In the notation of tabloids

\[ \psi_j(\{t\}) = \sum_{\{s\}} \{s\}, \]

where the sum is over all the \( (m-j,j) \)-tabloids \( \{s\} \) whose second row is a subset of the second row of \( \{t\} \).

**Proposition 2.** Let \( t \) be an \( (m-i,i) \)-tableau and \( e^j_t \) its \( j \)-polytabloid. Let \( k < j \leq i \) then

\[ \psi_k(e^j_t) = 0, \]

while

\[ \psi_j(e^j_t) = e_{t'}^j, \]

where \( t' \) is the \( (m-j,j) \)-tableau obtained from \( t \) by moving the last \( i-j \) entries in the bottom row to the end of the top row.
Proof.

\[
\psi_k(e^j_t) = \psi_k(\kappa_j(t)\{t\}) \\
= \psi_k\left( \sum_{\sigma \in C_j(t)} (-1)^\sigma \sigma\{t\} \right) \\
= \sum_{\sigma \in C_j(t)} (-1)^\sigma \sigma\psi_k(\{t\}) \\
= \sum_{\sigma \in C_j(t)} (-1)^\sigma \sigma \sum_{\{s\}} \{s\},
\]

where the second sum is over all \((m - k, k)\)-tabloids, \(\{s\}\), whose second row is a subset of the second row of \(\{t\}\). As \(k < j\) then some element in the first \(j\) entries of the second row of \(t\) must lie in the top row of \(\{s\}\), and there must be a transposition \(\sigma \in C_j(t)\) fixing \(\{s\}\). The terms involving this transposition and the terms not involving this transposition have opposite signs, and cancel, thus

\[
\psi_k(e^j_t) = 0.
\]

Similarly

\[
\psi_j(e^i_t) = \sum_{\sigma \in C_j(t)} (-1)^\sigma \sigma \sum_{\{s\}} \{s\},
\]

with cancellation for any \(\{s\}\) for which one of the first \(j\) elements of the second row of \(t\) appears in the first row. Therefore

\[
\psi_j(e^i_t) = \sum_{\sigma \in C_j(t)} (-1)^\sigma \sigma \{t'\} \\
= \sum_{\sigma \in C_j(t')} (-1)^\sigma \sigma \{t'\} \\
= e^j_t.
\]

\[
\square
\]

So, when restricted to \(S^{(m-i,j)}(m-i) \subseteq M^{(m-i)}\) the image of \(\psi_j\) is isomorphic to \(S^{(m-j,j)}\) and its kernel is \(S^{(m-i,j)}(m-i)\). This gives an alternative characterisation of \(S^{(m-i,j)}(m-i)\) as:

\[
S^{(m-i,j)}(m-i) = \cap_{k=0}^{j-1} (\ker(\psi_k : M^{(m-i,i)} \to M^{(m-k,k)})).
\]

To prove Theorem 3 in the next section we will identify a submodule of \(M^{(m-i,i)}\) and study its images under this map. We shall conclude this section by stating a special case of the famous hook length formula [1], which gives the dimension of a Specht module.

**Theorem 3.** Let \(k\) be a field.

\[
\dim S^{(m-j,j)} = \binom{m}{j} - \binom{m}{j-1},
\]

4
where $\binom{m}{1} = 0$.

The astute reader will have noticed that is the term which appears in the formula in Theorem 1.

3 Proof of Theorem 1

The rows of the inclusion matrix $A_n^i(m)$ are indexed by the $i$ subsets of $[m]$, which is naturally the basis for the $kS_m$-module $M^{(m-i,i)}$. The columns of span a submodule of $M^{(m-i,i)}$ of dimension $\text{rank}_k(M^{(m-i,i)})$. We shall denote this submodule by $P_n^i(m)$. Our analysis of $M^{(m-i,i)}$ in the previous section gives rise to a chain of submodules

$$P_n^i(m) \supseteq P_n^i(m)_1 \supseteq P_n^i(m)_2 \supseteq \cdots \supseteq P_n^i(m)_i \supseteq 0,$$

where $P_n^i(m)_j := P_n^i(m) \cap S^{(m-j,j)(m-i,i)}$. This shows that

$$P_n^i(m) \cong L^{(m)} L^{(m-1,1)} \cdots L^{(m-i,i)},$$

where each $L^{(m-j,j)}$ is some submodule of $S^{(m-j,j)}$. In particular, $L^{(m-j,j)}$ is the image of $P_n^i(m)_j$ under the map $\psi_j : M^{(m-i,i)} \to M^{(m-j,j)}$.

Observe that the columns of the matrix $A_n^i(m)$ correspond to the images of the $n$-subsets of $[m]$ under the homomorphism $\psi_i : M^{(m-n,n)} \to M^{(m-i,i)}$. The module $P_n^i(m)$ is thus the image of $\psi_i : M^{(m-n,n)} \to M^{(m-i,i)}$. Observe that although $(m-n,n)$ may not be a partition, we can still define the permutation module $M^{(m-n,n)}$, and we can also define $j$-polytabloids for any $j < \min\{m-n,n\}$. Denote by $x \in P_n^i(m)$ the image of the $j$-polytabloid corresponding to a $(m-n,n)$-tableau $t$, for $j \leq i$. Our assumption from the introduction that $i < \min\{m-n,n\}$ ensures that this $j$-polytabloid is well-defined.

$$x = \psi_i(e^j_t) = \sum_{\sigma \in C_t(i)} (-1)^\sigma \sum_{\{s\}} \{s\}$$

where the second sum is over all $(m-i,i)$-tabloids, $\{s\}$, whose second row is a subset of the second row of $\{t\}$. Of course we have cancellation of any terms for which the first $j$ entries from the second row of $t$ do not appear in the second row of $\{s\}$, so the sum is over all $(m-i,i)$-tabloids whose second row is a subset of the second row of $\{t\}$ of size $i$ containing these first $j$ entries. Observe then that

$$x = \sum_{s} e^j_s.$$
where the sum is over all \((m - i, i)\)-tableaux obtained by moving \(n - i\) of the last \(n - j\) entries of the second row of \(t\) to the top row. As \(x\) is a sum of \(j\)-polytabloids, \(x \in S^{(n - i, j)(m - i, i)}\) and thus \(x \in P^m_i(m)\), and so its image under \(\psi_j\) is in \(L^{(m-j,j)}\).

**Proposition 4.** If \(p \nmid \binom{n-j}{i-j}\) then \(L^{(m-j,j)} = S^{(m-j,j)}\).

**Proof.** Let \(x = \sum s \cdot e^j_s\) as above. Then, by Proposition 2,

\[
\psi_j(x) = \psi_j \left( \sum s \cdot e^j_s \right) = \sum s \cdot e^j_{s'},
\]

where \(s'\) is the \((m - j, j)\)-tableau obtained from \(s\) by moving the last \(i - j\) entries of the bottom row to the top row. Each term is equal, and the sum is over all \((m - i, i)\)-tableaux obtained by moving \(n - i\) of the last \(n - j\) entries of the second row of \(t\) to the top row, of which there are \(\binom{n-j}{i-j}\). Thus

\[
\psi_j(x) = \binom{n-j}{i-j} e^j_{s'},
\]

and hence \(e^j_{s'} \in L^{(m-j,j)}\). In fact, this shows that any \(j\)-polytabloid is in \(L^{(m-j,j)}\) and thus \(L^{(m-j,j)} = S^{(m-j,j)}\).

**Proof of Theorem 1.** Consider the image of \(P^m_i(m)\) under the map \(\psi_j\), which is a submodule \(L^{(m-j,j)} \subseteq S^{(m-j,j)}\). By Proposition 3 if \(p \nmid \binom{n-j}{i-j}\) then \(L^{(m-j,j)} = S^{(m-j,j)}\). On the other hand, if \(p \mid \binom{n-j}{i-j}\) then for any column \(y = \psi_i(Y)\) of \(A^m_i(m)\),

\[
\psi_j(y) = \sum_{X \subseteq Y} \psi_j(X) = \sum_{X \subseteq Y} \sum_{Z \subseteq X} Z = \sum_{Z \subseteq Y} \binom{n-j}{i-j} Z = 0.
\]

This means that \(\psi_j\) is the zero map on \(P^m_i(m)\), thus \(L^{(m-j,j)} = 0\). We conclude that

\[
P^m_i(m) \sim \frac{L^{(m)}}{L^{(m-1,1)}} \otimes \cdots \otimes \frac{L^{(m-i,i)}}{L^{(m-i,i)}},
\]
with
\[ L^{(m-j,i)} = \begin{cases} 
0 & \text{if } p \mid \binom{n-j}{i-j}, \\
S^{(m-j,i)} & \text{if } p \nmid \binom{n-j}{i-j}. 
\end{cases} \]

The dimension of this module is then:
\[
\dim_k(P^n(m)) = \sum_{j=0}^{m} \dim_k(L^{(m-j,i)})
= \sum_{p \mid \binom{n-j}{i-j}} \dim_k(S^{(m-j,i)})
= \sum_{p \mid \binom{n-j}{i-j}} \binom{m}{j} - \binom{m}{j-1},
\]
where the last equality is due to Theorem 3. The rank of the inclusion matrix \( A^n_t(m) \) over \( k \) is the dimension of the \( kS_n \)-module \( P^n_t(m) \), thus proving the result.

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