On $\text{FO}^2$ quantifier alternation over words

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\textbf{Abstract.} We show that each level of the quantifier alternation hierarchy within $\text{FO}^2[\prec]$ on words is a variety of languages. We use the notion of condensed rankers, a refinement of the rankers defined by Weis and Immerman, to produce a decidable hierarchy of varieties which is interwoven with the quantifier alternation hierarchy – and conjecturally equal to it. It follows that the latter hierarchy is decidable within one unit, a much more precise result than what is known about the quantifier alternation hierarchy within $\text{FO}[\prec]$, where no decidability result is known beyond the very first levels.

First-order logic is an important object of study in connection with computer science and language theory, not least because many important and natural problems are first-order definable: our understanding of the expressive power of this logic and the efficiency of the solution of related algorithmic problems are of direct interest in such fields as verification. Here, by first-order logic, we mean the first-order logic of the linear order, $\text{FO}[\prec]$, interpreted on finite words.

In this context, there has been continued interest in fragments of first-order logic, defined by the limitation of certain resources, e.g. the quantifier alternation hierarchy (which is closely related with the dot-depth hierarchy of star-free languages). It is still an open problem whether each level of this hierarchy is decidable. Another natural restriction concerns the number of variables used (and re-used!) in a formula. It is interesting, notably because the trade-off between formula size and number of variables is known to be related with the trade-off between parallel time and number of processes, see [18, 5, 1, 4].

In this paper, we concentrate on $\text{FO}^2[\prec]$, the 2-variable fragment of $\text{FO}[\prec]$. It is well-known that every $\text{FO}[\prec]$-formula is logically equivalent with a formula using only 3 variables, but that $\text{FO}^2[\prec]$ is properly less expressive than $\text{FO}[\prec]$. The expressive power of $\text{FO}^2[\prec]$ was characterized in many interesting fashions (see [12, 14, 15, 3]), and in particular, we know how to decide whether an $\text{FO}[\prec]$-formula is equivalent to one in $\text{FO}^2[\prec]$. 

$^*$ Both authors acknowledge support from the ANR project DOTS, the ESF program AUTO MATHA and the Indo-French P2R project MODISTE-COVER.

$^4$ On the other hand, the quantifier alternation hierarchy collapses at level 2 for the first-order logic of the successor $\text{FO}[S]$ [16, 9].
A recent result of Weis and Immerman refined a result of Schwentick, Thérien and Vollmer [12] to give a combinatorial description of the \( \text{FO}^2_m[<] \) definable languages (those that can be defined by an \( \text{FO}^2_m[<] \) formula with quantifier alternation bounded above by \( m \)), using the notion of rankers. Rankers are finite sequences of instructions of the form \text{go to the next a-position to the right (resp. left)} of the current position.

Our first set of results shows that \( \text{FO}^2_m \) (the \( \text{FO}^2_m[<] \)-definable languages), and the classes of languages defined by rankers having \( m \) alternations of directions (right vs. left), are varieties of languages. This means that membership of a language \( L \) in these classes depends only on the syntactic monoid of \( L \), which justifies an algebraic approach of decidability.

Our investigation shows that rankers are actually better suited to characterize a natural hierarchy within unary temporal logic, and we introduce the new notion of a condensed ranker, that is more adapted to discuss the quantifier alternation hierarchy within \( \text{FO}^2[<] \). There again, the alternation of directions in rankers defines hierarchies of varieties of languages \( R_m \) and \( L_m \), with particularly interesting properties. Indeed, we show that these varieties are decidable, that they admit a neat characterization in terms of closure under deterministic and co-deterministic products, and that \( R_m \cup L_m \subseteq \text{FO}^2_m \subseteq R_{m+1} \cap L_{m+1} \). The latter containments show that we can effectively compute, given a language \( L \in \text{FO}^2 \), an integer \( m \) such that \( L \) is in \( \text{FO}^2_{m+1} \) (possibly in \( \text{FO}^2_m \)), but not in \( \text{FO}^2_{m-1} \). This is much more precise than the current level of knowledge on the general quantifier alternation hierarchy in \( \text{FO}[<] \).

1 An algebraic approach to study \( \text{FO}^2_m \)

If \( u \in A^+ \) is a non-empty word, we denote by \( u[i] \) the letter of \( u \) in position \( i \) \((1 \leq i \leq |u|)\), and by \( u[i, j] \) the factor \( u[i] \cdots u[j] \) of \( u \) \((1 \leq i \leq j \leq |u|)\). Then we identify the word \( u \) with the logical structure \((\{1, \ldots, |u|\}, (a)_{a \in A})\), where \( a \) denotes the set of integers \( i \) such that \( u[i] = a \).

Let \( \text{FO}[<] \) (resp. \( \text{FO}^k[<], k \geq 0 \)) denote the set of first-order formulas using the unary predicates \( a \) \((a \in A)\) and the binary predicate \(<\) (resp. and at most \( k \) variable symbols). It is well-known that \( \text{FO}^3[<] \) is as expressive as \( \text{FO}[<] \) and that \( \text{FO}^2[<] \) is properly less expressive.

In the sequel, we omit the predicate \(<\) and we write simply \( \text{FO}^k \). The classes of \( \text{FO} \) and \( \text{FO}^2 \) definable languages have well-known beautiful characterizations [12, 14, 15, 3]. Two are of particular interest in this paper.

- The algebraic characterization in terms of recognizing monoids: a language is \( \text{FO} \)-definable if and only if it is recognized by a finite aperiodic monoid, i.e., one in which \( x^n = x^{n+1} \) for each element \( x \) and for all \( n \) large enough (Schützenberger and McNaughton-Ladner, see [13]); and a language is \( \text{FO}^2 \)-definable if and only if it is recognized by a finite monoid in \( \text{DA} \) (see [14, 3]), a class of monoids with

\[5\] Unfortunately, it cannot help directly with the general problem since a language \( L \) is \( \text{FO}^2[<] \)-definable if and only if \( L \) and its complement are \( \Sigma_2 \)-definable [11].
many interesting characterizations, which will be discussed later. These algebraic
characterizations prove the decidability of the corresponding classes of languages:
L is FO (resp. \( \text{FO}^2 \))-definable if and only if the (effectively computable) syntactic
monoid of L is in the (decidable) class of aperiodic monoids (resp. in DA).

- The language-theoretic characterization: a language is \( \text{FO} \)-definable if and
only if it is star-free, i.e., it can be obtained from singletons using Boolean
operations and concatenation products (Schützenberger, see [8]); a language is
\( \text{FO}^2 \)-definable if and only if it can be written as the disjoint union of unambiguous
products of the form \( B_0^* a_1 B_1^* \cdots a_k B_k^* \); where \( k \geq 0 \), the \( a_i \) are letters and
the \( B_i \) are subsets of the alphabet. Such a product is called unambiguous
if each word \( u \in B_0^* a_1 B_1^* \cdots a_k B_k^* \) admits a unique factorization in the form \( u =
\nu_0 a_1 u_1 \cdots a_k u_k \) such that \( u_i \in B_i^* \) for each \( i \).

We now concentrate on \( \text{FO}^2 \)-formulas and we define two important param-
eters concerning such formulas. To simplify matters, we consider only formulas
where negation is used only on atomic formulas so that, in particular, no quan-
tifier is negated. This is naturally possible up to logical equivalence. Now, with
each formula \( \varphi \in \text{FO}^2 \), we associate in the natural way a parse tree: each occur-
rence of a quantification, \( \exists x \) or \( \forall x \), yields a unary node, each occurrence of \( \lor \)
or \( \land \) yields a binary node, and the leaves are labeled with atomic or negated atomic
formulas. Each path from root to leaf in this parse tree has a quantifier label,
which is the sequence of quantifier node labels (\( \exists \) or \( \forall \)) encountered along this
path. A block in this quantifier label is a maximal factor consisting only of \( \exists \) or
only of \( \forall \). The quantifier depth of \( \varphi \) is the maximum length of the quantifier label of a path in the parse tree of \( \varphi \), and the number of blocks of \( \varphi \) is the maximum
number of blocks in the quantifier label of a path in its parse tree.

We let \( \text{FO}^2_{m,n} \) denote the set of first-order formulas with quantifier depth at
most \( n \) and with at most \( m \) blocks and let \( \text{FO}^2_m \) denote the union of the \( \text{FO}^2_{m,n} \) for
all \( n \). We also denote by \( \mathcal{FO}^2 (\mathcal{FO}^2_m) \) the class of \( \text{FO}^2 \) (\( \text{FO}^2_m \))-definable languages.
Weis and Immerman’s characterization of the expressive power of \( \text{FO}^2_{m,n}[<] \) in
terms of rankers [18], see Thm. 1.2 below, forms the basis of our own results.

1.1 Rankers and logic

A ranker [18] is a non-empty word on the alphabet \( \{X_a, Y_a \mid a \in A\} \).\(^6\) Rankers
may define positions in words: given a word \( u \in A^+ \) and a letter \( a \in A \), we
denote by \( X_a(u) \) (resp. \( Y_a(u) \)) the least (resp. greatest) integer \( 1 \leq i \leq |u| \) such
that \( u[i] = a \). If \( a \) does not occur in \( u \), we say that \( Y_a(u) \) and \( X_a(u) \) are not
defined. If in addition \( q \) is an integer such that \( 1 \leq q \leq |u| \), we let

\[
X_a(u, q) = X_a(u[q + 1, |u|]) \\
Y_a(u, q) = Y_a(u[1, q - 1]).
\]

\(^6\) Weis and Immerman write \( \triangleright_a \) and \( \triangleleft_a \) instead of \( X_a \) and \( Y_a \). We rather follow the
notation in [3], where \( X \) and \( Y \) refer to the future and past operators of LTL.
These definitions are extended to all rankers: if \( r' \) is a ranker, \( Z \in \{ X_a, Y_a \mid a \in A \} \) and \( r = r'Z \), we let \( r(u, q) = Z(u, r'(u, q)) \) if \( r'(u, q) \) and \( Z(u, r'(u, q)) \) are defined, and we say that \( r(u, q) \) is undefined otherwise.

Finally, if \( r \) starts with an \( X- \) (resp. \( Y- \)) letter, we say that \( r \) defines the position \( r(u) = r(u, 0) \) (resp. \( r(u) = r(u, \lceil |u| + 1 \rceil) \)), or that it is undefined on \( u \) if this position does not exist. Then \( L(r) \) is the language of all words on which \( r \) is defined. We say that the words \( u \) and \( v \) agree on a class \( R \) of rankers if exactly the same rankers from \( R \) are defined on \( u \) and \( v \).

Rankers can be seen as sequences of directional instructions: go to the next \( a \) to the right, resp. to the left. We classify them by the number of instructions and by the number of changes of direction. The depth of a ranker \( r \) is defined to be its length (as a word). A block in \( r \) is a maximal factor in \( \{ X_a \mid a \in A \}^+ \) (an \( X \)-block) or in \( \{ Y_a \mid a \in A \}^+ \) (a \( Y \)-block). If \( n \geq m \), we denote by \( R_{m,n}^X \) (resp. \( R_{m,n}^Y \)) the set of \( m \)-blocks, \( n \) rankers, starting with an \( X \)-(resp. \( Y \)-) block, and we let \( R_{m,n} = R_{m,n}^X \cup R_{m,n}^Y \) and \( R_m^X = \bigcup_{n \leq m} R_{m,n}^X \) and \( R_m^Y = \bigcup_{n \leq m} R_{m,n}^Y \).

We define \( R_{m,n}^Y \) dually and we let \( R_m^X = \bigcup_{n \geq m} R_{m,n}^X \) and \( R_m^Y = \bigcup_{n \geq m} R_{m,n}^Y \).

### Rankers and temporal logic

Let us depart for a moment from the consideration of \( \text{FO}^2 \)-formulas, to observe that rankers are naturally suited to describe the different levels of a natural class of temporal logic. The symbols \( X_a \) and \( Y_a \) (\( a \in A \)) can be seen as modal (temporal) operators, with the future and past semantics respectively. We denote the resulting temporal logic (known as unary temporal logic) by \( \text{TL} \): its only atomic formula is \( \top \), the other formulas are built using Boolean connectives and modal operators. Let \( u \in A^+ \) and let \( 0 \leq i \leq |u| + 1 \). We say that \( \top \) holds at every position \( i \), \( (u, i) \models \top \); Boolean connectives are interpreted as usual; and \( (u, i) \models X_a \varphi \) (resp. \( Y_a \varphi \)) if and only if \( (u, j) \models \varphi \), where \( j \) is the least \( a \)-position such that \( i < j \) (resp. the greatest \( a \)-position such that \( j < i \)). We also say that \( u \models X_a \varphi \) (resp. \( Y_a \varphi \)) if \( (u, 0) \models X_a \varphi \) (resp. \( (u, 1 + |u|) \models Y_a \varphi \)).

\( \text{TL} \) is a fragment of propositional temporal logic \( \text{PTL} \); the latter is expressively equivalent to \( \text{FO} \) and \( \text{TL} \) is expressively equivalent to \( \text{FO}^2 \), see [14].

As in the case of \( \text{FO}^2 \)-formulas, one may consider the parse tree of a \( \text{TL} \)-formula and define inductively its depth and number of alternations (between past and future operators). If \( n \geq m \), the fragment \( \text{TL}_{m,n}^X \) (resp. \( \text{TL}_{m,n}^Y \)) consists of the \( \text{TL} \)-formulas with depth \( n \) and with \( m \) alternations, in which every branch (of the parse tree) with exactly \( m \) alternations starts with future (resp. past) operators. The fragments \( \text{TL}_{m,n}, \text{TL}_{m,n}^X, \text{TL}_{m,n}^Y, \text{TL}_{m}^X, \text{TL}_{m}^Y \) and \( \text{TL}_{m} \) are defined according to the same pattern as in the definition of \( R_{m,n}^X, R_{m,n}^Y, R_m^X, R_m^Y \) and \( R_m \). We also denote by \( \text{TL}_{m,n}^X \) (\( \text{TL}_{m}, \text{TL}_{m}^X, \text{TL}_{m}^Y \), etc) the class of \( \text{TL}_{m,n} \) (\( \text{TL}_{m} \), \( \text{TL}_{m}^X \), \( \text{TL}_{m}^Y \), etc)-definable languages. The following result is elementary.

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7 Readers familiar with [18] may notice a small difference between our \( R_{m,n}^X \) and their analogous \( R_{m,n}^X \); introduced for technical reasons, it creates no difference between \( R_{m,n} \) and \( R_{m,n}^X \), the classes which intervene in crucial Thm. 1.2 below.
Proposition 1.1. Let $1 \leq m \leq n$. Two words satisfy the same $\text{TL}^X_{m,n}$ formulas if and only if they agree on rankers from $R^X_{m,n}$. A language is in $\text{TL}^X_{m,n}$ if and only if it is a Boolean combination of languages of the form $L(r)$, $r \in R^X_{m,n}$.

Similar statements hold for $\text{TL}^Y_{m,n}$, $\text{TL}^X_{m,n}$, $\text{TL}^X_{m,n}$, $\text{TL}^Y_{m,n}$, $\text{TL}^X_{m,n}$, and $\text{TL}_{m,n}$, relative to the corresponding classes of rankers.

Rankers and $\text{FO}^2$ The connection established by Weis and Immerman [18] between rankers and formulas in $\text{FO}^2_{m,n}$, Thm. 1.2 below, is deeper. If $x, y$ are integers, we let $\text{ord}(x, y)$, the order type of $x$ and $y$, be one of the symbols $<$, $>$ or $=$, depending on whether $x < y$, $x > y$ or $x = y$.

Theorem 1.2. Let $u, v \in A^*$ and let $1 \leq m \leq n$. Then $u$ and $v$ satisfy the same formulas in $\text{FO}^2_{m,n}$ if and only if

(WI 1) $u$ and $v$ agree on rankers from $R_{m,n}$,
(WI 2) if the rankers $r \in R_{m,n}$ and $r' \in R_{m-1,n-1}$ are defined on $u$ and $v$, then $\text{ord}(r(u), r'(u)) = \text{ord}(r(v), r'(v))$.
(WI 3) if $r \in R_{m,n}$ and $r' \in R_{m,n-1}$ are defined on $u$ and $v$ and end with different direction letters, then $\text{ord}(r(u), r'(u)) = \text{ord}(r(v), r'(v))$.

Corollary 1.3. For each $n \geq m \geq 1$, $\text{TL}^X_{m,n} \subseteq \text{FO}^2_{m,n}$ and $\text{TL}^X_{m} \subseteq \text{FO}^2_{m}$.

$\text{FO}^2_{m}$ and $\text{TL}^X_{m}$-definable languages form varieties Our first result is the following. We refer the reader to [8] and to Section 1.2 below for background and discussion on varieties of languages.

Proposition 1.4. For each $n \geq m \geq 1$, the classes $\text{TL}^X_{m,n}$, $\text{TL}^Y_{m,n}$, $\text{TL}^Y_{m}$, $\text{TL}^X_{m}$, $\text{TL}^X_{m,n}$, $\text{TL}^X_{m}$, $\text{FO}^2_{m,n}$ and $\text{FO}^2_{m}$ are varieties of languages.

Sketch of proof. Let $\rho_{m,n}$ be the relation for two words to agree on $\text{TL}^X_{m,n}$-formulas. Using Prop. 1.1, one verifies that $\rho_{m,n}$ is a finite index congruence. Then a language is $\text{TL}^X_{m,n}$-definable if and only if it is a union of $\rho_{m,n}$-classes, if and only if it is recognized by the finite monoid $A^*/\rho_{m,n}$. It follows that these languages are exactly those accepted by the monoids in the pseudovariety generated by the $A^*/\rho_{m,n}$, for all finite alphabets $A$, and hence they form a variety of languages. $\text{TL}^X_{m}$, being the increasing union of the $\text{TL}^X_{m,n}$ ($n \geq m$), is a variety as well.

The proof for the other fragments of $\text{TL}$ is similar. For the fragments of $\text{FO}^2$, we use Thm. 1.2 instead of Prop. 1.1.

This result shows that, for a given regular language $L$, $\text{TL}^X_{m,n}$ (resp. $\text{TL}_{m,n}$, $\text{FO}^2_{m,n}$, etc) definability is characterized algebraically, that is, it depends only on the syntactic monoid of $L$. This justifies using the algebraic path to tackle decidability of these definability problems. Eilenberg’s theory of varieties provides the mathematical framework.
1.2 A short survey on varieties and pseudovarieties

We summarize in this section the information on monoid and variety theory that will be relevant for our purpose, see [8, 2, 14, 15] for more details.

A language \( L \subseteq A^* \) is recognized by a monoid \( M \) if there exists a morphism \( \varphi : A^* \to M \) such that \( L = \varphi^{-1}(\varphi(L)) \). For instance, if \( u \in A^* \) and \( B \subseteq A \), let \( \text{alph}(u) = \{ a \in A \mid u = vaw \text{ for some } v, w \in A^* \} \) and \( |B| = \{ u \in A^* \mid \text{alph}(u) = B \} \). Then \( |B| \) is recognized by the direct product of \( |B| \) copies of the 2-element monoid \( \{0, 1\} \) (multiplicative).

A pseudovariety of monoids is a class of finite monoids closed under taking direct products, homomorphic images and submonoids. Pseudovarieties of subsemigroups are defined similarly. A class of languages \( V \) is a collection \( V = (V(A))_A \), indexed by all finite alphabets \( A \), such that \( V(A) \) is a set of languages in \( A^* \). If \( V \) is a pseudovariety of monoids, we let \( V(A) \) be the set of languages of \( A^* \) recognized by a monoid in \( V \). The class \( V \) is closed under Boolean operations, residuals and inverse homomorphic images. Classes of recognizable languages with these properties are called varieties of languages, and Eilenberg’s theorem (see [8]) states that the correspondence \( V \mapsto V \), from pseudovarieties of monoids to varieties of languages, is one-to-one and onto. Moreover, the decidability of membership in the pseudovariety \( V \), implies the decidability of the variety \( V \); indeed, a language is in \( V \) if and only if its (effectively computable) syntactic monoid is in \( V \).

For every finite semigroup \( S \) and \( s \in S \), we denote by \( s^\omega \) the unique power of \( s \) which is idempotent. Another important monoid-theoretic concept is the following: if \( S \) is a monoid and \( s, t \in S \), we say that \( s \leq_R t \) (resp. \( s \leq_L t \), \( s \leq_N t \)) if \( s = tuv \) (resp. \( s = tv, s = ut \)) for some \( u, v \in S \cup \{1\} \). We also say that \( s \beta t \) if \( s \leq_R t \) and \( t \leq_R s \). The relations \( R \) and \( L \) are defined similarly.

Pseudovarieties that will be important in this paper are the following.

- \( J_1 \), the pseudovariety of idempotent and commutative monoids; the corresponding variety is the Boolean algebra generated by the languages \( \{B\}, B \subseteq A \).
- \( R, L \) and \( J \), the pseudovarieties of \( R-, L- \) and \( J- \)-trivial monoids; a monoid is, say, \( R \)-trivial if each of its \( R \)-classes is a singleton.
- \( D_A \), the pseudovariety of all finite monoids in which \( (xy)^\omega x(xy)^\omega = (xy)^\omega \) for all \( x, y \); \( D_A \) has a great many characterizations in combinatorial, algebraic and logical terms [2, 3, 11, 12, 14, 15].
- \( K \) (resp. \( D, LI \)) is the pseudovariety of semigroups in which \( x^\omega y = x^\omega \) (resp. \( yx^\omega = x^\omega \), \( x^\omega yx^\omega = x^\omega \)) for all \( x, y \).

Finally, if \( V \) is a pseudovariety of semigroups and \( W \) is a pseudovariety of monoids, we say that a finite monoid \( M \) lies in the Mal’cev product \( W \odot V \) if there exists a finite monoid \( T \) and onto morphisms \( \alpha : T \to M \) and \( \beta : T \to N \) such that \( N \in V \) and \( \beta^{-1}(e) \in W \) for each idempotent \( e \) of \( N \). Then \( W \odot V \) is a pseudovariety of monoids and we have in particular [8, 2, 10]:

\[
K \odot J_1 = K \odot J = R, \quad D \odot J_1 = D \odot J = L, \quad LI \odot J_1 = LI \odot J = DA.
\]

We denote by \( TL_{m,n}^X, TL_{m,n}^Y, TL_{m,n}^\gamma, TL_{m,n}, TL_{m,n}^0, TL_{m,n}^1, FO^2_{m,n} \) and \( FO^\gamma_m \) the pseudovarieties corresponding to the language varieties discovered in Prop. 1.4.
2 Main results

Our main tool to approach the decidability of \( \text{FO}_{TL}^2 \)-definability lies in a variant of rankers, which we borrow from a proof in Weis and Immerman’s paper [18]. As in the turtle language of [12], a ranker can be seen as a sequence of instructions: go to the next \( a \) to the right, go to the next \( b \) to the left, etc. We say that a ranker \( r \) is condensed on \( u \) if it is defined on \( u \), and if the sequence of positions visited zooms in on \( r(u) \), never crossing over a position already visited. Formally, \( r = Z_1 \cdots Z_n \) is condensed on \( u \) if there exists a chain of open intervals

\[
(0, |u| + 1) = (i_0, j_0) \supset (i_1, j_1) \supset \cdots \supset (i_{n-1}, j_{n-1}) \ni r(u)
\]

such that for all \( 1 \leq \ell \leq n - 1 \) the following properties are satisfied:

- If \( Z_\ell Z_{\ell+1} = X_a X_b \) then \( (i_\ell, j_\ell) = (X_a(u, i_{\ell-1}), j_{\ell-1}). \)
- If \( Z_\ell Z_{\ell+1} = Y_a Y_b \) then \( (i_\ell, j_\ell) = (i_{\ell-1}, Y_a(u, j_{\ell-1}). \)
- If \( Z_\ell Z_{\ell+1} = X_a Y_b \) then \( (i_\ell, j_\ell) = (i_{\ell-1}, X_a(u, i_{\ell-1}). \)
- If \( Z_\ell Z_{\ell+1} = X_b Y_a \) then \( (i_\ell, j_\ell) = (Y_a(u, j_{\ell-1}), j_{\ell-1}). \)

For instance, the ranker \( X_a Y_b X_\ell \) is defined on the words \( bac \) and \( bca \), but it is condensed only on \( bca \). Rankers in \( \text{TL} \), or of the form \( X_a Y_{b_1} \cdots Y_{b_k} \) or \( Y_{a} X_{b_1} \cdots X_{b_k} \), are condensed on all words on which they are defined. We denote by \( L_v(r) \) the set of all words on which \( r \) is condensed. Condensed rankers form a natural notion, equally well-suited to the description of \( \text{FO}_{TL}^2 \)-definability (see Thm. 2.4 below). With respect to \( \text{TL} \), for which Prop. 1.1 shows a perfect match with the notion of rankers, they can be interpreted as adding a strong notion of unambiguity, see Section 3 below and the work of Lodaya, Pandya and Shah [7] on unambiguous interval temporal logic.

2.1 Condensed rankers determine a hierarchy of pseudovarieties

Let us say that two words \( u \) and \( v \) agree on condensed rankers from a set \( R \) of rankers, if the same rankers are condensed on \( u \) and \( v \). We write \( u \vartriangleright_{m,n} \vartriangleright_{m,n} v \) (resp. \( u \prec_{m,n} v \)) if \( u \) and \( v \) agree on condensed rankers in \( R^X_{m,n} \) (resp. \( R^R_{m,n} \)).

These relations turn out to have a very nice recursive characterization. For each word \( w \in A^* \) and letter \( a \) occurring in \( u \), the \( a \)-left (resp. \( a \)-right) factorization of \( w \) is the factorization that isolates the leftmost (resp. rightmost) occurrence of \( a \) in \( u \); that is, the factorization \( u = u_{-}a u_{+} \) such that \( a \) does not occur in \( u_{-} \) (resp. \( u_{+} \)). We say that the word \( a_1 \cdots a_r \) is a subword of \( u \) if \( u \) can be factored as \( u = u_0 a_1 u_1 \cdots a_r u_r \), with the \( u_i \in A^* \).

**Proposition 2.1.** The relations \( \succ_{m,n} \) and \( \prec_{m,n} (n \geq m \geq 1) \) are uniquely determined by the following properties.

- \( u \succ_{1,n} v \) if and only if \( u \prec_{1,n} v \), if and only if \( u \) and \( v \) have the same subwords of length at most \( n \).
- If \( m \geq 2 \), then \( u \succ_{m,n} v \) if and only if \( \text{alph}(u) = \text{alph}(v) \), \( u \prec_{m-1,n-1} v \) and for each letter \( a \in \text{alph}(u) \), the \( a \)-left factorizations \( u = u_{-}a u_{+} \) and \( v = v_{-}a v_{+} \) satisfy \( u_{-} \prec_{m-1,n-1} v_{-} \) and \( u_{+} \succ_{m,n-1} v_{+} \) (if \( n > m \)).
- If \( m \geq 2 \), then \( u \preceq_{m,n} v \) if and only if \( \text{alph}(u) = \text{alph}(v) \), \( u \triangleright_{m-1,n-1} v \) and for each letter \( a \in \text{alph}(u) \), the \( a \)-right factorizations \( u = u_-a^u_+ \) and \( v = v_-a^v_+ \) satisfy \( u_+ \triangleright_{m-1,n-1} v_+ \) and \( u_- \preceq_{m,n-1} v_- \) (if \( n > m \)).

**Corollary 2.2.** The relations \( \triangleright_{m,n} \) and \( \preceq_{m,n} \) are finite-index congruences.

For each \( m \geq 1 \), let us denote by \( R_m \) (resp. \( L_m \)) the pseudovariety generated by the quotients \( A^*/\triangleright_{m,n} \) (resp. \( A^*/\preceq_{m,n} \)), where \( n \geq m \) and \( A \) is a finite alphabet. Corollary 2.2 shows that a language \( L \) is in the corresponding variety \( R_m \) (resp. \( L_m \)) if and only if \( L \) is a Boolean combination of languages of the form \( L_c(r) \), with \( r \in R_m \) (resp. \( R_m^{\ell} \)).

By definition, \( R_m \) and \( L_m \) are contained in both \( R_{m+1} \) and \( L_{m+1} \) for all \( m \). Moreover, Prop. 2.1 shows that \( \triangleright_{1,n} = \preceq_{1,n} \) is the congruence defining the piecewise \( n \)-testable languages studied by Simon in the early 1970s, and that, in consequence, \( R_1 = L_1 = J \), the pseudovariety of \( J \)-trivial monoids [8].

In addition, one can show that if a position in a word \( u \) is defined by a ranker \( r \in R_{m,n} \) (resp. \( R_{m,n}^{\ell} \)), then the same position is defined by a ranker \( s \in R_{m,n} \) (resp. \( R_{m,n}^{\ell} \)) which is condensed on \( u \). This leads to the following result:

**Proposition 2.3.** Let \( n \geq m \geq 1 \). If the words \( u \) and \( v \) agree on condensed rankers in \( R_{m,n} \) (resp. \( R_{m,n}^{\ell} \)), then they agree on rankers from the same class. In particular, \( \textbf{TL}_m^X \subseteq R_m \) and \( \textbf{TL}_m^Y \subseteq L_m \).

As indicated above, condensed rankers allow for a description of \( \text{FO}_{m}^2 \)-definability, as neat as with ordinary rankers: we show that the statement of Weis and Immerman’s theorem can be modified to use condensed rankers instead.

**Theorem 2.4.** Let \( u, v \in A^* \) and let \( 1 \leq m \leq n \). Then \( u \) and \( v \) satisfy the same formulas in \( \text{FO}_{m,n}^2 \) if and only if

(WI 1c) \( u \) and \( v \) agree on condensed rankers from \( R_{m,n} \),

(WI 2c) if the rankers \( r \in R_{m,n} \) and \( r' \in R_{m-1,n-1} \) are condensed on \( u \) and \( v \), then \( \text{ord}(r(u),r'(u)) = \text{ord}(r(v),r'(v)) \).

(WI 3c) if \( r \in R_{m,n} \) and \( r' \in R_{m,n-1} \) are condensed on \( u \) and \( v \) and end with different direction letters, then \( \text{ord}(r(u),r'(u)) = \text{ord}(r(v),r'(v)) \).

Thus there is a connection between \( \text{FO}_{m}^2 \) and the varieties \( R_m \) and \( L_m \). But much more can be said about the latter varieties.

**2.2 Language hierarchies**

Prop. 2.1 also leads to a description of the language varieties \( R_m \) and \( L_m \) in terms of deterministic and co-deterministic products. Recall that a product of languages \( L = L_0a_1L_1\cdots a_kL_k \) (\( k \geq 1 \), \( a_i \in A \), \( L_i \subseteq A^* \)) is deterministic if, for \( 0 \leq i \leq k \), each word \( u \in L \) has a unique prefix in \( L_0a_1L_1\cdots L_{i-1}a_i \). If for

\[\text{8 whose converse does not hold, see Ex. 2.10 below.}\]
each \(i\), the letter \(a_i\) does not occur in \(L_{i-1}\), the product \(L_0a_1L_1 \cdots a_kL_k\) is called \textit{visibly deterministic}: this is obviously also a deterministic product.

The definition of a co-deterministic or visibly co-deterministic product is dual, in terms of suffixes instead of prefixes. If \(\mathcal{V}\) is a class of languages and \(A\) is a finite alphabet, let \(\mathcal{V}^{\text{det}}(A)\) (resp. \(\mathcal{V}^{\text{codet}}(A), \mathcal{V}^{\text{viscodet}}(A)\)) be the set of all Boolean combinations of languages of \(\mathcal{V}(A)\) and of deterministic (resp. visibly deterministic, co-deterministic, visibly co-deterministic) products of languages of \(\mathcal{V}(A)\). Schützenberger gave algebraic characterizations of the closure operations \(\mathcal{V} \mapsto \mathcal{V}^{\text{det}}\) and \(\mathcal{V} \mapsto \mathcal{V}^{\text{viscodet}}\), see [8]: if \(\mathcal{V}\) is a variety of languages and if \(\mathcal{V}\) is the corresponding pseudovariety of monoids, then \(\mathcal{V}^{\text{det}}\) and \(\mathcal{V}^{\text{viscodet}}\) are varieties of languages and the corresponding pseudovarieties are, respectively, \(K \odot \mathcal{V}\) and \(D \odot \mathcal{V}\). Then we show the following.

**Proposition 2.5.** For each \(m \geq 1\), we have \(\mathcal{R}_{m+1} = \mathcal{L}_{m+1}^{\text{codet}} = \mathcal{L}_{m}^{\text{det}}, \mathcal{R}_{m+1} = \mathcal{K} \odot \mathcal{L}_m, \mathcal{L}_{m+1} = \mathcal{K} \odot \mathcal{L}_{m+1}^{\text{codet}} = \mathcal{L}_{m}^{\text{codet}}\) and \(\mathcal{L}_{m+1} = D \odot \mathcal{R}_m\). In particular, \(\mathcal{R}_2 = \mathcal{R}\) and \(\mathcal{L}_2 = \mathcal{L}\).

**Sketch of proof.** Prop. 2.1 shows that \(\mathcal{R}_{m+1} \subseteq \mathcal{L}_{m}^{\text{codet}}\), which is trivially contained in \(\mathcal{L}_{m}^{\text{det}}\). The last containment is proved algebraically, by showing that if \(\gamma: A^* \to M\) is an onto morphism, and \(\gamma(u) = \gamma(v)\); thus \(M\) is a quotient of \(A^*/\mathcal{V}_{m+1,n}\) and hence, \(M \in \mathcal{R}_{m+1}\). This proof relies on a technical property of semigroups in \(\mathcal{D}\alpha\); if \(a \in A\) occurs in \(\alpha^h(v)\) and \(\gamma(u) \in \mathcal{R}\), then \(\gamma(\alpha^h(v)) \in \mathcal{R}\). \(\square\)

It turns out that the \(\mathcal{R}_m\) and the \(\mathcal{L}_m\) were studied in the semigroup-theoretic literature (Kufleitner, Trotter and Weil, [17,6]). In [6], it is defined as the hierarchy of pseudovarieties obtained from \(J\) by repeated applications of the operations \(X \mapsto K \odot X\) and \(X \mapsto D \odot X\). Prop. 2.5 shows that it is the same hierarchy as that considered in this paper\(^9\). The following results are proved in [6, Section 4].

**Proposition 2.6.** The hierarchies \((\mathcal{R}_m)_m\) and \((\mathcal{L}_m)_m\) are infinite chains of decidable pseudovarieties, and their unions are equal to \(\mathcal{D}\alpha\). Moreover, every m-generated monoid in \(\mathcal{D}\alpha\) lies in \(\mathcal{R}_{m+1} \cap \mathcal{L}_{m+1}\).

The decidability statement in Prop. 2.6 is in fact a consequence of a more precise statement (see [17,6]) which gives defining pseudoidentities for the \(\mathcal{R}_m\) and \(\mathcal{L}_m\). Let \(x_1, x_2, \ldots\) be a sequence of variables. If \(u\) is a word on that alphabet, we let \(\bar{u}\) be the mirror image of \(u\), that is, the word obtained from reading \(u\) from right to left. We let

\[
G_2 = x_2x_1, \quad I_2 = x_2x_1x_2,
\]

for \(n > 2\), \(G_n = x_nG_{n-1}, \quad I_n = G_nx_nI_{n-1}, \quad \varphi(x_1) = (x_1\bar{x}_2x_1)^\omega, \quad \varphi(x_2) = x_2^\omega, \quad \text{and, for } n > 2, \quad \varphi(x_n) = (x_n\bar{\varphi(G_{n-1}G_{n-1})}x_n^\omega)^\omega.
\]

\(^9\) More precisely, the pseudovarieties \(\mathcal{R}_m\) and \(\mathcal{L}_m\) in [6] are pseudovarieties of semigroups, and the \(\mathcal{R}_m\) and \(\mathcal{L}_m\) considered in this paper are the classes of monoids in these pseudovarieties.

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Proposition 2.7 ([6]). For each \( m \geq 2 \), \( R_m = DA \cap [\varphi(G_m) = \varphi(I_m)] \) and \( L_m = DA \cap [\varphi(G_m) = \varphi(I_m)] \).

Example 2.8. For \( R_2 \), this yields \( x_1^m (x_1^m x_2^m x_1^m)^\omega = x_2^m (x_1^m x_2^m x_1^m)^\omega x_2^m \). One can verify that, together with the pseudo-identity defining \( DA \), this is equivalent to the usual pseudo-identity describing \( R = R_2 \), namely \( (st)^\omega s = (st)^\omega \).

For \( R_3 = K \otimes L \), no pseudo-identity was known in the literature. We get
\[
\varphi(G_3) = (x_3^m ((x_1^m x_2^m x_1^m)^\omega x_2^m (x_1^m x_2^m x_1^m)^\omega)^\omega x_3^m)^\omega
\]
\[
\varphi(I_3) = (x_3^m ((x_1^m x_2^m x_1^m)^\omega x_2^m (x_1^m x_2^m x_1^m)^\omega)^\omega x_3^m)^\omega
\]
\[
(x_3^m ((x_1^m x_2^m x_1^m)^\omega x_2^m (x_1^m x_2^m x_1^m)^\omega)^\omega x_3^m)^\omega x_2^m (x_1^m x_2^m x_1^m)^\omega x_2^m.
\]

2.3 Connection with the TL\(_m\) and the FO\(^2\)_\(_m\) hierarchies

Prop. 2.3 established a containment between the \( R_m \) (resp. \( L_m \)) and the TL\(_m\) hierarchies. A technical analysis allows us to prove a containment in the other direction, but one that is not very tight – showing the difference between the consideration of condensed rankers and that of ordinary rankers.

Proposition 2.9. \( R_2 = TL^X_m \) and \( L_2 = TL^Y_m \). If \( m \geq 3 \) and if two words agree on rankers in \( R^X_{3m/2} \) (resp. \( R^Y_{3m/2} \)), then they agree on condensed rankers in \( L^X_m \) (resp. \( L^Y_m \)). In particular \( R_m \subseteq TL^X_{3m/2} \) and \( L_m \subseteq TL^Y_{3m/2} \).

Example 2.10. The language \( L_c(X_3 X_4 X_5) \) is in \( R_3 \) and not in \( TL^X_3 \).

The connection between the \( R_m \), \( L_m \) and FO\(^2\)_\(_m\) hierarchies is tighter.

Theorem 2.11. Let \( m \geq 1 \). Every language in \( R_m \) or \( L_m \) is FO\(^2\)_\(_m\)-definable, and every FO\(^2\)_\(_m\)-definable language is in \( R_{m+1} \cap L_{m+1} \). Equivalently, we have
\[
R_m \cup L_m \subseteq FO^2_m \subseteq R_{m+1} \cap L_{m+1},
\]
where \( V \cup W \) denotes the least pseudovariety containing \( V \) and \( W \).

Sketch of proof. The containment \( R_m \cup L_m \subseteq FO^2_m \) follows directly from Property (WI 1c) in Thm. 2.4. The proof of the converse containment also relies on that theorem. We show that if \( u \triangleright_{m+1,2} v \) or \( u \triangleleft_{m+1,2} v \), then Properties (WI 1c), (WI 2c) and (WI 3c) hold for \( m, n \). This is done by a complex and quite technical induction. ∎

If \( m = 1 \), we know that \( R_2 \cap L_2 = R \cap L = J = R_1 \cup L_1 \); this reflects the elementary observation that FO\(^2\)-definable languages, like FO\(_1\)-definable languages, are the piecewise testable languages. For \( m \geq 2 \), we conjecture that \( R_m \cup L_m \) is properly contained in \( R_{m+1} \cap L_{m+1} \). The following shows it holds for \( m = 2 \).
Example 2.12. It is elementary to find an $\text{FO}^2_2$-formula defining the language $L = \{b,c\}^{*ca}\{a,b\}^{*}$ (every $c$ is before every $a$, and every $b$ has an $a$ in its past or a $c$ in its future). The words $u_n = (bc)^n(ab)^n$ are in $L$, while the words $v_n = (bc)^n b(ca)^n$ are not. Almeida and Azevedo showed that $R_2 \cup L_2$ is defined by the pseudo-identity $(bc)^{\omega} (ab)^{\omega} = (bc)^{\omega} b(ab)^{\omega}$ [2, Thm. 9.2.13 and Exerc. 9.2.15]). In particular, for each language $K$ recognized by a monoid in $R_2 \cup L_2$, the words $u_n$ and $v_n$ are eventually all in $K$, or all in the complement of $K$. Therefore $L$ is not recognized by such a monoid, which proves that $R_2 \cup L_2$ is strictly contained in $\text{FO}^2_2$, and hence also in $R_3 \cap L_3$. It also shows that $\mathcal{T}\mathcal{L}_2$ is properly contained in $\text{FO}^2_2$.

Finally, we formulate the following conjecture.

Conjecture 2.13. For each $m \geq 1$, $\text{FO}^2_m = R_{m+1} \cap L_{m+1}$.

3 Consequences

The main consequence we draw of Thm. 2.11 and of the decidability of the pseudovarieties $R_m$ and $L_m$ is summarized in the next statement.

Theorem 3.1. Given an $\text{FO}^2$-definable language $L$, one can compute an integer $m$ such that $L$ is $\text{FO}^2_{m+1}$-definable but not $\text{FO}^2_{m-1}$-definable. That is: we can decide the quantifier alternation level of $L$ within one unit.

Sketch of proof. If $M \in \mathcal{D}A$, we can compute the largest $m$ such that $M \not\in R_m \cap L_m$ (Prop. 2.6). Then $M \in \text{FO}^2_{m+1} \setminus \text{FO}^2_{m-1}$ by Thm. 2.11.

The fact that the $R_m$ and $L_m$ form strict hierarchies (Prop. 2.6), together with Thm. 2.11, proves that the $\text{FO}^2_m$ hierarchy is infinite. Weis and Immerman had already proved this result by combinatorial means [18], whereas our proof is algebraic. From that result on the $\text{FO}^2_m$, it is also possible to recover the strict hierarchy result on the $R_m$ and $L_m$ and the fact that their union is equal to $\mathcal{D}A$.

By the same token, Prop. 2.3 and 2.9 show that the $\mathcal{T}\mathcal{L}_m$ (resp. $\mathcal{T}\mathcal{L}_m$) hierarchy is infinite and that its union is all of $\text{FO}^2$ (resp. $\mathcal{D}A$).

Similarly, the fact that an $m$-generated element of $\mathcal{D}A$ lies in $R_{m+1} \cap L_{m+1}$ (Prop. 2.6), shows that an $\text{FO}^2$-definable language in $A^*$ lies in $R_{|A|+1} \cap L_{|A|+1}$, and hence in $\text{FO}^2_{m+1}$ – a fact that was already established by combinatorial means by Weis and Immerman [18, Thm. 4.6]. It also shows that such a language is in $\mathcal{T}\mathcal{L}_m^{(|A|+1)}$ by Prop. 2.9.

Finally we note the following result. It was mentioned in the introduction that the languages in $\text{FO}^2$ are disjoint unions of unambiguous products of the form $B_i a_1 B_i' \cdots a_k B_k'$, where each $B_i$ is a subset of $A$. Props. 2.5 and 2.6 imply the following statement.\footnote{The weaker statement with the word visibly deleted was proved by the authors in [6], as well as by Lodaya, Pandya and Shah [7].}
Proposition 3.2. The least variety of languages containing the languages of the form \( B^* \) \((B \subseteq A)\) and closed under visibly deterministic and visibly co-deterministic products, is \( \mathcal{FO}^2 \).

Every unambiguous product of languages of the form \( B^*_0 a_1 B^*_1 \cdots a_k B^*_k \) (with each \( B_i \subseteq A \)), can be expressed in terms of the \( B^*_i \) and the \( a_i \) using only Boolean operations and at most \(|A| + 1\) applications of visibly deterministic and visibly co-deterministic products, starting with a visibly deterministic (resp. co-deterministic) product.

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