Fast Pairwise Conversion of Supernova Neutrinos: A Dispersion-Relation Approach

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(Dated: 11 January 2016)

Collective pair conversion $\nu_e\bar{\nu}_e \leftrightarrow \nu_x\bar{\nu}_x$ by forward scattering, where $x = \mu$ or $\tau$, may be generic for supernova neutrino transport. Depending on the local angular intensity of the electron lepton number carried by neutrinos, the conversion rate can be “fast,” i.e., of the order of $\sqrt{2}G_F(n_{\nu_e} - n_{\bar{\nu}_e}) \gg \Delta m_{\text{atm}}^2/2E$. We present a novel approach to understand these phenomena: a dispersion relation for the frequency and wave number $(\Omega, \mathbf{K})$ of disturbances in the mean field of $\nu_{e}\bar{\nu}_{e}$ flavor coherence. Run-away solutions occur in “dispersion gaps,” i.e., in “forbidden” intervals of $\Omega$ and/or $\mathbf{K}$ where propagating plane waves do not exist. We stress that the actual solutions also depend on the initial and/or boundary conditions, which need to be further investigated.

Introduction.—The physics of core-collapse supernova (SN) explosions and neutron-star (NS) mergers raises unique questions about flavor evolution in environments where neutrinos are dense. Their decoupling strongly depends on flavor because $\beta$ reactions dominate for $\nu_e$ and $\bar{\nu}_e$. As a result, the $\nu_e\bar{\nu}_e$ flux of the SN accretion phase exceeds the $\nu_x\bar{\nu}_x$ fluxes [1], an effect that is even more pronounced in NS mergers [2, 3]. Moreover, the SN $\nu_e$ flux is larger than the $\bar{\nu}_e$ one (deleptonization) and the other way round in NS mergers.

The subsequent flavor evolution matters because SN neutrinos not only carry away energy, but also deposit some of it in the gain region below the stalled SN shock by $\nu_e + n \rightarrow p + e^-$ and $\bar{\nu}_e + p \rightarrow n + e^+$, thus driving the delayed explosion. At later stages, neutrinos regulate the nucleosynthesis outcome in the neutrino-driven wind. The neutrino signal from the next nearby SN will also depend on the flavor ratio.

In the SN region of interest, the matter density is large and suppresses conventional flavor conversion of the type $\nu_e(p) \rightarrow \nu_x(p)$, which is driven by neutrino masses and mixing. This effect becomes important only at larger radii where neutrinos undergo an MSW resonance [4]. Stochastic density variations from turbulence might stimulate flavor conversions [5], but have been found to be ineffective during the accretion phase [6].

Neutrino-neutrino interactions can famously change this picture [1, 7–15] because flavor off-diagonal refraction by $\nu_e\nu_x$ coherence spawns conversion [16–18]. In this way, neutrinos feed back upon themselves and can develop collective run-away modes. Neutral-current interactions preserve flavor, so we are dealing with flavor exchange of the type $\nu_e(p) + \nu_x(k) \leftrightarrow \nu_x(p) + \nu_e(k)$ and especially $\nu_e(p) + \bar{\nu}_e(k) \leftrightarrow \nu_x(p) + \bar{\nu}_x(k)$ by forward scattering. Such pairwise swaps preserve net flavor, but still modify subsequent charged-current interactions.

The impact of refractive $\nu_e\bar{\nu}_e \leftrightarrow \nu_x\bar{\nu}_x$ conversion has never been studied in SN simulations because such effects seemed to arise only beyond the shock wave [19]. Yet, Sawyer has long held that such conclusions result from overly simplified assumptions about neutrino distributions [20–22] and recently, other authors have followed suit [23, 24]. The key issue is the $\nu_e$ and $\bar{\nu}_e$ angle distributions to be sufficiently different, in contrast to the traditional “bulb” emission model. Another option is a “backward” $\nu_e$ and $\bar{\nu}_e$ flux which is unavoidable in the SN decoupling region and also at larger distances [25, 26]. The growth rate for “fast multi-angle instabilities” is of the order of

$$\Phi_0 = \sqrt{2}G_F (n_{\nu_e} - n_{\bar{\nu}_e}) = 6.42 \text{ m}^{-1} \frac{n_{\nu_e} - n_{\bar{\nu}_e}}{10^{11} \text{ cm}^{-3}}. \quad (1)$$

Notice that we use natural units with $h = c = 1$ where $6.42 \text{ m}^{-1} = 1.92 \times 10^9 \text{ s}^{-1} = 1.27 \mu\text{eV}$. This rate is “fast” in that it far exceeds the vacuum oscillation frequency $\Delta m_{\text{atm}}^2/2E = 0.5 \text{ km}^{-1}$ where we have used $\Delta m_{\text{atm}}^2 = 2.4 \times 10^{-3} \text{ eV}^2$ and $E = 12.5 \text{ MeV}$. Fast flavor conversion does not require neutrino masses or mixing, except for providing seed perturbations. Moreover, energy drops out, forestalling the characteristic energy-dependent flavor swaps found in many scenarios of collective flavor conversion [1, 9]. More likely, some sort of flavor equilibration by chaotic evolution of many nonlinearly coupled modes will occur [20–22, 27–30].

We here propose a new perspective that vastly simplifies both the conceptual understanding and the practical treatment of these phenomena. The starting point is the mean field of $\nu_e\nu_x$ coherence, essentially the off-diagonal element of the usual $g(t, \mathbf{r}, \mathbf{p})$ flavor matrix, which normally evolves purely kinematically. However, after including $\nu\nu$ refraction, $g$ becomes dynamical and we can think of the neutrino medium as supporting flavor waves described by a wave four vector $K = (\Omega, \mathbf{K})$ and a corresponding polarization vector.

A propagating mode is a collective disturbance with a certain frequency $\Omega$. To fulfill the equation of motion (EOM), $\Omega$ may be required to be complex for some $\mathbf{K}$, leading to solutions which grow or shrink exponentially in time. Conversely, some $\Omega$ specified at the boundary may require complex $\mathbf{K}$ and thus, exponential solutions as a function of distance. Moreover, various recently discovered symmetry breaking effects [31–36] simply corre-
spond to complex $K$ in directions other than the symmetry axis of the neutrino medium, and/or to different polarizations of our flavor waves. We here focus on fast modes because they are less familiar, yet may dominate in environments where previously no conversion was thought to occur.

**Mean field of flavor coherence.**—We describe the neutrino mean field by the usual density matrices $\rho$. For two flavors, we write in the weak-interaction basis

$$\rho = \frac{f_{\nu_e} + f_{\nu_\mu}}{2} + \frac{f_{\bar{\nu}_e} - f_{\bar{\nu}_\mu}}{2} \begin{pmatrix} s & S \\ S^* & -s \end{pmatrix},$$

where $f_{\nu_e}$ and $f_{\nu_\mu}$ are the initial occupation numbers. The complex scalar field $S_p(t, r)$ represents $\nu_\mu\nu_\mu$ flavor coherence for mode $p$, whereas the real field $s_p(t, r)$ obeys $s_p^2 + |s_p|^2 = 1$ and provides the survival probability by $\frac{1}{2}(1 + s)$. We use the “flavor isospin convention,” where $\bar{\nu}$ has negative energy and negative $\rho$, so the $\bar{\nu}$ coefficients are $-(f_{\nu_e} + f_{\nu_\mu})/2$ and $-(f_{\bar{\nu}_e} - f_{\bar{\nu}_\mu})/2$.

The usual EOM is $(\partial_t + \mathbf{v} \cdot \mathbf{\nabla}_r) S_\nu = v^{\mu}(\Lambda + \Phi)_{\mu\nu} S_\nu - \int d\Gamma' v^{\mu'} v'_\nu G_{\nu'} S_{\nu'}$. Here $v^{\mu}(\Lambda + \Phi)_{\mu\nu} = \Lambda_0 + \Phi_0 - \mathbf{v} \cdot (\Lambda + \Phi)$ is the energy shift due to matter and neutrinos and $v^{\mu'} v'_\nu = (1 - \mathbf{v} \cdot \mathbf{v}')$. For a plane wave $S_\nu(t, r) = Q_\nu(\Omega, K) e^{-i(\Omega t - K \cdot r)}$, the EOM becomes

$$v^{\mu} k_\nu Q_\nu = - \int d\Gamma' v^{\mu'} v'_\nu G_{\nu'} Q_{\nu'},$$

where $K = \Omega - (\Lambda + \Phi)$ with $k^{\mu} = (\omega, \mathbf{k})$ and $K = (\Omega, \mathbf{K})$. Notice that our $\omega$ does not denote $\Delta m_{32}^2/2E$.

The dispersion relation will be for $(\omega, \mathbf{k})$ and depends only on $G_{\nu'}$. Matter enters through the constant shift $(\Omega, K) \rightarrow (\omega, \mathbf{k})$ which means going to a rotating frame in flavor space [18, 29, 39]. $K$ and $k$ have the same imaginary part, if any. The shift amounts to a global gauge transformation $S_p(r) \rightarrow S_p(r) e^{i(\Lambda + \Phi) r}$. For the $\bar{\nu}$ matrices, it is a global $SU(2)$ gauge transformation.

**Dispersion relation (DR).**—Without $\nu\nu$ interactions, Eq. (5) implies $v^{\mu} k_\nu = 0$. This purely kinematical relation means that a spatial disturbance of mode $\mathbf{v}$ is carried by the Liouville flow, causing a local time variation with $\omega = \mathbf{v} \cdot \mathbf{k}$. Including $\nu\nu$ interactions, the EOM becomes dynamical. Physically, the local time variation “observed” by another neutrino can lead to a parametric resonance and thus, to run-away solutions.

The right hand side of Eq. (5) has the form $v^{\mu} a_\mu$ with a “polarization vector” $a_\mu = - \int d\Gamma' v_{\nu'} G_{\nu'}$, so $Q_\nu = v^{\mu} a_\mu / v^{\mu} k_\mu$. Insertion on both sides of Eq. (5) yields $v^{\mu} a_\mu = - \int d\Gamma' v^{\mu'} v'_\nu G_{\nu'} v^{\mu'}/k^{\mu'} v'_\nu$. Using the metric $\eta^{\mu\nu} = \text{diag}(+, -, -, -)$, this EOM is $v_{\nu} \Pi^{\mu\nu} a_\nu = 0$. Here the “polarization tensor”

$$\Pi^{\mu\nu} = \eta^{\mu\nu} + \int \frac{d\nu}{4\pi} G_{\nu'} \frac{v^{\mu} v^{\nu'}}{\omega - \nu' \cdot \mathbf{k}}$$

contains all physical information, which derives from the ELN angle distribution $G_{\nu'}$. The EOM $v_{\nu} \Pi^{\mu\nu} a_\nu = 0$ applies to any mode $v_{\nu}$ and thus, amounts to

$$\Pi^{\mu\nu} a_\nu = 0.$$  

The latter has nontrivial solutions for $\det[\Pi^{\mu\nu}(k)] = 0$, providing the DR. Once we have found solutions $k^{\mu} = (\omega, \mathbf{k})$ we can identify the corresponding polarization vector $a^{\mu}$ and the eigenfunction $Q_\nu = a^{\mu} v_{\mu}/k^{\mu} v_{\nu}$. To find propagating modes with real $k$, we first pick a direction $\mathbf{K}$ and write $\mathbf{k} = \mathbf{k} n_\omega$ in terms of the refractive index $n$. In Eq. (6), we now pull $1/\omega$ out of the integral and recognize that $\det[\Pi^{\mu\nu}] = 0$ is a quartic equation for $\omega$ as a function of $n$; i.e., instead of $n(\omega)$ we find four branches $\omega(n)$. Considering $k(n) = \mathbf{k} n\omega(n)$, we thus find parametric solutions in the form $[\omega(n), \mathbf{k}(n)]$. On the other hand, there is no obvious elegant way to find complex $\omega$ solutions for real $\mathbf{k}$ or the other way round, without searching for roots of $\det[\Pi^{\mu\nu}(k)] = 0$. 

Assuming that in our test volume, the occupation numbers as well as the matter density are homogeneous and stationary, the linearized EOM is

$$i (\partial_t + \mathbf{v} \cdot \mathbf{\nabla}_r) S_\nu = v^{\mu}(\Lambda + \Phi)_{\mu\nu} S_\nu - \int d\Gamma' v^{\mu'} v'_\nu G_{\nu'} S_{\nu'}. $$

Here $\nu^{\mu}(\Lambda + \Phi)_{\mu\nu} = \Lambda_0 + \Phi_0 - \mathbf{v} \cdot (\Lambda + \Phi)$ is the energy shift due to matter and neutrinos and $v^{\mu'} v'_\nu = (1 - \mathbf{v} \cdot \mathbf{v}')$. For a plane wave $S_\nu(t, r) = Q_\nu(\Omega, K) e^{-i(\Omega t - K \cdot r)}$, the EOM becomes

$$v^{\mu} k_\nu Q_\nu = - \int d\Gamma' v^{\mu'} v'_\nu G_{\nu'} Q_{\nu'}, $$

where $K = \Omega - (\Lambda + \Phi)$ with $k^{\mu} = (\omega, \mathbf{k})$ and $K = (\Omega, \mathbf{K})$. Notice that our $\omega$ does not denote $\Delta m_{32}^2/2E$.
**Generic example.**—We assume axial symmetry of $G_\nu$ and pick $\mathbf{k}$ in the radial direction ($z$). In $\Pi^{\nu\nu}$ all terms linear in $v_{x,y}$ vanish, so Eq. (7) yields two equations for $(a_0, a_z)$, providing $Q_\nu = (a_0 - a_z c_\theta)/(\omega - k_z c_\theta)$ where we have used $\mathbf{k} = (0, 0, k_z)$. These are the bi-modal and multi-zenith angle (MZA) polarizations [32], which are axially symmetric. The diagonal $\Pi^{\nu\nu}$ terms from $v_x^2$ and $v_y^2$ yield degenerate solutions for $a_{x,y}$ with $Q_\nu = a_x s_\theta c_x + a_y s_\theta s_y)/((\omega - k_z c_\theta)$, the axial symmetry breaking multi-azimuth angle (MAA) polarizations.

To be explicit, we study the simplest non-trivial case: two $\theta$ modes representing two zenith ranges, i.e., $G_\nu = G_1 \delta(c_\theta - c_1) + G_2 \delta(c_\theta - c_2)$. The axially symmetric polarizations produce a quadratic form in both $\omega$ and $k_z$, implying that the DRs are hyperbolas in the $\omega$–$k_z$–plane, as shown in Fig. 1. The axially breaking polarizations provide similar results.

The left panels use forward modes ($0 < \cos \theta_1, 2 < 1$) as in traditional bulb emission. If $\nu_e$ dominates in both modes (upper left), both $\omega$ and $k_z$ are real: No fast flavor conversion occurs. If one mode has a $\nu_e$ excess ($G_1 < 0$), the DR has a gap, providing complex $\omega$ for real $k_z$ and the other way round as indicated by the red blob. Disturbances with $k_z$ in the gap grow exponentially in time. A real $\omega$ imposed at the boundary causes exponential spatial growth. These conclusions carry over to more general $G(\theta)$ where one needs a crossing from positive to negative ELN intensities to obtain a dispersion gap, which, in turn, enables fast flavor conversion, similar to spectral crossings for slow modes [40–42].

One forward and one backward mode with $\nu_e$ excess (upper right) produce two branches of real $\omega$ for all $k_z$, but an $\omega$ gap. All spatial disturbances propagate, but a “forbidden” frequency imposed at the boundary causes exponential spatial growth. If instead, one of our two modes has $\bar{\nu}_e$ excess (lower right), there is a gap in $k_z$. Wave numbers in this range imply temporal run away.

The direction of a general $\mathbf{k}$ can be chosen such that it feels forward and backward modes, even if all modes are forward in the SN frame. If $G_\nu > 0$ everywhere (no crossing), such cases produce a DR analogous to the upper right panel (an $\omega$ gap). The neutrino flow is a very anisotropic medium, so dispersion strongly depends on $\mathbf{k}$. Moreover, some components of $\mathbf{k}$ may be real and only one of them complex, producing exponential variation in only one spatial direction for a certain $\omega$ gap.

**Realistic distribution.**—The flavor-dependent neutrino angle distributions from SN simulations are not readily available. To gain intuition, we have extracted the ELN distributions from a Garching simulation of a 15 $M_\odot$ progenitor [26, 43, 44]. Figure 2 shows a typical case not far from the decoupling region. For larger distances, the ELN profile is horizontally compressed near the forward ($\cos \theta = 1$) direction, although backward modes ($\cos \theta < 0$) are never empty. One key feature is the forward dip due to $\bar{\nu}_e$ being more forward peaked than $\nu_e$. However, we have not found any place or time in this model where this dip would go negative.

**FIG. 1.** Dispersion relations (black lines) for two $\theta$ modes. The thick red line is $\text{Re}(\omega)$ for real $k_z$, or $\text{Re}(k_z)$ for real $\omega$. The width of the blob is ±1Im($\omega$) or ±1Im($k_z$). Left: Only outward modes. Right: One outward and one backward mode. Top: Both $\nu_e$ excess. Bottom: Forward mode $\bar{\nu}_e$ excess.

**FIG. 2.** Electron lepton number (ELN) angle distribution $G_\theta$ of a 15 $M_\odot$ SN simulation at 280 ms post bounce and a radius 37 km. We plot an ELN number density, to be converted to 10^{-11} cm^{-3}. Without $\nu\nu$ interactions, the DR is $\omega = c_\theta k_z$ for any angle mode $\theta$ (gray-shaded region). Including $\nu\nu$ interactions, this region becomes a “zone of avoidance” for propagating collective oscillations as $Q_\nu \propto 1/(\omega - c_\theta k_z)$ would be singular. The thick blue lines are the dispersion relations for...
the axially symmetric polarizations. The two degenerate axially breaking ones (thick orange) end at the big dots on the border of the zone of avoidance. In the frequency gap, $k_z$ is complex. We show its real part by semi-thick blue and orange lines ending on the horizontal axis. In analogy to the red blobs in Fig. 1, the blue and orange shaded regions which kiss the dispersion curves indicate the imaginary part of $k_z$, i.e., $k_z$ in the frequency gap has a real part (semithick line) plus/minus an imaginary part (edge of the blob).

**Growth in the gap.**—Any type of ELN distribution probably occurs somewhere in NS mergers or 3D SN models, but in our 1D model, $G_\nu$ is always positive and has no crossings. Hence, dispersion is similar to an EM wave in plasma: For every $k$ there is a real $\omega$, but there is an $\omega$ gap where the EOM requires $k$ to be complex.

In analogy to the stability analyses for slow modes [45], exponential spatial growth obtains if at an interface (e.g. the neutrino sphere), a forbidden frequency is prescribed. The latter was chosen to be stationary in the frame where $M^2$ is static, i.e., $\Omega = \omega + \Lambda_0 + \Phi_0 = 0$, and the system was stable (real $K$) in this region. However, the matter density and neutrino angle distribution evolve with radius, so a propagating wave can enter a forbidden frequency band. Exponentially damping and growing solutions ensue, the latter ones quickly taking over. Beginning with Ref. [7], such exponential growth starting at some “onset radius” has been found in many numerical studies.

Notice the difference to EM waves entering a forbidden region, e.g., radio waves in the ionized upper atmosphere. The plasma frequency prevents propagation and they are reflected—they do not grow exponentially in the ionosphere. Flavor waves obey a first-order differential equation, probably explaining this difference.

Recently it was argued that one should not pick $\Omega = 0$ a priori because every frequency would have some amplitude at the boundary [29, 39]. In this case the system is spatially unstable everywhere if it has a frequency gap.

**Boundary conditions.**—However, it is not obvious that the picture of the flavor field being driven by an external frequency at some “neutrino sphere” is an appropriate description altogether. Ignoring collisions and without a physical interface, the EOM applies on both sides of an assumed boundary surface. The length scales for fast flavor conversion are small, so something like the traditional bulb model is not justified in any obvious sense. Furthermore, the inclusion of backward modes may require to specify boundary conditions in different spatial regions. In a SN, all inward moving neutrinos come from neutral-current scattering of the outward moving ones; hence, inward and outward flows are flavor-correlated beyond what is prescribed by the EOM.

The DR alone only indicates which solutions are consistent with the EOM, but not which ones will actually occur. We would be sure that the system was always stable if the DR did not have any gaps, which, however, seem to be generic. Except for quantum fluctuations or hypothetical flavor-violating interactions [46–48], $M^2$ is the only source of seed perturbations. However, which spectrum of flavor disturbances is produced, and where, remains to be better understood.

**Summary.**—We have derived a general dispersion relation (DR) for disturbances in the mean field of $\nu_e\nu_x$ coherence. This approach corroborates that fast run-away solutions can indeed occur as first shown by Sawyer. We have found that it is the local $\nu_e$ minus $\bar{\nu}_x$, angle distribution $G_\nu$, that drives this effect. Therefore, $G_\nu$ should be investigated in a larger class of SN models, notably in 3D simulations exhibiting the LESA effect [49]. The presence of “crossings” in $G_\nu$ would signify $k$ gaps in the DR and concomitant temporal instabilities, which depend on the initial conditions of the flavor disturbances.

At present it looks like $\omega$ gaps are the most generic dispersion form, so the spatial boundary conditions and their time variation are needed to understand the generic behavior of the flavor field. Eventually, one may not get around, including the collision term in the EOM, to see which modes of the flavor field are actually excited.

While the DR alone does not prove that fast pairwise flavor conversion indeed occurs, it may well be a generic phenomenon for SN neutrinos. The impact of flavor equilibration in the decoupling region should be phenomenologically explored. The relevant length scales are much smaller than the resolution of SN simulations, so one any-way needs a schematic implementation. Although the details remain speculative, non-trivial modifications of shock reheating may be expected.
Acknowledgments.—GR acknowledges partial support by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (grant EXC 153) and the Horizon-2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions of the European Union (Grant No. H2020-MSCA-ITN-2015/674896-ELUSIVES). IT acknowledges support from the Knud Højgaard Foundation, the Villum Foundation (Project No. 13164) and the Danish National Research Foundation (DNRF91). We thank the Institute for Nuclear Theory at the University of Washington for hospitality and the DOE for partial support during early stages of this work.

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