Finite geometry for a generation

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Dedicated to J. A. Thas on his fiftieth birthday

There are a number of results concerning the generation of a collineation group by two of its elements. A. A. Albert and J. Thompson [1] were the first to exhibit two elements generating the little projective group $\text{PSL}(d, q)$ of $\text{PG}(d - 1, q)$ (for each $d$ and $q$). According to a theorem of W. M. Kantor and A. Lubotzky [8], "almost every" pair of its elements generates $\text{PSL}(d, q)$ as $qd \to \infty$ (asymptotically precise bounds on this probability are obtained in W. M. Kantor [7]). Given $1 \neq g \in \text{PSL}(d, q)$, the probability that $h \in \text{PSL}(d, q)$ satisfies $\langle g, h \rangle = \text{PSL}(d, q)$ was studied by R. M. Guralnick, W. M. Kantor and J. Saxl [3], and its behavior was found to depend on how $qd \to \infty$. Yet another variation that has been proposed is "$1\frac{1}{2}$"-generation: if $1 \neq g \in \text{PSL}(d, q)$ then some $h \in \text{PSL}(d, q)$ satisfies $\langle g, h \rangle = \text{PSL}(d, q)$. This note concerns a stronger version of this notion:

**Theorem.** For any $d \geq 4$ and any $q$, there is a conjugacy class $C$ of cyclic subgroups of $\text{PSL}(d, q)$ such that, if $1 \neq g \in \text{PSL}(d, q)$, then $\langle g, C \rangle = \text{PSL}(d, q)$ for more than 

$$\left(1 - \frac{1}{q} - \frac{1}{q^d-1}\right)^2 |C|$$

elements $C \in C$. In particular, there are more than $0.4|C|$ such elements if $q > 2$.

While this does not look at all like a geometric theorem, the proof is entirely geometric. The same type of result holds when $d = 2$ or 3 (and is easy), as well as for all the classical groups. The proof by W. M. Kantor [4] for the latter groups is still reasonably geometric, but is harder than the situation of the theorem.

Let $V$ be the vector space underlying $\text{PG}(d - 1, q)$. The following is a simple observation concerning the set $\text{Fix}(g)$ of fixed points (in $\text{PG}(d-1, q)$) of a collineation $g$:

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Lemma 1. Let $g \in \text{PSL}(V)$ have prime order.

(i) If $|g| \mid q$ then, for some point $z$ and hyperplane $Z$ fixed by $g$, $z$ lies in every hyperplane fixed by $g$.

(ii) If $|g| \not| q$ then $\text{Fix}(g) \subseteq A \cup B$ for nonzero subspaces $A$ and $B$ such that $V = A \oplus B$ and each hyperplane fixed by $g$ contains $A$ or $B$.

Proof. Let $\hat{g}$ be a linear transformation inducing $g$.

(i) We may assume that $|\hat{g}| = |g|$. Since $|\hat{g}| \mid q$, $\text{Fix}(g)$ is the set of points in the null space of $\hat{g} - I$, and this subspace is nonzero and proper in $V$. Let $Z$ be any hyperplane containing $\text{Fix}(g)$. Dually, the intersection of the set of fixed hyperplanes is nonzero, is fixed by $g$, and hence contains a nonzero point $z$ fixed by $g$.

(ii) This time $\text{Fix}(g)$ is the union of eigenspaces of $\hat{g}$ whose corresponding eigenvalues are in $GF(q)$. The span of these eigenspaces is their direct sum. Hence, let $B$ be any such (nonzero) eigenspace of smallest dimension, and let $A$ be a complement to $B$ containing all remaining eigenspaces; if there are no such nonzero eigenspaces then there are no fixed points, and $B$ can be chosen to be an arbitrary point. □

Let $C$ be a cyclic subgroup of $\text{PSL}(d, q)$ of order $q^{d-1} - 1$ that splits $V$ as $V = x \oplus X$ for a non-incident point $x$ and hyperplane $X$ (i.e., antiflag) of $\text{PG}(d - 1, q)$, where $C$ is transitive on the sets of points and hyperplanes of $X$. Let $\mathcal{C}$ denote the conjugacy class $C^{\text{PSL}(d, q)}$ of $C$. In view of the transitivity of $\text{PSL}(d, q)$ on the antiflags of $\text{PG}(d-1, q)$, each antiflag is fixed by the same number of members of $\mathcal{C}$.

Lemma 2. Assume that $d \geq 4$ and $\text{PSL}(d, q) \neq \text{PSL}(4, 2)$. If $C \leq J \leq \text{PSL}(d, q)$, where $J$ moves both $x$ and $X$, then $J = \text{PSL}(d, q)$.

Proof. Since $C$ is transitive on both the points and hyperplanes of $V/x$, $J$ is transitive on the set of those hyperplanes not disjoint from $\Omega := x^J$, and also on the set of those lines not disjoint from $\Omega$. In particular, all hyperplanes not disjoint from $\Omega$ meet $\Omega$ in the same number of points; and the same is true for the lines not disjoint from $\Omega$. Since $J$ moves the only point fixed by $C$, $|\Omega| > 1$. It follows that $\Omega$ is either the complement of a hyperplane or consists of all points (this simple result uses the fact that $d \geq 4$, and is proved on the bottom of p. 68 of W. M. Kantor [5]). Since $J$ moves the only hyperplane fixed by $C$, $\Omega$ must consist of all points.

Thus, $J$ is transitive on the set of points of $\text{PG}(d - 1, q)$, and hence also on the set of incident point-line pairs. By a result of W. M. Kantor [6], $J$ is 2-transitive on points. Now a theorem of P. J. Cameron and W. M. Kantor [2] implies that $J = \text{PSL}(d, q)$. □

The case $\text{PSL}(4, 2) \cong A_8$ of the theorem will be left to the reader, and hence is excluded here. Fix $1 \neq g \in \text{PSL}(d, q)$, where $|g|$ is prime. Call $C \in \mathcal{C}$ “good” if $\langle g, C \rangle = \text{PSL}(d, q)$.

(i) Suppose that $|g| \mid q$. Let $z, Z$ be as in lemma 1(i). By lemma 2, if $C \in \mathcal{C}$ is chosen so that its unique fixed point $x$ and hyperplane $X$ satisfy $x \notin Z$ and $z \notin X$, then $\langle g, C \rangle = \text{PSL}(d, q)$. The number of antiflags $x, X$ behaving in this manner is
$q^{d-1}(q^{d-1} - q^{d-2})$, and all such antiflags are fixed by the same number of members of $C$. Consequently, the proportion of good members of $C$ is at least

$$\frac{q^{d-1}(q^{d-1} - q^{d-2})}{[(q^d - 1)/(q - 1)]q^{d-1}} > \frac{11}{22}.$$  

(ii) Suppose that $|g|$ does not divide $q$. Let $A$ and $B$ be as in lemma 1(ii), where $A$ is a subspace $\text{PG}(a-1, q)$ and $B$ is a subspace $\text{PG}(b-1, q)$ with $a + b = d$ and $a \geq b$. Let $\mathcal{N}$ be the number of antiflags $x, X$ such that $x \notin A \cup B$ and $X \nsubset A, B$. Then the proportion of good members of $C$ is at least

$$\frac{\mathcal{N}}{[(q^d - 1)/(q - 1)]q^{d-1}} = \frac{\left[\frac{q^d - 1}{q - 1} - \frac{q^d - a - 1}{q - 1} - \frac{q^d - b - 1}{q - 1}\right](q^{d-1} - q^{a-1} - q^{b-1})}{[(q^d - 1)/(q - 1)]q^{d-1}} \geq \frac{q^d - q - q^{d-1} + 1}{q^{d-1} - 1} \frac{q^{d-1} - 1 - q^{d-2}}{q^{d-1}}.$$  

The right hand side is always $> \left(1 - \frac{1}{q} - \frac{1}{q^2}\right)^2$; if $q \geq 3$ then it is at least $(52/80)(17/27) > 0.4$. This proves the theorem.

**Remark.** If $q$ is fixed and $d \to \infty$, and if $g$ is always chosen to be a perspectivity in (i) or (ii), then the desired probability $\to (1 - 1/q)^2$.

**References**


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