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Test polynomials, retracts, and the Jacobian conjecture

Vladimir Shpilrain
and
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Abstract. Let $K[x, y]$ be the algebra of two-variable polynomials over a field $K$. A polynomial $p = p(x, y)$ is called a test polynomial for automorphisms if, whenever $\varphi(p) = p$ for a mapping $\varphi$ of $K[x, y]$, this $\varphi$ must be an automorphism. Here we show that $p \in \mathbb{C}[x, y]$ is a test polynomial if and only if $p$ does not belong to any proper retract of $\mathbb{C}[x, y]$. This has the following corollary that may have application to the Jacobian conjecture: if a mapping $\varphi$ of $\mathbb{C}[x, y]$ with invertible Jacobian matrix is “invertible on one particular polynomial”, then it is an automorphism. More formally: if there is a non-constant polynomial $p$ and an injective mapping $\psi$ of $\mathbb{C}[x, y]$ such that $\psi(\varphi(p)) = p$, then $\varphi$ is an automorphism.

1 Introduction

Let $K[x, y]$ be the algebra of two-variable polynomials over a field $K$ of characteristic 0. A subalgebra $R$ of $K[x, y]$ is called a retract if there is an idempotent homomorphism $\pi$ of $K[x, y]$ (called a retraction or a projection) such that $\pi(K[x, y]) = R$.

There are several equivalent descriptions of retracts of $K[x, y]$ known by now:

(i) $K[x, y] = R \oplus I$ for some ideal $I$ of $K[x, y]$;

(ii) $K[x, y]$ is a projective extension of $R$ in the category of $K$-algebras;

(iii) By a theorem of Costa [2], every proper retract of $K[x, y]$ (i.e., one different from $K[x, y]$ and $K$) is of the form $K[p]$ for some $p = p(x, y) \in K[x, y]$. The authors earlier proved [9] that there exists an automorphism of $K[x, y]$ which takes $p(x, y)$ to $x + y \cdot q(x, y)$ for some $q(x, y) \in K[x, y]$, and every polynomial of the form $x + y \cdot q(x, y)$ generates a proper retract of $K[x, y]$.

(iv) (see [9]) $p(x, y)$ generates a retract of $K[x, y]$ if and only if there is an endomorphism of $K[x, y]$ which takes $p(x, y)$ to $x$.

(v) (see [3]) $p(x, y)$ belongs to a proper retract of $\mathbb{C}[x, y]$ if and only if $p(x, y)$ is fixed by some endomorphism of $\mathbb{C}[x, y]$ with nontrivial kernel.

Recently retracts have found another application in a general setup of arbitrary free algebras and groups in relation with test elements, introduced in [8]. In general,
an element \( g \) of a group or an algebra \( F \) is a test element if any endomorphism of \( F \) fixing \( g \) is actually an automorphism. It is easy to see that a test element does not belong to any proper retract of \( F \); a remarkable result of Turner \([10]\) says that, if \( F \) is a free group, then the converse is also true. Thus, an element of a free group \( F \) is a test element if and only it does not belong to any proper retract of \( F \).

Here we establish a similar characterization of test polynomials in \( \mathbb{C}[x,y] \):

**Theorem 1.** A polynomial \( p \in \mathbb{C}[x,y] \) is a test polynomial if and only if \( p \) does not belong to any proper retract of \( \mathbb{C}[x,y] \).

Our proof uses several recent results, in particular, a result of Drensky and Yu \([3]\) mentioned in the item (v) above. Crucial for our proof is the following result of independent interest.

**Theorem 2.** Let \( \varphi \) be an injective endomorphism of \( \mathbb{C}[x,y] \) which is not an automorphism. Suppose that \( \varphi(p) = p \) for some non-constant polynomial \( p \in \mathbb{C}[x,y] \). Then \( p \in \mathbb{C}[q] \), where \( q \) is a coordinate polynomial of \( \mathbb{C}[x,y] \). In particular, \( p \) belongs to a proper retract of \( \mathbb{C}[x,y] \).

Recall that \( q = q(x,y) \) is a coordinate polynomial of \( \mathbb{C}[x,y] \) if it can be taken to \( x \) by an automorphism of \( \mathbb{C}[x,y] \).

We also use results of Shestakov and Umirbaev \([7]\) on estimating degrees of polynomials in two-generated subalgebras of \( K[x,y] \). Another ingredient is a result of Kraft \([5]\) concerning the subalgebra \( \varphi^\infty(\mathbb{C}[x,y]) = \bigcap_{k=1}^\infty \varphi^k(\mathbb{C}[x,y]) \).

Theorems 1, 2 have the following corollary:

**Corollary.** Let \( \varphi \) be an endomorphism of \( \mathbb{C}[x,y] \) with invertible Jacobian matrix. If there is a non-constant polynomial \( p \in \mathbb{C}[x,y] \) and an injective mapping \( \psi \) such that \( \psi(\varphi(p)) = p \), then \( \varphi \) is an automorphism of \( \mathbb{C}[x,y] \).

This strengthens our earlier result \([9, Corollary 1.7]\), where we showed that, if \( \varphi \) has invertible Jacobian matrix, then \( \varphi(p) = p \) implies that \( \varphi \) is an automorphism of \( \mathbb{C}[x,y] \).

To conclude the Introduction, we raise a problem motivated by results of this paper:

**Problem.** Suppose \( p \in \mathbb{C}[x,y] \) is a test polynomial and \( \varphi \) is an injective mapping of \( \mathbb{C}[x,y] \). Is \( \varphi(p) \) necessarily a test polynomial?

It is interesting to note that, by a result of Jelonek \([4]\), a “generic” polynomial of degree \( \geq 4 \) is a test polynomial.

## 2 Proof of Theorem 2

We consider the following two principal cases.

**Case I.** There is a coordinate polynomial in \( \varphi(\mathbb{C}[x,y]) \).
Case II. There are no coordinate polynomials in $\varphi(\mathbb{C}[x, y])$.

In Case I, consider two subcases:

(1) $\varphi$ is not birational, i.e., does not induce an automorphism of the field of fractions.

Then, by a result of Kraft [5, Lemma 1.3], $\varphi^\infty(\mathbb{C}[x, y])$ is either $\mathbb{C}$ or $\mathbb{C}[f]$, where $f = f(x, y)$ is some polynomial. Obviously, if $\varphi(p) = p$, then $p \in \varphi^\infty(\mathbb{C}[x, y])$. We are therefore going to focus on the case $\varphi^\infty(\mathbb{C}[x, y]) = \mathbb{C}[f]$ and show that, if $\varphi$ is injective, then $p \in \mathbb{C}[q]$, where $q$ is a coordinate polynomial.

Now suppose $r = r(x, y)$ is a coordinate polynomial in $\varphi(\mathbb{C}[x, y])$, and let $r = \varphi(s(x, y))$. Then, since $\varphi$ is injective, the polynomial $s = s(x, y)$ must be coordinate, too, by the result of [1]. Therefore, upon changing generating set of $\mathbb{C}[x, y]$ if necessary, we may assume that $r = \varphi(x)$. Furthermore, we can replace $\varphi$ with its conjugate by an arbitrary automorphism, say $\alpha$, i.e., with $\psi = \alpha\varphi\alpha^{-1}$, and at the same time replace $p$ with $p_1 = \alpha(p)$. Then we have:

$$\psi(p_1) = \alpha\varphi\alpha^{-1}(\alpha(p)) = \alpha(p) = p_1.$$  

Therefore, the pair $(\psi, p_1)$ has the same properties that the pair $(\varphi, p)$ does, namely, $\psi$ is injective but not birational, and $\psi(p_1) = p_1$; in particular, $p_1 \in \psi^\infty(\mathbb{C}[x, y])$. By choosing $\alpha$ appropriately, we can also have $\psi(x) = x$, thus getting $x \in \psi^\infty(\mathbb{C}[x, y])$.

Then, if $p$ (and therefore $p_1$) does not belong to $\mathbb{C}[q]$ for any coordinate polynomial $q$, $\psi^\infty(\mathbb{C}[x, y])$ cannot be of the form $\mathbb{C}[f]$, which is in contradiction with the result of Kraft mentioned above. This completes case (1).

(2) $\varphi$ is birational, i.e., induces an automorphism of the field of fractions. Again, as in the case (1) above, we deduce from [1] that $\varphi$ must take some coordinate polynomial to coordinate. Thus, upon changing generating set of $\mathbb{C}[x, y]$ if necessary, we may assume that $\varphi$ takes $x$ to $u$, and $y$ to $v \cdot f(u)$, where $\mathbb{C}[u, v] = \mathbb{C}[x, y]$, and $f(u)$ is a non-constant polynomial (otherwise, $\varphi$ would be an automorphism).

Now let

$$p = p(x, y) = \sum_{i,j} c_{ij} x^i y^j.$$  

Then

$$\varphi(p) = \sum_{i,j} c_{ij} u^i v^j (f(u))^j.$$  

Let $x^r y^s$ be the highest term of $p(x, y)$ in the “pure lex” order with $y > x$. Then in $\varphi(p)$, the highest term is that of $\varphi(x^r y^s)$ because the $y$-degree of $\varphi(y)$ is not lower than that of $\varphi(x)$. Furthermore, the highest term of $\varphi(x^r y^s)$ must have the $y$-degree at least $s$ since otherwise, one would have both $u$ and $v$ of $y$-degree equal to 0, which is impossible.

If the $y$-degree of $\varphi(x^r y^s)$ is $> s$, this gives a contradiction with $\varphi(p) = p$. Now suppose the $y$-degree of $\varphi(x^r y^s)$ is exactly $s$. This is only possible if the $y$-degree of $v$
Proof. The proof here is based on a result of Shestakov and Umirbaev [7, Theorem of $p_3$]. Let $N = \deg(x) \deg(y)$ such that the pair $(p,q)$ is elementary reduced. Let $n = \deg(p) < m = \deg(q); m,n \geq 2, \deg(D(p,q)) \geq k$. Let $w = w(x,y) \in \mathbb{C}[p,q])$. Then, unless $w$ is a linear combination of $p$ and $q$, one has $\deg(w) > \min(n,k)$.

Lemma. Let $p = p(x,y)$ and $q = q(x,y)$ be two algebraically independent polynomials such that the pair $(p,q)$ is elementary reduced. Let $n = \deg(p) < m = \deg(q); m,n \geq 2, \deg(D(p,q)) \geq k$. Let $w = w(x,y) \in \mathbb{C}[p,q])$. Then, unless $w$ is a linear combination of $p$ and $q$, one has $\deg(w) > \min(n,k)$.

Proof. The proof here is based on a result of Shestakov and Umirbaev [7, Theorem 3]. Let $N = N(p,q) = \frac{mn}{g.c.d.(n,m)} - m - n + \deg(D(p,q)) + 2$. Following [7], we may
assume that the highest homogeneous parts of $p$ and $q$ are algebraically dependent; otherwise, $\deg(w) > n$ is immediate (unless $w$ is a linear combination of $p$ and $q$). Then $\frac{mn}{\gcd(n, m)} - m - n \geq 0$. Indeed, if $\gcd(n, m) = n$, then the pair $(p, q)$ would not be elementary reduced, contradicting the assumption. If $\gcd(n, m) < n$, then $\frac{n}{\gcd(n, m)} \geq 2$, therefore $\frac{mn}{\gcd(n, m)} \geq 2m$, hence $\frac{mn}{\gcd(n, m)} - m - n \geq 0$.

Thus, from now on we assume $N = N(p, q) \geq \deg(D(p, q)) + 2$.

Suppose now that the $y$-degree of $w = w(x, y)$ is of the form $\frac{n}{\gcd(n, m)} \cdot b + r \neq 0$, where $0 \leq r < \frac{n}{\gcd(n, m)}$. Then, by [7, Theorem 3], we have

$$\deg(w(p, q)) \geq b \cdot N + nr.$$ 

If $b \neq 0$, this implies $\deg(w(p, q)) \geq N \geq k + 2 > k$. If $b = 0$, then $r \neq 0$, implying $\deg(w(p, q)) \geq m > n$.

It remains to consider the case where the $y$-degree of $w = w(x, y)$ is 0. Then the $x$-degree of $w$ must be nonzero; suppose it is of the form $\frac{m}{\gcd(n, m)} \cdot b_1 + r_1 \neq 0$, where $0 \leq r_1 < \frac{m}{\gcd(n, m)}$. Then, again by [7, Theorem 3], we have

$$\deg(w(p, q)) \geq b_1 \cdot N + nr_1.$$ 

As before, $b_1 \neq 0$ implies $\deg(w(p, q)) > k$. If $b_1 = 0$, then $r_1 \geq 2$ because we assume that $w(x, y)$ is not linear. Then we have $\deg(w(p, q)) \geq 2n > n$, which completes the proof of the lemma. □

Continuing with the proof of the Proposition, we aim at showing that for any integer $M$, there is an integer $k$ such that the degree of any polynomial in $\varphi^k(\mathbb{C}[x, y])$ is $> M$. The above lemma “almost” does it if we use it with $p = \varphi^k(x) = u^{(k)}, q = \varphi^k(y) = v^{(k)}$, but it has one extra condition on the pair $(p, q)$ to be elementary reduced, whereas a pair $(u^{(k)}, v^{(k)})$ may not be elementary reduced. However, if we denote by $(\overline{\varphi^{(k)}}, \overline{\varphi^{(k)}})$ an elementary reduced pair obtained from $(u^{(k)}, v^{(k)})$ by elementary transformations, we shall have all conditions of the lemma satisfied for this pair while obviously $\mathbb{C}[\overline{\varphi^{(k)}}, \overline{\varphi^{(k)}}] = \mathbb{C}[u^{(k)}, v^{(k)}]$. In particular, the inequality $\deg(D(\overline{\varphi^{(k)}}, \overline{\varphi^{(k)}})) \geq k$ follows from the fact that the mapping $x \to \overline{\varphi^{(k)}}, y \to \overline{\varphi^{(k)}}$ is a composition of $\varphi^k$ with an automorphism $\alpha$ of $\mathbb{C}[x, y]$ in such a way that $\alpha$ is applied first. Therefore, the “chain rule” applied to this composition yields $\deg(D(\overline{\varphi^{(k)}}, \overline{\varphi^{(k)}})) = \deg(D(u^{(k)}, v^{(k)}))$. Thus, our lemma is applicable to the pair $(\overline{\varphi^{(k)}}, \overline{\varphi^{(k)}})$, which completes the proof of the Proposition and therefore of Theorem 2. □

3 Proof of Theorem 1 and Corollary

The “only if” part of Theorem 1 follows from a result of [9] rather easily. If $p = p(x, y)$ belongs to a proper retract $\mathbb{C}[q]$ of $\mathbb{C}[x, y]$, then, by [9], for some automorphism $\alpha$, $\alpha(p)$ belongs to $\mathbb{C}[x + y \cdot u]$ for some polynomial $u = u(x, y)$. Then the mapping
$x \to x + y \cdot u$, $y \to 0$ fixes the polynomial $x + y \cdot u$, and therefore also fixes $\alpha(p)$. Thus, $\alpha(p)$ is not a test polynomial, and neither is $p$.

For the “if” part of Theorem 1, suppose that $p$ does not belong to any proper retract of $\mathbb{C}[x, y]$, and let $\varphi(p) = p$ for some mapping $\varphi$ of $\mathbb{C}[x, y]$. Then, by the result of [3], $\varphi$ must be injective. Then, by our Theorem 2, $\varphi$ must be an automorphism, hence $p$ is a test polynomial.

**Proof of Corollary 1.** By way of contradiction, assume that $\varphi$ is not an automorphism. Then, by our Theorem 2, $p \in \mathbb{C}[q]$, where $q$ is a coordinate polynomial of $\mathbb{C}[x, y]$. Therefore, the composite mapping $\psi \varphi$ fixes a polynomial $f(q)$ in $q$. Then it is easy to see (by looking at the highest degree monomial in $f(q)$) that $\psi(\varphi(q)) = c \cdot q$ for some $c \in \mathbb{C}^*$, which implies, by the result of [1], that $\varphi(q)$ is coordinate. A mapping of $\mathbb{C}[x, y]$ with invertible Jacobian matrix that takes a coordinate polynomial to a coordinate polynomial is obviously an automorphism, a contradiction.

In conclusion, we recall a result of [3] Theorem 1.3] saying that if, for a mapping $\varphi$ of $\mathbb{C}[x, y]$ with invertible Jacobian matrix, $\varphi(x)$ generates a proper retract of $\mathbb{C}[x, y]$, then $\varphi$ is an automorphism of $\mathbb{C}[x, y]$. Then, the case where $\varphi(x)$ belongs to a proper retract but does not generate it, can be ruled out since in that case, $\varphi(x) = f(p(x, y))$, where $p(x, y)$ generates a proper retract of $\mathbb{C}[x, y]$, and $f$ is some one-variable polynomial of degree >1. The gradient of such a polynomial cannot form a row of any invertible Jacobian matrix, which can be easily seen from the “chain rule” applied to $f(p(x, y))$.

Therefore, by Theorem 1 of the present paper, if $\varphi$ is a counterexample to the Jacobian conjecture for $\mathbb{C}[x, y]$, then $\varphi(x)$ must be a test polynomial. Perhaps a way to prove the Jacobian conjecture for $\mathbb{C}[x, y]$ could be through showing that the gradient of a test polynomial cannot form a row of any invertible Jacobian matrix. This is known to be the case with (non-commutative) partial derivatives of a test element of a free group of rank 2, see [3 Corollary 2.2.8].

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**References**


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