Formal derivation of the Lorentz transformations (optional)

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1 Lorentz transformations

Here we develop the form of Lorentz transformations using techniques from the study of Lie algebras. We find the general form of infinitesimal transformations, then apply those infinitely many times to develop the full set of finite transformations.

We define Lorentz transformations to be those linear transformations of the spacetime coordinates $x^{\alpha} = (ct, x, y, z)$, $\alpha = 0, 1, 2, 3$ for which

$$ds^2 = \eta_{\alpha\beta} x^{\alpha} x^{\beta}$$

= $-c^2 t^2 + x^2 + y^2 + z^2$

or equivalently, those linear transformations that preserve the wave equation. Either of these specifications leads to the necessary and sufficient condition

$$\eta_{\mu\nu}\Lambda^{\mu}_{\ \alpha}\Lambda^{\nu}_{\ \beta} = \eta_{\alpha\beta} \tag{1}$$

1.1 Infinitesimal transformations

We find all Lorentz transformations by first considering infinitesmal ones,

$$\Lambda^{\mu}_{\ \alpha} = \delta^{\mu}_{\ \alpha} + \varepsilon^{\mu}_{\ \alpha}$$

The defining condition becomes

$$\eta_{\mu\nu} \left(\delta^{\mu}_{\ \alpha} + \varepsilon^{\mu}_{\ \alpha} \right) \left(\delta^{\nu}_{\ \beta} + \varepsilon^{\nu}_{\ \beta} \right) = \eta_{\alpha\beta}$$
$$\eta_{\mu\nu} \delta^{\mu}_{\ \alpha} \delta^{\nu}_{\ \beta} + \eta_{\mu\nu} \delta^{\mu}_{\ \alpha} \varepsilon^{\nu}_{\ \beta} + \eta_{\mu\nu} \varepsilon^{\mu}_{\ \alpha} \delta^{\nu}_{\ \beta} + \eta_{\mu\nu} \varepsilon^{\mu}_{\ \alpha} \varepsilon^{\nu}_{\ \beta} = \eta_{\alpha\beta}$$
$$\eta_{\alpha\beta} + \eta_{\alpha\nu} \varepsilon^{\nu}_{\ \beta} + \eta_{\mu\beta} \varepsilon^{\mu}_{\ \alpha} + O\left(\varepsilon^{2}\right) = \eta_{\alpha\beta}$$

Dropping the higher order term, cancelling $\eta_{\alpha\beta}$, and defining

$$\varepsilon_{\alpha\beta} \equiv \eta_{\alpha\mu} \varepsilon^{\mu}_{\ \beta}$$

we have

$$\varepsilon_{\alpha\beta} + \varepsilon_{\beta\alpha} = 0$$

so that $\varepsilon_{\alpha\beta}$ must be antisymmetric.

The most general antisymmetric 4×4 matrix may be written as

where

 $a^i = (a_1, a_2, a_3)$ $b^i = (b_1, b_2, b_3)$

 $\quad \text{and} \quad$

and finally,

The 3×3 matrices \tilde{J}_i have components given by the Levi-Civita tensor,

$$\left[\tilde{J}_i\right]_{jk} = \varepsilon_{ijk}$$

To compute the transformations, we need to raise the first index of K_i and J_i using the inverse metric. The three K_i change:

while the J_i stay the same, that is, $[J_i]^{\alpha}_{\beta}$ has identical components to $[J_i]_{\alpha\beta}$. The transformations generated by the J_i with therefore be different from those generated by K_i .

2 Finite transformations

We build up finite transformations as the limit of an infinite number of infinitesmial transformations.

2.1 Rotations

Consider the transformations involving J_i first. A general, infinitesimal J_i -type transformation is given by

$$\Lambda = 1 + \mathbf{b} \cdot \mathbf{J}$$

To find a *finite* transformation we take the limit of many infinitesimal ones. Write the infinitesimal vector **b** as $\mathbf{b} = \varepsilon \mathbf{n}$ where **n** is a unit vector. Then define the finite transformation,

$$\Lambda\left(\mathbf{n},\theta\right) = \lim_{n \to \infty} \left(1 + \varepsilon \mathbf{n} \cdot \mathbf{J}\right)^{n}$$

where we take the limit in such a way that $\varepsilon n \to \theta$. To evaluate this we use the binomial theorem,

$$(a+b)^{n} = \sum_{k=0}^{n} \begin{pmatrix} n \\ k \end{pmatrix} a^{n-k} b^{k}$$

to write

$$\Lambda (\mathbf{n}, \theta) = \lim_{n \to \infty} \sum_{k=0}^{n} {n \choose k} 1^{n-k} (\varepsilon \mathbf{n} \cdot \mathbf{J})^{k}$$
$$= \lim_{n \to \infty} \sum_{k=0}^{n} \frac{n!}{k! (n-k)!} \varepsilon^{k} (\mathbf{n} \cdot \mathbf{J})^{k}$$

Now we need powers of $\mathbf{n} \cdot \mathbf{J}$. This is easiest if we focus on the nontrivial 3×3 part, since

$$\left(\mathbf{n}\cdot\mathbf{J}\right)^{n} = \begin{pmatrix} 0 & 0\\ 0 & \left(\mathbf{n}\cdot\tilde{\mathbf{J}}\right)^{n} \end{pmatrix}$$

Since every term in Λ lies in the lower 3×3 corner, this transformation only affects x, y, z and not t. Let $\tilde{\Lambda}(\mathbf{n}, \theta)$ be the 3-dim transformation,

$$\tilde{\Lambda}(\mathbf{n},\theta) = \lim_{n \to \infty} \sum_{k=0}^{n} \frac{n!}{k! (n-k)!} \varepsilon^k \left(\mathbf{n} \cdot \tilde{\mathbf{J}}\right)^k$$

with $\tilde{\mathbf{J}}$ the 3×3 form of the generators. We find

$$\begin{pmatrix} \mathbf{n} \cdot \tilde{\mathbf{J}} \end{pmatrix}^{2} = \begin{pmatrix} 0 & n_{3} & -n_{2} \\ -n_{3} & 0 & n_{1} \\ n_{2} & -n_{1} & 0 \end{pmatrix}^{2}$$

$$= \begin{pmatrix} -n_{2}^{2} - n_{3}^{2} & n_{1}n_{2} & n_{1}n_{3} \\ -n_{1}n_{2} & -n_{1}^{2} - n_{3}^{2} & n_{2}n_{3} \\ n_{1}n_{3} & n_{2}n_{3} & -n_{1}^{2} - n_{2}^{2} \end{pmatrix}$$

$$= \begin{pmatrix} n_{1}n_{1} & n_{1}n_{2} & n_{1}n_{3} \\ n_{1}n_{2} & n_{2}n_{2} & n_{2}n_{3} \\ n_{1}n_{3} & n_{2}n_{3} & n_{3}n_{3} \end{pmatrix} - (n_{1}^{2} + n_{2}^{2} + n_{3}^{2}) \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}$$

$$= \begin{pmatrix} \left(n \cdot \tilde{\mathbf{J}} \right)^{2} \right]_{j}^{i} = -\left(\delta_{j}^{i} - n^{i}n_{j} \right)$$

Taking one more power,

$$\begin{pmatrix} \mathbf{n} \cdot \tilde{\mathbf{J}} \end{pmatrix}^{3} = \begin{bmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} n_{1}n_{1} & n_{1}n_{2} & n_{1}n_{3} \\ n_{1}n_{2} & n_{2}n_{2} & n_{2}n_{3} \\ n_{1}n_{3} & n_{2}n_{3} & n_{3}n_{3} \end{pmatrix} - \begin{pmatrix} 1 \\ 1 \\ 1 \\ 1 \end{pmatrix} \end{bmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} 0 & n_{3} & -n_{2} \\ -n_{3} & 0 & n_{1} \\ n_{2} & -n_{1} & 0 \end{pmatrix}$$

$$= \begin{pmatrix} n_{1}n_{1} & n_{1}n_{2} & n_{1}n_{3} \\ n_{1}n_{2} & n_{2}n_{2} & n_{2}n_{3} \\ n_{1}n_{3} & n_{2}n_{3} & n_{3}n_{3} \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} 0 & n_{3} & -n_{2} \\ -n_{3} & 0 & n_{1} \\ n_{2} & -n_{1} & 0 \end{pmatrix} - \begin{pmatrix} 0 & n_{3} & -n_{2} \\ -n_{3} & 0 & n_{1} \\ n_{2} & -n_{1} & 0 \end{pmatrix}$$

$$= \begin{pmatrix} 0 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 \end{pmatrix} - (\mathbf{n} \cdot \tilde{\mathbf{J}})$$

$$= -(\mathbf{n} \cdot \tilde{\mathbf{J}})$$

so we have come back to the original matrix except for a sign. If we define $\tilde{M} \equiv -\left(n \cdot \tilde{J}\right)^2$ then we may write all powers as

$$\begin{pmatrix} \mathbf{n} \cdot \tilde{\mathbf{J}} \end{pmatrix}^{2m} = (-1)^m \tilde{\mathbf{M}}$$
$$\begin{pmatrix} \mathbf{n} \cdot \tilde{\mathbf{J}} \end{pmatrix}^{2m+1} = (-1)^m \mathbf{n} \cdot \tilde{\mathbf{J}}$$

and the series becomes

$$\begin{split} \tilde{\Lambda}(\mathbf{n},\theta) &= \lim_{n \to \infty} \sum_{k=0}^{n} \frac{n!}{k! (n-k)!} \varepsilon^{k} \left(\mathbf{n} \cdot \tilde{\mathbf{J}}\right)^{k} \\ &= \lim_{n \to \infty} \left[\tilde{\mathbf{1}} + \sum_{m=1}^{n} \frac{n!}{(2m)! (n-2m)!} \varepsilon^{2m} \left(\mathbf{n} \cdot \tilde{\mathbf{J}}\right)^{2m} + \sum_{m=0}^{n} \frac{n!}{(2m+1)! (n-2m-1)!} \varepsilon^{2m+1} \left(\mathbf{n} \cdot \tilde{\mathbf{J}}\right)^{2m+1} \right] \\ &= \tilde{\mathbf{1}} - \tilde{\mathbf{M}} + \tilde{\mathbf{M}} \lim_{n \to \infty} \sum_{m=0}^{n} \frac{(-1)^{m} n!}{(2m)! (n-2m)!} \varepsilon^{2m} + \mathbf{n} \cdot \tilde{\mathbf{J}} \lim_{n \to \infty} \sum_{m=0}^{n} \frac{(-1)^{m} n!}{(2m+1)! (n-2m-1)!} \varepsilon^{2m+1} \end{split}$$

where we add and subtract $\tilde{\mathbf{M}}$ so that m starts at 0 in the first sum. Now look at the remaining sums. Multiplying and dividing the first by n^{2m} ,

$$\lim_{n \to \infty} \sum_{m=0}^{n} \frac{(-1)^m n!}{(2m)! (n-2m)!} \varepsilon^{2m} = \lim_{n \to \infty} \sum_{m=0}^{n} \frac{(-1)^m n!}{(2m)! n^{2m} (n-2m)!} (n\varepsilon)^{2m}$$

$$= \lim_{n \to \infty} \sum_{m=0}^{n} \frac{(-1)^{m} n (n-1) (n-2) \cdots (n-2m+1)}{(2m)! n^{2m}} (n\varepsilon)^{2m}$$

$$= \lim_{n \to \infty} \sum_{m=0}^{n} \frac{(-1)^{m} 1 \left(1 - \frac{1}{n}\right) \left(1 - \frac{2}{n}\right) \cdots \left(1 - \frac{2m-1}{n}\right)}{(2m)!} (n\varepsilon)^{2m}$$

$$= \sum_{m=0}^{\infty} \frac{(-1)^{m} \theta^{2m}}{(2m)!}$$

$$= \cos \theta$$

and similarly for the second

$$\lim_{n \to \infty} \sum_{m=0}^{n} \frac{(-1)^m n!}{(2m+1)! (n-2m-1)!} \varepsilon^{2m+1} = \lim_{n \to \infty} \sum_{m=0}^{n} \frac{(-1)^m \eta^{2m+1}}{(2m+1)!} = \sin \theta$$

The full transformation is therefore

$$\tilde{\Lambda}(\mathbf{n},\theta) = \tilde{\mathbf{1}} - \tilde{\mathbf{M}} + \tilde{\mathbf{M}}\cos\theta + \mathbf{n}\cdot\tilde{\mathbf{J}}\sin\theta$$

where

$$\tilde{M}_{ij} = \delta_{ij} - n_i n_j$$

This is a rotation through an angle θ about the **n** direction. To see this, consider the effect on an arbitrary position vector, x^i . In components, remembering that $\left[\tilde{J}_i\right]_{jk} = \varepsilon_{ijk}$,

$$\begin{split} \tilde{\Lambda}^{i}_{j}x^{j} &= \left[\delta^{i}_{j} - \left(\delta^{i}_{j} - n^{i}n_{j}\right)\right]x^{j} + \left(\delta^{i}_{j} - n^{i}n_{j}\right)x^{j}\cos\theta + n_{k}\varepsilon^{ki}_{\ j}\sin\theta \\ &= n^{i}n_{j}x^{j} + \left(x^{i} - n^{i}n_{j}x^{j}\right)\cos\theta + n_{k}\varepsilon^{ki}_{\ j}x^{j}\sin\theta \\ &= n^{i}n_{j}x^{j} + \left(x^{i} - n^{i}n_{j}x^{j}\right)\cos\theta - \varepsilon^{i}_{\ kj}n^{k}x^{j}\sin\theta \\ \tilde{\Lambda}\mathbf{x} &= \mathbf{n}\left(\mathbf{n}\cdot\mathbf{x}\right) + \left(\mathbf{x} - \mathbf{n}\left(\mathbf{n}\cdot\mathbf{x}\right)\right)\cos\theta - \left(\mathbf{n}\times\mathbf{x}\right)\sin\theta \end{split}$$

Now divide \mathbf{x} into parts parallel and perpendicular to \mathbf{n} ,

$$\begin{aligned} \mathbf{x}_{\parallel} &= \mathbf{n} \left(\mathbf{n} \cdot \mathbf{x} \right) \\ \mathbf{x}_{\perp} &= \mathbf{x} - \mathbf{n} \left(\mathbf{n} \cdot \mathbf{x} \right) \end{aligned}$$

and notice that $\mathbf{n} \times \mathbf{x}$ is perpendicular to both.

$$\mathbf{\tilde{\Lambda}}\mathbf{x} = \mathbf{x}_{\parallel} + \mathbf{x}_{\perp} \left(\cos \theta - 1\right) - \left(\mathbf{n} imes \mathbf{x}_{\perp}\right) \sin \theta$$

The part of **x** parallel to **n** is unaffected by the transformation, while the perpendicular part undergoes a rotation by θ in the plane perpendicular to **n**

2.2 Boosts

Now consider the transformations generated by K_i . The basic approach is identical, with only the generators differing. Identical steps, taking the limit of many infinitesimal transformations, lead to

$$\Lambda(\mathbf{n},\theta) = \lim_{n \to \infty} \sum_{k=0}^{n} \frac{n!}{k! (n-k)!} \varepsilon^k \left(\mathbf{n} \cdot \mathbf{K}\right)^k$$

where the limit is taken with $n\varepsilon \to \zeta$ where ζ is finite. The powers of $\mathbf{n} \cdot \mathbf{K}$ again split into even and odd. Starting with

$$\mathbf{n} \cdot \mathbf{K} = \begin{pmatrix} 0 & -n_1 & -n_2 & -n_3 \\ -n_1 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\ -n_2 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\ -n_3 & 0 & 0 & 0 \end{pmatrix}$$
$$(\mathbf{n} \cdot \mathbf{K})^2 = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & n_1n_1 & n_2n_1 & n_3n_1 \\ 0 & n_1n_2 & n_2n_2 & n_3n_2 \\ 0 & n_1n_3 & n_2n_3 & n_3n_3 \end{pmatrix}$$
$$(\mathbf{n} \cdot \mathbf{K})^3 = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & n_1n_1 & n_2n_1 & n_3n_1 \\ 0 & n_1n_2 & n_2n_2 & n_3n_2 \\ 0 & n_1n_3 & n_2n_3 & n_3n_3 \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} 0 & -n_1 & -n_2 & -n_3 \\ -n_1 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\ -n_2 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\ -n_3 & 0 & 0 & 0 \end{pmatrix}$$
$$= \begin{pmatrix} 0 & -n_1 & -n_2 & -n_3 \\ -n_1 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\ -n_2 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\ -n_3 & 0 & 0 & 0 \end{pmatrix}$$

so in general,

$$(\mathbf{n} \cdot \mathbf{K})^{2m+1} = \mathbf{n} \cdot \mathbf{K}$$

$$(\mathbf{n} \cdot \mathbf{K})^{2m} = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & n_1 n_1 & n_2 n_1 & n_3 n_1 \\ 0 & n_1 n_2 & n_2 n_2 & n_3 n_2 \\ 0 & n_1 n_3 & n_2 n_3 & n_3 n_3 \end{pmatrix} \equiv \mathbf{N}$$

Notice that there is no alternating sign now. The power series rearranges as before to give

$$\begin{split} \Lambda \left(\mathbf{n}, \theta \right) &= \lim_{n \to \infty} \sum_{k=0}^{n} \frac{n!}{k! (n-k)!} \varepsilon^{k} \left(\mathbf{n} \cdot \mathbf{K} \right)^{k} \\ &= \mathbf{1} - \mathbf{N} + \mathbf{N} \sum_{m=0}^{\infty} \frac{\zeta^{2m}}{(2m)!} + \mathbf{n} \cdot \mathbf{K} \sum_{m=0}^{\infty} \frac{\zeta^{2m+1}}{(2m+1)!} \\ &= \mathbf{1} - \mathbf{N} + \mathbf{N} \cosh \zeta + \mathbf{n} \cdot \mathbf{K} \sinh \zeta \end{split}$$

If we define $n^{\alpha} = (0, n^i)$ and $m^{\alpha} = (1, \mathbf{0})$ then we may write

$$\begin{bmatrix} \mathbf{N} \end{bmatrix}_{\beta}^{\alpha} = n^{\alpha} n_{\beta} + m^{\alpha} m_{\beta} \\ \begin{bmatrix} \mathbf{n} \cdot \mathbf{K} \end{bmatrix}_{\beta}^{\alpha} = -m^{\alpha} n_{\beta} - n^{\alpha} m_{\beta} \end{bmatrix}$$

and the Lorentz boost becomes

$$\Lambda^{\alpha}_{\beta} = \delta^{\alpha}_{\beta} + (n^{\alpha}n_{\beta} + m^{\alpha}m_{\beta})\left(\cosh\zeta - 1\right) - (m^{\alpha}n_{\beta} + n^{\alpha}m_{\beta})\sinh\zeta$$

To see that this is a boost, let \mathbf{n} lie in the *x*-direction. Then

and therefore

just as we found previously as on of the transformations preserving the wave equation.