

Zeitschrift: L'Enseignement Mathématique
Herausgeber: Commission Internationale de l'Enseignement Mathématique
Band: 42 (1996)
Heft: 3-4: L'ENSEIGNEMENT MATHÉMATIQUE

Artikel: INTRODUCTORY NOTES ON RICHARD THOMPSON'S GROUPS
Autor: Cannon, J. W. / Floyd, W. J. / Parry, W. R.
Kapitel: §1. Introduction to F
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-87877>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 14.03.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

This paper is largely expository, and much of the material in it is standard. These notes originated from our interest in the question of whether or not F is amenable. They were expanded in order to make available Thompson's unpublished proofs (from [T1]) of the simplicity of T and V and Thurston's interpretations of F and T as the groups of orientation-preserving, piecewise integral projective homeomorphisms of the unit interval and the circle.

In §1 we define F as a group of piecewise linear homeomorphisms of the unit interval $[0, 1]$, and then give some examples of elements of F . In §2 we represent elements of F as tree diagrams, and give a normal form for elements of F . Two standard presentations for F are given in §3. In §4 we prove several theorems about F ; these are partly motivated by the question of whether F is an amenable group. In §5 we define T and give Thompson's proof that T is simple. In §6 we define V and give Thompson's proof that V is simple. In §7 we give W. Thurston's interpretations of F and T in terms of piecewise integral projective homeomorphisms.

The group that we are denoting F was originally denoted $\widehat{\mathbb{P}}$ in [T1] and \mathfrak{P}' in [McT], and was denoted \mathbb{P} in [T2]. It was denoted F in [BroG] in 1984, and it was also denoted F in [Bri], [BriS], [Bro1], [Bro3], [Fo], [FrH], [GhS], [Gre], [GreS], [GuS], and [St]. It is denoted G in [BieS].

The group that we are denoting T was originally denoted $\widehat{\mathcal{C}}$ in [T1]. It was denoted T in [Bro1] in 1987 and was denoted T in [Bri] and [St]. However, it was denoted G in [GhS] and [Gre]. It is denoted S in [BieS].

The group that we are denoting V was originally denoted \widehat{V} in [T1] and \mathcal{C}' in [McT], and was denoted $Fit(\omega 2)$ in [T2]. It was denoted $G_{2,1}$ in [H] in 1974, and was denoted G in [Bro1], [Bro2], and [St].

We have not included here all of the known results about these groups, but we have included in the bibliography those references of which we are aware.

We thank the referee for supplying important references of which we were unaware and helping to clarify the exposition. We also thank Ross Geoghegan for helpful comments.

§1. INTRODUCTION TO F

Let F be the set of piecewise linear homeomorphisms from the closed unit interval $[0, 1]$ to itself that are differentiable except at finitely many dyadic rational numbers and such that on intervals of differentiability the derivatives are powers of 2. Since derivatives are positive where they exist, elements of F

preserve orientation. Let $f \in F$, and let $0 = x_0 < x_1 < x_2 < \dots < x_n = 1$ be the points at which f is not differentiable. Then since $f(0) = 0$, $f(x) = a_1x$ for $x_0 \leq x \leq x_1$, where a_1 is a power of 2. Likewise, since $f(x_1)$ is a dyadic rational number, $f(x) = a_2x + b_2$ for $x_1 \leq x \leq x_2$, where a_2 is a power of 2 and b_2 is a dyadic rational number. It follows inductively that

$$f(x) = a_i x + b_i \quad \text{for } x_{i-1} \leq x \leq x_i$$

and $i = 1, \dots, n$, where a_i is a power of 2 and b_i is a dyadic rational number. It easily follows that $f^{-1} \in F$ and that f maps the set of dyadic rational numbers bijectively to itself. From this it is easy to see that F is closed under composition of functions. Thus F is a subgroup of the group of all homeomorphisms from $[0, 1]$ to $[0, 1]$. This group F is Thompson's group F .

EXAMPLE 1.1. Two functions in F are the functions A and B defined below.

$$A(x) = \begin{cases} \frac{x}{2}, & 0 \leq x \leq \frac{1}{2} \\ x - \frac{1}{4}, & \frac{1}{2} \leq x \leq \frac{3}{4} \\ 2x - 1, & \frac{3}{4} \leq x \leq 1 \end{cases} \quad B(x) = \begin{cases} x, & 0 \leq x \leq \frac{1}{2} \\ \frac{x}{2} + \frac{1}{4}, & \frac{1}{2} \leq x \leq \frac{3}{4} \\ x - \frac{1}{8}, & \frac{3}{4} \leq x \leq \frac{7}{8} \\ 2x - 1, & \frac{7}{8} \leq x \leq 1 \end{cases}$$

A useful notation for functions f in F will be described next. Construct a rectangle with a top, which is viewed as the domain of f , and a bottom, which is viewed as the range of f . For every point x on the top where f is not differentiable, construct a line segment from x to $f(x)$ on the bottom. Call the result the *rectangle diagram* of f . By juxtaposing the rectangle diagrams of a pair of functions, it is easy to compute the rectangle diagram of their composition. We learned about rectangle diagrams from W. Thurston in 1975; they also appear in [BieS].

EXAMPLE 1.2. Figure 1 gives some examples of functions in F and their rectangle diagrams.

Now define functions X_0, X_1, X_2, \dots in F so that $X_0 = A$ and $X_n = A^{-(n-1)}BA^{n-1}$ for $n \geq 1$. From Example 1.2 it is easy to see that the rectangle diagram of X_n is as in Figure 2.

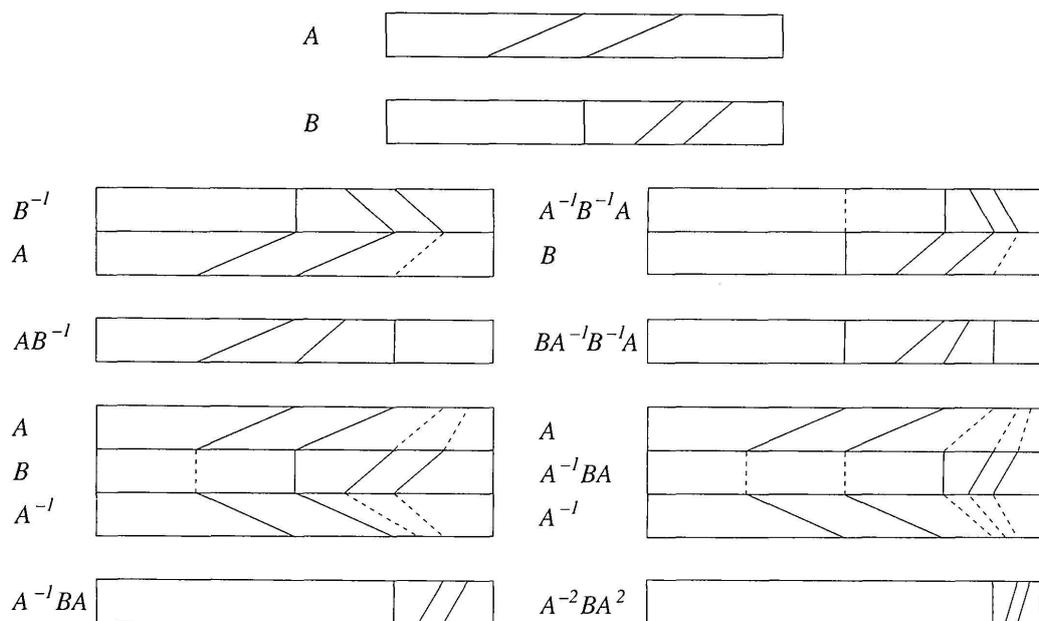


FIGURE 1

The rectangle diagrams of some elements of F

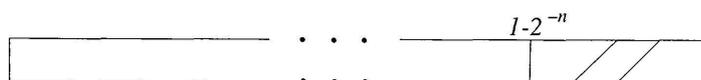


FIGURE 2

The rectangle diagram of X_n

§2. TREE DIAGRAMS

The notion of tree diagram is developed in this section. Tree diagrams are useful for describing functions in F ; we first encountered them in [Bro1].

Define an *ordered rooted binary tree* to be a tree S such that i) S has a root v_0 , ii) if S consists of more than v_0 , then v_0 has valence 2, and iii) if v is a vertex in S with valence greater than 1, then there are exactly two edges $e_{v,L}$, $e_{v,R}$ which contain v and are not contained in the geodesic from v_0 to v . The edge $e_{v,L}$ is called a *left edge* of S , and $e_{v,R}$ is called a *right edge* of S . Vertices with valence 0 (in case of the trivial tree) or 1 in S will be called *leaves* of S . There is a canonical left-to-right linear ordering on the leaves of S . The *right side* of S is the maximal arc of right edges in S which begins at the root of S . The *left side* of S is defined analogously.

An *isomorphism* of ordered rooted binary trees is an isomorphism of rooted trees which takes left edges to left edges and right edges to right edges. An *ordered rooted binary subtree* S' of an ordered rooted binary tree S is an