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## AN ELEMENTARY PROOF OF THE HILBERT–MUMFORD CRITERION\*

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**Abstract.** An elementary proof of the Hilbert–Mumford semistability criterion is given that is valid over  $\mathbb{C}$ . The proof of the criterion is deduced from an elementary lemma in linear algebra that may be of independent interest.

**Key words.** Semistability criterion, Algebraic one-parameter groups.

**AMS subject classifications.** 20G20, 14A25

**1. Introduction and lemma.** A classical result of geometric invariant theory is the Hilbert–Mumford semistability criterion. In one form, it deals with a linear action of a reductive algebraic group  $G$  on a vector space over any field  $k$ . The references [1], [2], [3], [4] contain proofs over algebraically closed fields, and [5] contains a proof that works over algebraic number fields as well. Here, a transparent elementary proof is given that is valid over  $\mathbb{C}$ . An elementary positivity lemma in linear algebra is proved and used to deduce the proof of the criterion over  $\mathbb{C}$ . The lemma may be of independent interest.

We start with the following positivity lemma.

**LEMMA 1.1.** *Let  $m_{ij}$ ,  $1 \leq i \leq r$ ,  $1 \leq j \leq n$ , be integers satisfying the following property:*

*If  $b_1, \dots, b_r$  are real numbers (not all zero) such that*

$$b_1 m_{1j} + \dots + b_r m_{rj} = 0 \quad \forall j = 1, \dots, n,$$

*then at least two of the  $b_i$  must have opposite signs.*

*Then there are real numbers (and, therefore, also integers)  $c_i$  such that*

$$m_{i1} c_1 + \dots + m_{in} c_n > 0 \quad \forall i \leq r.$$

*Proof.* The property above means that the kernel of the linear map  $M$  from  $\mathbb{R}^r$  to  $\mathbb{R}^n$  given by

$$(b_1, \dots, b_r) \mapsto \left( \sum_{i=1}^r b_i m_{i1}, \dots, \sum_{i=1}^r b_i m_{in} \right)$$

intersects the “positive orthant”  $\mathcal{O}$  in  $\mathbb{R}^r$  only in zero. The assertion of the lemma amounts to the statement that the image of the transpose  ${}^t M$  of  $M$  intersects the

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interior of  $\mathcal{O}$ . Since  $\text{Ker}(M)$  and the image of  ${}^tM$  are orthogonal complements of each other, it suffices to show that  $\text{Ker}(M)^\perp$  intersects the interior of  $\mathcal{O}$ . We show, more generally, that if  $K$  is a subspace of  $\mathbb{R}^r$  intersecting  $\mathcal{O}$  only in zero, then  $K^\perp$  intersects the interior of  $\mathcal{O}$ . We will first show that  $K$  can be assumed to be of codimension 1. Suppose that  $K$  has codimension  $k \geq 2$ . Now,  $D$  denotes the image of  $\mathcal{O}$  in  $\mathbb{R}^r/K \cong \mathbb{R}^k$ . Since  $\mathbb{R}^k \setminus \{0\}$  is connected, there is a vector  $v \neq 0$  in  $\mathbb{R}^k \setminus (D \cup -D)$ . Hence the line  $\mathbb{R} \cdot v$  intersects  $D$  only in 0. Pulling back to  $\mathbb{R}^r$ , we get a subspace  $L$  containing  $K$  in  $\mathbb{R}^r$  of one more dimension such that  $L \cap \mathcal{O} = \{0\}$ . In the above argument, one could replace  $\mathcal{O}$  more generally by a closed cone  $C$  in  $\mathbb{R}^r$  such that  $C \cap -C = \{0\}$ . We have used the fact that  $D$  is again closed. Proceeding in this way, we can assume that  $K$  has codimension 1. Now, let the equation of  $K$  be  $\sum_{i=1}^r \lambda_i X_i = 0$ . Then  $K \cap \mathcal{O} = \{0\}$ , which evidently forces either all of the  $\lambda_i > 0$  or all of the  $\lambda_i < 0$ . Suppose  $\lambda_i > 0 \forall i$ . Then  $K^\perp$  is generated by the vector  $(\lambda_1, \dots, \lambda_r)$  and, obviously,  $(\lambda_1, \dots, \lambda_r)$  is in the interior of  $\mathcal{O}$ . This completes the proof.  $\square$

REMARK 1.2. Note that in the above,  $\mathcal{O}$  can be replaced by any closed cone subtending an angle  $\geq 90^\circ$ . The statement is false for cones of smaller angle.

**2. The proof of the semistability criterion.** Let us see how the lemma applies to the following statement, known as the semistability criterion.

THEOREM 2.1. *Let  $G = GL(n, \mathbb{C})$  act linearly on a vector space  $V$ . Let  $v \in V$  be a point that is not semistable, i.e., the closure  $\overline{G \cdot v}$  of the orbit  $G \cdot v$  (in the classical topology) contains 0. Then there exists an algebraic one-parameter subgroup  $A \cong GL_1$  of  $G$  such that  $0 \in \overline{A \cdot v}$ .*

*Proof.* We have the (Cartan) decomposition  $G = KTK$ , where  $K$  is  $U(n)$  and  $T$  is the maximal diagonal torus—this can be easily deduced from the spectral theorem for Hermitian operators. From this decomposition, it immediately follows that  $0 \in \overline{T \cdot kv}$  for some  $k \in K$ . It is enough to get a multiplicative one-parameter subgroup  $A$ , as in the theorem, for the vector  $kv$ , since the group  $k^{-1}Ak$  works for  $v$  then. So, we rename  $kv$  as  $v$  and work with it without any loss of generality. Write  $v = \sum_{i=1}^r v_{\chi_i}$ , where

$$v_{\chi_i} \in V_{\chi_i} := \{w \in V : t \cdot w = \chi_i(t)w \forall t \in T\}$$

for some algebraic characters  $\chi_i : T \rightarrow \mathbb{C}^*$ . Let  $\chi_i = \sum_{j=1}^n m_{ij} \lambda_j$ , where  $\lambda_j : T \rightarrow \mathbb{C}^*$  is the character  $\text{diag}(t_1, \dots, t_n) \mapsto t_j$ ; here  $m_{ij}$  are integers. So, we have

$$t \cdot v = \sum_{i=1}^r t_1^{m_{i1}} \dots t_n^{m_{in}} v_{\chi_i}$$

for any  $t = \text{diag}(t_1, \dots, t_n) \in T$ .

*Claim.* If  $b_1, \dots, b_n$  are real numbers (not all zero) such that

$$b_1 m_{1j} + \dots + b_r m_{rj} = 0 \forall j = 1, \dots, n,$$

then at least two of the  $b_i$ 's are of opposite signs.

To prove the claim, we suppose, on the contrary, that there are  $b_i$  (not all zero) all of the same sign such that

$$b_1 m_{1j} + \dots + b_r m_{rj} = 0 \quad \forall j = 1, \dots, n.$$

Let  $t^{(k)} = \text{diag}(t_1^{(k)}, \dots, t_n^{(k)}) \in T$  be a sequence such that  $t^{(k)}.v \rightarrow 0$  as  $k \rightarrow \infty$ . Therefore,  $\forall i \leq r$ ,

$$(1) \quad (t_1^{(k)})^{m_{i1}} \dots (t_n^{(k)})^{m_{in}} \rightarrow 0 \quad \text{as } k \rightarrow \infty.$$

Suppose, now, that  $b_1 \neq 0$ . Then

$$-m_{1j} = \frac{b_2}{b_1} m_{2j} + \dots + \frac{b_r}{b_1} m_{rj} \quad \forall j \leq n$$

so that

$$(2) \quad t_1^{-m_{11}} \dots t_n^{-m_{1n}} = (t_1^{m_{21}} \dots t_n^{m_{2n}})^{\frac{b_2}{b_1}} \dots (t_1^{m_{r1}} \dots t_n^{m_{rn}})^{\frac{b_r}{b_1}}.$$

Since  $\frac{b_i}{b_1} \geq 0 \quad \forall i \geq 2$ , and not all of them are zero, the right-hand side of (2) tends to 0 as  $(t_1, \dots, t_n)$  runs over the sequence  $(t_1^{(k)}, \dots, t_n^{(k)})$ . Looking at the left-hand side of (2), we have a contradiction of (1). This proves the claim.

Let us continue with the proof of the theorem. First, an application of the lemma ensures the existence of integers  $c_i$  such that

$$(3) \quad m_{i1} c_1 + \dots + m_{in} c_n > 0 \quad \forall i \leq r.$$

Consider the algebraic one-parameter subgroup  $GL_1$  in  $T$  given by the homomorphism

$$\theta : GL_1 \rightarrow T, \quad t \mapsto \text{diag}(t^{c_1}, \dots, t^{c_n}).$$

Note that  $\theta(t).v = \sum_{i=1}^r t^{m_{i1}c_1 + \dots + m_{in}c_n} v_{\chi_i}$ . By (3), it is clear that  $0 \in \overline{\theta(GL_1).v}$ .  $\square$

The following is a corollary of the proof.

**COROLLARY 2.2.** *Let  $(,)$  denote the nondegenerate pairing*

$$X_*(T) \times X^*(T) \rightarrow \mathbb{Z},$$

where  $X_*(T) = \text{Hom}(GL_1, T)$  is the group of multiplicative one-parameter subgroups and  $X^*(T) = \text{Hom}(T, GL_1)$  is the character group of  $T$ . Then  $\theta \in X_*(T)$  satisfies  $0 \in \overline{\theta(GL_1).v}$  if and only if  $(\theta, \chi_i) > 0 \quad \forall i \leq r$ .

**REMARK 2.3.** For the other classical groups over  $\mathbb{C}$ , the proof is completely similar.

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