

The Complexity of a Single Face of a Minkowski Sum

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Abstract

This note considers the complexity of a free region in the configuration space of a polygonal robot translating amidst polygonal obstacles in the plane. Specifically, given polygonal sets P and Q with k and n vertices, respectively ($k < n$), the number of edges and vertices bounding a single face of the complement of the Minkowski sum $P \oplus Q$ is $\Theta(nk\alpha(k))$ in the worst case. The lower bound comes from a construction based on lower envelopes of line segments; the upper bound comes from a combinatorial bound on Davenport-Schinzel sequences that satisfy two alternation conditions.

1 Introduction and Background

Let A and B be two sets in \mathbb{R}^2 . The *Minkowski sum* (or vector sum) of A and B , denoted $A \oplus B$, is the set $\{a + b \mid a \in A, b \in B\}$.

The Minkowski sum is a useful concept in robot motion planning and related areas [2, 11, 12, 13]. For example, consider an obstacle A and a robot B that moves by translation. We can choose a reference point r rigidly attached to B and suppose that B is placed such that the reference point coincides with the origin. If we let B' denote a copy of B rotated by 180° , then $A \oplus B'$ is the locus of placements of the reference point where $A \cap B \neq \emptyset$. This sum is often called a *configuration-space obstacle* or *C-obstacle* because B collides with A under rigid motion along a path γ exactly when the reference point r , moved along γ , intersects $A \oplus B'$.

We confine ourselves to the Minkowski sum of polygonal sets, which is a polygonal set [4]. Let P and Q be two polygonal sets, not necessarily connected, with k and n vertices respectively. The boundary of $P \oplus Q$ comes from an arrangement of $O(nk)$ line segments, which has complexity bounded by $O(n^2k^2)$, and this bound is tight in the worst case [10, 14].

In applications such as motion planning [5] and assembly planning [18], however, we only need to know the *face complexity*—the number of segments that bound a single face of the complement of the Minkowski sum $P \oplus Q$ in the worst case. Figure 1 depicts the outer face of a sum $P \oplus Q$. Davenport-Schinzel sequence analysis, which is described in section 3.1, shows that the face complexity is $O(nk\alpha(nk))$ [14], where $\alpha(\cdot)$ is the functional inverse of Ackermann’s function.

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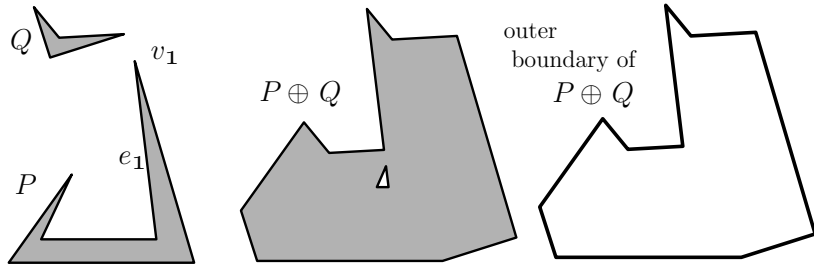


Figure 1: Two polygons, their Minkowski sum, and the outer face of the sum

There is a collection of kn segments that gives rise to a single face with complexity $\Omega(nk\alpha(nk))$ [17]. Speaking at the 5th CCCG [12], Milenkovic conjectured that the special structure of the segments in a Minkowski sum would imply $O(nk)$ complexity. We establish the true bound to be $\Theta(nk\alpha(k))$ with $k < n$. Our lower bound is based on the lower envelope construction of Wiernik and Sharir [17]. The upper bound comes from recent work of Har-Peled [7] on generalized combination lemmas; its combinatorial analysis of *double Davenport-Schinzel sequences* can be seen as a generalization of an analysis of Huttenlocher et al. [9].

These bounds are worth noting in the context of motion planning, where it is common to assume that P is a robot polygon with small fixed complexity and Q , the set of obstacles, has large complexity. In this setting, our bound states that the complexity of a single face in the complement of the Minkowski sum of the obstacles and the robot polygon is $\Theta(n)$.

2 The Lower Bound on the Face Complexity

We establish an $\Omega(nk\alpha(k))$ lower bound (with $k < n$) even for simple polygons P and Q . One can modify the construction to make P and Q be star-shaped polygons (which implies that $P \oplus Q$ is star-shaped).

Theorem 2.1 *Given $k < n$, there exists a simple polygon P with $\Theta(k)$ edges and a simple polygon Q with $\Theta(n)$ edges such that the outer face of $P \oplus Q$ has $\Omega(nk\alpha(k))$ edges.*

Proof: Let s_1, s_2, \dots, s_k be k segments such that their lower envelope \mathcal{L} has $\Omega(k\alpha(k))$ edges [17]. We may assume that the segments lie inside the unit square $(0, 1) \times (0, 1)$. Define P by extending the k segments $s_1 + (1, 0), s_2 + (2, 0), \dots, s_k + (k, 0)$ vertically to the line $y = 1$, as in Figure 2. This gives us a polygon with $\Theta(k)$ edges. Define Q by extending the $n+k$ points $(1, 0), (2, 0), \dots, (n+k, 0)$ vertically to the line $y = 1$. By thickening the edges, this gives us a polygon with $\Theta(n+k) = \Theta(n)$ edges. In Figure 2, one can see that $P \oplus Q$ is a polygon whose outer face includes n translated copies of \mathcal{L} and is thus of size $\Omega(nk\alpha(k))$. ■

3 The Upper Bound on the Face Complexity

To prove the upper bound, we employ a useful combinatorial theorem of Har-Peled [7]. We include the details to make this note self-contained.

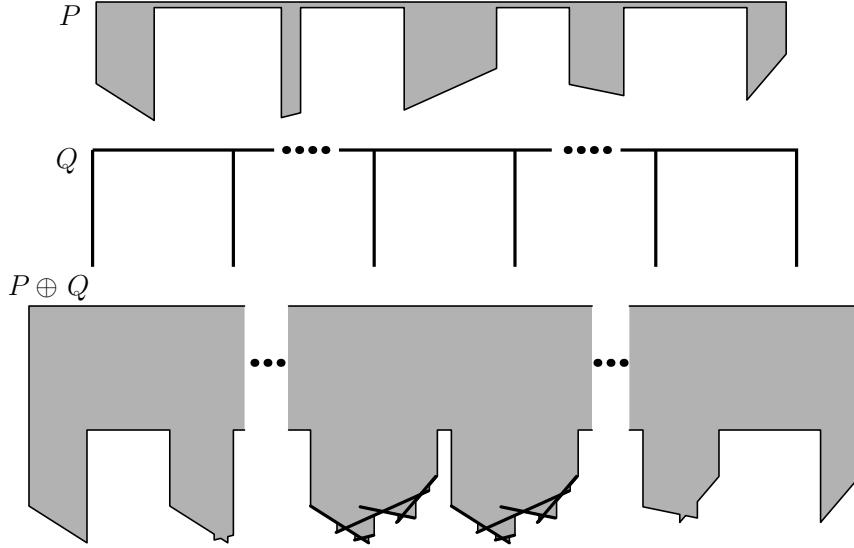


Figure 2: The polygons P and Q and sum $P \oplus Q$ with $\Omega(nk \alpha(k))$ complexity

3.1 Double Davenport-Schinzel Sequences

Davenport-Schinzel sequence analysis is a combinatorial tool with many applications in computational geometry. We remind the reader of the basic definitions; for more information, see Sharir’s survey [15, 16]. Let Σ be an alphabet with m symbols and s be a positive integer. A string $U = u_1 u_2 \dots u_r$ of symbols in Σ is an (m, s) -Davenport-Schinzel sequence if it satisfies two conditions:

1. No adjacent repeats: $u_i \neq u_{i+1}$ for all $i < r$.
2. No $s + 1$ alternations: For no distinct $a, b \in \Sigma$ is the alternating sequence $abab\dots$ of length $s + 2$ a subsequence of U .

Let $\lambda_s(m)$ denote the maximum length of an (m, s) -DS sequence. It is not hard to see that $\lambda_1(m) = m$ and that $\lambda_2(m) = 2m - 1$. Hart and Sharir [8] have shown that $\lambda_3(m) = \Theta(m\alpha(m))$, where $\alpha(m)$ is the functional inverse of Ackermann’s function. Agarwal et al. [1] have obtained the best bounds known for $\lambda_s(m)$ with $s > 3$; for any fixed s , the bounds are slightly superlinear in m .

Huttenlocher et al. [9] studied a variant of Davenport-Schinzel sequences in which there are a small number of “active” symbols at any given time. Har-Peled [7] has generalized and strengthened their result to what could be called “double” Davenport-Schinzel sequences: sequences satisfying two alternation restrictions. Let $\Sigma^i = \{a^{ij} \mid j = 1, \dots, n\}$ for $i = 1, \dots, k$. Let $\Sigma = \bigcup_{1 \leq i \leq k} \Sigma^i$. Thus, we have nk symbols in k families of n symbols.

Theorem 3.1 *Let $U = u_1 u_2 \dots u_r$ be a string of symbols of Σ satisfying:*

1. *No adjacent repeats: $u_\ell \neq u_{\ell+1}$, for $1 \leq \ell < r$.*
2. *No global alternating 5-seq.: For distinct $a, b \in \Sigma$, $ababa$ is a forbidden subsequence of U .*
3. *No family alternating 4-seq.: For all $1 \leq i \leq k$ and distinct $a, b \in \Sigma^i$, $abab$ is forbidden in U .*

Then the length $|U| = r = O(nk \alpha(k))$.

Proof: We first fix a family $i \in \{1, \dots, k\}$ and consider the sequence obtained from U by removing all elements of U that do not belong to Σ^i . This sequence might contain pairs of consecutive symbols that are identical. Contract strings of such identical symbols to just one symbol. Let the resulting string of symbols of Σ^i be U^i . Condition 3 implies that U^i is an $(n, 2)$ -DS sequence, so its length is at most $\lambda_2(n) = 2n - 1$. Summed over all families $\sum_{1 \leq i \leq k} |U^i| = (2n - 1)k$.

Now consider the sequence U and subdivide it into blocks as follows. Start at the beginning of U and continue until $2k$ distinct symbols have been seen (or U has been exhausted). This forms the first block of U ; remove it and repeat the process until U is exhausted. We prove that (1) U is hereby cut into at most $2n$ blocks and (2) each block has $O(k \alpha(k))$ symbols. The theorem follows immediately.

The second is easy: Any block U' of U contains at most $2k$ distinct symbols. By conditions 1 and 2, block U' is a $(2k, 3)$ -DS sequence, so its length is at most $\lambda_3(2k) = O(k \alpha(k))$.

As for the first claim, any block U' except the last uses exactly $2k$ distinct symbols. For each $1 \leq i \leq k$, mark in U' the first occurrence, if any, of a symbol from Σ^i . This marks at most k symbols. Now traverse U' from left to right, considering, for each symbol a^{ij} , its first *unmarked* appearance in U' , if any. There are at least k such appearances, and each corresponds to a new element of the sequence U^i described above. Because there are a total of $(2n - 1)k$ elements in all U^i 's, there are at most $2n$ blocks. ■

3.2 The Face Complexity of the Minkowski Sum

Theorem 3.2 *Let P and Q be polygonal sets with k and n vertices respectively. The complexity of a face of the complement of the Minkowski sum $P \oplus Q$ is $O(nk \alpha(k))$.*

Proof: The segments that bound the Minkowski sum $P \oplus Q$ are the sums of a vertex of one polygonal set with an edge of the other [4]. We treat these asymmetrically and define a *vertex set* to be a sum of a fixed vertex of P with all the edges of Q and an *edge set* to be the sum of a fixed edge of P and all the vertices of Q . Figure 3(a) depicts the vertex set induced by v_1 of Figure 1; Figure 3(b) depicts the edge set induced by e_1 .

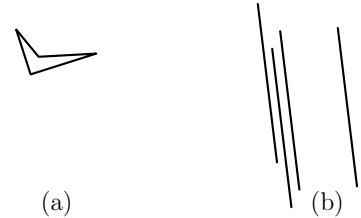


Figure 3: vertex & edge sets

Consider a face of the complement of $P \oplus Q$. We derive a double Davenport-Schinzel sequence on an alphabet consisting of $2k$ families (the vertex and edge sets) of $2n$ segments each. Starting at the rightmost point on the boundary of the face, walk around the boundary and list the segments encountered in order. When a segment s is encountered for the first time, split it into two, s and s' , to ensure that each segment is traversed in a consistent order. If the face has more than one boundary component, then repeat for each component, and concatenate the resulting lists arbitrarily to form sequence U . Because no segment can appear in two components, concatenation cannot create adjacent repeated symbols or forbidden alternation patterns in U . (This is no longer true if we look at the boundaries of all faces.)

Because each segment of a vertex or edge set bounds a polygon, each has only one side exposed to the complement. Thus, an $ababa$ subsequence in U would indicate that the two

segments a and b had two points of intersection, which is impossible. In a similar manner, an $abab$ subsequence with a and b from the same vertex set would indicate that two edges of Q intersected; an $abab$ subsequence with a and b from the same edge set would indicate that two parallel segments intersected. Therefore, U is a double Davenport-Schinzel sequence and Theorem 3.1 bounds its length by $O(nk\alpha(k))$. ■

Remark: Sharir, in personal communication, has pointed out that this theorem can also be proved by decomposing P into $O(k)$ triangles, computing the Minkowski sum of each triangle with Q to form $O(k)$ arrangements with $O(n)$ complexity, and then applying Har-Peled’s generalized combination theorem [7, Thm 3.1]. In fact, we can also apply the combination theorem directly to the arrangements of vertex and edge sets.

4 Open Problems

Can one further exploit the structure of vertex and edge sets to devise a “simple” deterministic algorithm for computing a face of the Minkowski sum (i.e., simpler than the general algorithm of Edelsbrunner *et al.* [3])? Can one exploit similar structure for constraint surfaces in other motion planning problems to improve bounds on the complexity of a connected component of free configuration space? One example is the three-dimensional configuration space of a polygon translating *and rotating* among polygons [6].

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