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# AN ELEMENTARY METHOD FOR COMPUTING THE KOSTKA COEFFICIENTS

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ABSTRACT. We present a simple and elementary method for computing the Kostka numbers. We use this method to give compact formulas for  $K_{\pi,\mu}$  in some special cases.

## 1. Introduction

Kostka coefficients appear in combinatorics and representation theory and they are very important from a physical point of view. The Kostka number  $K_{\pi,\mu}$  is the number of semi-standard Young tableaux of shape  $\pi$  and content  $\mu$  (see Section 2 below). It is also the multiplicity with which the weight  $\mu$  appears in the irreducible representation of  $\mathfrak{sl}_n(\mathbb{C})$ with highest weight  $\pi$ . Similarly, in the representation theory of symmetric groups we encounter the Kostka numbers as the multiplicity of irreducible character  $\chi_{\mu}$  in the induction of the principal character of the Young subgroup  $S_{\pi}$  to  $S_m$ . The Kostka coefficients are also important in the study of Schur functions. This work is devoted to computing these numbers in some special cases using an elementary method.

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# 2. Generalities

Let *m* be a positive integer. By a partition of *m*, we mean an *s*-tuple  $\pi = [a_1, a_2, \ldots, a_s]$  of positive integers with

$$a_1 \ge a_2 \ge \cdots \ge a_s,$$

and

$$a_1 + a_2 + \cdots + a_s = m_s$$

We say that s is the height of  $\pi$  and we denote it by  $h(\pi)$ . To any partition  $\pi$  of m we associate a *Ferrer's diagram* consisting of m boxes arranged in s rows in such a way that the *i*th row contains  $a_i$  boxes. For example, the following is the Ferrer's diagram associated with the partition  $\pi = [7, 5, 3, 3]$ :

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Now, let  $\mu = [b_1, b_2, \dots, b_r]$  be another partition of m. We say that  $\pi$  majorizes  $\mu$ , if for any i we have

$$b_1 + b_2 + \dots + b_i \le a_1 + a_2 + \dots + a_i.$$

In this case, we write  $\mu \leq \pi$ . This is a partial ordering on the set of all partitions of m. The partition [m] is the maximum element and the partition  $[1^m] = [1, 1, \ldots, 1]$  is the minimum element with respect to this ordering. If  $\pi = [a_1, a_2, \ldots, a_s]$  and  $\mu = [b_1, b_2, \ldots, b_r]$  are two arbitrary partitions of m, then by a semi-standard Young tableau of shape  $\pi$  and content  $\mu$ , we mean any distribution of the numbers  $1, 2, \ldots, m$  in the boxes of the associated Ferrer's diagram of  $\pi$  in such a way that

- 1. every row is non-decreasing;
- 2. every column is (strictly) increasing; and
- 3. for any  $1 \leq i \leq m$ , the multiplicity of *i* in the distribution is  $b_i$ .

**Example 2.1.** Let m = 5,  $\pi = [3, 2]$  and  $\mu = [2, 2, 1]$ . Then the only semi-standard Young tableaux of shape  $\pi$  and content  $\mu$  are the following two diagrams:



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The number of all semi-standard Young tableaux of shape  $\pi$  and content  $\mu$  is denoted by  $K_{\pi,\mu}$  and it is called the *Kostka coefficient* or the *Kostka number*. This combinatorial notion has a wide range of interpretations in the representation theory of Lie groups and Lie algebras as well as the representation theory of the symmetric group (see [1] or [2]). The Kostka numbers are also very important in the study of symmetric functions, especially Schur functions. It is well-known that  $K_{\pi,\mu} \neq 0$  if and only if  $\mu \leq \pi$ ; see [2] for details.

## 3. Computing Kostka coefficients

Let  $\pi = [a_1, a_2, \ldots, a_s]$  and  $\mu = [b_1, b_2, \ldots, b_r]$  be two arbitrary partitions of m with  $\mu \leq \pi$ . In general, every semi-standard Young tableau of shape  $\pi$  and content  $\mu$  has the following form:

where,  $(t^k)$  denotes t t  $\cdots$  t (k-times), and  $x_1, y_1, \ldots$  are non-negative integers. Given a semi-standard Young tableau of shape  $\pi$  and content  $\mu$  as above, we must have the following equalities:

$$\begin{array}{rcrcrcrc} x_1 + x_2 &=& b_2 \\ y_1 + y_2 + y_3 &=& b_3 \\ z_1 + z_2 + z_3 + z_4 &=& b_4 \\ && \vdots \\ x_1 + y_1 + z_1 + \cdots &=& a_1 - b_1 \\ x_2 + y_2 + z_2 + \cdots &=& a_2 \\ y_3 + z_3 + \cdots &=& a_3 \\ && \vdots \end{array}$$

as well as the inequalities below:

Our strategy is to count the number of non-negative integer solutions of this system of equalities and inequalities. The resulting number obviously will be the Kostka number  $K_{\pi,\mu}$ . In what follows, we are going to solve the system in some special cases: if we denote by (s, r) the pair consisting of the heights of  $\pi$  and  $\mu$  in that order, then the rest of this article concerns the following cases:

$$(s,r) = (2,3), (3,3), (3,4), (4,4).$$

3.1. The case (s, r) = (2, 3). Let  $\pi = [a_1, a_2]$  and  $\mu = [b_1, b_2, b_3]$ . The general form of any semi-standard Young tableau of shape  $\pi$  and content  $\mu$  is as follows:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} (1^{b_1}) & (2^{x_1}) & (3^{y_1}) \\ (2^{x_2}) & (3^{y_2}) \end{array}$$

Here,  $x_1, x_2, y_1, y_2$  are non-negative integers and we have the following equalities:

$$\begin{array}{rcl} x_1 + x_2 & = & b_2 \\ y_1 + y_2 & = & b_3 \\ x_1 + y_1 & = & a_1 - b_1 \\ x_2 + y_2 & = & a_2 \end{array}$$

as well as two inequalities:

We can write down the system of equations in matrix form:

ſ	1	1	0	0 ]	$\begin{bmatrix} x_1 \end{bmatrix}$		$b_2$	
	0	0	1	1	$x_2$	-	$b_3$	
	1	0	1	0	$y_1$	=	$a_1 - b_1$	·
	0	1	0	1	$y_2$		$a_2$	

We name the matrix of coefficients to be H. It has rank 3, and so any solution of the system has the form  $X = X_0 + X_1$ , where  $X_1$  is an arbitrary but fixed solution and  $X_0$  is the one-parametric solution of the homogenous system HX = 0. We set:

$$X_1 = \begin{bmatrix} a_1 - b_1 \\ b_1 + b_2 - a_1 \\ 0 \\ b_3 \end{bmatrix}.$$

On the other hand, the solution for HX = 0 is:

$$X_0 = \begin{bmatrix} T \\ -T \\ -T \\ T \end{bmatrix},$$

where,  $T \in \mathbb{Z}$ . Hence, we have

$$\begin{aligned} x_1 &= T + a_1 - b_1 \\ x_2 &= -T + b_1 + b_2 - a_1 \\ y_1 &= -T \\ y_2 &= T + b_3. \end{aligned}$$

Applying the inequalities we obtain five restrictions on T:

Now, define

$$\mathcal{L}_{\pi,\mu} = \max(b_1 - a_1, a_2 - a_1, -b_3),$$
  
$$\mathcal{U}_{\pi,\mu} = \min(0, b_1 + b_2 - a_1).$$

So, we have proved the following result.

**Theorem 3.1.** Let  $\pi = [a_1, a_2]$  and  $\mu = [b_1, b_2, b_3]$ . Then, we have

$$K_{\pi,\mu} = \mathcal{U}_{\pi,\mu} - \mathcal{L}_{\pi,\mu} + 1.$$

**Remark 3.2.** It is important to note that since we assumed  $\mu \leq \pi$ , every number in the list  $b_1 - a_1, a_2 - a_1, -b_3$  is less than or equal to the numbers in the list  $0, b_1 + b_2 - a_1$  (for example,  $a_2 - a_1 \leq b_1 + b_2 - a_1$ , because  $a_2 \leq \frac{m}{2}$ , while  $b_1 + b_2 \geq \frac{2m}{3}$ ). So, we never have the case  $\mathcal{U}_{\pi,\mu} < \mathcal{L}_{\pi,\mu}$ . The same is true for other cases in the next subsections.

3.2. The case (s,r) = (3,3). Now, suppose  $\pi = [a_1, a_2, a_3]$  and  $\mu = [b_1, b_2, b_3]$ . Any semi-standard Young tableau of shape  $\pi$  and content  $\mu$  has the form

$$\begin{array}{ccc} (1^{b_1}) & (2^{x_1}) & (3^{y_1}) \\ (2^{x_2}) & (3^{y_2}) \\ (3^{y_3}) \end{array}$$

with equalities

$$\begin{array}{rcrcrcrc} x_1 + x_2 & = & b_2 \\ y_1 + y_2 + y_3 & = & b_3 \\ x_1 + y_1 & = & a_1 - b_1 \\ x_2 + y_2 & = & a_2 \\ y_3 & = & a_3, \end{array}$$

and inequalities

$$\begin{array}{rcl}
0 < x_2 &\leq b_1 \\
x_2 + y_2 &\leq b_1 + x_1 \\
a_3 &\leq x_2.
\end{array}$$

The solution for this system is:

$$\begin{aligned} x_1 &= T + a_1 - b_1 \\ x_2 &= -T + b_1 + b_2 - a_1 \\ y_1 &= -T \\ y_2 &= T + b_3 - a_3. \end{aligned}$$

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Applying the inequalities, we obtain the restrictions

Note that the inequality  $b_2 - a_1 \leq T$  is removed rom the above list, because  $b_2 \leq a_2$ . Note also that, if we put  $a_3 = 0$ , we get the same inequalities as in the case (s, r) = (2, 3). Hence, if we define

$$\mathcal{L}_{\pi,\mu} = \max(b_1 - a_1, a_2 - a_1, a_3 - b_3), \mathcal{U}_{\pi,\mu} = \min(0, a_2 - b_3),$$

then we have proved the following result.

**Theorem 3.3.** For 
$$\pi = [a_1, a_2, a_3]$$
 and  $\mu = [b_1, b_2, b_3]$ , we have  
 $K_{\pi,\mu} = \mathcal{U}_{\pi,\mu} - \mathcal{L}_{\pi,\mu} + 1.$ 

3.3. The case (s,r) = (3,4). Now, we assume that  $\pi = [a_1, a_2, a_3]$  and  $\mu = [b_1, b_2, b_3, b_4]$ . Hence, our semi-standard Young tableau looks like

$$\begin{array}{cccc} (1^{b_1}) & (2^{x_1}) & (3^{y_1}) & (4^{z_1}) \\ (2^{x_2}) & (3^{y_2}) & (4^{z_2}) \\ (3^{y_3}) & (4^{z_3}) \end{array}$$

We have the equations

$$x_1 + x_2 = b_2$$
  

$$y_1 + y_2 + y_3 = b_3$$
  

$$z_1 + z_2 + z_3 = b_4$$
  

$$x_1 + y_1 + z_1 = a_1 - b_1$$
  

$$x_2 + y_2 + z_2 = a_2$$
  

$$y_3 + z_3 = a_3,$$

as well as the following inequalities

$$\begin{array}{rcrcrcr}
x_2 &\leq & b_1 \\
a_2 - b_1 &\leq & x_1 + z_2 \\
z_1 &\leq & a_1 - a_2 \\
z_2 &\leq & a_2 - a_3 \\
y_3 &\leq & x_2.
\end{array}$$

Let H be the matrix of coefficients in the system of equations. Then, H is row equivalent to the following matrix K:

1	0	0	-1	0	1	0	1	1
0	1	0	1	0	-1	0	-1	
0	0	1	1	0	0	0	-1	
0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	.
0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	

Hence, any solution to the system is in the form  $X = X_0 + X_1$ , where  $X_1$  is an arbitrary but fixed solution and  $X_0$  is the general solution of the homogenous system KX = 0. For  $X_1$ , we use

$$\begin{bmatrix} a_1 - b_1 \\ b_1 + b_2 - a_1 \\ 0 \\ a_1 + a_2 - b_1 - b_2 \\ -a_1 - a_2 + b_1 + b_2 + b_3 \\ 0 \\ 0 \\ b_4 \end{bmatrix}.$$

On the other hand,  $X_0$ , the general solution of the system KX = 0, has the following form:

$$\begin{bmatrix} T+S\\ -T-S\\ U-T\\ T\\ -U\\ -S-U\\ S\\ U \end{bmatrix},$$

with  $T, S, U \in \mathbb{Z}$ . Hence, we have

$$\begin{aligned} x_1 &= T + S + a_1 - b_1 \\ x_2 &= -T - S + b_1 + b_2 - a_1 \\ y_1 &= U - T \\ y_2 &= T + a_1 + a_2 - b_1 - b_2 \\ y_3 &= -U + a_3 - b_4 \\ z_1 &= -S - U \\ z_2 &= S \\ z_3 &= U + b_4. \end{aligned}$$

Applying and simplifying inequalities, we obtain the following restrictions on T, S, U:

The appendix contains a compact formula for the number of triples of integers (T, S, U) satisfying the above conditions.

3.4. The case (s,r) = (4,4). Suppose we have  $\pi = [a_1, a_2, a_3, b_4]$  and  $\mu = [b_1, b_2, b_3, b_4]$ . In this case, we have the following pattern:

$$\begin{array}{ccccc} (1^{b_1}) & (2^{x_1}) & (3^{y_1}) & (4^{z_1}) \\ (2^{x_2}) & (3^{y_2}) & (4^{z_2}) \\ (3^{y_3}) & (4^{z_3}) \\ (4^{z_4}) \end{array}$$

Hence, obviously  $z_4 = a_4$ . For other indeterminates, we have the following system of equations:

$$\begin{array}{rcrcrcrc} x_1 + x_2 & = & b_2 \\ y_1 + y_2 + y_3 & = & b_3 \\ z_1 + z_2 + z_3 & = & b_4 - a_4 \\ x_1 + y_1 + z_1 & = & a_1 - b_1 \\ x_2 + y_2 + z_2 & = & a_2 \\ y_3 + z_3 & = & a_3. \end{array}$$

Also, the following inequalities hold:

$$egin{array}{rcl} x_2 &\leq b_1 \ a_2 - b_1 &\leq x_1 + z_2 \ z_1 &\leq a_1 - a_2 \ z_2 &\leq a_2 - a_3 \ a_4 \leq y_3 &\leq x_2. \end{array}$$

As in the case (3, 4), we obtain:

$$\begin{array}{rcl} x_1 &=& T+S+a_1-b_1 \\ x_2 &=& -T-S+b_1+b_2-a_1 \\ y_1 &=& U-T \\ y_2 &=& T+a_1+a_2-b_1-b_2 \\ y_3 &=& -U-a_1-a_2+b_1+b_2+b_3 \\ z_1 &=& -S-U \\ z_2 &=& S \\ z_3 &=& U+b_4-a_4, \end{array}$$

where,  $T,S,U\in\mathbb{Z}$  and these numbers clearly must satisfy the following conditions:

The number of all triples of integers satisfying the above conditions is computed in the appendix, and thus again we obtain a compact formula for the Kostka number.

## 4. Appendix

Here, we give a formula for the number of triples of integers satisfying the following seven conditions:

Note that all constants in this system are integers or  $\pm \infty$ . In what follows, we will use the notation  $\langle x \rangle$  for  $\max(0, x)$ . We proceed step by step, first solving some simpler cases.

1. First, we obtain N, the number of solutions of the following system,

Let  $A \leq i \leq B$ . Define

$$X = \{(T,S) : a \le T \le b, a' \le S \le b'\}$$

and

$$X_i = \{ (T, S) \in X : T + S = i \}.$$

It is clear that  $(T, S) \in X_i$  if and only if S = i - T and

Hence, we have

$$N = \sum_{i=A}^{B} < \min(b, -a' + i) - \max(a, -b' + i) + 1 > .$$

2. Now, we consider the following situation:

$$egin{array}{rcl} a & \leq & T & \leq & b \ a' & \leq & S & \leq & b' \ a'' & \leq & U & \leq & b'' \ A & \leq & T+S & \leq & B \ A' & \leq & S+U & \leq & B' \end{array}$$

Let  $A \leq i \leq B$  and  $A' \leq j \leq B'$ . Define

$$X = \{ (T, S, U) : a \le T \le b, a' \le S \le b', a'' \le U \le b'' \}$$

and

$$X_{ij} = \{ (T, S, U) \in X : T + S = i, S + U = j \}.$$

We have  $(T, S, U) \in X_{ij}$  if and only if T = i - S and U = j - S, and also

$$egin{array}{rcl} -b+i &\leq S &\leq -a+i \ a' &\leq S &\leq b' \ -b''+j &\leq S &\leq -a''+j. \end{array}$$

So, we obtain:

$$N = \sum_{i=A}^{B} \sum_{j=A'}^{B'} < \min(b^{'}, -a+i, -a^{''}+j) - \max(a^{'}, -b+i, -b^{''}+j) + 1 > .$$

3. Now, consider the system,

To handle this case, let

$$f_{ij} = \max(a', -b+i, -b''+j), \ g_{ij} = \min(b', -a+i, -a''+j)$$

We have  $f_{ij} \leq S \leq g_{ij}$  and the condition  $A'' \leq T + S - U \leq B''$  implies

$$A'' \le i - j + S \le B'',$$

which is equivalent to:

$$A'' - i + j \le S \le B'' - i + j.$$

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Hence, we have

$$N = \sum_{i=A}^{B} \sum_{j=A'}^{B'} < \min(g_{ij}, B'' - i + j) - \max(f_{ij}, A'' - i + j) + 1 >,$$

or in other words,

$$N = \sum_{i=A}^{B} \sum_{j=A'}^{B'} < \min(B'' - i + j, b', -a + i, -a'' + j)$$
$$-\max(A'' - i + j, a', -b + i, -b'' + j) + 1 > .$$

4. We can now discuss the main case. We only need to have the additional restrictions  $T \leq U$  and  $C \leq T+2S$ . But, T = i-S and U = j-S, and so we must have  $i \leq j$  and also  $C - i \leq S$ . Hence, our required number is:

$$N = \sum_{i=A}^{B} \sum_{j=\max(A',i)}^{B'} < \min(B'' - i + j, b', -a + i, -a'' + j)$$
$$-\max(A'' - i + j, a', -b + i, -b'' + j) + 1 > .$$

**Remark 4.1.** Note that in any summation operation  $\sum_{j=x}^{y} F(j)$ , the result is zero if y < x.

**Example 4.2.** Suppose  $\pi = [4, 3, 2, 1]$  and  $\mu = [3, 3, 2, 2]$ . Then, the Kostka number  $K_{\pi,\mu}$  is equal to the number of integer solutions of the following system of inequalities:

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A direct check shows that  $K_{\pi,\mu} = 4$ . Using our formula, we also have

$$N = \sum_{i=-1}^{2} \sum_{j=\max(-1,i)}^{0} < \min(1-i+j,1,1+i,1+j) -\max(0,-1+j,-1-i)+1 > = <0-0+1>+<0-0+1>+<1-0+1> = 4.$$

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