Linear Fractional Transformations of Continued Fractions with Bounded Partial Quotients

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Abstract. Let θ be a real number with continued fraction expansion

$$\theta = [a_0, a_1, a_2, \dots],$$

and let

$$M = \begin{bmatrix} a & b \\ c & d \end{bmatrix}$$

be a matrix with integer entries and nonzero determinant. If θ has bounded partial quotients, then $\frac{a\theta+b}{c\theta+d} = [a_0^*, a_1^*, a_2^*, \dots]$ also has bounded partial quotients. More precisely, if $a_j \leq K$ for all sufficiently large j, then $a_j^* \leq |\det(M)|(K+2)$ for all sufficiently large j. We also give a weaker bound valid for all a_j^* with $j \geq 1$. The proofs use the homogeneous Diophantine approximation constant $L_\infty(\theta) = \limsup_{q\to\infty}(q||q\theta||)^{-1}$. We show that

$$\frac{1}{|\det(M)|}L_\infty(\theta) \leq L_\infty\left(\frac{a\theta+b}{c\theta+d}\right) \leq |\det(M)|L_\infty(\theta).$$

1. Introduction.

Let θ be a real number whose expansion as a simple continued fraction is

$$\theta = [a_0, a_1, a_2, \dots] \, ,$$

and set

(1.1)
$$K(\theta) := \sup_{i \geq 1} \, a_i \, ,$$

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where we adopt the convention that $K(\theta) = +\infty$ if θ is rational. We say that θ has *bounded partial quotients* if $K(\theta)$ is finite. We also set

$$(1.2) \qquad\qquad K_\infty(\theta) := \limsup_{i \geq 1} \ a_i \ ,$$

with the convention that $K_\infty(\theta) = +\infty$ if θ is rational. Certainly $K_\infty(\theta) \leq K(\theta)$, and $K_\infty(\theta)$ is finite if and only if $K(\theta)$ is finite.

A survey of results about real numbers with bounded partial quotients is given in [17]. The property of having bounded partial quotients is equivalent to θ being a *badly approximable number*, which is a number θ such that

$$\liminf_{q \to \infty} \ q\|q\theta\| > 0 \ ,$$

in which $\|x\| = \min(x - \lfloor x \rfloor, \lceil x \rceil - x)$ denotes the distance from x to the nearest integer and q runs through integers.

This note proves two quantitative versions of the theorem that if θ has bounded partial quotients and $M = \begin{bmatrix} a & b \\ c & d \end{bmatrix}$ is an integer matrix with $\det(M) \neq 0$, then $\psi = \frac{a\theta+b}{c\theta+d}$ also has bounded partial quotients.

The first result bounds $K_\infty(\frac{a\theta+b}{c\theta+d})$ in terms of $K_\infty(\theta)$ and depends only on $|\det(M)|$:

Theorem 1.1. *Let θ have a bounded partial quotients. If $M = \begin{bmatrix} a & b \\ c & d \end{bmatrix}$ is an integer matrix with $\det(M) \neq 0$, then*

$$(1.3) \qquad \frac{1}{|\det M|} K_\infty(\theta) - 2 \leq K_\infty\left(\frac{a\theta + b}{c\theta + d}\right) \leq |\det M|(K_\infty(\theta) + 2) \ .$$

The second result upper bounds $K(\frac{a\theta+b}{c\theta+d})$ in terms of $K(\theta)$, and depends on the entries of M:

Theorem 1.2. *Let θ have bounded partial quotients. If $M = \begin{bmatrix} a & b \\ c & d \end{bmatrix}$ is an integer matrix with $\det(M) \neq 0$, then*

$$(1.4) \qquad K\left(\frac{a\theta + b}{c\theta + d}\right) \leq |\det(M)|(K(\theta) + 2) + |c(c\theta + d)| \ .$$

The last term in (1.4) can be bounded in terms of the partial quotient a_0 of θ, since
$$|c\theta + d| \leq |c|(|a_0| + 1) + |d| \leq |ca_0| + |c| + |d| \ .$$
Theorem 1.2 gives no bound for the partial quotient $a_0^* := \lfloor \frac{a\theta+b}{c\theta+d} \rfloor$ of $\frac{a\theta+b}{c\theta+d}$.

Chowla [3] proved in 1931 that $K(\frac{a}{d}\theta) < 2ad(K(\theta)+1)^3$, a result rather weaker than Theorem 1.2.

We obtain Theorem 1.1 and Theorem 1.2 from stronger bounds that relate Diophantine approximation constants of θ and $\frac{a\theta+b}{c\theta+d}$, which appear below as Theorem 3.2 and Theorem 4.1, respectively. Theorem 3.2 is a simple consequence of a result of Cusick and Mendès France [5] concerning the Lagrange constant of θ (defined in Section 2).

The continued fraction of $\frac{a\theta+b}{c\theta+d}$ can be directly computed from that for θ, as was observed in 1894 by Hurwitz [9], who gave an explicit formula for the continued fraction of 2θ in terms of that of θ. In 1912 Châtelet [2] gave an algorithm for computing the continued fraction of $\frac{a\theta+b}{c\theta+d}$ from that of θ, and in 1947 Hall [7] also gave a method. Let $\mathcal{M}(n,\mathbb{Z})$ denote the set of $n \times n$ integer matrices. Raney [15] gave for each $M = \begin{bmatrix} a & b \\ c & d \end{bmatrix} \in \mathcal{M}(2,\mathbb{Z})$ with $\det(M) \neq 0$ an explicit finite automaton to compute the additive continued fraction of $\frac{a\theta+b}{c\theta+d}$ from the additive continued fraction of θ.

In connection with the bound of Theorem 1.1, Davenport [6] observed that for each irrational θ and prime p there exists some integer $0 \leq a < p$ such that $\theta' = \theta + \frac{a}{p}$ has infinitely many partial quotients $a_n(\theta') \geq p$. Mendès France [13] then showed that there exists some $\theta' = \theta + \frac{a}{p}$ having the property that a positive proportion of the partial quotients of θ' have $a_n(\theta') \geq p$.

Some other related results appear in Mendès France [11,12]. Basic facts on continued fractions appear in [1,8,10,18].

2. Badly Approximable Numbers

Recall that the continued fraction expansion of an irrational real number $\theta = [a_0, a_1, \ldots]$ is determined by

$$\theta = a_0 + \theta_0 , \quad 0 < \theta_0 < 1 ,$$

and for $n \geq 1$ by the recursion

$$\frac{1}{\theta_{n-1}} = a_n + \theta_n , \quad 0 < \theta_n < 1 .$$

The *n-th complete quotient* α_n of θ is

$$\alpha_n := \frac{1}{\theta_n} = [a_n, a_{n+1}, a_{n+2}, \ldots] .$$

The *n-th convergent* $\frac{p_n}{q_n}$ of θ is

$$\frac{p_n}{q_n} = [a_0, a_1, \ldots, a_n] ,$$

whose denominator is given by the recursion $q_{-1} = 0, q_0 = 1$, and $q_{n+1} = a_{n+1}q_n + q_{n-1}$. It is well known (see [8, §10.7]) that

$$(2.1) \qquad ||q_n\theta|| = |q_n\theta - p_n| = \frac{1}{q_n\alpha_{n+1} + q_{n-1}} \; .$$

Since $a_{n+1} \leq \alpha_{n+1} < a_{n+1} + 1$ and $q_{n-1} \leq q_n$, this implies that

$$(2.2) \qquad \frac{1}{a_{n+1} + 2} < q_n||q_n\theta|| \leq \frac{1}{a_{n+1}} \; ,$$

for $n \geq 0$.

We consider the following Diophantine approximation constants. For an irrational number θ define its *type* $L(\theta)$ by

$$L(\theta) = \sup_{q \geq 1} \, (q||q\theta||)^{-1} \; ,$$

and define the *homogeneous Diophantine approximation constant* or *Lagrange constant* $L_\infty(\theta)$ of θ by

$$L_\infty(\theta) = \limsup_{q \geq 1} \, (q||q\theta||)^{-1} \; .$$

We use the convention that if θ is rational, then $L(\theta) = L_\infty(\theta) = +\infty$. (N.B.: some authors study the reciprocal of what we have called the Lagrange constant.)

The best approximation properties of continued fraction convergents give

$$(2.3) \qquad L(\theta) = \sup_{n \geq 0} \, (q_n||q_n\theta||)^{-1}$$

and

$$(2.4) \qquad L_\infty(\theta) = \limsup_{n \geq 0} \, (q_n||q_n\theta||)^{-1} \; .$$

The set of values taken by $L_\infty(\theta)$ over all θ is called the *Lagrange spectrum* [4]. It is well known that $L_\infty(\theta) \geq \sqrt{5}$ for all θ. If $\theta = [a_0, a_1, a_2, \ldots]$, then another formula for $L_\infty(\theta)$ is

$$(2.5) \qquad L_\infty(\theta) = \limsup_{j \to \infty}([a_j, a_{j+1}, \ldots] + [0, a_{j-1}, a_{j-2}, \ldots, a_1]);$$

see [4, p. 1].

There are simple relations between these quantities and the partial quotient bounds $K(\theta)$ and $K_\infty(\theta)$, cf. [16, pp. 22–23].

Lemma 2.1. *For any irrational θ with bounded partial quotients, we have*

(2.6) $$K(\theta) \leq L(\theta) \leq K(\theta) + 2 \ .$$

Proof. This is immediate from (2.2) and (2.3).   □

Lemma 2.2. *For any irrational θ with bounded partial quotients*

(2.7) $$K_\infty(\theta) \leq L_\infty(\theta) \leq K_\infty(\theta) + 2 \ .$$

Proof. This is immediate from (2.2) and (2.4).   □

Although we do not use it in the sequel, we note that both inequalities in (2.7) can be slightly improved. Since $q_n \leq (a_n + 1)q_{n-1}$, (2.1) yields

$$q_n||q_n\theta|| \leq \frac{1}{\alpha_{n+1} + \frac{q_{n-1}}{q_n}} \leq \frac{1}{a_{n+1} + 1/(a_n + 1)} \ .$$

Since $a_n \leq K_\infty(\theta)$ from some point on, this and (2.4) yield

(2.8) $$L_\infty(\theta) \geq K_\infty(\theta) + \frac{1}{K_\infty(\theta) + 1} \ .$$

Next, from (2.1) we have

$$q_n||q_n\theta|| = \frac{q_n}{\alpha_{n+1}q_n + q_{n-1}}$$
$$= \frac{1}{a_{n+1} + \frac{1}{\alpha_{n+2}} + \frac{q_{n-1}}{q_n}} .$$

Hence

$$(q_n||q_n\theta||)^{-1} = a_{n+1} + \frac{1}{\alpha_{n+2}} + \frac{q_{n-1}}{q_n} .$$

Let $K = K_\infty(\theta)$. Then for all n sufficiently large we have

$$\alpha_{n+2} \geq 1 + \frac{1}{K + 1} = \frac{K + 2}{K + 1},$$

so

$$(q_n||q_n\theta||)^{-1} \leq K + \frac{K + 1}{K + 2} + 1$$
$$= K + 2 - \frac{1}{K + 2}.$$

We conclude that

(2.9) $$L_\infty(\theta) \leq K_\infty(\theta) + 2 - \frac{1}{K_\infty(\theta) + 2} \ .$$

3. Lagrange Constants and Proof of Theorem 1.1.

An integer matrix $M = \begin{bmatrix} a & b \\ c & d \end{bmatrix}$ with $\det(M) \neq 0$, acts as a linear fractional transformation on a real number θ by

$$(3.1) \qquad\qquad M(\theta) := \frac{a\theta + b}{c\theta + d} \; .$$

Note that $M_1(M_2(\theta)) = M_1 M_2(\theta)$.

Lemma 3.1. *If M is an integer matrix with $\det(M) = \pm 1$, then the Lagrange constants of θ and $M(\theta)$ are related by*

$$L_\infty(M(\theta)) = L_\infty(\theta) \; .$$

Proof. This is well-known, cf. [14] and [5, Lemma 1], and is deducible from (2.5).
□

The main result of Cusick and Mendès France [5] yields:

Theorem 3.2. *For any integer $m \geq 1$, let*

$$G_m = \{M \in \mathcal{M}(2, \mathbb{Z}) : |\det(M)| = m\} \; .$$

Then for any irrational number θ,

$$(3.2) \qquad\qquad \sup_{M \in G_m} (L_\infty(M(\theta))) = m L_\infty(\theta) \; .$$

and

$$(3.3) \qquad\qquad \inf_{M \in G_m} (L_\infty(M(\theta))) \geq \frac{1}{m} L_\infty(\theta) \; .$$

Proof. Theorem 1 of [5] states that

$$(3.4) \qquad\qquad \max_{\substack{a,b,d \\ ad=m \\ 0 \leq b < d}} \left(L_\infty \left(\frac{a\theta + b}{d} \right) \right) = m L_\infty(\theta) \; .$$

Let $GL(2, \mathbb{Z})$ denote the group of 2×2 integer matrices with determinant ± 1. We need only observe that for any M in G_m there exists some $\tilde{M} \in GL(2, \mathbb{Z})$ such that $\tilde{M}M = \begin{bmatrix} a' & b' \\ 0 & d' \end{bmatrix}$ with $a'd' = m$ and $0 \leq b' < d'$. For if so, and $\psi = \frac{a\theta + b}{c\theta + d}$, then Lemma 3.1 gives

$$L_\infty(\psi) = L_\infty(\tilde{M}(\psi)) = L_\infty(\tilde{M}M(\theta)) = L_\infty \left(\frac{a'\theta + b'}{d'} \right) \; ,$$

whence (3.4) implies (3.2). To construct $\tilde{M} = \begin{bmatrix} A & B \\ C & D \end{bmatrix}$, we must have

$$Ca + Dc = 0 \ .$$

Take $C = \frac{\mathrm{lcm}(a,c)}{a}$ and $D = -\frac{\mathrm{lcm}(a,c)}{c}$. Then $\gcd(C, D) = 1$, so we may complete this row to a matrix $\tilde{\tilde{M}} \in GL(2, \mathbb{Z})$. Multiplying this by a suitable matrix $\begin{bmatrix} \pm 1 & c \\ 0 & \pm 1 \end{bmatrix}$ yields the desired $\tilde{M}$.

The lower bound (3.3) follows from the upper bound (3.2). We use the adjoint matrix

$$M' = \mathrm{adj}(M) = \begin{bmatrix} d & -c \\ -b & a \end{bmatrix} \ ,$$

which has $M'M = \det(M)I = mI$ and $\det(M') = \det(M)$. If $\theta' = M(\theta)$, then

$$M'(\theta') = M'(M(\theta)) = M'M(\theta) = \theta \ .$$

We prove by contradiction. Suppose (3.3) were false, so that for some $M \in G_m$ and some θ we have

$$L_\infty(M(\theta)) < \frac{1}{m} L_\infty(\theta) \ .$$

This states that

$$mL_\infty(\theta') < L_\infty(M'(\theta')) \ ,$$

which contradicts (3.2) for θ', since $\det(M') = \det(M) = m$. $\square$

Remark. The lower bound (3.3) holds with equality for some values of θ and not for other values. If for given θ we choose an $M \in G_m$ which gives equality in (3.2), so that $L_\infty(M(\theta)) = mL_\infty(\theta)$, then equality holds in (3.3) for $\theta' = \mathrm{adj}(M)(\theta)$. However, if $L_\infty(\theta) = \sqrt{5}$, as occurs for $\theta = \frac{1+\sqrt{5}}{2}$, then $L_\infty(M(\theta)) \geq L_\infty(\theta)$ for all M; hence (3.3) does not hold with equality when $m \geq 2$.

Proof of Theorem 1.1. Theorem 3.2 gives $L_\infty(M(\theta)) \leq \det(M)L_\infty(\theta)$. Now apply Lemma 2.2 twice to get

$$\begin{aligned} K_\infty(M(\theta)) &\leq L_\infty(M(\theta)) \\ &\leq |\det(M)|L_\infty(\theta) \\ &\leq |\det(M)|(K_\infty(\theta) + 2) \ . \end{aligned}$$

(3.5)

To obtain the lower bound, we use the adjoint $M' = \mathrm{adj}(M) = \begin{bmatrix} d & -c \\ -b & a \end{bmatrix}$, and apply (3.5) with M' and $\theta' = M(\theta)$ to obtain

$$K_\infty(\theta) = K_\infty(M'(M(\theta))) \leq |\det(M')|(K_\infty(M(\theta)) + 2) \ .$$

Since $|\det(M)| = |\det(M')|$, this yields

$$K_\infty(M(\theta)) \geq \frac{1}{|\det(M)|} K_\infty(\theta) - 2 \ .$$

$\square$

4. NUMBERS OF BOUNDED TYPE AND PROOF OF THEOREM 1.2

Recall that the *type* $L(\theta)$ of θ is the smallest real number such that $q||q\theta|| \geq \frac{1}{L(\theta)}$ for all $q \geq 1$.

Theorem 4.1. *Let θ have bounded partial quotients. If $M = \begin{bmatrix} a & b \\ c & d \end{bmatrix}$ is an integer matrix with $\det(M) \neq 0$, then*

$$(4.1) \qquad L\left(\frac{a\theta + b}{c\theta + d}\right) \leq |\det(M)|L(\theta) + |c(c\theta + d)| .$$

Proof. Set $\psi = \frac{a\theta+b}{c\theta+d}$. Suppose first that $c = 0$ so that $|\det(M)| = |ad| > 0$. Then $L(\psi) \geq \frac{1}{x}$, where

$$(4.2) \qquad x := q||q\psi|| = q||q\left(\frac{a\theta + b}{d}\right)|| = q|q\left(\frac{a\theta + b}{d}\right) - p| .$$

We have

$$|ad|x = |aq|\ |aq\theta + (bq - dp)|$$
$$(4.3) \qquad\qquad \geq |aq|\ ||aq\theta|| \geq \frac{1}{L(\theta)} .$$

For any $\epsilon > 0$ we may choose q in (4.2) so that $\frac{1}{x} \geq L(\psi) - \epsilon$. Then

$$(4.4) \qquad |\det(M)|L(\theta) = |ad|L(\theta) \geq \frac{1}{x} \geq L(\psi) - \epsilon .$$

Letting $\epsilon \to 0$ yields (4.1) when $c = 0$.

Suppose now that $c \neq 0$. Again $L(\psi) \geq \frac{1}{x}$ where

$$x := q||q\psi|| = q|q\left(\frac{a\theta + b}{c\theta + d}\right) - p| .$$

We have

$$(4.5) \qquad |c\theta + d|x = q|(qa - pc)\theta - (pd - qb)| ,$$

so that

$$|c\theta + d|\left|\frac{qa - pc}{q}\right|x = |qa - pc|\ |(qa - pc)\theta - (pd - qb)|$$
$$(4.6) \qquad\qquad \geq |qa - pc|\ ||(qa - pc)\theta|| .$$

We first treat the case $qa - pc = 0$. Now

$$\begin{bmatrix} a & -c \\ -b & d \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} q \\ p \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} qa - pc \\ pd - qb \end{bmatrix} \neq \begin{bmatrix} 0 \\ 0 \end{bmatrix} ,$$

since $\det \begin{bmatrix} a & -c \\ -b & d \end{bmatrix} = \det(M) \neq 0$. Thus if $qa - pc = 0$ then $|pd - qb| \geq 1$, hence (4.5) gives

$$(4.7) \qquad\qquad |c\theta + d|x = q|pd - qb| \geq 1 .$$

This yields

$$(4.8) \qquad\qquad L(\psi) - \epsilon \leq \frac{1}{x} \leq |c\theta + d| \leq |c(c\theta + d)|.$$

since $c \neq 0$. If we can let $\epsilon \to 0$ or else $\epsilon = 0$ for values with $qa - pc = 0$, then (4.1) follows from (4.8).

Now suppose that $c \neq 0$ and $qa - pc \neq 0$. From the definition of $L(\theta)$ we have

$$(4.9) \qquad\qquad |qa - pc| \, \|(qa - pc)\theta\| \geq \frac{1}{L(\theta)} .$$

Given $\epsilon > 0$, we may choose q so that $\frac{1}{x} \geq L(\psi) - \epsilon$, and we obtain from (4.6) and (4.9) that

$$(4.10) \qquad\qquad |c\theta + d| \left| \frac{qa - pc}{q} \right| L(\theta) \geq \frac{1}{x} \geq L(\psi) - \epsilon .$$

Using the bound

$$\left| q\left(\frac{a}{c}\right) - p \right| \leq \left| q\left(\frac{a\theta + b}{c\theta + d}\right) - q\left(\frac{a}{c}\right) \right| + \left| q\left(\frac{a\theta + b}{c\theta + d}\right) - p \right| ,$$

and noting that first term on the right side is equal to $q|\det(M)|\frac{1}{|c(c\theta+d)|}$ while the second term is $\|q\psi\| = \frac{x}{q}$, we obtain

$$\left| \frac{qa - pc}{c} \right| \leq q|\det(M)|\frac{1}{|c(c\theta + d)|} + \frac{x}{q}.$$

Multiplying this by $\frac{c}{q}$ and applying it to the left side of (4.10) yields

$$(4.11) \qquad L\left(\frac{a\theta + b}{c\theta + d}\right) - \epsilon \leq |\det(M)|L(\theta) + |c(c\theta + d)|\frac{xL(\theta)}{q^2} .$$

We now claim that

$$(4.12) \qquad L\left(\frac{a\theta + b}{c\theta + d}\right) \leq |\det(M)| L(\theta) + |c(c\theta + d)| .$$

always holds. This is immediate if $L(\theta) \geq L(\psi)$. Now suppose $L(\theta) < L(\psi)$. Suppose we can let $\epsilon \to 0$ or else $\epsilon = 0$ through values with $qa - pc \neq 0$. Now the ratio $\frac{L(\theta)}{L(\psi) - \epsilon}$ becomes ≤ 1 in the limit, and since $q \geq 1$, (4.12) follows from (4.11). This completes the case $c \neq 0$. $\quad\square$.

Proof of Theorem 1.2. Applying Theorem 4.1 and Lemma 2.1 gives

$$\begin{aligned} K\left(\frac{a\theta + b}{c\theta + d}\right) &\leq L\left(\frac{a\theta + b}{c\theta + d}\right) \\ &\leq |\det(M)| L(\theta) + |c(c\theta + d)| \\ &\leq |\det(M)|(K(\theta) + 2) + |c(c\theta + d)| , \end{aligned}$$

which is the desired bound. $\quad\square$

Remarks. (1). The proof method of Theorem 4.1 can also be used to directly prove the bounds

$$(4.14) \qquad \frac{1}{|\det(M)|} L_\infty(\theta) \leq L_\infty(M(\theta)) \leq |\det(M)| L_\infty(\theta) ,$$

of Theorem 3.2, from which Theorem 1.1 can be easily deduced. The lower bound in (4.14) follows from the upper bound as in the proof of Theorem 3.2. We sketch a proof of the upper bound in (4.14) for the case $\psi = \frac{a\theta + b}{c\theta + d}$ with $c \neq 0$. For any $\epsilon^* > 0$ and all sufficiently large $q^* \geq q^*(\epsilon^*)$, we have

$$(4.15) \qquad q^* \|q^* \theta\| \geq \frac{1}{L_\infty(\theta) + \epsilon^*} .$$

We choose $q = q_n(\psi)$ for sufficiently large n, and note that

$$q^* = |q_n(\psi)a - p_n(\psi)c| \to \infty$$

as $n \to \infty$, since ψ is irrational. We can then replace (4.9) by (4.15), and then deduce (4.11) with $L(\theta)$ replaced by $L_\infty(\theta) + \epsilon^*$. Letting $q \to \infty$, $\epsilon \to 0$ and $\epsilon^* \to 0$ in that order yields the upper bound in (4.14).

(2). For a given matrix M consider the set of attainable ratios

$$(4.16) \qquad \mathcal{V}(M) := \left\{ \frac{L_\infty(M\theta)}{L_\infty(\theta)} : \theta \text{ has bounded partial quotients} \right\} .$$

By Lemma 3.1 the set $\mathcal{V}(M)$ depends only on its $SL(2, \mathbb{Z})$-double coset

$$[M] = \{N_1 M N_2 : N_1, N_2 \in SL(2, \mathbb{Z})\} .$$

Theorem 3.2 shows that

$$(4.17) \qquad \mathcal{V}(M) \subseteq \left[\frac{1}{|\det(M)|} \, , \, |\det(M)| \right] \, .$$

It is an interesting open problem to determine the set $\mathcal{V}(M)$. Both $|\det(M)|$ and $\frac{1}{|\det(M)|}$ lie in $\mathcal{V}(M)$, as follows from Theorem 3.2 and the remark following it.

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