1.1.4.5. *Intrinsic symmetry of tensors*

1.1.4.5.1. *Introduction*

The symmetry of a tensor representing a physical property or a physical quantity may be due either to its own nature or to the symmetry of the medium. The former case is called intrinsic symmetry. It is a property that can be exhibited both by physical property tensors or by field tensors. The latter case is the consequence of Neumann's principle and will be discussed in Section 1.1.4.6. It applies to physical property tensors.

1.1.4.5.2. *Symmetric tensors*

1.1.4.5.2.1. *Tensors of rank 2*

A bilinear form is symmetric if

$$T(\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y}) = T(\mathbf{y}, \mathbf{x}).$$

Its components satisfy the relations

$$t_{ij} = t_{ji}.$$

The associated matrix, T, is therefore equal to its transpose T^T:

$$T = \begin{pmatrix} t_{11} & t_{12} & t_{13} \\ t_{21} & t_{22} & t_{23} \\ t_{31} & t_{32} & t_{33} \end{pmatrix} = T^T = \begin{pmatrix} t_{11} & t_{21} & t_{31} \\ t_{12} & t_{22} & t_{32} \\ t_{13} & t_{23} & t_{33} \end{pmatrix}.$$

In a space with n dimensions, the number of independent components is equal to

$$(n^2 - n)/2 + n = (n^2 + n)/2.$$

Examples

(1) The metric tensor (Section 1.1.2.2) is symmetric because the scalar product is commutative.

(2) The tensors representing one of the physical properties associated with the leading diagonal of the matrix of physical properties (Section 1.1.1.4), such as the dielectric constant. Let us take up again the demonstration of this case and consider a capacitor being charged. The variation of the stored energy per unit volume for a variation d$\mathbf{D}$ of the displacement is

$$\mathrm{d}W = \mathbf{E} \cdot \mathrm{d}\mathbf{D},$$

where [equation (1.1.3.3)]

$$D^i = \varepsilon^i_j E^j.$$

Since both D^i and E^j are expressed through contravariant components, the expression for the energy should be written

$$\mathrm{d}W = g_{ij} E^j \ \mathrm{d}D^i.$$

If we replace D^i by its expression, we obtain

$$\mathrm{d}W = g_{ij}\varepsilon^i_k E^j \ \mathrm{d}E^k = \varepsilon_{jk} E^j \ \mathrm{d}E^k,$$

where we have introduced the doubly covariant form of the dieletric constant tensor, ε_{jk}. Differentiating twice gives

$$\frac{\partial^2 W}{\partial E^k \partial E^j} = \varepsilon_{jk}.$$

If one can assume, as one usually does in physics, that the energy is a 'good' function and that the order of the derivatives is of little importance, then one can write

$$\frac{\partial^2 W}{\partial E^k \partial E^j} = \frac{\partial^2 W}{\partial E^j \partial E^k}.$$

As one can exchange the role of the dummy indices, one has

$$\partial^2 W/(\partial E^j \partial E^k) = \varepsilon_{kj}.$$

Hence one deduces that

$$\varepsilon_{jk} = \varepsilon_{kj}.$$

The dielectric constant tensor is therefore symmetric. One notes that the symmetry is conveyed on two indices of the same variance. One could show in a similar way that the tensor representing magnetic susceptibility is symmetric.

(3) There are other possible causes for the symmetry of a tensor of rank 2. The strain tensor (Section 1.3.1), which is a field tensor, is symmetric because one does not take into account the rotative part of the deformation; the stress tensor, also a field tensor (Section 1.3.1), is symmetric because one neglects body torques (couples per unit volume); the thermal conductivity tensor is symmetric because circulating flows do not produce any detectable effects *etc.*

1.1.4.5.2.2. *Tensors of higher rank*

A tensor of rank higher than 2 may be symmetric with respect to the indices of one or more couples of indices. For instance, by its very nature, the demonstration given in Section 1.1.1.4 shows that the tensors representing principal physical properties are of even rank. If n is the rank of the associated square matrix, the number of independent components is equal to $(n^2 + n)/2$. In the case of a tensor of rank 4, such as the tensor of elastic constants relating the strain and stress tensors (Section 1.3.3.2.1), the number of components of the tensor is $3^4 = 81$. The associated matrix is a 9×9 one, and the number of independent components is equal to 45.

1.1.4.5.3. *Antisymmetric tensors – axial tensors*

1.1.4.5.3.1. *Tensors of rank 2*

A bilinear form is said to be antisymmetric if

$$T(\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y}) = -T(\mathbf{y}, \mathbf{x}).$$

Its components satisfy the relations

$$t_{ij} = -t_{ji}.$$

The associated matrix, T, is therefore also antisymmetric:

$$T = -T^T = \begin{pmatrix} 0 & t_{12} & t_{13} \\ -t_{12} & 0 & t_{23} \\ -t_{13} & -t_{23} & 0 \end{pmatrix}.$$

The number of independent components is equal to $(n^2 - n)/2$, where n is the number of dimensions of the space. It is equal to 3 in a three-dimensional space, and one can consider these components as those of a *pseudovector* or *axial* vector. It must never be forgotten that under a change of basis the components of an axial vector transform like those of a tensor of rank 2.

Every tensor can be decomposed into the sum of two tensors, one symmetric and the other one antisymmetric:

$$T = S + A,$$

with $S = (T + T^T)/2$ and $A = (T - T^T)/2$.

Example. As shown in Section 1.1.3.7.2, the components of the vector product of two vectors, $\mathbf{x}$ and $\mathbf{y}$,

$$z_k = \varepsilon_{ijk} x^i y^j,$$

are really the independent components of an antisymmetric tensor of rank 2. The magnetic quantities, $\mathbf{B}$, $\mathbf{H}$ (Section 1.1.4.3.2), the tensor representing the pyromagnetic effect (Section 1.1.1.3) *etc.* are axial tensors.

references