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# $\mathcal{PT}$ -symmetry and its spontaneous breakdown explained by anti-linearity

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### Abstract

The impact of an anti-unitary symmetry on the spectrum of non-hermitean operators is studied. Wigner's normal form of an anti-unitary operator is shown to account for the spectral properties of non-hermitean,  $\mathcal{PT}$ -symmetric Hamiltonians. Both the occurrence of single real or complex conjugate pairs of eigenvalues follows from this theory. The corresponding energy eigenstates span either one- or two-dimensional irreducible representations of the symmetry  $\mathcal{PT}$ . In this framework, the concept of a spontaneously broken  $\mathcal{PT}$ -symmetry is not needed.

Deep in their hearts, many quantum physicists will renounce hermiticity of operators only reluctantly. However, non-hermitean Hamiltonians are applied successfully in nuclear physics, biology and condensed matter, often modelling the interaction of a quantum system with its environment in a phenomenological way. Since 1998, non-hermitean Hamiltonians continue to attract interest from a conceptual point of view [1]: surprisingly, the eigenvalues of a one-dimensional harmonic oscillator Hamiltonian remain real when the complex potential  $\hat{V} = i\hat{x}^3$  is added to it. Numerical, semiclassical, and analytic evidence [2] has been accumulated confirming that bound states with real eigenvalues exist for the vast class of complex potentials satisfying  $V^{\dagger}(\hat{x}) = V(-\hat{x})$ . In addition, pairs of complex conjugate eigenvalues occur systematically.

 $\mathcal{PT}$ -symmetry has been put forward to explain the observed energy spectra. The Hamiltonian operators  $\hat{H}$  under scrutiny are invariant under the combined action of parity  $\mathcal{P}$  and time reversal  $\mathcal{T}$ ,

$$[\hat{H}, \mathcal{PT}] = 0. \tag{1}$$

They act on the fundamental observables according to

$$\mathcal{P}: \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \hat{x} \to -\hat{x} \,, \\ \hat{p} \to -\hat{p} \,, \end{array} \right. \qquad \mathcal{T}: \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \hat{x} \to \hat{x} \,, \\ \hat{p} \to -\hat{p} \,, \end{array} \right.$$
 (2)

and T anti-commutes with the imaginary unit,

$$\mathcal{T}i = i^* \mathcal{T} \equiv -i \mathcal{T} \,. \tag{3}$$

Whenever a  $\mathcal{PT}$ -symmetric Hamiltonian has a real eigenvalue E, the associated eigenstate  $|E\rangle$  is found to be an eigenstate of the symmetry  $\mathcal{PT}$ ,

$$E = E^*: \hat{H}|E\rangle = E|E\rangle, \quad \mathcal{PT}|E\rangle = +|E\rangle.$$
 (4)

Occasionally,  $\mathcal{PT}|E\rangle = -|E\rangle$  occurs [3] which is equivalent to (4) upon redefining the phase of the state:  $\mathcal{PT}(i|E\rangle) = +(i|E\rangle)$ . There is no difference between symmetry and anti-symmetry under  $\mathcal{PT}$ .

However, if the eigenvalue E is complex, the operator  $\mathcal{PT}$  does not map the corresponding eigenstate of  $\hat{H}$  to itself,

$$E \neq E^*: \hat{H}|E\rangle = E|E\rangle, \quad \mathcal{PT}|E\rangle \neq \lambda|E\rangle, \text{ any } \lambda.$$
 (5)

This situation is described as a 'spontaneous breakdown' of  $\mathcal{PT}$ -symmetry. No mechanism has been identified which would explain this breaking of the symmetry.

The  $\mathcal{PT}$ -symmetric square-well model provides a simple example for this behavior [4]. It describes a particle moving between reflecting boundaries at  $x = \pm 1$ , in the presence of a piecewise constant complex potential,

$$V_Z(x) = \begin{cases} iZ, & x < 0, \\ -iZ, & x > 0, \end{cases} \qquad Z \in \mathbb{R}.$$
 (6)

Acceptable solutions of Schrödinger's equation must satisfy both the boundary conditions,  $\psi(\pm 1) = 0$ , and continuity conditions at the origin. As long as the value of the parameter Z is below a critical value,  $Z < Z_0^c$ , the eigenvalues  $E_n$  of the non-hermitean Hamiltonian  $\hat{H} = -\partial_{xx} + V_Z(x)$  are real, and each eigenstate  $|\psi_n\rangle$  satisfies the relations (4), with eigenvalues  $E_n$  and +1, respectively. Above the threshold,  $Z > Z_0^c$ , at least one pair of complex conjugate eigenvalues  $E_0$  and  $E_0^*$  develops. One of the corresponding eigenstates has the form [4]

$$\psi_0(x) = \begin{cases} K_p \sinh \kappa (1-x), & x > 0, \\ K_n \sinh \lambda^* (1+x), & x < 0, \end{cases}$$
 (7)

the complex parameters  $\kappa$ ,  $\lambda$ ,  $K_n$ , and  $K_p$  being determined by the boundary and continuity conditions. The state  $\psi_0(x)$  is not invariant under  $\mathcal{PT}$ , i.e. (5) holds.

The purpose of the present contribution is a group-theoretical analysis of  $\mathcal{PT}$ -symmetry. The properties of  $\mathcal{PT}$ -symmetric systems are explained in a natural way by taking into account that  $\mathcal{PT}$  is not a unitary but an anti-unitary symmetry of a non-hermitean operator. The argument proceeds in three steps. First, Wigner's normal form of anti-unitary operators is reviewed, i.e. their (irreducible) representations are identified. Second, the properties of non-hermitean operators with anti-unitary symmetry are derived. These results are then shown to account for the characteristic features of  $\mathcal{PT}$ -symmetric systems.

Wigner develops a normal form of anti-unitary operators  $\hat{A}$  in [5]. Anti-unitarity of  $\hat{A}$  is defined by the relation

$$\langle \hat{A}\chi | \hat{A}\psi \rangle = \langle \psi | \chi \rangle \tag{8}$$

and it implies anti-linearity,

$$\hat{A}(\alpha|\psi\rangle + \beta|\chi\rangle) = \alpha^* \hat{A}|\psi\rangle + \beta^* \hat{A}|\chi\rangle. \tag{9}$$

which is equivalent to (3). The representation theory of  $\hat{A}$  relies on the fact that the square of an anti-unitary operator is unitary:

$$\langle \hat{A}^2 \chi | \hat{A}^2 \psi \rangle = \langle \hat{A} \psi | \hat{A} \chi \rangle = \langle \chi | \psi \rangle. \tag{10}$$

Therefore, the operator  $\hat{A}^2$  has a complete, orthonormal set of eigenvectors  $|\Omega\rangle$  with eigenvalues  $\Omega$  of modulus one,

$$\hat{A}^2|\Omega\rangle = \Omega|\Omega\rangle, \quad |\Omega| = 1.$$
 (11)

It plays the role of a Casimir-type operator labelling different representations of  $\hat{A}$ . Wigner distinguishes three different types of representations corresponding to the eigenvalues of  $\hat{A}^2$ : complex  $\Omega$  ( $\neq \Omega$ ),  $\Omega = +1$ , or  $\Omega = -1$ , summarized in Table (1).

- 1. An eigenstate  $|\Omega\rangle$  of  $\hat{A}^2$  with eigenvalue  $\Omega$  ( $\neq \Omega^*$ ) is not invariant under  $\hat{A}$ . Instead, the states  $|\Omega\rangle$  and  $|\Omega^*\rangle \equiv \hat{A}|\Omega\rangle$  constitute a 'flipping pair' with complex 'flipping value'  $\omega$  (and  $\omega^*$ ), where  $\omega^2 = \Omega$ . They span a two-dimensional space which is closed under the action of  $\hat{A}$ . Therefore, it carries a two-dimensional representation of  $\hat{A}$ , denoted by  $\Gamma_*$ , which is *irreducible*: due to the anti-linearity of  $\hat{A}$ , no (non-zero) linear combination of the flipping states exist which is invariant under  $\hat{A}$ .
- 2. Similarly, if  $\hat{A}^2$  has an eigenvalue  $\Omega = -1$ , then the operator  $\hat{A}$  flips the states  $|-\rangle$  and  $|-^*\rangle \equiv \hat{A}|-\rangle$ . The flipping value is i, and the associated two-dimensional representation  $\Gamma_-$  is not reducible.
- 3. Two different situations arise if there is an eigenstate  $|1\rangle$  of  $\hat{A}^2$  with eigenvalue +1. The state  $\hat{A}|1\rangle$  is either a multiple of itself or not. In the first case, the space spanned by  $|1\rangle$  is invariant under  $\hat{A}$  and hence carries a one-dimensional representation  $\gamma_+$  of  $\hat{A}$ . When redefining the phase of the state appropriately, one obtains an eigenstate  $|1\rangle$  of  $\hat{A}$  with eigenvalue +1. In the second case, the two states  $|+\rangle \equiv |1\rangle$  and  $|+^*\rangle \equiv \hat{A}|1\rangle$  provide a flipping pair with flipping value  $\omega = +1$ , and hence a representation  $\Gamma_+$ . This representation, however, is reducible due to the reality of the flipping value: the linear combinations  $|1_r\rangle = |+\rangle + |+^*\rangle$  and  $|1_i\rangle = i(|+\rangle |+^*\rangle)$  are both eigenstates of  $\hat{A}$  with eigenvalue +1.

| $\Omega \equiv \omega^2$ | Γ            | action of $\hat{A}$   | dim Γ |
|--------------------------|--------------|---|-------|
| $\Omega  eq \Omega^*$    | $\Gamma_*$   | $\hat{A} \Omega\rangle = \omega^* \Omega^*\rangle$ $\hat{A} \Omega^*\rangle = \omega \Omega\rangle$ | 2     |
| -1                       | Γ_           | $\hat{A} -\rangle = -i -^*\rangle$ $\hat{A} -^*\rangle = +i -\rangle$                               | 2     |
| +1                       | $\Gamma_{+}$ | $\hat{A} +\rangle = + +^*\rangle$ $\hat{A} +^*\rangle = + +\rangle$                                 | 2     |
| +1                       | $\gamma_{+}$ | $\hat{A} 1\rangle = + 1\rangle$   | 1     |

Table 1: Representations  $\Gamma$  of the operator  $\hat{A}$ 

Consequently, a Hilbert space  $\mathcal{H}$  naturally decomposes into a direct product of invariant subspaces, each invariant under the action of the anti-unitary operator  $\hat{A}$ ,

$$\mathcal{H} = \Gamma_*^{\otimes N_*} \otimes \Gamma_-^{\otimes N_-} \otimes \Gamma_+^{\otimes N_+} \otimes \gamma_+^{\otimes n_+} ; \qquad (12)$$

the nonnegative integers  $N_*$ ,  $N_{\pm}$  and  $n_+$  are related to the degeneracies of the eigenvalues  $\Omega (\neq \Omega^*)$  and  $\Omega = \pm 1$  of the operator  $\hat{A}^2$ . The corresponding decomposition of a vector  $|\psi\rangle \in \mathcal{H}$  is the closest analog of an expansion into the eigenstates of a hermitean (or unitary) operator. Surprisingly, two-dimensional irreducible representations of  $\hat{A}$  exist although there is only one generator,  $\hat{A}$ . No 'good quantum number' exists which would label the states spanning these representations.

A (diagonalizable) non-hermitean Hamiltonian  $\hat{H}$  with a discrete spectrum [6] and its adjoint  $\hat{H}^{\dagger}$  each have a complete set of eigenstates:

$$\hat{H}|\psi_n\rangle = E_n|\psi_n\rangle, \quad \hat{H}^{\dagger}|\psi^n\rangle = E^n|\psi^n\rangle,$$
 (13)

with complex conjugate eigenvalues related by  $E^n = E_n^*$ . They form a bi-orthonormal basis in  $\mathcal{H}$ , as they provide two resolutions of unity,

$$\sum_{n} |\psi^{n}\rangle\langle\psi_{n}| = \sum_{n} |\psi_{n}\rangle\langle\psi^{n}| = \hat{I}, \qquad (14)$$

and satisfy orthogonality relations,

$$\langle \psi_m | \psi^n \rangle = \delta_m^n \,. \tag{15}$$

Let the non-hermitean operator  $\hat{H}$  have an anti-unitary symmetry  $\hat{A}$ ,

$$[\hat{H}, \hat{A}] = 0. \tag{16}$$

Then the unitary operator  $\hat{A}^2$  commutes with  $\hat{H}$ , and it has eigenvalues  $\Omega$  of modulus one. Consequently, there are simultaneous eigenstates  $|n,\Omega\rangle$  of  $\hat{H}$  and  $\hat{A}^2$ :

$$\hat{H}|n,\Omega\rangle = E_n|n,\Omega\rangle, \quad \hat{A}^2|n,\Omega\rangle = \Omega|n,\Omega\rangle, \quad E_n \in \mathsf{C}.$$
 (17)

For simplicity, the eigenvalues  $\Omega$  are assumed discrete and not degenerate. Wigner's normal form of anti-unitary operators suggests to consider three cases separately: complex  $\Omega \neq \Omega^*$  and  $\Omega = \pm 1$ .

 $\Omega \neq \Omega^*$  The state

$$|n, \Omega^*\rangle \equiv \omega \hat{A}|n, \Omega\rangle, \quad \omega^2 = \Omega,$$
 (18)

is a second eigenstate of  $\hat{A}^2$ , with eigenvalue  $\Omega^*$ . The states  $\{|n,\Omega\rangle,|n,\Omega^*\rangle\}$  provide a flipping pair under the action of the operator  $\hat{A}$ ,

$$\hat{A}|n,\Omega\rangle = \omega^*|n,\Omega^*\rangle, \quad \hat{A}|n,\Omega^*\rangle = \omega|n,\Omega\rangle,$$
 (19)

carrying the representation  $\Gamma_*$ . No degeneracy of the eigenvalue  $E_n$  is implied by the anti-unitary  $\hat{A}$ -symmetry of  $\hat{H}$ . However, the non-hermitean Hamiltonian has a second eigenstate  $|n, \Omega^*\rangle$  with eigenvalue  $E_n^*$ ,

$$\hat{H}|n,\Omega^*\rangle = E_n^*|n,\Omega^*\rangle, \qquad (20)$$

as follows from multiplying the first equation of (17) with  $\hat{A}$  and  $\omega$ .

 $\underline{\Omega = -1}$  Formally, the results for the representation  $\Gamma_{-}$  are obtained from the previous case by setting  $\omega = i$ . Again, a pair of complex conjugate eigenvalues is found, and the associated flipping pair spans a two-dimensional representation space.

 $\Omega = +1$  This case is conceptually different from the previous ones as two possibilities arise. Consider the state  $|n, +\rangle$ , an eigenvector of both  $\hat{H}$  and  $\hat{A}^2$  with eigenvalues  $E_n$  and +1, respectively. It satisfies Eqs. (17) with  $\Omega \to +$ . If, on the one hand, applying  $\hat{A}$  to  $|n, +\rangle$  results in  $e^{i\phi}|n, +\rangle$ , then the state  $|n, 1\rangle \equiv e^{-i\phi/2}|n, +\rangle$  is an eigenstate of  $\hat{A}$  with eigenvalue +1,

$$\hat{A}|n,1\rangle = |n,1\rangle. \tag{21}$$

This occurrence of the one-dimensional representation  $\gamma_+$  forces the associated eigenvalue  $E_n$  of  $\hat{H}$  to be real since

$$E_n|n,1\rangle = \hat{H}\hat{A}|n,1\rangle = \hat{A}\hat{H}|n,1\rangle = E_n^*|n,1\rangle. \tag{22}$$

If, on the other hand,  $|n, +^*\rangle \equiv \hat{A}|n, +\rangle$  is not a multiple of  $|n, +\rangle$ , then these states combine to form the representation  $\Gamma_+$ , the flipping value being +1. Further, the state  $|n, +^*\rangle$  is an eigenstate of the Hamiltonian with eigenvalue  $E_n^*$ . As the flipping number is real, linear combinations of  $|n, +\rangle$  and  $|n, +^*\rangle$  do exist which are eigenstates of  $\hat{A}$ —however, they are not eigenstates of  $\hat{H}$ . Consequently, the anti-unitary symmetry of the Hamiltonian makes itself felt (on a subspace with  $(\mathcal{PT})^2 = +\hat{I}$ ) by either a single real eigenvalue or a pair of two complex conjugate eigenvalues.

If any of the two-dimensional representations  $\Gamma_*$  or  $\Gamma_{\pm}$  occurs and the associated eigenvalue happens to be real, the anti-unitary symmetry implies a twofold degeneracy

of the energy eigenvalue. Again, the symmetry provides no additional label, and simultaneous eigenstates of  $\hat{H}$  and  $\hat{A}$  can be constructed for  $\Gamma_+$  only. These cases will be denoted by  $\Gamma_*^d$  or  $\Gamma_+^d$ .

It will be shown now that the properties of  $\mathcal{PT}$ -symmetric quantum systems are consistent with the representation theory of non-hermitean Hamiltonians possessing an anti-unitary symmetry. Upon identifying

$$\hat{A} = \mathcal{PT} \,, \tag{23}$$

one needs to check the value of  $(\mathcal{PT})^2$  when applied to eigenstates of the Hamiltonian in order to decide which of the representations  $\Gamma_*$ ,  $\Gamma_{\pm}$ , or  $\gamma_+$ , is realized. Various explicit examples will be given now.

For parameters  $Z < Z_0^c$ , the eigenvalues of the  $\mathcal{PT}$ -symmetric square-well are real throughout, and the operators  $\hat{H}$  and  $\mathcal{PT}$  have common eigenstates. Thus, the relations (4) correspond to a multiple occurrence of the representation  $\gamma_+$ , compatible with  $(\mathcal{PT})^2 = +\hat{I}$ .

For  $Z > Z_0^C$ , the energy eigenstate  $\psi_0(x) \equiv \langle x | E_0, + \rangle$  in (7) satisfies  $(\mathcal{PT})^2 | E_0, + \rangle$  =  $+ | E_0, + \rangle$ . Therefore, the states  $| E_0, + \rangle$  and  $| E_0, +^* \rangle \equiv \mathcal{PT} | E_0, + \rangle$  carry a representation  $\Gamma_+$ , and the presence of two complex energy eigenvalues,  $E_0$  and  $E_0^*$  is justified. Eqs. (5) can be completed to read:

$$E \neq E^*: \begin{array}{ccc} \hat{H}|E_0, +\rangle = E_0|E_0, +\rangle, & \mathcal{PT}|E_0, +\rangle = +|E_0, +^*\rangle, \\ \hat{H}|E_0, +^*\rangle = E_0^*|E_0, +^*\rangle, & \mathcal{PT}|E_0, ^*\rangle = +|E_0, +\rangle. \end{array}$$
(24)

Consequently,  $\mathcal{PT}$ -symmetry is not broken but at  $Z = Z_0^c$  the system switches between the representations  $\Gamma_+$  and  $\gamma_+$ , with a corresponding change of the energy spectrum.

The following examples are taken from a discrete family of non-hermitean operators [7],

$$\hat{H}_M = \hat{p}^2 - (\zeta \cosh 2x - iM)^2, \quad \zeta \in \mathbb{R},$$
(25)

M taking positive integer values. Each operator  $\hat{H}_M$  is invariant under the combined action of  $\mathcal{PT}$  where  $\mathcal{P}$  is parity about the point  $a = i\pi/2$ :  $x \to i\pi/2 - x$ . Due to the reflection about a point off the real axis, the operators  $\mathcal{P}$  and  $\mathcal{T}$  do not commute as has been pointed out in [8]. However, this fact is not essential here since only the anti-unitary character of the symmetry  $\mathcal{PT}$  is essential.

For M=2, two complex conjugate eigenvalues  $E_+$  and  $E_-=E_+^*$  of  $\hat{H}_2$  exist, with associated eigenstates

$$\psi_{+}(x) = \Psi(x) \cosh x \equiv \langle x | E_{+}, - \rangle, \quad \psi_{-}(x) = \Psi(x) \sinh x \equiv \langle x | E_{+}, -^{*} \rangle,$$
 (26)

and a  $\mathcal{PT}$ -invariant function  $\Psi(x) = \exp[(i/2)\zeta \cosh 2x]$ . These states are a flipping pair with flipping value i,

$$\mathcal{PT}\psi_{+}(x) = -i\psi_{-}(x), \quad \mathcal{PT}\psi_{-}(x) = i\psi_{+}(x), \tag{27}$$

and the twofold application of  $\mathcal{PT}$  gives (-1). Hence, the representation  $\Gamma_{-}$  is realized. Similarly, for M=4, four eigenstates form two flipping pairs, i.e. two representations  $\Gamma_{-}$ , each being associated with a pair of complex conjugate eigenvalues.

For M=3, three different real eigenvalues of the Hamiltonian  $\hat{H}_3$  have been obtained analytically if  $\zeta^2 < 1/4$ . The corresponding eigenfunctions are given by

$$\psi(x) = \Psi(x)\sinh 2x \,, \quad \psi_{\pm}(x) = \Psi(x)(A\cosh 2x \pm iB) \,, \tag{28}$$

with real coefficients A and B. Under the action of  $\mathcal{PT}$ , the state  $\psi(x)$  is mapped to itself, while  $\psi_{\pm}(x)$  each acquire an additional minus sign. Therefore, the states  $\psi(x) \equiv \langle x|E,+\rangle$  and  $i\psi_{\pm}(x) \equiv \langle x|E_{\pm}\rangle$  are simultaneous eigenstates of  $\hat{H}$  and  $\mathcal{PT}$  with eigenvalues +1. The part of Hilbert space spanned by these three states transforms according to three copies of the representation  $\gamma_{+}$ . If  $\zeta=1/2$ , the eigenvalues  $E_{\pm}$  turn degenerate, and the eigenstates given in (28) merge,  $i\psi_{+}(x)=i\psi_{-}(x)\equiv\varphi(x)$ . However, a second, independent  $\mathcal{PT}$ -invariant solution of Schrödinger's equation can be found,

$$\phi(x) = \Psi(x) \int_{x_0}^x dy \frac{e^{-i\varphi(y)/2}}{\varphi^2(y)}. \tag{29}$$

The solutions  $\{\varphi, \phi\}$  transform according to  $\gamma_+ \otimes \gamma_+ \equiv \Gamma_+^d$ . So far, the representation  $\Gamma_*$  has apparently not been realized in  $\mathcal{PT}$ -symmetric quantum systems—a possible explanation is the constraint  $\mathcal{T}^2 = \pm 1$  for time reversal [9].

In summary, the representation theory of anti-unitary symmetries of non-hermitean 'Hamiltonians' has been developed on the basis of Wigner's normal form of antiunitary operators. Typically, energy eigenvalues come in complex conjugate pairs, and the associated eigenstates of the Hamiltonian span a two-dimensional space carrying one of the two-dimensional representations  $\Gamma_*$ , or  $\Gamma_{\pm}$ . Furthermore, a single real eigenvalue may occur, related to a one-dimensional representation  $\gamma_+$ . In this case a single  $\ddot{A}$ -invariant energy eigenstate state exists while there are no simultaneous eigenstates of the Hamiltonian and the symmetry operator in the two-dimensional A-invariant subspaces. Instead, flipping pairs of states can be identified. Generally, the symmetry does not imply the existence of degenerate eigenvalues—only if the Hamiltonian happens to have a real eigenvalue, a two-dimensional degenerate subspace may exist occasionally. These results naturally explain the properties of eigenstates and eigenvalues of  $\mathcal{PT}$ -symmetric quantum systems. In particular, it is not necessary to invoke the concept of a spontaneously broken PT-symmetry. Contrary to a unitary or hermitean symmetry, the presence of an anti-unitary symmetry does not imply the existence of a set of simultaneous eigenstates of  $\hat{H}$  and  $\mathcal{PT}$ —simply because an anti-linear operator is not guaranteed to have a complete set of eigenstates. Finally, the present approach provides a new perspective on the suggested modification of the scalar product in Hilbert space [10] which will be presented elsewhere [11] in detail.

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