A Note on Super Catalan Numbers

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We show that the super Catalan numbers are special values of the Krawtchouk polynomials by deriving an expression for the super Catalan numbers in terms of a signed set.

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The super Catalan numbers,

\[ S(m, n) := \frac{(2m)! (2n)!}{m! n! (m + n)!}, \]

as designated by Gessel in [9, Eq. (28)] form, hierarchically speaking, special cases of super ballot numbers (cf. [9, pp. 180, 189]). Historically, Gessel points out that these numbers had been observed as early as 1874 and studied by E. Catalan [6]; Aguiar and Hsiao in [1] provide a more detailed account of earlier appearances (cf. [5], [8], [7], and [9, pp. 180, 189]). Surprisingly, the innocent looking numbers, \( S(m, n) \), seem to have been immune against a combinatorial interpretation for all values of \((m, n)\) over the last century despite limited success stories for particular values (see problem 66(a) in Stanley’s bijective open problems compendium [16]). The following references highlight the success cases. In [9], Gessel notes that for \( S(1, n)/2 \) we obtain the Catalan number \( C_n \); whereas for the case when \( m = 0 \), we yield middle binomial coefficients, \( \binom{2n}{n} \). In [10], Gessel and Xin provide a combinatorial interpretation in terms of Dyck paths when \( m = 2 \) or 3. An alternative combinatorial interpretation for the case \( m = 2 \) was provided by Schaeffer in [15] using a method that was introduced in the interpretation to formulas of Tutte for planar maps. A more topologically flavored yet still combinatorial interpretation for the \( m = 2 \) case is also available by Pippenger and Schleich in [13]; they count cubic trees on \( n \) interior vertices (or the number of hexagonal trees with \( n \) nodes). In 2005, Callan in [4] provided an elegant combinatorial interpretation of the recurrence \( S(m, n)/2 = \sum_{k \geq 0} 2^{m-2k} \binom{n+k}{n} S(m, k)/2 \) for the case when \( m = 2 \) showing that it enumerates the aligned cubic trees by number of vertices that are neither a leaf nor adjacent to a leaf.

In this note we establish the following expression for super Catalan numbers:

\[ S(m, n) = (-1)^m \sum_{P \in \mathcal{P}_{m+n}} (-1)^{h_{2m}(P)}, \]

where the sum is over the set \( \mathcal{P}_{m+n} \) of all lattice paths from \((0, 0)\) to \((m+n, m+n)\) consisting of unit steps to the right and up, and \( h_{2m}(P) \) denotes the height of \( P = (P_0, P_1, \ldots, P_{2(m+n)}) \in \mathcal{P}_{m+n} \) after the \( 2m \)-th step, i.e., the \( y \)-coordinate of \( P_{2m} \). Although this is an interpretation of \( S(m, n) \) in terms of a signed set only, the right-hand side of (1) is a special value of the Krawtchouk polynomial defined as follows:

\[ K^d_j(x) = \sum_{h=0}^{j} (-1)^h \binom{x}{h} \binom{d-x}{j-h}. \]

Then (1) is equivalent to

\[ K^d_{2(m+n)}(2m) = (-1)^m S(m, n). \]

To see the equivalence, observe that each \( P \in \mathcal{P}_{m+n} \) has exactly \( m+n \) up-steps and that the number of \( P \in \mathcal{P}_{m+n} \) with \( h_{2m}(P) = h \) is therefore equal to \( \binom{2n}{h} \binom{2n}{m+n-h} \).

Krawtchouk polynomials \( K^d_j(x) \) appear as the coefficients of the so-called MacWilliams identities (cf. [12, Chap. 5, §2]), and also as the eigenvalues of the distance-\( j \)-graph of the \( d \)-cube (cf. [3, Chap. 3, §2]). The identity shows that \( ((-1)^m S(m, n) \mid m, n \geq 0, m + n = N) \) coincides with the set of non-zero eigenvalues of the distance-\( N \) graph of

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the $2N$-cube, which is known as the orthogonality graph and has been studied in connection with pseudo-telepathy in quantum information theory (cf. [11]). Finally, (2) follows immediately from the identity of von Szily (cf. [9, Eq. (29)]):

\[
S(m, n) = \sum_{k \in \mathbb{Z}} (-1)^k \binom{2m}{m+k} \binom{2n}{n-k} = (-1)^m \sum_{h=0}^{m+n} (-1)^h \binom{2m}{h} \binom{2n}{m+n-h} = (-1)^m K_{m+n}^{2m+n}/(2m).
\]

We note that (2), as well as the identity of von Szily, is just a restatement of (a special case of) Kummer’s evaluation of well-poised $_2F_1(-1)$ series.

To obtain a proper interpretation as the size of a set of certain paths, we need to find an injection from the set

\[
\{ P \in \mathcal{P}_{m+n} \mid h_{2m}(P) \neq m \pmod{2}\}
\]

to

\[
\{ P \in \mathcal{P}_{m+n} \mid h_{2m}(P) \equiv m \pmod{2}\},
\]

and a description of the complement of the image. This is known for the case $m = 1$ (see [2, Section 5.3]), but it seems to be a difficult problem in general.

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**REFERENCES**