

# QUASIPOSITIVITY PROBLEM FOR 3-BRAIDS

S.YU. OREVKOV

ABSTRACT. A braid is called *quasipositive* if it is a product of conjugates of standard generators of the braid group. We present an algorithm deciding if a given braid with three strings is quasipositive or not. The complexity (the time of work) of our algorithm is  $O(n^k)$  where  $n$  is the length of the word in standard generators representing the braid and  $k$  is the algebraic length of the braid. The algorithm is based on the Garside normal form.

The problem of quasipositivity in braid groups is motivated by the topology of plane real algebraic curves (16th Hilbert's problem). In particular, our result can be interpreted as a classification of trigonal real pseudoholomorphic curves on rational ruled surfaces.

Let  $G$  be a group and  $\mathcal{X}$  a fixed set of its elements which we shall call *positive generators*. An element  $g \in G$  is called  $\mathcal{X}$ -*quasipositive* if  $g = \prod_j a_j x_j a_j^{-1}$  where  $a_j \in G$  and  $x_j \in \mathcal{X}$ . We shall give a solution for the quasipositivity problem (i.e. we shall present an algorithm deciding if a given element is quasipositive or not) for a free group with any number of generators (Sect 1) and for the group of braids with three strings (the rest of the paper).

The complexity (the time of work) of our algorithm is  $O(n^{k+1})$  where  $n$  is the length and  $k$  is the algebraic length (the exponent sum) of the word.

The result on the free group is not new (see Remark 1.3) but we present it here because our proof of this result serves as a model of the proof for 3-braids. The main ingredient of the proof is the Garside normal form of a braid.

The term "quasipositive braid" was introduced by Lee Rudolph [5]. For us, the main motivation of the quasipositivity problem comes from the topology of plane real algebraic curves (see details in [2,3]). A necessary condition for existence of a real algebraic curve realizing a given isotopy type, is the quasipositivity of a certain braid. If one enlarge the class of real algebraic curves up to the class of real pseudoholomorphic curves, then this condition becomes necessary and sufficient. In particular, the result of this note can be interpreted as a classification of trigonal real pseudoholomorphic curves on rational ruled surfaces.

**1. Quasipositivity problem in free group.** Let  $\mathcal{X}$  be any set and  $\mathbf{F}_{\mathcal{X}}$  be the free group generated by  $\mathcal{X}$ . We shall call  $\mathcal{X}$ -quasipositive elements just *quasipositive*. In the set of words composed of the characters "[", "]", "\*", we define a subset of *regular bracket structures* (RBS) recursively: the empty word and the word \* are RBS; if  $a$  and  $b$  are RBS then  $ab$  and  $[a]$  also are.

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Let  $\mathcal{X}^{-1} = \{x^{-1} \mid x \in \mathcal{X}\}$ . A word  $x_1x_2\dots x_n$  in  $x_j \in \mathcal{X} \cup \mathcal{X}^{-1}$  is called *quasipositive* if there exist a RBS  $u_1u_2\dots u_n$  which *agrees with  $w$* , i.e. such that

- (1) if  $u_j = *$  then  $x_j \in \mathcal{X}$ ;
- (2) if  $u_j$  is the bracket matching to  $u_i$  then  $x_j = x_i^{-1}$ .

**Proposition 1.1.** *Any word representing a quasipositive element of  $\mathbf{F}_{\mathcal{X}}$ , is quasipositive.*

*Proof.* By definition, any quasipositive element can be represented by a quasipositive word  $\prod a_jx_ja_j^{-1}$ . If a word  $w$  is obtained by inserting  $xx^{-1}$  into a quasipositive word then  $w$  is also quasipositive (one should just insert "[ ]" into the corresponding place of the RBS). It remains to prove that if a word  $w'$  is obtained by removing  $xx^{-1}$  or  $x^{-1}x$  from a quasipositive word  $w$  then  $w'$  is quasipositive.

Let  $w = x_1\dots x_n$ . Let  $u_1\dots u_n$  be the corresponding RBS and  $w'$  is obtained from  $w$  by removing  $x_ix_{i+1}$  where either  $x_i = x$  and  $x_{i+1} = x^{-1}$ , or  $x_i = x^{-1}$  and  $x_{i+1} = x$  for some  $x \in \mathcal{X}$ . Let us consider separately all the possibilities for the word  $u_iu_{i+1}$ .

*Case 1. " \*\* "*. Impossible because  $x$  and  $x^{-1}$  cannot belong both to  $\mathcal{X}$ .

*Case 2. " \* ] " or " \* [ "* (the case of " [ \* " and " ] \* " is analogous). We have  $x_i = x \in \mathcal{X}$ ,  $x_{i+1} = x^{-1}$ . Let  $u_j$  be the bracket matching to  $u_{i+1}$ . Then we have  $x_j = x$ , and the word obtained from  $u_1\dots u_n$  by deleting  $u_iu_{i+1}$  and replacing  $u_j$  with " \* ", is an RBS which agrees with  $w'$ .

*Case 3. " [ ] " or " ] [ "*. Deleting  $u_iu_{i+1}$  yields an RBS which agrees with  $w'$ .

*Case 4. " [ [ " (the case of " ] ] " is analogous).* Let  $u_j = u_k = ]$ ,  $j < k$ , be the brackets matching to  $u_i$  and  $u_{i+1}$ . Removing  $u_iu_{i+1}$  and replacing  $u_j$  with " [ ", we obtain an RBS which agrees with  $w'$ .

To check that the obtained words are RBS, it is convenient to use the following criterion. A word in " [ ", " \* ", " ] " is an RBS if and only if the number of " [ " is equal to the number of " ] ", and for any initial subword, the number of " [ " is not less than the number of " ] ".  $\square$

**Corollary 1.2.** *A word over the alphabet  $\mathcal{X} \cup \mathcal{X}^{-1}$  defines a quasipositive element if and only if after removing some positive generators one obtain a word representing the unit of the group  $\mathbf{F}_{\mathcal{X}}$ .*

*Remark 1.3.* According to a result of Blank [4], the question of extendibility of an immersion  $S^1 \rightarrow \mathbf{R}^2$  up to an immersion  $D^2 \rightarrow \mathbf{R}^2$  (where  $D^2$  is a disk and  $S^1$  is its boundary) can be reduced to the quasipositivity problem in a free group. In [4], it is given an algorithm of recognizing quasipositive words, thus, our Proposition 1.1 is not a new result.

**2. Garside normal form in the group of braids with three strings [1].** Let  $B_3 = \langle \sigma_1, \sigma_2 \mid \sigma_1\sigma_2\sigma_1 = \sigma_2\sigma_1\sigma_2 \rangle$  be the group of braids with three strings. Let  $\Delta$  be the Garside element:  $\Delta = \sigma_1\sigma_2\sigma_1$ . Let  $\tau : B_3 \rightarrow B_3$  be the automorphism  $\sigma_1 \mapsto \sigma_2$ ,  $\sigma_2 \mapsto \sigma_1$ . It is easy to check that

$$\Delta\beta = \tau(\beta)\Delta, \quad \beta \in B_3. \quad (1)$$

Let  $\mathbf{a}$  be the homomorphism of  $B_3$  to the additive group of integers  $\mathbf{Z}$ , such that  $\mathbf{a}(\sigma_1) = \mathbf{a}(\sigma_2) = 1$ , i.e.  $\mathbf{a}(\beta)$  is the exponent sum (the algebraic length) of  $\beta$ .

Let  $B_3^+$  be the submonoid (recall that *monoid* is a semigroup with the unit element) of  $B_3$  generated by  $\sigma_1, \sigma_2$ . Elements of  $B_3^+$  are called *positive braids*. Let

$\alpha, \beta \in B_3^+$ . Let us say that  $\beta$  is *left* (resp., *right*) *divisible by*  $\alpha$  if there exists  $\gamma \in B_3^+$  such that  $\beta = \alpha\gamma$  (resp.,  $\beta = \gamma\alpha$ ). A word in  $\sigma_1, \sigma_2$ , is called *positive*.

**Lemma 2.1.** (see [1; Theorem 4]). *Two positive words are equal in  $B_3$  if and only if one of them can be obtained from the other by applying the relations  $\sigma_1\sigma_2\sigma_1 = \sigma_2\sigma_1\sigma_2$ .*

**Lemma 2.2.** *A positive word is left or right divisible by  $\Delta$  if and only if it contains the subword  $\sigma_1\sigma_2\sigma_1$  or  $\sigma_2\sigma_1\sigma_2$ .*

*Proof.* If  $w$  contains such a subword then  $w = \alpha\Delta\beta = \Delta\tau(\alpha)\beta = \alpha\tau(\beta)\Delta$  by (1). Otherwise, by Lemma 2.1, the word  $w$  cannot be equal in  $B_3$  to any other positive word.  $\square$

**Corollary 2.3.** *An element of  $B_3^+$  not divisible by  $\Delta$  can be represented by a positive word in a unique way.*

**Definition.** *A Garside decomposition of a braid  $\beta \in B_3$  is its presentation*

$$\beta = \beta_+\Delta^m, \quad \beta_+ \in B_3^+. \quad (2)$$

If  $\beta_+$  is not divisible by  $\Delta$  then the decomposition (2) is called the *Garside normal form* of  $\beta$ . In this case,  $m$  is called the *power* of  $\beta$ . By Corollary 2.3, the Garside normal form is uniquely defined.

To find a Garside decomposition, we replace each occurrence of  $\sigma_1^{-1}$  with  $\sigma_2\sigma_1\Delta^{-1}$ , and  $\sigma_2^{-1}$  with  $\sigma_1\sigma_2\Delta^{-1}$ , and then push all  $\Delta^{-1}$  to the right using (1). To find further the Garside normal form, one should successively replace all subwords  $\sigma_1\sigma_2\sigma_1$  and  $\sigma_2\sigma_1\sigma_2$  with  $\Delta$ , and push them to the right using (1).

**3. Quasipositivity problem in the group of braids with three strings.** A braid with three strings (an element of  $B_3$ ) is called *quasipositive* if it is  $\mathcal{X}$ -quasipositive for  $\mathcal{X} = \{\sigma_1, \sigma_2\}$ . It is clear that if a braid admits a decomposition (2) with a non-negative  $m$  then it is quasipositive. A criterion of the quasipositivity in the case of negative  $m$  is as follows.

**Proposition 3.1.** *Let  $\beta = \beta_+\Delta^m$  where  $\beta_+$  is a positive word (i.e. a word in  $\sigma_1, \sigma_2$ ), and  $m \leq 0$ . The braid  $\beta$  is quasipositive if and only if one can delete some letters from  $\beta_+$  so that the obtained word is equal in  $B_3^+$  to the word  $\Delta^{-m}$ .*

This proposition follows immediately from Proposition 3.3 below. It provides the following algorithm to decide if a given word in  $\sigma_1^{\pm 1}, \sigma_2^{\pm 1}$  represents a quasipositive braid. Let  $k$  be the algebraic length of the braid.

**Algorithm 3.2.**

- (1) Compute the Garside normal form  $\beta_+\Delta^m$  of the given braid  $\beta$ .
- (2) Try to remove  $k$  letters from  $\beta_+$  in all possible ways, each time computing the Garside normal form of the obtained braid.
- (3) If we obtain at least once the trivial braid on the step (2) then the braid  $\beta$  is quasipositive. Otherwise it is not.

It is clear that the complexity (the time of work) of this algorithm is  $O(n^{k+1})$  where  $n$  is the length of the initial word. The rest of the section is devoted to the proof of Proposition 3.1.

In the set of words composed of the characters "[", "|", "]", "\*", let us define a subset of *regular bracket structures with delimiters* (RBSD) recursively as follows: the empty word and the word \* are RBSD; if  $a$  and  $b$  are RBSD then  $ab$  and  $[a|b]$  also are. If  $a$  is an RBSD then its *wight*  $\ell(a)$  is defined as the number of occurrences of the character "|". It is clear that any occurrence of one of the characters "[", "|", or "]" into an RBSD  $w$ , uniquely determines the occurrences of the other two characters such that  $w = a[b|c]d$  where  $b$ ,  $c$ , and  $ad$  are RBSD. Such a mutual occurrence of "[", "|", and "]" is called a *regular mutual occurrence*.

Let us say that a positive word  $x_1 \dots x_n$ ,  $x_j \in \{\sigma_1, \sigma_2\}$ , *agrees* with an RBSD  $u_1 \dots u_n$ , if for any regular mutual occurrence of  $u_i = [$ ,  $u_j = |$ ,  $u_k = ]$ , into  $u_1 \dots u_n = au_i bu_j cu_k d = a[b|c]d$ , we have either

$$x_i = \sigma_1, \quad x_j = \mathbf{r}^{\ell(b)}(\sigma_2), \quad x_k = \mathbf{r}^{\ell(bc)}(\sigma_1),$$

or

$$x_i = \sigma_2, \quad x_j = \mathbf{r}^{\ell(b)}(\sigma_1), \quad x_k = \mathbf{r}^{\ell(bc)}(\sigma_2),$$

**Proposition 3.3.** *Let  $b = w\Delta^m$  where  $w$  is a positive word and  $m \leq 0$ . The braid  $b$  is quasipositive if and only if there exists an RBSD of the weight  $-m$  which agrees with  $w$ .*

This statement easily follows from the results of Section 2 and the following lemma.

**Lemma 3.4.** *Let  $w = x_1 \dots x_n$  be a positive word which agrees with some RBSD of a non-zero weight. Suppose that  $w$  contains a subword  $x_i x_{i+1} x_{i+2} = \sigma_1 \sigma_2 \sigma_1$ . Then there exists an RBSD  $u_1 \dots u_n$  of the same weight agreeing with  $w$  such that  $u_i u_{i+1} u_{i+2} = [|]$ .*

*Proof.* In the RBSD agreeing with  $w$ , let us consider the subword  $v$  which corresponds to  $x_i x_{i+1} x_{i+2}$ . If  $v = **$ , then we replace  $v$  with  $[|]$  and we replace an arbitrary regular mutual occurrence  $\dots [\dots | \dots] \dots$  with  $\dots * \dots * \dots * \dots$ .

If  $v$  intersects only with one regular mutual occurrence of  $[|]$ , then we replace  $v$  with  $[|]$ , and we replace with  $*$  each element of this regular mutual occurrence which does not belong to  $v$ .

If  $v$  intersects with more than one regular mutual occurrence of  $[|]$ , then we shall consider separately all possibilities for  $v$  up to a symmetry:

$$\begin{array}{l} 121 \dots 2 \dots 1 \dots 2 \dots 1 \longrightarrow 121 \dots 2 \dots 1 \dots 2 \dots 1 \\ * [ [ | \dots ] \dots [ | \dots ] \longrightarrow [ ] \dots * [ [ \dots | \dots ] \\ 1 \dots 121 \dots 2 \dots 1 \dots 2 \longrightarrow 1 \dots 121 \dots 2 \dots 1 \dots 2 \\ [ * [ [ | \dots ] \longrightarrow * [ [ ] \dots [ | \dots ] \\ 2 \dots 1 \dots 121 \dots 2 \dots 1 \longrightarrow 2 \dots 1 \dots 121 \dots 2 \dots 1 \\ [ | \dots * [ [ | \dots ] \longrightarrow [ * [ [ ] \dots [ | \dots ] \\ 1 \dots 2 \dots 1 \dots 121 \dots 2 \longrightarrow 1 \dots 2 \dots 1 \dots 121 \dots 2 \\ [ [ | \dots * ] | \longrightarrow [ [ | \dots ] [ ] * \\ 2 \dots 1 \dots 2 \dots 1 \dots 121 \longrightarrow 2 \dots 1 \dots 2 \dots 1 \dots 121 \\ [ | \dots [ | \dots * ] \longrightarrow [ | \dots ] * [ [ ] \\ 2 \dots 121 \dots 2 \dots 1 \dots 1 \longrightarrow 2 \dots 121 \dots 2 \dots 1 \dots 1 \\ [ | * [ [ | \dots ] \longrightarrow [ [ ] \dots [ | \dots ] * \\ 1 \dots 2 \dots 121 \dots 2 \dots 1 \longrightarrow 1 \dots 2 \dots 121 \dots 2 \dots 1 \\ [ | \dots ] * [ [ | \dots ] \longrightarrow [ | \dots [ ] \dots ] * \end{array}$$

$$\begin{array}{l}
 121\dots 2\dots 1\dots 2\dots 1\dots 2\dots 1 \longrightarrow 121\dots 2\dots 1\dots 2\dots 1\dots 2\dots 1 \\
 \left[ \left[ \left[ \begin{array}{c} | \\ \hline \end{array} \right] \right] \right] \longrightarrow \left[ \left[ \begin{array}{c} | \\ \hline \end{array} \right] \right] \\
 2\dots 121\dots 2\dots 1\dots 2\dots 1\dots 2 \longrightarrow 2\dots 121\dots 2\dots 1\dots 2\dots 1\dots 2 \\
 \left[ \begin{array}{c} | \\ \hline \left[ \begin{array}{c} | \\ \hline \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right] \longrightarrow \left[ \begin{array}{c} | \\ \hline \left[ \begin{array}{c} | \\ \hline \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right] \\
 1\dots 2\dots 121\dots 2\dots 1\dots 2\dots 1 \longrightarrow 1\dots 2\dots 121\dots 2\dots 1\dots 2\dots 1 \\
 \left[ \begin{array}{c} | \\ \hline \left[ \begin{array}{c} | \\ \hline \left[ \begin{array}{c} | \\ \hline \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right] \longrightarrow \left[ \begin{array}{c} | \\ \hline \left[ \begin{array}{c} | \\ \hline \left[ \begin{array}{c} | \\ \hline \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right] \\
 2\dots 1\dots 2\dots 121\dots 2\dots 1\dots 2 \longrightarrow 2\dots 1\dots 2\dots 121\dots 2\dots 1\dots 2 \\
 \left[ \begin{array}{c} | \\ \hline \left[ \begin{array}{c} | \\ \hline \left[ \begin{array}{c} | \\ \hline \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right] \longrightarrow \left[ \begin{array}{c} | \\ \hline \left[ \begin{array}{c} | \\ \hline \left[ \begin{array}{c} | \\ \hline \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right]
 \end{array}$$

$$\begin{array}{l}
 121\dots 2\dots 1\dots 2 \longrightarrow 121\dots 2\dots 1\dots 2 \\
 \left[ \left[ \begin{array}{c} | \\ \hline \end{array} \right] \right] \longrightarrow \left[ \left[ \begin{array}{c} | \\ \hline \end{array} \right] \right] \\
 2\dots 121\dots 2\dots 1 \longrightarrow 2\dots 121\dots 2\dots 1 \\
 \left[ \begin{array}{c} | \\ \hline \left[ \begin{array}{c} | \\ \hline \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right] \longrightarrow \left[ \begin{array}{c} | \\ \hline \left[ \begin{array}{c} | \\ \hline \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right] \\
 2\dots 121\dots 2\dots 1 \longrightarrow 2\dots 121\dots 2\dots 1 \\
 \left[ \begin{array}{c} | \\ \hline \left[ \begin{array}{c} | \\ \hline \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right] \longrightarrow \left[ \begin{array}{c} | \\ \hline \left[ \begin{array}{c} | \\ \hline \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right]
 \end{array}$$

To simplify notation, we omit  $\mathfrak{r}^{\ell(\dots)}$  in the above list of modifications and we write 1 and 2 instead of  $\sigma_1$  and  $\sigma_2$ . For example, the first line of the list should be understood as

$$\begin{array}{c}
 \sigma_1 \sigma_2 \sigma_1 a \mathfrak{r}^{\ell(\tilde{a})}(\sigma_2) b \mathfrak{r}^{\ell(\tilde{a}\tilde{b})}(\sigma_1) c \mathfrak{r}^{\ell(\tilde{a}\tilde{b}\tilde{c})}(\sigma_2) d \mathfrak{r}^{\ell(\tilde{a}\tilde{b}\tilde{c}\tilde{d})}(\sigma_1) \\
 * \left[ \left[ \begin{array}{c} | \\ \hline \end{array} \right] \right] \\
 \downarrow \\
 \sigma_1 \sigma_2 \sigma_1 a \mathfrak{r}^{\ell(\tilde{a})}(\sigma_2) b \mathfrak{r}^{\ell(\tilde{a}\tilde{b})}(\sigma_1) c \mathfrak{r}^{\ell(\tilde{a}\tilde{b}\tilde{c})}(\sigma_2) d \mathfrak{r}^{\ell(\tilde{a}\tilde{b}\tilde{c}\tilde{d})}(\sigma_1), \\
 \left[ \begin{array}{c} | \\ \hline \end{array} \right] * \left[ \begin{array}{c} | \\ \hline \end{array} \right]
 \end{array}$$

where  $a, b, c, d$  are arbitrary words in  $\sigma_1, \sigma_2$ , and  $\tilde{a}, \tilde{b}, \tilde{c}, \tilde{d}$  the corresponding RBSD ( $\tilde{a}, \tilde{b}, \tilde{c}, \tilde{d}$  are not changed under the modification).  $\square$

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LABORATOIRE EMILE PICARD, UFR MIG, UNIV. PAUL SABATIER, 118 ROUTE DE NARBONNE, 31062 TOULOUSE, FRANCE  
*E-mail address:* orevkov@picard.ups-tlse.fr  
*Personal web-page:* <http://picard.ups-tlse.fr/~orevkov>

STEKLOV MATHEMATICAL INSTITUTE, UL. GUBKINA 8, MOSCOW, 119991 RUSSIA