Cayley’s Formula: A Page From The Book

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Abstract. We present a simple proof of Cayley’s formula.

We give a short elementary proof of Cayley’s famous formula for the enumeration $T_n$ of free, unrooted trees with $n \geq 1$ labeled nodes. We first count $F_{n,k}$, the number of $n$-node forests composed of $k$ rooted, directed trees, for $1 \leq k \leq n$. For the history of the formula, including Jim Pitman’s use of directed forests, see [1, pp. 221–226].

The crux of the proof is simple double counting. There are two equivalent ways of counting the number of $k$-tree forests with one designated internal (nonroot) node, which shows, for all $k = 1, \ldots, n-1$, that

$$(n-k)F_{n,k} = knF_{n,k+1}. \tag{*}$$

- For the left side of (*): Consider one of the $F_{n,k}$ forests with $k$ trees. Designate any one of its $n-k$ internal nodes.
- For the right side: Consider one of the $F_{n,k+1}$ forests with $k+1$ trees. Choose any one of the $n$ nodes, and hang from it any one of the $k$ trees not containing that node. The root of that grafted subtree is the designated internal node.

Iterating (*) $n-1$ times gives

$$F_{n,1} = \frac{1}{n-1} n F_{n,2} = \frac{1}{n-1} \frac{2}{n-2} n^2 F_{n,3} = \cdots = \frac{1}{n-1} \frac{2}{n-2} \cdots \frac{n-1}{1} n^{n-1} F_{n,n}.$$  

The $k$ and $n-k$ factors all cancel each other out. Because there is precisely one way of turning $n$ nodes into $n$ distinct trees (each root being a whole tree), we have $F_{n,n} = 1$. Thus, the number $F_{n,1}$ of $n$-node rooted trees is $n^{n-1}$. Since any of the $n$ nodes in a tree can be the root, $F_{n,1} = nT_n$; Cayley’s formula, $T_n = n^{n-2}$, follows.

Applying (*) only $n-k$ times, yields $F_{n,k} = (\binom{n}{k}) kn^{n-k-1}$, for $k = 1, \ldots, n$.

Alternatively, the relation $(k+1)R_{n,k} = knR_{n,k+1}$ for the number $R_{n,k}$ of $n$-node forests with $k$ designated roots leads to $R_{n,k} = kn^{n-k-1}$ and to $T_n = R_{n,1} = n^{n-2}$.

As a final remark, there are $(n+1)^{n-1}$ rooted trees with $n+1$ nodes that all share the same root. Each corresponds to a rooted forest with $n$ nodes—just chop off the root node. Therefore, the limit of the ratio of rooted labeled forests to rooted labeled trees, as their size grows, is $\lim_{n \to \infty} (n+1)^{n-1}/n^{n-1} = e$.

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