

General Coordinates  
By  
Al Bernstein  
Signal Science, LLC  
[www.signalscience.net](http://www.signalscience.net)  
[alb@signalscience.net](mailto:alb@signalscience.net)

This note discusses how to work with a general non-orthogonal coordinate system.

## Basis Vectors

A vector is specified by a directed line segment that possesses a magnitude and direction as shown in Figure 1.

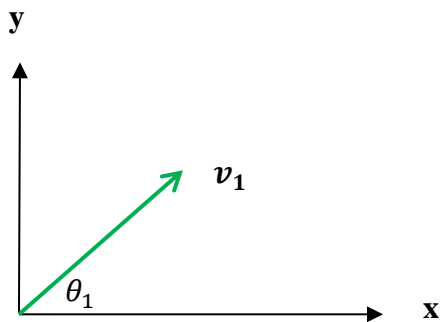


Figure 1

Figure 1 shows a vector -  $v_1$  - denoted by bold type.

$v_1$  consists of a magnitude -  $v_1$  - denoted by normal type and a direction angle -  $\theta_1$ .

Figure 2 shows two non-orthogonal vectors creating a coordinate system.

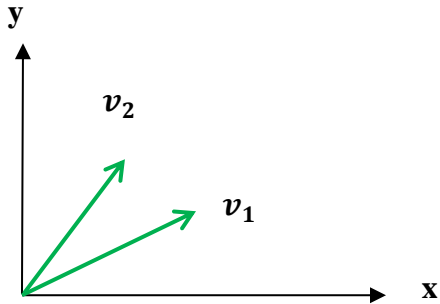


Figure 2

Table 1 shows the parameters to describe the vector – magnitude, direction and components - for the coordinate system of Figure 2.

vector	magnitude	direction	$xy$ - components
$v_1$	$v_1$	$\theta_1$	$a_1x + b_1y$
$v_2$	$v_2$	$\theta_2$	$a_2x + b_2y$

Table 1

The next section discusses the dot product between two vectors that will be used to compute the coordinates of these vectors.

## The Dot Product

The dot product of two vectors gives the magnitude of one vector in the direction of the other. One could think of this as a projection of one vector onto the other. Figure 3 shows the definition.

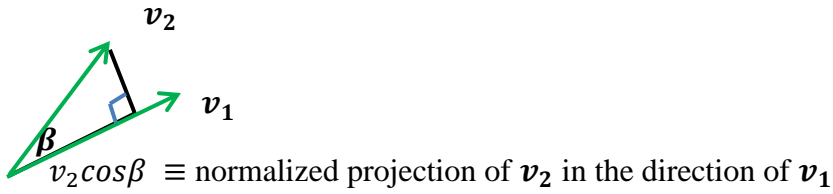


Figure 3

Dot product  $\mathbf{v}_1 \cdot \mathbf{v}_2 \equiv (\text{normalized projection of } \mathbf{v}_2 \text{ in the direction of } \mathbf{v}_1) \times \text{magnitude of } \mathbf{v}_1$

Equation (1) defines the dot product.

$$\mathbf{v}_1 \cdot \mathbf{v}_2 = v_1 v_2 \cos \beta \tag{1}$$

where  $\beta = \theta_2 - \theta_1$  from Table 1

The component form of the dot product of  $\mathbf{v}_1$  and  $\mathbf{v}_2$  is shown in equation (2)<sup>1</sup>.

$$\begin{aligned} \mathbf{v}_1 \cdot \mathbf{v}_2 &= v_1 v_2 \cos(\beta) = v_1 v_2 \cos(\theta_2 - \theta_1) = \\ v_1 v_2 \cos \theta_2 \cos \theta_1 + v_1 v_2 \sin \theta_2 \sin \theta_1 &= a_1 a_2 + b_1 b_2 \end{aligned} \tag{2}$$

From the property of  $\cos(\theta_2 - \theta_1)$

and the direction of cosines of the components.

$x$  – components from Table 1

$$\begin{aligned} v_1 \cos \theta_1 &= a_1 \\ v_2 \cos \theta_2 &= a_2 \end{aligned}$$

$y$  – components from Table 1

$$\begin{aligned} v_1 \sin \theta_1 &= b_1 \\ v_2 \sin \theta_2 &= b_2 \end{aligned}$$

Also note that the dot product is linear

$$\mathbf{v}_1 \cdot c(\mathbf{v}_2 + \mathbf{v}_3) = c\mathbf{v}_1 \cdot \mathbf{v}_2 + c\mathbf{v}_1 \cdot \mathbf{v}_3$$

where  $c$  is a constant.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://mathworld.wolfram.com/DotProduct.html>

## Reciprocal Basis Vectors

A note on notation - we'll adopt a notation of using  $\mathbf{e}_i$  for basis vectors – subscripted indices. In the basis set pictured in Figure 2,  $\mathbf{v}_1$  will be notated as  $\mathbf{e}_1$  and  $\mathbf{v}_2$  will be notated as  $\mathbf{e}_2$ .

Equation (3) shows an arbitrary vector in the  $\mathbf{e}_1 - \mathbf{e}_2$  basis.

$$\mathbf{v}_3 = a\mathbf{e}_1 + b\mathbf{e}_2 \tag{3}$$

for real numbers  $a$  and  $b$ .

A reciprocal basis  $\boldsymbol{\omega}^1 - \boldsymbol{\omega}^2$  is introduced to compute the components  $a$  and  $b$ .

Table 2 shows the properties of the  $\boldsymbol{\omega}^1 - \boldsymbol{\omega}^2$  basis needed to recover the numbers  $a$  and  $b$  from  $\mathbf{v}_3$ .

Dot product •	$\boldsymbol{\omega}^1$	$\boldsymbol{\omega}^2$
$\mathbf{e}_1$	1	0
$\mathbf{e}_2$	0	1

Table 2

Equation (4) shows this relationship.

$$\text{We want } \boldsymbol{\omega}^i \cdot \mathbf{e}_j = I = \delta^i_j \tag{4}$$

where  $I$  is the identity matrix – a matrix with 1's on the diagonal and zeros off the diagonal. This functions as an identity operator on vectors as shown in equation (5).

$$I \cdot \mathbf{v} = \mathbf{v} \tag{5}$$

$\delta^i_j$  is called the Kronecker delta and is defined below – it's an identity matrix in index notation.

$$\delta^i_j = \begin{cases} 1 & i = j \\ 0 & i \neq j \end{cases}$$

The  $\omega^i$  vectors are called reciprocal vectors or dual vectors. The set of  $\omega^i$  reciprocal vectors is called a reciprocal basis or dual basis. Note that basis vectors are notated with a subscript index -  $e_i$  and reciprocal basis vectors are notated with a superscript index  $\omega^i$ .

Now define 2 matrices

$$A = \begin{bmatrix} e_1 \\ e_2 \end{bmatrix}$$

and

$$B = \begin{bmatrix} \omega^1 \\ \omega^2 \end{bmatrix}$$

where the rows are the basis vectors.

For example

$e_1 = [e_{11} \quad e_{12}]$  is a row basis vector.

Equation (4) becomes

$$BA^T = I$$

so

$$B = (A^T)^{-1} = \begin{bmatrix} \omega^1 \\ \omega^2 \end{bmatrix}$$

(6)

where

$A^T$  is the matrix transpose operation where the rows and columns are interchanged

$A^{-1}$  is the matrix inverse

Note also

$$B = (A^{-1})^T$$

To show this

$$(BA^T)^T = I^T = I = AB^T$$

So

$$\mathbf{B} = (\mathbf{A}^{-1})^T$$

To complete the notation

Components of basis vectors will be labeled  $v^i$  – upper index

Components of reciprocal basis vectors will be labeled  $\alpha_i$  – lower index

## Numerical Example

Example vectors are shown in Table 3

vector	$\mathbf{xy}$ - components
$\mathbf{e}_1$	$5\mathbf{x} + 9\mathbf{y}$
$\mathbf{e}_2$	$7\mathbf{x} + 12\mathbf{y}$

Table 3

$$\mathbf{A} = \begin{bmatrix} 5 & 9 \\ 7 & 12 \end{bmatrix}$$

Note the basis vectors are the rows of  $\mathbf{A}$

$$\mathbf{B} = (\mathbf{A}^T)^{-1} = \begin{bmatrix} -4 & \frac{7}{3} \\ 3 & \frac{-5}{3} \end{bmatrix}$$

$$\mathbf{BA}^T = \begin{bmatrix} -4 & \frac{7}{3} \\ 3 & \frac{-5}{3} \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} 5 & 9 \\ 7 & 12 \end{bmatrix} = \mathbf{I} = \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 0 \\ 0 & 1 \end{bmatrix}$$

Note: The reciprocal basis vectors are the rows of  $\mathbf{B}$

Table 4 shows the basis and reciprocal basis vectors and their components

vector	$xy$ - components
$e_1$	$5x + 9y$
$e_2$	$7x + 12y$
$\omega^1$	$-4x + \frac{7}{3}y$
$\omega^2$	$3x - \frac{5}{3}y$

Table 4

Notice that these vectors are not normalized and don't have to be.

## The Metric

A vector represents a geometrical object whose characteristics are the same regardless of what basis set is being used – basis vectors or reciprocal basis vectors - so

$$\mathbf{v} = v^i \mathbf{e}_i = v_j \boldsymbol{\omega}^j \tag{7}$$

where there is an implied summation over repeated indices – called Einstein notation.

so

$$\mathbf{v} \cdot \mathbf{e}_j = v^i \mathbf{e}_i \cdot \mathbf{e}_j = v_j \boldsymbol{\omega}^j \cdot \mathbf{e}_j = v_j = \mathbf{G} v^i \tag{8}$$

where

$\mathbf{G} = g_{ij} = \mathbf{e}_i \cdot \mathbf{e}_j$  is called the metric tensor. The metric converts a vector component -  $v^i$  into its reciprocal vector component -  $v_j$ . and will be discussed more thoroughly in a different note. Also, all combinations of the indices  $i$  and  $j$  are used so  $\mathbf{G}$  is a matrix.

From equation (7)

$$\mathbf{v} \cdot \boldsymbol{\omega}^j = v^i \mathbf{e}_i \cdot \boldsymbol{\omega}^j = v_i \boldsymbol{\omega}^i \cdot \boldsymbol{\omega}^j = v^i = \mathbf{G}^{-1} v_i \quad (9)$$

where

$\mathbf{G}^{-1} = g^{ij} = \boldsymbol{\omega}^i \cdot \boldsymbol{\omega}^j$  is called the inverse metric and converts a reciprocal vector component  $v_i$  into its vector component  $v^i$

Multiplying the metric by the inverse metric gives the identity matrix

$$g_{ij} g^{jk} = (\mathbf{e}_i \cdot \mathbf{e}_j)(\boldsymbol{\omega}^j \cdot \boldsymbol{\omega}^k) = I \quad (10)$$

again there is an implied summation over repeated indices which in this case specifies a matrix multiplication.

In matrix notation, the metric is given by equation (11)

$$\mathbf{G} = g_{ij} = \mathbf{A}\mathbf{A}^T \quad (11)$$

and the inverse metric is given by equation (12)

$$\mathbf{G}^{-1} = g^{ij} = \mathbf{B}\mathbf{B}^T \quad (12)$$

$$\mathbf{G}\mathbf{G}^{-1} = g_{ij} g^{jk} = \mathbf{A}\mathbf{A}^T \mathbf{B}\mathbf{B}^T$$

$$\text{but } \mathbf{A}^T = \mathbf{B}^{-1}$$

so

$$\mathbf{G}\mathbf{G}^{-1} = \mathbf{A}\mathbf{B}^T$$

but

$$\mathbf{B}^T = \mathbf{A}^{-1}$$

so

$$\mathbf{G}\mathbf{G}^{-1} = \mathbf{A}\mathbf{A}^{-1} = I$$



## Numerical Example

Table 5 shows 2 vectors in the arbitrary coordinate system from the last example

vector	$e_1 e_2$ - components	coordinates
$\mathbf{v}$	$3\mathbf{e}_1 + 9\mathbf{e}_2$	$[v^1 = 3, v^2 = 9]$
$\mathbf{u}$	$\mathbf{e}_1 + 11\mathbf{e}_2$	$[u^1 = 1, u^2 = 11]$

Table 5

From Table 4 of the previous example

$$\mathbf{G} = \mathbf{A}\mathbf{A}^T = \begin{bmatrix} 5 & 9 \\ 7 & 12 \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} 5 & 7 \\ 9 & 12 \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} 106 & 143 \\ 143 & 93 \end{bmatrix} \quad (13)$$

$$v_i = \mathbf{G}v^i = \begin{bmatrix} 106 & 143 \\ 143 & 93 \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} 3 \\ 9 \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} 1605 \\ 2166 \end{bmatrix} \quad (14)$$

$$\mathbf{v} = v^i = \begin{bmatrix} 3 \\ 9 \end{bmatrix} \text{ in the vector basis}$$

$$\mathbf{v} = v_i = \begin{bmatrix} 1605 \\ 2166 \end{bmatrix} \text{ in the reciprocal basis}$$

To test, put  $\mathbf{v}$  in  $\mathbf{xy}$  coordinates using basis coordinates and reciprocal basis coordinates.

$$3\mathbf{e}_1 + 9\mathbf{e}_2 = 3 \begin{bmatrix} 5 \\ 9 \end{bmatrix} + 9 \begin{bmatrix} 7 \\ 12 \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} 78 \\ 135 \end{bmatrix}$$

$$1605\boldsymbol{\omega}^1 + 2166\boldsymbol{\omega}^2 = 1605 \begin{bmatrix} -4 \\ 7 \\ 3 \end{bmatrix} + 2166 \begin{bmatrix} 3 \\ -5 \\ 3 \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} 78 \\ 135 \end{bmatrix}$$

so the reciprocal basis coordinates are correct and give the same vector in  $\mathbf{xy}$  coordinates.

$$\mathbf{G}^{-1} = \mathbf{B}\mathbf{B}^T = \begin{bmatrix} -4 & \frac{7}{3} \\ 3 & \frac{-5}{3} \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} \frac{-4}{3} & 3 \\ 7 & \frac{-5}{3} \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} \frac{193}{9} & \frac{-143}{9} \\ \frac{-143}{9} & \frac{106}{9} \end{bmatrix} \quad (15)$$

Test to see if reciprocal basis coordinates -  $v_i$  - convert back to the vector basis coordinates -  $v^i$ .

$$v^i = \mathbf{G}^{-1}v_i = \begin{bmatrix} \frac{193}{9} & \frac{-143}{9} \\ \frac{-143}{9} & \frac{106}{9} \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} 1605 \\ 2166 \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} 3 \\ 9 \end{bmatrix} \quad (16)$$

which is correct.

## The Dot Product in General Coordinates

Consider two vectors in a general coordinate system.

$$\mathbf{u} = u^1\mathbf{e}_1 + u^2\mathbf{e}_2$$

$$\mathbf{v} = v^1\mathbf{e}_1 + v^2\mathbf{e}_2$$

The basis vectors in the general coordinate system have properties shown in Table 2 - so to get the correct orthogonality condition - we need to multiply one vector in vector coordinates by the other in the reciprocal vector coordinates as shown in equation (17).

First put  $\mathbf{u}$  in the reciprocal basis.

$$\mathbf{u} = u^1\mathbf{e}_1 + u^2\mathbf{e}_2 = u_1\boldsymbol{\omega}^1 + u_2\boldsymbol{\omega}^2 \quad (17)$$

Then take the dot product and use the linearity properties of the dot product.

$$\mathbf{u} \cdot \mathbf{v} = (u_1\boldsymbol{\omega}^1 + u_2\boldsymbol{\omega}^2) \cdot (v^1\mathbf{e}_1 + v^2\mathbf{e}_2) = u_1v^1\boldsymbol{\omega}^1 \cdot \mathbf{e}_1 + u_1v^2\boldsymbol{\omega}^1 \cdot \mathbf{e}_2 + u_2v^1\boldsymbol{\omega}^2 \cdot \mathbf{e}_1 + u_2v^2\boldsymbol{\omega}^2 \cdot \mathbf{e}_2$$

But

$$\boldsymbol{\omega}^i \cdot \mathbf{e}_j = I = \delta^i_j$$

so

$$\mathbf{u} \cdot \mathbf{v} = u_1 v^1 \boldsymbol{\omega}^1 \cdot \mathbf{e}_1 + u_2 v^2 \boldsymbol{\omega}^2 \cdot \mathbf{e}_2 = u_1 v^1 + u_2 v^2 \quad (18)$$

From the last section we know that the metric can lower a coordinate index – go from  $v^i$  to  $v_i$  and the inverse metric can raise a coordinate index – go from  $v_i$  to  $v^i$ .

So the metric and inverse metric can be used to compute a dot product in general coordinates as shown in equation (19).

$$\begin{aligned} u_i &= \mathbf{G}u^i \\ \mathbf{u} \cdot \mathbf{v} &= g_{ij}v^i u^j = (\mathbf{G}u^i)^T \mathbf{v} = g^{ij}v_i u_j = (\mathbf{G}^{-1}u_i)^T v_i \end{aligned} \quad (19)$$

where we treat  $v_i$  and  $u_i$  as column vectors and are the coordinates of the reciprocal basis vectors.

## Numerical Example

First calculate  $\mathbf{v}$  and  $\mathbf{u}$  in Cartesian coordinates to check the dot product.

$$\mathbf{v} = v^i \mathbf{e}_i = 3\mathbf{e}_1 + 9\mathbf{e}_2 = 3 \begin{bmatrix} 5 \\ 9 \end{bmatrix} + 9 \begin{bmatrix} 7 \\ 12 \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} 78 \\ 135 \end{bmatrix}$$

$$\mathbf{u} = u^i \mathbf{e}_i = 1\mathbf{e}_1 + 11\mathbf{e}_2 = 1 \begin{bmatrix} 5 \\ 9 \end{bmatrix} + 11 \begin{bmatrix} 7 \\ 12 \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} 82 \\ 141 \end{bmatrix}$$

$$\mathbf{v} \cdot \mathbf{u} = \begin{bmatrix} 78 & 135 \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} 82 \\ 141 \end{bmatrix} = 25431$$

Now check the dot product with the metric computed in the last example.

$$g_{ij}v^i u^j = v^i \mathbf{G}(u^i)^T = \begin{bmatrix} 3 & 9 \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} 106 & 143 \\ 143 & 93 \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} 1 \\ 11 \end{bmatrix} = 25431$$

This is correct.

Now check the dot product with the inverse metric.

$$u_i = \mathbf{G}(u^i)^T = \begin{bmatrix} 106 & 143 \\ 143 & 93 \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} 1 \\ 11 \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} 1679 \\ 2266 \end{bmatrix}$$

$$g^{ij}v_iu_j = (v_i)^T \mathbf{G}^{-1}u_i = [1605 \quad 2166] \begin{bmatrix} \frac{193}{9} & \frac{-143}{9} \\ -\frac{143}{9} & \frac{106}{9} \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} 1679 \\ 2266 \end{bmatrix} = 25431 \quad (20)$$

This is correct.

## Coordinate Transforms

From Table 4

$$\mathbf{A} = \begin{bmatrix} 5 & 9 \\ 7 & 12 \end{bmatrix}$$

But these coordinates are in terms of  $\mathbf{x}$ - $\mathbf{y}$  coordinates

Equation (21) shows the vector basis as a coordinate transformation.

$$\mathbf{e} = \mathbf{A}\mathbf{x} \quad (21)$$

In general transforming from one general basis to another is shown in equations (22) and (23) for vector and reciprocal vector basis.

$$\bar{\mathbf{e}} = \mathbf{A}\mathbf{e} \quad (22)$$

Reciprocal basis

$$\bar{\boldsymbol{\omega}} = \mathbf{B}\boldsymbol{\omega} \quad (23)$$

To transform the vector components

$$\bar{\mathbf{v}}^i = \mathbf{C}\mathbf{v}^i$$

Because a vector is a geometric object, the components times the basis in one coordinate system should equal components times the basis in the other.

$$[\bar{\mathbf{v}}^i]^T \bar{\mathbf{e}} = [\mathbf{v}^i]^T \mathbf{e}$$

So

$$(\mathbf{C}\mathbf{v}^i)^T \mathbf{A}\mathbf{e} = [\mathbf{v}^i]^T \mathbf{e}$$

$$[\mathbf{v}^i]^T \mathbf{C}^T \mathbf{A}\mathbf{e} = [\mathbf{v}^i]^T \mathbf{e}$$

so

$$\mathbf{C}^T \mathbf{A} = \mathbf{I}$$

$$\mathbf{C} = (\mathbf{A}^{-1})^T$$

But from equation (6)

$$\mathbf{B} = (\mathbf{A}^T)^{-1} = (\mathbf{A}^{-1})^T \tag{6}$$

so  $\mathbf{C}$  is the  $\mathbf{B}$  matrix

so

$$\bar{\mathbf{v}}^i = \mathbf{B}\mathbf{v}^i \tag{24}$$

To transform the reciprocal vector components  $\mathbf{v}_i$

$$\bar{\mathbf{v}}_i = \mathbf{C}\mathbf{v}_i$$

$$[\bar{\mathbf{v}}_i]^T \bar{\boldsymbol{\omega}} = [\bar{\mathbf{v}}_i]^T \boldsymbol{\omega}$$

$$(\mathbf{C}\mathbf{v}_i)^T \mathbf{B}\boldsymbol{\omega} = \mathbf{v}_i \boldsymbol{\omega}$$

so

$$[\bar{\mathbf{v}}_i]^T \mathbf{C}^T \mathbf{B}\boldsymbol{\omega} = [\mathbf{v}_i]^T \boldsymbol{\omega}$$

so

$$C^T B = I$$

$$B = (C^T)^{-1}$$

so

$$C = A$$

(25)

Figure 4 is a summary of all the relationships between vectors, dual vectors, and their coordinates.

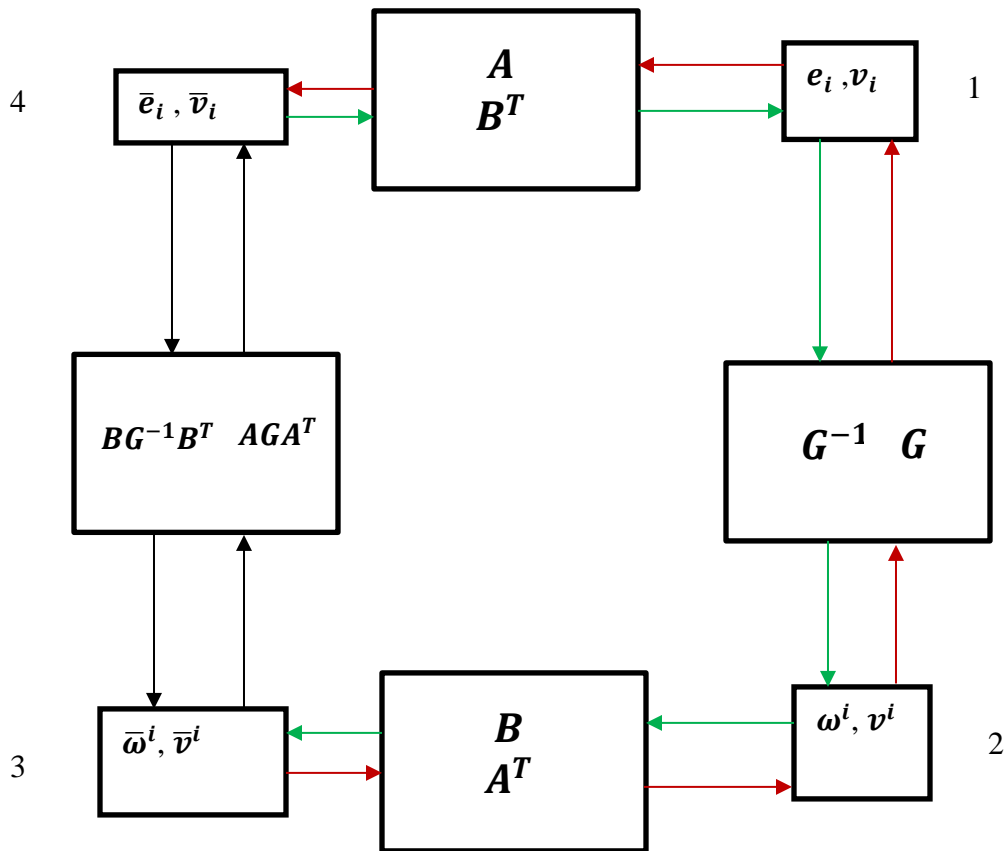


Figure 4

For example, starting at Node 3 and following the red arrows produces equation (26)

$$\bar{\mathbf{v}}_i = \mathbf{A}\mathbf{G}\mathbf{A}^T\bar{\mathbf{v}}^i \quad (26)$$

For  $\mathbf{v}^i$ , and  $\mathbf{v}_i$  in Cartesian coordinates

$$\mathbf{G} = \mathbf{I}$$

and

$$\bar{\mathbf{v}}_i = \mathbf{A}\mathbf{A}^T\bar{\mathbf{v}}^i = \bar{\mathbf{G}}\bar{\mathbf{v}}^i \quad (27)$$

which is the same as equation (8) without the overlines.

$$\mathbf{v}_j = \mathbf{G}\mathbf{v}^i \quad (8)$$

Starting at Node 4 and following the green arrows we get

$$\bar{\mathbf{v}}^i = \mathbf{B}\mathbf{G}^{-1}\mathbf{B}^T\bar{\mathbf{v}}_i = \bar{\mathbf{G}}^{-1}\bar{\mathbf{v}}_i$$

For  $\mathbf{v}^i$ , and  $\mathbf{v}_i$  in Cartesian coordinates

$$\mathbf{G}^{-1} = \mathbf{I}$$

$$\bar{\mathbf{v}}^i = \mathbf{B}\mathbf{B}^T\bar{\mathbf{v}}_i = \bar{\mathbf{G}}^{-1}\bar{\mathbf{v}}_i$$

which is the same as equation (9) without the overlines

$$\mathbf{v}^i = \mathbf{G}^{-1}\mathbf{v}_i \quad (9)$$