

## ON QUASINILPOTENT OPERATORS

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(Communicated by David R. Larson)

ABSTRACT. In this note we modify a new technique of Enflo for producing hyperinvariant subspaces to obtain a much improved version of his “two sequences” theorem with a somewhat simpler proof. As a corollary we get a proof of the “best” theorem (due to V. Lomonosov) known about hyperinvariant subspaces for quasinilpotent operators that uses neither the Schauder-Tychonoff fixed point theorem nor the more recent techniques of Lomonosov.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Let  $\mathcal{H}$  be a separable, infinite dimensional, complex Hilbert space, and denote by  $\mathcal{L}(\mathcal{H})$  the algebra of all bounded linear operators on  $\mathcal{H}$  and by  $\mathbf{K} = \mathbf{K}(\mathcal{H})$  the ideal of compact operators in  $\mathcal{L}(\mathcal{H})$ . Perhaps the first invariant-subspace theorem for operators in  $\mathcal{L}(\mathcal{H})$ , other than those provided by the spectral theorem for normal operators, was that every operator in  $\mathbf{K}(\mathcal{H})$  has a nontrivial invariant subspace.

According to Aronszajn-Smith [3], this was proved by John von Neumann (unpublished) about 1935. Thus there has now been over a half-century of work devoted to establishing that operators in  $\mathcal{L}(\mathcal{H})$  that have a nice enough relation to some compact operator have nontrivial invariant subspaces. Without attempting to be exhaustive we mention the papers of Bernstein-Robinson [4], Halmos [9], [10], Arveson-Feldman [1], Deckard-Douglas-Pearcy [7], Pearcy-Salinas [14], Lomonosov [11], [12], [13], Pearcy-Shields [15], Scott Brown [5], and, more recently, Chevreau-Li-Pearcy [6], Simonic [16], Ansari-Enflo [2], and Enflo-Lomonosov [8]. Several of these works took something from previous ones, but many also added new techniques, some dramatically new (for example, the use by Lomonosov in [11] of the Schauder-Tychonoff fixed point theorem for nonlinear mappings).

In [2], a very recent new technique was introduced (and ascribed there to Enflo) for producing invariant subspaces for compact-related operators in  $\mathcal{L}(\mathcal{H})$ . The following old theorem of Lomonosov ([11]; cf. also [15]) was thus given in [2] a completely different proof (neither utilizing the Schauder-Tychonoff fixed point theorem nor the ideas of [12]).

**Theorem 1.1.** *Every nonzero compact operator in  $\mathcal{L}(\mathcal{H})$  has a nontrivial hyperinvariant subspace.*

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Received by the editors February 6, 2002.

2000 *Mathematics Subject Classification.* Primary 47A15.

*Key words and phrases.* Invariant subspaces, Enflo technique, extremal vectors.

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As another consequence of this technique, Enflo in [8] obtained the following interesting “two sequences” theorem.

**Theorem 1.2.** *Let  $\mathcal{A} \subset \mathcal{L}(\mathcal{H})$  be any commutative algebra that contains a nonzero quasinilpotent operator. Then there exist sequences  $\{s_k\}_{k=1}^\infty$  and  $\{t_k\}_{k=1}^\infty$  in  $\mathcal{H}$  that converge weakly to nonzero vectors  $s_0$  and  $t_0$ , respectively, such that for every bounded sequence  $\{A_k\}_{k=1}^\infty \subset \mathcal{A}$ ,*

$$\lim_k (A_k s_k, t_k) = 0.$$

This technique of proof (from [2] and [8]) uses some “extremal vectors” in a very clever way, and, as was mentioned in [8], is so new that most likely it will be some time before one knows whether the technique (or modifications thereof) will yield all the stronger theorems from [11] and [12] as well as perhaps some completely new results in the same direction.

The purpose of this note is to show that by modifying Enflo’s new technique, a considerably better version of Theorem 1.2, with a somewhat simpler proof, can be obtained as follows.

**Theorem 1.3.** *Suppose  $Q \neq 0$  is a quasinilpotent operator in  $\mathcal{L}(\mathcal{H})$  and  $\{Q\}'$  denotes the commutant of  $Q$ , i.e.,  $\{Q\}' = \{A \in \mathcal{L}(\mathcal{H}) : AQ = QA\}$ . Let  $B_0$  be an arbitrary nonzero operator in  $\{Q\}'$  such that  $B_0 Q \neq 0$ . Then there exist sequences  $\{s_k\}_{k=1}^\infty$  and  $\{t_k\}_{k=1}^\infty$  in  $\mathcal{H}$  that converge weakly to nonzero vectors  $s_0$  and  $t_0$ , respectively, with  $B_0 s_0 \neq 0$ , and a sequence  $\{\beta_k\}$  of positive numbers converging to zero, such that for every doubly indexed sequence  $\{A_{m,k}\}_{m,k \in \mathbb{N}}$  in the unit ball of  $\{Q\}'$ , we have*

$$|(A_{m,k} s_k, t_k)| < \beta_k, \quad m, k \in \mathbb{N}.$$

Also as a corollary of Theorem 1.3, the following better (than Theorem 1.1) but not so old theorem of Lomonosov [12] can be deduced.

**Corollary 1.4** ([12]). *Suppose that  $Q \neq 0$  is a quasinilpotent operator in  $\mathcal{L}(\mathcal{H})$  and there exist a sequence  $\{D_m\}_{m \in \mathbb{N}} \subset \{Q\}'$  converging in the weak operator topology to a nonzero  $C$  (in  $\{Q\}'$ ) and a sequence  $\{K_m\}_{m \in \mathbb{N}}$  of compact operators such that*

$$(1) \quad \lim_m \|D_m - K_m\| = 0.$$

*(In other words, in the language of [12], we suppose that  $\{Q\}'$  has the Percy-Salinas property.) Then  $Q$  has a nontrivial hyperinvariant subspace.*

In other words, this note may be considered as a first step in the direction of determining what are the best theorems that can be obtained by (modifications of) this new Enflo technique from [2] and [8]. We remark that Corollary 1.4 is the “strongest” theorem known which produces hyperinvariant subspaces for a quasinilpotent operator, so, at least in this direction, Enflo’s new technique produces the “best” theorem known.

## 2. SOME LEMMAS

Our proof of Theorem 1.3 depends on several lemmas (essentially) from [2].

**Lemma 2.1.** *Suppose  $u$  and  $v$  are nonzero vectors in  $\mathcal{H}$  such that for every  $z \in \mathcal{H}$ ,  $\operatorname{Re}(u, z) < 0$  implies that  $\operatorname{Re}(v, z) \geq 0$ . Then there exists a negative number  $r_0$  such that  $v = r_0 u$ .*

*Proof.* Write  $v = \alpha_0 u + w$  where  $\alpha_0 \in \mathbb{C}$  and  $w$  is orthogonal to  $u$ . Note that if we set  $z = z(\gamma, x) = \gamma u + x$ , where  $x$  is orthogonal to  $u$  and  $\operatorname{Re} \gamma < 0$ , then

$$\operatorname{Re}(u, z) = \operatorname{Re}(u, \gamma u + x) = \|u\|^2 \operatorname{Re} \gamma < 0.$$

Thus, for all  $x$  orthogonal to  $u$  and for all  $\gamma$  with  $\operatorname{Re} \gamma < 0$ , we have, by hypothesis,

$$\operatorname{Re}(v, z(\gamma, x)) = \operatorname{Re}(\alpha_0 u + w, \gamma u + x) = \|u\|^2 \operatorname{Re}(\alpha_0 \gamma) + \operatorname{Re}(w, x) \geq 0.$$

Upon fixing  $\gamma$  and taking  $x$  to be a large enough negative scalar multiple of  $w$ , we see that necessarily  $w = 0$  and that  $\operatorname{Re}(\alpha_0 \gamma) \geq 0$ . Upon writing  $\alpha_0 = r_0 + i s_0$  and  $\gamma = t + i q$  where  $r_0, s_0, t, q$  are real, we get that  $r_0 t - s_0 q \geq 0$  for all  $q \in \mathbb{R}$  and all  $t < 0$ . Fixing  $t$  and letting  $q$  run we get  $s_0 = 0$  and then  $r_0 \leq 0$ . Since  $v = r_0 u$  and  $v \neq 0$ , we must have  $r_0 < 0$ , so the proof is complete.  $\square$

**Lemma 2.2.** *Suppose  $T \in \mathcal{L}(\mathcal{H})$  and has dense range. Suppose also that  $x_0$  is a nonzero vector in  $\mathcal{H}$  and that  $\varepsilon$  satisfies  $0 < \varepsilon < \|x_0\|$ . Then there exists a unique nonzero vector  $y_0 = y_0(x_0, \varepsilon)$  such that*

- a)  $\|y_0\| = \inf\{\|y\| : \|Ty - x_0\| \leq \varepsilon\}$  and
- b)  $\|Ty_0 - x_0\| = \varepsilon$ .

*Proof.* Let  $\mathcal{F} = \{y \in \mathcal{H} : \|Ty - x_0\| \leq \varepsilon\}$ . Since  $T$  has dense range, clearly  $\mathcal{F}$  is nonempty, and since  $T$  is continuous and  $\mathcal{F}$  is the inverse image under  $T$  of the norm-closed ball centered at  $x_0$  with radius  $\varepsilon$ ,  $\mathcal{F}$  is a norm-closed set. Moreover an easy calculation shows that  $\mathcal{F}$  is a convex set. But, as is well-known, such a set has a unique vector  $y_0$  of minimal norm. Thus a) is satisfied, and if  $\|Ty_0 - x_0\| < \varepsilon$ , then for  $\delta > 0$  sufficiently small,  $(1 - \delta)y_0$  would belong to  $\mathcal{F}$  and have smaller norm, so b) is satisfied.  $\square$

**Lemma 2.3.** *Suppose  $T, x_0, y_0$ , and  $\varepsilon$  are as in Lemma 2.2. Then there exists a negative number  $r$  such that  $T^*(Ty_0 - x_0) = ry_0$ .*

*Proof.* We apply Lemma 2.1 to  $u = T^*(Ty_0 - x_0)$  and  $v = y_0$ . Clearly it suffices to show that  $u$  and  $v$  satisfy the hypotheses of Lemma 2.1 (and then set  $r = 1/r_0$ ). Thus suppose that  $z_0$  is any vector in  $\mathcal{H}$  satisfying

$$\operatorname{Re}(u, z) = \operatorname{Re}(T^*(Ty_0 - x_0), z_0) = \operatorname{Re}(Ty_0 - x_0, Tz_0) < 0.$$

It follows easily that there exists a sufficiently small interval  $[0, t_0]$ , on which the function  $t \rightarrow \|(Ty_0 - x_0) + tTz_0\|^2$  is strictly monotone decreasing (its derivative is continuous and negative at the origin). Thus for  $t \in (0, t_0]$  we have

$$\|T(y_0 + tz_0) - x_0\| < \|Ty_0 - x_0\| = \varepsilon.$$

Thus for  $t \in (0, t_0]$ ,  $y_0 + tz_0 \in \mathcal{F}$ , and by the minimality of  $y_0$ , we must have

$$\|y_0 + tz_0\|^2 \geq \|y_0\|^2, \quad t \in (0, t_0].$$

But the derivative of the function

$$t \rightarrow \|y_0 + tz_0\|^2$$

is continuous and its value at the origin is  $2\operatorname{Re}(y_0, z_0)$ , which must therefore satisfy  $\operatorname{Re}(y_0, z_0) \geq 0$ , and the lemma is proved.  $\square$

**Lemma 2.4.** *Suppose  $T \in \mathcal{L}(\mathcal{H})$  is quasinilpotent with dense range, let  $x_0$  be a nonzero vector in  $\mathcal{H}$ , let  $\varepsilon$  satisfy  $0 < \varepsilon < \|x_0\|$ , and (via Lemma 2.2) let, for each  $n \in \mathbb{N}$ ,  $y_n = y_n(\varepsilon, x_0)$  be a (nonzero) vector satisfying*

- a)  $\|y_n\| = \inf\{\|y\| : \|T^n y - x_0\| \leq \varepsilon\}$  and

b)  $\|T^n y_n - x_0\| = \varepsilon.$

Then there exists a subsequence  $\{y_{n_k}\}_{k=1}^\infty$  of the sequence  $\{y_n\}$  satisfying

$$\lim_k \frac{\|y_{n_k}\|}{\|y_{n_k+1}\|} = 0.$$

*Proof.* Suppose, to the contrary, that there exist  $t > 0$  and  $N_t \in \mathbb{N}$  such that

$$\inf_{n \geq N_t} \frac{\|y_n\|}{\|y_{n+1}\|} = t.$$

Then

$$\|y_{N_t}\| \geq t\|y_{N_t+1}\| \geq t^2\|y_{N_t+2}\| \geq \dots \geq t^n\|y_{N_t+n}\|, \quad n \in \mathbb{N}.$$

By the minimality of  $\|y_{N_t}\|$  from a), we have (since  $\|T^{N_t+n}y_{N_t+n} - x_0\| = \varepsilon$ )

$$\|T^n y_{N_t+n}\| \geq \|y_{N_t}\|, \quad n \in \mathbb{N}.$$

Thus

$$\|T^n\| \|y_{N_t+n}\| \geq \|y_{N_t}\| \geq t^n \|y_{N_t+n}\|, \quad n \in \mathbb{N},$$

and hence  $\|T^n\| \geq t^n, n \in \mathbb{N}$ , which contradicts the fact that  $\sigma(T) = \{0\}$ . The result follows. □

### 3. PROOFS OF THE RESULTS

On the basis of these lemmas, we now prove Theorem 1.3 and Corollary 1.4.

*Proof of Theorem 1.3.* Let  $B_0 \in \{Q\}'$  be such that  $B_0Q \neq 0$ . If  $\mathcal{M} = (\text{range } Q)^- \neq \mathcal{H}$ , then  $\mathcal{M}$  is a nontrivial hyperinvariant subspace for  $Q$  and the result follows by choosing nonzero vectors  $s_0 \in \mathcal{M}$  and  $t_0 \in \mathcal{M}^\perp$  such that  $B_0s_0 \neq 0$  and defining  $s_k = s_0, t_k = t_0, k \in \mathbb{N}$ , and  $\{\beta_k\}$  to be an arbitrary sequence of positive numbers tending to zero. Thus we may suppose that  $Q$  has dense range (which implies that each  $Q^n$  also has dense range). Let  $x_0$  be a nonzero vector in  $\mathcal{H}$  such that  $B_0Qx_0 (= QB_0x_0) \neq 0$ , and let  $\varepsilon$  satisfy

$$0 < \varepsilon < \min\{\|x_0\|, \|Qx_0\|, (1/\|B_0\|)\|B_0x_0\|\}.$$

For each  $n \in \mathbb{N}$ , let  $y_n = y_n(\varepsilon, x_0)$  satisfy a) and b) of Lemma 2.4 (with  $T = Q$ ). By Lemma 2.4, we can choose a subsequence  $\{y_{n_k}\}$  of  $\{y_n\}$  such that

$$\lim_k \frac{\|y_{n_k}\|}{\|y_{n_k+1}\|} = 0.$$

By dropping down to successive subsequences of  $\{y_{n_k}\}$  we may suppose (without changing the notation accordingly), since all of the vectors  $Q^n y_n, n \in \mathbb{N}$ , belong to the norm-closed ball of radius  $\varepsilon$  centered at  $x_0$ , that the sequence  $\{Q^{n_k} y_{n_k}\}$  converges weakly to a vector  $z_0$  and, similarly, that the sequence  $\{Q^{n_k+1} y_{n_k+1}\}$  converges weakly to a vector  $v_0$ . Since norm-closed balls in  $\mathcal{H}$  are weakly closed, we have  $\|v_0 - x_0\| \leq \varepsilon, \|z_0 - x_0\| \leq \varepsilon$  (so, in particular,  $v_0 \neq 0 \neq z_0$ ),  $\|B_0z_0 - B_0x_0\| \leq \|B_0\| \varepsilon$ , and  $B_0z_0 \neq 0$ .

We next show that  $v_0 - x_0 \neq 0$ , which shows also (since  $\mathcal{M} = \mathcal{H}$ ) that  $Q^*(v_0 - x_0) \neq 0$ . By the definition of the  $y_n$  and Lemma 2.3, we have

$$\begin{aligned} \varepsilon^2 &= \|Q^{n_k+1} y_{n_k+1} - x_0\|^2 \\ &= (y_{n_k+1}, (Q^{n_k+1})^*(Q^{n_k+1} y_{n_k+1} - x_0)) - (x_0, Q^{n_k+1} y_{n_k+1} - x_0) \\ &= r_{n_k+1} \|y_{n_k+1}\|^2 - (x_0, Q^{n_k+1} y_{n_k+1} - x_0), \quad k \in \mathbb{N}, \end{aligned}$$

where  $r_{n_k+1} < 0$  for all  $k \in \mathbb{N}$ . Thus

$$-\varepsilon^2 \geq (x_0, Q^{n_k+1}y_{n_k+1} - x_0), \quad k \in \mathbb{N},$$

and, taking limits as  $k \rightarrow \infty$ , we get  $-\varepsilon^2 \geq (x_0, v_0 - x_0)$ , so  $v_0 - x_0 \neq 0$  and  $Q^*(v_0 - x_0) \neq 0$ .

Now define

$$\begin{aligned} s_k &= Q^{n_k}y_{n_k}, \\ t_k &= Q^*(Q^{n_k+1}y_{n_k+1} - x_0), \\ \beta_k &= \|y_{n_k}\| \varepsilon (\|x_0\| + \varepsilon) / \|y_{n_k+1}\|, \quad k \in \mathbb{N}, \end{aligned}$$

and note that the sequences  $\{s_k\}_{k=1}^\infty$  and  $\{t_k\}_{k=1}^\infty$  converge weakly to the nonzero vectors  $s_0 := z_0$  and  $t_0 := Q^*(v_0 - x_0)$ , respectively, and that the sequence  $\{\beta_k\}$  converges to zero. Next we let  $\{A_{m,k}\}_{m,k \in \mathbb{N}}$  be an arbitrary doubly indexed sequence in the unit ball of  $\{Q\}'$ , and we write

$$(2) \quad A_{m,k}y_{n_k} = \alpha_{n_k}^{(m)}y_{n_k+1} + w_{n_k+1}^{(m)}, \quad m, k \in \mathbb{N},$$

where  $\alpha_{n_k}^{(m)} \in \mathbb{C}$  and  $w_{n_k+1}^{(m)}$  is orthogonal to  $y_{n_k+1}$  for all  $m, k \in \mathbb{N}$ . Note that

$$\begin{aligned} \|y_{n_k}\|^2 &\geq \|A_{m,k}y_{n_k}\|^2 \\ &= |\alpha_{n_k}^{(m)}|^2 \|y_{n_k+1}\|^2 + \|w_{n_k+1}^{(m)}\|^2, \quad m, k \in \mathbb{N}, \end{aligned}$$

and thus

$$(3) \quad \frac{\|y_{n_k}\|}{\|y_{n_k+1}\|} \geq |\alpha_{n_k}^{(m)}|, \quad m, k \in \mathbb{N}.$$

An application of  $Q^{n_k+1}$  to each side of (2) gives

$$(4) \quad \begin{aligned} QA_{m,k}Q^{n_k}y_{n_k} &= Q^{n_k+1}A_{m,k}y_{n_k} \\ &= \alpha_{n_k}^{(m)}Q^{n_k+1}y_{n_k+1} + Q^{n_k+1}w_{n_k+1}^{(m)}, \quad m, k \in \mathbb{N}. \end{aligned}$$

Upon taking the inner product of each side of (4) with  $Q^{n_k+1}y_{n_k+1} - x_0$ , we obtain

$$(5) \quad (A_{m,k}s_k, t_k) = \alpha_{n_k}^{(m)}(Q^{n_k+1}y_{n_k+1}, Q^{n_k+1}y_{n_k+1} - x_0), \quad m, k \in \mathbb{N},$$

since, by Lemma 2.3,

$$(w_{n_k+1}^{(m)}, (Q^{n_k+1})^*(Q^{n_k+1}y_{n_k+1} - x_0)) = (w_{n_k+1}^{(m)}, r_{n_k+1}y_{n_k+1}) = 0, \quad m, k \in \mathbb{N}.$$

Moreover, since

$$|(Q^{n_k+1}y_{n_k+1}, Q^{n_k+1}y_{n_k+1} - x_0)| \leq (\|x_0\| + \varepsilon)\varepsilon, \quad k \in \mathbb{N},$$

we have from the definition of  $\beta_k$ , (3), and (5) that

$$|(A_{m,k}s_k, t_k)| \leq \beta_k, \quad m, k \in \mathbb{N}.$$

Since we saw earlier that  $B_0s_0 = B_0z_0 \neq 0$ , the theorem is proved. □

*Proof of Corollary 1.4.* We may suppose, without loss of generality, that  $Q$  is a quasiaffinity (otherwise  $\ker Q$  or  $(\text{range } Q)^\perp$  is a nontrivial hyperinvariant subspace for  $Q$ ). Thus  $CQ \neq 0$ , and we set  $B_0$  of Theorem 1.3 equal to  $C$ . Now let the sequences  $\{s_k\}$ ,  $\{t_k\}$ , and  $\{\beta_k\}$  be as in Theorem 1.3, with  $\{s_k\}$  and  $\{t_k\}$  having nonzero weak limits  $s_0$  and  $t_0$ , respectively. Also let  $A_0$  be an arbitrary operator in the unit ball of  $\{Q\}'$  such that  $A_0C \neq 0$ . We will show that  $(A_0Cs_0, t_0) = 0$ , and therefore that  $\mathcal{M} = (\{Q\}'Cs_0)^\perp$  is the desired nontrivial hyperinvariant subspace

for  $Q$ . (Note that  $0 \neq C s_0 \in \mathcal{M}$  and that  $t_0$  is orthogonal to  $\mathcal{M}$ .) We may suppose, without loss of generality, that the sequence  $\{D_m\}$  lies in the unit ball of  $\{Q\}'$ . Define the doubly indexed sequence  $\{A_{m,k}\}_{m,k \in \mathbb{N}}$  by  $A_{m,k} = A_0 D_m$ ,  $m, k \in \mathbb{N}$ . Then, from Theorem 1.3, we know that

$$(6) \quad |(A_0 D_m s_k, t_k)| < \beta_k, \quad m, k \in \mathbb{N}.$$

Now let  $\eta > 0$  be given and note that (since  $\{K_m\}$  tends to  $C$  in the weak operator topology) it suffices to find  $M_\eta > 0$  such that

$$(7) \quad |(A_0 K_m s_0, t_0)| \leq \eta, \quad m \geq M_\eta.$$

Choose  $K > 0$  such that for  $k \geq K$ ,  $\beta_k < \eta/2$ , and, by (1), choose  $M_\eta > 0$  such that

$$(8) \quad \|D_m - K_m\| < \eta / \{2 \|A_0\| (\sup_k \|s_k\| \|t_k\|)\}, \quad m \geq M_\eta.$$

Then, via (6) and (8),

$$(9) \quad \begin{aligned} |(A_0 K_m s_k, t_k)| &\leq |(A_0 D_m s_k, t_k)| \\ &+ |(A_0 (K_m - D_m) s_k, t_k)| < \eta, \quad m \geq M_\eta, k \geq K. \end{aligned}$$

Fix an arbitrary  $m_0 \geq M_\eta$ , and note that since  $\{s_k\}$  tends weakly to  $s_0$  and  $A_0 K_{m_0}$  is compact, we obtain

$$(10) \quad \lim_k \|A_0 K_{m_0} s_k - A_0 K_{m_0} s_0\| = 0.$$

Moreover, since  $\{t_k\}$  tends weakly to  $t_0$ , we get from (9), (10), and a short calculation, that

$$|(A_0 K_{m_0} s_0, t_0)| = \lim_k |(A_0 K_{m_0} s_k, t_k)| \leq \eta, \quad m_0 \geq M_\eta,$$

which establishes (7) and completes the proof.  $\square$

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The first and second authors were supported by KOSEF 2000-1-10100-002-3. The third author gratefully acknowledges the support of the National Science Foundation.

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