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NEW PROBLEMS OF PATTERN AVOIDANCE

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Let $\Sigma_k := \{0, 1, \dots, k-1\}$ for an integer $k \geq 2$. Define $\sigma(a) = (a+1) \bmod k$ for $a \in \Sigma_k$. In this paper we consider several new pattern avoidance problems, of which the following is a typical example: what is the smallest k for which one can simultaneously avoid the patterns xx and $x\sigma(x)$ over Σ_k ?

1 Introduction and definitions

Pattern avoidance problems have long been studied in formal language theory, and have interesting applications to group theory, universal algebra, and other areas. For example, Axel Thue^{6,2} constructed an infinite squarefree word over $\{0, 1, 2\}$; i.e., a word that contains no subword of the form xx , where x is a nonempty word.

Eventually, generalizations of Thue's problem were considered. Erdős, for example, suggested trying to find infinite words containing no subword of the form xy , where y is a permutation of the letters of x . Such words are now sometimes called "abelian squarefree"³. For other papers on pattern avoidance, the reader can fruitfully consult, for example, ^{1,5,4}.

In this paper, we consider some new generalizations of Thue's problem. We start with some notation. Let Σ, Γ be finite alphabets. A *morphism* is a map $h: \Gamma^* \rightarrow \Sigma^*$ such that $h(xy) = h(x)h(y)$ for all $x, y \in \Gamma^*$. We let Σ^ω denote the set of all one-sided infinite words over Σ , and we let $\Sigma^\infty = \Sigma^* \cup \Sigma^\omega$. If $x \in \Sigma^+$, then by x^ω we mean the one-sided infinite word $xxx\dots$.

If there exist words $x, y \in \Sigma^*$, $w, z \in \Sigma^\infty$ such that $w = xyz$, then we say y is a finite *subword* of w . Suppose we are given a finite or infinite subset $P \subseteq \Sigma^*$. Then we say a word $w \in \Sigma^\infty$ *avoids* P if we cannot write $w = xyz$ such that $y \in P$. We say P is *avoidable* over Σ if it is possible to construct an infinite word $w \in \Sigma^\omega$ which avoids P .

Sometimes we employ a common abuse of notation. For example, instead of saying that the infinite word w avoids $\{xx : x \in \Sigma^+\}$, we will instead simply say that w *avoids the pattern* xx . When we use this formulation, we always assume the strings in the pattern are nonempty.

We define $\Sigma_k = \{0, 1, 2, \dots, k-1\}$ for some integer $k \geq 2$, and we define the morphism $\sigma_k(a) = (a+1) \bmod k$. If the subscript k is clear from the context, we omit it. In this paper, we consider avoiding patterns of the form $x\sigma^i(x)$.

We use two notational conventions that may be somewhat confusing. First, we think of the elements of Σ_k as residue class representatives so that, for example, -1 and 2 denote the same element of Σ_3 . Second, since we allow negative numbers in words, we sometimes use the notation $(a_1, a_2, a_3, \dots, a_n)$ to denote the word $a_1 a_2 a_3 \dots a_n$. Thus, for example, 012 and $(0, -2, -1)$ denote the same element of

Σ_3^* .

Some of the infinite words we construct arise from iterated morphisms. Call a morphism $h: \Gamma^* \rightarrow \Sigma^*$ *non-erasing* if $h(a) \neq \epsilon$ for all $a \in \Gamma$. Let $h: \Sigma^* \rightarrow \Sigma^*$ be a non-erasing morphism, and let $a \in \Sigma$ be a letter such that $h(a) = ax$. Then we define $h^\omega(a) = axh(x)h^2(x)h^3(x)\dots$. Note that $h^\omega(a)$ is a fixed point of the map h extended to Σ^ω .

2 Avoiding $x\sigma(x)$

It is clear that over $\Sigma_2 = \{0, 1\}$, there are only two infinite words avoiding the pattern $x\sigma(x)$, namely 0^ω and 1^ω . However, we have the following result:

Theorem 1 *Over Σ_k for $k \geq 3$, there are uncountably many infinite words avoiding $x\sigma(x)$.*

Proof. Define $a_1 = 1$, and set $a_{i+1} = a_i + 1$ or $a_i + 2$, according to choice. Then

$$w = \prod_{i \geq 1} ((-i) \bmod 3)^{a_i} = 2^{a_1} 1^{a_2} 0^{a_3} 2^{a_4} 1^{a_5} 0^{a_6} \dots$$

avoids the pattern $x\sigma(x)$, and there are uncountably many such words. ■

3 Avoiding $xx, x\sigma(x), \dots, x\sigma^j(x)$ simultaneously

The following theorem constitutes our main result. It characterizes, for each integer $j \geq 0$, the smallest integer k for which we can avoid the $j + 1$ patterns $xx, x\sigma(x), \dots, x\sigma^j(x)$ simultaneously over $\Sigma_k = \{0, 1, \dots, k - 1\}$.

Theorem 2

- One can avoid the pattern xx over Σ_3 , and 3 is best possible.
- One can avoid the patterns xx and $x\sigma(x)$ simultaneously over Σ_5 , and 5 is best possible.
- One can avoid the patterns $xx, x\sigma(x), x\sigma^2(x)$ simultaneously over Σ_5 , and 5 is best possible.
- One can avoid the patterns $xx, x\sigma(x), x\sigma^2(x), x\sigma^3(x)$ simultaneously over Σ_6 , and 6 is best possible.
- For $j \geq 4$, one can avoid the $j + 1$ patterns $xx, x\sigma(x), \dots, x\sigma^j(x)$ simultaneously over Σ_{j+4} , and $j + 4$ is best possible.

Remark. Our proofs of these facts are of two different types. First, in order to show that it is possible to avoid a certain set of patterns over Σ_k , we explicitly construct an infinite word over Σ_k having the desired property. Second, to show

that k is optimal for a certain set of patterns, we use a classical breadth-first tree traversal technique, as follows:

Suppose we wish to avoid a given set of words P over Σ_k . We maintain a queue, Q , and initialize it with the empty word ϵ . If the queue is empty, we are done. Otherwise, we take the next element w from the queue, and form k new words by appending $0, 1, \dots, k - 1$ to it. For each new word wa , we check to see whether some suffix of wa occurs in P . If it does, we discard it; otherwise we add it to the queue.

If this algorithm terminates, we have proved that it is *not* possible to avoid P over Σ_k . The resulting proof may be represented in the form of a tree, with the leaves representing minimal length prefixes that contain an occurrence of one of the patterns as a suffix.

In the particular case of the patterns we discuss in this section, two additional efficiencies are possible. First, since a word w simultaneously avoids the patterns $xx, x\sigma(x), \dots, x\sigma^j(x)$ iff $\sigma(w)$ does, we may without loss of generality consider only the words that begin with the letter 0. Second, if the last letter was a , then the next letter must be contained in the set $\{a + j + 1, \dots, a + k - 1\}$, for otherwise our word would contain a length-2 subword of the form $x\sigma^i(x)$ for $0 \leq i \leq j$. This observation significantly cuts down on the branching factor of the trees we generate.

Proof of Theorem 2. Let us start with assertion (a). As already noted, a classical result due to Thue^{6,2} shows that one can avoid the pattern xx over $\Sigma_3 = \{0, 1, 2\}$. Furthermore, it is an old and easy observation that any word of length ≥ 4 over $\Sigma_2 = \{0, 1\}$ contains an occurrence of the pattern xx . More generally, we have

Proposition 3 *Let $k \geq 2$ be an integer, and let r be an integer with $1 \leq r < k$. Then any word of length ≥ 4 over Σ_k contains an occurrence of the pattern $x\sigma^a(x)$ for some $a \not\equiv r \pmod{k}$.*

Proof. We use the tree traversal algorithm. Assume the first letter is 0; then if the next letter is $a \neq r$, we are done. Hence assume the next letter is r . Then, by a similar argument, the next letter must be $2r$, and the next $3r$. However, the word $(0, r, 2r, 3r)$ contains the pattern $x\sigma^{2r}(x)$ for $x = (0, r)$. Since $r \neq 0$, we have $2r \not\equiv r \pmod{k}$. ■

Now let us prove assertion (b) of Theorem 2. By Proposition 3 with $r = 2$, one cannot avoid the patterns xx and $x\sigma(x)$ simultaneously over Σ_3 . We also have

Proposition 4 *Every word of length ≥ 24 over Σ_4 contains an occurrence of either xx or $x\sigma(x)$.*

Proof. We use the tree traversal algorithm. The resulting tree has depth 24 and contains 233 leaves. Figure 1 below lists these leaves in breadth-first order. ■

Figure 1: Leaves of the tree giving a proof of Proposition 4.

0202	0203210202	03132110310	021020320210313	02102032021032020	031321103132103131
0213	0210203203	031321031320	021020320210310	02102032021032021	031321103132103132
0310	0210313210	031321031321	021020320210321	0210313211031320	0320210203202103203
02031	0210320213	032021032020	02103132110310	0210313211032132	032103210321103202
03131	031321102	032021032021	03132110321313	02103202102032020	03211031321103203
03203	0313210203	03211031320	03132110321310	02103202102032131	03211031321103210
021021	0313210203	03211032131	032021020320213	02103202102032132	03211031321103210
031320	0313210310	032110321310	032021020320213	02103202102032103	03211031321103210
032020	0320210202	032102032102	032021020321021	02103202102032103	03211031321103210
032132	0320210313	032102032102	03211031321020	032110313210210	03211031321103210
032103	0320210310	032102032103	03211031321021	032110313210210	03211031321103210
0203203	0320210321	0203202102031	03211031321032	032110313210321	03211031321103210
0210202	032110310	0203202103203	0321020321021	032110313210321	03211031321103210
0210310	032110320	0203210203203	0203202102032020	032110313210321	03211031321103210
0210321	02032021021	0210203210202	0203202102032021	032110313210321	03211031321103210
0210322	02032102031	0210203210203	0203202102032131	032110313210321	03211031321103210
0320213	02102032102	021031321102	0203202102032132	032110313210321	03211031321103210
0321313	02102032102	021031321102	0203202102032103	032110313210321	03211031321103210
0321021	02102032102	021031321102	0210203202102031	032110313210321	03211031321103210
02032020	02102032102	021031321102	0210203202102032	032110313210321	03211031321103210
02032132	02102032103	031321103131	0210203202102032	032110313210321	03211031321103210
02032103	02103132132	031321103203	0210203202103203	032110313210321	03211031321103210
02102031	03132103131	031321103210	0210203202103203	032110313210321	03211031321103210
02103131	03202102031	0320210203203	021031321103210	032110313210321	03211031321103210
02103203	03202103203	0321020320213	021031321103203	032110313210321	03211031321103210
03132132	0321103131	02032021032020	021031321103210	032110313210321	03211031321103210
03213102	0321103210	02032021032021	0210320210203203	032110313210321	03211031321103210
03210202	03210203203	02032102032020	031321103132131	032110313210321	03211031321103210
020320213	02102032102	02102032021021	031321103132132	032110313210321	03211031321103210
020321021	0203202102031	0203202102031	0320210203202102	032110313210321	03211031321103210
021031320	020320210310	0313211031320	0320210203210202	032110313210321	03211031321103210
021032020	020320210321	0313211032132	032021020320210321	032110313210321	03211031321103210
031321313	020321020321	03202102032132	032110313210321	032110313210321	03211031321103210
031321021	021020320213	03202102032132	032110313210321	032110313210321	03211031321103210
031321032	02102032021	03202102032103	032110313210321	032110313210321	03211031321103210
032021021	02103132131	0321103132132	0321020320210310	032110313210321	03211031321103210
032102031	021032021021	020320210203203	0321020320210310	032110313210321	03211031321103210
0203213102	021032021031	02032021020320213	0321020320210321	032110313210321	03211031321103210
0203213103	021032021032	021020320210202	0321020320210321	032110313210321	03211031321103210

Thus we cannot avoid the patterns xx and $x\sigma(x)$ simultaneously over Σ_4 . However, we can avoid the patterns xx and $x\sigma(x)$ simultaneously over Σ_5 . This will follow from Theorem 5 below.

Next, let us prove assertion (c). As we have seen in Proposition 3 above, every word of length ≥ 4 over Σ_4 contains an occurrence of one of the patterns xx , $x\sigma(x)$, or $x\sigma^2(x)$. We now show

Theorem 5 *It is possible to simultaneously avoid the patterns xx , $x\sigma(x)$, and $x\sigma^2(x)$ over Σ_5 .*

Before starting the proof, we introduce some notation. If $\mathbf{w} = a_1a_2a_3 \dots$ is a word over Σ_k , then

$$\Delta(\mathbf{w}) := (a_2 - a_1, a_3 - a_2, a_4 - a_3, \dots),$$

where the differences are, of course, taken mod k . Similarly, we write

$$S(\mathbf{w}) = (0, a_1, a_1 + a_2, a_1 + a_2 + a_3, \dots),$$

where the sums are, of course, taken mod k . Note that $\Delta(S(\mathbf{w})) = \mathbf{w}$, and if $a_1 = 0$, then $S(\Delta(\mathbf{w})) = \mathbf{w}$. Finally, if $x = a_1 \dots a_m \in \Sigma_k^*$, we define $s_k(x) = (\sum_{1 \leq i \leq m} a_i) \bmod k$.

The following lemma relates occurrences of patterns of the form $x\sigma^a(x)$ in \mathbf{w} to other, easier-to-study patterns in $\Delta(\mathbf{w})$.

Lemma 6 *Let $w \in \Sigma_k^\infty$, and let $a \in \Sigma_k$. Then w avoids the pattern $x\sigma^a(x)$ iff $\Delta(w)$ avoids $\{ycy : y \in \Sigma_k^*, c \in \Sigma_k, \text{ and } s_k(yc) = a\}$.*

Proof. Suppose w contains an occurrence of the pattern $x\sigma^a(x)$. Write $x = b_1b_2 \dots b_i$. Then

$$w = w'b_1b_2 \dots b_i\sigma^a(b_1) \dots \sigma^a(b_i) \dots$$

Thus

$$\Delta(w) = \Delta(w'b_1), (b_2 - b_1, \dots, b_i - b_{i-1}, \sigma^a(b_1) - b_i, b_2 - b_1, \dots, b_i - b_{i-1}, \dots),$$

and hence contains ycy with

$$y = (b_2 - b_1, \dots, b_i - b_{i-1}), \quad c = \sigma^a(b_1) - b_i.$$

Also

$$\begin{aligned} s_k(yc) &= (b_2 - b_1) + \dots + (b_i - b_{i-1}) + \sigma^a(b_1) - b_i \\ &= (b_i - b_1) + (a + b_1 - b_i) \\ &= a. \end{aligned}$$

Now suppose $\Delta(w)$ contains a subword ycy with $y \in \Sigma_k^*$, $c \in \Sigma_k$, and $s_k(yc) = a$. Then $\Delta(w) = xycyz$ for some $x = b_1b_2 \dots b_j$ and $y = d_1d_2 \dots d_i$. Then

$$\Delta(w) = b_1b_2 \dots b_jd_1d_2 \dots d_id_1d_2 \dots d_i \dots$$

Then if e is the first letter of w , we have

$$\begin{aligned} w &= (e, e + b_1, e + b_1 + b_2, \dots, e + b_1 + b_2 + \dots + b_j, e + f + d_1, e + f + d_1 + d_2, \dots \\ &\quad e + f + d_1 + d_2 + \dots + d_i, e + f + g + c, e + f + g + c + d_1, \\ &\quad e + f + g + c + d_1 + d_2, \dots, e + f + g + c + d_1 + d_2 + \dots + d_i, \dots) \end{aligned}$$

where $f := b_1 + b_2 + \dots + b_j$ and $g := d_1 + d_2 + \dots + d_i$. It follows that w contains an occurrence of $x\sigma^a(x)$, where $x = (e + f, e + f + d_1, \dots, e + f + d_1 + d_2 + \dots + d_i)$ and $a = g + c$. But $g + c = s_k(d_1d_2 \dots d_i) = s_k(yc)$. ■

Now to prove Theorem 5, it suffices to construct an infinite word \mathbf{v} where \mathbf{v} avoids

$$P_2 := \{ycy : y \in \Sigma_5^*, c \in \Sigma_5, \text{ and } s_5(yc) \in \{0, 1, 2\}\}.$$

For then we could set $\mathbf{w} = S(\mathbf{v})$, and by Lemma 6, \mathbf{w} avoids the patterns xx , $x\sigma(x)$, and $x\sigma^2(x)$ over Σ_5 . We construct such a \mathbf{v} using the following theorem.

Theorem 7 *Let h be the morphism over $\{3, 4\}$ defined by $h(4) = 4433$ and $h(3) = 44433$. Let w be a finite word. If w avoids P_2 , then $h(w)$ avoids P_2 .*

Proof. We prove the contrapositive.

Suppose $h(w)$ contains an occurrence of the pattern ycy with $y \in \Sigma_5^*$, $c \in \Sigma_5$, and $s_5(yc) \in \{0, 1, 2\}$. Write $h(w) = z_1ycyz_2$. Without loss of generality, we may assume that $|z_1|$ is as small as possible, or, in other words, that the occurrence of ycy we are dealing with lies as far to the left as possible within $h(w)$.

Also note that $s_5(i) = s_5(h(i))$ for $i \in \{3, 4\}$, and so it follows that $s_5(w) = s_5(h(w))$ for all finite strings $w \in \{3, 4\}^*$.

We claim that if ycy is a subword of $h(w)$ for some w such that y, c obey the given conditions, then $|y| \geq 5$. Table 1 below suffices to prove this.

The explanation of the table is as follows. We examine all possible subwords yc of length ≤ 5 that occur in $\{4433, 44433\}^*$. For each such subword, it suffices to show that either $s_5(yc) \notin \{0, 1, 2\}$, or ycy cannot occur as a subword of $h(w)$ for any $w \in \{3, 4\}^*$. For this last check, it suffices to observe that if ycy contains any of the subwords 434, 343, 333, or 4444, then it cannot occur as a subword of $h(w)$.

Table 1: Proof that $|y| \geq 5$.

$ y $	yc	$s_5(yc)$	ycy	ycy contains forbidden subword	if so, which one
0	3	3	3	no	
	4	4	4	no	
1	33	1	333	yes	333
	34	2	343	yes	343
	43	2	434	yes	434
	44	3	444	no	
2	334	0	33433	yes	343
	344	1	34434	yes	434
	433	0	43343	yes	343
	443	1	44344	yes	434
	444	2	44444	yes	4444
3	3344	4	3344334	no	
	3443	4	3443344	no	
	3444	0	3444344	yes	434
	4334	4	4334433	no	
	4433	4	4433443	no	
	4443	0	4443444	yes	434
4	33443	2	334433344	yes	333
	33444	3	334443344	no	
	34433	2	344333443	yes	333
	34443	3	344433444	no	
	43344	3	433444334	no	
	44334	3	443344433	no	
	44433	3	444334443	no	

It follows that $|y| \geq 5$. There are now several cases to consider.

Case 1: y starts with 33. Then $ycy = 33 \dots c 33 \dots$. Since $h(w) \in \{4433, 44433\}^*$, we must have $c = 4$. Also, y must end with 4, and furthermore the letter immediately preceding the occurrence of ycy in $h(w)$ must be 4. We can therefore write $y = 33t4$ for some string t , and observe that $4 33t4 4 33t4 = 4y4y$ is a subword of $h(w)$. Now let $y' = 433t$, and note that $y'4y'$ is a subword of $h(w)$. But $s_5(y'4) = s_5(433t4) = s_5(33t44) = s_5(y4) \in \{0, 1, 2\}$, so $y'4y' \in P_2$, contradicting our assumption that ycy was the leftmost such occurrence in $h(w)$.

Case 2: y starts with 34. Then $ycy = 34 \dots c 34 \dots$, so $c = 3$. Thus $ycy = 34 \dots 3 34 \dots$, so y must end in 4, and further the letter immediately preceding the occurrence of ycy in $h(w)$ must be 3. We can therefore write $y = 34t3$ for some string t , and observe that $3 34t3 3 34t3 = 3y3y$ is a subword of $h(w)$. Now let $y' = 334t$ and note that $y'3y'$ is a subword of $h(w)$. But $s_5(y'3) = s_5(334t3) = s_5(34t33) = s_5(y3) \in \{0, 1, 2\}$, so $y'3y' \in P_2$, contradicting our assumption that ycy was the leftmost such occurrence in $h(w)$.

Case 3: y starts with 43. Then $ycy = 43 \dots c 43 \dots$, so $c = 4$, and further the letter immediately preceding the occurrence of ycy in $h(w)$ must be 4. Thus $y = 43t$. Write $t = t'b$, where $|b| = 1$. Then $y = 43t'b$. Then $4ycy = 4 43t'b 4 43t'b$ is a subword of $h(w)$. Let $y' = 443t'$. Then $y'by'$ is a subword of $h(w)$, and $s_5(y'b) = s_5(443t'b) = s_5(43t'b4) = s_5(y4) \in \{0, 1, 2\}$, so $y'by' \in P_2$, contradicting our assumption that ycy was the leftmost such occurrence in $h(w)$.

Case 4: y starts with 444. Then $ycy = 444 \dots c 444 \dots$, so $c = 3$, and further, y ends with 3. Since $|y| \geq 5$, we can write $y = 444t3$ for some string t . It follows that $y3y3 = 444t3 3 444t3 3$ is a subword of $h(w)$. Hence there exists a string u such that $h(3u) = y3$, and $3u3u$ is a subword of w . We have $s_5(u3) = s_5(3u) = s_5(y3) \in \{0, 1, 2\}$, so $u3u$ is an occurrence of a string of P_2 in w , as desired.

Case 5: y starts with 443. There are two subcases to consider:

Case 5a: $c = 3$. Then the last two characters of y must be 43. We have $ycy = 443 \dots 43 3 443 \dots 43$. Then $y3y3$ is a subword of $h(w)$, and there must exist u such that $h(4u) = y3$ and $u4u$ is a subword of w . Then $s_5(u4) = s_5(4u) = s_5(y3) \in \{0, 1, 2\}$, so $u4u$ is an occurrence of a string of P_2 in w , as desired.

Case 5b: $c = 4$. Then $ycy = 443 \dots 4 443 \dots$, so the last three characters of y must be 433. Since $|y| \geq 5$, we must have $y = 4433 \dots 433$. Write $y = 4433y'$. Then $ycy = 4433 y' 44433 y'$ is a subword of $h(w)$ and there exists u such that $h(u) = y'$. Then $h(u3u) = y' 44433 y'$. Now $s_5(u3) = s_5(h(u3)) = s_5(y'44433) = s_5(4433y'4) = s_5(y4)$, so $u3u$ is an occurrence of a string of P_2 in w , as desired.

This completes the proof of Theorem 7. ■

Proof of Theorem 5. Define

$$v = h^\omega(4) = 443344334443344433 \dots$$

We claim v avoids P_2 . This follows because the word w avoids P_2 , and by Theorem 7, if w avoids P_2 then so does $h(w)$. Now consider $S(v) = 0431432032103104314\dots$. From Lemma 6, it follows that $S(v)$ avoids the patterns xx , $x\sigma(x)$, and $x\sigma^2(x)$. This completes the proof of Theorem 5, and hence assertion (c) of Theorem 2.

We now turn to assertion (d) of Theorem 2. From Proposition 4 with $r = 4$ we know any word of length ≥ 4 over Σ_5 contains an occurrence of one of the patterns xx , $x\sigma(x)$, $x\sigma^2(x)$, or $x\sigma^3(x)$. The methods of Theorem 7 and Lemma 6 lead immediately to

Theorem 8 *It is possible to simultaneously avoid the patterns xx , $x\sigma(x)$, $x\sigma^2(x)$, and $x\sigma^3(x)$ over Σ_6 .*

Proof. We construct an infinite word w over Σ_6 such that w simultaneously avoids the patterns xx , $x\sigma(x)$, $x\sigma^2(x)$, and $x\sigma^3(x)$. Let g be the morphism over $\{4, 5\}$ defined by $g(5) = 55544$ and $g(4) = 555544$. We claim that $w = S(g^\omega(5))$ simultaneously avoids the patterns xx , $x\sigma(x)$, $x\sigma^2(x)$, and $x\sigma^3(x)$. The proof follows exactly the same plan as that of Theorem 7. We omit it here. ■

Remark. We note that the morphisms used in the proof of Theorem 7 and Theorem 8 do not generalize to any other j . For example, if we were to define h analogously for $j = 4$, we would have $h(6) = 666655$ and $h(5) = 6666555$. By inspection, we see that $h(6) = 6666555$ contains ycy where $y = 66$ and $c = 6$. Hence $s_7(yc) = 4 = j$ and so $S(h(6))$ does not avoid the pattern $x\sigma^4(x)$.

Finally, we turn to assertion (e). First, we show it is not possible to avoid the patterns xx , $x\sigma(x)$, \dots , $x\sigma^4(x)$ on 7 letters. Here the corresponding tree has 215 leaves, and the longest leaf has length 36. See Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Leaves of the tree giving the proof of assertion (e)

0531	0643206432	0853106542065432	09542066431654320643210
0642	0543216431	0654206543165431	05543165432064321643216
0643	0642106420	06431065432065431	05321064210653106542065431
06320	0642106421	06321064210653106	0643216432106321064210654
06420	0642106632	064321643210632106	064210653106542065431653
06532	0653106631	06421065310664205	065310654206543165432063
064310	0653106632	06531065420654310	065420654316543206432165
064216	0653106643	06542065431654321	065431654320643216432106
065316	0654206542	06543165432064320	0632106421065310654206542
064221	0654316542	06321064210653106	0643216432106321064210654
065432	06321064216	064210653106642054	06431065432064316542
0632165	06432164320	06531065420654316	06431065432064316542
0643184	06421066316	065420654316543206	064316543206432164321064
0643206	06431066421	065431654320643210	0632106421065310654206542
0643210	06542065432	065431654320643210	0643216432106321064210653
0653105	06543165431	0632106421065310653	06421065310654206543165431
0654206	063210642106	064210653106642054	065310654206543165432063
0654310	0643216432106	06531065420654316	065420654316543206432165
06321642	064210663106	065420654316543206	0632106421065310654206542
06321643	065310664206	0654316543206432106	0643216432106321064210654
06321054	065420654310	0654316543206432106	06431065432064316542
06321065	065431654321	0632106421065310653	065420654316543206432165
06431653	0632106421064	064210653106642054	065431654320643216432106
06431654	0643216432106	06531065420654316	065420654316543206432165
06432053	0642106631064	065420654316543206	0632106421065310654206542
06432165	0653106642064	0654316543206432106	0643216432106321064210653
06421063	0654206543164	0632106421065310653	06421065310654206543165431
06421064	0654316543206	064210653106642054	065310654206543165432063
06531064	06321064210654	06531065420654316	065420654316543206432165
06542064	064321643210654	065420654316543206	0632106421065310654206542
	064310664210654	0654316543206432106	0643216432106321064210653
	064321643210654	0632106421065310653	06421065310654206543165431
		064210653106642054	065310654206543165432063
		06531065420654316	065420654316543206432165
		065420654316543206	0632106421065310654206542
		0654316543206432106	0643216432106321064210654
		0632106421065310653	06421065310654206543165431
		064210653106642054	065310654206543165432063
		06531065420654316	065420654316543206432165
		065420654316543206	0632106421065310654206542
		0654316543206432106	0643216432106321064210654
		0632106421065310653	06421065310654206543165431
		064210653106642054	065310654206543165432063
		06531065420654316	065420654316543206432165
		065420654316543206	0632106421065310654206542
		0654316543206432106	0643216432106321064210654
		0632106421065310653	06421065310654206543165431
		064210653106642054	065310654206543165432063
		06531065420654316	065420654316543206432165
		065420654316543206	0632106421065310654206542
		0654316543206432106	0643216432106321064210654
		0632106421065310653	06421065310654206543165431
		064210653106642054	065310654206543165432063
		06531065420654316	065420654316543206432165
		065420654316543206	0632106421065310654206542
		0654316543206432106	0643216432106321064210654
		0632106421065310653	06421065310654206543165431
		064210653106642054	065310654206543165432063
		06531065420654316	065420654316543206432165
		065420654316543206	0632106421065310654206542
		0654316543206432106	0643216432106321064210654
		0632106421065310653	06421065310654206543165431
		064210653106642054	065310654206543165432063
		06531065420654316	065420654316543206432165
		065420654316543206	0632106421065310654206542
		0654316543206432106	0643216432106321064210654
		0632106421065310653	06421065310654206543165431
		064210653106642054	065310654206543165432063
		06531065420654316	065420654316543206432165
		065420654316543206	0632106421065310654206542
		0654316543206432106	0643216432106321064210654
		0632106421065310653	06421065310654206543165431
		064210653106642054	065310654206543165432063
		06531065420654316	065420654316543206432165
		065420654316543206	0632106421065310654206542
		0654316543206432106	0643216432106321064210654
		0632106421065310653	06421065310654206543165431
		064210653106642054	065310654206543165432063
		06531065420654316	065420654316543206432165
		065420654316543206	0632106421065310654206542
		0654316543206432106	0643216432106321064210654
		0632106421065310653	06421065310654206543165431
		064210653106642054	065310654206543165432063
		06531065420654316	065420654316543206432165
		065420654316543206	0632106421065310654206542
		0654316543206432106	0643216432106321064210654
		0632106421065310653	06421065310654206543165431
		064210653106642054	065310654206543165432063
		06531065420654316	065420654316543206432165
		065420654316543206	0632106421065310654206542
		0654316543206432106	0643216432106321064210654
		0632106421065310653	06421065310654206543165431
		064210653106642054	065310654206543165432063
		06531065420654316	065420654316543206432165
		065420654316543206	0632106421065310654206542
		0654316543206432106	0643216432106321064210654
		0632106421065310653	06421065310654206543165431
		064210653106642054	065310654206543165432063
		06531065420654316	065420654316543206432165
		065420654316543206	0632106421065310654206542
		0654316543206432106	0643216432106321064210654
		0632106421065310653	06421065310654206543165431
		064210653106642054	065310654206543165432063
		06531065420654316	065420654316543206432165
		065420654316543206	0632106421065310654206542
		0654316543206432106	0643216432106321064210654
		0632106421065310653	06421065310654206543165431
		064210653106642054	065310654206543165432063
		06531065420654316	065420654316543206432165
		065420654316543206	0632106421065310654206542
		0654316543206432106	0643216432106321064210654
		0632106421065310653	06421065310654206543165431
		064210653106642054	065310654206543165432063
		06531065420654316	065420654316543206432165
		065420654316543206	0632106421065310654206542
		0654316543206432106	0643216432106321064210654
		0632106421065310653	06421065310654206543165431
		064210653106642054	065310654206543165432063
		06531065420654316	065420654316543206432165
		065420654316543206	0632106421065310654206542
		0654316543206432106	0643216432106321064210654
		0632106421065310653	06421065310654206543165431
		064210653106642054	065310654206543165432063
		06531065420654316	065420654316543206432165
		065420654316543206	0632106421065310654206542
		0654316543206432106	0643216432106321064210654
		0632106421065310653	06421065310654206543165431
		064210653106642054	065310654206543165432063
		06531065420654316	065420654316543206432165
		065420654316543206	0632106421065310654206542
		0654316543206432106	0643216432106321064210654
		0632106421065310653	06421065310654206543165431
		064210653106642054	065310654206543165432063
		06531065420654316	065420654316543206432165
		065420654316543206	0632106421065310654206542
		0654316543206432106	0643216432106321064210654
		0632106421065310653	06421065310654206543165431
		064210653106642054	065310654206543165432063
		06531065420654316	065420654316543206432165
		065420654316543206	0632106421065310654206542
		0654316543206432106	0643216432106321064210654
		0632106421065310653	06421065310654206543165431
		064210653106642054	065310654206543165432063
		06531065420654316	065420654316543206432165
		065420654316543206	0632106421065310654206542
		0654316543206432106	0643216432106321064210654
		0632106421065310653	06421065310654206543165431
		064210653106642054	065310654206543165432063
		06531065420654316	065420654316543206432165
		065420654316543206	0632106421065310654206542
		0654316543206432106	0643216432106321064210654
		0632106421065310653	06421065310654206543165431
		064210653106642054	065310654206543165432063
		06531065420654316	065420654316543206432165
		065420654316543206	0632106421065310654206542
		0654316543206432106	0643216432106321064210654
		0632106421065310653	06421065310654206543165431
		064210653106642054	065310654206543165432063
		06531065420654316	065420654316543206432165
		065420654316543206	0632106421065310654206542
		065	

0234567	0245678AB	01246789AB	01235789ABDE
0124679	0234579AC	01235789AC	01234689ABCE
0123579	0234568AC	01234689AC	01234689ABCD
0123467	0135678AB	0245678ACDF	

We now show it is possible to simultaneously avoid the patterns xx , $x\sigma(x)$, \dots , $x\sigma^j(x)$ on Σ_{j+4} for $j \geq 4$. Actually, we prove a more general result from which this result will follow.

Theorem 10 Let $k \geq 4$ be an integer, and let $A \subset \Sigma_k$ such that $\text{Card } A \leq k - 3$. Then it is possible to simultaneously avoid the patterns $\{x\sigma^a(x) : a \in A\}$ over Σ_k .

Proof. Once again, the idea is to consider the first differences of words, modulo k . Suppose we can construct a word w over Σ_k such that w avoids both (i) the pattern ycy , where $|y| \geq 1$ and $|c| = 1$, and (ii) the letters $a \in A$. Then it follows from Lemma 6 that $S(w)$ avoids the pattern $x\sigma^a(x)$.

Lemma 11 Let $w = a_1a_2a_3 \dots$ be any squarefree word over Σ_3 . Then the word $a_1a_1a_2a_2a_3a_3 \dots$ avoids the pattern ycy for $y \in \Sigma_3^+$ and $c \in \Sigma_3$.

Proof. Suppose $y = b_1b_2 \dots b_k$, and the pattern ycy occurs in $z = a_1a_1a_2a_2a_3a_3 \dots$. There are three cases to consider, depending on $|y|$ and where y starts in z .

Case 1: $|y|$ is even and y starts with $a_i a_i$. Let $k = 2j$. Then we have

$$\begin{array}{cccccccc} b_1 & b_2 & \dots & b_{2j} & c & b_1 & b_2 & \dots & b_{2j} \\ & & & & = & & & & \\ a_i & a_i & \dots & a_{i+j-1} & a_{i+j} & a_{i+j} & a_{i+j+1} & \dots & a_{i+2j} \end{array}$$

and so $a_{i+j} = b_1 = a_i = b_2 = a_{i+j+1}$. It follows that w contains the square $a_{i+j}a_{i+j+1}$, a contradiction.

Case 2: $|y|$ is even and y starts with $a_i a_{i+1}$. Let $k = 2j$. Then we have

$$\begin{array}{cccccccc} b_1 & b_2 & \dots & b_{2j} & c & b_1 & b_2 & \dots & b_{2j} \\ & & & & = & & & & \\ a_i & a_{i+1} & \dots & a_{i+j} & a_{i+j} & a_{i+j+1} & a_{i+j+1} & \dots & a_{i+2j} \end{array}$$

and so $a_i = b_1 = a_{i+j+1} = b_2 = a_{i+1}$. It follows that w contains the square $a_i a_{i+1}$, a contradiction.

Case 3: $|y|$ is odd. Let $k = 2j + 1$. Then either

$$\begin{array}{cccccccc} b_1 & b_2 & \dots & b_{2j} & b_{2j+1} & c & b_1 & b_2 & \dots & b_{2j} & b_{2j+1} \\ & & & & & = & & & & & \\ a_i & a_i & \dots & a_{i+j-1} & a_{i+j} & a_{i+j} & a_{i+j+1} & a_{i+j+1} & \dots & a_{i+2j} & a_{i+2j+1} \end{array}$$

or

$$\begin{array}{cccccccc} b_1 & b_2 & \dots & b_{2j} & b_{2j+1} & c & b_1 & b_2 & \dots & b_{2j} & b_{2j+1} \\ & & & & & = & & & & & \\ a_i & a_{i+1} & \dots & a_{i+j} & a_{i+j} & a_{i+j+1} & a_{i+j+1} & a_{i+j+2} & \dots & a_{i+2j+1} & a_{i+2j+1} \end{array}$$

In either case we find

$$\begin{array}{l} a_i = b_1 = a_{i+j+1} \\ a_{i+1} = b_3 = a_{i+j+2} \\ \vdots \\ a_{i+j} = b_{2j+1} = a_{i+2j+1} \end{array}$$

It follows that $a_i a_{i+1} \dots a_{i+j} = a_{i+j+1} a_{i+j+2} \dots a_{i+2j+1}$ and so w contains the square $a_i a_{i+1} \dots a_{i+2j+1}$, a contradiction. The proof of the Lemma is complete. ■

Remark. One cannot avoid the pattern ycy , with $|y| \geq 1$ and $|c| = 1$, over an alphabet of 2 letters. As the tree traversal algorithm shows, any word of length ≥ 7 over $\{0, 1\}$ contains an occurrence of ycy .

Now we can complete the proof of Theorem 10. Let x be any squarefree word over $\{0, 1, 2\}$. Since $\text{Card } A = k - 3$, we have $\Sigma_k - A = \{d, e, f\}$ for some distinct integers $0 \leq d, e, f < k$.

Consider the morphism $\varphi : \Sigma_{j+4}^* \rightarrow \Sigma_{j+4}^*$ defined as follows:

$$\begin{array}{l} 0 \rightarrow dd \\ 1 \rightarrow ee \\ 2 \rightarrow ff \end{array}$$

We claim $S(\varphi(x))$ avoids the patterns xx , $x\sigma(x)$, \dots , $x\sigma^j(x)$.

Let $v = S(\varphi(x))$. Then $\Delta(v) = \varphi(x)$ clearly avoids ycy by Lemma 11, and it also avoids all the letters in A by construction. Then by Lemma 6, v avoids the patterns $x\sigma^a(x)$ for $a \in A$. ■

As a consequence we get

Corollary 12 It is possible to simultaneously avoid the patterns xx , $x\sigma(x)$, \dots , $x\sigma^j(x)$ on Σ_{j+4} for $j \geq 4$.

The proof of Theorem 2 is now complete. ■

4 Even more results

One may also consider the problem of avoiding other sets of patterns of the form $x\sigma^a(x)$. In this section, we let $j \geq 1$ be an integer, and consider avoiding the $2j + 1$ patterns $x\sigma^{-j}(x)$, \dots , $x\sigma^{-1}(x)$, xx , $x\sigma(x)$, \dots , $x\sigma^j(x)$ simultaneously over the alphabet Σ_k .

Theorem 13 For $j \geq 1$, one can simultaneously avoid the patterns $x\sigma^{-j}(x)$, \dots , $x\sigma^{-1}(x)$, xx , $x\sigma(x)$, \dots , $x\sigma^j(x)$ over Σ_{2j+4} , and this is best possible.

Proof.

By Theorem 10 with $A = \{-j, 1-j, \dots, -1, 0, 1, 2, \dots, j\}$, we see that we can simultaneously avoid the patterns $x\sigma^{-j}(x), \dots, x\sigma^{-1}(x), xx, x\sigma(x), \dots, x\sigma^j(x)$ over Σ_{2j+4} .

It follows from Proposition 3 that one cannot avoid $x\sigma^{-j}(x), \dots, x\sigma^{-1}(x), xx, x\sigma(x), \dots, x\sigma^j(x)$ over Σ_{2j+2} or smaller alphabet.

To prove that one cannot simultaneously avoid the patterns $x\sigma^{-j}(x), \dots, x\sigma^{-1}(x), xx, x\sigma(x), \dots, x\sigma^j(x)$ over Σ_{2j+3} , we use the tree traversal algorithm. Then every word of length ≥ 8 over Σ_{2j+3} contains an occurrence of $x\sigma^l(x)$ for some l with $-j \leq l \leq j$. Figure 4 below gives the output of the tree traversal algorithm, showing that there are 24 leaves. Here $t = j + 1$. ■

Figure 4: Leaves of the tree giving a proof of Theorem 13.

(0, -t, -2t, -3t)	(0, -t, -2t, -t, 0, t)	(0, -t, -2t, -t, 0, -t, -2t, -3t)
(0, -t, 0, -t)	(0, -t, 0, t, 0, t)	(0, -t, -2t, -t, 0, -t, -2t, -t)
(0, t, 0, t)	(0, t, 0, -t, 0, -t)	(0, -t, 0, t, 0, -t, 0, -t)
(0, t, 2t, 3t)	(0, t, 2t, t, 0, -t)	(0, -t, 0, t, 0, -t, 0, t)
(0, -t, -2t, -t, -2t)	(0, -t, -2t, -t, 0, -t, 0)	(0, t, 0, -t, 0, t, 0, -t)
(0, -t, 0, t, 2t)	(0, -t, 0, t, 0, -t, -2t)	(0, t, 0, -t, 0, t, 0, t)
(0, t, 0, -t, -2t)	(0, t, 0, -t, 0, t, 2t)	(0, t, 2t, t, 0, t, 2t, t)
(0, t, 2t, t, 2t)	(0, t, 2t, t, 0, t, 0)	(0, t, 2t, t, 0, t, 2t, 3t)

5 Avoiding $x\sigma^i(x)$ for all i

Generalizing the results of the previous section, we may ask if it is possible to avoid the patterns $x\sigma^i(x)$ for all i . Unfortunately, this is clearly impossible, for if a word z begins with ij , then it contains a subword of the form $i\sigma^{j-i}(i)$.

However, we can relax our conditions for avoidance, as follows: we say an infinite word *weakly avoids* the patterns $x\sigma^i(x)$ if it contains no subwords of the form $x\sigma^i(x)$ with $|x| \geq 2$. (In contrast, our previous notion of avoidability we will call *strong*.)

Proposition 14 *Over Σ_2 , every word of length ≥ 8 contains a subword of the form $x\sigma^i(x)$ for some $i \geq 0$, with $|x| \geq 2$.*

Proof. Our simple tree traversal algorithm proves this. The tree generated has 24 leaves, and the leaves are given in Figure 5. ■

Figure 5: Leaves of the tree giving a proof of Proposition 14.

0000	000101	00010000
0011	001001	00010001
0101	010000	00100010
0110	011100	00100011

00011	0001001	01000100
00101	0010000	01000101
01001	0100011	01110110
01111	0111010	01110111

However, it is possible to weakly avoid the patterns $x\sigma^i(x)$ for all $i \geq 0$ over Σ_3 . Let w be any squarefree word over $\{0, 1, 2\}$, and consider the morphism f which maps

$$\begin{aligned} 0 &\rightarrow 00 \\ 1 &\rightarrow 10 \\ 2 &\rightarrow 20. \end{aligned}$$

Theorem 15 *The infinite word $f(w)$ weakly avoids the patterns $x\sigma^i(x)$ for all $i \geq 0$.*

Proof. Let $w = c_1c_2c_3 \dots$, and $f(w)$ contains a subword of the form $z = x\sigma^i(x)$ for some i and $|x| \geq 2$. There are two cases, depending on $|x| \pmod 2$.

Case 1: $|x| \equiv 0 \pmod 2$. In this case, there are two possibilities, depending where x starts in $f(w)$:

$$\begin{aligned} z &= \overbrace{d_1 0 d_2 0 \dots d_j 0}^x \mid \overbrace{d_{j+1} 0 \dots d_{2j} 0}^{\sigma^i(x)} \\ z &= 0 d_1 0 d_2 \dots 0 d_j \mid 0 d_{j+1} \dots 0 d_{2j} \end{aligned}$$

where $d_t = c_{t+k}$ for some integer $k \geq 0$. Comparing the second symbol in the first case, or the first symbol in the second case, we see that if $z = x\sigma^i(x)$, then $i = 0$. Hence $d_t = d_{j+t}$ for $1 \leq t \leq j$, and so $c_{k+t} = c_{k+j+t}$ for $1 \leq t \leq j$, contradicting the assumption that w was squarefree.

Case 2: $|x| \equiv 1 \pmod 2$.

$$\begin{aligned} z &= \overbrace{d_1 0 d_2 \dots}^x \mid \overbrace{0 d_j 0 \dots}^{\sigma^i(x)} \\ z &= 0 d_1 0 \dots \mid d_j 0 d_{j+1} \dots \end{aligned}$$

If $z = x\sigma^i(x)$, then, in the first case, we must have $d_1 = d_2$, and in the second $d_j = d_{j+1}$. Both correspond to a square in w , a contradiction. ■

We might also try weakly avoiding $x\sigma^i(x)$ for $0 < i < k$ over Σ_k , while simultaneously (strongly) avoiding xx .

Theorem 16 *If $k = 4$, one can, over Σ_k , simultaneously weakly avoid $x\sigma^i(x)$ for $0 < i < k$ and strongly avoid xx . Here k is best possible.*

Proof. We can weakly avoid $x\sigma^i(x)$ for $0 < i < k$ and strongly avoid xx over Σ_4 as follows: let w be any squarefree word over $\{1, 2, 3\}$, and consider the morphism f which maps

$$\begin{aligned} 1 &\rightarrow 10 \\ 2 &\rightarrow 20 \\ 3 &\rightarrow 30. \end{aligned}$$

Then it follows from the same method of the proof of Theorem 15 that $f(w)$ weakly avoids $x\sigma^i(x)$ for all i . However, it is clear from the construction that $f(w)$ has no subword of the form cc for $c \in \Sigma_4$, so $f(w)$ also strongly avoids xx .

On the other hand, the tree traversal algorithm shows that over Σ_3 , any word of length ≥ 8 has a (weak) occurrence of $x\sigma^i(x)$ with $0 < i < 3$, or a strong occurrence of xx . The tree generated has 24 leaves, and the leaves are given in Figure 6. ■

Figure 6: Leaves of the tree giving a proof of Theorem 16.

0101	010202	01020101
0120	012102	01020102
0202	020101	01210120
0210	021201	01210121
01021	0102012	02010201
01212	0121010	02010202
02012	0201021	02120210
02121	0212020	02120212

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