

# Constant sign and sign changing NLS ground states on metric graphs

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Joint work with

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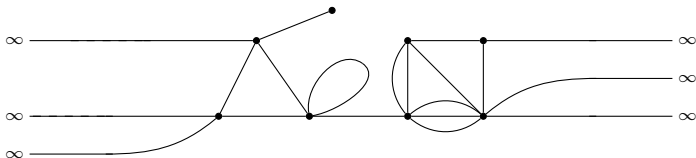
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Thanks to Damien and Enrico for the pictures

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## Metric graphs: informal definition

A **metric graph**  $\mathcal{G} = (\mathbb{V}, \mathbb{E})$  is a **connected network** made up of **edges**  $e \in \mathbb{E}$ , **glued** at **vertices**  $v \in \mathbb{V}$ , according to the topology of a graph:

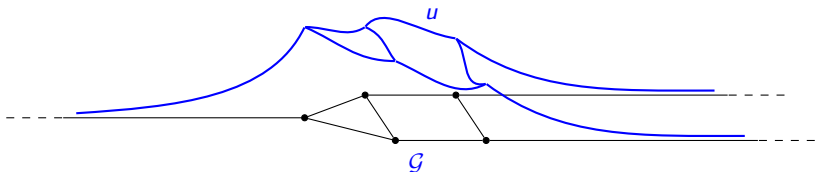


- We always assume  $\mathcal{G}$  is connected and has an at most countable number of edges,  $\deg(v) < \infty$  for every  $v \in \mathbb{V}$ ,  $\inf_{e \in \mathbb{E}} |e| > 0$ ,  $\mathbb{V}_0 \subset \mathbb{V}$  is a (possibly empty) set of degree 1 vertices.
- Any **bounded** edge  $e$  is identified with an **interval**  $[0, \ell_e]$ , any **unbounded** one with a **half-line**  $[0, +\infty)$
- With the **shortest-path** distance, we obtain a **metric space**  $\mathcal{G}$
- $u \in L^p(\mathcal{G}) \iff \begin{cases} u \in L^p(e) & \text{for every edge } e \text{ of } \mathcal{G} \\ \sum_{e \in \mathbb{E}} \|u\|_{L^p(e)}^p < +\infty \end{cases}$

The Sobolev space  $H^1(\mathcal{G})$  is defined as follows

$$u \in H^1(\mathcal{G}) \iff \begin{cases} u \in H^1(e) & \text{for every edge } e \text{ of } \mathcal{G} \\ u : \mathcal{G} \rightarrow \mathbb{R} & \text{is continuous on } \mathcal{G} \\ \sum_{e \in \mathbb{E}} \|u\|_{H^1(e)}^2 < +\infty \end{cases}$$

Here is what a typical  $H^1(\mathcal{G})$  function looks like:



# The problem

On a metric graph  $\mathcal{G}$  we consider the problem

$$\begin{cases} -u'' + \lambda u = |u|^{p-2}u & \text{on every edge } e \in \mathbb{E} & (1) \\ u \text{ is continuous} & \text{on } \mathcal{G} \\ u(v) = 0 & \text{at every vertex } v \in \mathbb{V}_0 & (2) \\ \sum_{e \succ v} u'_e(v) = 0 & \text{at every vertex } v \in \mathbb{V} \setminus \mathbb{V}_0 & (3) \end{cases}$$

where  $p > 2$ ,  $\lambda > 0$ ,

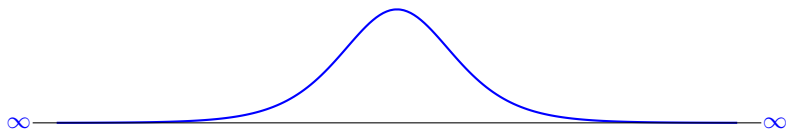
$u'_e(v)$  is the derivative away from the vertex  $v$  along the edge  $e$   
the sum  $\sum_{e \succ v}$  means that the sum is on all edges  $e$  incident at  $v$ ,  
 $\mathbb{V}_0 \subset \mathbb{V}$  is made of vertex of degree 1.

- (1) is the NLS equation,
- (2) is the Dirichlet condition,
- (3) is the Kirchhoff (or natural) condition.

Applications :

- 1) Propagation of signals in some optical fibers leads to a nonlinear Schrödinger equation (with  $p = 4$ ). The cubic term therein comes from the Kerr effect, referring to a nonlinear change in the refraction index of an optical material.
- 2) Bose-Einstein condensates
- 3) ...

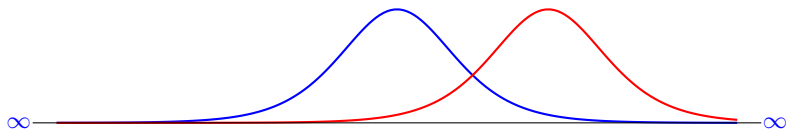
## Example 1 - Travelling solitons



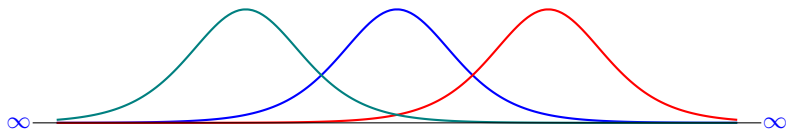
Note:

$$\phi_{\lambda}(x) = \left(\frac{p}{2}\right)^{\frac{1}{p-2}} \lambda^{\frac{1}{p-2}} \left(\cosh\left(\frac{p-2}{2}\sqrt{\lambda}x\right)\right)^{\frac{-2}{p-2}}$$

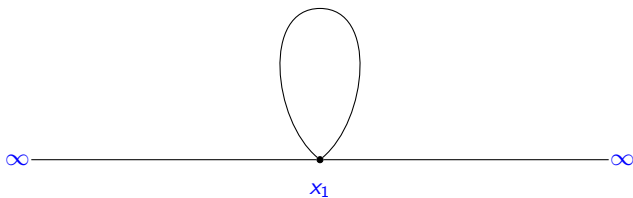
## Exemple 1 - Travelling solitons



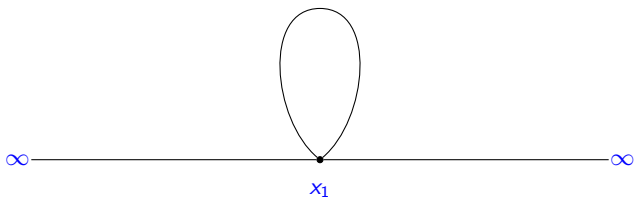
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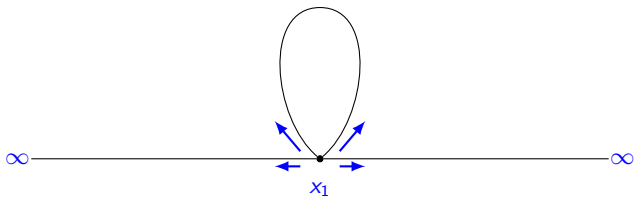
## Example 2 - The real line with two points glued together



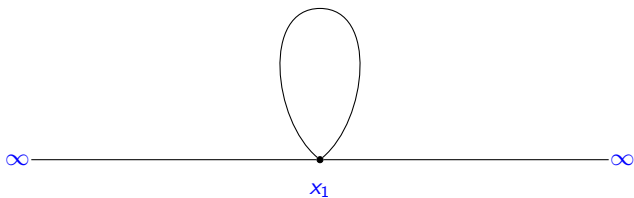
## Example 2 - The real line with two points glued together



One solution is “easy” 😊 ,



$$\sum u'_e(x_1) = 0,$$



more solutions ?? "easy" 😊

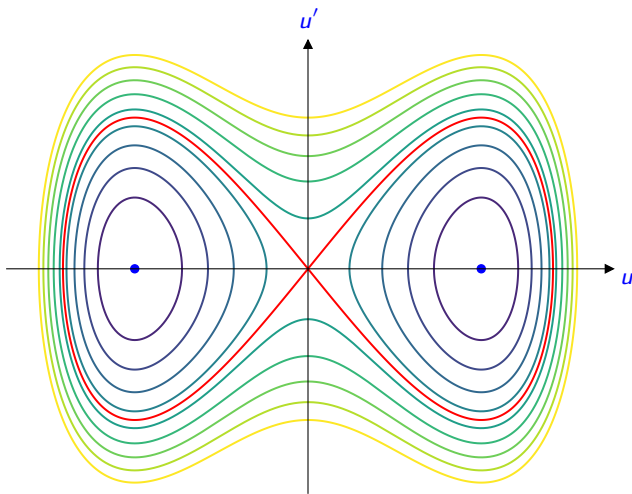
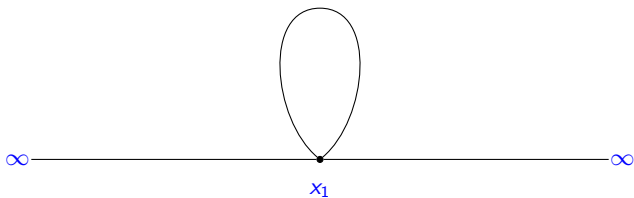
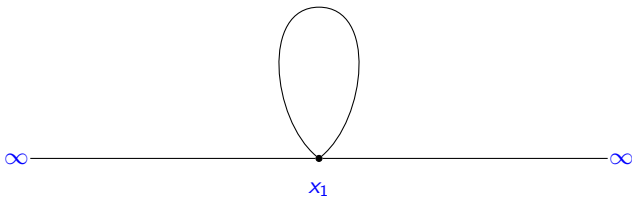


Figure: Phase portrait of the ODE when  $\lambda > 0$



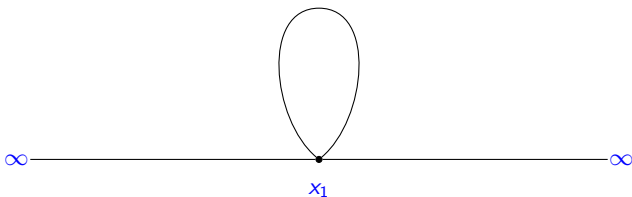
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### (Non-trivial) Solutions:

- The soliton “glued on all the graph”
- The soliton on the two half-lines and a periodic solution on the loop, either positive (if the length of the loop is long enough) or sign-changing ... and some translate
- 0 on the two half-lines, a periodic sign-changing solution on the loop with 0 on the node.

“easy” 😊

**Question 1:** One vertex create so many different new situations ? How ?

## How to prove existence ?

$u$  is a *weak solution* if  $\forall v \in H_D^1(\mathcal{G})$ ,  $\int_{\mathcal{G}} u'v' + \lambda \int_{\mathcal{G}} uv - \int_{\mathcal{G}} |u|^{p-2}uv = 0$ ,

where  $\int_{\mathcal{G}} = \sum_i \int_{e_i}$ , the sum being on all the edges of  $\mathcal{G}$  and

$$H_D^1(\mathcal{G}) = \{u \in \mathcal{C}(\mathcal{G}) \mid \int_{\mathcal{G}} |u'|^2 + \int_{\mathcal{G}} |u|^2 < \infty \quad \text{and} \quad u(v) = 0, \forall v \in \mathbb{V}_0\}.$$

This comes from the fact that, if  $e_i = (a_i, b_i)$  and if  $u$  is regular enough

$$\int_{e_i} u'v' = -u'_{e_i}(b_i)v(b_i) - u'_{e_i}(a_i)v(a_i) - \int_{e_i} u''v$$

and hence, for all  $v$ ,

$$\begin{aligned} \int_{\mathcal{G}} u'v' + \lambda \int_{\mathcal{G}} uv - \int_{\mathcal{G}} |u|^{p-2}uv &= \sum_i \int_{e_i} u'v' + \lambda \sum_i \int_{e_i} uv - \sum_i \int_{e_i} |u|^{p-2}uv \\ &= -\sum_v \sum_{e \ni v} u'_e(v)v(v) - \int_{\mathcal{G}} u''v + \lambda \int_{\mathcal{G}} uv - \int_{\mathcal{G}} |u|^{p-2}uv \end{aligned}$$

Hence we look for critical points of the **action functional**

$$J : H_D^1(\mathcal{G}) \rightarrow \mathbb{R} : J(u) := \frac{1}{2} \int_{\mathcal{G}} |u'|^2 + \frac{\lambda}{2} \int_{\mathcal{G}} |u|^2 - \frac{1}{p} \int_{\mathcal{G}} |u|^p$$

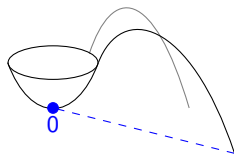
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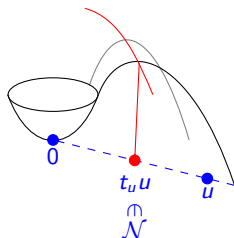


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- 2) there is no global minimum

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- 1)  $0$  is a local minimum but ... too simple
- 2) there is no global minimum

As  $J$  is **not** bounded from below on  $H_D^1(\mathcal{G})$  we introduce the **Nehari manifold** and the **nodal Nehari set** associated with  $J$ :

$$\begin{aligned} \mathcal{N}(\mathcal{G}) &= \{u \in H_D^1(\mathcal{G}) \mid u \neq 0, J'(u)u = 0\} \\ &= \{u \in H_D^1(\mathcal{G}) \mid u \neq 0, \int_{\mathcal{G}} |u'|^2 + \lambda \int_{\mathcal{G}} |u|^2 = \int_{\mathcal{G}} |u|^p\} \end{aligned}$$

$$\mathcal{M}(\mathcal{G}) = \{u \in H_D^1(\mathcal{G}) \mid u^\pm \in \mathcal{N}(\mathcal{G})\}$$

Of course  $\mathcal{M}(\mathcal{G}) \subset \mathcal{N}(\mathcal{G})$  and if  $u \in \mathcal{N}(\mathcal{G})$ , then

$$J(u) = \kappa \|u\|_{L^p(\mathcal{G})}^p = \kappa (\|u'\|_{L^2(\mathcal{G})}^2 + \lambda \|u\|_{L^2(\mathcal{G})}^2), \quad \kappa = \frac{1}{2} - \frac{1}{p},$$

so that  $J$  is bounded from below on  $\mathcal{N}(\mathcal{G})$  and  $\mathcal{M}(\mathcal{G})$ .

### Definition

We say that

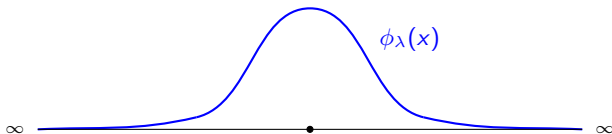
- $u \in H_D^1(\mathcal{G})$  is a (positive) **(action) ground state** if

$$J(u) = \inf_{v \in \mathcal{N}(\mathcal{G})} J(v).$$

- $u \in H_D^1(\mathcal{G})$  is a **(action) nodal ground state** if

$$J(u) = \inf_{v \in \mathcal{M}(\mathcal{G})} J(v).$$

When  $\mathcal{G}$  is the real line, it is well known that **ground states exist**. They are the family of solitons  $\pm\phi_\lambda(x - c)$ ,  $c \in \mathbb{R}$



We denote by  $s_\lambda$  the **soliton level**:

$$s_\lambda := J(\phi_\lambda) = \inf_{v \in \mathcal{M}(\mathbb{R})} J(v).$$

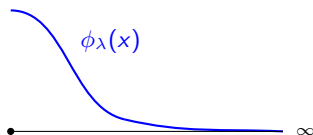
On the contrary,

$$\inf_{v \in \mathcal{M}(\mathbb{R})} J(v) = 2s_\lambda$$

and it is not achieved: **nodal ground states do not exist on  $\mathbb{R}$** .

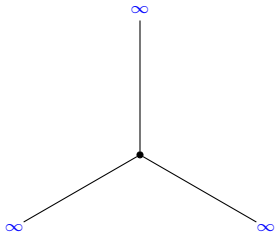
When  $\mathcal{G}$  is the half-line, it is well known that

- 1 ground states exist if we put Neumann condition on the vertice  
The solutions are the half-solitons  $\pm\phi_\lambda(x)$ ,

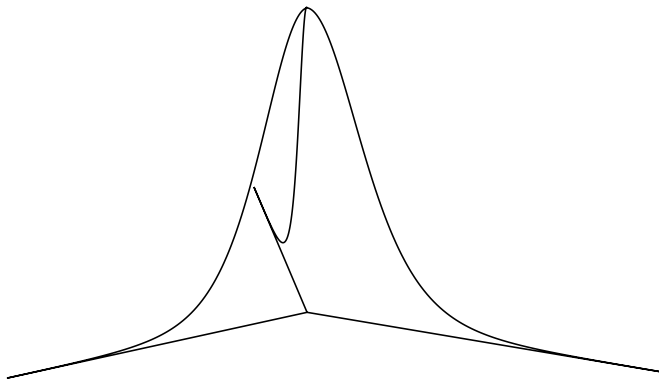


- 2 ground states do not exist if we put Dirichlet condition on the vertice.
- 3 nodal ground states do not exist on  $\mathbb{R}^+$ .

## Fundamental example - 3-star-graph

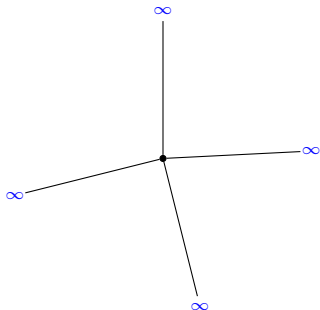


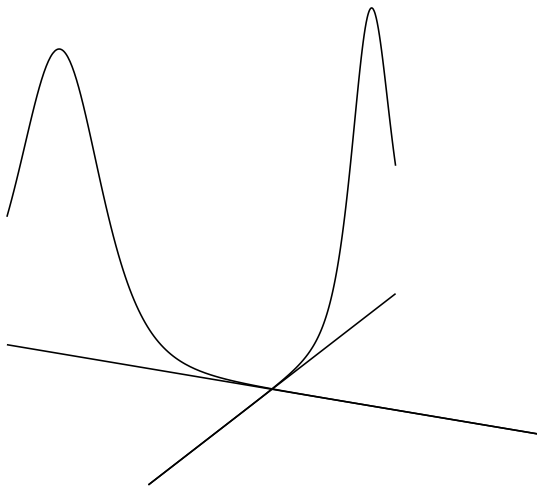
When  $\mathcal{G}$  is the 3-star graph, we know that the solutions are given by



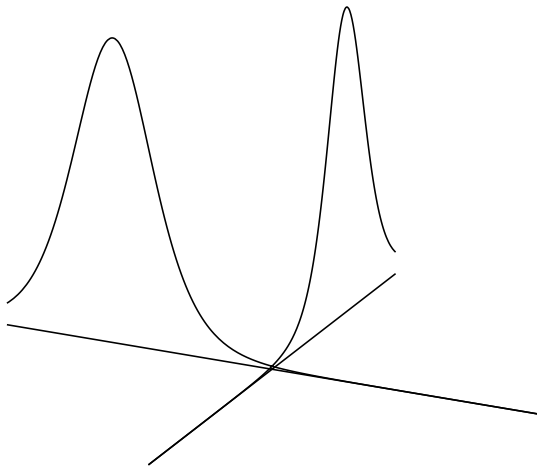
The positive solution on the 3-star graph

## Fundamental example - 4-star-graph

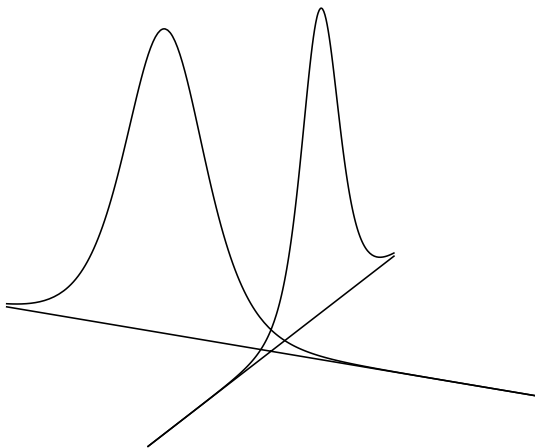




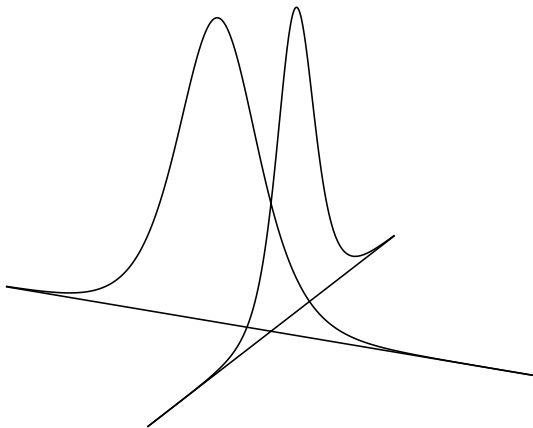
A continuous family of solutions on the 4-star graph



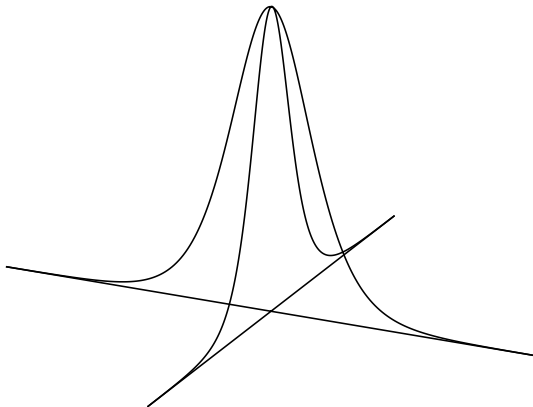
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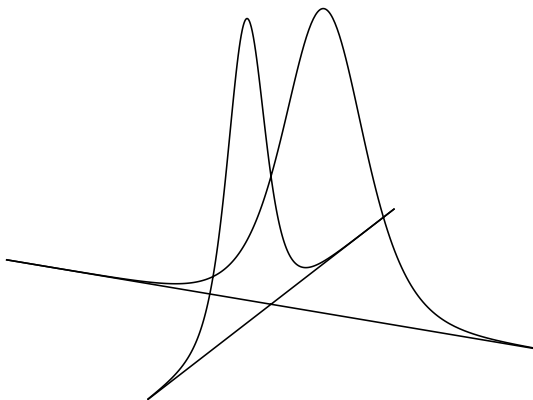
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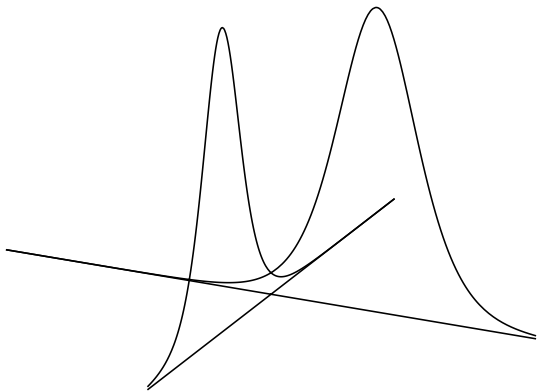
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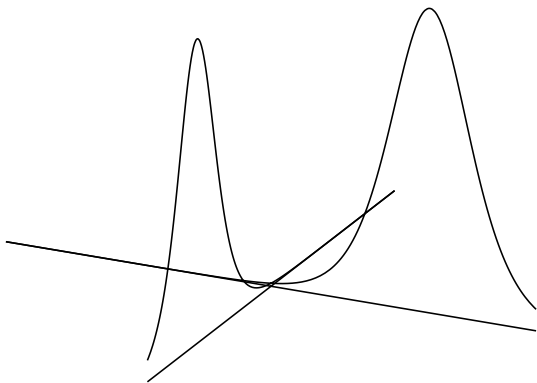
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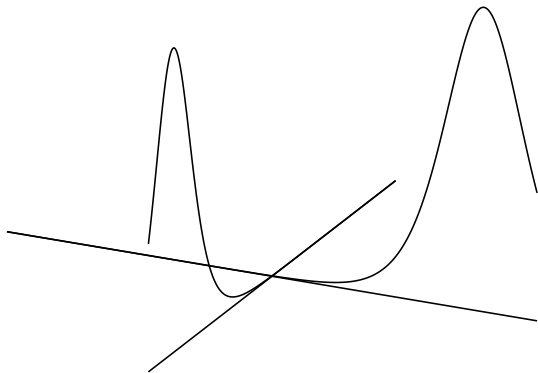
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On star graph (with  $N \geq 3$ ):

- ① No ground states.
- ② No nodal ground states.
- ③ No nodal solutions.

# What it's all about

On a **compact** graph  $\mathcal{G}$  (finite number of edges of finite length), ground state and nodal ground state **always exist**.

A graph is characterized by **topological** and **metrical** properties.

Our aim is to inspect how these features can

- **rule out** ground states or nodal ground states
- or
- **ensure** their existence

working at a high level of generality

consider the impact of the boundary condition (Dirichlet somewhere or not)

# The abstract way to existence

There is a somewhat standard way to study existence.

One defines the **level at infinity**

$$J^\infty(\mathcal{G}) := \inf \left\{ \liminf_n J(u_n) \mid (u_n)_n \subset \mathcal{N}(\mathcal{G}), u_n \rightharpoonup 0 \text{ in } H_D^1(\mathcal{G}) \right\}$$

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## Theorem (Abstract existence theorem)

Let  $\mathcal{G}$  be a noncompact graph.

If

$$\inf_{v \in \mathcal{N}(\mathcal{G})} J(v) < J^\infty(\mathcal{G}),$$

then  $\mathcal{G}$  admits a **ground state**.

If

$$\inf_{v \in \mathcal{M}(\mathcal{G})} J(v) < J^\infty(\mathcal{G}) + \inf_{v \in \mathcal{N}(\mathcal{G})} J(v),$$

then  $\mathcal{G}$  admits a **nodal ground state**.

We construct a min. sequence  $(u_n)_n \subset \mathcal{N}(\mathcal{G})$  (resp.  $(u_n)_n \subset \mathcal{M}(\mathcal{G})$ ) s.t.

$$u_n \rightharpoonup u \quad \text{weakly in } H^1(\mathcal{G}) \quad \text{and} \quad J'(u) = 0.$$

In the first case, we have to avoid that  $u \equiv 0$ . if  $(u_n)_n \subset \mathcal{N}(\mathcal{G})$  is such that  $u_n \rightarrow 0$  in  $H_D^1(\mathcal{G})$ ,

$$\inf_{v \in \mathcal{N}(\mathcal{G})} J(v) = \liminf_{n \rightarrow \infty} J(u_n) \geq J^\infty(\mathcal{G}) \quad \text{contradiction.}$$

In the second case, we have to show that  $u^\pm \not\equiv 0$ . For every  $n$ ,

$$J(u_n) = J(u_n^+) + J(u_n^-) \geq J(u_n^+) + \inf_{v \in \mathcal{N}(\mathcal{G})} J(v).$$

If, for instance,  $u^+ \equiv 0$ , then  $u_n^+ \rightarrow 0$  in  $H_D^1(\mathcal{G})$ , so that

$$\begin{aligned} \inf_{v \in \mathcal{M}(\mathcal{G})} J(v) &= \liminf_{n \rightarrow \infty} J(u_n) \geq \liminf_{n \rightarrow \infty} J(u_n^+) + \inf_{v \in \mathcal{N}(\mathcal{G})} J(v) \\ &\geq J^\infty(\mathcal{G}; Z) + \inf_{v \in \mathcal{N}(\mathcal{G})} J(v) \quad \text{contradiction.} \end{aligned}$$

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Good. But if one is not able to compute  $J^\infty(\mathcal{G})$ , this is **useless**.

## Noncompact graphs with a half-line

The behavior of noncompact graphs with an **half-line** is **very different** from that of graphs with **infinitely many bounded** edges.

In the first case the soliton level  $s_\lambda$  plays a central role.

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## Theorem

Let  $\mathcal{G}$  be a noncompact graph with at least one half-line. Then

$$\inf_{v \in \mathcal{N}(\mathcal{G})} J(v) \leq s_\lambda$$

$$\inf_{v \in \mathcal{M}(\mathcal{G})} J(v) \leq s_\lambda + \inf_{v \in \mathcal{N}(\mathcal{G})} J(v)$$

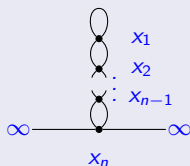
If moreover,  $\mathcal{G}$  has a finite number of edges

$$J^\infty(\mathcal{G}) = s_\lambda$$

## Theorem

Let  $\mathcal{G}$  have at least one half-line.

$$\sigma(\mathcal{G}) = 0 \implies \begin{cases} \inf_{v \in \mathcal{N}(\mathcal{G})} J(v) = s_\lambda \\ \text{no ground state unless } \mathcal{G} \text{ is isometric to} \end{cases}$$



$$\sigma(\mathcal{G}) \leq 1 \implies \begin{cases} \inf_{v \in \mathcal{M}(\mathcal{G})} J(v) = s_\lambda + \inf_{v \in \mathcal{N}(\mathcal{G})} J(v) \\ \mathcal{G} \text{ admits no nodal ground state} \end{cases}$$

The set of “vertices at infinity” of  $\mathcal{G}$  is

$$\mathbb{V}_\infty = \{v \text{ is the “vertex” of degree 1 of some half-line}\}.$$

Define the set

$$F(\mathcal{G}) = \{e \in \mathbb{E} \mid \text{at least one connected component of } \mathcal{G} \setminus \{e\} \\ \text{has no vertices in } \mathbb{V}_0 \cup \mathbb{V}_\infty\}.$$

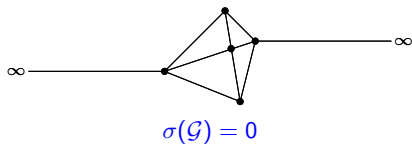
#### Definition

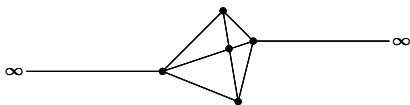
Let  $\mathcal{G}$  be a graph with a finite number of edges. The **splitting index**  $\sigma(\mathcal{G})$  of  $\mathcal{G}$  is the cardinality of  $F(\mathcal{G})$ :

$$\sigma(\mathcal{G}) := \#F(\mathcal{G}).$$

The splitting index of  $\mathcal{G}$  is a **purely topological** concept.

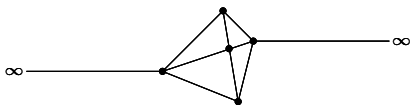






$$\sigma(\mathcal{G}) = 0$$

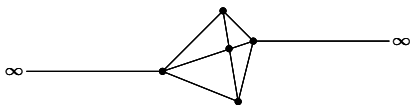
No GS, No NGS



$$\sigma(\mathcal{G}) = 0$$

No GS, No NGS



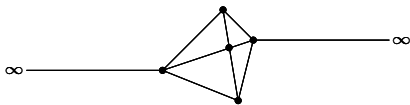


$$\sigma(\mathcal{G}) = 0$$

No GS, No NGS



$$\sigma(\mathcal{G}) = 1$$



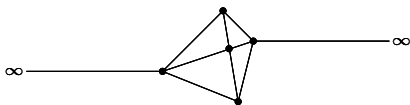
$$\sigma(\mathcal{G}) = 0$$

No GS, No NGS



$$\sigma(\mathcal{G}) = 1$$

GS ?, No NGS



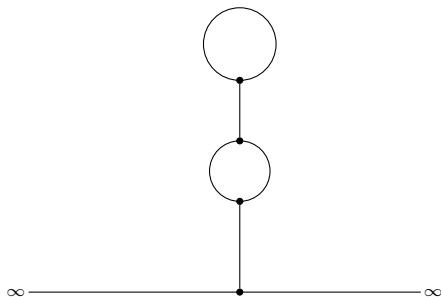
$$\sigma(\mathcal{G}) = 0$$

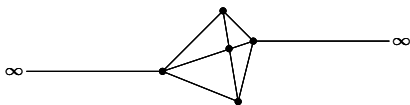
No GS, No NGS



$$\sigma(\mathcal{G}) = 1$$

GS ?, No NGS





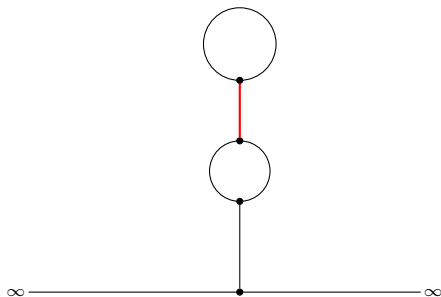
$$\sigma(\mathcal{G}) = 0$$

No GS, No NGS

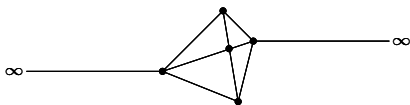


$$\sigma(\mathcal{G}) = 1$$

GS ?, No NGS



$$\sigma(\mathcal{G}) = 2$$



$$\sigma(\mathcal{G}) = 0$$

No GS, No NGS

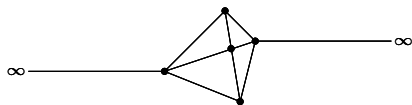


$$\sigma(\mathcal{G}) = 1$$

GS ?, No NGS



$$\sigma(\mathcal{G}) = 2$$



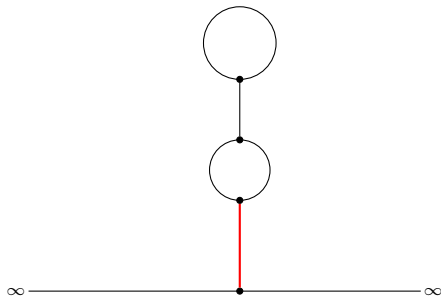
$$\sigma(\mathcal{G}) = 0$$

No GS, No NGS

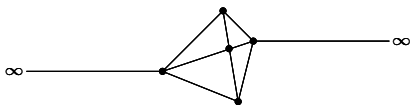


$$\sigma(\mathcal{G}) = 1$$

GS ?, No NGS



$$\sigma(\mathcal{G}) = 2$$



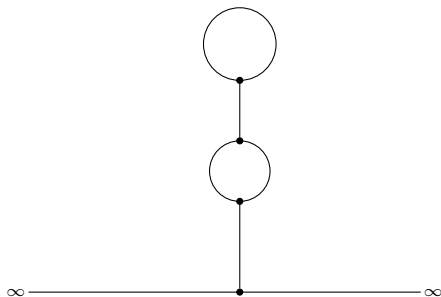
$$\sigma(\mathcal{G}) = 0$$

No GS, No NGS



$$\sigma(\mathcal{G}) = 1$$

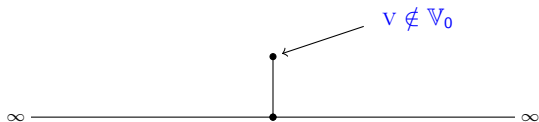
GS ?, No NGS



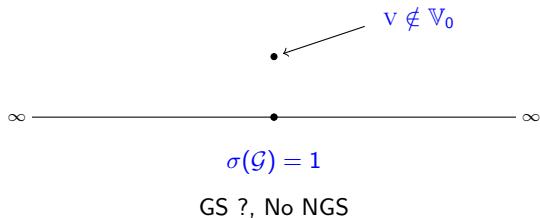
$$\sigma(\mathcal{G}) = 2$$

GS ?, NGS ?

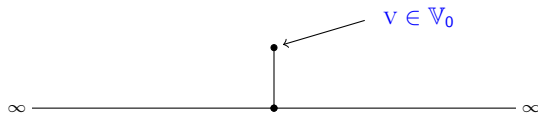
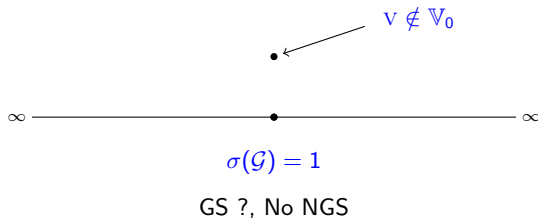
The presence of vertices  $v \in \mathbb{V}_0$  may lower  $\sigma(\mathcal{G})$ .



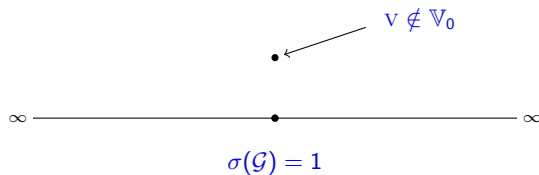
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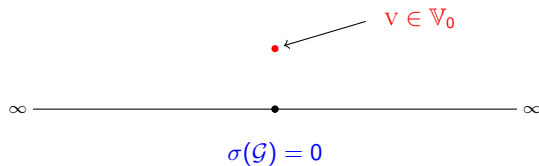
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GS ?, No NGS

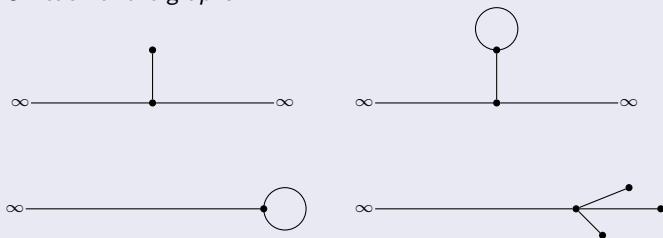


No GS, No NGS

In a few cases the topology of the graph guarantees the existence of ground states.

## Theorem

On each of the graphs



$\inf_{v \in \mathcal{N}(\mathcal{G})} J(v) < s_\lambda = J^\infty(\mathcal{G})$ . Hence *they all admit ground states*.

Note that all these graphs satisfy  $\sigma(\mathcal{G}) \geq 1$ .

Therefore the nonexistence condition  $\sigma(\mathcal{G}) = 0$  is sharp.

Here by “pendant” we mean a terminal edge whose vertex of degree 1 is not in  $V_0$ .

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### Theorem

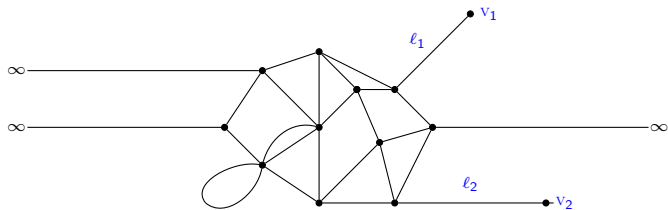
*Let  $\mathcal{G}$  be a noncompact graph with a finite number of edges.*

*If  $\mathcal{G}$  has a sufficiently long pendant, then  $\mathcal{G}$  admits a ground state.*

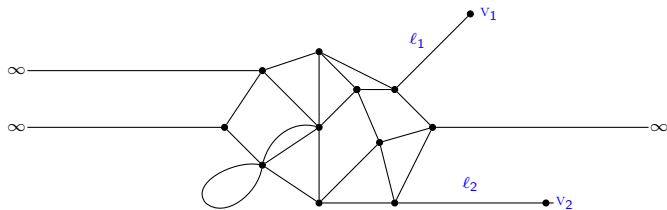
*If  $\mathcal{G}$  has two sufficiently long pendants, then  $\mathcal{G}$  admits a nodal ground state.*

Remark. The threshold on the lengths of the pendants depends on  $\lambda$  and  $p$  but not on  $\mathcal{G}$ .

# A final example

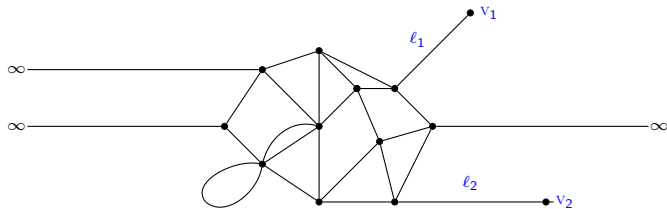


## A final example



If  $v_1, v_2 \in \mathbb{V}_0$ , then  $\sigma(\mathcal{G}) = 0$ : **no** ground states, **no** nodal ground states

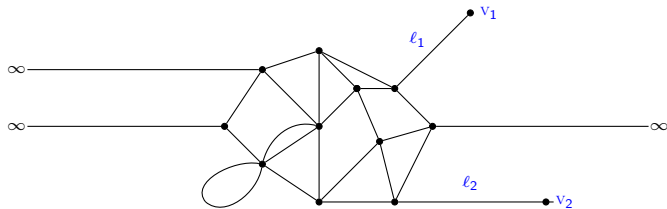
## A final example



If  $v_1, v_2 \in \mathbb{V}_0$ , then  $\sigma(\mathcal{G}) = 0$ : **no** ground states, **no** nodal ground states

If  $v_1 \in \mathbb{V}_0$  and  $v_2 \notin \mathbb{V}_0$ , then  $\sigma(\mathcal{G}) = 1$ : ground state if  $l_2$  large enough, **no** nodal ground states

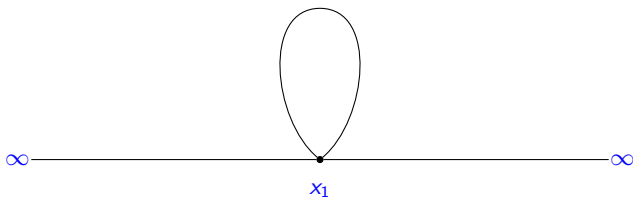
## A final example



If  $v_1, v_2 \in \mathbb{V}_0$ , then  $\sigma(\mathcal{G}) = 0$ : **no** ground states, **no** nodal ground states

If  $v_1 \in \mathbb{V}_0$  and  $v_2 \notin \mathbb{V}_0$ , then  $\sigma(\mathcal{G}) = 1$ : ground state if  $l_2$  large enough, **no** nodal ground states

If  $v_1, v_2 \notin \mathbb{V}_0$ , then  $\sigma(\mathcal{G}) = 2$ : ground state **and** nodal ground states if  $l_1, l_2$  large enough

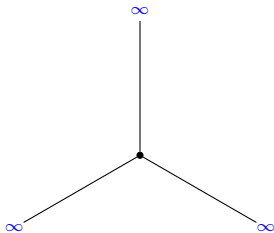


$$\sigma(\mathcal{G}) = 0$$

GS (the soliton “glued on all the graph”), no NGS

**Question 2:** Characterization of the known nodal solutions ?

**Question 3:** Characterization of the other positive solutions ?



$$\sigma(\mathcal{G}) = 0$$

no GS, no NGS

**Question 4:** Characterization of the solutions ?

## Extension of the Nehari method

The Nehari method works well when  $\lambda > -\lambda_1$  where  $\lambda_1 = \inf \frac{\int_G |u'|^2}{\int_G |u|^2}$  in order to have the good behavior around 0.

## Extension:

- **A. Pankov**, *Periodic nonlinear Schrödinger equation with application to photonic crystals*, Milan J. Math. 73 (2005), 259–287.
- **A. Szulkin and T. Weth**, *The Method of Nehari Manifold*, in Handbook of Nonconvex Analysis and Applications (D. Y. Gao and D. Motreanu, eds.), International Press Somerville, 597–632, 2010.

## For graphs:

- **A. Pankov**, *Nonlinear Schrödinger equations of periodic metric graphs*, Discrete and continuous dynamical systems, 38, (2018), 697-714
- **S. Akduman, A. Pankov**, *Nonlinear Schrödinger equation with growing potential on infinite metric graphs*, Nonlinear Analysis 184 (2019) 258–272
- **D. Galant, T. Weth**, *Normalized solutions of Nehari-Pankov type to indefinite variational problems*, arxiv.2601.10941
- ...

In order to have other solutions than the AGS, we can fix the bounded edge where we wanted the solution has his maximum.

- **R. Adami, E. Serra, P. Tilli**, *Multiple positive bound states for the subcritical NLS equation on metric graphs*, Calc. Var. PDE 58(5), (2019) 16.
- **C. De Coster, S. Dovetta, D. Galant, E. Serra**, *On the notion of ground state for nonlinear Schrödinger equations on metric graphs*, Calc. Var. Partial Differential Equations, 62(2023) 159.
- **Q. Liu**, *Multiple positive bound states for NLS equations on noncompact metric graphs with an attractive potential*, arXiv:2602.18894v1
- ...

- **C. Besse, R. Duboscq, S. Le Coz**, *Computation of excited states for the nonlinear Schrödinger equation: numerical and theoretical analysis*, ESAIM: M2AN 59 ( 2025), 899-923.
- ...

- **L. Song**, *Properties of the least action level, bifurcation phenomena and the existence of normalized solutions for a family of semi-linear elliptic equations without the hypothesis of autonomy*, J. Differential Equations 315 (2022), 179–199.
- **L. Jeanjean, S.-S. Lu**, *On global minimizers for a mass constrained problem*, Calc. Var. Partial Differential Equations 61 (2022), no. 6, article no. 214
- **S. Dovetta, E. Serra, and P. Tilli**, *Action versus energy ground states in nonlinear Schrödinger equations*, Math. Ann. 385 (2023), no. 3-4, 1545–1576.
- **C. De Coster, S. Dovetta, D. Galant, E. Serra**, *An action approach to nodal and least energy normalized solutions for nonlinear Schrödinger equations*, Ann. Inst. H. Poincaré C Anal. Non Linéaire, published online first, 2025.
- **D. Galant, T. Weth**, *Normalized solutions of Nehari-Pankov type to indefinite variational problems*, arxiv.2601.10941
- ...

• ...





Picture of Stockholm, December 2025

Thanks Delio 