

# The tree structure in staircase tableaux

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**Abstract.** Staircase tableaux are combinatorial objects which appear as key tools in the study of the PASEP physical model. The aim of this work is to show how the discovery of a tree structure in staircase tableaux is a significant feature to derive properties on these objects.

## Introduction

The *Partially Asymmetric Simple Exclusion Process* is a physical model in which  $N$  sites on a one-dimensional lattice are either empty or occupied by a single particle. These particles may hop to the left or to the right with fixed probabilities, which defines a Markov chain on the  $2^N$  states of the model. The explicit description of the stationary probability of the PASEP was obtained through the Matrix- Ansatz [6]. Since then, the links between specializations of this model and combinatorics have been the subject of an important research (see for example [7, 3, 2]). A great achievement is the description of the stationary distribution of the most general PASEP model through statistics defined on combinatorial objects called staircase tableaux [5].

The objective of our work is to show how we can reveal an underlying tree structure in staircase tableaux and use it to obtain combinatorial properties. In this paper, we focus on some specializations of the *fugacity partition function*  $Z_n(y; \alpha, \beta, \gamma, \delta; q)$ , defined in the next section as a  $y$ -analogue of the classical partition function of staircase tableaux.

The present paper is divided into two sections. Section 1 is devoted to the definition of labeled tree-like tableaux, which are a new presentation of staircase tableaux, and to the presentation of a tree structure and of an insertion algorithm on these objects. Section 2 presents combinatorial applications of these tools. We get:

- a new and natural proof of the formula for  $Z_n(1; \alpha, \beta, \gamma, \delta; 1)$ ;
- a study of  $Z_n(y; 1, 1, 0, 1; 1)$ ;
- a bijective proof for the formula of  $Z_n(1; 1, 1, 1, 0; 0)$ .

*In this extended abstract, most proofs are omitted or only sketched.*

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# 1 Staircase tableaux and labeled tree-like tableaux

## 1.1 Staircase tableaux

**Definition 1.** A staircase tableau  $\mathcal{T}$  of size  $n$  is a Ferrers diagram of “staircase” shape  $(n, n-1, \dots, 2, 1)$  such that boxes are either empty or labeled with  $\alpha$ ,  $\beta$ ,  $\gamma$ , or  $\delta$ , and satisfying the following conditions:

- no box along the diagonal of  $\mathcal{T}$  is empty;
- all boxes in the same row and to the left of a  $\beta$  or a  $\delta$  are empty;
- all boxes in the same column and above an  $\alpha$  or a  $\gamma$  are empty.

Figure 1 (left) presents a staircase tableau  $\mathcal{T}$  of size 5.

				$\alpha$
		$\delta$	$\alpha$	
		$\beta$		
$\alpha$	$\gamma$			
$\beta$				

1	$q$	1	1	$\alpha$
$q$	$q$	$\delta$	$\alpha$	
1	1	$\beta$		
$\alpha$	$\gamma$			
$\beta$				

**Fig. 1.** A staircase tableau and its weight labels

**Definition 2.** The weight  $\mathbf{w}(\mathcal{T})$  of a staircase tableau  $\mathcal{T}$  is a monomial in  $\alpha, \beta, \gamma, \delta$  and  $q$ , which we obtain as follows. Every blank box of  $\mathcal{T}$  is assigned a  $q$  or a 1, based on the label of the closest labeled box to its right in the same row and the label of the closest labeled box below it in the same column, such that:

- every blank box which sees a  $\beta$  to its right gets a 1;
- every blank box which sees a  $\delta$  to its right gets a  $q$ ;
- every blank box which sees an  $\alpha$  or  $\gamma$  to its right, and an  $\alpha$  or  $\delta$  below it, gets a 1;
- every blank box which sees an  $\alpha$  or  $\gamma$  to its right, and a  $\beta$  or  $\gamma$  below it, gets a  $q$ .

After filling all blank boxes, we define  $\mathbf{w}(\mathcal{T})$  to be the product of all labels in all boxes.

The weight of the staircase tableau  $\mathcal{T}$  on Fig. 1 is  $\mathbf{w}(\mathcal{T}) = q^3 \alpha^3 \beta^2 \gamma \delta$ .

There is a simple correspondence between the states of the PASEP and the diagonal labels of staircase tableaux: diagonal boxes may be seen as sites of the model, and  $\alpha$  and  $\delta$  (resp.  $\beta$  and  $\gamma$ ) diagonal labels correspond to occupied (resp. unoccupied) sites. We shall use a variable  $y$  to keep track of the number of particles in each state. To this way, we define  $t(\mathcal{T})$  to be the number of labels  $\alpha$

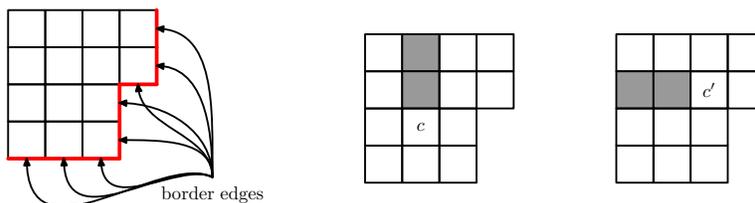
or  $\delta$  along the diagonal of  $\mathcal{T}$ . For example the tableau  $\mathcal{T}$  in Fig. 1 has  $t(\mathcal{T}) = 2$ . The *fugacity partition function* of the PASEP is defined as

$$Z_n(y; \alpha, \beta, \gamma, \delta; q) = \sum_{\mathcal{T} \text{ of size } n} \mathbf{w}(\mathcal{T}) y^{t(\mathcal{T})}.$$

## 1.2 Labeled tree-like tableaux

We shall now define another class of objects, called labeled tree-like tableaux. They appear as a labeled version of tree-like tableaux (TLTs) defined in [1]. These tableaux are in bijection with staircase tableaux, and present two nice properties inherited from TLTs: an underlying tree structure, and an insertion algorithm which provides a useful recursive presentation.

In a Ferrers diagram  $D$ , the *border edges* are the edges that stand at the end of rows or columns. The number of border edges is clearly the half-perimeter of  $D$ . For any box  $c$  of  $D$ , we define  $L_D(c)$  as the set of boxes placed in the same column and above  $c$  in  $D$ , and  $A_D(c)$  as the set of boxes placed in the same row and to the left of  $c$  in  $D$ . By a slight abuse, we shall use the same notations for any tableau  $T$  of shape  $D$ . These notions are illustrated at Fig. 2.



**Fig. 2.** Border edges,  $L_D(c)$  and  $A_D(c')$

**Definition 3.** A labeled tree-like tableau (LTLT)  $T$  of size  $n$  is a Ferrers diagram of half-perimeter  $n+1$  such that some boxes and all border edges are labeled with  $1, \alpha, \beta, \gamma,$  or  $\delta$ , and satisfying the following conditions:

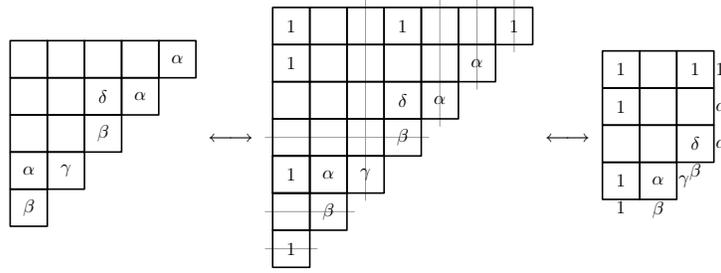
- the Northeast-most box (root box) is labeled by  $1$ ;
- the labels in the first row and the first column are the only labels  $1$ ;
- in each row and column, there is at least one labeled box;
- for each label  $\alpha$  or  $\beta$ , all boxes in  $L_T(c)$  are empty and at least one box in  $A_T(c)$  is labeled;
- for each label  $\beta$  or  $\delta$ , all boxes in  $A_T(c)$  are empty and at least one box in  $L_T(c)$  is labeled.

**Proposition 1.** For  $n \geq 2$ , LTLTs of size  $n$  are in bijection with staircase tableaux of size  $n - 1$ .

*Proof.* We shall only outline the correspondence  $\Lambda$  that sends a staircase tableau  $\mathcal{T}$  of size  $n - 1$  to an LTLT  $T$ . It consists in the following steps (see Fig. 3):

- we add to  $\mathcal{T}$  a hook  $(n + 1, 1^n)$ ;
- in this hook, we label by 1: the root-cell, the border edges and the cells in the first row that see a  $\beta$  or  $\delta$  below, and the cells in the first column that see an  $\alpha$  or  $\gamma$  to their right;
- for each label  $\alpha$  or  $\gamma$  (resp.  $\beta$  or  $\gamma$ ) on the diagonal, we erase the corresponding column (resp. row) in the tableau, which has to be empty, and put the label on the vertical (resp. horizontal) border edge to its left (resp. above it).

The result of these operations is an LTLT  $\Lambda(\mathcal{T})$  of size  $n$ . We shall not give here all the details to check that  $\Lambda$  is a bijection.



**Fig. 3.** The bijection  $\Lambda$

A nice feature of the notion of LTLT is its underlying tree structure. Let us consider an LTLT  $T$  of size  $n$ . We may see each label of  $T$  as a node, and Def. 3 ensures that each node (except the NE-most one, which appears as the root) has either a node above it or to its left, which may be seen as its father. We refer to Fig. 4 which illustrates this property. A *crossing* is a box  $c$  such that

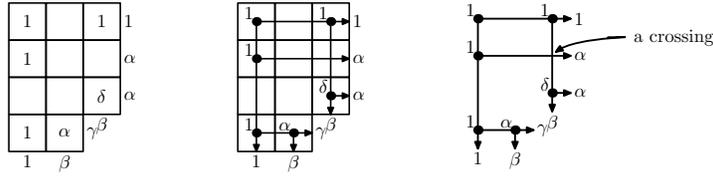
- there is a label to the left and to the right of  $c$ ;
- there is a label above and below  $c$ .

We get a labeled binary tree with some crossings of edges, thus a labeled binary tree. The size of the LTLT is equal to the number of internal nodes in its underlying binary tree.

### 1.3 The insertion algorithm

Given an LTLT  $T$  and a border edge  $e$ , a *compatible bi-label* is the choice of a (new) couple  $(x, y)$  of labels such that

- if  $e$  is in the first row of  $T$  (thus vertical):  $x = 1$  and  $y \in \{\beta, \delta\}$ ;
- if  $e$  is in the first column of  $T$  (thus horizontal):  $y = 1$  and  $x \in \{\alpha, \gamma\}$ ;



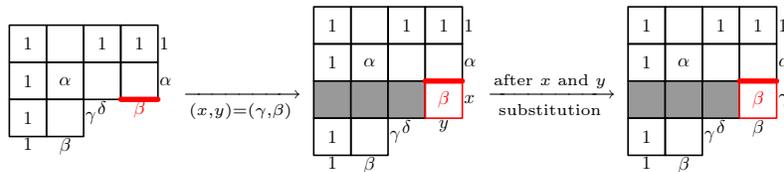
**Fig. 4.** The tree structure of staircase tableaux

- otherwise:  $x \in \{\alpha, \gamma\}$  and  $y \in \{\beta, \delta\}$ .

**Definition 4.** Given an LTLT  $T$ , a vertical border edge  $e$  (thus at the end of a row  $r$ ) with label  $\ell$ , and a compatible bi-label  $(x, y)$ , the column addition in  $T$  at edge  $e$ , with new label  $(x, y)$  is defined as follows:

- we add a cell to  $r$  and to all rows above it;
- since vertical (resp. horizontal) border edges are shifted horizontally (resp. vertically), we shift also the corresponding labels;
- we label the new box in row  $r$  by  $\ell$ ;
- we label the two new vertical and horizontal border edges respectively by  $x$  and  $y$ .

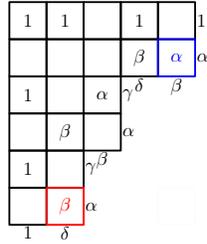
If the edge  $e$  is horizontal, we define in the same way the row addition.



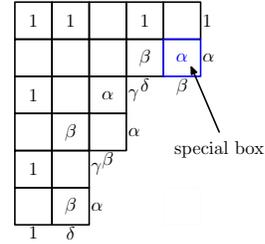
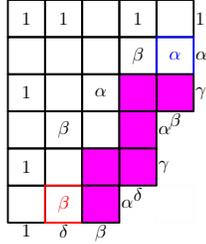
**Fig. 5.** The row insertion

Given two Ferrers diagrams  $D_1 \subseteq D_2$ , we say that the set of cells  $S = D_2 - D_1$  (set-theoretic difference) is a *ribbon* if it is connected (with respect to adjacency) and contains no  $2 \times 2$  square. In this case we say that  $S$  can be added to  $D_1$ , or that it can be removed from  $D_2$ . For our purpose, we shall only consider the addition of a ribbon to an LTLT  $T$  between a vertical border edge  $e_1$  and an horizontal border edge  $e_2$ . As in the row/column insertion, we observe that vertical (resp. horizontal) border edges are shifted horizontally (resp. vertically), thus we shift also the corresponding labels. Figure 6 illustrates this operation.

**Definition 5.** Let  $T$  be an LTLT. The special box of  $T$  is the Northeast-most labeled box among those that occur at the bottom of a column. This is well-defined since the bottom row of  $T$  contains necessarily a labeled box.



$\xrightarrow{\text{ribbon insertion}}$



**Fig. 6.** The ribbon insertion

**Fig. 7.** The special box

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**Algorithm 1** Insertion procedure

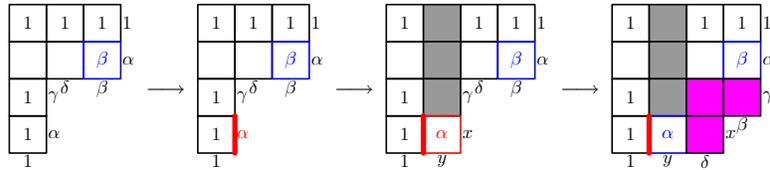
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**Require:** an LTLT  $T$  of size  $n$  together with the choice of one of its border edges  $e$ , and a compatible bi-label  $(x, y)$ .

- 1: Find the special box  $s$  of  $T$ .
- 2: Add a row/column to  $T$  at edge  $e$  with new bi-label  $(x, y)$ .
- 3: If  $e$  is to the left of  $s$ , perform a ribbon addition between  $e$  and  $s$ .

**Ensure:** a final LTLT  $T'$  of size  $n + 1$ .

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**Fig. 8.** The insertion procedure

**Proposition 2.** *The insertion algorithm 1 induces a bijection between*

- LTLTs of size  $n$  together with the choice of a border edge and a compatible bi-label,
- LTLTs of size  $n + 1$ .

*Proof.* We shall only give the key ingredient, which is analog to Theorem 2.2 in [1]: the insertion algorithm is constructed in such a way that the added labeled box becomes the special box of the new LTLT. This implies that the process may be inverted, thus proving Prop. 2.

*Remark 1.* An important feature of this algorithm is that it provides a recursive comprehension focused on the border edges of the LTLT, *i.e.* on the diagonal

element of the staircase tableaux. Up to now, the recursive approach was with respect to the first column, which is of course less significant since the state of the PASEP is encoded by the labels on the diagonal. We give in the next section three examples of the use we can make of the tree structure and the insertion algorithm.

## 2 Combinatorial applications

### 2.1 A product formula for $Z_n(1; \alpha, \beta, \gamma, \delta; 1)$

**Proposition 3.** *When  $q = y = 1$ ,*

$$Z_n(1; \alpha, \beta, \gamma, \delta; 1) = \prod_{j=0}^{n-1} (\alpha + \beta + \gamma + \delta + j(\alpha + \gamma)(\beta + \delta)). \quad (1)$$

*Proof.* Proposition 2 clearly implies (1), because of Prop. 1.

*Remark 2.* Prop. 3 corresponds to Theorem 4.1 in [2]. The insertion algorithm gives a trivial and natural explanation for this formula. Moreover, Prop. 3 implies that the number of staircase tableaux of size  $n$  is given by  $4^n n!$ : we can use the insertion algorithm to get a bijection between staircase tableaux and doubly signed permutations.

### 2.2 Study of $Z_n(y; 1, 1, 0, 1; 1)$

In this part, we consider staircase tableaux without any  $\gamma$  label. We denote by  $T(n, k)$  the number of such tableaux  $\mathcal{T}$  of size  $n$  with  $k$  labels  $\alpha$  or  $\delta$  in the diagonal, *i.e.* such that  $t(\mathcal{T}) = k$ .

Our goal is to get a recursive formula on  $T(n, k)$  numbers. We consider a staircase tableau  $\mathcal{T}$  of size  $n - 1$  with  $t(\mathcal{T}) = k$ , and we let  $T = \Lambda(\mathcal{T})$  its associated LTLT of size  $n$ . Now we examine the possible insertions on  $T$  to obtain an LTLT  $T'$  of size  $n + 1$ : let  $e$  be the edge where the insertion occurs,  $z$  be the label of  $e$  (which does not appear on the border edges of  $T'$ ), and  $(x, y)$  the compatible bi-label which appears on the border edges of  $T'$ . We denote by  $\mathcal{T}'$  the staircase tableau  $\Lambda^{-1}(T')$  of size  $n$ .

We get that  $t(\mathcal{T}') - t(\mathcal{T})$  can be equal to

- 0 when  $(z, x, y)$  is either  $(\alpha, \alpha, \beta)$  or  $(\delta, \alpha, \beta)$  or  $(1, 1, \beta)$ , which gives  $k + 1$  possibilities;
- 1 when  $(x, y, z)$  is either  $(\alpha, \alpha, \delta)$  or  $(\delta, \alpha, \delta)$  or  $(\beta, \alpha, \beta)$  or  $(1, 1, \delta)$  or  $(1, \alpha, 1)$ , which gives  $n + 1$  possibilities;
- 2 when  $(x, y, z) = (\beta, \alpha, \delta)$  which gives  $n - 1 - k$  possibilities (the number of border edges labeled by  $\beta$ ).

Putting all this together, we get the following recursive formula:

$$T(n, k) = (k+1)T(n-1, k) + (n+1)T(n-1, k-1) + (n-k+1)T(n-1, k-2) \quad (2)$$

from which we deduce a property of the polynomial  $Z_n(y; 1, 1, 0, 1; 1)$ .

**Proposition 4.** *The polynomial  $Z_n(y; 1, 1, 0, 1; 1)$  has all its roots in the segment  $] -1, 0[$ . As a consequence, it is stable and log-concave.*

*Proof.* We let  $P_n(y) = \sum_{k \leq n} T(n, k)y^k = Z_n(y; 1, 1, 0, 1; 1)$  and use (2) to write

$$\begin{aligned} P_n(y) &= \sum_k (k+1)T(n-1, k)y^k + \sum_k (n+1)T(n-1, k-1)y^k \\ &\quad + \sum_k (n-k+1)T(n-1, k-2)y^k \\ &= (1 + (n+1)y + (n-1)y^2)P_{n-1}(y) + (y-y^3)P'_{n-1}(y) \\ &= ((y-y^3)e^{\lambda_n(y)}P_{n-1}(y))' \times e^{-\lambda_n(y)} \end{aligned}$$

with  $\lambda_n(y) = -(n + \frac{3}{2}) \ln(1-y) - \frac{1}{2} \ln(1+y)$ . Then we check that the equation

$$P_n(y) = f'_n(y)e^{-\lambda_n(y)}$$

with  $f_n(y) = (y^3 - y)e^{\lambda_n(y)}P_{n-1}(y)$  implies by induction on  $n$  that  $P_n$  has at least  $n$  distinct zeros in  $] -1, 0[$ . Since  $n$  is the degree of  $P_n$ , the conclusion follows.

*Remark 3.* Equation (2), as well as Prop. 4 are new. Our insertion algorithm shows its strength when it comes to study recursively the diagonal in staircase tableaux, which is meaningful in the PASEP model: it is by far more natural than the already studied [5] recursion with respect to the first column of the tableau.

### 2.3 A bijective proof for $Z_n(1; 1, 1, 1, 0; 0)$ .

We show how our tools lead to a bijection between staircase tableaux without any label  $\delta$  or weight  $q$  and a certain class of paths enumerated by the sequence A026671 of [9]. This is an answer to Problem 5.8 of [2].

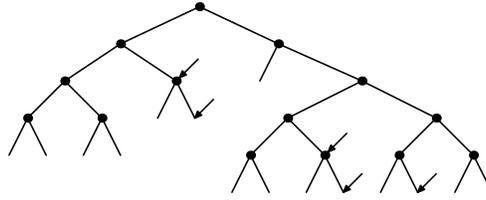
A *lazy path* of size  $n$  is a path on the lattice  $\mathbb{Z} \times \mathbb{Z}$

- starting at  $(0, 0)$ , ending at  $(2n, 0)$ ,
- whose steps are  $(1, 1)$ ,  $(1, -1)$  or  $(2, 0)$ ,
- such that its steps  $(2, 0)$  only appear on the axis  $(0, x)$ .

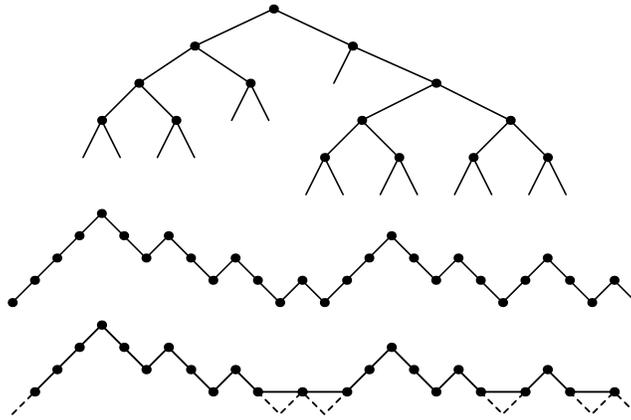
Figure 9 is an example of a lazy path.

Let us consider LTLTs which are in bijection with staircase tableaux without  $\delta$  or  $q$ . The first observation is that these tableaux correspond to trees without any crossing, since a crossing sees an  $\alpha$  or a  $\gamma$  to its right and a  $\beta$  below, which gives a weight  $q$  (*cf.* Fig. 10). Thus we have to deal with binary trees whose left sons only have one choice of label ( $\beta$ ) and whose right sons may have one ( $\alpha$ ) or two choices ( $\alpha$  or  $\gamma$ ) of labels. The restriction of no weight  $q$  is equivalent to forbidding any point in the tree which sees an  $\alpha$  or a  $\gamma$  to its right and a  $\beta$  below it. Since we deal with binary trees (without any crossing), we get that the only





**Fig. 11.** Arrows give the possible positions for a  $\gamma$  label



**Fig. 12.** The bijections  $\pi$  and  $\pi'$

**Proposition 5.** *The application  $\Phi$  defines a bijection from the set of staircase tableaux  $\mathcal{T}$  without label  $\delta$  and weight  $q$ , of size  $n$ , to the set of lazy paths of size  $n$ . Moreover, if we denote:  $D(\Phi(\mathcal{T}))$  the number of  $(1, -1)$  steps,  $M(\Phi(\mathcal{T}))$  the number of  $(1, 1)$  steps,  $A(\Phi(\mathcal{T}))$  the length of the initial maximal sequence of  $(1, 1)$  steps,  $H(\Phi(\mathcal{T}))$  the number of  $(2, 0)$  steps,  $F(\Phi(\mathcal{T}))$  the number of factors, and  $N(\Phi(\mathcal{T}))$  the number of negative factors in  $\Phi(\mathcal{T})$ , then:*

- the number of  $\gamma$  labels in  $\mathcal{T}$  is given by  $N(\Phi(\mathcal{T}))$ ;
- the number of  $\alpha$  labels in  $\mathcal{T}$  is given by  $M(\Phi(\mathcal{T})) - N(\Phi(\mathcal{T}))$ ;
- the number of  $\beta$  labels in  $\mathcal{T}$  is given by  $D(\Phi(\mathcal{T})) + H(\Phi(\mathcal{T})) - A(\Phi(\mathcal{T}))$ ;
- the number of columns indexed by  $\beta$  in  $\mathcal{T}$  is given by  $H(\Phi(\mathcal{T}))$ ;
- the number of rows indexed by  $\alpha$  or  $\gamma$  in  $\mathcal{T}$  is given by  $A(\Phi(\mathcal{T}))$ .

*Sketch of the proof for the statistics.* We recall that, as defined in [5], rows indexed by  $\beta$  or  $\delta$  (resp. columns indexed by  $\alpha$  or  $\gamma$ ) of  $\mathcal{T}$  correspond to non-root 1 labels in the first row (resp. first column) of  $\Lambda(\mathcal{T})$ . We have:

- the number of  $\gamma$  labels is by definition the number of negative factors in  $N(\Phi(\mathcal{T}))$ ;
- the number of  $\alpha$  or  $\gamma$  labels is  $M(\Phi(\mathcal{T}))$ ;
- the number of  $\beta$  labels is the number of external nodes minus the number of nodes in the left branch of the tree, thus  $D(\Phi(\mathcal{T})) + H(\Phi(\mathcal{T})) - A(\Phi(\mathcal{T}))$ ;

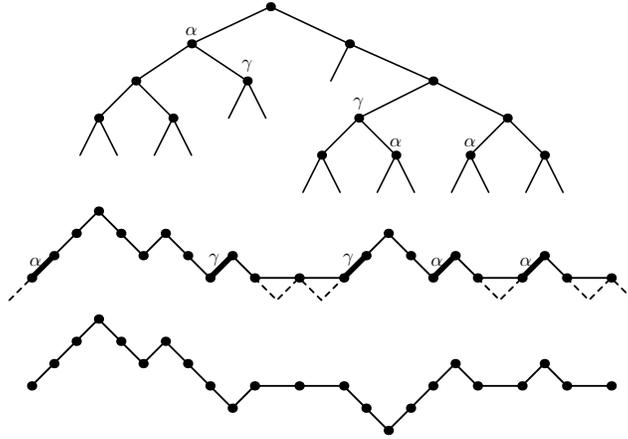


Fig. 13. From labeled trees to lazy paths

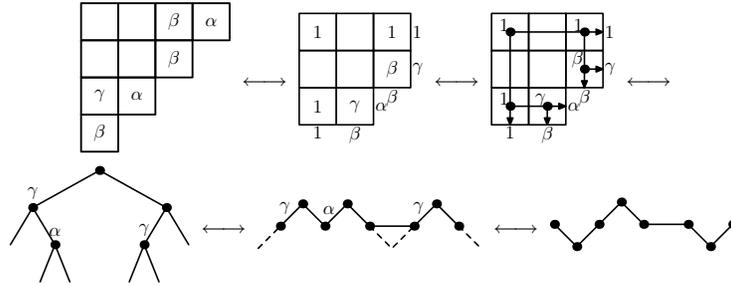


Fig. 14. Bijection  $\Phi$

- columns indexed by  $\beta$  correspond to nodes in the right branch of the tree, their number is  $H(\Phi(\mathcal{T}))$ ;
- rows indexed by  $\alpha$  or  $\gamma$  correspond to nodes in the left branch of the tree, their number is  $A(\Phi(\mathcal{T}))$ .

*Remark 4.* We may observe that among this class of staircase tableaux  $\mathcal{T}$ , those who have only  $\beta$  or  $\gamma$  labels on the diagonal, *i.e.* such that  $t(\mathcal{T}) = 0$  are in bijection with binary trees whose internal nodes are of left depth at most 1, and such that we forbid the  $\alpha$  label on external nodes. The bijection  $\Phi$  sends these tableaux onto lazy paths of height and depth bounded by 1 and whose factors preceding either a  $(2, 0)$  step or the end of the path are negative (*cf.* Fig. 15). Let us denote by  $S(n)$  the number of such path of size  $n$ . By decomposing the path with respect to its first two factors, we may write

$$S(n) = 3S(n - 1) - S(n - 2)$$

which corresponds (*cf.* the entry A001519 in [9]) to the recurrence of odd Fibonacci numbers  $F_{2n+1}$ , as claimed in Corollary 3.10 of [2].



**Fig. 15.** An odd Frobenius path

*Remark 5.* Another interesting special case concerns staircase tableaux of size  $n$  without any  $\delta$  or  $\gamma$  labels, and without weight  $q$ . It is obvious that the bijection  $\Phi$  maps these tableaux onto binary trees, enumerated by Catalan numbers  $C_n = \frac{1}{n+1} \binom{2n}{n}$ . Moreover, if we keep track of the number  $k$  of external nodes labeled with  $\beta$ , we get a bijection with Dyck paths  $\pi$  of size  $n$  with exactly  $k$  peaks, enumerated by Narayana numbers  $N(n, k)$ .

**Forthcoming objective.** We are convinced that LTLTs, because of their insertion algorithm, are objects that are both natural and easy to use, as shown in this paper on some special cases. To be able to use this structure in the general case of the PASEP, we have to find a description of the weight defined on staircase tableaux directly on LTLTs. This is the subject of a future work.

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