

Relativity principle

Notes by K. V. Shajesh*

School of Physics and Applied Physics, Southern Illinois University–Carbondale, Carbondale, Illinois 62901, USA

(Dated: October 15, 2022)

The relativity principle states that the laws of physics are invariant (or covariant) when observed using different coordinate systems. In special relativity we restrict these coordinate systems to be uniformly moving with respect to each other. Let $z = z' = 0$ at $t = 0$.

1. Linear: Spatial homogeneity, spatial isotropy, and temporal homogeneity, require the transformation to be linear. (We will skip this derivation.) Then, for simplicity, restricting to coordinate systems moving with respect to each other in a single direction, we can write

$$z' = A(v)z + B(v)t, \tag{1a}$$

$$t' = E(v)z + F(v)t. \tag{1b}$$

We will refer to the respective frames as primed and unprimed.

2. Identity: An object P at rest in the primed frame, described by $z' = 0$, will be described in the unprimed frame as $z = vt$.

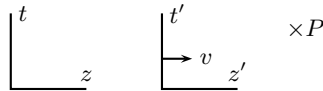


FIG. 1. Identity.

Using these in Eq. (1a), we have

$$0 = A(v)vt + B(v)t. \tag{2}$$

This implies $B(v) = -vA(v)$. Thus, show that

$$z' = A(v)(z - vt), \tag{3a}$$

$$t' = E(v)z + F(v)t. \tag{3b}$$

3. Reversal: The descriptions of a process in the unprimed frame moving to the right with velocity v with respect to the primed should be identical to those made in the unprimed (with their axis flipped) moving with velocity $-v$ with respect to the primed (with their axis flipped). This is equivalent to the requirement of isotropy in an one dimensional space.



FIG. 2. Reversal.

* kvshajesh@gmail.com

That is, the transformation must be invariant under

$$z \rightarrow -z, \quad z' \rightarrow -z', \quad v \rightarrow -v. \quad (4)$$

This implies

$$-z' = A(-v)(-z + vt), \quad (5a)$$

$$t' = -E(-v)z + F(-v)t. \quad (5b)$$

Show that Eqs. (3a) and (5a) in conjunction imply

$$A(-v) = A(v). \quad (6)$$

Further, show that Eqs. (3b) and (5b) in conjunction implies

$$E(-v) = -E(v), \quad (7a)$$

$$F(-v) = F(v). \quad (7b)$$

4. Reciprocity: The description of a process in the unprimed frame moving to the right with velocity v is identical to the description in the primed frame moving to the left.



FIG. 3. Reciprocity.

That is, the transformation must be invariant under

$$(z, t) \rightarrow (z', t') \quad (z', t') \rightarrow (z, t) \quad v \rightarrow -v. \quad (8)$$

Show that this implies

$$z = A(-v)(z' + vt'), \quad (9a)$$

$$t = E(-v)z' + F(-v)t'. \quad (9b)$$

Show that Eqs. (3) and Eqs. (9) imply

$$E(v) = \frac{1}{v} \left[\frac{1}{A(v)} - A(v) \right], \quad (10a)$$

$$F(v) = A(v). \quad (10b)$$

Together, for arbitrary $A(v)$, the relativity principle allows the following transformations,

$$z' = A(v)(z - vt), \quad (11a)$$

$$t' = A(v) \left[\frac{1}{v} \left(\frac{1}{A(v)^2} - 1 \right) z + t \right]. \quad (11b)$$

In Galilean relativity we require $t' = t$. Show that this is obtained with

$$A(v) = 1 \quad (12)$$

in Eqs. (11). This leads to the Galilean transformation

$$z' = z - vt, \quad (13a)$$

$$t' = t. \quad (13b)$$

In Einstein's special relativity the requirement is for a special speed c that is described identically by both the primed and unprimed frames. That is,

$$z = ct, \tag{14a}$$

$$z' = ct'. \tag{14b}$$

Show that Eqs. (14) when substituted in in Eqs. (11) leads to

$$A(v) = \frac{1}{\sqrt{1 - \frac{v^2}{c^2}}}. \tag{15}$$

This corresponds to the Lorentz transformation

$$z' = A(v)(z - vt), \tag{16a}$$

$$t' = A(v) \left(-\frac{v}{c^2}z + t \right). \tag{16b}$$

This suggests that it should be possible to contrive additional solutions for $A(v)$ that respects the relativity principle, but with new physical requirements for the respective choice of $A(v)$. Construct one such transformation, which will not be used in grading.