

# On the verbal width of finitely generated pro- $p$ groups

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## Abstract

Let  $p$  be a prime. It is proved that a non-trivial word  $w$  from a free group  $F$  has finite width in every finitely generated pro- $p$  group if and only if  $w \notin (F')^p F''$ . Also it is shown that any word  $w$  has finite width in a compact  $p$ -adic group.

## 1. Introduction

Let  $F$  be a free group on  $k$  independent generators. We will call an element  $w$  from  $F$  a word. If  $G$  is a group, then we say that  $g \in G$  is a  $w$ -value in  $G$  if there are  $g_1, \dots, g_k \in G$  such that  $g = w(g_1, \dots, g_k)^{\pm 1}$ . We denote the set of the all  $w$ -values in  $G$  by  $G^{\{w\}}$ . A simple argument (see [6]) shows that if  $G$  is profinite, then  $w(G)$  (the abstract subgroup generated by  $G^{\{w\}}$ ) is closed if and only if there exists  $l$  such that any element from  $w(G)$  is a product of at most  $l$  elements from  $G^{\{w\}}$ . The smallest such number  $l$  is called the **width** of  $w$  in  $G$ .

In this paper we consider a particular case of the following question: which words do have finite width in a finitely generated profinite group  $G$ ? The most important achievement in this subject is a recent work of N. Nikolov and D. Segal (see [13]), where they proved that if  $w$  is either  $d$ -locally finite or  $w$  is a simple commutator, then  $w$  has finite width in any  $d$ -generated profinite group  $G$  (we recall that a group word  $w$  is  **$d$ -locally finite** if every  $d$ -generator group  $H$  satisfying  $w(H) = 1$  is finite).

The main result of this paper is as follows.

**Theorem 1.1.** *Let  $w \neq 1$  be an element of a free group  $F$ . Then the following are equivalent:*

1.  $w(H)$  is closed for every finitely generated pro- $p$  group  $H$ ;
2.  $w \notin (F')^p F''$ .

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The proofs of two implications in Theorem 1.1 are quite different. In order to prove  $2 \Rightarrow 1$  we characterize the words  $w \in F$  satisfying  $w \notin (F')^p F''$ . We say that  $w$  is a  $\mathcal{N}_p$ -**word** if for every finitely generated pro- $p$  group  $H$ ,  $H/\overline{w(H)}$  is nilpotent-by-finite, where  $\overline{w(H)}$  denotes the closure of  $w(H)$  in  $H$ . For example,  $x^{p^n}$  is a  $\mathcal{N}_p$ -word by Zelmanov's solution of the restricted Burnside problem. An Engel word is another example of  $\mathcal{N}_p$ -word (see [21]).

**Theorem 1.2.** *Let  $w$  be an element of a free group  $F$ . Then the following are equivalent:*

1.  $w$  is a  $\mathcal{N}_p$ -word;
2. if  $H$  is a free pro- $p$  group on two generators then  $H/w(H)$  is nilpotent-by-finite;
3.  $w(C_p \wr \mathbb{Z}) \neq \{1\}$ ;
4.  $w \notin (F')^p F''$ .

This theorem reduces the proof of the implication  $2 \Rightarrow 1$  from Theorem 1.1 to the case when  $H$  is virtually nilpotent. This case is solved using the following more general result, which also answers a question posed by L. Pyber:

**Theorem 1.3.** *Let  $G$  be a compact  $p$ -adic analytic group. Then any word  $w$  of a free group  $F$  has finite width in  $G$ .*

Note that in Theorem 1.3 we do not assume that  $G$  is a pro- $p$  group.

In order to prove other implication from Theorem 1.1 we show that if  $w \in (F')^p F''$  and  $H$  is a non-abelian free pro- $p$  group, then  $H^{\{w\}}$  is “very small” (more concretely we show that no power of  $H^{\{w\}}$  can contain a non-trivial normal subgroup of  $H$ ).

We use the following notation. If  $S$  is a set and  $m$  is a natural number then  $S^{(m)}$  denotes the cartesian product of  $m$  copies of  $S$ . If  $S$  is a subset of a group  $H$ , then  $S^{*m}$  is the set of all products  $s_1^{\pm 1} \cdots s_n^{\pm 1}$ , where  $n \leq m$  and  $s_i \in S$ . We will also use the same notation when the operation in  $H$  is additive, so in this case  $S^{*m} = \{\pm s_1 \pm \cdots \pm s_n \mid n \leq m, s_i \in S\}$ . We will say that  $S$  has **finite width** in  $H$  if there exists  $l$  such that the subgroup  $\langle S \rangle$  generated by  $S$  is equal to  $S^{*l}$ . We use  $[ , ]_L$  to denote the Lie bracket and simply  $[ , ]$  for the group commutator.

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### 2. Proof of Theorem 1.3

In the following  $|\cdot|_p$  is the standard  $p$ -adic valuation on  $\mathbb{Q}_p$ : if  $a \in p^k\mathbb{Z}_p \setminus p^{k+1}\mathbb{Z}_p$ , then  $|a|_p = p^{-k}$ . Let  $X = (X_1, \dots, X_m)$  be  $m$  commuting indeterminates and let  $\mathbb{Q}_p[[X]]$  denote the set of formal power series over  $\mathbb{Q}_p$ . The ring  $\mathbb{Q}_p\{X\}$  of restricted power series in  $X$  over the  $p$ -adic field  $\mathbb{Q}_p$  consists of the formal power series  $\sum_i a_i X^i$  in  $\mathbb{Q}_p[[X]]$  such that  $|a_i|_p \rightarrow 0$  as  $|i| \rightarrow \infty$ . Here  $i = (i_1, \dots, i_m)$  ranges over  $\mathbb{Z}_{\geq 0}^{(m)}$ ,  $|i| = i_1 + \dots + i_m$ ,  $X^i = X_1^{i_1} \dots X_m^{i_m}$ . Let  $f = \sum_i a_i X^i$  be in  $\mathbb{Q}_p\{X\}$  and  $x \in \mathbb{Z}_p^{(m)}$ . Then the series  $\sum_i a_i x^i$  converges to a limit in  $\mathbb{Q}_p$  which we denote by  $f(x)$ . The subring  $\mathbb{Z}_p\{X\}$  of  $\mathbb{Q}_p\{X\}$  consists of the series  $\sum_i a_i X^i$  in  $\mathbb{Q}_p\{X\}$  all of whose coefficients are in  $\mathbb{Z}_p$ .

Let  $L = (\mathbb{Z}_p^{(m)}, +)$ . We will consider  $L$  as a  $p$ -adic manifold. Hence for each points  $a$  of  $L$  we can define a local ring  $H_a$  at  $a$  with the maximal ideal  $\mathfrak{m}_a$ . The dual of  $\mathfrak{m}_a/\mathfrak{m}_a^2$  is the tangent space of  $L$  at  $a$  and it is denoted by  $T_a L$ . If  $K$  is another  $p$ -adic manifold and  $g: K \rightarrow L$  is an analytic map, then the induced map of the tangent spaces  $T_x K \rightarrow T_y L$  ( $y = g(x)$ ) is denoted by  $T_x g$ . For details, see [18, Part II. Chapter III]. We denote the element  $(0, \dots, 0)$  by  $\mathbf{e}$ .

**Lemma 2.1.** *Let  $Y = (Y_1, \dots, Y_n)$  and  $f = (f_1, \dots, f_m)$  be a  $m$ -tuple consisting of  $m$  formal power series from  $\mathbb{Z}_p\{Y\}$  such that  $f(\mathbf{e}) = \mathbf{e}$ . Put*

$$S = f(\mathbb{Z}_p^{(n)}) = \{(f_1(x), \dots, f_m(x)) \mid x \in \mathbb{Z}_p^{(n)}\} \subseteq \mathbb{Z}_p^{(m)}.$$

*Then the width of  $S$  in  $(\mathbb{Z}_p^{(m)}, +)$  is finite.*

**Proof.** Put  $K = \mathbb{Z}_p^{(n)}$  and  $L = (\mathbb{Z}_p^{(m)}, +)$  and let  $A$  be the closed subgroup of  $L$  generated by  $S$ . If  $L_1 = \{l \in L \mid p^k l \in A \text{ for some } k\}$ , then we can find a subgroup  $L_2$  of  $L$  such that  $L = L_1 \oplus L_2$ . We can choose new coordinates  $\{x_1, \dots, x_m\}$  of  $L$  such that  $L_1$  is given by equations  $\{x_{s+1} = \dots = x_m = 0\}$ . Then in new coordinates the map  $f$  looks like  $(h_1, \dots, h_s, 0, \dots, 0)$ . Hence, without loss of generality, we can suppose that  $S$  generates an open subgroup in  $L$ . We may clearly assume that  $L \neq 0$ .

For any  $a \in K$  define  $g_a(Y) = f(Y) - f(a)$ . Then  $g_a$  is an analytic map from  $K$  to  $L$  and  $g_a(a) = \mathbf{e}$ . This analytic map induces a map between the tangent space  $T_a g_a: T_a K \rightarrow T_{\mathbf{e}} L$ . Let us calculate the image of this map.

Let  $\partial_i$  be the partial derivation with respect to the  $i$ th coordinate. Then the functionals  $e_i: \mathfrak{m}_a/\mathfrak{m}_a^2 \rightarrow \mathbb{Q}_p$  defined by  $e_i(q) = (\partial_i q)(a)$  form a basis of  $T_a K$ . In the same way the functionals  $h_i: \mathfrak{m}_{\mathbf{e}}/\mathfrak{m}_{\mathbf{e}}^2 \rightarrow \mathbb{Q}_p$  defined by  $h_i(q) = (\partial_i q)(\mathbf{e})$  form a basis of  $T_{\mathbf{e}} L$ .

Notice that  $(T_a g_a)(e_i)(x_j) = e_i(f_j - f_j(a)) = \partial_i f_j(a)$ . Thus,

$$(T_a g_a)(e_i) = \sum_{j=1}^m \partial_i f_j(a) h_j.$$

Now consider the subspace of  $T_e L$  generated by all images of  $T_a g_a$  for all  $a$ . If this subspace is different from  $T_e L$ , then there are constants  $\alpha_1, \dots, \alpha_m$ , not all zero, such that for all  $a \in K$  and  $1 \leq i \leq N$ ,

$$0 = \sum_{j=1}^m \alpha_j \partial_i f_j(a) = \partial_i \left( \sum_{j=1}^m \alpha_j f_j \right)(a).$$

Thus  $\partial_i(\sum_{j=1}^m \alpha_j f_j) = 0$  for all  $i$ . Hence  $g = \sum_{j=1}^m \alpha_j f_j$  is a constant function. But since  $g(\mathbf{e}) = \mathbf{e}$ ,  $g$  is the zero function. But this contradicts the assumption that  $S$  generates an open subgroup in  $L$ .

Hence the subspace of  $T_e L$  generated by all images of  $T_a g_a$  is equal to  $T_e L$ . Therefore we can find  $m$  elements  $a_1, \dots, a_m$  in  $K$  such that

$$(2.1) \quad T_{a_1} g_{a_1}(T_{a_1} K) + \dots + T_{a_m} g_{a_m}(T_{a_m} K) = T_e L.$$

Define a map  $h$  from  $K^{(m)}$  to  $L$  by  $h(b_1, \dots, b_m) = g_{a_1}(b_1) + \dots + g_{a_m}(b_m)$ . Put  $b = (a_1, \dots, a_m)$ . Then, by 2.1,  $T_b h(T_b K^{(m)}) = T_e L$ . Hence from [18, Theorem 10.2, p.85] we obtain that  $h$  is a submersion and so  $h(K^{(m)})$  contains an open in  $L$  subset. Thus  $S^{*m}$  contains an open in  $A = \langle S \rangle$  subset.

Since  $A$  is a profinite group, there exists an open subgroup  $B$  of  $A$  and  $a \in A$  such that  $a + B \subseteq S^{*m}$ . Since  $A = S^{*l} + B$  for some  $l$ ,  $A = S^{*(m+l)}$ . ■

Recall that a pro- $p$  group  $G$  is called **powerful** if  $[G, G] \leq G^p$  when  $p > 2$  or  $[G, G] \leq G^4$  when  $p = 2$ . We say that a finitely generated pro- $p$  group  $G$  is **uniform** if  $G$  is powerful and without torsion. A **uniform  $\mathbb{Z}_p$ -Lie lattice** is a Lie ring  $L$  such that  $L$  is a finitely generated free  $\mathbb{Z}_p$ -module and  $[L, L]_L \leq pL$  when  $p > 2$  or  $[L, L]_L \leq 4L$  when  $p = 2$ . According to Lazard (see, for example, [4]), there is an equivalence between the category of uniform pro- $p$  groups and the category of uniform  $\mathbb{Z}_p$ -Lie lattices. The uniform  $\mathbb{Z}_p$ -Lie lattice  $\mathbf{H}$  corresponding to a uniform pro- $p$  group  $H$  has  $H$  itself as its underlying set and the Lie ring operations are given in terms of the group operations as follows: for all  $z \in \mathbb{Z}_p$  and all  $x, y \in H$  we have

$$(2.2) \quad \begin{aligned} z \cdot x &= x^z, \\ g + h &= \lim_{n \rightarrow \infty} (g^{p^n} h^{p^n})^{p^{-n}}, \\ [g, h]_L &= \lim_{n \rightarrow \infty} [g^{p^n}, h^{p^n}]^{p^{-2n}}. \end{aligned}$$

Conversely, given a uniform  $\mathbb{Z}_p$ -Lie lattice  $\mathbf{H}$  of rank  $m$ , the uniform pro- $p$  group  $H$  corresponding to  $\mathbf{H}$  can be constructed via the Baker-Campbell-Hausdorff formula. Its underlying set is again  $\mathbf{H}$ , and the group product of  $x, y \in \mathbf{H}$  is given by  $xy = \Phi(x, y)$ . Recall that the Baker-Campbell-Hausdorff formula is  $\Phi(x_1, x_2) = \log(e^{x_1}e^{x_2})$  regarded as a formal power series in two non-commuting variables (see [4, Section II.6.5]).

From now on we fix a system of free  $\mathbb{Z}_p$ -generators of  $\mathbf{H}$ . Thus to any element  $x$  from  $\mathbf{H}$  corresponds a  $m$ -tuple  $(x_1, \dots, x_m)$  from  $\mathbb{Z}_p^{(m)}$ . We will refer to this  $m$ -tuple as coordinates of  $x$  and we will regard  $\mathbf{H}$  (and so  $H$ ) as  $\mathbb{Z}_p^{(m)}$ . Then, by [2, Proposition II.8.1]), the multiplication in  $H$  is given by a  $m$ -tuple  $(F_1, \dots, F_m)$  where  $F_i \in \mathbb{Z}_p\{X\}$ .

**Corollary 2.2.** *Let  $Y = (Y_1, \dots, Y_n)$  and  $f = (f_1, \dots, f_m)$  be a  $m$ -tuple consisting of  $m$  formal power series from  $\mathbb{Z}_p\{Y\}$ . Put*

$$S = f(\mathbb{Z}_p^{(n)}) = \{(f_1(x), \dots, f_m(x)) \mid x \in \mathbb{Z}_p^{(n)}\} \subseteq H.$$

*Suppose that  $f(\mathbf{e}) = \mathbf{e}$  and the group generated by  $S$  is abelian. Then the width of  $S$  in  $H$  is finite.*

**Proof.** Since the group  $\langle S \rangle$  is abelian, we can apply Lemma 2.1, because the width of  $S$  in  $H$  is the same as the width of  $S$  in  $(\mathbf{H}, +)$ . ■

**Lemma 2.3.** *Let  $Y = (Y_1, \dots, Y_n)$  and  $f = (f_1, \dots, f_m)$  be a  $m$ -tuple consisting of  $m$  formal power series from  $\mathbb{Z}_p\{Y\}$ . Put*

$$S = f(\mathbb{Z}_p^{(n)}) = \{(f_1(x), \dots, f_m(x)) \mid x \in \mathbb{Z}_p^{(n)}\} \subseteq H.$$

*Suppose that  $f(\mathbf{e}) = \mathbf{e}$  and  $S$  is a normal set in  $H$ . Then the width of  $S$  in  $H$  is finite.*

**Proof.** Let  $T$  be the closed subgroup generated by  $S$ . Since  $S$  is a normal set in  $H$ ,  $T$  is a normal subgroup of  $H$ . Hence the set

$$R = \{x \in H \mid x^{p^k} \in [T, T] \text{ for some } k\}$$

is also normal subgroup in  $H$ . Put  $\bar{H} = H/R$ . Note that  $\bar{H}$  is a uniform pro- $p$  group. Moreover,  $R$  is an ideal of  $\mathbf{H}$ . Hence we can choose new coordinates  $\{x_1, \dots, x_m\}$  of  $\mathbf{H}$  in such way that  $R$  is defined by equations  $\{x_1 = \dots = x_s = 0\}$ . Suppose that in these new coordinates the map  $f$  looks like  $(g_1, \dots, g_m)$ . Note that the first  $s$  coordinates  $(x_1, \dots, x_s)$  of  $\mathbf{H}$  determine uniquely an element  $\bar{x}$  from  $\bar{\mathbf{H}}$  and they are coordinates of  $\bar{x}$  with respect to some system of  $\mathbb{Z}_p$ -generators of  $\bar{\mathbf{H}}$ . Thus, the composition of  $f$  with the natural epimorphism to  $\bar{\mathbf{H}}$  looks like  $(g_1, \dots, g_s)$ . Since the set  $\bar{S} = SR/R$

generates an abelian subgroup in  $\bar{H}$ , we obtain from the previous corollary that there exists  $l_1$  such that  $T = S^{*l_1}R$ . On the other hand  $R/[T, T]$  is finite, whence we also obtain that  $T = S^{*l_2}[T, T]$  for some  $l_2$ .

Since  $H$  is uniform,  $T$  is finitely generated. Let  $t_1, \dots, t_l \in S$  be the generators of  $T$  as a pro- $p$  group. Then  $[T, T] = [t_1, T] \cdots [t_l, T]$  (see [4, Proof of Proposition 1.19]) and so, since  $S$  is normal,  $[T, T] \subseteq S^{*2l}$ . Hence  $T = S^{*(2l+l_2)}$ . ■

**Proof of Theorem 1.3 .** Since  $G$  is  $p$ -adic analytic,  $G$  has an open uniform normal pro- $p$  subgroup  $H$  (see [4, Corollary 8.34]). Let  $\{a_i \mid 1 \leq i \leq |G : H|\}$  be a transversal of  $G$  over  $H$ . For each  $i = (i_1, \dots, i_k)$  define the function  $g_i : H^{(2k)} \rightarrow H$  by means of

$$g_i(h_{1,i}, \dots, h_{2k,i}) = w(a_{i_1}h_{1,i}, \dots, a_{i_k}h_{k,i})w(a_{i_1}h_{k+1,i}, \dots, a_{i_k}h_{2k,i})^{-1}.$$

Choose any order on  $k$ -tuples and put  $f = \prod_i g_i$ . Then  $f$  is a function from  $H^{2k|G:H|^k}$  to  $H$ . Moreover, if we regard  $H$  as  $\mathbb{Z}_p^{(m)}$  then  $f$  is an  $m$ -tuple of functions from  $\mathbb{Z}_p\{Y\}$ , where  $Y = (Y_1, \dots, Y_n)$  and  $N = 2Mk|G : H|^k$ . Put  $S = f(\mathbb{Z}_p^{(n)})$  and let  $T$  be the closed subgroup generated by  $S$ .

If  $h, h_1, \dots, h_k \in H$  and  $1 \leq i_1, \dots, i_k \leq |G : H|$ , then

$$w(a_{i_1}h_1, \dots, a_{i_k}h_k)^h = w(a_{i_1}[a_{i_1}, h]h_1^h, \dots, a_{i_k}[a_{i_k}, h]h_k^h).$$

Therefore  $S$  is a normal set in  $H$ , and so,  $T$  is a normal subgroup of  $G$ . By the previous lemma, there exists  $l$  such that  $T = S^{*l}$ . Since  $S^{*l} \subseteq (G^{\{w\}})^{*2lMk|G:H|^k}$ , we obtain that  $T \subseteq (G^{\{w\}})^{*m_1}$  for some  $m_1$ .

Consider the group  $\bar{G} = G/T$ . Note that the word  $w$  takes only finitely many different values in  $\bar{G}$ . Since  $\bar{G}$  is a  $p$ -adic analytic group, it is linear. Hence, by Merzlyakov’s solution of Hall’s problem for linear groups [10],  $w(\bar{G}) = w(G)/T$  is finite. Thus,  $w(G) = (G^{\{w\}})^{*m_2}T = (G^{\{w\}})^{*(m_1+m_2)}$  for some  $m_2$ . ■

We recall that P. Hall’s question is

**Question.** Let  $G$  be a group and  $w$  a word from a free group. Suppose that the word  $w$  takes only finitely many different values in  $G$ . Is it true that  $w(G)$  is finite?

S. Ivanov [8] answered this question for arbitrary groups in the negative; he constructed a group  $H$  and a word  $w(x, y)$  such that  $w(H)$  is infinite cyclic but  $w(x, y)$  has only one non-trivial value in  $H$ . Ivanov’s example is not residually finite. So as far as I know, P. Hall’s question for profinite groups is still open.

### 3. Verbal subgroups corresponding to $\mathcal{N}_p$ -words

In this section we prove that if  $H$  is a finitely generated pro- $p$  group then  $w(H)$  is closed for any  $\mathcal{N}_p$ -word  $w$ . First we prove Theorem 1.2.

**Proof of Theorem 1.2.** The implications  $1 \Rightarrow 2 \Rightarrow 3 \Rightarrow 4$  are clear.

Suppose now that the third condition holds. If  $w$  is not a  $\mathcal{N}_p$ -word, then by [3] (see also [17]), there is a finitely generated non  $p$ -adic analytic pro- $p$  group  $H$  such that  $w(H) = 1$ . From [19] it follows that  $w(C_p \wr \mathbb{Z}) = 1$ , a contradiction. Hence  $3 \Rightarrow 1$ .

Now  $4 \Rightarrow 3$  follows, for example, from [11, Theorem 22.43]. ■

**Theorem 3.1.** *Let  $w$  be a  $\mathcal{N}_p$ -word and  $G$  a finitely generated pro- $p$  group. Then  $w(G)$  is closed.*

**Proof.** Let  $d = d(G)$  and  $H$  be a free pro- $p$  group on generators  $x_1, \dots, x_d, z$ . Since  $w$  is a  $\mathcal{N}_p$ -word,  $\gamma_n(H^{p^t}) \leq \overline{w(H)}$  for some  $n$  and  $t$ .

Denote by  $y_1, \dots, y_s$  generators of  $\overline{\langle x_1, \dots, x_d \rangle^{p^t}}$ . Note that  $y_i$  are pro- $p$  words in  $x_i$  (and do not involve  $z$ ). By Theorem 1.3, there exists  $k$  such that for any,  $i_1, \dots, i_n \in \{1, \dots, s\}$ ,

$$[z, y_{i_1}, y_{i_2}, \dots, y_{i_n}] \equiv v_{i_1, \dots, i_n} \pmod{\gamma_{n+2}(H^{p^t})},$$

where  $v_{i_1, \dots, i_n}$  is a product of at most  $k$   $w$ -values in  $H$ . Thus,

$$v_{i_1, \dots, i_n}(x_1, \dots, x_d, z) = [z, y_{i_1}, y_{i_2}, \dots, y_{i_n}]r_{i_1, \dots, i_n}(x_1, \dots, x_d, z)$$

with  $r_{i_1, \dots, i_n}(x_1, \dots, x_d, z) \in \gamma_{n+2}(H^{p^t})$ .

Let  $h_1, \dots, h_d$  be generators of  $G$ .

*Claim 1.* Let  $a \in \gamma_m(G^{p^t})$ ,  $g \in G$  and  $r \in \gamma_l(H^{p^t})$ . Then

$$r(h_1, \dots, h_d, g) \equiv r(h_1, \dots, h_d, ga) \pmod{\gamma_{m+l-1}(G^{p^t})}.$$

When  $l = 1$ , the claim is clear. The general case follows by induction on  $l$ .

*Claim 2.*  $\gamma_{n+1}(G^{p^t}) = \prod_{i_1, \dots, i_n} v_{i_1, \dots, i_n}(h_1, \dots, h_d, G^{p^t})$ .

By induction on  $m$  we prove that if  $m \geq n + 1$  then

$$\gamma_{n+1}(G^{p^t}) = \prod_{i_1, \dots, i_n} v_{i_1, \dots, i_n}(h_1, \dots, h_d, H^{p^t})\gamma_m(G^{p^t}).$$

This implies the claim because the set

$$\prod_{i_1, \dots, i_n} v_{i_1, \dots, i_n}(h_1, \dots, h_d, H^{p^t})$$

is closed.

The base of induction  $m = n + 1$  is clear. Suppose it holds for  $m$ . Let prove it for  $m + 1$ . Let  $h \in \gamma_{n+1}(G^{p^t})$ . By the inductive hypothesis, there are  $g_{i_1, \dots, i_n} \in H^{p^t}$  and  $u \in \gamma_m(G^{p^t})$  such that

$$h = \prod_{i_1, \dots, i_n} v_{i_1, \dots, i_n}(h_1, \dots, h_d, g_{i_1, \dots, i_n})u.$$

We can write

$$u \equiv \prod_{i_1, \dots, i_n} [t_{i_1, \dots, i_n}, \tilde{y}_{i_1}, \dots, \tilde{y}_{i_n}] \pmod{\gamma_{m+1}(G^{p^t})},$$

where  $\tilde{y}_j = y_j(h_1, \dots, h_d)$  and  $t_{i_1, \dots, i_n} \in \gamma_{m-n}(G^{p^t})$ . Thus,

$$h \equiv \prod_{i_1, \dots, i_n} [g_{i_1, \dots, i_n} t_{i_1, \dots, i_n}, \tilde{y}_{i_1}, \dots, \tilde{y}_{i_n}] r_{i_1, \dots, i_n}(h_1, \dots, h_d, g_{i_1, \dots, i_n}) \pmod{\gamma_{m+1}(G^{p^t})}.$$

By Claim 1,

$$r_{i_1, \dots, i_n}(h_1, \dots, h_d, g_{i_1, \dots, i_n}) \equiv r_{i_1, \dots, i_n}(h_1, \dots, h_d, g_{i_1, \dots, i_n} t_{i_1, \dots, i_n}) \pmod{\gamma_{m+1}(G^{p^t})}.$$

Hence we have

$$h \equiv \prod_{i_1, \dots, i_n} v_{i_1, \dots, i_n}(h_1, \dots, h_d, g_{i_1, \dots, i_n} t_{i_1, \dots, i_n}) \pmod{\gamma_{m+1}(G^{p^t})}.$$

This finishes the proof of the claim.

It follows that the closed subgroup  $\gamma_{n+1}(G^{p^t})$  is contained in  $w(G)$ . We may therefore apply Theorem 1.3 and deduce that

$$w(G)/\gamma_{n+1}(G^{p^t}) = w(G/\gamma_{n+1}(G^{p^t}))$$

is closed. Hence  $w(G)$  is closed. ■

### 4. Words of infinite width

In this section we prove that if  $F$  is a non-abelian free group and  $1 \neq w \in (F')^p F''$ , then  $w(H)$  is not closed in a free finitely generated non-abelian free pro- $p$  group  $H$ . These examples generalize the example of Roman'kov [15] who proved the same statement for  $w = [[x, y], [z, u]]$ .

**Theorem 4.1.** *Let  $F$  be a non-abelian free group,  $p$  a prime number and  $H$  a non-abelian finitely generated free pro- $p$  group. Suppose that  $1 \neq w \in (F')^p F''$ . Then the verbal subgroup  $w(H)$  is not closed.*



We explain first the strategy of the proof of this theorem. We suppose the contrary, that there exists  $k$  such that any element of  $w(H)$  is a product of at most  $k$   $w$ -values in  $H$ . Hence since  $w \in (F')^p F''$  there exists a number  $l$  depending on  $w$  such that any element of  $w(H)$  is a product of at most  $l$  values of the word  $x^p[y, z]$  in  $H'$ . Now, note that  $H'$  is a free pro- $p$  group of infinite rank and  $w(H)$  is a normal subgroup of  $H'$ . Then the following proposition leads us to a contradiction.

**Proposition 4.2.** 1. *Let  $K$  be a free pro- $p$  group of rank  $d$  and  $\{1\} \neq N$  a closed normal subgroup of  $K$ . Then there exists an element  $g \in N$  such that  $g$  cannot be represented as a product of less than  $\lfloor d/3 \rfloor$  values of the word  $x^p[y, z]$  in  $K$ .*

2. *Let  $K$  be a free pro- $p$  group of infinite rank and  $\{1\} \neq N$  a closed normal subgroup of  $K$ . Then for any  $l \in \mathbb{N}$  there exists an element  $g \in N$  such that  $g$  cannot be represented as a product of less than  $l$  values of the word  $x^p[y, z]$  in  $K$ .*

Before the proof of the proposition we present an auxiliary result. For any pro- $p$  group  $G$ , let  $D_i(G)$  be the  $i$ th dimension subgroup of  $G$  (see e.g. [4, Chapter 11]). Let  $K$  be a free pro- $p$  group of rank  $d$  and  $\{1\} \neq N$  a closed normal subgroup of  $K$ . Put  $N_i = N \cap D_i(K)$  and define the following numbers:

$$a_i = \log_p |D_i(K) : D_{i+1}(K)|, \quad b_i = \log_p |K : D_{i+1}(K)|,$$

$$c_i = \log_p |N_i : N_{i+1}|, \quad d_i = \log_p |N : N_{i+1}| = \log_p |ND_{i+1}(K) : D_{i+1}(K)|.$$

**Lemma 4.3.** *When  $n$  tends to infinity the following holds*

1.  $a_n = \frac{d^n}{n}(1 + o(1))$ ;
2.  $b_n = \frac{d^{n+1}}{(d-1)^n}(1 + o(1))$ ;
3.  $c_n = \frac{d^n}{n}(1 + o(1))$ ;
4.  $d_n = \frac{d^{n+1}}{(d-1)^n}(1 + o(1))$ .

**Proof.** Let  $L$  be a free Lie algebra generated by  $d$  elements. Then  $L$  can be graded in a standard way if we suppose that free generators are elements of degree 1. Then we can write  $L = \bigoplus_i L_i$ . The following formula

$$\dim L_i = M_d(n) = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{k|n} \mu(k) d^{n/k}$$

is well-known. Moreover,  $M_d(n) = \frac{d^n}{n}(1 + o(1))$  (see [7, Chapter VIII]).

Recall that if  $G$  is a pro- $p$  group, then  $L_p(G) = \oplus D_i(G)/D_{i+1}(G)$  has the structure of a restricted Lie  $\mathbb{F}_p$ - algebra. Moreover,  $L_p(K)$  is a free  $p$ -restricted Lie  $\mathbb{F}_p$ -algebra. The construction of a free Lie restricted  $\mathbb{F}_p$ -algebra from a free Lie  $\mathbb{F}_p$ -algebra is described, for example, in [2, Exercise 2.3.4]. It follows that if  $n = p^s m$ , where  $m$  and  $p$  are coprime, then

$$a_n = \log_p |D_n(K) : D_{n+1}(K)| = \sum_{k=0}^s M_d(mp^k).$$

This is an easy exercise to obtain from this that  $a_n = \frac{d^n}{n}(1 + o(1))$ .

Now, since

$$\lim_{n \rightarrow \infty} a_n = \lim_{n \rightarrow \infty} b_n = \infty \text{ and } \lim_{n \rightarrow \infty} \frac{a_{n+1} - a_n}{b_{n+1} - b_n} = \frac{d - 1}{d},$$

we obtain that  $\lim_{n \rightarrow \infty} \frac{a_n}{b_n} = \frac{d-1}{d}$ . Hence  $b_n = \frac{d^{n+1}}{(d-1)^n}(1 + o(1))$ .

Put  $G = K/N$ . Then  $p$ -enveloping algebra of  $L_p(G)$  is a proper quotient of a free  $\mathbb{F}_p$ -algebra on  $d$ -generators. Hence, by [5] (see also [12, Theorem 3.1] and [14, Theorem 15]), there exists  $\alpha < d$  such that

$$a_i - c_i = \log_p |D_i(G)/D_{i+1}(G)| \leq \alpha^n$$

when  $n$  tends to infinity. This inequality with the previous estimation for  $a_n$  implies that  $c_n = \frac{d^n}{n}(1 + o(1))$ . As in the case  $b_n$ , we obtain that  $d_n = \frac{d^{n+1}}{(d-1)^n}(1 + o(1))$ . ■

Now we are ready to prove Proposition 4.2.

**Proof of Proposition 4.2.** 1. Put  $V_n = \{g_1^p[g_2, g_3] \in K/D_{n+1}(K) \mid g_i \in K/D_{n+1}(K)\}$ . Then, by Lemma 4.3,

$$|V_n| \leq |K/D_n(K)|^3 = p^{3b_{n-1}} = p^{\frac{3d^n}{(d-1)^{n-1}}(1+o(1))}.$$

On the other hand applying again Lemma 4.3, we obtain that

$$|ND_{n+1}(K)/D_{n+1}(K)| = p^{\frac{d^{n+1}}{(d-1)^n}(1+o(1))}.$$

Comparing these two expressions we obtain 1.

2. In order to prove 2, it is enough to observe that for any  $d > 1$ , a free pro- $p$  group of infinite rank is residually-free pro- $p$  of rank  $d$ . Hence for any  $d > 1$  there exists a homomorphism of  $K$  onto a free pro- $p$  group of rank  $d$  such that the image of  $N$  is not trivial. Then we can apply 1. Since  $d$  is arbitrary, we obtain 2. ■

**Remark 4.4.** The first statement of Proposition 4.2 has the following interpretation. For any closed subset  $V$  of  $K$  define its Hausdorff dimension (see [1]):

$$\dim_H V = \liminf_{n \rightarrow \infty} \frac{\log |VD_n(K) : D_n(K)|}{\log |K : D_n(K)|}.$$

In the proof of Proposition 4.2 we have shown that  $\dim_H N = 1$  for any nontrivial normal subgroup  $N$  of  $K$  and  $\dim_H K^{\{x^p[y,z]\}} \leq \frac{3}{d}$ .

## 5. Final remarks

### 5.1. The finite verbal width and the Restricted Burnside Problem

If  $H$  is a finitely generated pro- $p$  group and  $w = x^{p^n}$ , then all known proofs that  $w(H)$  is closed use the Zelmanov’s solution of the Restricted Burnside Problem. For example, from Zelmanov’s result it follows that  $w$  is a  $\mathcal{N}_p$ -word and then we can apply Theorem 3.1. In [16, page 53], Dan Segal suggested that it would be very interesting to prove that  $H^{p^n}$  is closed without appealing to Zelmanov’s result. Using the ideas of the previous section we will show that it would give an alternative solution of the Restricted Burnside Problem.

**Theorem 5.1.** *Let  $F$  be a free group and  $w \in F$ . Put  $t = w^p$ . Then if  $t(G)$  is closed for any finitely generated pro- $p$  group  $G$ , then  $w(G)$  is open for any finitely generated pro- $p$  group  $G$ .*

**Proof.** Note that in the proof of Theorem 3.1 we have used the solution of the Restricted Burnside Problem (we needed  $H^{p^s}$  to be open). However, if we assume that  $w$  satisfies a stronger condition:  $G/\overline{w(G)}$  is nilpotent for any finitely generated pro- $p$  group  $G$ , then we obtain that  $w$  is of finite width without appealing to the solution of the Restricted Burnside Problem.

Let, now,  $H$  be a non abelian finitely generated free pro- $p$  group and  $\overline{w(H)}$  the closure of  $w(H)$  in  $H$ . First we assume that  $\overline{w(H)}$  is not open. Since  $H$  is a non-abelian free pro- $p$  group, then  $\overline{w(H)}$  is a free pro- $p$  group of infinite rank. Now, using the argument of the proof of Theorem 4.1, we obtain that  $t(H)$  is not closed.

Hence we can assume that  $\overline{w(H)}$  is open. In particular,  $H/\overline{w(H)}$  is nilpotent. Thus, from the first paragraph we obtain that  $w(H)$  is also closed and so open. ■

### 5.2. Pronilpotent groups

In this subsection we show how our previous results on pro- $p$  groups can be generalized on pronilpotent groups. The possibility of this generalization has been suggested to us by Dan Segal.

We say that  $w$  is a  $\mathcal{N}$ -word if for any finitely generated pronilpotent group  $H$ ,  $H/\overline{w(H)}$  is nilpotent-by-finite, where  $\overline{w(H)}$  denotes the closure of  $w(H)$  in  $H$ . The following characterization of  $\mathcal{N}$ -words is due to Dan Segal.

**Theorem 5.2.** *Let  $w$  be an element of a free group  $F$ . Then the following are equivalent*

1.  $w$  is a  $\mathcal{N}$ -word;
2.  $w$  is a  $\mathcal{N}_p$ -word for all primes  $p$ .

**Proof.** The implication  $1 \Rightarrow 2$  is clear. Let us prove  $2 \Rightarrow 1$ .

Let  $d$  be a natural number,  $U$  a free group on  $d$  generators and  $T$  the maximal residually nilpotent quotient of  $U/w(U)$ . Since  $w$  is a  $\mathcal{N}_2$ -word, the pro-2 completion  $T_2$  of  $T$  is virtually nilpotent, and so of finite rank. Using [9, Lemma 9, page 386], we obtain that there exists a finite set  $\pi$  of primes such that  $T$  is embedded in  $\prod_{p \in \pi} T_p$ . Applying again that  $w$  is a  $\mathcal{N}_p$ -word for all primes  $p \in \pi$ , we conclude that  $T$  is virtually nilpotent.

Let now  $H$  be a finitely generated pronilpotent group and  $\bar{H} = H/\overline{w(H)}$ . Put  $d = d(H)$ . Let  $T_1$  be a dense  $d$ -generated subgroup of  $\bar{H}$ . Then,  $T_1$  is a quotient of  $T$ . Hence  $T_1$  and  $\bar{H}$  are virtually nilpotent. ■

Now, we are ready to prove the main theorem of this subsection.

**Theorem 5.3.** *Let  $1 \neq w$  be an element of a free group  $F$ . Then the following two statements are equivalent:*

1.  $w(H)$  is closed for every finitely generated pronilpotent group  $H$ ;
2.  $w \notin \bigcup_{p \text{ prime}} (F')^p F''$ .

**Proof.** The implication  $1 \Rightarrow 2$  follows from Theorem 1.1. Now assume that  $w \notin \bigcup_p (F')^p F''$ . Then by Theorems 1.2 and 5.2,  $w$  is a  $\mathcal{N}$ -word. We will argue as in the proof of Theorem 3.1.

Let  $G$  be a finitely generated pronilpotent group,  $d = d(G)$  and  $H$  a free pronilpotent group on generators  $x_1, \dots, x_d, z$ . Since  $w$  is a  $\mathcal{N}$ -word,  $\gamma_n(H^t) \leq \overline{w(H)}$  for some  $n$  and  $t$ . We write  $G$  as  $G = G_1 \times G_2$ , where  $G_1$  is the product of all the Sylow pro- $p$  subgroups with  $p \in \pi(t)$  and  $G_2$  is the product of the rest of the Sylow pro- $p$  subgroups. In the same way we write  $H = H_1 \times H_2$ . Note that  $w(G)$  is closed if and only if  $w(G_1)$  and  $w(G_2)$  are closed. Since  $w(G_1)$  is closed by Theorem 1.1, it is enough to prove only that  $w(G_2)$  is closed.

By our construction of  $H_2$  we have that  $\gamma_n(H_2) \leq \overline{w(H_2)}$ . Repeating the argument from the proof of Theorem 3.1, we obtain that any element of  $\gamma_n(G_2)$  is a product of a bounded number of  $w$ -values in  $G_2$ . The Stroud-Roman'kov theorem [20, 15] says that any word  $w$  has a finite width in a finitely generated nilpotent group. If the word  $w$  has width at most  $l$  in the free  $d$ -generator nilpotent group of class  $n - 1$ , then  $w$  has width at most  $l$  in every finite quotient of this group; consequently  $w(G_2/\gamma_n(G_2))$  is closed. Thus we conclude that  $w(G_2)$  is also closed. ■

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