Phyllotaxis as a Physical Self-Organized Growth Process

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A specific crystalline order, involving the Fibonacci series, had until now only been observed in plants (phyllotaxis). Here, these patterns are obtained both in a physics laboratory experiment and in a numerical simulation. They arise from self-organization in an iterative process. They are selected depending on only one parameter describing the successive appearance of new elements, and on initial conditions. The ordering is explained as due to the system's trend to avoid rational (periodic) organization, thus leading to a convergence towards the golden mean.

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The elements of a plant (leaves, sepals, florets, etc.) form very regular patterns, with a crystallinelike order. In the most common arrangement (e.g., on a sunflower head or a pinecone), the eye is attracted to conspicuous spirals (the parastichies) linking each element to its nearest neighbors. The whole surface is covered with a number \( i \) of parallel spirals running in one direction, and \( j \) in the other. The most striking feature is that \((i,j)\) are nearly always two consecutive numbers of the Fibonacci series, \( \{F_k\} \equiv \{1,1,2,3,5,8,13,21,34,\ldots\} \) where each new term is the sum of the two preceding ones. Early works [1-3] showed that such patterns resulted from the successive appearance of the elements on a uniquely tightly wound spiral, called the generative spiral. The basic quantity is then the divergence \( \Phi \), which is the angle between the radial directions of two consecutive elements. Measurements [3] of divergences on mature plants showed that they were surprisingly close to the golden section: \( \Phi = 2\pi (1 - \tau) \approx 137.5^\circ \), where \( \tau = (-1 + \sqrt{5}) / 2 \) is the golden mean.

A basic hypothesis is that these phyllotactic patterns result from the conditions of appearance of the primordia near the tip of the growing shoots (for reviews see Refs. [4] and [5]). The stem tips (the apical meristems) have axisymmetric profiles [Fig. 1(a)]. The summit is occupied by a stable region: the apex. The primordia (which will evolve into leaves, petals, stamens, florets, etc.) are first visible as small protrusions at the periphery of the apex. In the reference frame of the tip, due to the growth, the existing primordia are advected away from the apex while new ones continue to be formed [6]. In botany, it was suggested [7] that a new primordium appears with a periodicity \( T \) near the tip in the largest gap left between the previous primordia and the apex.

Altogether this forms an iterative process which we wish to investigate as a dynamical system. To implement a laboratory experiment and a numerical simulation, we retained from botany the following characteristics: Identical elements are generated with a periodicity \( T \) at a given radius \( R_0 \) from a center in a plane surface [8]. They are radially advected at velocity \( V_0 \), and there is a repulsive interaction between them (so that the new element will appear as far as possible from the preceding ones, i.e., in the largest available place). The results can be interpreted using only one adimensional parameter \( G = V_0 T / R_0 \).

The experimental system [Fig. 1(b)] consists of a horizontal dish filled with silicone oil and placed in a vertical magnetic field \( H(r) \) created by two coils near the Helmholz position. Drops of ferrofluid of equal volume \((c = 10 \, \text{mm}^3)\) fall with a tunable periodicity \( T \) at the center of the cell. The drops are polarized by the field and form small magnetic dipoles, which repel each other with a force proportional to \( d^{-4} \) (where \( d \) is their distance). These dipoles are advected by a radial gradient of the magnetic field (from \( 2.4 \times 10^4 \, \text{A/m} \) at the center to \( 2.48 \times 10^4 \, \text{A/m} \) at the border of the dish), their velocity \( V(r) \) being limited by the viscous friction of the oil. In order to model the apex, the dish has a small truncated cone at its center, so that the drop introduced at its tip quickly falls to its periphery. \( G \) can be tuned by changing either the periodicity \( T \) or the gradient of \( H \) (controlling

FIG. 1. (a) Sketch of the growth in plants. (b) Sketch of the experimental apparatus.
FIG. 2. Three photographs of experimental patterns. The numbers show the order of deposition of the drops (arbitrary origin). (a) $G = 1, \varphi = 180^\circ$. (b) $G = 0.7, \varphi = 150^\circ$ with $(i=1, j=2)$. (c) $G = 0.15, \varphi \approx 139^\circ$ with $(i=3, j=5)$.

$V_0$). The drops ultimately fall into a ditch at the periphery. We used an ionic ferrofluid in nitric acid [9] with a volumetric concentration of 8%. The magnetization was $M = \chi H$ with $\chi = 0.493$.

The experiment shows that the final steady pattern depends crucially on $G$. For a strong advection [Fig. 2(a), $G = 1$], each new drop is repelled only by the previous one so that successive drops move away in opposite directions (this mode with $\varphi = 180^\circ$ is called the alternate or distichous mode in botany). Below a threshold $G_{1,1}$ each new drop is repelled by the two previous ones and cannot remain in line with them. When the third drop slides to one of either side of this line there is a symmetry breaking into a chiral mode which selects once and for all the direction of rotation of the generative spiral. A steady regime is reached with a constant divergence $\varphi$ [in Fig. 2(b), $\varphi = 150^\circ$ and $i = 1, j = 2$]. For smaller $G$ the new drop becomes sensitive to the interaction of three or more previous ones, and the divergence gets nearer to $\Phi$. In Fig. 2(c) for $G = 0.15, \varphi \approx 139^\circ$ and the spiral Fibonacci mode is $i = 3, j = 5$.

Our numerical simulations are based on similar physical hypotheses. In a plane, the locus of appearance of elements is a circle $C$ of radius $R_0$ centered at the origin. These elements are punctual particles, each generating a repulsive energy $E(d)$, where $d$ is the distance to the particle. Several energy laws were used, $1/d, 1/d^3$ (case of the ferrofluid drops), and $\exp(-d/l)$: the results were qualitatively the same. To decide the place of birth of a particle, we compute in each point of the circle $C$ the value of the total energy due to all the previous particles, and place the new element at the point of minimum energy. All particles after their appearance are given the same radial motion with a velocity $V(r)$, thus neglecting any later reorganization due to the interaction of particles [10]. In this case the results are qualitatively independent of the chosen radial motion. In order to remain close to botany [4,5] we chose an exponential growth $[V(r) = V_0r/R_0]$.

A brutal way to start the simulation is, at a fixed value of $G$, to begin without any previous particles and to see which pattern is spontaneously obtained. For large $G$ ($> 0.4$) the divergence angles are the same as in the experiment. But for small $G$, the system undergoes long transients, and either converges on various steady regimes (with several possible values of $\varphi$) or stabilizes on more or less complicated periodic regimes. We will focus on the steady regimes [11]. The possible values of $\varphi$ plotted versus $G$ form several curves (Fig. 3). In order to investigate the limits of existence of each curve, we also initially forced an artificial pattern and observed whether it could keep growing. We find all the curves in Fig. 3 to be interrupted above a limiting value of $G$, except for the main one. All the obtained patterns present spirals with a given set of parastichies numbers $(i, j)$ (Fig. 4). Along a

FIG. 3. Diagram of the steady divergences $\varphi$ ($\varphi > 0$) obtained as a function of $G$ for two energy profiles $1/d^3$ (triangles) and $\exp(-d/l)$ with $l = 0.1$ (squares). The solid line shows a diagram obtained using the geometrical condition. Inset: Detail of a transition.
of the radius of the disks to that of the cylinder. In our case, a diagram of this type can also be obtained by stating that a new particle appears exactly equidistant from \( n-i \) and \( n-j \) [cf. Fig. 1(a)]. This approximation transforms our dynamical problem into a geometrical one. If a geometrical constant \( H \) of the assumed regular spiral [15] is set equivalent to \( G \), it is possible to compare the geometrical relation between \( \varphi \) and \( H \) [for each \((i,j)\)] and our simulations results (Fig. 3). As in all geometrical models [12–14], the curve corresponding to parastichies \((i,j)\) (with \( j > i \)) is connected at \( G_{ij} \) with the two curves \((j,i+j)\) and \((i,i+j)\). The geometrical models fail to obtain the selection because they do not take into account the fact that the condition on the new element is not only to be located between two previous ones, but also that its place should be the best (e.g., the largest space). To our knowledge only one previous work [16] has used such a criterion in the simulation of the diffusion of an inhibitor in a cylindrical geometry. A convergence of \( \varphi \) towards \( \Phi \) had been obtained though the overall structure of the bifurcations diagram was not described.

All the bifurcations and their imperfections can be simply interpreted. For parastichies numbers \((i,j)\), the new particle \( n \) is repelled essentially by the \( j \) previous ones, and is precisely between \( n-i \) and \( n-j \) [17]. If \( G \) was decreased and no other particles other than the latest \( j \) are taken into account, the divergence would tend toward a rational: \( n \) would appear at the same angular position as a previous particle, which, from the regularity of the pattern, is \( n-\hat{\varphi}(i+j) \). But near \( G_{ij} \), the repulsion due to \( n-(i+j) \) becomes no longer negligible and \( n \) slides to avoid the proximity of this particle. As \( n-j \) is older than \( n-i \), the situation is not symmetrical and \( n \) is always angularly between \( n-(i+j) \) and \( n-j \) [Fig. 1(a)]. Below \( G_{ij} \), \( n \) thus slides between \( n-j \) and \( n-(i+j) \) selecting the transition with the Fibonacci rule. When \( G \) is decreased, the system thus avoids all the successive possible periodic arrangements and \( \varphi \) converges towards the simplest irrational numbers. Figure 4 shows a pattern obtained after a short transition (lasting \( 6T \)) in which \( G \) has decreased from 1 to 0.01. In the resulting steady regime \( i=13, j=21 \) and \( \varphi=137.47^\circ \).

Our results can be compared to those of Levitov [18] published during the course of our work. In a cylindrical geometry he assumed a regular helical lattice with repelling elements, and sought the lattice slope for which the interaction energy is minimum. He showed that the compression of the whole lattice produces a similar diagram of imperfect bifurcations. This theoretical work appeared far from the problem of botanical growth. The relation to our work, however, is similar to that between the investigation of the energy of periodic lattices and the search for the growth mechanism of crystals. The convergence of both results shows that the dynamics of appearance of the new primordia at the place of lowest repulsive energy creates a final structure of minimum glo-
bal interaction energy.

Examining finally the relevance of our results to botany we can note that the process we described is robust relative to the law of interaction. A hypothesis for the physiological process of the primordia’s interaction was thus not necessary. Our model is also robust relative to change of the criterion of appearance of a new primordium [19]. The plants’ growth is usually characterized by the plastochrone ratio $P$ [20,21] which is directly related to $G (P = \exp(G))$. This parameter is known to vary during the growth [16]. For instance Meienheimer [21] showed that the continuous evolution of phyllotaxis from vegetative growth to flowering was essentially due to a decrease of $P$. Our main result is that when $G$ decreases the parastichies numbers follow the Fibonacci series and $\varphi$ tends to oscillate towards $\Phi$ [22]. This self-organization through an iterative process could thus explain the appearance and selection of the spiral botanical patterns showing a Fibonacci order.

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1. Also at Laboratoire de Physique, Ecole Normale Supérieure Lyon, 46 allée d’Italie, 69364 Lyon, CEDEX 07, France.
2. K. F. Schimper, Geiger’s Mag. für Pharm. 29, 1 (1830).
8. The exact geometry should not be an important parameter, provided it has axisymmetry. In botany, similar phyllotactic modes are obtained with various apical meristem profiles.
10. Note that the repulsion of the particles is only important initially. We checked this in the experiment: The trajectories of the drops are radial except very near the center. This is also coherent with the botanical observations, in which no primordia motions were ever reported.
11. The regime in which $\varphi$ oscillates in time corresponds either to the steady patterns in which pairs of particles have their appearance order inverted or to a rarer family of phyllotactic patterns: the bivariate arrangements, with two “generative spirals” and parastichy numbers double those of the Fibonacci series.
12. G. van Iterson, Mathematische und Mikroskopische Anatominische Studien über Blattstellungen, nebst Betrachtungen über den Schalenbau der Miliolinen (Gustav-Fisher-Verlag, Iena, 1907).
15. In the geometrical model the positions of the particles are $a$ priori on an artificial generative spiral: $n(n) = n\varphi, N(n) = N_{\exp}(n\varphi)$.
17. It is equivalent to say (Ref. [3]) that the appearance order of the two neighbors of the new particle $n$ is $n-i$ and $n-j$, and that the parastichy numbers are $(i, j)$.
19. In a different hypothesis I. M. Snow and R. Snow, Philos. Trans. R. Soc. London B 244, 483 (1962) a primordium only appears near the apex where and when there is a space of a certain minimum size. We thus, in our simulation, left free the time of appearance of a new element but added the condition that it could only appear when the minimum energy became smaller than a threshold $E_s$. We obtained the same steady regimes shown in Fig. 3 with an appearance period $T(E_s)$. In this simulation, however, other phyllotactic patterns where several particles appeared at the same time could also be reached. As these modes of growth exist in plants (e.g., the opposite decussate mode) this criterion has probably a more general relevance in botany [S. Douady and Y. Couder (to be published)].
22. A discontinuous evolution of $G$ can induce a jump to the other curves $\varphi(G)$ and result into the patterns with secondary Fibonacci series which are found as anomalies in plants.
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