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Existence and Stability of Traveling Wave Solutions in Reaction–Diffusion Equations

Rajesh Kumar

Department of Mathematics
Damyanti Raj Anand Government Degree College Bisauli, Budaun, Uttar Pradesh, India
E-mail: rajmathraj@rediffmail.com

Abstract:
Traveling fronts are the coherent structures of scalar reaction–diffusion equations: a fixed profile translating at constant speed, the mathematical image of invasion. In this expository article we develop the classical existence and stability theory for monotone fronts of the scalar equation $u_t = Du_{xx} + f(u)$ in one space dimension. The traveling wave ansatz reduces the partial differential equation to a second-order ordinary differential equation whose heteroclinic orbits are the fronts. We present the existence theory in its two principal cases: the bistable case, where phase-plane shooting (Fife [6]) yields a unique speed whose sign is the sign of the integral of f, and the monostable (KPP) case, where the linear prediction $c^* = 2\sqrt{Df'(0)}$ of Kolmogorov, Petrovsky, and Piskunov [2] is sharp (Aronson–Weinberger [3, 4]) and governs both the minimal front speed and the asymptotic spreading speed of localized disturbances that the same number answers two questions, and that coincidence is one of the miracles of the subject. For stability we linearize about the front: the essential spectrum is read off from the constant-coefficient asymptotic operators, the point spectrum from the Evans function [8], and the translation eigenvalue $\lambda = 0$ is the principal eigenvalue by Sturm–Liouville theory. Nonlinear asymptotic stability follows from the comparison principle — via the squeezing argument of Fife and McLeod [5] for bistable fronts and weighted-norm estimates (Sattinger [7]) for KPP fronts. The Fisher–KPP equation serves throughout as the running example, including the closed-form front of Ablowitz and Zeppetella [12]. The results are classical; proofs are sketched when they illuminate and referenced otherwise.

Keywords. Reaction–diffusion equations; traveling wave solutions; existence; stability; Evans function; comparison principle.

1. Introduction

A flame advances through a combustible mixture, an advantageous gene spreads through a spatially distributed population, an electrical impulse races down a nerve axon: in each case a fixed profile translates at constant speed, one state displacing another. These are traveling fronts, the coherent structures of reaction–diffusion equations, and they are the subject of this article.

The mathematical theory begins in 1937, with Fisher [1] on the spread of an advantageous gene and, the same year, the celebrated analysis of Kolmogorov, Petrovsky, and Piskunov [2] of the equation now known by their initials. What Fisher and KPP uncovered that a nonlinear invasion process selects a definite speed, and that the linearization ahead of the front predicts it that has organized the subject ever

since. The decades that followed added the machinery: phase-plane shooting for bistable kinetics (Fife [6]), the spreading theory of Aronson and Weinberger [3, 4], the comparison-principle stability of Fife and McLeod [5], weighted-norm techniques (Sattinger [7]), and the Evans function [8] as a spectral tool. The monographs of Fife [6], Smoller [10], Henry [9], and Volpert, Volpert, and Volpert [11] treat this material systematically.

We work throughout with the scalar equation in one space dimension in the simplest setting, and deliberately so. Here the comparison principle holds, and with it the theory becomes essentially complete: existence by shooting or by monotone iteration, speed selection by linear or integral criteria, stability by squeezing or by spectral estimates. For systems the principle fails, and with it much of the sharpness; that contrast is itself instructive, and the scalar case remains the benchmark against which every generalization is measured. It is no accident that the deepest results that the Fife and McLeod stability theorem, the Bramson logarithmic correction that were first proved, and in some cases only proved, in this setting.

This article is expository. Its aim is to assemble, in one place and with modest prerequisites, the classical core of the subject: the traveling wave ODE and its heteroclinic orbits, the minimal-speed theory for KPP kinetics, the sign-of-speed identity for bistable kinetics, linearization and the essential spectrum, the Evans function, and nonlinear stability by comparison. Short proofs are included when they illuminate; for the deeper arguments we give precise references.

There is a classical precedent for the point of view taken here. The traveling wave ODE converts a problem in partial differential equations into one in ordinary differential equations that the same reduction that made the nineteenth-century theory of water waves tractable, and the reason the front, among all solutions of (1), is the one we can hope to describe completely. Once a front is known, it organizes its surroundings: nearby solutions converge to a translate of it, invasion speeds coincide with its speed, and the long-time dynamics are, in a precise sense, dictated by it. The correspondence between the front speed and the spreading speed that Theorem 4.4 below that is the hinge of the existence theory, just as the translation eigenvalue is the hinge of the stability theory.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 introduces the equation and the three standard classes of reaction kinetics. Section 3 derives the traveling wave ODE. Section 4 treats existence: the bistable case by phase-plane methods and the monostable case by the minimal-speed theory. Section 5 is devoted to stability: linearization, the essential spectrum, the Evans function, and nonlinear stability via comparison. Section 6 works out the Fisher–KPP equation as an illustration, and Section 7 offers concluding remarks.

2. The scalar reaction–diffusion equation

We consider

$$u_t = Du_{xx} + f(u), \text{x} \in \text{R}, \text{t} > 0 \qquad (1)$$

with bounded continuous initial data $u(x,0) = u_0(x)$. Here $D > 0$ is the diffusion coefficient and $f : \mathbb{R} \to \mathbb{R}$ is of class C^1. Translating and scaling the dependent variable, we may suppose that f vanishes at 0 and 1, so that the constant functions $u \equiv 0$ and $u \equiv 1$ are spatially homogeneous equilibria. The character of the dynamics is dictated by the shape of f, and three classes of nonlinearity have emerged as canonical.

(i) Monostable (KPP type):

$$f(0) = f(1) = 0, \text{f} > 0 \text{ on } (0,1), \text{f}'(0) > 0, \text{f}(u) \leq \text{f}'(0)u \text{ on } [0,1] \quad (2)$$

Here $u = 1$ is stable and $u = 0$ unstable, so the state 1 invades the state 0 that the Fisher–KPP scenario of [1, 2]. The logistic nonlinearity $f(u) = u(1 - u)$ is the prototype. A striking feature of this class is the hair-trigger effect: any nontrivial nonnegative disturbance, however small and localized, eventually drives the solution to 1 everywhere that the unstable state 0 cannot resist invasion, no matter how feeble the initial push (Aronson and Weinberger [4]).

(ii) Bistable:

$$f(0) = f(a) = f(1) = 0 \text{ for some } a \in (0,1), \text{f} < 0 \text{ on } (0,a), \text{f} > 0 \text{ on } (a,1), \text{f}'(0) < 0, \text{f}'(1) < 0 \quad (3)$$

Both 0 and 1 are stable and the intermediate zero a unstable that the double-well picture of combustion and phase transitions. The cubic $f(u) = u(1 - u)(u - a)$ that the Nagumo nonlinearity that is the standard example. In contrast to the KPP case there is a genuine threshold here: small disturbances of 0 decay, and only a sufficiently large nucleus of the state 1 can trigger invasion. The front speed, when it exists, may point either way, and its direction is decided by the integral criterion of Theorem 4.1 below.

(iii) Ignition (combustion): $f(u) = 0$ for $0 \leq u \leq \theta$ and $f(u) > 0$ for $\theta < u < 1$, for some ignition temperature $\theta \in (0,1)$. The ignition case is mentioned for completeness; its theory parallels the bistable case [3].

The comparison principle that order preservation for (1) that underlies everything that follows.

Lemma 2.1 (Comparison principle). Let u and v be classical solutions of (1) on $\mathbb{R} \times (0,T]$ with $u(x,0) \leq v(x,0)$ for all x. Then $u(x,t) \leq v(x,t)$ for all x and $0 < t \leq T$, with strict inequality unless $u \equiv v$.

Ordered data stay ordered, and constant sub- and supersolutions trap solutions for all time. This is the engine of the scalar theory that and the reason it is so much more complete than its counterpart for systems, where no such principle exists.

3. Traveling waves and the wave ODE

A traveling wave is a solution of the form

$$u(x,t) = \varphi(\xi), \xi = \text{x - ct} \quad (4)$$

for a profile $\varphi : \mathbb{R} \to \mathbb{R}$ and a speed $c \in \mathbb{R}$ to be found. Inserting (4) in (1) that primes are $d/d\xi$ that gives the traveling wave equation

$$D\varphi'' + c\varphi' + f(\varphi) = 0 \text{ on R} \quad (5)$$

together with the asymptotic boundary conditions

$$\lim_{\xi \to -\infty} \varphi(\xi) = u_-, \lim_{\xi \to +\infty} \varphi(\xi) = u_+ \quad (6)$$

where $u_\pm$ are zeros of f. A solution of (5)–(6) with $u_- \neq u_+$ is a front; coincident end states give a pulse. We treat fronts, and — changing ξ to $-\xi$ if needed — decreasing ones, $u_- = 1$, $u_+ = 0$.

Two remarks. First, (5) is autonomous, hence translation invariant: with $\varphi(\xi)$ also $\varphi(\xi + \xi_0)$ solves (5) for every $\xi_0 \in \mathbb{R}$. A front is therefore unique only up to translation — $\varphi(0) = 1/2$ is a convenient normalization. This innocent-looking nonuniqueness has a concrete consequence for stability: perturbing a front along itself produces neither growth nor decay, and the resulting neutral mode that the translation eigenvalue of Section 5 that must be factored out of every stability statement. Second, (5) as the first-order system

$$\varphi' = \psi, \psi' = -\frac{c}{D}\psi - \frac{f(\varphi)}{D} \quad (7)$$

exhibits fronts as heteroclinic orbits from $(1,0)$ to $(0,0)$ in the (φ,ψ)-plane. Existence is a question about connecting orbits; stability, about linearizing (1) at φ.

4. Existence of traveling fronts

4.1. The bistable case

For bistable f the phase portrait of (7) is about as clean as these things get. The equilibrium $(1,0)$ is a saddle whose unstable manifold dives into $\{\psi < 0\}$; following it as φ decreases, it meets $\{\varphi = 0\}$ first at $(0,\psi_1(c))$. Now $\psi_1(c)$ depends continuously and strictly monotonically on c that a shooting argument, for which see Fife [6, Chapter 4] that and vanishes for exactly one speed c^*: $\psi_1(c^*) = 0$, the unstable manifold of $(1,0)$ coinciding then with the stable manifold of $(0,0)$. That coincidence is the front. The monotonicity in c is the heart of the matter: raising the speed tilts the vector field, and the first-intersection height responds strictly, so the equation $\psi_1(c) = 0$ can have at most one root that and a limiting argument gives existence.

Theorem 4.1 (Fife [6]; Aronson–Weinberger [3]). *Let f be bistable. Then there exists a unique $c^* \in \mathbb{R}$ such that (5)–(6) admits a strictly decreasing solution φ with $\varphi(-\infty) = 1$ and $\varphi(+\infty) = 0$. The profile is unique up to translation, and sign $c^* = sign \int f(u)\,du$.*

The sign-of-speed identity has a proof too pretty to omit. Multiply (5) by φ' and integrate over $\mathbb{R}$; since $\varphi'(\xi) \to 0$ as $|\xi| \to \infty$,

$$c \int -\infty\infty(\varphi')^2\,d\xi = \int 01 f(u)\,du \quad (8)$$

with $u = \varphi(\xi)$ as the new variable. Since φ is strictly decreasing, $\int (\varphi')^2\,d\xi > 0$, and the sign of c^* follows at once. In particular, the front moves right ($c^* > 0$) exactly when the invaded state 0 is "weaker" than the invading state 1 in the integral sense.

Remark 4.2. For the Nagumo nonlinearity $f(u) = u(1-u)(u-a)$, the front can be written down in closed form, as may be checked by direct substitution:

$$\varphi(\xi) = \frac{1}{1+e^{\frac{\xi}{\sqrt{2}}}}, c^* = \frac{1-2a}{\sqrt{2}} \quad (9)$$

Indeed, $\int 01 f(u)\,du = (1-2a)/12$, in agreement with Theorem 4.1.

4.2. The monostable (KPP) case

Ahead of the front, φ is small and $f(\varphi) = f'(0)\varphi + o(\varphi)$. Try a tail of the form $\varphi(\xi) \sim e^{-\lambda\xi}$ with $\lambda > 0$; out pops the characteristic equation

$$D\lambda^2 - c\lambda + f'(0) = 0 \quad (10)$$

Real roots λ need a nonnegative discriminant, i.e.

$$c^* = 2\sqrt{Df'(0)} \le c \quad (11)$$

Remarkably, this linear prediction is sharp.

Theorem 4.3 (Kolmogorov–Petrovsky–Piskunov [2]; Aronson–Weinberger [3, 4]). *Let f satisfy the KPP conditions (2). Then: (i) for every $c \ge c^*$ there exists a strictly decreasing front of speed c satisfying (5)–(6) with $u_- = 1$ and $u_+ = 0$; (ii) no monotone front with $0 \le c < c^*$ exists.*

The construction is by monotone iteration: solve (5) on $(-R, R)$ with well-chosen boundary data and send $R \to \infty$, using the exponential $e^{-\lambda\xi}$ — with λ the smaller root of (10) — as a barrier. So the minimal speed c^* is linearly determined; such fronts are called pulled.

The tail asymptotics are read off from (10). For $c > c^*$ the roots

$$\lambda_{\pm} = \frac{c \pm \sqrt{c^2 - 4Df'(0)}}{2D} \tag{12}$$

are real and distinct, and $\varphi(\xi) = Ae^{-\lambda_- \xi}(1 + o(1))$ as $\xi \to +\infty$ for some $A > 0$. At the critical speed $c = c^*$ the roots coalesce at $\lambda^* = \sqrt{f'(0)/D}$, and $\varphi(\xi) = (A\xi + B)e^{-\lambda^*\xi}(1 + o(1))$.

Nonexistence for $c < c^*$ is already visible at the linear level: the roots of (10) go complex, so any decaying solution of the linearization would have to oscillate about 0 that impossible under the positivity and monotonicity forced by the KPP hypothesis $f(u) \le f'(0)u$.

The speed c^* turns out to govern more than fronts: it sets the pace of invasion from localized data, too (Aronson–Weinberger [4]).

Theorem 4.4 (Asymptotic spreading). *Let f be of KPP type and let u solve (1) with $0 \le u_0 \le 1$ compactly supported and $u_0 \not\equiv 0$. Then*

$$\lim_{t \to \infty} \max_{|x| \le ct} |u(x,t) - 1| = 0, 0 \le c < c^* \tag{13}$$

$$\lim_{t \to \infty} \max_{|x| \ge ct} |u(x,t)| = 0, c > c^* \tag{14}$$

So c^* plays a double role: minimal front speed and asymptotic spreading speed. Bramson [14] refined (13)–(14): the invasion front sits at $c^*t - \frac{3}{2\lambda_*}\log t + O(1)$, a logarithmic delay behind the linear prediction.

5. Stability of traveling fronts

Fix a front φ with speed c and move into the frame $\xi = x - ct$. Writing $u(x,t) = \varphi(\xi) + v(\xi,t)$, the perturbation v satisfies v_t = Lv + N(v), where N is quadratic and L is the linearized operator. In the moving frame the front is a steady state, and linear stability is the question of whether L generates a decaying semigroup that modulo, always, the neutral translation mode.

$$v_t = Dv_{\xi\xi} + cv_\xi + f'(\varphi)v =: Lv \tag{15}$$

Differentiating the wave equation (5) with respect to ξ gives the fundamental identity

$$L\varphi' = 0 \tag{16}$$

translation invariance of (1) produces the eigenvalue $\lambda = 0$ with eigenfunction φ'. For a monotone front, φ' does not change sign, and Sturm–Liouville theory then implies that 0 is the principal (rightmost) eigenvalue of L.

5.1. Linearization and the spectrum

Consider the eigenvalue problem

$$Lp = \lambda p \tag{17}$$

on a suitable Banach space X (typically $L^2(\mathbb{R})$ or a weighted L^2 space). The essential spectrum $\sigma_{ess}(L)$ is determined by the constant-coefficient asymptotic operators $L_{\pm} = D\partial_{\xi\xi} + c\partial_\xi + f'(u_{\pm})$. By Fourier transform, its boundary consists of the parabolas

$$\lambda_{\pm}(k) = -Dk^2 + ick + f'(u_{\pm}), \mathrm{k} \in \mathrm{R} \quad (18)$$

opening to the left with vertices at $f'(u_{\pm})$.

For bistable fronts, $f'(0) < 0$ and $f'(1) < 0$, so $\sigma_{ess}(L)$ sits strictly in the open left half-plane. The front is spectrally stable in the unweighted space, with (16) the only obstruction — a neutral mode, not an instability.

KPP fronts are subtler: $f'(0) > 0$, so the essential spectrum leaks into the right half-plane. The instability is convective — perturbations grow ahead of the front but get swept away in the moving frame — and it disappears once we work in the exponentially weighted space ${L^2}_{\alpha}$ with norm $\|v\|_{\alpha} = \|e^{\alpha\xi}v\|_{L^2}$. Indeed, conjugation gives $e^{\alpha\xi}Le^{-\alpha\xi} = D\partial_{\xi\xi} + (c - 2D\alpha)\partial_{\xi} + (D\alpha^2 - \mathrm{c}\alpha + \mathrm{f}'(\varphi))$, pushing the essential spectrum boundary to $Re\,\lambda = -Dk^2 + D\alpha^2 - c\alpha + f'(u_{\pm})$. For every $c > c^*$ one can pick $\alpha \in (\lambda_-, \lambda_+)$ so that $\sigma_{ess}(L) \subset \{\mathrm{Re}\,\lambda < 0\}$ in ${L^2}_{\alpha}$ (Sattinger [7]).

Either way, the point spectrum to the right of σ_{ess} is tamed by the maximum principle: with $\varphi' < 0$ nodeless, $\lambda = 0$ is simple and maximal. Spectral stability is therefore the estimate

$$\sigma(L) \setminus [0] \subset [\lambda \in \mathbb{C} : \mathrm{Re}\,\lambda \leq -\omega] \quad (19)$$

for some $\omega > 0$, in $L^2(\mathbb{R})$ for bistable fronts and in ${L^2}_{\alpha}$ for KPP fronts with $c > c^*$.

5.2. The Evans function

To locate the point spectrum, write (17) as a first-order system $Y' = A(\xi; \lambda)Y$ on $\mathbb{C}^n$ (here $n = 2$), with $A(\xi; \lambda) \to A_{\pm}(\lambda)$ exponentially as $\xi \to \pm\infty$. For λ to the right of the essential spectrum, $A_-(\lambda)$ possesses an unstable subspace of dimension k and $A_+(\lambda)$ a stable subspace of dimension $n - k$. Choosing bases $\{{y_j}^-(\xi; \lambda)\}$ of solutions decaying as $\xi \to -\infty$ and $\{{y_j}^+(\xi; \lambda)\}$ of solutions decaying as $\xi \to +\infty$, analytically in λ, the Evans function

$$\mathrm{D}(\lambda) = \det(y_1^-, \ldots, y_k^-, y_1^+, \ldots, y_{n-k}^+)(0; \lambda) \quad (20)$$

is analytic, and λ is an eigenvalue of L exactly when $D(\lambda) = 0$, with matching algebraic multiplicities. In particular $D(0) = 0$ is translation invariance speaking, and the sign of $D'(0)$ — the stability index — sees the parity of the number of unstable eigenvalues. Evans [8] introduced the function for nerve impulse equations; it has since become the standard tool for the spectral stability of nonlinear waves. Kapitula and Promislow [16] give the full story.

5.3. Nonlinear stability

The comparison principle lifts linearized stability to nonlinear, asymptotic stability. For bistable fronts the definitive word belongs to Fife and McLeod [5].

Theorem 5.1 (Fife–McLeod). *Let φ be the bistable front of Theorem 4.1. There exist $\delta > 0$ and $\omega > 0$ such that if $\|u_0 - \varphi\|_{\infty} < \delta$ and u_0 has the same limits at $\pm\infty$ as φ, then the solution of (1) satisfies $\|u(x,t) - \varphi(x - ct - x_0\|_{\infty} \leq Ce^{-\omega t}$ for some phase shift x_0 depending on u_0.*

The proof builds explicit sub- and supersolutions that squeeze u toward a translate of φ — the phase shift x_0 cannot be avoided, since perturbations along φ' neither grow nor decay. For KPP fronts with $c > c^*$, asymptotic stability holds in the weighted norms of Section 5.1 (Sattinger [7]); the critical front

$c = c^*$ is stable but without an exponential rate that as one expects from Bramson's logarithmic corrections [14].

6. Example: the Fisher–KPP equation

Consider the equation of Fisher [1],

$$u_t = u_{xx} + u(1 - u) \tag{21}$$

Here $D = 1$ and $f'(0) = 1$, so the minimal speed is

$$c^* = 2\sqrt{Df'(0)} = 2 \tag{22}$$

By Theorem 4.3, monotone fronts $u(x,t) = \varphi(x - ct)$ exist for every $c \geq 2$ and for no $c < 2$; by Theorem 4.4, compactly supported data spread with asymptotic speed 2. At the two ends the essential spectrum touches the parabolas $\lambda_+(k) = -k^2 + ick + 1$ and $\lambda_-(k) = -k^2 + ick - 1$; in a well-chosen weighted space the fronts with $c > 2$ enjoy the spectral gap (19) and are asymptotically stable up to translation. At the special speed $c = \frac{5}{\sqrt{6}}$ the front is known in closed form (Ablowitz–Zeppetella [12]): $u(x,t) = \left[1 + \exp\left(\frac{x - ct}{\sqrt{6}}\right)\right]^{-2}$.

7. Concluding remarks

We have surveyed the classical existence and stability theory for traveling fronts of the scalar reaction–diffusion equation: existence by phase-plane shooting in the bistable case and by sub- and supersolutions in the KPP case; the minimal speed $c^* = 2\sqrt{Df'(0)}$ and the associated spreading phenomenon; and stability via linearization, exponentially weighted spaces, the Evans function, and the comparison principle. It is worth pausing to appreciate how much of this structure hinges on scalarity and one dimension. The comparison principle does the heavy lifting at every stage — in the construction of fronts, in the squeezing arguments of Fife and McLeod, even, indirectly, in the spectral picture. Take it away, and the theory becomes far less complete; that is why the systems case, despite decades of effort, still feels like unfinished business.

Several directions deserve mention, if only to indicate where the classical picture ends. The distinction between pulled fronts, whose speed is set by the linearization ahead of the front, and pushed fronts, driven by the nonlinearity in the interfacial region, refines the KPP story considerably and has real consequences for stability: pushed fronts tend to be more robust, spectrally and nonlinearly, than their pulled cousins. The critical front itself, moving at exactly the minimal speed, sits at the boundary between these regimes, and its stability — algebraic rather than exponential, tangled up with the logarithmic corrections of Bramson [14] — remains one of the subtler chapters of the theory. Beyond the homogeneous setting, fronts in heterogeneous and nonlocal media (see Xin [15]) raise genuinely new questions about what "propagation" even means when translation invariance is lost. And in several space dimensions, the transverse stability of planar fronts — whether a flat front survives wrinkling — opens a door to pattern formation that the one-dimensional theory can only gesture at.

What endures, through all of this, is the circle of ideas we began with. The traveling wave ODE turns a PDE problem into an ODE problem; the comparison principle turns order into convergence; linearization and the Evans function turn stability into algebra. The scalar case remains the model

against which all generalizations are measured — not because it is easy, but because it is the one case where the picture is, at last, essentially complete.

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