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Fixed-Time Group Tracking Control with Unknown Inherent Nonlinear Dynamics

Yilun Shang and Yamei Ye

Abstract—In this paper, the fixed-time group tracking problem for multi-agent systems with unknown inherent nonlinear dynamics is studied. A distributed tracking control protocol is introduced to ensure that the follower agents in each subgroup can track their respective leaders in a prescribed time regardless of the initial conditions. Compared to the existing works on group (tracking) consensus, we do not require the inter-group balance condition, and the leaders are allowed to interact with follower agents in different subgroups. Some conditions have been derived to choose appropriate control gains to achieve the fixed-time group tracking. Finally, numerical simulations are presented to illustrate the availability of our results.

Index Terms—Fixed-time consensus; group consensus; multi-agent system; inherent nonlinear dynamics; leader-follower.

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, distributed cooperative control of multi-agent systems has attracted considerable attention [1], [2] because coordination control reduces system costs, enhances resilience against possible agent fault, breaches the size constraints, and increases flexibility in performance as compared to traditional monolithic ones. Coordination control of multi-agent systems has found a wide range of applications in areas including distributed computation, coordination of distributed sensor networks, cooperation of unmanned aerial vehicles, and formation of multi-robots etc.; see, e.g., [3], [4], [5]. Many control tasks in multi-agent systems can be boiled down to consensus problems [1], which aim to design distributed protocols and algorithms based only on the local relative information such that the states of all agents reach an agreement, i.e., converge to a consistent value. Various types of control protocols, such as average consensus protocols, leader-following consensus protocols, and event-based control protocols, have been proposed to deal with different agent dynamics and communication constraints; see the updated survey papers [2], [5] and references therein.

While most of the existing works are concerned with global consensus, namely, all the agents reach a common state, in many practical applications, there may be multiple consistent states as agents are often divided into some subgroups to carry out different cooperative tasks. Examples include team hunting of predators, obstacle avoidance of flocks and herds, coordinated military actions, and cooperative searching of autonomous vehicles for multiple objects. As an extension to global consensus protocols, group (or cluster) consensus protocols [6], [7] have been proposed to solve these issues,

where the states of multiple agents in each subnetwork converge to an individual consistent state asymptotically when information exchanges exist not only among agents within the same subnetwork but among those in different subnetworks. Group consensus problems have been studied intensively in recent years for both continuous-time (e.g., [6], [7], [8], [9], [10]) and discrete-time systems (e.g., [11], [12], [13]), to name just a few. However, most of the existing group consensus protocols have been designed to achieve group consensus when there is no leader or the ultimate consistent states are not explicitly provided. On the other hand, the leader-follower consensus problem (a.k.a., consensus tracking [14]) has been firstly motivated in [15], where a group of mobile autonomous agents (followers) asymptotically track the leader by exchanging their own state information with their neighbors. Consensus tracking protocols have many applications and have been further developed recently to solve group consensus tracking problems with multiple leaders for a second-order multi-agent system in [9] and to achieve event-triggered group consensus in [16], both in the manner of asymptotic convergence. The main goal of the current paper is to move a further step along this line of research by focusing on the convergence rate.

In the consensus problems, convergence rate is a significant performance indicator of the control strategies. Compared to the usual asymptotic algorithms, finite-time controller enjoys some attractive properties such as faster convergence rate, better disturbance rejection, and more robustness to uncertainties [17]. Finite-time consensus problems have been tackled for first-order [18], second-order [19], and inherent nonlinear/uncertain dynamics [20], [21]. It is worth noting that the settling time of the above finite-time control laws depends on the initial conditions of agents, which cannot guarantee a prescribed convergence time since the knowledge of initial conditions is usually not available in advance in distributed systems. To overcome this weakness, some new results based on the notion of fixed-time stability [22] have been reported recently, which allow an upper-bounded settling time independent of the initial conditions of the agents. In the leaderless scenario, fixed-time consensus protocols are proposed for multi-agent systems with integrator dynamics [23], [24], [25] under undirected communication topologies. The results are generalized in [26], [27] to accommodate directed topologies. In [28], the fixed-time leader-follower consensus problem is treated for first-order multi-agent systems with unknown nonlinear inherent dynamics under undirected topologies. Two fixed-time tracking control protocols for second-order integrator systems with bounded input uncertainties are proposed in [29].

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Very recently, fixed-time group consensus/synchronization has been addressed in [30] in the leaderless scenario.

Motivated by the above works, we in this paper consider the fixed-time group tracking problem for multi-agent systems with unknown inherent nonlinear dynamics. The contribution of this paper is highlighted as follows. First, compared with the existing results [9], [16], [28], [29], we generalize the leader-follower consensus problems by splitting the network into different subgroups and assigning a virtual leader to each subgroup of the system. We not only present the settling time regardless of the initial conditions, but address the unknown inherent nonlinear dynamics. Second, the proposed controllers enable group tracking without requiring the *inter-group balance condition* (c.f. Assumption 2), which is literally imposed on all the above mentioned works concerning group consensus problems, restricting the communication topology to a ragescent grouping. Third, we introduce a competition and cooperation mechanism for different groups, namely, the coupling strength between agents in different groups is allowed to be negative. Finally, our framework is less restrictive than most of the existing works dealing with group tracking in the sense that information exchange between leaders and followers in different subgroups is taken into consideration (c.f. Remark 1). We emphasize that, inspired by the controller design and convergence analysis in the recent work [28], the novelty of the current work lies in further dealing with group tracking scheme with multiple leaders in the fixed-time consensus framework and weakening some common assumptions in group consensus problems.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 gives some preliminaries and formulate the group tracking problem. Section 3 is devoted to the study of the fixed-time group tracking protocols. In Section 4, some examples are provided to illustrate the availability of the theoretical results. The paper is concluded in Section 5.

II. NOTATIONS AND PRELIMINARIES

We begin with some notations that will be used throughout the paper. The size of a set S is denoted by $|S|$. Let \mathbb{R}_+ represent the set of non-negative real numbers. Let M^T be the transpose of a matrix M . For a symmetric matrix $M \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times N}$, $M > 0$ indicates that M is positive definite. The maximum and minimum eigenvalues are denoted by $\lambda_{\max}(M)$ and $\lambda_{\min}(M)$, respectively. $1_N \in \mathbb{R}^N$ is a vector with all the entries being 1, and $\text{diag}(a_1, \dots, a_N) \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times N}$ is a diagonal matrix with diagonal entries a_1, \dots, a_N . For a vector $x = (x_1, \dots, x_N)^T \in \mathbb{R}^N$ and $a \geq 0$, we define $[x]^a = (\text{sgn}(x_1)|x_1|^a, \dots, \text{sgn}(x_N)|x_N|^a)^T$, where $\text{sgn}(\cdot)$ is the signum function. For $p > 0$, the p -norm $\|\cdot\|_p$ is defined as $\|x\|_p = (\sum_{i=1}^N |x_i|^p)^{1/p}$ for a vector $x \in \mathbb{R}^N$. The following lemma connecting different norms is very instrumental in dealing with the fixed-time consensus problems, a proof of which can be found in [31].

Lemma 1. *Let $x \in \mathbb{R}^N$ and $p > q > 0$. Then*

$$\|x\|_p \leq \|x\|_q \leq N^{\frac{1}{q} - \frac{1}{p}} \|x\|_p.$$

In view of Lemma 1, we will simply denote $\|\cdot\|$ for some norm in a finite-dimensional linear space when the precise definition is not essential.

A. Graph theory

The communication topology of a multi-agent system can often be described by a graph [32]. Let $G = (V, E)$ be an undirected graph, where the node set $V = \{1, 2, \dots, N\}$ represents N follower agents and the edge set $E \subseteq V \times V$ describes the information exchange among the followers. Define $A = (a_{ij}) \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times N}$ as an associated weighted adjacency matrix of the graph, where $a_{ij} = a_{ji} \neq 0$ if $(i, j) \in E$ and $a_{ij} = 0$ otherwise. We will only consider undirected graphs in this work, and A satisfies $A^T = A$.

To investigate the group consensus, a *grouping* $\mathcal{G} = \{\mathcal{G}_1, \dots, \mathcal{G}_K\}$ of the graph G is defined by dividing its node set into disjoint groups $\{\mathcal{G}_k\}_{k=1}^K$. In other words, \mathcal{G} satisfies $\cup_{k=1}^K \mathcal{G}_k = V$ and $\mathcal{G}_k \cap \mathcal{G}_{k'} = \emptyset$ for $k \neq k'$. To fix the notation, we write $\mathcal{G}_1 = \{1, \dots, r_1\}$, $\mathcal{G}_2 = \{r_1 + 1, \dots, r_2\}$, \dots , $\mathcal{G}_K = \{r_{K-1} + 1, \dots, N\}$. Let $r_0 = 0$. We assume that $a_{ij} \geq 0$ if $i, j \in \mathcal{G}_k$ for some k . Namely, the interactions between agents in the same group are cooperative. Naturally, \mathcal{G}_k ($1 \leq k \leq K$) inherit the structure of G in the sense of induced subgraph [32]. For each $1 \leq k \leq K$, the Laplacian matrix of \mathcal{G}_k is defined as $L_k = (l_{ij}) \in \mathbb{R}^{|\mathcal{G}_k| \times |\mathcal{G}_k|}$ with $l_{ii} = \sum_{j \in \mathcal{G}_k, j \neq i} a_{ij}$ and $l_{ij} = -a_{ij}$ for $i \neq j$. It is well-known that L_k is positive semi-definite and zero is an eigenvalue of L_k with the eigenvector $1_{|\mathcal{G}_k|}$. Furthermore, we define $L \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times N}$ as a block matrix, where the K diagonal blocks are L_1, \dots, L_K , and all other entries equal the corresponding entries (i.e., with the same positions) in the matrix $-A$.

Let $\Theta = \{\theta_1, \theta_2, \dots, \theta_K\}$ be the set of K virtual leader agents. The topology of the leader-follower multi-agent system can be characterized by the weighted matrix

$$H = L + \sum_{k=1}^K Q_k := \begin{pmatrix} H_1 & H_{12} & \cdots & H_{1K} \\ H_{21} & H_2 & \cdots & H_{2K} \\ \vdots & \vdots & \ddots & \vdots \\ H_{K1} & H_{K2} & \cdots & H_K \end{pmatrix} \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times N}, \quad (1)$$

where $H_k \in \mathbb{R}^{|\mathcal{G}_k| \times |\mathcal{G}_k|}$ and $Q_k = \text{diag}(a_{1\theta_k}, \dots, a_{N\theta_k}) \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times N}$ represents the information exchange between the N followers and the k -th leader for $1 \leq k \leq K$. The weights $\{a_{i\theta_k}\}$ can be either non-negative (i.e., cooperative) or non-positive (i.e., competitive). To delineate the overall communications between the followers and the virtual leaders, we define a new (undirected) graph \bar{G} on $V \cup \{0\}$ by attaching a new node 0 to G and adding an edge between $i \in V$ and 0 whenever $\sum_{k=1}^K a_{i\theta_k} > 0$. The node 0 can be viewed as a super leader.

The following lemma characterizes the property of the diagonal blocks $\{H_k\}_{k=1}^K$ in (1), which will play a key role in the convergence analysis of tracking error system.

Lemma 2. *Fix $k \in \{1, \dots, K\}$. H_k is positive definite if and only if the following two conditions hold.*

- (a) *Each follower in \mathcal{G}_k has a path to the super leader in the graph \bar{G} ;*

- (b) For all $i \in \mathcal{G}_k$, $\sum_{k'=1}^K a_{i\theta_{k'}} \geq 0$, meaning that the overall relationship between the K leaders and each follower i is cooperative.

Proof. Sufficiency. Suppose that S_1, \dots, S_ρ with $\rho \geq 1$ are the connected components of \mathcal{G}_k (viewed as an induced subgraph of G). Let $V(S_l)$ be the node set of S_l (with nodes arranged according to S_1, \dots, S_ρ without loss of generality) and write $|V(S_l)| = s_l$ for $l = 1, \dots, \rho$. Recall that L_k is the Laplacian matrix of \mathcal{G}_k , which is of the form of a block diagonal matrix $L_k = \text{diag}(L_{k,1}, \dots, L_{k,\rho})$, where $L_{k,l} \in \mathbb{R}^{s_l \times s_l}$ is the Laplacian matrix of S_l . For each $1 \leq k' \leq K$, we write $Q_{k'}|_{\mathcal{G}_k} \in \mathbb{R}^{|\mathcal{G}_k| \times |\mathcal{G}_k|}$ for the k -th diagonal block if $Q_{k'}$ is partitioned as $Q_{k'} = \text{diag}(Q_{k'}|_{\mathcal{G}_1}, \dots, Q_{k'}|_{\mathcal{G}_K})$. We further partition $Q_{k'}|_{\mathcal{G}_k}$ according to the pattern of L_k as $Q_{k'}|_{\mathcal{G}_k} = \text{diag}(Q_{k'}|_{\mathcal{G}_{k,1}}, \dots, Q_{k'}|_{\mathcal{G}_{k,\rho}})$.

It follows from (1) that $H_k = \text{diag}(L_{k,1} + \sum_{k'=1}^K Q_{k'}|_{\mathcal{G}_{k,1}}, \dots, L_{k,\rho} + \sum_{k'=1}^K Q_{k'}|_{\mathcal{G}_{k,\rho}})$. Following the comments above Lemma 2, the conditions (a) and (b) indicate that $\sum_{k'=1}^K Q_{k'}|_{\mathcal{G}_{k,l}}$ is a positive definite diagonal matrix for each $l = 1, \dots, \rho$. Thanks to the structure of L_k which has zero row sum, we are led to the conclusion that H_k is strictly diagonally dominant, which in turn implies that H_k is invertible employing the Levy-Desplanques theorem [33]. Since L_k is positive semi-definite and $\sum_{k'=1}^K a_{i\theta_{k'}} \geq 0$ holds for all $i \in \mathcal{G}_k$, H_k is also positive semi-definite. Therefore, H_k must be positive definite.

Necessity. If (a) is not true, then there exists an integer $l \in \{1, \dots, \rho\}$ such that there is no path connecting the component S_l to the super leader in \bar{G} . Hence, the diagonal elements in $\sum_{k'=1}^K Q_{k'}|_{\mathcal{G}_{k,l}}$ are non-positive. Since zero is an eigenvalue of $L_{k,l}$, we have $\lambda_{\min}(L_{k,l} + \sum_{k'=1}^K Q_{k'}|_{\mathcal{G}_{k,l}}) \leq \lambda_{\min}(L_{k,l}) + \lambda_{\max}(\sum_{k'=1}^K Q_{k'}|_{\mathcal{G}_{k,l}}) \leq 0$ by Weyl's theorem [33]. This implies that H_k has a non-positive eigenvalue, which contradicts the condition that H_k is positive definite.

If (b) does not hold, then there exists some $i \in \mathcal{G}_k$ such that $\sigma := \sum_{k'=1}^K a_{i\theta_{k'}} < 0$. The entries of L_k can be chosen small (in modules) enough so that $\lambda_{\max}(L_k) < -\sigma$ by using the Geršgorin disk theorem [33]. Another application of Weyl's theorem yields $\lambda_{\min}(H_k) \leq \lambda_{\max}(L_k) + \lambda_{\min}(\sum_{k'=1}^K Q_{k'}|_{\mathcal{G}_k}) < 0$, which contradicts the condition that H_k is positive definite. \square

Remark 1. In the construction of communication topology \bar{G} , we consider the information exchange between followers in each subgroup \mathcal{G}_k and its own leader θ_k as well as leaders for other groups. It is worth noting that this is more general than the recent works [9], [16], [27] on group tracking control, where followers can only have access to its own leader in each subgroup. As we will see below, this flexible framework would enable the agents in \mathcal{G}_k to track actually any leader in Θ provided an appropriate protocol is in use.

The following corollary is immediate from Lemma 2.

Corollary 1. Fix $k \in \{1, \dots, K\}$. Suppose that \mathcal{G}_k (viewed as an induced subgraph of G) is connected. If $\sum_{k'=1}^K a_{i\theta_{k'}} \geq 0$ holds for all $i \in \mathcal{G}_k$, with at least one of these inequalities being strict, then H_k is positive definite.

B. Fixed-time stability

Consider the general differential inclusion

$$\dot{x}(t) \in F(t, x(t)), \quad x(0) = x_0, \quad (2)$$

where $x \in \mathbb{R}^n$ and $F : \mathbb{R}_+ \times \mathbb{R}^n \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^n$ is an upper semi-continuous convex-valued mapping such that the set $F(t, x)$ is non-empty for all $(t, x) \in \mathbb{R}_+ \times \mathbb{R}^n$ and $F(t, 0) = 0$ for $t > 0$. The solutions of (2) are understood in the sense of Filippov [34].

Definition 1. [17] The origin of system (2) is globally finite-time stable if there is a function $T : \mathbb{R}^n \rightarrow \mathbb{R}_+$, called settling time function, such that for all $x_0 \in \mathbb{R}^n$, the solution $x(t, x_0)$ of system (2) is defined and $x(t, x_0) \in \mathbb{R}^n$ for $t \in [0, T(x_0))$ and $\lim_{t \rightarrow T(x_0)} x(t, x_0) = 0$.

Definition 2. [22] The origin of system (2) is a globally fixed-time equilibrium if it is globally finite-time stable and the settling-time function $T(x_0)$ is bounded; namely, there is some $T_{\max} > 0$ satisfying $T(x_0) \leq T_{\max}$ for any $x_0 \in \mathbb{R}^n$.

For example, the origin of the simple scalar system $\dot{x} = -x^{1/3}$ is globally finite-time stable with $T(x_0) = \frac{3}{2} \sqrt[3]{|x_0|^2}$. The origin of $\dot{x} = -|x|^{1/3} - |x|^2$ is globally fixed-time stable because $T(x_0) \leq \pi$ for any $x_0 \in \mathbb{R}$.

Lemma 3. [23] If there is a continuously differentiable positive definite and radially unbounded function $V : \mathbb{R}^n \rightarrow \mathbb{R}_+$ such that

$$\sup_{t>0, y \in F(t, x)} y \frac{\partial V(x)}{\partial x} \leq -aV^p(x) - bV^q(x) \quad \text{for } x \neq 0,$$

with $a, b > 0$, $p = 1 - (1/\mu)$, $q = 1 + (1/\mu)$, and $\mu > 1$. Then the origin of the system (2) is globally fixed-time stable and the following estimate of the settling time holds:

$$T(x_0) \leq T_{\max} = \frac{\pi\mu}{2\sqrt{ab}}, \quad \forall x_0 \in \mathbb{R}^n.$$

This lemma provides a good estimate of the settling time independent of the initial conditions, which will be used to analyze the fixed-time convergence of group tracking protocols.

C. Problem formulation

Now we are in the position to formulate our fixed-time group consensus tracking problem. Consider the following multi-agent system with N follower agents and K virtual leaders governed by

$$\begin{aligned} \dot{x}_i &= f(t, x_i) + u_i, \quad i \in V, \\ \dot{x}_{\theta_k} &= f(t, x_{\theta_k}) + u_{\theta_k}, \quad k \in \{1, \dots, K\}, \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

where $x_i \in \mathbb{R}^m$ (resp. $x_{\theta_k} \in \mathbb{R}^m$) is the state of agent i (resp. leader θ_k) and $u_i \in \mathbb{R}^m$ (resp. $u_{\theta_k} \in \mathbb{R}^m$) is the control input of agent i (resp. leader θ_k). The input u_{θ_k} is assumed to be bounded by a known constant ω , i.e., $\|u_{\theta_k}\| \leq \omega$ for all $1 \leq k \leq K$. The function $f : \mathbb{R}_+ \times D \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^m$ represents the uncertain dynamics of an agent, which is continuous in t and $D \subseteq \mathbb{R}^m$ is a domain containing the origin. Since f in general is a nonlinear function, we assume that there exist positive constants ℓ_1, ℓ_2 and ℓ_3 such that

$$\begin{aligned} \|f(t, x_1) - f(t, x_2)\|^2 &\leq \ell_1 + \ell_2 \|x_1 - x_2\|^2 \\ &\quad + \ell_3 \|x_1 - x_2\|^4 \end{aligned} \quad (4)$$

holds for all $x_1, x_2 \in D$ and $t \geq 0$.

Remark 2. The condition (4) is also adopted in [28], which is more general than most of the previous works concerning nonlinear inherent dynamics [16], [20], [29]. In fact, (4) encompasses the usual Lipschitz condition ($\ell_1 = \ell_3 = 0$), quasi-Lipschitz condition ($\ell_3 = 0$) and some essentially polynomial models in mechanical sciences, including the polynomial friction models [35] and the polynomial magneto-rheological damper dynamics [36].

The communication topology is assumed to satisfy the following assumption.

Assumption 1. Each follower in \mathcal{G}_k ($1 \leq k \leq K$) has a path to the super leader 0 in the graph \bar{G} ; and $\sum_{k'=1}^K a_{i\theta_{k'}} \geq 0$ for all $i \in V$.

It follows from Lemma 2 that H_k is positive definite for $1 \leq k \leq K$. The goal of this paper is to design suitable distributed protocols u_i such that followers in each subgroup track the corresponding virtual leader in a pre-defined time T_{\max} , i.e., $x_i(t) = x_{\theta_k}(t)$ for all $i \in \mathcal{G}_k$ ($1 \leq k \leq K$) and $t \geq T_{\max}$. For simplicity, $m = 1$ is assumed in the following. However, the analysis is valid for $m > 1$ exploiting the properties of the Kronecker product.

III. FIXED-TIME GROUP TRACKING PROTOCOLS

In this section, for ease of presentation, we first design the fixed-time group tracking control law under the inter-group balance condition, and see how it can be treated in general scenarios.

A. Consensus under inter-group balance condition

Assumption 2. In the weighted adjacency matrix A of G , we assume that $\sum_{j \in \mathcal{G}_{k'}} a_{ij} = 0$ for all $i \in \mathcal{G}_k$ and $k \neq k'$.

Remark 3. Recall that the interaction between different groups is allowed to be cooperative or competitive. The above condition indicates a balance of influence between an agent in a subgroup and all agents in any other subgroup. This condition (and a relaxed variant replacing 0 by a constant $c_{kk'}$ depending only on k and k') is essential in most of the literature concerning group consensus; see, e.g., [6], [7], [8], [9], [10], [12], [30]. We will see in the next subsection on how to revise the main result if it is violated.

For the leader-follower multi-agent system (3), we introduce the control protocol for $i \in \mathcal{G}_k$, $k = 1, \dots, K$ as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} u_i = & \alpha \left[\sum_{j \in \mathcal{G}_k \cup \theta_k} a_{ij} (x_j - x_i) \right]^2 + \left[\sum_{k' \neq k} \sum_{j \in \mathcal{G}_{k'}} a_{ij} x_j \right]^2 \\ & + \beta \left(\sum_{j \in \mathcal{G}_k \cup \theta_k} a_{ij} (x_j - x_i) \right) + \left(\sum_{k' \neq k} \sum_{j \in \mathcal{G}_{k'}} a_{ij} x_j \right) \\ & + \gamma \operatorname{sgn} \left(\sum_{j \in \mathcal{G}_k \cup \theta_k} a_{ij} (x_j - x_i) \right) \\ & + \operatorname{sgn} \left(\sum_{k' \neq k} \sum_{j \in \mathcal{G}_{k'}} a_{ij} x_j \right), \end{aligned} \quad (5)$$

where $\alpha, \beta, \gamma > 0$ are positive control gains. Note that only local information between neighboring agents is needed. Recall that the follower i is cooperative (competitive) with the leader θ_k if $a_{i\theta_k} > 0$ (< 0). Here, the negative weights $\{a_{i\theta_k}\}$ are allowed but not required.

Let $\tilde{x}_i = x_i - x_{\theta_k}$ be the tracking error for $i \in \mathcal{G}_k$, $1 \leq k \leq K$. Let $\bar{a} = \max_{i \in \mathcal{G}_k, j \in \mathcal{G}_{k'}, k \neq k'} |a_{ij}|$. Denote by $W = \operatorname{diag}(H_1, \dots, H_K) \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times N}$ the block diagonal matrix. We have $\lambda_{\max}(W) = \max_{1 \leq k \leq K} \lambda_{\max}(H_k)$ and $\lambda_{\min}(W) = \min_{1 \leq k \leq K} \lambda_{\min}(H_k)$.

Theorem 1. Under Assumptions 1 and 2, the multi-agent system (3) with protocol (5) and

$$\begin{aligned} \alpha &= \frac{(\bar{a}^2 N^3 + \sqrt{\ell_3 N}) \lambda_{\max}^{3/2}(W)}{\lambda_{\min}^{7/2}(W)} + \frac{\rho \sqrt{N}}{2\sqrt{2} \lambda_{\min}^{3/2}(W)}, \\ \beta &= \frac{\bar{a} N + \sqrt{\ell_2}}{\lambda_{\min}(W)}, \\ \gamma &= 1 + \omega + \sqrt{\ell_1 \max_{1 \leq k \leq K} |\mathcal{G}_k|} + \frac{\rho}{\sqrt{2} \lambda_{\min}(W)} \end{aligned}$$

with $\rho > 0$, achieves the convergence of the tracking errors \tilde{x}_i , $i \in V$ to zero in a finite time, which is bounded by $T_{\max} = \pi/\rho$.

Proof. For $1 \leq k \leq K$, let $\delta_k = (\tilde{x}_{r_{k-1}+1}, \dots, \tilde{x}_{r_k})^T \in \mathbb{R}^{|\mathcal{G}_k|}$. Let $\tilde{x} = (\delta_1^T, \dots, \delta_K^T)^T \in \mathbb{R}^N$ be the tracking error vector. Furthermore, let $f_k = (f(t, x_{r_{k-1}+1}) - f(t, x_{\theta_k}), \dots, f(t, x_{r_k}) - f(t, x_{\theta_k}))^T \in \mathbb{R}^{|\mathcal{G}_k|}$ and $U_k = u_{\theta_k} \mathbf{1}_{|\mathcal{G}_k|} \in \mathbb{R}^{|\mathcal{G}_k|}$ for $1 \leq k \leq K$. Recall that we have set $m = 1$. By using (1) and Assumption 2, the dynamics of the tracking errors can be obtained from (3) and (5) as

$$\begin{aligned} \dot{\delta}_k = & -\alpha [H_k \delta_k]^2 + \left[\sum_{k' \neq k} H_{kk'} \delta_{k'} \right]^2 - \beta H_k \delta_k + \sum_{k' \neq k} H_{kk'} \delta_{k'} \\ & - \gamma \operatorname{sgn}(H_k \delta_k) + \operatorname{sgn} \left(\sum_{k' \neq k} H_{kk'} \delta_{k'} \right) + \tilde{f}_k - U_k, \\ & 1 \leq k \leq K. \end{aligned} \quad (6)$$

Define the Lyapunov function as

$$V = \frac{1}{2} \tilde{x}^T W \tilde{x} = \frac{1}{2} \sum_{k=1}^K \delta_k^T H_k \delta_k. \quad (7)$$

By Lemma 2, W is positive definite. Let $V_k = \frac{1}{2} \delta_k^T H_k \delta_k$, and hence $V = \sum_{k=1}^K V_k$. The time derivative of (7) along the solution of (6) is given by

$$\dot{V} = \sum_{k=1}^K \delta_k^T H_k \dot{\delta}_k = \sum_{k=1}^K \dot{V}_k, \quad (8)$$

where

$$\begin{aligned}
 \dot{V}_k &= -\alpha \delta_k^T H_k [H_k \delta_k]^2 + \delta_k^T H_k \left[\sum_{k' \neq k} H_{kk'} \delta_{k'} \right]^2 \\
 &\quad - \beta \delta_k^T H_k^2 \delta_k + \delta_k^T H_k \left(\sum_{k' \neq k} H_{kk'} \delta_{k'} \right) \\
 &\quad - \gamma \delta_k^T H_k \text{sgn}(H_k \delta_k) + \delta_k^T H_k \text{sgn} \left(\sum_{k' \neq k} H_{kk'} \delta_{k'} \right) \\
 &\quad + \delta_k^T H_k \tilde{f}_k - \delta_k^T H_k U_k. \tag{9}
 \end{aligned}$$

In the sequel, we estimate the eight terms in (8) and (9) separately. It follows from the Courant-Fischer theorem [33] that $\|W\tilde{x}\|_2^2 \geq \lambda_{\min}(W)\tilde{x}^T W \tilde{x} = 2\lambda_{\min}(W)\mathcal{V}$. Therefore, the first term can be estimated as

$$\begin{aligned}
 -\alpha \sum_{k=1}^K \delta_k^T H_k [H_k \delta_k]^2 &= -\alpha \|W\tilde{x}\|_3^3 \\
 &\leq -\alpha N^{-1/2} (2\lambda_{\min}(W)\mathcal{V})^{3/2}
 \end{aligned}$$

using Lemma 1. For the second term, we obtain

$$\begin{aligned}
 &\delta_k^T H_k \left[\sum_{k' \neq k} H_{kk'} \delta_{k'} \right]^2 \\
 &\leq \sum_{i \in \mathcal{G}_k} \left| \sum_{j \in \mathcal{G}_k \cup \theta_k} a_{ij} (x_j - x_i) \right| \cdot \left| \sum_{k' \neq k} \sum_{j \in \mathcal{G}_{k'}} a_{ij} x_j \right|^2 \\
 &\leq \bar{a}^2 \left(\sum_{i \in \mathcal{G}_k} \left| \sum_{j \in \mathcal{G}_k \cup \theta_k} a_{ij} (\tilde{x}_j - \tilde{x}_i) \right| \right) \cdot \left| \sum_{k' \neq k} \sum_{j \in \mathcal{G}_{k'}} \tilde{x}_j \right|^2 \\
 &\leq \bar{a}^2 \|H_k \delta_k\|_1 \|\tilde{x}\|_2^2,
 \end{aligned}$$

where we have used Assumption 2 in the second inequality. Hence, summing over k and by a repeated use of Lemma 1 and the Courant-Fischer theorem, we obtain

$$\begin{aligned}
 &\sum_{k=1}^K \delta_k^T H_k \left[\sum_{k' \neq k} H_{kk'} \delta_{k'} \right]^2 \\
 &\leq \bar{a}^2 \|\tilde{x}\|_1^2 \|W\tilde{x}\|_1 \leq \bar{a}^2 N \|\tilde{x}\|_2^2 \|W\tilde{x}\|_1 \leq \frac{\bar{a}^2 N}{\lambda_{\min}^2(W)} \|W\tilde{x}\|_1^3 \\
 &\leq \frac{\bar{a}^2 N^{5/2}}{\lambda_{\min}^2(W)} \|W\tilde{x}\|_2^3 \leq \frac{\bar{a}^2 N^{5/2}}{\lambda_{\min}^2(W)} (2\lambda_{\max}(W)\mathcal{V})^{3/2}. \tag{10}
 \end{aligned}$$

The third term is $-\beta \sum_{k=1}^K \delta_k^T H_k^2 \delta_k = -\beta \|W\tilde{x}\|_2^2$ and the fourth term can be bounded similarly as in (10) by

$$\begin{aligned}
 &\sum_{k=1}^K \delta_k^T H_k \left(\sum_{k' \neq k} H_{kk'} \delta_{k'} \right) \\
 &\leq \bar{a} \|\tilde{x}\|_1 \|W\tilde{x}\|_1 \leq \bar{a} \sqrt{N} \|\tilde{x}\|_2 \|W\tilde{x}\|_1 \\
 &\leq \frac{\bar{a} \sqrt{N}}{\lambda_{\min}(W)} \|W\tilde{x}\|_2 \|W\tilde{x}\|_1 \leq \frac{\bar{a} N}{\lambda_{\min}(W)} \|W\tilde{x}\|_2^2.
 \end{aligned}$$

The fifth term equals $-\gamma \sum_{k=1}^K \delta_k^T H_k \text{sgn}(H_k \delta_k) = -\gamma \|W\tilde{x}\|_1$. We estimate the sixth term as

$$\sum_{k=1}^K \delta_k^T H_k \text{sgn} \left(\sum_{k' \neq k} H_{kk'} \delta_{k'} \right) \leq \sum_{k=1}^K \|H_k \delta_k\|_1 = \|W\tilde{x}\|_1.$$

In the light of (4) and the Cauchy-Schwarz inequality, the seventh term is upper-bounded by

$$\begin{aligned}
 &\sum_{k=1}^K \delta_k^T H_k \tilde{f}_k \\
 &\leq \sum_{k=1}^K \|H_k \delta_k\|_2 \|\tilde{f}_k\|_2 \\
 &\leq \sum_{k=1}^K \|H_k \delta_k\|_2 \left(\sqrt{\ell_1 |\mathcal{G}_k|} + \sqrt{\ell_2} \|\delta_k\|_2 + \sqrt{\ell_3} \|\delta_k\|_4^2 \right) \\
 &:= I_1 + I_2 + I_3.
 \end{aligned}$$

Note that

$$I_1 \leq \sum_{k=1}^K \|H_k \delta_k\|_1 \sqrt{\ell_1 |\mathcal{G}_k|} \leq \|W\tilde{x}\|_1 \sqrt{\ell_1 \max_{1 \leq k \leq K} |\mathcal{G}_k|}.$$

By the Courant-Fischer theorem, we have $I_2 \leq \sum_{k=1}^K \frac{\sqrt{\ell_2}}{\lambda_{\min}(H_k)} \|H_k \delta_k\|_2^2 \leq \frac{\sqrt{\ell_2}}{\lambda_{\min}(W)} \|W\tilde{x}\|_2^2$. For I_3 , we have

$$\begin{aligned}
 I_3 &= \sqrt{\ell_3} \sum_{k=1}^K \|H_k \delta_k\|_2^3 \frac{\|\delta_k\|_4^2}{\|H_k \delta_k\|_2^2} \leq \sqrt{\ell_3} \sum_{k=1}^K \|H_k \delta_k\|_2^3 \frac{\|\delta_k\|_2^2}{\|H_k \delta_k\|_2^2} \\
 &\leq \frac{\sqrt{\ell_3}}{\lambda_{\min}^2(W)} \sum_{k=1}^K \|H_k \delta_k\|_2^3, \tag{11}
 \end{aligned}$$

where the first inequality is due to Lemma 1 and the second inequality is because $\frac{\|\delta_k\|_2}{\|H_k \delta_k\|_2} \leq \lambda_{\min}^{-1}(H_k) \leq \lambda_{\min}^{-1}(W)$. Another application of Lemma 1 shows that the right-hand side of (11) is upper-bounded by $\frac{\sqrt{\ell_3}}{\lambda_{\min}^2(W)} \|W\tilde{x}\|_2^3$, which together with the last inequality in (10) yields

$$I_3 \leq \frac{\sqrt{\ell_3}}{\lambda_{\min}^2(W)} (2\lambda_{\max}(W)\mathcal{V})^{3/2}.$$

Finally, recall the boundedness of u_{θ_k} , and the eighth term can be calculated as $-\sum_{k=1}^K \delta_k^T H_k U_k \leq \omega \sum_{k=1}^K \|H_k \delta_k\|_1 = \omega \|W\tilde{x}\|_1$.

Now, we obtain from (8) that

$$\begin{aligned}
 \dot{V} &\leq \left(-\alpha N^{-1/2} (2\lambda_{\min}(W))^{3/2} + \frac{\bar{a}^2 N^{5/2}}{\lambda_{\min}^2(W)} (2\lambda_{\max}(W))^{3/2} \right. \\
 &\quad \left. + \frac{\sqrt{\ell_3} (2\lambda_{\max}(W))^{3/2}}{\lambda_{\min}^2(W)} \right) \mathcal{V}^{3/2} \\
 &\quad - \left(\beta - \frac{\bar{a} N + \sqrt{\ell_2}}{\lambda_{\min}(W)} \right) \|W\tilde{x}\|_2^2 \\
 &\quad - \left(\gamma - 1 - \omega - \sqrt{\ell_1 \max_{1 \leq k \leq K} |\mathcal{G}_k|} \right) \|W\tilde{x}\|_1. \tag{12}
 \end{aligned}$$

Taking α, β, γ as in the statement of Theorem 1, and noting that $\|W\tilde{x}\|_1 \geq \|W\tilde{x}\|_2 \geq (2\lambda_{\min}(W)\mathcal{V})^{1/2}$, we derive that $\dot{V} \leq -\rho \mathcal{V}^p - \mathcal{V}^q$ with $\mu = 2, p = 1 - (1/\mu)$ and $q = 1 + (1/\mu)$.

According to Lemma 3, one can conclude that the origin of the system (6) is globally fixed-time stable and the settling time is bounded by $T_{\max} = \pi/\rho$. The proof is completed. \square

Remark 4. Notice that the convergence time upper-bound is independent of the initial conditions of the network and can be adjusted arbitrarily by tuning the controller parameters α and γ (through ρ). When $K = 1$, i.e., there exists only one leader, the problem reduces to fixed-time consensus tracking, which has been solved in [28]. Extension to group tracking control here invokes major changes in dealing with the weighted block matrix H , which encodes the interactions of agents between and within subnetworks (and their respective leaders).

B. Consensus without inter-group balance condition

It is clear that the protocol (5) may not drive the multi-agent system to fixed-time convergence if Assumption 2 is violated, because the tracking error system (6) is no longer valid.

For any $1 \leq k \leq K$, $i \in \mathcal{G}_k$, set $\eta_{ik'} = \sum_{j \in \mathcal{G}_{k'}} a_{ij}$. For each $i \in \mathcal{G}_k$, we partition the set $\{1, \dots, K\} \setminus \{k\}$ into two subsets Φ_i^0 and Φ_i^1 by $\Phi_i^0 = \{k' | k' \neq k, \eta_{ik'} = 0\}$ and $\Phi_i^1 = \{k' | k' \neq k, \eta_{ik'} \neq 0\}$. Evidently, $\Phi_i^1 = \emptyset$ for all $i \in V$ if Assumption 2 holds. In general, we propose the following assumption for the information exchange between the followers and the virtual leaders.

Assumption 3. For each agent $i \in \mathcal{G}_k$, $1 \leq k \leq K$, we assume $a_{i\theta_{k'}} = -\eta_{ik'}$ for $k' \in \Phi_i^1$.

Remark 5. Assumption 3 means that the coupling strength between a follower agent i in subgroup \mathcal{G}_k and the leader $\theta_{k'}$ for any other subgroup $\mathcal{G}_{k'}$ satisfying $\eta_{ik'} \neq 0$ is specified as $-\eta_{ik'}$. An interesting implication is that some virtual leaders may be designed in practical applications such as multi-robot systems to compensate the influence of agents in other subgroups so that the inter-group balance condition (Assumption 2) can be lifted. It is also worthy of noting that $\eta_{ik'}$ involves only local information within the neighborhood of agent i , and hence can be easily computed in a distributed manner.

For the leader-follower multi-agent system (3), we here introduce a modified distributed control law for $i \in \mathcal{G}_k$,

$k = 1, \dots, K$ as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} u_i = & \alpha \left[\sum_{j \in \mathcal{G}_k \cup \theta_k} a_{ij}(x_j - x_i) \right]^2 + \left[\sum_{k' \in \Phi_i^0} \sum_{j \in \mathcal{G}_{k'}} a_{ij}x_j \right]^2 \\ & + \left[\sum_{k' \in \Phi_i^1} \sum_{j \in \mathcal{G}_{k'}} a_{ij}(x_j - x_{\theta_{k'}}) \right]^2 \\ & + \beta \left(\sum_{j \in \mathcal{G}_k \cup \theta_k} a_{ij}(x_j - x_i) \right) + \left(\sum_{k' \in \Phi_i^0} \sum_{j \in \mathcal{G}_{k'}} a_{ij}x_j \right) \\ & + \left(\sum_{k' \in \Phi_i^1} \sum_{j \in \mathcal{G}_{k'}} a_{ij}(x_j - x_{\theta_{k'}}) \right) \\ & + \gamma \operatorname{sgn} \left(\sum_{j \in \mathcal{G}_k \cup \theta_k} a_{ij}(x_j - x_i) \right) \\ & + \operatorname{sgn} \left(\sum_{k' \in \Phi_i^0} \sum_{j \in \mathcal{G}_{k'}} a_{ij}x_j \right) \\ & + \operatorname{sgn} \left(\sum_{k' \in \Phi_i^1} \sum_{j \in \mathcal{G}_{k'}} a_{ij}(x_j - x_{\theta_{k'}}) \right), \end{aligned} \quad (13)$$

where $\alpha, \beta, \gamma > 0$ are positive control gains.

Theorem 2. Under Assumptions 1 and 3, the multi-agent system (3) with protocol (13) and

$$\begin{aligned} \alpha &= \frac{(\bar{a}^2 N^3 + \sqrt{\ell_3 N}) \lambda_{\max}^{3/2}(W)}{\lambda_{\min}^{7/2}(W)} + \frac{\rho \sqrt{N}}{2\sqrt{2} \lambda_{\min}^{3/2}(W)}, \\ \beta &= \frac{\bar{a}N + \sqrt{\ell_2}}{\lambda_{\min}(W)}, \\ \gamma &= 1 + \omega + \sqrt{\ell_1 \max_{1 \leq k \leq K} |\mathcal{G}_k|} + \frac{\rho}{\sqrt{2} \lambda_{\min}(W)} \end{aligned}$$

with $\rho > 0$, achieves the convergence of the tracking errors \tilde{x}_i , $i \in V$ to zero in a finite time, which is bounded by $T_{\max} = \pi/\rho$.

Note that from Assumption 3, the tracking error dynamics (6) can be reproduced, and hence Theorem 2 follows exactly from the proof of Theorem 1. Clearly, Theorem 1 is a special case of Theorem 2 with $\Phi_i^1 = \emptyset$ for all $i \in V$.

IV. NUMERICAL EXAMPLES

In this section, we present numerical examples to validate our theoretical results and illustrate the flexibility of our developed framework.

Example 1 (Three leaders). In this example, we consider multi-agent system (3) with $K = 3$ leaders and $N = 9$ follower agents having $\mathcal{G}_1 = \{1, 2, 3\}$, $\mathcal{G}_2 = \{4, 5\}$, and $\mathcal{G}_3 = \{6, 7, 8, 9\}$. The network topology G together with its associated weights is shown in Fig. 1. Note that the leaders are by no means influenced by the followers as the weights shown between the leaders and the followers only appear in the controllers u_i 's for the followers (see Eqs. (5) and (13)). It is easy to see that Assumptions 1 and 3 hold. The inherent nonlinear dynamics is chosen as $f(t, x_i) = 0.2 \sin(x_i)$ for

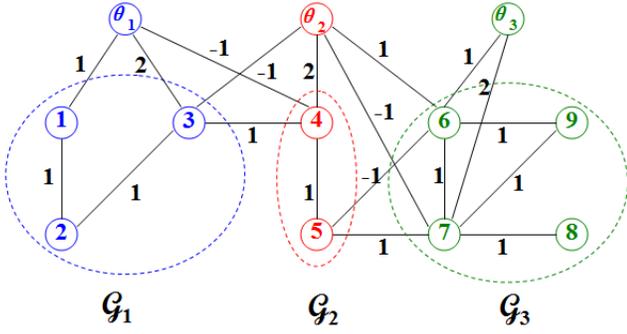


Fig. 1. Communication topology for Example 1.

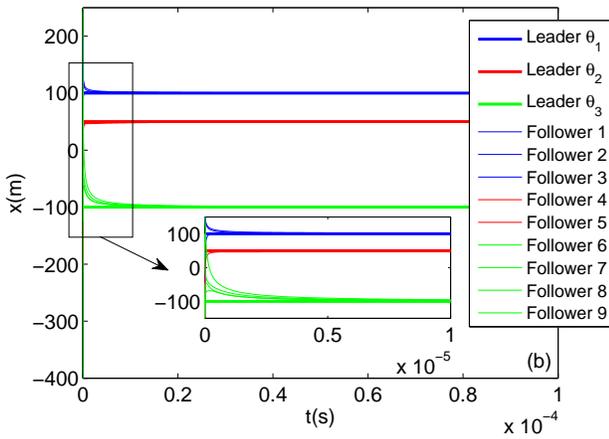
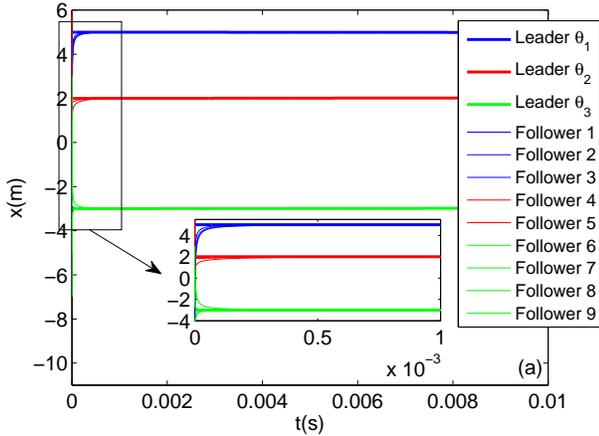


Fig. 2. Fixed-time group tracking consensus for multi-agent systems (3), (13) and communication topology shown in Example 1. (a) is for $(x_{\theta_1}(0), x_{\theta_2}(0), x_{\theta_3}(0), x_1(0), x_2(0), x_3(0), x_4(0), x_5(0), x_6(0), x_7(0), x_8(0), x_9(0)) = (5, 2, -3, 2, -4, -3, 6, 0, -5, 3, 1, -7)$; and (b) is for $(x_{\theta_1}(0), x_{\theta_2}(0), x_{\theta_3}(0), x_1(0), x_2(0), x_3(0), x_4(0), x_5(0), x_6(0), x_7(0), x_8(0), x_9(0)) = (100, 50, -100, -50, 200, 150, -200, 75, -125, -400, 250, 100)$.

all $i \in \{1, \dots, 9\} \cup \{\theta_1, \theta_2, \theta_3\}$. The condition (4) holds with $l_1 = l_3 = 0$ and $l_2 = 0.04$. The control inputs for the three leaders are taken as $u_{\theta_1} = -1$, $u_{\theta_2} = 1 + \cos(t)$, and $u_{\theta_3} = 2 \cos(t)$; they are bounded by $\omega = 2$. By taking $\rho = 200$, we obtain from Theorem 2 an explicit estimation of the settling time $T_{\max} \approx 0.015$, which is independent

of the initial conditions of the system. The group consensus tracking behaviors are shown with a small initial condition in Fig. 2(a) and a large initial condition in Fig. 2(b). One can see that the convergence time for both cases is less than 5×10^{-4} . The theoretical upper bound seems to be quite conservative for this scenario. Note that the initial conditions for the leaders are also different in these two situations for the sake of clear illustration. In view of the conservativeness of the estimation, a more practical settling time may be obtained by simulating the dynamical system for the followers with sufficiently large initial conditions. This is feasible because the fixed-time convergence is theoretically guaranteed and thus the convergence time will tend to a finite limit as the initial conditions increase. As such, we estimate the convergence time for the cases (a) and (b), respectively, as 4×10^{-4} and 10^{-5} .

Example 2 (Merging two of the leaders).

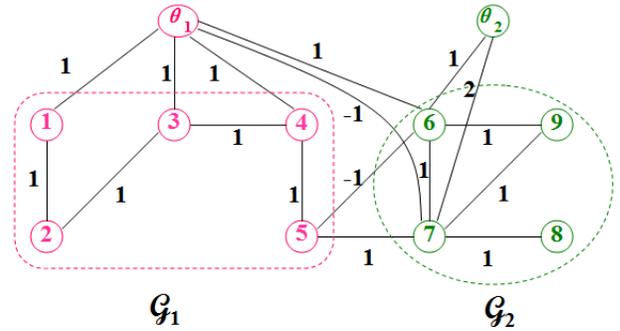


Fig. 3. Communication topology for Example 2.

Here, we merge the two leaders θ_1 and θ_2 in Example 1 so that they have the same dynamics and is denoted by a new θ_1 . The corresponding network architecture is depicted in Fig. 3, which contains two subgroups $\mathcal{G}_1 = \{1, 2, 3, 4, 5\}$ and $\mathcal{G}_2 = \{6, 7, 8, 9\}$. One can see that Assumptions 1 and 3 still hold. For the new leader θ_1 , the control input is taken as $u_{\theta_1} = \cos(t)$. The control input for the new leader θ_2 , the inherent nonlinear dynamics, and ρ are unchanged. Again, it follows from Theorem 2 that the estimated upper bound of settling time is $T_{\max} \approx 0.015$ regardless of the initial conditions. Analogously, the fixed-time group consensus tracking behavior is shown in Fig. 4 for two different initial conditions. We see that the follower agents 1-5 now track their common new leader θ_1 . The convergence time for both cases in Fig. 4 is less than 5×10^{-4} . Similar practical convergence time as in Example 1 is applicable here.

Example 3 (Cross-tracking).

In this example, we get back to the scenario in Example 1 with three subgroups $\mathcal{G}_1 = \{1, 2, 3\}$, $\mathcal{G}_2 = \{4, 5\}$, and $\mathcal{G}_3 = \{6, 7, 8, 9\}$. But now we let the first group \mathcal{G}_1 track θ_2 and let the second group \mathcal{G}_2 track θ_1 . The network topology is shown in Fig. 5, which is literally the same as Fig. 1. It is easy to see that Assumptions 1 and 3 hold, and the system parameters, including the control inputs for leaders, inherent nonlinear dynamics and ρ , are the same as in Example 1. Therefore, Theorem 2 implies an explicit estimation of the

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