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On the number of transversals in a class of Latin squares

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Abstract

Denote by $A_{pk}^p$ the Latin square of order $n = p^k$ formed by the Cayley table of the additive group $(\mathbb{Z}_p^k, +)$, where $p$ is an odd prime and $k$ is a positive integer. It is shown that for each $p$ there exists $Q > 0$ such that for all sufficiently large $k$, the number of transversals in $A_{pk}^p$ exceeds $(nQ)^{n(p-1)}$.

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1 Introduction

Several recent papers have addressed the issue of bounds on the numbers of transversals in Latin squares. So, suppose that $S$ is a Latin square. Denote by $T(S)$ the number of transversals in $S$, and put

$$T(n) = \max\{T(S) : S \text{ is a Latin square of order } n\}.$$  

It was shown by McKay, McLeod and Wanless [4] that for $n \geq 5$, $15^{n/5} \leq T(n) \leq 0.6135n!\sqrt{n}$.

The Cayley table of any finite group forms a Latin square, and such squares are called group-based. Let $A_n$ denote the cyclic Latin square of order $n$, that is the square formed by the Cayley table of the cyclic group $(\mathbb{Z}_n, +)$. If $n$ is even then $T(A_n) = 0$, but for odd $n$ it was conjectured by Vardi [6] that there exist positive constants $c$ and $d$ such that $c^n n! \leq T(A_n) \leq d^n n!$. Subsequently Cavenagh and Wanless [1] proved that for all sufficiently large $n$, $T(A_n) > (3.246)^n$, and this appears to remain the best lower bound for any class of group-based Latin squares obtained to date.

More recently, Taranenko [5] proved that $T(n) \leq [(1 + o(1)) \frac{n}{\ln n}]^n$, while Glebov and Luria [3] have shown that $T(n) \geq [(1 - o(1)) \frac{n}{\ln n}]^n$. The latter result is based on a probabilistic argument employing random Latin squares. These more recent results lend credence to Vardi’s conjecture but do not address group-based squares directly.

In the current paper we take $p$ to be an odd prime and $k$ to be a positive integer. Then the Cayley table of the additive group $(\mathbb{Z}_p^k, +)$ forms a Latin square of order $n = p^k$ which we denote by $A_p^k$. We will assume that this square has its rows and columns labelled in the natural way by elements of $\mathbb{Z}_p^k$ represented as $k$-vectors over $\mathbb{Z}_p$, and when $k = 1$ we write $A_p$ rather than $A_p^1$. We prove that, for all sufficiently large $k$, $A_p^k$ has more than $(nQ)^{p^n+1}$ transversals, where $Q > 0$ depends only on $p$ and is independent of $k$.

Note added in proof: Since drafting our current paper, our attention has been drawn to the arXiv paper [2] which claims a proof of Vardi’s conjecture.

2 Results

We start with the observation that $A_p^k$ has a transversal $T$ formed from its leading diagonal. We will construct a large number of transversals by carrying out transversal trades on $T$. These trades are based on the square $A_p$ and involve transversals within this square that do not contain the (row, column, entry) triple $(0, 0, 0)$. So let $T^*$ denote the number of transversals of $A_p$ that do not contain this triple. By transitivity, the number of transversals in $A_p^k$ that contain the triple $(0, 0, 0)$ is $T(A_p^k)/p^k$, so the number of transversals not containing this triple is $T(A_p^k)(1 - \frac{1}{p^k})$. In particular, $T^* = T(A_p)(1 - \frac{1}{p})$, and note rather trivially that $T(A_p) \geq p$. 


For \( k \geq 2 \), the square \( A^k_p \) can be partitioned into \( p^2 \) subarrays by writing the row labels, the column labels and the entries in the form \((z,i)\) where \( z \in \mathbb{Z}_{p}^{k-1} \) and \( i \in \mathbb{Z}_p \). This is shown schematically in Figure 1 with the row and column labels omitted.

\[
A^k_p = \begin{pmatrix}
(A^k_p,0) & (A^k_p,1) & \ldots & (A^k_p,p-1) \\
(A^k_p,1) & (A^k_p,2) & \ldots & (A^k_p,p-1) \\
\vdots & \vdots & \ddots & \vdots \\
(A^k_p,p-1) & (A^k_p,0) & \ldots & (A^k_p,p-2)
\end{pmatrix}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{c|c|c|c|}
A_{0,0} & A_{0,1} & \ldots & A_{0,p-1} \\
A_{1,0} & A_{1,1} & \ldots & A_{1,p-1} \\
\vdots & \vdots & \ddots & \vdots \\
A_{p-1,0} & A_{p-1,1} & \ldots & A_{p-1,p-1}
\end{array}
\]

Figure 1: Partitioning \( A^k_p \).

Taken without the row and column labels inherited from \( A^k_p \), the subarrays \( A_{i,j} \) and \( A_{i',j'} \) are identical when \( i + j = i' + j' \) in \( \mathbb{Z}_p \). However, we will associate each of these subarrays with their original row and column labels.

Our transversal trades will be based on copies of \( A_p \), each having precisely one entry from each \( A_{i,j} \). Specifically, one (row, column, entry) triple is selected from the leading diagonal of \( A_{0,0} \), say \((a,0),(a,0),(2a,0)\), and one triple is selected from \( A_{0,1} \) having the same row entry, say \((a,0),(b,1),(a+b,1)\). These two choices are sufficient to determine a copy of \( A_p \), denoted by \( A(a,b) \), as shown in Figure 2, which also shows the inherited row and column labels.

\[
\begin{array}{c|c|c|c|}
(a,0) & (b,1) & (2b-a,2) & \ldots & (2a-b,p-1) \\
\hline
(2a,0) & (a+b,1) & (2b,2) & \ldots & (3a-b,p-1) \\
(a+b,1) & (2b,2) & (3b-a,3) & \ldots & (2a,0) \\
\vdots & \vdots & \vdots & \ddots & \vdots \\
(3a-b,p-1) & (2a,0) & (a+b,1) & \ldots & (4a-2b,p-2)
\end{array}
\]

Figure 2: The array \( A(a,b) \).

Note that the row and column labels of \( A(a,b) \), inherited from \( A^k_p \), have the form \((rb-(r-1)a,r)\) and the entries have the form \((rb-(r-2)a,r)\), both for \( r = 0,1,\ldots,p-1 \).

The leading diagonal of \( A(a,b) \) lies in the leading diagonal of \( A^k_p \) and therefore this diagonal of \( A(a,b) \) forms a part of the transversal \( \mathcal{T} \). There are \( T^* \) transversals in \( A(a,b) \) that do not contain the triple \((a,0),(a,0),(2a,0)\). If the diagonal transversal of \( A(a,b) \) in \( \mathcal{T} \) is traded for any one of these \( T^* \) transversals, then a new transversal in \( A^k_p \) is obtained that does not contain the triple \((a,0),(a,0),(2a,0)\). Hence, for each given \( a \in \mathbb{Z}_p^{k-1}, T^* \) distinct transversals of \( A^k_p \) may be obtained for each \( b \in \mathbb{Z}_p^{k-1} \). Furthermore, for two different
values $b, b' \in \mathbb{Z}_p^k - 1$, the arrays $A(a, b)$ and $A(a, b')$ only intersect in the cell $((a, 0), (a, 0))$, and so by varying $b$, a total of $p^{k-1}T^*$ distinct transversals of $A_p^k$ may be obtained that do not contain the triple $((a, 0), (a, 0), (2a, 0))$.

In principle, we wish to carry out these trades sequentially for as many values of $a$ as is possible. The obstacle is that having carried out a trade using $A(a, b)$, and having chosen $a' \neq a$, the choice of $b'$ is constrained by the need to ensure that $A(a', b')$ avoids the rows, columns and entries of $A(a, b)$. So suppose that trades have already been made using $c - 1$ choices of $(a, b)$ and that a $c^{th}$ choice is to be made. If $(a, b)$ defines one of the previous choices and $(a', b')$ is the proposed $c^{th}$ choice, with $a' \neq a$, then to ensure that rows and columns do not clash it is necessary and sufficient that $((r' - (r' - 1)a'))$ and $(rb - (r - 1)a, r)$ are unequal for all $r, r' = 0, 1, \ldots, p - 1$. But these two quantities can only be equal if $r' = r$, and then only if $rb' - (r - 1)a' = rb - (r - 1)a$. Hence the rows and columns of $A(a, b)$ and $A(a', b')$ are distinct provided that $b' \neq b + \frac{c - 1}{p} (a' - a)$ for $r = 1, 2, \ldots, p - 1$. As $r$ varies from 1 to $p - 1$, $\frac{c - 1}{p}$ takes all values in $\mathbb{Z}_p$, apart from the value 1. Hence in selecting $b'$ it is necessary to avoid the $p - 1$ values $b + \rho(a' - a)$ for $\rho = 0, 2, 3, \ldots, p - 1$ for each previous choice of $(a, b)$.

By arguing in a similar fashion regarding entries, we obtain exactly the same condition to avoid entry clashes between $A(a, b)$ and $A(a', b')$. It follows that at the $c^{th}$ choice, there are at least $p^{k-1} - (c - 1)(p - 1)$ choices for $b'$ (rather more if there is multiple counting of excluded rows, columns and entries).

Now put $C = \left[\frac{p^{k-1}}{p-1}\right] = \frac{p^{k-1} - 1}{p - 1}$ and let $c \leq C$ be a positive integer. Then it is possible to choose $c$ subarrays of the form $A(a, b)$ that are pairwise disjoint as regards rows, columns and entries. Suppose that the subarrays chosen are $A(a_i, b_i)$ for $i = 1, 2, \ldots, c$. Then the number of transversals in $A_p^k$ that do not contain any of the triples $((a_i, 0), (a_i, 0), (2a_i, 0))$ for $i = 1, 2, \ldots, c$, and which can be constructed by trades on these arrays is at least

$$(T^* (p - 1))^c(p^{k-1} - (p - 1))(p^{k-1} - 2(p - 1)) \ldots (p^{k-1} - (c - 1)(p - 1))$$

$$> (T^* (p - 1))^c \frac{c!}{(C - c)!}$$

To see that these transversals are all distinct, consider any one of them, say $T^*$. Each $a_i$ for $i = 1, 2, \ldots, c$ can be identified from those diagonal entries of $A_{0,0}$ that do not form part of $T^*$. Having identified an $a_i$, there will be a triple of $T^*$ of the form $((a_i, 0), (rb_i - (r - 1)a_i, r), (rb_i - (r - 2)a_i, r))$ where $r \neq 0$. From this triple, $r$ can be identified and hence also $b_i$. Thus the subarrays $A(a_i, b_i)$ can be recovered from $T^*$, and the distinctness of the transversals follows. In fact any distinct choices of up to $C$ values for $a_i$ will yield distinct transversals. Hence we obtain the following theorem.

**Theorem 2.1** If $p$ is an odd prime and $k$ is a positive integer, then the number of transversals in the Latin square $A_p^k$, denoted by $T(A_p^k)$, satisfies the inequality

$$T(A_p^k) > \sum_{c=0}^{C} \binom{p^{k-1}}{c} (T^* (p - 1))^c \frac{C!}{(C - c)!}$$

(1)
where $C = \frac{p^k - 1}{p - 1}$ and $T^* = T(A_p)(1 - \frac{1}{p})$.

The final term in the summation (1) gives

$$T(A^k_p) > \left(\frac{p^k - 1}{C}\right)(T^*(p - 1))C!$$

$$= \frac{(p^k - 1)!}{(p^k - C)!}(T^*(p - 1))^C$$

Applying Stirling’s Theorem in the form $r! = r^{r+\frac{1}{2}}e^{-r}\sqrt{2\pi}e^{o(1)}$ (as $r \to \infty$) to this expression for large $k$ gives

$$T(A^k_p) > \left[p^{k-1}T^*(p - 1)e^{-1}\right]^C \cdot \left[1 - \frac{C}{p^k - 1}\right]^{-(p^k - 1)}e^{o(1)}.$$  (2)

For $p \geq 3$ and $k \geq 2$ we have $(1 - \frac{C}{p^k - 1}) \leq (1 - \frac{1}{p})$ and $p^{k-1} - C + \frac{1}{2} > (p - 2)C$. Hence

$$T(A^k_p) > \left[p^{k-1}T^*(p - 1)e^{-1}\right]^C \cdot e^{o(1)}.$$  (2)

The square $A^k_p$ has order $n = p^k$ and $C = \frac{n}{p^{k-1}} - \frac{1}{p^k}$, so taking $Q$ to be slightly less than $\left(\frac{p^k}{p^k - 1}\right)^{p-4}T(A_p)e^{-1}$ gives the following corollary.

**Corollary 2.1** If $p$ is an odd prime, there exists $Q > 0$ such that for all sufficiently large $k$,

$$T(A^k_p) > (nQ)^{\frac{n}{p^{k-1} - 1}},$$

where $n = p^k$.

In fact if $p$ is also sufficiently large, then using the result of [1], we may take $Q = (3.246)\sqrt{p}$. However, the bound is clearly best when $p$ is small. In the case $p = 3$, inequality (2) simplifies as follows. Firstly $T(A_3) = 3$, so $T^* = 2$. Also $C = (3^{k-1} - 1)/2$ and $3^{k-1} - C + \frac{1}{2} = 3^{k-1}/2 + 1$. Hence

$$T(A^k_p) > \left(4 \cdot 3^{k-1} \cdot e^{-1}\right)^C \cdot \left(1 + \frac{1}{3^{k-1}}\right)^{-(\frac{3^{k-1}}{2} + 1)}e^{o(1)}$$

$$= \left(\frac{4n}{3e}\right)^C \cdot 2^{C+\frac{3}{2}} \cdot \left(1 + \frac{1}{3^{k-1}}\right)^{-(\frac{3^{k-1}}{2} + 1)}e^{o(1)}$$

$$= \left(\frac{8n}{3e}\right)^C \cdot 2^{C+\frac{3}{2}} \cdot \frac{1}{\sqrt{e}}e^{o(1)},$$

since $(1 + \frac{1}{r})^{-r} \to e^{-1}$ as $r \to \infty$. Noting that $8/3e > 0.981$ and that $C = \frac{n}{6} - \frac{1}{2}$, we obtain
Corollary 2.2 For all sufficiently large \( k \), \( T(A^k_3) > (0.981n)^{\frac{k}{n}} \), where \( n = 3^k \).

Finally we remark that, by transitivity, the number of orthogonal mates of the Latin square \( A^k_p \) is \( T(A^k_p)/n \) (where \( n = p^k \)) and so Theorem 2.1 and its corollaries also provide lower bounds for this quantity.

References


