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Note

On the number of transversals in a class of Latin squares

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Abstract

Denote by $A_k^p$ 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 $A_k^p$ exceeds $(nQ)^{p^k/n}$.

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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 $n \geq 5$, $15^{n/5} \leq T(n) \leq 0.6135^n n! \sqrt{n}$.

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 $T(n) \geq [(1 - o(1)) \frac{n}{2^e}]^n$, while Glebov and Luria [3] have shown that $T(n) \leq [(1 - o(1)) \frac{n}{2^e}]^n$. 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 $A_k^p$. 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 $A_1^1$. We prove that, for all sufficiently large $k$, $A_k^p$ has more than $(nQ)^{p^k/n}$ 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.

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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 $T(A_p^k)(1 - 1/p^k)$. In particular, $T^* = T(A_p)(1 - 1/p)$, and note rather trivially that $T(A_p^k) \geq p$.

For $k \geq 2$, the square $A_p^k$ 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 Fig. 1 with the row and column labels omitted.

Taken without the row and column labels inherited from $A_p^k$, the subarrays $A_{ij}$ 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 $A_{ij}$. 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 $(a, b)$, as shown in Fig. 2, which also shows the inherited row and column labels.

Note that the row and column labels of $A(a, b)$, inherited from $A_p^k$, 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 $A_p^k$ and therefore this diagonal of $A(a, b)$ forms a part of the transversal $T$. 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 $T$ is traded for any one of these $T^*$ transversals, then a new transversal in $A_p^k$ 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 $A_p^k$ may be obtained for each $b \in \mathbb{Z}_p$. 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 $\left(r'b' - (r' - 1)a', r'\right)$ and $\left(rb - (r - 1)a, r\right)$ 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 $b' \neq b + \frac{r-1}{r'}(a' - a)$ for $r = 1, 2, \ldots, p - 1$. As $r$ varies from $1$ to $p - 1$, $\frac{r-1}{r'}$ 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 $C = \left\lfloor \frac{p^{k-1}}{p-1} \right\rfloor$ 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

$$\left(T^*\right)^c \left(p^{k-1} - (p - 1)(p^{k-1} - 2(p - 1)) \ldots (p^{k-1} - (c - 1)(p - 1))\right) > \left(T^* \right)^c \frac{C!}{(C - c)!}.$$

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

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

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

The final term in the summation (1) gives

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

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

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

$$T(A_p^k) > \left( p^{k-1} \left( p - 1 \right)^{p-1} \right)^c \left( 1 - \frac{C}{p^{k-1}} \right)^{-(p^{k-1} - C) + \frac{1}{2}} e^{o(1)}.$$  

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

$$T(A_p^k) > \left( p^{k-1} \left( p - 1 \right)^{p-1} T(A_p) e^{-1} \right)^c e^{o(1)}.$$

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

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

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

where $n = p^k$.

In fact if $p$ is also sufficiently large, then using the result of [1], we may take $Q = (3.246)^p$. 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

$$T(A_3^k) > \left( 4 \cdot 3^{k-1} \cdot e^{-1} \right)^c \left( \frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{2} \cdot 3^{k-1} \right)^{-(3^{k-1} + 1)} e^{o(1)}$$

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

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

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 \( k \), \( T(A_k^3) > (0.981 n)^{\frac{3}{2}} \), where \( n = 3^k \).

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

References