ON THE SET OF DISTANCES BETWEEN TWO SETS OVER FINITE FIELDS

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Received 13 March 2006; Revised 12 May 2006; Accepted 9 July 2006

We use bounds of exponential sums to derive new lower bounds on the number of distinct distances between all pairs of points $(\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y}) \in \mathcal{A} \times \mathcal{B}$ for two given sets $\mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B} \in \mathbb{F}_q^n$, where $\mathbb{F}_q$ is a finite field of q elements and $n \geq 1$ is an integer.

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1. Introduction

For a ring $\mathcal{R}$ and two finite sets $\mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B} \subseteq \mathcal{R}^n$, we denote by $\Gamma(\mathcal{R}^n, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B})$ the number of distinct distances between all pairs of points $(\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y}) \in \mathcal{A} \times \mathcal{B}$, that is,

$$\Gamma(\mathcal{R}^n, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B}) = |\{d(\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y}) \mid (\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y}) \in \mathcal{A} \times \mathcal{B}\}|, \quad (1.1)$$

where for $\mathbf{x} = (x_1, \dots, x_n), \mathbf{y} = (y_1, \dots, y_n) \in \mathcal{R}^n$ we define

$$d(\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y}) = \sum_{j=1}^n (x_j - y_j)^2. \quad (1.2)$$

In the case $\mathcal{A} = \mathcal{B}$ the problem of estimating $\Gamma(\mathcal{R}^n, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{A})$ is well known. In particular, the *Erdős distance conjecture* asserts that over the real numbers, that is, for $\mathcal{R} = \mathbb{R}$, the bound

$$\Gamma(\mathbb{R}^n, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{A}) \geq c(\varepsilon) |\mathcal{A}|^{2/n-\varepsilon} \quad (1.3)$$

holds for an arbitrary $\varepsilon > 0$ and any finite set $\mathcal{A} \subseteq \mathbb{R}^n$, where $c(\varepsilon) > 0$ depends only on ε . Despite that there are some very interesting lower bounds on $\Gamma(\mathbb{R}^n, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{A})$, this conjecture is still widely open in any dimension including $n = 2$. For some recent achievements and generalisations, see [1–6] and references therein.

Iosevich and Rudnev [4] have recently considered this problem for sets over finite fields (again for $\mathcal{A} = \mathcal{B}$) and obtained several very interesting results.

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The case of arbitrary sets $\mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B} \in \mathbb{F}_q^n$ has recently been studied in [8], where the lower bound

$$\Gamma(\mathbb{F}_q^n, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B}) > q - \frac{q^{n+2}}{|\mathcal{A}||\mathcal{B}|} \quad (1.4)$$

is given (which in some special case is new even for $\mathcal{A} = \mathcal{B}$). In particular, it is nontrivial for $|\mathcal{A}||\mathcal{B}| > q^{n+1}$. The method of [8] rests on a new bound of exponential sums over the set of distances. Here we use this bound in a slightly different way to derive an improvement of (1.4), which is nontrivial for $|\mathcal{A}||\mathcal{B}| > q^n$.

In fact, one can easily adjust the method of [4] to the case of distinct sets $\mathcal{A}$ and $\mathcal{B}$, or in fact derive a lower bound on $\Gamma(\mathbb{F}_q^n, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B})$ from already existing results of [4]. Such bounds are usually stronger than the bound of this work. However in some extremal cases our approach leads to a bound of the same order of magnitude which has completely explicit (and perhaps better than those one can extract from [4]) constants. For example, one can derive from [4] that if $|\mathcal{A}||\mathcal{B}| > Cq^{n+1}$, then $\Gamma(\mathbb{F}_q^n, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B}) = q$, provided that C is sufficiently large.

Furthermore, as in [8], given n polynomials $f_j(X, Y) \in \mathbb{F}_q[X, Y]$, $j = 1, \dots, n$, we define the *generalised distance*

$$d_{\mathbf{f}}(\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y}) = \sum_{j=1}^n f_j(x_j, y_j), \quad (1.5)$$

where $\mathbf{f} = (f_1, \dots, f_n)$.

Now, for two sets $\mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B} \subseteq \mathbb{F}_q^n$, we define

$$\Gamma_{\mathbf{f}}(\mathbb{F}_q^n, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B}) = |\{d_{\mathbf{f}}(\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y}) \mid \mathbf{x} \in \mathcal{A}, \mathbf{y} \in \mathcal{B}\}|. \quad (1.6)$$

In the special case of the Euclidean distance function $\mathbf{f}_0 = (f_{1,0}, \dots, f_{n,0})$, where $f_{j,0}(X, Y) = (X - Y)^2$, $j = 1, \dots, n$, we simply have

$$\Gamma_{\mathbf{f}_0}(\mathbb{F}_q^n, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B}) = \Gamma(\mathbb{F}_q^n, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B}). \quad (1.7)$$

In particular, under some conditions on $\mathbf{f}$, the bound

$$\Gamma_{\mathbf{f}}(\mathbb{F}_q^n, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B}) = q + O\left(\frac{q^{3n/2+2}}{|\mathcal{A}||\mathcal{B}|}\right) \quad (1.8)$$

has been given in [8]. Here we show that the power of q in the error term can be lowered to $q^{3n/2+1}$.

2. Euclidean distances

We start with the case of Euclidean distances and improve the bound (1.4).

THEOREM 2.1. *For arbitrary sets $\mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B} \subseteq \mathbb{F}_q^n$,*

$$\Gamma(\mathbb{F}_q^n, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B}) > \frac{|\mathcal{A}||\mathcal{B}|q}{q^{n+1} + |\mathcal{A}||\mathcal{B}|}. \quad (2.1)$$

Proof. Let χ be a nontrivial additive character of $\mathbb{F}_q$ (see [7] for basis properties of additive characters). In particular, we recall the identity

$$\sum_{s \in \mathbb{F}_q} \chi(st) = \begin{cases} 0 & \text{if } t \in \mathbb{F}_q^*, \\ q & \text{if } t = 0. \end{cases} \quad (2.2)$$

As in [8], we consider character sums

$$S(a, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B}) = \sum_{\mathbf{x} \in \mathcal{A}} \sum_{\mathbf{y} \in \mathcal{B}} \chi(ad(\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y})), \quad a \in \mathbb{F}_q, \quad (2.3)$$

where as before $d(\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y})$ is given by (1.2).

Our principal tool is the upper bound

$$|S(a, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B})| \leq \sqrt{|\mathcal{A}||\mathcal{B}|q^n}, \quad (2.4)$$

which is established in [8] for any $a \in \mathbb{F}_q^*$.

For $\lambda \in \mathbb{F}_q$, we denote by $N(\lambda)$ the number of representations $\lambda = d(\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y})$ with $(\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y}) \in \mathcal{A} \times \mathcal{B}$.

Then by (2.2) we have

$$N(\lambda) = \frac{1}{q} \sum_{\mathbf{x} \in \mathcal{A}} \sum_{\mathbf{y} \in \mathcal{B}} \frac{1}{q} \sum_{a \in \mathbb{F}_q} \chi(a(d(\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y}) - \lambda)) = \frac{1}{q} \sum_{a \in \mathbb{F}_q} \chi(-a\lambda) S(a, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B}). \quad (2.5)$$

Hence,

$$\begin{aligned} \sum_{\lambda \in \mathbb{F}_q} N(\lambda)^2 &= \frac{1}{q^2} \sum_{\lambda \in \mathbb{F}_q} \sum_{a, b \in \mathbb{F}_q} \chi((b-a)\lambda) S(a, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B}) \overline{S(b, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B})} \\ &= \frac{1}{q^2} \sum_{a, b \in \mathbb{F}_q} S(a, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B}) \overline{S(b, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B})} \sum_{\lambda \in \mathbb{F}_q} \chi((b-a)\lambda) \\ &= \frac{1}{q} \sum_{a \in \mathbb{F}_q} |S(a, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B})|^2, \end{aligned} \quad (2.6)$$

since by (2.2) the sum over λ vanishes unless $a = b$.

We now use the bound (2.4) for $a \in \mathbb{F}_q^*$ and the trivial bound $|S(a, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B})| \leq |\mathcal{A}||\mathcal{B}|$ for $a = 0$, getting

$$\sum_{\lambda \in \mathbb{F}_q} N(\lambda)^2 < |\mathcal{A}||\mathcal{B}|q^n + |\mathcal{A}|^2 |\mathcal{B}|^2 q^{-1}. \quad (2.7)$$

Clearly

$$\sum_{\lambda \in \mathbb{F}_q} N(\lambda) = |\mathcal{A}||\mathcal{B}|. \quad (2.8)$$

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Now by the Cauchy inequality we derive

$$\begin{aligned} (|\mathcal{A}||\mathcal{B}|)^2 &= \left(\sum_{\lambda \in \mathbb{F}_q} N(\lambda) \right)^2 \leq \Gamma(\mathbb{F}_q^n, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B}) \sum_{\lambda \in \mathbb{F}_q} N(\lambda)^2 \\ &< \Gamma(\mathbb{F}_q^n, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B}) (|\mathcal{A}||\mathcal{B}|q^n + |\mathcal{A}|^2|\mathcal{B}|^2, q^{-1}), \end{aligned} \quad (2.9)$$

which implies the desired result. $\square$

3. Generalised distances

We now use similar arguments to improve the bound (1.8).

THEOREM 3.1. *Let $\mathbf{f} = (f_1, \dots, f_n)$, where each of the polynomials $f_j(X, Y) \in \mathbb{F}_q[X, Y]$, $j = 1, \dots, n$, is of degree at most k and is not of the form $f_j(X, Y) = g_j(X) + h_j(Y)$ with $g_j(X) \in \mathbb{F}_q[X]$, $h_j(Y) \in \mathbb{F}_q[Y]$. Then, for arbitrary sets $\mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B} \subseteq \mathbb{F}_q^n$,*

$$\Gamma_{\mathbf{f}}(\mathbb{F}_q^n, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B}) = q + O\left(\frac{q^{3n/2+1}}{|\mathcal{A}||\mathcal{B}|}\right). \quad (3.1)$$

Proof. Here, instead of the bound (2.4), we use the bound

$$|S_{\mathbf{f}}(a, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B})| = O\left(\sqrt{|\mathcal{A}||\mathcal{B}|q^{3n/2}}\right), \quad a \in \mathbb{F}_q^*, \quad (3.2)$$

which is established in [8] for the character sums

$$S_{\mathbf{f}}(a, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B}) = \sum_{\mathbf{x} \in \mathcal{A}} \sum_{\mathbf{y} \in \mathcal{B}} \chi(ad_{\mathbf{f}}(\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y})), \quad a \in \mathbb{F}_q, \quad (3.3)$$

where $d_{\mathbf{f}}(\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y})$ is given by (1.5).

Let $N_{\mathbf{f}}(\lambda)$ be the number of solutions to the equation

$$d_{\mathbf{f}}(\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y}) = \lambda, \quad \mathbf{x} \in \mathcal{A}, \mathbf{y} \in \mathcal{B}. \quad (3.4)$$

As in the proof of Theorem 2.1, using (3.2) instead of (2.4), we deduce

$$\sum_{\lambda \in \mathbb{F}_q} N_{\mathbf{f}}(\lambda)^2 = \frac{1}{q} \sum_{a \in \mathbb{F}_q} |S(a, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B})|^2 = |\mathcal{A}|^2|\mathcal{B}|^2q^{-1} + O(|\mathcal{A}||\mathcal{B}|q^{3n/2}). \quad (3.5)$$

As before, we also have

$$\sum_{\lambda \in \mathbb{F}_q} N_{\mathbf{f}}(\lambda) = |\mathcal{A}||\mathcal{B}|, \quad (3.6)$$

and by the Cauchy inequality we derive

$$\begin{aligned} (|\mathcal{A}||\mathcal{B}|)^2 &= \left(\sum_{\lambda \in \mathbb{F}_q} N(\lambda) \right)^2 \leq \Gamma(\mathbb{F}_q^n, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B}) \sum_{\lambda \in \mathbb{F}_q} N(\lambda)^2 \\ &< \Gamma(\mathbb{F}_q^n, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B}) (|\mathcal{A}|^2 |\mathcal{B}|^2 q^{-1} + O(|\mathcal{A}||\mathcal{B}| q^{3n/2})), \end{aligned} \quad (3.7)$$

which implies the desired result. $\square$

Acknowledgments

The author is very grateful to Alex Iosevich for many useful discussions and encouragement, in particular, for clarifying how the results and methods of [4] can be modified to incorporate the case of distinct sets $\mathcal{A} \neq \mathcal{B}$. During the preparation of this note, the author was supported in part by ARC Grant DP0556431.

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