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On the number of solutions of the equation $1^k + 2^k + \cdots + (x-1)^k = y^z$

By B. BRINDZA (Debrecen) and Á. PINTÉR (Debrecen)

To Professor K. Győry on his 60th birthday

1. Introduction

In 1956 Schäffer proved

Theorem A (Schäffer [13]). *For fixed $k > 0$ and $m > 1$ the equation*

$$1^k + 2^k + \cdots + (x-1)^k = y^m \tag{1}$$

has an infinite number of solutions in positive integers x and y only in the cases

(i) $k = 1,\ m = 2$; (ii) $k = 3,\ m \in \{2, 4\}$; (iii) $k = 5,\ m = 2$.

For further generalisations and improvements we refer to [3], [5], [7], [9], [14], [15], [16] and [17]. One of the most surprising results is

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Theorem B (Győry, Tijdeman and Voorhoeve [17]). *Let $R(x)$ be a fixed polynomial with rational integer coefficients. Let $b \neq 0$ and $k \geq 2$ be fixed rational integers such that $k \notin \{3, 5\}$. Then the equation*

$$1^k + 2^k + \cdots + x^k + R(x) = by^z$$

in integers $x, y \geq 1$ and $z > 1$ has only finitely many solutions.

It is known that the sum $S_k(x) = 1^k + 2^k + \cdots + (x-1)^k$ can be expressed in terms of Bernoulli polynomials, hence the equation (1) can be considered as a superelliptic equation and one can derive an upper bound for the size of the solutions by using Baker's method. Dealing with the number of solutions, Brindza obtained

Theorem C (Brindza [4]). *For any given $m \notin \{1, 2, 4\}$, the equation (1) has at most e^{7k} solutions.*

The purpose of this paper is to handle the more general case when the exponent m is also unknown; i.e. we consider the equation

$$S_k(x) = y^z \text{ in positive integers } x, y > 1,\ z > 2 \quad \text{and } (k, z) \notin (3, 4). \tag{2}$$

Theorem 1. *The equation (2) has at most*

$$\max\{c_1, e^{3k}\}$$

solutions, where c_1 is an effectively computable absolute constant.

A reasonable upper bound in the hyperelliptic case (i.e. when $z = 2$), which is not covered by Theorem C is provided by

Theorem 2. *If k is even then the equation*

$$S_k(x) = y^2 \tag{3}$$

possesses at most $\max\{c_2, 9^k\}$ solutions in positive integers x and y, where c_2 is an effectively computable absolute constant.

2. Preliminaries

The proofs are based upon several classical properties of Bernoulli polynomials and some up-to-date results. For the following known properties we refer to [11] (pages 4–22).

Let $B_n(X)$ denote the nth Bernoulli polynomial and $B_n = B_n(0)$, $n = 0, 1, 2, \ldots$; moreover, let D_n be the denominator of B_n. Then we have

$$(A) \qquad B_n(X) = \sum_{i=0}^{n} \binom{n}{i} B_i X^{n-i}, \quad (B_0 := 1),$$

$$(B) \qquad 1^k + 2^k + \cdots + (x-1)^k = \frac{1}{k+1}(B_{k+1}(x) - B_{k+1}),$$

$$(C) \qquad B_n(X) = (-1)^n B_n(1-X),$$

$$(D) \qquad B_{2n+1} = 0, \quad n = 1, 2, \ldots,$$

$$(E) \qquad \text{(Von Staudt and Clausen)}, \ D_{2n} = \prod_{p-1|2n} p, \ \ p \text{ prime};$$

$$(F) \qquad \frac{2 \cdot (2n)!}{(2\pi)^{2n}} < |B_{2n}| < \frac{(2n)!}{12(2\pi)^{2n-2}} \qquad (n > 1).$$

$$(G) \qquad \text{If } k \text{ is odd then } 0, \ 1, \ \frac{1}{2} \text{ are simple zeros of } B_k(X).$$

Moreover, we shall use the following lemmas.

Lemma 1. *For any $n \geq 3$ and positive integers a, b the diophantine equation*

$$|ax^n - by^n| = 1$$

has at most one solution in positive integers x and y.

Proof. See [2]. □

In the sequel, $c_3, c_4, \ldots$, will denote effectively computable absolute constants.

Lemma 2. *The equation* (2) *implies*

$$z < c_3 k^2 \log 2k.$$

Proof. See [10, Theorem] and the subsequent remark. □

Lemma 3. *For any given k, m with $k > c_4$, $m > 2$ the equation* (1) *possesses at most $e^{2.85k}$ solutions.*

Proof. Using Brindza's approach (see [4]), one can see that (1) leads to at most $T(k)$ equations of type

$$au^m - bv^m = 1 \text{ in positive integers } u, v,$$

where

$$T(k) \le \left(\frac{k}{3}\right)^{\epsilon k\left(2+\frac{\log 3}{\log 2}\right)} \left(\prod_{\substack{p<2^{1/\epsilon}\\ p \text{ prime}}} \frac{2}{\epsilon \log 2}\right)^{2+\frac{\log 3}{\log 2}} \qquad (k > c_5).$$

We mention that the upper bound for $T(k)$ is valid for all $\epsilon > 0$. Applying the well-known inequality

$$\pi(n) < \frac{2n}{\log n}, \quad n > 1 \text{ (cf. [12])}, \tag{4}$$

and on taking

$$\epsilon = \frac{\log 2}{\log k/2}$$

we have

$$\begin{aligned} T(k) &\le \exp\left\{\frac{\log k/3}{\log k/2}\log 2\left(2+\frac{\log 3}{\log 2}\right)k \right.\\ &\qquad \left. + \frac{\log 2 + \log\log k/2 - 2\log\log 2}{\log k/2}\left(2+\frac{\log 3}{\log 2}\right)k\right\}\\ &\le \exp\left\{\left(2+\frac{\log 3}{\log 2}\right)(\log 2 + 0.1)k\right\} \le e^{2.85k}, \end{aligned}$$

for $k > c_6$. Finally, Lemma 1 completes the proof.

Lemma 4. *If a, b and c are positive integers then the simultaneous equations*

$$ax^2 - by^2 = 1, \quad by^2 - cz^2 = 1$$

has at most one solution (x, y, z) in positive integers.

Proof. This is the main result of [1]. □

Lemma 5. *Let $d(n)$ denote, as usual, the number of positive divisors of n. Then for every positive ϵ and positive integer n*

$$d(n) \le n^{\epsilon} \prod_{\substack{p^{\epsilon}<2 \\ p \text{ prime}}} \frac{2}{\epsilon \log 2}.$$

PROOF. See e.g. [8], page 111. □

3. Proofs of Theorems

PROOF of Theorem 1. Since all the parameters of the kth Bernoulli polynomials depend only on k thus the unknowns x, y and z are bounded by a function of k.

If $k \le c_7$ then our result is an easy consequence of Lemma 2 and Lemma 5. Now supposing $k > c_7$ Theorem 1 is a straightforward corollary of Lemmata 1, 2 and 3. □

PROOF of Theorem 2. We may assume again that $k > c_8$, otherwise Theorem 2 is proved by Lemma 5. If k is even then

$$\begin{aligned}(k+1)y^2 &= (k+1)S_k(x) = B_{k+1}(x) \\ &= \binom{k+1}{1} B_k x + \binom{k+1}{3} B_{k-2} x^3 + \cdots + x^{k+1}.\end{aligned}$$

On setting $P_k = \prod_{\substack{p \le k \\ p \text{ prime}}} p$ we obtain

$$(k+1)P_k y^2 = x\big((k+1)B_k P_k + x^2 f(x)\big),$$

where $f(x) \in \mathbb{Z}[x]$ and thus

$$x = au^2, \quad a \mid (k+1)B_k P_k$$

and a is a square-free and positive. We get similarly

$$x - 1 = bv^2 \quad \text{and} \quad 2x - 1 = cz^2,$$

where b and c also square-free positive rational integers and divide $(k+1)B_kP_k$. Using Lemma 4, it is enough to give an upper bound for the number of triplets (a,b,c) denoted by $N(a,b,c)$. It is plain that

$$N(a,b,c) \le d\big(|(k+1)B_kP_k|\big)^3$$

and a simple calculation gives

$$\begin{aligned}|(k+1)B_kP_k| &\le (k+1)\frac{k!}{12(2\pi)^{k-2}}\,2.8^k \\ &\le (k+1)\left(\frac{k}{e}\right)^k \sqrt{2\pi k}\,e^{1/12}\frac{4\pi^2}{12}\left(\frac{2.8}{2\pi}\right)^k < \left(\frac{k}{4}\right)^k.\end{aligned}$$

Now we have, by Lemma 5 and inequality (4),

$$d\big(|(k+1)B_kP_k|\big) \le \left(\frac{k}{4}\right)^{k\epsilon} \prod_{p<2^{1/\epsilon}} \frac{2}{\epsilon\log 2} \le \left(\frac{k}{4}\right)^{k\epsilon}\left(\frac{2}{\epsilon\log 2}\right)^{\frac{2\cdot 2^{1/\epsilon}}{1/\epsilon\cdot\log 2}}.$$

On choosing

$$\epsilon = \frac{\log 2}{\log k/2}$$

we obtain

$$\begin{aligned}&d\big(|(k+1)B_kP_k|\big) \\ &\quad\le \exp\left\{\frac{\log k/4}{\log k/2}k\log 2 + \frac{k}{\log k/2}(\log 2 + \log\log k - 2\log\log 2)\right\} \\ &\quad\le \exp\{k(\log 2 + 0.03)\} \le 9^{k/3}.\end{aligned}$$

□

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B. BRINDZA
INSTITUTE OF MATHEMATICS AND INFORMATICS
KOSSUTH LAJOS UNIVERSITY
H–4010 DEBRECEN, P.O. BOX 12
HUNGARY

Á. PINTÉR
INSTITUTE OF MATHEMATICS AND INFORMATICS
KOSSUTH LAJOS UNIVERSITY
H–4010 DEBRECEN, P.O. BOX 12
HUNGARY

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