Asymptotic upper bounds on progression-free sets in $\mathbb{Z}_p^n$

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Abstract

We show that any subset of $\mathbb{Z}_p^n$ (p an odd prime) without 3-term arithmetic progression has size $O(p^{cn})$, where $c := 1 - \frac{1}{18 \log p} < 1$. In particular, we find an upper bound of $O(2.84^n)$ on the maximum size of an affine cap in $GF(3)^n$.

Introduction

Given an abelian group G, a subset $A \subseteq G$ is *progression-free* if there are no disctinct $a, b, c \in A$ for which $a + b = 2c$. In their recent paper [2], Croot, Lev and Pach used the polynomial method to show an upper bound of $O(4^{0.926 \cdot n})$ on the size of progression-free sets in $\mathbb{Z}_4^n$. In this paper, we extend their method to progression-free sets in $\mathbb{Z}_p^n$, where p is an odd prime. This improves the bound $O(\frac{p^n}{n})$ of Meshulam [7] and the bound $O(\frac{3^n}{n^{1+\epsilon}})$ (where $\epsilon > 0$ is a constant) in the case $p = 3$ due to Bateman and Katz [1].

Remark 1. *While submitting the paper, the author was informed that Jordan S. Ellenberg proved a similar result [4] three days ago. In their paper an upper bound of $O(2.756^n)$ for progression-free subsets of $\mathbb{Z}_3^n$ (and hence affine caps in $\mathbb{F}_3^n$ is proved. The paper also claims that their method gives an upper bound of $O(p^{cn})$ for some $c = c(p) < 1$ in the case of $\mathbb{Z}_p^n$.*

Main theorem

Throughout, $\mathbb{F} = GF(p)$ will be a finite field, where p is an odd prime. We denote by $L_n := \text{span}\{x^\alpha : \alpha \in \{0, 1 \ldots, p-1\}^n\}$ the linear space of polynomials over $\mathbb{F}$ in n variables in which no variable occurs with exponent more than $p - 1$. Here we use the notation $x^\alpha := x_1^{\alpha_1} x_2^{\alpha_2} \cdots x_n^{\alpha_n}$. Also, we denote $|\alpha| := \alpha_1 + \cdots + \alpha_n$. For $f \in L_n$, we denote by $Z(f) := \{a \in \mathbb{F}^n \mid f(a) = 0\}$ the zero set of f. For any integer $d \in \{0, \ldots, (p-1)n\}$ we denote by $L_{n,d}$ the subspace of L_n consisting of polynomials of degree at most d. Observe that $\dim L_{n,d} + \dim L_{n,(p-1)n-d-1} = p^n$ since the map $(\alpha_1, \ldots, \alpha_n) \mapsto (p - 1 - \alpha_1, \ldots, p - 1 - \alpha_n)$ induces a bijection from the set of monomials in L_n to itself. We will use the following estimate on the dimension of $L_{n,(p-1)n/3}$.

In order to bound the dimension of the subspaces $L_{n,d}$, we use the following inequality.

Theorem 1 (Hoeffding inequality [6])**.** *Let $X_1, \ldots, X_n$ be independent random variables on $[a_i, b_i]$ and let $S = X_1 + \cdots + X_n$. Then*

$$\Pr(E[S] - S \geq t) \leq \exp\left(-\frac{2t^2}{\sum_{i=1}^n (b_i - a_i)^2}\right).$$

Lemma 1. *Let $c := 1 - \frac{1}{18 \log p} < 1$. For n a positive multiple of 3, we have $\dim L_{n,(p-1)n/3} \leq p^{cn}$.*

Proof. Denote by $\binom{n}{k}_{p-1} := |\{a \in \{0, 1, \ldots, p-1\}^n : |a| = k\}|$ the extended binomial coefficients (see e.g. [5]). So we have $\dim L_{n,d} = \sum_{k=0}^d \binom{n}{k}_{p-1}$. Let $X_1, \ldots, X_n$ be i.i.d. random variables

with $\Pr[X_i = t] = \frac{1}{p}$ for $t = 0, \ldots, p-1$. Let $S := X_1 + \cdots + X_n$. It is easy to see that $\binom{n}{k}_{p-1} = p^n \Pr[X = k]$. The expected value of S equals $\frac{1}{2}(p-1)n$.

By Hoeffding's inequality, we have

$$\Pr[S \leq \tfrac{1}{3}(p-1)n] = \Pr[S \leq \tfrac{1}{2}(p-1)n - \tfrac{1}{6}(p-1)n] \leq e^{-\frac{1}{18}n}.$$

It follows that

$$\dim L_{n,(p-1)n/3} \leq p^n \cdot e^{-\frac{1}{18}n} = p^{n \cdot (1 - \frac{1}{18 \log p})} = p^{cn}.$$

□

Proposition 1. *The evaluation map $\phi : L_n \to \mathbb{F}^{\mathbb{F}^n}$ given by $\phi(f) = (f(a))_{a \in \mathbb{F}^n}$ is a linear bijection.*

Proof. The fact that ϕ is linear is clear. Since $\dim L_n = \mathbb{F}^n = \dim \mathbb{F}^{\mathbb{F}^n}$, it suffices to show that ϕ is injective. We will show this by induction on n. If $n = 1$, this follows since a nonzero polynomial $f = c_0 + c_1 x_1 + \cdots + c_{p-1} x_1^{p-1}$ has at most $p - 1 < p$ roots in $\mathbb{F}$.

Now let $n \geq 2$ and let $f \in L_n$ be such that $Z(f) = \mathbb{F}^n$. We need to show that $f = 0$. Write $f = f_0 + x_n f_1 + x_n^2 f_2 + \cdots + x_n^{p-1} f_{p-1}$, where $f_0, \ldots, f_{q-1} \in L_{n-1}$. Observe that for any $a_1, \ldots, a_{n-1} \in \mathbb{F}$ the univariate polynomial $g(x_n) := \sum_{i=0}^{p-1} x_n^i \cdot f_i(a_1, \ldots, a_{n-1})$ evaluates to zero on the whole of $\mathbb{F}$ and therefore is the zero polynomial. That is, for all $a_1, \ldots, a_{n-1}$ and all $i = 0, \ldots, p-1$ we have $f_i(a_1, \ldots, a_{n-1}) = 0$. By induction it follows that $f_i = 0$ for $i = 0, \ldots, p-1$ and hence that $f = 0$. □

Lemma 2. *Let $g = \sum_{\alpha,\beta} C_{\alpha,\beta}\, x^\alpha y^\beta \in \mathbb{F}[x_1, \ldots, x_n, y_1, \ldots, y_m]$, where $C \in \mathbb{F}^{\mathbb{N}^n \times \mathbb{N}^m}$. Let $A \subseteq \mathbb{F}^n$ and $B \subseteq \mathbb{F}^m$. Define the matrix $M \in \mathbb{F}^{A \times B}$ by $M_{ab} := g(a, b)$. Then $\operatorname{rank} M \leq \operatorname{rank} C$.*

Proof. Let $M_A \in \mathbb{F}^{\mathbb{N}^n \times A}, M_B \in \mathbb{F}^{\mathbb{N}^m \times B}$ be defined by $(M_A)_{\alpha,a} := a^\alpha$ and $(M_B)_{\beta,b} := b^\beta$. It is easy to check that $M := M_A^\intercal C M_B$. Hence, $\operatorname{rank} M \leq \operatorname{rank} C$. □

Proposition 2. *Let $f \in L_{n,2d}$ and let $A \subseteq \mathbb{F}^n$. Suppose that for all $a, b \in A$ we have: $f(a+b) = 0$ if and only if $a \neq b$. Then $|A| \leq 2 \dim L_{n,d}$.*

Proof. Let $g \in \mathbb{F}[x_1, \ldots, x_n, y_1, \ldots, y_n]$ be defined by $g(x, y) := f(x + y)$. So g has degree at most $2d$. Write $g = \sum_{\alpha,\beta} C_{\alpha,\beta} x^\alpha y^\beta$. Note that $C_{\alpha,\beta}$ is nonzero only if $|\alpha| \leq d$ or $|\beta| \leq d$. It follows that the support of C is contained in the union of the rows indexed by monomials of degree at most d and the columns indexed by monomials of degree at most d. Hence, $\operatorname{rank} C \leq 2 \dim L_{n,d}$.

On the other hand, the $A \times A$ matrix M defined by $M_{a,b} := g(a, b)$ is a diagonal matrix with nonzero diagonal elements and therefore has rank $|A|$. By Lemma 2, it follows that $|A| = \operatorname{rank} M \leq \operatorname{rank} C \leq 2 \dim L_{n,d}$. □

Theorem 2 (Main theorem)**.** *Let $c := 1 - \frac{1}{18 \log p} < 1$. For $A \subseteq \mathbb{F}^n$ progression free, we have $|A| = O(p^{cn})$.*

Proof. Let n be a multiple of 3 and let $A \subseteq \mathbb{F}^n$ be progression free. It suffices to show that $|A| \leq 3p^{cn}$.

Define $B := \{a + b \mid a, b \in A \text{ with } a \neq b\}$ and $C := \{a + a \mid a \in A\}$. Since A is progression-free we have $B \cap C = \emptyset$. Let

$$\begin{aligned} K &:= \{f \in L_n \mid (\mathbb{F}^n \setminus C) \subseteq Z(f)\}, \\ L &:= L_{n, \frac{2}{3}(p-1)n}. \end{aligned}$$

Note that K is a linear space of dimension $|C|$ by Proposition 1. By Lemma 1, L is a linear space of dimension

$$\dim L \geq p^n - \dim L_{n, \frac{1}{3}(p-1)n-1} \geq p^n - p^{cn}.$$

Denote $V := K \cap L$. We have

$$\dim V \geq \dim L + \dim K - p^n \geq |C| - p^{cn}. \tag{1}$$

In particular, we may assume that V has positive dimension, for otherwise $|A| = |C| \leq p^{cn}$, and we would be done.

By Proposition 1, we can view V as a linear subspace of $\mathbb{F}^C$. Hence, there is a subset $C' \subseteq C$ of size $\dim V$ such that the evaluation map $\phi : V \to \mathbb{F}^{C'}$ given by $\phi(f) := (f(c))_{c \in C'}$ is surjective. Hence, we can choose $f \in V$ such that $f(c) = 1$ for all $c \in C'$.

Let $A' := \{a \in A \mid a + a \in C'\}$. Since p is odd, we have $|A'| = |C'|$. Since $f \in K$, we have $B \subseteq (\mathbb{F}^n \setminus C) \subseteq Z(f)$. This implies that $f(a + b) = 0$ for all $a, b \in A'$ distinct. By our choice of f we also have $f(a + a) = 1$ for all $a \in A'$. Since f has degree at most $\frac{2}{3}(p-1)n$, Proposition 2 implies that $|A'| \leq 2 \dim L_{n, \frac{1}{3}(p-1)n} = 2 \dim L$. Hence, $|C'| = |A'| \leq 2p^{cn}$. By (1), we obtain

$$|A| = |C| \leq p^{cn} + \dim V = p^{cn} + |C'| \leq 3p^{cn}.$$

□

In the special case $p = 3$, progression-free sets correspond exactly to affine caps. The best known *lower* bound for affine caps in $\mathbb{F}_3^n$ is $\Omega(2.2174^n)$ due to Edel [3]. Since $3^{1 - \frac{1}{18 \log 3}} = 2.84\cdot$, Theorem 2 implies an *upper* bound of $O(2.84^n)$, improving the previous best upper bound of $O(\frac{3^n}{n^{1+\epsilon}})$ due to Bateman and Katz [1].

Corollary 1. *The maximum size of an affine cap in $\mathbb{F}_3^n$ is $O(2.84^n)$.*

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