Number Theory. Tutorial 5: Bertrand's Postulate

1 Introduction

In this tutorial we are going to prove:

Theorem 1 (Bertrand's Postulate). *For each positive integer* $n > 1$ *there is a prime* p *such that* $n < p < 2n$.

This theorem was verified for all numbers less than three million for Joseph Bertrand (1822-1900) and was proved by Pafnutii Chebyshev (1821-1894).

2 The floor function

Definition 1. *Let* x *be a real number such that* $n \leq x < n+1$. *Then we define* $\lfloor x \rfloor = n$. *This is called the floor function.* $\lfloor x \rfloor$ *is also called the integer part of* x *with* $x - \lfloor x \rfloor$ *being called the fractional part of* x. *If* $m-1 < x \leq m$, *we define* $\lceil x \rceil = m$. *This is called the ceiling function.*

In this tutorial we will make use of the floor function. Two useful properties are listed in the following propositions.

Proposition 1. $2\lfloor x \rfloor \leq \lfloor 2x \rfloor \leq 2\lfloor x \rfloor + 1$.

Proof. Proving such inequalities is easy (and it resembles problems with the absolute value function). You have to represent x in the form $x = \lfloor x \rfloor + a$, where $0 \leq a < 1$ is the fractional part of x. Then $2x = 2\lfloor x \rfloor + 2a$ and we get two cases: $a < 1/2$ and $a \geq 1/2$. In the first case we have

$$2\lfloor x \rfloor = \lfloor 2x \rfloor < 2\lfloor x \rfloor + 1$$

and in the second

$$2\lfloor x \rfloor < \lfloor 2x \rfloor = 2\lfloor x \rfloor + 1.$$

□

Proposition 2. *let a, b be positive integers and let us divide a by b with remainder*

$$a = qb + r \qquad 0 \le r < b.$$

Then $q = \lfloor a/b \rfloor$ and $r = a - b\lfloor a/b \rfloor$.

Proof. We simply write

$$\frac{a}{b} = q + \frac{r}{b}$$

and since q is an integer and $0 \le r/b < 1$ we see that q is the integer part of a/b and r/b is the fractional part. ☐

Exercise 1. $\lfloor x \rfloor + \lfloor x + 1/2 \rfloor = \lfloor 2x \rfloor$.

3 Prime divisors of factorials and binomial coefficients

We start with the following

Lemma 1. *Let n and b be positive integers. Then the number of integers in the set $\{1, 2, 3, \ldots, n\}$ that are multiples of b is equal to $\lfloor n/b \rfloor$.*

Proof. Indeed, by Proposition 2 the integers that are divisible by b will be $b, 2b, \ldots, \lfloor m/b \rfloor \cdot b$. ☐

Theorem 2. *Let n and p be positive integers and p be prime. Then the largest exponent s such that $p^s \mid n!$ is*

$$s = \sum_{j \ge 1} \left\lfloor \frac{n}{p^j} \right\rfloor . \tag{1}$$

Proof. Let m_i be the number of multiples of p^i in the set $\{1, 2, 3, \ldots, n\}$. Let

$$t = m_1 + m_2 + \ldots + m_k + \ldots \tag{2}$$

(the sum is finite of course). Suppose that a belongs to $\{1, 2, 3, \ldots, n\}$, and such that $p^j \mid a$ but $p^{j+1} \nmid a$. Then in the sum (2) a will be counted j times and will contribute i towards t. This shows that $t = s$. Now (1) follows from Lemma 1 since $m_j = \lfloor n/p^j \rfloor$. ☐

Theorem 3. *Let n and p be positive integers and p be prime. Then the largest exponent s such that $p^s \mid \binom{2n}{n}$ is*

$$s = \sum_{j \geq 1} \left(\left\lfloor \frac{2n}{p^j} \right\rfloor - 2 \left\lfloor \frac{n}{p^j} \right\rfloor \right). \tag{3}$$

Proof. Follows from Theorem 2. □

Note that, due to Proposition 1, in (3) every summand is either 0 or 1.

Corollary 1. *Let $n \geq 3$ and p be positive integers and p be prime. Let s be the largest exponent such that $p^s \mid \binom{2n}{n}$. Then*

(a) $p^s \leq 2n$.

(b) If $\sqrt{2n} < p$, then $s \leq 1$.

(c) If $2n/3 < p \leq n$, then $s = 0$.

Proof. (a) Let t be the largest integer such that $p^t \leq 2n$. Then for $j > t$

$$\left(\left\lfloor \frac{2n}{p^j} \right\rfloor - 2 \left\lfloor \frac{n}{p^j} \right\rfloor \right) = 0.$$

Hence

$$s = \sum_{j=1}^{t} \left(\left\lfloor \frac{2n}{p^j} \right\rfloor - 2 \left\lfloor \frac{n}{p^j} \right\rfloor \right) \leq t.$$

since each summand does not exceed 1 by Proposition 1. Hence $p^s \leq 2n$.

(b) If $\sqrt{2n} < p$, then $p^2 > 2n$ and from (a) we know that $s \leq 1$.

(c) If $2n/3 < p \leq n$, then $p^2 > 2n$ and

$$s = \left(\left\lfloor \frac{2n}{p} \right\rfloor - 2 \left\lfloor \frac{n}{p} \right\rfloor \right)$$

As $1 \leq n/p < 3/2$, we se that $s = 2 - 2 \cdot 1 = 0$.

□

4 Two inequalities involving binomial coefficients

We all know the Binomial Theorem:

$$(a+b)^n = \sum_{k=0}^{n} \binom{n}{k} a^{n-k} b^k. \tag{4}$$

Let us derive some consequences from it. Substituting $a = b = 1$ we get:

$$2^n = \sum_{k=0}^{n} \binom{n}{k}. \tag{5}$$

Lemma 2. *(a) If n is odd, then*

$$\binom{n}{(n+1)/2} \leq 2^{n-1}.$$

(b) If n is even, then

$$\binom{n}{n/2} \geq \frac{2^n}{n}.$$

Proof. (a) From (5), deleting all terms except the two middle ones, we get

$$\binom{n}{(n-1)/2} + \binom{n}{(n+1)/2} \leq 2^n.$$

The two binomial coefficients on the left are equal and we get (a).

(b) If n is even, then it is pretty easy to prove that the middle binomial coefficient is the largest one. In (5) we have $n+1$ summand but we group the two ones together and we get n summands among which the middle binomial coefficient is the largest. Hence

$$n\binom{n}{n/2} \geq \sum_{k=0}^{n} \binom{n}{k} = 2^n,$$

which proves (b).

□

5 Proof of Bertrand's Postulate

Finally we can pay attention to primes.

Theorem 4. *Let $n \geq 2$ be an integer, then*

$$\prod_{p \leq n} p < 4^n,$$

where the product on the left has one factor for each prime $p \leq n$.

Proof. The proof is by induction over n. For $n = 2$ we have $2 < 4^2$, which is true. This provides a basis for the induction. Let us assume that the statement is proved for all integers smaller than n. If n is even, then it is not prime, hence by induction hypothesis

$$\prod_{p \leq n} p = \prod_{p \leq n-1} p < 4^{n-1} < 4^n,$$

so the induction step is trivial in this case. Suppose $n = 2s + 1$ is odd, i.e $s = (n-1)/2$. Since $\prod_{s+1<p\leq n} p$ is a divisor of $\binom{n}{s+1}$, we obtain

$$\prod_{p \leq n} p = \prod_{p \leq s+1} p \cdot \prod_{s+1<p\leq n} p < 4^{s+1} \cdot \binom{n}{s+1} < 4^{s+1}2^{n-1}$$

using the induction hypothesis for $n = s + 1$ and Lemma 2(a). Now the right-hand-side can be presented as

$$4^{s+1}2^{n-1} = 2^{2s+2}2^{n-1} = 2^{4s+2} = 4^{2s+1} = 4^n.$$

This proves the induction step and, hence, the theorem. $\square$

Proof of Bertrand's Postulate. We will assume that there are no primes between n and $2n$ and obtain a contradiction. We will obtain that, under this assumption, the binomial coefficient $\binom{2n}{n}$ is smaller than it should be. Indeed, in this case we have the following prime factorisation for it:

$$\binom{2n}{n} = \prod_{p \leq n} p^{s_p},$$

where s_p is the exponent of the prime p in this factorisation. No primes greater than n can be found in this prime factorisation. In fact, due to Corollary 1(c) we can even write

$$\binom{2n}{n} = \prod_{p \leq 2n/3} p^{s_p}.$$

Let us recap now that due to Corollary 1 $p^{s_p} \leq 2n$ and that $s_p = 1$ for $p > \sqrt{2n}$. Hence

$$\binom{2n}{n} \leq \prod_{p \leq \sqrt{2n}} p^{s_p} \cdot \prod_{p \leq 2n/3} p.$$

We will estimate now these product using the inequality $p^{s_p} \leq 2n$ for the first product and Theorem 4 for the second one. We have no more that $\sqrt{2n}/2-1$ factors in the first product (as 1 and even numbers are not primes), hence

$$\binom{2n}{n} < (2n)^{\sqrt{2n}/2-1} \cdot 4^{2n/3}. \tag{6}$$

On the other hand, by Lemma 2(b)

$$\binom{2n}{n} \geq \frac{2^{2n}}{2n} = \frac{4^n}{2n}. \tag{7}$$

Combining (6) and (7) we get

$$4^{n/3} < (2n)^{\sqrt{n/2}}.$$

Applying logs on both sides, we get

$$\frac{2n}{3} \ln 2 < \sqrt{\frac{n}{2}} \ln(2n)$$

or

$$\sqrt{8n} \ln 2 - 3 \ln(2n) < 0. \tag{8}$$

Let us substitute $n = 2^{2k-3}$ for some k. Then we get $2^k \ln 2 - 3(2k-2) \ln 2 < 0$ or $2^k < 3(2k-2)$ which is true only for $k \leq 4$ (you can prove that by inducton). Hence (8) is not true for $n = 2^7 = 128$. Let us consider the function $f(x) = \sqrt{8x}\ln 2 - 3\ln(2x)$ defined for $x > 0$. Its derivative is

$$f(x) = \frac{\sqrt{2x}\cdot\ln 2 - 3}{x}.$$

let us note that for $x \geq 8$ this derivative is positive. Thus (8) is not true for all $n \geq 128$. We proved Bertrand's postulate for $n \geq 128$. For smaller n it can be proved by inspection. I leave this to the reader. □

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