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Most integers are not a sum of two palindromes[†]

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Abstract

For $g \geqslant 2$, we show that the number of positive integers at most X which can be written as sum of two base g palindromes is at most $X/\log^c X$. This answers a question of Baxter, Cilleruelo and Luca.

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Fix an integer $g \geqslant 2$. Every positive integer $a \in \mathbb{N}$ has a base g representation, i.e. it can be uniquely written as

$$a = \overline{a_n a_{n-1} \dots a_0} = \sum_{i=0}^{n} g^i a_i, \quad \text{where } a_i \in \{0, 1, \dots, g-1\} \text{ and } a_n \neq 0. \tag{1}$$

A number $a \in \mathbb{N}$ with representation (1) is called *a base g palindrome* if $a_i = a_{n-i}$ holds for all $i = 0, \dots, n$. Baxter, Cilleruelo and Luca [3] studied additive properties of the set of base g palindromes. Improving on a result of Banks [2], they showed that every positive integer can be written as a sum of three palindromes, provided that $g \geqslant 5$. The cases $g = 2, 3, 4$ were later covered by Rajasekaran, Shallit and Smith [4, 5]. Baxter, Cilleruelo and Luca also showed that the number of integers at most X which are sums of two palindromes is at least $Xe^{-c_1\sqrt{\log X}}$ and at most $c_2 X$, for some constants $c_1 > 0$ and $c_2 < 1$ depending on g, and asked whether a positive fraction of integers can be written as a sum of two base g palindromes. This was later reiterated by Green in his list of open problems as Problem 95. We answer this question negatively:

THEOREM 1. *For any integer $g \geqslant 2$ there exists a constant $c > 0$ such that*

$$\#\{n < X : n \text{ is a sum of two base } g \text{ palindromes}\} \leqslant \frac{X}{\log^c X},$$

for all large enough X.

It is an interesting open problem to close the gap between this result and the lower bound of Baxter, Cilleruelo and Luca [3]. We now proceed to the proof.

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For $n \geqslant 1$, let P_n be the set of base g palindromes with exactly n digits and $P = \bigcup_{n\geqslant 1} P_n$ be the set of all base g palindromes. Note that

$$|P_n| = \begin{cases} g^{n/2} - g^{n/2-1}, & n \text{ is even,} \\ g^{(n+1)/2} - g^{(n-1)/2}, & n \text{ is odd.} \end{cases}$$

For an integer $N \geqslant 1$, we write $[N] = \{0, 1, \ldots, N-1\}$. For $A, B \subset \mathbb{Z}$ we let $A + B = \{a + b,\ a \in A,\ b \in B\}$ denote the sumset of A and B. Let $k \geqslant 1$ be sufficiently large and let $X = g^k$, it is enough to consider numbers X of this form only. With this notation, our goal is to upper bound the size of the intersection $(P+P) \cap [X]$. We have

$$(P+P) \cap [X] = \bigcup_{k \geqslant n \geqslant m \geqslant 1} (P_n + P_m) \cap [X]$$

and so we can estimate

$$|(P+P) \cap [X]| \leqslant \sum_{k \geqslant n \geqslant m \geqslant 1} |P_n + P_m|. \tag{2}$$

We have $|P_n| \leqslant g^{(n+1)/2}$, $|P_m| \leqslant g^{(m+1)/2}$ so using the trivial bound $|P_n + P_m| \leqslant |P_n||P_m|$ we can immediately get rid of the terms where m is small:

$$\begin{aligned} \sum_{\substack{k \geqslant n \geqslant m \geqslant 1 \\ m \leqslant k - \gamma \log k}} |P_n + P_m| &\leqslant \sum_{k \geqslant n \geqslant 1} |P_n| \cdot \sum_{m \leqslant k - \gamma \log k} |P_m| \\ &\leqslant \sum_{k \geqslant n \geqslant 1} |P_n| \cdot 4 g^{(k+1)/2 - \gamma \log k/2} \\ &\leqslant 16 g^{k+1-\gamma \log k/2} \lesssim \frac{X}{k^{\gamma \log g/2}} \sim \frac{X}{(\log X)^{\gamma \log g/2}}, \end{aligned} \tag{3}$$

where $\gamma > 0$ is a small constant which we will choose. Now we focus on a particular sumset $P_n + P_m$ from the remaining range. Write $m = n - d$ for some $d \geqslant 0$.

For an integer $a = \overline{a_n \ldots a_0}$ let $r(a) = \overline{a_0 \ldots a_n}$ be the integer with the reversed digit order in base g (we allow some leading zeros here). For $d \geqslant 0$ define

$$a = \overline{1\underbrace{0\ldots0}_{d}1},\ b = \overline{0\underbrace{0\ldots0}_{d}0},\ a' = \overline{0\underbrace{\ell\ldots\ell}_{d}0},\ b' = \overline{\underbrace{0\ldots0}_{d}11},$$

where we denoted $\ell = g - 1$. These strings are designed to satisfy the following:

$$a + b = a' + b' \ \text{ and } \ g^d r(a) + r(b) = g^d r(a') + r(b'). \tag{4}$$

Indeed, note that

$$a' = \sum_{i=1}^{d} g^i \ell = g^{d+1} - g = (g^{d+1} + 1) + 0 - (g+1) = a + b - b'$$

and

$$g^d r(a') = g^d a' = g^{2d+1} - g^{d+1} = g^d(g^{d+1} + 1) + 0 - (g^{d+1} + g^d) = g^d r(a) + r(b) - r(b').$$

We claim that the fact that (4) holds for some a, b, a', b' forces the sumset $P_n + P_{n-d}$ to be small. Roughly speaking, whenever palindromes $p \in P_n$ and $q \in P_{n-d}$ contain strings a

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and b on the corresponding positions, we can swap a with a' and b with b' to obtain a new pair of palindromes $p' \in P_n$ and $q' \in P_{n-d}$ with the same sum $p' + q' = p + q$. A typical pair (p, q) will have $\gtrsim C^{-d}n$ disjoint substrings (a, b) and so we can do the swapping in $\gtrsim \exp(C^{-d}n)$ different ways. So a typical sum $p + q \in P_n + P_{n-d}$ has lots of representations and this means that the sumset has to be small.

Denote $t = [n/3(d+2)]$. For $p = \overline{p_0 p_1 \ldots p_1 p_0} \in P_n$ and $q = \overline{q_0 q_1 \ldots q_1 q_0} \in P_{n-d}$ let $S(p, q)$ denote the number of indices $1 \leqslant j \leqslant t$ such that

$$\overline{p_{(d+2)j+d+1} p_{(d+2)j+d} \cdots p_{(d+2)j+1} p_{(d+2)j}} = a, \tag{5}$$

$$\overline{q_{(d+2)j+d+1} q_{(d+2)j+d} \cdots q_{(d+2)j+1} q_{(d+2)j}} = b, \tag{6}$$

i.e. the segments of digits of p and q in the interval $[(d+2)j, (d+2)j + d + 1]$ are precisely a and b.

PROPOSITION 1. *The number of pairs* $(p, q) \in P_n \times P_{n-d}$ *such that* $S(p, q) \leqslant t/2g^{2d+4}$ *is at most* $\exp\left(-t/8g^{2d+4}\right) |P_n||P_{n-d}|$.

Proof. Draw (p, q) uniformly at random from $P_n \times P_{n-d}$. Then $S(p, q)$ is a sum of t i.i.d Bernoulli random variables with mean $g^{-2(d+2)}$. So the expectation $\mathbb{E}_{p,q} S(p, q)$ is given by $\mu = tg^{-2(d+2)}$ and by Chernoff bound (see e.g. [**1**, appendix A]),

$$\Pr[S(p, q) \leqslant \mu/2] \leqslant \exp(-\mu/8) = \exp\left(-\frac{t}{8g^{2d+4}}\right).$$

Now we observe that for any $p = \overline{p_0 p_1 \ldots p_1 p_0} \in P_n$, $q = \overline{q_0 q_1 \ldots q_1 q_0} \in P_{n-d}$, the sum $s = p + q$ has at least $2^{S(p,q)}$ distinct representations $s = p' + q'$ for $(p', q') \in P_n \times P_{n-d}$. Indeed, let $j_1 < \ldots < j_u$ be an arbitrary collection of indices such that (5) and (6) hold for $j = j_1, \ldots, j_u$. Let p' and q' be obtained from p and q by replacing the a and b-segments on positions $j_1, \ldots, j_u$ by a' and b' and replacing $r(a)$ and $r(b)$-segments on the symmetric positions by $r(a')$ and $r(b')$, respectively. Then we claim that $p' \in P_n$, $q' \in P_{n-d}$ and $p' + q' = p + q$. Indeed, more formally, we can write

$$p' = p + \sum_{i=1}^{u} g^{(d+2)j_i}(a' - a) + g^{n-(d+2)j_i-d-1}(r(a') - r(a)),$$

$$q' = q + \sum_{i=1}^{u} g^{(d+2)j_i}(b' - b) + g^{(n-d)-(d+2)j_i-d-1}(r(b') - r(b)),$$

and so (4) implies that $p + q = p' + q'$. Since we can choose $j_1 < \cdots < j_u$ to be an arbitrary subset of $S(p,q)$ indices, we get $2^{S(p,q)}$ different representations $p + q = p' + q'$.

Using this and Proposition 1 we get

$$\begin{aligned} |P_n + P_{n-d}| &\leqslant \# \left\{ p + q \mid S(p, q) \geqslant \frac{t}{2g^{2d+4}} \right\} + \# \left\{ p + q \mid S(p, q) \leqslant \frac{t}{2g^{2d+4}} \right\} \\ &\leqslant 2^{-\frac{t}{2g^{2d+4}}} |P_n||P_{n-d}| + \exp\left(-\frac{t}{8g^{2d+4}}\right) |P_n||P_{n-d}| \\ &\leqslant 2\exp\left(-\frac{n}{30(d+2)g^{2d+4}}\right) |P_n||P_{n-d}|. \end{aligned}$$

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Using this bound we can estimate the part of (2) which was not covered by (3):

$$\sum_{k\geqslant n\geqslant m\geqslant k-\gamma \log k} |P_n + P_m| \leqslant \sum_{k\geqslant n\geqslant k-\gamma \log k} \sum_{d=0}^{\gamma \log k} |P_n + P_{n-d}|$$
$$\leqslant \sum_{k\geqslant n\geqslant k-\gamma \log k} \sum_{d=0}^{\gamma \log k} 2\exp\left(-\frac{n}{30(d+2)g^{2d+4}}\right) |P_n||P_{n-d}|$$
$$\leqslant \sum_{k\geqslant n\geqslant k-\gamma \log k} 2\exp\left(-\frac{n}{k^{3\gamma \log g}}\right) g^{k+1}$$

so if we take, say, $\gamma = 1/4 \log g$ then this expression is less than, say, $k^{-1}g^k \lesssim X/\log X$ provided that k is large enough. Combining this with (3) gives $|(P+P)\cap[X]| \leqslant X/(\log X)^{0.1}$ for large enough X (the proof actually gives $1/4-\varepsilon$ instead of 0.1 here).

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