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ENRICO BOMBIERI

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COUNTING POINTS ON CURVES OVER FINITE FIELDS

[d'après S. A. STEPANOV]

by Enrico BOMBIERI

I. Let C/k , $k = \mathbb{F}_q$, be a projective non-singular curve of genus g , over a finite field k of characteristic p , with q elements. Let $k_r = \mathbb{F}_{q^r}$ and let $v_r(C)$ be the number of k_r -rational points of the curve C . It is well-known that

$$(1) \quad v_r(C) = q^r - \sum_1^{2g} \omega_i^r + 1$$

where the ω_i are algebraic integers independent of r , such that

$$(2) \quad \omega_i \omega_{2g-i} = q \quad (\text{functional equation})$$

$$(3) \quad |\omega_i| = q^{\frac{1}{2}} \quad (\text{Riemann hypothesis}).$$

Of these results, (1) and (2) are easy consequences of the Riemann-Roch theorem on C , while (3) lies deeper. The first general proof of (3) was obtained by Weil [3], as a consequence of the inequality

$$(4) \quad |v_r(C) - (q^r + 1)| \leq 2g q^{r/2}.$$

Until recently, all existing proofs of (3) followed Weil's method, either using the Jacobian variety of C or the Riemann-Roch theorem on $C \times C$. In this talk I want to explain a new approach to (3) invented by S. A. Stepanov [2]. Stepanov himself proved (3) in special cases, e. g. if C was a Kummer or an Artin-Schreier covering of $\mathbb{P}^1$, and a proof in the general case has been also obtained by W. Schmidt. The case in which $g = 2$ has been investigated carefully by

Stark [1], who showed that in certain cases (e. g. $q = 13$) one can get bounds for $v_r(C)$ slightly better than those obtainable by (4).

Stepanov's idea is quite simple. One looks for a rational function f on C , not identically 0, such that

- (i) f vanishes at every k -rational point of C , of order $\geq m$, except possibly at a fixed set of m_0 rational points of C .

It is now clear that

$$m(v_1(C) - m_0) \leq \# \text{ zeros of } f = \# \text{ poles of } f$$

therefore

$$v_1(C) \leq m_0 + \frac{1}{m} (\# \text{ poles of } f).$$

If we are able to construct f with not too many poles, then we may get an useful bound for $v_1(C)$, essentially of the same strength as (4).

The construction of f given by Stepanov, and also by Schmidt in the general case, is complicated, and in order to prove that f vanishes of order $\geq m$ they consider derivatives or hyperderivatives of f , of order up to $m - 1$. In the final choice, m is about $q^{\frac{1}{2}}$. The argument I will give here, though based on the same idea, does not use derivations and is extremely simple.

II. As Serre pointed out to me, it is more convenient to give C over the algebraic closure $\bar{k}$ of k , to give a Frobenius morphism

$$\varphi : C \rightarrow C$$

of order q , and ask for

$$v_r = \# \text{ fixed points of } \varphi^r.$$

We begin with

THEOREM 1.- Assume $q = p^\alpha$, where α is even. Then if $q > (g+1)^4$ we have

$$(5) \quad v_1 < q + (2g+1)q^{\frac{1}{2}} + 1.$$

For the proof, we may assume that φ has a fixed point x_0 , otherwise there is nothing to prove. Now define

R_m = vector space of rational functions on $C/\bar{k}$, such that $(f) \geq -mx_0$.

The following facts are either obvious or trivial consequences of the Riemann-Roch theorem on C .

$$(i) \quad \dim R_m \leq m+1$$

$$(ii) \quad \dim R_m \geq m+1-g,$$

with equality if $m > 2g-2$

$$(iii) \quad \dim R_{m+1} \leq \dim R_m + 1.$$

Next, we note that since $\varphi(x_0) = x_0$, we have

$$(iv) \quad R_m \circ \varphi \subseteq R_{mq},$$

(v) every element $f \circ \varphi$ of $R_m \circ \varphi$ is a q -th power, and we have

$$(f \circ \varphi) = q\varphi((f)).$$

If A, B are vector subspaces of R_m, R_n we denote by AB the vector subspace of R_{m+n} generated by elements fh , $f \in A$, $h \in B$; also we denote by $R_\ell^{(p^\mu)}$

the subspace of $R_{\ell p^\mu}$ consisting of functions f^{p^μ} , $f \in R_\ell$. Note that

$$(vi) \quad \dim R_\ell^{(p^\mu)} = \dim R_\ell,$$

$$\dim R_m \circ \varphi = \dim R_m.$$

The following simple result is the key lemma in the proof.

Lemma.- If $\ell p^\mu < q$, the natural homomorphism

$$R_\ell^{(p^\mu)} \otimes_{\bar{k}} (R_m \circ \varphi) \rightarrow R_\ell^{(p^\mu)} (R_m \circ \varphi)$$

is an isomorphism.

COROLLARY.- If $\ell p^\mu < q$ then

$$(6) \quad \dim R_\ell^{(p^\mu)}(R_m \circ \varphi) = (\dim R_\ell)(\dim R_m) .$$

Proof of Corollary. Obvious from (vi).

Proof of Lemma. Let $\text{ord } f$ denote the order of a function f at x_0 , so that

$$\text{ord } f \geq -m \quad \text{for } f \in R_m .$$

By (iii), there is a basis $s_1, s_2, \dots, s_r$ of R_m such that

$$\text{ord } s_i < \text{ord } s_{i+1} \quad \text{for } i = 1, 2, \dots, r-1 .$$

Now in order to prove the Lemma we have to show that if $\sigma_i \in R_\ell$ and if

$$\sum_{i=1}^r \sigma_i^{p^\mu} (s_i \circ \varphi) \equiv 0$$

then the σ_i are also identically 0. But assume

$$\sum_{i=p}^r \sigma_i^{p^\mu} (s_i \circ \varphi) \equiv 0, \quad \sigma_p \neq 0 .$$

We find

$$\begin{aligned} \text{ord}(\sigma_p^{p^\mu} (s_p \circ \varphi)) &= \text{ord}(-\sum_{i=p+1}^r \sigma_i^{p^\mu} (s_i \circ \varphi)) \\ &\geq \min_{i>p} \text{ord}(\sigma_i^{p^\mu} (s_i \circ \varphi)) \\ &\geq -\ell p^\mu + q \text{ ord } s_{p+1} \end{aligned}$$

because $\text{ord}(\sigma_i^{p^\mu}) = p^\mu \text{ ord}(\sigma_i) \geq -\ell p^\mu$ and $\text{ord}(s_i \circ \varphi) = q \text{ ord}(s_i)$, while $\text{ord}(s_i)$ is strictly increasing with i , by our choice of the basis of R_m .

Hence

$$\begin{aligned} p^\mu \text{ ord } \sigma_p &\geq -\ell p^\mu + q (\text{ord } s_{p+1} - \text{ord } s_p) \\ &\geq -\ell p^\mu + q > 0 \end{aligned}$$

and σ_ρ vanishes at x_0 . But $\sigma_\rho \in R_\ell$, hence σ_ρ has no poles outside x_0 . Hence σ_ρ has no poles and at least one zero, hence $\sigma_\rho \equiv 0$, a contradiction.

Q.E.D.

Proof of Theorem 1. Assume $\ell p^\mu < q$. By the lemma, the map

$$\sum \sigma_i^{p^\mu}(s_i \circ \varphi) \mapsto \sum \sigma_i^{p^\mu} s_i$$

is well-defined and gives a homomorphism

$$\delta : R_\ell^{(p^\mu)}(R_m \circ \varphi) \rightarrow R_\ell^{(p^\mu)} R_m \subseteq R_{\ell p^\mu + m}.$$

By the Corollary of the lemma and by the Riemann-Roch theorem we have

$$\begin{aligned} \dim \ker(\delta) &\geq (\dim R_\ell)(\dim R_m) - \dim R_{\ell p^\mu + m} \\ &\geq (\ell + 1 - g)(m + 1 - g) - (\ell p^\mu + m + 1 - g) \end{aligned}$$

if $\ell, m \geq g$.

Every element $f \in \ker(\delta)$ vanishes of order $\geq p^\mu$ at every fixed point of φ , except possibly at x_0 . In fact, if

$$f = \sum \sigma_i^{p^\mu}(s_i \circ \varphi) \neq 0$$

we have

$$\begin{aligned} f(x) &= \sum \sigma_i^{p^\mu}(x) s_i(\varphi(x)) \\ &= \sum \sigma_i^{p^\mu}(x) s_i(x) \\ &= (\delta f)(x) = 0, \end{aligned}$$

hence f vanishes at every fixed point of φ , except at x_0 . But since every element in $R_\ell^{(p^\mu)}(R_m \circ \varphi)$ is a p^μ -th power, f is a p^μ -th power.

We conclude that f has at least

$$p^\mu(v_1 - 1) \text{ zeros.}$$

But $f \in R_\ell^{(p^\mu)}(R_m \circ \varphi) \subseteq R_{\ell p^\mu + mq}$, hence f has at most

$lp^\mu + mq$ poles.

We conclude that if

$$lp^\mu < q, \quad l, m \geq g, \quad \dim \ker(\delta) > 0,$$

i.e. if

$$(l+1-g)(m+1-g) > lp^\mu + m+1-g$$

then

$$(7) \quad v_1 \leq l + mq/p^\mu + 1.$$

If $q = p^\alpha$, α even, $q > (g+1)^4$ we may choose

$$\mu = \alpha/2, \quad m = p^\mu + 2g, \quad l = \left[\frac{g}{g+1} p^\mu \right] + g+1$$

and we get the conclusion of Theorem 1.

Q.E.D.

III. The argument given before does not give a lower bound for v_1 , while this is needed if we want to deduce the Riemann hypothesis (3). For example,

$$\text{if} \quad v_r = q^r - \omega_1^r - \omega_2^r + 1$$

and $\omega_1 = q$, $\omega_2 = 1$ then (2) is verified, v_r is always 0 but (3) is false.

For the Riemann hypothesis, we note that we may assume that q is an even power of p , by making a base field extension for C . Also, by a well-known approximation argument, it is sufficient to prove

$$v_1 = q + O(q^{\frac{1}{2}}).$$

To prove this, we argue as follows.

The function field $\bar{k}(C)$ of the curve $C/\bar{k}$ contains a purely transcendental subfield $\bar{k}(t)$ such that $\bar{k}(C)$ is a separable extension of $\bar{k}(t)$. Hence there is a normal extension of $\bar{k}(t)$ which is also normal over $\bar{k}(C)$; geometrically, we have a situation

$$C' \rightarrow C \rightarrow \mathbb{P}^1$$

where $C' \rightarrow \mathbb{P}^1$ is Galois, with Galois group G , and $C' \rightarrow C$ is also a Galois covering, corresponding to a subgroup H of G . We may assume that G acts on C' over k , by making a finite base field extension. If x is a point of $\mathbb{P}^1$ rational over k and unramified in $C' \rightarrow \mathbb{P}^1$, and if y is a point of C' lying over x , we have

$$\varphi(y) = \eta \cdot y$$

for some $\eta \in G$, called the Frobenius substitution of G at the point y .

Let $\nu_1(C', \eta)$ be the number of such points of C' with Frobenius substitution η . Arguing as before, but using

$$\delta_\eta : R_\ell^{(P^\mu)}(R_m \circ \varphi) \rightarrow R_\ell^{(P^\mu)}(R_m \circ \eta)$$

instead of δ , we obtain easily

$$(8) \quad \nu_1(C', \eta) \leq q + (2g' + 1)q^{\frac{1}{2}} + 1,$$

where g' = genus of C' . On the other hand

$$(9) \quad \sum_{\eta \in G} \nu_1(C', \eta) = |G| \nu_1(\mathbb{P}^1) + O(1)$$

(the $O(1)$ takes care of the branch points of $C' \rightarrow \mathbb{P}^1$). Since

$$\nu_1(\mathbb{P}^1) = q + 1,$$

comparison of (8) and (9) gives

$$(10) \quad \nu_1(C', \eta) = q + O(q^{\frac{1}{2}})$$

for every $\eta \in G$. We have also

$$\sum_{\eta \in H} \nu_1(C', \eta) = |H| \nu_1(C) + O(1)$$

whence by (10) we get

$$\nu_1(C) = q + O(q^{\frac{1}{2}}),$$

Q.E.D.

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