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THE ERDŐS–KO–RADO THEOREM FOR INTEGER SEQUENCES

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For positive integers n,q,t we determine the maximum number of integer sequences $(a_1,\dots,a_n)$ which satisfy $1 \le a_i \le q$ for $1 \le i \le n$, and any two sequences agree in at least t positions. The result gives an affirmative answer to a conjecture of Frankl and Füredi.

1. Introduction

Let n,q,t be positive integers with $q \ge 2$, $n \ge t$, and let $[q] := \{1,2,\dots,q\}$. Then $\mathcal{H} \subset [q]^n$ is a set of integer sequences $(a_1,\dots,a_n)$, $1 \le a_i \le q$. We say that $\mathcal{H}$ is t-intersecting if any two sequences intersect in at least t positions, more precisely, $|\{i : a_i = a'_i\}| \ge t$ holds for all $(a_1,\dots,a_n),(a'_1,\dots,a'_n) \in \mathcal{H}$. In this paper, we determine the exact value of the following function.

$$f(n,q,t) := \max\{|\mathcal{H}| : \mathcal{H} \subset [q]^n,\ \mathcal{H} \text{ is } t\text{-intersecting}\}.$$

A family $\mathcal{A} \subset 2^{[n]}$ is called t-intersecting if $|A \cap A'| \ge t$ holds for all $A, A' \in \mathcal{A}$. Define a weighted size of $\mathcal{A}$ by $w(\mathcal{A}) := \sum_{A \in \mathcal{A}} (q-1)^{n-|A|}$. Using a shifting technique, it is not difficult to check the following:

Lemma 1. (Proposition 2 in [5].) $f(n,q,t) = \max_{\mathcal{A}} w(\mathcal{A})$, *where* $\mathcal{A} \subset 2^{[n]}$ *runs over all* t*-intersecting families.*

If $q = 2$ then $w(\mathcal{A}) = |A|$. Thus, $f(n,2,t)$ is simply the maximal size of t-intersecting family $\mathcal{A} \subset 2^{[n]}$, which is given by the Katona Theorem. This case was solved by Kleitman [7].

Let us define a t-intersecting family $\mathcal{A}_r \subset 2^{[n]}$ by

$$\mathcal{A}_r := \{A \subset [n] : |A \cap [t+2r]| \ge t+r\}.$$

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In [5], Frankl and Füredi conjectured $f(n,q,t)=\max_{r\geq 0} w(\mathcal{A}_r)$. If $q\geq t+1$ then the conjecture claims $f(n,q,t)=q^{n-t}$. They showed that this is true if $t\geq 15$.

Now we introduce the full Erdős–Ko–Rado theorem, which was conjectured by Frankl in [4], and proved by Ahlswede and Khachatrian in [1]. Set

$$\mathrm{AK}(n,k,t,r) := |\{B \in \binom{[n]}{k} : |B\cap[t+2r]| \geq t+r\}|.$$

Theorem 1. ([1]) *Let $1\leq t\leq k\leq n$ and $\mathcal{B}\subset\binom{[n]}{k}$ be t-intersecting. If*

$$(k-t+1)\left(2+\frac{t-1}{r+1}\right) \leq n \leq (k-t+1)\left(2+\frac{t-1}{r}\right)$$

for some $r\in\mathbb{N}$, then $|\mathcal{B}|\leq \mathrm{AK}(n,k,t,r)$.

Using the above result, we prove the following in section 2.

Theorem 2. *Let $q\geq 3$ and set $r:=\left\lfloor\frac{t-1}{q-2}\right\rfloor$. Then $f(n,q,t)=w(\mathcal{A}_r)$ for $n\geq t+2r$.*

Note that

$$w(\mathcal{A}_r) = \sum_{j=0}^{n-t-2r}\sum_{i=t+r}^{t+2r}\binom{t+2r}{i}\binom{n-t-2r}{j}(q-1)^{n-i-j}$$

$$= \sum_{j=0}^{n-t-2r}\binom{n-t-2r}{j}(q-1)^{n-t-2r-j}\sum_{i=t+r}^{t+2r}\binom{t+2r}{i}(q-1)^{t+2r-i}$$

$$= q^{n-t-2r}\sum_{i=0}^{r}\binom{t+2r}{i}(q-1)^{i}. \tag{1}$$

In section 3, we prove the case $q\geq t+1$ (and $t\geq 1$) directly.

Independently, Ahlswede and Khachatrian [2] obtained Theorem 2 as a diametric theorem in Hamming spaces. They used a different method. See [6] or [2] for the history of the problem.

2. Proof of the theorem

Throughout this section, we fix q and t and set

$$r := \left\lfloor\frac{t-1}{q-2}\right\rfloor = \frac{t-1}{q-2}-\delta.$$

Let us recall the following easy probabilistic result.

Lemma 2. (Proposition 3 in [5].) *For every $\epsilon > 0$ the number of sequences $(a_1,\dots,a_n)\in[q]^n$ which contain more than $(1+\epsilon)(n/q)$ 1's or less than $(1-\epsilon)(n/q)$ 1's is less than ϵq^n for $n>n_0(\epsilon)$.*

Choose any sufficiently small positive ϵ, i.e., $0<\epsilon<\epsilon_0(q,t)$, and set an open interval $I:=((1-\epsilon)(n/q),(1+\epsilon)(n/q))$. In view of Lemma 1, $f(n,q,t)q^{-n}=w(\mathcal{A})q^{-n}$ for some t-intersecting family $\mathcal{A}$. Moreover Lemma 2 gives that

$$f(n,q,t)q^{-n} < w(\mathcal{B})q^{-n} + \epsilon$$

where $\mathcal{B}:=\{B\in\mathcal{A}:|B|\in I\}$. Set $\mathcal{B}(k):=\{B\in\mathcal{B}:|B|=k\}$.

Case I. $0<\delta<1$.
Note that δ depends only on t and q.

Lemma 3. *For $k\in I$ and sufficiently large n,*

$$(k-t+1)\left(2+\frac{t-1}{r+1}\right) \le n \le (k-t+1)\left(2+\frac{t-1}{r}\right) \tag{2}$$

Proof. (2) is equivalent to

$$(2+(t-1)/r)^{-1}n+t-1 \le k \le (2+(t-1)/(r+1))^{-1}n+t-1 \tag{3}$$

Let us show the right half. Since $k<(1+\epsilon)(n/q)$, it is sufficient to show

$$(1+\epsilon)(n/q) \le (2+(t-1)/(r+1))^{-1}n+t-1$$

or

$$(1+\epsilon)(2+(t-1)/(r+1)) < q.$$

This follows from $q=2+(t-1)/(r+\delta)>2+(t-1)/(r+1)$ and $\epsilon<\epsilon_0(q,t)$. One can prove the left half of (3) similarly. ∎

Thus, by the Ahlswede–Khachatrian theorem we have $|\mathcal{B}(k)|\le \mathrm{AK}(n,k,t,r)$. Therefore,

$$\begin{aligned} f(n,q,t)q^{-n} &< q^{-n}\sum_{k\in I} w(\mathcal{B}(k)) + \epsilon \\ &\le q^{-n}\sum_{k\in I}\mathrm{AK}(n,k,t,r)(q-1)^{n-k}+\epsilon \\ &= q^{-n}\sum_{k\in I}\sum_{j=t+r}^{t+2r}\binom{t+2r}{j}\binom{n-t-2r}{k-j}(q-1)^{n-k}+\epsilon \\ &< q^{-n}\sum_{j=t+r}^{t+2r}\binom{t+2r}{j}\sum_{k=j}^{n-t-2r+j}\binom{n-t-2r}{k-j}(q-1)^{n-k}+\epsilon \end{aligned}$$

$$= q^{-n} \sum_{j=t+r}^{t+2r} \binom{t+2r}{j} \sum_{i=0}^{n-t-2r} \binom{n-t-2r}{i} (q-1)^{(n-t-2r)-i} (q-1)^{t+2r-j} + \epsilon$$

$$= q^{-n} \sum_{j=t+r}^{t+2r} \binom{t+2r}{j} q^{n-t-2r} (q-1)^{t+2r-j} + \epsilon$$

$$= q^{-t-2r} \sum_{i=0}^{r} \binom{t+2r}{i} (q-1)^i + \epsilon.$$

Hence we have

$$g(q,t) := \lim_{n\to\infty} f(n,q,t) q^{-n} \le q^{-t-2r} \sum_{i=0}^{r} \binom{t+2r}{i} (q-1)^i. \tag{4}$$

On the other hand, (1) implies

$$g(q,t) \ge q^{-t-2r} \sum_{i=0}^{r} \binom{t+2r}{i} (q-1)^i. \tag{5}$$

By (4) and (5), we finally have

$$g(q,t) = q^{-t-2r} \sum_{i=0}^{r} \binom{t+2r}{i} (q-1)^i.$$

Now suppose that for some t-intersecting family $\mathcal{A} \subset 2^{[n]}$ we have $w(\mathcal{A}) \ge q^n g(q,t)+1$. Since $f(n+1,q,t) \ge q f(n,q,t)$ we have

$$f(n',q,t) \ge q^{n'-n} f(n,q,t) \ge q^{n'-n} w(\mathcal{A}) \ge q^{n'} (g(q,t) + q^{-n}),$$

which implies $\lim_{n'\to\infty} f(n',q,t) q^{-n'} \ge g(q,t) + q^{-n} > g(q,t)$, a contradiction. Thus we must have $w(\mathcal{A}) \le q^n g(q,t)$, and actually $w(\mathcal{A}_r) = q^n g(q,t)$. (We need $n \ge t+2r$ here.) This completes the proof of Case I.

Case II. $\delta = 0$.
In this case, we have $q = 2 + \frac{t-1}{r}$.

Lemma 4. *For $k \in I$ and sufficiently large n,*

$$(k-t+1)\left(2 + \frac{t-1}{r+1}\right) \le n \le (k-t+1)\left(2 + \frac{t-1}{r-1}\right).$$

In fact, one can prove

$$\left(2 + \frac{t-1}{r-1}\right)^{-1} n + t - 1 \le (1-\epsilon)\frac{n}{q}$$

$$< \frac{n}{q} + t - 1 < (1+\epsilon)\frac{n}{q} \le \left(2 + \frac{t-1}{r+1}\right)^{-1} n + t - 1.$$

The proof is similar to the proof of Lemma 3 and we omit it. By this lemma, we have

$$|\mathcal{B}(k)| \le \max\{\mathrm{AK}(n,k,t,r), \mathrm{AK}(n,k,t,r-1)\}.$$

If $n=q(k-t+1)$ then $\mathrm{AK}(n,k,t,r)=\mathrm{AK}(n,k,t,r-1)$. Since

$$\begin{aligned}\mathrm{AK}(n,k,t,r) &= \sum_{j=0}^{r}\binom{t+2r}{t+r+j}\binom{n-t-2r}{k-t-r-j}\\ &= \binom{n-t-2r}{k-t-r}\sum_{j=0}^{r}\binom{t+2r}{t+r+j}\prod_{i=1}^{j}\frac{k-t-r-i+1}{n-k-r+i},\end{aligned}$$

we have

$$\begin{aligned}1 &= \frac{\mathrm{AK}(n,k,t,r-1)}{\mathrm{AK}(n,k,t,r)}\\ &= \frac{(n-t-2r+2)(n-t-2r+1)}{(k-t-r+1)(n-k-r+1)}\frac{\sum_{j=0}^{r-1}\binom{t+2r-2}{t+r+j-1}\prod_{i=1}^{j}\frac{k-t-r-i+2}{n-k-r+i+1}}{\sum_{j=0}^{r}\binom{t+2r}{t+r+j}\prod_{i=1}^{j}\frac{k-t-r-i+1}{n-k-r+i}}.\end{aligned}$$

The above ratio tends to

$$\frac{q^2}{(q-1)}\frac{\sum_{j=0}^{r-1}\binom{t+2r-2}{t+r+j-1}(q-1)^{-j}}{\sum_{j=0}^{r}\binom{t+2r}{t+r+j}(q-1)^{-j}} = \frac{q^2}{(q-1)}\frac{\sum_{i=1}^{r}\binom{t+2r-2}{i-1}(q-1)^{i}}{\sum_{i=0}^{r}\binom{t+2r}{i}(q-1)^{i}}$$

as $n\to\infty$ for fixed q,t and $n=q(k-t+1)$. This proves

$$q^2\sum_{i=1}^{r}\binom{t+2r-2}{i-1}(q-1)^i = (q-1)\sum_{i=0}^{r}\binom{t+2r}{i}(q-1)^i \tag{6}$$

Now choose $k \in I$. (Here we do not assume $n = q(k-t+1)$.) Then,

$$\frac{\mathrm{AK}(n,k,t,r-1)}{\mathrm{AK}(n,k,t,r)}$$

$$= \frac{(n-t-2r+2)(n-t-2r+1)}{(k-t-r+1)(n-k-r+1)} \frac{\sum_{j=0}^{r-1} \binom{t+2r-2}{t+r+j-1} \prod_{i=1}^{j} \frac{k-t-r-i+2}{n-k-r+i+1}}{\sum_{j=0}^{r} \binom{t+2r}{t+r+j} \prod_{i=1}^{j} \frac{k-t-r-i+1}{n-k-r+i}}$$

$$< \frac{n^2}{(1-\epsilon)(n/q)(1-(1+\epsilon)/q)n} \frac{\sum_{j=0}^{r-1} \binom{t+2r-2}{t+r+j-1} \prod_{i=1}^{j} \frac{(1+\epsilon)(n/q)}{(1-(1+\epsilon)/q)n}}{\sum_{j=0}^{r} \binom{t+2r}{t+r+j} \prod_{i=1}^{j} \frac{(1-\epsilon)(n/q)}{(1-(1-\epsilon)/q)n}}$$

$$= \frac{q^2}{(1-\epsilon)(q-1-\epsilon)} \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{r} \binom{t+2r-2}{i-1} \left(\frac{q-1-\epsilon}{1+\epsilon}\right)^i}{\sum_{i=0}^{r} \binom{t+2r}{i} \left(\frac{q-1+\epsilon}{1-\epsilon}\right)^i}.$$

By (6), the above ratio tends to 1 as $\epsilon \to 0$. Thus for any $\epsilon' > 0$ we can conclude that

$$\mathrm{AK}(n,k,t,r-1) < (1+\epsilon')\mathrm{AK}(n,k,t,r)$$

if we choose ϵ sufficiently small and n sufficiently large, and $k \in I$. Finally we have

$$\begin{aligned} f(n,q,t)q^{-n} &< q^{-n} \sum_{k \in I} \max\{\mathrm{AK}(n,k,t,r), \mathrm{AK}(n,k,t,r-1)\}(q-1)^{n-k} + \epsilon \\ &< (1+\epsilon')q^{-n} \sum_{k \in I} \mathrm{AK}(n,k,t,r)(q-1)^{n-k} + \epsilon \\ &< (1+\epsilon')q^{-t-2r} \sum_{i=0}^{r} \binom{t+2r}{i} (q-1)^i + \epsilon. \end{aligned}$$

Using the same argument in Case I, we have

$$g(q,t) := \lim_{n \to \infty} f(n,q,t)q^{-n} = q^{-t-2r} \sum_{i=0}^{r} \binom{t+2r}{i} (q-1)^i,$$

and $f(n,q,t) = q^n g(q,t)$, which completes the proof of the theorem. ∎

3. Another approach

In this section we give a direct proof for the case $q \geq t+1$ using tools developed in [1].

Let $\mathcal{A} \subset 2^{[n]}$. A family $\mathcal{G} \subset 2^{[n]}$ is called a kernel of $\mathcal{A}$ if $\mathcal{A} = \bigcup_{G \in \mathcal{G}} \mathcal{U}(G)$ where $\mathcal{U}(G) := \{F \subset [n] : G \subset F\}$. A rank of $\mathcal{A}$ is defined by

$$\operatorname{rank}(\mathcal{A}) := \min\{|\bigcup_{G \in \mathcal{G}} G| : \mathcal{G} \text{ is a kernel of } \mathcal{A}\}.$$

Theorem 3. *Let $\mathcal{A} \subset 2^{[n]}$ be a shifted t-intersecting family with $w(\mathcal{A}) = f(n,q,t)$. Then $\operatorname{rank}(\mathcal{A}) \leq t + 2r$, where $r := \left\lfloor \frac{t-1}{q-2} \right\rfloor$.*

Since the proof is almost the same as the proof of Lemma 6 in [1], we omit the details.

Proof. (Outline) Choose a shifted, inclusion minimal (i.e., antichain) kernel $\mathcal{G} \subset 2^{[n]}$ of $\mathcal{A}$ satisfying $\operatorname{rank}(\mathcal{A}) = |\bigcup_{G \in \mathcal{G}} G|$. Assume that $\delta > 0$ and $M := t+2r+\delta = \operatorname{rank}(\mathcal{A})$. Let $\mathcal{G} = \mathcal{G}_0 \cup \mathcal{G}_1$, $\mathcal{G}_0 := \{G \in \mathcal{G} : M \in G\}$, $\mathcal{G}_1 := \mathcal{G} - \mathcal{G}_0$, and let

$$\mathcal{G}_0 = \mathcal{R}_{t+1} \cup \cdots \cup \mathcal{R}_{M-1},$$

where $\mathcal{R}_i := \mathcal{G}_0 \cap \binom{[M]}{i}$. Set

$$\mathcal{R}'_i := \{E - \{M\} : E \in \mathcal{R}_i\} \subset \binom{[M-1]}{i-1}.$$

Then, $E \in \mathcal{R}'_i$, $E' \in \mathcal{R}'_j$ and $i + j \neq M + t$ imply $|E \cap E'| \geq t$. Thus we may assume that $\mathcal{R}_i \neq \emptyset$, $\mathcal{R}_j \neq \emptyset$, $i + j = M + t$ for some i, j.

Case I. $i \neq j$.
Define

$$\mathcal{F}_1 := \mathcal{G}_1 \cup (\mathcal{G}_0 - (\mathcal{R}_i \cup \mathcal{R}_j)) \cup \mathcal{R}'_i,$$
$$\mathcal{F}_2 := \mathcal{G}_1 \cup (\mathcal{G}_0 - (\mathcal{R}_i \cup \mathcal{R}_j)) \cup \mathcal{R}'_j,$$
$$\mathcal{B}_i := \mathcal{U}(\mathcal{F}_i).$$

Then we have

$$\mathcal{A} - \mathcal{B}_1 = \{R \cup S : R \in \mathcal{R}_j,\ S \in 2^{[M+1,n]}\},$$
$$\mathcal{B}_1 - \mathcal{A} = \{R \cup S : R \in \mathcal{R}'_i,\ S \in 2^{[M+1,n]}\},$$

and hence

$$w(\mathcal{A} - \mathcal{B}_1) = |\mathcal{R}_j|(q-1)^{M-j} q^{n-M},$$
$$w(\mathcal{B}_1 - \mathcal{A}) = |\mathcal{R}_i|(q-1)^{M-i+1} q^{n-M}.$$

If $w(\mathcal{A}) \geq w(\mathcal{B}_1)$ and $w(\mathcal{A}) \geq w(\mathcal{B}_2)$ then

$$|\mathcal{R}_j|(q-1)^{M-j} \geq |\mathcal{R}_i|(q-1)^{M-i+1},$$
$$|\mathcal{R}_i|(q-1)^{M-i} \geq |\mathcal{R}_j|(q-1)^{M-j+1}.$$

Thus $1 \geq (q-1)^2$, a contradiction.

Case II. $i = j = \frac{M+t}{2} = t + r + \frac{\delta}{2}$.
In this case δ is even and $\delta \geq 2$. Using the same argument in Case I, we may assume that $\mathcal{R}_\alpha = \emptyset$ for all $\alpha \neq i$, and $\mathcal{G} = \mathcal{R}_i \cup \mathcal{G}_1$. The average degree $\bar{d}$ of $\mathcal{R}'_i \subset \binom{[M-1]}{i-1}$ is given by $\bar{d} = (i-1)|\mathcal{R}_i|/(M-1)$. Therefore we can find $\ell \in [M-1]$ such that $\deg_{\mathcal{R}'_i}(\ell) \leq \bar{d}$. Define a t-intersecting family $\mathcal{T}$ as follows:

$$\mathcal{T} := \{E \in \mathcal{R}'_i : \ell \notin E\} \subset \binom{[M-1]-\{\ell\}}{i-1}.$$

Then $|\mathcal{T}| \geq |\mathcal{R}'_i| - \bar{d} = \frac{M-i}{M-1}|\mathcal{R}_i|$. Let $\mathcal{A} = \mathcal{D}_1 \cup \mathcal{D}_2$ where $\mathcal{D}_1 := \mathcal{U}(\mathcal{G}_1)$, $\mathcal{D}_2 := \mathcal{U}(\mathcal{R}_i) - \mathcal{D}_1$, and let $\mathcal{U}(\mathcal{T} \cup \mathcal{G}_1) = \mathcal{D}_1 \cup \mathcal{D}_3$ where $\mathcal{D}_3 := \mathcal{U}(\mathcal{T}) - \mathcal{D}_1$. Then we have

$$w(\mathcal{D}_2) = |\mathcal{R}_i|(q-1)^{M-i}q^{n-M},$$
$$w(\mathcal{D}_3) = |\mathcal{T}|(q-1)^{M-i}q^{n-M+1} \geq \frac{M-i}{M-1}|\mathcal{R}_i|(q-1)^{M-i}q^{n-M+1}.$$

If $w(\mathcal{D}_2) \geq w(\mathcal{D}_3)$ then $1 \geq \frac{M-i}{M-1} \cdot q$. Since $M = t + 2r + \delta$ and $i = t + r + \frac{\delta}{2}$, we have

$$t + 2r + \delta - 1 \geq \frac{2r+\delta}{2} q,$$

or equivalently,

$$r \leq \frac{t-1-(q/2-1)\delta}{q-2} = \frac{t-1}{q-2} - \frac{\delta}{2}.$$

Since $\frac{\delta}{2} \geq 1$ we have $r \leq \frac{t-1}{q-2} - 1$, which contradicts a definition of r. ∎

Corollary 1. *If $q \geq t+1$ then $f(n,q,t) = q^{n-t}$.*

Proof. Suppose that $\mathcal{A} \subset 2^{[n]}$ is t-intersecting and $w(\mathcal{A}) = f(n,q,t)$. By Theorem 3, we may assume $\text{rank}(\mathcal{A}) \leq t + 2r$, $r := \left\lfloor \frac{t-1}{q-2} \right\rfloor$. If $q \geq t+2$ then $r = 0$, and $f(n,q,t) \leq w(\mathcal{A}_0) = q^{n-t}$.

If $q = t+1$ then $r = 1$ and $f(n,q,t) \leq \max\{w(\mathcal{A}_0), w(\mathcal{A}_1)\}$. In this case we have $w(\mathcal{A}_0) = w(\mathcal{A}_1) = q^{n-t}$. ∎

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