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# On two combinatorial problems arising from automata theory

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## Abstract

We present some partial results on the following conjectures arising from automata theory. The first conjecture is the triangle conjecture due to Perrin and Schützenberger. Let  $A = \{a, b\}$  be a two-letter alphabet,  $d$  a positive integer and let  $B_d = \{a^i b a^j \mid 0 \leq i + j \leq d\}$ . If  $X \subset B_d$  is a code, then  $|X| \leq d + 1$ . The second conjecture is due to Černý and the author. Let  $\mathcal{A}$  be an automaton with  $n$  states. If there exists a word of rank  $\leq n - k$  in  $\mathcal{A}$ , there exists such a word of length  $\leq k^2$ .

## 1 Introduction

The theory of automata and formal languages provides many beautiful combinatorial results and problems which, I feel, ought to be known. The book recently published: *Combinatorics on words*, by Lothaire [8], gives many examples of this.

In this paper, I present two elegant combinatorial conjectures which are of some importance in automata theory. The first one, recently proposed by Perrin and Schützenberger [9], was originally stated in terms of coding theory. Let  $A = \{a, b\}$  be a two-letter alphabet and let  $A^*$  be the free monoid generated by  $A$ . Recall that a subset  $C$  of  $A^*$  is a code whenever the submonoid of  $A^*$  generated by  $C$  is free with base  $C$ ; i.e., if the relation  $c_1 \cdots c_p = c'_1 \cdots c'_q$ , where  $c_1, \dots, c_p, c'_1, \dots, c'_q$  are elements of  $C$  implies  $p = q$  and  $c_i = c'_i$  for  $1 \leq i \leq p$ . Set, for any  $d > 0$ ,  $B_d = \{a^i b a^j \mid 0 \leq i + j \leq d\}$ . One can now state the following conjecture:

**The triangle conjecture.** *Let  $d > 0$  and  $X \subset B_d$ . If  $X$  is a code, then  $|X| \leq d + 1$ .*

The term “The triangle conjecture” originates from the following construction: if one represents every word of the form  $a^i b a^j$  by a point  $(i, j) \in \mathbb{N}^2$ , the set  $B_d$  is represented by the triangle  $\{(i, j) \in \mathbb{N}^2 \mid 0 \leq i + j \leq d\}$ . The second conjecture was originally stated by Černý (for  $k = n - 1$ ) [3] and extended by the author. Recall that a finite automaton  $\mathcal{A}$  is a triple  $(Q, A, \delta)$ , where  $Q$  is a finite set (called the set of states),  $A$  is a finite set (called the alphabet) and  $\delta : Q \times A \rightarrow Q$  is a map. Thus  $\delta$  defines an action of each letter of  $A$  on  $Q$ . For simplicity, the action of the letter  $a$  on the state  $q$  is usually denoted by  $qa$ . This action can be extended to  $A^*$  (the free monoid on  $A$ ) by the associativity rule

$$(qw)a = q(wa) \text{ for all } q \in Q, w \in A^*, a \in A$$

Thus each word  $w \in A^*$  defines a map from  $Q$  to  $Q$  and the rank of  $w$  in  $\mathcal{A}$  is the integer  $\text{Card}\{qw \mid q \in Q\}$ .

One can now state the following

**Conjecture (C).** *Let  $\mathcal{A}$  be an automaton with  $n$  states and let  $0 \leq k \leq n - 1$ . If there exists a word of rank  $\leq n - k$  in  $\mathcal{A}$ , there exists such a word of length  $\leq k^2$ .*

## 2 The triangle conjecture

I shall refer to the representation of  $X$  as a subset of the triangle  $\{(i, j) \in \mathbb{N}^2 \mid 0 \leq i + j \leq d\}$  to describe some properties of  $X$ . For example, “ $X$  has at most two columns occupied” means that there exist two integers  $0 \leq i_1 < i_2$  such that  $X$  is contained in  $a^{i_1}ba^* \cup a^{i_2}ba^*$ .

Only a few partial results are known on the triangle conjecture. First of all the conjecture is true for  $d \leq 9$ ; this result has been obtained by a computer, somewhere in Italy.

In [5], Hansel computed the number  $t_n$  of words obtained by concatenation of  $n$  words of  $B_d$ . He deduced from this the following upper bound for  $|X|$ .

**Theorem 2.1** *Let  $X \subset B_d$ . If  $X$  is a code, then  $|X| \leq (1 + (1/\sqrt{2}))(d + 1)$ .*

Perrin and Schützenberger proved the following theorem in [9].

**Theorem 2.2** *Assume that the projections of  $X$  on the two components are both equal to the set  $\{0, 1, \dots, r\}$  for some  $r \leq d$ . If  $X$  is a code, then  $|X| \leq r + 1$ .*

Two further results have been proved by Simon and the author [15].

**Theorem 2.3** *Let  $X \subset B_d$  be a set having at most two rows occupied. If  $X$  is a code, then  $|X| \leq d + 1$ .*

**Theorem 2.4** *Assume there is exactly one column of  $X \subset B_d$  with two points or more. If  $X$  is a code, then  $|X| \leq d + 1$ .*

**Corollary 2.5** *Assume that all columns of  $X$  are occupied. If  $X$  is a code, then  $|X| \leq d + 1$ .*

**Proof.** Indeed assume that  $|X| > d + 1$ . Then one of the columns of  $X$  has two points or more. Thus one can find a set  $Y \subset X$  such that: (1) all columns but one of  $Y$  contain exactly one point; (2) the exceptional column contains two points. Since  $|Y| > d + 1$ ,  $Y$  is a non-code by Theorem 2.4. Thus  $X$  is a non-code.  $\square$

Of course statements 2.3, 2.4, 2.5 are also true if one switches “row” and “column”.

## 3 A conjecture on finite automata

We first review some results obtained for Conjecture (C) in the particular case  $k = n - 1$ : “Let  $\mathcal{A}$  be an automaton with  $n$  states containing a word of rank 1. Then there exists such a word of length  $\leq (n - 1)^2$ .”

First of all the bound  $(n - 1)^2$  is sharp. In fact, let  $\mathcal{A}_n = (Q, \{a, b\}, \delta)$ , where  $Q = \{0, 1, \dots, n - 1\}$ ,  $ia = i$  and  $ib = i + 1$  for  $i \neq n - 1$ , and  $(n - 1)a = (n - 1)b = 0$ .

Then the word  $(ab^{n-1})^{n-2}a$  has rank 1 and length  $(n - 1)^2$  and this is the shortest word of rank 1 (see [3] or [10] for a proof).

Moreover, the conjecture has been proved for  $n = 1, 2, 3, 4$  and the following upper bounds have been obtained

$$\begin{aligned}
2^n - n - 1 & \quad (\check{\text{Cerný}} [2], 1964) \\
\frac{1}{2}n^3 - \frac{3}{2}n^2 + n + 1 & \quad (\text{Starke} [16, 17], 1966) \\
\frac{1}{2}n^3 - n^2 + \frac{n}{2} & \quad (\text{Kohavi} [6], 1970) \\
\frac{1}{3}n^3 - \frac{3}{2}n^2 + \frac{25}{6}n - 4 & \quad (\check{\text{Cerný}}, \text{Pirická et Rosenauerová} [4], 1971) \\
\frac{7}{27}n^3 - \frac{17}{18}n^2 + \frac{17}{6}n - 3 & \quad (\text{Pin} [11], 1978)
\end{aligned}$$

For the general case, the bound  $k^2$  is also the best possible (see [10]) and the conjecture has been proved for  $k = 0, 1, 2, 3$  [10]. The best known upper bound was

$$\frac{1}{3}k^3 - \frac{1}{3}k^2 + \frac{13}{6}k - 1 [11]$$

We prove here some improvements of these results. We first sketch the idea of the proof. Let  $\mathcal{A} = (Q, A, \delta)$  be an automaton with  $n$  states. For  $K \subset Q$  and  $w \in A^*$ , we shall denote by  $Kw$  the set  $\{qw \mid q \in K\}$ . Assume there exists a word of rank  $\leq n - k$  in  $\mathcal{A}$ . Since the conjecture is true for  $k \leq 3$ , one can assume that  $k \geq 4$ . Certainly there exists a letter  $a$  of rank  $\neq n$ . (If not, all words define a permutation on  $Q$  and therefore have rank  $n$ .) Set  $K_1 = Qa$ . Next look for a word  $m_1$  (of minimal length) such that  $K_2 = K_1m_1$  satisfies  $|K_2| < |K_1|$ . Then apply the same procedure to  $K_2$ , etc. until one of the  $|K_i|$ 's satisfies  $|K_i| \leq n - k$ :

$$Q \xrightarrow{a} K_1 \xrightarrow{m_1} K_2 \xrightarrow{m_2} \cdots K_{r-1} \xrightarrow{m_{r-1}} K_r \quad |K_r| \leq n - k$$

Then  $am_1 \cdots m_{r-1}$  has rank  $\leq n - k$ .

The crucial step of the procedure consists in solving the following problem:

**Problem P.** Let  $\mathcal{A} = (Q, A, \delta)$  be an automaton with  $n$  states, let  $2 \leq m \leq n$  and let  $K$  be an  $m$ -subset of  $Q$ . Give an upper bound of the length of the shortest word  $w$  (if it exists) such that  $|Kw| < |K|$ .

There exist some connections between Problem P and a purely combinatorial Problem P'.

**Problem P'.** Let  $Q$  be an  $n$ -set and let  $s$  and  $t$  be two integers such that  $s + t \leq n$ . Let  $(S_i)_{1 \leq i \leq p}$  and  $(T_i)_{1 \leq i \leq p}$  be subsets of  $Q$  such that

- (1) For  $1 \leq i \leq p$ ,  $|S_i| = s$  and  $|T_i| = t$ .
- (2) For  $1 \leq i \leq p$ ,  $S_i \cap T_i = \emptyset$ .
- (3) For  $1 \leq j < i \leq p$ ,  $S_j \cap T_i = \emptyset$ .

Find the maximum value  $p(s, t)$  of  $p$ .

We conjecture that  $p(s, t) = \binom{s+t}{s} = \binom{s+t}{t}$ . Note that if (3) is replaced by

- (3') For  $1 \leq i \neq j \leq p$ ,  $S_i \cap T_j = \emptyset$ .

then the conjecture is true (see Berge [1, p. 406]).

We now state the promised connection between Problems P and P'.

**Proposition 3.1** *Let  $\mathcal{A} = (Q, A, \delta)$  be an automaton with  $n$  states, let  $0 \leq s \leq n - 2$  and let  $K$  be an  $(n - s)$ -subset of  $Q$ . If there exists a word  $w$  such that  $|Kw| < |K|$ , one can choose  $w$  with length  $\leq p(s, 2)$ .*

**Proof.** Let  $w = a_1 \cdots a_p$  be a shortest word such that  $|Kw| < |K| = n - s$  and define  $K_1 = K$ ,  $K_2 = K_1 a_1$ ,  $\dots$ ,  $K_p = K_{p-1} a_{p-1}$ . Clearly, an equality of the form  $|K_i| = |K a_1 \cdots a_i| < |K|$  for some  $i < p$  is inconsistent with the definition of  $w$ . Therefore  $|K_1| = |K_2| = \cdots = |K_p| = (n - s)$ . Moreover, since  $|K_p a_p| < |K_p|$ ,  $K_p$  contains two elements  $x_p$  and  $y_p$  such that  $x_p a_p = y_p a_p$ .

Define 2-sets  $T_i = \{x_i, y_i\} \subset K_i$  such that  $x_i a_i = x_{i+1}$  and  $y_i a_i = y_{i+1}$  for  $1 \leq i \leq p - 1$  (the  $T_i$  are defined from  $T_p = \{x_p, y_p\}$ ). Finally, set  $S_i = Q \setminus K_i$ . Thus we have

(1) For  $1 \leq i \leq p$ ,  $|S_i| = s$  and  $|T_i| = 2$ .

(2) For  $1 \leq i \leq p$ ,  $S_i \cap T_i = \emptyset$ .

Finally assume that for some  $1 \leq j < i \leq p$ ,  $S_i \cap T_j = \emptyset$ , i.e.,  $\{x_i, y_i\} \subset K_i$ . Since

$$x_i a_i \cdots a_p = y_i a_i \cdots a_p,$$

it follows that

$$|K a_1 \cdots a_{j-1} a_i \cdots a_p| = |K_j a_i \cdots a_p| < n - s$$

But the word  $a_1 \cdots a_{j-1} a_i \cdots a_p$  is shorter than  $w$ , a contradiction.

Thus the condition (3), for  $1 \leq j < i \leq p$ ,  $S_j \cap T_i \neq \emptyset$ , is satisfied, and this concludes the proof.  $\square$

I shall give two different upper bounds for  $p(s) = p(2, s)$ .

### Proposition 3.2

- (1)  $p(0) = 1$ ,
- (2)  $p(1) = 3$ ,
- (3)  $p(s) \leq s^2 - s + 4$  for  $s \geq 2$ .

**Proof.** First note that the  $S_i$ 's ( $T_i$ 's) are all distinct, because if  $S_i = S_j$  for some  $j < i$ , then  $S_i \cap T_i = \emptyset$  and  $S_i \cap T_j \neq \emptyset$ , a contradiction.

Assertion (1) is clear.

To prove (2) assume that  $p(1) > 3$ . Then, since  $T_4 \cap S_1 \neq \emptyset$ ,  $T_4 \cap S_2 \neq \emptyset$ ,  $T_4 \cap S_3 \neq \emptyset$ , two of the three 1-sets  $S_1$ ,  $S_2$ ,  $S_3$  are equal, a contradiction.

On the other hand, the sequence  $S_1 = \{x_1\}$ ,  $S_2 = \{x_2\}$ ,  $S_3 = \{x_3\}$ ,  $T_1 = \{x_2, x_3\}$ ,  $T_2 = \{x_1, x_3\}$ ,  $T_3 = \{x_1, x_2\}$  satisfies the conditions of Problem P'. Thus  $p(1) = 3$ .

To prove (3) assume at first that  $S_1 \cap S_2 = \emptyset$  and consider a 2-set  $T_i$  with  $i \geq 4$ . Such a set meets  $S_1$ ,  $S_2$  and  $S_3$ . Since  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  are disjoint sets,  $T_i$  is composed as follows:

- either an element of  $S_1 \cap S_3$  with an element of  $S_2 \cap S_3$ ,
- or an element of  $S_1 \cap S_3$  with an element of  $S_2 \setminus S_3$ ,
- or an element of  $S_1 \setminus S_3$  with an element of  $S_2 \cap S_3$ .

Therefore

$$\begin{aligned} p(s) - 3 &\leq |S_1 \cap S_3| |S_2 \cap S_3| + |S_1 \cap S_3| |S_2 \setminus S_3| + |S_1 \setminus S_3| |S_2 \cap S_3| \\ &= |S_1 \cap S_3| |S_2| + |S_1| |S_2 \cap S_3| - |S_1 \cap S_3| |S_2 \cap S_3| \\ &= s(|S_1 \cap S_3| + |S_2 \cap S_3|) - |S_1 \cap S_3| |S_2 \cap S_3| \end{aligned}$$

Since  $S_1$ ,  $S_2$ ,  $S_3$  are all distinct,  $|S_1 \cap S_3| \leq s - 1$ . Thus if  $|S_1 \cap S_3| = 0$  or  $|S_2 \cap S_3| = 0$  it follows that

$$p(s) \leq s(s - 1) + 3 = s^2 - s + 3$$

If  $|S_1 \cap S_3| \neq 0$  and  $|S_2 \cap S_3| \neq 0$ , one has

$$|S_1 \cap S_3| |S_2 \cap S_3| \geq |S_1 \cap S_3| |S_2 \cap S_3| - 1,$$

and therefore:

$$p(s) \leq 3 + (s-1)(|S_1 \cap S_3| + |S_2 \cap S_3|) + 1 \leq s^2 - s + 4,$$

since  $|S_1 \cap S_3| + |S_2 \cap S_3| \leq |S_3| = s$ .

We now assume that  $a = |S_1 \cap S_2| > 0$ , and we need some lemmata.

**Lemma 3.3** *Let  $x$  be an element of  $Q$ . Then  $x$  is contained in at most  $(s+1)$   $T_i$ 's.*

**Proof.** If not there exist  $(s+2)$  indices  $i_1 < \dots < i_{s+2}$  such that  $T_{i_j} = \{x, x_{i_j}\}$  for  $1 \leq j \leq s+2$ . Since  $S_{i_1} \cap T_{i_1} \neq \emptyset$ ,  $x \notin S_{i_1}$ . On the other hand,  $S_{i_1}$  meets all  $T_{i_j}$  for  $2 \leq j \leq s+2$  and thus the  $s$ -set  $S_{i_1}$  has to contain the  $s+1$  elements  $x_{i_2}, \dots, x_{i_{s+2}}$ , a contradiction.  $\square$

**Lemma 3.4** *Let  $R$  be an  $r$ -subset of  $Q$ . Then  $R$  meets at most  $(rs+1)$   $T_i$ 's.*

**Proof.** The case  $r = 1$  follows from Lemma 3.3. Assume  $r \geq 2$  and let  $x$  be an element of  $R$  contained in a maximal number  $N_x$  of  $T_i$ 's. Note that  $N_x \leq s+1$  by Lemma 3.3. If  $N_x \leq s$  for all  $x \in R$ , then  $R$  meets at most  $rs$   $T_i$ 's. Assume there exists an  $x \in R$  such that  $N_x = s+1$ . Then  $x$  meets  $(s+1)$   $T_i$ 's, say  $T_{i_1} = \{x, x_{i_1}\}, \dots, T_{i_{s+1}} = \{x, x_{i_{s+1}}\}$  with  $i_1 < \dots < i_{s+1}$ .

We claim that every  $y \neq x$  meets at most  $s$   $T_i$ 's such that  $i \neq i_1, \dots, i_{s+1}$ . If not, there exist  $s+1$  sets  $T_{j_1} = \{y, y_{j_1}\}, \dots, T_{j_{s+1}} = \{y, y_{j_{s+1}}\}$  with  $j_1 < \dots < j_{s+1}$  containing  $y$ . Assume  $i_1 < j_1$  (a dual argument works if  $j_1 < i_1$ ). Since  $S_{i_1} \cap T_{i_1} = \emptyset$ ,  $x \notin T_{i_1}$  and since  $S_{i_1}$  meets all other  $T_{i_k}$ ,  $S_{i_1} = \{x_{i_2}, \dots, x_{i_{s+1}}\}$ . If  $y \in T_{i_1}$ ,  $y$  belongs to  $(s+2)$   $T_i$ 's in contradiction to Lemma 3.3. Thus  $|S_{i_1}| > s$ , a contradiction. This proves the claim and the lemma follows easily.  $\square$

We can now conclude the proof of (3) in the case  $|S_1 \cap S_2| = a > 0$ . Consider a 2-set  $T_i$  with  $i \geq 3$ . Since  $T_i$  meets  $S_1$  and  $S_2$ , either  $T_i$  meets  $S_1 \cap S_2$ , or  $T_i$  meets  $S_1 \setminus S_2$  and  $S_2 \setminus S_1$ . By Lemma 3.4, there are at most  $(as+1)$   $T_i$ 's of the first type and at most  $(s-a)^2$   $T_i$ 's of the second type. It follows that

$$p(s) - 2 \leq (s-a)^2 + as + 1$$

and hence  $p(s) \leq s^2 + a^2 - as + 3 \leq s^2 - s + 4$ , since  $1 \leq a \leq s-1$ .  $\square$

Two different upper bounds were promised for  $p(s)$ . Here is the second one, which seems to be rather unsatisfying, since it depends on  $n = |Q|$ . In fact, as will be shown later, this new bound is better than the first one for  $s > \lfloor n/2 \rfloor$ .

**Proposition 3.5** *Let  $a = \lfloor n/(n-s) \rfloor$ . Then*

$$p(s) \leq \frac{1}{2}ns + a = \binom{a+1}{2}s^2 + (1-a^2)ns + \binom{a}{2}n^2 + a$$

if  $n-s$  divides  $n$ , and

$$p(s) \leq \binom{a+1}{2}s^2 + (1-a^2)ns + \binom{a}{2}n^2 + a + 1$$

if  $n-s$  does not divide  $n$ .

**Proof.** Denote by  $N_i$  the number of 2-sets meeting  $S_j$  for  $j < i$  but not meeting  $S_i$ . Note that the conditions of Problem P' just say that  $N_i > 0$  for all  $i \leq p(s)$ . The idea of the proof is contained in the following formula

$$\sum_{1 \leq i \leq p(s)} N_i \leq \binom{n}{2} \quad (1)$$

This is clear since the number of 2-subsets of  $Q$  is  $\binom{n}{2}$ . The next lemma provides a lower bound for  $N_i$ .

**Lemma 3.6** *Let  $Z_i = \bigcap_{j < i} S_j \setminus S_i$  and  $|Z_i| = z_i$ . Then  $N_i \geq \binom{z_i}{2} + z_i(n - s - z_i)$ .*

**Proof.** Indeed, any 2-set contained in  $Z_i$  and any 2-set consisting of an element of  $Z_i$  and of an element of  $Q \setminus (S_i \cup Z_i)$  meets all  $S_j$  for  $j < i$  but does not meet  $S_i$ .

We now prove the proposition. First of all we claim that

$$\bigcup_{1 \leq i \leq p(s)} Z_i = Q$$

If not,

$$Q \setminus (\bigcup Z_i) = \bigcap_{1 \leq i \leq p(s)} S_i$$

is nonempty, and one can select an element  $x$  in this set. Let  $T$  be a 2-set containing  $x$  and  $S$  be an  $s$ -set such that  $S \cap T = \emptyset$ . Then the two sequences  $S_1, \dots, S_{p(s)}, S$  and  $T_1, \dots, T_{p(s)}, T$  satisfy the conditions of Problem P' in contradiction to the definition of  $p(s)$ . Thus the claim holds and since all  $Z_i$ 's are pairwise disjoint:

$$\sum z_i = n \quad (2)$$

It now follows from (1) that

$$p(s) \leq \binom{n}{2} - \sum_{1 \leq i \leq p(s)} (N_i - 1) \quad (3)$$

Since  $N_i > 0$  for all  $i$ , Lemma 3.6 provides the following inequality:

$$p(s) \leq \binom{n}{2} - \sum_{z_i > 0} f(z_i) \quad (4)$$

where  $f(z) = \binom{z}{2} + z(n - s - z) - 1$ .

Thus, it remains to find the minimum of the expression  $\sum f(z_i)$  when the  $z_i$ 's are submitted to the two conditions

- (a)  $\sum z_i = n$  (see (2)) and
- (b)  $0 < z_i \leq n - s$  (because  $Z_i \subset Q \setminus S_i$ ).

Consider a family  $(z_i)$  reaching this minimum and which furthermore contains a minimal number  $\alpha$  of  $z_i$ 's different from  $(n - s)$ .

We claim that  $\alpha \leq 1$ . Assume to the contrary that there exist two elements different from  $n - s$ , say  $z_1$  and  $z_2$ . Then an easy calculation shows that

$$\begin{aligned} f(z_1 + z_2) &\leq f(z_1) + f(z_2) && \text{if } z_1 + z_2 \leq n - s, \\ f(n - s) + f(z_1 + z_2 - (n - s)) &\leq f(z_1) + f(z_2) && \text{if } z_1 + z_2 > n - s. \end{aligned}$$

Thus replacing  $z_1$  and  $z_2$  by  $z_1 + z_2$  — in the case  $z_1 + z_2 \leq n - s$  — or by  $(n - s)$  and  $z_1 + z_2 - (n - s)$  — in the case  $z_1 + z_2 > n - s$  — leads to a family  $(z'_i)$  such that  $\sum f(z'_i) \leq \sum f(z_i)$  and containing at most  $(\alpha - 1)$  elements  $z'_i$  different from  $n - s$ , in

contradiction to the definition of the family  $(z_i)$ . Therefore  $\alpha = 1$  and the minimum of  $f(z_i)$  is obtained for

$$z_1 = \cdots = z_\alpha = n - s \quad \text{if } n = a(n - s),$$

and for

$$z_1 = \cdots = z_\alpha = n - s, \quad z_{\alpha+1} = r \quad \text{if } n = a(n - s) + r \text{ with } 0 < r < n - s.$$

It follows from inequality (4) that

$$\begin{aligned} p(s) &\leq \binom{n}{2} - af(n - s) && \text{if } n = a(n - s), \\ p(s) &\leq \binom{n}{2} - af(n - s) - f(r) && \text{if } n = a(n - s) + r \text{ with } 0 < r < n - s. \end{aligned}$$

where  $f(z) = \binom{n}{2} + z(n - z) - 1$ .

Proposition 3.5 follows by a routine calculation.  $\square$

We now compare the two upper bound for  $p(s)$  obtained in Propositions 3.2 and 3.5 for  $2 \leq s \leq n - 2$ .

**Case 1.**  $2 \leq s \leq (n/2) - 1$ .

Then  $a = 1$  and Proposition 3.5 gives  $p(s) \leq s^2 + 2$ . Clearly  $s^2 - s + 4$  is a better upper bound.

**Case 2.**  $s = n/2$ .

Then  $a = 2$  and Proposition 3.5 gives  $p(s) \leq s^2 + 2$ . Again  $s^2 - s + 4$  is better.

**Case 3.**  $(n + 1)/2 \leq s \leq (2n - 1)/3$ .

Then  $a = 2$  and Proposition 3.5 gives

$$\begin{aligned} p(s) &\leq 3s^2 - 3ns + n^2 + 3 = s^2 - s + 4 + (n - s - 1)(n - 2s + 1) \\ &\leq s^2 - s + 4 \end{aligned}$$

**Case 4.**  $2n/3 \leq s$ .

Then  $a \geq 3$  and Proposition 3.5 gives

$$\begin{aligned} p(s) &\leq \binom{a+1}{2} s^2 + (1 - a^2)ns + \binom{a}{2} n^2 + a + 1 \\ &\leq s^2 - s + \frac{1}{2}a(a-1)(n-s)^2 - ((a-1)(n-s) - 1)s + a + 1 \end{aligned}$$

Since  $s \leq (1 - a)(n - s)$ , a short calculation shows that

$$p(s) \leq s^2 - s + 4 - \frac{1}{2}(a-1)(a-2)(n-s)^2 + (a-1)(n-s) + (a-3)$$

Since  $a \geq 3$ ,  $-\frac{1}{2}(a-1) \leq -1$  and thus

$$p(s) \leq s^2 - s + 4 - (a-2)(n-s)^2 + (a-1)(n-s) + (a-3),$$

and it is not difficult to see that for  $n - s \geq 2$ ,

$$-(a-2)(n-s)^2 + (a-1)(n-s) + (a-3) \leq 0$$

Therefore Proposition 3.5 gives a better bound in this case.

The next theorem summarizes the previous results.



**Theorem 3.7** Let  $\mathcal{A} = (Q, A, \delta)$  be an automaton with  $n$  states, let  $0 \leq s \leq n-2$  and let  $K$  be an  $(n-s)$ -subset of  $Q$ . If there exists a word  $w$  such that  $|Kw| < |K|$ , one can choose  $w$  with length  $\leq \varphi(n, s)$  where  $a = \lfloor n/(n-s) \rfloor$  and

$$\varphi(n, s) = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if } s = 0, \\ 3 & \text{if } s = 3, \\ s^2 - s + 4 & \text{if } 3 \leq s \leq n/2, \end{cases}$$

$$\varphi(n, s) = \binom{a+1}{2} s^2 + (1-a^2)ns + \binom{a}{2} n^2 + a = \frac{1}{2}ns + a$$

if  $n = a(n-s)$  and  $s > n/2$ ,

$$\varphi(n, s) = \binom{a+1}{2} s^2 + (1-a^2)ns + \binom{a}{2} n^2 + a + 1$$

if  $n-s$  does not divide  $n$  and  $s > n/2$ .

We can now prove the main results of this paper.

**Theorem 3.8** Let  $\mathcal{A}$  be an automaton with  $n$  states and let  $0 \leq k \leq n-1$ . If there exists a word of rank  $\leq n-k$  in  $\mathcal{A}$ , there exists such a word of length  $\leq G(n, k)$  where

$$G(n, k) = \begin{cases} k^2 & \text{for } k = 0, 1, 2, 3, \\ \frac{1}{3}k^3 - k^2 + \frac{14}{3}k - 5 & \text{for } 4 \leq k \leq (n-2) + 1, \\ 9 + \sum_{3 \leq s \leq k-1} \varphi(n, s) & \text{for } k \geq (n+3)/2. \end{cases}$$

Observe that in any case

$$G(n, k) \leq \frac{1}{3}k^3 - k^2 + \frac{14}{3}k - 5$$

Table 1 gives values of  $G(n, k)$  for  $0 \leq k \leq n \leq 12$ .

$k \backslash n$	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1	0	1	4	9	19	34	56	85	125	173	235	310
2		0	1	4	9	19	35	57	89	128	180	244
3			0	1	4	9	19	35	59	90	133	186
4				0	1	4	9	19	35	59	93	135
5					0	1	4	9	19	35	59	93
6						0	1	4	9	19	35	59
7							0	1	4	9	19	35
8								0	1	4	9	19
9									0	1	4	9
10										0	1	4
11											0	1
12												0

Figure 1: Values of  $G(n, k)$  for  $0 \leq k \leq n \leq 12$ .

**Proof.** Assume that there exists a word  $w$  of rank  $\leq n-k$  in  $\mathcal{A}$ . Since Conjecture (C) has been proved for  $k \leq 3$ , we may assume  $k \geq 4$  and there exists a word  $w_1$  of length  $\leq 9$  such that  $Qw_1 = K_1$  satisfies  $|K_1| \leq n-3$ . It suffices now to apply the method described at the beginning of this section which consists of using Theorem 3.7 repetitively. This method shows that one can find a word of rank  $\leq n-k$  in  $\mathcal{A}$  of length

$\leq 9 + \sum_{3 \leq s \leq k-1} \varphi(n, s) = G(n, k)$ . In particular,  $\varphi(n, s) = s^2 - s + 4$  for  $s \leq n/2$  and thus

$$G(n, k) = \frac{1}{3}k^3 - k^2 + \frac{14}{3}k - 5 \quad \text{for } 4 \leq k \leq (n-2) + 1$$

It is interesting to have an estimate of  $G(n, k)$  for  $k = n - 1$ .

**Theorem 3.9** *Let  $\mathcal{A}$  be an automaton with  $n$  states. If there exists a word of rank 1 in  $\mathcal{A}$ , there exists such a word of length  $\leq F(n)$  where*

$$F(n) = \left(\frac{1}{2} - \frac{\pi^2}{36}\right)n^3 + o(n^3).$$

Note that this bound is better than the bound in  $\frac{7}{27}n^3$ , since  $7/27 \simeq 0.2593$  and  $(\frac{1}{2} - \frac{\pi^2}{36}) \simeq 0.2258$ .

**Proof.** Let  $h(n, s) = \binom{a+1}{2}s^2 + (1 - a^2)ns + \binom{a}{2}n^2 + a + \varepsilon(s)$ , where

$$\varepsilon(s) = \begin{cases} 0 & \text{if } n = a(n - s) \\ 1 & \text{if } n - s \text{ does not divide } n. \end{cases}$$

The above calculations have shown that for  $3 \leq s \leq n/2$ ,

$$s^2 - s + 4 \leq h(n, s) \leq s^2 + 2.$$

Therefore

$$\sum_{0 \leq s \leq n/2} \varphi(n, s) \sim 9 + \sum_{3 \leq s \leq n-2} s^2 \sim \frac{1}{24}n^3 \sim \sum_{0 \leq s \leq n/2} h(n, s)$$

It follows that

$$\begin{aligned} F(n) = G(n, n-1) &= \sum_{0 \leq s \leq n-2} h(n, s) + o(n^3) \\ &= \sum_{0 \leq s \leq n-1} h(n, s) + o(n^3) \end{aligned}$$

A new calculation shows that

$$h(n, n-s) = n^2 + (\lfloor n/s \rfloor + 1) \left( \frac{1}{2} \lfloor n/s \rfloor s^2 - sn + 1 \right) - \varepsilon(n-s)$$

Therefore

$$F(n) = \sum_{1 \leq i \leq 6} T_i(n) + o(n^3)$$

where

$$\begin{aligned} T_1 &= \sum_{s=1}^n n^2 = n^3, & T_4 &= -n \sum_{s=1}^n \lfloor n/s \rfloor s \\ T_2 &= \frac{1}{2} \sum_{s=1}^n \lfloor n/s \rfloor^2 s^2, & T_5 &= -n \sum_{s=1}^n s, \\ T_3 &= \frac{1}{2} \sum_{s=1}^n \lfloor n/s \rfloor s, & T_6 &= \sum_{s=1}^n \lfloor n/s \rfloor s + 1 - \varepsilon(n-s). \end{aligned}$$

Clearly  $T_5 = -\frac{1}{2}n^3 + o(n^3)$  and  $T_6 = o(n^3)$ . The terms  $T_2$ ,  $T_3$  and  $T_4$  need a separate study.

**Lemma 3.10** We have  $T_3 = \frac{1}{6}\zeta(3)n^3 + o(n^3)$  and  $T_4 = -\frac{1}{2}\zeta(2)n^3 + o(n^3)$ , where  $\zeta(s) = \sum_{n=1}^{\infty} n^{-s}$  is the usual zeta-function.

These two results are easy consequences of classical results of number theory (see [7, p. 117, Theorem 6.29 and p. 121, Theorem 6.34])

$$\begin{aligned} \text{(a)} \quad \sum_{s=1}^n \lfloor n/s \rfloor s &= \sum_{s=1}^n \sum_{d=1}^{\lfloor n/s \rfloor} s = \frac{1}{2} \sum_{s=1}^n (\lfloor n/s \rfloor^2 + \lfloor n/s \rfloor) \\ &= \frac{1}{2} n^2 \sum_{k=1}^n \frac{1}{k^2} + o(n^2) = \frac{1}{2} \zeta(2) n^2 + o(n^2) \end{aligned}$$

Therefore  $T_4 = -\frac{1}{2}\zeta(2)n^3 + o(n^3)$ .

$$\begin{aligned} \text{(b)} \quad \sum_{s=1}^n \lfloor n/s \rfloor s^2 &= \sum_{s=1}^n \sum_{d=1}^{\lfloor n/s \rfloor} s^2 = \frac{1}{2} \sum_{s=1}^n (2\lfloor n/s \rfloor^3 + 3\lfloor n/s \rfloor^2 + \lfloor n/s \rfloor) \\ &= \frac{1}{3} n^3 \left( \sum_{k=1}^n \frac{1}{s^3} \right) + o(n^3) = \frac{1}{3} \zeta(3) n^3 + o(n^3) \end{aligned}$$

Therefore  $T_3 = \frac{1}{6}\zeta(3)n^3 + o(n^3)$ .

**Lemma 3.11** We have  $T_2 = \frac{1}{6}(2\zeta(2) - \zeta(3))n^3 + o(n^3)$ .

**Proof.** It is sufficient to prove that

$$\lim_{n \rightarrow \infty} \frac{1}{n^3} \sum_{s=1}^n \lfloor n/s \rfloor^2 s^2 = \frac{1}{6}(2\zeta(2) - \zeta(3))$$

Fix an integer  $n_0$ . Then

$$\begin{aligned} \frac{1}{n^3} \sum_{j=1}^{n_0} j^2 \sum_{s=\lfloor n/(j+1) \rfloor + 1}^{\lfloor n/j \rfloor} s^2 &\leq \frac{1}{n^3} \sum_{s=1}^n \lfloor n/s \rfloor^2 s^2 \\ &\leq \frac{1}{n} \left\lfloor \frac{n}{n_0 + 1} \right\rfloor + \frac{1}{n^3} \sum_{j=1}^{n_0} j^2 \sum_{s=\lfloor n/(j+1) \rfloor + 1}^{\lfloor n/j \rfloor} s^2 \end{aligned}$$

Indeed,  $\lfloor n/s \rfloor s \leq n$  implies the inequality

$$\frac{1}{n^3} \sum_{s=1}^{\lfloor n/(n_0+1) \rfloor} \left\lfloor \frac{n}{s} \right\rfloor^2 s^2 \leq \frac{1}{n} \left\lfloor \frac{n}{n_0 + 1} \right\rfloor$$

Now

$$\lim_{n \rightarrow \infty} \frac{1}{n^3} \sum_{\lfloor n/(j+1) \rfloor + 1 \leq s \leq \lfloor n/j \rfloor} s^2 = \frac{1}{3} \left( \frac{1}{j^3} - \frac{1}{(j+1)^3} \right)$$

It follows that for all  $n_0 \in \mathbb{N}$

$$\begin{aligned} \frac{1}{2} \sum_{j=1}^{n_0} j^2 \left( \frac{1}{j^3} - \frac{1}{(j+1)^3} \right) &\leq \liminf_{n \rightarrow \infty} \frac{1}{n^3} \sum \left\lfloor \frac{n}{k} \right\rfloor^2 k^2 \\ &\leq \limsup_{n \rightarrow \infty} \frac{1}{n^3} \sum \left\lfloor \frac{n}{k} \right\rfloor^2 k^2 \\ &\leq \limsup_{n \rightarrow \infty} \frac{1}{n} \left\lfloor \frac{n}{n_0+1} \right\rfloor + \frac{1}{3} \sum_{j=1}^{n_0} j^2 \left( \frac{1}{j^3} - \frac{1}{(j+1)^3} \right) \end{aligned}$$

Since

$$\limsup_{n \rightarrow \infty} \frac{1}{n} \left\lfloor \frac{n}{n_0+1} \right\rfloor = \frac{1}{n_0+1}$$

We obtain for  $n_0 \rightarrow \infty$ ,

$$\begin{aligned} \lim_{n \rightarrow \infty} \frac{1}{n^3} \sum_{s=1}^n \left\lfloor \frac{n}{s} \right\rfloor^2 s^2 &= \frac{1}{3} \sum_{j=1}^{\infty} j^2 \left( \frac{1}{j^3} - \frac{1}{(j+1)^3} \right) \\ &= \frac{1}{3} \sum_{j=1}^{\infty} \frac{2j-1}{j^3} = \frac{1}{3} (2\zeta(2) - \zeta(3)) \end{aligned}$$

Finally we have

$$\begin{aligned} F(n) &= n^3 \left( 1 + \frac{1}{6} (2\zeta(2) - \zeta(3)) + \frac{1}{6} \zeta(3) - \frac{1}{2} \zeta(2) - \frac{1}{2} \right) + o(n^3) \\ &= \left( \frac{1}{2} - \frac{1}{6} \zeta(2) \right) n^3 + o(n^3) \\ &= \left( \frac{1}{2} - \frac{\pi^2}{36} \right) n^3 + o(n^3) \end{aligned}$$

which concludes the proof of Theorem 3.9.  $\square$

## Note added in proof

- (1) P. Shor has recently found a counterexample to the triangle conjecture.
- (2) Problem P' has been solved by P. Frankl. The conjectured estimate  $p(s, t) = \binom{s+t}{s}$  is correct. It follows that Theorem 3.8 can be sharpened as follows: if there exists a word of rank  $\leq n-k$  in  $\mathcal{A}$  there exists such a word of length  $\leq \frac{1}{6}k(k+1)(k+2) - 1$  (for  $3 \leq k \leq n-1$ ).

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