MATH 433

Applied Algebra

Lecture 10:
Order of a congruence class.
Fermat's Little Theorem.

Powers of a congruence class

Let $[a] \in \mathbb{Z}_n$ be a congruence class modulo n. The powers $[a]^k$, $k = 1, 2, \dots$ are defined inductively: $[a]^1 = [a]$ and $[a]^k = [a]^{k-1}[a]$ for $k > 1$. It easily follows by induction that $[a]^k = [a^k]$ for all $k \geq 1$.

Theorem 1 $[a]^{k+m} = [a]^k[a]^m$ and $[a]^{km} = ([a]^k)^m$ for all $k, m \geq 1$.

In the case when $[a]$ is invertible, we also let $[a]^0 = [1]$ and $[a]^{-k} = ([a]^{-1})^k$ for each $k \geq 1$.

Theorem 2 If $[a]$ is invertible, then $[a]^{k+m} = [a]^k[a]^m$ and $[a]^{km} = ([a]^k)^m$ for all $k, m \in \mathbb{Z}$.

Finite multiplicative order

A congruence class $[a]_n$ is said to have **finite (multiplicative) order** if $[a]_n^k = [1]_n$ for some positive integer k. The smallest k with this property is called the **order of** $[a]_n$. We also say that k is the **order of** a **modulo** n.

Theorem A congruence class $[a]_n$ has finite order if and only if it is invertible (i.e., a is coprime with n).

Proof: If $[a]_n$ has finite order k, then $[1]_n = [a]_n^k = [a]_n[a]_n^{k-1}$, which implies that $[a]_n^{-1} = [a]_n^{k-1}$.

Conversely, suppose that $[a]_n$ is invertible. Since the set $\mathbb{Z}_n$ is finite, the sequence $[a]_n, [a]_n^2, [a]_n^3, \dots$ contains repetitions. Hence for some integers r and s, $0 < r < s$, we will have

$$[a]_n^s = [a]_n^r \implies [a]_n^s[a]_n^{-r} = [a]_n^r[a]_n^{-r} \implies [a]_n^{s-r} = [1]_n.$$

Proposition 1 Let k be the order of an integer a modulo n. Then $a^s \equiv 1 \bmod n$ if and only if s is a multiple of k.

Proof: If $s = k\ell$, where $\ell \in \mathbb{N}$, then

$$[a^s]_n = [a]_n^s = ([a]_n^k)^\ell = [1]_n^\ell = [1]_n.$$

Conversely, let $[a]_n^s = [1]_n$. We have $s = kq + r$, where q is the quotient and r is the remainder of s by k. Then

$$[a]^r = [a]^{s-kq} = [a]^s([a]^k)^{-q} = [1]([1])^{-q} = [1].$$

Since $0 \leq r < k$, it follows that $r = 0$.

Proposition 2 Let k be the order of an integer a modulo n. Then $a^s \equiv a^t \bmod n$ if and only if $s \equiv t \bmod k$.

Proof: If $s \equiv t \bmod k$, then $s - t = \ell k$, $\ell \in \mathbb{Z}$. It follows that $[a^s] = [a]^s = [a]^{t+\ell k} = [a]^t([a]^k)^\ell = [a]^t[1]^\ell = [a]^t = [a^t]$. Conversely, if $[a^s] = [a^t]$, then

$$[a]^{s-t} = [a]^s[a]^{-t} = [a]^s([a]^t)^{-1} = [a^s][a^t]^{-1} = [1].$$

By Proposition 1, $s - t$ is a multiple of k.

Examples. • $G_7 = \{[1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6]\}$.

$[1]^1 = [1]$,

$[2]^2 = [4]$, $[2]^3 = [8] = [1]$,

$[3]^2 = [9] = [2]$, $[3]^3 = [2][3] = [6]$, $[3]^4 = [2]^2 = [4]$,
$[3]^5 = [4][3] = [5]$, $[3]^6 = [3][5] = [1]$.

$[4]^2 = [16] = [2]$, $[4]^3 = [4][2] = [1]$.

$[5]^2 = [25] = [4]$, $[5]^3 = [4][5] = [-1]$, $[5]^4 = [-1][5] = [2]$,
$[5]^5 = [2][5] = [3]$, $[5]^6 = [3][5] = [1]$.

$[6]^2 = [-1]^2 = [1]$.

Thus [1] has order 1, [6] has order 2, [2] and [4] have order 3, and [3] and [5] have order 6.

• $G_{12} = \{[1], [5], [7], [11]\}$.

$[1]^1 = [1]$, $[5]^2 = [25] = [1]$, $[7]^2 = [-5]^2 = [25] = [1]$,

$[11]^2 = [-1]^2 = [1]$.

Thus [1] has order 1 while [5], [7], and [11] have order 2.

Fermat's Little Theorem Let p be a prime number. Then $a^{p-1} \equiv 1 \bmod p$ for every integer a not divisible by p.

Proof: Consider two lists of congruence classes modulo p:

$$[1], [2], \dots, [p-1] \text{ and } [a][1], [a][2], \dots, [a][p-1].$$

The first one is the list of all elements of G_p. Since a is not a multiple of p, it's class $[a]$ is in G_p as well. It follows that all elements in the second list are from G_p. Also, all elements in the second list are distinct as

$$[a][n] = [a][m] \implies [a]^{-1}[a][n] = [a]^{-1}[a][m] \implies [n] = [m].$$

It follows that the second list consists of the same elements as the first (arranged in a different way). Therefore

$$[a][1] \cdot [a][2] \cdots [a][p-1] = [1] \cdot [2] \cdots [p-1].$$

Hence $[a]^{p-1}X = X$, where $X = [1] \cdot [2] \cdots [p-1]$.
Note that $X \in G_p$ since G_p is closed under multiplication.
That is, X is invertible. Then $[a]^{p-1}XX^{-1} = XX^{-1}$
$\implies [a]^{p-1}[1] = [1] \implies [a^{p-1}] = [1]$.

Corollary 1 Let p be a prime number. Then $a^p \equiv a \bmod p$ for every integer a (that is, $a^p - a$ is a multiple of p).

Corollary 2 Let a be an integer not divisible by a prime number p. Then the order of a modulo p is a divisor of $p - 1$.

Proof: By Fermat's Little Theorem, $a^{p-1} \equiv 1 \bmod p$. According to a previously proved proposition, the order of a modulo p divides any positive integer s such that $a^s \equiv 1 \bmod p$.

Problem. Find the remainder of 12^{50} after division by 17.

Since 17 is prime and 12 is not a multiple of 17, we have $[12]_{17}^{16} = [1]_{17}$. Then $[12^{50}] = [12]^{50} = [12]^{3\cdot 16+2}$ $= ([12]^{16})^3 \cdot [12]^2 = [12]^2 = [-5]^2 = [25] = [8]$. Hence the remainder is 8.