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Commentationes Mathematicae Universitatis Carolinae, Vol. 44 (2003), No. 1, 1--7

Persistent URL: `http://dml.cz/dmlcz/119363`

Comment.Math.Univ.Carolin. 44,1 (2003)1–7

On the Diophantine equation $\frac{q^n-1}{q-1} = y$

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Abstract. There exist many results about the Diophantine equation $(q^n - 1)/(q - 1) = y^m$, where $m \geq 2$ and $n \geq 3$. In this paper, we suppose that $m = 1$, n is an odd integer and q a power of a prime number. Also let y be an integer such that the number of prime divisors of $y - 1$ is less than or equal to 3. Then we solve completely the Diophantine equation $(q^n - 1)/(q - 1) = y$ for infinitely many values of y. This result finds frequent applications in the theory of finite groups.

Keywords: higher order Diophantine equation, exponential Diophantine equation

Classification: 11D61, 11D41

The theory of finite groups leads to some Diophantine equations in which the variables are restricted to be *prime* or *a power of a prime number*.

There exist many results about the Diophantine equation

$$(*) \qquad \frac{q^n - 1}{q - 1} = y^m \text{ in integers } q > 1, \quad y > 1, \quad n > 2, \quad m \geq 2.$$

A long standing conjecture claims that the Diophantine equation $(*)$ has finitely many solutions, and, may be, only those given by

$$\frac{3^5 - 1}{3 - 1} = 11^2, \quad \frac{7^4 - 1}{7 - 1} = 20^2, \quad \text{and} \quad \frac{18^3 - 1}{18 - 1} = 7^3.$$

Among the known results, let us mention that Ljunggren [14] solved $(*)$ completely when $m = 2$ and Ljunggren [14] and Nagell [16] when $3|n$ and $4|n$: they proved that in these cases there is no solution, except the previous ones.

Also Equation $(*)$ is completely solved when q is square (there is no solution in this case [17], [5], [1]); when q is a power of any integer in the interval $\{2, \cdots, 10\}$ (the only two solutions are listed above [4]); when q is a power of a prime number, say p, and $p|y-1$ [4]; or when m is a prime number and every prime divisor of q also divides $y-1$ [6].

For more information and in particular for finiteness type results under some extra hypothesis, we refer the reader to Shorey & Tijdeman [19], [20] and to the survey of Shorey [18].

If k is an integer, then $\pi(k)$ is the set of prime divisors of k. Y. Bugeaud and M. Mignotte in [4] solved the Equation $(*)$ when $m \geq 2$ and q be a power of a prime number, say p, and $p|y-1$. Hence in this paper we consider Equation $(*)$ when $m = 1$ and q be a power of a prime number, say p. Obviously $p|y-1$. Also we let $2 \not| \, n$ and $|\pi(y-1)| \leq 3$. Then we solve completely the Diophantine equation $\frac{q^n-1}{q-1} = y$. This result finds frequent applications in the theory of finite groups.

Lemma A ([4], [8]). *With the exceptions of the relations* $(239)^2 - 2(13)^4 = -1$ *and* $3^5 - 2(11)^2 = 1$, *every solution of*

$$p_1^r - 2p_2^s = \pm 1; \quad p_1, p_2 \ \ \textit{primes}; \quad r, s > 1,$$

has exponents $r = s = 2$; *i.e., it comes from a unit* $p_1 - p_2.2^{1/2}$ *of the quadratic field* $Q(2^{1/2})$ *for which the coefficients* p_1, p_2 *are prime.*

Remark. Although it is proved that (with two exceptions) the above equation becomes $p_1^2 - 2p_2^2 = \pm 1$, we do not know whether or not there are infinitely many prime pairs p_1, p_2 that satisfy this equation.

Lemma B ([8]). *The only solution of the equation* $p_1^r - p_2^s = 1$, *where* p_1, p_2 *are prime numbers and* $r, s > 1$, *is* $3^2 - 2^3 = 1$.

Remark ([11]). If $n > 1$ and $a^n - 1$ is prime, then $a = 2$ and n is prime, but the converse is not true. Prime numbers of the form $2^n - 1$ are called *Mersenne primes*.

Also if $a \geq 2$ and $a^n + 1$ is prime, then a is even and $n = 2^k$, but the converse is not true. Prime numbers of the form $2^n + 1$ are called *Fermat primes*.

Main Theorem. *Let* q *be a power of a prime number,* $|\pi(y-1)| \leq 3$ *and* $n \geq 3$ *an odd integer. Then the solutions of the Diophantine equation*

$$\frac{q^n - 1}{q - 1} = y, \tag{1}$$

are listed in table (I):

Table I

q	n	y	conditions
2	3	7	
8	3	73	
$p-1$	3	p^2-p+1	p is a Fermat prime
p	3	p^2+p+1	p is a Mersenne prime
2	7	127	
2	5	31	
2^α	5	$\frac{2^{5\alpha}-1}{2^\alpha-1}$	$2^\alpha+1$ and $2^{2\alpha}+1$ are Fermat primes, $\alpha \geq 1$
p	3	p^2+p+1	p is a prime number such that $\frac{p+1}{2}$ is a power of a prime number
$2p-1$	3	$4p^2-2p+1$	p is a prime number such that $2p-1$ is a power of a prime number
3	5	121	
239^2	3	3262865763	
7	5	2801	
p^2	3	p^4+p^2+1	$\frac{p^2+1}{2} = p'^2$ where p' is a prime number
b	5	$\frac{b^5-1}{b-1}$	$b = 2^{\alpha-1}-1$ and $p = 2^{2\alpha-3}-2^{\alpha-1}+1$ are prime

Proof: Let (q,n,y) be a solution of (1). Let $y = A+1$, where $|\pi(A)| \leq 3$. Then

$$\frac{q(q^{n-1}-1)}{q-1} = \frac{q(q^{(n-1)/2}-1)(q^{(n-1)/2}+1)}{q-1} = A. \tag{2}$$

Also $(q^{(n-1)/2}-1, q^{(n-1)/2}+1)|2$, $q-1|q^{(n-1)/2}-1$ and hence $q^{(n-1)/2}+1|A$.

If $|\pi(A)| = 1$ then $n = 2$, since $(q, \frac{q^{n-1}-1}{q-1}) = 1$, which is a contradiction.

If $|\pi(A)| = 2$ then $y = x^\alpha p^\beta + 1$, where p, x are prime numbers and α, β are positive integers. Now we have $q(q^{n-1}-1)/(q-1) = x^\alpha p^\beta$. Therefore $q = x^\alpha$ or $q = p^\beta$. Let $q = x^\alpha$ then $q^{(n-1)/2}+1 = p^{\beta'}$, for some $\beta' \leq \beta$. Therefore $p = 2$ or $x = 2$, and hence $y = 2^\alpha p^\beta + 1$. Now we consider two cases:

Case 1. $q = 2^\alpha$

Then $q^{(n-1)/2}+1 = p^\beta$ and $\frac{q^{(n-1)/2}-1}{q-1} = 1$, since $(q^{(n-1)/2}-1, q^{(n-1)/2}+1) = 1$. Hence $n = 3$, $2^\alpha + 1 = p^\beta$. If $\alpha = 1$ then $p^\beta = 3$, and hence $(2,3,7)$ is a solution of (1). If $\alpha, \beta > 1$ then $\alpha = 3$, $p^\beta = 3^2$ by Lemma B. Hence $(8,3,73)$ is a solution of (1), too. If $\beta = 1$ then $p = 2^\alpha + 1$. Since p is a prime number, $\alpha = 2^t$. Hence if $p = 2^{2^t}+1$, $t \geq 1$, is a prime number, then $(p-1, 3, p^2-p+1)$ is a solution of (1). Special cases are $(4,3,21)$, $(16,3,273)$, $(256,3,65793)$.

Case 2. $q = p^\beta$

Obviously if $n \neq 3$ then $\frac{q^{(n-1)/2}-1}{q-1} > 2$. Therefore $\frac{q^{(n-1)/2}-1}{q-1} = 1$ and $q^{(n-1)/2} + 1 = 2^\alpha$ which implies that $n = 3$, $p^\beta + 1 = 2^\alpha$. By using Lemma B, $\beta = 1$, $p = 2^\alpha - 1$, and hence α is a prime number. Therefore if $p = 2^\alpha - 1$ is a prime number, then $(p, 3, p^2 + p + 1)$ is a solution of (1). Special cases are $(3, 3, 13)$, $(7, 3, 57)$.

If $|\pi(A)| = 3$, then $y = a^\alpha b^\beta p^\lambda + 1$, where α, β and λ are positive integers. Similar to the case $|\pi(A)| = 2$, we have $y = 2^\alpha b^\beta p^\lambda + 1$, and $q = 2^\alpha$ or $q = b^\beta$ or $q = p^\lambda$, where α, β and λ are positive integers.

Step 1. $q = 2^\alpha$

Then

$$2^{\alpha(n-1)/2} + 1 = p^\lambda \qquad \text{and} \qquad \frac{2^{\alpha(n-1)/2} - 1}{2^\alpha - 1} = b^\beta.$$

Obviously $n \neq 3$, since $\beta \neq 0$. Now we consider 3 cases:

(1.1) If $\alpha(n-1)/2 = 1$ then $\beta = 0$, which is a contradiction.

(1.2) If $\alpha(n-1)/2 > 1$, $\lambda > 1$ then $\alpha(n-1)/2 = 3$ and $p^\lambda = 3^2$, by Lemma B. Then $n = 7$ and $\alpha = 1$, since $n \neq 3$. Hence $(2, 7, 127)$ is a solution of (1).

(1.3) If $\lambda = 1$ then $p = 2^{\alpha(n-1)/2} + 1$. Hence $\alpha(n-1)/2 = 2^t > 1$, since p is a prime number. Therefore

$$b^\beta = \frac{2^{\alpha(n-1)/2} - 1}{2^\alpha - 1} = \frac{(2^{\alpha(n-1)/4} - 1)(2^{\alpha(n-1)/4} + 1)}{2^\alpha - 1}$$

and since $(2^{\alpha(n-1)/4} - 1, 2^{\alpha(n-1)/4} + 1) = 1$ we have $n = 5$, and $p = 2^{2\alpha} + 1$. Hence $b^\beta = 2^\alpha + 1$. Now we consider 3 subcases:

(1.3.1) If $\alpha = 1$ then $b^\beta = 3$, $p = 5$ and $y = 31$. Hence $(2, 5, 31)$ is a solution of (1).

(1.3.2) If $\alpha > 1$, $\beta > 1$ then $b^\beta = 3^2$ and $\alpha = 3$ by Lemma B. But then $p = 65$ which is not a prime number, a contradiction.

(1.3.3) If $\beta = 1$ then $b = 2^\alpha + 1$ and $p = 2^{2\alpha} + 1$. Hence $(2^\alpha,\ 5,\ 2^{4\alpha} + 2^{3\alpha} + 2^{2\alpha} + 2^\alpha + 1)$ is a solution of (1), where $2^\alpha + 1$ and $2^{2\alpha} + 1$ are prime numbers.

Step 2. $q = b^\beta$

Then $(q^{(n-1)/2} - 1, q^{(n-1)/2} + 1) = 2$, and $n \neq 3$. Similar to the last step we have 3 subcases:

(2.1) If

$$\frac{b^{\beta(n-1)/2} - 1}{b^\beta - 1} = 2p^\lambda, \qquad b^{\beta(n-1)/2} + 1 = 2^{\alpha-1},$$

then $\beta(n-1)/2=1$, by Lemma B, which is a contradiction since $n>3$.

(2.2) If

$$\frac{b^{\beta(n-1)/2}-1}{b^\beta-1}=p^\lambda, \qquad b^{\beta(n-1)/2}+1=2^\alpha,$$

then similarly to (2.1), we have $n=3$ which is a contradiction.

(2.3) If

$$\frac{b^{\beta(n-1)/2}-1}{b^\beta-1}=2^{\alpha-1}, \qquad b^{\beta(n-1)/2}+1=2p^\lambda,$$

then by using Lemma A we consider 4 cases:

(2.3.1) If $\beta(n-1)/2=1$ then $n=3$, $\beta=1$ and $q=b$. Then $\alpha=1$, $b+1=2p^\lambda$. Hence if $(b,\ p,\ \lambda)$ is a solution of the Diophantine equation $b+1=2p^\lambda$, then $(b,\ 3,\ b^2+b+1)$ is a solution of (1).

(2.3.2) If $\lambda=1$ then $b^{\beta(n-1)/2}+1=2p$. Let $m=\frac{n-1}{2}$. Hence $q^m-1=2^{\alpha-1}(q-1)$ and $q^m+1=2p$.
If m is odd and $m>1$ then $2p=q^m+1=(q+1)(q^{m-1}-\cdots+1)$, which is a contradiction, since p is a prime number. Therefore $m=1$, $\alpha=1$ and hence $y=2b^\beta p+1$, $2p=b^\beta+1$. Hence if p is a prime number and $2p-1$ is a power of a prime number then $(2p-1,\ 3,\ 4p^2-2p+1)$ is a solution of (1).
If m is even then let $m=2k$. Now we have $(q^k-1)(q^k+1)=2^{\alpha-1}(q-1)$. Therefore $k=1$, $n=5$ and $q+1=2^{\alpha-1}$. Hence $b^\beta+1=2^{\alpha-1}$. By using Lemma B, $\beta=1$ and hence $b=2^{\alpha-1}-1$. Now if $b=2^{\alpha-1}-1$ and $p=2^{2\alpha-3}-2^{\alpha-1}+1$ are prime numbers, then $(b,5,b^4+b^3+b^2+b+1)$ is a solution of (1). But we guess that the only possible case is $(3,5,121)$.

(2.3.3) If $p^\lambda=13^4$ and $b^{\beta(n-1)/2}=239^2$ then $\beta(n-1)/2=2$.
If $\beta=2$, $n=3$ then $\alpha=1$ and $y=3262865763$.
If $\beta=1$, $n=5$ then $\frac{239^2-1}{239-1}=240$ which is not a power of 2, which is a contradiction. Hence $(239^2,3,3262865763)$ is a solution of (1).

(2.3.4) If $\lambda=2$ and $\beta(n-1)/2=2$ then we have two subcases:

(2.3.4.1) If $\beta=1$, $n=5$ then $b^2+1=2p^2$ and $b+1=2^{\alpha-1}$. Hence $p^2=2^{2\alpha-3}-2^{\alpha-1}+1$ which implies that $(p-1)(p+1)=2^{\alpha-1}(2^{\alpha-2}-1)$. Therefore $p-1=2^{\alpha-2}$ and $p+1=2(2^{\alpha-2}-1)$. Hence $\alpha=4$, $p=5$, $b=7$ and $y=2801$. Therefore $(7,5,2801)$ is a solution of (1).

(2.3.4.2) If $\beta=2$ and $n=3$ then $b^2+1=2p^2$. Hence if b and p are odd prime numbers such that $b^2+1=2p^2$ then $(b^2,3,b^4+b^2+1)$ is a solution of (1).

(2.4) If

$$\frac{b^{\beta(n-1)/2}-1}{b^\beta-1}=2^\alpha, \qquad b^{\beta(n-1)/2}+1=p^\lambda,$$

then we get a contradiction since b and p are odd numbers.

Now the proof of the main theorem is completed. □

Remark. Sometimes in the theory of finite groups we need the solutions of (1), where y is prime.

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(*Received* June 1, 2002, *revised* November 18, 2002)