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# A FACTORIAL POWER VARIATION OF FERMAT'S EQUATION

Matthew J. Green

**Abstract.** We consider a variant of Fermat's well-known equation  $x^n + y^n = z^n$ . This variant replaces the usual powers with the factorial powers defined by  $x^n = x(x-1)\cdots(x-(n-1))$ . For  $n = 2$  we characterize all possible integer solutions of the equation. For  $n = 3$  we show that there exist infinitely many non-trivial solutions to the equation. Finally we show there exists no maximum  $n$  for which  $x^n + y^n = z^n$  has a non-trivial solution.

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## 1 Introduction

The search for solutions to the Diophantine equation  $x^n + y^n = z^n$  has led to the well-known Pythagorean triples as well as Fermat's last conjecture, which was eventually proven by Andrew Wiles [1]. Over the years a number of variations of this equation have also been considered, such as replacing the integral powers with rational powers (see [2] [3]). We consider a variation that replaces the  $n$ th powers with the factorial powers. That is, we consider the equation

$$x^n + y^n = z^n, \quad (1)$$

where the factorial power,  $x^n$ , is defined by Graham, Knuth, and Patashnik [5] as follows.

**Definition 1.1.** Let  $x$  be a real number and  $n \geq 1$  be an integer. The *factorial power  $n$  of  $x$* , denoted  $x^n$ , is defined by the formula,

$$x^n = x(x-1) \cdots (x-n+1).$$

The standard form of the equation has infinitely many solutions for  $n = 2$ , and no non-trivial solutions for  $n > 2$ . We will show that the factorial power variation has infinitely many non-trivial solutions for  $n = 2$  and  $n = 3$ , and that non-trivial solutions exist for arbitrarily large values of  $n$ .

In Section 1 we will be introducing a few tools that will be of use throughout our work, as well as noting the trivial solutions. In Section 2 we completely describe all integral solutions to the equation for  $n = 2$ . Following this, we show that there exists infinitely many solutions for  $n = 3$  in Section 3, and conclude our investigation in Section 4 with a proof that there exists no maximum  $n$  for which non-trivial solutions exist.

## 2 General Observations

The main object of study of this paper is equation (1), and throughout the paper it will be assumed that  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $z$  are integers.

Clearly for non-negative integers less than  $n$  we have  $x^n = 0$ . As such, if  $y$  is less than  $n$ , we have a trivial solution  $x^n + y^n = z^n + 0 = x^n$  for any integer  $x$ .

At this time we will note that the even factorial powers are symmetric, and the odd factorial powers are antisymmetric, around  $\frac{n-1}{2}$ .

**Claim 2.1.** For all  $x$ , we have  $x^n = (-1)^n(n-x-1)^n$ .

*Proof.* Expanding  $x^n$ , we have

$$\begin{aligned} x^n &= x(x-1) \cdots (x-n+1) \\ &= (-1)^n(-x)(-x+1) \cdots (-x+n-1) = (-1)^n(n-x-1)^n. \end{aligned}$$

□

This leads us to note another set of trivial solutions for odd  $n$ . If  $y = -(n - x - 1)$  then  $x^n + y^n = 0$ , and thus  $z$  can be any positive integer less than  $n$ .

Additionally, the definition of the factorial powers leads us directly to another simple solution for each  $n$ , which we will consider trivial. Setting  $x = y = 2n - 1$  we have

$$\begin{aligned} (2n - 1)^n + (2n - 1)^n &= 2(2n - 1)(2n - 2) \cdot \dots \cdot n \\ &= 2n(2n - 1) \cdot \dots \cdot (n + 1) = (2n)^n. \end{aligned}$$

Thus for all  $n$ , we have the solution  $(2n - 1)^n + (2n - 1)^n = (2n)^n$ .

As such we will use the following definition of trivial solutions through out this paper.

**Definition 2.2.** Any solution to equation 1 such that  $x$ ,  $y$ , or  $z$  is non-negative and less than  $n$ , or  $x = y = 2n - 1$ , will be considered *trivial*.

Note that, the binomial coefficients can be defined as follows:

$$\binom{x}{n} = \frac{x^n}{n!}.$$

From this we can see that  $x^n + y^n = z^n$  if and only if

$$\binom{x}{n} = \binom{z}{n} - \binom{y}{n}. \quad (2)$$

### 3 Factorial Squares

For the case of  $n = 2$  we will assume for simplicity that  $x \geq 2$  and  $y < z$  as the remaining solutions are either trivial or can be obtained using Claim 2.1. We will begin by considering the equation (2). In this case we have  $\binom{x}{2} = \sum_{j=0}^{x-1} j$ , which leads us to the following claim.

**Claim 3.1.** A triple  $(x, y, z)$  is a solution to the equation  $x^2 + y^2 = z^2$  if and only if

$$\binom{x}{2} = \sum_{j=y}^{z-1} j.$$

*Proof.* From equation (2), we obtain

$$\binom{x}{2} = \binom{z}{2} - \binom{y}{2} = \sum_{j=y}^{z-1} j.$$

□

Note that by defining the binomial coefficients in terms of the factorial powers in the end of Section 2, we have extended the binomial coefficients to the negative integers. Thus  $\binom{x}{2}$  is the sum of  $m$  consecutive integers if and only if there exists some  $y$  and  $z$ , whose difference is  $m$ , such that  $x^2 = z^2 - y^2$ . This leads us to the following claim.

**Claim 3.2.** *Let  $N$  be an integer and  $m$  be a positive integer. Then  $N$  is the sum of  $m$  consecutive integers if and only if  $m$  divides  $2N$  and either  $m$  or  $\frac{2N}{m}$  is odd.*

*Proof.* Clearly,  $N$  is the sum of  $m$  consecutive integers if and only if there exists a  $y$  such that

$$2N = 2 \left( ym + \frac{m(m-1)}{2} \right) = m(2y + m - 1). \quad (3)$$

Thus we see that  $m$  divides  $2N$ .

If  $m$  is even, then as  $2N = m(2y + m - 1)$ , we see that  $m$  divides  $2N$  and, as  $2y$  is clearly even,  $2y + m - 1 = \frac{2N}{m}$  is odd.

From the above equalities it is clear the converse also holds.  $\square$

Now we have a full description of how a given number can be written as the sum of consecutive integers. With this we can describe all integer solutions to equation (1) for the case of  $n = 2$ .

We will introduce the following set to first allow us to clearly describe all solutions for a given  $x$ , and then to allow us to extend this to describe all solutions for a given  $m$ .

**Definition 3.3.** For a given integer  $x$ , let  $\mathcal{D}(x)$  be the set of odd divisors of  $x$ .

Now we have the following theorem describing all solutions containing  $x$  as a summand, with  $z > 0$ .

**Theorem 3.4.** *Let  $x$  be a positive integer. Each integer solution  $(y, z)$  to the equation*

$$x^2 + y^2 = z^2 \quad (4)$$

*with  $z > 0$ , belongs to one of two disjoint families of solutions,  $\phi_x$  and  $\psi_x$ , parameterized by the odd divisors of  $x^2$  as follows:*

$$\phi_x = \left\{ \left( \frac{q + q^2 - x^2}{2q}, \frac{q + q^2 + x^2}{2q} \right) : q \in \mathcal{D}(x^2) \right\},$$

$$\psi_x = \left\{ \left( \frac{q - q^2 + x^2}{2q}, \frac{q + q^2 + x^2}{2q} \right) : q \in \mathcal{D}(x^2) \right\}.$$

*Proof.* Let  $x$  be a positive integer, and  $(y, z)$  be an integer solution to equation (4). Then, by Claim 3.1 we have that  $\binom{x}{2}$  must be the sum of  $m$  consecutive integers, where  $m = z - y$ .

By Claim 3.2, we have that  $m$  divides  $x^2$  and either  $m$  or  $d = \frac{x^2}{m}$  is odd. For a given odd

divisor  $q$  of  $x^2$  we have that either  $q = m$  or  $q = d$ . If  $q = m$  by equation (3) we have  $y = \frac{x^2 - m^2 + m}{2m}$ . Therefore  $z = \frac{x^2 + m^2 + m}{2m}$  and we have  $(y, z) \in \psi_x$ . Similarly if  $q = d$  it is easy to check that  $(x, y) \in \phi_x$ .

Note that, by the construction of the sets and Claim 3.2, all elements of  $\psi_x$  will be integer solutions to equation (4), and the same holds for all elements  $\phi_x$ .

Due to the parity of  $m$  the sets are clearly disjoint. □

From this theorem and Claim 2.1 we have the following corollary.

**Corollary 3.5.** *For each integer  $x$ , there exists  $4d$  distinct solutions to equation (4) which include  $x$  in the summand, where  $d$  is the number of odd divisors of  $x^2$ .*

**Example 3.6.** To obtain all solutions which include 28 as a member of the summand, we start with the set  $\mathcal{D}(28^2) = \{1, 3, 7, 9, 21, 27, 63, 189\}$ .

From Theorem 3.4, we obtain the sets  $\psi_{28}$  and  $\phi_{28}$ , and from these sets of solutions, applying Claim 2.1 to  $z$  for each member provides the remaining solutions which include 28 as shown below.

$q$	$\phi_{28}$	$\psi_{28}$	Related Solutions	
1	(-377, 379)	(378, 379)	(-377, -378)	(378, -378)
3	(-124, 128)	(125, 128)	(-124, -127)	(125, -127)
7	(-50, 58)	(51, 58)	(-50, -57)	(51, -57)
9	(-37, 47)	(38, 47)	(-37, -46)	(38, -46)
21	(-7, 29)	(8, 29)	(-7, -28)	(8, -28)
27	(0, 28)	(1, 28)	(0, -27)	(1, -27)
63	(26, 38)	(-25, 38)	(26, -37)	(-25, -37)
189	(93, 97)	(-92, 97)	(93, -96)	(-92, -96)

Thus giving us all 32 solutions including 28 in the summand.

As the parameter  $m$  has been so important in providing this solution, we will conclude our examination of the solutions for  $n = 2$  with a description of our solution set based on  $m$ .

**Corollary 3.7.** *Let  $m$  be an integer. If  $m = 2k + 1$ , then the set all triples of falling factorial power 2 such that  $z - y = m$  can be written as*

$$x^2 + \left(\frac{x^2 - m^2 + m}{2m}\right)^2 = \left(\frac{x^2 + m^2 + m}{2m}\right)^2,$$

where  $x$  is an integer such that  $m \in \mathcal{D}(x^2)$ .

If  $m = 2r$ , then all triples of falling factorial power 2 such that  $z - y = m$  can be written as

$$x^2 + \left(\frac{m^2 - x^2 + m}{2m}\right)^2 = \left(\frac{x^2 + m^2 + m}{2m}\right)^2,$$

where  $x$  is an integer such that  $\frac{x^2}{m}$  is odd.

*Proof.* This theorem comes directly out of the construction of the sets in the previous proof.  $\square$

Note that while equation (4) is similar to the equation  $x^2 + y^2 = z^2$  from which the Pythagorean triples are derived, the equation for the Pythagorean triples is homogenous and birationally equivalent to the real line, which allows for a straight-forward parametrization of the set of integral solutions. As our equation is non-homogeneous, we do not have such a parametrization.

## 4 Factorial Cubes

The existence of numerous solutions to equation (1) for  $n = 3$  is easily confirmed through a computer-assisted search. To investigate the cardinality of the solution set, we once again use the parameter  $m = z - y$  to rewrite the equation as  $x^3 + y^3 = (y + m)^3$ . From this we obtain the following theorem.

**Theorem 4.1.** *For all  $m \in \mathcal{Z}$  there exist some  $x, y, z \in \mathcal{Z}$  with  $z - y = m$  such that  $x^3 + y^3 = z^3$ .*

*Proof.* Given  $m$ , let  $x = 3m^3 - 6m^2 + m + 2$ , and  $y = m(3m^3 - 9m^2 + 6m + 1)$ . It can be shown that

$$x^3 = m^2(3m^2 - 6m + 1)(3m^2 - 3m - 2)(3m^3 - 6m^2 + m + 1)$$

and

$$y^3 = m^3(3m^3 + 1)(3m^3 - 6m^2 + 1)(3m^3 - 3m^2 + 1).$$

From this

$$x^3 + y^3 = m^2(3m^3 + 2)(m(3m^3 + 2) - 1)(3m^3 - 6m^2 + 2).$$

Now  $y + m = m(3m^3 - 9m^2 + 6m + 2)$  and it can be shown that

$$(y + m)^3 = m^2(3m^3 + 2)(m(3m^3 + 2) - 1)(3m^3 - 6m^2 + 2).$$

Thus we have that  $x^3 + y^3 = (y + m)^3$ .  $\square$

Note that in the above construction  $y > x$  and  $x$  is increasing for all  $m \geq 2$ . Therefore we see this construction gives distinct integral solutions.

With the existence of solutions for all  $m$  shown, we now consider the cardinality of the solution set for a given  $m$ .

Expanding and simplifying the equation  $x^3 + y^3 = (y + m)^3$  gives us the elliptic curve

$$x^3 - 3x^2 + 2x - 3my^2 + (6m - 3m^2)y - m^3 = 0,$$



where  $m$  is a fixed parameter. Note that  $m = 0$  gives us only trivial solutions noted in Section 2.

With this in mind we now consider Siegel's Theorem on integral points on elliptic curves, stated below as in [4, p. 146]. It should be noted that the theorem is stated in the context of the projective real plane.

**Theorem 4.2** (Siegel). *Let  $C$  be a non-singular cubic curve given by an equation  $F(x, y) = 0$  with integer coefficients. Then  $C$  has only finitely many points with integer coordinates.*

Now, we will show in the proof of the following theorem that every non-zero  $m$  the curve is non-singular, thus  $m$  has a finite number of corresponding non-trivial solutions.

**Theorem 4.3.** *For any non-zero integer  $m$ , there exists a finite non-zero number of pairs,  $(x, y) \in \mathcal{Z}^2$  such that  $x^3 + y^3 = (y + m)^3$ .*

*Proof.* By the previous theorem we know there exists at least one solution for all  $m$ .

Now, by setting  $x = X/Z$  and  $y = Y/Z$ , and multiplying through by  $Z^3$  we have the curve in homogeneous coordinates.

$$F(X, Y, Z) = X^3 - 3X^2Z + 2XZ^2 - 3mY^2Z + (6m - 3m^2)YZ^2 - m^3Z^3$$

Calculating the partial derivatives, we get

$$\begin{aligned}\frac{\partial F}{\partial X} &= 3X^2 - 6XZ + 2Z^2 \\ \frac{\partial F}{\partial Y} &= (6m - 3m^2)Z^2 - 6mYZ \\ \frac{\partial F}{\partial Z} &= 2(2X + (m - 3m^2)Y)Z - 3(X^2 + mY^2 + m^3Z^2).\end{aligned}$$

If  $Z = 0$ , then the gradient is  $(3X^2, 0, 3(X^2 + mY^2))$ . As  $m \neq 0$ , the gradient is 0 if and only if  $X = 0$  and  $Y = 0$ . As  $(0, 0, 0)$  does not exist in the projective space, we have no singular points.

If  $Z \neq 0$ , we can let  $Z = 1$ , and thus  $\frac{\partial F}{\partial X} = 0$  if and only if  $X = \frac{1}{3}(3 \pm \sqrt{3})$ , and  $\frac{\partial F}{\partial Y} = 0$  if and only if  $Y = (1 - \frac{m}{2})$ . It can be shown that this point is not on the curve for any  $m \in \mathcal{Z}$ .

Thus, applying Siegel's Theorem we have that for any given  $m$  there exists a finite number of integer solutions to the equation  $x^3 + y^3 = (y + m)^3$ .  $\square$

## 5 Higher Factorial Powers

Besides the trivial and simple solutions provided in Section 2, individual solutions to the equation for  $n \geq 4$  are not as easy to find as they were in the cases of  $n = 2, 3$ . However, we have the following theorem.

**Theorem 5.1.** *For any  $n \in \mathcal{Z}$  there exists an  $N > n$  such that there exists a non-trivial solution to the equation  $x^N + y^N = z^N$ .*

*Proof.* There exists a family of solutions to equation (1) for  $n = 2$  of the form

$$x^2 + x^2 = z^2$$

which can be obtained from the following formulas, which were derived using the work of Hong, Jeong, and Kwon [6] on the integral points on hyperbolas:

$$x_k = \frac{1}{2} \left( \frac{(1 + \sqrt{2})^{2k+1} - (1 - \sqrt{2})^{2k+1}}{\sqrt{8}} + 1 \right)$$

$$z_k = \frac{1}{2} \left( \frac{(1 - \sqrt{2})^{2k+1} + (1 + \sqrt{2})^{2k+1}}{2} + 1 \right).$$

Given  $2x^2 = z^2$  it is easy to see that

$$2(z - 2)^{z-x} = z^{z-x}.$$

The formula for the difference  $z_k - x_k = m_k$  is given by

$$m_k = \frac{((3 + 2\sqrt{2})^k - (3 - 2\sqrt{2})^k)}{4\sqrt{2}}.$$

It can be shown that this function takes on integral values for all  $k \in \mathcal{Z}$  and  $m_k > k$  for all  $k > 1$ . Thus, given  $n > 1$ , we have the solution  $2(z_n - 2)^N = z_n^N$ , where  $N = m_n > n$ .  $\square$

The first few examples of this family of solutions are  $19^6 + 19^6 = 21^6$ ,  $118^{35} + 118^{35} = 120^{35}$ , and  $695^{204} + 695^{204} = 697^{204}$ .

## 6 Conclusions

We have developed a method to describe all solutions equation (1) for the case of  $n = 2$ , as well as an infinite family of solutions for the case of  $n = 3$  and shown that there exists no maximal  $n$  for which non-trivial solutions exist.

In addition to these previously discussed solutions a computer aided search found only two other solutions for  $n \leq 20$  and  $x, y < 44000$ . For the case of  $n = 4$  it was found that  $132^4 + 190^4 = 200^4$  and for the case of  $n = 6$  it was found that  $14^6 + 15^6 = 16^6$ .

We are left with the following questions.

**Question 6.1.** Is 3 the greatest value of  $n$  for which an infinite family of solutions exist?

**Question 6.2.** Does there exist  $n$  such that no non-trivial solutions exist?

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