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On a result of James and Niven concerning unique factorization in congruence semigroups

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The theory of non-unique factorizations in integral domains and monoids is a very active area of current research (see both [1] and [4] to view recent trends in this work). To demonstrate the phenomena of non-unique factorizations, we consider a result from the classical setting on uniqueness of factorizations by James and Niven [11]. We proceed as follows: Let $\mathbb{N}$ represent the natural numbers and suppose that $M \subseteq \mathbb{N}$ is a multiplicative semigroup. M is called a *congruence semigroup* if there exists a natural number n such

Im Hilbertschen Monoid $1+4\mathbb{N}_0 = \{1, 5, 9, 13, \ldots\}$ ($\mathbb{N}_0 =$ natürliche Zahlen inklusive Null) ist die Zerlegung in irreduzible Faktoren nicht eindeutig: Es gilt zum Beispiel $441 = 9 \cdot 49 = 21 \cdot 21$. Hilberts Monoid ist ein Beispiel einer Kongruenz-Halbgruppe. Ein klassisches Resultat von James und Niven besagt, dass in einer Kongruenz-Halbgruppe M genau dann der Fundamentalsatz der Arithmetik gilt, wenn M aus allen Zahlen besteht, die relativ prim zu einer festen Zahl $n \in \mathbb{N}$ sind. Die Autoren der vorliegenden Arbeit untersuchen das andere Extrem, nämlich den Fall, wo M aus allen Zahlen besteht, die *nicht* relativ prim zu einer festen Zahl $n \in \mathbb{N}$ sind. Sie zeigen, dass in diesem Fall wenigstens die *Anzahl* der Primfaktoren bei der Zerlegung einer Zahl eindeutig ist.

that

$$x \in M \text{ and } x \equiv y \pmod{n} \text{ for } y \in \mathbb{N} \text{ implies } y \in M.$$

If M is as above, then we call n a *modulus of definition* of M. It follows directly from the definition that a congruence semigroup M of modulus n is completely determined by n and $M \cap \{1, 2, \ldots, n\}$. In a congruence semigroup M, we call an element x *irreducible* if x cannot be written in the form yz where y and z are nonunits of M (note that M possesses at most one unit, that being 1). The classic proof that all natural numbers can be factored as a product of primes can be easily modified to show that each nonunit of a congruence semigroup can be factored as a product of irreducible elements. In general, such a semigroup is called *atomic*. The interested reader can find more information on congruence semigroups in [8] and a review of basic algebra terminology in [10].

Examples of congruence semigroups can be found throughout the mathematical literature. In particular, Davenport [7, p. 21] uses the "Hilbert monoid"

$$1 + 4\mathbb{N}_0 = \{1, 5, 9, 13, 17, 21, \ldots\}$$

as an example of a multiplicative system where the Fundamental Theorem of Arithmetic fails. To be precise, in this system,

$$441 = 21 \cdot 21 = 9 \cdot 49$$

and 9, 21 and 49 are all nonassociated irreducibles in $1 + 4\mathbb{N}_0$.

Hence, it is reasonable to ask which congruence semigroups do satisfy the Fundamental Theorem of Arithmetic. This question was answered by James and Niven in [11], where they prove the following interesting result. We will require the following notation: if $n \in \mathbb{N}$, then set

$$A(n) = \{m \mid m \in \mathbb{N} \text{ and } \gcd(m, n) = 1\}$$

and $B(n) = \mathbb{N} - A(n)$.

Theorem (James and Niven [11]). *Let M be a congruence semigroup. M has unique factorization of elements into products of irreducible elements if and only if there exists a positive integer n with $M \cap A(n) = A(n)$ and $M \cap B(n) = \emptyset$. In other words, M has unique factorization if and only if M consists of all elements relatively prime to a fixed positive integer n.*

An alternate proof of this theorem due to Halter-Koch (which uses the *divisor theory* of a commutative cancellative monoid) can be found in [9]. As a byproduct of the theorem, we point out that the modulus for a congruence semigroup is not unique. Notice that letting $n = 2$ or 4 in the theorem produces the same semigroup. Hence, this M can be viewed with modulus of definition 2 or 4. While the modulus is not unique, it is obvious that each congruence semigroup has a unique *minimal modulus*.

We are struck by what happens in the other extreme suggested by the theorem (i.e., when M consists of all elements not relatively prime to a fixed positive integer n). It turns out that such an M also exhibits an interesting factorization property.

Proposition. *Let $n = p_1^{n_1} \cdots p_k^{n_k}$ be a positive integer where the p_i's are distinct primes and the n_i's positive integers. Set*

$$M = \{m \in \mathbb{N} \mid \gcd(m, n) \neq 1\}.$$

M is a congruence semigroup with minimal modulus $n' = p_1 \cdots p_k$ which satisfies the following factorization property: If $x \in M$ and

$$x = y_1 \cdots y_s = z_1 \cdots z_t \qquad (*)$$

where each y_i and z_j is irreducible in M, then $s = t$.

Proof. Since the product of two numbers not relatively prime to n is again not relatively prime to n, M is closed under multiplication and is a multiplicative semigroup. It follows directly from the hypothesis of the proposition and elementary number theory that M is a congruence semigroup of modulus n. We show that M also has modulus $n' = p_1 \cdots p_k$. Setting

$$M' = \{m \in \mathbb{N} \mid \gcd(m, n') \neq 1\}$$

we obtain, as above, that M' is a congruence monoid of modulus n'. For $m \in \mathbb{N}$ it follows that $\gcd(m, n) \neq 1$ if and only if $\gcd(m, n') \neq 1$. Hence $M = M'$ and n' is a modulus of definition for M. We argue that this is the minimal modulus. Suppose M is defined by some modulus $d < n'$. Then there exists an i such that $p_i \nmid d$. Now, by definition $p_i \in M$, but note that $p_i^{\varphi(d)} \equiv 1 \pmod{d}$ (where φ represents the Euler φ-function), and hence $1 \in M$, a contradiction.

We now show that M satisfies $(*)$. By the definition of M, if $x \in M$, then $x = p_1^{\alpha_1} \cdots p_k^{\alpha_k} w$ where the α_i's are nonnegative integers (with at least one nonzero) and $w \in \mathbb{N}$ with $\gcd(w, n') = 1$. Define a function $f : M \to \mathbb{N}$ by

$$f(x) = \sum_{i=1}^{k} \alpha_i.$$

It is easy to verify that for x and $y \in M$ we have $f(xy) = f(x) + f(y)$.

Claim: $x \in M$ is irreducible in M if and only if $f(x) = 1$.

Proof of Claim: ($\Rightarrow$) Suppose that $x \in M$ and $f(x) > 1$. Write $x = pqk$ where p and q are not necessarily distinct primes which divide n' and $k \in \mathbb{N}$. By definition, p, q and qk are in M. Hence $pqk = (p)(qk)$ and thus is not irreducible in M.

($\Leftarrow$) Suppose $x = pk$ where p is a prime divisor of n' and $\gcd(k, n') = 1$. If $x = yz$ where y and $z \in M$, then $1 = f(x) = f(yz) = f(y) + f(z)$, which implies that either $f(y)$ or $f(z) = 0$, a contradiction.

Now, suppose that $x \in M$ and

$$x = y_1 \cdots y_s = z_1 \cdots z_t$$

where each y_i and z_j is irreducible in M. Then $f(x) = \sum_{i=1}^{s} f(y_i) = \sum_{i=1}^{t} f(z_i)$. Since each $f(y_i) = 1 = f(z_i)$, we have that $f(x) = s = t$ and the result follows. □

We close with some comments concerning the proposition.

(1) An atomic semigroup (or monoid) which satisfies $(*)$ is called *half-factorial*. More information on the half-factorial property can be found in [5].

(2) The James and Niven result indicates that the set of odd integers, when viewed as a semigroup, has unique factorization. On the other hand, the proposition indicates that the set of even integers is half-factorial. As the proof indicates, a non-unique factorization in the set of even integers is given by

$$6 \cdot 10 = 2 \cdot 30,$$

where 2, 6, 10 and 30 are all irreducible as even integers.

(3) Not all half-factorial congruence semigroups are of the form M in the proposition. The Hilbert Monoid, $H = 1 + 4\mathbb{N}_0$ is also half-factorial. To see this, notice that $x \in H$ is irreducible if and only if

(i) x is prime in $\mathbb{N}$, or

(ii) $x = q_1 q_2$ where q_1 and q_2 are not necessarily distinct primes in $\mathbb{N}$ which are congruent to $3 \pmod 4$.

Hence, if $x \in H$ is of the form

$$x = p_1 \cdots p_s q_1 \cdots q_t$$

where each p_i is a prime congruent to $1 \pmod 4$ and each q_j is a prime congruent to $3 \pmod 4$, then any irreducible factorization of x in H has length $s + \frac{t}{2}$ (note that t will necessarily be even). Half-factorial congruence semigroups which are also arithmetic sequences have been characterized in [3, Theorem 2.6].

(4) To exhibit a congruence semigroup which is neither factorial nor half-factorial, let $M = 1 + 5\mathbb{N}_0$. In M we have

$$81 \cdot 2401 = 21 \cdot 21 \cdot 21 \cdot 21$$

and each of 81, 2401 and 21 are irreducible in M. A good general reference on monoids which do not satisfy the unique factorization property is [6].

(5) The function f in the proof of the proposition is known as a *semi-length function* on M. The reader can find more information on semi-length functions in [2].

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