THE COMMUNICATION COMPLEXITY OF
THE EXACT GAP-HAMMING PROBLEM

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ABSTRACT. We prove a sharp lower bound on the distributional communication
certainty of the exact gap-hamming problem.

1. Introduction

The gap-hamming function $\text{GH} = \text{GH}_{n,k} : \{\pm 1\}^n \to \{0, 1, \ast\}$ is defined by

$$\text{GH}(x, y) = \begin{cases} 
1 & \langle x, y \rangle \geq k, \\
0 & \langle x, y \rangle \leq -k, \\
\ast & \text{otherwise},
\end{cases}$$

where $\langle x, y \rangle = \sum_{i=1}^{n} x_i y_i$ is the standard inner product (the Hamming distance between $x$ and $y$ is $\frac{n - \langle x, y \rangle}{2}$). This problem naturally fits into the framework of two-party communication complexity; for background and definitions, see the books [7, 9]. Alice gets $x$, Bob gets $y$, and their goal is to compute $\text{GH}(x, y)$. It is a promise problem — the protocol is allowed to compute any value when the input corresponds to a $\ast$, and it needs to be correct only on the remaining inputs. The standard choice for $k$ is $\lceil \sqrt{n} \rceil$, so we write $\text{GH}_n$ to denote $\text{GH}_{n, \lceil \sqrt{n} \rceil}$.

The gap-hamming problem was introduced by Indyk and Woodruff in the context of streaming algorithms [5], and was subsequently studied and used in many works and in various contexts (see [6, 12, 1, 2, 3] and references within). Proving a sharp $\Omega(n)$ lower bound on its randomized communication complexity was a central open problem for almost ten years, until Chakrabarti and Regev [4] solved it. Later, Vidick [11], Sherstov [10], and [8] found simpler proofs. The difficulties in proving this lower bound are explained in [4, 10].

The exact gap-hamming function is defined by

$$\text{EGH}_{n,k}(x, y) = \begin{cases} 
1 & \langle x, y \rangle = k, \\
0 & \langle x, y \rangle = -k, \\
\ast & \text{otherwise},
\end{cases}$$

As before, we write $\text{EGH}_n$ to denote $\text{EGH}_{n, \lceil \sqrt{n} \rceil}$. The exact gap-hamming function is easier to compute than gap-hamming; the protocol only needs to worry about inputs

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whose inner product has magnitude exactly $k$. Proving a sharp lower bound on the randomized communication complexity of $\text{EGH}$ was left as an open problem.

One of the difficulties in proving a lower bound for $\text{EGH}$ is the following somewhat surprising property: for infinitely many values of $n$, the deterministic communication complexity of $\text{EGH}_n$ is 2. The reason is that there is a simple deterministic protocol of length 2 that computes $\langle X, Y \rangle \mod 4$ for all $n$. The players announce the parities of their inputs $\frac{n-\sum_{j=1}^{n} x_j}{2} \mod 2$ and $\frac{n-\sum_{j=1}^{n} y_j}{2} \mod 2$. Because $n = \langle X, Y \rangle \mod 2$, this data determines $\langle X, Y \rangle \mod 4$. For example, this deterministic protocol computes $\text{EGH}_n$ when $\sqrt{n}$ is an odd integer, because then we have $-\sqrt{n} \neq \sqrt{n} \mod 4$.

We overcome this difficulty and show that $\text{EGH}$ is extraordinary in that although it is a natural problem with communication complexity $O(1)$ for infinitely many $n$'s, the following holds.

**Theorem.** The randomized communication complexity of $\text{EGH}_n$ is at least $\Omega(n)$ for infinitely many values of $n$.

There is a natural reduction between different parameters $n, k$, and from randomized protocols to distributional protocols. Denote by $U_{n,k}$ the uniform distribution over the set of pairs $(x, y) \in \{\pm 1\}^n \times \{\pm 1\}^n$ so that $(x, y) \in \{\pm k\}$. For each integer $t$, given inputs $x, y \in \{\pm 1\}^n$, the players can use repetitions and public randomness (and no communication) to generate $(X', Y')$ that is distributed according to $U_{tn,tk}$ for $k = \langle x, y \rangle$. In other words, from a protocol that solves $\text{EGH}_{tn,tk}$ over the distribution $U_{tn,tk}$, we get a randomized protocol that solves $\text{EGH}_{n,k}$. So, to prove the lower bound stated above, it suffices to prove the following distributional lower bound.

**Theorem 1.** For every $\beta > 0$, there are constants $n_0 > 0$ and $\alpha > 0$ so that the following holds. Let $n, k$ be positive even integers so that $n > n_0$ and $k < \alpha \sqrt{n}$. Any protocol that computes $\text{EGH}_{n,k}$ over inputs from $U_{n,k}$ with success probability $2/3$ must have communication complexity at least $(1-\beta)n$.

Theorem 1 is sharp in the following two senses. First, if $k \neq n \mod 2$ then $\text{EGH}_{n,k}$ is trivial, and if $k$ is odd then the deterministic communication complexity of $\text{EGH}_{n,k}$ is 2. Secondly, for every $\alpha > 0$, there is $\beta > 0$ so that if $k > \alpha \sqrt{n}$ then the randomized communication complexity of $\text{EGH}_{n,k}$ is at most $(1-\beta)n$. In the randomized protocol, Alice gets $x$, Bob gets $y$ and the public randomness is a sequence $I_1, I_2, \ldots, I_m$ of i.i.d. uniform elements in $[n]$ for $m \leq O(\frac{\alpha}{\sqrt{n}})$. By a standard coupon collector argument, the number of (distinct) elements in the set $S = \{I_1, \ldots, I_m\}$ is at most $(1-\beta)n - 1$ with probability at least $\frac{5}{6}$. If $|S| > (1-\beta)n - 1$, the parties “abort”, and otherwise Alice sends to Bob the value of $x_s$ for all $s \in S$. Bob uses this data to compute $z = \text{sign}(\sum_{j=1}^{m} x_{I_j} y_{I_j})$. Bob sends the output of the protocol $z$ to Alice. Chernoff’s bound says that if $\text{EGH}_{n,k}(x, y) \neq \star$ then $\Pr[z = \text{EGH}_{n,k}(x, y)] \geq \frac{5}{6}$. The union bound implies that the overall success probability is at least $\frac{2}{3}$.

The lower bounds \[4 \parallel 11 \parallel 10 \parallel 8 \] for $\text{GH}$ are based on anti-concentration. Roughly speaking, these works prove that $\Pr[\langle X, Y \rangle \in I] < p$ for all small intervals $I \subset \mathbb{R}$.
and some small \( p > 0 \). The main ingredient for our lower bound on the complexity of EGH is the following “smoothness” result (which implies anti-concentration).

**Theorem 2.** For every \( \epsilon > 0 \), there is \( c_0 > 0 \) so that the following holds. Let \( A,B \subseteq \{\pm 1\}^n \) be of size \( |A| \cdot |B| \geq 2^{(1+\epsilon)n} \). Let \( (X,Y) \) be uniformly distributed in \( A \times B \). For every integer \( k \),

\[
\left| \Pr[\langle X,Y \rangle = k] - \Pr[\langle X,Y \rangle = k + 4] \right| \leq \frac{c_0}{n}.
\]

Here is a simple application of the smoothness theorem. Consider the function \( f \) defined by \( f(k) = \Pr[\langle X,Y \rangle = k] \), where here \( X,Y \) are uniformly random in a large rectangle as in Theorem 2. The theorem shows that the “derivative” of \( f \) is bounded from above, so that if \( f \) takes a large value at a point then it takes large values on a large neighborhood of that point. For example, if \( f(k_0) \geq \Omega(\sqrt{n}) \) for some \( k_0 \) then \( f(k) \geq \frac{9}{10} f(k_0) \) for all \( k \) so that \( |k - k_0| \ll \sqrt{n} \) and \( k = k_0 \mod 4 \). In particular, \( f(k_0) \leq O(\frac{1}{\sqrt{n}}) \).

Theorem 2 is sharp in the following two senses. First, even for the case \( A = B = \{\pm 1\}^n \), there is a \( k \) so that\(^1\)

\[
|\Pr[\langle X,Y \rangle = k] - \Pr[\langle X,Y \rangle = k + 4]| \geq \Omega(\frac{1}{n}).
\]

So, \( O(\frac{1}{n}) \) is the best upper bound possible. Secondly, as the deterministic protocol described above shows, there are sets \( A,B \) of size \( |A| = |B| = 2^{n-1} \) so that for all \( j \in \{1,2,3\} \),

\[
|\Pr[\langle X,Y \rangle = 0] - \Pr[\langle X,Y \rangle = j]| = \Pr[\langle X,Y \rangle = 0] = \Omega(\frac{1}{\sqrt{n}})
\]

So, +4 is the minimum gap for which an \( O(\frac{1}{n}) \) upper bound holds.

### 2. Smoothness

To prove smoothness, we use the following theorem that was initially used to prove anti-concentration \[8\].

**Theorem 3.** For every \( \beta > 0 \) and \( \delta > 0 \), there is \( c > 0 \) so that the following holds. Let \( B \subseteq \{\pm 1\}^n \) be of size \( 2^{5n} \). For each \( \theta \in [0,1] \), for all but \( 2^{n(1-\beta+\delta)} \) vectors \( x \in \{\pm 1\}^n \) it holds that

\[
\left| \mathbb{E}_Y[\exp(2\pi i \theta \langle x, Y \rangle)] \right| < 2 \exp(-cn \sin^2(4\pi \theta)).
\]

Surprisingly, the constant \( 4\pi \) on the r.h.s. of the bound above plays a crucial role in our arguments.

\(^1\)For an integer \( k = \frac{n}{2} - \sqrt{n} \), we have \( \binom{n}{k+1} - \binom{n}{k} = \binom{n}{k+1} \frac{n-2k-1}{n-k} \geq \frac{2^n}{n} \).
Proof of Theorem 2. Let $\beta > 0$ be so that $|B| = 2^{\beta n}$ so that $|A| \geq 2^{(1-\beta+\epsilon)n}$. Theorem 3 with $\delta = \frac{\epsilon}{3}$ promises that for each $\theta \in [0, 1]$, the size of

$$A_{\theta} = \left\{ x \in A : |E_Y[\exp(2\pi i \theta \langle x, Y \rangle)] > 2 \exp(-cn \sin^2(4\pi \theta)) \right\}$$

is at most $2^{n(1-\beta+\delta)}$. For each $x \in A$, define $S_x = \{ \theta \in [0, 1] : x \in A_{\theta} \}$.

Fix $x$ such that $|S_x| \leq 2^{-\delta n}$. Bound

$$\left| \Pr_Y[\langle x, Y \rangle = k] - \Pr_Y[\langle x, Y \rangle = k + 4] \right| = \left| E_Y \left[ \int_0^1 \exp(2\pi i \theta (\langle x, Y \rangle - k)) - \exp(2\pi i \theta (\langle x, Y \rangle - k - 4)) \, d\theta \right] \right| \leq \int_0^1 |\exp(4\pi i \theta) - \exp(-4\pi i \theta)| \cdot \left| E_Y[\exp(2\pi i \theta \langle x, Y \rangle)] \right| \, d\theta \leq 2 \int_0^1 |\sin(4\pi \theta)| \cdot \left| E_Y[\exp(2\pi i \theta \langle x, Y \rangle)] \right| \, d\theta.$$

Continue to bound

$$\int_0^1 |\sin(4\pi \theta)| \cdot \left| E_Y[\exp(2\pi i \theta \langle x, Y \rangle)] \right| \, d\theta \leq 2^{-\delta n} + \int_0^1 |\sin(4\pi \theta)| \cdot \exp(-cn \sin^2(4\pi \theta)) \, d\theta.$$

The integral goes around the circle twice, and it is identical in each quadrant. So,

$$\int_0^1 |\sin(4\pi \theta)| \cdot \exp(-cn \sin^2(4\pi \theta)) \, d\theta = 8 \int_0^{1/8} \sin(4\pi \theta) \cdot \exp(-cn \sin^2(4\pi \theta)) \, d\theta \leq 32\pi \int_0^{\infty} \theta \cdot \exp(-16\pi \theta^2) \, d\theta \leq \frac{c_1}{n} \int_0^{\infty} \phi \cdot \exp(-\phi^2) \, d\phi \leq \frac{c_2}{n},$$

where $c_1, c_2 > 0$ depend on $\epsilon$, and we used $\frac{\pi}{4} \leq \sin(\eta) \leq \eta$ for $0 \leq \eta \leq \frac{\pi}{2}$.

Finally, because

$$E_x |S_x| = E_{\theta} \frac{|A_{\theta}|}{2^n} \leq 2^{n(-\beta+\delta)},$$

the number of $x \in A$ for which $|S_x| > 2^{-\delta n}$ is at most $2^{-\delta n}|A|$. Hence,

$$\left| \Pr_{X,Y}[\langle X, Y \rangle = k] - \Pr_{X,Y}[\langle X, Y \rangle = k + 4] \right| \leq 2^{-\delta n} + 2(2^{-\delta n} + \frac{c_2}{n}) \leq \frac{c_0}{n}. \quad \Box$$
3. The lower bound

Proof of Theorem 1] Suppose the assertion of the theorem is false. The space of inputs can be partitioned into rectangles $R_1, \ldots, R_L$ with $L \leq 2^{(1-\beta)n}$, where the output of the protocol on each $R_{\ell}$ is fixed.

Let $X, Y$ be i.i.d. uniformly at random in $\{\pm 1\}^n$. Let $E$ denote the event that $|\langle X, Y \rangle| = k$. Define the collection of “typical” rectangles as

$$T = \{ \ell \in [L] : \Pr_{X,Y}[E|R_{\ell}] \geq \frac{\Pr_{X,Y}[E]}{10} \land \Pr_{X,Y}[R_{\ell}] \geq 2^{-\left(1-\frac{\beta}{2}\right)n} \}.$$ 

For $\alpha \leq 2$, because $k = n \mod 2$, we have $\Pr_{X,Y}[E] \geq \frac{2}{\sqrt{n}}$ for some universal constant $p > 0$. The contribution of non-typical rectangles is small:

$$\sum_{\ell \notin T} \Pr_{X,Y}[E] \leq \frac{1}{\Pr_{X,Y}[E]} \sum_{\ell \notin T} \Pr_{X,Y}[R_{\ell}] \Pr_{X,Y}[E|R_{\ell}]$$

$$< \frac{1}{\Pr_{X,Y}[E]} \left( L 2^{-\left(1-\frac{\beta}{2}\right)n} + \Pr_{X,Y}[E] \frac{10}{10} \right) < \frac{1}{5},$$

for $n$ large enough. Because $k = -k \mod 4$ and $|k| < \alpha \sqrt{n}$, for each $\ell \in T$, Theorem 2 with $\epsilon \geq \frac{\beta}{2}$ implies that

$$|\Pr_{X,Y}[\langle X, Y \rangle = k|R_{\ell} \land E] - \Pr_{X,Y}[\langle X, Y \rangle = -k|R_{\ell} \land E]|$$

$$= |\Pr_{X,Y}[\langle X, Y \rangle = k|R_{\ell}] - \Pr_{X,Y}[\langle X, Y \rangle = -k|R_{\ell}]| \cdot \frac{1}{\Pr_{X,Y}[E|R_{\ell}]}$$

$$\leq \alpha \sqrt{n} \frac{\epsilon_0}{n} \cdot \frac{10}{p} \frac{\sqrt{n}}{} < \frac{1}{6},$$

for $\alpha$ small enough. So, the probability of error conditioned on $R_{\ell}$ for $\ell \in T$ is at least $\frac{5}{12}$. The total probability of error is at least

$$\sum_{\ell \in T} \Pr_{X,Y}[R_{\ell}] \cdot \frac{5}{12} > \frac{5}{5} \cdot \frac{5}{12} = \frac{1}{3}.$$ 

This contradicts the correctness of the protocol. \qed

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References


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